

# THE LAST DAYS OF VIENNA

(Written for "The Listener" by G. E. ESH)

I MET him first in Vienna in 1930 or thereabouts. The set I moved in at that time was a rather sophisticated coterie of Bright Young Things. If anyone was to draw my attention at all he had to be "somebody." Well—Peter C. certainly was "somebody." From the very first moment I disliked his physical appearance intensely, and never got quite used to it. He was very short, hardly more than 5ft. 3in., and his face was like a faun's. Only his eyes were human; they were beautiful, deep, intelligent, and strangely melancholy. He was a Jew, and something of the hunted look of his race was in them, though that was long before Hitler's Jew-baiting had become the order of the day.

His intelligence was subtle and his universal knowledge a kind of perpetual wonder to me. He devoured whole libraries, lock, stock, and barrel; not only German books, but English, French, Italian ones as well. His memory was fantastic; he could quote long passages of prose or poetry which he had read years before without hesitation. Yet his cleverness was not flawless. It was disquieting, nervous, sensitive, and somehow rootless. His whole personality was unbalanced.

He was a typical town product, one of those hothouse plants who grow in the over-heated atmosphere of a civilisation twice removed from the soil. No other town but dying Vienna with all its grace and morbid charm, could have moulded him. I do not know whether he was aware of his strangeness, his aloofness from the average man. He often made pathetic attempts to fall in with the popular amusements of the crowd, but there was always something preposterous about it.

## "Relaxation"

I remember meeting him once rigged up in something which he presumably considered a sports suit. "Where are you

off to?" I inquired, surprised. "Oh, I am going to a football match," he told me beamingly: "You see, I am not as bookish as all that." Nevertheless I discovered a book tucked under his arm. "What is the book you are taking with you?" I asked. "Thomas Hobbes's 'Leviathan.'"

Poor Peter! He never realised how utterly ludicrous he was.

Peter was a fervent patriot. With the zeal of a newcomer to the political arena (for the emancipation of Austrian Jews was of comparatively recent date), he devoted himself to historical research work. He was especially interested in the relations between Germany and Austria since the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848. He was a staunch "Grossdeutscher," a champion for the union of Germany and Austria conceived in 1848 and thwarted by Bismarck's foundation of the "Reich" in 1871. Little did Peter

know then that the realisation of his dream meant death to him.

He had volunteered and fought in the Great War; he had lost a brother in it, and he himself got away with a serious shell-shock, the results of which had not worn off when I met him so many years later. His right hand shook badly when he took up a pen or lit a cigarette. We never spoke about the war, but it was clear to everyone who knew him that not only physically, but also morally, it had left a deep imprint on him.

## Attraction, Repulsion

I do not know up to this day whether Peter was ever in love with me, as he sometimes pretended to be. What I do know is that I certainly never was for a moment in love with him. I was attracted by his mental qualities; his physical and human ones repulsed me

or left me indifferent. Never before or afterwards have I experienced this capacity for making a clear cut between the man and the scholar. Humanly speaking his most amiable feature was his love and worship of his mother, a widow with whom he lived.

When I left Vienna in 1931 I kept up correspondence with Peter for a year or so. Then by and by the interest faded away; other persons, countries, events crowded my life, and I lost sight of him altogether.

In 1938, shortly after Hitler's march into Vienna, a friend sent me a neutral paper relating the events in detail. I still was stunned by the brutal facts of the recent developments; I read in detail about the entry of German troops into the town; the ceremony on the "Heldenplatz"; Hitler's speech; about the persecution of free Austrians, liberals, socialists, and Jews, about the series of murders and desperate suicides. Many friends of mine lived in Vienna, and my heart went out to them; but I must confess that I never thought of Peter in particular. Just when I was about to discard the paper, I caught sight of a short notice with a familiar name. It ran as follows: — "Dr. Peter C., the well-known university lecturer and Austrian historian, committed suicide yesterday after having shot his mother."

## Utter Despair

Slowly I dropped the paper: what an incredible end to the life of a brilliant man! This suicide, only one of many hundreds committed in those anxious days, was the negation and annihilation of all he had lived for. What utter despair must have guided his trembling hand. I never would have considered him capable of holding a revolver, let alone aiming and shooting with accuracy. And shooting the most beloved person he knew on earth, his mother!

At the very moment when history had come to the point towards which he strove in all his work, he had to disappear from this world. For he knew only too well that for a Jew — be he as patriotic and loyal as he may — there was no place in Hitler's Vienna. This Vienna was not the Vienna he loved, of which he was proud, and of which he was such a typical product. Thus he became one of the millions of Hitler's innocent victims.

I record this story because it is a typical case seen through a personal experience. It may sound callous, but in a way I am glad of Peter's heroic decision — he was spared much in days to come. His action was heroic, for real courage means overcoming inhibited fears. His self-chosen end was quite contrary to his mental make-up, and only through supreme will-power could he achieve a deed which did not correspond with the ideas of his lucid mind. Others may call him an escapist or a coward. But who are we to judge?



## TAKING HER NUMBER!

A numerical interview with

**VERA LYNN**

(In "Melody Maker")

How old were you when you first sang professionally? .....	7
And when you first sang over the radio? .....	18
How many bands have you sung with? .....	4
When did you first join Ambrose? .....	1936
How many songs have you introduced over the air? .....	51
How many records have you made? .....	150
How old were you when you first recorded on your own? .....	19
How many times a week do you write to your fiancé, Harry Lewis? .....	7
How tall are you? .....	5ft. 8ins.
How many proposals of marriage have you had? .....	6
How many evening dresses do you possess? .....	20
What size shoe do you take? .....	5
How many cigarettes do you smoke a day? .....	0
How many pounds of sweets do you eat a day? .....	3
What is the h.p. of your present car? .....	10
What did you pay for it? .....	£200
How many fan-letters do you receive a week? .....	(about) 150
How many times a year do you have your hair permed? .....	3
How old were you when you started painting? .....	5
In the event of a fire, how many of the pictures you have painted would you save? .....	0
When did you visit Holland and Belgium with Ambrose? .....	1938
What time in the morning did you get home after Monday's raid? ..	4.45
When do you hope to get married? .....	1941
How many children would you like? .....	3

(Picture of Vera Lynn at the age of 18 was sent to "The Listener" by Mrs. C. J. Cummings, of Hawera)

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