

A GLIMPSE OF GERMANY

LAST May my wife and I were standing in the main railway station at Munich, looking at a board on which hotels were listed with the number of rooms vacant and the price. As usual in Europe, we were soon approached by a man offering accommodation, an oldish man with a walrus moustache and an amiable manner.

"Hotel?"

"Ja," I said. "Nicht teuer." I was accustomed to getting rooms this way, saying "not dear," "non costoso," and so on.

He handed me a card with the name "Fremdenheim Hasler" on it—the "Hasler Guesthouse," then raised his finger to his hat, and beckoned us to follow him with the knowing look of one who understood us completely.

"Zwei minuten," he said.

"Two minutes' away," I said to my wife.

He looked up, eagerly and expectantly. "Englisch?"

"Ja, von Neuseeland," I replied.

Beaming with delight, he took a grubby wallet from his pocket. Opened, it showed an old soldier's card and a photograph of himself, presumably, in uniform.

"Im Krieg," he announced proudly. "1914-1918."

Well. In the 1914-1918 war. He nodded vigorously as I repeated it. A bond between German and English. Others would not understand. That would be good for an extra mark in the tip, of course.

The Fremdenheim Hasler was just round the corner, occupying one floor of a big city building.

The hausfrau who opened the door was youngish, spick and span, and of that startling blondness which gives an

by
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immediate impression of good looks to many German women.

We could see that she showed a little dismay. The Germans have the reputation of being houseproud, and the appearance of this place bore it out. And we had arrived in old clothes for tramping, carrying ruc-sacs. This was quite in order in Austria, but here, I could feel, it was viewed disapprovingly. She probably dealt mainly with business people, whom we might frighten away. We felt that she distrusted the judgment of our old friend of the First World War.

She asked us how many nights, with an air that suggested the fewer the better.

"Eines," I said. "Wir müssen gehen nach Heidelberg."

There was no "must go to Heidelberg" about it, but we intended to, and I could manage to say it and did. It paid off. She was obviously not merely relieved but impressed. We had to go to Heidelberg. Of course. That explained everything, ruc-sacs and all. University people. Knocking about on holiday. She relaxed and smiled.

It was getting dark when we went out again. We couldn't get the door on to the street open, and were struggling with it, when a teenage girl came tearing downstairs. In leopard-skin trousers and Italian-style sweater, her hair done up in a pony tail, and with the speed of a satellite in the sky, she produced a key, opened the door, and conveyed to us perfectly clearly though we could not follow her words at all that "You have to have a key to get out though you don't need one to get in you simply push that button and the lock will open and you have to be staying

here to get a key but don't stop me to tell me whether you are or not I don't care and don't ask me why there should be such a silly arrangement either I'm in a hurry to get out and have a good time."

"Auf wiedersehen. A whole generation probably missed out on having a good time here, but this one won't," said my wife.

"With all the ruins it looked one hell of a place when we arrived," I said. "But the depressing effect disappears at night. And day or night everyone's smartly dressed and full of life. There's something dynamic about the place."

"DIE beste," said the old newspaper vendor next morning with the air of an expert imparting confidential information as he picked out the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* for me from his stand. He had one of the new Baedekers, too, about Munich, in English.

"We should look for the art gallery first," I said. "That's the place to go when you don't know what else to do."

At the gallery, when we told the man at the desk from whom we got some reproductions that we thought this an exceptionally impressive art collection he seemed quite pleased and mentioned it to one of his colleagues.

"I shouldn't have thought he needed us to tell him," I remarked. "This is famous."

"Probably the reason why this collection seems outstanding to you is that it is the best part of a very large collection. The presentation of so many first-rate works together is very striking," said a man standing near us. He was middle-aged, professional by his dress and bearing, and he spoke excellent English. He had been, as we thought, glaring at us ferociously in what we thought an overbearing German manner—we were new enough to the country to be deceived by this appearance and had

not learned how friendly the people behind it could be.

"Munich is a busy and prosperous-looking place," I said. "I had thought of it as—well, I really don't know—something typified by beer-halls, I suppose."

"Oh, Munich has quite changed," he replied. "There has been a big influx of refugees from East Germany, business and professional people. I am one myself. I think the native Bavarians don't care much for the newcomers, who are too hurried and bustling. It is hard now to find the old Bavarian 'beer-quiet,' I suppose the word would be."

He told us he was returning from a brief organised visit to Istanbul and Athens. Archaeology was his hobby. He was a doctor.

WE arrived in Heidelberg about 10 o'clock at night, and ventured out of the big modern railway station, which stands aloof from the little old town across a wide open area and presents a rather startling contrast with it. Suddenly we were halted by two men with torches. We had wandered on to the grounds of the big printing press factory. Verboten! But one of them rang up a hotel for us "nicht teuer" as specified—12 marks, about £1 as usual. He pointed it out to us, and in no time we were under the customary German feather bed covering.

Next day we were among the crowds of visitors up at the old castle.

"It's pretty even in the rain," said an American woman to her enthusiastic escort, who was pointing out the buildings of the town below. Heidelberg is a romantic name, but after the fantastic beauty of Salzburg we found it less than we had expected, though it was easy to understand that it could have nostalgic memories for old students.

"Why are the Americans so fond of Heidelberg?" I asked a young German. "Surely they haven't all been students here."

"Well, the headquarters of the American forces are near by. Perhaps the father has served at Heidelberg, and he will send his son here for a holiday."

He made the occupation seem an accepted part of the German structure.

As well as Americans there were many working men and women from the neighbouring industrial town of Mannheim—it was Sunday. There were escorted tours of the castle in different languages, and, being in a hurry to move on, we got into the German one, which was first. There was more to listen to than to see; but these people paid devoted attention to their history lesson and seemed determined to get their full value.

Back in the town we felt puzzled by Heidelberg, full of noisy young people, not at all the quiet old world town we had imagined. We were disappointed. But then so was Mr Somerset Maugham, once a student there, when he visited it about a month after this time.

We went into St. Peter's Church: the open Bible between two masses of white flowers reminded us that Germany was the land of the Reformation; the effect was dramatic after the baroque ecclesiastical splendours of Austria and Bavaria.

We left with the trippers from Mannheim, in the old-fashioned wooden-seated carriages of the excursion train. It was a sober and respectable scene: working people dressed in their best, solemnly returning home after a day's outing well spent. We offered English cigarettes, luxuries here, to a young man and young woman. Their gratitude and shyness were embarrassing. She kept hers, but he handed her his to try the



HEIDELBERG
Crowds in the streets celebrate the return of spring