

THE SEA DEVIL SAILED ON!



Man Who Managed Felix von Luckner in New Zealand Tells Inside Story of His Tour

Special To The "RECORD"

By A. R. McELWAIN

Felix
Graf von
Luckner

actor, and in his make-up there is a measure of "blarney" born of many years of performing before admiring audiences. But he is essentially genuine, kind to a degree that is sometimes embarrassing. With his naval cap, his giant stature and his inevitable pipe, his broad smile and his studied, "By Joe!" he drew crowds wherever he went.

At not one of his lectures was there a discordant note. In even the smallest towns it was impossible to get him away from teeming autograph-hunters.

Marked Antagonism

APART from that Wanganui experience, the German didn't have it all his own way. There was marked antagonism, not so much to the visitor himself as to the Hitler and Nazism which, in the eyes of many, he personified. This animosity, while not openly demonstrated, simmered away behind the scenes and badly affected the financial side of the tour.

At every town in which the Count spoke, acrimonious controversies cropped up. In many instances

parochial and absurd arguments were advanced as to why von Luckner should be boycotted. Preposterous stories about his activities as a spy were circulated. In one town a prominent business man took me into a side street, made certain no one was within earshot and asked me to tell him—just him—as friend to friend, if the Count really was a spy!

At a cocktail party the other afternoon I overheard a guest declare: "Wanganui knew how to treat von Luckner, any way. . . They wouldn't have a bar of him up there!" Well, it is true that, for an expression of prejudice against the ex-raider, Wanganui certainly distinguished itself, and the visit, from a lecture point of view, was a complete "flop." The peculiar thing, however, about the Wanganui visit was that, while one-half of the people held aloof, the other half fell over themselves being hospitable—and those who know Wanganui realise how really hospitable it can be. The social side of the Count's stay was more pleasant than it was in any other place on the tour; and, believe me, that's saying something! Von Luckner would have needed at least a week in the town to get through the invitations showered upon him.

My real purpose in giving the Wanganui aspect of von Luckner's tour pride of place is that, fundamentally, the divided attitude toward the visitor was completely typical of all other places included in our itinerary. The "Sea Devil's" tour began on the very day news of Hitler's Austrian coup was announced in screaming newspaper headlines and condemned vigorously by every newspaper in the country. With public opinion so inflamed it seemed like deliberately courting disaster to proceed.

It was actually suggested to von Luckner that the tour should be cancelled. Replying that "he had faced obstacles all his life and was ready to face them again," the redoubtable sailor sailed straight into the face of public opinion. Few men in a similar position would have done it. How many other German officers, distinguished during the War as daring and dangerous enemies of Great Britain and her Allies, and now adherents of the Nazi regime, could tour a British Dominion proudly recounting their exploits of 1914-1918—and get away with it? This is worth thinking about. . . .

In many respects the tour was a personal triumph. Apart altogether from von Luckner's sterling record as a kindly and courteous—as well as a bold and calculating—foe, he has an extraordinary personality and an amazing capacity for making friends. Admittedly he is a born

THE day Count von Luckner, Nazi and ex-sea raider, began his lecture tour of New Zealand, Hitler seized Austria. Public opinion was more roused against Germany than at any time since the War. But von Luckner carried on with his tour and made a success of it.

How many men would have cared to undertake the same job?

I replied that he might be for all I knew, but if, on this rushed tour, playing one and two night "stands" in mostly inland country towns, the Count was managing to fit in a spot of spying on the side, he had my profound admiration. It amused me to think of von Luckner, his great bulk heavily disguised, sneaking out of his hotel at four in the morning to take a flashlight photograph of the Wanganui River, or sketching the main street of Dargaville "in the interests of a foreign Power," as the Oppenheim lads love to put it.

Nor shall I forget the naivete of the gentleman who contended that this shrewdest of all war-time strategists had, as a spy, convicted himself out of his own mouth because the Count during his lectures invariably mentioned that he had a cinematographer on his yacht *Seeteufel*, and that he would take back to Germany with him views of various parts of New Zealand. (Continued on page 42).