

# YEW-TREE: FRANKFURT

By RUDOLF NASSAUER

COME with me to the city I knew, great Patrizier city, great for its Jews, garbardined black as mourning women, great for its churches built when Christ was a mighty spirit, haunting the ancient red-brick walls, scurrying through the air to be ever-present everywhere. The great city of the cloister where the Carmelites went into hiding from the world, where the Holy Roman Emperors were crowned amid banquets and glory, where the greatest German poet sulked away his youth, where, at the opera, from the fattest and most noble throats of Europe emanated Hosannas at each performance, where, more than anywhere in the world, I have seen the twilight mist a puff of breaths of the girls in the rainbow, and where to this day the river lies like a giant lover in his soft bed, his arms about his city.

First come to a place of sadness which, before grandmother taught me some meaning of death through my father's tears, was a place for me full of coffers of gold, full of wonderment as Ali Baba's cave, when I was tall but as the tombstones of the poor. My friend and I criss-crossed the cemetery on summer afternoons, summer made us boisterous and brave, we were innocent and cheeky as sparrows flying and lechering in the air, above hospitals where men went simply to transact their business with death, or flying twittering past windows behind which lay boys and girls screaming with belly-ache, ice-cream or doughnut pain. We criss-crossed the graves, then lay our ears on to the cold tombstones to listen to the moans of discomfort underneath, our victims cursing the sand that had trickled into their eyes. Then, haunted with fear, we rushed away like the swiftest foxes upon earth.

There was more to be derived from the cemetery than the boast of wickedness. There, over on the right, beyond the Yew-Tree, lay Rothschildts whose fabulous wealth protruded from the earth in twisted pillars of black marble within whose temple-coolness stood the still sarcophagi. To the left and right of our Yew-tree lay the tombs of those centuries dead, to the left and right lay the corpses of legends, hearsays, jokes and history, who mingled with our ancestors underground, in the earth exciting as a secret.

And there, within the area of the outthrown arms of a huge Yew-tree speckled with scarlet berries, lay my family dead. It was our story told to us all as some heritage granted

by some power which was neither God nor Satan, but of equal importance, a power also of no fixed address. It said that from the grave of the good would grow a Yew-tree, and from the grave of the evil the hand that had struck God. That was the meaning of our Yew-tree standing in the middle of the space in the world reserved for our graves, in the cemetery of our town. There we belonged, we had a right to claim a home, there lay the dead genitals and wombs who in their summer had cast men, generations till me, generations from Adam and Eve to them.

There is much of my youth, much I cannot tell. I have written down my youth and stored the coloured volumes in the library of my heart. I am the bibliophile of my youth, and liken my heart to the shape of a cage from which daily in my intercourse with the world a book takes wing and flies away, a bird splendid as Zarathustra's vision. But one book, when my youth has thus dispersed and my life is spent, is white and will surely be the last to fly away. It will turn into a dove and fly message to God of my coming. It is the book into which I have written of man's new righteousness, man cleansed through terror and trial, exiled from his land, ruined and resurrected: it is a stupid book, full of degradations and Hosannas, in equal parts, in complete sanity. It describes only pain and joy, it is obsessed with these two words and uses God for want of a better word, for want, in fact, of God.

I grew into the man I have described in my book. I loved soldiers and cruelty as did other children, bravery, food, sweets and dreams. I loved fairy-stories, sages, my country, my father, my nanny, an ugly boy called Ralph, and a pretty girl whose name was Lyddia. It's all different now, but I remember well.

The beginning of a new world when Adolf Hitler won the vote. When God decided to slay Egypt's first-born, he told Moses to tell his people to mark their doors with some sign so that God's hirelings would know whom to spare. The Nazis took much from God, especially His ruthlessness. They also marked doors, the doors of the Egyptians and smashed the Jewish shopfronts, pilfered the marvellous wares, they marched through the streets in magnificence of conviction, froth at their mouths the sign of awe and abandonment, marching, marching. Those who did not march that April day in thirty-three, when the sun tingled the first crocuses with delight, and hares on their first scurry across the fields that morning found the grass stiff with frost hard as stubbles, killed my friend's father and

brother and shot my curly friend a bullet in his loins. At night they caroused.

Swastikas and lightning flashes lit up the German sky, made the air eerie with forebodings, the nights were darker than starless nights, the days brighter than a vision of great arson. I remember much rain, dark skies and clouds the color of a pig's purple guts rotating like revolving doors, now and again throwing out a beam of brilliant blinding light on the earth, aggressively bright and redeemed only by a splendid rainbow. The weather in my young years was dramatic, Wagnerian, Shakespearean. I pitied animals and stones exposed to its ruthless onslaught: to shelter in warm snug rooms was to feel the comfort of deer and foxes hiding from cold and rain beneath thickets and shrubs out in the forests. I felt akin to these animals, I loved to watch a herd of deer race down the slopes of the moors, every nerve of their agile bodies trained on their flight. The sight of deer was in league with my tears. If only they knew, I thought, that they could be shot at any time, that hunters lay in wait for them! Shots in the distance made me reel with grief, shots in the forests always sound final, there's just one foul thud, like the word: death. At least we knew we were being hunted, or rather, I constantly imagined the sights of a thousand guns trained on me. We could beware.

To us, however—as perhaps to the deer—danger was marvellous. We took full advantage of all the privileges which accrue for children in common danger with grown-ups. School and homework become unimportant when the sound of battle draws near, you are accepted completely as an equal, and in addition, you become a miser of the privileges which pity and sacrificial sympathy offer you on account of your green age. You gather, greedily as a reaper, the fat harvest which danger has sown. And the beauty of danger! Above all things that elate, there is the feel of danger which you touch purely for your own response, like a reverie of women when no guilt intrudes through any crevice of your conscience. It liberates, like an obsession, from all cares. You feel great safety, dream and action fuse into one faring forward, one upward thrust, the bird's ascent in flight. Beneath our high existence, the world was breaking up, our world was smitten into a thousand pieces, but what did we care, boys of danger, what was it to us, the nineteen hundred years of our settlement, history exploding beneath us, around us, never above us? What did it matter if everything was destroyed, everyone killed except me?

1938. I heard the silence that November day, when news came through that a Nazi diplomat had been shot in Paris. I have never heard such silence again. The mighty trees of the German forests stood still and unreal like painted scenery on an empty stage: our river was a sheet of glass, expanding in my delirious eyes from a splinter to a vast expanse of danger. The town, with its deserted streets, was a cardboard village, or a town simply built as a cloak to hide ancient ruins, for everyone I saw about that day I suspected somehow to prepare someone's death, like the tortures I have often seen in Roman ruins. All day this silence hung over us, solid as the rains of monsoon, but unlike the mercy of rain, unmercifully.

Night that day took a long time coming. The day was like a man about to be hanged, it seemed an endless time before the priest and wardens would come to the cell to fetch the prisoner. Everywhere I saw a hangman prepare his bold task, testing the trapdoor, the sliding sling, conscientiously, meticulously, with great diligence. No doubt the prisoner was thankful for this time he took, for the seconds that were thus added to his life. But we, who clamoured about the gates of the prison, in the mob waiting for the execution notice to be nailed up, we were terribly impatient. The prisoner's fate had been sealed by a Judge's decision. We were waiting simply for that decision to be carried out. So, now I think of it once more, was the unfortunate prisoner. He was not grateful for the extra seconds the hangman's careful preparations added to his life. Nonsense. I am sure, in fact, that he cursed the hangman. Oh, the waiting for the hangman that day was terrible!

At dusk they launched their attack. They strode through our town, two men at a time, the first lamplight reflected in the mirror of their boots, black determined figures, fearless in the dark. They hauled male Jews from bus and train, fathers were made to abandon their children, old couples who had taken a conjugal walk in the park were intersected and the women were left to totter home alone. They ransacked houses right through the night, synagogues burnt like unholy offerings, a grand piano was thrown from the second floor window of my aunt's house, and down our street an aged, for years bed-ridden, man was jettisoned from a window high up, sitting in his bed.

Unscathed we escaped, with luck and regret after nineteen hundred years, the land of our fathers. There remain volumes

to be written, delights and griefs to be faithfully recorded, because everything is important all the time, everything that happened to me and happened now and everything that happened and happens to you, all of it concerns you and me all the time. Only there is the selection of what one tells, the words I choose, my choice of what I tell, for good God there is no time to tell everything, to record all the trivial details which like a flake of new snow easily slide down the mountainside to become big and dangerous. I mean the process of becoming huge and fearful, of *becoming* all the time, absorbing all the details, stones and wintry bushes, trees, villages, lives, the avalanche of becoming and absorbing which gradually grows into a huge round world, the world in which all of us are involved. It is of love that avalanche is made. It is my path to love I have tried to sketch, some incredible powerful all-embracing love which rolled down the mountainside of my life which has caused havoc to hatred I have known. It has made me speak again to men who, out of sheer drunken wantonness, ripped out the genitals of some Jew, beat children to death, who somehow shut their eyes to all fear of God, and then chose their way to satisfy man's terrible craving for happiness. What comparison to the force that has annihilated us is there other than Sodom and Gomorrah? Was there not one good man who should have been spared in these unlucky cities? Say: what of the swine that raced into the lake, their bellies full of devils? Is there no-one who will weep over the innocence of the swine?

Back now, after this great war, we journeyed to our erstwhile city. It was to prove that really we all belong to one another most tempted me to go, but also to prove that nothing, once absorbed, diminishes or increases in importance. There is no laughing into the face of one's past. The teddybear lying in the attic, fetch it down if you want to prove what I say. It was never taller or fatter, fluffier or warmer than it is now, the dust of your adolescence and years settled in its fur. What exists finds permanent accommodation in one's sanity. But what of that which has been destroyed?

In the cemetery of the town to which I returned, the graves are destroyed. Our Yew-Tree has gone, there's no trace left of it. I even borrowed the sexton's spade to look for some sign of the roots, which I had always imagined to be spread like an umbrella over our dead, but I found nothing. Besides, I suddenly lost all desire to seek our Yew-tree. For it was

then I discovered the spirit of man's new righteousness. What right had a man to build a house within a house? Why had my ancestors transported my great-grandfather's corpse from the United States where he had died, to our own town to lay him to rest among the family dead? Do we belong less together if we are apart? I do not plead for the precedence of the spirit. I plead for a new world.

A world where we need no country, no rivers to call our own, no mountains to boast of, forests to make us proud. Even language we can replace. I don't care what they did with our Yew-tree, our graves. Though I weep to the faces of the hooligans I do not seek revenge. Rather let hooligans trample upon me, wantonly destroy me. For pain, like the scream of anguish, exists only in silence. It has never been recorded in history, and never will. It is unimportant. Pain does not matter. Therefore can I bear to be involved in man's shame and insanity, therefore do I weep over our common guilt.