

WHAT I HEARD IN NORMANDY

ARNOLD WHITRIDGE

THE *curé* looked up at the ruins of his church. It was one of the many churches in Normandy that the Germans had used as an observation post, and which our Air Force had consequently bombed. "*Vous savez, Monsieur, cela nous fait mal aux reins.*" He leant against the wall of his garden, pressing his hands to his sides as if he were in pain. There was no play-acting about the gesture. The destruction of his church hurt him physically. He felt it in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps the ancients were not so far wrong in believing that the bowels are the seat of compassion rather than the heart.

I tried to express my sympathy, and with it the sympathy of the American people, but that was not exactly what he wanted. He was not blaming us for the destruction of his church, he was much too reasonable for that. As a loyal Frenchman who hated the Germans as much as a good *curé* could hate anybody, he would have been willing to see every village in his beloved Cotentin destroyed, provided the rest of France were liberated intact. "We must pay the price," he murmured, "and don't think we are not grateful to you. Your soldiers are magnificent; only"—here he paused, and I could see he was afraid of hurting my feelings—"I wonder if they understand how much it hurts. Not the loss of life, I am sure they understand that, but the houses, this church. You build so quickly and so easily in America, and then you move about so much more than we do, it must be hard for you to see what these stones mean to us."

The conversation was interrupted by Vivienne, the *curé's* *bonne*. Was Monsieur staying for lunch? Vivienne looked worried. Like every French cook she took pride in her *metier*. If an American officer were coming to lunch, she wanted to be given an opportunity to show what she could do, not suddenly to be called upon to cook impromptu. To everybody's relief I decided that I had to get back to headquarters, but the *curé* was so charmingly hospitable that he would not let me go without my promising to come back to lunch the following Sunday.

What a good lunch it was—cold eggs, boiled tongue with mushrooms, *puree de pommes* (for which mashed potatoes is an inadequate translation), raspberries and Isigny cheese. Except for coffee, which had long since disappeared from French tables, and bread, which had become scarce since our Air Force had disrupted communications and so prevented flour from the

Beauce reaching Normandy, it was like the innumerable good lunches in country inns that everybody who has ever travelled in France remembers. There was plenty of cider, and even a bottle of red wine which the *curé* had kept hidden away for four years. After lunch he brought out some Calvados, the native liqueur of Normandy, and I sat back to enjoy myself while he rolled me out his mind.

He talked intimately, as men do sometimes with strangers who, knowing nothing of their backgrounds or their hobby horses, are all the more ready to listen sympathetically. The dam of silence was broken, and it all came flooding out:—what he thought of the Germans, what he thought of his own people, and now what he thought of us. "Don't believe for a moment," he began, "that the Germans are correct. They stole everything, but their hypocrisy disgusted me even more than their stealing. At first they wanted to impress us with their courtesy. It was part of their policy never to say 'No' to any request. 'By all means, we will see what can be done.' That was the answer to every complaint. But when you came back week after week, and nothing ever was done, you began to see the cruelty behind their studied air of politeness." They even encouraged the Russian troops under their command, ex-prisoners who had been given the choice of joining the German army or slowly starving to death in a prison camp, to terrorize French women and children. Then if any Frenchman protested to the German authorities, they just shrugged their shoulders: "Oh, the Russians—we have long ago given up trying to discipline them. But after all, what can you expect from Bolshevists? You ought to understand them, they are your allies." And so the matter rested.

"But there must have been some unobjectionable Germans," I protested. "During four years, one or two at least must have made friends with the civilian population." Apparently not. Hitler was afraid that fraternizing might lead to a deterioration in morale. Accordingly, it was only the officers and a few non-commissioned officers who were billeted in private houses. The enlisted men lived in barracks outside the villages. Now and then one heard of a French girl having an illegitimate child by a German soldier, but not often. On the whole, the conduct of the civilians was "*tres digne*". The German authorities were said to have been willing to pay 3000 francs to any mother for an illegitimate child. These were sent back to the Reich, pre-

sumably for use as cannon fodder in the next war. The *curé* did not know for certain whether any such sale had actually taken place. He himself saw as little as possible of the Germans. Two officers lived in his house for several months, but his conversation with them was limited to "good morning" and "good evening". Germans never went to Mass, not even German priests, for that was forbidden. Only once did he see a German in his church during the whole occupation, and that man he suspected of having been sent to spy on him.

Obviously it was no good trying to get the *curé* to admit there was any such animal as a good German, if by "good" we mean some one who has decent standards and is determined to live by them. He did not vituperate the Germans, and I never heard him express any sentiment of revenge, but he was terribly clear-eyed. If there had ever been a spark of kindly feeling in Germany, the Nazi regimen had stamped it out. Even among themselves there was no ease or friendliness. No German dared speak his mind before his brother or his best friend, on account of the Gestapo. There was a "*regime de police*" that could never be relaxed for an instant.

The *curé's* indictment of the German occupation was all the more effective because it was not inspired by any personal grievance. He had been compelled, it is true, to travel on trains as a hostage ever since we had started bombing locomotives, but he bore no grudge against the Germans on this account. "*Matériellement je n'ai pas souffert, mais on souffre moralement*". What a world of anguish there was in that unemphatic statement!

For a proud people the indignity of occupation is hard to over-estimate. Not to be able to call your house your own, never to go out without permission after curfew, never to be able to turn on the radio without making sure there were no Germans within earshot, these things are the inevitable price that a conquered people must pay. But from the beginning the Germans made things ten times worse by systematically dividing Frenchmen among themselves. The myth of an unoccupied France may have fooled Petain and Weygand for a few weeks, but it did not fool anybody for long. There was not a corner of the national life into which the Germans did not insinuate themselves, and wherever they went they spread dissension.

As a former professor of French literature at Caen, the *curé* was particularly bitter over the attempt of the Vichy Education Minister to impose a view of German culture upon French

schoolchildren that bore no relation to the facts. For this purpose one of the texts selected for reading in what would correspond to first and second year high school was Madame de Stael's *De l'Allemagne*. Anybody familiar with that rather verbose essay in internationalism will remember that Madame de Stael gazed across the frontier through a rosy haze of *gemutlichkeit*. The idea of foisting upon a tortured France a conception of a kindly Kris Kringle Germany was too clumsy to succeed, but the fact that Vichy issued the texts heavily underscored for the benefit of the teachers showed how abjectly Germanophile the supposedly French administration had become. As for Petain, his edicts to the people proved only that he was luxuriating in his humiliation.

Like many serious minded Frenchmen, the *curé* felt that the most sinister aspect of the German occupation was the assault on French morale. France is a rich country, and even though the Germans looted everything they could lay their hands on, from potatoes to locomotives, it will not take her long to make a physical recovery. He reminded me of her resilience after the Franco-Prussian war. Yes, France would soon be rich again. Potatoes can be grown and locomotives can be built as efficiently as ever, but spiritual recovery is another matter. How far the cancer of collaboration has eaten into the body of France, no one knows. The very word "collaboration" is hard to define. Were the workmen in the Renault factories, who were turning out trucks for the Germans, collaborators? And, if so, were they more or less guilty than the poor miserable creatures whose heads were shaved because some one believed they had been living with German officers? Not more than five per cent trafficked with the enemy to the detriment of their own people, but the line between right and wrong, honour and dishonor, was very hard to fix. A farmer might be selling butter to the Germans at a huge profit instead of to his own people, and at the same time he might be risking his life by sheltering an airman of the Allies in his barn. Was he a traitor and a patriot at the same time, or just a good Frenchman who liked making a little money on the side? No one who has not lived under an occupation can realize the moral confusion it involves. The immediate welfare of one's own family and friends is always being pitted against the instinct of patriotism, and it is as a strong man indeed who would not sometimes beg a favor of the enemy.

The *curé* detested the Germans for many reasons; not least, because they brought with them an atmosphere of suspicion that

permeated the whole structure of French society. Wherever possible, they fanned local prejudices and fostered the antagonism between Catholics and Communists. In revenge, the French sowed the seeds of decay in the Nazi army by a wholesale campaign of bribery that extended from generals down to privates. Never was the art of lying more universally respected! The *curé* was perplexed by it all. As Napoleon said: "In war the vices and the virtues live together quite respectably." Would they separate as soon as the Germans were gone?

I asked him whether the confusion extended to politics as well as to morality. "*Mon Dieu,*" he exclaimed, "in politics the confusion is even worse. Certainly everybody admires de Gaulle," he went on in answer to my question, "but not everybody is a de Gaullist. They are grateful to him for having picked the French flag up out of the mud, but they don't like the men he has gathered around him." I mentioned a rich farmer in the neighborhood whom I had heard fulminating against the Communists in Algiers. "That is just it. The people here want de Gaulle to appoint a cabinet of gentlemen farmers from the Cotentin. France is too big for that."

"But, *mon père*, are you prepared to see Communists in de Gaulle's government?" "*Ma foi, oui!* There is not much to choose between an atheist and a Catholic who never goes to church. De Gaulle can't build a government just out of the men he finds personally sympathetic. Our people are all too ready to withdraw from politics, and to flatter themselves for doing so, whenever the choice of candidates does not entirely suit them. The Republic has always been cursed by an aristocracy that prided itself on its divorce from politics. That is one of the reasons why we have been entertaining Germans for the last four years."

I could see the *curé* was warming to his work. In another minute he would be galloping straight for Alsace-Lorraine and the Dreyfus case. It was not easy to hold him to 1944 when he wanted to head back to 1789, but the roar of American trucks down the street jerked him back to the present.

"We used to think you were a long time in coming, but now we see all this equipment, we wonder that you came as soon as you did. *Quelle organization!* The Germans had nothing to compare with it." He went on to describe the day of invasion—how he woke up one morning and saw the ships stretched out along the horizon as far as the eye could reach. Then as the trucks and tanks climbed up the beaches and started rumbling

down the French roads, he understood why we had taken so long. It was the equipment, the marvellous combination of American ingenuity and American mass production. How could the Germans with their horsedrawn vehicles compete with our Juggernaut?

Yes, he had guessed we would land just where we did. "*Je mets un peu coquetterie à vous le dire.*" He had been a soldier himself in the last war—in the artillery, and that gives you an eye for terrain. He knew we had to have a port, and he had picked Cherbourg as the most likely. No member of Gen. Eisenhower's staff could have followed the day-by-day progress of the armies with more enthusiasm, and nothing could have been more touching than his eagerness to make friends with the American soldier across the barrier of language. There is a good fairy that looks after Franco-American relations. Traditionally we are friends, and the very fact that most Frenchmen and Americans speak each other's language prevents misunderstanding.

The only thing that worried the *curé* was that we might not know how deeply grateful France was. The Norman is not an expansive fellow. He is the New Englander of Frenchmen, slow and cautious, but if a Norman himself was a little tentative at first, there was no hesitation about his children. They gravitated instinctively towards our soldiers, and the men loved it. In France as in England, their easy-going naturalness won all hearts. It was not only French territory that was being liberated, but the French spirit as well, and the symbol of that liberation was the American soldier—easy-going, friendly, resourceful, and perhaps most of all, confident.

The wife of the Mayor of *Ste. Mère Eglise* casually let drop a remark that epitomized the American temperament. She was describing the descent of our paratroopers upon her village. "How did you know they were Americans", I asked? "I knew them by their *allure dégagée*." That was just it. She spotted at once the native easy-going gait of the American soldier as something inherently different from the acquired precision of the Prussian. Implicit in that easy-going gait was an indescribable confidence, confidence in their leadership, confidence in their weapons, and of course supremely confident in the fundamental rightness of America. It was precisely this confidence that France lacked, and that the French people found so lovable in the American soldier.

Where could they hope to find it in their own country? Naturally the *curé* had no doubts on that question. The Faith was the only bulwark in time of trouble. As we picked our way through the rubble of the churchyard back to the road where I had left my jeep, the sun was shining full on a little stone Virgin that stood in front of his house. No guide book would have noticed her. Probably she had been carved by the local stone mason. He had caught the same combination of gaiety and dignity that radiated from the *curé* himself. I waved goodbye, and joined a long convoy that was lurching down the road into Isigny. The doughboys in the truck behind me waved too. The *curé* and the little stone Virgin were still smiling as we swung around the corner.