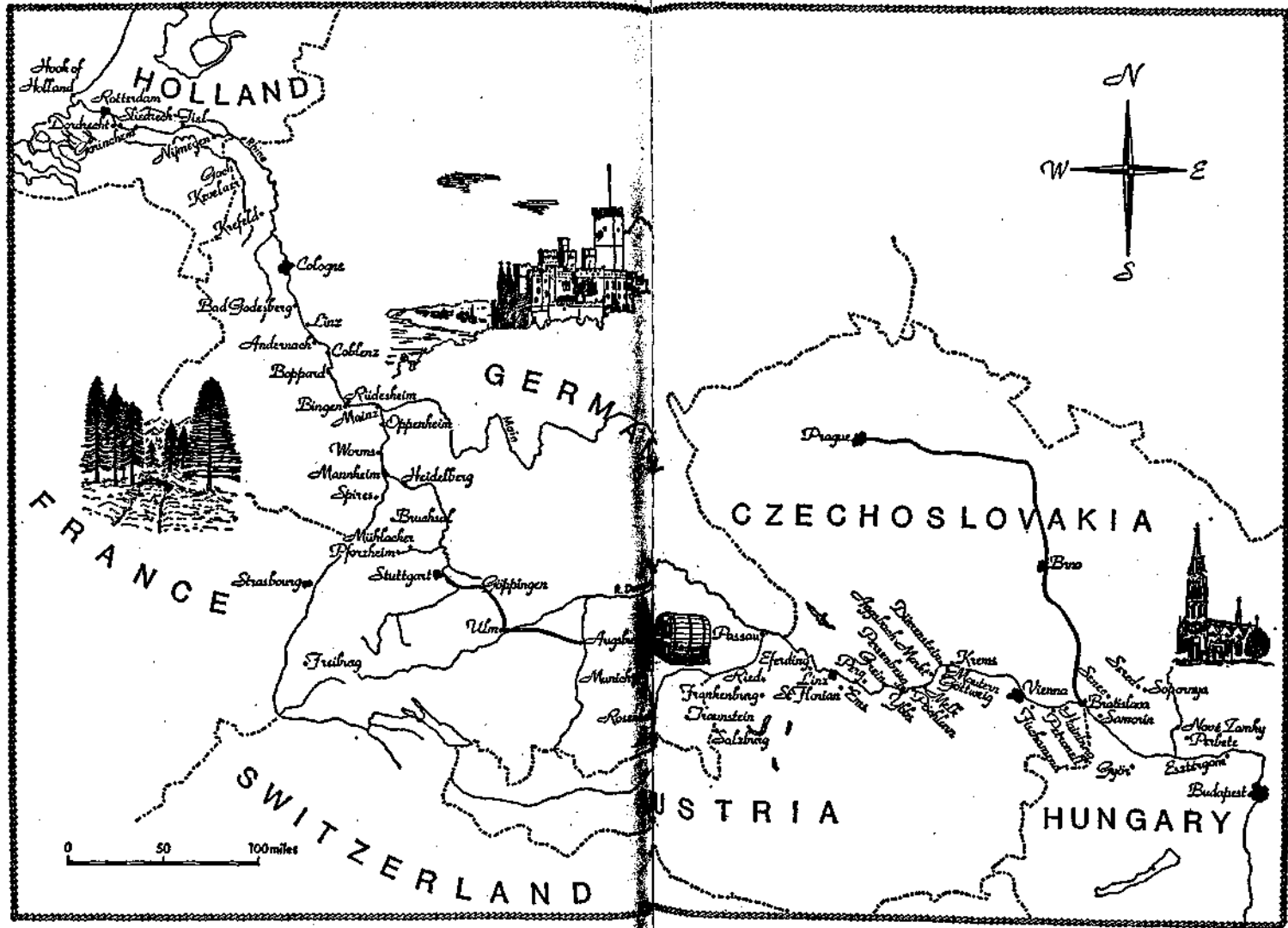


HARRY TRAVELLING BRITONS WEEK 12
(C. & E. EUROPE)



EIGHT

The Edge of the Slav World

THE friend who had driven me through the eastern suburbs of Vienna drew up under the barbican of Fischamend: 'Shall we drive on?' he asked. 'Just a bit further?' Unawares, we had gone too far already. The road ran straight and due east beside the Danube. It was very tempting; all horsepower corrupts. But rather reluctantly, I fished out my rucksack, waved to the driver on his return journey to Vienna and set off.

Trees lined the road in a diminishing vista. The magpies that flew to and fro in the thin yellow sunshine were beyond all joy-and-sorrow computation and all other thoughts were chased away, as I approached the little town of Petronell, by wondering what a distant object could be that was growing steadily larger as I advanced. It turned out to be a Roman triumphal gateway standing in the middle of a field like a provincial version of the Arch of Titus; alone, enormous and astonishing. The vault sprang from massive piers and the marble facings had long fallen away, laying bare a battered and voluminous core of brick and rubble. Rooks crowded all over it and hopped among the half-buried fragments that scattered the furrows. Visible for miles, the arch of Carnuntum must have amazed the Marcomanni and the Quadi on the opposite bank. Marcus Aurelius wintered here three years, striding cloaked across the ploughland amid the hovering pensées, alternately writing his meditations and subduing the barbarians on the other side of the Danube. His most famous victory – fought in a deep canyon and celestially reinforced by thunder and hail – was known as the Miracle of the Thundering Legions. It is commemorated on the Antonine Column in Rome.

The Marchfeld – the moss-land and swamp on the other shore – was another region that history has singled out for slaughter: wars between Romans and the Germanic tribes at first, dim clashes of Ostrogoths, Huns, Avars and the Magyars later on, then great medieval pitched-battles between Bohemia and Hungary and the

Empire. Archduke Charles, charging flag in hand through the reeds, won the first allied victory over Napoleon at Aspern, a few miles upstream and the field of Wagram was only just out of sight.

In the late afternoon I knocked on the gate of Schloss Deutsch-Altenburg – a wooded castle on the Danube's bank. Friends in Vienna had asked the owner to put me up for the night and old Graf Ludwigstorff, after a kind welcome, handed me over to his pretty daughter Maritschi. We gazed at the Roman tombstones in the museum and the marble and bronze busts. There were fragments of a marble maenad and a complete shrine of Mithras, companion to all the others that scattered the Roman frontier from Hadrian's Wall to the Black Sea.

Snowdrops were out along the tow-path. We played ducks and drakes, sending the pebbles skimming among the floating ice until it was too dark to see them. Then, stepping through the driftwood, we got back in time for tea. The windows were only separated from the river by a clump of trees, and any lingering pangs for lost Vienna soon dissolved in the friendly lamplight.

I was through the barbican in the old walled town of Hainburg early next day. Castled hills rose from the shore, and soon, under the ruins of Theben, the battle-haunted fens came to an end on the other side of the river. Below this steep rock, the March – which is the Czech Morava – flowed into the Danube from the north, marking the Czechoslovak border. The Wolfstal, the narrow trough between the two spurs that rose on either side of the Danube, was the inmemorial sally-port that led to Hungary and the wild east: the last bastion to be stormed by Asian invaders before laying siege to Vienna.

I was excited by the thought that the frontiers of Austria and Czechoslovakia and Hungary were about to converge. Though separated from it by the river, I was opposite Czechoslovakian territory already; I planned to wheel left into the Republic and attack Hungary later on from the flank. In reality I was even closer than that: I was wandering across a field when a man in uniform began shouting from the dyke-road overhead. Where the devil did I think I was going? It was the Austrian frontier post.

'You were walking straight into Czechoslovakia!' the official said reproachfully as he stamped my passport. I left the eagles and the red-white-red road barrier behind. The next frontier, after a stretch of no man's land, was closed by a barrier of red, white and blue. Another rubber-stamp was smacked down by a broad-faced Czechoslovak official with the Lion of Bohemia on his cap. 'My fourth country,' I thought exultantly.

In a little while I got to an enormous bridge. Its great frame, the masts and trees and old buildings congregated at the further bridgehead and the steep ascending city above them had been visible for miles. It was the old city of Pressburg, re-baptized with the Slav name of Bratislava when it became part of the new Czechoslovak Republic. The climbing roofs were dominated by a hill and the symmetry of the huge gaunt castle and the height of its corner-towers gave it the look of an upside-down table.

I reached the middle of the bridge at the same moment as a chain of barges and leaned over to watch them nose their way upstream through the flotsam. The ice-fragments were beginning to get furry at the edges. Colliding with them softly, the vessels disappeared under the bridge one by one and emerged the other side in the wake of a sturdy tug. It flew the Yugoslav colours and the name *Beograd* was painted along the sooty bows in Cyrillic and Latin characters. The long-drawn-out wail of the siren gave way to the coughing staccato of the engine. The funnel puffed out a non-stop sequence of smoke balloons that lingered on the still air as the procession grew smaller in the distance, in a slowly-dissolving dotted line. The barges toiled against the current, sunk to their gunwales under a tarpaulined cargo. But in a day or two - I thought with sudden envy - they would be stealing into the Wachau and waking the two-noted echo of Dürnstein.

Listening to the unfamiliar hubbub of Slovak and Magyar the other side, I realized I was at last in a country where the indigenous sounds meant nothing at all; it was a relief to hear some German as well. I managed to find my way to the Bank where my friend Hans Ziegler held minor sway and ask if the Herr Doktor was in his office; and that evening I was safe under a roof which was to be my haven for days.

Hans and I had made friends in Vienna. He was nine years older than I. His family lived in Prague and, like many Austrians at the break-up of the Empire, they had found themselves citizens of the new-born Republic, tied there beyond uprooting by old commitments; in this case, by a family bank. Hans helped to run the branch of an associate establishment in Bratislava - or Pressburg, as he still firmly called it, just as ex-Hungarians stubbornly clung to *Pozony** - and felt rather cut off from life. Vienna was his true home. Apart from this, England was his favourite. He had many friends there and happy memories of college lawns and country sojourns. His fondness for architecture coincided with my early fumbings in the same direction; and it was from him, I am certain, that I first heard the great names of Fischer von Erlach and Hildebrandt and the Asam family. 'Come and stay on your way to Hungary and cheer me up,' he had said. 'I get so bored there.'

To my uncritical eye Bratislava didn't seem too bad. Anyway, Hans's humorous gift turned the society of the place into a comic and entertaining scene. Whenever he had a free moment, we explored the surviving relics of the town, plunging through arched barbicans and along twisting lanes in our search; journeys which ended with cakes stuffed with nuts and poppy-seeds in a wonderful Biedermeier café called the *Konditorei Maier*, or sipping stronger stuff in a little vaulted bar hard by. At certain hours, all that was dashing in the town assembled there like forest creatures gathering at their water-hole.

Hans wasn't alone in his critical feelings about Bratislava. Most of the people we saw would have agreed - a few worldly-wise Austrians, that is, some breezy Hungarian squires from nearby estates, the amusing Jewish manager of the brewery, a Canon of the Cathedral chapter expert in Magyar history, and the local eccentrics and a few of the local beauties. 'You should have seen it before the War!' - this was the general burden of those who were old enough to remember. The great days of the city were long past. During the centuries when all Hungary south of the Danube

* The word is pronounced as though it were French and spelt *Pôjogne*, with a heavy stress on the first syllable.

was occupied by the Turks, the city was the capital of the unconquered remainder of the Kingdom on the north side of the river: the modern province of Slovakia, that is to say. The Kings of Hungary were crowned here in the gothic Cathedral from 1536 to 1784: Habsburgs by then, thanks to the able marriage policy of the dynasty, by which the Hungarian crown had become an appanage of the Austrian ruling house. When the Turks were flung back, the accumulated splendours of the city flowed downstream. The palaces remained, but their incumbents settled in rival mansions that sprang up on the slopes of reconquered Buda. In 1811, as though immolating itself in protest, the great royal castle – the upturned table on the hill – caught fire and burned to a cinder. It was never rebuilt, and the enormous gutted shell, which still looked intact from a distance, sulked on its hilltop as a memento of fled splendour. For its old Hungarian overlords the city's recent change of nationality and name and nature seemed the ultimate sorrow.

'Östlich von Wien fängt der Orient an.* I had picked up this phrase of Metternich's somewhere, and it kept reminding me that the crescent moon of the Turks had fluttered along the southern bank of the river for nearly two centuries. But there was another feeling in the air as well, unconnected with the vanished Ottomans, which was new and hard to define. Perhaps it had something to do with the three names of the city and the trilingual public notices and street names: the juxtaposition of tongues made me feel I had crossed more than a political frontier. A different cast had streamed on stage and the whole plot had changed.

Except for balalaika-players in night-clubs, the Slovak and the occasional Czech in the streets were the first Slav sounds I had ever heard. I learnt all I could about how they had come here but even so, there was something mysterious about that vast advent. It was so quiet: a sudden Dark Ages outflow, in the twilight regions between the Vistula and the Pripet Marshes, from a staunchless spring of tribes. The noisy upheavals of the Germanic races and their famous *Drang* westwards must have muffled other

* 'East of Vienna, the Orient begins.'

sounds while the Slavs flowed south through the Carpathians. The settlements of the Czechs and the Slovaks were no more than early landmarks in this voluminous flux. On it went: over the fallen fences of the Roman Empire; past the flat territories of the Avars; across the great rivers and through the Balkan passes and into the dilapidated provinces of the Empire of the East: silently soaking in, spreading like liquid across blotting paper with the speed of a game of Grandmother's Steps. Chroniclers only noticed them every century or so and at intervals of several hundred miles. They filled up Eastern Europe until their spread through the barbarous void was at last absorbed by the greater numbers and the ancient and ailing realm of Byzantium.* Their eastward expansion and hegemony only stopped at the Behring Straits.

There was no ambiguity about the events that split the Slav world in two. The Magyars, at the end of their journey from faraway pastures a thousand miles north-east of the Caspian, broke through the Carpathian passes in 895. Although they had been some centuries on the way, it was a demon-king entrance – the flames and the thunder were accompanied by shouts from saddle to saddle in the Ugro-Finnish branch of the Ural-Altai languages – and everything went down before it. The desert tract east of the Danube, abruptly cleared of the newly arrived Bulgars and the last of the shadowy Avars, became the Great Hungarian Plain at last; and the Slav kingdom of Great Moravia, the vital link between the northern and the southern Slavs, broke up for ever under the newcomers' hoofs. Their arrival had followed the well-known pattern of barbarian invasions. Indeed, the analogy between the Huns of Attila and the Magyars of Arpád was close enough for the West to misname not only the new arrivals, but the land where they took root. But, after a few decades of spirited havoc all over western and southern Europe, the pattern changed. Within a century, the conquests of these heathen horsemen had

* But by no means at once. Even in the Mani, the southern tip of Europe where I am writing these pages, there are traces of their progress: the names of hill villages a couple of miles from my table, incomprehensible here, would be understood at once on the banks of the Don.

turned into one of the most powerful and resplendent of the western states, a realm with enormous frontiers and a saint for a king. From the very first, the kingdom included all the lands of the Slovaks and the frontier remained unchanged for the ten centuries that separate Arpád from President Wilson. A few years ago, they had been detached from the crown of St Stephen and given to the new Republic of Czechoslovakia. If the transferred province had contained only Slovaks, it would have been painful to the Hungarians, but ethnologically just. Unfortunately it contained a wide strip of land to the north of the Danube whose inhabitants were Magyars: a fierce amputation for Hungary, a double-edged gift for Czechoslovakia, and rife with future trouble. The German-speakers were descendants of the Teutonic citizens who had helped to populate most of the cities of Central Europe.

Few readers can know as little about these new regions as I did. But, as they were to be the background for the next few hundred miles of travel, I felt more involved in them every day. All at once I was surrounded by fresh clues – the moulding on a window, the cut of a beard, overheard syllables, an unfamiliar shape of a horse or a hat, a shift of accent, the taste of a new drink, the occasional unfamiliar lettering – and the accumulating fragments were beginning to cohere like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Meanwhile, further afield, the shift of mountains and plains and rivers and the evidence of enormous movements of races gave me the feeling of travelling across a relief map where the initiative lay wholly with the mineral world. It evicted with drought and ice, beckoned with water and grazing, decoyed with mirages and tilted and shifted populations, like the hundreds-and-thousands in a glass-topped balancing game; steering languages, breaking them up into tribes and dialects, assembling and confronting kingdoms, grouping civilizations, channelling beliefs, guiding armies and blocking the way to philosophies and styles of art and finally giving them a relenting shove through the steeper passes. These thoughts invested everything with drama. As I listened to the muffled vowels of the Slovaks and the traffic-jams of consonants and the explosive spurts of dentals and sibilants, my mind's eye automatically suspended an imaginary backcloth of the Slav heartlands behind the speakers: three reeds on a horizontal line, the map-makers' symbol

for a swamp, infinitely multiplied; spruce and poplar forests, stilt houses and fish-traps, frozen plains and lakes where the ice-holes were black with waterfowl. Then, at the astonishing sound of Magyar – a dactylic canter where the ictus of every initial syllable set off a troop of identical vowels with their accents all swerving one way like wheat-ears in the wind – the scene changed. For some reason I surveyed this from above – prompted, perhaps, by a subconscious hint from *Sohrab and Rustam?* – as though I were a crane migrating across Asia. League upon league of burnt-up pasture unfurled. The glaciers of the Urals or the Altai hung on the skyline and threads of smoke rose up from collapsible cities of concertina-walled black felt pavilions while a whole nation of ponies grazed. Everything seemed to corroborate these inklings. Wandering in the back-lanes on the second day I was there, I went into a lively drinking-hall with the Magyar word *VENDEGLŐ* painted in large letters across the front pane and bumped into a trio of Hungarian farmers. Enmeshed in smoke and the fumes of plum-brandy with paprika-pods sizzling on the charcoal, they were hiccupping festive dactyls to each other and unsteadily clinking their tenth thimblefuls of palinka: vigorous, angular-faced, dark-clad and dark-glanced men with black moustaches tipped down at the corners of their mouths. Their white shirts were buttoned at the throat. They wore low-crowned black hats with narrow brims and high boots of shiny black leather with a Hessian notch at the knee. Hunnish whips were looped about their wrists. They might have just dismounted after sacking the palace of the Moravian kral.

My next call, only a few doors away, was a similar haunt of sawdust and spilt liquor and spit, but, this time, *KRČMA* was daubed over the window. All was Slav within. The tow-haired Slovaks drinking there were dressed in conical fleece hats and patched sheepskin-jerkins with the matted wool turned inwards. They were shod in canoe-shaped cowhide moccasins. Their shanks, cross-gartered with uncured thongs, were bulbously swaddled in felt that would only be unwrapped in the spring. Swamp-and-conifer men they looked, with faces tundra-blank and eyes as blue and as vague as unmapped lakes which the plum-brandy was misting over. But they might just as well have been swallowing

hydromel a thousand years earlier, before setting off to track the cloven spoor of the aurochs across a frozen Trans-Carpathian bog.

Liquor distilled from peach and plum, charcoal-smoke, paprika, garlic, poppy seed – these hints to the nostril and the tongue were joined by signals that addressed themselves to the ear, softly at first and soon more insistently: the flutter of light hammers over the wires of a zither, glissandos on violin strings that dropped and swooped in a mesh of unfamiliar patterns, and, once, the liquid notes of a harp. They were harbingers of a deviant and intoxicating new music that would only break loose in full strength on the Hungarian side of the Danube.

In the outskirts of the town these hints abounded: I felt myself drawn there like a pin to a magnet. Half-lost in lanes full of humble grocers' shops and harness-makers and corn-chandlers and smithies, I caught a first glimpse of Gypsies. Women with chocolate-coloured babies were begging among the pony-carts and a brown Carpathian bear, led by a dancing-master dark as sin, lumbered pigeon-toed over the cobbles. Every few seconds, his leader jangled a tambourine to put the animal through his paces; then he laid a wooden flute to his lips and blew an ascending trill of minims. Sinuous and beautiful fortune-tellers, stagily coifed and ear-ringed and flounced in tiers of yellow and magenta and apple-green, perfunctorily shuffled their cards and proffered them in dog-eared fans as they strolled through the crowds, laying soft-voiced and unrelenting siege to every stranger they met. Sinking flush with the landscape, the town quickly fell to pieces and gave way to an ambiguous fringe of huts and wagons and fires and winter flies where a tangle of brown children scampered and wrestled in the mud among the skirmishing and coupling dogs. I was soon sighted. This far-off glimpse launched a pattering of small feet and a swarm of snot-caked half-naked Mowglis who pummelled each other for precedence as they raced on their quarry. Clambering over each other, they patted and pulled and wheedled in Hungarian and reviled each other in Romany. An old blacksmith, bronze-hued as an Inca, egged them on under the semblance of rebuke in a stream of words from beyond the Himalayas. (His anvil, with a row of horse-nails laid out, was stapled to a tree-stump and one brown foot worked the bellows of a little forge.) I

gave a small coin to the nearest. This wrought the onslaught of his rivals to a frenzy and their shrill litanies rose to such a pitch that I scattered my small change like danegeld and retreated. At last, when they saw there was nothing left, they trotted back to the huts, exchanging blows and recriminations. All except one, that is, a hardy chestnut-coloured boy about five years old wearing nothing at all except a black trilby that must have been his father's. It was so big for him that, though he constantly wriggled his head from side to side as he plucked and pleaded, the hat remained stationary. But there was nothing left. Suddenly giving up, he pelted downhill to join the others.

Pincers in hand, the old blacksmith had watched all this with the mare's near-fore hoof cupped in his lap while her colt tugged thirstily. A hush had spread among the wagons and the twinkling fires when I last looked back. The Gypsies were settling down to their evening hedgehog and dusk was beginning to fall.

Bratislava was full of secrets. It was the outpost of a whole congeries of towns where far-wanderers had come to a halt, and the Jews, the most ancient and famous of them, were numerous enough to give a pronounced character to the town. In Vienna, I had caught fleeting glimpses of the inhabitants of the Leopoldstadt quarter, but always from a distance. Here, very early on, I singled out one of the many Jewish coffee houses. Feeling I was in the heart of things, I would sit rapt there for hours. It was as big as a station and enclosed like an aquarium with glass walls. Moisture dripped across the panes and logs roared up a stove-chimney of black tin pipes that zigzagged with accordion-pleated angles through the smoky air overhead. Conversing and arguing and contracting business round an archipelago of tables, the dark-clad customers thronged the place to bursting point. (Those marble squares did duty as improvised offices in thousands of cafés all through Central Europe and the Balkans and the Levant.) The minor hubbub of Magyar and Slovak was outnumbered by voices speaking German, pronounced in the Austrian way or with the invariable Hungarian stress on the initial syllable. But quite often the talk was in Yiddish, and the German strain in the language always made me think that I was going to catch the ghost of a

meaning. But it eluded me every time; for the dialect – or the language, rather – though rooted in medieval Franconian German, is complicated by queer syntax and a host of changes and diminutives. Strange gutturals, Slav accretions and many words and formations remembered from the Hebrew have contributed to its idiosyncrasy. The up-and-down, rather nasal lilt makes it more odd than harmonious to an outsider but it is linguistically of enormous interest: a vernacular in which the history of the Jews of northern Europe and the centuries of their ebb and flow between the Rhine and Russia are all embedded. (Two years later, in London, when I felt I knew German a little better, I went twice to the Yiddish Theatre in Whitechapel; but I found the dialogue on the stage more fugitive than ever.) There were rabbis in the café now and then, easily singled out by their long beards and beaver hats and by black overcoats down to their heels. Occasionally they were accompanied by Talmudic students of about my age, some even younger, who wore small skullcaps or black low-crowned hats with the wide brims turned up, and queer elf-locks trained into corkscrews which hung beside their ears. In spite of these, pallor and abstraction stamped some of these faces with the beauty of young saints. They had a lost look about them as if they were permanently startled when they were away from their desks. Their eyes – bright blue, or as dark as midnight oil – were expanded to the innocent width of the eyes of gazelles. Sometimes they had a nearly blind expression; years of peering at texts seemed to have put their gaze out of focus for a wider field. I had visions of them, candle-lit behind sealed and cobwebbed windows, with the thick lenses of their spectacles gleaming close to the page as they re-unravelling Holy Writ: texts that had been commented on, re-censured, annotated and bickered over in Babylon, Cordova, Kairouan, Vilna, Troyes and Mainz and Narbonne by fourteen centuries of scholiasts. Mists of dark or red fluff blurred a few of those chins that no razor touched, and their cheeks were as pale as the wax that lit the page while the dense black lettering swallowed up their youth and their lives.*

* These days marked the resumption of an old obsession with alphabets. The back pages of a surviving notebook are full of Old Testa-

I longed to attend a religious service, but without the guidance of some initiate friend, didn't dare. This diffidence was broken many years later by Dr Egon Wellesz' book on Byzantine plain-song. In apostolic times, he writes, the Psalms formed the backbone of the Christian liturgy, chanted just as they were in the great temples of Jerusalem and Antioch. The same music is the common ancestor of the Jewish service, the chants of the Greek Orthodox Church and Gregorian plain-song; of the last, the *cantus peregrinus*, which appropriately accompanies the chanting of *In exitu Israel*, is considered the closest. Spurred by this, I ventured into the magnificent Carolean Portuguese-Dutch Synagogue in Artillery Row. By good luck, a visiting Sephardic choir of great virtuosity was singing, and I thought, perhaps rather sanguinely, that I could detect a point of union between the three kinds of singing. It was like singling out familiar notes faintly carried by the breeze from the other side of a dense forest of time. There was a comparably moving occasion many years later. Wandering about north-western Greece, I made friends with the Rabbi of Yannina, and he invited me to attend the Feast of Purim. The old, once

ment names laboriously transliterated into Hebrew characters, complete with their diacritics. There are everyday words copied down as well, for the ancient script was also used in the Yiddish vernacular on shop-fronts and in the newspapers I saw in cafés. (There are even words, similarly transliterated on later pages, from the old Spanish Ladino of the Constantinople and Salonica Jews.) Next, symptoms from the final stages of this journey, come Cyrillic and Arabic: Arab letters were still used among the unreformed Turks in Bulgaria and in Greek Thrace. There are struggles with obsolete Glagolitic and bold attempts at the twisted pothooks and hangers of the Armenians who scattered the Balkans like little colonies of toucans. The brief catalogue ends with a flood of Greek. The magic of all these letters largely depended on their inscrutability: when I learnt a bit of Bulgarian, Cyrillic lost some of its *mana*. But Arabic and Hebrew retain theirs to the last. Even today, a toothpaste advertisement in Arabic suggests the *Thousand and One Nights*, a message in Hebrew over a shop window – 'Umbrellas Repaired on the Spot', or 'Daniel Kisch, Koscher Würste und Salami' – is heavy with glamour. The symbols carry a hint of the Kabala, an echo of Joshua's ram's horns and a whisper from the Song of Songs.

crowded Sephardic Jewish quarter inside Ali Pasha's tremendous walls was already falling to ruin. The rabbi had assembled the little group which was all that had survived the German occupation and come safe home. Cross-legged on the low-railed platform and slowly turning the two staves of the scroll, he intoned the book of Esther – describing the heroine's intercession with King Ahasuerus and the deliverance of the Jews from the plot of Haman – to an almost empty synagogue.

The Schlossberg, the rock which dominates the town with its colossal gutted castle, had a bad name, and I hadn't climbed many of the steps of the lane before understanding why. One side of the path dropped among trees and rocks, but on the other, each of the hovels which clung to the mountain was a harlot's nest. Dressed in their shifts with overcoats over their shoulders or glittering in brightly-coloured and threadbare satin, the inmates leaned conversationally akimbo against their door-jambs, or peered out with their elbows propped on the half-doors of their cells and asked passers-by for a light for their cigarettes. Most of them were handsome and seasoned viragos, often with peroxidized hair as lifeless as straw and paint was laid on their cheeks with a doll-maker's boldness. There were a few monsters and a number of beldames. Here and there a pretty newcomer resembled a dropped plant about to be trodden flat. Many sat indoors on their pallets, looking humble and forlorn, while Hungarian peasants and Czech and Slovak soldiers from the garrison clumped past in ascending and descending streams. During the day, except for the polyglot murmur of invitation, it was rather a silent place. But it grew noisier after dark when shadows brought confidence and the plum-brandy began to bite home. It was only lit by cigarette ends and by an indoor glow that silhouetted the girls on their thresholds. Pink lights revealed the detail of each small interior: a hastily tidied bed, a tin basin and a jug, some lustral gear and a shelf displaying a bottle of solution, pox-foiling and gentian-hued; a couple of dresses hung on a nail. There would be a crucifix, or an oleograph of the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption, and perhaps a print of St Wenceslas, St John Nepomuk or St Martin of Tours.

Postcards of male and female film stars were stuck in the frames of the looking-glasses, and scattered among them snapshots of Maszaryk, Admiral Horthy and Archduke Otto declared the allegiance of the inmates. A saucepan of water simmered over charcoal; there was little else. The continuity of these twinkling hollows was only broken when one of the incumbents charmed a stooping soldier under her lintel. Then a dowsed lamp and the closing of a flimsy door, or a curtain strung from nail to nail, masked their hasty embraces from the passers-by. This staircase of a hundred harlots was trodden hollow by decades of hobnails, and the lights, slanting across the night like a phosphorescent diagonal in a honeycomb, ended in the dark. One felt, but could not see, the huge battlemented ruin above. At the lower end, the diffused lights of the city cataracted downhill.

This was the first quarter of its kind I had seen. Without knowing quite how I had arrived, I found myself wandering there again and again, as an auditor more than an actor. The tacit principle to flinch at nothing on this journey quailed here. These girls, after all, were not their Viennese sisters, who could slow up a bishop with the lift of an eyelash. And even without this embargo, the retribution that I thought inevitable – no nose before the year was out – would have kept me safely out of doors. The lure was more complicated. Recoil, guilt, sympathy, attraction, *romantisme du bordel* and *nostalgie de la boue* wove a heady and sinister garland. It conjured up the abominations in the books of the Prophets and the stews of Babylon and Corinth and scenes from Lucian, Juvenal, Petronius and Villon. It was aesthetically astonishing too, a Jacob's ladder tilted between the rooftops and the sky, crowded with shuffling ghosts and with angels long fallen and moulting. I could never tire of it.

Loitering there one evening, and suddenly late for dinner, I began running downhill and nearly collided in the shadows with a figure that was burlier than the rest of us and planted like a celebrity in the centre of a dim and respectful ring. When the bystanders drew to one side, it turned out to be the brown Carpathian bear, unsteadily upright in their midst. His swart companion was at hand, and as I sped zigzagging among my

into the distance, snow-covered and out of sight beyond the furthest ceiling of cloud. The invisible watershed shares its snowfalls with the Polish slopes and the tremendous Carpathian barrier, forested hiding-place of boars and wolves and bears, climbs and sweeps for hundreds of miles beyond the reach of even memory's eye. It towers above southern Poland and the Ukraine and the whole length of Rumania in a thousand-mile-long boomerang-shaped curve until it retreats west again, subsides and finally drops into the lower Danube at the Iron Gates for its underwater meeting with the Great Balkan Range.

From the foot of the castle's north-western tower, a ravine sauntered towards Moravia. Then, as I rotated the beam of my glance westward, the valley-framed fragment of the Marchfield – penultimate glimpse of Maria Theresa's kind world – wheeled back into view. The western edge of the plain melted into the Leitha mountains of Lower Austria and the glimmering Neusiedlersee. This was the Burgenland, taken from Hungary two decades earlier to compensate Austria for the loss of the South Tyrol. It was once the most southern region of the vanished kingdom of Great Moravia, the last connecting filament which still united the North and the South Slavs when the Magyars sundered them for ever.

Craning from these ramparts and peering beyond the long and winding lake that was just out of sight, a giant with a telescope could have spotted the Italianate palace of the Eszterházys at Eisenstadt. He could also have picked out the chapel and the private theatre and the tiled roof under which Haydn had lived and composed for thirty years. A few miles further on, this giant would have pin-pointed the dairy-farm where Liszt was born – his father was a steward in the same music-loving family. A group of local noblemen subscribed for the young composer to study in Paris. Later on, they presented him with a sword of honour to cut a dash with in the courts of the West. It was just a thousand years since their pagan ancestors, who could only count up to seven, had drawn rein here. I liked to think of those country dynasts, with their theatres and their sword of honour and their passion for music. The memory of the two great composers hallowed the region and seemed to scatter the southern skyline with notes.

My glance, having completed its circle, veered over the Hungarian border again and followed the eastward rush of the clouds. I should be on the march there next day.

Or so I thought.

NINE

Prague under Snow

BUT next evening, when I should have been finding somewhere to sleep after the first day's march in Hungary, Hans and I were unfolding our napkins under the pink lampshades of the dining-car while the night train to Prague whirled us full tilt in the opposite direction. Hans, who had taken my Central European education in hand, said it would be a shame to go gallivanting further east without seeing the old capital of Bohemia. I couldn't possibly afford the trip but he had abolished all doubts by a smile and a raised hand enjoining silence. I had been gaining skill, when involved in doings above my station, at accepting this tempering of the wind to the shorn lamb. The banknote I flourished in restaurants, like Groucho Marx's dollar-bill on a length of elastic, grew more tattered with each airing. I strove to make my protests sound sincere, but they were always brushed aside with amiable firmness.

Falling asleep after dinner, we woke for a moment in the small hours as the train came to a halt in a vast and silent station. The infinitesimal specks of snow that hovered in the beam of the station lamps were falling so slowly that they hardly seemed to move. A goods train at another platform indicated the sudden accessibility of Warsaw. PRAHA - BRNO - BRESLAU - LODZ - WARZAVA. The words were stencilled across the trucks; the momentary vision of a sledded Polack jingled across my mind's eye. When the train began to move, the word BRNO slid away in the opposite direction then BRNO! BRNO! BRNO! The dense syllable flashed past the window at decreasing intervals and we fell asleep again and plunged on through the Moravian dark and into Bohemia.

At breakfast time, we climbed down into the awakening capital.

Stripped of the customary approach on foot, Prague remains distinct from all the other towns of this journey. Memory en-

circles it with a wreath, a smoke-ring and the paper lattice of a valentine. I might have been shot out of a gun through all three of them and landed on one of its ancient squares fluttering with the scissor-work and the vapour and the foliage that would have followed me in the slipstream. The trajectory had carried Hans and me back into the middle of winter. All the detail - the uprush of the crockets, the processions of statues along the coping of bridges and the levitated palaces - were outlined with snow; and, the higher the buildings climbed, the more densely the woods enfolded the ancient town. Dark with nests, skeleton trees lifted the citadel and the cathedral above the tops of an invading forest and filled the sky with cawing and croaking.

It was a bewildering and captivating town. The charm and the kindness of Hans's parents and his brothers were a marvellous enhancement of it, for an articulate enthusiasm for life stamped them all; and, in borrowed evening plumage that night, among the candle-lit faces of an animated dinner party, I first understood how fast was the prevailing pace. Hans we know. Heinz, the eldest brother, a professor of political theory at the University, looked more like a poet or a musician than a don and the ideas he showered about him were stamped with inspiration. Paul, the youngest and a few years older than me, was touched by the same grace. Those candles, rekindled now for a moment, also reveal their kind parents, and Heinz's dark and beautiful wife. There is also a remarkable relation-in-law of hers, a man of great age and originality, called Pappi, or Haupt zu Pappenheim. His talk, rooted in a picaresque life all over the world, emerged in a headlong rush of omniscience and humour. (My seventeenth-century obsession connected the name at once with the great cavalry commander in the Thirty Years War, one who had sought out Gustavus Adolphus at Lützen, as Rupert had sought out Cromwell at Marston Moor, to be struck down at the same moment as the King in another part of the field. His relation's discourse had some of the same dash.)

Much later the scene shifted from these candles to a cave-like nightclub where silhouettes floated past on a tide of cigarette smoke, and the talk - abetted by syphon-hiss and cork-pop, and encouraged rather than hindered by the blues and the muted

cymbals and the wailing saxophone – flowed unshakably on. It culminated in marvellously abstruse and inventive theories, launched by Heinz, about Rilke and Werfel and the interrelation of Kafka's Castle – as yet unread by me – and the actual citadel that dominated the capital. When we emerged, the great pile itself was still wrapped in the dark, but only just.

As I followed Hans's zigzag and switchback course all over the steep city, it occurred to me that hangovers are not always harmful. If they fall short of the double-vision which turns Salisbury Cathedral into Cologne they invest scenery with a lustre which is unknown to total abstainers. Once we were under the lancets of St Vitus's Cathedral, a second conviction began to form. Prague was the recapitulation and the summing-up of all I had gazed at since stepping ashore in Holland, and more; for that slender nave and the airy clerestory owed spiritual allegiance far beyond the Teutonic heartland, and the Slav world. They might have sprung up in France under the early Valois or in Plantagenet England.

The last of the congregation were emerging to a fickle momentary sunlight. Indoors the aftermath of incense, as one might say with a lisp, still floated among the clustered piers. Enconced in their distant stalls, an antiphonal rearguard of canons was intoning Nones.

Under the diapered soffits and sanctuary lamps of a chantry, a casket like a brocaded ark of the covenant enclosed the remains of a saint. Floating wicks and rows of candles lit up his effigy overhead: they revealed a mild medieval sovereign holding a spear in his hand and leaning on his shield. It was Good King Wenceslas, no less. The confrontation was like a meeting with Jack the Giant Killer or Old King Cole . . . English carol-singers, Hans told me as we knelt in a convenient pew, had promoted him in rank. The sainted Czech prince – ancestor of a long line of Bohemian kings, however – was murdered in 934. And there he lay, hallowed by his countrymen for the last thousand years.

Outside, except for the baroque top to the presiding belfry, the cathedral itself might have been an elaborate gothic reliquary. From the massed upward thrust of its buttresses to the stickle-back ridge of its high-pitched roof it was spiked with a forest of

perpendiculars. Up the corner of the transepts, stairs in fretted polygonal cylinders spiralled and counter-spiralled, and flying buttresses enmeshed the whole fabric in a radiating web of slants. Borne up in its flight by a row of cusped and trefoiled half-arches, each of them carried a steep procession of pinnacles and every moulding was a ledge for snow, as though the masonry were perpetually unloosing volleys of snow-feathered shafts among the rocks and the bruise-coloured and quicksilver clouds.

A spell hangs in the air of this citadel – the Hradčany, as it is called in Czech; Hradschin in German – and I was under its thrall long before I could pronounce its name. Even now, looking at photographs of the beautiful lost city, the same spell begins to work. There was another heirloom of the old Bohemian kings hard by the cathedral: the church of St George, whose baroque carapace masked a Romanesque church of great purity. The round arches that we call Norman plunged through bare and massive walls, flat beams bore up the ceiling; and a slim, gilt medieval St George gleamed in the apse as he cantered his charger over the dragon's lanced and coiling throes. He reminded me of that debonair stone banneret at Ybbs. It was the first Romanesque building I had seen since those faintly remembered Rhenish towns between Christmas and the New Year.

And, at this very point, confusion begins. The city teems with wonders; but what belongs where? Certainly that stupendous staircase called the Riders' Steps, and all that lay beyond them, were part of the great castle-palace. The marvellous strangeness of the late gothic vaults enclosing this flight must have germinated in an atmosphere like the English mood which coaxed fan-tracery into bloom. The Winter Queen, in her brief snowy reign, was equally astonished, perhaps; her English renaissance upbringing – those masques and their fantastic stage-sets by Inigo Jones – may have been a better preparation. I kept thinking of her as I peered up. These vaults are almost impossible to describe. The ribs burst straight out of the walls in V-shaped clusters of springers. Grooved like celery stalks and blade-shaped in cross section with the edge pointing down, they expanded and twisted as they rose. They separated, converged again and crossed each other and as they sped away, enclosed slender spans of wall like the petals of

tulips; and when two ribs intersected, they might both have been obliquely notched and then half-joggled together with studied carelessness. They writhed on their own axes and simultaneously followed the curve of the vault; and often, after these contorted intersections, the ribs that followed a concave thrust were chopped off short while the convex plunged headlong and were swallowed up in the masonry. The loose mesh tightened as it neared the rounded summit and the frantic reticulation jammed in momentary deadlock. Four truncated ribs, dovetailing in rough parallelograms, formed keystones and then broke loose again with a wildness which at first glance resembled organic violence clean out of control. But a second glance, embracing the wider design, captured a strange and marvellous coherence, as though petrification had arrested this whirling dynamism at a chance moment of balance and harmony.

Everything here was strange. The archway at the top of these shallow steps, avoiding the threatened anticlimax of a flattened ogee, deviated in two round-topped lobes on either side with a right-angled central cleft slashed deep between the cusps. There had been days, I was told, when horsemen on the way to the indoor lists rode in full armour up these steps: lobster-clad riders slipping and clattering as they stooped their ostrich-plumes under the freak doorway, gingerly carrying their lances at the trail to keep the bright paint that spiralled them unchipped. But in King Vladislav's vast Hall of Homage the ribs of the vaulting had further to travel, higher to soar. Springing close to the floor from reversed and bisected cones, they sailed aloft curving and spreading across the wide arch of the ceiling: parting, crossing, re-joining, and – once again – enclosing those slim subdivided tulips as they climbed. Then they cast their intertwining arcs in wider and yet wider loops with the looseness and the overlap of lassoes kept perpetually on the move, accelerating, as they ascended, to the speed of coiling stockwhips . . . Spaced out along the wide ridge of the vault, their intersections composed the corollas of marguerites and then fled away once more into wider patterns that needed another shift of focus to apprehend. Travelling the length of that arched vista of ceiling, the loops of the stone ribs expanded and crossed and changed partners, simultaneously altering direction

and handing on the succession of arcs until the parabolas, reaching the far limit of this strange curvilinear relay-race, began to swing back. Nearing home and completing the journey in reverse, they rejoined their lost companions at their starting point and sank tapering and interlocked. The sinuous mobility entranced the eye, but it was not only this. Lit by the wintry chiaroscuro of the tall windows, the white tulip-shaped expanses that these stone ribs enclosed so carelessly seemed to be animated by an even more rapid and streamlined verve. Each of these incidental and sinuous facets reflected a different degree of white, and their motion, as they ascended the reversed half-cones of the vault and curled over into the ceiling, suggested the spreading and upward-showering rush of a school of dolphins leaping out of the water.

It was amazing and marvellous. I had never seen anything like it. One can imagine a draughtsman twiddling arcs and marguerites with his compass and elaborating them for fun in vast symmetrical tangles – only to push them aside with a sigh. It is the high-spirited audacity of their materialization that turns everything to wonder. Hans was telling me as I gazed how Count Thurn and a party of Protestant nobles had tramped under these vaults on the way to their fateful meeting with the councillors of the Holy Roman Emperor, all in full armour: the word 'armour' suddenly offered a solution. It seemed, all at once, the apt analogy and the key to everything here. The steel whorls and flutings, those exuberant wings of metal that adorned the plate-armour of Maximilian's Knights! Carapaces which, for all their flamboyance and vainglory, withstood mace-blows and kept out arrows and the points of swords and lances. In the same way the flaunting halls and the seven hundred rooms of this castle have maintained thousands of labyrinthine tons of Kafka masonry against fire and siege for centuries. These vaults and these stairways were concave three-dimensional offshoots of the Danubian breakout, and shelter for Landsknechts. Altdorfer's world!

Heraldry smothered the walls and the vaults that followed. Shield followed painted shield and aviaries and zoos and aquaria supplied the emblems that fluttered and reared and curvetted among the foliage on the helmets. We were in the very heart of the Landsknecht century. Reached by a spiral, the last of these

castle-interiors was an austere and thick-walled room, roofed with dark beams and lit by deeply embrased leaded windows; a sturdy old table was set on the waxed flag-stones. It was in this Imperial aulic council chamber, on 23 May 1618, that Thurn and those mail-clad Czech lords had pressed their claims on the Imperial councillors and broken the deadlock by throwing them out of the window. The Defenestrations of Prague were the penultimate act before the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. The last was the arrival of the Elector Palatine and his English Electress to be crowned.*

It was time to seek out one of the wine tellars we had noticed on the way up.

I climb about the steep city in retrospect and rediscover fragments one by one. There are renaissance buildings, light arcaded pavilions and loggias on slim Ionic pillars that could have alighted here from Tuscany or Latium, but the palaces on the squares and the citadel and the steep wooded slopes belong to the Habsburg afternoon. Troops of Corinthian pillars parade along half-façades of ashlar rusticated like the nail-head patterns on decanters, and symbols and panoplies overflow the pediments. Branching under processions of statues, shallow staircases unite before great doorways where muscle-bound Atlantes strain under the weight of the lintels, and the gardens underneath them are flocked by marble populations. Nymphs bind their collapsing sheaves, goddesses tilt cornucopias, satyrs give chase, nymphs flee, and tritons blow fanfares from their twirling shells. (The snow in the folds of their flying garments and the icicles which seal the lips of the river gods are there till spring.) Terraces climb the hillside in a giant staircase and somewhere, above the frosty twigs, juts a folly like a mandarin's hat; it must have been built about the time when *Don Giovanni* was being composed a mile away. Looking-glass regions

* They lost their kingdom for ever when the Bohemian army was routed by Maximilian of Bavaria, Chief of the Catholic League, at the battle of the White Hill - only a mile from the citadel - on 8 November 1620.

Question: Who is the most unexpected private soldier to be fighting as a volunteer in Maximilian's army? Answer: Descartes.

succeed each other inside the palaces - aqueous reaches under vernal and sunset pastorals where painters and plasterers and cabinet-makers and glaziers and brasiers have fused all their skills in a silence that still seems to vibrate with fugues and passacaglias and the ghosts of commiserating sevenths.

Where, in this half-recollected maze, do the reviving memories of the libraries belong? To the Old University perhaps, one of the most ancient and famous in Europe, founded by the great King Charles IV in 1384. I'm not sure. But I drive wedge-shaped salients into oblivion nevertheless and follow them through the recoiling mists with enfiling perspectives of books until bay after bay coheres. Each of them is tiered with burnished leather bindings and gold and scarlet gleam on the spines of hazel and chestnut and pale vellum. Globes space out the chessboard floors. There are glass-topped homes for incunables. Triangular lecterns display graduals and antiphonals and Books of Hours and coloured scenes encrust the capitals on the buckled parchment; block-notes and lozenges climb and fall on four-line Gregorian staves where the Carolingian uncials and blackletter spell out the responses. The concerted spin of a score of barley-sugar pillars upholds elliptic galleries where brass combines with polished oak, and obelisks and pineapples alternate on the balustrades. Along the shallow vaulting of these chambers, plasterwork interlocks triangular tongues of frosty bracken with classical and allegorical scenes. Ascanius pursues his stag, Dido laments the flight of Aeneas, Numa slumbers in the cave of Egearia and all over the ceiling draped sky-figures fall back in a swoon from a succession of unclouding wonders.

Floating downhill, memory scoops new hollows. Churches, echoing marble concavities dim as cisterns in this cloudy weather, celebrate the Counter-Reformation. Plinths round the floor of rotundas hoist stone evangelists aloft. With robes spiralling in ecstasy and mitres like half-open shears, they hover half-way up the twin pillars from whose acanthus-tops the dome-bearing semi-circles fly. In one of these churches, where the Tridentine fervour had been dulled by two centuries of triumph, there were saints of a less emphatic cast. The figure of St John the Divine - imberb, quizzically smiling, quill in hand and at ease in a dressing-gown

with his hair flowing loose like an undress-wig, he might be setting down the first line of *Candide* instead of the Apocalypse; perhaps the sculptor has confused his Enlightenments. Seen from a fountain-square of the Hradčany, the green copper domes, where each snow-laden segment is pierced with a scrolled lunette, might belong to great Rome itself. The pinnacles on all the cupolas are tipped with monstrances shooting rays like golden fireworks; and when these and the gold balls on the tips of the other finials are touched by a rare sunbeam, the air glitters for a moment with a host of flying baubles.

A first glance, then, reveals a baroque city loaded with the spoils of the Austrian Caesars. It celebrates the Habsburg marriage-claims to the crown of Bohemia and reaffirms the questionable supersession of the old elective rights of the Bohemians; and alongside the Emperor's temporal ascendancy, this architecture symbolizes the triumph of the Pope's Imperial champion over the Hussites and the Protestants. Some of the churches bear witness to the energy of the Jesuits. They are stone emblems of their fierce zeal in the religious conflict. (Bohemia had been a Protestant country at the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. It was Catholic once more at its close and as free of heresy as Languedoc after the Albigensian crusade, or the sea-shore of oyster-response at the end of 'The Walrus and the Carpenter'.)*

But in spite of this scene, a renewed scrutiny of the warren below reveals an earlier and a medieval city where squat towers jut. A russet-scaled labyrinth of late medieval roofs embeds the baroque splendours. Barn-like slants of tiles open their rows of flat dormers like gills – a medieval ventilation device for the breeze to dry laundry after those rare washing-days. Robust buildings join each other over arcades that are stayed by the slant of heavy buttresses. Coloured houses erupt at street corners in the cupola-topped cylinders and octagons that I had first admired in Swabia

* These were bad decades for religious toleration in Europe. They include the massacres of Drogheda and Wexford, the expulsions beyond the Shannon and Cromwell's resolute attempts to stamp out the Catholic Church in Ireland.

and the façades and the gables are decorated with pediments and scrolls and steps; teams of pargetted men and animals process solemnly round the walls; and giants in high relief look as though they are half immured and trying to elbow their way out. Hardly a street is untouched by religious bloodshed; every important square has been a ceremonious stage for beheadings. The symbolic carved chalices, erased from strongholds of the Utraquist sect of the Hussites – who claimed communion in both kinds for the laity – were replaced by the Virgin's statue after the re-establishment of Catholicism. Steel spikes, clustered about with minor spires, rise by the score from the belfries of the older churches and the steeples of the riverside barbicans, flattened into sharp wedges, are encased in metal scales and set about with spikes and balls and iron pennants. These are armourers' rather than masons' work. They look like engines meant to lame or hamstring infernal cavalry after dark. Streets rise abruptly; lanes turn the corners in fans of steps; and the cobbles are steep enough to bring down dray-horses and send toboggans out of control. (Not now; the snow has been heaped in sooty banks, deep and crisp but uneven; the real Wenceslas weather was over.)

These spires and towers recalled the earlier Prague of the Wenceslases and the Ottokars and the race of the Přemysl kings, sprung from the fairy-tale marriage of a Czech princess with a plough-boy encountered on the banks of the river. The Czechs have always looked back with longing to the reigns of the saintly sovereign and of his descendants and to the powerful and benevolent Charles IV – a golden age when Czech was the language of rulers and subjects, religious discord unknown and the rights of crown and nobles and commons and peasants all intact. These feelings gained strength during the Czech revival under the last hundred years of Habsburg ascendancy. Austrian rule fluctuated between unconvinced absolutism and liberalism soon repented and it was abetted by linguistic pressures, untimely inflexibility and all of the follies that assail declining empires, for knavery was not to blame. These ancient wrongs must have lost much of their bitterness in the baleful light of modern times when the only evidence to survive is an heirloom of luminous architectural beauty.

It took me a little time to realize that the Vltava and the

Moldau were the Czech and the German names for the same river. It flows through the capital as majestically as the Tiber and the Seine through their offspring cities; like them, it is adorned with midstream islands and crossed by noble bridges. Among crowding churches and a mist of trees, two armoured barbicans prick their steeples like gauntlets grasping either end of a blade and between them flies one of the great medieval bridges of Europe. Built by Charles IV, it is a rival to Avignon and Regensburg and Cahors and a stone epitome of the city's past. Sixteen tunnelling spans carry it over the flood. Each arc springs from a massive pier and the supporting cutwaters advance into the rush of the current like a line of forts. High overhead and every few yards along either balustrade stand saints or groups of saints and as one gazes along the curve of the bridge, the teams unite in a flying population; a backward glance through one of the barbicans reveals the façade of a church where yet another holy flock starts up from a score of ledges. At the middle of one side and higher than the rest, stands St Johannes Nepomuk. He was martyred a few yards away in 1393 – he is said to have refused, under torture, to betray a confessional secret of Queen Sophia. When the henchmen of Wenceslas IV carried him here and hurled him into the Vltava, his drowned body, which was later retrieved and entombed in the Cathedral, floated downstream under a ring of stars.*

It was getting dark when we crossed the bridge. Leaning on the balustrade, we gazed upstream and past an eyot towards the river's source; it rises in the Bohemian forest somewhere north of Linz. Then, looking over the other side, we pieced together the river's itinerary downstream. If we had launched a paper boat at the quay she would have joined the Elbe in twenty miles and entered Saxony. Then, floating under the bridges of Dresden and Magdeburg, she would have crossed the plains of Old Prussia with Brandenburg to starboard and Anhalt to port and finally, battling on between Hanover and Holstein, she would have picked her

* Other versions exist. There are several instances of defenestration in Czech history, and it has continued into modern times. The Martyrdom of St Johannes is the only case of depontication, but it must be part of the same Tarpeian tendency.

way between the ocean liners in the Hamburg estuary and struck the North Sea in the Bight of Heligoland.

We shall never get to Constantinople like this. I know I ought to be moving on; so does the reader. But I can't – not for a page or two.

Prague seemed – it still seems, after many rival cities – not only one of the most beautiful places in the world, but one of the strangest. Fear, piety, zeal, strife and pride, tempered in the end by the milder impulses of munificence and learning and *douceur de vivre*, had flung up an unusual array of grand and unenigmatic monuments. The city, however, was scattered with darker, more reticent, less easily decipherable clues. There were moments when every detail seemed the tip of a phalanx of inexplicable phantoms. This recurring and slightly sinister feeling was fortified by the conviction that Prague, of all my halts including Vienna itself, was the place which the word *Mittleuropa*, and all that it implies, fitted most aptly. History pressed heavily upon it. Built a hundred miles north of the Danube and three hundred east of the Rhine, it seemed, somehow, out of reach; far withdrawn into the conjectural hinterland of a world the Romans never knew. (Is there a difference between regions separated by this ancient test? I think there is.) Ever since their names were first recorded, Prague and Bohemia had been the westernmost point of interlock and conflict for the two greatest masses of population in Europe: the dim and mutually ill-disposed volumes of Slavs and Teutons; nations of which I knew nothing. Haunted by these enormous shadows, the very familiarity of much of the architecture made Prague seem more remote. Yet the town was as indisputably a part of the western world, and of the traditions of which the West is most justly vain, as Cologne, or Urbino, or Toulouse or Salamanca – or, indeed, Durham, which – on a giant scale, *mutatis mutandis*, and with a hundred additions – it fleetingly resembled. (I thought about Prague often later on and when evil times came, sympathy, anger and the guilt which the fate of Eastern Europe has justly implanted in the West, coloured my cogitations. Brief acquaintance in happier times had left me with the vision of an actual city to set against the conjectured metamorphosis and this made later

events seem both more immediate and more difficult to grasp. Nothing can surprise one in the reported vicissitudes of a total stranger. It is the distant dramas of friends that are the hardest to conjure up.

I was glad Hans had given me *The Good Soldier Švejk* to read, but I only realized its importance later on. After *Don Quixote*, Švejk is the other fictitious figure who has succeeded in representing – under one aspect and in special circumstances – a whole nation. His station in life and his character have more in common with Sancho Panza than with his master, but the author's ironic skill leaves it doubtful whether ruse or innocence or merely a natural resilience under persecution, are the saving talisman of his hero. Jaroslav Hašek was a poet, an anti-clerical eccentric and a vagabond full of random learning and his adventures paralleled the picaresque wanderings of his creation. In and out of jail, once locked up as insane and once for bigamy, he was an incessant drinker and his excesses killed him in the end. He had a passion for hoaxes and learned journals. Until he was found out, his description of imaginary fauna in the *Animal World* attained wild heights of extravagance; and his fake suicide, when he jumped off the Charles Bridge, at the point where St John Nepomuk was thrown in, set all Prague by the ears.

Some of Hašek's compatriots disliked his fictional hero and disapproved of the author. In the rather conventional climate of the new Republic, Švejk seemed an unrepresentable travesty of the national character. They needn't have worried. The forces that Švejk had to contend with were tame compared to the mortal dangers of today. But it is the inspiration of his raffish and irrefragable shade that has come to the rescue.

In this late attempt to recapture the town, I seem to have cleared the streets. They are as empty as the thoroughfares in an architectural print. Nothing but a few historical phantoms survive; a muffled drum, a figure from a book and an echo of Utraguists rioting a few squares away – the milling citizens, the rushing traffic vanish and the voices of the bilingual city sink to a

whisper. I can just remember a chestnut-woman in a kerchief stamping beside a brazier to keep warm and a hurrying Franciscan with a dozen loaves under his arm. Three cab-drivers nursing their tall whips and drinking schnapps in the outside-bar of a wine cellar materialize for a moment above the sawdust, their noses scarlet from the cold or drink or both, and evaporate again, red noses last, like rear lamps fading through a fog.

What did Hans and I talk about in the cask-lined cave beyond? The vanished Habsburgs for sure, whose monuments and dwelling-places we had been exploring all day. My Austrian itinerary had infected me long ago with the sad charm of the dynasty. I felt that this comforting grotto, with its beams and shields and leaded windows and the lamplight our glasses refracted on the oak in bright and flickering discs, might be the last of a long string of such refuges. We were drinking Franconian wine from the other side of the Bohemian-Bavarian border. In what glasses? The bowls, correctly, were colourless. But by the Rhine or the Mosel, as we know, the stems would have ascended in bubbles of amber or green, and tapered like pagodas. Perhaps these stalks were ruby alternating with fluted crystal, for these, with gentian blue and underwater green and the yellow of celandines, are the colours for which the Prague glass-makers have always been famous . . . We had gazed with wonder at the astronomical instruments of Emperor Rudolf II. A celestial globe of mythological figures in metal fretwork turned in a giant foliated egg-cup of brass. Chased astro-labes gleamed among telescopes and quadrants and compasses. Armillary spheres flashed concentrically, hoops within hoops . . . More of a Spanish Habsburg than an Austrian, Rudolf made Prague his capital and filled it with treasures; and, until the horrors of the Thirty Years War began, Prague was a Renaissance city. Deeply versed in astronomical studies, he invited Tycho Brahe to his Court and the great astronomer arrived, noseless from a duel in Denmark, and lived there until he died of the plague in 1601. Kepler, promptly summoned to continue Brahe's work on the planets, remained there till the Emperor's death. He collected wild animals and assembled a court of mannerist painters. The fantasies of Arcimboldi, which sank into oblivion until they were un-

earthed again three centuries later, were his discovery. Moody and unbalanced, he lived in an atmosphere of neo-platonic magic, astrology and alchemy. His addiction to arcane practices certainly darkened his scientific bent. But Wallenstein, who was one of the ablest men in Europe, was similarly flawed. In fact, an obsession with the supernatural seems to have pervaded the city. A whole wing of the Italianate palace which Wallenstein inhabited with such mysterious splendour was given over to the secret arts; and when Wallenstein inherited Kepler from Rudolf, the astronomer took part in these sessions with an ironic shrug.*

As well as astrology, an addiction to alchemy had sprung up, and an interest in the Cabala. The town became a magnet for charlatans. The flowing robes and the long white beard of John Dee, the English mathematician and wizard, created a great impression in Central Europe. He made the rounds of credulous Bohemian and Polish noblemen and raised spirits by incantation in castle after castle. He arrived in Central Europe after being

* The Waldstein Palace (as I learnt that it was more correctly called) was still owned by the family, and it harboured, among more usual heirlooms, the stuffed charger which had carried Wallenstein at Lützen. An eighteenth-century descendant befriended Casanova, who spent his last thirteen years as librarian composing his memoirs in Waldstein's Bohemian castle. Another descendant was the friend to whom Beethoven dedicated the Waldstein Sonata. He was the most interesting figure of the Thirty Years War. Suspected by the Emperor of intriguing with the Swedes before actually changing sides – and perhaps planning, it was rumoured, to seize the Bohemian crown – he fled to a snow-bound castle near the Bavarian border. Four soldiers of fortune from the British Isles – Gordon, Leslie, Devereux and Colonel Butler of Butler's Irish regiment of Dragoons – cut down Wallenstein's henchmen over the dinner table. Then they sought out the great duke and Devereux ran him through with a pike. By far the best and most exciting book on the whole period is C. V. Wedgwood's *Thirty Years' War*. Dame Veronica delivers an adverse verdict on the last part of Wallenstein's career; ruthlessness and megalomania and increasing trust in astrology had dimmed his earlier genius. He was tall, thin and pale with reddish hair and eyes of a remarkable brilliance.

stripped of his fellowship at Cambridge.* (One wonders how the Winter Queen, arriving a few decades later, reacted to this odd atmosphere; we have mentioned, earlier on, her contacts in Heidelberg with the early Rosicrucians.) The Jews, who had been settled in Prague since the tenth century, fell victims in the eighteenth to a similar figure called Hayan. He was a Sephardic Jew from Sarajevo, a Cabalist and a votary of the false Messiah Sabbatai Zevi; he convinced the trusting Ashkenazim. With Elijah's guidance, he proclaimed in private séances that he could summon God, raise the dead, and create new worlds.

Our wanderings had ended under a clock tower in the old Ghetto, where the hands moved anti-clockwise and indicated the time in Hebrew alphabetic numbers. The russet-coloured synagogue, with its steep and curiously dentated gables, was one of the oldest in Europe; yet it was built on the site of a still older fane which was burnt down in a riot, in which three thousand Jews were massacred, on Easter Sunday, 1389. (The proximity of the Christian festival to the Feast of the Passover, coupled with the myth of ritual murder, made Easter week a dangerous time.) The cemetery hard by was one of the most remarkable places in the city. Thousands of tombstones in tiers, dating from the fifteenth to the end of the eighteenth century, were huddled under the elder branches. The moss had been scoured from the Hebrew letters and the tops of many slabs bore the carved emblems of the tribes whose members they commemorated: grapes for Israel, a pitcher for Levi, hands raised in a gesture of benediction for Aaron. The emblems on the other stones resembled the arms parlant which symbolize some family names in heraldry: a stag for Hirsch, a carp for Karpeles, a cock for Hahn, a lion for Löw; and so on. A sarcophagus marked the resting place of the most famous bearer of

* The cause of his downfall was a public demonstration of the device by which Trygaeus, the hero of *The Peace* of Aristophanes, flew to the crest of Olympus to beg the Gods to end the Peloponnesian War. As this vehicle was a giant dung-beetle from Mount Etna which the protagonist refuelled with his own droppings on the long ascent, the exhibition may well have caused a stir. I would like to have seen it.

the name of Löw. He was Rabbi Jehuda ben Bezabel, the famous scholar and miracle-worker who died in 1609. His tomb is the most important memento of Prague's involvement with the supernatural, for it was the Rabbi Löw who constructed the many-legended robot-figure of the Golem, which he could secretly endow with life by opening its mouth and inserting slips of paper on which magic formulae were inscribed.

My last afternoon was spent high above the river in the library of Heinz Ziegler's flat. I had had my eye on those book-covered walls for a couple of days and this was my chance. I was in pursuit of links between Bohemia and England, and for a specific reason: I had taken my disappointment over the topography of *The Winter's Tale* very hard, and it still rankled: Shakespeare must surely have known more about Bohemia than to give it a coast ... So I stubbornly muttered as I whirled through the pages. He needn't have known much about Peter Payne, the Yorkshire Lollard from Houghton-on-the-Hill who became one of the great Hussite leaders. But he was full of knowledge about my second Anglo-Bohemian figure, Cardinal Beaufort. He was not only John of Gaunt's son and Bolingbroke's brother and Bishop of Winchester, but one of the chief characters in the first and second parts of *Henry VI*. Before completing his cathedral and being buried there, Beaufort took part in a crusade against the Hussites and slashed his way across Bohemia at the head of a thousand English archers. A third connection, John of Bohemia, must have been equally well known, for he was the blind king who fell in the charge against the Black Prince's 'battle' at Crécy. (His putative crest and motto – the three silver feathers and *Ich dien* – were once thought – wrongly, it appears – to be the origin of the Prince of Wales's badge.) This remarkable man, famous for his Italian wars and his campaigns against the Lithuanian heathen, was married to the last of the Přemysl princesses and one of his children was the great Charles IV, the builder of bridges and universities and, almost incidentally, Holy Roman Emperor as well; and here the connecting thread with England suddenly thickens; for another child was Princess Anne of Bohemia, who became Queen of Eng-

land by marrying the Black Prince's son, Richard of Bordeaux.* But my last discovery clinched all. Sir Philip Sidney's brief passage across the sixteenth century glowed like the track of a comet: he seemed unable to travel in a foreign country without being offered the crown or the hand of the sovereign's daughter, and his two sojourns in Bohemia – once after his Viennese winter with Wotton and a second time at the head of Elizabeth's embassy to congratulate Rudolf II on his accession – must have lit up the Bohemian Kingdom, for even the most parochial of his distant fellow countrymen, with a flare of reality.† Ten years younger than Sidney, Shakespeare was only twenty-three and quite unknown when his fellow poet was fatally wounded at Zutphen. But Sidney's sister was married to Lord Pembroke and Pembroke's Players were the most famous acting company in London: they must have been friends of the playwright. Their son William Herbert could not – as some critics used rashly to maintain – have been Mr W.H., but when the posthumous *First Folio* was published, he and his brother were the dedicatees; their cordial links with the poet are carefully stressed by the publishers. Shakespeare

* She died young and her tomb is in Westminster Abbey. It is her successor, the French Princess Isabelle, who, in *Richard II*, overhears the gardeners talking of the King's fall as they bind up the dangling apricocks. She was only eleven when Richard was murdered. Back in France as a Queen Dowager, she married her cousin, the poet Charles d'Orléans, who was later captured at Agincourt by Henry V and held prisoner in England for a quarter of a century. She was only nineteen when she died.

† Edmund Campion was also in Prague at the time, teaching at a Jesuit seminary. The two had long meetings and they liked and respected each other. Once, in honour of a state occasion, Campion wrote a long tragedy on the theme of Saul and the city produced it at vast expense; it was produced with great magnificence and although it lasted six hours, Rudolf ordered a special repeat performance. In England four years later, secretly ministering to harried recusants under the new penal laws, Campion was captured and after the customary tortures and a rushed trial, condemned to die at Tyburn. He endured the barbarous penalty with the courage of a saint.

must have known everything about Sir Philip Sidney. It became plainer every minute that Bohemia can have held no secrets for him.

This was the point I had reached when Heinz came into the room. He was amused by the earthwork of books which the search had flung up on the carpet, and I explained my perplexity. After a thoughtful pause, he said: 'Wait a moment!' He shut his eyes for a few seconds – they were grey with a hazel ring round the pupil – tapped his forehead slowly once or twice with a frowning effort of memory, opened them again and took down a book. 'Yes, I thought so!' he said in an eager and cheerful voice as he turned the pages, 'Bohemia did have a coast line once' – I jumped up – 'but not for long ...' He read out the relevant passages: 'Ottokar II ... Yes, that's it ... Victory over Béla II of Hungary in 1260 ... enlarged the frontiers of Bohemia ... Kingdom expands over all Austria ... yes, yes, yes ... southern border extended to both sides of the Istrian peninsula, including a long stretch of the north Dalmatian shore ...! Failed to become Emperor, perhaps owing to anti-Slav prejudice among the Electors ... Yes, yes ... Defeated and slain by Rudolf of Habsburg at Dürnkrut in 1273, when the country shrank once more to its old frontiers ...' He shut the book. 'There you are!' he said kindly. 'A coast of Bohemia for you! But only for thirteen years.'

It was a moment of jubilation! There was no time to go into detail, but it looked as though my problems were solved. (The lack of time was a boon; for, once again, disappointment lay in wait. None of the historical characters, even by the boldest feat of literary juggling, could be made to fit. Worse, I discovered that when Shakespeare took the story of *The Winter's Tale* from Robert Greene's *Pandosto, or the Triumph of Time*, he light-heartedly switched the names of Sicily and Bohemia! It was total defeat. I felt as though the poet himself had reached from the clouds to checkmate me by castling the pieces in a single unorthodox move. I understood at last what I should have divined at the outset: punctiliously exact in the historical plays, Shakespeare didn't care a fig for the topography of the comedies. Unless it were some Italian town – Italy being the universal lucky dip for Renaissance playwrights – the spiritual setting was always the same. Woods and

parkland on the Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire borders, that is; flocks and fairs and a palace or two, a mixture of Cockayne- and Cloud-Cuckoo- and fairyland with stage mountains rather taller than the Cotswolds and full of torrents and caves, haunted by bears and washed, if need be, by an ocean teeming with foundering ships and mermaids.)

But it was an instant of seeming triumph in which Heinz and his wife and Paul and Hans all joined. Heinz was soon filling glasses of celebration from a decanter cut in a nail-head pattern as bold as the façade of the Czernin palace. It was a valedictory drink as well, for the night train was taking Hans and me back to Bratislava and I planned to cross the Danube into Hungary next day.

The windows of the flat looked down on the whole of Prague. Towards the end of my search, the pale sun had set among those silver and purplish clouds and at lighting-up time all the lamps of the city had leapt simultaneously to life. Now, though the towers and pinnacles and the snow-covered domes were swallowed by the night, their presence was reaffirmed by the city-wide collusion of bells. Picked out by the embankment lights and the rushing headlamps of the traffic, the river was a curving band of darkness crossed by the many-beaded necklaces of the bridges. Directly below, between clusters of baroque lamp-brackets, the grouped statues dimly postured along the balustrades of the Charles Bridge. The lights grew scarcer as they climbed the citadel and dispersed round the steep dark wastes where the rooks had assembled for the night in the invading woods. It was a last glimpse of Prague which has had to last me from that evening to this.

TEN

Slovakia: A Step Forward at Last

MY original scheme, on leaving Bratislava, had been to cross the Danube, strike south-east to the Hungarian frontier and then follow the right bank to the old town of Győr. This itinerary, which would have led across those beginnings of the puszta I had spied out from the castle, was the traditional entrance to Hungary.

But the plan had been changed at the last moment by friends of Hans. Gerti v. Thuroczy, who was married to one of the breezy Hungarian country-gentlemen I mentioned two chapters ago, suggested I should change my route and stay with her brother, Philipp Schey, on the way. The Barons Schey v. Koromla, to give them their full style, were an extremely civilized Austrian-Jewish family – friends of artists, poets, writers and composers and with kinsmen and ramifications in half a dozen countries – that had played an important part in the life of Central and Western Europe. They had once been very rich, but, like everyone else, they were less so now. I had met Pips Schey (as he was universally called) but only for a moment. He was a fascinating and many-legended figure and he lived about forty miles east of Bratislava. Telephones had rung and I was expected in two days.

So I headed north-east instead of south. I was still on the wrong side of the Danube and getting further from the river with every step and deeper into Slovakia. My new plan was to make a wide Slovakian loop, strike the Danube again about a hundred miles downstream and cross into Hungary by the Parkan-Esztergom bridge.

Meanwhile, an important change has come over the raw material of these pages.

Recently – after I had set down all I could remember of these ancient travels – I made a journey down the whole length of the Danube, starting in the Black Forest and ending at the Delta; and

in Rumania, in a romantic and improbable way too complicated to recount, I recovered a diary I had left in a country house there in 1939.

I must have bought the manuscript book in Bratislava. It is a thick, battered, stiffly-bound cloth-backed volume containing 320 closely-written pages in pencil. After a long initial passage, the narrative breaks off for a month or two, then starts up again in notes, stops once more, and blossoms out again in proper diary form. And so it goes on, sporadically recording my travels in all the countries between Bratislava and Constantinople, whence it moves to Mount Athos and stops. In the back of the book is a helpful list of overnight sojourns; there are rudimentary vocabularies in Hungarian, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Turkish and Modern Greek and a long list of names and addresses. As I read these, faces I had forgotten for many years began to come back to me: a vintner on the banks of the Tisza, an innkeeper in the Banat, a student in Berkovitz, a girl in Salonica, a Pomak hodja in the Rhodope mountains . . . There are one or two sketches of the details of buildings and costumes, some verses, the words of a few folk-songs and the alphabetical jottings I mentioned two chapters back. The stained covers are still warped from their unvarying position in my rucksack and the book seemed – it still seems – positively to smell of that old journey.

It was an exciting trove; a disturbing one too. There were some discrepancies of time and place between the diary and what I had already written but they didn't matter as they could be put right. The trouble was that I had imagined – as one always does with lost property – that the contents were better than they were. Perhaps that earlier loss in Munich wasn't as serious as it had seemed at the time. But, with all its drawbacks, the text did have one virtue: it was dashed down at full speed. I know it is dangerous to change key, but I can't resist using a few passages of this old diary here and there. I have not interfered with the text except for cutting and condensing and clearing up obscurities. It begins on the day I set out from Bratislava.

'March 19th 1934.

'... The sky was a lovely blue with big white clouds, and I

walked along a twisting avenue of elm trees. The grass is a brilliant green and Spring has begun! Looking back, I could see all the chimney pots of Pressburg and the grey castle on the mountain and hear the bells over the fields. I wandered on, smoking contentedly, and at noon sat on a log and looked at the sun shining on the Little Carpathian mountains to the left of the road as I ate my brioches, speck and a banana. A troop of Czechoslovak cavalry were exercising in a field nearby. Their horses were lovely long-legged creatures, about sixteen hands, with undocked tails and uncobbed manes. The soldiers rode very well. Their shaven heads made them look tough and Kossack-like.

I felt very drowsy sitting in the sun. My path ran through a hazel-wood where young roedeer bounced nimbly away, their white rumps twinkling in the undergrowth. Later, I must have been wandering along in a sort of trance, as by four o'clock I had no idea where I was, and whenever I stopped peasants and asked the way to Baron Schey's at Kövecsespuszta, they gesticulated helplessly, saying "Magyar" or "Slovenski", and I realized the difficulty I was going to have about languages. I must learn some Hungarian! I was miles off my way, close to a little town called Senec and about as far from Kövecses as Kövecses is from Pressburg. A country postman speaking a little German said I should head for Samorin, about twenty kilometres off; so I set out along a dismal track over an absolutely flat plain with a few white farmhouses dotted about. Occasionally I came on an old bent woman gathering catkins and pussy-willows. (Next Sunday's Palm Sunday.) They must be frightfully devout people. I've never seen anything like the reverence with which they knelt on the earth before wayside crucifixes, crossing themselves and laying sprigs of palm on the ledge. At last I came to a tributary of the Danube winding through water meadows and shaded by willows. It's called the Kleine Donau, or in Magyar, Kish* Duna. I walked till I came to a ferry, and shouted across. An old man showed up and got in the boat and pulled it over by

* Kis, little.

tugging at a taut rope stretched shoulder-high. I was on the edge of that marshy country, full of rivers and brooks, that I looked down on from the castle before we went to Prague.

On the other side, I was walking through utterly flat fields again. The sun was setting in a soft pink sky with a few strands of lighted cloud. *The gold bar of heaven!* Everything was quiet and windless and high above the green fields larks were fluttering. I watched them soaring about the sky, hovering and sinking and ascending. It was lovely and it made me think of Spring in England.

Soon, as the sky began to fade into twilight, I reached a little place called Nagy-Magyar,* a collection of white-washed houses thatched with long reeds, unkempt and desolate, with roads of rutted mud and no pavements or garden fences. The whole village teemed with swarthy black-haired children in coloured blankets. There were dark-skinned hags with strands of greasy hair hanging out of their headcloths and tall, dark, loose-limbed and shifty-eyed young men. *Zigeunervolk!* Hungarian Gipsies, like the ones I saw in Pozony. Amazing! *Östlich von Wien fängt der Orient an!*

I found the Burgomaster's house, I don't know how, with all these people surging about. He was a splendid man, a typical Hungarian with a handsome hatchet-face, speaking German in the Hungarian way with the accent always on the first syllable and half the a's turning to o. He at once said he would put me up, and we talked all the evening by the fire, smoking his very strong Hungarian tobacco and drinking golden wine. Wine is *sor* (pronounced *shor*); tobacco, *dohányi*; a light or matches, *gyufa*; "Good night", "*jó éjszokát kívánok*", and "I kiss your hand", "*kezeit csokolom!*" I know this because the old crone who brought in our supper said this and did it in a ceremonious and stately way. I was nonplussed, but it seems it's usual, even to a tramp like me, if he is a stranger and a guest. (Only one word of Slovak so far: *selo* = village, like the Russian

* I can't find this tiny village (which means 'Big Hungarian') in any map. There is a much larger place called Nagy Megyer some distance off, but it can't be the same. It's rather confusing.

overflowed in neat piles on the floor. The surviving area of wall was filled by antlers and roebuck horns, a couple of portraits and a Rembrandt etching. There was an enormous desk covered with photographs, a box of cigars with a cutter made out of a deer's slot and, beside them, a number of silver cigarette cases laid in a neat row, each of them embossed with a different gold monogram. (This, I noticed later on, was an invariable item in Central European country houses, particularly in Hungary. They were presents exchanged on special occasions, and always between men: for standing godfather, being best man at a wedding, second in a duel, and so on.) There were shaded lamps and leather arm-chairs beside a huge open stove, a basket of logs and a spaniel asleep in front of it.

'I'm on the last volume,' Baron Pips said, lifting up a French paper-bound book. It was *Le Temps Retrouvé* and an ivory paper-knife marked the place three quarters of the way through. 'I started the first volume in October and I've been reading it all winter.' He put it back on the table by his chair. 'I feel so involved in them all, I don't know what I'll do when I've finished. Have you ever tried it?'

As one can guess from the tone of my diary, I had only just heard of Proust, but always mentioned in tones of such respect that I was flattered by his question. I took the first volume to bed that night; but it was too dense a wood. When I tried again in Rumania next year, the wood lightened and turned into a forest whose spell has been growing ever since: so, in spite of this hesitant start, Baron Pips was my true initiator. Perhaps because of this, some perverse process of the subconscious for a long time associated him in my mind's eye with the figure of Swann. Beyond one or two haphazard points in common, the resemblance was not close. Certainly not physically, if Swann is to be identified with photographs of Charles Haas in Mr Painter's book. Nevertheless the confusion persisted for years.

He was fifty-two years old and tall and slim and his extraordinary good looks were marked by a kind of radiant distinction. I remember them all the more lucidly – the rather pale, high forehead, the chiselled lines of brow and nose and jaw, the clear blue eyes and the straight silver hair – from making a careful sketch a

couple of days later. There was a cast of wisdom and kindness in his face and something about the mouth which suggested an artist or a musician, and his features often lit up with humour and amusement. He wore a very old tweed shooting jacket, soft leather breeches of the kind I had envied in Austria, and thick ribbed green stockings, and his slippers replaced some muddy brogues I had seen in the hall. From his demeanour and the excellence of his English I think a stranger in a railway carriage would have taken him for an Englishman but of a half-patrician, half-scholarly kind which even then seemed threatened with extinction. I knew that his life had been full of movement and adventures, quite apart from his two marriages, the first to a charming and highly suitable member of a similar dynasty, the other to a famous actress in Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater in Berlin. There existed, at the time we met, a great attachment between him and a beautiful and poetic-looking white Russian I had met in Bratislava, I think on her way from Köveces.*

On the evening I arrived, Sari laid dinner on a folding table in the library. When it was cleared away, we went back to the arm-chairs and the books with our brandy glasses and, undeterred by a clock striking midnight somewhere in the house, talked until nearly one o'clock†

These days at Köveces were a sojourn of great delight and an

* They were married soon after.

† I learnt later on that the eponymous hero (though not the plot) of Wassermann's two-volume novel *Christian Wahnschaffe* – 'World's Illusion' in translation – was based on Baron Pips as a young man: and hastened to read it. It's an extraordinary book, written before the first World War; rather turgid and very melodramatic. The hero is a young patrician of dazzling looks, brilliant talents and great wealth. Through idealism and some not very clearly expounded philosophy he gradually divests himself of all his friends, his money and his goods in order to live a life of Franciscan poverty and unworldliness among the poor and the criminals and the whores of a great city. There is a touch of resemblance, I think; with the exception that the saintly fictional figure is without a flicker of the humour of his living prototype.

walking to our rooms late at night, he stopped in the passage and said 'I feel I ought to set out like a kind of Don Quixote,' then added with a sad laugh, 'but of course I won't.'

Austria was a rich mine for reminiscence. The familiar figures of Franz Josef and the Empress Elizabeth led to Pauline Metternich, Frau Schratt, the tragedy of Mayerling, the axioms of Taaffe, the misadventures of Bay Middleton. An entire mythology unfolded and I felt glad that Vienna had recently become a real background, in my mind, both for these shadows and for the newer *dramatis personae* I was meeting at one remove: Hofmannsthal, Schnitzler, Kokoschka, Musil and Freud and a galaxy of composers whose importance I didn't really take in till years after. (I wished I had gone to the Opera! I might have broken into an unknown field of delights a decade earlier than I did.) Hölderlin, Rilke, Stefan George and Hofmannsthal were the poets I remember him taking down from the bookshelves when I asked how they sounded. Apropos of Lewis Carroll and Lear and nonsense poetry in general, he introduced me to Christian Morgenstern.* I developed an immediate passion for the characters in his poems and for the vague and hallucinating world they inhabit: a world in which unprincipled architects steal and make off with the empty spaces between the uprights of a railing; where unclassified creatures, followed by their young, stalk on the scene on their multiple noses; and where the legs of two boys, side by side in the cold, begin to freeze, one boy centigrade, the other fahrenheit . . . An inventor, in one poem, after building a smell-organ, composes music for it - triplets of eucalyptus, tuberoses and alpine flowers are followed by hellebore scherzos; and later on, the same inventor creates a giant wicker trap into which he lures a mouse by playing the violin, in order to set it free in the solitudes of a distant forest. Dreamland.

We were sitting in front of the house in the shade of two ancient and enormous poplars and Baron Pips, to illustrate the reckless frequency of French words in pre-war Austrian conversations, told me that when he was a small boy, he had overheard the Emperor saying to a Princess Dietrichstein at a garden-party at

* He died in 1914.

Bad Ischl, 'Das ist ja *incroyable*, Fürstin! Ihr Wagen scheint ganz *introuvable* zu sein.'† Similar surroundings were the scene of another tale. Friedrich-August, the last King of Saxony, a fat, easy-going and proverbially good-natured man, loathed all court functions and especially the midsummer garden party at Dresden. Once, in liquefaction after a heat-wave afternoon, he was escaping, his duty done, to a cool drink in his study when he spotted, at the other side of the park under a tree, two aged and dismal-looking professors he had forgotten to greet. Hating to hurt anyone's feelings he toiled all the way over to them and shook their hands limply. But the afternoon's output had been too much for him: he just managed to croak 'Na, ihr beide' - 'Well, you two' - and tottered away again.*

I loved these stories. Another, prompted by a mention of Frederick the Great, cropped up while we were walking through the woods at the other end of the demesne. As I've never heard or read it anywhere else, here it is.

Learning that one of his officers had fought with great bravery, the King recommended him for an immediate award of the *Pour le Mérite* Cross; the Prussian equivalent of the V.C., which he had just founded. The ribbon was sent off at once. A few days later, when the officer turned up at the King's headquarters with dispatches, Frederick glanced at his neck and asked him why he wasn't wearing it. There had been a terrible mistake, the officer explained. The award had gone to a cousin in his regiment with the same rank and name. A look of deepening horror spread over the King's face, and when he had finished, the King jumped to his feet and drove him out, crying 'Weg! Geh! weg! Du hast kein Glück!' - 'Away! Go away! You've no luck!'

'Perhaps he said it in French,' Baron Pips said after a pause. 'He hated talking German.'

These walks carried us far afield. All trace of winter had vanished and the snow with it, except for a dwindling line here and there under a hedge or in the lee of a wall where the sun never

† It's *incroyable*, Princess! Your carriage seems quite *introuvable*.'

* He abdicated in 1919.

reached. Otherwise, the season had leaped forward into spring. The grass, recovered from the lank pallor of its first re-emergence, was bright green, and the banks and the roots of the trees were thick with wild violets. Green lizards, freshly woken from their winter torpor, scuttled electrically and froze in postures of alert petrification. The hazel-spinneys and the elms and the poplars and the willows and aspens along the streams were all putting out new leaves. The universal white had vanished and an unseen Europe was coming to the surface. The scores of larks and the returning migrants reminded me that I had hardly seen any birds except rooks, ravens and magpies, and an occasional robin or a wren, for a quarter of a year. There was a fidgeting of wagtails and the twittering that accompanied all the building and nest-repair was almost an uproar. The peasants in the fields lifted fleece caps and black hats with friendly greetings and Baron Pips would answer with a wave of an old green felt with a cord round it, and the ritual response in Slovak or Hungarian. The Váh,* the wide, swift river that formed one of the estate boundaries, rose two hundred miles to the north-east, near the Polish frontier. The sides were banked high against the danger of floods when the thaw came to the Tatra mountains. The weather had changed so much, we could lie on the grass there, talking and smoking cigars and basking under a cloudless sky like the lizards, watching the water flow past on its way to the Danube. One afternoon, carrying guns so beautifully balanced that they seemed as light as feathers – ‘relics of former splendour,’ Baron Pips had said, filling his pockets with cartridges in the hall – we went out after rabbits. We returned through a vast warren as evening was coming on. They were scampering about and sitting in groups and casting shadows across the fields. I said, although I was carrying three of them, that they looked so cheerful and decorative it was a shame to shoot them. After a moment, I heard Baron Pips laugh quietly and asked why. He said: ‘You sound just like Count Sternberg.’ He was an ancient and rather simple-minded Austrian nobleman, he explained. When he was on his death-bed his confessor said the time had come to make a general confession. The Count, after

* Waag in German, Vár in Magyar.

racking his brains for a while, said he couldn't remember anything to confess. ‘Come, come, Count!’ the priest said, ‘you must have committed *some* sins in your life. Do think again.’ After a long and bewildered silence, the Count said, rather reluctantly, ‘Habe Hasen geschossen’ – ‘I've shot hares’ – and expired.

Just after sunset, six or seven log-rafts, bound for the Danube and the Balkans, floated by. The trunks had been felled in the Slovakian forests, then lashed together and laden with timber in neat criss-cross stacks. A hut was built on the stern of each of them and the fires for the raftsmen's suppers cast red reflections in the river. The lumberjacks in their leather knee-boots were turning into silhouettes in the failing light. They wished us good evening as they passed, and waved their fur caps. We waved back and Baron Pips called: ‘God has brought you.’ Except for the fires and their reflections, the rafts had melted into the dark by the time they slid out of sight among the distant trees.

One evening, after my temporary setback with Proust – though I enjoyed the passages that Baron Pips read out when he was particularly struck; for instance, the opinions of Charlus as he crossed Paris during an air-raid – I discovered a hoard of children's books and took them to bed. There were both *Alices*, several Coloured Fairy Books, *Struwelpeter* in the original, which I'd never seen, and the illustrated couplets of Wilhelm Busch: *Max und Moritz*, *Hans Hucklebein* and so on. There was plenty of French: *Becassine*, I remember, and the innumerable volumes of the *Bibliothèque Rose*. All these books were inscribed in childish writing with the names ‘Minka’ and ‘Alix’, and here and there the same hands had brushed in the outlines of the black-and-white illustrations with bold swirls of water-colour. They were my host's two beautiful daughters,* both by his first marriage, and already familiar from the photographs on his desk in the library. I was only to discover years later and long after the War, when we met in France and became friends, that I had an odd link with these girls – the addiction, that is, to saying things backwards. This habit is first engendered, I suspect, by the sight of the words TAM HTAÆ rumbled across the bathroom floor when learning

* Minka Strauss and Alix de Rothschild.

to read, and then by deciphering *REŠTAVNĀI CĀFF* and *TĪARUATŠĒJ* while gazing out of the windows of restaurants and cafés. At first single words are formed, then whole sentences and, by the time they are spoken fast enough to sound like an unknown language, this useless accomplishment has become an obsession. When I had run out of material for recitation on the march I would often find myself, almost without knowing it, reciting, say, the 'Ode to a Nightingale' in this perverse way:

Ym traeh sehca dna a ysword ssenbmun sniap
 Ym esnes, sa hguoht fo kcolmeh I dah knurd
 Ro deitpme emos llud etaipo ot eht sniard
 Eno etunim tsap dna Ehtelsdraw dah knus,

and so on. For the initiated, these utterances have an arcane and unearthly beauty.

Away! Away! For I will fly to thee!

becomes

Yawa! Yawa! Rof I lliw ylf ot eeht!

and the transposition of

Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways,

is

Hguorht suorudrev smoolg dna gnidniw yssom syaw.

It seems almost to surpass the original in forest mystery.

I would have remembered most of the details of these days, even without the re-discovery of my diary, but not all. The leaving-present of a pocket-volume of Hölderlin would have outlasted oblivion, and the old leather cigar-case filled with Regalia Media cigars, but not the two-ounce tin of Capstan pipe tobacco* that

*The diary lays a lot of stress on cigar- and pipe-smoking; I had forgotten the latter. I think they were both slightly self-conscious symbols of emancipation and maturity. I always seem to be 'puffing away thoughtfully' or 'enjoying a quiet pipe', in these pages.

Baron Pips had discovered in a cupboard; nor the contents of the lunch parcel Sari had made up. Her name would have stuck, but not Anna's, the old housemaid, although I remember her face clearly.

Baron Pips kept me company across the fields till we said goodbye outside the little village of Kissujfalu. I looked back when I reached it. He waved when he saw I'd taken the right path, then turned and disappeared into his woods with the spaniel trotting behind.

'Pips Schey?' someone, a vague relation-in-law, said to me, years later in Paris. 'What a charming man! Magical company! And wonderful looking. But he never did anything, you know.' Well, he did in my case, as I have more than hinted. Though we never met again, we corresponded for years. He married soon afterwards, and, when things began to go wrong in Austria and Czechoslovakia, they left Kővecses and settled at Ascona, on the western shore of Lake Maggiore, just north of the Swiss-Italian frontier. He died in 1957 in his younger daughter's country house in Normandy - about twenty miles, in fact, from Cabourg, which is the main candidate for the Proustian town of Balbec. The literary coincidence completes a fortuitous literary circle in my mind. I wish we had met again. I thought of him often, and I still do.

I felt so buoyed up by these days, that even the vague speculation as to how I might have struck him failed to damp my elation: precocious, immature, restless, voluble, prone to show off, unreliably bookish perhaps . . . it didn't seem to matter a damn. My journey had taken on a new dimension and all prospects glowed.