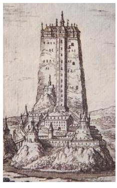

STARING INTO DARKNESS

Out in the black night, a muffled bell tolled one, two, three times, from one of Nürnberg's surviving clock-towers. And then the deep silence returned, empty save for a murmuring wind around the eaves, one that pecked sporadically at a loose tile. Minutes passed, time did not. It was a relief, oddly expected, to hear at last the high, lonely sound of a solitary aircraft crossing the endless ceiling of heaven from south to north, its propellers tugging at his heart, urging him to be gone, return home, seek the lonely places; slowly, so slowly it passed, labouring across oblivion, that the sound only seemed to cease when the bell tolled once more. Half past three.

McGeorge stared into the darkness; then turned again, determined to get some sleep before the day began. Six hours he had lain there: turn in early, get some sleep before another big day, he had thought. Well, that had been wrong: his soul had been reeled into a pitiless *danse macabre* of doubt. His head was unable to find rest upon the bolster which Frau Müller had supplied, stinking still of the stale sweat of previous lodgers - soldiers, workers, refugees, fascists, socialists, sons. It was likely that every single previous sleeper was now dead, blown apart, melted down, or lost in the snow-bound plains of Europe.

Nürnberg, the second night of December 1945. What was he doing here? The war was over, Germany was defeated, most of his fellows had either demobbed to the safety of civilian life, or had found themselves some niche up north with the Control Commission. Not McGeorge. Something important for you to do down south, they said. A contribution to the Peace, they said. Work that you will look back on with pride. All words that had seemed persuasive then. Not so now, in the dead-point of a desolate winter's night. This work that had seemed so solid and important was now riddled by futility and undermined by doubt. Justice, they said - or was it underhand forgiveness? Was it retribution, or an excuse to pardon the less-prominent war-criminals?

A fortnight ago, he had been introduced to his 'client', a well-fed man who, despite his confinement in a bare room with bars on its windows, gave every sign of commanding a team of hair-dressers and gentleman's outfitters. He wore a beige, high-buttoned, military tunic in haute-couture style, his black hair was slicked back, his chin was shaved smooth as silk. Sir, the liaison officer addressed this man in terrible German, this is Flight-Lieutenant McGeorge; he will be your interpreter - "he wishes to become thy translator", were the exact words used - a desecration of the German language, but not worth arguing about. The man in the cell had nodded indifferently, then turned back to gaze out of the window at the falling snow, his fingers playing nervously. McGeorge had mumbled a few polite words, glad not to have to shake hands with the man; he immediately regretted his instinct for politeness; then he had been escorted from the room and dispatched to examine some of the legal papers which would be discussed by the court over the next few weeks.

The next time the man appeared, it was on the first day in the Tribunal, when he was called with a score of his erstwhile colleagues to stand before the judges. The charges against him were read in English - summarised as 'crimes against peace' - McGeorge had dutifully, slightly nervously, translated them into accurate German, the accused had said nothing, simply sat back and relaxed, smiling. McGeorge, although sitting five yards away, was invisible to him, just a voice in the head-phones.

In the course of the twelve days since then, the interpreter had acted as the invisible mouthpiece, had spoken the words of denial, had abjured all responsibility, had blamed all those

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who were now dead - Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels. McGeorge and the Nazi, talking and listening as one. McGeorge, who excelled in foreign languages, using his skills now to act as the bridge between conquerors who rarely admitted guilt and the vanquished who rarely understood it. This was not work as a man, this was work as a device, a tool, a pen, or a wireless set. Interpreting meant communication between two minds, each tuned to a different station, it was a creative act, requiring skill, nuance, empathy. But it also meant alienation, withdrawal of judgement, a strict adherence to the language. That's why you've been picked: your proficiency in German has been noted, they said. You have a major role to play in the coming months. The eyes of the world will be upon the Tribunal in Nürnberg. This is your chance to be part of history. This is not simply a job, it is a duty. Of course he had snapped it up: yes, of course, sir, it would be an honour.

After barely two weeks it was no longer an honour, it was only a duty. McGeorge turned again in his bed, the rough blankets irritating his skin. He lit and smoked a cigarette. The glowing tip burned comfortingly, a single bright point of focus in the blackness of the night.

On that first public day at the Tribunal, most of those in the dock had been unknown even to him, who had kept his finger on the pulse of German politics throughout the past fifteen years of turmoil. The faces were bland like shop-keepers, scared like trapped rats, smiling like politicians, downcast like penitents, blank like criminals. Only those of Hess, Goering, Ribbentrop and Speer were familiar to him - but even then, he might not have recognised them in such unfamiliar settings; as for the rest, twenty of them, they could have been any well-heeled burghers waiting to be measured by their tailors, or attended to by a dentist. Such ordinary types concealing such an abyss of cold, sinister and human cruelty, the ordinary face of horror.

The accused sat in two rows in front of a line of military guards, an ill-fitting block. The eight interpreters sat at two desks, jammed tightly in a corner to the right of the dock, as far out of sight as could be managed - it seemed only fitting for this honour and this duty. The rest of the great wood-panelled room was packed with secretaries, recorders, defence counsel, prosecutors, guards, newspaper-men, official photographers, observers, military brass, judges, messengers. A clock solemnly ticked away the minutes. The air was thick with the smoke from cigarettes - American, there was no other - which billowed around the bare lights.

In one lull in the proceedings, McGeorge had cast a glance over the defendants, wondered just how many of them would walk free, how many would serve short prison sentences, how few would die on the scaffold. There would be off-stage negotiations to keep some of them alive, notwithstanding their complicity in the dark matters which were now said to be resolved. Was there not an economy and a society to be rebuilt? Democracy? There would be endless public submissions of regret, sorrow, ignorance, repentance; it would be pointed out that none of the accused were of an age to continue to pursue past policies - if they could not do it again in this life, argued some, why punish them? A few, almost certainly, would be spared, to live out their lives in shuttered villas behind tall hedges in the exclusive suburbs of German cities.

Doubtless, these Juggernaut wheels of Allied Justice would reveal details to the world which were not yet common currency. The tragedy and farce of recent history would probably be enacted again in intimate manner in this court-room, acts of horrific evil reduced to petty squabbles between bureaucrats. The broad picture was unlikely to change. But as always, McGeorge had kept his thoughts to himself. He had, after all, his job: to fit inside the machine like the well-oiled cog, just keep turning. The war is over, sir, let it go. Don't ask questions, just translate what is said, don't even consider the significance of the words. Do not think, do not judge, and above all do not remember.

If he suppressed his thoughts, his judgement, his memories, McGeorge could hope for three, maybe six months of comfortable living - cigarettes, beer and coffee - tucked away in the

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beautiful home-town of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Sachs; it would be a steady job, an impressive tour of duty to which to refer when applying for a position back in Britain. In this town which still bore the marks of the astonishing fertility of German art and literature, perhaps there was something to be salvaged?

The clock-tower rang out four times. That a clock-tower still functioned was, for those who did not understand Germany, a miracle. For the man who did, there was still not the slightest promise of sleep. How was he to concentrate tomorrow, when questions of great moment would be posed and all ears would attend upon the answers which he alone would translate? He lit another cigarette. Maybe he would get used to it: tomorrow was only the eleventh day; there were days and weeks and months to come, McGeorge would adapt, this work would become just another framework in which he could live. He had done such things before, he fitted in: interpreting was fitting in; fitting in was what he was good at, fitting in even when he most wanted to break out.

God Almighty, it was cold, a surprise even to McGeorge, who had experienced some of the breath-robbing, penetrating winters of central Europe. He clutched his blankets about his feet and head and wished for a warm companion. These were the bleakest hours of the night, hopeless hours, lonely hours, dark hours, empty hours, cold.

Back home in Edinburgh, a wife waited for him, sick, wasted, maybe dying. Helen. They had been married for seven years, separated for almost six by the duties of war, which had sent him wherever his language-skills were needed: in Bermuda for one glorious surreal year interviewing refugees from Europe, determining whether those who were fleeing to America bore either intelligence or malice or both; then working with several hundred drones at Bletchley, unravelling the secrets of the German High Command, usually too late to prevent another grim massacre; then criss-crossing Germany in the days after surrender, accompanying the cream of the British officer caste on fruitless errands and missions of doubtful strategic value.

A wife, but no children. Since their marriage, there had been neither time nor energy for children. Perhaps, after the Tribunal was over, a new age, talking forgiveness, talking brave, talking new, talking life: perhaps then, one son or a daughter. A son, now - he could teach a son how to live, intelligently, gravely and with compassion. Or a daughter, perhaps better suited to such advice.

At worst, he thought, I will waste some months of my life providing a service for this pomaded thug. Speaking to him, but not conversing; hearing him, but not listening; rendering into English some words, thoughts, excuses which he had no time for. And then doing exactly the reverse for the prosecuting officers, or the presiding judge: would the prisoner explain why he did this? whom did he order to do that? please provide the names of those who - it would go on and on. To what end? The German people knew who had ultimately led them into destruction, they could surely exact revenge, where revenge was needed. They did it after the last war - Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, revolution, hopeful uprising and hopeless civil war: when there had been a need, there had been response enough. Perhaps now the Germans needed to be left alone to sort themselves out, not to be patronised by the Allied judiciary.

A far cry, Germany now, from that year he had spent in Potsdam as a young man: every summer's morning, as he walked to teach at a school in that cultured town, he would be passed by a man heading for the lake on a bicycle. One day, a pupil proudly pointed out that the man pedalling by, at slightly less than the speed of light, was none other than Albert Einstein on holiday. "A little maddened, the Herr Professor?" suggested his pupil, making full use of the English idiom which he thought to have acquired. A little maddened: but that was a lifetime away and more - since then, a little rill of madness had been swept away by an endless black torrent of brazen insanity. Now, he was surrounded by post-war Germany, by the living altar-pieces depicting destruction, poverty, and - above all - resentment.

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He turned again in his bed, desperate for sleep: he stared into the darkness. If he didn't do this job, then someone else would. Would working make him free? Would it not be better just to stay at his post, see this through, do the work, then go home, find a school in the quietest corner of Scotland, there to teach and lose all his memories? Or would he regret it for the rest of his life, if he just walked away from this? A golden opportunity, or a poisoned chalice? He knew there was no rational answer to these questions.

Far and away in the sky, the persistent sound of a second transport-plane, a bomber with no bombs left to drop; it droned, one engine slightly faltering, across the stars, as near to him as if he were in the cockpit, for minutes on end, threading through the heavy cloth of the night. The very sound was comfort and anguish. Heading north to Berlin, perhaps. McGeorge felt the dizzying despair of life wrap its arms around him, a vertiginous companion.

The final hours of the night slid past, hauled bell by bell into the coldest passage, the ghastly catacomb of dawn. He could barely say the word 'catacomb' - his teeth began chattering. He got up and struggled into his great-coat, pulled on an extra pair of socks, went over to the frosted window, opened it on the knife-cold air and looked out. The sky in the east was perhaps beginning to lighten. He smoked another cigarette, despised the taste, spat. Outside, a street away or more, a dog began to bark monotonously, endlessly. It might have been the only other living creature left in all the world. There was no one to shout at it to stop. McGeorge closed the window again, went back to bed and lay under the comfortless blankets, breathing heavily into his hands to warm them.

At six, Frau Müller emerged from her room on the landing below and shuffled down the stairs to the kitchen, coughing badly. She would be dressed as always indoors, in two thin coats, a man's scarf wound round her head, cast-off military gloves. Despite McGeorge's frequent attempts at polite conversation, she barely spoke to him. Understandable perhaps - he was the recent enemy, the guest she didn't invite. Her husband and sons were lost in the east. He had no idea whether she found his work honourable or otherwise. He loved the German language because he loved the German soul, the German past. But Germany now and the present German soul were closed to him.

He did not hear half-past-six.

At eight o'clock precisely, he was roused by the army driver who clattered up the stairs, rapped on the door and burst in. "Shake a leg, sir," he called cheerily, as he always did, "Field-Marshall's waiting! Ain't you the regular Kip van Winkle, eh?" And then he swaggered back downstairs whistling, to sit outside in his commandeered Volkswagen, revving the engine and sounding the horn at girls, as conquerors may do. Drained of all energy, McGeorge reluctantly got out of his bed, shaved, dressed, lit the last cigarette of the night, set off for work.

Coffee and hot rolls and butter, unimaginable luxuries for the rest of Germany, were always in abundance at the International Military Tribunal - for both the judges and the judged; and nicotine, as much as your throat could take. After a cup of hot coffee, it should look like a decent number, a comfortable billet to look back on - "as it happens, I was the interpreter for Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering". It should be a decent number, if you kept your eyes down, where the clear light of interpreting shone; but what if you raised them and stared into the darkness?

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