

STRAIGHT ON

ROBERT COLLIS AND
HAN HOGERZEIL



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ROBERT COLLIS AND HAN HOGERZEIL

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HERMINA AND LUBA

STRAIGHT ON

by

ROBERT COLLIS

and

HAN HOGERZEIL



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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COMPLETE
CONFORMITY WITH THE AUTHORIZED
ECONOMY STANDARDS

TO OUR FRIENDS
LUBA TRYSZYNSKA
AND
HERMINA KRANTZ

FOREWORD

THE story told here is not propaganda in any sense, for the authors have no interest in any particular national attitude. They have attempted to tell a true story as simply as possible. The descriptions of Auschwitz and Belsen were taken down from the raconteurs, translated and carefully checked with the official records. Where German phraseology is used the actual words spoken have been recorded for their historical value.

For the sake of simplicity, one of the authors (R.C.) assumes the first person in the narrative, but the events recorded have in fact been seen equally by both and the record has this dual quality almost throughout.

The drawings are not included for decorative purposes only, but were done on the spot independently by the artist who himself worked as a war correspondent in the camp.

Many may wonder what is now happening to Luba, Hermina and the children. Hermina has gone home and got married. Luba and one group of the children are still in Sweden. Another group have been taken to Ireland, where some have been adopted and others are still in hospital.

It is our hope to be able to find a happy future for all of the children somewhere in the world. Elsewhere one of us (R.C.) is raising a Belsen Children's Fund for the purpose.

R.C.
H.H.
E.A.

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SIGMUND
VERA FERDERBERG
NURSING MOTHER

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(At the end)

BERGOORD

HAN, BONSEL AND SOME OF THE CHILDREN

R.C.AND TONI

DR. BERGER AND WIFE

TIBOR AND ZSUZSI

ZSOLTAN AND EDIT

EDIT, EVELYN, TIBOR, ZSUZSI AND ZSOLTAN AS THEY ARE TODAY

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‘Only one thing mattered in the end—love—
which is the charity of Christ, that cloak holding
within its many folds mutual forbearance which
is the beginning of compassion.’

CHAPTER ONE

JOURNEY TO HOLLAND

THERE they were lined up against the kerb, our ambulances, fifteen-hundredweights and three-tonners. As I crossed the square I noticed for the first time that the vehicles carried no red crosses but rather what looked like the American star.

‘Why haven’t we got red crosses?’ I said to MacClancy.

‘Cos of some International Red Cross rule,’ he said.

‘Curious,’ I said. ‘I should have thought that if anybody could have the protection, if it is a protection, of a red cross on their car, we should.’

‘Against the rules,’ he said.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘but why an American star on the bonnet?’

‘To stop the Yanks potting you from the air,’ he said; ‘dangerous otherwise.’

The sun shone, but it was bitter and I shivered. We stood about for an hour, just waiting, while people came up with more papers. Finally a stir was evident. The H.Q. staff began to say good-bye. I shook hands, turned, mounted into the driver’s seat and seized the controls. As I did so the scene changed. Suddenly I saw the houses, some battered, all unpainted, the one cloud in the sky between two chimneys, with the blue sky to the right, the chairman’s tired stoop; the secretary, quick, organizing, yet frustrated.

‘Come on,’ some one yelled, ‘get into line.’

I pushed in the clutch, we jerked forward, wheeled after the truck in front. We were off, the journey had started.

The City of London, once centre of the world’s money, looked very naked that spring morning. Gone were the narrow streets around St. Paul’s where I used to get lost every time I went to see my publisher, just a wall against the sky and a flat open space and St. Paul’s standing above symbolizing the English God. Funny nobody thinks of St. Paul’s as a place to pray in by oneself. General thanksgivings, inaugurations, Queen Victoria’s jubilee, yes.—People go and look at it, talk about the dome, the structure, the lack of tombs, but not about Jesus.

The city passed us as we drove, rather than we the city, and we found ourselves moving suddenly through a mean world. Everything was ugly, except the sky. The houses were small, brick, and dirty. There was no fineness, no architecture, nothing but straight mean ugliness; mile followed mile. We stopped constantly. I looked at the names above the little shops that stuck out from the houses, Rubenstein, Levy, Morris. I looked at the people, they seemed unfamiliar.

‘Of course, the Jewish quarter. How I dislike these people,’ I said to MacClancy who sat beside me.

‘Yes’ he said. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’—It didn’t seem necessary to think why.—These beastly people in their beastly streets, of course one hated them, everybody did.—We jerked on again. We came to

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a gaping hole where two houses had been, like a tooth-mark of some prehistoric monster of overwhelming dimensions; then another and another, and then a whole line of houses leaning drunkenly about, without glass in their windows, doors ajar and roofs sagging.

'V ones and V twos,' MacClancy said.

'Bomb alley,' I said. 'Pity they're not all quite flat, then perhaps they might put up a decent place instead of just East End slums. But they wouldn't anyway. These people like it, I expect.' MacClancy didn't reply, he wasn't interested.

The truck in front stopped. Automatically I applied the brakes. We stopped and got out. We had halted beside a near-field, for that was all the grimy, grass-covered, open space could be called.

'You drive,' I said, and I took the other seat. We went on. I closed my eyes. After a long time we reached more near-fields. We passed the rusty barbed wire of a prisoner-of-war camp, but we didn't see any prisoners. At last we stopped at a place marked '*Transit Camp*.' We pulled the convoy herring-wise on to the side of the road and got out. It was 3 p.m. Orders came through a loud-speaker to the effect that we would move off to the port at 3 a.m. I remembered that some one had said that Army life was chiefly hours of soul-killing boredom interspersed with moments of excitement Twelve hours to wait. Nothing to do. Nothing to read. Just wait. To do nothing came as such a shock that I became quite sullen with anger.—Nothing to do for twelve hours except walk round in bloody circles.—The sun had gone in. The wind had got colder. There were no latrines. It began to rain.

'We won't be fresh in the morning if we don't get to sleep,' MacClancy said.

'No sleeping for me in transit blankets.'

'What about the back of the bus?'

'What about the packing cases?'

'We'll pull a mattress across them.'

We were so close to the top tarpaulin that we could smell its mackintoshy wetness. I was inside. There was no air except that which filtered through MacClancy's socks. He snored like a rhinoceros in a tunnel. My nose was stopped. I lay in a stupor. Suddenly there was a crackling on the loud-speaker. 'The German Army has "surrendered" and the "cease fire" will take effect from...

'Paddy,' I said, 'did you hear that? The war's over. We may as well go home!'

'Christ,' he said, striking his head against an iron bar, 'what's that you said?'

'I said, the war's over.'

'Shut up, can't yer,' he said, and fell back into stertorous unconsciousness.

I lay awake trying to think, but the nearness of the tarpaulin above me shut in my thoughts, the packing case under my left shoulder bit me continuously, and Time carried me forward, my spirit struggling but faintly against his current.

Sometimes when the sun shines and love stands holding our hands, we forget him. He almost disappears, even consciously we sometimes tell each other that we've escaped him. Oh, we're outside Time, we say to our love, but he stands there in the shadow, yes, just behind us biding *his time*. And now second by second he ticked away. I ceased to struggle and lay motionless. It seemed like eternity. Then the loud-speaker began to crackle again and hoarsely announced that it was time to get ready. It was 3 a.m. We slid out of that truck on to the road in our socks. It was raining hard. It was very cold.—Maybe the war was over, but there was no light, not a glimmer.—I couldn't find anything anywhere. Engines began

to warm up. The truck behind me suddenly lurched forward into the darkness. Some way I found the gears, and some way we found ourselves going down a road in a line of noises we couldn't see. Dawn broke. The sky was grey. We reached the port. We waited an hour, then another hour, then another hour. Then activity started suddenly. The cars moved forward on to the jetty, against which the jaws of a large landing craft were fixed. Without warning each vehicle was swung round and backed into the gaping mouth behind it. Down one ramp you went and up another with a crash and a bump, and lo! you were in a lift going up to another deck. Here the truck was made fast.

We got out and walked around, only to find every possible accommodation on the ship already overfilled. We went back and sat in the truck. It rained. The boat put to sea. It steamed into driving rain for an hour. Then it stopped and remained stopped for seven hours. We sat till we were altogether chilled. My cold now began to take charge and ousted time from my consciousness. I took sulphonamide. Night came on. We found a place on an iron floor to lie on, in a draught. We said we didn't sleep a wink. But whenever we looked round everybody else was snoring, and we said we all looked round all the time. And then suddenly everybody got up, everybody was washing in the same basin, or drinking out of the same cup of tea.

We went up to our truck. The ship was entering Ostend Harbour. It was 7 a.m. The sky was grey, there was a brisk north-easter blowing the rain sideways across our truck on the upper deck. We walked up to the bows as the grey ship slid silently into the harbour between grey walls of broken cement, smashed docks and blasted jetties.

On a dismal, grey, concrete landing place stood a grey crowd of people in the driving rain. We were landing in Europe on V.E. day. The war was over. Goodwill, love, fellowship, beauty were about to return to this continent. We looked at Ostend. A ragged Belgian slipped as they threw him a rope. A man in uniform said something to him. He put his hands in his pockets and turned his back, leaving the rope in the water.

'Do you remember me telling you about the end of the war last night?' I said to Mac-Clancy.

'I thought you said the end of the world,' he replied. We went ashore.

Next day when we awoke—and oh, how we had slept—the sun was shining. The cold spell had disappeared. My cold had left me and we stepped into as fair a May morning as ever smiled upon mankind.

As soon as we had left Ostend and the fortifications around it, we drove out into the flat land of Belgium. On every side were fertile fields of different greens, depending on the rising crops there. No corner was left untilled. In front of every little house a tethered sheep or a goat with lamb or kid beside her, cropped the verges. The cattle looked up at us without real interest. They had seen too many convoys before and the wet spring grass absorbed their instincts. Later, when full enough to sit down and chew the cud, they might have time for meditation, but at this hour they were solely engaged in their historical mission of providing the world with milk. Beside them chewed the short-necked Flemish horses. They flicked their ears with angry quickness as we passed, their enemies all forms of mobile wagons. And so we sat looking out lazily, and felt the sun. Coming to a village we saw the people smile and greet us as their friends. We smiled back happily and thus we passed on through literally smiling hamlets, villages, towns and fair countryside, seeing no trace of war save a few broken bridges across canals. We drove north-east steadily, hour after hour.