

## MIRADOR-MY TERM AS HITLER'S GUEST \*

### *Prisoner or guest?*

At first sight the title of this delightful autobiography would hardly qualify for the usual subject of books presented in the *International Review of the Red Cross*. Yet a cursory perusal of the artistic dust-jacket already promises that, among a panoply of uncommon incidents and fascinating persons, the reader can expect to meet the “dedicated *Croce Rossina*” and the “humane efficient executive of the Red Cross”.

Indeed the wartime Red Cross emerges with flying colours in this memoir dedicated “To All Prisoners”. Yet the book is not about the Red Cross. It is the day-to-day record of the life of a young British Army Medical Officer, from the day he is captured at Anzio, to the day he is liberated just outside Berlin, as the millennial capital of a mad dictator was going up in flames and crashing down in ruins.

It is difficult to categorize this book. Dr. Burton prefers to call it a novel about himself. And it does read like a novel—a life drama in which the tragic, the funny and the comic merge, the realistic and the philosophical unite without colliding, humour and pathos cohabit without difficulty; the ensemble reflecting a real human situation, rendered more bizarre by man’s folly of war. Are we reading about a P.O.W. camp or just a pleasant camp? Is the first person singular a guest or prisoner (as the title leaves us hanging)? Is the captured officer an underdog or a privileged observer of his captor?

Knowing the author as does this reviewer, John Burton could certainly not be just a prisoner, much less an underdog. In fact he states this in the very first line of his memoir: “Being an underdog is a rare experience for a Doctor. Learning its arts was necessary but adopting its psychology was not; sceptical optimism prevailed”—and it prevails through 163 pages of beautifully written English which, one suspects, even when expressed in stalag German, must have impressed and perhaps intimidated the camp Kommandant.

This posture begins right from the start when, on being captured and interrogated, Captain Burton coolly says to his victorious captor: “I wish to lodge a formal protest at the flagrant breach of the Geneva Conventions. You must give us back our jeep and grant us safe passage to our lines”. When his repeated protests are ignored he decides that perhaps while continuing his profession and caring for the wounded soldiers—enemy and allied—he might as well settle down to profit from the unique occasion and analyse the defeat of the foe from within. And what a fascinating observation post this becomes! So much so that, in line with the enigma—guest or prisoner?—Chapter 2 is entitled “Who captured

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\* John Burton: *Mirador—my term as Hitler’s guest*. Regency Press, London and New York, 1986, 163 pp.

whom?”. “I had become very interested in observing the behaviour of the master race which had produced so many geniuses... What had gone wrong?”

The “normal” camp population was an international medley of some 60,000 overcrowded, underfed prisoners—Poles, Yugoslavs, British, Americans, Russians, Czechs and other undesirables. But as the tide turns and the victorious thud of the Allied armies is heard in the distance, the seniors of the stalag meet secretly and decide on action. “Our decisions were brief and to the point. We decided to liberate ourselves”, and liberate they did, overnight. And for those of us in international service an instructive *a parte* is added: “Rarely can action have followed an international decision so rapidly”... Soon, with other “liberated” arrivals, the camp population swells up to over 300,000. Food, more than anything else, becomes the most urgent and crucial need. And here again the efficient and humane ICRC delegate De B. is magically at hand producing 500,000 parcels and a convoy of 50 trucks, Heaven knows how, which are rushed to the hungry inmates just in time to build the minimum energy to produce a victory smile on emaciated faces.

The following day Burton climbs into the dark belly of a Liberator transport and finds the green meadows of his free England. “Captivity in Germany”, he concludes in characteristic understatement, “was an unique experience which one could have no other way”. It makes uniquely sobering reading.

S. William Gunn

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## CES LIEUX OÙ HENRY DUNANT...

### *Story in stone...*

The Henry Dunant Society of Geneva, whose purpose is to encourage and co-ordinate historical studies of the life, thought and activities of Henry Dunant and thereby spread his message, has just published an illustrated volume entitled *Ces lieux où Henry Dunant...*<sup>1</sup>. The idea is an original one: to discover or rediscover Henry Dunant, the members of his family and the “founding fathers” of the Red Cross through their family circumstances and their geographical, cultural and social environment. The author, Roger Durand, President of the Henry Dunant Society, therefore invites us to stroll through the streets of Geneva and the surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Durand, Michel Rouèche, *Ces lieux où Henry Dunant...*, Henry Dunant Society, Geneva, 1986, 60 p., 24 illustrations. (French text, English abstracts).