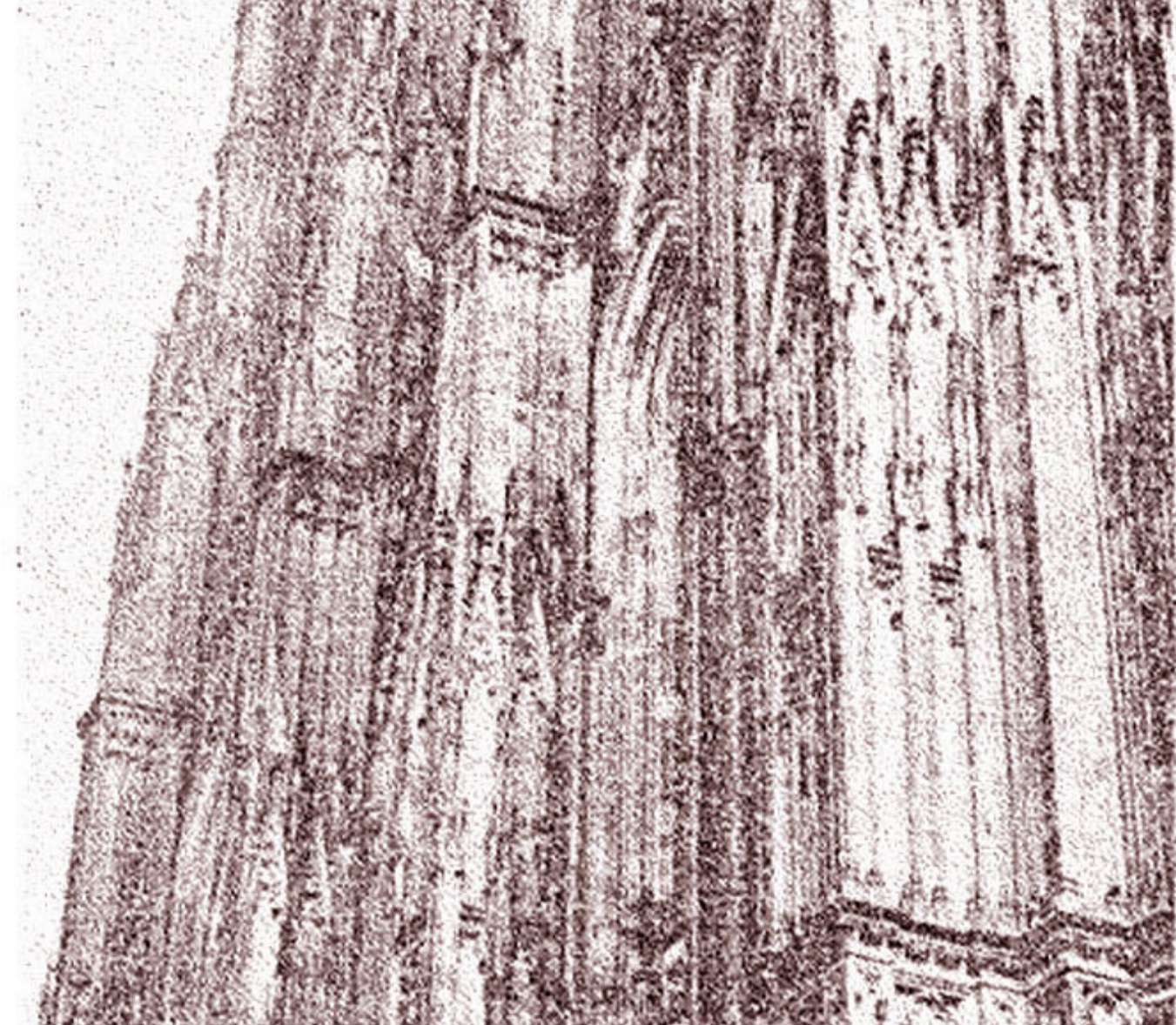


CROSS

VS

SWASTIKA



The above is "the cross that is not the cross of God"

As pastor of the little Austrian church, the good father was happy until Nazis swallowed the country, mistreated his Jewish converts and threw many of his colleagues into the dreaded concentration camp of Dachau. Shocked, he attempted to preserve a fragmentary picture of events for posterity—and found himself in Dachau. Similar episodes, which are today common throughout Nazidom, only succeed in stiffening the Catholic fight against Nazism.

THIS is the story of an anti-Nazi Catholic priest. The facts are not denied. The Nazi themselves have published them in their newspapers. The following, then, is a well authenticated account of an episode in one of the most dramatic struggles of modern times—the Catholic Church vs. the National Socialist Party.

Father Andreas Rieser was pastor of the Roman Catholic Church of Hofgastein, a pretty little mountain town buried deep in the Austrian Alps. Father Rieser for many years had enjoyed a happy pastorate. The townsmen remained pious Catholics, just as their forefathers had been for centuries. Also, the priest attracted the attention of many rich Viennese who stopped at the neighboring—and famous—watering-place of Bad Gastein. They came to hear Father Rieser say Mass and preach his Sunday sermon. The sermons, it is important to note, were outspokenly anti-Nazi up to March, 1938.

From that month on—the month when Hitler and his Nazis swept the Austrian republic into the lap of the Third Reich—the priest in Hofgastein had to temper his zeal and conceal his assaults on National Socialist philosophy with the symbolism of theology. Nor was it possible any more to talk freely among his congregation. For Nazi ideas had infected some parishioners—individuals who found it profitable to jump on Hitler's bandwagon. Father Rieser, therefore, had to limit his opposition to contributions to the whispering campaign which the majority of Austrians, still good Catholics, have carried on ever since the Anschluss. Bits of local gossip or news from Vienna relayed slyly from parish to

parish nourish what constitutes a formidable opposition movement in Austria today.

But there are limits to the satisfaction which such a campaign can give. Father Rieser was inspired with the desire to transmit to posterity the thoughts of a soldier in the war against the New Paganism. He was impatient to commit these to paper. A dangerous ambition, to be sure, in a country under the yoke of the Gestapo.

But the priest thought he had found a way. He dare not, of course, keep notes or a diary. No desk drawers nor closets remained securely locked against Nazi spies. Another repository, however, offered a chance, he thought, to execute his scheme.

For a long time, everyone in Hofgastein had noticed that the cross on top of the church steeple had become dangerously bent. The strong winds driving down from the mountains had inclined the cross, and, indeed, to a certain extent, the steeple itself, at an angle that threatened disaster. Repair work was obviously necessary.

But this steeple, like all other steeples in Austria, is an "onion" steeple. Beneath the cross bulges a sphere, not unlike those on top of the Orthodox Greek Churches. This sphere, in many Austrian communities, serves one of the oldest of Austrian customs. From time to time, documents describing the life of the parish are sealed in this aerial tomb as records for the perusal of parishioners in centuries to come. What better or safer place, then, could the priest find than this? Why should not he smuggle into it a picture of the present tyranny so that later generations could know the truth? In this confessional, the priest could talk at will. The Gestapo rummaged in dresser drawers. But the Gestapo would not think of the steeple.

Accordingly, he summoned the carpenters and masons. When they were in the midst of their work, he placed in their hands a large envelope, sealed—perhaps too conspicuously—with red wax, with orders to place it without delay in the "onion."

But Father Rieser had counted without the burgomaster of Hofgastein. This dignitary, by this time a faithful agent of the Nazis, became suspicious when he heard of the red seal and of the priest's instructions to make haste. He knew the priest's political views. Taking advantage of his authority as burgomaster to affix his official signature to any document placed in this parochial place, he ordered the workmen to bring him the envelope. He opened it. Here is what he read, carefully written in ink on vellum paper:

"Rosenberg, author of *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, is considered in the Reich as the true German pope. Hitler claims to want to build a 'Greater Germany' and that is the reason why he 'swallowed' little Austria. Schuschnigg's fault when he came to power was in not conducting a radical extermination of the Nazis. He had ordered a popular referendum

CROSS vs SWASTIKA

for the 10th of March. There is no doubt that the result would have strikingly confirmed his policy.”

After this preamble, the priest sought to describe the plight of his Fatherland and his Church following the Anschluss. “We priests are condemned to a terrible fate. Many of us have been thrown into prison by the Nazis and are rotting there. Many prominent men who supported Schuschnigg’s regime are now in the famous concentration camp of Dachau, where it is understood they suffer atrocious treatment.

“The treatment of the Jews is worse, even when they have become sincere Catholics. Haven’t I converted many rich Viennese Jews who used to come to Bad Gastein? And haven’t I witnessed how strongly they cling to their new faith? Jews, whether converted or not, possess immortal souls. The pagan racial theories of Rosenberg have been expressly condemned by the Holy Father.

“There are no longer any Christian newspapers. We no longer know what is going on. Press, radio—everything is in the hands of the State. We can believe nothing we read or hear through these channels. A little truth filters through thanks to broadcasting stations like that of the Vatican. I can’t believe that this regime of brutality and oppression can maintain itself. We keep the hope that Austria has not yet terminated its mission. Prussia must be dismembered. When that is done, Austria will rise again.

“I have still more to say, but time and a safe place to conceal what I have to say are lacking. Who knows if even this manuscript will find peace in the church tower.”

Prophetic conclusion! The manuscript never found peace. Its author, according to Nazi journals, “is today in a position to document himself personally on the so-called atrocious treatment of Dachau.” By this delicate manner, we are informed that Father Rieser has been thrown into the concentration camp, perhaps for the rest of his days. That will teach him to write such a history! The Nazi journal goes on, “So it is Prussia, that is to say Germany, which they want to ‘dismember.’ That’s their war cry which rings out under the murmurs of their ‘Kyrie eleisons.’ That is what they want and not the salvation of the souls of their flock, nor the destruction of the Jewish bolshevism which destroys their own churches.”

A savage epitaph for the good Father. Yet in these words, there is a note of fear as well as exultation. There are still many thousands of Father Riesers tending their flocks. Many of them like their parishioners in Austria have taken on a new militancy. When Nazis broke into the apartment of Cardinal Innitzer last November, the papers did not tell the whole story. The Nazi outrage was provoked by militant Catholics who demonstrated against the Nazis. This underground Catholic movement now publishes a paper, which has a wide circulation for its news of Nazi out-

CROSS vs SWASTIKA

rages and appeal for a Catholic front. It was with this in mind that Herr Rosenberg at Nuremberg counseled caution to his Nazis in attacking the Catholic Church, especially in Austria. He urged that they should refrain from a "wild radicalism" lest they "not only harm the prestige of the government but at the same time strengthen the martyrdom among followers of the Church." Rosenberg was right. It is martyrdoms like that of Father Rieser which stiffen the Catholic fight against Nazism. ●



March 23, 1939

p. 25