

WITH YOUNG GERMANY ON SKIS IN 1932

IAN F. MACKINNON

WE paused for a minute in the darkness, just where the path in the snow reached the top of the first ridge, at the side of the valley, and let those who had straggled a bit at the end of the line close up. The night was still and clear, with four or five degrees of frost. Oberstdorf lay reflected on the snowy surface of the plain, a pattern of lights; across the valley, and at a little higher level, a modern sport and luxury hotel blazed like a jewelled broach against the black mountain side.

All day we had travelled south by train from Marburg, one of the many university or high school ski-parties which pack up for a fortnight holiday in the Bavarian Alps or the Tyrol at the close of the winter semester. Before the Christmas and New Year's vacation, and more especially during the last week of February, preparations are general to take advantage of the snow falls on the higher land within reach of the larger centres of population. Interest is keen not only in student circles but also among the younger people of all classes. Skiing is possibly the most conspicuous illustration of Germany's present trend toward an out-door life and physical culture, in the general movement that has covered the land with expensively equipped "Sport-platz," summer and winter swimming-baths, and "Jugendherberge"—cheap over-night cabins for hikers. To the Canadian, who sees yearly his own snowy wastes at home going unexploited, reports in the newspapers of snow conditions, depth in centimetres, temperature, consistency—whether "Papp-schnee," "Harsch," or "Pulverschnee"—seem at first superfluous bits of information, until he discovers how eagerly these prospects are watched by his companions. From the crowded cities of the Rhineland, and from the great industrial centres of the North, special trains carry their enthusiastic freight to the Harz mountains, to the Sauerland and to the Vogelsberg; while those who have time and opportunity prepare for the longer run to the higher ranges and to the more exciting possibilities of the Alps. Travelling with one of the student groups and sharing the intimacy of their life in one of the remote "Hutten" affords an unique opportunity of understanding the ways and problems of Young Germany in 1932.



Ruck-sacks piled in the corridors, skis stacked in the van, a barrage of "auf Wiedersehens" from the platform in the darkness preceding the dawn, we had rolled away on our journey in two wagons attached to the Hamburg-Frankfort express. Members of the party were of both sexes, and wore a variety of ski costumes. Strains of a mandolin issuing from one compartment vied with those of a gramophone playing in the next. At Frankfort everyone took advantage of an hour's wait to make purchases for the day. No one entered the diner. It was too costly a luxury. Money is a scarce commodity with the German student these days. Twice in the last fifteen years the ordinary family has been stripped of its savings; at the collapse of the war-loan in 1919, and of the currency in 1923, an event more disastrous financially to the middle class than even the loss of the War. In these dreadful days the bottom dropped out of enterprises which were the results of a life-time's patient labour, all sense of security vanished, and even the Life Insurance deposits and credits were wiped out. Whole sections of the population were reduced to a state of poverty making the maintenance of a son or daughter at college to-day a privilege to be envied. On holiday trips "Wurst" and bread must constitute the main items in the menu. When a group such as ours descends upon the stores of some modest establishment, a genial struggle takes place between the invading hordes and the staff, who, from the manager to the scullery maid, must league themselves to protect their wares, if they are not to come off second-best in the encounter.

Our journey south illustrated well the fact that Germany is a conglomeration of countries as varied in landscape and architecture as Europe itself. From Hesse, so distinctive in the structure of its village barns and in the traditional costumes of its peasants, we passed into the old Palatinate and stopped for a minute or two in Heidelberg. From these Hessian villages George III drew the mercenaries with whom he hoped to hold America. A colonel of one of these regiments lies buried in St. Paul's Church, Halifax, with an orange in his hand, a curious reminiscence of a feudal practice in interring the last representative of a noble house.

It was impressive to note how well versed in the history of their own country were these young Germans, an indication of how deeply rooted are national antipathies and specially the feeling against the French, scarcely understandable to the Westerner, who lives for the present, but explaining the menace of age-old frontier questions. For example, when someone read from a journal that Germans had fought on French soil twice in the last fifty years, immediately

came the rejoinder in an estimate of how often the French had invaded this very territory, where scarcely a Gothic monument survived the terrible Thirty Years War and the even more complete devastation of the Palatinate under Louis XIV. "Old Heidelberg", the back-ground of musical plays, the Mecca of American university students and summer visitors, is in reality but a year or two older than Halifax; with the exception of the church, a tower, an old bridge, nothing at all remains of the city destroyed by the French.

So far no snow had been visible, either on the Sauerland to the north or on the Vogelsberg to the south. At Stuttgart the first ski people appeared on the platform. At Ulm, four hours later, they swarmed everywhere. It was Saturday, the beginning of the week-end. In the Catholic South, early Mass is said even in the railway stations of the larger cities for the benefit of skiers off for the day. Leaving our special coaches, we had transferred to a local train which puffed and panted its arduous way toward Immerstadt and the foot-hills, and the white covering on the ground, which had become visible shortly after leaving Ulm and might have been termed in Nova Scotian parlance "a skiff of snow", soon attained to a respectable depth. At each small stopping-place a forest of skis now passed the windows of our coach, their bearers dimly to be descried in the gathering dusk. Would there be room for us all on the Alps? It was a question not to be so lightly dismissed as might appear, when one remembers that because of the innumerable visitors to these regions in summer, sign-boards have been placed all over the hill-sides stating that one of this, two of that, or none of another variety of wild flowers might be picked. One more change, introducing the last stage by train, and our eighteen hours rail journey came to an end, and we stood grouped about the leader under the winter stars.

After a few minutes halt, the guide gave the sign; ruck-sacks were picked up again and slung across shoulders, and we set off in single file into the mountains. Sixteen kilometres lay before us to the "Auenhutte" and its Alpine lodging. A shoulder of the foot-hills, heavily wooded with spruce, soon shut off any further view of our starting-point. We halted for a moment beneath a board that said "Germany" on one side and "Austria" on the other; no customs examination; no question about papers; an interesting indication of the bond between the two countries at the moment. The snow increased in depth and the night grew colder, made more keen by a light breeze from the mountains. In spite of heavy ski clothes no one was inclined to flag in his pace, and no one dared

to offer to relieve the girl students of their burdens—an offer which would have been indignantly refused. An eagerness to undergo endurance tests pervades the youth of Germany. An intense wave of national feeling now sweeps the country, and results in feats that could scarcely be paralleled in the student life of an American university. An occasional gleam, far above us, now told that we had penetrated the higher ranges. An hour past midnight brought the lights of our objective and its hospitable cheer.

Gathered into the warm interior of the building, we looked around with interest at the fittings of the place and noted what chance had brought in the way of companionship for the next two weeks. Most of the hotel guests had retired for the night. Some were merely over-night visitors. Ski journeys of considerable length have been undertaken in recent years. The travellers carry their lunches for the day, and put up at night at these "Hutten". It is said that in this manner, with the aid of ski maps, one may travel from the Mediterranean to the Carpathians. Our Marburg party was apparently drawn from all parts of the Fatherland. In a group such as ours one found illustrated a most significant feature of life among young Germans of to-day. They travel together in large parties. Undoubtedly, in the first place this is a matter of temperament. English and Scottish people are gregarious to a point. We prefer to make our holiday expeditions single or with special friends. Not so in Germany, and very fortunately. The young people prefer to go off on their summer and winter tours *en masse*, under leadership; and forty or fifty are not considered too many or too unwieldy to handle for a ten days outing. A university course, combining arts subjects with special gymnasium training, where a high degree of efficiency must be attained, qualifies the graduate for the position of "Jugend-Fuhrer". The youth movement in Germany flourishes under the competent direction of these officers. The Government assists with special rates on the railways. In summer, parties on foot can put up at the "Jugendherberge" at the cost of six or seven cents apiece. As rendezvous for winter trips the high schools and universities maintain their own private and splendidly equipped camps in the Alps. In this manner Germany has overtaken the Herculean task of entertaining its youth in a country with a population of over sixty millions and in reality with room for only about forty. Conditions such as these cannot be paralleled in our own free and empty Canada; yet we might learn much from a system so highly developed.

Glorious sunlight tipped the mountain peaks to the south, and flooded our room high up under the eaves of our chalet. March

in the Tyrol shares with the Riviera a deep blue and cloudless sky and most brilliant sunshine. In addition it has the invigorating air of high altitudes. Down stairs the "Auenhutte" appeared to be wonderfully accommodating in spite of its modest dimensions. A dining room equipped with rough tables seating half a hundred, a sun-room walled with glass, a tiny shop for ski equipment, a bar, and the kitchens, all occupied the ground floor. In the cellar were the furnaces. Although so far up in the mountains, the place was centrally-heated. Skis were stored over-night in the waxing-room and given different preparations to suit a variety of weather conditions—"Steig"-wax for climbing, "Gleich"-wax for general purposes, a heavy coating of "Grund"-wax burned in with a hot iron and covered with two or more layers of Parafin wax for wet snow. Above were the sleeping quarters in three storeys. One or two of the rooms had beds; the majority were large ones, fitted with bunks, as in a Canadian fishing lodge to accommodate half-a-dozen or more. We discovered, on descending, that the love of order and a racial determination to do the work of the day thoroughly had already expressed themselves among our ski enthusiasts in a self-imposed regulation, a fine of ten pfennig for anyone who came late to breakfast. This was paid regularly and cheerfully throughout our stay by the lone Canadian.

But no one could remain slumbering long with the summons of such perfect weather and glorious scenery. At the door, people were busily engaged in arranging their snow-glasses and in applying cold cream to face and arms, whether they were taking part in the day's programme or not. So strong was the morning sun at ten that one or two of the more elderly visitors could seat themselves in deck-chairs on the wooden platform in front of the sun-room, with arms and shoulders bare, and only a wrap across their knees. Yet on the north side the icicles hung firmly and heavily from the eaves, and the thermometer registered several degrees of frost. The same phenomenon was observable on the mountain peaks. The tips of the precipices facing south were clear of snow and showed the black rock; the northern portions, still in shadow, and feeling the power of the sun's rays only an hour or two during the whole day, were buried deep with the drift of the winter's storms. We were to find this a danger in exploring even the lesser peaks. Where the snow is blown off the summits into the lee in this manner, it may cover with an innocent surface a jumble of precipitous clefts. Such places are marked in the ski maps of the district with red.

The German is inherently militaristic, disciplined, and without doubt his is the most virile race on the continent of Europe. As

we took our places on Skis and numbered off, girls and boys, one could not help thinking that French fears were justified, when they had such sturdy people for their neighbours. No more charming group could be imagined. Nowhere would the stranger be received with greater kindness and entertained with more evident good-will; or his conversation, a product of the languageless high-school and university training of his homeland, be endured with more patient courtesy. Nevertheless, it is clear what Europe must take into consideration when forecasting the future. Precision and systematic obedience are inborn in the race. Throughout our stay, though no written order demanded it, and although no penalty was imposed, no one dreamed of disputing the authority of our two leaders, or of hesitating for a moment to carry out their sergeant-major like commands. Coupled with this respect for authority are found a self-discipline and a determination to reach as high a degree of physical perfection as possible. A feature of our stay was abstemiousness in smoking and in patronizing the bar. This was not due to economic reasons, nor carried out from moral or religious motives, but rather a part of the intense wave of national feeling that has swept the youth of the land, and made them subordinate self-indulgence to the fixed purpose of restoring the position of Germany in the world.

Unforgettable was our first attempt on a near-by mountain summit. Those whose finances allowed it purchased "Fehler",—strips of seal fur for the bottom of the ski, affording a smooth surface when gliding forward, and to prevent slipping backward. Others cut tips from spruce boughs and bound these underneath with straps. The valley and its lonely establishment dropped rapidly away beneath us. A thousand feet, and we were still directly above the "Auenhütten". One might easily, it seemed, have tossed a ski stick on to its roof. The last stages of the climb lay up ravines under towering cliffs. Our leaders were careful to keep the party far out from places where snow might come down. "Bretter", or tiny snow-slides, a yard or two in width, and crossing the trail of former ski parties fully a quarter of a mile out from the base of the cliffs, showed how far this danger might extend. Our advance guard, containing the most proficient members, a full hour-ahead of the rest, appeared at intervals like a row of tiny black dots clinging to the plaster-like surface of the mountain wall. No breath of air stirred on these higher levels; the sun blazed down with Mediterranean intensity. It was necessary to oil the inside of the snow glasses, as perspiration caused a mist to form and to blur the vision. Another hour of steady effort and strenuous exertion,

and then, seated breathless on the turf of the summit blown clear of snow and burned dry as a summer sod, we beheld a hundred peaks shimmer around us.

In the evenings, after the thrill of the descent, and when the sky reversed its morning's pageant of changing light and colour, or during days when snow fell silently and an occasional "Lavine" sounded its dull thunder through the valley from the heights above, we gathered in the dining room, listened to music, wrote letters, or repaired broken equipment. These were the occasions when conversation revived the stories of war-time, or analysed the present political and economic crisis. A young gymnasium professor, chief of our party, with a four years' war experience, had been taken prisoner by the Canadians in front of Arras in August, 1918. He described this engagement minutely. He had little complaint to make of his subsequent year's detention in England. The experience of the remainder did not go back to these years. Yet it is true to say that the war and its consequences colour all attitudes in Germany at present. The Germans discuss and write about the war much more than we do. Canada compared with Germany was relatively unaffected by the struggle, and those years have passed, except in special cases, pretty well out of the recollection of our people. One has to remember that Germany and the German people were completely changed by the war; that every family had its killed and wounded; and that the number of those who perished of starvation and undernourishment during the year following the peace has been placed at nine hundred thousand.

More immediate were the problems that confronted the younger members of our group in a year which witnessed six thousand doctors of philosophy walking the streets without employment. Before the war the nation had more graduates than it could absorb. The colonies took care of the surplus. To-day there are twice as many students in proportion to the population as formerly, while Samoa and New Guinea have been taken by Australia, and German East Africa is under the flag of a British colony. A young man engaged to a girl of our party stated that three thousand applications were on the list ahead of his own in the district of Prussia where he hoped to be a teacher. He drew an interesting parallel between the possible future of the old possessions and French Canada. Would the German language and culture survive, as French language, law and religion had remained in Quebec? And would opportunities be given the young people of Germany to accept positions in their former colonies? More critical was the case of a youth whose mother and family home were in Metz, a German city in

the debatable land of the West given to France by the Treaty of Versailles. He had avoided compulsory military service in the French army by escaping across the frontier to get his education in Germany, and now could not return to visit his home or his mother without risk of being sent to the Foreign Legion. School-questions in the Polish Corridor, in that part of Czecho-Slovakia formerly German and still containing a population ninety per cent German, and problems of other districts kept cropping up, until one wondered if Europe, instead of one Alsace-Lorraine problem, as before the war, had not now at least a dozen.

These young people, with no discoverable exceptions, were "Nazi's," or followers of Hitler. More than fifty per cent of the students of Germany are said to be his enthusiastic supporters; theological students as well. That such a man and such a programme could capture the youth of the country is due to the desperate state of the times and the hopelessness of securing employment. Soviet Russia and Italy, two countries where exactly contradictory ways of government are being tested at the moment, lie at Germany's door; this proximity also profoundly influences the present alignment of the student body. The menace of Communism is a powerful one; the party includes some six millions of the population, and is armed with immensely attractive and clever propaganda; yet no one could doubt from the atmosphere of our party that it was foreign to the German temperament. None of our party, apparently, were "monarchist" in their view. Altogether, with so many claims upon their allegiance, the steadiness of young Germany in these days is truly wonderful.

Friendships of an international character are the best guard against war. Our peace talk on this side of the Atlantic must be better informed, with full knowledge of the history, economic difficulties, prospects, limitations, of each of these groups of Continental students. "Young Canada Demands Peace", was recently the heading of an article in a Canadian religious journal. "Of course young Canadians want peace," would be the comment of the *Auenhütten*; security to make money, and to enjoy the advantages of life in a land of opportunity." In crowded Europe the prospect is so different. We must cultivate in our advances an informed sympathy and a practical approach to the problems of the future that bound the horizon of the young European like mountains surrounding an Alpine valley.

One cannot forget Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, the memorials with their sombre back-ground of spruce in many a Nova Scotian hamlet; nor that the German nation, surrendering to a military

aristocracy and a crazed monarch, launched in 1914 the biggest buccaneering expedition the world has ever seen. Yet the people who produced Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner in the realm of music; Kant in philosophy; Humbolt in botany; whose land was the home of Martin Luther and in whose soil took root the first seeds of the Reformation; whose tongue is the language of culture for all eastern and northern Europe, and the language of science of one-third of the world, must have great contributions yet to make through its students toward the enrichment of human life. Co-operation and understanding will help Germany to weather the present crisis and to take its place once more in the family of nations.