THE WINDOW

MEET LISBON

In this issue’s “Window” we are publishing reports by neutral authors which contain first-hand information on two European countries and were written on the spot. The first of these, a Swiss report, dated November 1943, gives us a glimpse of life in one of the few remaining neutral capitals of Europe.—K.M.

TWO high embassy officials, both foreigners, live here in Lisbon under the same roof in the same building. This fact itself may not be so exceptional; in our case, however, the two officials are a genuine Englishman and a hundred-per-cent German. I was curious enough to ask one of them whether they still managed to get along with each other after so many years of war, and he replied, not without a certain satisfaction, that they managed very nicely to pass by each other. For reasons of mutual consideration, their cars, for instance, (which both bear the “CD” plates of the diplomatic corps, so frequently to be seen here in Lisbon) never pull up at the entrance of the house; the Englishman parks his Austin in a lane to the left of the house, and the German drives on to the first crossing on the right. They live with their families on different floors; of course, they do not have any social contacts with each other. On the other hand, they inevitably meet now and again on the stairs. In such cases, a minimum of courtesy requires that they greet each other with a brief but polite bow in passing. This has been going on for years without a single word ever having been exchanged. “That’s Lisbon for you,” the diplomat said, and changed the subject.

Indeed, that is the way it is all over Lisbon, in every hotel, in every good restaurant. Germans, Englishmen, Americans sit there, if not at the same tables, yet—and this can hardly be avoided—close together. They do not speak to each other but, as diplomatic courtesy demands even among enemies, they nod to each other.

For Lisbon—as every newcomer very quickly learns—has its own atmosphere: there is no visible hatred here. After years of living in a country at war, here one is inclined from the very first day to believe again in the possibility of peace.

In the show window of a large toyshop, there are hundreds of lead soldiers. Some of them represent the armies of the Allies; others again, nicely separated, wear the uniforms of German soldiers. A glance at this curious display is really enough to become acquainted with the Portuguese idea of neutrality: not to favor any belligerent country in public, even if it is only a question of displaying toy soldiers.

This, then, is neutrality at any price. One senses this everywhere in public life. In conversations with Portuguese one finds out, moreover, that the geographical position of the country at the edge of Europe has strongly influenced political thought. When one inquires, for instance, as to personal sympathies toward this or that belligerent country, one is seldom immediately given an unequivocal reply. The Portuguese clearly find it difficult, and not only for well-considered reasons of neutrality, to make up their minds.

When the Portuguese speak or write about the “Allies,” they mean the British and the Americans. They try to ignore the Russians as much as possible, for public opinion in Portugal is very anti-Bolshevist. This not only for political but, above all, for religious reasons. The Portuguese as a nation are devout Catholics, and their leader, Dr. Antonio Salazar, long considered becoming a priest before entering upon a political career and devoting his whole energies to the service of his country. Moreover, the influence of the Cardinal-Patriarch of Lisbon is undeniable, even in the political life of the country. The hostility toward present-day Russia is so pronounced that, although the press mentions the advance of the Red Army according to British and American reports, it gives it the smallest possible space. Commentaries on important events on the German-Soviet front are hardly ever published.
The Portuguese press is anyway very careful with commentaries of a foreign-political nature; this applies not only to the press but also to public opinion. They actually do not prefer either of the two warring camps. The main thing for most Portuguese is that Salazar keeps them out of the war. What is happening on the European war theaters is of minor importance.

As a result of centuries of good relations, England holds a special position in Portugal's attitude. But the sympathies for England are more of a historical and economic nature than political or conditioned by war events. On the other hand, there are many indications to prove that Portugal is by no means anti-German. No newspaper would dare to write against Germany. From a foreign-political view, England's progress is observed with greater interest than that of Germany, as has been confirmed by the case of the Azores. But, from a domestic point of view, the Portuguese show unmistakably greater interest in Germany. Indeed, they seem to have taken Germany as an example in various respects, as, for instance, in the organization of the government's power and in youth education. At any rate, Salazar's government tries to maintain as even and impartial relations as possible with the Allies—except for Russia—as well as with Germany, difficult as this may sometimes prove to be.

A happy people, indeed, that does not get excited over this terrible world in arms. For someone who has been transferred here from other parts of tortured Europe, this calm is almost intolerable. At first one finds it difficult to become accustomed to it, but after a time it feels like a balm. A complete adjustment to it, however, seems for the time being out of the question, as far as I am concerned.

Lisbon is today probably the calmest city in Europe. Will it remain so? Do the people in Lisbon really feel the war? Psychologically, hardly; economically, above all, by the increasing rise in prices. The shops are full of goods, it is true, and almost everything can be obtained as in peace time. One cannot speak of an actual rationing system; some important foodstuffs such as oil, butter, and flour are scarce. On account of the shortage of gasoline, private cars can only be driven on Wednesdays and Saturdays; on the other hand, after a short restriction, taxis are plentiful. The railways are suffering from coal shortage, and locomotives are being driven with wood. As a precautionary measure, railway traffic has been curtailed: at present only three pairs of express trains are running in Portugal per week.

It cannot be claimed, however, that these restrictions have brought the war home very acutely to the Portuguese. But the goods in the shops have become very expensive; prices have been rising steadily for two years, and there seem to be no indications of a price stop. Lisbon has become one of the most expensive cities in Europe. It is one of the most remarkable facts of this war that life in the belligerent countries is cheaper than in those which are still at peace.

When one has but recently had to see how the terrible power of war has reduced hundreds of houses in no time at all to rubble and ashes; when one has but recently had to pass rows of burning houses with a damp handkerchief before one's eyes as a protection against the thick black smoke of vast conflagrations, one stops, amazed, in Lisbon's newest avenidas and observes incredulously the work of hundreds of workmen employed on the building of huge blocks of houses. In Lisbon's suburbs, new groups of buildings are going up which, in their somewhat monotonous uniformity, remind one of America but which do full credit to the progressive spirit of Lisbon's architects. However, the apartments in these large and comfortably furnished houses are generally very expensive.

Indeed, Lisbon's atmosphere is a strange one.—E. Th.

LIFE IN FINLAND

By Lennart F. Strid

The following report, which has just reached us from Helsinki via Switzerland, describes conditions in Helsinki as they were last autumn.—K.M.

In a country which is dependent on imports to such a degree as Finland, war must naturally endanger the normal supply of foodstuffs. Sweden was in a similar position when the blockade began, but she has managed to come to terms with both bel-