

1

WHY I AM TELLING YOU ALL THIS

PLAS GAERLLWYDD
PENGADOG
NEAR LLANGWYNYDD
WEST GLAMORGAN
SEPTEMBER 1986

I MAGINE THAT MANY OF MY LISTENERS will take the view that if a man has to wait until his hundred and first year before committing himself to posterity, then what he has to say cannot really have been very important in the first place. I am afraid though that I cannot help this. Please understand that I am sitting here now, speaking into this little machine, as much for my own benefit as for yours. Naturally, I hope that these ramblings of mine may be of some historical value; perhaps also divert or even amuse you. But my main purpose in committing all this to record is to try and make some sense of it all to myself: to carry out, if you like, a sort of final audit of the accounts before they tow me away on my long-overdue voyage to the breaker's yard.

I think that I may not have much time left now. This, I appreciate, hardly sounds a very remarkable statement, coming from a man who celebrated his hundredth birthday nearly six months ago; but the fact of the matter is that the ghosts have been hovering about me night and day these past few months, ever since the reappearance of the album and my arrival here in this place whose name I shall not even attempt to pronounce. But no, "ghosts" is not the right word, I think: there is nothing at all threatening or sinister about these sudden, vivid, quite unpredictable incursions of the people and events of seventy years ago into the world of here and now. Quite the contrary: now that I have got used to them they leave me with a curious feeling of peace. Nor are they

transparent or insubstantial in any way; in fact they seem far more real than the events of a few minutes ago—or what pass for events in an old people's home full of decrepit Central European émigrés. Do they come to me or do I go to them? Or have they been there all the time? I really cannot say. All I know is that time is falling to pieces now: day and night and past and present all shuffled together like a pack of cards as I drift into eternity.

We had a storm last night, with a good deal of that loud, ill-tempered thunder that seems to go on above the clouds. I was lying half-asleep, half-awake in the fitful way that you will doze if you ever live to be as monstrously old as I am. Then suddenly, for no reason that I could think of, I was back there with them aboard *U26* that morning—it must have been May 1917—when the British destroyers were depth-charging us off Malta. It was no dream, I can assure you: I was present again among them in that cramped, stuffy little control room as we turned and dived and doubled our course down there in the crashing green twilight, sixty metres below the ultramarine waves, thrown about like frogs in a bucket as each brain-jarring concussion shattered the electric lamps and brought flakes of white paint showering down from the deckheads. No, it was no dream; they were all there exactly as they had been that morning: my Second Officer Béla Meszáros, his brow beaded with sweat and his knuckles clenched white as he gripped the edge of the chart table to steady himself. And our helmsman, the Montenegrin Grigorovic, huge and impassive as ever, with his egg-brown face and his little waxed moustache, wedged into his chair behind the steering wheel and gyro compass card, repeating my helm orders as calmly as if he were piloting a steam pinnace at a regatta in Pola harbour—except that I could just hear him mutter to himself: “Hail Mary, full of grace ... Starboard ten points Herr Kommandant ... Pray for us sinners ...” CRASH! “... now and at the hour of our death ...” Well, even as a lifelong sceptic I have to admit that the Blessed Virgin's intercession on our behalf was efficacious that morning. We all lived to die another day, for I suppose that they must all be dead now, many years since, except for me: the thirty-one-year-old whom they called “der Alte”—“the Old Man.”

But this is unforgivable, to ramble on like this without introducing myself. At your service: Ottokar Eugen Prohaska, Ritter von Strachnitz, sometime Senior Lieutenant in the Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Navy, sometime Commander-in-Chief of the Czechoslovak Danube Flotilla, sometime Admiralissimo of the Paraguayan Republic, Commodore in the Polish Navy and Attaché Extraordinary to the Polish and Czechoslovak Governments-in-Exile, holder of the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresa, the Gold and the Silver Signum Laudis, the Knight's Cross of the Order of Leopold, the Order of the Iron Crown First Class, the Military Service Cross with Laurels, the German Iron Cross First Class, the Ottoman Liakat Order with Crossed Sabres, the Order of Polonia Restituta, the Silver Virtuti Militari, the Order of the White Lion, the Paraguayan Golden Armadillo with Sun Rays and the Distinguished Service Order with Bar.

However, if you care to strip away the fake title of nobility and the encrustations of metalware, like layers of paint and rusted drawing-pins off the back of an old door, you may think of me as Otto Prohaska, which was my name during my years in the Austrian service. Or if you prefer it, as plain Ottokár Procházka, the square-faced old Czech peasant who looks at me out of the mirror each morning: a wrinkled Bohemian village elder with high cheek-bones and a bristling white moustache, just like his grandfather and the preceding forty or so generations of Procházkas who goaded their plough-oxen across the fields around the village of Strchnice in the district of Kolin, about sixty kilometres east of Prague. They certainly built us to last. My grandfather lived to be ninety-seven, while as for my father the Imperial-Royal Deputy District Superintendent of Posts and Telegraphs, he would probably have made the century as well if he had not been run over by a railway locomotive.

As for myself, I passed my hundredth birthday back in April. I didn't receive the customary telegram from your Queen. But please don't think that I am complaining about this: I gather that the telegram has to be requested on behalf of the recipient, and the Mother Superior did write to Buckingham Palace on my behalf. Her Majesty's secretary

was very polite, but said that they have to abide by certain rules, and require a birth certificate as evidence. And of course, as to my birth certificate, who can say? Perhaps it lies mouldering in some cellar in Prague or Brünn or Vienna; more likely it was burnt and scattered to the winds in 1945. No, I am more than grateful enough to Queen Elizabeth and her father for having given a penniless old refugee somewhere to rest his bones these past forty years. Beyond that, why should I be any concern of hers? I was born a subject of the Emperor Franz Josef, and I have served a dozen states since without ever having sworn allegiance to any of them. No, the only oath of loyalty that I ever took was as a pink-cheeked young Seefähnrich that morning in 1905 on the quarterdeck of the old *Babenburg*, swearing lifelong devotion to Emperor and Dynasty as I tied on for the first time that sword belt of black-and-yellow silk, like a nun taking the veil. Since then it has all been one to me: Austria-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Paraguay, Poland, The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Empires, People's Republics, thousand-year Reichs, all of them as insubstantial as smoke and transient as hailstones on an August afternoon, those huge Central European hailstones that smash roof-tiles and kill animals and flatten hectares of rye, then vanish before your eyes as the sun comes out.

That was what they used to drum into us cadets at the Imperial and Royal Marine Academy in Fiume: "Whoever puts on the tunic of a Habsburg officer puts aside his nationality." The only snag for me and for a generation of my brother officers was that there would come a day when the tunics would be rudely stripped from our backs and we would have to don our old nationality again—if we could remember what it had once been. Most of us found that they fitted indifferently on middle-aged bodies, while as for myself, I never really found one that suited me. I have been a Stateless Person these past thirty-five years, ever since the Poles took away my passport and the Czech regime sentenced me to death in absentia, and I must say that this citizenship suits me as well as any other. A good joke really, if you think about it: the man without a country who doesn't know his own name, born in a town without a name and brought to die in a place whose name he can't even

pronounce. When young Dr Watkins came to see me a few weeks ago I asked him if he would consider making out my death certificate in advance, so that I can have at least some official evidence that I exist. He smiled evasively and pretended not to have heard me.

Anyway, I am wandering away from my task, which is to tell you why I am putting my recollections on record. So really I suppose that I have to start with Sister Elisabeth—or Elżbieta, to give her her on-duty Polish title. She arrived at the Convent in Ealing about the middle of last year, on secondment from the Mother Convent of the Sisters of the Perpetual Veneration at a place called Tarnów in southern Poland: a dull little town which I remember quite well from my youth when some cousins of mine lived near by. Now, I will say nothing against the Sisters: they took me in, free of charge, ten years ago when my wife died and I could no longer look after myself, and since that time they have been very good to me in so far as they have been able, with ninety or so other aged, sick and cantankerous Polish refugees to look after. In fact I feel a perfect fraud for having lived so long and been such a burden on their generosity. They are all very sweet and kind. But even so these have been lonely and trying years for me. For one thing, being a sort of Czech has set a certain gulf between me and the other “pure ethnic Polish” residents (I must try not to call them inmates) of the Home. My mother was a Pole, I speak the language better than many of them and I think that my record of service to the Polish state speaks for itself. But still there has always been a certain reserve and awkwardness between me and them. And there is the matter of age, now that I am “Our Oldest Resident” (Mother Superior’s sickly sweet way of addressing me—“And how is Our Oldest Resident this morning?”—as if I had forgotten my name during the night). I am now nine years older than the next most senior resident Mr Wojciechowski (who is completely gaga) and thirty-eight years older than the eldest of the Sisters. Perhaps this might have been tolerable if my brain had turned to soup, but I’m afraid that it remains as sharp as ever, though sadly lacking in stimulation these past couple of years now that the cataracts prevent me from reading very much.

But Sister Elisabeth is not like the rest of them. It must be admitted

that she is not much to look at: a drab, mouse-like little woman with wire-rimmed spectacles and a mouthful of stainless steel teeth to replace the ones lost through scurvy and beatings in a Soviet labour camp in 1940. But for me she has been a spring of crystal water in a ten-year-wide wilderness of dust and stones: someone who talks with me about things that we both know and understand, someone who treats me as an intelligent human being rather than a near-imbecile. Also she is great fun to be with: a natural anarchist with a deadly talent for mimicry and a charmingly irreverent attitude to the Church and all other purveyors of received truth. I believe that her father was a senior civil servant in the old Imperial-Royal Ministry of Education, in charge of middle schooling throughout Austrian Poland: a *Regierungsrat*, no less. Elisabeth was born in 1924 in the former provincial capital of Lemberg, by that time renamed Lwów. But even though her home language was Polish she was brought up to think of herself as a servant of the now-vanished Dynasty and its scattered peoples: in other words, as an Old Austrian, unencumbered by anything so vulgar as a nationality. One of her first memories, she tells me, is of her father lulling her to sleep by humming the “Gott Erhalte,” Haydn’s beautiful old imperial anthem with its versions in all eleven official languages of the Monarchy. They work her very hard in the kitchens, but we still find time to sit together and talk about the places we both knew and the people who once lived in them, before the flood came and swept them all away.

It was Sister Elisabeth who restored the album to me one morning early in May, as the lime trees of Iddesleigh Road were breaking into flower and the Heathrow Nightingales were starting to thunder overhead, one every three minutes. It was the day before I was due to set off on my journey down here to South Wales, and I was sitting in my room watching as Sister Anuncja packed my suitcase, kneeling on the lid in an effort to engage the catches. As she worked she talked to me over her shoulder in the way that one would speak to a cat or a low-grade mental defective—someone at any rate who is not expected to reply, or even to understand very much. She was telling me how much I would enjoy my holiday at Plas Gaerllwydd.

“Really,” she prattled, “it’s so lovely down there by the sea. The

beach is all white sand and three kilometres long and the waves are huge and go crash on the beach all day long. You'll really enjoy it. It's nearly as nice as Sopot."

I was just about to enquire whether I would be allowed to go paddling (though I find that, in general, sarcasm is quite wasted on the Sisters) when Sister Elisabeth came scuffling in through the half-open door with that slightly furtive, hamster-like gait of hers. I saw that she was carrying something wrapped in a Sainsburys carrier bag; also that she had about her a distinct air of excitement and conspiracy. She smiled at me from behind her thick, round lenses and gave me a glimpse of the dental catastrophe behind her lips. Anuncja glanced behind her.

"Oh, it's you Elzbieta—been out shopping I see." Then, without waiting for a reply: "Here, look after the old rascal for a few minutes will you, while I pop down to the laundry?"—for all the world as if I, who still read newspapers and am neither senile nor incontinent, would infallibly electrocute myself or drown in the wash-basin if left alone for more than twenty seconds. As Anuncja's busy footsteps receded down the linoleum-covered corridor Sister Elisabeth shut the door gently behind her and came over to where I was sitting.

"Here," she said, "look what I've brought for you. I found it outside a junk shop on Hanwell Broadway and I thought it might be of interest." She fumbled in the rustling plastic bag and produced a large, thick book, bound in mulberry-coloured watered-silk board and evidently much the worse for wear. She placed it on the table beside me, then stepped back with the expectant air of one who has just lit the touchpaper of an old firework without a label and is waiting to see what will happen: whether it will be a shower of blue and orange stars, or a loud bang or simply a damp splutter and then silence.

"Thank you, Sister Elisabeth," I said. "You are really too good to me. I wonder what on earth this can be. Would you be so kind as to pass me my reading glasses from beside the bed?" I slipped on my spectacles and began to examine the volume lying on the table in front of me.

It was certainly an album of some description: a thick, heavy book with tattered morocco leather corners and a broken spine. I could not

for the life of me imagine what it might be. But as I touched it, without knowing why, I felt a sudden and disturbing tingle of recognition. I inspected the book more closely, and saw that the lower left-hand corner of the front cover bore a small, round, embossed stamp; and that the stamp consisted of a double-headed eagle surrounded by the legend K.K. HOFRA T J. STROSSMAYER. FOTOGRAF. WIEN 7. MARIAHILFERSTRASSE 23. My hands trembled as I opened the front cover and my ears began to sing with a high-pitched ringing note. Then my eyes fell on the first page. My mind skated helplessly across the paper, trying to take in what lay before it.

There could be no doubt about it. The photograph was on poor-quality wartime paper and had already turned brown and begun to crumble slightly about the edges. But there was no doubt about it: there I stood, sixty-seven years before, leaning against the gun on the foredeck of a submarine at sea, surrounded by a group of laughing men and holding up a painted egg for inspection. And there at the bottom, written in German in my own once-firm handwriting, was the inscription: U26, EASTER SUNDAY 1918, 23 MILES WNW OF BENGHAZI.

It was all there, captured in an instant of a long lifetime ago: myself in seaboots and a shabby grey Army tunic with the Linienschiffsleutnant's three cuff-rings home-made out of sailcloth; the others in the usual Austrian U-Boat mixture of naval uniform and Dalmatian fisherman's rig; the two lookouts up on the conning tower—Preradovic and Souvlicka by the looks of it—sweeping the horizon with their binoculars; and our helmsman, Steuerquartiermeister Alois Patzak, standing behind the surface steering wheel, gazing sternly into the distance in a manner appropriate to a man on watch with no time for any of this off-duty skylarking.

Perhaps you may imagine what a shock it was for me, to come face to face with myself as I was nearly seventy years before, looking out from the pages of a photograph album which I had last seen in my lodgings in the Romanian port of Braila one day in 1922. I was quite unable to speak for some time, and thinking that perhaps her little gift had done for me at last, Sister Elisabeth rushed out of the room in alarm, to return a minute or so later with a tooth-glass full of water

laced with spirit wheedled out of the duty cook downstairs. This brought me out of my state of shock—largely because I detest vodka. But as I returned to my senses the memories came surging through as if a dam had burst: a dam so old and overgrown that everyone had forgotten the existence of the weed-covered lake behind it.

I have the album on the table in front of me as I speak to you now, open at that photograph. Yes, we are all there: healthy, cheerful young men in the full exuberance of life that spring morning off the coast of Africa, sailors of an empire already tottering its last few steps to the grave. But the picture has a good deal more than sentimental or documentary worth for me, since it was very nearly our tombstone. I well remember how, about five seconds after the shutter clicked, a yell from the port lookout had turned our attention to the track of a torpedo, streaking towards us from the submerged submarine that must have been stalking us unobserved for the past hour or so. Luckily for us, Patzak had the presence of mind to put the wheel hard down without waiting for an order, so that the torpedo hissed past our stern, missing us by a couple of metres. We did not stay around to congratulate ourselves though: only tumbled down the hatches one on top of the other to execute what must have been one of the fastest dives on record, then, once we had sorted ourselves out, set off in search of our would-be assassin intending to return the salute. But an hour's zigzagging to and fro at periscope depth produced not even a glimpse of our attacker, so we surfaced and resumed our previous course. Our enemy had failed to kill us: we would certainly have done the same to him, given the chance, and there was no more to be said about it, other than a terse entry in the log that evening: "9:27 a.m., 32° 24' N by 19° 01' E; single torpedo fired from unidentified submarine. Missed." We had survived yet again, perhaps only to be blown up on a drifting mine half an hour later. In those days, who could tell?

Looking now at that laughing group of young men I think to myself how little I have ever wanted to know the future, ignorance of which seems to me to be one of the few anaesthetics administered by Providence to us mortal men. Poor Patzak, so strong and confident-looking up there on the conning tower: he could not know that he had

less than a week to live. And there at the back of the group, grinning broadly in shirtsleeves and a fisherman's woollen cap, my young Third Officer Fregattenleutnant Franz Xavier Baudrin de la Rivière, Graf d'Ermenonville, mercifully unaware of the Gestapo cell and the loop of wire lying in wait for him a quarter of a century into the future. In fact, as I turn the dog-eared pages of the album I cannot help reflecting on the sheer whimsicality of Fate, that a whole continent should have been devastated and tens of millions perished while such an insignificant piece of flotsam should have survived; and not only survived but been carried back to its owner sixty-odd years later by God alone knows what strange currents and eddies. Sister Elisabeth went back to the shop next day of course, at my request, but the proprietor remembered little of how he had come by the album. All he could tell her was that he had been over to North Acton about three weeks previously to clear out a bed-sitter whose tenant—an elderly Russian or Ukrainian or something like that—had been felled by a stroke. No, he couldn't remember which house or even the street; only that it had been filthy dirty and had contained nothing much except girlie magazines and empty bottles. The only items of value had been an old cavalry sabre, which someone had bought the following week, and a shoe-box with some coins and postcards. He had considered flinging the album into the skip with the rest, but on reflection had put it out in a cardboard box on a broken-legged table in front of the shop since (he said) you never knew what people collected these days. There it had lain in the traffic fumes and the summer drizzle until Sister Elisabeth had chanced that way, drawn towards it by a loathsome oleograph of the Sacred Heart which now hangs in the residents' lounge.

The previous owner had left few traces of his possession of the book, apart from a few photographs of heavy-featured women in late-1920s hair-styles and a picture postcard of Marseille harbour, posted by one "Volodya" to a certain M. Dushinskyj at Antibes on 20 June 1932. Otherwise, what moved him to acquire the volume, keep it for perhaps half a century and carry it with him to the other side of Europe is a complete mystery. Certainly the album has some good ship photographs in it. I was always interested in photography and took one

of the early Joule-Herriot box cameras to sea with me on my first ocean voyage as a cadet aboard the *Windischgrätz*, back in 1901. The keeping of diaries was of course forbidden during the war—though Austria being Austria, this ban was generally ignored. But I had special permission to keep the album since it was the War Ministry's intention to publish a book entitled *The Wartime Career of an Imperial and Royal U-Boat*. The book never appeared of course, but I kept photographs for it, and not only photographs but a great many sketch-maps of engagements, log excerpts, notes of positions and so forth. Perhaps a quarter of the pictures had fallen out and been lost, their positions marked by oblong dark patches on the faded brown pages. But enough remained to hold me a prisoner for most of my first fortnight down here in Wales, until Sister Elisabeth arrived to distract my mind a little from the flood of memories from out of that forgotten world.

No, "forgotten" is not the right word: I very rarely forget things even now, far gone as I am in bodily decay. I always had a retentive memory and would learn whole navigational exercises and pages of Italian irregular verbs by heart when I was a cadet at the Marine Academy. No, the truth is that in the years after 1918 I made an almost conscious effort not to think about my eighteen years' service in the now vanished Navy of Imperial Austria. That part of my life was never forgotten, only rolled up like some unwanted, moth-eaten old carpet and locked away in a remote lumber room at the back of my mind. This was not duplicity on my part: at least I never denied my past or—like some of my contemporaries—concocted half a dozen fraudulent and contradictory life-histories for myself. But there I was, a thirty-three-year-old career naval officer in a miserable, defeated, poverty-stricken little country which no longer possessed either a navy or a coastline for it to defend. Unlike Sister Elisabeth's poor father and thousands of others like him, I neither believed nor even hoped that the Habsburgs would return. I had seen far too much of Old Austria's decay ever to imagine that a restoration of the Dual Monarchy was any more likely than an Egyptian mummy getting up and dancing the polka. No, like tens of thousands of other ex-wearers of the black-and-yellow sword belt, I had to make my way as best I could in that harsh new world of

defeat and hunger. What was past was past, and there seemed little sense in dwelling upon my glorious deeds in the service of the Noble House of Austria—not when the ministerial corridors in Prague and Belgrade were crowded with once ultra-Kaisertreu former officers, all brandishing pre-1914 police dossiers (usually forged) in an effort to prove that they had been secret nationalists all along. Then in later years, in England, there were the feelings of my second wife Edith to be considered. She had lost an adored elder brother to the U-Boats in 1916, a Third Engineer on the liner *Persian*; and although she knew that I had been in the Austrian fleet and had served aboard submarines, she was a tactful woman and never enquired too closely into what I had been doing in those years.

But this is all becoming unbearably sentimental, and if I am not careful it will end up like one of those touching little patriotic stories that we used to be set in German classes at the k.u.k. Marine Akademie: I am sure that you can imagine the sort of thing—the broken-down old ex-cavalry horse, wearing out his days dragging a Viennese coal-cart, but still pricking up his ears and breaking into a trot when he hears a band playing the “Lothringen March.” So let us get on with the story.

In the normal course of things not even the near-miraculous restoration of my old photograph album would have induced me to sit here boring you with my memoirs. Like most seafarers, I have always appreciated a good yarn; but I have never been one of nature’s diarists and certainly not one of those (of whom this place, unfortunately, holds many) who consider it their duty to relate their life-histories and accumulated wisdom to anyone unable to escape. No, some last safety catch had to be released, and this was done for me early in June by Kevin Scully.

Kevin is about twenty-five years old, I should think, and works here as a part-time handyman and jobbing gardener, driving over from Llanelli two or three days each week in his battered Ford Cortina. And there is certainly never any lack of things for him to do about this ramshackle property up here on the headland over the bay, blasted by every Atlantic gale. Gutters fall down, windows leak, roof-slates blow away and drains block: but it is good for him that they do, because it

seems that he has no other income apart from unemployment benefit. I have known him now for nearly three months and I must say that he has impressed me very favourably as one of those people, lowly in origin and of little education, who still possess a lively intelligence and sense of curiosity that not even the schooling system has managed to knock out of them. Also I detected in him from the very beginning some remnants of the bearing of an ex-serviceman. It appears that he left the Royal Navy two years ago and has never had a proper job since. He lives on a council estate with his mother and a girlfriend with whom he has an "on and off" understanding.

We first met at the beginning of June, after I had been here some three weeks. The weather had turned unexpectedly warm and the Sisters had allowed me to sit out in the sunshine in a secluded little stone-flagged garden at the back of the house that serves as a drying ground. It is very pleasant to sit there from about mid-morning, when there is no wind, looking out across Pengadog Bay to the pine-clad promontory at the end of the huge whale-backed ridge they call the Cefn Gaerllwydd. Sister Elisabeth had left me there in the deckchair with a rug over my legs while she went down to the post office in Llangwynydd on the Convent bicycle. The Plas is seven kilometres from the village, and five kilometres from the nearest public house, in the otherwise uninhabited parish of Pengadog which gives the bay its name and the house its postal address. This remoteness from alcohol is a particularly sore trial to the residents, several of whom are said to have been ushered out of this world by swigs of metal polish or unspeakable distillations of raisins and mashed potatoes. But there; as we say, it is not permissible to examine the teeth of a gift horse. The property was donated to the Sisters some ten years ago, a deathbed bequest from a local Polish farmer who is said to have murdered his partner, about 1948, then disposed of the body so efficiently that the police were never able to bring charges.

I sat there in the little garden, gazing out across the bay to the great ocean beyond as recollections surged and swirled inside my head. The smallest thing would bring the memories back now: that idiotic film *The Sound of Music* on the television in the residents' lounge, with

someone trying to impersonate my old comrade Georg von Trapp; or a whiff of diesel fuel from a delivery van in the driveway; or the wireless playing the waltz from *Where the Lark Sings* and taking me straight back to dying Imperial Vienna in that hopeless, hungry spring of 1918. Even out here there was no escape; not when the blue waters of the bay—calm for once—and the pine trees on the limestone rocks around were so like the sea as I had first set eyes on it, on that family holiday at Abbazia in 1897. What was it all for, this terrible, sad comedy of life? No sense; no order; no purpose: only to live for a century and end up here alone on the edge of nowhere, a bundle of skin and arthritic bones barely distinguishable from the deckchair supporting me.

Just then my thoughts were interrupted by a discordant whistling as Kevin came into the garden, carrying a coil of thin line slung over his arm. We had been introduced by Sister Elisabeth a few days before, and since Kevin has no manners, and therefore no notion that ancients like myself should automatically be treated as mental defectives, he greeted me cheerfully in his nasal Cardiff accent.

“G’mornin Mr Procházka, lovely day iznit? You out here doin’ a bit of sunbathin’ then?”

“Yes. As you see, I am taking advantage of this sunny weather and also admiring the view.”

“Yeah, not bad izzit—lucky you can see it when it isn’t rainin’.”

“Is the weather here usually that bad, then?”

He grinned. “Not half—you can only tell it’s summer because the bloody rain gets a bit warmer, like. They reckon the sheep round ’ere all fall over when the wind stops blowin’.”

With that he turned to set about his work. He was fixing up a new clothes-line for Sister Teresa, who runs the laundry. The new line had turned out to be several metres too short and Kevin was now engaged in joining a relatively sound section from the old line on to the end of the new one, using a simple reef-knot. Knowing that he had once been a sailor I thought I would torment him a little.

“Is that what they teach you in the training establishments these days? When I was at sea you would have been up on Captain’s Report for using a hitch like that. A splice is required there. Really. What is the

world coming to?"

He turned around and stared at me for some moments as if a snake had bitten him, then guffawed—though good-naturedly, I saw.

"Huh! Fat lot you know about splices an' all. When was you ever at sea then, ey?"

"I was a career naval officer for something like thirty years in total, young man, and trained in pure sailing ships. But if it comes to that, when were you at sea yourself?"

He advanced upon me in mock indignation. "Me?" he said. "'Ere, take a look at that will you?" He rolled up his sleeve and thrust an arm under my nose. It was covered from elbow to shoulder with a baroque riot of dolphins, anchors, mermaids, lions, tritons blowing conch-shells and heaven alone knows what else, all bound together by a tangle of cordage. In the middle of it all sat Britannia with her trident, an English lady staying calm amid these foreigners, while beneath was an ornate scroll with the legend DREADNOUGHT and a list of battle honours. I have seen quite a few tattoos over the years and I must admit that this one was quite pleasingly done: a well-balanced design, and about as finely executed as is possible when drilling pigment into living skin. It was quite clearly the work of a Mediterranean artist: possibly Maltese I thought.

"See that?" he said. "Cost me two hundred and fifty quid out in Gibraltar that did: took him thirty-four sessions too. Swollen up like a bloody black pudding I was for weeks after—used to wake up half the lower deck if I turned over in my bunk at night."

"Yes," I replied after examining the tattoo at suitable length, "most impressive, and I dare say that it cost nearly as much as you say. But not everyone with a tattooed arm is a seaman."

"Lissen, five years' service—left with the rank of Able Rate I did, and two good-conduct stripes into the bargain: Radio Operator Second Class H.M. Submarines, that's me—one year in nukes and two in diesel boats."

This last remark caught my interest. "Ah, Kevin, so we have something in common then. I myself was a submariner once."

He stared at me in puzzlement, not quite sure whether to take me

seriously. "G'won then, you wasn't. When was that then?"

"In the World War of 1914 to 1918: I was a U-Boat captain for three and a half years."

Kevin gave me a look of even greater bewilderment and suspicion, though mixed with increasing interest. "You—a U-Boat captain? But I thought you was a Pole, not a German. What were you doing with them?"

"Well, Kevin, it's a long story, but for one thing I am a sort of Czech, not a Pole, and for another they were Austrian U-Boats that I commanded, not German."

He abandoned his work and came over to sit on the low stone wall next to me, entirely baffled by the complexities of European history. He looked me straight in the face with the air of a prosecuting counsel determined to worm out the truth.

"Now, let's get this straight—you're a Polish Czech and you were Captain of an Austrian U-Boat, right?" "Yes, that is correct."

"Well," (with an air of triumph) "I know that's not bloody well true because, for one thing, you can't be a Polish-Czech-Austrian, and for another, I got a pass in CSE Geography and I know Austria's up in the mountains: me Mam went there last year on a coach outing so that proves it."

"Yes," I replied, rather enjoying this little argument, "I take your point. But you are a Welshman, yet you served in the British Navy, and as for Austria, it may be a little inland country now but in my day it was a huge empire with a coastline and a sizeable navy, including a fleet of submarines."

"Oh yeah? I bet you never sank anything though."

"On the contrary: in three years and seven months in the Mediterranean I sank an armoured cruiser, a destroyer, an armed liner and a submarine. I also sank or captured eleven merchant vessels totalling twenty-five thousand tonnes, shot down a dirigible airship ..." Kevin stared at me speechless, his mouth hanging open "... and damaged a light cruiser, a destroyer, an armed trawler and at least two merchantmen."

Kevin had by now regained the power of speech. "You old liar, you

ought to be fuckin' well ashamed at your age, you did."

I felt that this was really going a little too far.

"Young man," I said, trying my best to sound like a newly commissioned Leutnant taking offence outside an ice-cream parlour, "I have to inform you that as an officer of the House of Habsburg it would once have been my duty to draw my sword and cut you down like a dog for so much as suggesting that I was not telling the truth; in fact I would have been court-martialled and cashiered for failing to kill you on the spot. Whoever insulted an officer insulted the Monarchy itself."

To my surprise he became very contrite at this. "No, sorry, I di'n mean to call you a liar—only it just seems a bit ... a bit far-fetched like, what you was sayin'." Then, moving up closer to me: "'Ere, how 'bout tellin' me then? Always liked a story I did, ever since me ol' man used to tell me them when I was a kid—before he ran off." Then, in a low conspiratorial tone, fumbling in the back pocket of his jeans: "Wanna fag, do you? That ol' cow Felicja's out for the day so she won't come botherin' us. Always prowlin' about she is." Sister Felicja is a large, ugly nun from Pozna who controls the day-to-day business of the Home with all the tact and charm of an old-style Prussian Feldwebel—except that she seems not to wax the ends of her moustache.

I sensed that the offer of a cigarette (which I refused as politely as I could, not having smoked for many years now) was an outward sign of confidence and esteem on Kevin's part. He rolled up his jacket as a pillow, lit up a cigarette and lay down on the grass beside my chair. He blew out a cloud of smoke and closed his eyes. We were quite unobserved there in the little garden. In the distance pots and pans were clattering in the kitchen, while from an open upstairs window in the house there came the characteristic sound of two elderly Poles arguing—curiously soothing at this distance, like a ball being whacked to and fro on a tennis court. The bees hummed among the flowers in the unaccustomed sunshine and stillness of the air, while from far away there came the sound of the Atlantic waves breaking on the beach in Pengadog Bay and the faint chickering of a tractor working among the bracken on the side of Cefn Gaerllwydd.

"Well, you goin' to tell me about it then?"

I hesitated. What concern was it of his? What possible interest could there be for this child in disinterring the dusty bones of a half-forgotten empire perished a half-century before he was born, in telling tales of dim events that must surely mean as little to him now as the Siege of Troy?

“Aw, c’mon Mr Procházka, tell us about it. You mightn’t get the chance ag—” He stopped. “No, sorry, I di’n’ mean that ... only, you know ...”

“Yes Kevin, please don’t apologise. I understand perfectly, and you are quite right of course.”

“No, what I meant was, there can’t be many of you left now, and when you’re all dead it’ll have gone with you, like.”

Then it struck me for the first time: you are one of the last witnesses. In fact it’s quite possible that you are all that’s left of the old Imperial and Royal Navy, in so far as you are now probably its most senior surviving officer. The ships that you sailed aboard have all vanished long since into the far blue, while as for those who sailed with you, the youngest Midshipman would now be in his mid-eighties. Was it all such a waste of time though that the very memory of it has to perish?

So I told him, as I am telling it to you now in whatever time is left to me. To my considerable surprise Kevin not only listened to me all that morning, plying me with tea laced with rum stolen from the kitchen when I began to flag, but came back the next day and the day after that, all through this past summer. In the end he and Sister Elisabeth conspired to get me this attic room overlooking the sea and this little machine. So here I am now, reclining in a comfortable if shabby old armchair, with my photograph album open on my knees to remedy the deficiencies of memory as far as possible. I will do my best to steer straight from headland to headland as I tell you these tales; but I am a very old man, and I trust that you will bear with me if I sometimes deviate from my charted course to explore some hidden cove or river-mouth. You may believe what I have to tell you, or you may consider it the most amazing pack of lies that you have ever heard and think it shameful that a man on the edge of eternity should tell such whoppers. It may bore you, or you may decide to stay around for the

story even if you consider the history to be doubtful. But in any event, I hope that it will give you some idea of how it was for us all those years ago, fighting for a lost empire in that first great war beneath the waves: of what it was like to be a sailor of Austria.