

IN WAR-TIME EUROPE

by
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1939 – Paris

War clouds were gathering in 1938; Hitler had annexed Austria and was threatening Czechoslovakia. My client, Dillon, Read & Co., was heavily involved in European matters through its offices in Paris and London. I agreed to go and try to button things down in case war should break, so—armed with authority, I sailed for Europe, touching base in London and in Paris. On September 30, came the Munich pact, England and France appeasing Hitler by consenting to his annexation of the Sudetenland, an important part of Czechoslovakia. After Chamberlain returned to England with his umbrella and triumphant “Peace in Our Time!”, I sailed for home.

Back in New York, I reported: England had no alternative. Militarily and emotionally, she was not prepared to fight. For example: A Mr. Treasure of Dillon, Read, London, I had observed in detail. He was a relatively young man, a young British athlete. In London, as he had spoken to me, he pointed out that his hands were trembling so that he could scarcely light his cigarette; he and his wife were both nervous wrecks—they went in the evenings to the cinema because they didn’t want to be home and have friends drop in and find them in such deplorable shape. Mr. Dillon, knowing Treasure, was interested in my report.

But the “peace” envisioned by Chamberlain was short-lived. Mid-August, 1939, I spent the day with Mr. Clarence Dillon at his home in Bedminster, New Jersey. We listened to the radio; we got various telephone reports. Hitler again was threatening and things looked bad! I dashed to Englewood, packed a bag, Miriam drove me in town, and that night I sailed for Europe on the QUEEN MARY, equipped again with authority to do whatever was necessary with Dillon, Read—London and Paris. It was a curious crossing; only a handful of passengers were aboard and we, and the British crew, spent most of all 24-hour units listening to radio reports. Hitler was apparently about to march.

Arriving in London I did not go to my hotel but made a bee-line for the Dillon, Read office. Shortly, a call came through from New York—Clarence Dillon: “One question—is England emotionally ready to fight?” “I have been here only thirty minutes. That’s a big question.” “What does Treasure say?” “He has just been on maneuvers with his regiment; he is tanned and looks fit; he says his outfit needs six weeks more training but even now they are not so damn bad.” “Thanks; that is all I need; you have the authority; good-bye.”

September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland; England and France had sent ultimatums; the British General Mobilization had begun. I arranged for closing the Dillon, Read London office and the sending of all records to storage. (Incidentally, later it was bombed out and everything obliterated.) Then I crossed to Paris on what proved to be the last steamer available to civilians. When I arrived, France was mobilizing.

September 3, 1939, when war was declared, I was staying at the Hotel Continental and busy winding up the Dillon, Read Paris office. How to get home? All Atlantic crossings were automatically cancelled. Tourists, mostly without money, were milling around. I got a cable asking that I stay on in Paris and help the U.S. Consulate with the securing of refugee ships and the repatriation of stranded Americans. This I did, finally returning late October on the last refugee ship sent from America. Among the experiences I was to remember during those weeks in Paris was a dinner at the luxurious apartment of General and Mrs. de Chambrun. He had been a member of the French High Command in World War I and was of France’s wealthy aristocracy. His wife was American—the sister of Nicholas Longworth, and the only son, Rene, had a law degree and had worked for a year or more with the Davis, Polk law firm in New York and was married to Jose, the only child of the French Premier Pierre Laval. For a period of years the General had been one of the managers of the Paris office of First National City Bank and I had known him through that connection and through mutual friends and business connections in New York. The General had had a goodly quota of red wine and champagne and, over the protests of some of the French guests present, launched out on a criticism of the World War II French High Command: “Mark my words—they are going to be fooled like we were fooled in World War I.

We tried to anticipate how this war of 1914 would be different from the earlier wars we had studied in our military school text books? Answer: This 1914 war would be characterized by lightening-like movement. In previous wars they had only horse-drawn vehicles—now we had trucks and cars and motorcycles, and what happened? Both armies dug trenches and stayed grounded in them—no movement at all. Now France has dug a magnificent trench—the Maginot Line—and they think they will sit comfortably in it for the duration—but mark my words—they are going to be as far wrong as was our High Command in World War I!” I asked what he thought might be the technique this time. “This war will be determined by gigantic engineering feats. For example, if the Germans could divert the Rhine into the Maginot Line our entire army would die like rats.” The Germans did not divert the Rhine but as we got reports of the Allies constructing that enormous artificial harbor off the Normandy coast, making possible the invasion of the continent, I had cause to remember the old general’s prediction of “gigantic engineering feats”.

The return ship was loaded to the gunwales; all safety regulations were abandoned. The first-class pool had been drained and I helped to assign myself to one of the 75 bunks on the floor on the bottom of the pool. There was no air and the cots were solid side-by-side, a person getting into his bunk by going down a narrow aisle and then getting onto his knees at the foot and sliding onto his cot. Suitcases were underneath. The air was terrible—but we were on our way home; perilous because Hitler’s submarines were sinking “neutral” shipping. Of the 75 who slept on the pool bottom, only one or two ever groused. A vice-president of the Pullman Car Company (who had been in Europe trying to sell American-made Pullman cars) became our leader. He organized us into the order “Knights of the Bath.” Our insignia was the only thing the ship provided—a paper clip for the lapel of the coat. We “Knights of the Bath” were the self-proclaimed aristocrats and we had a special prerogative; whenever, in a group, cocktails were ordered, a “Knight” present had the privilege and honor of paying for all. Somehow, under stress, a leader seems to emerge. This Pullman Vice-President, whose name I can’t recall, was one of these.

I never saw Treasure again. Someone told me that he was one of those who failed to make it at Dunkirk.

William Fiske was the head of the Dillon, Read-Paris office and he had lived in Europe for many years. In winding up the Paris office and getting him and his wife off for New York, I spent much time at their lovely Paris apartment and their gracious country estate outside at Corneille. Their son, Billie, was an athlete, and once captained the U.S.A. Olympic Bobsled Team. Educated in England, a graduate of Cambridge, he had excelled in fencing and belonged, with a group of British wealthy student aristocrats, to a flying club. He had married an English, titled girl. Much to the distress of the parents, he had enlisted in the British Royal Air Force when his club, as a unit, had joined immediately on declaration of war. The parents explained to me that he was an American citizen and this was not our war; if the U.S.A. was involved they would, of course, have no objection. With very little military training, this unit was pitted against Hitler's militarily-trained Luftwaffe. Not one of the club survived the war; Billie was shot down during the early September, 1940, blitz on London. Shortly after, the British bride came to New York and was met by Mr. Fiske, her father-in-law, who started to cry, then went into uncontrollable sobbing and died before medical aid could reach him. He is one of two men I have known who literally "died of a broken heart." From the wreck of his plane, Billie's wings and insignia were cut from his uniform and are in a glass-enclosed niche in the crypt of Westminster Abbey. Winston Churchill presided at the dedication and over the niche is an excerpt from his speech: "An American who was willing to die that England might live." I settled the estates of both the father and the son.

The war seriously divided America. For example, Charles Lindbergh, a public idol, became head of "America First," and stumped the country telling people that this was not our war; Hitler represented the wave of the future and let him rule Europe; Europeans were constantly at war and we had been sucked in once; now let them stew in the juice of their own making; any involvement by the U.S.A. in this war would be immoral; we had no obligation to be their keepers. In the mid-west he had a strong following. Miriam and I did not agree with this. Convinced that a victory by Hitler would be a colossal disaster, I joined the "Aid to the Allies" movement, stumping around the country, sometimes teamed up with Dr. Henry Pitt Van Dusen, the President of Union Theological Seminary. Miriam, although traditionally a pacifist

and a contributing member of Fellowship of Reconciliation, supported and encouraged me in this activity, accompanying me to meetings in the vicinity of New York.

On May 10, 1940, Hitler invaded Holland. Our family was enjoying a few days' holiday at Silver Bay, in the cabin. We did not have a radio and news of the ruthless invasion was brought to us by Mr. Carpenter when he delivered our morning milk. For Miriam and me it was a profound shock; we looked at each other; this surely meant our involvement in the war—America could no longer stay out. We packed up and hurried home. I bought the most powerful short-wave radio set then on the market and Miriam and I spent many hours huddled before it trying to piece out the short-wave news from England and from Germany. We never went to bed before getting the 11 P.M. news summary from New York. Norway and Denmark had already been occupied, and then followed the take-over of Belgium, Luxembourg and France, and the drawing of the demarkation line across France and the setting up of the "Vichy Government" of Petain and Laval.

The Presidential campaign of 1940 was a bitter one. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was breaking tradition by running for a third term on an aid to the allies platform; Wendell Wilkie also was for the allies but he was constantly having to compromise and weaken his position in order to hold in line his Republican isolationists—such as Senators Borah of Idaho and Taft of Ohio who were claiming the whole thing a "phony" war. My law firm was counsel for RCA which at that time owned the two major radio networks—the "Red" and the "Blue." About two weeks before election at a conference, I saw the allocation of air time filled by the two political parties for the closing days of the campaign. The Republicans had awarded *all* their time to the isolationist group. Miriam and I were shocked at this revelation and concluded that Wilkie was a puppet; that the control of the party was in the hands of the isolationists. So, in spite of the fact that I had been an active member of the Englewood Republican organization, we deserted the national ticket and contributed \$4,000—the limit allowed—to the Roosevelt campaign. News of this was published in the local press and we were denounced and socially ostracized. Some tried to spell out some sinister tie to the fact that at the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr., was working in my law office, but Miriam and I always tried to make

clear that we were sticking to the local Republican slate and policy but that we were deserting the national ticket because we thought the candidate was a puppet of the isolationists. (After the war broke, our fellow townsmen apologized, said they thought we had been right; and welcomed us back into the party. Not long later, I was asked to serve as a member of the New Jersey Republican Finance Committee, and in 1952 was designated one of the party's candidates for the Electoral College, where it was my privilege to cast a vote for Dwight D. Eisenhower for President and Richard M. Nixon for Vice-President.)

In 1940 Congress enacted protective legislation, including the "Neutrality Act" which imposed many fiscal controls, such as blocking of Axis funds, and prohibited American citizens from traveling in the war zones, from dealing with Axis powers and putting severe restrictions on even communications. An amendment to the Revenue Laws permitted taxpayers to take a 1940 tax deduction for their investment in properties located in the territory controlled by Hitler.