

STRENGTH THROUGH SUFFERING

By *Walter Zander*

SUFFERING is without doubt one of the most characteristic features of our history, and it is therefore obvious that our attitude to suffering must be one of the fundamental problems of our life.

In regard to this Dostoevsky in his essays on the Jewish question once made the following remark:

“It is indeed very difficult to understand the forty-century-old history of such a people as the Jews; one thing, however, I know absolutely for certain, and that is that there is no other people in the whole world who, at every moment, with every step and every word, bewails its fate, its suffering, its humiliation and martyrdom as do the Jews.”

I would not like to argue with so profound a thinker as to what extent this reproach is justified. I personally believe that there is much truth in it. Moreover it has been raised in many quarters, and in my opinion, the only constructive attitude to such a reproach is to examine whether it is justified, and insofar as we find any truth in it, to eliminate the defect.

To lament is unworthy; this is obvious. More than that, it is always embarrassing ; but that is not the main point. It is also feeble and, in contrast to silent sorrow, can never realise truly creative forces. There is a deep cause for this, for everybody feels that lamenting is only possible if a person is at variance with his fate and has proved himself incapable of mastering his lot.

Such an attitude, although it may often have appeared, is not compatible with our innermost character as Jews. Truly Jewish, however, was that great vision which realised for the first time that human history does not consist of disconnected separate facts but is one spiritual, all-embracing unity. This vision, which to-day is still the basis of every homogeneous science of history, sprang out of the centre of our religious conception.

The more we realise that everything we experience historically-whether it contains joy or sorrow-is a part of this spiritual unity, the more we feel at one with the historical reality, the greater will be the forces we develop and the possibilities we shall find of contributing creatively towards the shaping of history.

This realisation will have a twofold effect. First, it will strengthen our inner fellowship with other people and nations, even if seemingly we are very different and have opposite interests. The stronger, however, this realisation of

unity, the sooner we shall be able to compose differences and bring nearer peace-the highest spiritual goal.

Further, we see that each nation has to fulfil its own task within the whole and independently of what the politics of the day would call success or failure, victory or defeat, honour or disgrace. For it has been proved over and again in history that fate can reserve for an unfortunate and dishonoured man, or a defeated and humiliated nation, a great and most constructive task.

For such a task our suffering is by no means an obstacle. On the contrary, it may prove a unique preparation. The very fact that we Jews on the Continent have lost our material property and our social position may mean a new beginning, if we can manage to reconstruct our attitude to Possessions and Position in a more spiritual sense. Our enemies most probably will mock at any such effort, but nevertheless its success will depend on us alone.

I would even go a step further. It has been said recently that the social aims of all political parties are fundamentally the same. Each wants to abolish the slums, to create better conditions for the worker, to bring about higher education for all.

Over most of the European Continent we Jews are excluded from all these blessings. For us artificial slums are being erected, our working and living conditions are increasingly worsened ; all possibilities of higher education are destroyed, and nobody thinks of giving the Jews “Strength through joy.” But all this need not be the end. It will only become hopeless if we give way to despair. If, however, we are spiritually strong enough to set against “Strength through joy” a “ Strength through Suffering,” then we will release the deepest creative forces hidden within us.

Naturally such an attitude requires a very great spiritual effort. It means neither fatalistic acceptance of our fate nor withdrawal from the world. It is rather an effort to maintain the spiritual principle in all and the most difficult circumstances, and to build up outward conditions on this spiritual base.

In this sense I understand Professor Brodetsky’s words when he says: “I have a feeling that the Jews in the ghetto of Warsaw are winning the war in a much more eternal sense than most of us realise.” And I only hope from the depths of my heart that his feeling is justified.

During recent years we have perhaps built too much on

the hope that the Jewish question could be solved through external measures, Acts of Parliament, immigration, settlements, and so on. All these things doubtless are of great importance, but the heart of the problem is spiritual and its solution lies within us. Only if we succeed in lifting the Jewish question into the sphere of the spirit, tackling the social and political questions from there, can we hope that the solution will correspond to our deepest nature.

In this connection perhaps another remark in Dostoevsky's essay will become significant. For he says that, notwithstanding their forty-century-old history the world has not yet said its final word about the Jews and perhaps has not yet been able to say it. Our history, therefore, in his eyes is not yet completed, and a last and essential element is still, as it were, missing. This last element, he says, has doubtless a religious character. I feel it lies hidden in our attitude to suffering.

I believe that we are at a decisive moment of our history. Our final fate has not yet been decided and it will not be decided by weapons. If we use the unique opportunity and try to transform our fate in a spiritual sense, we will have found the answer to the question of our day, and - despite all external pressure - will have taken the shaping of our fate into our hands - again; and no one can foresee what may be the outcome of such an effort.