

PERSONAL VIEW Horses for courses

Robert-Ian Caldwell

Dear Aunt Ethel,

I saw the film *War Horse* the other day. A review in the media includes: 'a story about lost innocence and the atrocities of war ... perhaps the most moving, beautiful and inspirational movie of the year ... In the midst of cruelty, we see demonstrated humanity.'

The ceasefire in no-man's-land between the trenches was a riveting scene. Bitter enemies united as human beings for a brief period in order to free a frenzied animal from an entanglement of barbed wire.

Decisions seemed simple in my end-of-World-War-II upbringing. My father drove only British or American motor-cars – even though the Yanks chewed gum. Germans, Italians and Japanese were the enemy. France had surrendered and Sweden had remained neutral. As for the Russians ...

Somehow music remained exempt from this discrimination. Beethoven and Verdi crackled off the 12-inch 78 rpm records in the big black box that my dad inherited from his late wartime friend, Bobby Croudace of Maritzburg. He also occasionally played Rachmaninov and Chopin fluently on the piano, between party pieces.

War movies reinforced this villain-of-the-piece mentality, although Rommel, the Desert Fox, managed to escape such harsh judgement. I was still sceptical as a recently qualified doctor, when a girlfriend told me that her ex-prisoner-of-war father felt that the Germans were not bad guys at all. Mind you, her Teutonic flatmate and her friends seemed most charming and attractive.

However, meeting German medical colleagues at Charles Johnson

Memorial Hospital in Nqutu, Zululand, when I worked there for six months in 1972, finally convinced me. A young medical student, who subsequently became a paediatrician, was particularly gentle, considerate and compassionate, despite our cruel imitation of her halting English at the breakfast table: 'Bitte the butter to pass, *Fraulein Rotraud*'.

Miss Hunteler took it all in her stride and steadily showed that her generation was wearing the conscience of a previous one on their shoulders. I visited her in Cologne, where she was studying medicine, a couple of years later. She showed me the famous cathedral, restored after near-destruction by Allied bombing. She then took me to a small chapel, built specifically as a symbol of peace and reconciliation, in honour of *all* the fallen in World War II, irrespective of persuasion. The humility on the part of a vanquished nation was moving indeed.

That evening we went to her parents' home in a small village nearby. Her father was a soon-to-retire country vet. His English was minimal, and my German non-existent, but with Rotraud's interpretation we managed some conversation. We suddenly came to realise that in late 1942, during the second battle of El Alamein, veterinary surgeon Hunteler was looking after the horses of Rommel's army on one hillside, while medical officer Caldwell, my late father, was tending the wounded on the opposite hillside, occupied by the 8th Army under the command of Montgomery. The silence that followed had nothing to do with language difficulties.

Years later, two German elective medical students whom I had befriended during a locum in the UK asked me why the English of their parents' generation always talked about 'ze war' at the earliest opportunity. I told them this story; and that episode in *War Horse* has reminded me of it again.

Yours affectionately,

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