

Discoveries by Emanuel Litvinoff

DISTANT STRAINS OF TRIUMPH, by Werner Pelz (Gollancz, 21s).

WERNER PELZ must be an unusual man. He was born in Berlin in 1921, son of a minor cinema magnate who became impoverished after the Nazis took power. At the age of 17 he left his parents and younger sister to come to England as a refugee. He was never to see his family again; they were overtaken by the collective doom. Werner Pelz was interned in Australia for two years, returned to work as a farm labourer in Gloucestershire, met a refugee girl from Vienna and, soon after the war ended, got married. This brief summary is, of course, unrevealing. Many thousands of Central European Jews have a similar history. Now they are British barristers, American tycoons, Israeli diplomats, scientists, bank clerks, property millionaires, gown manufacturers, television writers, and so on. Less conventionally, Mr Pelz has become a Lutheran pastor, was vicar of a Bolton parish for 10 years and, together with his wife, is author of "God Is No More," a study of Christianity. He has travelled far from his refugee origins to a world remote from the Jewish people. One is, at least, curious to know how it happened, what led to his singular choice.

The early, vivid chapters about his Berlin childhood contain intimations. His father was "too German, too deeply rooted," with some pride in the Prussian army and a certain middle-class conservatism. Young Werner himself, sent for Jewish religious instruction because Hitler had made some such affirmation a human necessity, was compelled to memorise names and laws recited by "the bright, dry, cruel voice of Rabbi Nussbaum." He construes the Jewish concept, *Mitzvah*, as "an unlovely" idea of "duty," perhaps because

repellent Rabbi Nussbaum failed to communicate the qualities of compassion, love, and responsibility inherent in this beautiful word. So the first encounter with religion left a feeling of nausea and he became a Communist, "the obvious self-assertion of a Jewish boy under fascism."

Much of the rest of the book is concerned with the intellectual and emotional ferment of youth. Circumstances had removed Mr Pelz from the events that were destroying the Europe he had known. In remote Australia the war was newspaper headlines, cinema newsreels, noises off. Reality consisted of the more intimate violence of the blood, of Holderlin and Mozart and young homosexual love. It is lyrically, evocatively recalled. The education of the heart continued during long months of laborious farmwork, the shy, unfulfilled lust for girls, first coupling in a wartime field near Oxford, the gracelessly austere registrar's marriage.

For those of us who belong to the author's generation, all this awakens an ineffable nostalgia. With precisely that intoxication we too read poetry in wartime huts, yearned for shabby, buxom girls in village dance halls, stumbled as unexpectedly into love and marriage. If I am disappointed it is because I had hoped for something more actual, concrete, and particular than these generic memories, more of the qualities present in the Berlin chapters. Afterwards, much of the writing is in soft focus, reflecting on reflections, concerned with philosophical speculations that seem to echo things we have heard before. I would have liked to know more about this unusual man, but he remains perplexingly reticent about those areas of feeling that are special to him alone, as a German Jew, as a refugee, as a man bereft of family, background, tradition.