

Sheep

Early in 1919, Private Fred returned from France and was sent to a farm in Oxfordshire as part of the process of his demobilization and return to civilian life. On the farm, he found other young British soldiers like himself and a small number of German prisoners of war: he and the other British soldiers were supposed to keep an eye on them as well as work out their time on the farm.

Fred found most of the Germans to be just young lads like himself and a kind of camaraderie developed amongst these young men who had each been called up for their country and were still serving it away from home. Fred found one called Fritz particularly easy to get on with. Both had grown up on farms where the main activity was caring for sheep. So, it was no surprise for them to find that a significant number of new-born lambs on the Oxfordshire farm were badly deformed: some had two heads, for example, and others an extra limb in an unconventional place. To preserve the quality of his flock, the farmer had all such deviants put down. Fred and Fritz both sometimes had to help with this job on the farm.

After two lambing times, Fritz was repatriated and Fred returned to civilian life proper. The two eventually lost touch. Both, however, were young enough for their countries to call on them for a second time during the Second World War. Around its end, Fred was in Germany as part of the British effort to resettle inmates of some of the German concentration camps. In one, he met a German soldier, rather mature like himself, who, once they got to know one another, turned out to be the Fritz whom Fred had known in 1919. Now, though, attitudes between the two armies were very different. There was talk of the concentration-camp-guards being tried for war crimes. Privately, Fritz recalled their earlier time together and said he found that his being called to handle the non-true German inmates recently was not unlike having to deal with the defective sheep during their earlier time together. It was tough work which, nevertheless, had to be done.

A year or so later, Fritz was charged with war-crimes, in that he had taken part in killings of Prisoners in the camp. He told his counsel about his time in England in 1919 and asked where the difference lay, in principle, between the treatment of defective sheep and that of the non-Aryan, and so defective, human inmates of the camps. When he asked Fred the same question, he saw, for the first time, how Nazi philosophy had indoctrinated him into attitudes about fellow human-beings his parents, for example, would never have had had. And attitudes most of the world held distasteful and which led to criminal actions.

Fred met Fritz's counsel and explained their earlier life together, including their handling of the defective sheep. The trial judges found Fritz guilty but recommended mercy and a relatively minor punishment, considering the nature, and scale, of the crimes committed at his camp.

Fritz decided to spend the rest of his post-WWII life taking a fairly liberal view in politics. Neither he nor Fred took up sheep-farming.