

Le clan des Ostendais

G.Simenon

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The book is published by Folio and listed as a policier, no doubt because of the author. But Maigret does not appear on its pages, nor is there any crime to be investigated, instead we are becoming privy to the plight of some Flemish fishermen and their families. Furthermore at the back of the book there is a reference to the Netherlands but of course the fishermen are not Dutch and Oostende is a Belgian town.

The story takes place early in 1940 with the French armies overrun by the Germans, while Holland and Belgium are overrun in spite of their neutral stands. Omer Petermann, a big man, with if possible an even bigger wife - La grosse Maria - head a flotilla of five boats, who seek shelter in the port of La Rochelle, after having braved bombardment off the Belgian coast to evacuate their families. The authorities are puzzled and a bit disconcerted by their arrival, how many are they, there seems to be an unending supplies of children, furthermore communication is difficult as they only speak Flemish, luckily a nurse is found to interpret. Being war the authorities feel entitled to requisition their boats and to move the families and their belongings inland to join other refuges, mostly internal ones, which is done over the protests of Omer. They get settled in a small village at an old police station, but La grosse Maria arranges that at least her family gets better accommodations and she rents the mansion of an old widow in which they settle with all the furniture they had managed to salvage from their home. But Omer insists that he will gain control over his boats, after all he is a fisherman and his job is to fish. He manages, maybe by force of his invincible personality to bend the wills of the authorities to his purposes and after that the Germans are in charge he and his men make regular forays into the sea bringing home their cargo of fish some of which is donated to the village. Belgium is overrun and capitulates which has ramifications as to their status as refugees, and as noted soon the Germans arrive and take control. Omer maintains polite relations with the Germans, which is viewed with some suspicions among the locals, as the Flemish tend to be confused with the Germans. Worse is that one of the young women among them behaves like a bitch in heat consorting with German officers and soldiers, much to the consternation of La grosse Maria who pleads with her husband that he should do something about it, but he remains unperturbed and retreats into silence. The fishing expeditions continue, but there is a full-blown war out there with treacherous mines and aerial bombings and during three separate expeditions a boat is lost and in the end the flotilla is reduced to only two. Boats lost also translates into lives lost with tragic consequences. Omer and Maria first lose a son-in-law and their daughter with a small baby is inconsolable, then they lose their eldest son and soon thereafter the second in line. In the end they had had enough and the last pages tell how they all in the middle of the night leave for the two remaining boats in order to seek sanctuary across the channel in England.

So what is it all about? There is really no conclusion to a story told, no mystery to keep you in suspense, but more of a description and evocation of the confusion of the times

of war. The Germans are not depicted as monsters, but rather as polite fellows taking over, and as every occupational force anxious to achieve and maintain good relations with the local populations. The Second World War in the West was really very different from that in the East, and one can almost speak of two different wars. If there is any drama it is to be found in the deteriorating relations between Omer and his wife as the consequence of misfortune and tragedy. But a crisis, which eventually resolves itself and results in the decision to leave, be it out of unclear grounds as well as with uncertain results. Will it turn out in act to be an act of suicide? The story is conveniently open-ended.

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