

Behind The Iron Curtain

by DENNIS MADDEN

In the early morning hours as we boarded the train bearing the sign "Orient Express—Paris to Warsaw", a handful of people gathered about the car to say a last good-by to their relatives and friends who were returning behind the Iron Curtain.

During the 36 hours we spent in our compartments travelling from Paris to Prague we learned that a number of our fellow passengers had willingly chosen to return to their homelands. Yet the sombre faces, and their reluctance to speak all too clearly revealed their fear and anxiety for the future that awaited them in the Peoples Democracies.

Before crossing the Czech frontier we stopped at a small village in West Germany, where our passports were inspected by unarmed control officers. As we gazed out the compartment window we saw a locomotive approaching from the Czech frontier. It bore very distinctive feature, a massive Red star on the front, an omnipresent symbol in the Peoples Democracies. Behind the new locomotive we rapidly picked up speed and sped towards the border. Suddenly the barbed wire fences and frontier towers appeared menacingly in the distance. As we passed through the opening we could see the insulators on the wire and the sentries in the towers. For the next two miles we passed through a zone devoid of all inhabitants, the houses and farms deserted, the windows broken. The only persons in this zone were border guards engaged in target practice.

At the end of this zone we stopped at a small frontier outpost, where the train was surrounded by guards carrying rifles and light machine guns. The under-carriage, box cars, locomotive and passenger cars were thoroughly inspected by gun toting officials, who apparently were attempting to ferret out any uninvited guests.

Cheb was our first official stop in Czechoslovakia. As the train came to a stop a small group of men and women approached the train to greet their returning friends, only to be rudely turned back by the armed guards stationed on either side of the train. During the two hours we remained in the station, passengers were not permitted to leave or enter the train.

To our surprise and dismay we were told by the border officials that we would have to turn our cameras over to them, as reports had been received that we had been seen taking pictures while crossing the frontier. Our films were to be exposed, after which our cameras would be returned. Despite the pleading of one of our group, who spoke German, that we had not taken any pictures and that our color film was very expensive, our cameras were seized. However, within a half an hour they were returned untouched and with an appropriate apology. With the exception of the above incident we had little difficulty at the border. To our surprise none of our luggage was inspected.

During our seven days in Prague we frequently questioned our hosts about the barbed wire, watch towers and guards; while commenting that none of this existed on the German side of the frontier. Our young Czech hosts found our queries somewhat irksome but justified the Iron Curtain by saying it was necessary to prevent a resurgence of Nazi aggression.

Our hosts, the Czechoslovak Union of Youth, were extremely hospitable and saw to it that all our needs were fulfilled, we had merely to make a desire known and it was quickly satisfied. Our guides were students like ourselves, and thus we did not hesitate to ask questions with an alarming degree of frankness. Often at the end of a meal we were embarrassed to find that we had interrogated our guides so relentlessly that they did not get an opportunity to finish their first course.

To our surprise we found that one guide spoke English perfectly, including American slang. She was Rita Budinova, a young girl in her twenties, who had spent the war years in New York City with her parents and had returned to Czechoslovakia when the Communists took over. During our travels we met many such people, from England, the U.S. and Canada

who had chosen to return to Czechoslovakia to work for the Communist party.

Prague is a very picturesque city, with its many squares, bridges and quaint alleys, but like a deserted house, it is weather beaten and worn. Once a gay city, it now seems austere and sad.

As we walked along the streets we were constantly reminded, by signs, monuments and flags of the contributions the Soviet Union is making to the country. To me, the most odious form of propaganda was the Orwellian type of loud speaker found in all main streets of the cities and towns. Four or five times each day they blare out news and cultural programmes to their captive audience.

Prague has, relatively speaking, one of the highest standards of living of any of the satellites. Yet, compared with the standards of living in North America or West Germany, the Czechs are not faring very well.

As we walked about the streets of the city we studied the crowds with interest as they peered in the shop windows, after which they turned away unable to make a purchase. Apparently the supply of consumer goods such as T.V. sets, radios, plastic coats has increased but they are still beyond the reach of the vast majority of people.

On Sunday morning, which is now a shopping day in Czechoslovakia, I toured a large department store, and noted down some

of the prices based on seven Czech crowns to a dollar.

2 door Skoda Car	\$2900.
Motorcycle	1250.
Sewing Machine	471.
Man's Suit	182.
Bicycle	255.

Housing conditions are deplorable, even with party support it is often difficult to obtain adequate housing. It was not uncommon to find four or five people sharing one or two rooms.

The highest paid class in the country are the artists, writers, singers and actresses. Next come a segment of the working class, the miners and factory workers who are obliged to work under adverse conditions requiring great physical strength and endurance. The highly paid professional class found in all capitalist countries, receive a very moderate income in Czechoslovakia. It was not uncommon to meet doctors and lawyers, who for political reasons left their professions in order to drive a taxi or engage in manual labor.

While we were free to walk about the streets, it was not always possible, due to the language barrier and fear of implicating people, to speak to the people we met on the streets. Despite the ostensible hospitality of our hosts it soon became apparent that any "unofficial" Gallop Polling was not welcome. Nocturnal meetings in city parks became a frequent occurrence, apparently a peculiar habit of most Western visitors visiting a Peoples Democracy.

DON'T BE CRULE

(An obvious parody on an obvious song meant to be sung (obviously) to obvious people at an obvious time of the year.)

You know Ah can't be found
Studyin' all the time;
If you must give exams
Don't fail me, it's a crime.

Don't be crule

To a kid in school.

Don't wanna fail yore class
And Ah know Ah really needn't if ya let muh pass.
Maybe Ah made ya mahad
Some a muh tests were sad;
Puhleeze fergit muh past
Exams loom up ahead.

Don't be crule

To a kid in school.

Don't stop tuh count muh quizzes
Don't make muh feel this way;
Do come 'raound and pass me,
Yuh know what Ah want yuh t'say.

Don't be crule

To a kid in school.

Why should Ah fail this course?

Really study now on, cross muh heart.

Let's push me over 50.

Please to say yuh do;

Then Ah'll know that youh've passed me

And youh'll know yuh've passed me too.

Don't be cruuuuuuuuuuule

—Margaret Doody.

Hot Time At Shirreff Hall

Flames leaped at Shirreff Hall last week as members of the fairer sex scurried in all directions.

For a few hectic moments there was fear that the Fire Department would have to be called but thanks to some quick thinking an embarrassing situation was avoided.

The story behind the story is that a toilet seat caught fire from undetermined causes. At the moment there is an investigation underway but the results are not known. At press time there were no reports of any casualties.

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