

1949

## II. HUNGARY

By BELA FABIAN

ON PAGE 35 of John Gunther's *Behind the Curtain* I came across this extraordinary statement: "A peasant who was a serf and who wallowed in mud like his owner's pigs, and who now despite intense privation may be tilling his own small plot of land, in circumstances where his children go to school and where he has at least the promise of decent roads and electric light, may be pardoned if he pays more attention to the propaganda of Moscow than of reactionary refugees in New York."

From his very use of that word "reactionary," it seems to me that Mr. Gunther himself has been paying attention to the propaganda of Moscow. I wonder if he doesn't know that the chief factor of national resistance in the countries behind the Iron Curtain is the peasant? Did he never hear of Petkov, the Bulgarian Peasant leader who was hanged, of Béla Yarga, Ferenc Nagy, Tibor Eckhardt, Mikolajczyk, Dimitrov and Mathek, Peasant Party leaders of their countries, who fled from the gallows?

I wonder if he doesn't know that the peasants in the satellite states have had their land taken away from them, have been forced into collective farms, have become slaves attached to the land as in the days before the abolition of serfdom?

"The cafés are animated," writes Mr. Gunther of Budapest. What Potemkin-land did he visit? In Hungary even the tiny bars have been closed on the ground that "counter-revolutionaries" met there.

"For instance at a place called the Sanghay," he writes on page 169, "the table next to mine was occupied by guests not in black tie, but actually white. But the booth beyond was filled with workmen who, so far as costume was concerned, might have been in overalls." This, of course, means that workers frequent night clubs in Budapest. How can they afford it on the 800 forints per month which, according to the author, constitute the top wage of a skilled worker? Though Mr. Gunther reckons that 700 forints equal sixty dollars, in black market currency they amount to no more than ten dollars.

Did it ever occur to you, Mr. Gunther, that these "workers" were secret police who appeared in workmen's clothes that night as guests of the night club in your honor—or rather in honor of an America to be submitted to propaganda?

"There are no massed red flags, no pictures of Stalin and Lenin, no marching parades of young Communists," the author writes. I don't believe that Hungarian Communist papers would quote this part of the book, for the display of such pictures and flags is considered a part of Hungarian patriotism today.

"'Voluntary' labor is unknown," he further writes. The author doesn't seem to have heard of the gratuitous Sunday labor which Hungarian workers had to put in for various purposes, including aid to the "Greek freedom fighters."

"One afternoon we visited a fac-

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tory, the Manfred Weiss works on Csepel, a Danube island. Once this was owned in part by the Horthy family," the book relates. "The plant has, on the Russian model, a theater, free schools, a nursery, clinics for pregnant women, a college for adult education, various clubs and culture 'corners', and a large playground and athletic field. We watched two football teams scrambling together, and some tennis matches. Always, visiting a new city behind the curtain, we would try to keep one question foremost in mind. 'Is this regime really doing something for the people?' Visiting this factory anyway we felt that the answer was a fairly clear Yes."

Csepel and the Csepel factory belonged for 17 years to my constituency. It was the exclusive property of the Weiss family. I knew the factory, its welfare institutions, its sports fields, its theater and lecture halls. Just as I knew the Alice Weiss Nursery and maternal health clinic, founded and maintained by the former owner of the factory in memory of his deceased wife. All the playgrounds and welfare institutions were established by the former owners and kept up by them. The Communists took them over as they had taken over the whole factory. This, of course, Mr. Rákosi and your other Communist sources of information forgot to mention, Mr. Gunther.

Did you hear that the workers of the Csepel factory, directly before your visit, went out on strike? They objected to the longer working hours, to the decreased purchasing power of their wages and to their complete loss of freedom. To strike is a serious crime

behind the Iron Curtain. But the Communists wanted to handle the Csepel workers with velvet gloves, for they had always been in the vanguard of the Hungarian labor movement. So they didn't set the secret police on them immediately. President Szakasits and Rákosi went out to the factory with a lot of NKVD men. First Szakasits mounted the platform and gave an emotional speech. But the workers kept shouting, "Bread, bread!" As the disorder grew, Rákosi pushed Szakasits aside and cried, "Anyone who is not at his working place in five minutes will be taken at once to a concentration camp!"

When the workers did not move, agents of the secret police captured 200 rebels. The others crept disconsolately to their places. If you wish further details, Mr. Gunther, kindly apply to Karl Peyer, leader of Hungarian trade unions, at 42 Rue de Zurich, Geneva, Switzerland.

"THERE are no fewer than nineteen Roman Catholic newspapers still published," the book declares. I know of only one weekly, *Uj Ember*. I have all the numbers which appeared at the time when you were in Budapest, Mr. Gunther—some published before Cardinal Mindszenty's arrest, some after. Perhaps it will interest you to know that this one Catholic paper reported the arrest in a single sentence: "Cardinal Mindszenty was arrested." The one Zionist paper has been stopped, and the only other papers are Communist.

Mr. Gunther quotes Mindszenty as having said, "In the old Hungary the distribution of arable land between

small and large estates could not be considered unhealthy." The Cardinal never said such a thing. Neither did he ever draw a cent in salary, though the author states, "Mindszenty himself drew a salary as Prince Primate which was twice that of the Prime Minister."

In connection with Mindszenty's arrest by the Nazis in November, 1944, Mr. Gunther writes: "The Communists make light of the Nazi jail sentence today, saying that Mindszenty would not have been arrested at all except for the fact that he was discovered to be hoarding 1,800 shirts and pieces of underwear in his Bishop's castle." Did you ever hear, Mr. Gunther, that the Cardinal hid Jews in his cellar, issued pastoral letters against the Nazis, organized resistance against them; that he handed over the memoranda of the bishops demanding an armistice to the Nazi Deputy Prime Minister on November 13, 1944, and was arrested two weeks later at the Bishop's palace?

Of Rákosi you say, "He has a soft emphatic voice and a deliberate manner in conversation." Those who are sentenced to death or beaten to death without sentence, those who suffer in the dungeons of the secret police at Andrassy ut 60, probably have a different opinion of that voice. On the whole, the book seems to discover a sympathetic feature in every Moscow-

educated henchman in the new Hungarian regime.

As a journalist who has lived behind the Iron Curtain, I should like to make a few suggestions to foreign journalists visiting there:

1. An author who writes an "inside" book about a country should understand its language; or at least should spend a few months in that country and try to get facts not merely from its oppressors or those officially assigned to help him.

2. Never accept a car from a Communist People's Commissar. The driver is a secret police agent, who immediately reports where the foreign journalist has gone and with whom he has talked.

3. The greater the interest of the material placed at one's disposal, the greater the skepticism with which it should be viewed.

4. Whoever writes about prisons should have lived in one as a prisoner. Whoever writes about socialized factories should not form his impression from watching the workers play football. He should work in the factory, or at least find a way to listen to some workers without the surveillance of the secret police.

If Mr. Gunther's purpose in writing this book was to lull the conscience of the American people about the situation behind the Iron Curtain, then he has succeeded.