

HACKETT, Billy, comedian
4 months in Hungary

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Hackett Observes Life in Hungary

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It was 2 a.m. The lights were low. A girl in a white gown sat behind the bar scratching a piano's back. Buddy Hackett stirred his drink by pushing a cube in circles.

HACKETT was talking about a movie he made in Hungary. He had finished his final show at the Diplomat Hotel, and he no longer had to be funny.

"It's called 'The Golden Head,'" said Buddy. "It's about Saint Lazlo. I bet you never even heard of Saint Lazlo?"

"Well," said Buddy, "he was a Hungarian saint, so when Cinerama shot the picture—where else?"

The comedian, who is rare because he is loyal and lovable and not eaten by ambition, said that he feels nostalgic every time he thinks of Budapest. He cannot understand this, because Hungary is Communist. He was there four months. He took his wife and children, and Tina, the maid.

"They have a credo in Hungary," Hackett said. "Everybody has a job, but nobody works." The men average eight American dollars a week. They get paid in florins, and the florins are peculiar because the government gives 11 of them to the dollar, the banks give 23 to the dollar, the stores give 30 to the dollar, and the Russians exchange them with the American legation at 48 to the dollar."

There are no Russian soldiers in Budapest, Hackett said. Since the Hungarian uprising, they remain in the small towns around the capital.

No citizen owns an automobile. The government owns all cars, and all taxis. There is some private business, but it can grow no larger than a family can operate by itself with no more than one outside employe.

All the stately buildings in Budapest are picked with shell holes. The Germans hit the city, the Russians hit it, then the Hungarians hit it as they begged the United Nations to help them gain their freedom. The United Nations was impotent.

Some Catholic churches are open. Hungarian Catholics attend a different church each Sunday so that, if the secret police are making pictures, they never see the same faces. To be a practicing Catholic is to be an enemy of the state. Everyone carries an identification card with name, occupation, home and state status on it.

The state police confiscate the passports of all visitors. They hold them for 24 hours of investigation. Last August 31, Hackett was 39 years of age. His wife gave him a big party at the Gelliert Hotel, where all bugs are in the form of hidden microphones. Many Hungarians attended. They were poor people with generous hearts. Some brought a single flower. One man gave an eyeglass case. A dozen brought tiny ashtrays. Hackett sat with them,

stood with them, sang with them, told funny stories through a slow interpreter, drank their most muscled booze, and got up chipper in the morning to taunt them in their death throes. They were astonished that anyone could outdrink them, and they called him "Isson Oktato"—professor of drinking.

DAY AFTER DAY, and night after night, Hackett saw the truck full of secret police standing at the curb in front of the American Legation. It has been there for eight years, waiting for Cardinal Mindszenty to come out. The Kadar government offered him a chance to go to Rome, but the slender man with the gray face declined. "My place is here in Hungary," he said. Now the wolves wait for the shepherd. They already have the lambs.

"Our maid, Tina, made quite a hit," Hackett said. "The Hungarians seldom see a Negro, so, when she had dinner with us and the kids, they watched from around pillars and potted palms. I told her she was a celebrity in Budapest and I asked if she would like to live there. She didn't even smile. 'I'll take Alabama any day,' she said."

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