

## LETTER FROM PRAGUE

JULY 21

IT is hard for anyone who remembers Czechoslovakia in the days before the Communists took over, in February, 1948, to believe that only seventeen months have gone by since the "revolution." In no other country behind the Iron Curtain can the change between the old days and the new days have been more radical. Of course, no other country now behind the Iron Curtain has ever been a democracy, in the Western sense of the word. Poland, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria all had authoritarian regimes before the Curtain fell, and to those countries the present "people's democracies"—there seems to be more talk of democracy in the Soviet orbit than anywhere else on earth—merely mean more of the same thing. To Czechoslovakia, the change means a fundamentally new way of life. It is too early yet to know clearly and fully what that life will be; this is still the stage of reform and growth. "No revolution is pleasant," a Czech Communist said to me the other day. "A few individuals must always suffer for the sake of the common good." It would be more correct to say "a few million individuals." A mere two years ago, the name of Dr. Eduard Beneš to most Czechs was a symbol of hope for a better world. Last May 28th, when Beneš would have been sixty-five had he lived, only a short paragraph in the government-controlled press mentioned the anniversary, and only a handful of people visited his grave. On the same day, the speech of Václav Kopecký, the Minister of Information and Public Culture, before the Ninth Congress of Czechoslovakia's Communist Party, was given almost five pages of precious newsprint in every paper, and half a million people marched to Prague's Old Town Square to shout "*At žije Stalin!*" and "*At žije Gottwald!*"

The machinelike precision of the cheering sections uncomfortably reminded some foreigners (and some Czechs, too) of the Nazis' roaring at the Nuremberg conclaves. It is a sad, unarguable fact

that the six-year German Occupation of Czechoslovakia left deeper marks on the Czech people than anyone here is willing to admit. Pedestrians now watch traffic lights and follow the orders of the cops, both of which submissions would have been unthinkable in the old days; there are parades and meetings and displays of flags, slogans, and banners; everybody's movements are "supervised," by districts and even by blocks and houses; there are conflicts between Church and State, between child and parent, and between school and family; and there is a streak of anti-Semitism, though of the four hundred thousand Jews in the country before the war, only forty thousand reappeared, and half of those have left again. All of which proves that even such sturdy, level-headed, and basically good-natured people as the Czechs have not been able to recover entirely from the demoralization of Hitlerism.

It is not that the Czechs have a liking for strong men, as the Germans did. The Czechs hated the Hapsburgs, they hated the Germans, and many of them now hate the Czech Communists. A non-Communist said to me, "It has been fashionable in the West to blame us for not putting up a stronger resistance against the Communist revolution. I guess that's right. But do they know in the West what happens to you during six years of oppression? Eating every day, yet never eating enough. Getting so used to talking in whispers that you can't talk out loud any more. In six long years of this, something hap-

pens to you. Your spine is broken—or gets bent."

POLITICALLY, there are now five kinds of people in Czechoslovakia: those who still live in the faraway past of the Austrian monarchy; those who can't forget the happy days of Thomas Masaryk's First Republic; those who didn't mind the German Occupation very much, because it meant good business for them; those who fondly remember the short postwar period under Beneš; and, lastly, the admirers of the present regime. It would be hard for anybody to please that many kinds of people at once, and the Communists don't come anywhere near doing so. There is an anti-Communist resistance movement, but it is inefficient, suffering from delusions, and sadly disorganized—or, rather, unorganized. The Czechs have always been hard realists. When a Czech turns into a romantic, he is lost. The enemies of the regime live on romantic notions. "It can't last," they say. "Another six months. A year, at the most." But when one asks them what is going to happen in a year, they have no answer. Some admittedly pray for another war. All these dissidents, referred to officially, and, for the most part, inaccurately, as "reactionaries"—businessmen and shopkeepers whose enterprises have been nationalized, expropriated landowners, impoverished professional people, purged intellectuals, cashiered soldiers and expelled students, worried Catholics, staunch followers of Beneš, and a sprinkling of actual dyed-in-the-wool reactionaries—have only one thing in common: They know what they want. They dream of "liberation." On the other hand, they are quite vague about the when, the how, and the who of it. They are always talking of a D Day—Beneš's birthday was the last one—but nothing happens when it comes. They mail out chain letters urging the people to write to the United States Embassy in Prague and ask that free elections be held under the supervision of the United Nations. (More than thirty-seven thousand such letters, mostly unsigned, were





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received by the Embassy in June. Then the flow suddenly stopped, possibly halted by the Czech postal authorities.) They have helped to make Czechoslovakia the world's greatest rumor market, circulating creations of stunning fantasy. ("America must have new markets and will take over Siberia," for instance.) Many of these rumors may have been first disseminated by Communist *agents provocateurs*, of whom there are many.

Yet even if the resistance were organized, it would suffer from lack of leadership. Since the death of Jan Masaryk, there has been no one around who can capture the imagination of the masses and rouse their spirit. No one I have talked to in Prague, not even the anti-Communists, has any doubt that Masaryk plunged unassisted to his death in a moment of depression, or possibly in the obscure and forlorn hope of straightening the bent backs of his countrymen by his act. As for the Czech exiles in London and New York, they are unpopular with the resistance, which censures them for leaving the country instead of sticking it out at home.

It isn't easy to work for the resistance. Many people in the new underground served a thorough apprenticeship during the Nazi Occupation, but the present Czech police, in their turn, learned a few tricks from the Gestapo. One of the nerve centers of activities against the state has been the Army, and it is in the Army that the government's purges have been most severe. Hundreds of officers have been arrested or dismissed as "enemies of the state." A frequent indictment is "contact with foreigners." Last February, General Heliodor Pika, the former Deputy Chief of Staff, was sentenced to death by hanging for treason, the specification being that he had "received funds from the British to spy on the Russians in 1940"—a year when the Russians were quite chummy with the Nazis. Pika was executed four weeks ago. Last February, General Karel Kutlwař, one of the leaders of the popular uprising against the Germans in May, 1945, and twelve other officers were arrested as "spies and plotters against the Republic." Because Kutlwař is something of a hero, an official reeducation campaign was waged to convince the Czechs that he had "conducted negotiations with Karl Hermann Frank and the German troops to enter Prague." Nobody believed that one, so the defamation was generalized to "spying for foreign reaction, collecting

arms, and distributing illegal pamphlets," which was more effectively equivocal. He was given a life sentence. Three of the officers arrested with him have been executed.

Despite the underground's lack of cohesion, the Czech press constantly reports isolated instances of sabotage in factories and on lines of communication. They are ugly stories, which show that the fight is being conducted on both sides with the sort of violence that marked the German Occupation. Last winter, a number of high-school boys in a small Bohemian town helped wrap packages of Russian tea, which the government distributed at Christmas in addition to the regular rations. When the packages were opened, they were found to contain anti-Communist leaflets as well as tea. In the investigation that followed, one of the boys informed on some of his classmates, who were arrested. The next day, the informer was found dead. His father was warned that if he didn't keep quiet, his second child would be killed, too.

Such stories are quoted by wishful thinkers as "proof" that the days of the Communist bosses are numbered. This is plain nonsense. Of Czechoslovakia's nearly thirteen million inhabitants, almost two and a half million are members of the Communist Party, which makes it, proportionally, the largest Communist Party on earth. In fact, some big shots in the Party feel that it is too big. Bandwagon-jumpers are being weeded out or put on "probation," and of late it hasn't been easy to join up. According to one of those popular jokes, the circulation of which seems to provide many Czechs with their only means of expressing dissatisfaction, there are three kinds of Party members—the rock variety (the hardy old-timers), the water variety (those who swim with the current), and the wood variety (those who stand unobserved behind trees, waiting to see which way the wind will blow).

ACTUALLY, almost all Party members firmly back up the government in a pinch, simply out of interest in their own survival, if for no other reason. There is, however, a lot of disenchantment among the rank-and-file members, and quite a few comrades even criticize the government in private. The solidarity of the Party was greatly fortified by the appearance at the Ninth Communist Congress of Georgi M. Malenkov, the Politburo's No. 2 man, who was sent by Moscow



apparently to prove to all that Russia has no intention of giving up Czechoslovakia, as had been rumored. In addition to the tough core of Party members, the government has now at its disposal the newly purged Army and a very efficient police force. But perhaps the most important persuader in the government's hands is the promise that the country will get more food in the future. "Abolish rationing and they'll love us yet," a shrewd Communist told me. He didn't think, though, that it could be abolished for at least two years. Today, the Czechs eat very little—even less than the British. An individual gets a basic monthly ration of three pounds of meat, five eggs, three hundred and twenty grams of butter, and three pounds of sugar. There is no shortage of flour. Children get extra rations of chocolate, rice, cocoa, milk, and butter. Three pounds of meat a month isn't much, but the government points out that the over-all consumption of meat is larger now than it was in 1938, when some people could buy all the meat they wanted and many had none at all. Still, the Czechs can't forget that back in 1946, when U.N.R.R.A. was operating here, everything was to be had, and that in nearby Vienna, which, compared to Prague, was always a hungry city, there is now plenty of food and E.C.A. prosperity.

Suits, shirts, and shoes are also rationed. Everybody, or nearly everybody, can get a pair of shoes for about 300 koruny, or \$6, at the official rate of exchange. If anyone other than a manual worker—manual workers are much pampered and get extra points—wants a point-free pair, he can buy them on the "free" market. The free market is an adaptation of the idea of the expensive "commercial" shops that the Russians set up in all their big towns and cities at home from 1942 to 1947. On the free market, a pair of shoes costs \$60. (True, they were \$90 a few months ago, but even so, \$60 is a lot of money in a country where \$100 is considered a good monthly income.) A pound of butter costs \$4, a man's shirt \$30, a necktie \$20, a pound of coffee \$15, and a suit \$300. The purpose in setting up the free market was to kill off the black market (which it did), to lure a lot of hoarded money into circulation (which it has done), and to act as an incentive for the workers to produce more (which it has so far failed to do). The prices are too high even for the well-paid workers; many of them complain that they can buy less today with their high wages than they could in the old days with



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**I**F YOU WERE watching the Dodgers play the Phillies on your television set on Independence Day you will recall the sudden windstorm which practically swept right into your living room from Ebbets Field, forcing the game to recess for 21 minutes. Pat McBride was at the controls of a CBS-TV camera and filled in during the recess with pictures of various planes flying over the field. McBride is known among his colleagues for not being able to keep his camera off airplanes which is why you may have heard the announcer suddenly declare "McBride has just shot his sixth plane and is now an ace."

**T**HE YEAR 1910 was the time "Mama" (of "Mama's Bank Account") was in her heyday. You can see this heyday brilliantly recaptured every Friday night at 8 pm on CBS-TV with Peggy Wood playing the captivating character filled by Mady Christians on Broadway, Irene Dunne in Hollywood. But you needn't fear you'll be seeing a reprise of the stage or screen versions. Same Mama, new predicaments. You know how it is.

**T**ECHNICAL OPERATIONS NOTE: Complex title clearance problems have resulted in the replacement of Shep, star of CBS-TV's six a week *Chuck Wagon* program by Tumbleweed Grogan. Shep, a mixture of Collie and German Shepherd, operated under a lend-lease agreement from the ASPCA; Grogan, a mixture of Cocker and Terrier, was purchased outright with no strings attached.

**O**NE REASON television is trickier than radio is that two transmission lines instead of one are involved—a video line for the picture, an audio line for the sound. With a lot of programs going out on the air simultaneously the trick is to keep them straight. The other night, for instance, folks in Buffalo were fascinated by a picture on their television sets of two wrestlers in the throes of a toe-hold—and then heard the low thrilling tones of a man's voice saying "Darling, we were meant for each other." Right picture, wrong sound.

## CBS TELEVISION

their low pay. Only those families in which two or three members are working can supplement their rations to any extent on the free market. No teacher, civil servant, or professional man can possibly afford to shop there. Even Communists complain that the government-decreed prices don't make sense at either end of the scale. It's all right to ask \$80 for a kilo of Russian caviar; no one cares. But when the price of a kilo of cherries, the country's most popular fruit, is fixed at eight cents, the peasants don't bother to bring the cherries to market. Last year, almost nobody in town got any cherries. A few months ago, the government declared an amnesty for hoarders of foreign currencies, who, up to then, had been considered criminals, and opened a number of shops, called Darex stores, in which high-quality Czechoslovakian goods, manufactured only for export, could be bought for dollars, pounds, Swiss francs, or any other hard foreign currency. Since the great majority of Czechs have neither hard money nor friends abroad who can supply them with it, a great many people go to the Darex stores, as people elsewhere go to museums, and gaze wistfully at all the wonderful things they can't buy.

The output of the once-famous Czechoslovakian textile industry has decreased in both quality and quantity, and the Czechs, never paragons of sartorial refinement, are now almost shabbily dressed. Prague's historical sites are still lovely, and the haunted, baroque charm of the city's towers, bridges, palaces, and monuments to wicked saints is unimpaired, but the buildings in the business district look drab and need paint. The standard of living here has unquestionably gone down, as it has elsewhere in Europe, but it is still probably higher than in any other country recently shut off by the Iron Curtain. Ultimately, the standard will probably settle somewhere below the prewar level. But it must also be said that although there are no elegantly dressed women in Prague's Wenceslas Square, there are no beggars either, and the working-class districts look more *petit bourgeois* than those of Paris. Also, unemployment in Czechoslovakia today is negligible, while back in 1933 more than a million people were without jobs.

**T**O what extent the Communist regime will eventually be tolerated by its opponents, whose number has been

estimated by foreign observers to be between fifty and seventy-five per cent of the population (meaning that that proportion would vote against the Communists if free and secret elections were possible), will depend on the success or failure of Czechoslovakia's *pětiletka*, or Five-Year Plan. Everybody in Prague knows that the Kremlin is taking a particular interest in this program. Suppose Czechoslovakia, the most Westernized ally of Russia, with her well-educated working class, her highly developed industries, and her modern agricultural methods, should be better off in 1953, at the end of the Five-Year Plan, than, say, Italy at the end of E.C.A. aid—what a triumph for Moscow that would be! At the moment, though, the plan is having rough going. Raw materials are in increasingly short supply, machinery has become obsolete, and the workers are not producing enough or well enough. At the recent Party Congress, Rudolf Slánský, the General Secretary of the Party, surprised a lot of Comrades by saying, "We will grant privileges to those who produce best, whether or not they carry a Party card."

Not only are the workers exhorted to work longer hours but they are forced to spend a lot of their time going to meetings, putting up flags and pictures of Stalin, and getting their Marxist education. No one can keep a job of any consequence without passing a lot of stiff examinations in Marxist, Leninist, and Stalinist theory. Two years ago, one was likely to see Czechs studying English irregular verbs as they rode to work in the streetcars. Today, they study books by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and President Klement Gottwald, which are printed here in vast numbers. Gottwald is his country's best-selling author; more than 2,307,000 copies of his works have been bought in little more than a year. The children in the public schools get Marx with their multiplication tables. There are courses and evening discussion groups in Marxist dialectics for government work-



ers, journalists, students, laborers—everybody. And everybody must spend some extra time in a manual-labor brigade, felling trees, helping with the harvest, or building roads. "Uncoöperative" elements are fined or otherwise dealt with. In the last six months, six thousand students—one out of every ten—have been thrown out of universities and technical colleges for being slackers. No doubt, quite a number of


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these were the usual sort of aimless scholars, but the real motive behind the dismissals may have been the government's doctrine that most students should be of working-class stock. Anything smacking of the West or capitalism has become dangerous. The monument put up in Pilsen in honor of the United States Army was dismantled shortly before the anniversary of the Liberation.

**M**ANY paradoxes are to be noted here. Thousands of political prisoners are kept in jails for six months and longer, although the new constitution states that a person must either be released or brought before a court within forty-eight hours. "Class justice" is dispensed by the People's Court, and many of the judges' only qualifications are a four-week course in law and a Party card. To become a lawyer, one has still, theoretically, to be a graduate of a law school, but the Minister of Justice may relieve particularly worthy and compliant candidates of this requirement. There is a bad shortage of doctors, but doctors are being sent as laborers to factories and mines because of "unsuitable mentalities." Czechs may listen to the Voice of America broadcasts, and many do, but it is unwise for them to spread the news they hear. English and American papers have disappeared from the newsstands, and all Czech papers read alike, but foreign correspondents, once they are admitted, can move around freely and are not interfered with. The United States Information Service and the British Information Service are not bothered in their work, but occasionally Czechs who have dropped in to read are stopped as they come out by plainclothesmen and told not to return if they know what's good for them. People queue up in front of the U.S.I.S. window displays showing capitalistic America at work, but there are never crowds in front of the Soviet Information Service office. Once, a flurry of excitement was caused when the National Theatre sent over to U.S.I.S. to borrow a few American periodicals. The flurry subsided when it turned out that the magazines were needed merely as stage props; a manservant in a play was to carry them in on a tray to a capitalist having breakfast in bed. In the Prague version of Garson Kanin's "Born Yesterday," the junk dealer is the kind of despicable capitalist that is typical of his country, and the *New Republic* writer a shining knight in Red armor. In the bookshops, there is little for sale except Party litera-

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ture, because new manuscripts must be approved by the government officials stationed in each publishing house, by the Ministry of Information, and, finally, by the Party itself, which sets the line. Since the line often changes before a book can be finished, most novelists have suspended production. But there is a lot of excellent music here—opera, concerts, oratorios, and recitalists. Among the recitalists who have appeared recently are Paul Robeson, the most popular American in Czechoslovakia today, and David Oistrakh, the great Soviet violinist, whose mastery is equalled by only three or four musicians in the world. Every concert is sold out. Music is the only thing people can afford, and perhaps the only way they can relax and, for a while, forget.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA has always been a land of grumblers; if all the present-day grumblers were arrested, the streets would be deserted. But Czechoslovakia is also the country of Thomas Masaryk, and what is one to say when the *Lidové Noviny*, once the favorite newspaper of Masaryk, joins the rest of the press in calling informing a "public virtue"? Perhaps the most plausible explanation for what is going on here now was given to me by an old friend of mine who was once a Social Democrat and has never become a Communist. "No one in this country has forgotten the little matter of Munich," he said to me. "Maybe one out of three people in Czechoslovakia fears and hates the Russians. But three out of three fear and hate the Germans. We all get hysterical about Germany, and can you blame us when we have lived for centuries next to Teutonic aggression? I despise the Russians myself, but if one day we have to choose between a German-spearheaded 'liberation' from the West and the Russians in the East, I will go with the Russians, and so will everybody else here."

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