A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE ROAD TO SINAIA

SINAIA, a resort town in the Transylvanian Alps, three thousand feet above sea level and seventy miles north-northwest of Bucharest, used to be the summer residence of the kings of Rumania. In the final years of the monarchy—or, to borrow a phrase from the present regime, "the last phase of the bourgeois-landowner era"—the Cabinet would follow King Carol or King Michael to the mountains, and so would a host of court dignitaries and pretty women, along with the financiers whose contributions helped keep the whole entourage afloat. I first heard about Sinaia from Rumanian-born friends of mine, now in the States, who spoke nostalgically of its handsome casino, luxury hotels, fine villas, pleasant cafés, exclusive shops, and cool woods and hills. When I visited Bucharest some weeks ago, to report on the Fourth World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship, a jamboree that combined a little athletics with a lot of propaganda, I was eager to see Sinaia for myself, especially since Bucharest was hot—hotter, a Nigerian delegate told me, than his tropical homeland. Besides, the Festival was frazzling, particularly the columns of youths and students eternally shouting "Peace and friendship!" and the loudspeakers eternally blaring the same few Russian and Rumanian songs. As it happened, David Everett Mark, a member of the United States Legation staff, invited three other correspondents and me to drive up to Sinaia with him on our last Sunday in Rumania. We accepted with delight.

According to the Government Press Bureau, whose charges the four of us were, we were allowed to travel anywhere in the country except into a fairly deep frontier zone. We had to watch our step in Bucharest, because parts of it are off limits, and we didn't want to be picked up by the *Securitate*, the security police, who keep track of even the most inconsequential movements of all foreigners except Russians, but Sinaia is in the heart of the country, about a hundred miles from the nearest frontier. Mark told us, however, that the Press Bureau was not to be taken literally, that he had to apply to the Foreign Ministry every time he wanted to make the trip, and that we had better ask for permits. The highway to Sinaia, he explained, runs through Ploesti, one of the largest oil-producing areas in Europe, and the Russians, who have taken over the fields and refineries—as they have taken over practically every other substantial Rumanian industry—prefer not to have strangers poking about.

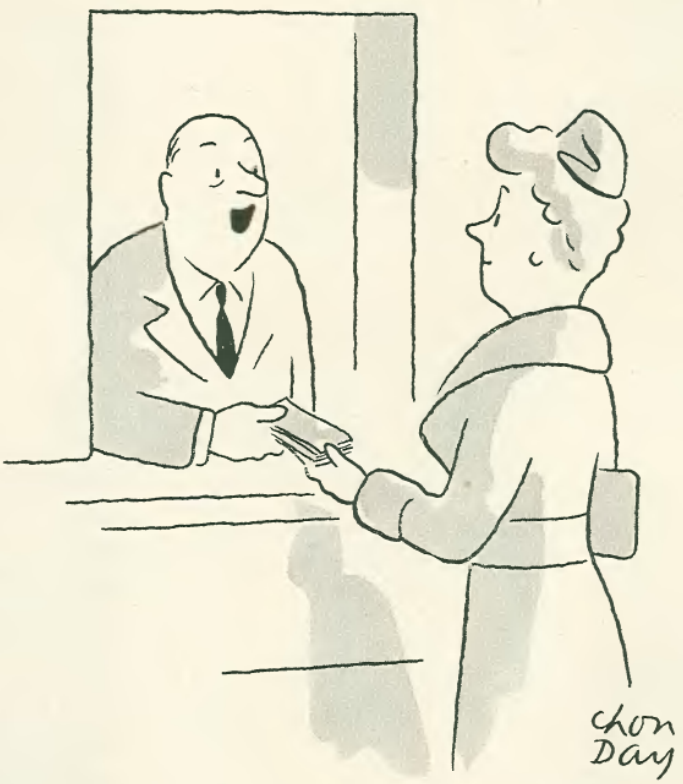
We went to the Press Bureau for permits four or five days in advance, and were assured by an elaborately polite official that they would be coming along promptly. "We *want* you to visit our beautiful Sinaia," he said. Several days went by without any sign of permits, so we began to pester the interpreters whom the Bureau had assigned us. They might, we thought, be able to speed things up. They did their best. Every hour or so, they phoned the home office, which invariably reported that the permits were in the works. They were still in the works on Saturday morning, and Mark decided to include us in his request for a permit from the Foreign Ministry. "Maybe we'll get some action there," he said, "but we won't know before midnight. That's when they usually send over my permit. Or else it arrives at ten in the morning, when I'm all ready to leave." Many Rumanian officials work until the early hours of the morning, perhaps because their Russian advisers have that habit. Sure enough, at midnight a messenger delivered Mark's permit to his house, where we all had been spending the evening, but for us there was only a note saying that we did not come under the Foreign Ministry's jurisdiction. Mark suggested that we take a chance and go along anyway. "Let's see what happens," he said.

"Won't we be stopped?" I asked him.

"Certainly we'll be stopped," Mark said. "There's a check point just before Ploesti. But, who knows? The militiamen may have instructions to let us through." He glanced at a servant who was rubbing an imaginary spot off a plate. "They'll know before the night's over that we're planning to go." All Rumanians employed by Westerners are required to spy for the *Securitate*, which occupies, among other buildings, a house just across the street from Mark's and a house next to the American Legation. Not long ago, a number of domestic servants were ordered to report the combinations of the Western Legation safes. Those who demurred were tortured, and a few got out of the chore by committing suicide.

Mark picked us up the next morning at the Hotel Athénée-Palace, where we were having breakfast with our interpreters and a chubby, soft-spoken man who, for no apparent reason, had attached himself to us the day of our arrival. He always carried a fat briefcase, he stopped to talk to people all over

WITHDRAWALS



"Well, that cleans him out."

town, he never spoke anything but Rumanian, and he mystified us thoroughly until we found out—I can't explain how without getting some very good people into some very bad trouble—that he was a captain in the *Securitate*. His English was excellent, we were told, and he spent his nights writing down all we had said during the day, which must have been a strain, for we said a great deal. I introduced Mark around and announced that we were off to Sinaia. This threw the interpreters into the state of utter bewilderment that seems to follow the slightest deviation from a fixed program in a people's democracy. When they had pulled themselves together, one of them suggested that we might never get to Sinaia. The *Securitate* captain headed for a telephone, which he did frequently. (The interpreters had told us that he was a newlywed and that his wife wanted to know where he was every moment of the day.) When he came back, he wished us a very pleasant trip. So did the interpreters. They always caught on fast. "In case you should decide to return early," one of them said, "we'll be at the hotel at lunchtime." We asked him whether he would like to join us—there was room for one more in the car—but he said, "Thanks, no, no, no." He preferred, he added, to watch Zatopek, the great Czech distance runner, in the ten thousand metres.

AS we set out in Mark's Chevrolet, a black Russian Pobeda sedan, with two men inside, passed us. "Seven three seven four," Mark said, reading the number on the license plate. "That's one of the cars that shadow me. *Securitate* cars always carry three or four different plates, but after a while you get to recognize most of them. These boys think they're pretty subtle, though. Sometimes they follow, sometimes they go first. A few weeks ago, they were driving along ahead of me on my way home, and they ran out of gas. I stopped and let them have some of mine. They looked quite sheepish." We slowed down at a railroad crossing outside Bucharest, and a dark-blue Tatra, also with two men inside, went by at high speed. Mark guessed that it, too, was a *Securitate* car. "They drive recklessly and pay no attention to traffic police or militiamen," he said. "You can recognize them by the sticker on their windshields. It says 'LIBERA,' which sort of means *laissez-passer*, and it's issued only to agents of the *Securitate* and to the top Party people." We caught up with the Tatra at the next intersection,

where it had stopped with its turn indicator pointing left; the driver and his companion, tough-looking customers in dark-blue shirts, were studying the road to the left. When we turned right, toward Sinaia, they turned right, too. We were just creeping along, but they made no attempt to overtake us until after we had passed a military airport, with a Russian soldier at the gate. The day was beautiful, and the fine asphalt road, a relic of the bourgeois-landowner era, stretched ahead of us like a dark mirror. In the fields, the corn and sunflowers stood high. After three years of drought, a splendid harvest was expected, and everybody was hoping that this fall, for a change, enough of it would remain in Rumania, once a land of plenty, to prevent starvation. Good year or bad, of course, a large part of Rumania's agricultural output goes to the Soviet Union, in exchange for machinery and armament. We passed a few collective farms and a tractor station. Only a quarter of Rumania's farmland has been socialized, and for the moment the government seems content to stop there. The collectivization program, though, has not been put into reverse, as it reportedly has been in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Westerners are instructed not to talk to the villagers, who are instructed not to talk to strangers, but it is no secret that there has been trouble on the land. "Conditions of a class struggle in the countryside have sharpened," *Scanteia*, the Party paper, noted recently, and went on to say that three thousand *chiaburs* had been put in jail for "obstructing the program." *Chiabur* is Rumanian for "kulak," which, in Communist usage, means not a rich farmer but any farmer who doesn't like the government. The worst sin a *chiabur* can commit is to fall short of his delivery quota. To prevent this, the government ruled, in 1951, that anybody who can prove that a farmer has been hoarding crops gets twenty-five per cent of the hoard. There was no lack of informers the last two winters, both of which were hard.

The road was well guarded by militiamen, most of whom looked the other way as we went by. We passed a sign that, Mark told us, was a warning not to exceed the speed limit, but he said this was difficult to obey, since not even the police knew what the limit was. We also passed the turnoff to Lake Snagov, where Cabinet members and Party leaders have taken over houses that used to belong to bankers and landowners. Cominform headquarters is known to be in or near Bucharest, but

the exact location is a secret; one guess is the former country club of a Western oil company on Lake Snagov.

"We're coming to the check point," said Mark. Two militiamen stood in the middle of the road, one leaning on a bicycle and the other waving a red stop sign. We pulled up behind two cars—a German BMW, with the hood up and three men peering at the motor, and our old friend the Tatra. One of the blue shirts was thoughtfully kicking the right rear tire while the other fumbled with a jack. The cyclist, a tall, dark-haired fellow with a beautiful mustache and a prominent nose, pedalled up to our car, dismounted, saluted, and asked for our permits. Mark handed his over. The militiaman read it, looked up, and then reread it. "Five men in the car," he muttered, "and the permit is good only for one." (This, like the rest of the Rumanian we heard on the trip, was translated for us by Mark.) Mark replied that the four of us were correspondents and that the Press Bureau had told us we were free to go anyplace we liked. We fished out the identity cards that the Bureau had given us, but the militiaman wasn't interested in them. He scratched his head and said he would have to phone Bucharest for instructions.

"Let's follow him," Mark said. He and I jumped out of the car. The militiaman had stopped beside the Tatra and seemed to be whispering to the men bent over the tire. As we approached, he raised his voice. "You know that you're not permitted to park near the check point," he said. "Let's see your car papers." The men shrugged, and one produced a sheaf of papers. Peering over the militiaman's shoulder, we saw, on the top document, a red streamer, "PROPRIETATE MINISTERULUI SECURITATII DE STAT." "Fix your tire and get going!" the militiaman said. "You can't park here." He wheeled his bike over to the BMW. The hood was still up, but one man was now behind the wheel and the engine was purring.

"Is this the road to Sinaia?" the man at the wheel asked.

"*Da, da,*" said the militiaman. "It's forbidden to park here. Hand over your driver's license." As the man opened his wallet, I saw a bright-red card, which, I had been told, was the badge of a *Securitate* agent. Mark saw it, too, and he said to the militiaman, "Please ask the *Securitate* officers whether my American friends are permitted to go with me to Sinaia."

The militiaman appeared a bit shaken

and said nothing. The man at the hood banged it down, and the others looked absently down the road. For an instant, we savored the pleasant silence of Communist consternation. Then the militiaman repeated that he was going to phone his headquarters in Bucharest, and cycled over to a small house. Mark and I tagged along and went in. The poor fellow, who was obviously being driven crazy by our snooping, was at the telephone, but we could see that he was holding the hook down. After talking earnestly into the dead instrument for a moment, he replaced the receiver and told us to wait in the car. As we went past the *Securitate* men, they looked the other way. Mark told me he thought we would be permitted to go on. "They are very upset because we found out who they are," he said. "They won't dare stop us now."

After a couple of minutes, the militiaman cycled back, appearing considerably relieved. He asked for our identity cards, copied our names into a black notebook, saluted smartly, and wished us a pleasant trip. "It's a fine day for driving," he said, looking up at the sky. "I wish I could go with you." We started, and the two disabled cars, abruptly repaired, started too.

A few miles farther along, the air began to smell of oil, tall refinery stacks gleamed in the sun, and we passed a sign that said "PLOESTI." This is the name of the oil region and also of its principal town, which lies a little way off the highway. We turned off to look at it and found that it had recently been spruced up, obviously for the Festival. Many houses had new coats of white paint; the façade of the Banca de Credit de Ploesti, in the main square, had just been cleaned; and there were flags, posters, and blown-up photographs of President Petru Groza and Prime Minister Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. Youths were parading and shouting, "Peace and friendship!" The songs we had been fleeing came at us from loudspeakers and through the windows of several buildings, where, we learned, the program was piped by a process, something like Muzak, called *radioficare*. It's a rare Rumanian who can escape this form of entertainment. It goes to public squares, factories, and collective farms. The population is one vast captive audience. Militiamen, traffic policemen, and uniformed *Securitate* troopers with automatics mingled with the crowd of oil workers and their wives watching the parade. The men wore dark trousers and white shirts with rolled-up sleeves, and the women

cheap bright cotton dresses. The Communists claim that the oil workers of Ploesti, a somewhat pampered group, are faring much better than they did before the new order took over, but that isn't true if real wages, instead of money wages, are the index.

Most of the officials I had talked to in Bucharest had proudly steered the conversation to Rumania's oil production, which, after the Soviet Union's, is the largest in Europe. In 1947, the country produced 3,810,000 metric tons of oil; this year, the output may reach the prewar record of 8,700,000, established in 1936; by 1955, if the Five Year Plan works, it should exceed 10,000,000 tons. This doesn't sound like much in the United States, which produces more than 300,000,000 metric tons a year, but to the Soviet Union, whose own yearly output is about 45,000,000, it is a good deal more than a drop in the bucket. The entire Rumanian oil operation is controlled by a super-trust called Sovrompetrol, composed of seven sub-trusts. In Ploesti, where the Russians are drilling more wells, they have retained the Rumanian chief geologist, a bourgeois septuagenarian who refuses to join the Party, but most of the other high-ranking Rumanian technicians have been either dismissed or demoted on the ground that they were real or potential saboteurs. At a trial, held in Ploesti last February, twenty-three Rumanians once employed by British and American companies that had concessions there in the nineteen-thirties were indicted for espionage, sabotage, and swapping currency on the black market. "Behind this scurrilous, murderous gang," said Radio Bucharest, "stood the arch-enemies and former masters of our country, the American imperialists." According to *Scanteia*, the defendants took the trial hard. "Crushed under the burden of their crimes," it said, "they heard the indictments with bent heads and furtive eyes, some with their faces distorted by a nervous tic." Most of the group were sentenced to life for high treason, and several of the lifers got an additional five years for conspiring with the "Western oil masters."

The increase in Rumanian oil production has been a pretty expensive achievement. Nine out of ten of the new wells being drilled in Ploesti are reported to yield only water. The Russians have recently had better luck elsewhere in Rumania, but by Western standards the cost of production is still

extremely high. Russia's thirst for oil, however, is great enough to eliminate all considerations of thrift. Little Rumanian petrol is available in Rumania. There is only one filling station in Bucharest that sells ethyl, and it caters exclusively to Party leaders, diplomats, and the *Securitate*. Gas sold at ordinary stations smells, looks, and performs as though it were diluted with gooseberry juice.

AFTER we left the town of Ploesti, we passed a huge refinery-equipment plant called Sovrompetrol No. 5, with a swarm of guards at the gate; several large refineries going full blast; a forest of derricks, which made me think of Long Beach, California; and one idle refinery, its grounds rank with weeds, which had been put out of commission during the war by Allied bombs. We went by all these at a good clip, to be sure not to give our pursuers any funny ideas. At one intersection, a militiaman was standing in a sentry hut. He rushed out, took down our license number, and rushed back. Looking over my shoulder, I saw him pick up a phone.

At last, after we had crossed several bridges guarded by *Securitate* troopers, the road began to ascend and the air took on the pleasant smell of fir. Some of the houses on the hillside had columned verandas and Japanesy, curved gables. When we reached the summit, Sinaia appeared below us—a scattering of white villas in a valley with wooded mountains rising to five thousand feet on the other side. High up on one of the peaks, we saw a big, modern hotel, the Casa de Odihna 9 Mai, or Rest Home of May 9th, where a Rumanian can spend his vacation, Mark said, only if he is a super-Stakhanovite, or, better still, a high government official. As we coasted down into the town, another militiaman looked at our license plate and lit out for the nearest phone.

We drew up before a large house, the Casa de Creatie a Uniunii Scriitorilor, or House of Creation of the Union of Writers, and got out of the car to look around. I had heard about the place from one of our interpreters, an aspiring novelist whose chief ambition is to be sent there. It is not an easy ambition to achieve. In the Rumanian People's Republic, novels are government-inspected and graded, somewhat like beef in the United States, as first-class, second-class, and third-class. "All the psychoneurotic nonsense and Mickey Spillane violence that's published in

America wouldn't even rate as third-class," said the interpreter, who had lived in Washington for a year or two after the last war. "Here the content must be realistic and the conclusion positive." I asked him what makes a novel first-class. "That's obvious," he said. "It must deal with the contemporary struggle of workers and peasants. The main thing is to create the image of the new, free man in Rumania. As Malenkov said, 'Writers should set off in positive artistic images the new type of man in his grandiose human dignity.' " He let that sink in, and then added, "A good example of a first-class novel is 'Mitrea Cocor,' the new best-seller by our great Mihail Sadoveanu. It's the story of a simple peasant suffering under the—"

"Bourgeois-landowner regime," I said.

"Have you read it?" he asked, pleased. I hadn't. He sighed. "Well, it starts with the war. The hero is drafted by the Fascist army and is deeply disappointed because nobody teaches him to read and write. He fights against the Red Army and is captured. In the Russian prisoner-of-war camp a new life begins for Mitrea. He is taught all the things he wanted to learn. He sees that he was deceived by the Fascists. After the end of the war, he returns to his native village, is given a few hectares of land, and becomes a fighter for peace. The novel has become popular with tens of thousands of farmers who had a similar experience." I said that the book sounded interesting, and he went on, "Suppose a novelist has an idea. He writes a chapter or two and an outline of the rest and submits this to the state publishing house. If he has the germ of a first-class novel, the writer is sent to the House of Creation in Sinaia. He may stay a reasonable time there. Of course, he's got to produce. He can't just lie in the sun and think, or wait for inspiration. He, too, must fulfill his work norm."

I asked what happened if the finished product turned out to be unworthy of publication. "It never does," the interpreter said. "Publishing here is scientific. Our publishing houses always know in advance how good a book will be. We need no state juries, since all readers and editors are employees of the state anyway. When they decide that a novel is going to be first-class, it turns out first-class. That makes quite a difference to a writer, since he gets higher royalties. Oh, how I'd like to be sent to the House of Creation at Sinaia!"

On this bright Sunday, there was no

sign of life in the House of Creation. We debated knocking on the door and decided not to, for fear of distracting a genius on the last few pages of his daily work norm.

SINAIA looked as if its present inhabitants had tried to wipe out every trace of the bourgeoisie and the landowners. There were no beautiful little shops, no de-luxe restaurants. The casino was boarded up. The big hotels had become drab rest homes, their paint flaking off and their gardens gone to seed. The villas, many of which have been given to prominent Communists, were run-down. "The regime is interested in building new houses, not in fixing up old ones," I had been told in Bucharest. A few shabbily dressed people sat on benches in a seedy park. The usual loudspeaker was blaring the usual music, a Chinese film was showing at the Cinema Progresul, and there were posters reading, "ARM IN ARM WITH THE SOVIET UNION TOWARD SOCIALISM." But there were no young people walking arm in arm. The regime frowns on flirtation, and, according to *Scanteia*, young people are supposed to meet and make friends at "cultural events." Last summer, the paper complained that vacationers were passing these up in favor of walks in the woods.

Heading for the Royal Palace, we saw a golf course, lined with trenches, that has been turned into an Army training ground, and a stately mansion that once belonged to General Ion Antonescu, the Fascist dictator, and has been turned into a girls' rest home. The palace, surrounded by high trees, is on the side of a steep hill overlooking the valley. The location is splendid, but the architecture, a combination of pseudo-Bavarian, pseudo-Norman, pseudo-English, and pseudo-Renaissance, is atrocious. The original structure was built late in the last century, and several wings have been added to it, each in worse taste than the last. The palace is now a museum, but it wasn't open, and Mark told us it hardly ever is. Above the main doorway was a photograph of Gheorghiu-Dej, and on the wall nearby was a chalked sign reading, "NO PHOTOGRAPHS PERMITTED."

"Carol's bedroom was on the second floor," Mark said. "Mme. Lupescu lived up the hill in a lovely hunting lodge. There's a suite that was fitted out especially for a state visit of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The story is that it was a duplicate of the Archduke's apartment in Schönbrunn Palace

in Vienna." The palace had its most recent fling in the summer of 1948, when the executive committee of the Cominform sat in one of the big rooms and read Marshal Tito out of the brotherhood.

As we got into the car, a militiaman came out of a small building, took down our license number, and went in again. Mark backed up, almost bumping into the Tatra. Its passengers looked the other way. I hesitate to think how many gallons of ethyl gasoline the *Securitate* used up that Sunday because of us.

WE drove up to an Alpine-style lodge that the American Legation has rented as a weekend retreat for its staff, which is now down to ten people—one of the smallest diplomatic staffs we have anywhere. In the living room were American magazines and an American radio, tuned in to Radio Free Europe. A Rumanian woman served us American drinks, American corned beef, Rumanian corn on the cob, and a lemon-chiffon pie that had been flown frozen from the United States to our Army Commissary in Vienna and brought to Bucharest, thirty-three hours away on the Orient Express, by a Legation man. The pie tasted even better than back home, and the radio was softly playing American jazz. We looked outside and saw the Pobeda that had whisked past us in front of the Athénée-Palace, waiting to escort us back to Bucharest. The license number was now 8235. —JOSEPH WECHSBERG

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Howard Smith was in Lynn, Mass., the first of last week studying power burners. He now has the mumps.—*Barre (Vt.) Daily Times.*

He didn't expect to get off with a light cold, did he?

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This is a story about the old west. How could it miss, with Robert Taylor and Ava Gardner?

There are those who claim that Ava Gardner can't act. Who cares?—*Ottawa Citizen.*

We care terribly.

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MOST FASCINATING NEWS STORY OF THE WEEK

[*The following item, reprinted in its entirety, is from the Sault Ste. Marie (Mich.) News*]

MONTEBELLO, CALIF. (AP)—Police arrested Charles Edward Calkin, 38, last night while he watered his garden.