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Mann, Klaus

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In Free Czechoslovakia

BY KLAUS MANN

Somewhere in Czechoslovakia, May 17

THIS date line has nothing to do with military security; I simply don't know where we are. Maybe this place doesn't have any name? It isn't even a village—just an isolated hamlet, with three or four farmhouses and a tiny church. Well, we are not in a position to be particular. Our car broke down. It was our capricious vehicle which picked this out-of-the-world place to stop.

I am feeling keyed up because I am *abroad*—in another country. This part of Czechoslovakia has been liberated, and is now being protected, by the Czech and Russian armies. As long as you stick to American-occupied areas, you have never left home. Of course, the scenery changes as you move from one "theater" to another, but there are always the same American uniforms and vehicles, the same American faces and accents, the same American officers and regulations. As soon as you step out of "our" zone, however, things begin suddenly to look different.

We took off from Linz, Austria, this morning and proceeded eastward, leaving behind our familiar G. I. world. Everybody seems pleased to see a couple of Americans. The Czech civilians in the villages wave at us, and the soldiers—Russian as well as Czech—salute and grin and shout "Amerikanski!" The Czech and Russian troops seem to be on the best of terms with each other as well. There is heavy military traffic on the highways—partly in American-made jeeps and trucks, partly in horse-drawn vehicles—and long columns of liberated slave workers and prisoners. At crossroads and particularly crowded spots these movements are directed by smartly uniformed Russian police women, who have at once an authoritative and a graceful manner of manipulating their little red and yellow flags.

You see flags all over the countryside—a lavish display of Czechoslovakia's national colors side by side with the red Soviet banner, the Union Jack, and the Stars and Stripes. Even the smallest villages through which we have passed are festively decorated and have pictures of Benes, Masaryk, and Stalin in the windows.

The peasant woman in whose house we may have to stay tonight told us that Benes had just returned to Prague and received a great ovation. The room into which she has invited us has already been fixed for some Russian officers, whom our hostess expects to arrive any day. The wall behind the beds is adorned with a huge crucifix, hanging just over the trinity—Stalin, Masaryk, Benes.

Prague, May 18

It's wonderful to be here, to see the city again, to find it free and practically undamaged. The lights are on, most stores and hotels are open, the streets are teeming with people. And all those flags! Prague looks indeed like a victorious capital.

Benes's popularity seems to have increased enormously during his absence. He has always been liked and respected,

but now he is loved as the symbol of national freedom. I daresay his prestige today equals that of his great master and predecessor, Thomas G. Masaryk. Czechoslovakia has a new "President-Liberator."

From our room at the good old Shroubeck Hotel we have a beautiful view over the Wenzels Square. It's fun to watch the crowd—Czech civilians and soldiers, with a sprinkling of Russian uniforms. No Germans. The great question is where to get a bite to eat. The Shroubeck manager informed us politely but positively that he could not feed us unless we had ration cards. Unfortunately, we haven't any.

There was a chap hanging around in the lobby—a slim, gray-haired, rather distinguished-looking fellow—who told us that he was an American, and that he could easily get us all the food we wanted. But for some reason I don't feel like accepting his offer.

May 19

Breakfast and lunch at the Alcron Hotel, which most members of the new administration have made their provisional home. A Czech doctor and government official, just returned from exile, introduced us and made the necessary arrangements. Yet the man hardly knows us. He simply met us in the square and welcomed us as Americans.

In the Alcron lobby we were presented to the new Prime Minister, Zdenek Fierlinger, former Czechoslovak ambassador to Moscow, and to Professor Pazak, Minister of Information. We told Pazak we should like to get an interview with Benes, and he said he would forward our request to the President's office. We were tactfully advised, however, that just now the President is exceedingly occupied and would hardly have time to receive any correspondents.

One of Professor Pazak's assistants, Vaclav Zizka, deputy chief of the press department, suggested that we might like to meet General Charles Kutelvaser, the military leader who directed the uprising of Prague's population. On our way from the Alcron to Kutelvaser's headquarters we passed the ruins of the ancient City Hall, destroyed by German bombs after the armistice had been signed. In many streets we found the pavement still torn open or inadequately repaired—reminding us of the barricades behind which Czech men and women had risked their lives in the fight against the oppressors. Everybody we met seemed eager to tell us all about that violent and glorious episode.

General Kutelvaser, with whom we had a long and cordial talk, described dramatically the development of the patriotic rebellion. It started on the evening of May 4, when people in certain districts of the capital demonstrated against the Nazi regime by tearing down German street signs and posters. The next day came the first clashes between Czech patriots and German troops; the street fighting continued and increased in violence until May 11.

The rebellion was a spontaneous, not to say improvised, uprising. The patriots lacked arms and ammunition. Con-

stantly harried by the Gestapo, they had been unable to communicate among themselves or coordinate their plans. There was no such thing as a revolutionary army; the movement consisted of numerous isolated groups—Czech deserters from the Wehrmacht, units of the Prague police force, student organizations, and so forth. But once the fighting started, this vanguard of liberation was joined by the masses.

"You must keep this in mind if you want to understand what has really happened," the General insisted. "The Battle of Prague was not fought by professional soldiers but by the people. Everybody took part, not only men but women and children. Those who were unable to fight helped by building barricades or carrying weapons and supplies."

In spite of so much patriotic unity and collective heroism, the situation looked grim by May 11. General Toussaint, commander of the German occupation army, had asked for reinforcements; five German divisions were approaching the capital. "The Russians came just in time to relieve us!" said General Kutelvaser. "They looked like angels to us as they moved in from Dresden with their heavy armor and artillery. But they might not have been able to take the city as quickly as they did if it had not been for our preparatory action. And if we had not kept the Germans busy, Prague might not exist today; those vandals would undoubtedly have carried out their plan to blow up the city."

I have just had a telephone call from the Ministry of Information. The President will see us this afternoon! Two *Stars and Stripes* men will be the first correspondents to be received by Benes in the liberated capital.

The same day, later

I didn't find Benes much changed. He received us in the same room in the Hradshin where I talked with him in 1937. As I congratulated him on his triumphant return, he said: "I have never doubted that I would come back, a little sooner or a little later, and that I would be welcomed by my people the way I actually was. The men and women of Czechoslovakia are with me because they know that my heart has always been with them, even when I was compelled to fight and work for my nation in foreign lands."

The country, he told us, has emerged from the ordeal in astonishingly good shape. The nation is today more united than ever; there have been hardly any quislings. "As for our economic situation, it will quickly improve," he said. "Important parts of our industrial plants have fortunately remained intact. I predict that two or three years from now Czechoslovakia will have regained the prosperity it enjoyed before the German invasion."

The country's present division into two separate zones—one occupied by the Americans, the other by the Russians—does not seem to worry him. "The administration of the Republic is firmly in the hands of the Czechoslovak government," he insisted. Of course the presence of foreign armies always involves certain inconveniences. But Benes emphasized, the behavior of both the Russians and the Americans is absolutely correct. "The Russians," he said, "have so far fulfilled conscientiously all their promises, and I don't doubt that they will continue to do so. Naturally, we shall have to live up to our obligations as well. For instance, it is our duty to feed the Russian forces as long as they are in our country. That may not be easy, but it has to be done."

There was one point which Benes stressed repeatedly. "The future well-being of Czechoslovakia and of Europe," he said again and again, "depends on one vital, indispensable condition—unity among Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. If they continue to collaborate in peace as they did in war, we may live to witness an era of progress and prosperity; if they fail to do so, there will be anarchy and disaster."

I left Benes, after one hour of stimulating talk, as full of respect and admiration as I had been after our first meeting. His idealistic élan is combined with a good deal of political shrewdness and realism. He possesses both faith and flexibility—a combination which makes him akin to a great American President, the late Franklin D. Roosevelt.

May 20

What a curious place this Hotel Alcron is, with its colorful crowd of government functionaries, high-ranking Czech and Russian officers, diplomats, newspapermen, Czech pilots in dapper R. A. F. uniforms! Most of these people have just come home, after six years of exile. They seem to feel somewhat strange and forlorn in their own country. One young flier told me that he had been born and brought up in Prague, and had spent the past six years in Poland, France, England, and in the skies over many a battlefield, always longing to be home. "Now I am back at last," he said. "It's wonderful, of course, but somehow it isn't quite what I expected. So far I haven't been able to locate any of my relatives or old friends. The Nazis knew I was fighting them; that was why they arrested my whole family."

Any reporter who hangs around this lobby long enough should be able to pick up a lot of stories. But to me the most remarkable thing about the Alcron is the food. In the morning all these important-looking gentlemen and their ladies assemble in the hotel restaurant—the typical pompous dining-room of a typical pompous European palace caravansary. Respectfully welcomed by well-trained and dignified waiters, they take their places at beautifully set tables. The waiters, with long coat tails, white neckties, and all, rush to the kitchen and after a while return, to present—what? A cup of lukewarm *Ersatz* coffee without cream or sugar, two slices of incredibly poor black bread, and a bit of very dubious jam. That is what the government has for breakfast; if you offered such rations to any G. I. outfit, mutiny would break out. And the lunches and dinners aren't any better.

But nobody here seems to mind; the Alcron clientèle has other worries and interests. They talk heatedly during their pathetic meals and afterward in the lobby. There are so many things to discuss, so many problems to tackle.

"We'll have to work—all of us. We'll have to work very hard," exclaimed one of Czechoslovakia's leading bankers with whom we had dinner tonight. "Reconstruction is a hard, sober task. Words won't help us. One thing that *would* help us, the thing we need most urgently right now, is transportation. We need lorries. How can we start reconstruction unless we have enough vehicles to transport our men and materials? Lorries, that's what we should have! A tremendous number of them." "Liberation was just a beginning," he went on. "Now we've entered a new phase. The phase of lorries—if you know what I mean."

Let's send plenty of lorries to Czechoslovakia.

May 21

We have had a curious, rather unpleasant experience with the gray-haired American who lives in our hotel. We finally accepted his invitation to have a glass of wine with him in his room. He talked a lot in a nervous, uneasy manner. Though he tried to appear nonchalant, he could not conceal a peculiar embarrassment; there was something hectic about the friendliness with which he treated us. Soon enough we were to find out what made him so fidgety and apologetic.

He had been in Germany during the whole war, without ever getting interned. Afterward he kept away from American authorities and had not yet visited the American-held zone of Czechoslovakia. He asserted, however, that he was anxious to return to the "good old U. S. A."—mainly for the purpose of suing one of the popular New York weeklies which had "slandered" him two or three years ago.

At this point our host did something almost incredibly reckless. He produced the allegedly "slandering" article and the letter he had written to his lawyer regarding the whole affair. This letter, which he was so naive or so foolhardy as to show us, confirmed beyond any doubt the exposé published in the American magazine. The man whose fairly good red wine we were enjoying was described by the New York weekly as a "short-wave traitor" in the service of Dr. Goebbels. And that is what he actually was, according to his own representation. A resident of Berlin for a number of years and an ardent Nazi sympathizer, he had made a living before and after Pearl Harbor by broadcasting German propaganda to the United States. In other words, our nervous host was a minor Lord Haw-Haw or Ezra Pound.

It was only toward the end of the war, when German victory became more and more doubtful, that he retired from his lovely job. The past two years or so he had spent in a Bohemian spa, proceeding to Prague after the German collapse. The first thing he did in the Czech capital was to present himself as an American citizen to the Ministry of

Information and to broadcast an enthusiastic eulogy of the anti-Nazi uprising. A fellow with principles!

Obviously he had expected us to be amused by his story or even to sympathize with him in his predicament. Our disgust and indignation seemed to surprise him greatly. "I'm extremely sorry you're taking this view," was all he had to say as we expressed our feelings in straightforward words.

We went over to the Alcron and reported the case to a Czech official. An hour later we were informed that our short-wave traitor had been arrested by the Czech police and would be turned over to American authorities in Pilsen. I suppose investigations about him may still be going on; that is why I prefer not to mention his name.*

May 22

I hate to leave Prague. There are so many issues about which I should like to gather more information.

What about the Sudeten problem? Will it be possible for the Czechs to live in peace with the Goebbels-infected Germans of that area?

What about Slovakia? An English correspondent just arrived from Bratislava told me that Nazi propaganda and Nazi bribes have not been without effect in that part of the republic. The Slovak administration, I understand, still recognizes certain anti-Semitic laws introduced by the Germans.

And what about those lorries?

Clearly, there are plenty of difficulties confronting Benes and his co-workers. But I have a lot of confidence in Benes, and I have a lot of confidence in Czechoslovakia. If any nation has, and deserves, a chance to recover quickly from the tribulations of the past few years, then it is this one. Democrats by instinct and tradition, the Czechs cherish their own freedom and respect the rights of others. They have a shrewd, courageous leader. And they have a beautiful capital—I really hate to leave Prague.

* The traitor who betrayed himself to Klaus Mann is Edward Leo Delaney; his arrest was reported in the American press last Wednesday.—EDITORS THE NATION.