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Notes in Czechoslovakia.

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NOTES IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

By

K l a u s M a n n

(of "The Stars and Stripes")

Somewhere in Czechoslovakia, May 17, 1945 -- This dateline 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 some kind of isolated hamlet. Three or four farmhouses and a tiny church -- that's all.

Well, we are not in a position to be particular. Our car broke down. It was she -- I mean, ~~it was~~ our capricious vehicle -- who picked this out-of-the-world locality. Besides we might have been much less fortunate. The house is clean, the people are as nice and helpful as they could be. And I wouldn't be too surprised if the athletic-looking young Czech Partisan who promised to take care of our restive automobile, turned out to be a competent technician. As my assistance would only complicate ~~and slow down~~ his job, I may as well take it easy and jot down a few notes.

I am feeling kind of keyed-up because I am abroad -- in another country. Not that there is anything unusual or exciting about our crossing the frontier between Austria and Czechoslovakia; that is in itself a rather trivial event -- in fact, I don't even remember having noticed any boundary. But this part of Czechoslovakia has been liberated, and is now being protected, by Czech and Russian armies; that's what makes our trip somehow adventurous. This is the first time since I came to Europe, eighteen months ago, that I am in a

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territory not under Anglo-American jurisdiction.

As long as you stick to American-occupied ~~territories~~^{areas}, you'll have never left home. Of course, the sceneries change as you move from one European "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.

If we (I am travelling with Howard Byrne of The Stars and Stripes, Paris Edition) had entered Czechoslovakia from the mountainous region of the Bavarian Forest, we would have found ourselves before long eating chow in a nice American garrison town by the name of Pilsen. But we took off from Linz, Austria, this morning and proceeded eastwards -- thus leaving behind our familiar GI world. Presently our surroundings assumed an exotic aspect.

That is not to say that there was anything weird or hostile about this unfamiliar milieu -- on the contrary. Everybody seemed pleased to see a couple of Americans; we were received as friends. The Czech civilians in the villages waved at us, and the soldiers -- Russian as well as Czech -- saluted and grinned and shouted "Americanski!"

This word works like a magic ~~spell~~^{charm}. Whenever a roadblock ~~stopped~~^{guard} us and didn't recognize our insignia, we had just to introduce ourselves as "Americanski," and our man was all smile. In view of the affectionate light which this one word, "Americanski," kindled in bearded Russian faces and in stern Czech physiognomies, I remembered what Wendell Willkie once said about the enormous reservoir of good will and respect which our nation commands all over the world; but

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I recalled also what he added about the great responsibilities this universal prestige involves.

The Czech and Russian troops, both so sincerely cordial in their attitude toward us, seem to be on the best of terms with each other as well. There was plenty of military traffic on the highways -- partly in American-made jeeps and trucks, partly in horse-drawn vehicles -- and there were long columns of liberated slave workers and prisoners. On crossroads and at particularly crowded spots these movements were directed by smartly uniformed Russian policewomen who had an at once authoritative and graceful manner of manipulating their little red and yellow flags.

There were plenty of flags all over the countryside -- a lavish exhibition of Czechoslovakia's national colors presented side by side with the red Soviet banner, the Union Jack, and our Stars and Stripes. Even the smallest villages through which we came were festively decorated, with portraits of Benes, Masaryk and Stalin ^{displayed} ~~mounted~~ in the windows.

The peasant woman in whose house we may have to spend the night told us that Benes has just returned to Prague and was given a great ovation. She is a sturdy-looking old thing -- kind and resolute and probably rather shrewd. I speak German with her, although she told me that she doesn't have much use for the Germans; but it happens to be the only idiom which we both understand.

The room into which she 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

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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.

What a difference between this place and the gloomy, ruined German towns where I spent the past weeks! Here, 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.

Too bad we missed yesterday's great parade in honor of Benes' return. It must have been quite a spectacle! But even without having seen the marching formations and the cheering crowd, I can imagine the enthusiasm with which the Czech people welcomed their own leader, after six years of bondage and foreign rule.

Benes' popularity seems to have enormously increased during the time of his absence. He has always been liked and respected, but now he is loved as the symbol of national freedom. I daresay his prestige, at this point, 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 animated crowd -- Czech civilians and soldiers, with a sprinkling of Russian uniforms. No Germans!

The question is where we'll be able 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 don't have any.

There was a chap hanging around in the lobby -- a ^{slim} ~~slender~~, grey-haired, rather distinguished-looking old boy -- who told us that he was

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an American, indeed, a New Yorker, and that he could easily get us all the food we wanted. But for some reason I don't feel like accepting his generous offer.

May 19 -- Breakfast and lunch at the Alcron Hotel where most members of the new Administration have made their provisional home. A Czech doctor and government official, just returned from exile, introduced us there and made the necessary arrangements. The amazing thing about it is that the man hardly knows us. He just met us on the Wenzels ~~Place~~ Square and welcomed us as Americans.

In the Alcron lobby we were presented to the new Prime Minister, Fierling -- former Ambassador of Czechoslovakia to Moscow, --, and to Prof. Pazak, Minister of Information. We told the latter that we would like to have an interview with Benes, and he said that he would forward our request to the President's office. We were tactfully advised, however, that right now the President is exceedingly occupied and would hardly have time to receive any correspondents.

One of Prof. Pazak's assistants, Mr. Vaclav Zizka, deputy chief of the press department, asked us whether we would be interested in ⁸ meeting General Charles Kutelvaser, the military leader who directed the uprising of Prague's population against the Nazi yoke. We said that we would be happy to accompany Mr. Zizka who had to see the General this morning.

On our way from the Alcron to Kutelvaser's headquarters we passed by the ruins of ⁸ the ancient City Hall -- destroyed by German bombs at a time when the Armistice had ⁸ already been signed. There were other marks of the recent struggle. In many streets we found the pavement still torn open or inadequately repaired -- reminding us of the barricades

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behind which Czech men and women risked their lives in the fight against the oppressors.

Everybody we met seemed eager to tell us all about this violent and glorious episode. We heard the epic story from eyewitnesses and actual participants; it was disclosed to us by enthusiastic lads wearing proudly their brassards with the letters "R G" (standing for Revolutionary Guard), and we learned further details from the officer who was in charge of the whole operation.

Kutelvaser with whom we had a long and cordial talk, described dramatically the development of the patriotic rebellion. It all started in the evening of May 4, when people in certain districts of the capital demonstrated against the Nazi regime by tearing down German road signs and posters. The next day, May 5, the first clashes between Czech patriots and German troops occurred; the streetfighting continued and increased in violence until May 11.

The rebellion was a spontaneous, not to say improvised, upheaval -- inadequately prepared and organized. The patriots were lacking in arms and ammunition. Constantly watched and persecuted by the Gestapo, they had been unable to communicate among each other and to coordinate their strategic plans. There was no such thing as a revolutionary army; the movement consisted of numerous isolated groups -- Czech deserters from the German Wehrmacht, units of the Prague police force, student organizations, and so forth. But once the actual battle had started, this militant vanguard of liberation was supported and 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

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fought by military professionals but by the people themselves. Everybody took part, everybody contributed his share -- not only our men but also our women and children. Those who were unable to fight helped by building barricades or carrying weapons and supplies. It was indeed an uprising of the people if there has ever been one!"

In spite of so much patriotic unity and such great collective heroism, the situation looked grim about May 11. General Toussaint, commander of the German occupation army, had asked for ~~an~~ reinforcements; five German divisions were approaching the capital. "The Russians came just in time to^s relieve us!" said General Kutelvaser. "To us, they looked like angels as they moved on from Dresden with their heavy armour and artillery. But again, 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, ~~the~~ Prague might not exist anymore; those vandals would undoubtedly have carried out their plan to blow up our capital in its entirety."

..... I was just interrupted by a telephone call from the Ministry of Information. The President will see us this afternoon. That's indeed much more than I expected. From a professional viewpoint, I suppose it's something like a scoop. So two Stars and Stripes ^{men} ~~correspondents~~ ^{reporters} are the first ~~newspaper men~~ to be received by Benes after his return to the liberated capital of Czechoslovakia!

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

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that I would be ~~well received~~ ^{welcomed} by my people. 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."

His country, he told us, has emerged from the ordeal in astonishingly good shape. The nation is today more united than ever; there have hardly been any quislings.

"As for our economic situation, it will quickly improve," he said. "Important parts of our industrial plants have fortunately remained intact. I venture to predict that in about two or three years from now, Czechoslovakia will have regained the prosperity she used to enjoy before the German invasion."

The country's present division into two different 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 Czechoslovakian Government," he insisted.

Of course, the presence of foreign armies involves always a certain amount of inconveniences. But -- Benes emphasized -- the behaviour 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 in the future. But, naturally, we will 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 always be easy, but it has to be done."

There was one point which Benes stressed repeatedly ^{in the course} ~~of our conversation~~. "The ^{future} well-being of Czechoslovakia and of Europe,"

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he said again and again, "depends on one vital, indispensable condition: unity among the three leading powers -- 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 ~~some~~ anarchy and disaster."

He is not afraid that the interests of the small nations will be unfavourably affected by the lasting alliance of the Big Three; on the contrary, he feels that the permanence of the present coalition is the only thing for which all ~~the~~ nations, great or small, can hope.

When leaving Benes, after one hour of stimulating and instructive conversation, I was as full of respect and admiration for this man as I had been after our first meeting.

No doubt, it is his ardent idealism to which this leader owes his energy and endurance. But in his character this idealistic elan is combined with a good deal of political shrewdness and realism. Benes possesses both faith and flexibility -- a combination of talents and impulses which makes him akin to a great American President, the late F. D. Roosevelt.

May 20 -- The fact that we have seen the President, and that our interview has lasted for an hour, stirred quite a sensation in the Alcron lobby. Everybody wanted to know what Benes had said, what kind of impression he had made on us, and so forth.

What a curious place this Hotel Alcron is, with his colorful crowd of governmental functionaries, high-ranking Czech and Russian officers, diplomats, newspaper men, Czech pilots in dapper RAF uniforms. Most of these people have just come home, after six years of exile. They seem to

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feel somewhat strange and forlorn in their own country. One young flier told me that he was born and brought up in Prague, and how homesick he had been during the past six years which he spent in Poland, France, England, and in the ^{skies} ~~air~~ over many a battlefield. "So 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} ~~find~~ any of my relatives or old friends. The Nazis knew that I was fighting them; that's why they have arrested my whole family..."

It's indeed an extraordinary milieu; any reporter who hangs around this lobby long enough should be able to pick up a lot of first-rate stories. But to me, the most remarkable thing about the Alcron are the meals. Three times a day all these important-looking gentlemen ^{and} ~~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 place at beautifully set tables. The waiters, with long coat tails, white necktie and all, rush to the kitchen and ^{after a while} ~~promptly~~ 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's what the government has for breakfast; if you offered ^{such} ~~the same kind of~~ rations to any GI outfit, mutiny would inevitably break out the same morning. As for the lunches and dinners served at the Alcron, they ~~aren't~~ aren't any better.

But nobody here seems to mind this abominable food; nobody cares; the Alcron clientele has other worries and interests. How keenly and heatedly they converse among each other, during their pathetic meals and

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afterwards in the lobby! There are so many things to discuss, so many problems to be tackled.

"We'll have to work -- all of us! We'll have to work very hard!" It was one of Czechoslovakia's leading bankers who made this exclamation, with ^(the unmistakable) ~~an~~ ^{striking} accent of fervent sincerity. We had dinner with him tonight. He didn't seem to notice how poor the food was he ate while he kept talking about Czechoslovakia.

"This is not a time for beautiful words," he said. "Reconstruction is a hard, ^{sober} ~~complex~~ task. Beautiful words won't help us. One thing that would help us -- the thing we need ~~wanted~~ most urgently right now -- is transportation! Don't you see? We need lorries! How can we start reconstructing, if we don't have enough vehicles to transport our men and our material? Lorries, that's what we should get! Lorries, my friends! A vast amount of them!"

I'll never forget the passionate expression with which he ~~cried~~ ^{cried} out this word -- "lorries!" It sounded as though he were invoking Liberty, or Justice, or some other lofty ideal.

"Liberation was just a beginning," the banker said. "Now we've entered a new phase. The phase of lorries -- if you know what I mean..."

Yes, I suppose I do. Let's have plenty of lorries for Czechoslovakia.

May 21 -- ~~The Russian uniforms in town~~ ^{There} seem to be less Russians in town than we found at the time of our arrival. As we mentioned this observation to one of our friends at the Alcron, we were told that the Red Army has already begun to evacuate the Czech capital.

Lunch with some officers of the First Czech Brigade recently returned from Russia. (Incidentally, the Army seems to be much better fed than the Government...) All these men have not only an impressive military

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record, but they have also pleasant manners and a good deal of mature intelligence.

I think this combination of toughness and sensitivity is more frequent in Czech characters than in other ~~pe~~ nationalities. I have known many Czechs who were at once ^{resolute} ~~determined~~ and civilized; ~~determined~~ determined and uncompromising, yet urbane and open-minded. It's a good, well-balanced mixture.

The Czech are an excellent people. They will play a constructive, significant role in the future of this continent and of our civilization.

The same day, later -- Curious, rather unpleasant experience with the grey-haired American who lives in our hotel. Finally we accepted his invitation to have a glass of wine with him in his room. He talked a lot, in a nervous, uneasy manner. While trying hard to appear nonchalant, he could not conceal a peculiar embarrassment. The elegance of his motions was forced; there was something hectic and exaggerated about the friendliness with which he treated us. Soon enough we should find out ~~what~~ made him so fidgety and so apologetic.

He ~~had been~~ ^{was} in Germany during the whole war, without ever getting interned. So far, he has kept away from American authorities and has not yet visited the American-held zone of Czechoslovakia. He asserted, however, that he was anxious to return to "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 inconsiderate. He produced, first, the allegedly "slandorous" article, and, second, the letter he had written to his ~~law~~ lawyer regarding the whole affair.

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This letter, which he was naive or foolhardy enough to show us, confirmed beyond any doubt the expose published in the American magazine. The man whose fairly good red wine we were just enjoying, ^(was described) ~~had been characterized~~ by the popular 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 presentation. 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 towards 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 spent in a Bohemian spa, from where he proceeded to Prague ~~when~~ 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} ~~description~~ 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;" that was all he had to say as we expressed our feelings in harshly straightforward words.

We went over to the Aleron and reported the case to a competent Czech personality. He promised us to have the matter investigated. An hour later we were informed that our short-wave traitor had been arrested by the Czech police and will be turned over to American authorities in pilsen.

I suppose that investigations about him may still be going on ^{that} ~~which~~

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is why I prefer not to mention his name.

May 22 -- I hate to leave Prague. There are so many issues about which I would like to gather additional 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? Will it be possible to evacuate the whole German-speaking population?

What about Slovakia? A very intelligent Jew, just arrived from Bratislava, told me that Nazi propaganda and Nazi bribes have not been without effect in that part of the Republic. The Slovakian 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 collaborators. But then, they are just the men to master even the most delicate situations. I have a lot of confidence in Benes and in his crew.

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's this one.

Democrats by instinct and tradition, they cherish their own freedom and respect the rights of others. They are good patriots and good citizens of the world. They have a shrewd, courageous leader, and they have a beautiful capital.

I really hate to leave Prague.

THE END