

ECHOES FROM THE FORGOTTEN MASSES OF POLAND

By JOHN L. SPIVAK

WARSAW.

IN THE third-class compartment on the train from Lemberg to Warsaw there was a policeman with his wrist manacled to the wrist of a rather thin man in his early thirties with beady but bright and cheerful eyes. I assumed the prisoner a thief, for it is quite common for policemen, their wrists manacled to those of their prisoners, to be seen walking Polish streets. A woman with a kindly, sympathetic face, a rather cocky self-assured man, my translator and I occupied the rest of the compartment.

"I'm on my way to Koronova to do five years."

"You are well dressed, eh? Then why are you riding third-class, tell me that!"

Before my translator could tell me what he said, the thief continued angrily:

"I am not good enough to be spoken to, eh? But I have been spoken to by teachers—the best of them! By professors and scholars and men who know more than all of you will ever know!" He made a quick motion with his hands and the manacled one fell back.

The cocky man with the contemptuous smile now laughed openly.

"I suppose they invited you to their house for tea?" he asked sarcastically.

"I lived with them!" the thief exclaimed. "In the Lemberg prison!"

"Fine people," the man commented dryly, "to be in prison".

"They were not in prison for stealing," the thief said quickly. "They are not like me. They would not take a groschen from anybody. They are good men, but very unfortunate. They were political prisoners."

"Oh," said the man. "Communists, eh? They—"

"Don't you say a word against them!" the thief interrupted harshly. "They are better men than you and me."

"You got out on parole and now you are on your way to do five years in Koronova. You learned a lot from the Communists!"

"And now I got five years! I have always been very unfortunate. Even when I was in Lemberg and we started a hunger strike because they were beating us I was the one who got the biggest beating!"

"The Communists—" the man began tauntingly.

"I will not hear a word against them," the thief interrupted sharply. "I can tell you do not like them and I will not hear a word against them! They are not like us. When we thieves and robbers went

on a hunger strike against the rotten food and the way we were being beaten, the Communists also went on a hunger strike—just to show their sympathy for us! Tell me, who would do that for a thief? Instead of spitting on us, they used to tell us about the world and the history of the world. They used to tell us more than I ever learned in school—"

The woman nodded her head sympathetically.

"I'm on my way to do five years in Koronova," he continued, turning to her, "to do five years at hard labor. Eh! That's nothing. I do not care. I like to work."

"You'll get a chance to like it," said the man dryly.

"Tell me this," the thief turned upon him. "They give me five years to do hard work. Why did they not give me work when I was free? Tell me that!"

The man stared at him without answering.

"When I was young I got four zloty a week for working and I was hungry, so I began to steal—" the thief continued thoughtfully. "And now that I have grown up I steal because they will not give you work. They give you work only when you steal!"

He shook his head and laughed as though the absurdity of it was terribly funny.

"I wish I were on my way to do five years for doing what the Communists did—to make speeches and organize the workers—instead of stealing," he volunteered. When no one answered him, he shrugged his shoulders and added regretfully, "But I am a dark man and I do not know enough; but they are good men, those Communists."

The policeman, who had not opened his mouth, let the prisoner talk. As the train entered the Warsaw station, the thief laughed cheerfully.

"Change for a five-year ride," he called loudly. He bowed with exaggerated deference to the man who had aroused his ire. "Good day to you, sir" he said, holding his left hand to his heart.

The policeman, whose stolid expression had not changed during the entire ride, now turned to his prisoner.

"We shall have to walk through the streets," he said. "I do not want to shame you by having these handcuffs on your wrist. If you will give me your word not to try to escape I will take them off."

The thief looked at him in astonishment.

"You will take my word—a thief's word?"

"If you give it," said the policeman solemnly.

"I give it," said the thief. "See, you"—he turned upon the cock man—"follow us and see whether a thief can keep his word! When you talk to me like that," he said, turning to the policeman, "I would walk all the way to Koronova without a guard and appear at the prison walls. That's the way to talk to a thief!" he said loudly, turning again to the man who had irritated him. "Human, this policeman—almost like a Communist!"

LEFT him and went wandering to the great market at Hale Miroskie, where the people came to buy from the little traders, those who can afford only a little stall or unable to afford even that, stand about on the curb so closely together that they form a solid line of humanity. One old woman stood at one of the street corners clutching seven thin radishes in her hand. It was obviously all she had to sell and as I passed she held them out, calling, "Prosha pana."

"I don't want any radishes," I said, shaking my head.

She smiled a friendly little smile.

"But they are good radishes," she protested, holding them toward me. "And only five groschen for one."

"I am not buying radishes," I explained, "I just wanted to see how you live and work in this market."

"I was not always like this," she said quickly. "Once when I was young I was a servant girl in a grand house. Then I was happy and had a place to sleep in all my own and all I wanted to eat." She looked at radishes and smiled a little wistfully. "But that was long ago. I married a man and so I lost my nice place to live."

"And your husband? You are still with him?"

"No. He is dead. But I have two daughters. One is in America and the other is in Lodz but I never hear from either of them. I do not know if they are living or dead."

"Then whom do you live with?"

"I have a son. But he is not working. He cannot find work—"

"Do you live in Warsaw?"

"No," she shook her head, "I live seven miles from Warsaw in a little village."

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"How did you get here?"

"I walked, of course," she said. "At two o'clock this morning I got up and with my radishes walked to Warsaw because everybody comes to buy here on Tuesdays and Fridays. These are the big market days and I had to be here at five o'clock. It takes me longer," she added apologetically, "because I am old now and cannot walk so well."

"But it snowed and rained last night —"

"Yes. It snowed and then it turned to rain. Just before I got to Warsaw it turned to rain and the roads were very muddy and it was hard walking."

"And you stay here how long?"

"All day until it gets dark and then I walk back to my village."

"How much do you make after a day's work like that?"

"Sometimes a zloty and fifty groschen and sometimes two zloty and sometimes not even fifty groschen."

"And on that you have to live half the week?"

"Me and my son. He is ill now and cannot get up from bed or he would be helping me," she added quickly.

does not in any way signify a tendency towards laxness in this field. Today, side by side with the struggle with acts against public property, which is the main force of resistance of the remnants of hostile elements, special attention is devoted to the fight with crimes against the person. In the Soviet Union, where the human being is looked upon as the most valuable capital, the person of the citizen, his property and his rights are placed under special protection. This is precisely the reason for the measures for punishing more severely certain categories of crimes such as ruffianism, wilful refusal to pay alimony and similar cases. The unusual results in the Soviet Union's struggle against crime have been obtained on the basis of the abolition of exploitation of man by man, the abolition of poverty and unemployment, and the rise in the standard of living and the culture of the population.

A tremendous role in the effectiveness of the Soviet juridical policy is played by the principles of coercive labor, the whole idea of which consist in changing the minds of people, who, in the past were enemies of a socialist society and, under the Soviet system of education, have largely become converted into new people who have forgotten their previous customs and habits.

We are confident that this fight with crime will, as a result of the victory of Communism, lead to the final and complete abolition of crime in the land of the Soviets.

"When you have so little, what do you eat?" I asked.

"Bread and potatoes. What else is there to eat? Potatoes are very cheap but the bread is dear. Sometimes if I make only fifty or sixty groschen after all day here I buy only potatoes and we have them. But if I am lucky to make a zloty, then we can have a bread too."

I had been taking her time which she might have used to sell her radishes and I gave her a zloty. She offered me the seven radishes she held in her hand.

"No, no," I said. "I have taken up your time so you keep this zloty."

"The whole zloty!" she exclaimed, holding it in her hand and looking at it with unbelieving eyes.

"Yes, of course. You keep it. Put it away. I guess you can use it. Life is pretty hard, isn't it?"

And suddenly those old eyes filled with tears and she began to cry.

"Ai, pana, pana," she sobbed, "no one knows how hard our life is".

THE desire for "something to happen—anything"—is widespread and there is a whole vast area in Poland extending from 100 to 200 miles from the Russian border and running about 1,000 miles from the northern frontier of Czechoslovakia to the southern frontiers of Lithuania and Latvia where the "anything" is being translated into action with organization behind it. This is the "pacification area," so named because Poland is trying to "pacify" the peasants. How the peasants feel and how they are being "pacified" is not being made public by the government or by the Polish press nor does the iron censorship permit news of it to seep out if it can be stopped.

"Pacification" first began in 1913 in the region immediately north of the Carpathian-Russ section of Czechoslovakia and has become increasingly brutal and ruthless. The men and women, both radical and conservative, who told me what is being done to the peasants there were as frightened as those who speak in Italy or Germany, for in Poland the authorities need only to suspect that you talked of these matters to find yourself on the way, without a trial, to the concentration camp at Bereza Kartuska.

Not far away was the Soviet Union where the peasants had been miserable but now news was seeping across the frontier that Russian peasants were eating again, that they had salt for their potatoes, that they ate meat, that they had bread, that things were getting better while in Poland life for the peasants was steadily growing worse. Peasants turned their eyes eastward where Soviet soil now offered a haven of plen-

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ty. A strong Communist sentiment developed and this resulted in the effort to "pacify" the region.

Battalions of soldiers swarmed on villages seeking the leaders but the peasants refused to surrender them and in desperate efforts to root out the "Reds" the officials introduced the custom of "common responsibility." This procedure is quite simple, soldiers surround a village where a Communist is suspected of being active and line up all village residents. The officers then announce that the village is "commonly responsible" for the existence of a Communist in their midst and unless he is surrendered within one our every fifth person, man, woman or child above fourteen, chosen at random, will be placed under arrest, beaten severely and then imprisoned on suspicion of being themselves Communists.

On my way to the village of Kolki in the Volhynia district, where I had heard children had been "pacified" for asking for free schools I talked with peasants who told me many things with anxious pleas not to tell that they had talked with me, pleas as anxious as any I encountered in Italy or Germany. Even government officials in Warsaw, sick of the occurrences in the "pacification area" talked. And I heard tales like the one when the military swept upon and surrounded the little village of Bobraka where a Communist was active. The threat of "common responsibility" was made and either because the peasants were terrified or because there was an informer in their midst the Communist was found and taken away to prison "and the *izba* (peasant hut) where he had lived was burned to the ground and over the cold ashes plows were drawn and the land was plowed so that no one would ever know even the ground where a Communist had lived."

There were many such tales as I went wandering around the Volhynia district, stopping at *izbas* that sagged from the weight of their snow-covered straw-thatched roofs and then I came to Kolki where an old and bearded peasant told me of what happened on May Day of 1935.

The new Polish Constitution had guaranteed free schools and there had been joy in the hearts of the "dark people". The illiterate and hungry peasants had heard that the educated did not hunger and they wanted to see their children educated so they "would not hunger as we are starving." When no schools were built the peasants began to demand them and at first shyly and with many apologies and then a little irritably they asked why the schools were not being built for the children and the

authorities had no answer. On May Day of 1935 a twenty-two-years-old Communist, the local school teacher, organized the peasants from the neighboring farms and led a May Day march on the village. They carried a red banner inscribed with the words "Give Us Schools for Our Children" and well over a thousand peasants, ancient Poles whose ancestors had tilled the soil for generations, their wives, younger folk and children of school age, marched upon the village of Kolki. There was a picnicky air about it. The long winter was over. May and the sun and warmth were here and to most of the gay and laughing line it was a great big party to be enjoyed, a sort of communal celebration. The young teacher led the procession and as they approached the long, level road leading to the village they met a group of policemen obviously on their way to intercept them.

"Where are you going?" the police demanded.

"To the village to ask for free schools," the teacher responded gaily.

"Our children will not be as dark and ignorant as we," said several peasants crowding around the police.

"You cannot march on the village," said the police.

"But the new constitution has guaranteed us free schools," the teacher protested.

"You will have to disperse," said the police. "You cannot march on Kolki."

"But all that these peasants and children want is to ask for the free schools the constitution has guaranteed them," the girl protested.

The police officer shook his head angrily and spread out his arms to signify that the road was barred. The girl turned to the peasants and waving the red banner with the words "Give Us Schools for Our Children" she called. "We have the right to march to Kolki and we are marching."

The policeman slapped her and in a few moments the gay and happy peasants and their wives had so set upon the police, kicking and cuffing them, that they beat a hasty retreat.

"Ah," sighed the old peasant, "we laughed—even the children laughed when we saw them running back to Kolki; and the teacher laughed and said that that showed what we could do when we were determined, that a few policemen could not stop us."

They marched on again, singing the International, laughing and joking about how the police had run away.

And then they saw a detachment of soldiers in the distance and an old peasant, wise in the ways of the military, called a halt.

"They are there to stop us from going

to Kolki," he said. "They will threaten us."

"We are not children to be frightened," said another. "I have been a soldier and I am not frightened so easily."

They placed the children in the front line so that the soldier could see they were on a peaceful mission, placed them right behind the teacher who was leading them and carrying the red banner asking that the children be not allowed to grow up in the darkness of their elders.

The officer in command of the soldiers shouted to them to stop. The teachers' face flushed as red as the banner she carried and she turned to the peasants behind her.

"Let us sing!" she called loudly. "All together—as we go to demand the end of darkness for our children!"

She waved the red banner and her voice came strong like a challenge to battle:

"Arise! Ye prisoners of starvation—"

The children who had learned the song joined in. Quavering peasant voices picked it up and then the voices were drowned out by a burst of machine-gun fire.

Nineteen were killed. Twelve little children who had gone to plead for free schools that they might not grow up in the darkness of their elders, the teacher, still clutching the banner even in death and six peasants. They had been "pacified."

"We could not even bury our dead," said the old peasant, rubbing a grimy hand over his nose. "We were told that here and there they are buried, the teacher and the children. There were many wounded and when we fled we carried them with us to our homes."

Not a word of the massacre was published. The organ of the Socialist Party, *Robbotnik*, learned of it and tried to publish an account of what had happened and the issue was promptly confiscated.

"And now?" I asked.

He stared at the floor.

"Now we remember our dead," the old peasant said quietly.

We sat silent for a while, none of us feeling much like talking after this tale.

"Some day," said the peasant slowly, "where those children died and where that teacher lies buried, blood will run like a river in the spring and it will not be the blood of peasant children."

"They will shoot you down as before," I said.

"They will shoot many of us down," he returned quietly, "but there"—he motioned to the east—"not a two day's journey by even a starving horse, are soldiers of the peasants. They are our soldiers. And they will come to help us."

JOSEPH STALIN

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cow, in Austria, and was able to take part in the conference of the party with Lenin, when he was elected a member of the Central Committee.

Some Russian revolutionists of this period spent considerable time abroad studying in comparative security. Not so Stalin. He was always at the most dangerous front, giving himself unsparingly to the illegal work of his party. In 1913 he took part in the elective campaign for the fourth Duma (congress) and became leader of the Bolshevik faction. At that time he was also one of the editors of the illegal Bolshevik papers, "The Star" and "The Truth." In February, 1913, he was arrested for the sixth time and exiled under a heavy guard. This time he did not escape and was freed only by the February revolution.

In the Bolshevik Revolution Stalin was one of the committee of five who managed the uprising, working shoulder to shoulder with Lenin and strongly favoring the seizure of power, in opposition to Zinoviev and Kamenev, who cautioned delay. From 1917 to 1923 he was People's Commissar of Nationalities, the man who initiated the successful policy of giving cultural autonomy and local freedom to the nationalities within the Union. Besides this, from 1919 to 1920, he was People's Commissar for Workers and Peasants Inspection, and from 1920 to 1923, a member of the Revolutionary War Council of the Republic.

The intervention in Russian affairs of England, France, Japan and the United States threw him into the civil war. He was sent from one front to another, serving against Udenitch, Denikin and the Poles, and, for his heroism he was decorated with the highest Soviet order of the Red Sign.

It is always the custom for the Red Army soldiers to greet a commander with a cheer. On the front near Petrograd one December, Stalin noted that the soldiers did not greet him with enthusiasm. Halting one whose tightly compressed lips indicated complete silence, Stalin asked, "Why?" The man pointed to his own feet, clad only in straw sandals. Stalin immediately took off his own fine leather boots, gave them to the soldier, and took in return the straw sandals, which he wore all winter, sharing the deprivation with his men.

One of his comrades, Sturo, told his adventures during the direst days of the civil war, when it was a race between starvation and defeat at the Allies' hands. Stalin was food dictator. Said Sturo:

"I was commissioned to secure food for Baku. At the time Baku had a

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