

DORA SCARLETT

A Bureau in Hungary

The author of this article worked for four years for the Foreign Language Department of Radio Budapest. She was assigned to this work by the British Communist Party, but instructed to preserve complete secrecy - among British and Hungarian non-Party acquaintances - as to the nature of her work. By taking examples from the daily life and routines of one of the great bureaux in the 'new democracies', she gives a 'worm's eye view' of life under the Rakosi regime - and draws some conclusions about the character of Communist bureaucracy. In the autumn of 1956 she associated herself with the Revolutionary Council which was formed on Budapest Radio, but (she writes) 'I have been careful not to mention any other persons who were there under the same conditions as myself. They - and they include many different nationalities - have taken their own decisions'

Before the war those two admirable Soviet satirists, Ilf and Petrov, wrote a book about the U.S.A., *Little Golden America*, and one about the Soviet Union, *Little Golden Calf*. When I mentioned Ilf and Petrov - and, of course, it was usually to Communists or Communist sympathisers - I found that many people associated their names with *Little Golden America*, and had read that book with delight, but when I spoke of *Little Golden Calf* they thought I was confusing the titles, and in fact showed that they had not heard of it.

Little Golden Calf is a very funny book, one of the last Soviet satires of the early period, the Zoshchenko period, before Stalin's solemn and grandiose myth-making suppressed all fresh and individual voices. The book has a moral - two unprincipled rogues contrive to live and amass money in Soviet Society, aided by the inefficiency and bureaucracy around them, but in the end they find there is no place for them in the new order, and retribution overtakes them while they are trying to leave the country.

When I read this book for the first time, in the thirties, I thought the authors had fantastically overdrawn a situation - which nevertheless must have a basis in fact - in order to indulge their sense of fun and point a moral. Then I came across it again, in 1955, in Hungary. Someone who had a private collection of English books from earlier years had retained it. I was immediately struck by it in quite a different way. Tiny details, about shops, restaurants, public notices, to which I had paid little attention before, now seemed absolutely authentic, and therefore significant. The *tone* of life was the same in Hungary. There was the

Dora Scarlett: A Bureau in Hungary

53

important man who was never in his office; in Ilf and Petrov's description he was waylaid by all kinds of people before he could reach his desk; he held earnest conferences on corners of the staircase; he was called away to a meeting, and he could not attend one meeting because he was called away to another; you could pursue him from room to room, he had just been there, his breath was still on the telephone, but he was gone. And, I noticed, no message was ever left with a subordinate; no one but the great man could deal with the matter. How true! Did I not spend half my time hunting for the same man, or warding off collision with others who were on his trail.

Fitzroy Maclean, in *Eastern Approaches*, describes how he took a fancy to cross the Caspian Sea to a small and quite unremarkable place. The organisation which was supposed to look after the needs of foreign travellers put insuperable obstacles in his way; the boats were not sailing; they were always full; in any case, the place was not worth seeing. Finally, after days of this, Maclean found that all he had to do was to go up to a little window and pay a few roubles for a ticket.

In Budapest I learned that bureaucracy may be quite unyielding to frontal attack, but there is usually a way round it - and a quite open and respectable way, not an illicit one. I struggled for weeks to obtain some statistical information from the relevant Ministries, making official requests from the Radio. I was fobbed off with excuses; the Minister was away, and his permission could therefore not be obtained; the person who took my original message a few weeks ago had left, and I must begin all over again; a mass of material was sent to me, which proved to be quite beside the point. Then I suddenly found that I could obtain a lot of useful information simply by buying the Statistical Review (in Hungarian) from a news-stand in the street.

Another example was that of pen-friends. The Radio received many requests for Hungarian correspondents; we were not allowed to put people in touch, although we could not tell listeners this, but had to put them off with some excuse. It was impossible to do this without telling lies, and I objected. In many bitter and protracted arguments I was made to feel that I was deficient in political understanding; I was irresponsible, lacking in vigilance; once we had put people in touch we could not supervise them and who could know what they would write, and how many politically immature Hungarians would be led astray by specious arguments from the West? My political group leader told me roundly that she would tell a lie without hesitation at any time if it was for the good of the Party, and it was because I had too many bourgeois

ideas that I would not do the same.

Then I discovered that the Hungarian Stamp Collectors' Association had been putting correspondents in touch quite openly for years, and printing names and addresses in their journal. All I had to do was to tell enquirers to write to the Association.

I could go on for many pages describing ways in which the Party-governed bureaucracy of Budapest is similar to that of East Berlin, Prague or Warsaw. I have compared notes with people who have lived and worked in other capitals of Eastern Europe, and found the same habits of thought, modes of expression, and ways of dealing with situations. This applies to countries with very different histories, national traditions, and levels of industrialisation; the same kind of miasma spreads over them all.

When I first went to Hungary and came up against the agonising frustrations which seemed inseparable from daily life and work, I was told by a number of people in positions of political responsibility, and especially by the deputy leader of our Department (an old Communist, but a woman who had kept a very human and sympathetic heart), that one must have great patience. These people, she said, have had twenty-five years of fascism; Hungary was a backward country, and not used to western business methods; many people in important jobs are drawn from the working class and have not had a very high education. Give us time, and we shall learn.

I accepted this explanation at first, but I soon found that there was something wrong with it. It is not difficult, in Hungary, to find remnants of the old regime; chauvinism, bombast, or the attachment to certain political illusions, for example, or, on a more practical plane, the time-honoured custom of using the concierges of blocks of flats as spies on the inhabitants. But in every difficulty which obstructed democracy, flexibility in working, and the delegation of responsibility, in the Party unit, the Trade Union, and the Radio administration, it was in fact the tried and tested Party members, the fighters against fascism - many of whom had not been in Hungary but in the Soviet Union before 1945 - who constituted the rock upon which one's best efforts foundered.

This was the case with meetings. The important personage described by Ilf and Petrov was closeted in meetings almost continually. With us, smaller fry, it was less continuous, but sufficient to hinder normal working and to make everyone tired, careless and dispirited. Meetings within the Radio were called by the Party, the Trade Union or the Department (in our case the foreign language section). They would start at eight a.m. and go on till twelve-thirty or one. Generally, they seemed to have no special character.

but to be all alike. Either there was no agenda or we received it at the last moment; minutes were taken, but only for the information of the Party centre and the top leadership of the Radio; they were never read or discussed at subsequent meetings, and decisions taken were never checked, and seldom carried out.

I put forward the suggestion - in the proper quarter, our Party Group - that it would be better if time was limited and the carrying out of decisions verified. To do the latter it would be necessary to read and pass minutes. I was told that 'we don't want to copy bourgeois methods'. I replied that it was a method which the British Trade Unions, and all working-class organisations found essential to proper functioning. After many attempts I got a promise that my suggestion would be put to the Party, but I heard no more about it. At length I resigned myself to the fact that 'the purpose of holding a meeting is to hold a meeting' - it need not achieve anything, in fact, it had better not achieve much, but the exhausted participants, when they rush off to have some coffee, or take up their neglected work, can feel they have fulfilled their duty, and banish the matter from their minds. All decisions which really mattered came from the Party Centre, or from private meetings of the Radio leadership, and no time was wasted in discussing them.

But on October 30th, 1956, a Revolutionary Council was formed in the Radio. It did not discuss 'how to improve our work in the light of the new directives of the Party', but the gravest issues involving in some cases personal risk and heavy responsibility. It was a battle-ground, because feeling ran very high about the past conduct of some members of the staff who had been active, not nominal, Communists, and the Council had to decide both its general principles and its attitude to individuals. But from its very inception the Revolutionary Council kept minutes and read them meticulously; it kept to its agenda, took its decisions democratically, and got through more business in one hour than our previous long-drawn meetings had done in a year.

In a country where many people still fetch their water from wells, and the Post Office vans are drawn by horses, one does not expect streamlined office furniture, the most efficient filing systems, or up-to-the-minute business methods. But one soon finds out that the real obstacles to doing good work are not the result of any shortcomings in these respects, but arise from a personal attitude which runs through the whole of society. That attitude is fear.

The Hungarian Party is afraid of the masses, because it came to power without the support of the majority, and it has not been able to win them since, but has lost the support it had. This is

linked with the frantic fear of the cold war and outside interference. The other aspect of fear is the individual's fear of censure, of losing a job and with it the possibility of getting any other worth-while job, not to mention further consequences. This fear is all-pervading because it is quite impossible to say what the future line will be; what conduct which is permissible now will become impermissible later; what persons now in favour **will** be discarded. So the only safe course is to *do* as little as possible; not to give information rather than to give it, not to meddle in other people's jobs, and not to grant requests except on direct orders from the highest quarters. When the woman in the Ministry of Transport goes on holiday without arranging that your request for information about traffic problems in Budapest shall be dealt with in her absence; or when she cannot find the Minister to get his approval of the information, it is not because she is inefficient, but because she knows that she must not give you what you ask for. She cannot say so, because there is a pretence that the Radio may give information freely in response to listener's questions, and that the Ministries are willing to help. She just hopes you will get tired. And she does not care in the least if you find the information somewhere else, as long as she has not the responsibility of having given it to you. The people who oppose your attempts to give listeners pen-friends do not care if the Stamp Collectors' Association is putting correspondents in touch all the time; their concern is that *they* shall not be the ones who have taken a step which might lead to trouble. This explains the curious fact that there is generally a way to get round this kind of bureaucracy; no one has a thought to spare for the over-all working of the system, but each puts on blinkers, and looks only at the ground in front of him. And that is why the constant pep-talks, meetings of Party 'activists', and lectures on initiative and improvement of work have such negligible effect.

The question which raised some of the sharpest dilemmas was that of Yugoslavia. There was in our Radio programmes a feature of long standing entitled 'Where the People Are in Power', and dealing in turn with aspects of life in the Soviet Union, the 'People's Democracies' of Eastern Europe, and China. In May, 1955, Bulganin and Krushchev paid their visit to Belgrade, and assured 'Comrade Tito' that the charges against him made in 1948 had been found to be based on a forgery. Unfortunately, they omitted to say whether Yugoslavia could now be regarded as a country building socialism.

Immediately, the stream of anti-Yugoslav spite and vilification, which the Hungarian press had been pouring out since 1948,

stopped, as at the turning off of a tap. But the great question remained; if Yugoslavia was not a lackey of imperialism, a spring-board for war against the Soviet Union, what kind of a country was it; was it returning to capitalism or progressing to socialism? No one, not even the lecturer sent specially to us from Party headquarters could answer that one.

Our Party Group leader suggested that we should change the title of 'Where the People Are in Power' to something like 'Round the World', and broaden the scope of the feature. The American Section, which was more amenable to suggestions than we were, did this, and began to include talks on such countries as India and Indonesia. The feature - never a satisfactory one - now seemed to be going to take on the appearance of the innocuous and naive 'Travel Notes' which had begun to appear in the Soviet *New Times*. (This was the period of 'peaceful co-existence'.) Our Group Leader - herself a great careerist - finally explained to me what was at the back of all the pother, and in so doing threw much light on her own mind. We could not yet dare to speak about Yugoslavia in a feature entitled 'Where the People Are in Power', but if we kept the title and did *not* include Yugoslavia we might find, at some future date, that we *ought* to have done so. We would have made a political mistake. But if we changed to a politically non-committal title we could then make use of some of the articles appearing in the Party daily, *Szabad Nep*, under such titles as 'A Hungarian Journalist's Impressions of Yugoslavia', or we could omit all mention of Yugoslavia, without in either case putting ourselves politically in the wrong.

Always to guard against all possible errors and omissions is a considerable strain. Among the articles which made the *Literary Gazette* famous during 1956 is one which was very popular; it was entitled 'At the Same Time', and satirised that Party control of journalism which condemned any attempt to deal with one aspect or detail of a subject without presenting a picture of the whole, for fear of being considered politically unbalanced or 'under-developed'. Above all, one must bring out the *positive* aspects. So, says the author of 'At the Same Time', 'there is a lack of reference to the bright side in Balzac's Pere Goriot, though it must be obvious that all the daughters of France of his age did not sponge on their fathers with wanton selfishness. Equally condemnable is Shakespeare's omission, in Hamlet, to spotlight the favourable aspects of life and conditions in Denmark ... How blatantly one-sided and objectionable a piece of writing is Zola's leader on the Dreyfus affair, which is unaccountably considered of lasting merit! ... All he wanted was to fight for one solitary cause, and

though ultimate victory was partly due to his writings, the articles at issue are none the less to be deprecated as they are full of negative evidence.'

One result of the 'at the same time' attitude is to prevent any really vigorous, concentrated and dramatically pointed writing. When so many matters have to be taken into consideration, one's concluding sentences seem to straggle like a river through a sandy delta. Another result is the evolution of the safe formula for a speech, which is used so often that all speeches seem alike. First, the positive assessment: 'During the last ten years we have achieved ... this and that.' Then the big 'but' (this came into use most fully when, after the death of Stalin, the Party began to admit more and more 'shortcomings'). 'We have still not done ... this or that.' You cannot indulge in criticism without praise of the Party, or else your speech is 'negative'. You cannot indulge in criticism without self-criticism, even if you have to rake up a self-criticism which is quite foreign to the points you want to make. Then you must show the way forward, and express confidence that the Party will overcome all its mistakes - otherwise, again, you are 'negative'. Even the condemnation of Imre Nagy in 1955 followed this pattern.

Fear brings about endless secrecy and mystification by the Party, until it seems that every cupboard has a skeleton in it. I will give one example out of the dozens of things or people that must not be mentioned. At the Party Congress of 1951, among those elected to the Central Committee were Janos Kadar and Sandor Zold. These two were arrested soon after, and disappeared from view till 1956. The copy I have of the Report of that Congress includes these two names in the new Central Committee, but they have been blotted out with green ink. This was done to all copies before distribution. The names can still, however, be read on a close scrutiny. This reminds me of the procedure described in George Orwell's *1984*, in which a past speech which was found inconvenient would be blotted out of existence by recalling all copies of the papers in which it was printed and reprinting them with a different speech. Hungary had not the technical means to do this, but everyone knew that they must pretend that Kadar and Zold had never been elected, and indeed must not refer to them.

People have to come to terms with the system if they are to live at all. When discussing with people over here just what value to attach to personal statements or official declarations coming from Eastern Europe I find a difficulty in explaining whether people are 'sincere' or 'insincere'. In some contexts the words are meaningless; it is like asking whether a fish is 'sincere' in taking in and

out through its gills the particular water in the aquarium; there is no other water to be had.

To begin with, everyone knows what may or may not be said as surely as we know, for example, what expressions may be used in polite society. It is difficult to say how the knowledge is acquired, but it is exact. Foreign delegates are sometimes impressed by hearing hard-hitting criticism made, perhaps, by Trade Unions - criticisms of inefficient management, bad workmanship, and non-fulfilment of the Plan. Of course! The Trade Unions are Government agencies for increasing production. But it was a very brave venture, even well into 1956, when the tide of revolt was rising fast, to speak about the privileged shops for high Party officials, or the Party cars with drawn curtains.

Often, people are doing their best in very limiting conditions. For example, there is a partial 'thaw', like that of 1953, and the Party allows more criticism. Then the time comes when the Party wants to halt or reverse the process. Some Party spokesman will write an article in the press - Jozsef Darvas wrote one like this, calling the tendency he criticised 'over-bidding'. Then people will be told that this is an interesting article; they should read it and say what they think of it at the next meeting, which will be called for the express purpose of this discussion.

It is not only dangerous, but quite useless to oppose the article. The whole thing reflects a decision which has been taken from above. But by making a formal speech admitting that the article is justified, it is possible to say 'but, all the same ...' and defend one tiny inch of ground for the old tendency. This finely adjusted mechanism broke down in the summer of 1956 because the mass movement reached such proportions that the Party was on the defensive, and therefore people knew that there could be some result from frank speech and thorough-going opposition. It was then that people stood up and said Rakosi was a murderer; but they had known it for a long time.

It must always be remembered that it is impossible to resign from the Party (that would stamp one at once as an enemy) or even to refuse or to give up any Party assignment. It is not impossible, but it is very difficult, to remain aside from public demonstrations and work competitions. 'Socialist' competitions in industry have led to an enormous amount of bad work; in the Radio they always seemed to me meaningless, because there was no standard of judgment applicable to programmes in different languages, directed to different countries. But it was heresy to say

so; there must be 'friendly competition' in socialism, and my lack of enthusiasm branded me as 'bourgeois' without doing anyone

any good. In the same spirit people allow themselves to be elected to a Parliament which they know does not govern, and Trade Unions which are responsible to the Party and not to the workers.

Of course, the real business of governing the country, and the inner government of the Party, has nothing to do with all this. It is done, quite simply, by decree, and in all important, and many unimportant, matters, by decree from Moscow. (The decision that Radio programmes should not mark Stalin's birthday in 1955 came from Moscow; they knew he was going to be denounced, and we did not.) But there is a kind of false web which spreads over the whole of daily life and is inescapable. It is more than bureaucracy but its roots are the same as those of bureaucracy. A few days after Kadar came to power, carried by Russian tanks, he issued a proclamation which was pasted up all over Budapest. It had sixteen or so points - I forget the exact number - one of which was a promise to 'abolish bureaucracy'. The article by the East German economist, Kuczynski, dealt with in the last number of the *New Reasoner*, has a passage in which bureaucracy in a socialist society is described as an 'afterbirth' which will quickly disappear. Both statements are ridiculous. What I have called 'bureaucracy', in its widest sense, is in the very marrow of the bones of these societies, and I have never seen a successful attempt to deal with it except the revolutionary actions of 1956.

I contend that the source of the distortions we have witnessed is not the difficulties which had to be met, in themselves, but in the way they were met - by the one, infallible Party which identifies its continuation in power with the hope of mankind, and so can never resign, be electorally defeated, or learn from any other party without betraying its principles. All the excuses for purges, trials and executions, and for the Soviet intervention in Hungary, on the grounds of defending "the dictatorship of the proletariat" are valueless, because when you have done these things you no longer have the kind of society you thought you were defending (if you ever had it). You may have more heavy industry, but you do not have a socialist society.

Another aspect of the 'one, infallible Party' is this: I think any socialist would agree, in principle, that in building the new society those people should be promoted to responsible positions who are politically reliable, that is, who have the success of the new society at heart. This evokes a vision of honest workers taking over the leadership of factories, Ministries and public services, and promoting subordinates solely according to reliability and good work. But the actual result has been a monstrous fabric of spying

by fellow-workers into people's private lives and behaviour, and the subjection of technically competent workers and good craftsmen to control by ignoramuses, who happened to have the talent for distinguishing themselves at Party education classes, because they could remember texts. The economy is linked to ideology and not to efficient working; Party secretaries have more power over the lives of workers than the old-time capitalist had over his factory hands. A very big premium is put on hypocrisy at all levels of the organisation.

Although this system inevitably becomes the vehicle for favouritism, personal vendettas, and the denunciation of inconvenient rivals, even its 'legitimate' working, without any abuse is sufficient to have a disastrous effect on the working of the economy, and the condition of the human individual. Really high technical achievements (like the launching of sputniks) may seem to contradict this. But I am sure that the personnel and material means for such undertakings must be lifted right out of the morass of 'socialist emulation', work pledges, ideological directives and interference by 'activists'. It is in the general mass of industry that the sorry tale of unfulfilled plans, unsaleable goods, and wasted effort goes on.

The Party's irresponsible power is backed up by its ownership of all the means of production and all the channels of publicity. It is not enough to say that workers' rights must be guaranteed by the constitution; the Hungarian constitution contains all that one could wish for. But any working-class organisation, any parliamentary assembly, can be easily and thoroughly emptied of all content by a Party in sole and uncontested power.

Yet, can any party not willing to assume sole power be strong enough not only to carry through a revolution, but to survive the strains that would follow it? These are the things socialists ought to be thinking about. Until we wrestle with these problems we are talking in the air.