



I Went to School Behind the Iron Curtain

By IVAN PLUHAR

Mr. Pluhar, a Czech student, fled in 1951 from forced labor in the uranium mines of his Communist-run homeland. This was his second brush with tyranny, the first being a year's labor ordered by the Nazi conquerors in 1944-5. Here, in an exclusive article for QUICK, he tells of his experiences under Czechoslovakia's Red dictatorship.

In 1945, I returned to my native Brno with the hope of finishing preparatory school quickly and going on to the university. But I hadn't taken into account the Soviet Army "liberators." They had destroyed our school buildings, carted away valuable scientific equipment. Red soldiers even drank the alcohol in which we used

to keep dead research animals in our laboratories.

When the schools finally did open, the Russians did not overlook the students either. Their Czech communist puppets (whose strength became evident in the 1946 national elections) secretly financed many student groups. This was especially true at the university, which I entered that year. There, for example, the Union of Czech Youth had gained popularity through its lively program. Its appeal for East-West peace and cooperation also attracted many Czechs, because our country lay perilously between Russia and the West. After the Reds took over, we discovered that the propaganda and the program of the Union were planned and paid for by the Communists.

Reds Work, Others Wait

So while the Reds and their dupes worked, we waited to see what our president, Eduard Benes, might do. We knew the Communists were only troublemakers and could not win power without the Red Army.

Then, one morning – February 28, 1948 – we found they had won. Benes, fearing civil war, had agreed to their demands, and the Communists' secret militia took

over factories, barracks and government offices. Red action committees controlled the schools.

The university did not open that day, nor for 14 days afterwards. Communist action committees of students and co-operating professors and party men were



Brno, Czechoslovakia, where Pluhar
attended school

"cleaning out the bureaucracy."

In the law school, where I studied, they removed the dean and the top teachers. Then they re-hired many of them because there weren't enough trusted replacements.

New Lessons

Communist law was now taught first; Roman law last. One of the worst innovations was a short course to make workers into state lawyers in six months, an impossibility under a true legal system.

I was also studying at a business school at Brno. Here, I ran into my first collision with the new regime. All of us were ordered to attend a lecture at a nearby hall. When we had arrived, a professor stood upon the platform and praised at length the Communist plans for the country. After he finished, I asked for the floor. I denied that Czech culture had come from Russia, as he had said, or that the Communists allowed freedom of the press. Communists, I said, were criminals and should be punished. Most of the students applauded.

In Trouble

Three weeks later, I was expelled from the business school. The strange "reason": Czech law didn't allow a student to attend two schools at once.

Meanwhile, I heard that a letter had been sent to the university's action committee labeling me an "enemy



Pluhar arrives in U. S.



Pluhar's Czechoslovakia: from Brno's hall to Jachymov's mines

of the country" and a "reactionary."

I decided to stop my courses and wait for the results. I organized an underground group to work against the Communists. We cooperated with other such groups through one contact man, seldom knew each other's last names. It is true that we were young—I was only 21—but, because the older responsible men had to flee from Czechoslovakia or go to prison, we were all that remained. We had to make up in action what we lacked in experience.

Finally, I was called to appear before the university's special committee of students. This group asked me such questions as "What is Stalin's real name?" or "When was the Russian revolution?" After I answered, they told me to await their decision. I knew what that would be. I was expelled, this time because my intelligence was "too low for a successful student."

The Uranium Mines

A few months later, in early 1949, I was arrested, tried and sentenced to 15 years hard labor in the uranium mines at Jachymov. For two years, I dug the valuable ore for Russian overseers. Living conditions

were poor, the area thickly fenced and dotted with watchtowers.

One day, a comrade of mine stumbled on an abandoned shaft near our work posts in the mines. By rushing each day to fill our high quotas, seven of us also had time to dig in the shaft toward its mouth, which lay outside the barbed wire but was blocked by earth and stones. This took three months.

Then, one midnight in September, 1951, we crawled out and, after eight days of running and hiding, escaped into West Germany.

Refuge in America

Now I am in the United States, through the aid of the International Rescue Committee. I want to express my gratitude for this help, especially that of IRC's steadfast Munich director, Mrs. Anna Matson. Also, I'm grateful for the one-year scholarships financed by the National Committee for a Free Europe—last year in France and now at the Virginia U. School of International Affairs.

At 26, I almost have to start all over again—to find work to support myself, and to study for a degree. This is how war and Communist tyranny can drag out a man's life. But I do not complain. I'm lucky because I now have the chance to learn and, some day soon, to work again for a free Czechoslovakia.

This Week in History

Nov. 13, 1927—The Holland Tunnel, first twin under-sea vehicular tubes, linked New York, New Jersey.

Nov. 16, 1864—To split the South, Sherman's Union troops began their march from Atlanta to the sea.

Nov. 17, 1800—Congress first met in Washington.