

A London Newsman Revisits People's Hungary

By PETER FRYER

IT WAS seven years ago I had last visited Hungary. I had gazed at it through rose-colored spectacles, hungry to see perfection in the new life being built there.

What exactly did I expect to find on revisiting the country, my illusions and fancies shattered by the revelation that the trial of László Rajk—which I helped to report for the London Daily Worker—had been a monstrous frame-up?

The reality was both worse and better than I expected. Worse, in the sense that the mistakes and crimes of the bad years had blighted the new-born Socialist democracy, had choked free discussion, had spread an atmosphere of fear. It seems that it was no easy thing to be a Communist in Hungary in 1950, 1951, 1952. . . .

Worse, in the sense that the standard of living in the Hungarian people is in 1956 was not yet back at the 1949 level, thanks to planning mistakes and various other reasons.

But better, far better, in the sense that everyone in a leading position to whom I spoke had shed his own illusions far more thoroughly than I.

THE SEARCHING questions I took with me went unmasked

—because they were answered before I had a chance to ask him.

Factory managers, foremen, Party secretaries, would speak of their work. After 10 minutes they would say: "So far the good side. Now let me tell you what mistakes we made, what weaknesses there are in our work. . . ."

Such remarkable frankness, repeated over and over again, was to me, at any rate, the best guarantee that the terrible events that had stained Hungary's Socialist achievements would never recur—that Hungary has, indeed, begun to write a clean new page in her history.

There were still many things I did not like things that seemed to have no place in a Socialist country. But I could find no one prepared to defend them.

THE STREETS of Budapest are dirty. Dust and litter befoul this loveliest of European capitals.

But a "Keep Hungary Tidy" campaign has just been launched, and is catching on fast.

I went into a shop to buy a bottle of ink. It took three people to serve me: the girl who got the ink, the girl who wrote out the bill, the girl at the cash-desk who took the money.

But everybody agreed with me that this is a wasteful method.

Hungary's newspapers lack in-

dividuality of style. They look dull and stodgy and solid in the bad sense, and often carry identical government announcements with identical headlines.

But the journalists are well aware of their need to learn from Western newspaper techniques. Indeed, they were far, far more critical than I.

Only the London Daily Worker is on sale in Budapest. Even in the great Szechenyi library no other British newspaper whatever is available.

But I found not a single defender of this relic of the days when Hungary cut herself off from the West, when everything Western, from lipstick to jazz, was suspect.

I have not exhausted my list of criticisms. But let me turn to the other side of the picture.

IT IS EXCITING to live in Hungary today. Big changes have taken place. More are on the way.

In the beautiful Parliament building, on the banks of the Danube. I witnessed re-born Socialist democracy pushing up vigorous, lusty shoots.

Parliament was in session, and for the first time for eight years, the M.P.s were using their right to ask questions. Question time. Twenty-one questions were asked.

And the M.P.'s were no longer tamely rubber-stamping Government decisions. They were fighting for their constituents.

One woman M.P. asked a series of loaded questions on night work by juveniles. The Minister gave feeble answers. "No, Comrade President, I don't accept the answer," she said.

And when the President put it to the M.P.s as a whole, not a single hand was raised to support the Minister, who was forced to take back his answer for reconsideration.

THAT IS just one example. Here is another. I attended a meeting of active Party members in one Budapest district.

Four years ago, such meetings were marked by absolute unanimity. Anyone who asked awkward questions was told he was helping the enemy. The secretary sometimes hammered the table, till the last dissenter fell silent.

Now it's the members who have the last word. They are critical of the slowness with which rehabilitation is being carried through; they are outspoken about everything they dislike.

Or take one little thing. Not long ago uniformed security men guarded Budapest's public buildings and bridges. Now they are nowhere to be seen. If you want to see a Minister you no longer

have to get past the tommy-guns and worse, the barricade of passes and paper forms.

SOCIALIST HUNGARY'S two greatest achievements, beyond question, are Sztalinvaros, the great steel town, and her children.

Sztalinvaros captures the imagination of all who visit it. The tempo with which the new plants are being opened is tremendous. The coke plants was started up the week before I went there; it is manned by lads in their twenties, whose technical knowhow is impressive, whose white-hot enthusiasm is infectious.

All around, the new mingles with the old. The magnificent automated steel-mixing plant, the last word in technique—and outside dirt tracks with lean horses and rickety carts.

But the new is overcoming the old. The workers of Sztalinvaros are forging more than steel; they are forging new relations between men.

And the bonny children, so lively and so well cared for, of their own and other towns, will inherit a country prosperous and free.

Already the travail is over. The Hungarian people are looking, not to the past, but to the future. And they are doing so with confidence.