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From: Miss Cooper - Room 20, 200, Oxford St.

'BRITAIN SPEAKS' - 'The Children of Poland'

By

DOROTHY M. CARDLE.

Overseas North American Service. Monday/Tuesday: June 9th/30th. 1942.
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The Children of Poland

by Dorothy Macardle

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No sooner were a handful of Polish refugee children in London than they had a school. It was a bare room in an empty flat, but white eagles on red shields, maps, flowers, and pictures soon made it gay. Londoners who came to help were a little dismayed by the amount that those children knew, just as young men in the Forces here are impressed by the intellectual equipment of Polish comrades aged 18 or 19 years.

These young Polish soldiers and airmen are studying still. Their Government gives them six months leave for the purpose. They have their own class rooms in Glasgow and enter for Polish matriculation - a formidable examination which ~~xxxxxx~~ covers twenty subjects or more.

History has been moving with such rapidity that our imaginations do not keep pace with it. We recognise a ^{high} ~~medium~~ National culture of a high order; ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ but forget what an achievement this is. We forget that Polish men and women still in their forties look back to school-days, darkened by foreign oppression and tense with conspiracy.

secret
schools

Those who have read the life of Marie Curie will remember that school-room scene. A patriotic teacher is ^{secretly} giving a ~~xxxxx~~ lesson in Polish history: the bell rings: it is a signal, given by the vigilant porter below. Books are bundled into another room: sewing comes out: the Czarist inspector finds a room full of meek little girls stitching at button holes. He has his suspicions, nevertheless, and asks probing questions on the titles and territories of the Czars. Little Marie, chosen by the teacher as spokeswoman, answers bravely, but when he has gone burst into tears from humiliation and over-wrought nerves. Later, she and her fellow students ran their "floating university" teaching the forbidden subjects, under hourly danger of arrest and exile to Siberia.

The Austrian Government was less oppressive, but in the sections of partitioned Poland under the Czarist and German rule these conditions ~~existed~~ persisted long after Marie Curie's youth. In nineteen hundred and five came the strike of the children. In the Russian area it had a partial success: Poles were allowed to open schools though they had to maintain these themselves. In the German territories there were brutal floggings of children and prison sentences for their parents, but secret Polish teaching went on.

It is not surprising that when their country was liberated at last, the Poles became almost fanatical educationists.

The leaders were faced with a tremendous task. In Eastern Poland there was widespread illiteracy, in the West there were only Germanised schools. Buildings, text books and equipment had to be created and teachers trained. In a few years ninety-seven per cent of the children of Poland were going to school. There were even bilingual schools for the numerous minority ¹²⁵groups - Ukrainians, White Ruthenians, Germans, Jews.

It proved impossible to maintain this rate of progress, because of the economic crisis and the necessity of spending on armaments. Also, the birth-rate was rising rapidly, with free beds for mothers in Maternity Hospitals and free milk for children. In Poland, children were wanted, loved and indulged. It was disgraceful to strike a child.

In thirty nine, the Educational scheme was still incomplete, but the Nation had about twenty nine thousand elementary schools. Besides secondary schools and the five famous Universities. there were professional and trade schools, Polytechnics and Academies of Fine Art.

"Every day", a young naval lieutenant told me ~~that~~ "every day, my father talked to me about how precious education is and said that there is no life for a man without it and that I mustn't lose time".

Elementary education was free and compulsory and was shared alike by all social classes from the age of seven to fourteen. No child went to work under fifteen years of age: there was vocational guidance and a year of special training for those starting at that age. These boys and girls often organised continuation classes for themselves. Students followed public affairs almost too keenly and had their political circles of all kinds.

The Secondary school course did not conclude until the student was about eighteen years of age, whether he was destined for agricultural, commercial, technical or professional work or for a military career. ^{At 18} He would pass matric and enter the University or go to a specialised college, then.

This high level of general education to the age of eighteen has produced the remarkable national culture which the Nazis have set themselves to undo.

Frank, German Governor-General in Poland, has explained the Nazi programme to the Polish people in these words: -

"We do not want a Polish educated class.

The Reich has an abundance of educated men of her own. By the will of the Führer you are to be a nation of peasants and workmen".

They have paid teachers the honour of recognising them as formidable enemies of the New Order. University Professors were arrested at the outset in scores and interned. Out of Orienburg and other internment camps news comes of one renowned intellectual leader after another - news that they are dying or dead. The Universities have been robbed of their equipment and closed. Secondary schools remain open, but only German children may go to them.

In the part of the country known as the "Gouvernement General" some Polish elementary schools are open. Most of them have unqualified Germans as teachers. All teaching has to be based on the official periodical issued by the Nazis for the purpose. When Polish children leave these schools they are sent to train for trades selected for them by the German authorities. If they do not go willingly they are taken by the police. The Nazis' official order, published in Warsaw, gives teachers in these schools these instructions with reference to Poles: -

"Only work strictly connected with the necessities of daily life, like food research, is permitted, and those in charge of the laboratories should see to it that no Polish students try to increase their knowledge and to add to their education."

In the area incorporated in the Reich, elementary schools are open for Poles for about two hours every day. German only may be spoken: it is dangerous to speak Polish even in the streets. In some of the districts children are sent to forced labour at the age of twelve.

The Nazis, realising that no half measures will suffice to de-nationalise the Polish people, ^{they} have sought to destroy everything which might keep their patriotism and their natural love of learning alive. Throughout the country they have altered street names, dynamited statues, confiscated radios, suppressed newspapers and burnt books. Poles are forbidden to publish books, periodicals or music. The music of Chopin and other great Polish composers is prohibited: a list of ^{many} Polish writers includes fifteen hundred of the most famous names: it includes Conrad and Reymont.

That is a negative side of the Nazis effort. Herr Greiser has stated the positive aim, in words as shameless as any ~~that~~ ^{recorded} have been uttered in the history, ~~of man.~~

"The Poles must forever be placed on the low level to which they belong".

The Nazis authorities have opened cheap gambling saloons for Poles: pornographic magazines in Polish are printed and sold. Frank's Ministry of Popular Enlightenment has issued a guide on cultural activity to local Nazi authorities: serious music, opera and drama are prohibited. His memorandum states that entertainment ^{in Polish} must be confined to "the elementary needs of pleasure and amusement". It adds "~~Poland~~" there is no objection

to rendering the programme trivial and erotic".

Life must be a ~~living~~ nightmare to fathers and mothers in Poland today. There is danger on every side. Deportation to barren places, crowding into half ruined towns, fearful journeys through the winter ^{when} ~~and~~ scores of children froze to death are things which have happened to thousands and may happen to thousands more. The children cannot be properly fed. The occupying troops take every license: girls disappear from the streets. Some who came home after a few month's absence were described as "walking like ghosts". Parents are aware that the slightest hint of hostility from the children may bring punishment that takes no account of childishness or youth. They remember Stas Kempinski, a boy of nine who tore down an anti-British poster and was shot, ^{they remember} and a hundred and thirty six schoolboys executed at Bromburg, and two girls of Warsaw, aged fourteen and sixteen, who were caught with illegal journals, kept for a time in prison and then shot.

They know it, and yet the underground work goes on and children take a part in it. The story of their part in it can't be told yet, but the time will come.

The underground workers of Poland, in the Manifesto which they contrived to send out a few months ago expressed ~~the~~

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In Scotland the Polish Government has schools for boys and girls and special Polish classes in British schools: Polish families living in villages and sending their children to the Scottish day schools have Polish visiting teachers who come round and teach Polish subjects to groups of children twice a week.

indomitable confidence, soundly based on their Nation's achievement in the past:

"We remain a living nation, thirty million strong, free in spirit, united in thought and aim, united in the effort to overthrow the tyranny of occupation at the earliest opportunity. No force will break us, and we shall defeat the ruses, tricks, and stratagems of the enemy by our own methods of revolutionary work, evolved in a hundred years of struggle against oppressors. Our illegal press grows daily, as also our agonised organisation: every day we feel stronger."

Perhaps The children of Poland ~~must~~ find strength in thinking of their comrades and school fellows who have escaped - in knowing that those who are free are not idle and do not forget. ~~All over~~ the world, wherever there are Polish children there are Polish lessons and Polish schools - in America and Britain, in Hungary, Switzerland, and Sweden, in Rhodesia and Palestine.

Nothing that the enemy can do will put out the light of Polish culture. It will be kept alive at home by the courage of the underground workers, old and young, and it will be replenished before long, when they come home, by the young Poles who are preparing steadfastly elsewhere.