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CZECHOSLOVAKIA

HUNGARY

POLAND

RELIGION (2800)
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MORALE AND GENERAL MOOD (2000)
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AUSTRIAN PRIEST RECEIVES LETTERS FROM BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN.

SOURCE GRAZ : Interview with Pater BEDA, "Sakristeidirektor" of the pilgrimage church at MARIAZELL - Northern Styria.

DATE OF OBSERVATION: 1950 to May 1955.

EVALUATION COMMENT : Attention Religious Program Editors. Please see the Correspondent's Comment. The text of Pater BEDA's speech was attached to this report and may be inspected at the CS Evaluation Desk.

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Pater BEDA (real name: Count DOEBRENTEI Gabor,) Benedictine monk and "Sakristeidirektor" of the pilgrim-age church at MARIAZELL, receives letters from the CSR and Poland "at regular, but widely spaced intervals."

Educated and trained as a priest in VIENNA, Pater BEDA has since 1948 regularly recorded sermons that are broadcast by all the Austrian stations. A fervent supporter of Otto von HABSBURG and advocate of the old empire, he "nearly always" includes references to "our brothers in the East" in his sermons. Being in charge of MARIAZELL, he points out that this church was originally built by LAJOS the Great of Hungary and added to by the kings and nobles of Bohemia and Poland. He "emphasizes" that the Holy Virgin, in whose honor the church was erected, is "The Great Mother of Austria, The Great Lady of the Hungarians" and "The Mother of the Slav Peoples." Using "carefully worded phrases," he attacks the Communists and their persecution of the Catholic Church, "making it clear who is meant, but using no names."

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Despite his violently anti-Communist attitude, he is allowed to record his sermons on RAVAG premises in VIENNA and has "only once, some time ago," had a speech censored by the Soviets. Referring to his broadcasts on American and Russian controlled stations in the past, Pater BEDA comments: "I always had more and better response to those of my sermons transmitted by RED-WHITE-RED, than to those put on the air by RAVAG. Now, of course, there is no difference since all stations are in Austrian hands."

From late 1949 -- when he first came to MARIAZELL from VIENNA -- to March 1954, Pater BEDA broadcast during all the winter months, from October to March. Last year, however, "more priests became available and the preaching rota was reorganized." Consequently, he has since only delivered sermons in October and November 1954, on May 1 1955 and to various pilgrim-age groups in MARIAZELL church.

As his sermons are meant for Austrian congregations, the Pater always preaches in German. Therefore, "the hundreds of letters" he receives from people who hear him speak "are written mainly by Austrians." But a few, "from not more than five or six persons at the most at any time," come from the CSR and Poland.

"These letters from the East," says Pater BEDA, "started to arrive in early 1950 and are written by Germans or by persons who speak very good German. None are written in Polish or Czech. Until about a year ago, I also received letters from Hungary. I replied to these in Hungarian, on a postcard, invoking a blessing and saying "I think of you." But now, since I no longer preach so often, nobody writes to me from Hungary and the number and frequency of other letters has also decreased. On the other hand, a few persons in BRATISLAVA, OLOMOUC and NITRA in the CSR, a married couple in KATOWICE and a young, female pianist in GLEIWITZ in Poland write to me every Easter and Christmas, one of them via a friend in the Soviet Zone of Austria. I also get odd letters at other times, but the last three I received all arrived this Easter (1955.) These letters seem to indicate that very many people in the East listen to the Austrian stations."

According to Pater BEDA, the writers in the CSR and Poland are "careful in what they say" and "never openly criticize the regimes." Now and then, however, they do make "rather incautious remarks." So, for instance, the couple in KATOWICE once said: "All of us who speak German gather round the radio on Sundays and are happy to hear frank words" A writer in

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BRATISLAVA remarked: "How things are with us, you know well enough!" From Slovakia, a third "regular" correspondent wrote: "Unfortunately, we cannot go to church. It was closed down some weeks ago because of a cattle disease. Now, they have also closed the church in the neighborhood."

Once, "about three years ago," a letter even came from a Czech Communist, who, asking the Pater to reply, said: "The Catholic Church and Communism must come to an understanding." Pater BEDA, who "considered it too dangerous to enter into a written discussion with a Communist," never answered this man.

Pater BEDA's sermons have also attracted official Communist attention. In 1953, Kurt DICHTL, "crypto-Communist member of the Christian Democrats," asked him to meet Hungarian priests in the VIENNA embassy. He retaliated by requesting that these priests visit him in MARIAZELL and was, after some delay, informed that the Hungarians would not be able to come "for technical reasons." In 1955, the Polish embassy in VIENNA sent him a copy of the propaganda magazine "Kirche und Staat," which describes the support given the Catholic Church in Poland by the regime.

Asked when he will again broadcast his sermons, Pater BEDA replied that he will be preaching "on practically every Sunday in October and November 1955. As always," he says, "I will address myself to the East, but without speaking directly to the faithful in the Communist countries. In the meantime, I am too busy organizing pilgrim-ages and supervising the restoration of MARIAZELL church. In fact, I am so busy that I had to refuse a recent offer to broadcast over the VATICAN radio."

CORRESPONDENT's COMMENT: This report is a follow-up on VIENNA Item No.54/55. We have not seen any of the letters referred to in the text, Pater BEDA not having them at hand, but we are sure that they exist. The quotes are those given us by the Pater from memory. Enclosed please find a copy of the sermon delivered by BEDA on May 1 1955. His political convictions will be obvious to anyone reading this document.

End.