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YOUTH  
Students  
Exchange Brigades CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
Labor

INDUSTRY  
Building Construction

LABOR  
Brigades  
Wages and Hours  
Youth  
Recruiting of manpower  
Factory mess hall

A Construction Technician's Experiences and Observations on a Building Site at KOSICE

SOURCE SALZBURG/GRAZ: A 21-year-old bricklayer and construction technician (stavebni technik) from LITOMERICE. Escaped in August 1953 to avoid military service, and to continue his technical studies in the West. He worked on subject site and reported his own experiences and observations.

DATE OF OBSERVATION: 3 to 30 August 1953.

EVALUATION COMMENT: This report is believed here to be correct. The industrial school at LIBEREC is confirmed here as "Vyssi prumyslova skola" (see Item No. 884/53 and the telephone directory 1951/52.) It is located at Leninova street No.3. The building construction enterprise at KOSICE is called "Ceskoslovenske stavebni zavody n.p." The enterprise's office for KOSICE district is located at Masiarska street No. 78. The medical faculty at KOSICE is also confirmed here as is the construction of the students' home (see "Rude Pravo" of 30.5.1953 and Monitoring of 6.7.1953.) The wages of the construction workers are believed to be in line with Item No. 8407/53 reporting the same subject. The presence of student brigade workers at the building site of the abovementioned students' home is also confirmed by Monitoring of 6.7.1953. The price of the meals in subject factory mess hall seems high in comparison with that reported in Item No. 7872/53.

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On 3 August 1953 subsource was sent by the "Ceskoslovenske stavebni zavody" to its "Narodni Podnik" in KOSICE as

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a construction technician (stavebni technik.) This posting was not, however, affected without some preliminary confusion and inconvenience to subsource. "In June," he said, "they told me at the 'Prumyslova Skola' in LIBEREC that I would be going to CIERNA PRI COPE, so I sent most of my baggage there in advance. Then, at the last moment, I was told that I would be going to KOSICE instead. The only reason for this change was, according to the people at the 'Skola,' 'that all the workers at CIERNA spoke Hungarian' and that I had therefore 'better go to KOSICE first for six months and learn enough Hungarian to get by on'. As a result I arrived in KOSICE late at night, without most of my baggage and with not more than 20 Kcs in my pocket. Most of this money I spent getting a bed in the station hostel and paying for my breakfast next morning (4 August) when I reported to the 'Narodni Podnik's' offices at 0800 hours, with practically not a penny to my name."

The "Narodni Podnik's" offices (subsource has forgotten the exact address) are "in an old monastery. A dark, gloomy, damp and dismal building with poky, musty little rooms and low, arched ceilings that make you feel depressed as soon as you walk in. In all there are some 50 to 60 rooms, some of them unused, in which some 80 people work. About 90 per cent of these employees are Hungarians and a lot of them do not seem to have anything to do."

After entering the building subsource reported to the "Kadrový referent," a Hungarian named BALINT (fnu), who told him that he would be employed on the construction of a students' hostel just outside the town. Subsource tried to get an advance of salary from BALINT, pointing out that he was more or less penniless but was told that he could not be given any pay for about another fortnight and that he had now "better report to the director (Riaditel) immediately."

The "Riaditel," a SZABO (fnu), took "little interest" in subsource's technical qualifications but spent half an hour talking politics. Describing this interview subsource said, "he asked me silly questions like 'What do you think of the situation in Korea?' Of course, I gave him the answers expected of me, then handed him my 'kadrový posudek'. The contents seemed to satisfy him and he finally dismissed me with the words, 'I expect you to be a useful member of society. Join the local branch of the Youth Movement as soon as possible and put some go into the members. They are sadly lacking in enthusiasm'. Naturally I told him I would do so, although I was already planning to escape in a few weeks."

Thus dismissed subsource went to the "Riaditel R.O.H."

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(Revolucni Odborove Hnuti,) a Hungarian speaking Slovak (NU), whose main job "appeared to be supervising the people in charge of the canteen, the issuing of work clothes, etc." This man found him a room in a hostel recently built by the "Narodni Podnik" and supplied him with bedding and canteen meal tickets for a week. Subsource was not particularly pleased with his quarters because as he said, "I had to pay 80 Kcs rent monthly with light and heating extra. As I was only to earn 700 Kcs monthly and reckoned I'd need 600 Kcs for food alone I thought this was a bit expensive. Theoretically I should not need so much money for food, breakfast, lunch and supper in the canteen costing me 9.60 Kcs daily with an additional 2.40 Kcs being paid by the "Podnik", but canteen meals being what they are I knew I'd have to buy something extra."

At 10.00 hours, having completed all the necessary formalities and having borrowed money to pay for his meal tickets, etc., subsource went to CIERNA PRI COPE, collected his baggage and returned to KOSICE in the evening.

Next day (5 August) subsource reported to the offices again and was sent to the building site, a field about three kilometers from the center of the town and a half kilometer from the local university (which is apparently for medical students only.) Here the "Stavitel" (NU) showed him the site and then left him to his own devices, "to get used to the idea of working here." According to subsource he "did very little for a couple of days and just loafed around." He was, fortunately, in a position to do this as he drew a fixed monthly salary of 700 Kcs no matter how much, or little, he did. The only others on the site in an equally favorable position were the two "Stavitels" (one for each shift,) the other "stavebni technik," the three clerks and the three foremen (polir,) of whom the "Stavitels" drew 1400 Kcs and the clerks "about 1,000 Kcs" each. All these worked in two of a group of four wooden huts next to the site, the "technical personnel" in the one and the "administrative personnel" in the other. The remaining two huts were used as a tool store and a changing room respectively. Subsource therefore only had to keep moving between huts and site in order to make people think he was working hard.

The bricklayers, carpenters, etc., altogether some 20 men, had to comply with "norms." Subsource claims to know nothing about these norms, "Save that a bricklayer was paid 7.50 Kcs for every cubic meter of wall built." This meant that a bricklayer had to put up "at least four cubic meters daily in an eight hour shift if he wanted to earn 750 Kcs monthly and live more or less decently. If he had a family to provide for he would have to put up six to seven

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cubic meters." About the two unskilled laborers (whom he described as "gypsies") permanently employed by the "Narodni Podnik," subsource knows nothing other than that they earned "about 650 Kcs per month."

The presence of only two unskilled laborers is explained by the fact that all the donkey work on the site was done by about 100 medical students from the local university, who lived in the university's hostel and worked as a "Brigada." These students were detailed to two shifts, 50 men in each working in groups of five to seven and competing with one another. Subsource knew that these groups had to comply with norms and that some groups completed these to 140 per cent and others to only 50 per cent. However, he knows no details and said "I never really understood how much work the students were supposed to do in one shift. I myself had to keep a record of the work they did, but only filled in how many cubic meters of earth had been dug up and moved, etc. I think each student was paid between 0.90 and 2.80 Kcs per hour but I know for certain that they were never paid in full for their work. Quite often the "Normovac" would check through the work sheets I had compiled for the students and cross out some of my entries. I do not think that this was because the "Normovac" (NU) did not want to pay them, but because the building estimates had only provided a certain sum for their payment and he did not dare allow more to be spent. On the average subsource estimates that each student earned "about 400 Kcs monthly" but adds "I may have overestimated the average wage. I know some only got 300 Kcs monthly and did not even have enough to pay for their food, having to rely on parcels from home." The students apparently knew that they were not being properly paid and often complained, nevertheless "they worked well and enthusiastically."

Work on the site was carried on in two shifts, from 0600 to 1400 hours and from 1400 to 2200 hours, the shifts changing on Mondays.. "But," said subsource, "the only people who adhered to these hours were the students. Discipline was terrible and the skilled workers, e.g. bricklayers, came to work when they felt like it. They knew they could not be replaced and took advantage of the fact. Half of them were supposed to work in the afternoons but they never turned up. Instead they'd come in next morning at about 0800 hours and work until 1500 or 1600 hours, together with the morning shift." Two bricklayers, however, each with several children, went to the opposite extreme and worked two shifts (16 hours) almost every day. When subsource asked one of them why he did this the man answered, "Well, I have got my children to feed and I'll probably

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be ill or unemployed in the winter. What else can I do to keep my family and myself alive?"

When subsource first came to this site night shifts were being worked but due to the lack of discipline these were a farce. During the night, from 2200 to 0600 hours, the "Stavitel" did not bother to come. He had worked during the afternoon and had no intention of working overtime. The skilled workers, especially the bricklayers said they could not work in the dark and just refused to come." Subsource was therefore left in charge of a full shift of student workers. "These did their best," he said. "They even put up several walls. But as none of them were bricklayers and were working in the dark the things they put up were crooked, not to say unsightly." Finally, on 15 August, all attempts to work a night shift were abandoned. About the same time a "Commission" came from PRAGUE and inspected what there was of the building. The commission members promptly wanted the student built walls torn down, saying they were "not safe." However, the "Stavitel" in charge at the time refused, pointing out that work was already a fortnight behind schedule. After arguing for half an hour he won his case and the commission decided to leave the walls as they were.

Apart from his supervision of the night shift subsource was mainly concerned with the compilation of the construction expenses for each section of the building, with the supervision of the machines in use, the general supervision of the day's work and with the drawing up of the work sheets for the student laborers. The compilation of the construction expenses appears to have been something he loathed and touched as little as possible. He seemingly never finished any part of this job and can give no details, other than that "he had to add together the value of the materials used and the wages paid for the construction of every floor, so that the cost could be compared with the estimates originally made." He said "An engineer came regularly from PRAGUE to look at these things but I never had anything finished. I shared the work with the "stavebni technik" in the other shift, but it was really the Stavitel's job. Anyway I did not care if anything was finished or not since I was planning to escape." As far as his supervision of the machinery was concerned, he merely had to see that none of the six or seven trucks, three or four cement mixers, the four small (1 ton) cranes or the four hoists was standing idle. He states that he spent "one and a half hours checking the work done by the students and four hours working out the construction costs." He would therefore appear to have been idle for two and a half hours of every shift.

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Subsource's (and presumably the other employees') attitude together with the general lack of discipline would appear to have been the reason why work was behind schedule. "Matters improved during the last week in August, when 10 more bricklayers, mostly men who had just finished their apprenticeship, arrived to work on the site." However, these new men could not work as fast as an experienced bricklayer and did not therefore speed up construction as much as might have been expected. In the original "plan" the hostel, a building two stories high, 70 meters long and 13 meters wide, the construction of which was begun on 1 July 1953, was due to be completed on 30 September 1953 and to be occupied by 180 students from the local university on 1 October. But subsource thinks "It will be a miracle if it is finished on time." In a frantic attempt to catch up lost time" everything is being done in a hasty and slipshod fashion. The bricklayers do not care what their work looks like or how long it will last, so long as it passes muster and they complete their norms. The students are supposed to perform wonders and are kept continually on the move." Mainly because of this haste an accident occurred on 19 August. A student, driving one of the cranes, upset the machine, which fell on him and one of the bricklayers. Both had to be taken to hospital with broken legs (further developments unknown.) Despite all this haste the ground floor at the rear of the building had not been completed on 30 August, although work was progressing on the second floor in front. Of these sections practically only the walls have been erected. Commenting on those parts of the building already erected Subsource said "Work is proceeding too fast. The walls, crooked and badly finished, are still wet and will 'sink' about 20 cm before they are dry. Unseasoned wood, straight from the forest, has been used for door and window frames, which will warp and require replacing in about three years." Even the students, many of whom are to live in this building, do not consider the construction safe and came to subsource to ask "if it would not collapse one night." Subsource reassured them but privately thought that "it would fall apart like a house of cards if a bomb fell within 100 meters." He himself lived in a similar building, put up by the same "Narodni Podnik" and presumes that the new hostel and three other buildings being erected in KOSICE will be the same when finished. This means that "the floor will be so warped it will have waves in it and the window frames so out of shape that you cannot close them. The walls between rooms will be so thin that privacy will be a dream." He could hear someone listening to an RFE broadcast in the next room but "probably a new fellow who did not know what kind of

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6

building he was in."

Finally, on 30 August 1953, subsource, feeling disgusted with the state of affairs at KOSICE, decided that he had been away from home long enough to ensure that the police would not suspect his parents of having helped him and escaped to Austria.

CORRESPONDENT'S COMMENT: Subsource, although apparently very interested in the building trade as a rule, could not remember many details re norms, etc. while being interviewed. This, and his inability to remember names or to describe properly how he spent his working day, gives the impression that he took very little interest in his surroundings just prior to his escape. However, he was available for a few hours only and may have been confused and worrying about his actions in the near future during the interview. It is therefore possible that, given time to calm down and think properly, he might be able to remember more details.

End.