

The Thundering Echoes of Poznan

The current trials, growing out of the bitter riots of June 28, lay bare the long years of misery suffered by the Polish people under Communist rule.

By FLORA LEWIS

POZNAN, Poland.

ON Thursday, June 28, a dull, gray day, the workers at the sprawling Zispo factory reported for the morning shift in a ferment of excitement. That day was the deadline their representatives had set for an answer to their bitter demand for enough pay to live on. There had been no answer. So the Zispo workers, as they had already agreed, marched back out of the factory down the two miles of narrow street to the center of the city. There were 16,000 of them, including 4,000 Communist party members.

Workers in Communist countries do not strike. Communism does not permit strikes on the argument that the workers own the factories and that it would logically be an absurdity for them to strike against themselves. But the Zispo workers had an argument above logic. So they picked up the banners they had made demanding bread and freedom and they marched. The rest of Poznan, understanding the Zispo argument and no other, joined them.

The surging crowd, suddenly alive with a common despair that had been no more than a sum of individual yearning on the day before, turned on the authority it held accountable. There was shooting. Many people were killed. The official count was fifty-three dead and several hundreds wounded.

On Thursday, Sept. 27, three months later, the Poznan trials were formally opened. A series of cases against some of the people in that crowd was started with two trials of a total of twelve defendants. Three of them were charged with the murder of a Security Police corporal who, beyond question of doubt, had been done to death by the barbarous fury of a mob. Another nine stood judgment on the charge of attacking the solid gray cement compound which is the local headquarters of the U. B.—the dread initials of the Polish Secret Police. In a third trial, which opened a week afterward, ten more young workers of Poznan answered to a flock of accusations reflecting the uproar of that fateful June day. They were charged with attacking tanks, ransacking the radio jamming station, breaking open the jails to release prisoners and destroy records, overturning street cars, disarming soldiers and militia men, and looting shops.

THE picture of the physical events in a city aroused to frenzy and then subdued by force emerged in the mosaic of the testimony. But the story of long, sullen years that have bred the sudden storm and the taut calm that followed it seeped only through the crack in orderly courtroom proceeding.

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POZNAN DRAMA, TWO ACTS—Young defendants, heavily guarded, sit in the courtroom where they have been on trial, charged with criminal actions during the riots of June 28, below.



The superficial, almost soulless tableau that was arranged by the trials from the jumble of the riots is at once the achievement and the weakness of Poland's Communist regime.

In the three months' intermission between the scenes of rioting and the trials, the Polish Government had been wracked by a dilemma that was not directly visible to the audience. Here was a Communist regime attacked by workers, challenged at the very heart of its authority in such a way that to leave the challenge unanswered would gravely undermine that authority. And yet the challenge had come precisely at the moment when Poland's Communist leadership was trying to shift the basis of its authority toward a little more confidence in its people.

could only harden old hatred. Polish Communist leaders in what they call the "liberal" wing of their party realized that the trials would be taken as a supreme test of their professed intentions to introduce a renaissance of justice in their country. They could not find it possible in themselves to forswear all punishment and thus implicitly to accept the total burden of guilt for Poznan. Nor could they accept Moscow's advice. So they settled on an uneasy compromise: they would observe scrupulously the form of fair and open trials but, for purely political reasons, they would judge essentially political acts as though they were ordinary crimes committed in a social vacuum.

THE first sentences, pronounced last week, were lenient. Of the three young men accused of murder, two were given four and one-half years' imprisonment and the third got four years. The court gave legalistic reasons for its moderation, although the presiding judge said the tribunal had taken into account the youth and background of the defendants. Equally significant as an earnest of the Government's wish to show that it was seriously trying to mend its ways was the judge's statement that he had considered only testimony given in court, where the accused had "full freedom of speech." This was meant to be a repudiation of police brutality which had led to false statements in pre-trial examination. It also meant that the higher-ups were again warning Polish police that the time had come to change methods.

When, late in September, the trials opened, the tenuous policy of ignoring their political content showed some chance of success. On the first day, there was the excitement of uncertainty. The streets of Poland were ominously patrolled by trios of armed militia. Several hundred more militia men guarded the approaches to the courthouse, inspecting at three successive points the coveted admission cards which had been issued to reporters, relatives of the accused, some officials from Warsaw, a few foreign guests and diplomats, and a bevy of secret policemen. But the people of the city bit their lips and waited silently.

TWO trials opened at once, establishing the pattern that was to be followed. In one large and one small courtroom prisoners, sandwiched between armed guards, sat glumly on their rows of wooden benches at little more than arm's distance from the spectators. Defense lawyers, in the long black robes that cloak ordinary mortals with the outward solemnity of justice, sat in front of the accused. On a high dais, reflecting the special status accorded the attorneys (Continued on Page 68)

A year or two ago there would have been no problem. The riposte would have been flat and ferocious: mass arrests and a political show trial blaming everything on foreign agents, provocateurs, cosmopolites, counter-revolutionaries and the fashionable scapegoats of the day. There would have been a tightening of the screws that were already unbearably imbedded, perhaps a purge. And, in fact, during the first few days after Poznan erupted, that was the official reaction.

Then came a reconsideration and a fierce argument inside the highest Polish council. Moscow offered advice—use the old way. Ordinary Poles trembled in anger as much as in fear. The demonstrators of Poznan had spoken for them. Merciless retribution

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for the state in Communist law, sat the robed prosecutors and judges. There was no jury, a concept that has been discarded by Communist notions of judgment and replaced by what are known as "lay judges." These are, in theory, ordinary but, in practice, carefully selected citizens who flank the professional judge and by their majority vote insure the triumph of what Communists call "Peoples' justice."

THE indictments were read, the accused called one by one to the bar and the machinery set in motion. Faithful to its announcement and its delicately fashioned plan, the Government had brought no Zispo workers for trial. On the prisoners' benches there were rows of strained young faces; few looked over 22 and many were still in their teens. They wore the crumpled, sometimes gaudy, mostly shoddy clothes of youngsters whose appropriate setting is some street corner. They had the casual manners and the aggressive uneasiness of children aged too quickly on the sidewalk of any city in the world.

As each stood up to tell his story, the meaning of the lottery that selected them to stand judgment for their city and their country grew clearer. Curiosity, a thirst for adventure, the lure of excitement had drawn them into the ranks of the maddened crowd. Few had more than a grammar-school education, none had more than an instinctive knowledge of the reason for the unrest that gnawed at them. No lucid mind or facile tongue that might speak piercingly was chosen.

They were accused of specific actions. The awesomeness of the legal process served to press down and contain the scalding sense of the trials under a leaden cover of minute evidence, detailed point of fact and lengthy recitals of chronology. The procedure was not like that of an American court nor even like that of a French court which uses the Napoleonic Code, the basis of all Continental law. But it was manifestly correct. Within the bare walls of the courtroom, unadorned even with the national flag, let alone the once customary photographs of the personification of power, the trials were conducted fairly and openly.

THAT was the rub. For it was not possible, after all, to achieve the Government's vision of trials that would be at once fair and meaningless. The very decision to let the prisoners speak freely and to let the lawyers defend honestly wrecked the scheme. From time to time, the geyser of suppressed bitterness that was the

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Once, on the ninth day of the trials, the explosion of passion was so fierce that the session had to be broken off. A 19-year-old defendant, Wladyslaw Caczkowski, was testifying. A round-cheeked, fresh-faced boy with his dark hair neatly combed, he had droned through the recital of his deeds on that frantic June Thursday. Tears began to roll down his cheeks as he told how he had voluntarily surrendered himself for arrest the next morning but had nevertheless been badly beaten. Suddenly he could bear no more and he broke down in sobs.

IT was not because he had painted so graphic a picture that the explosion was touched off. But his story evoked raw personal memories stored behind the glazed eyes of every Pole in the courtroom. From the back of the prisoners' dock, another accused jumped up, shouting hysterical curses at the police. From the spectators' benches, a pale, tired-faced young woman screamed as though in a nightmare. "Our father died for Poland in 1939. Our mother died, too. And now we are more oppressed than ever."

From the press benches a

Polish Communist hissed between clenched teeth, "It's true. And it's not news. We've known it for a long time."

NOR was that the only time. On the third day, a scrawny, wild-eyed defendant of 22, Janusz Suwart, recounted methodically the story of police brutality and of forced confessions that had already become familiar in a courtroom rapidly inured to insinuation of terror. But his moment of crisis came when the prosecutor, seeking to fix a picture of the prisoner as an habitual delinquent to be found among the dregs of any society, brought out a previous conviction for theft.

"I'll tell you why I did it," screamed Suwart. "Poverty made me steal."

And from his trembling mouth poured a long story of humiliation and degradation all the more shocking because, to the court's surprise, his has been a Communist family. To work for the regime and to have believed in it was no protection; in fact, it was a handicap. For Suwart told the court, "The party turned against us. The neighbors never liked us because they knew our father was a Communist and worked for the police before he was arrested. So there was no place to turn."

Not only the misery and the



QUESTION—"We want bread. How much has been supplied?" asks this sign placed in a Poznan street during the workers' demonstration of June 28.

fear of a population, but the terrible isolation of its oppressors were spread out in full view. Things were said which had never been said in public before. "The hatred of U. B. burst its bounds and inflamed the mob," testified a sociologist who was analyzing mob psychology in his cold professor's voice.

"I owe this defense to the workers of Poznan, to the people of Poland. Let the judges search their own con-

sciences," said a defense lawyer in his final peroration.

In one way or another, at unexpected moments, everything began to come out. One defendant, a 23-year-old worker, admitted that he had shot at the U. B. headquarters. "Someone put a rifle in my hand. I didn't want to shoot but, when I saw what was happening, my gorge rose." With dread in his voice, he intoned, "I saw them massacre workers in the streets."

Poor, cramped by a life of unrewarding toil like all the others in and outside the court, this man, Marian Joachimiak, reflected with unique dignity the pressures of the life that he had led. He denied that he had taken stolen clothes on the day of the rioting but admitted having accepted a stolen watch. Though his monthly wages totaled the cost of two pairs of shoes, he explained, "I didn't take the clothes because I come from a worker's family that has always earned what it got. But"—and he lowered his eyes—"I wanted a watch all my life. I knew I could never afford one. I felt an awful struggle in myself but I couldn't resist the watch."

ANOTHER defendant recounted, "I was raised on the streets. My father was killed in the war. My mother had to work." The mother of yet another defendant told how she had left her 5-year-old son when she had been taken off to forced labor in Germany. Her daughter had disappeared in a German labor camp. Now, before her boy's arrest, she had lived with him in a basement room on their joint income of twenty zlotys a day—the price of seven loaves of bread or nine quarts of milk or one pound of lard.

Although these were not the people who marched out of the factory and lettered the slo-

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gans on the posters, little by little it was clear that each in his heart shared in the reason for it all.

And, little by little, through the fragments of the testimony, the true picture emerged of what had happened in Poznan. When the Zispo workers started their march, they headed for the square in front of the town hall in the center of the city. Groups of them darted into other factories and offices along the route to spread the news of the strike and no one stayed behind. They sang religious hymns and old forbidden patriotic songs as they marched, and all who heard ran out to join them. But no one showed up to talk to them at the town hall and rumors spread that a representative delegation which had gone to Warsaw had been arrested.

So some turned right toward the prison, where they scaled the walls, broke open the cells and set fire to the hated piles of dossiers. Others turned left and crossed the bridge to Kochanowski Street, where the U. B. had its freshly painted headquarters. It was an angry crowd and the U. B. tried to disperse it with fire hoses. Children who had come from all over the city to join in a protest that they felt without understanding found the water mains and closed them. Then the crowd threw stones. Finally there was firing.

THOSE first shots at a little past 11 o'clock shattered the surface of peaceful intentions. The crowd overturned street cars, rolled up truck trailers filled with cement to use as barricades. Groups roamed the city gathering up arms from police stations, the prisons and military schools to shoot back at the U. B. Militia and troops were called out. Some of the soldiers, with the crowd, shot at the police. Some turned over their weapons and at least one tank. Most refused to fire in either direction. By now the crowd had watchwords:

"Out With the Russians."

"We Want Bread."

"The Government Has Fallen."

"Freedom and Religion."

All restraints were gone. Some people broke into shops and looted. Others vented their frustration on radio jamming equipment atop a four-story building around the corner from U. B. headquarters. Most of the hatred was directed against the U. B., but there

was enough to drench everything that represented the rulers.

Then a new wave of troops arrived from outside Poznan. These apparently were special security troops and they did not waver. Tanks blocked all the entrances to the city and rumbled through its streets. The people who had known war and occupation recoiled in horror. They had only the small arms they had stolen that day. There was heavy shooting that night and the next day. Bewildered, without leaders, the mob broke up. A few groups tried to hold out. By the third day, Saturday, the Poznan uprising was over.

BUT it cannot be erased. The efforts of the trials to minimize it failed. The trials themselves became a part of the protest against what Poland is today. After all, the boys in the prisoners' dock turned out to be the youths that Communist Poland has bred, the legitimate sons of Poznan. There was nothing unusual about them. The prosecutor called them "hooligans," but all the evidence was on the side of a defense lawyer who pointed out that they were "workers and sons of workers."

It was not only the dramatics of the courtroom that brought another defense lawyer to declare, "These trials, like the demonstrations that led to them, will go down in history and history will be the final judge of us all." There was an almost tangible feeling in the courtroom that somehow the fate of Poland was at stake. And it is entirely suited to the turbulent history of Poland that fate commands a complicated game.

The Poznan trials have brought out in an immediate personal way just how the Polish people feel about their rulers and why. But they have brought it out because the rulers felt obliged to permit it. There is a tendency among the people in Poland to suppose that this is due to the presence of Western observers, but the facts deny that supposition. The obligation arises from the requirements of a battered, hungry, bitter Poland.

The rulers, too, are a part of that Poland in a complex way. So the Poznan trials must have a double meaning. There is the shame of a regime that has driven people beyond desperation and there is the hope that can be drawn from the confession made on behalf of the regime, with its permission, in the courtroom.



COURTROOM—A scene during the Poznan trials. One of the judges is a woman.

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