

PRIME MINISTER

*Don't say anything  
much. Please  
keep on US  
file*

In view of your recent visits to the Eastern Bloc I thought you might be interested in the attached observations from the Reverend John Russell who last summer spent two months visiting churches in East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

He is the incumbent of one of the Lord Chancellor livings in the Birmingham Diocese and is coming to see me on 2 March to discuss his own future. This note was sent to me purely as a matter of interest. From all that I know of him he is a level-headed and perceptive priest with an enquiring mind. It is so difficult to get any information from visits of this nature but you might find his comments of interest.

*Geoffrey Butler*

*MTJ*

15 February 1984

## BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

In July 1960 I met theological students from all over the world, at a World Council of Churches' international conference. Three have particularly kept in touch with me - two are now pastors in Poland, one in East Germany. They are not allowed to travel out, so I have been glad of the chance, this summer, to go behind the Iron Curtain and visit them. Indeed the visit stretched into a two-month tour, visiting as many Christians and churches as I could in East Germany, and more briefly in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The churches I visited were mainly Lutheran.

These three <sup>2</sup>countries are very different. Further, my observations arise out of a very brief visit, and any conclusions drawn from them would have to be very tentative.

In East Germany you go to church, and it feels like England - the empty pews, the way that religion is only for the minority who are interested, churches often lacking young people. Minor awkwardnesses, like sitting for the hymns and standing for the prayers; and Holy Communion only once a month, inevitably on the Sunday when I'm not there. It's when you get talking to individual Christians that you begin to see what it's about.

One problem at the moment is that of Peace. The East German government never stops talking about Peace: it is a peace-loving country, it works for peace, it is strongly opposed to new Western nuclear missiles. One hears all this daily. But it is combined with a total lack of self-criticism about the East German government's own military activities. It is a bone of contention for many Christians that army cadet training is compulsory from the age of 14, also National Service; that children in schools are taught that one must hate one's enemy (enemies are trying to prevent the rightful struggle of the workers); and that any peace slogan that suggests an arms reduction on both sides is totally banned.

I got the feeling that such points can be spoken of freely only inside church circles. Therefore young people with or without a Christian connection are attracted to the Church. The Church begins to become a focus for criticism of the State, which is an unwelcome development, both to the government, and to the majority of churchmembers who value the government's toleration of the Church. But other Christians are glad that by this Peace debate young people from outside the Church are being drawn into lively contact with young Christians.

Another problem is what amounts to discrimination against Christians. This is not uniform, it appears to be stricter in some places than others. Thus, children of Christian parents find it hard to be accepted for an A-level course, and rarely get into university. So unless the parents and children keep clear of Church entanglements for several years, the children are restricted to theological training by the Church, or non-academic training. Many families find this hard. Or again: Christians who don't conform to the system cannot usually get a teaching post, or any responsible post in business or public life. Conforming to the system may involve such things as joining the Communist Party, breaking off contact with one's own relatives in the West, and always saying things favourable to the government.

I was most impressed by a large Kirchentag, or lay Christian Congress, permitted by the Government for this Luther's 500th anniversary year. Seven such Congresses are being held, in different places; at the one I was at several thousand came together, mainly young people, for discussion, worship and fellowship. The young people I spoke to said that they need the encouragement they get from this kind of event to carry them through the discouragements of ordinary day-to-day Christian living.

Poland was so different: full churches, both Roman Catholic and Lutheran, you feel that the Church is the voice of the people. It is said that on a typical Sunday, on average over the whole country, 80% of Polish adults are at Mass - compare that with Britain! Some of this is clearly influenced by Polish nationalist feeling. I also noticed the continuing poverty in Poland.

As to the political temperature there, many said everything is fine, but I heard of others who are suffering harassment as churchmembers. Often I felt that people were afraid to say anything. One church leader, when I asked how things were for Christians in his church, said only "We can eat, we can live". I had the impression that he was implying problems about everything else; but he would not be drawn further. I found it impossible to get a true picture.

In Czechoslovakia I unfortunately lost nearly all my luggage - stolen out of a locked left-luggage locker. This caused me to discover the difficulties of shopping in a Communist country. By Western standards, nearly all goods are of poor quality and unattractive to look at, and some (like handkerchiefs and envelopes) simply not available.

I found repression in Czechoslovakia, although I was only in Prague, a tourist city, where I expect things are better than anywhere else in the country. The official line is this: the Church democratically governs its own affairs, it supports the State, the State pays the pastors' salaries. Meetings for young people and any form of evangelism are, however, forbidden. (A special youth assembly was arranged last year, on the occasion of a visit by Billy Graham, who was greatly impressed; but I was told that was window-dressing, quite untypical.)

So the Church becomes a set of isolated small groups. When a pastor moves even a little outside the circle of his group, he is liable to be dismissed, and must find whatever low-grade secular work he can. If he is obstinate he will go to prison with hard labour. I met some who had so suffered. Some interest in the Church remains; I was at a church where three teenagers and a young woman had recently been drawn into membership. But I couldn't speak much with Christians in Czechoslovakia.

Everywhere I went, in these countries, I found great interest in the West, and delight that we are making the effort to keep links open. They value our interest, indeed I believe they need it.

My thanks go to the Bishop of Birmingham, to the Board of Mission and Unity of the Church of England, to the Harold Buxton Trust, and to all others who made this visit possible. I would gladly tell anyone more about it. In particular I kept a detailed diary, at some length, and anyone particularly interested could borrow it.

John Russell.

Rowley Regis. July 1983.