

GERMANY'S "COLONIAL" PROVINCE

Silesia And Its Capital As I Knew It

(Written for "The Listener" by G.E.E.)

BE quite honest! How much did you know about Silesia and Breslau, its capital, about its situation, size, and its historical role, before these places became headline news a few weeks ago? Very little, I daresay.

Everybody has heard of Munich—even before it became infamous; of Cologne—mainly associated with its cathedral and lately with air-raids; of Nuremberg—town of the Hitler rallies, and rich in medieval art treasures; of Frankfurt-on-Main—Goethe's birth-place, and a flourishing industrial town (much better known than the now often-mentioned Frankfurt-on-Oder); of Heidelberg and Göttingen—famous small university towns and once the centre of learning. But Breslau? Were you aware before your paper or your radio commentator told you that it is among the 10 biggest cities of the Reich and that its population before the war was more than one-third the total number of the inhabitants of New Zealand (615,000)?

You need not be ashamed of your lack of knowledge about this eastern provincial capital. Even in Germany—in pre-Hitler Germany at least—people did not know very much about it, and Silesia always thought itself forgotten or unnoticed, a Cinderella among the provinces of the Reich. It felt, rightly or wrongly, that it was unduly neglected, and that it could never catch up with the fast development of the west; it had never participated to the same degree in the cultural heritage of such favoured provinces as the Rhineland or Bavaria.

Russia Helped

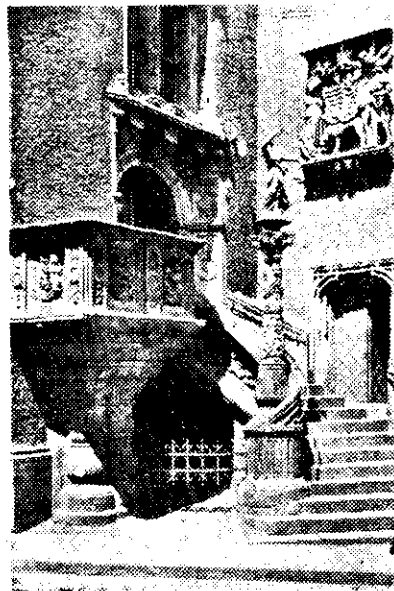
The reasons for these real or imaginary griefs are to be found in Silesia's history. Until the middle of the 18th century, it belonged to Austria. Just 200 years ago (on Christmas Day, 1745) the Treaty of Dresden was signed at the conclusion of two victorious wars which Frederick the Great had waged against the Austrian Empress, Maria Theresa. In his own words, Frederick wanted Silesia to come "to me without further treachery or trick; you, wholly as you were." But not until the conclusion of the Third Silesian War (better known as the Seven Years' War) in 1763 was it finally incorporated into Prussia and later divided into the three provincial districts of Lower, Central and Upper Silesia.

It is an historical fact not without irony to-day that Russia was instrumental in helping the King to achieve these plans. Had it not been for the advent of Catherine the Great to the Russian throne at the most critical time and for the aid she immediately gave to her royal Prussian friend, Silesia might well have remained within the orbit of Austrian politics. However, its absorption by Prussia brought a complete change in the political, economic and religious spheres. Though industrial development was then still in its infancy, Frederick encouraged it in the newly-acquired territory on a large scale. He imported

THE following article attempts to give an outline of Silesia and its capital, Breslau, as seen by the writer during a long sojourn in this part of Germany in the years 1929-1931 (i.e. in pre-Hitler days). Many observations then made and impressions received are now probably quite out-of-date, but it is hoped that even when only "Memory Holds the Door," this account will offer some glimpses that are interesting, even to-day.



Old houses in the capital of Silesia.



Staircase of the Town Hall of Corlitz, near Breslau.

machinery and manufacturing experts from England into a country which had been thus far merely agricultural.

Industrial Unrest

If we call material development "progress," the change-over might be called beneficial. But the more doubtful blessings of industrial development became apparent in Silesia sooner than anywhere else. It had concentrated on the manufacturing of linen, and the first industrial revolt was an abortive rising of the Silesian weavers against the increasing use of machinery which reduced them to dire poverty.

This rising has its historical parallel in the movement of the English Luddites. Silesia's greatest son, the modern playwright Gerhart Hauptmann, wrote an impressive play (1892) which became a milestone in the development of the naturalistic drama with a message. In *The Weavers* he depicted the tragedy of the working-class during the days of the Industrial Revolution in the first half of the 19th century. Another interesting earlier document (published in London in 1804) is "Letters on Silesia" by John Quincy Adams (later a President of the United States).

After the Last War

It somehow seems that Silesia, so promisingly started on the road to success, never quite recovered from its

various set-backs. The heaviest blow to its industry and possession of raw material (coal) was dealt to it after Versailles when it lost an integral part of Upper Silesia to Poland.

Post-war Silesia was certainly not a happy country. In no other part of Germany have I met with such great poverty and misery among the lower classes. Admittedly I lived there during the years of depression (1929-1931), but it was obvious to the newcomer from the west that the general standard of living even in better days had never been as high in this province as elsewhere. Living accommodation, even for the middle class, plumbing, sanitation, road transport, etc.—all were backward compared with the rest of Germany. People were overworked and undernourished. The Weimar Republic set up various commissions to investigate the main grievances and to alleviate the greatest evils. But it was difficult to catch up with the times, as Silesia had so long been regarded as a kind of "colony" from which to extract as much raw material (coal and ore) and labour as possible.

The Silesian soil is poor and the crops—mainly potatoes and oats—are scarcely sufficient to feed its people. When touring the country by car I received a shock on seeing the emaciated bodies and lined faces of young-old



Breslau Cathedral in winter.

men, women and children, such as I had never encountered in the west. Another time an elderly and respectable looking woman accosted me at midnight in one of Breslau's main streets asking for some money, as she had not eaten for two days.

The Silesian Junker Class

On the other hand, the big landed gentry, the industrialists and mine-owners, were counted among the wealthiest people of Germany. The Pückler-Muskau, the York-Wartenbergs, the Pless, and a few others had enormous estates, arable land, forests, and big industrial plants not only under their control but in their sole possession. They represented the Silesian Junker class, slightly different perhaps from their East Prussian and Pomeranian brethren: a trifle less arrogant and militant, and living in a way of "frugal ostentation."

Field-Marshal (then General) von Rundstedt was town commandant of Breslau at this time. Even in these pre-armament days he was considered the "coming man of the Reichswehr." He lived rather modestly with his family in a modern flat near the main barracks of the town. A rather amusing incident comes to mind in this connection: though very slight and unimportant in itself it reveals clearly the often-quoted German lack of humour. I had met Rundstedt's son (now a prisoner in England) at a social function, and jokingly said to him: "I am living near the barracks, and every morning I am roused from sleep by the bugle calls of the reveille; could you not ask your father to postpone it from 5 to 6 o'clock?" Whereupon, clicking his heels and bowing correctly from the waist, he answered seriously and apologetically: "I am sorry. I hardly think I could do that."

The specific and peculiar character of the Silesian has often been analysed. He holds a special position among other German types. Hitler's fanaticism of race-purity might deny the fact, but it nevertheless remains true that there are

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