

BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

Presbyterians at Work in Hungary

THE first non-official to be allowed to pass the "iron curtain" into Russian-occupied Hungary, the Rev. C. A. F. Knight, arrived the other day from Scotland to become Professor of Old Testament Studies at Knox College and Otago University.

Professor Knight had broadcast to New Zealand in the BBC Pacific Service some three weeks before his arrival, under the title "Just Back from Hungary." "All the same," said he, "it was really July when I was there—after 13 months pestering for a permit. The Church of Scotland sent me out to report on what help could be given to rebuilding church life in Central Europe, and I was the first non-official person since the war began who was allowed in at all. Before my visit, Hungarian news in the world's papers had been simply what rumours reporters could pick up in Vienna. I had four full weeks, too, in which to travel about everywhere and talk and listen to everybody."

But how, I asked, did a Scot come to know Magyar well enough to do that? And what was the Church of Scotland's particular interest in Hungary?

"The fact that every fourth Hungarian is a Presbyterian," replied the Professor, "and I would naturally know their language nearly as well as English because I lived there through the 'thirties. From 1935 to 1940 I was head of the Church of Scotland's Mission to Jews in Budapest and in charge of non-Aryan relief work."

A very big undertaking, in these years of persecution, I suggested.

"Yes. But the British and American churches helped with funds, and our mission staff even before had numbered 40—all Hungarians except myself. Well, you see there were 550 pupils in our girls' school alone, three-quarters of them Jewish. No, they weren't there because they were excluded from other schools, but because they appreciated a school with no anti-semitism about it. We taught the New Testament, of course, as a school subject, along with the Old, but we applied no pressure for conversions.

"Actually, however, more than 30,000 Jews joined the Church in Hungary during the 'thirties—and we insisted on a stiff six months' course of instruction in every case, to make their new attitude well-based. The result was to add to the Presbyterians—the great bulk of whom were poverty-stricken peasants—a body of city intellectuals. And such people became the core and backbone of the Resistance Movement. The President to-day is a Presbyterian minister, and so are several members of the Cabinet, all Peasant Party men."

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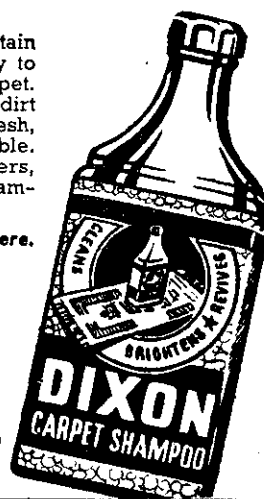
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