

Car-Dwellers of Budapest

By EVA VAJKAI

Budapest, January 31

MR. THEODOR BARTL, Secretary of the Municipality of Budapest and Commissioner of the Fugitives, invited me to visit with him the western railway station in Budapest. After walking for about ten minutes along the tracks, we saw long lines of cars, such as are used for the transport of animals and freight. An employee joined us.

"How many are there?" asked Mr. Bartl, looking at his notebook. "Ninety-eight are assigned to this station."

"One hundred and twenty-seven," answered the man. "Twenty-nine cars full have come tonight, the same people we sent away five days ago in order to get them home into their villages under Rumanian occupation."

"Why have they come back?"

"The Rumanians would not let them go over the Tisza."

Mr. Bartl shrugged his shoulders. "Always the same story. Their number is telephoned to us every evening, and in the morning a new lot has arrived. In addition to the thousands who would not take the oath to the Rumanian constitution, there are the inhabitants of whole villages, who fled in April, May, and June, because their homes stood in the firing-line. These are the worst off; for eight months they have been sleeping on rotten straw in the cars, most of them in rags, as they could not bring anything except what they had on their bodies. We feed them—but do not ask how—with such provisions as we have. And what you see here, you will find in every little town in the country; but the country towns try to get rid of them by sending them here as soon as a locomotive can be found."

We go first to see the newcomers. We knock at the closed door; it is pushed open; we climb up a little ladder into the dim interior, whence a filthy gust of air strikes us. These cars, of course, have no windows—only the usual little latticed openings which are covered with rags or paper, in order to keep out the cold air. There is literally no furniture—dirty straw for beds and some chests which serve as chairs. Twenty-two people live in this car, men, women, and children, promiscuously huddled together ever since April, 1919. They fled from the country of Szatmar by night, after having endured gun-fire all day long. Four times already negotiations have been opened with the Rumanians, to get them home. The High Commandant agreed, but the sentries near the Tisza did not let them pass the

bridge. These people are wholly apathetic; they let themselves be shunted to and fro. They steal wood here and there to keep the car warm, but that is all. They have each of them one shirt, a pair of trousers, and the most necessary clothing. It was distributed to them from the Swiss gifts. No shoes, no stockings.

With very few exceptions the same state of things exists in the other twenty-eight cars on this track. We notice the great number of children. They are from Transylvania and have the right—on paper—to go back, since they were born there. All look pale and thin, with their bones sticking out; no one would recognize them as of that robust race, the Szekely.

On the next line stand the cars of the state employees, who come from the parts occupied by the Jugoslavs and from Fiume, most of them from the staffs of the railways. One sees good furniture in their cars, but there is the same want of air in these cattle-trucks, unfit for human beings, and the same promiscuous huddling together, regardless of age or sex. The men are employed in the offices in Budapest, where in a short time there will be a special employee to stamp each letter! For the country, reduced to fourteen counties and with not even a third part of its territory left, has, somehow or other, to feed the thousands and thousands of its employees, victims of the war. In one car we are shown a child about a week old. It is wrapped in the petticoat of the young mother; no baby cloth is to be had in Budapest, and no foreign supplies can be given to individuals when hospitals are unprovided for.

On an adjacent track, in cars carefully closed, live people of the middle class from Slovakia and Transylvania.

"You cannot see them," says Mr. Bartl. "They are

ashamed of their misery and had rather die than exhibit it." Yet the man who accompanies us knocks at the door of a car, and a woman opens it. Very thin and white is she, the wife of a college professor. The man gives her a paper to sign. I peep into the interior. Very little furniture. No fire in the little stove; it is miserably cold; her fingers are stiff and she is scarcely able to hold the pen.

"You get frozen here," says the man. She shrugs her shoulders. "The coal I get on the ticket is just enough to cook our dinner in the evening."

The man having stepped away, I venture to say, casting a furtive glance on a car filled with wood standing near her door, "Is there no way to get some?"

She looks at me vacantly for a moment, then answers: "No. I won't steal; I would rather die."

"They are all like her—the better people, I mean," says Mr. Bartl. "The others, poor devils, get broken by misery. We have no material to build anything better than a barrack for them. At first they struggle to arrange things as comfortably as they can; then they lose their energy and become apathetic. A man without a room to dwell in is just like a fish thrown out on the shore; he cannot live."

As I looked at all those rows of cars intended for cattle, now filled with human beings, I was told that on this day 645 cars stood in the different stations of Budapest and about 2,000 more in the whole of the unoccupied territory; all filled with people who either had been driven out of their homes by the occupying forces, or had had to flee from persecution of the most outrageous sort.

And all the while Wilson preaches of the protection of minorities!