

IRON CURTAIN CHRISTIANITY

Jamie Buckingham



GOD IS NOT ONLY alive and well, but His workers are quite active behind the Iron Curtain.

Although my primary reason for being in Czechoslovakia was to trace down a story for a national religious magazine, the real story lay in what I discovered among the underground Christians.

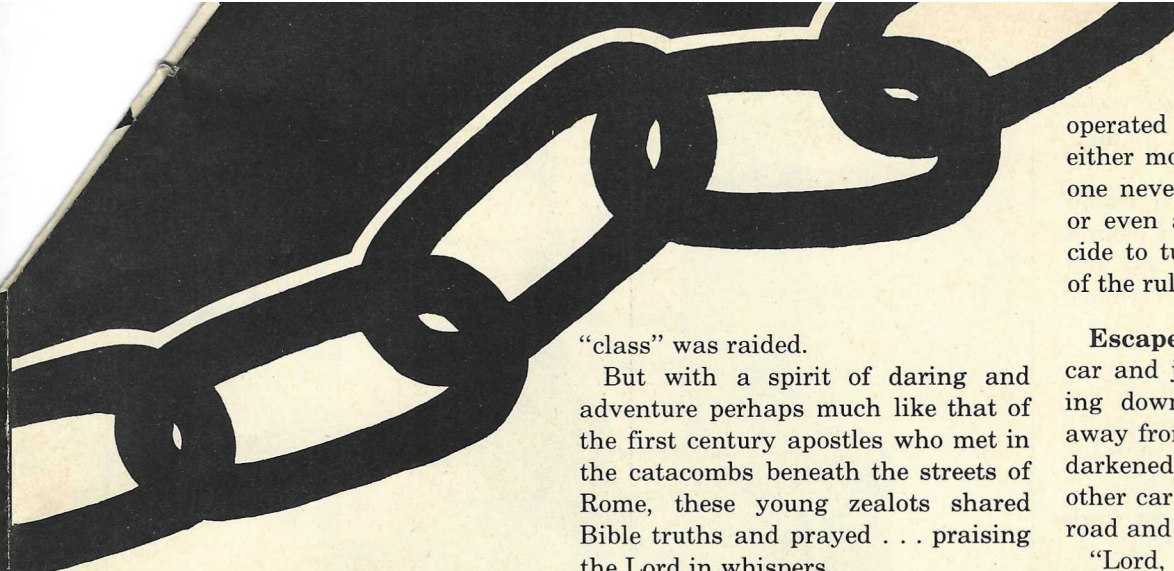
Typical among them was John Montgomery (his name is changed to protect him from Communist incrimination). John is a 29-year old language professor at one of the major universities. An Englishman, he speaks nine languages fluently and was invited by the Communist officials at the University to leave his secure position at the University of London to move to

Czechoslovakia to teach linguistics.

What the Communists didn't know was that John, an ardent Christian, had been secretly praying for five years that God would provide a means for his going behind the Iron Curtain as a missionary.

On my first night in the drab, black and white country (which used to be described as the show spot of eastern Europe) I found myself in a basement

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room of the University for a "class." Professor Montgomery was in charge.

Forbidden Meeting: More than thirty "students" had gathered in the dimly lit room. The windows were closed, the shades drawn and the young men and women all spoke in whispers. The "linguistics" class was actually an underground prayer meeting and Bible study.

Each individual in the room had been thoroughly screened to make sure they were not a member of the secret police. Since a recently passed government edict stated that no groups larger than six could meet for any reason without state approval, each one present was running the risk of arrest and imprisonment if the

"class" was raided.

But with a spirit of daring and adventure perhaps much like that of the first century apostles who met in the catacombs beneath the streets of Rome, these young zealots shared Bible truths and prayed . . . praising the Lord in whispers.

After the meeting was over, my Dutch guide, the young professor, and I slipped out a back door and drove to a hillside overlooking the city. There, parked along a deserted road with the windows rolled up, they discussed changes in the plan to smuggle Bibles and Christian literature behind the Iron Curtain.

Suddenly our conversation was interrupted by a car that approached up the mountain road. It stopped about 50 yards from us with the parking lights on.

"They're here," John said, "we must go."

He was speaking of the secret police. In Communist countries nearly everyone in a sense belongs to the secret police. Since the spy system is

operated on a program of rewards, either monetary or by giving medals, one never knows when his neighbor, or even a family member, might decide to turn him in for an infraction of the rules.

Escape: John quickly started the car and jammed it in reverse. Heading down the mountain, we roared away from the parking place past the darkened car that held two men. The other car made a sharp U-turn in the road and the chase was on.

"Lord, confuse their minds," my Dutch companion prayed audibly as we careened around mountain curves.

Suddenly John pulled into a small side road, cut the lights and waited -- while the pursuing car sped past and down the street. Then he slowly backed out, turned in the opposite direction and headed back to the city by a different route.

"Now we can praise the Lord," he grinned.

Knowing how many Americans have gone behind the "curtain" and simply disappeared, I needed no other hint. My praise was not only sincere but like my companion's, quite vocal.

The entire two week excursion into this land of fear and hopelessness was made up of just such miracles.

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Everywhere we went we were greeted with the whispered inquiry, "Do you have Bibles?"

"Not this trip," my Dutch friend said. He had made many trips behind the curtain at the risk of arrest and imprisonment to smuggle in Bibles and literature.

Hungry for God's Word: I had been briefed by my companion before flying in from Amsterdam that we would be followed. "But do not worry," he said confidently, "God is at work behind the Iron Curtain too."

Indeed He was.

One night I met with a small group gathered in the basement of a garage apartment. A Baptist pastor was leading a few old peasants in a Bible study. The only light in the room was a candle on a table in the middle of the small, dank room.

"Perhaps you would like to teach our people an American hymn," he said.

I looked around the room at the dozen wrinkled, grizzled faces. Their eyes spoke of the horror of the German occupation and the hopelessness of the Russian takeover which followed. "I would be honored," I said, and in a cracked voice I sang a childhood song:

*Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.*

The pastor translated the song and the small church group, voices wavering yet firm with conviction, sang it back to me in the Czech language.

After the meeting was over, an old woman, bent and stooped, her face lined like an old walnut, came up to me. Speaking through the interpreter she said, "You Americans know Jesus loves you because you have a Bible. But we Czechs have no Bibles. The Communists have taken them all. The only love of Jesus we know is in the faces of our friends."

I slept little that night as her words burned holes in my brain. I could not help but think of fat, rich, lazy Americans who stay away from church when it drizzles.

Why is it that Communists are so afraid of Christians?" I asked one of the leaders of the underground church.



Christianity Feared: "Aside from their political philosophy which teaches that a return to Christianity would be a return to the feudalism of the past, most Communists are very insecure," he said. "They fear a revolution that will unseat them from their places of leadership. They sense in Christianity a flavor of revolution -- not submission to the system. They feel, therefore, it must be stamped out. Totally."

"Christianity teaches revolution," Professor Montgomery said as we sat drinking black coffee on our final night before leaving the country. "But it is a revolution of man-not society. Lenin taught that man is changed by changing society. Christ teaches that society is changed by changing man. Communism analyzes history, but it fails to see that all history is His-

story . . . that history belongs to the one who says, *All power is given unto me.*"

"But what about you?" I asked. "Don't you realize you could be arrested and put in prison any moment?"

He grinned, running his fingers through his long, black hair. "And where else could I find a captive audience to preach to," he answered.

Despite the so-called advances of the socialistic state, I returned home realizing that all the teachings of Lenin and Marx still leave the human heart hungry and the soul dissatisfied. Even though the signs in Wenceslaus Square in Prague proclaim, "Lenin is Alive! Glory be to Lenin," the people still know, deep down inside, that there is but one worth dying for, the One who brings life to living. ♦♦