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EISTEDDFOD Y CYMRY.

1943

These mysterious words were, to me, the same enigma as they certainly were, until now, to most of my Czechoslovak readers. I say - "they were" an enigma because today I know their full meaning and these words have opened a skylight through which I am able to gaze upon a new, perhaps unknown, but at the same time amazing world, a new world very rich and extremely interesting, full, both of ancient life and a youthful and exuberant enthusiasm.

I do not know whether I shall correctly translate the sense of these words when I tell you that they mean "A National Meeting of Wales". Therefore I shall henceforth use the designation Eisteddfod. (Welsh words - different from English words - are pronounced as they are written; only Ll is pronounced like chl, w like u, and f almost like v - therefore Eistedvod).

Eisteddfod is the traditional annual meeting of the Welsh bards - singers, reciters, poets, the bearers and lovers of the Welsh language and of its ancient culture. These meetings and festivals, these poetic and singing tournaments have been carried on from times immemorial, and in them culminates, even today, the modern effort for the preservation of the Welsh national consciousness and of the Welsh cultural endeavours. Since the time of the Welsh king Howel or Hywel the Good, who lived in the tenth century, history has recorded without interruption, memorable Eisteddfods, many of which have formed important mile stones in the Welsh national and cultural life.

The kind invitation of the president of the British Council, Sir Malcolm Robertson, made it possible for me - in the same measure as for the representatives of other Allied nations - to represent, perhaps for the first time in history, the Czechoslovak Republic at this year's national festival of Wales.

This year's Eisteddfod took place in picturesque Bangor, on the Atlantic coast of Wales, in a countryside which, apart from the sea, reminded me of the hilly country somewhere in central Slovakia, in the Low Tatras. Because of this impression and undoubtedly also because of the generousness and extreme kindness, as well as the naturalness and joyful spirit of the Welsh people, I felt, in this attractive environment very much as if I were at home. It was not merely a polite phrase when I said that to my last days I shall not forget those two days, perhaps the most interesting and happy days of my exile in this splendid and free country of Great Britain.

In the midst of a formidable and terrible war, in which mammoth tanks attack each other, in which the air is charged with the thunder of bombarding aircraft, in which new machines, invented by modern technicians are spreading destruction upon the seas, from the air and on the land, I have been transplanted into an atmosphere breathing of an ancient tradition of bards, lute-singers, harpists and of migrating popular poets.

When during the main ceremony of the festival, the bards, victors and bearers of literary and musical prizes, took their places on the stage in a picturesque semi-circle, dressed in their ancient wide linen robes, white, green and blue, with crowns and laurel wreathes and winged head-dresses. I had the impression of being present at a meeting of Egyptian

or biblical archpriests at the court of a prince or a king of by-gone times.

And when the chief victor of the poetic encounter, Emrys James, pastor and poet, already crowned at a former Eisteddfod and today knighted with a huge and heavy sword as a "chaired bard"; a man with clear cut features, broad and wide-shouldered, dressed in a loose white tunic took his seat in the massive wooden richly carved chair, which according to the tradition should actually become his property, you had the impression that one of the Roman imperators majestically sat upon the throne.

And looking round about you will find among the public, costumes of the Middle Ages, wives of knights and of rich merchants, in high black hats with broad brims, all giving the effect as if they had stepped out of a Dutch painting or out of an etching by Hollar. In the modern development of the new cultural life of Wales, the Eisteddfod has wider and richer aims than was the case in the Old and Middle Ages. Competitions are held not only between singers and poets and reciters. Now, men, women and mixed choirs compete with composers, writers of novels, of stories and of dramas, in fact it is a competition for all branches of artistic and literary life. It is all directed by the Archdruid, the Archpriest Grwys dressed in a golden robe with a golden sceptre. Each manifestation is, however, presided by an outstanding personage in the life of Wales, who is either a member of the Government, a member of Parliament, or a person prominent in cultural life.

The main ceremony this year, as during the last 50 years, was to have been presided by the most prominent Welsh statesman, the aged patriarch Lloyd George, but as his health did not permit it, he was represented by

the M.P. of his party, Major Goronvy Owen. Other manifestations were presided by the former member of the Government, miner Grefnell and by the President of this year's Eisteddfod, the Member of Parliament Evans.

The whole proceedings were, of course, in the Welsh language. You listen to this ancient Celtic tongue and have the impression that you understand. It seldom happens that you hear talking and singing with a like fervour and spirit, and with such a natural and at the same time deeply felt manner of expression. You will seldom hear an anthem sung with such an exalted piety as I heard the Welsh "Rwy'n gweld o bell y dydd yn dod". The best professionals and amateurs of the highest quality took part in the concert. You have the impression that every Welshman is a born actor. That is why you understand not only melodies which often assail your ears with plaintive accords - I would say Slavonic - but you understand also recitations, rendered in a colourful and vivid manner more in a continental way than in the calm and dispassionate English way.

As I have said, everything is conducted in the Welsh language. But at this year's Eisteddfod the Yugoslav, Russian, French, Flemish and the Slovak tongues were also heard. The representatives of the Allied nations present, the Minister Krek, deputy Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, M. Hoste, the Belgian Minister of Education, the representative of the Czechoslovak Government and last but not least the Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, M. Karavaev, were all requested to say a few words in their own tongue. The hall reverberated with enthusiasm, the loudest of all, of course, when the representative of Soviet Russia was addressing the meeting, but the address in Slovak in which I expressed the hope that the next

Eisteddfod would take place in peace time and assured my listeners that representatives of our free nations would take part in it, was welcomed with animation too.

On other occasions, such as at receptions, luncheons and dinners, we of course, spoke in English, but during the manifestations themselves, of which a permanent record was made by microphones for future reference, our addresses were translated only into the Welsh tongue.

My ode to Eisteddfod - touching from time to time prosaic elements - would be incomplete if I omitted to mention here an occasion at which we arrived at the true communion with the Welsh soul. It happened at one of the improvised merry nights, in a small room at the Girls University Hostel, which room eloquently proved the truth of our proverb saying that "a lot of good people take little space". We were sitting on the floor, reclining or standing - and our chief occupation consisted in singing, making speeches, reciting and laughing. Here the Welsh talents were at their best - in improvised songs, poems and anecdotes. Never before have I seen so much joy - without the aid of alcohol. Simple farmers, young men, young women, members of parliament, ministers of the gospel, teachers, students, all of them overflowing with wit, humour, health and joy. There were also songs in Slovak, Flemish, Russian and Slovene. Minister Grenfell started the Russian tune Stenka Razin. And we - the Allies - joined in the singing of the Welsh merry melodies. Those were moments of which we only have to say in the words of the poet Hviezdoslav: "No, we never shall forget you".