

# *Into the Darkness: An Uncensored Report from Inside the Third Reich at War*

by Lothrop Stoddard



1940

## **Chapter 6: Vienna and Bratislava**

About a fortnight after my arrival in Germany I had an opportunity to secure two worth-while interviews away from Berlin. The first was with General Loehr, Commander- in-Chief of the Air-Arm at Vienna. The second was with Father Joseph Tiso, newly elected President of the equally new Slovak Republic, at his capital, Bratislava. Neither had as yet been interviewed by an American journalist.

Since I was to be the guest of the Air Ministry, an army transport plane had been placed at my disposal.

Accordingly, I motored out to Berlin's main airport, accompanied by a major of the Air-Arm who was to be with me on the journey. A pleasant-faced Hanoverian in his mid-forties, he proved to be an agreeable companion.



[Image] Junker Ju 52 transport plane

The tri-motored, slate-gray plane took off on schedule, and we soon rose above the ground-haze into the clear air of a crisp autumn morning. Flying at about 2,000 feet, we skimmed swiftly over the flat plains of North Germany — an endless patchwork of forest and farmland, interspersed with lakes and dotted with villages or towns. The sky was cloudless until we approached the Bohemian Mountains, when we encountered a billowing wave of white pouring like a giant cataract onto the Saxon plain. Rising steeply above this cloud-sea, we lost sight of earth during most of our flight over Bohemia. Only now and then did I catch a glimpse of the Protectorate through a rift in the white veil. I had a quick sight of Prague. Its palace-citadel looked like a toy castle. The river Moldau was a silvery ribbon winding across the landscape.



[Image] Slovakia 1939

As we neared the hilly border between Bohemia and Austria, the cloud-belt beneath us was again unbroken, though a few mountain summits rose like dark islets above a white sea. On the outskirts of Vienna the clouds thinned and the pilot could see his way to a smooth landing. Greeted cordially by airport officials, the Major and I motored to our hotel, a quaint hostelry named the Erzherzog Karl, on the Kaerntner Strasse. We were in the heart of old Vienna, a city I am always glad to see. I knew it in its glory before the Great War, when it was the capital of the vanished Habsburg Empire. I knew it again in the dark post-war days, when hunger and despair stalked its shabby streets. Now I was to see it in a new guise — demoted to a provincial center of the Third Reich.



[Image] Erzherzog Karl, on Kaerntner Strasse, Vienna

Curious to sense the feel of the place, I wandered about town all that afternoon and evening, sizing up the street crowds, revisiting old haunts, and dropping into an occasional cafe. In their general appearance the people looked similar to those in Berlin. I saw no ragged or starving persons, neither was I accosted by beggars. But the old Viennese spirit was gone. The mental atmosphere was one of tired resignation to whatever might be in store.

However, the Viennese did not have the stiff stolidity of the Berliners. They still smiled easily and entered quickly into friendly conversation. The most notable difference was in the women, who have retained some of their former chic despite the cramping limitations of hard times and clothing-cards. My biggest surprise was when I saw perfectly respectable women and girls in a leading cafe casually take out their lipsticks and freshen their make-up.

Bright and early next morning the Major and I went to the Hauptkommando, a huge, dingy old building rising to the height of seven stories. Here I met the military censor who was to pass on my interviews and give me permission to get them on the wireless for transmission to America. He was a tall, slender man, obviously Austrian, as were the other officers to whom I was introduced. The necessary formalities having been completed, I motored to Air Headquarters not far away, where General Loehr awaited me.

The General received me in a large office equipped with an exceedingly long conference table. This came in handy for a panoramic series of air photographs which stretched its entire length. With these the General illustrated his story of the great air attack which he had commanded during the Polish campaign. In vigorous middle life, with graying-dark hair and an agreeable voice, he is typically Austrian in both appearance and manner. An airman since youth, his recent exploits in Poland are the climax of a brilliant professional career.



[Image] General Loehr

With soldierly promptness, General Loehr wasted no time starting the interview. His dynamic forefinger swept over the photographic panorama that lay on the conference table.

*“Picture to yourself,”* said he, *“a thousand troop trains jammed along a sixty-kilometer stretch of railway under mass-attack by bombing planes.”*

Taken from a great height, the photos were in miniature, but with a magnifying glass I could spot the trains, singly or in bunches along the right-of-way, or filling sidings and freight-yards. Now and then I noted squadrons of bombers at lower altitudes than the photographing plane and could spot their work by puffs of smoke where bombs exploded with deadly accuracy over the double-track railroad line.

The General went on to describe the terrific disorganization wrought by this mass air attack upon the Polish army retreating from the Posen front to form a new line before Warsaw — soldiers leaping to the tracks from troop trains and losing their formations; horses and guns forced from freight cars, with no unloading platforms. This harassed army was still full of fight and tried to attack, but it so lacked coordination that the bravest efforts were vain. To make matters worse, the telephone and telegraph lines, which in Poland follow railroads rather than highways, were likewise shattered by bombing, so communication was destroyed. Loehr also showed me aerial glimpses of the countryside dotted with Polish soldiery breaking up into small groups.

Asked to give what he considered the reasons for his quick victory over the Polish air force which preceded the bombing of the army, just related, Loehr replied substantially as follows: The German air force had as its primary aim the destruction of Polish air power — if possible on the ground. So the very first day of the war all practicable airfields were assailed. On that fateful first of September the weather was very bad for flying. This made the task a hard one, but the Poles were not expecting a general air attack in such weather and were thus caught unprepared. Loehr attributed much of his success to blind-flying excellence, which he claimed was a German specialty. Caught unprepared, the Polish airfields were terribly mauled. To give one instance, twenty-five planes in one hangar at Cracow were destroyed by a single bomb. This first attack was followed by a second that same day. Again the Poles were unprepared, because they did not think the German bombers could reload and refuel so soon. They were thus caught salvaging their damaged planes and fighting airfield fires.

This initial German success was not without its price.

Loehr frankly admitted heavy losses in these first attacks — losses which might have been troublesome if they had kept up. But the vast damage the Germans inflicted had so weakened the Polish air force that, only two days after war broke out, it was incapable of further concerted action, and Germany had obtained command of the air. Thereafter Polish air activity was limited to sporadic counterattacks by small squadrons or single planes. Only after the Polish air power was thus broken did the German Air-Arm turn its attention to the railways and ground forces.

Loehr stated that in this campaign Germany's initial air preponderance was not so great as commonly imagined abroad. At the start, he had only about one-third numerical advantage. This was less than the Allied lead over the Germans on the West Front during the World War, where the Allies never attained real command of the air. The General closed the interview with expressions of polite regret that he could not invite me to the luncheon he had planned for me, because he had been suddenly ordered to fly for a conference at Berlin.

I spent the afternoon writing out my interview and transcribing it in semi-code for the wireless — a technical job which always takes some time. The obliging censor passed it with a couple of minor changes, and I saw the interview safely on its way across the ocean, returning to my hotel just in time to meet friends with whom I was to spend the evening. We dined at The Three Hussars, a cozy little restaurant long famous for its food and wines. The wines were still up to par, but the food had sadly deteriorated from the old days. In fat-short wartime Germany, really good cooking is as unlikely as bricks made without straw.



[Image] The Three Hussars

During dinner we discussed the local situation. Both my host and his wife were members of the Party and thus enthusiastically in favor of Anschluss. They admitted, however, that Austria's inclusion into the Third Reich had produced many economic difficulties. Much of Vienna's local industry had been luxury products for foreign markets. This had greatly suffered since annexation, owing to several factors such as difficulty of obtaining raw materials through lack of foreign exchange, competing German lines, and the boycott of German goods (now extended to Austrian goods) in foreign lands, notably in the United States. He himself had suffered through the closing of a factory of which he had been manager. Controlled by German interests, it had

been closed after Anschluss as uneconomical. Things had been pretty bad until the outbreak of war, when the increase of employment on war work coupled with army mobilization had relieved the labor situation. He believed that, on the long pull, Austria would benefit economically by Anschluss, but she was going through a trying transition period.

That evening we went to one of the best-known music halls, where we saw a typical Viennese program, full of skits and jokes — many of them sharp knocks at current conditions. I expressed my surprise and said I did not think such latitude would be tolerated in Berlin. My hostess laughingly assured me that the Viennese must have their satirical jokes. It was an historic tradition, and the German authorities had been persuaded that they had best not sit on this characteristic Austrian safety-valve.

Another surprising matter was the number of officers and soldiers sitting together in gay parties throughout the audience. I had already noted instances of this in North Germany, but not to the same extent. Recalling as I did the rigid caste lines in both the old Imperial Army and the small professional Reichswehr established after the World War, it took me some time to get used to these evidences of social fraternization. The new trend is due to two causes. In the first place, it is part of the Nazi philosophy to break down class and caste distinctions, and weld the whole nation into a conscious Gemeinschaft — an almost mystical communion, as contrasted with the rest of the world. In such a socialized nationhood, the traditional caste barriers, first between officers and soldiers, secondly between army and civilians, are obviously out of line. The present German army is undoubtedly more of a Volksheer — a People's Army, than it ever was before. This new tendency is also furthered by the fact that with better education, specialization, and technical training of the rank-and-file, officers and men are more nearly on the same plane. The old Imperial Army, unmechanized and made up so largely of peasant lads commanded by Junker squires, was a vastly different institution.

Yet, despite all social changes, military discipline and authority do not seem to have suffered. No matter how friendly men and officers may be off duty, the heel-clicking and stiff saluting on duty are as punctilious as they ever were in the old days.

Next morning, the Major and I set off by military car to get my interview with the new Slovak President. The little Republic of Slovakia, so recently carved from the former Czechoslovakia, is technically an independent state, though actually it is a German Protectorate. The fiction of sovereignty is carried out in every detail. The Major and I had both sent our passports to the Slovak Consulate in Vienna to obtain visas for our one-day trip in a “*foreign*” land.



[Image] Danube Valley

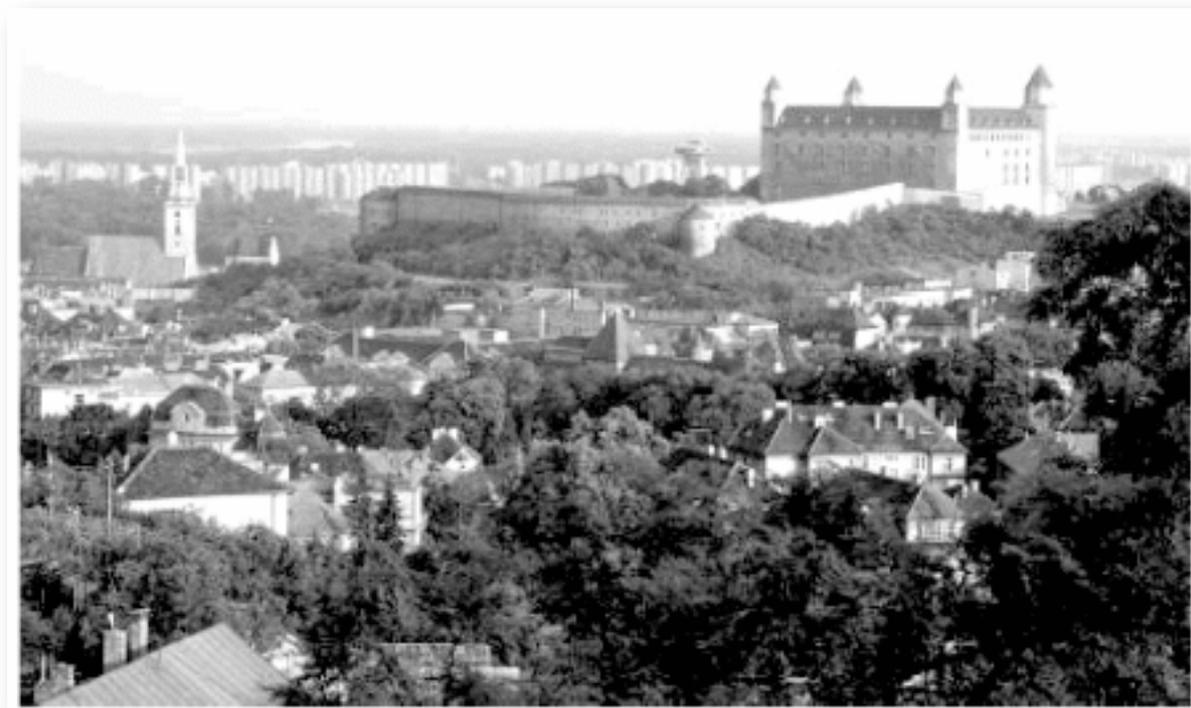
The fine weather of the past two days had given place to heavy clouds and spitting rain. Once out of Vienna, there was little to see except marsh and sodden fields as we motored down the Danube valley. To pass the time, I entered into conversation with our military chauffeur,

who was an unusual type — a man with an air of good breeding enhanced by slender hands and dark, well-cut features. I was surprised to learn that he was a German from the Caucasus, one of the few survivors of a flourishing colony established there long ago under the Czars but wiped out by the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution. Escaping as a boy, he had wandered in many countries, returning at last to the ancestral Fatherland which he had never previously seen. Incidentally, it is curious how often one encounters in Germany such persons come home from the Teutonic diaspora. Besides Austrian Adolf Hitler, four of the top-flight Nazi leaders were born abroad — Wilhelm Bohle in Britain, Alfred Rosenberg in Russia, Rudolf Hess in Egypt, and Walther Darre in the Argentine.

From Vienna to Bratislava is only an hour's quick run by motor car. For a national capital, Bratislava is most unhandily situated. It lies on the north bank of the Danube. On the south bank stretches the German Reich, while a few miles downstream is the Hungarian border. Bratislava is thus wedged narrowly between two foreign nations. Still, it's the only city in Slovakia, so there's no second choice. The rest of the little country is a jumble of mountains inhabited by a primitive and pious peasantry. When I called on the Minister of Foreign Affairs that same afternoon, his office windows looked out across the river directly at alien soil. Certainly a unique situation.

We arrived at the international bridge about noon. The usual formalities of passport and customs inspection were gone through with on the German side, plus money control. Although we were to be out of the Reich only a few hours, we had to leave our marks behind and thus quit German soil with no money except a little loose change. Fortunately we were to be the guests of the German Minister, so we did not have to go to the bother of getting Slovak currency. Incidentally, it was lucky we made the trip when we did. That very night Adolf Hitler was to have his narrow escape from being blown up by the bomb explosion in Munich which killed or wounded so many of his old companions-in-arms. Thereafter, for some days, I

understand that every frontier of the Reich was almost hermetically sealed.



[Image] Bratislava, capital of Slovakia

Crossing the massive bridge over the muddy Danube, our car came to a halt at the Slovak customs control. This did not take long, and we were soon motoring through the town on our way to the German Military Mission, where we were to check in. The people on the streets of Bratislava were distinctly Slavic in type, with broad faces and high cheekbones. Slovakia has a small army of its own, so I saw a few soldiers. They still wore the regulation Czechoslovak uniform, which is so like the American that they looked strangely similar to our own doughboys. All the business signs were in Slovak. The street signs were in both Slovak and German.

The Germans were apparently trying to avoid publicly ruffling Slovak sensibilities. The iron hand seems to be covered by a well-padded glove. Their Military Mission is inconspicuously tucked away in a modest villa on a side street; so is the Legation, to which we soon drove in order to meet the Reich's diplomatic representative. In fact, it

is too small to house the Minister and his numerous family. He is therefore obliged to live at Bratislava's one hotel.

The Minister is a clever man, as he has to be to fill so responsible a post. He is also a jovial soul, as I soon discovered when we began to swap jokes. Before long we adjourned to the hotel for lunch. That meal was an eye-opener to me. Slovakia is a neutral land which grows a surplus of foodstuffs, so rationing is unknown. What a joy it was to tuck into a Wiener Schnitzel with sour cream gravy, backed by vegetables with a good butter base! A momentary fly in the ointment appeared when a message was brought to our table that President Tiso might be unable to see me as arranged because he was closeted with Parliamentary leaders putting the last licks on Slovakia's new legal code. My face must have shown some dismay, but the Minister put a reassuring hand on my arm. "*Don't worry,*" he smiled, "*I'll get right on the phone and persuade him.*" Soon he was back. As he sat down, he remarked with a sly wink: "*He's persuaded.*" Accordingly, late afternoon found me hurrying from a call on the Foreign Minister to keep my rendezvous with Slovakia's clerical President. The newspapermen in Berlin had already told me that the reverend gentleman was a pretty tough political operator — more holy than righteous, as the saying goes. So I was curious.



[Image] Father Josef Tiso

The interview took place under conditions typical of this al fresco republic. Since the President's official residence is not yet ready, his temporary office is on the second floor of an apartment house. Two stolid Slovak sentries at the house entrance alone marked it off from other buildings in the block. In response to our summons a small boy opened the house door. I climbed a flight of stone stairs, rang a bell, and was promptly ushered into the Presence.



[Image] Hitler and Tiso meeting in 1943

The President was equally informal but by no means so unimpressive. Father Tiso is a big man — big head, broad face, broad shoulders, massive body, and legs like tree trunks. A typical peasant even in his black clerical garb, he is visibly rooted in the soil.

The many persons of Slovak origin in my native land naturally came to mind, so my first question was what message he had for them. The answer came quickly in a deep rich voice:

*“Tell my Slovak brothers in the United States that all goes well here; that we have peace again now that the Polish War is over; that order prevails, and that our new state will work out its national evolution by its own inner strength. I beg the Slovaks in America not to believe the many rumors I know to be current there about our situation. They simply aren’t true.”*

*“You mean, Mr. President,” I queried, “reports that Slovakia is merely a puppet state of the Reich?”*

Father Tiso smiled calmly. *“How long have you been in this country?”* he asked in turn.

*“About six hours,”* I admitted rather ruefully.

*“All right,”* he shot back quickly.

*“Stay here a week and travel through Slovakia. Then you’ll learn the answer yourself.”*

That seemed to settle that, so I tried a new tack.

*“How do Slovakia’s aims and ideals differ from the former Czechoslovakia, of which it formed a part?”*

*“Our aim,”* began President Tiso deliberately,

*“is the perfecting of Slovak nationality. Czechoslovakia was founded on the fiction of a Czechoslovak nation without the hyphen — that precious hyphen which we were promised from the first as an equal member of a dual nation. The Czechs gave us nothing to say. They claimed we were merely backward Czechs, whereas there are deep cultural differences between us. We have our own history, language, art, music, folk-songs. For centuries we defended this cultural heritage against foreign rulers. And on those deep-laid foundations we propose to build our own national life.”*

*“What sort of life?”* I countered.

*“Let’s take the practical angle. Will your economic development be individualistic business, peasant equality, or national socialism?”*

Again the President replied slowly.

*“It is true that today we are mainly a land of peasants. But the rapid increase of our population makes the development of industry an urgent necessity. However, we intend that industry shall serve the good of the whole nation — not merely its own good. So I may say that our economic aim is our special type of national socialism based on Christian principles and practices.*

*We know that capital must be allowed to earn a fair return. But we intend that the worker shall have a fair livelihood, with security against unemployment and unmerited poverty. The Government will interfere in industry to correct — but not to direct.”*

I turned to politics. “*Isn’t it true,*” I asked,

*“that you have some non-Slovak national minorities, especially Hungarians and Germans? How will you handle them?”*

“*We assure them cultural liberty,*” said the President.

*“They will have the right to their own language, education, and Parliamentary representation proportionate to their electoral voting strength.”*

“*Well, what about the Slovak majority?*” I queried.

*“How does it stand politically?”*

“*There is only one Slovak party in Parliament,*” answered President Tiso.

*“This is the National Party, until recently headed by our revered leader, the late Father Hlinka. In the recent elections, the Slovaks were unanimous, and the next elections will be five years hence. There is nothing in the Constitution to prevent the formation of new parties. But there aren’t any others just now.”*

So saying, this clerical President rose to indicate that he must return to his task of building a nation. “*A clever man,*” I thought to myself. “*He knows all the words.*” When I left the presidential apartment, night had fallen. But, in neutral Bratislava, night was normal. There was no blackout. How gay I felt to walk, even in a chill rain, along well-lighted streets with cheery shop-window displays and glimpses of folk dining or drinking comfortably in restaurants and cafes! You learn to prize the simplest amenities of peacetime when you have lost them for a while, even though that apparent peace may cloak an iron repression.

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# Version History

Version 1: Published Nov 27, 2014

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