Congress for Cultural Freedom

The first international Congress for Cultural Freedom symbolically was held in Berlin and lasted five days, from June 26 to 30. Attended by 150 delegates from countries all over the world, large audiences heard outdoor sessions. Dr. Eugen Kogon, noted editor-author and president in Germany of „Europa Union,“ is speaker. (Photos by Jacoby, PRD HICOG)

Review

By WOLF von ECKARDT

The five-day Congress for Cultural Freedom, which brought a distinguished array of prominent artists, writers and scientists from many lands to Berlin this past summer, turned out to be a far more dynamic event than the expected demonstration in behalf of cultural liberty.

Both timing and locale — the Congress which met 105 miles behind-the-Iron-Curtain coincided with the first disturbing news from Korea — set the spirit and gave this assembly of some 150 of the world’s leading minds a peculiar sense of urgency and determination.

The original broad general program of the Congress rapidly swerved from its non-political theme of upholding democratic cultural freedom to a resounding farewell to the concept of neutrality toward the totalitarian menace.

The idea for the Congress first originated in the mind of David Rousset, celebrated French socialist, who, while attending the Cultural Congress of the European Union held in Lausanne last year, said: “We should hold an international cultural congress of writers, artists, and thinkers, who are fully aware of their responsibilities to the world, and this congress should be held in Berlin.”

Rousset’s words provided the spark which kindled the plans for the Berlin Congress. The idea caught the imagination of such men as Germany’s Carlo Schmid and Eugen Kogon; America’s James Burnham; and leaders in world thought from many countries. A Secretariat was formed with American magazine editor Melvin J. Lasky as secretary-general. Invitations were issued to prominent intellectuals of various shades of political thought throughout the Western world for the fundamental Congress idea was that it was to be a representative gathering, not of the right, left or center, but of those who explored objective truth.

Congress organizers were faced with a variety of difficulties. Invitations had to be sent to a truly representative body of men, and many guests had to be convinced as to the free and objective nature of the forum which was to be established. On one hand, those of the political right wanted proof that this was not to be a Communist-inspired slogan-throwing contest. On the other hand, those of the left wanted to be assured that this was not to be a super-reactionary propaganda stunt. All insisted on maintaining the right of their own political convictions while engaging in free and unfettered discussions of the problems which were to be brought up at the Congress. As delegates arrived at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin on what has been called “the cultural airlift,” the necessity for a clear and unequivocal stand was by no means apparent to all. Not a few of the Europeans could be heard around pre-Congress dinner tables expressing anxiety lest the meeting impel them to adopt a forward position too far removed from sophisticated, contemplative detachment.
The pitch was set by British author Arthur Koestler during the ceremonious opening session held in the overcrowded Titania Palast theater. In a quiet, deep voice, devoid of demagoguery he lashed out against "the nimble-witted navigators in no-man's land... who preach neutrality toward the bubonic plague."

In vital emergencies like our present, Koestler said, "there are situations in which decisions are vital for spiritual and physical survival."

His Bible quotation, "Let your words be yea, yea, nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these, comes from evil," became a theme of the Congress of which speaker after speaker, in the course of long disputations, sounded his own variations.

COMBINED WITH the impact of Communist aggression in the Far East and the determined atmosphere of Free Berlin this theme caused notable men to descend from their traditional ivory tower and to join in a new community dedicated to a spirited fight for the preservation and extension of cultural freedom as inseparable from peace.

James Burnham, professor of philosophy at New York University, and one of the outstanding delegates from the United States, in conversation with Carmen de Guterbay, Spanish political refugee who resides in Paris and who was present at the congress as an unofficial participant.

Thus the Austrian atomic physicist Hans Thirring, for example, spontaneously cancelled the prepared speech in which he had urged understanding and tolerance of Communism. Those who managed to get hold of a copy of Thirring's lecture, which already had been mimeographed, could read an appeal to intellectuals to stop the cold war because "no country in the world needs peace more urgently to realize its grandiose plans than the Soviet Union." This assumption, the professor told the Congress, had become doubtful now.

During the same session, devoted to a discussion on "Science and Totalitarianism," Alfred Weber, well-known Heidelberg sociologist, announced that he was withdrawing immediately from membership in the German Academy of Science, located in Eastern Berlin, because he had learned that the Academy had sent a telegram of friendship and adulation to Stalin without prior consultation with its membership. Amid heavy applause the vigorous 83-year-old professor sharply criticized those West German intellectuals who still believed in co-operation with the East.

A FURTHER SYMBOL of the persuasive magnetism of the assembly was the unexpected arrival of Theodor Plivy, erstwhile Communist who defected not too long ago and who wrote his best-selling "Stalingrad" in his previous capacity of "honored writer of the Soviet Union."

"This conference has such great impact on the defense of cultural values and humanism that I just had to come," he explained.

The famous German writer must have become convinced, as were most others in the course of the discussions, that the meeting wanted nothing more or less than to discuss "the problems connected with cultural freedom without the usual blinders of fanaticism or propaganda," as the Italian writer Ignazio Silone put it.

This was possible because the Congress was not an official body but a free association of men and women who represented no one but themselves and who were — however divergent in their political, social, artistic and religious beliefs — drawn together by mutual respect.
In contrast to the rigid unity which Soviet-controlled cultural meetings in Breslau, New York and Paris displayed in their effort to hold a propagandistic monopoly over peace and culture, the Berlin Congress resulted in a creative association which drew its very strength from the diversity and richness of different opinions.

The two days of panel discussions devoted to "Science and Totalitarianism," "Art, Artists and Freedom," "The Citizens in a Free Society" and "The Defense of Peace and Freedom" provided, of course, ample opportunity for a heated manifestation of these differences.

They flared up in particularly bitter arguments over Arthur Koestler's contention that 'Left' or 'Right,' socialism or capitalism, had lost their meaning in today's world. "As long as Europe remains caught in these false alternatives which obscure clear thought, it will be impossible to find a constructive solution of the problems of our time," he explained.

Although the author of "Darkness at Noon" made quite clear that he intended neither to defend capitalism nor to attack socialism, the socialists were up in arms. Haakon Lie, the Norwegian labor leader, went far beyond a mere election speech on the virtues of socialism in Scandinavia and elsewhere when he touched on the dire necessity for social reform as a first line of defense against totalitarian extremism. He was seconded by David Rousset.

Other heated discussions were prompted by statements of the American political thinker Prof. James Burnham, Italian scholar Franco Lombardi, exiled Polish writer Joseph Czapski, British conservative Julian Amery, and several others of equal distinction.

The projected publication of the transcript of this meeting will bring out the various arguments and points made. Most speakers attempted to move on to new ideas in the realm of politics as well as culture and searched for new words to replace those which had become meaningless through cunning distortion and desperate abuse. As the discussion developed, prepared texts were cast aside in favor of a lively give and take miraculously conducted practically all at once in French, English and German.

The sessions took place in an attractive hall known as "Taberna Academica" and normally used as a dining and lecture hall by the students of Berlin's Technical University. The students seemed to enjoy the international intrusion and a great many of them volunteered, together with their fellows from the Free University, to render the Congress such technical services as running mimeograph machines, translating, ushering or just cheering.

In this they were joined by a veritable invasion of their less fortunate colleagues from Eastern universities, one of whom, representing a small resistance group at Leipzig, read the greetings of his group to the Congress. "This meeting of the leading representatives of the free world in the free and courageous city of Berlin has shown the group," the message said, "that we are not yet lost or forgotten."

The many people who could not attend the discussion in the overcrowded "Taberna Academica" had occasions to see the stars of the Congress during a variety of special meetings held at Berlin’s US Information Center and at the Free University. One of the most interesting meetings was devoted to a discussion of the

Arthur Koestler (right), celebrated British novelist, discusses the day's news with Mme. Suzanne Labin, French writer, and Carlo Schmid, vice president of the "Bundestag," the federal parliament of the German Federal Republic.
Negro question in the United States was attended by most of the American delegation: David Schuyler, editor of the Negro paper Pittsburgh Courier; Max Yergan, noted Negro writer on race relations; David C. Williams, of "Americans for Democratic Action;" and James T. Farrell, author of "Studs Lonigan" and other books.

Other prominent Americans attending the Congress included movie actor and radio commentator Robert Montgomery, who gave a much applauded lecture on art; Prof. Sidney Hook, who twice addressed the meetings in fluent German and took vigorous part in all major discussions, and Irving Brown, representative of the American Federation of Labor.

But as is inevitable at such large meetings, a great deal of the actual work was done behind the scenes, in the cafes and restaurants around Steinplatz, the seat of Congress headquarters, between acts of the splendid gala performance of Beethoven's "Fidelio," and at the festive reception in the City Guest House at Wannsee.

There the two main factions which had developed during the day's discussions, led by Arthur Koestler and James Burnham on one and David Rousset and Ignazio Silone on the other side, ironed out differences sufficiently to work out various plans for positive action to grow out of the Congress. These plans will assume concrete form when the permanent Committee for Cultural Freedom elected by the Congress meets in Paris this fall. This committee includes Silone, Rousset, Koestler, Irving Brown and Carlo Schmid, the German social-democratic parliamentarian.

Delegates sat until five o'clock one morning and spent a total of 10 strenuous hours working out a Manifesto for Cultural Freedom and other resolutions until they could be unanimously accepted. Their devotion was particularly taxed since these closed meetings took place in the Renaissance Theater where smoking is prohibited.

When Ignazio Silone was asked how he thought the Communists would react to the Congress he answered: "Like dogs — they will bark." They did.

Gerhart Eisler's propaganda headquarters in Goebbels' former ministry employed the usual list of kindly epithets including "literary monkey," "atom spy" and "Wall Street chain dog" to greet the participants, many of whom they had once counted among their comrades.

There was but one word the Communist press and radio omitted, perhaps reluctantly: the word "Fascist." For most of those who came to Berlin to unite in their efforts to combat the Communist brand of totalitarianism had, like Ignazio Silone, the French socialist David Rousset, or the Greek statesman Panayotis Kanellopoulos, a record in the resistance against the Fascist and Nazi variety.

From a leading German anti-Nazi the Congress heard what was perhaps the first public admission of German guilt, when Prof. Alfred Weber said: "Without belittling ourselves but in manly honesty we must state foremost: Nostra culpa, nostra maxima culpa. We must try to correct this guilt." Kanellopoulos, however, pointed out that the fight he led in Greece against both Fascism and Nazism had made him realize that totalitarianism was not native to any one people allegedly predisposed to this disease.

This recognition, reiterated by many others, prompted the Congress to tell itself and the world repeatedly that the event was by no means a cultural lineup of "West" against "East." The presence of a variety of cultural leaders from Iron-Curtain countries such as Nicolay An-
dreyev, Russian literary critic now teaching at Cambridge, England; Josef Czapski, Polish writer who spent years in Soviet concentration camps; Jerzy Giedroyc, also a Polish author who now lives in Paris; Mintauts Cakste, the son of the founding President of the Latvian Republic, and Salomon Schwarz, Russian economist now living in New York, emphasized that Slavic culture is as much the property of all mankind as are the accomplishments of the West.

THE HOST OF the Congress and frequent chairman of discussion meetings, Berlin's Mayor Ernst Reuter, received long applause from the 'Titania Palace' audience when he said in his opening address: "Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary belong to Europe as do our brothers in Russia, the land of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the land which has given such greatness to mankind."

This spirit of positive solidarity with the people of good will beyond the Iron Curtain was reiterated by many speakers of all nationalities and inspired a "Message to the East," extending greetings to the peoples of Russia and others oppressed by Stalinist dictatorship. It assured "all those who fight for freedom against oppression of unlimited solidarity." This message was read at the final public meeting of the Congress where Berliners also sat with respectful patience through a long speech the Russian exile Boris Nikolaevsky delivered to his people in his own language. To it Ernst Reuter added, also in Russian: "Long live freedom; long live the peoples of Russia!"

But the culmination of the work of the Congress for Cultural Freedom is its manifesto, a document which James Burnham said privately he hoped would be studied in all high schools and colleges in the United States and elsewhere.

It is dramatic evidence of a new and growing international solidarity of free intellectuals throughout the world sponsored by the leading philosophers of our day, Benedetto Croce of Italy, John Dewey of the United States, Karl Jaspers of Germany, Jaques Maritain of France and Bertrand Russell of Britain. The artists, writers, scientists, philosophers, journalists, churchmen, trade-unionists and publishers who issued this manifesto* on the tiny island of Free Berlin, have emphatically given the lie to the counterfeit slogans of the deceptive Communist "peace movement."

* For text, see page 18.

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**Europa Union Plebiscites**

which specific political and economic problems in Europe are presented in simple language, a door to door grass roots campaign of the same type as that used by the Communists, and the organization of a traveling exhibition designed to educate people on all-European questions.

According to Dr. Blessing, it is the credo of Europa Union that the greatest danger to Europe is not military, great as that may be, but ideological, and that Europe desperately needs a positive faith. According to him it is also evident that the arguments of competing political parties confuse rather than clarify this issue of faith, and that therefore it is up to the movement for European federation to fill the European ideological vacuum by promoting the concept of a strong European federation of free men. It is the position of Europa Union that Europe expects much from Germany in this endeavor, and that Germany must not be found wanting.

There is difference of opinion as to what the ultimate fate of Europa Union plans may be and as to the interpretation to be put on the results from Breisach and Castrop-Rauxel. However, few can take issue with the German newspaperman who wrote "(at Breisach) it was the voice of the people that was heard" and "after all the disillusionments of the past years, he (the common European) can be captivated by only one idol: Europe." Europa Union intends that statesmen shall take heed.