Political Humor Saves Hungarians

(Mrs. Cyrus Eaton Sr. is accompanying her husband on a tour of Europe, both east and west of the Iron Curtain. She is reporting her observations exclusively for The Plain Dealer.)

By ANNE EATON

BUDAPEST, Hungary — There's a new political joke here every day. A man went to a grocery store for tea. "Russian or Chinese? asked the grocer. "PLEASE, no politics," the man said, "just give me cocoa."

In this sophisticated Paris on the Danube they take their politics a la Art Buchwald, whose columns are often reprinted here. Walter Lippmann, is respected; Buchwald is their brother.

The poet Devecseri who has translated all of Homer and is now on Euripides (with some Tennyson and Keats thrown in) says, "Clouds gather and then they break up, in politics," and with more than 1,000 years of invasions and counter-invasions ("we have no really ancient buildings here, they're all burned, sooner or later") a certain humorous detachment about current events is possibly the only sane attitude for people who have seen everything twice.

AFTER THE WAR there was not one bridge left over the Danube which separates Buda and Pest. The last one to be rebuilt was angled slightly at one end to avoid spoiling a medieval church.

The gist of our talks with with the ministers of finance and trade, the foreign minister and Prime Minister Kadar himself is that they hope for an "enhancement" of trade between the United States and Hungary. Agricultural Hungary became industrial fast under socialism, and trade with highly industrialized nations is a natural next step beneficial to both. For instance, Hungary raises more food animals than it can raise corn for and would be a "stable buyer" of American grain surplusses.

In the five years since we last visited, the most striking change is in agriculture: the speedy way the richer farmers took to collectivization (instead of the poorer ones, as expected) surprised even the government. Contrary to every experience in other socialist countries, farm production the first year of collectivization increased, and the per capita income is 30% to 40% higher than before the war. No village is without electricity, refrigerators, washing machines, new houses and new roads, and with TV "it's getting so you can't tell a country girl from a girl from Budapest."

EACH YEAR $150,000,000 is invested in farm machinery, equipment and barns. Chemical fertilizer has greatly increased the food and canning industry which uses tin plate from England and West Germany and makes cans here. Complete plants for fertilizer, plastics and canning have been purchased from England first, then Belgium, France and Italy.

"Someone in Washington should know," it is said, "that although Hungary is a small 'firm,' all the socialist countries together make a big market, and we don't care who we deal with. West Germany, our largest market, trades with us not because they love us or like communism, but to stabilize their own markets. We are orderly buyers. Whatever else you may hear about Hungary, you will hear that we pay when we say we will. So the choice for the United States is not whether to love us or not, but whether to leave all the business to the West Europeans."

THE UNITED STATES NOT only will not give credit, its tariff on Hungarian goods is 35% contrasted to 15% on the same goods from other countries.

Our hotel is bulging with businessmen representing our allies whose war-damaged industries the American taxpayer rebuilt. They are obviously enjoying good business as well as good food, wine and gypsy violins in the elegant, excellent dining room. The orchestra can play anything from "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" to a Swiss yodel, and Hungary's own "Merry Widow Waltz" mists the international eye. Tourist trade is terrific (1,400,000 last year) and could be 10 times greater if there were more hotels—which it is hoped Americans the ministers of finance at the airport in five minutes on arrival.)

U.S. POLICY in Viet Nam is considered very dangerous: a case of getting more and more involved in a situation that will be harder and harder to get out of. Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko is here for urgent talks. Viet Nam and Santo Domingo are also reminiscent here of the U.S. action that put "the Hungarian question" on the U.N. agenda for six years: all three U.S. moves look like "a heavyweight boxer taking on a lightweight. Even if the heavyweight wins he'll look silly."