

Eduard Valenta:

MOVING A MOUNTAIN

When, on a misty summer morning in the year 1932, the Junker aeroplane in which Thomas Baťa was a passenger crashed behind the wall of the paper-factory in the immediate neighbourhood of the aerodrome, nobody knew that it was not the first time that the Shoe-king had come to grief over the low-lying meadowland in which he met his death. It was his second — and, this time, irremediable — defeat on this terrain.

Hard by this piece of meadowland flows the river Morava, which is now being made navigable as far as the Danube in order to provide Zlín with an outlet into the world. Up to the present, however, the river has done more harm than good, as from time to time it overflows its banks and floods wide areas.

In the same direction there runs a double-track railway mainline, with a road parallel to it; both are connected with Zlín. In this district there is water in plenty, and to spare, for tanneries, paper-factories, and similar enterprises, which drink up whole lakes. One day Thomas Baťa bought the piece of meadowland by the river Morava. There he was going to have those auxiliary enterprises that needed a lot of water and other things in which Zlín was lacking.

Not long after the purchase, a boilerhouse already stood there, and the first factory-buildings began to rise from the ground. A little later still, however, neither boilerhouse nor factory-buildings were to be found there. They were somewhere on their way to the Black Sea, and round about the foundation-walls the water stood nearly five feet deep. Baťa, beaten by his piece of land, stood on a little hill and watched hundreds of hares, which had found shelter on some of the islands that stuck up above the yellow flood, running timidly to and fro.

Any ordinary person would have said: "Ah well, I see that this con-founded bit of earth won't do for us. I've lost a good deal over it, but at least I shan't go throwing good money after bad." But Baťa was different. What he said was: "Look at those hares. Hundreds and thousands of years ago that is how they escaped from the water. If man



Washing away a mountain.

had no intelligence, in a hundred years' time he would run away from the water in exactly the same way. But God — praise be! — has planted intelligence in our skulls. We shall build those factories here, and nowhere else."

That was a big thing to say, but a far bigger thing to carry out. On the opposite bank of the river there rose wooded hills. Ample high-lying ground for building on was to be had there, where the water would never be able to reach. The only trouble was that nobody had the slightest wish to build factories over there.

"Men, make me a hill, like that one, on this bank of the river."

Across the river a bridge pushed its way. At the foot of the nearest hill, dynamite began to detonate and a power-shovel to chug. The wooden bridge trembled under the threatening weight of an uninterrupted file of lorries.

It soon became evident, however, that this was a struggle but not a victory. Every cubic metre of earth carried across the river cost, as could easily be calculated, eight Czechoslovak crowns, and at this rate the banking up of the meadow would swallow up a round thirty million crowns. No business enterprise can bear the strain of a dead investment costing such a high sum. So the work was abandoned and the building-operations for the new factory-quarter were transferred to a site further away from the river. The piece of meadowland remained waste and deserted; it was the scene of the crash that sent Bata to his death; and then, in 1933, there came the new man, Jan Bata, with the new idea:

"How would it be if we freed this bit of land for ever from risk of flood, by putting it under water?"

Superior smiles on every face. A man like this has, we know, so many

The mountain comes down into the plain.



worries on his shoulders nowadays that perhaps, though Heaven forbid, it has made him a little . . .

Then Jan Baťa explained his idea, and everyone at once saw that, far from being sheer nonsense, it was an idea in a million, and as simple as every really great idea is. Here stands the hill, with far more earth than is needed. To transport this earth in motor-lorries to the opposite bank is theoretically possible, but not practicable. We must approach the matter from another angle. Here we have the river. We shall turn the river onto the hill, and it will flow with its sediment onto this meadowland. The water is carried off, but the silt remains, as mud. Mud, however, is mud only so long as it is wet. When it dries, it becomes solid earth. It is admittedly awkward that the hill should stand on the opposite side of the Morava; but couldn't we quietly guide the flow of water to the other side of the river? What a lot of valuable mud the river can wash over to our side!

Calculations were made: thirty per cent. Well, we shall manage it cheaper: twenty, fifteen, let us say ten per cent. What does a cubic metre come to, at that rate? Two crowns, or perhaps a little dearer. How much faster can we work with water than with power-shovels and motor-lorries? Ha! instead of thirty millions it will cost only three millions. To work, quickly, then; that's how we shall do it. Men of science wrung their hands over this idea. But the men of Zlín lost no time in finding out which factories were in a position to supply them, within a few days, with pipes and pumps and everything else they needed. After many experiments and modifications, this is what the scene looks like, three months later, between the hill and the meadow:

At the foot of the hill stands a hut with the pump, which was already there, and at work, nine days after it had been ordered. With a thousand horse-power the pump sucks the water of the Morava into two thick pipes, large enough for a child to creep through, and forces it up into the quiet woods. The artificial torrent thus formed has begun to eat its way into the hill. Above the bridge over the Morava, at a height of twenty metres, a wooden conduit, lined with lead, has been built. It is a sort of second bridge, through which the muddy stream flows from one bank of the river to the other, and floods the piece of meadowland there.

Above, on the hill, the picture is one of utter devastation. Where woods once used to be, deep furrows now gape, as if tornados and a battery of the heaviest artillery had combined to do their destructive work. The paths through the trees come out, abruptly, to the edge of a drop of ten metres, at the foot of which a strong current tears deeper and deeper furrows into the soft earth — uninterruptedly, at the rate of twenty-two thousand litres a minute, thirty-two million litres a day. In one month that is as much as would be needed to fill a lake one kilometre long, two hundred metres wide, and five metres deep. On the bank of this torrent stand eight men with hosepipes, from which shoot powerful jets of water. These jets are played onto the furrows torn in the hill-face, where they bore and burrow and wash the earth, bit by bit, into the turbulent torrent, which carries it, rumbling and thundering, high above the river Morava, through the wooden conduit, and onto

The artificial torrent.



the other bank. Along the conduit stand men with poles, with which they dislodge anything — tree-root or branch or whatever it may be — that hinders the free passage of the turbid water.

The water sweeps everything along with it. It is only when big blocks of stone and rock check progress that the help of dynamite, lorries, and rails is necessary. This is a hard job that is being carried out here, and a dirty one; but it is a success. The people engaged in it speak, wading deep in mud and detritus, of the asphalted streets that it will be possible in a few years' time to build, on the other side of the river, over this mud, and that they will be able to walk along in patent leather shoes. That part of the meadowland opposite has already been raised two metres, and in two months the water has accomplished more than petrol did in four years. The fight for the meadow, this furious struggle now in its third round, is going badly for the swamp.

The mountain is coming to Mahomet, as Mahomet has not come to the mountain.

("Lidové Noviny", Brno, October 1933.)

Building the ship-canal between Bařov and Zlín, which in future will effect communication with the waterway of the river Danube and thus afford an outlet into the Black Sea.

