

TRIBULATIONS OF IRON CURTAIN GOLF

A "monument to nose-thumbing," as its founder describes it, stands on the hills of Old Buda, overlooking the Danube River and Pest on the other side. It's a four-hole golf course, known as the "Air Free Golf Club", for reasons having to do with its location deep behind the Iron Curtain.

The founder is Christian M. Ravndal, former U. S. Minister to Hungary and the kind of golf enthusiast who isn't to be deterred by a Communist government's dislike for the game. The club has been in operation since 1952 and among its members is President Eisenhower. The President acknowledged the gift of life membership in a letter that has been framed and now hangs in the clubhouse. Expressing his warm thanks, he commented that, unfortunately, he didn't think he would be able to get around to playing the course.

When Ravndal arrived at his post in Budapest, in December, 1951, there were eight holes left of what had been the Hungarian Golf Club's magnificent eighteen-hole course. By Easter, 1952, there were only five holes. The government had taken the land of the other three for military buildings.

Five Hours To Leave

"One day I was playing with Joe Stammel, the pro, when the Hungarian War Minister and a Russian general came along and gave us five hours to clear out everything," Ravndal recalls.

He immediately decided to see whether something could be done with some near-by property bought by the United States Government in 1947. It was to have been the site of residences for the Legation staff; the Congress of the United States had, however, halted all government building in Iron Curtain countries.

The Germans and Russians had fought

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over the property in 1914, during the battle for Budapest. Where there wasn't a jungle of bushes and trees, there were huge bomb craters, smashed-up stables and various other hindrances to building a golf course.

Paying for everything out of their own pockets, the Minister, his counsel, Sidney Lafoon, and other members of the Legation hired Stammel as their pro and told him to see what he could do. Joe and some Hungarians cleared the jungle by hand. They filled in bomb craters. They got rid of dozens of hand grenades, one of which exploded just after Joe threw it away. And they had four holes ready for play by July, 1952.

Par Is 48

Hole number one is a 90-yard shot, slightly uphill, with a small, bunkered green and trees on right and left. Number two is 120 yards, number three a hefty 170 yards, and number four another 120 yarder. The score cards are made out for sixteen holes to a round. Par is 48 and Stammel holds the course record of 45.

The course is amazingly well kept, thanks to Joe, who supervises all the details and gives lessons besides. Grateful members are continually improving the club. Lafoon donated the men's locker room and the Legation's Marine guards contributed the money to wire the clubhouse for electricity. The club has become self-supporting and now sports a swimming pool and a tennis court.

Practice Shooting—For Skeet!

Ravndal has some amusing recollections about getting the court built. "Joe needed some sod for the greens," he said. "So I asked the Hungarians if we could buy the sod from the greens of the old golf course. They told us the greens were needed for their own people practicing for the Olympics. I was curious to see and went out to take a look. They were practicing all right—skeet shooting!"