THE LAST YEARS OF ANAGARIKA DHARMAPALA

by

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Anagarika Dharmapala (1864 - 1933) undoubtedly is the greatest Sinhala Buddhist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and one of the greatest Sri Lankans of all time. In some ways he was a veritable Mahatma Gandhi, and in his turn has been compared to Emperor Asoka, Dutugemunu and Parakramabahu I, and to Anathapindika Setthi, the great benefactor of Gautama Buddha. His life of sixty eight years was a period of ceaseless activity. spanning two centuries, and encompassing the length and breadth of Sri Lanka, India, Europe, USA and East and South-East Asia. His vision of an independent Sri Lanka was far reaching and all embracing. So was his vision of a Buddhist India. Like Gandhi, who without occupying any political office (other than that of President of All India National Congress), became the most influential politician of his time, Dharmapala also without being directly involved in national politics, nevertheless played a very crucial and decisive role in the political and social changes in Sri Lanka during the last few decades of the nineteenth, and the first few decades of the present century. In fact, his impact has been felt long after his death, right down to this day.

Dharmapala has left behind a wealth of source material pertaining to his life and activities. He was a profilic writer of essays, articles and private correspondence. He published a weekly newspaper in Sinhala (Sinhala Bauddhaya) and a periodical in English (Maha Bodhi Journal) both of which carried regular contributions from him. His speeches, easily running into a few thousands, have been reported in some form or other in the contemporary newspapers, both here and sometimes abroad. He himself maintained a diary, in which his thoughts, activities and other incidental things were meticulously recorded, practically every day of his adult life. In spite of all this abundant source material, his most fascinating life and personality, and his incomparable and inestimable service to the country and to Buddhism, not a single scholarly work on his remarkable career has appeared to this day, even after the lapse of more than half a century since his demise. The only exceptions, however, are two collections of some of his speeches, letters and writings in Sinhala and English, published during his birth centenary in 1964, a more recent short treatise in Sinhala on Dharmapala's socialist ideas, and a few popular biographies of very modest proportions, also in Sinhala and English

(see Bibliography). In this short article, it is attempted to present Dharmapala as a Samanera, or one who has been initially ordained as a Bhikkhu, and as a 'Navaka' who has undergone the Higher Ordination or Upasamapda.

Dharmapala was born on the seventeenth of September 1864 and was named Don David Hewavitharne. Twenty one years later, in 18851 he wrote to his parents expressing his desire to remain unmarried and to continue till the end of his life as a Brahmacārin. He assumed that being a Brahmācārin he could devote his whole life in the service of humanity. His needs were such that he felt contented with a monthly allowance of five rupees from his wealthy parents. Beginning with the giving up of cating meat and fish at the age of twenty2 he began a gradual process of renunciation of material things, which reached its final climax with his Higher Ordination, forty seven years later in 1933. His decision to become a Brahmacarin was accompanied by his rejection of some of the Western-Christian trappings around him, by changing his name to Dharmapala Hewavitharne. Before long he stopped calling himself Hewavitharne; instead he designated himself Anagārika or 'homeless' Dharmapala. He continued to be known by that name till he bacame a Samanera in 1931, which marked another landmark in his life. With that event he became Siri Devamitta Dhammapāla, signifying his final severing of secular ties and also his abandonment of the Sanskritic 'Dharmapala' in preference to its Pali version.

Writing to his parents in 1885 Dharmapala had mentioned that although he cherished the idea of becoming a Bhikkhu he was desisting from doing so, because it would only serve one's own personal spiritual advancement whereas by being a Brahmacarin or Anagarika, one could serve humanity better. By way of analogy he cited the ascetic Sumedha who declined nirvāna or a cessation of his sansaric existence, in preference to service for all worldly beings. Perhaps this inclination of Dharmapala was due to his close association with the more eclectic theosophist movement which he served in various capacities for nearly five years (1886 - 1890). And at the same time, on his own admission, he wanted to follow the example of the Bodhisattva³. However, even after severing his association with the Theosophists and identifying himself exclusively with the Buddhist movements, he continued to hold to his earlier views and remained as Angarika for another forty years. All that time, however, he steeped himself in Buddhism, sought the spiritual company and scriptural guidance of erudite and pious Mahātheras, and also actively encouraged young lay persons of promise to become Bhikkhus and assist him with his work in India and in other parts of the world. Unlike other lay persons, he had the moral courage and scriptural knowledge to admonish errant and devious Bhikkhus and to advise them on the correct observance of the Vinaya (rules), and also on the proper application of their energies and experience for the good of the Buddha Sāsana. In doing so, he often contrasted the slothful and lazy attitude of some of the Bhikkhus of his day with the selfless service and dedication of other religionists, especially the Christian missionaries.

The decision of Dharmapala to refrain from becoming a Bhikkhu may have also been motivated by other considerations, such as the need to maintain control, supervision and utilisation of material resources which he had inherited, as well as obtained from benefactors, both local and overseas. However, according to the Vinaya, engagement in financial transactions is forbidden to Bhikkhus, and should be left in the hands of lay persons. The considerable parental properties and wealth which Dharmapala had inherited were administered either by himself or by those delegated with such authority, and all of which were utilised for religious and national enterprises. His persuits also took him to many corners of the world, and brought him into close association with both lay men and women. In fact some of his greatest benefactors and collaborators were women, such as Madame Blavatsky and Madame Foster Robinson. Therefore as long as he had the energy and the tenacity to engage himself in this ceaseless activity to uplift the Buddha Sasana, and the Sinhala nation, he may have felt that he could better serve these causes by remaining outside the more restrictive fraternity of Bhikkhus. This surmise is further confirmed by the fact that when he finally decided to become a Bhikkhu he had almost come to the end of his active life, having achieved most of the things he set out to do, and having renounced all interest in national affairs.

In 1929 (3 April) his younger brother, Dr. C. A. Hewavitharne was travelling by car to meet Dharmapala, having been urgently summoned by him. Unfortunately the car collided with a moving train, instantly killing Dr. Hewavitharne. This was a terrible blow to Dharmapala. His other two brothers had predeceased him, Simon in 1913 and Edmond in 1915. In fact Dr. Hewavitharne had sacrificed his own professional career and thrown his full weight into the work initiated by his eldest brother. He was the constant companion and confidente of Dharmapala, and was by his side in his most trying moments, and was like a solid rock on which Dharmapala could lean against during periods of stress and impending crisis. This brother was also Dharmapala's personal physician, who constantly watched over his frail and fragile physical condition. An equally devastating blow also occurred in the same year, when his greatest benefactor and foster mother (Deveni mavu kenek)4 Madame Foster Robinson of Honolulu, also passed away. These two calamities, coming one after the other, may have made Dharmapala conscious of his own

fraility and premonition of impending death. His mental and physical condition seems to have been further aggravated by a sense of despondency and despair, and a feeling of rejection, resulting from certain developments in his own country, such as hostile criticisms directed at him by those who had been close to him and who had enjoyed his affection and benefaction, and also the twists and turns in national politics in the 1920s, very much contrary to his expectations. The cumulative result of all these factors was that in 1930 he was suddenly struck down with a serious heart condition, while still in Sri Lanka. Death had seemed so imminent that Dharmapala had wished himself to be rushed to Maligakanda Vihara, which was also the headquarters of the Maha Bodhi Society of which he was the founder, so that he could breathe his last with his eyes focussed on the Buddhist shrine there.

However, having survived this brush with death, Dharmapala decided to return to India, as soon as his health would permit him. In anticipation he entrusted all his wealth in Sri Lanka to a Trust nominated by him, and then planned to leave for India on the 15th of January 1931. Due to the uncertainty regarding his health, the date was postponed to March, and following medical advice, the journey from Colombo to Calcutta was undertaken by steam ship on the 5th of March 19315. But before his departure he attended the last public appearance on Sri Lanka soil, when he addressed a large and eager crowd which had come to hear him, at the Vidyodaya Pirivena in Colombo. Later some of the public figures of the time including Sir D. B. Jayatilaka had entertained him to lunch. Dharmapala himself did not wish to return to Sri Lanka which had almost forsaken him, and looked forward to his death in India, which was his adopted home and where he also wished to be reborn, not once, but twenty five times⁷. Having left Sri Lanka in 1931, Dharmapala was destined not to return to the land of his birth.

After Dharmapala's return to India he set about making arrangements to sever any remaining connections with material concerns, by entrusting them to those whom he could trust, and whom he had groomed for this eventuality. But not withstanding his health he continued to exert himself in ecclesiastical matters, such as the setting up of a Samanera Vidyalaya at Isipatana, Sarnath, constructing the Mulagandhakuti Vihara also at the same place, and in the welfare of the Samaneras in India, who were his dear wards. His concerns, as evident from some of his letters written during 1932 - 33, did not stop there, but even extended to plants and pet animals, and even to inanimate objects such as flower ponds. Whenever his health permitted him, he undertook visits from Calcutta to Sarnath, because this in particular had a rejuvenating effect on him⁸. The day that Dharmapala would eventually join the Order of Bhikkhus finally arrived

on the 13th of July 1931, when he had reached the advanced age of sixty seven years. His ordination was performed in accordance with the traditional rites and observances as followed by the Siam Nikaya in Sri Lanka. The only exception was that it was being performed on foreign soil, at Sarnath in India. The ordination ceremony was conducted by Ven. Borukgamuve Sri Revata, head of the Subhadrarama, Gangodawila, Sri Lanka, and he was assisted by other Bhikkhus resident at Sarnath. Ven. Revata himself became the Acariya or teacher of the new Samanera. On joining the Order of Bhikkhus Dharmapala was given the name of Siri Devamitta Dhammapala. The choice of this unpretentious epithet 'Siri Devamitta' is rightly attributted to his respect for a former venerable teacher at the Vidyodaya Pirivena, by the name of Ven. Heiyantuduwe Sri Devamitta, who had unsuccessfully tried to persuade young Don David to join the Order, while imparting him religious instruction. His choice of the Acariya from whom he would obtain ordination also confirms this conclusion, in that Ven. Sri Revata was himself a pupil of Ven. Sri Devamitta9 However, it can also be speculated that he may have chosen an epithet reminiscent of the equally unpretentious epithets "Devanam Piya Piyadasi" - adopted by Asoka after he was converted to Buddhism. Whatever the reason be, it indeed would have been a subtle but sharp rebuke on all those Bhikkhus who have presumptious and pretentious titles of considerable length gharishly adorning their names.

Ven. Dharmapala continued as a Samanera for a period of nearly one and a half years, during which time he saw the fulfilment of some of his cherished dreams, such as the completion of the construction of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara at Sarnath (opened for worship on 11th November 1931) and the Samanera Vidyalaya, also at the same place. The former in fact is one of the most eloquent and enduring monuments to the memory of Dharmapala. The formal opening ceremony of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara was conducted jointly by Ven. Kahave Sri Sumangala Ratanasara, Head of the Vidyodaya Pirivena and Ven. Lunupokune Sri Dhammananda, Head of the Vidyalankara Pririvena, the two premier Buddhist educational institutions in Sri Lanka at the time. The public meeting which followed had been attended by many Indian and foreign dignitaries, including Jawaharlal Nehru¹⁰.

Following the ordination in July 1931 Ven. Dhammapala had returned to Calcutta, where he continued to undergo medical treatment. He also agonised over the unfriendly activities of some of his former associates and subordinates, and also some of the Bhikkhus in whom he had reposed his confidence and expectations, in regard to the continuation of his work, particularly in India and U. K. Those who still remained with him, especially the Samaneras at Sarnath, he tried to instill in them a sense

of dedication, scholarship and good conduct. He exhorted them in every letter written from Calcutta to unfailingly attend to their priestly duties, to maintain internal and external purity and cleanliness, to practice maitri bhāvanā (meditation on Loving Kindness, and expeditiously master Bengali, English, Hindi, Pali, Urdu, and even Siamese. He himself claimed that he mastered Siamese in a few days, so that he could read the Siamese Tripitaka, gifted by the King of Siam (Thailand)¹¹. Among other such claims was that Dharmapala had read from cover to cover both the Bible and the Koran, and he wished the Bhikkhus to do the same.

On 22 August 1931 in a letter to Sarnath, Ven. Dhammapala indicated his plans to return there. But it did not come about, as his health began to deteriorate. For most of 1931 and 1932, he was forced to remain in Calcutta. While being confined to bed he persisted in following his usual routine of getting up very early in the morning and engaging in writing continuously for hours¹². He was also a voracious reader, as implied by his references to new books, in his weekly column in the Sinhala Bauddhaya¹³.

By April 1932, once again death appeared to be an imminent prospect so much so that he advised the Samaneras that in the event of his death to remain friendly and united and to continue with their studies at Isipatana. In spite of his failing health, his attention continued to be drawn to his most memorable battle ground, Buddhgaya, where he saw the chances of consolidating previous gains through the intervention of Bhikkhus who would stay there and constantly attend to religious observances. Writing in June 1932¹⁴ he still yearned to return to Isipatana, his health permitting. While he was afflicted with sickness, he was also tormented by thoughts of failure, especially in his investment in human resources, in trying to equip them morally, intellectually and spiritually, to shoulder the responsibilities for which they were being groomed. The desire to breathe his last at Isipatana was strong in him, so much so that he wished, like the Buddha who travelled from Pava to Kusinara with the approaching Parinirvana, to undertake the long journey, even ignoring the discomfort that would be caused, and in defiance of doctor's strict orders. Subsequent plans to visit Isipatana in July also had to be abandoned due to his weak heart and other ailments. As he lay awake in the nights with sleep beyond his grasp, his frequent therapy was to practice maitri bhavana¹⁵.

As the year 1932 was coming to an end, Ven. Dhammapala was once again getting ready to leave Calcutta for Sarnath. Although he did not look forward to returning to Sri Lanka, his concern for the Sinhala Buddhists had not diminished as reflected by his repeated instructions to young Samaneras in India to write regularly to Sinhala Bauddhaya. He himself was distressed to learn about the hardships of his compatriots, owing to the

prevailing world - wide economic depression and its effects on Sri Lanka¹⁶. As the year wore on steps were also being taken to perform Upasampada or the Higher Ordination for his exclusive benefit, as requested by the Maha Bodhi Society and the trustees of the Ven. Dhammapala's bequests. This in itself was an unprecedented event in the history of Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka. Ven. Dhammapala himself mentions that since the Muslim invasions of India, there had been no Upasampada there¹⁷. There have been instances in the past when such ceremonies were conducted in Sri Lanka by Bhikkhus coming from Burma and Thailand, and also of Sri Lankan Bhikkhus travelling to the same countries in search of Ordination. But at no time were Sri Lankan Samaneras being ordained by Sri Lankan Bhikkhus on foreign soil. However, owing to the delicate health of Ven. Dhammapala a new tradition was being created. It is also speculated that because Anagarikas' mother was not of the Goigama caste, the members of the Siyam Nikaya may have resorted to this innovation of performing the Upasampada on foreign soil.

According to the Theravada - Mahavihara tradition a Samanera after Higher Ordination becomes a 'Navaka', and only after ten successive years or Vassas, would qualify to be a 'Thera', and only after an equally long period would a 'Thera' graduate to the position of a 'Mahathera'. The conducting of the Upasampada had to be performed at a specially designated place or $Sim\bar{a}$, which was also wanting in India. This required that the $Sim\bar{a}$ be first established by accredited Bhikkhus before the Upasampada. Since the requisite number of Bhikkhus were not available in India at the time they also had to be brought over from Sri Lanka, probably at a considerable cost. The need for a $Sim\bar{a}$ had already been expressed by those Bhikkhus who attended the previous ordination in July 1931, perhaps in anticipation of the Upasampada of Ven. Dhammapala¹⁸.

According to the documents attested by those who participated in these historic events, a party of seventeen Bhikkhus accompanied by four lay persons had left Colombo on the 9th of January 1933, and reached Benares on the 15th, via Madras, Calcutta and Buddhagaya. Since no mention is made of Ven. Dhammapala joining them in Calcutta, it could only be presumed that he had preceded them to Sarnath. However, he had been in very poor health, being confined to bed, and for most of January had been on a liquid diet of orange juice, sour milk and powder milk¹⁹. On the following day (16th) at the appointed time Ven. Dhammapala gifted to the Maha Sangha, with the traditional water pouring ceremony, the piece of land demarcated for the Simā in which the Upasampada would take place. Having formally established the Simā, the same seventeen theras then conducted with due solemnity the Higher Ordination of Ven. Dhammapala. Among those present to witness this ceremony were two groups of pilgrims from Japan and Tibet. According to Ven. Dhammapala three historic events took place at about the same time at Isipatana, namely the establishment of a Simā, the Upasampada and the receiving of Buddha's relics from the British authorities in India.

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The seventeen Bhikkhus from Sri Lanka were a very representative and august group, being drawn from the Malwatta Vihara, Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Pirivenas, Subhadrarama, Gangodawila and other leading Pirivenas and Viharas in the island. Malwatta Chapter of the Siyam Nikaya itself was represented by the Anunayaka. All the names and designations of visitors from Sri Lanka are recorded²⁰ in the Sandesaya (memorandum) prepared for the occasion. Ven. Dhammapala in his turn submitted his own Sandesa to the Mahanayaka Theras, profoundly thanking them for their generosity and consideration for him, and in concluding expressed his desire to see his work being continued uninterruptedly, and for which purpose he gifted to the Maha Sanghathe custody and administration of all the Buddhist sites and establishments in India, of which he had been the custodian (24).

According to an official certificate issued for the occasion Ven. Madugalle Sri Siddhartha, the Anunayaka Maha Thera of the Malwatta Chapter, officiated as the Upadhyaya and Ven. Haramitigala Sri Ratnapala Dhirananda Maha Thera and Ven. Mabopitiye Pundit Medhankara Thera, officiated as the Karmacharyas for Ven. Dhammapala on this historic occasion, and they solemnly certified the successful completion of the Upasampada (see text).

Ven. Dhammapala unfortunately did not long survive this historic event. At the time he was sixty eight years and four months, and was not in a state of stable health. Perhaps with his last wish also fulfilled, he did not desire to prolong his fading life. Neither did he return to Calcutta, but remained in Sarnath in anticipation of his death on this sacred ground. It is however remarkable that while being so afflicted he continued to write his weekly column to Sinhala Bauddhaya, and as many private letters as possible, with no regard for the resultant physical and mental strain.22 February 1933 had been a very bad month indeed, because it brought him sad tidings of a betrayal by his own compatriots of his long arduous struggle to recover Buddhagaya, when they agreed with the Governer-General of India to renounce all claims to Buddhist sacred sites not in the sole custody of Buddhists at the time²³. Thus wracked by illness and despondency, he was seriously stricken again in March and was emphatic that no more money should be wasted on medicines, but rather that also be utilised for Buddhist activities, for the promotion of which he had strived so long and so hard. For a few weeks he lingered on in this condition, and finally on the 29th of April 1933, breathed his last, and as he wished with his gaze fixed on the Mulagandhakuti Vihara, and was cremated at the same spot, few days later.

Text of the Upasampada certificate

ශී බුද්ධ වර්ෂ 2476/ශත වර්ෂ 1854/කිස්තු වර්ෂ 1933

ශ් ලංකාද්වීපයෙහි මහනුවර උපෝෂිත පුෂ්පාරාම කාරක මහා සංඝ සභාවේ සම්මතයෙන් වැඩම කළ සහාමොපාලි මහා නිකායේ මහා සංඝයාවහන්ටස් විසින් දඹදිව බරණැස් නුවර ඉසිපනනාරාමයෙහි සම්මත කොට වදාළ බද්ධසීමා මාලකයෙහිදි ශ් බුද්ධ වර්ෂ 2476 වැන්නෙහි දුරුතු මස අවවිසේනීය ලත් සපුදින නොහොත් කිස්තු වර්ෂ 1933 ජනවාරි මස 16 වැනි දින රාතියේ පළමුවැනි පැය වේලාවට සංඝරාජ පරිවේනාධිපති පවර නෙරුත්තික විනයාවාර්ය මඩුගල්ලේ සිරි සුමන ධම්මසිද්ධ සිද්ධාත්ථාභිධාන සෞමෝපාලි මහනිකායේ අනුනායක මහා සථවිර පාදයන් වහන්සේ සිද්ධාත්ථාභිධාන සෞමෝපාලි මහනිකායේ අනුනායක මහා සථවිර පාදයන් වහන්සේ සිද්ධාත්ථාභිධාන නායක මහාසථවිරපාදයන් හි සද්ධර්මවාශීශ්වරවාය නි රතනපාල ධරාතන්දාභිධාන නායක මහාසථවිරපාදයන් වහන්සේ සහ සංඝරාජ පිරිවෙණහි උපපුධානාවාය ශ් හී වර්ධනාරාමාධිපති මාබෝපිටියේ පණ්ඩින මෙධංකරාභිධාන සථවිර පාදයන් වහන්සේත් කම්මාවාය වීව ඉසිපනන මූලගන්ධකුටි විහාරාධිපති සිරිදේවමින්න ධම්මපාල තැනුගේ උපසම්පදා මංගලාය සිද්ධ කළාදෙන.

උපාධානයයන් වහන්මස්ගේ අත්සන.

M. Siddhattha.

කම්මාචාය්‍රීයන් වහන්මස්ලාගේ අත්සන්;

H. Sri. R. Dhirananda.
M. Medhankara.
ශී බුද්ධ වර්ෂ 2476 වැන්නෙහි
දුරුතු මස අටසැටවකලත් කුජ දින ඉසිපතන මූලගන්ධකුටි විහාරයේදීය.

Buddhist Era 2476; Saka Era 1854; Christian Era 1933

This is to certify that following the decision of the Karaka Maha Sangha [Sabha Executive Committee,] of the Uposhita Pushparama, in Kandy, in the Island of Sri Lanka, the Maha Sangha of the Syamopali Maha Nikaya, having travelled to India, and within the precincts of the Sacred Sima established by them at the Isipatanarama, in the city of Benares, in India, conducted the Higher Ordination Ceremony of Venerable Siri Devamitta Dhammapala, Head of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara, at Isipatana, at the first hour, in the night of Monday the fifth day of the waning moon in the month of Duruthu in the year 2476 of the Buddhist era or on the 16th day of January, 1933, with the reputed etymologist and (exponent of) Vinayacharya Venerable (Maha Thera) Madugalle Sirisumana Dhammasiddhi Siddhartha, Anunayka Mahathera of the Syamopali sect. officiating as upadhyaya (teacher), and the Venerable Sri Saddharmavagisvaracariya Ratanapala Dhirananda, Nayaka Maha Thera, Principal of the Sastralankara pirivena, and Venerable Pandita Mabopitiye Medhankara Thera, Vice - principal of the Sangharaja Pirivena, and the Head of the Sriwardhanarama, officiating as Karmacariyas (preceptors) of Venerable Siri Devamitta Dhammapala.

Signature of the Upadhyaya M. Siddhattha
Signatures of the Karmacariyas H. Sri. R. Dhirananda M. Medhankara

Tuesday, the sixth day of the waning moon in the month of Duruthu the illustrious Buddhist Era 2476, at The Mulagandhakuti Vihara, Isipatana,

FOOT NOTES

- 1. Sinhala Bauddhaya (hereafter SB), Vesak Kalapaya 10.05, 1930, p. 3. In some instances this event is also dated in 1886.
- 2. SB., 24.12 1932, p. 6.
- 3. SB., Vesak Kalapaya, 10. 05. 1930. p. 3.
- 4. SB., 24. 01. 1931, p. 1.
- 5. SB., 14. 02. 1931, p. 7.
- 6. SB. 07. 03. 1931, p. 7.
- 7. SB. 07. 03. 1931, p. 7.
- 8. SB. 02. 05. 1931, p. 9.
- 9. *SB*. 04. 07. 1931, p. 7.
- 10. SB., 21. 11. 1931, p. 1.
- 11. Letter dated 04 July 1932 (private collection).
- 12. SB., 24. 12. 1932, p. 1.
- 13. SB., 06. 08. 1932, p. 12.
- 14. Letter dated 02. 06. 1932 (private collection).
- 15. Letter dated 06. 08. 1932 p. 4. (private collection)
- 16. Letter dated 04. 07. 1932 (private collection).
- 17. S.B, 07. 01. 1933. p. 1.
- 18. SB., 25. 05. 1931, p. 7; 23. 07, 1932. p. 6.
- 19. SB., 07. 01. 1933, p. 6.
- 20. SB., 28. 01. 1933, p. 6.
- 21. SB., 04. 02. 1933, p, 1.
- 22. SB., 04. 02. 1933, p. 8.
- 23. SB., 18. 03. 1933, p. 1; 01. 04. 1933, p. 7.

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