

The crown, the coup and the crunch

When just 23 years old he masterminded a coup d'état which delivered his country from nazi invaders and brought him international acclaim.

Four years later he had to watch helplessly as the Russians took over his country and dethroned him — a victim of the postwar deliberations which gave the communists free rein in Eastern Europe.

King Michael of Rumania — now living in forced exile — and his wife Queen Anne are in South Africa at the joint

invitation of the homeland leaders and Moral Rearmament.

On March 3 King Michael addressed the Lebowa Legislative Assembly at Seshego, and in a short speech he recalled the events of 1944 and 1948 when he saved Rumania from one invader only to see his country lost to another.

"I became King of Rumania at the age of 18 years," he told the Assembly. "It was just before World War 2, and a pro-Nazi fascist dictator had seized the reins of government."

"For three years I struggled to find a way to

save the freedom of my people. Finally we managed to get rid of him, and freedom seemed to be within our grasp.

"But then the Russians came in and supported the communists, and once more we were up against a totalitarian regime."

"For three more years I fought to save our freedom, but finally the palace was surrounded by tanks and I was forced to leave my country."

Quiet, withdrawn, but a tall figure of dignity, King Michael played down his dramatic role in liberating Rumania.

He mentioned none of his feelings at being sum-



The King and Queen of Rumania stroll arm in arm through the garden of the house they stayed in while they were in Johannesburg.

On a visit to South Africa, King Michael of Rumania recalls how he rid his country of one invader only to be driven out by the tanks of another which surrounded his palace. ANTHONY DUIGAN reports.

moned early one morning in September 1940 to take over the throne of Rumania without any preparation or notice after his father, King Carol, was forced out by the Rumanian dictator, General Antonescu.

Figurehead

"I inherited a situation where I was a figurehead king — Antonescu had stripped away most royal powers and had invited the German Army into the country," King Michael said.

As Rumania was dragged towards disaster by General Antonescu's declaration of war on Russia, the political leaders looked to King Michael as their saviour.

"Our aspirations were with the Allies in the war, and we had clandestine contact with them in Turkey and Egypt," he said.

In August 1944 King Michael set a trap for Antonescu and his prime minister.

Round-up

"They were asked to the palace to discuss the war situation, and when they would not comply with our demands to take us out of the war I ordered them to be locked up."

"Then we arrested their bodyguards and began rounding up other pro-Nazi leaders."

Then King Michael broadcast to the nation reinstating the old constitution, and calling on his countrymen to throw out the nazis.

This bold action was taken when he was only 23 years old, an inexperienced and powerless monarch with no army and only the hope that the country would rally behind him.

"There was not one defection from my countrymen, and within a few days we had driven out, captured or killed all the 50 000 German soldiers in

our country," he said proudly.

"There was the element of surprise in the coup, but we could not have succeeded without the help of God."

The King's action was acclaimed around the world, and shortly afterwards the United States Government conferred the Legion of Merit on him.

In the citation for the award, President Harry Truman of the United States said: "By his superior judgment, his boldness of action and the high character of his personal leadership, King Michael has made an outstanding contribution to the cause of freedom and democracy."

But while the King had saved Rumania from one invader another was breaking through in the north of the country.

"The Russians claimed they liberated Rumania from the Antonescu dictatorship," King Michael said sarcastically. "All they 'liberated' was articles from the shops and the countryside."

"We were powerless to oppose the communists except by passive resistance, because the Allies had given over this part of Eastern Europe to Russia at the Teheran and Yalta conferences."

In November 1947 he went to the wedding of Queen (then Princess) Elizabeth and Prince Philip in London. There he met his future wife, Princess Anne of Bourbon-Parma, a French royal family.

When he returned to

Rumania he was summoned to Bucharest by the communist authorities and told there would be a bloodbath in the country if he did not abdicate.

In January 1948 he left Rumania for good with little more than his clothes.

Today he may not return to Rumania, and he recalls vividly the "hatred and bitterness" he felt when his country was lost behind the Iron Curtain "through lack of planning by some and thorough planning by others."