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# Rudolf Slansky: His Trials and Trial

By Igor Lukes



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CHRISTIAN F. OSTERMANN, Series Editor

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Rudolf Slansky:  
His Trials and Trial

Igor Lukes

A disarmingly honest Czech worker selected to attend the 1952 trial of former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC), Rudolf Slansky, admitted on Radio Prague that it was a confusing experience. The main defendant and his thirteen accomplices had confessed to very serious crimes and were obviously facing the death penalty. Yet they testified almost casually. The worker reported that he and his colleagues in the audience wondered why the defendants never displayed any emotion. Didn't they fear for their lives?<sup>1</sup>

The worker's testimony was meant to strengthen the trial's legitimacy. It achieved the opposite; it hinted at the possibility that the prisoners had been turned into robots and deprived of their fundamental human instincts. It also indirectly raised questions about the premise on which the whole affair depended, viz., that the defendants' confessions, no matter how they had been obtained, were tantamount to legal proof of guilt.<sup>2</sup> Other questions regarding the alleged Slansky conspiracy appeared soon after the trial, many of which remained unanswered into the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

Although more than half a century has passed since Slansky's fate took a startling downturn, his trial remains a focus of interest among professional historians and journalists.<sup>4</sup> As one of the formative events in the early years of the Cold War, the Slansky affair confirmed both sides in their view of the other as a deadly and deceitful

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<sup>1</sup> Open Society Archives, Budapest, OSA 300-30-22/5, Radio Prague, 29 November 1951. The evidence presented in the courtroom "gave us the chills," said the worker, but the defendants "were cool and blasé about it."

<sup>2</sup> OSA300-30-22/box 22, Radio Prague, 14 December 1952. Zdenek Nejedly, a leading CPC propagandist and Minister of Education, had to confront rumors regarding the Slansky trial only a few days after the defendants had been executed. He addressed those who wondered "why the defendants admitted their crimes so fully." As was to be expected, Nejedly rejected the view that they had been tortured and he dismissed the possibility that they had been drugged. Torture, Nejedly insisted, was never used in the communist system. The Communist Party was solely interested in truth, and beatings or other forms of torture did not lead to it. He was equally clear regarding the use of drugs to obtain the defendants' compliance. Drugs might be used to poison people or to cause them to pass out, but even the most advanced science knows nothing about drugs that would make people testify against their self-interest. Neither drugs nor beatings were the answer, but overwhelming evidence were behind the confessions, Nejedly argued. It was massive evidence and their shame that had caused the defendants to cooperate with the court.

<sup>3</sup> For background information, see Jiri Solc, "Operace 'Velky metar,'" *Historie a vojenství*, 4, (1995): 79-101; Igor Lukes, "Der Fall Slansky: Eine Exilorganisation und das Ende des tschechoslowakischen Kommunistenführers," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 4 (1999): 459-501; and Lukes, "The Rudolf Slansky Affair: New Evidence," *Slavic Review* 58, 1 (Spring 1999): 160-187.

<sup>4</sup> In April 2003 a large international conference in Prague examined the Slansky show-trial; its findings were extensively discussed in the media. The French and German press also pay attention to the Slansky affair. See, for instance, Lutz Krusche, "Jetzt gibt Genosse Kanapa dem Genossen Stalin alle Schuld," *Frankfurter Rundschau* (17 December 1976); Karl W. Mekiska, "Nach 25 Jahren ist der Schock noch unvergessen: Als in Prag Kommunisten gehängt wurden," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (3 December 1977); Heinrich von Grauberger, "Ein kleiner Feger in der großen Zange," *junge Welt* (18 December 1999).

enemy. The United States and its allies perceived the trial as an orgy of communist injustice on a par with the Stalinist show-trials of the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> They saw it as an irrational witch hunt with an anti-Semitic odor, which reassured those in the West who had the most skeptical view of the Kremlin that their position was correct.<sup>6</sup>

The affair had an equally negative impact on Moscow. On the basis of the evidence that came across his desk, Stalin concluded that American special services had covertly attempted to arrange the defection of Slansky, the recently deposed CPC general secretary. The Soviet leader, who was not above wallowing in the darkest of scenarios, was jolted by this discovery. What if the former general secretary had managed to escape to the West, as the Americans had apparently invited him to do? Slansky's debriefing by American authorities would have been most harmful to Soviet interests, since the former general secretary had attended various top secret conferences where Stalin's strategy vis-à-vis the West was openly discussed.<sup>7</sup> Having spent the war in the Soviet Union and having been in charge of military and security-related matters in communist Czechoslovakia, Slansky held many vital Soviet secrets. His defection would therefore have had a significant impact on the international scene, even more so than when Hitler's lieutenant Rudolf Hess turned up in Great Britain at the height of World War II. The business with Slansky affirmed Stalin in his most negative beliefs regarding his American rivals. Consequently, he pressured Czechoslovak President Klement Gottwald to arrange for Slansky's arrest and destruction with unprecedented openness.<sup>8</sup>

The trial had a powerful impact on the surviving communist leaders in Prague. Although the party reemerged from the purge and went on to rule for decades, it was never the same. Having consented to the murder of Slansky and other former colleagues,

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<sup>5</sup> OSA, *News From Behind the Iron Curtain* 1, 12 (December 1952), published by Radio Free Europe in Munich, called the Slansky trial "the biggest propaganda show since the Moscow purges of 1937 . . ."

<sup>6</sup> Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts, FOIA, Papers released by the Department of the Army, United States Army Intelligence and Security Command, 22 October 1996, case number 1460F-96, 8 December 1952.

<sup>7</sup> Slansky attended the Kremlin meeting on 9 January 1951 where Stalin asserted that NATO would be ready for a conflict with the Soviet bloc by 1953 and demanded that all the satellites increase their military spending—without regard to economic and political consequences—to prepare for war. See Jan Adamec, "Vite, kolik stojí jeden kriznik? K moskevske schuzce v lednu 1951," <[www.coldwar.cz](http://www.coldwar.cz)>, October 2002. In response Czechoslovakia increased its military spending by 353 percent in the 1950-53 period. Vit Smetana, "Posledni utok na zapad? Nad mytickou moskevskou schuzkou z ledna 1951," *Dejiny a soucasnost* 1 (2001): 39-44.

<sup>8</sup> National Archives, Czech Republic, Prague, NA, Archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, henceforth NA ACC CPC, Komise I, volume 2, archival unit 12.



the new bosses relinquished their idealism and their faith in communist doctrine. They focused more and more on the material benefits of power.<sup>9</sup> Cynical opportunism proved to be the only rational attitude toward changing party policy.<sup>10</sup> Slansky's arrest, trial, and execution thus represent a watershed that indelibly changed the nature of the regime; it became clear even to the most thick-headed Stalinists that the CPC had come perilously close to committing public hara-kiri.

The Slansky affair marked the personal and political collapse of the CPC boss, Klement Gottwald. From the beginning of the Czechoslovak political crisis in the summer of 1945, Gottwald was accepted by the United States Embassy in Prague and by Washington as a serious political opponent. Even after February 1948, when the CPC established a monopoly on power, the Americans in Prague saw Gottwald as a legitimate successor of Edvard Benes at the Prague Castle. They disliked him and they disagreed with his ideology, but no one disputed that Gottwald and his party had won the contest with their democratic rivals by political means, even if the end in February 1948 was messy. However, once Gottwald handed Slansky and others over to the executioner, he showed himself to be a Soviet puppet who sacrificed his innocent colleague to the demands of Stalin's paranoia. He had betrayed his comrade in order to save his own neck. Under his leadership the CPC deprived Czechoslovakia of its status as a sovereign state, and Gottwald knew it. He isolated himself in the Castle, where he sank rapidly into alcoholism. He became a fearful recluse struggling with ghosts from his past and with his syphilitic condition.<sup>11</sup>

The Prague trial made a powerful impact on public opinion in Europe, especially in France, where it remains a topic of considerable interest. Communism had previously been viewed by some as representing a search for social justice and a faith in a future

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<sup>9</sup> Karel Richter, Roman Cilek, Jiri Bilek, *Uhlavni pratele: osudova spojeni, Stalin-Trockij, Hitler-Röhm, Gottwald-Slansky* (Prague: Themis, 2002) and Jiri Pernes, *Takovi nam vladli* (Prague: Brana, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> OSA 300-30-31/box18, Messages Home Program, 1951-1953. Radio Free Europe pointed out that on 30 September 1951 the party awarded Slansky the highest medal, Order of Socialism, for his "extraordinary contribution to the victorious construction of socialism in Czechoslovakia." But two months later the party announced that Slansky was in jail, having been stripped of all his positions in the government and party. It would be hard to imagine that Slansky's colleagues whom the purge by-passed would be able to remain idealistic regarding the nature of the system that was capable of such dramatic twists and turns.

<sup>11</sup> The best evidence on the intimate side of Gottwald can be found in Karel Bartosek, *Cesky vezen* (Prague: Paseka, 2001), especially the testimonies of Marie Svermova and Josefa Slanska.

without wars and material deprivation. The Slansky affair associated the movement instead with police terror, torture, and implausible confessions before a manipulated court. Originally, Soviet planners had hoped that after the war Czechoslovakia, with its industrial infrastructure and democratic tradition, could be used to make the Soviet variety of communism look good, even desirable, to other countries in Europe.<sup>12</sup> This scheme collapsed with the Prague trial, which infused Czechoslovakia with the same odor that emanated from the other East European outposts of the Soviet empire.

### **Rudolf Slansky**

Slansky was born in 1901 in Nezvestice, a village southeast of Plzen. A persistent rumor has it that his original name was Salzman; this is groundless. His ancestors had lived in the region for generations, mostly as shopkeepers, and all bore the name Slansky. Having discovered Marxism as a teenager, young Slansky abandoned plans for a career in business and law, and in 1921, when he was just twenty years old, became a founding member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC).

Slansky soon discovered he had a talent for being an *apparatchik*, a cog in a large machinery. But he was also ambitious and in short order left the ranks of regular party members to join the professional corps of revolutionaries. The CPC sent him to work in Ostrava, the center of heavy industry, steel works, and coal mines in northern Moravia. In 1926 Slansky took over the Communist Party daily *Delnický deník*. Under his leadership it became a platform for radicals who rejected the more consensual attitude preferred, at least initially, by those who had arrived at communism after years as social democrats. Slansky preferred the tough Leninist line: no peace with the class enemy. His allies in the party were Klement Gottwald, Vaclav Kopecky, Marie Svabova (later Svermova), Jan Sverma and Bruno Köhler.

The party's general secretary, Bohuslav Jilek, disapproved of Slansky's uncompromising radicalism and in 1928 removed him from his post in Ostrava. This was the beginning of the end of Jilek's own career. The next year at the 5<sup>th</sup> CPC Conference Slansky helped overthrow the general secretary and install another radical, his close

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<sup>12</sup> Aleksei M. Filitov, "Problems of Post-War Construction in Soviet Foreign Policy Conceptions during World War II," in Francesca Gori and Silvio Pons (eds.), *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943-53* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 9.

friend Klement Gottwald. In December 1929 the new CPC chief made perfectly clear how he intended to conduct himself as a politician. His maiden speech before the Parliament became notorious. Addressing his fellow deputies, Gottwald declared:

We call you socialfascists, and you tell us it's an epithet. Well, in that case an ass could complain when he is called ass that it's a swear-word. Or a crook or a murderer when he is called that. Soviet prisons are filled with counter-revolutionaries and murderers, just as you will one day sit in Czechoslovak prisons. You are and will be even more in the future an avant-garde of fascism, imperialism, and war. And one day we'll deal with you the way the Russian Bolsheviks have dealt with the Tsar, the bourgeoisie, and Kerensky. We'll disturb your peace. We won't let you rest for a minute. We go to Russian Bolsheviks to learn how to break your necks, and surely you know that they are masters in that.<sup>13</sup>

This set the tone for other members of the CPC, especially Slansky, who, addressing the bourgeoisie, predicted that the communists were going to “exterminate the leeches that suck peoples' blood.”<sup>14</sup> When he was challenged by a fellow parliamentarian to explain the Moscow show trials of Zinoviev and Kamenev that ended with sixteen death penalties, Slansky asserted that the Soviet courts were defending socialism, freedom, and peace. Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others deserved to die because they had plotted against the brilliant leader of mankind, Joseph Stalin.<sup>15</sup>

It was clear that Slansky was willing to embrace the values and speak the language of Moscow and the Comintern. He was rewarded with appointments in the Central Committee and the Politburo; he also became the party secretary in charge of the Prague district.<sup>16</sup> Slansky's importance in the communist apparat grew rapidly when he took over the important Organizational Department of the Central Committee. But this brought him to the attention of Soviet advisors who closely supervised the manner in which communist parties conducted themselves. In 1935 Gottwald left for Moscow, leaving Slansky in charge of the daily affairs of the party. Before he could even orient himself, the young man became the target of scathing criticism by Moscow-based officials of the Communist International, who alleged that he had failed to implement the

<sup>13</sup> Klement Gottwald, *Vybrane spisy* (Prague: SNPL, 1954), vol. 1, 126-140.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Slansky, *Za vitezsvi socialismu: stati a projevy* (Prague: Svoboda, 1951), 255.

<sup>15</sup> Rudolf Slansky, “Sovetsky soud – ochrana socialismu, svobody a miru,” *Rude Pravo*, 30 August 1936.

<sup>16</sup> Slansky's curriculum vitae is reviewed in Karel Kaplan, Pavel Kosatik, *Gottwaldovi muzi* (Praha, Litomyšl: Paseka, 2004), 79-121.

united front policy the Kremlin had unexpectedly prescribed. The new line was riddled with internal contradictions and ambiguities, as one of its interpretations went directly against the very essence of the most recent and fervently proclaimed official view of the Kremlin.<sup>17</sup> All thinking members of the communist movement found the situation most confusing. Nevertheless, Slansky was expelled from his posts in the CPC Central Committee. This sudden transformation of a general secretary *pro tempore* into a heretic took a heavy toll on the young man; the party had long ago become his extended family. He repented and was greatly relieved when the Comintern allowed his readmission into the Central Committee the next year.

By the time World War II was about to break out, Slansky had fully regained his standing in the world of international communism. In 1939-40 many communists needed shelter to protect them from the long arm of the Gestapo. But when they approached Soviet authorities and requested asylum, most of them were turned away. Those who in desperation crossed into Soviet territory without proper papers were arrested as spies and processed through the Gulag. However, some of the CPC leaders, including Gottwald and Slansky—along with his wife Josefa and their young son Rudolf—were allowed to settle down in Moscow, a sign of their importance and Soviet appreciation for years of loyal service.

While life in Stalin's Soviet Union was never easy, the tense period on the eve of the war was surely among the worst. The purge was still in full swing when the Slanskys arrived and took up rooms in the Hotel Lux.<sup>18</sup> Arrests, especially at night, occurred regularly. Mrs. Slansky later recalled that the guests at the Hotel Lux were “absolutely isolated from normal Soviet people” and they consequently knew next to nothing about the suffering outside the ghetto of international party activists. They knew as little about their next door neighbors in the hotel. When someone disappeared it was *de rigueur* to presume that he had been sent on a secret mission. Inquiries were discouraged, and when one violated the custom and asked: “Where is your husband,” the answer would typically

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<sup>17</sup> Igor Lukes, *Czechoslovakia Between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Benes in the Thirties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 67-78.

<sup>18</sup> Valuable information is in Karel Bartosek, *Cesky vezen* (Prague: Paseka, 2001), 51-85 and 129-157.

be an evasive lie.<sup>19</sup> None of this diminished the Slanskys' love for Stalin. Not even when they experienced a personal tragedy—the kidnapping and loss of their child.

On 3 October 1943 Mrs. Slansky, an announcer with the Czech section of Radio Moscow, was supposed to have a free morning. Unexpectedly she was summoned to report for duty. She put her youngest child, Nadia, in a carriage, and took her to a park adjacent to the Radio Moscow building, leaving her eight-year old son, Rudolf, Jr., in charge. When she came back, both her children were gone. After searching on her own, she called her husband, who finally found Slansky junior—exhausted and asleep in the park. He was holding onto the carriage, but there was no Nadia.

It turned out that soon after Mrs. Slansky had left her son and Nadia in the park, a woman appeared who told little Rudolf that his mother had to seek emergency medical treatment and had asked the woman to take Nadia home and feed her; her brother was to wait in the park. The boy did not believe the stranger and demanded: “What is my mother’s name? Where does she work? Which program? What does she do there?” Even after the woman had accurately answered all his questions, Rudolf stood his ground and held tight onto the carriage. At that point the woman seized the baby-girl and started running away. Little Rudolf tried to follow the kidnapper but he lost track of her and became disoriented in the park. Eventually, he sat down on a bench and fell asleep. That is how he was discovered by his father. Despite interventions with the police and letters to Soviet authorities, including one to Stalin himself, Nadia was never returned to the family. The Slanskys’ letters went unanswered and Nadia, the darling girl of the family, was swallowed up in by the vastness of Russia.<sup>20</sup>

The Soviet Union had the most elaborate system of population control in the world. No one could travel, take a train, stay in a hotel, or rent an apartment without

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<sup>19</sup> Bartosek, *Cesky vezen*, 153-154. Their unwillingness to discuss the arrests and disappearances of their neighbors would indicate that foreign communists in Moscow were more “disciplined” than the local kind. For instance, the tenants of the notorious House on the Embankment, “the hideous luxury building for younger leaders,” like their colleagues at Hotel Lux “waited each night for the groan of the elevators, the knock on the doors, as the NKVD arrived to arrest their suspects.” Some had prepared emergency bags to take with them to prison, some had made advance arrangements regarding their children, others had placed pistols within reach to shoot themselves rather than face the Stalinist system of justice. But at the House on the Embankment, unlike at Hotel Lux, “every morning the uniformed doorman informed the other inhabitants who had been arrested during the night. Soon the building was filled with empty apartments, doors ominously sealed by the NKVD.” Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 258.

<sup>20</sup>Josefa Slansky, *Report on My Husband*, 121-125.

endless permits, signatures, and stamps from Soviet officials whose own lives depended on their vigilance and vigorous enforcement of the law. Moreover, one could not buy food, let alone baby-food, without ration-coupons. This was true everywhere, but especially in Moscow in 1943. The Slanskys knew this, of course, and one wonders how much they were able to believe the official explanation that the perpetrator was a disturbed woman who mysteriously appeared at the park and then dropped out of existence, with their little Nadia in her arms. How is it that the kidnapper, supposedly a crazy street-person, was able to answer all the questions put to her by little Rudolf? How could she have managed to fool the elaborate and invasive police *apparat*, especially if she was “insane,” and disappear with someone else’s baby? The Slanskys understood the Soviet system too well to pose such questions publicly.

It was hardly surprising that they received so little assistance from the authorities or from their Soviet friends, but it must have been excruciatingly disheartening to receive no support even from their Czech communist colleagues in Moscow, especially from such close friends as the Gottwalds. On one occasion Mrs. Slansky showed emotion over her lost child in the presence of the CPC boss. She felt safe doing so because he was a personal confidant: he called her “Little Starling” and he sometimes talked to her for hours about his own intimate problems. This time Gottwald showed no pity for Nadia and he had only this advice for her mother: “Stop weeping and moaning about it. You and Rudolf should just make yourselves a new kid.”<sup>21</sup> After this the Slanskys abandoned all further inquiries and accepted their loss with true Bolshevik grit.<sup>22</sup> Even after the war, Nadia’s kidnapping and disappearance had more publicity in France than in Slansky’s native Czechoslovakia.<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Slansky returned to this tragedy only in the mid-sixties and in a private letter. After she had received as a present the painting “A Girl With Her Face Turned Away,” she wrote to the artist on Christmas Eve 1966:

I always longed to have somebody paint Nadia for me. An unfulfillable wish!  
How can an artist paint the face of a girl whom even her own mother doesn’t  
know? And yet you managed to paint Nadia for me when you did not know of her

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<sup>21</sup> Bartosek, *Cesky vezen*, 140.

<sup>22</sup> NA ACC CPC, 100/50 file 1, archival unit 1. Slansky makes no reference to the event or to his daughter in his curriculum vitae that he wrote around 1944.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Cuau (1935-1995), the French journalist and playwright, wrote a well-received drama called *Nadia* that was performed at a festival in Avignon. It deals with Nadia, a child kidnapped in 1943 in Moscow, and her parents.

existence—for indeed to this day you still don't know—and when I myself was only a name to you. You painted a girl with her back turned and her head hidden by an umbrella. If she turned around I should recognize my Nadia in her. You didn't know that when you gave me this present you were giving me my Nadia. I will sit here looking at this girl, and maybe I will even worry lest she turned around.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this tragedy, during the war and for years still to come, the Slanskys' commitment to the Soviet cause and the communist movement never wavered. In 1944 Rudolf volunteered for duty with a Soviet-controlled guerrilla unit in occupied Czechoslovakia; he behaved well under fire. His loyalty and fortitude did not go unnoticed in the Kremlin. In March 1945 he became the party's general secretary and leading CPC strategist. Although Gottwald nominally maintained the top position as party chairman, Slansky was responsible for the CPC's day-to-day operations. Of the two CPC leaders, Slansky had acquired a reputation as the more hard-line Stalinist.<sup>25</sup>

### **Slansky's CPC, May 1945 to May 1949: From Victory to Defeat**

Before the coup d'état, the party had successfully presented itself to the electorate as the embodiment of a modern and future-oriented alternative to all its rivals on the Czechoslovak political scene. Remarkably, the CPC managed to define not only itself, but also the democratic parties, which it portrayed as standing for the obsolete and failed political principles that had brought the country to isolation, defeat, and destruction in 1938-45. Party propaganda suggested that citizens faced a simple choice. Either stay with the free-market economy and the democratic political system that gave the world the economic crisis of the 1930s, then Hitler and Auschwitz, or choose socialism and the planned economy that had industrialized the Soviet Union, broken the German war machine at Stalingrad, and conquered Hitler's bunker in Berlin.

Many voters responded as the CPC propagandists had anticipated. Even such a champion of democracy and opposition to Nazi and communist totalitarianism as Milada

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<sup>24</sup> Josefa Slansky, *Report on My Husband* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969), 194-196.

<sup>25</sup> Dana Adams Schmidt, *Anatomy of a Satellite* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952), 463. Marie Svermova, a CPC Politburo member, testified that Slansky was famous for being a Stalinist with a dogmatic bent. She claimed he "mechanically applied things from Moscow that were inappropriate to Czech traditions and customs." Bartosek, *Cesky vezen*, 64.

Horakova expressed interest in joining the CPC after the war.<sup>26</sup> She did join the Society for Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship.<sup>27</sup> The communists executed her after a show trial in June 1950.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Vaclav Cerny, a public intellectual and a prominent participant in the struggle against Nazism and communist totalitarianism, wrote in 1945 that the Soviet Union was “the paragon and source” of moral certainty, and even defended the infamous Stalinist campaign against Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and artistic freedom in general, in the fall of 1946. Reactionaries the world over, he observed, criticized the recent *chistka* (purge) in the Soviet Union and for this reason alone he, Cerny, was unwilling “to utter *as much as a single little word of dissent* in this matter.”<sup>29</sup> He mentions in his *Memoirs* that when a representative of Polish exiles came to Prague in 1946 the two had a row. The Pole “declared our faith in Moscow a grievous error.” Cerny recalls that he defended it vigorously.<sup>30</sup> The “sacrosanctity of the USSR and its leaders” is a theme embedded in virtually all his early postwar writings.<sup>31</sup> Vaclav Cerny’s postwar treatment of the Soviet Union as being beyond criticism does not negate the courage with which he later took on its puppets ensconced in the Prague Castle, but merely reveals him to be as fallible as many of his fellow citizens. Horakova and Cerny were exceptionally strong personalities who followed their own moral compass throughout their lives and against all odds. Their postwar attitude toward the Soviet Union and communism, however short-lived, must therefore not be dismissed as simple opportunism.

The party’s postwar appeal can be explained by a variety of factors that had little to do with the merits of communist ideology. First, there was a general public perception in Czechoslovakia that the country had been abandoned by its Western allies during the crisis with Nazi Germany; France and Great Britain had discredited themselves in 1938.

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<sup>26</sup> Bartosek, *Cesky vezen*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Prokop *Dratina*, *Ceskoslovensko, muj osud* (Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1982), vol. 2, book 2, 528-529.

<sup>28</sup> Milada Horakova was a Czech democratic politician and social activist. After the German occupation, she was arrested by the Gestapo in 1940 and spent the rest of the war in a concentration camp. She was arrested by the communists in 1949 and executed the next year. See Karel Kaplan, *Nejvetsi politicky proces* (Brno: Doplnek, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Peter Bugge, “Vaclav Cerny, 1945-48,” in Robert B. Pynsent (ed.), *The Phoney Peace: Power and Culture in Central Europe 1945-49* (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 2000), 232-4.

<sup>30</sup> Vaclav Cerny, *Pameti IV* (Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1983), 119.

<sup>31</sup> Bugge, “Vaclav Cerny,” 234.



The Soviet Union had not; by May 1945 its 1939 pact with Hitler's Third Reich was long forgotten. Second, the course of the war left the impression, not without justification, that it was the Red Army that had contributed the most to the defeat of Nazism. The Soviet military victory legitimized and empowered the ideology that stood behind it.

Consequently, on the eve of the communist coup of 1948 the CPC ran not only the power ministries, but "also controlled the system of values, the symbolic structure of meaning in the eyes of individuals and of society as a whole."<sup>32</sup> Third, there was the belief that the CPC was merely proposing to introduce into Czechoslovakia, with significant improvements, elements of the political and economic system that had proven itself within the Soviet Union. The CPC leaders repeatedly asserted that they were not planning to impose the Soviet model on the country; they hoped to borrow from it the components that had been tested and found suitable for postwar Czechoslovakia.

Finally, most Czechs emerged from the war with a pathological fear of Germany. Although Germany had been conquered and divided into zones of occupation, in the eyes of many Czech citizens it continued to present a grave threat. They believed that the Soviet Union was the only country capable and willing to protect Czechoslovakia from any future German threat. The Prague democratic political elite came to believe that working with Moscow meant strengthening Czechoslovakia's national security, while criticizing the Soviet Union for any reason, justified or not, meant endangering Czechoslovak security. For example, Pavel Tigrid, a Czech democratic journalist, published an article in 1946 warning that Czechoslovakia had tied itself too closely to the Soviet bloc, while its relations with the West had declined considerably. In the crisis that followed the article's appearance, Tigrid was attacked not only by Gottwald, a communist, but also by his own People's (Catholic) Party colleague Msgr. Frantisek Hala. He was subsequently fired from the Foreign Ministry not by Vlado Clementis, a communist, but by the democrat Arnost Heidrich, whom Tigrid would meet in exile less than two years later.<sup>33</sup>

These factors combined to legitimize the communist party's ideology and to enable its decisive victory in the May 1946 elections. The CPC won in Prague, it won in

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<sup>32</sup> Bugge, "Vaclav Cerny," 240.

<sup>33</sup> Milan Drapala, *Na ztracene varte Zapadu: Antologie ceske nesocialisticke publicistiky z let 1945-1948* (Prague: Prostor, 2000), 166.

Bohemia, it won in Moravia, and it came in second in Slovakia. In the two historical provinces, Bohemia and Moravia, it received 2,205,658 votes. Taken together with the votes it gained in Slovakia, 2,695,915 Czechs and Slovaks chose the CPC.<sup>34</sup> Nationally, the party gained the post of the prime minister and it held onto the most powerful ministries.

Its regional influence in Bohemia and Moravia was just as impressive. In Bohemia, 47% of the city halls were chaired by a communist, 15% by a member of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party, 11% by a Catholic, 11% by a Social Democrat, and the remaining mayors were without party affiliation. The results were similar in Moravia: the CPC had 47% percent, the Catholics 17%, the National Socialists 16%, Social Democrats 14%, with the remainder going to candidates who did not belong to any party.<sup>35</sup>

The February 1948 coup d'état, practically speaking, reaffirmed an already existing situation; the CPC had been in charge, at least since the summer of 1947. It had acted on its own and without the direct or material involvement of the Soviet Union. When Stalin's emissary, Valerian Zorin, arrived in Prague at the height of the February crisis, Klement Gottwald became angry: "What's he doing here? Now everybody will speculate that all of this is happening because of Moscow and Stalin, that it's a Russian-instigated operation." Gottwald refused to see Zorin, who was briefed instead by Slansky, assured that all was under control, and encouraged to depart.<sup>36</sup>

The February 1948 coup d'état was a textbook operation that combined political maneuvers with threat of force. The democratic camp was taken by surprise.<sup>37</sup> Even Western diplomats with extensive contacts in Czech society were surprised by the sudden and decisive CPC power grab. The coup came at a time when influential personalities on the Prague scene, such as US Ambassador Laurence A. Steinhardt, had been predicting

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<sup>34</sup> "The CPC Is The Biggest Party in the Republic," *Rude Pravo*, 28 May 1946.

<sup>35</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond 60, 60/6/3, box 2.

<sup>36</sup> Bartosek, *Cesky vezem*, 80-81.

<sup>37</sup> Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMFA), fond: Politicke zpravy, Washington. Josef Hanc, Chargé d'Affaires, Czechoslovak Embassy, Washington, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, 17 March 1948. Hanc quotes the former Czechoslovak Ambassador Slavik who had requested political asylum in the United States: "the revolutionary methods took all democratic parties by surprise. They followed democratic principles and did not believe that anyone in Czechoslovakia could act differently."

the gradual decline of communist influence in Czechoslovakia.<sup>38</sup> Many Czechs and foreigners had let themselves believe that a communist dictatorship could never be imposed on their “Masarykian democracy.”<sup>39</sup> The reality was very different: within a matter of days the democratic tradition was swept aside and replaced by a dictatorship wherein a minority had an absolute monopoly on power. In June 1948, Klement Gottwald became president and Rudolf Slansky became one of the two most powerful men in the country. The CPC celebrated his achievements with extraordinary passion.<sup>40</sup> For once, Slansky seemed relaxed and happy.

After its triumph in February 1948, the party started to implement the principles of a socialist economy and to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., of the CPC Politburo. Gottwald and Slansky had neither scruples nor illusions that this could be done without violence directed at those who did not share their faith in communism. The CPC had promised more than once to search for a moderate and inclusive sort of socialism.<sup>41</sup> However, after February 1948 it abandoned its promises and turned into a juggernaut crushing opponents in its path. From the very first day of the communist coup d'état, the prisons of Czechoslovakia began to be filled with individuals serving sentences for political “crimes.”

A major impetus for this wave of arrests came from the CPC General Secretary Rudolf Slansky, who said in September 1948, on the day of Edvard Benes's funeral in Prague, that the country needed labor camps to deal with the class enemy and it made no difference that the West was going to complain about communist concentration camps in Czechoslovakia. Attempts at ideological education would be insufficient for dealing with

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<sup>38</sup> Library of Congress, Washington, DC, LOC, Private Papers of Ambassador Lawrence A. Steinhardt, PAS, box 68. On 24 September 1947, Ambassador Steinhardt assured his staff during a meeting that although the Czechoslovak communists were hoping to win a majority of the vote in the next elections scheduled for 1948 “he doubts that they will receive it and thinks that they may well receive from only 20 to 30 percent of the votes. He said that several Communists have privately admitted to him that the party has suffered a loss in strength since the last elections [May 1946].” As it turned out the Communists had become so strong that there would be no real elections for the next 40 years.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Louise Schaffner Armstrong, 11 June 1998. Mrs. Armstrong served in Prague at the time of the communist takeover as the Third Secretary at the US Embassy.

<sup>40</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond 100/50, file 1, unit 2 and ACC CPC, 100/50, file 19, units 184 and 185.

<sup>41</sup> Slansky told Adolf Klimek of the Catholic (People's) Party that there “was no . . . reason why the Catholics and the communists could not work together. . . . they had the same interests and they were both dedicated to improving the lot of the common man.” Quoted on p. 68 in the unpublished thesis of James E. Mrazek, Colonel, U. S. Army, Georgetown University, 1953. Colonel Mrazek served in the US Embassy in Prague at the time of the postwar crisis.

enemies of communism. Slansky's point of view fully resonated with his colleagues at the CPC Politburo.<sup>42</sup> In May 1950 there were 32,638 prisoners in Czechoslovakia. Of those, 11,026, more than a third of the total, were political.<sup>43</sup> Before the end of the Stalinist era, some 27,000 Czechs and Slovaks had been sentenced to five years or more for political crimes.<sup>44</sup>

The party cleaned up the security apparatus with great care (c. 3,000 officers were fired) and the military (close to 30 percent of Army and Air Force officers were dismissed). Even manual laborers were not immune. More than 4,000 workers were fired for the simple reason that they had not taken part in the party-sanctioned strike in February 1948. Karel Kaplan claims that the number of people directly affected by the post-February 1948 purge was between 250 and 280 thousand.<sup>45</sup>

After they seized power, the CPC leaders faced an unexpected danger. Now that they had successfully outmaneuvered their democratic opponents, they found themselves under pressure from the Kremlin to admit that their party had been penetrated by Western spies. Stalin made clear that Prague should invite his specialists in purging the ranks of communist parties. Given their slavish attitude toward Stalin before and during the war, it is surprising how long Gottwald and Slansky resisted. Stalin was astonished to discover that his directives had failed to produce the desired result, and it made him even more suspicious.<sup>46</sup> The Czechoslovaks meekly argued that, unlike other communist parties in Eastern Europe, the CPC had been a political force before the war and its leaders had lived and worked shoulder-to-shoulder for almost thirty years.<sup>47</sup> When Gottwald was shown the list of alleged traitors among the Czechoslovak leadership harvested from the Hungarian interrogation protocols, he simply rejected it as "not serious."<sup>48</sup> The Hungarian

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<sup>42</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond 02/1, 7 September 1948. This records Slansky's speech before the CPC Politburo.

<sup>43</sup> Ales Kyr, "Nektere sociologicke aspekty zachazeni s vezni v CSR v letech 1945-1955," in *Vezenske systemy v Ceskoslovensku a ve stredni Evrope 1945-1955* (Opava: Slezske zemske muzeum, 2001), 34.

<sup>44</sup> Ministerstvo skolstvi, *Svedectvi z doby totality, 1948-1989* (Prague: MS, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> Karel Kaplan, *Kronika komunistickeho Ceskoslovenska: doba tani 1953-1956* (Barrister & Principal, 2005), 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> Jan Frolik, "Plukovník Antonín Prchal a jeho doba," *Minulosti zapadoceskeho kraje XXXI* (1996): 162.

<sup>47</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, archival unit 13 – this contains letters exchanged between Klement Gottwald and J. V. Stalin.

<sup>48</sup> Among those on the Hungarian list were: Minister of Interior Vaclav Nosek, Minister of Foreign Affairs Vlado Clementis, deputy ministers Vavro Hajdu, Artur London, Evzen Löbl, diplomats Eduard Goldstücker, Richard Slansky, Evzen Klínger, CPC secretary

situation, he pointed out, was different. The party there had operated underground for twenty years. No wonder it was penetrated by undercover agents and Western spies. The CPC, by contrast, was a vibrant political player led by a team that had worked together since the 1920s. Therefore, the likelihood of having American spies in their midst was negligible.<sup>49</sup>

Such arguments failed to impress the Kremlin, which began using other levers to get its advisors to Prague. On 3 September 1949 Mátyás Rákosi, the Hungarian communist leader, sent Gottwald a toughly-formulated letter requesting that Czechoslovakia join the other socialist countries in a search for traitors who had penetrated into the highest echelons of the ruling parties in Eastern Europe, just as Stalin had warned. Rákosi pointed out that the Hungarian security agency, *Államvédelmi Hivatal* (ÁVH), had already discovered a network of traitors and American spies in Budapest, some of whose tentacles led to Prague; the letter even included a list of Czechoslovak citizens allegedly “unmasked” by the ÁVH as traitors. Rákosi threatened Gottwald: “The dimensions of the conspiracy in your country are fundamentally similar to what we have found here. But the number of individuals who returned after the war from the West and the role they now play in your government are greater. We find it most disturbing that there are in Czechoslovakia in the highest places individuals who are suspected of being in the pay of American imperialists.” Rákosi even suggested that the ÁVH was unwilling to share secrets with its Czech colleagues because “we are afraid that the information then reaches the Americans.” On 7 September 1949 Gottwald sent to Budapest his emissary, Karel Svab, who reported on his return that Rákosi ended their conversation on an ominous note: it was “better to strike a few innocents than to allow the enemy to flourish inside the party.”<sup>50</sup>

The next in line were the Poles. On 12 September 1949 Warsaw invited Jindrich Vesely, a high ranking officer of the Czechoslovak state police, *Statni bezpecnost* (StB), for urgent consultations. Vesely learned that some fifty members of the conspiracy unmasked in Budapest had already been found in Poland, and more arrests were to be

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Otto Sling, and the future CPC general secretary and architect of “normalization” Gustav Husak. See Karel Kaplan, *Zprava o zavrazdeni Generalniho tajemnika* (Prague: Mlada Fronta, 1992), 55.

<sup>49</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 14, unit 383.

<sup>50</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, archival unit 504.

expected. Stanislaw Radkiewicz, the Polish Minister of Public Security, told Vesely that in the present struggle against the internal enemy one had to apply the harshest of measures. There was no reason “to be afraid, as the Czechs appear to be, of arresting people. Radkiewicz himself had ordered arrests without regard to the possibility that, here and there, an innocent person could be harmed. There was no time to run long-term operations and work with double agents. The objective can be reached only through arrests, interrogations, or confrontations.” Vesely also spoke with the top Polish party leaders, Boleslaw Bierut, Jakub Berman, and Roman Zambrowski. They told him that Prague had to take into consideration that “Czechoslovakia is—because of its importance and its exposed position in the Cold War—more in the focus of Western imperialists than Poland.”<sup>51</sup>

It finally dawned on Gottwald and Slansky that their resistance had endangered not only their posts, but also their lives. Time was now of the essence. On 16 September 1949 Slansky drafted a telegram that was signed by Gottwald and sent to the Kremlin: “In connection with the unmasking of the Rajk gang in Hungary, some of its links with Czechoslovakia were identified. We ask the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to send a few specialists to Prague who are, if possible, familiar with the results of the Hungarian case.” Moscow replied quickly: “Regarding your request, instructions have been issued to the Ministry of National Security to select and send the necessary personnel.”<sup>52</sup> The first Soviet advisors arrived in early October 1949. They immediately made it clear that they were in charge and that the StB had been far too lenient.<sup>53</sup>

However, before the purge could be launched, a secure facility was needed where the detainees could be held and broken down in absolute secrecy, away from the general prison population. The latter requirement ruled out the use of regular prisons, such as Pankrac, Mirov, Bory, or Leopoldov. Thus in April 1949 the CPC politburo instructed Slansky, Karel Svab, and Josef Frank to supervise the renovation of a large building in Ruzyne on the outskirts of Prague into a modern detention center. There was no need for

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<sup>51</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, archival unit 504.

<sup>52</sup> NA ACC CPC, 100/24, file 62, archival unit 947.

<sup>53</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, archival unit 504.

debate. All were in agreement that “the importance of this construction project is self-evident.”<sup>54</sup> As it happened, Slansky, Svab, and Frank would soon see the interior of Ruzyně as inmates. Within its walls, they would confess to crimes that would lead them to the gallows.<sup>55</sup>

The project was accomplished with Stakhanovite speed in half a year, to coincide with the arrival of the Soviet advisors. On 29 October 1949 the top three CPC bosses—Klement Gottwald, Rudolf Slansky, and Antonin Zapotocky—as well as the Minister of Interior, Vaclav Nosek, inspected the building and declared it ready. They spent about two hours inside. None of them could later claim that he did not understand the nature and *modus operandi* of the system over which he presided.<sup>56</sup>

All was now set to go. When a Soviet advisor demanded information about a high-ranking CPC official, an StB officer hesitated to provide it. The advisor exploded: “I didn’t come here for discussions. I came to Czechoslovakia to see heads roll. I’d rather wring a hundred and fifty other necks than lose my own.” When the StB officer insisted that requests of this kind would have to be cleared with the party leadership, the advisor replied with four-letter words. Then he explained that he was prepared to take on anyone, no matter what his position might be in the Czechoslovak power hierarchy.<sup>57</sup>

This was no empty boasting. Initially, only minor figures were arrested.<sup>58</sup> The first, on 29 May 1949, was Gejza Pavlik, who was directly tied with the Rajk case in Hungary. Then, on 22 November 1949, StB chief Stepan Placek was arrested by his own subordinates.<sup>59</sup> (Placek’s chief interrogator, Bohumil Doubek, testified in 1955 that during his long sessions with the prisoner, lasting “at least sixteen to eighteen hours,”

<sup>54</sup> NA ACC CPC, 100/2, volume 56, unit 614.

<sup>55</sup> NA ACC CPC, Komise II, volume 14, unit 382. When Slansky installed Svab in his new post of deputy minister of national security he gave him a present: a book (written in German) about Joseph Fouché, the police minister. He advised him to apply the same methods as the Frenchman.

<sup>56</sup> Jan Herold, “La mystérieuse citadelle de Prague,” *Le Figaro*, 23 July 1951.

<sup>57</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise Piller, “The Case of Bourgeois Nationalists,” information no. 32, December 1968. Neither the Soviet advisor (Likhachev) nor the cautious StB officer (Balaz) escaped from the clutches of their own system: Likhachev was recalled to the Soviet Union, tried, sentenced to death and executed on 19 December 1956. Balaz was sentenced in 1953 to twenty-five years.

<sup>58</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 3, archival unit 37. Unless indicated, all data in this paragraph are taken from this remarkable document, entitled, curiously, “The Most Interesting Arrests after 1948.”

<sup>59</sup> AMI, A-8-1355. Stepan Placek, born 30 August 1909, served from 1946 until the fall of 1948 as chief of “internal intelligence sectors.”

Placek's feet swelled up so much that "the skin burst open and water starting pouring out."<sup>60</sup>) The arrest of Evzen Löbl on 24 November 1949 moved the purge to high gear. He was a deputy minister of foreign trade, but he was more than that. He was an old Comintern and intelligence professional who understood his new circumstances fully; he had no illusions regarding the value of his life in the eyes of the StB and its Soviet advisors and was willing to cooperate with the interrogators right from the start and in any way whatsoever.

Löbl accepted the fictitious premise put to him by the interrogators, namely, that the ranks of the leadership had been infiltrated by Western spies, and turned it into his life-preserver. He started naming higher and higher party and government officials, charging that they were, like himself, also spies, enemy agents, and wreckers of socialism.<sup>61</sup> This was, perhaps, the point the Soviet advisors had always hoped to reach, but from the perspective of the CPC it proved to be a double-edged sword. The Ruzyně regime forced Löbl to deny reality and falsely confess to a conspiracy in the highest echelons of the state. But the "logic" of this fiction empowered Löbl and weakened the interrogators: it now appeared that the prisoner, not his jailers, decided who the next victim might be.

The situation made the StB quite uncomfortable. They did not know how high up in the hierarchy they could go in the process of "unmasking the enemy." They understood that their own lives would be jeopardized if they failed to pursue any accusations that Löbl or other desperate prisoners had made. But they also risked their lives if they implicated a party leader whom the invisible director of the purge meant to keep out. Many interrogators sensed that the purge acquired a momentum of its own.<sup>62</sup>

On 8 November 1950 a most remarkable letter landed on the desk of Slansky at the CPC Headquarters in Prague. It was an anonymous letter posted the day before in Brno. It read, "Sir, since we cannot get together I must write discretely. Escape across the border because preparations for your arrest are under way." It was signed "Jirka." The envelope was addressed in firm handwriting to "CPC General Secretary Rudolf Slansky."

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<sup>60</sup> Karel Kaplan (ed.), *StB o sobe: vypoved vysetrovatele Bohumila Doubka* (Prague: UDV, 2002), 54-55.

<sup>61</sup> For his own account, see Eugene Löbl, *My Mind on Trial* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

<sup>62</sup> An autopsy of this perverse development is in Kaplan (ed.), *StB o sobe*.



Nothing more. No street or even city.<sup>63</sup> Of course, the letter may have been a practical joke. But it must have raised Slansky's blood-pressure considerably, for by the end of 1950 no one in the party, StB, or Army leadership was in a position to dismiss rumors of one's arrest as too far-fetched. The anonymous Jirka could not have known that exactly a year later, another letter for Slansky would arrive, one that would help usher him to the gallows.

Slansky's fate took a decisive turn in April or May 1951, when StB interrogator Kohoutek obtained from Löbl a forty-nine page document, which the prisoner typed himself. In it he confessed to his (utterly fictitious) crimes and treasonous contacts in the West, implicated others, but made no reference to Slansky. However, a few days later, Löbl demanded the document back because he needed to "add" to it. When the new version reached Kohoutek it contained a statement that Löbl "and other members of the conspiracy were able to commit their crimes only because they enjoyed Slansky's support."

Kohoutek recognized immediately the explosive nature of this material. He ordered Löbl to keep this strictly confidential and he rushed to consult Soviet advisor S. N. Galkin, who told him to do nothing and wait while he went to see another advisor, Boris Yesikov. The next day Galkin and Yesikov told Kohoutek to encourage Löbl to say more. (Some of the conversations took place in the corridor because Galkin could not be sure that Kohoutek's office was not bugged.) Löbl was ready to oblige. Within days Kohoutek and the two advisors had a new report, hand-written by Löbl, twenty-two pages long. Two copies were made. One went to Moscow, the other to Minister of National Security Ladislav Kopriva. In August 1951 Kohoutek received a new secret directive: everything regarding CPC General Secretary Rudolf Slansky was to be recorded.<sup>64</sup>

Löbl's spurious charges against Slansky gained more credibility in late July 1951. The StB interrogator Josef Michalek asked another Ruzyne inmate, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Artur London: "Who is the head of Trotskyites in Czechoslovakia?" The surprising answer was: General Secretary Slansky. Michalek interrupted the session, sent the prisoner to his cell, and went to see his boss, Kohoutek,

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<sup>63</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 10.

<sup>64</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 28, folder Vladimir Kohoutek.

who told him to drop the topic. An hour later, Michalek was summoned to see Bohumil Doubek, the chief of StB interrogators in Ruzyne, who threatened him with severe punishment if it could be established that the interrogator had obtained the charge against Slansky by force. But about ten days later Michalek was absolved: Doubek and Kohoutek had had a private session with London, out of which came a formal protocol “63 or 72 pages long. It charged Slansky with being the head of the conspiracy in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>65</sup>

At that point Slansky had no indication that he had become a target of interrogations in Ruzyne. In fact, the StB officially still pursued the line that the conspiracy had been directed *against* Slansky. This was based, in part, on a letter by Stepan Placek and Karel Cerny, two hard-line communists in the security apparatus, who wrote in July 1948 that they had acquired evidence of Western plots to “murder comrade Slansky, General Ludvik Svoboda, and Colonel Reicin.”<sup>66</sup> The StB had other indications that Gottwald and Slansky were the intended victims of the enemies and wreckers.<sup>67</sup> Even the arrest in the summer of 1950 of Otto Sling, Slansky’s close colleague and, to an extent, his protégé, was not in itself catastrophic for the general secretary. Slansky quickly distanced himself from Sling and derived hope from the rumor that his former colleague had conspired against him, the honest communist Rudolf Slansky.<sup>68</sup>

The attitude of the StB was officially reversed in the summer of 1951. Soviet advisor Galkin told the StB officer Bohumil Doubek that there was new evidence—from the interrogations of Löbl, London, Josef Vondracek, Osvald Zavodsky, and Sling—indicating that Slansky was not the target of the conspiracy but was, in fact, its head. The evidence, Galkin continued, had been shown to neither Doubek nor other StB officers in Ruzyne, nor even to Minister Kopriva. It went directly to Moscow via the Soviet Embassy in Prague. And the Soviet Embassy now presented the evidence to Minister Kopriva. He was incredulous and summoned Doubek and Kostal, StB interrogators from Ruzyne, to his office. There he expressly forbade them to collect further evidence against

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<sup>65</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 28. Josef Michalek, interrogator, 3 June 1957, CC CPC.

<sup>66</sup> NA ACC CPC, fond 100/35, vol. 35, archival unit 1164, “Dopis Stepana Placka a Karla Cerneho ustrednimu vyboru KSC o situaci ve Statni bezpecnosti,” 13 July 1948.

<sup>67</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44. Interrogation of Bohumil Doubek, 15 December 1955, Pankrac prison.

<sup>68</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 14, unit 380.

“the CPC general secretary and other leading personalities without his knowledge and permission.”<sup>69</sup> The Soviet advisors never forgave Minister Kopriva this moment of hesitation. He too would be dismissed and his life would hang in the balance.

But no one among the bosses of communist Czechoslovakia was big enough to stand in the way of directives from Moscow for long. Soviet advisors asked Minister Kopriva to go to Ruzyne and personally interrogate London regarding Slansky, “so that he could verify the seriousness of London’s confessions.” Kopriva of course did so. London had been undoubtedly prepared for the occasion by the advisors—he and Löbl would save their necks—and Kopriva, now supposedly persuaded that London’s charges had to be taken seriously, authorized the StB to continue collecting evidence against the general secretary.<sup>70</sup> On 14 July 1951 Vladimir Kohoutek, an StB interrogator, produced a protocol signed by London stating, “The head of the Trotskyite conspiracy in Czechoslovakia is General Secretary Slansky [. . .]”<sup>71</sup>

Given the small size of the party, government, and security apparatus, the scope of the purge was impressive and frightening. However, those still at large, including Gottwald and Slansky, took comfort in noting that, so far, many of the victims had spent the war in the West. This made Gottwald and Slansky feel somewhat less insecure. After all, they had spent the war at the beck and call of Joseph Stalin in Moscow and under the watchful eye of the NKVD. They had never lived in Poland, Romania, Hungary, the Middle East, France, Great Britain, Switzerland, or the United States. Therefore, they

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<sup>69</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 6, unit 67. Gottwald’s note: “According to Stalin it was necessary to dismiss comrade Kopriva as minister . . . Stalin believes that Kopriva is an ally of Slansky’s. This makes it dangerous for him to occupy such a post [minister of national security].” ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 6, unit 72. Kopriva testified in January 1963: “I will tell you frankly I could not orient myself in the situation. Once Gottwald called me and asked to come to see him and he said that Stalin had written us to demand that we stop investigating Slansky, that it could be the work of the class enemy who is trying to sow discord into our ranks. And at the same time, they had not acknowledged Slansky’s birthday in any way . . . Then came the advisor Alexei and he was against Slansky. I was at that time in a difficult situation: the security apparatus was already focused on Slansky. I could not understand it. One side was saying this, the other side was saying that.” OSA, *New from Behind the Iron Curtain*, vol. 1, no. 2 (February 1952) – this quotes Radio Prague, 23 January 1952: “The President of the Republic relieved Ladislav Kopriva of his post . . . upon his request.” Kopriva had the best imaginable credentials: he joined the CPC in 1921, spent time in the Soviet Union in the twenties, was elected into the Central Committee when Gottwald became general secretary, was arrested by the Gestapo in 1939, as he was trying to escape to the Soviet Union, and spent the whole war in the Dachau concentration camp.

<sup>70</sup> ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44. Interrogation of Bohumil Doubek, born 14 October 1919, on 15 December 1955, Pankrac prison.

<sup>71</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, unit 504. Report of the Drahomir Kolder Commission, 19 March 1963.

could not have been recruited by American intelligence officers who were said to have prowled through refugee camps during the war searching for agents to be used against Soviet interests after the war. This reasoning was the source of Gottwald's and Slansky's hope that they would ride out the purge.

There was another item that several victims of the purge shared: during the war they had received assistance from Noel or Hermann Field, two American relief workers who helped many anti-Fascist refugees survive in the West. Gottwald and Slansky had never met the brothers, and this must have added to their sense of security. But the specter of the two Americans was looming large over Eastern European capitals. It was particularly visible in Budapest, where quite a few of the defendants admitted they had survived the war in refugee camps run by the Fields. Soviet intelligence knew that there was a connection between Noel Field and Allen Dulles, a high-ranking officer of the American intelligence agency, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The Russians convinced themselves that the camps had served as a hunting ground for American special services, who had helped finance such establishments in the hope that this would give them access to potential agents who could be used against Soviet interests after Hitler's defeat. This theory acquired much currency in the NKVD and among its junior partners in Eastern Europe, such as the ÁVH, UB, and StB.

### **The Field Brothers**

Noel Field, born in 1904 into a Quaker family, graduated from Harvard University and in 1925 joined the Department of State. His friends considered him to be an eccentric and "a Christian Communist."<sup>72</sup> Field lived through the Great Depression and witnessed serious social upheavals in the Washington area; he took part in the 1932 march of unemployed veterans on the national capital. There is little doubt that, like many others at the time, Field considered capitalism obsolete, a spent force. But he took this view further than most: he became an agent of Soviet intelligence. This was repeatedly confirmed by Noel himself and by others in the espionage business.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>AFL-BU, box 1. Vladimir Sokolin to Flora Lewis, 30 September 1960.

<sup>73</sup>AMI, 302-103-3. Noel Field's interrogation in Budapest, 4 January 1950. This is confirmed in the Czech summary of the case in AMI, Z-84, no. 4528. See also Fond 100/24, volume 62, unit 947. Noel told Ludvik Frejka in Prague that he had been recruited by

In April 1936 Field resigned his foreign service commission and moved to Europe, where he found a position with the League of Nations. In March 1941 he was chosen by the American Unitarian Association to take charge of the Unitarian Service Committee, the USC, a charitable relief organization set up to assist refugees in war-torn Europe. Noel's first base was in Marseilles; the Wehrmacht then forced him to relocate to Geneva, Switzerland. The USC's objective in Europe was to help those without money and papers who were fleeing the Germans, many of whom were Jewish communists from Nazi-occupied Europe.<sup>74</sup> Noel worked closely with his former State Department colleague, Allen Dulles, who operated out of Switzerland as an official of the OSS.<sup>75</sup> Field provided information he picked up from the refugees, and Dulles paid him back with money, passports or other documents that could be put to good use in the camps.<sup>76</sup>

Noel returned briefly to the United States in 1945. It was not a happy visit. Hede Massing, the woman who had recruited him for Soviet intelligence, warned him that she was planning to testify before Congress about her involvement with the NKVD. He responded illogically that he was not afraid to be identified as a Soviet agent and that he was proud of the work he had done for the Soviet Union.<sup>77</sup> But he quickly left the country and was back in Europe when Massing testified; when he was subpoenaed he decided never to return to the United States.

By the fall of 1947 Noel had lost his job with the USC.<sup>78</sup> He was now quickly running out of options. He had lost his position with the Unitarians, American authorities suspected him of being a Soviet agent, and Western Europe was no longer safe now that the Cold War had intensified. Therefore, Prague was one of his few remaining options.

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Soviet intelligence in 1927. Further, Mr. Hermann Field told me in an interview on 25 April 1998 that Noel affirmed his work for Soviet intelligence in a manuscript he prepared while he was in a Hungarian prison, and which the Hungarians now made available to Hermann. Noel was also identified as a Soviet agent by Hede Massing, the woman who recruited him in Washington, and her husband Paul Massing. AFL-BU, Hede Massing to Flora Lewis, 23 September 1959 and 16 April 1960. Hede Massing identified Noel as a Soviet agent in congressional hearings; House of Representatives, 8th Congress, 2nd session, 27 August 1948. Henry Jordan, "Where is Noel Field?" *Argosy Magazine* (November 1958); Jordan quotes Walter Krivitsky to the effect that Noel had worked for him while he was employed by the League of Nations. Noel states the same in AMI, Z-84.

<sup>74</sup>AFL-BU, box 1.

<sup>75</sup>AFL-BU, Arthur Schlesinger to Flora Lewis, December 1959, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>76</sup>AMI, Z-84 and AFL-BU, Bert Jolis to Flora Lewis, 11 June, no year.

<sup>77</sup>AFL-BU, Hede Massing to Flora Lewis, 16 April 1960.

<sup>78</sup>AFL-BU, box 1. Mr. Bragg to Flora Lewis: "When I visited some of our installations [in France], I was welcomed as a comrade." Noel's salary was cut off in October 1947.

When Noel came to Prague in September 1948, the StB placed him under surveillance.<sup>79</sup> The once stateless communist refugees whom he had helped during the war were now in power. The important ones refused to see him: they knew too much about their own system to agree to meet an American, even if he had once been their savior.<sup>80</sup>

Noel either did not understand the situation or he felt he had nowhere else to go. He stayed in Prague too long, and in November 1948 the StB decided to take action; Field was detained and interrogated. The Czechs had heard from Budapest of his contacts with Allen Dulles and they were ready to close in on him.<sup>81</sup> They had also seen a letter, dated 13 April 1945, from Noel Field to Allen Dulles of the OSS, recommending a Swiss citizen, Herr Max Horngacher. This young man, Field suggested, could be trusted. After the war, in 1947, Arthur London recruited the same Horngacher for Czechoslovak Intelligence.<sup>82</sup>

When the StB sat down to interrogate Noel Field regarding his contacts with the OSS, he surprised them: he identified himself as an officer of Soviet intelligence. The StB were taken aback by this news, and they decided to let him go. At the end of 1948, Noel left Prague for Paris.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, various old communists had been arrested in Budapest. They admitted to having been American spies. One, Tibor Szönyi, stated that he had carried letters between Noel Field and Allen Dulles during the war. This prompted Colonel István Szücs of the ÁVH to travel to Prague in January 1949 to demand that the StB arrest Noel and hand him over to the Hungarians; the Prague government agreed. The StB quickly located Noel Field in Switzerland and told him that he needed to return to Czechoslovakia so that his claim of having been a Soviet agent could be clarified.<sup>84</sup>

Noel obediently returned to Prague. On 11 May 1949 the StB arrested him and handed him over to the ÁVH.<sup>85</sup> Field's wife Herta became desperate when Noel

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<sup>79</sup>AMI, Trust Fund, 302-103-3.

<sup>80</sup>AMI-Z-84 and AMI, Trust Fund, 302-103-3.

<sup>81</sup>Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 20. The StB file on Noel originally consisted of "just a tiny note without any attribution from which it followed that Field was supposed to be an American agent."

<sup>82</sup>NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 14, unit 383.

<sup>83</sup>AMI, 372-Z-82.

<sup>84</sup>AMI, Z-84.

<sup>85</sup>Fond Komise II, volume 25, unit 504. Mátyás Rákosi to Klement Gottwald, 9 May 1949: "To comrade Gottwald. Please do us a favor and arrest Field who has just returned to Prague. Rákosi."

disappeared. She came to Prague on 4 August 1949, hoping to trace him. There was always the possibility, she confessed to Artur London, the communist deputy minister of foreign affairs, who recorded the conversation for the benefit of the StB, that Noel may have been kidnapped by the Central Intelligence Agency; or he may have been yet again put to work by the NKVD. On 27 August 1949 the StB drove Herta Field to the Hungarian border and handed her over to the ÁVH.<sup>86</sup>

By now Noel's younger brother, Hermann, had agreed to come to Prague to help Herta in her search. He was arrested at the Warsaw airport and taken to a secret prison outside Warsaw.<sup>87</sup> Like Noel, Hermann fit well into the fictitious scenario being created in the secret police headquarters in Moscow, Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest. In March 1939, he had become the director of a refugee camp in Kraków, run by the so-called Trust Fund, a British charitable organization.<sup>88</sup> Thanks to Hermann's Trust Fund in Kraków, and Noel's Unitarian Service Committee in Marseilles and Geneva, hundreds of Eastern European refugees were saved from the Nazis. By 1945-1949, several of them had acquired important posts in the Czechoslovak, Polish, East German, and Hungarian governments.

The StB and its sister organizations in Poland and Hungary turned Noel's and Hermann's ideology upside down and began treating the Trust Fund and the USC as Western espionage organizations. The camps run by the Field brothers, the StB claimed, were used by British and American intelligence to recruit individuals who would later, after the war, rise to important government posts as Western spies.<sup>89</sup> The StB demanded that Hermann identify the people he had helped, and he named the Czechoslovak communist minister of the interior, as well as officials of the CPC, ministry of foreign affairs, and ministry of trade.<sup>90</sup> Noel Field in Hungary and Hermann Field in Poland admitted to having played roles in a plot against the communist regimes in Eastern

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<sup>86</sup>AMI, Z-84.

<sup>87</sup>Hermann and Kate Field, *Departure Delayed: Stalins Geisel im Kalten Krieg* (Hamburg, 1996) or *Trapped in the Cold War: The Ordeal of an American Family* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>88</sup>Interview with Hermann Field, Shirley, MA, 21 January 1998.

<sup>89</sup>Fond Komise II, volume 6, unit 72. Interrogation of Ladislav Kopriva, 28-29 January 1963: "Trust Fund was construed as a cover for English intelligence where people with long term perspectives could be recruited." See also the testimony of Otto Sling and Ludvik Frejka, Ministerstvo spravedlnosti, *Proces*, 9.

<sup>90</sup>AMI, 302-103-3, Trust Fund. Record no. 4, 5, and. 22.

Europe. Their boss, they confessed under duress, was none other than Noel's old friend from the State Department, Allen Dulles, and others in the recently created CIA.

Such a scheme could only have been prepared by someone who in the spring of 1939 had had the ability to predict the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the outbreak of World War II, Germany's violation of its agreement with Stalin in June 1941, Germany's defeat, the Soviet victory, the emergence of communist governments in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and the Cold War. Yet this sort of teleological thinking became the received wisdom in the minds of security officers throughout the Soviet bloc.

In July 1949 Noel admitted to the ÁVH that Gejza Pavlik, a Czechoslovak citizen and a refugee whom the USC had protected during the war, was his agent and that Allen Dulles the ultimate master of his intelligence network. Soon there was a list of other Czechoslovak citizens, mostly hard-core Stalinists, who had acted as informers for "Field, the American spy."<sup>91</sup> The StB acted on it, adding other names that came from the confessions of Löbl. Among the prominent ones were Vilem Novy (26 November 1949), the daring and unconventional party leader Otto Sling (6 October 1950), StB bosses Osvald Zavodsky (27 January 1951), Vladimir Smolka (27 January 1951), Karel Cerny (27 January 1951), Chief of Intelligence Oskar Vales (27 January 1951), Deputy StB Chief Ivo Milen (28 January 1951), Foreign Minister Vladimir Clementis (28 January 1951), Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Artur London (29 January 1951), party and security official and Deputy Chief of the Border Guards Josef Pavel (2 February 1951), Deputy Minister of Defense Bedrich Reicin (8 February 1951), Deputy Minister of National Security Karel Svab (16 February 1951), Deputy General Secretary of the CPC Marie Svermova (21 February 1951), Deputy Chief of Intelligence Jiri Sindelar (27 February 1951), intelligence official Jiri Wehle (29 March 1951), Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vavro Hajdu (2 April 1951), chief of President Gottwald's body guards Colonel Leopold Hofman (30 June 1951), Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade Otto Fischl (31 July 1951), and Oskar Langer (28 August 1951), a party boss in Slovakia. In many cases, the arrests of these officials triggered arrests of their deputies and staff, and also their patrons and protectors. The arrest of Reicin, uniquely, caused the arrests not only of those whose careers he had enabled, but also of his fierce critics and rivals: General

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<sup>91</sup>AMI, 302-103-3, Trust Fund. Interrogation of Noel Field, 5 June 1949.



Ludvik Klen, General Josef Musil, and officers Josef Mirovsky, Richard Mysik, Karel Vas, Vilem Kahan, and others.<sup>92</sup>

Most of the Ruzyne inmates reacted to their arrest and mistreatment by resigning themselves and preparing for the inevitable. The StB interrogators knew this, thanks to the presence of informers who, posing as prisoners, recorded every statement of their cellmates. For instance, when Reicin returned from interrogation on 5 March 1951 he stated to his cell-mate that “his sentence had been passed before he was arrested.” Marie Svermova noted on 23 May 1951 that her interrogators were completely uninterested in truth. The party had decided that she, Svermova, had to admit to certain crimes, and that was that. “Initially she resisted accepting this conclusion, but now she is convinced that this is what is happening. She is in a grotesque situation.” And on 25 May 1951 an agent reported to the StB that Reicin “was making things up so that he would be left in peace.” Sling stated on 28 May 1951 that “his case was run from Moscow and its purpose is to destroy innocent people who spent time in England and those who fought in Spain.” Stepan Placek, one of the first whistle-blowers who had warned that the enemy had penetrated the communist apparat, was among the first victims of the purge he had demanded for others. In Ruzyne he complained to his cell-mate about the injustice of his case; he had been a loyal agent of Soviet intelligence, and he was rewarded with torture at the hands of his own people. On 5 August 1951 Reicin told a fellow prisoner that he believed Sling was completely innocent. He was sharply critical of Soviet advisors and claimed that the StB manipulated the interrogation protocols.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 12, unit 203. Reicin was born in Prerov on 29 September 1911. He started as a youth in the Zionist movement, but in 1926 abandoned it and joined the Komsomol; in 1929, he joined the CPC. During the German occupation, Reicin was twice arrested by the Gestapo, then released, but with the provision that he had to report his whereabouts weekly. On 14 October 1940 Reicin and his wife received passports from the German authorities that allowed them to travel to Shanghai via the Soviet Union, which was then an ally of the Third Reich. Once they reached Soviet soil the Reicins sought and received asylum in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Reicin joined the Czechoslovak Army and became, in January 1945, chief of the dreaded Military Counterintelligence (OBZ). On 1 February 1951 when he sensed he might be arrested, Reicin wrote a letter to Gottwald demanding that his case be examined objectively, “but not by people who would first label me a criminal and then look for evidence.” Gottwald ignored the letter. Reicin was arrested and charged with spying for the Gestapo and the United States. His treatment in Ruzyne was particularly harsh because he proved to be a tough man for the StB to break. He agreed to play his role before the Tribunal only after his interrogators strongly hinted that he might avoid the death penalty and firmly promised that his family would be treated well. He was executed with Rudolf Slansky.

<sup>93</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 3, unit 38.

While the *chistka* was under way, in May 1951 the CPC observed its thirtieth anniversary. The celebration took place in *Hrad*, the royal castle overlooking Prague, now Gottwald's seat of power. Slansky focused his speech on the need to unmask and destroy the enemy within. Capitalists, he claimed, would never accept the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. There would therefore always be "reactionaries, saboteurs, and imperialist agents." But the party knows how to deal with such enemies because its leaders had been taught in Moscow. He concluded: "There is no other path that leads to victory than the one of the Bolsheviks, outlined by Lenin and Stalin. The past thirty years have taught us that the party can sustain itself only through an uncompromising struggle with its enemies."<sup>94</sup> This was a signal that the CPC intended to govern not only by destroying its opponents, but also amidst a permanent purge in its own ranks.

No one could feel secure in such an environment. Paradoxically, this was especially true for Gottwald and Slansky, the two men nominally in charge of the purge. They knew that all interrogation records from the Ruzyne facility went regularly to Stalin in the Kremlin. What he decided and for what reason no one could guess.

### **Stalin-Gottwald Correspondence**

On 20 July 1951 the Soviet boss gave the first indication of how intimately involved he had become in the crisis gathering around Slansky. He wrote to Gottwald that he had seen the materials against Slansky. "We consider them insufficient and maintain that there is no reason to charge him. We believe that it is not possible to form conclusions on the basis of charges coming from well-known culprits. Facts are needed that confirm such charges. This only demonstrates that [Soviet advisor] Boyarsky does not take his job seriously and we have decided to recall him to Moscow."<sup>95</sup>

This was quintessential Stalin. He postured as a defender of legality, but he knew full well that his call for "facts" would put pressure on Soviet advisors in Prague who, trembling for their lives, would increase their pressure on the Czech interrogators in Ruzyne who in turn, trembling for their lives, would pressure the prisoners, and that they

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<sup>94</sup> OSA 300-30-6/291, Radio Prague, 17 May 1951.

<sup>95</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 13, Rudolf Slansky, Filipov [Stalin] to the Embassy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, for comrade Gottwald, 20 July 1951.

would confess that there was a large-scale conspiracy among the ruling communist elites in Czechoslovakia, with Rudolf Slansky as its chief. The only possible outcome of Stalin's call against "jumping to conclusions" regarding Slansky before all facts were known was to push him ever closer to the Ruzyne abattoir.

Still, Gottwald was apparently relieved to learn that Stalin did not demand Slansky's arrest. And the point that statements by confessed criminals had to be read with caution and skepticism was also welcome. Would it, perhaps, be possible to arrest the purge's progress? Gottwald rushed to repeat Stalin's point as his own. He wrote to the Kremlin the same day, 20 July 1951: "I fully agree with you that on the basis of interrogation materials it is not possible to charge [Slansky], let alone draw conclusions. This is especially true when the statements come from proven criminals. Such has been my opinion right from the moment I learned about the matter." Gottwald even permitted himself to praise Boyarsky and asked Stalin to leave the advisor in Prague.

Stalin's warning against arresting comrades pell-mell on charges derived from interrogation protocols energized Gottwald. He summoned Minister of National Security Ladislav Kopriva to the Castle. There Kopriva heard directly from the president: Stalin warned the Prague authorities that "the enemy seeks to sow discord, his objective is to divide us so as to reach his goals more easily." Gottwald stated that this was a reference to the recent charges against Slansky. Kopriva continued: "Comrade Gottwald told me to stop further interrogations regarding Slansky. I asked him how it should be justified. He replied—find something, persuade them [in Ruzyne] that they should not be doing it." Kopriva tried to do that. But by August or September 1951, Soviet advisors and the chief of StB interrogators at Ruzyne, Bohumil Doubek, were back—with more damaging information against Slansky.<sup>96</sup>

It would be truly naïve to accept at face value Stalin's warning against recklessly following up frivolous charges against loyal comrades. What he wanted in Prague was a show-trial, just like those in all other Soviet bloc countries. Stalin apparently enjoyed the slow, meticulous preparation for the destruction of a human being, particularly one who was blindly loyal to him. For example, he had worked for several long years on the downfall of the Soviet Marshal Mikhail Nikolayavich Tukhachevsky. Now the Slansky

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<sup>96</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise C. Ladislav Kopriva Before Komise C, 23 May 1956.

case was also developing nicely. Perhaps to increase his pleasure, and certainly, to underline his personal interest in the Czech affair, Stalin invited Gottwald to the Kremlin to discuss the matter directly. The Communist International veteran declined to go, claiming to be ill, and sent instead his ambitious son-in-law, Alexej Cepicka.

On 23 July 1951, only three days after Stalin had demanded hard data rather than unsubstantiated rumors regarding Slansky, the Soviet boss suddenly knew enough. He told Gottwald's son-in-law that Slansky was no longer trusted in Moscow. According to Cepicka, the Soviet leader asked pointedly "whether it was true that Löbl, London, Svab were Slansky's good friends." He repeated his previous theme, i.e., that "wreckers in the Soviet Union on occasion falsely charged honest party members" and that party leaders had to be vigilant lest communist security organs started doing the work of the class enemy. But he finished by stressing the importance of "control." In the Kremlin—and here Stalin turned to Politburo members to confirm his point, which they promptly did—nobody was big enough to live outside the zone of strict control.

Stalin's meeting with Cepicka in the Kremlin was followed by an obligatory trip to a dacha on the outskirts of Moscow with the "great leader's" usual sycophants. The bizarre revelry lasted well into the morning of the next day. Amidst hard drinking, Stalin, suddenly stone-sober, turned to Cepicka and asked whether his people could be relied upon to produce the amount of steel that was expected of them. Cepicka plucked up his courage and warned that Czechoslovakia was not getting enough raw materials from the Soviet Union to fulfill its quota. Stalin rejected his excuses out of hand. He pointed out that, first of all, the Czechs should search for more iron ore and other raw materials in the mountains in Western Bohemia. Second, said Stalin in all seriousness, they had to stop wasting human excrement from public bathrooms. Flabbergasted, Cepicka remained silent. In his written account of the trip made exclusively for Gottwald, Cepicka quoted Stalin's advice verbatim, but added: "If I understood comrade Stalin accurately." And while he was at it, Stalin took a swipe at another target. He asked "sarcastically," according to Cepicka, whether the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Antonin Zapotocky was still in the business of writing novels.<sup>97</sup> When one devoted oneself to writing novels,

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<sup>97</sup> Zapotocky, who was trained as a stone-cutter, wrote five novels, including one, *Barunka*, that achieved considerably popularity. Stalin had never forgotten that Zapotocky had started his career as a labor organizer in the ranks of the Social Democratic Party. That

Stalin continued, it was hardly surprising that there was no time left for revolution. Zapotocky, Stalin continued ominously, had never risen above the level of a trade-unionist. Then he turned to face Cepicka, “Perhaps Comrade Cepicka is also a writer or hopes to become one, when it is so fashionable over there.” The other party-goers, as if on a cue, burst out laughing, shouting further remarks that the frightened comrade Cepicka failed to comprehend. But he knew that they were not meant to flatter.<sup>98</sup> In the morning, Cepicka received Stalin’s letter for Gottwald and instructions to deliver it promptly. He was glad to oblige: it is unlikely that he had any desire to linger on in Moscow.

Stalin’s letter to Gottwald praised the Czech leader for the “caution” with which he treated the statements of criminals regarding Slansky and repeated that the enemy sometimes deliberately spreads lies about loyal comrades. But then Stalin asserted, without offering any evidence, that Slansky had “made many errors regarding top personnel decisions. He proved to be short-sighted and far too trusting, and this gave the conspiracy members and enemies considerable freedom to act against the party and people without fear of punishment. It seems to us,” Stalin concluded, “that such a person cannot serve in the post of party general secretary. It is therefore necessary to replace him.” Stalin also reminded Gottwald who was in charge. Regarding the request to keep Boyarsky in Prague, Stalin stated that “in this matter we are of a different opinion.” The advisor was not “sufficiently qualified to fulfill his duties as advisor. Therefore, we have decided to recall him from Czechoslovakia.”

Gottwald was shocked when he read Stalin’s latest missive. Slansky was his life-long comrade, he was a close friend of Mrs. Slansky, who knew his secrets, and their wives were also close friends.<sup>99</sup> There was another problem: the CPC had already launched the campaign to celebrate Slansky’s fiftieth birthday.<sup>100</sup> Gottwald did not know how to react. He certainly had no desire to unmask Slansky as a party wrecker. To do so

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he thought of himself as a writer and art connoisseur in general lowered him even further in the eyes of the Kremlin. See Jiri Pernes, *Takovi nam vladli* (Prague: Brana, 2003), 233-237.

<sup>98</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 12. Zprava Dr. A. Cepicky o jednani v Moskve na predsednictvu UV KSSS, 23. 7. 1951, A. Cepicka A. Novotnemu, I. taj. UV KSC, 5. 5. 1956.

<sup>99</sup> NA ACC CPC, 100/50, volume 19, unit 184. Mrs. Gottwald: “My Dear Little Starling, Many thanks for your kind and encouraging words and for the beautiful bouquet of flowers. Yours, Marta.”

<sup>100</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 12.

amounted to admitting serious flaws in the organization of which he, Gottwald, was chairman. He knew enough about the world of international communism to imagine various outcomes, but none ended well.

This is why Gottwald drafted a reply in which he hinted at doubting the wisdom of Stalin's demand: "Firstly," he wrote, "I trust comrade Slansky's political and personal honesty and good will. Secondly, I do not even know who could successfully replace him in his current position. Finally, I myself do not feel entirely innocent and without responsibility for the errors that have been made."<sup>101</sup> But Gottwald had seen too much during his years in Moscow to believe that a person in his position could resist Stalin and live. He set the draft aside—it ends, literally, in the middle of the word "secretary"—and wrote that he accepted Moscow's instruction for Slansky's dismissal. Yet, he kept the door open for a peaceful solution: he told Stalin that he planned to give Slansky "another responsible position, albeit elsewhere."<sup>102</sup> Stalin replied immediately: "We have received your letter. We agree. Stalin."<sup>103</sup> Gottwald prepared the ground for Slansky's so-called promotion to another post, and hoped that the affair would fizzle out. But first the party needed to celebrate Slansky's fiftieth birthday.

### **Slansky Turns Fifty**

When Slansky turned fifty at the end of July 1951, the CPC dutifully celebrated its founding member and leader. President Gottwald led the way. On 30 July 1951 he awarded "CPC General Secretary Rudolf Slansky for his outstanding and extraordinary contribution to the victorious construction of socialism in Czechoslovakia, The Order of Socialism."<sup>104</sup> In his native village, Nezvestice, Slansky was treated to a concert by a choir of communist policemen.<sup>105</sup> That evening Radio Prague set aside many hours for a celebration of Rudolf Slansky's life. Patriotic songs were followed by a segment called "The Great Fighter," which featured dramatic actors reading from his collected works. A live concert was followed by a speech that honored the CPC leader with unmeasured

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<sup>101</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, unit 504.

<sup>102</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 14, unit 380 and Komise II, volume 25, unit 504.

<sup>103</sup> NA ACC CPC, Komise II, volume 25, unit 504.

<sup>104</sup> OSA 300-30-31/box 18.

<sup>105</sup> *Rude Pravo*, "Oslava narozenin soudruha Rudolfa Slanskeho v jeho rodne obci," 31 July 1951.

tones. The arrival of Slansky's actual birthday, 31 July 1951, brought the shrill tone even higher.<sup>106</sup>

Yet, the official photographs of Rudolf Slansky captured an unsmiling man with deeply sad eyes—as if he had sensed that the clouds had begun to gather around him.<sup>107</sup> But only a specialist in esoteric communications would have noticed that the celebration was taking place under a shadow. All external signs were fine; the party's main ideologue, Vaclav Kopecky, sang odes to Slansky's "dedication to the Soviet Communist Party and his burning love for the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin." His collected works appeared in two volumes, covered with fine leather.<sup>108</sup> Despite the rapidly declining standard of living, the country's enterprises, schools, and thousands of individuals sent congratulatory telegrams to the general secretary.<sup>109</sup> Many delegations came to congratulate him in person.<sup>110</sup>

The insincerity of the celebration was revealed within a few days, when Gottwald indicated he wanted to visit the Slanskys in their house. This was unusual because he normally preferred to summon them to the Castle; now he took the trouble to go to see them. The Slanskys jumped at the idea. It reminded them of the good old days, which, paradoxically, meant the time before the CPC victory. That evening they drank to excess, but after a while Gottwald blurted it out: "They keep demanding that I recall you from your post, and I can no longer postpone it." Mrs. Slansky, who was present that evening, recalled that Gottwald did not once refer to Stalin, Moscow, or the Soviets. They all understood. "You know," Gottwald continued, "I deliberately saw to it that your birthday was celebrated in a big style, I purposely underlined all that you'd done for the party. I hoped that if we showed you the way you are, with all that you've achieved for the party, that they would back out. But they didn't back out, they insist that I recall you."

<sup>106</sup> OSA 300-30-22/box 3, Radio Prague 30 July 1951 and 31 July 1951.

<sup>107</sup> NA ACC CPC, 100/45, volume 16, unit 271, unit 273, and 100/50, volume 22, unit 188.

<sup>108</sup> Rudolf Slansky, *Za vitezstvi socialismu*, vol. 1 and 2 (Prague, 1951). See NA ACC CPC, 100/50, file 21, unit 185. Murashko, "Delo Slanskogo," *Voprosy istorii*, 3 (1997): 16. The Soviet Embassy reported that the General Secretary was paid rather well for his collected works: he was supposed to have received 1,200,000 Kcs. I find it hard to believe. Slansky and other CPC bosses lived in luxurious homes, took over country mansions for their recreation, provided their wives with fur-coats, employed servants and guards. But their need for cash was quite limited.

<sup>109</sup> NA ACC CPC, 100/50, file 22, unit 188.

<sup>110</sup> OSA 300-30-22/box 3, Radio Prague, 1 August 1951.

Gottwald's old friend had no option but to say: "Go ahead, do it, I won't hold it against you."<sup>111</sup> He was now at a point beyond which there was the Ruzyne jail that he had helped to build, the Soviet advisors whom he had invited, and the StB whom he had brought to power in February 1948. This was perhaps Stalin's favorite moment in the game. His victim was brought to a spot from which he could survey and contemplate his hellish future, but with just enough hope of avoiding it by becoming even more obsequious.

Inside the party, Slansky's fate took a decisive downturn on 5 September 1951. The CPC Politburo recorded only one terse sentence: "Resolved: to recall General Secretary Slansky from his post, unanimously."<sup>112</sup> As far as the public was concerned, the blow fell on Thursday, 6 September 1951, at the meeting of the CPC Central Committee.<sup>113</sup> The speech was delivered by Klement Gottwald. He announced that "comrade Slansky, who was the CPC general secretary, is being transferred to another responsible position. The post of CPC general secretary will not be filled, and duties related to this job are being shifted to the post of CPC chairman [i.e., Gottwald himself]." At the end of his statement Gottwald urged the party to rely on the "gigantic Soviet Union and the working class, just as we are taught to do by the great and wise Stalin." The audience did not need long to absorb the news. They jumped to their feet and sang the *Internationale*.<sup>114</sup>

Slansky sang along with the others, of course, but he could not have enjoyed the occasion. Some saw his new job—deputy prime minister—as a promotion, but he had no illusions.<sup>115</sup> He was a seasoned politician well versed in Stalin's *modus operandi*. He knew his life was on the line.

However, Slansky could not have known that he had been an object of close study not only by the Kremlin, but also by the West. Specifically, he was in the cross-hairs of OKAPI, an intelligence organization set up in the late 1940s by the Americans in their

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<sup>111</sup> Bartosek, *Cesky vezem*, 148.

<sup>112</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 15. Politburo resolution, 5 September 1951.

<sup>113</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 15. Also US NA 749.00/9-1051. Ellis O. Briggs, US Embassy, Prague, to the Secretary of State, Washington, DC, 10 September 1951.

<sup>114</sup> OSA 300-30-22/box 5, Radio Prague, 7 September 1951.

<sup>115</sup> *The New York Times*, 9 September 1951.



zone in Germany, staffed by Czechoslovak military officers and civilian intelligence specialists, one of whom was Major Ostry.

### **Major Frantisek Ostry, the Americans, and OKAPI**

Frantisek Zdenek Ostry, born in 1913, was a career army officer.<sup>116</sup> When Hitler occupied his native Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the young lieutenant escaped abroad to fight. His journey started in a refugee center in Poland and continued via a detention camp in the Soviet Union, whence he got to Turkey, and, by boat, to France.<sup>117</sup> After arriving in Marseilles in May 1940, he found his way to Agde, where he joined the First Regiment of the Czechoslovak Army. Soon he was at the front, facing the *Blitzkrieg*. When all organized resistance collapsed, he was taken prisoner-of-war by the Wehrmacht. He escaped and made his way to the free zone in southern France. In Marseilles he briefly enjoyed the protection of Noel Field's USC.<sup>118</sup> Ostry and other Czechoslovak Army officers soon crossed the Pyrenees into Spain.<sup>119</sup> They were imprisoned again, this time at Miranda del Ebro, where they languished until they managed, with US visas and via Gibraltar, to reach Great Britain. They rejoined the Czechoslovak Army and the war effort.<sup>120</sup> Ostry's courage won him a spot on the team of Colonel (later General) Frantisek Moravec, the chief of Czechoslovak Military Intelligence.<sup>121</sup>

Major Ostry returned to liberated Czechoslovakia in July. He was then a well-trained intelligence officer, but when the communists took over in February 1948 he was ousted from the Army. He took a civilian job, focused on his family, and stayed away from politics.<sup>122</sup> In reality, though, Ostry was looking for a fight.

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<sup>116</sup>The following is based in part on the private papers of Colonel Frantisek Zdenek Ostry (PFO) and various archival documents from Prague, such as, NA, 2-1-617-3. The first reference in official print to Major Ostry and his activities was in Jiri Solc, "Operace 'Velky metar,'" *Historie a vojenství* 4, (1995): 79-101.

<sup>117</sup> AMI, H-235/2.

<sup>118</sup>Interviews with General Alois Seda, Watsonville, CA, 8-10 March 1997

<sup>119</sup> Lewis M. White, *On All Fronts: Czechoslovaks in World War II*, vol. 2 (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1995), 295.

<sup>120</sup>Interviews with General Alois Seda, Watsonville, CA, 8-10 March 1997.

<sup>121</sup>AMI, H-664, Operation General.

<sup>122</sup>AMI, H-235. KV-StB Praha to KV-StB Karlovy Vary, 22 June 1949.

Meanwhile, after the 1948 February coup d'état, General Moravec, Major Milos Knorr, Lt. Colonel Alois Seda, his brother Colonel Ferdinand Seda, Major Herbert Nemeč and many of their colleagues escaped yet again to the West, mostly to the American zones in Austria and Germany. They almost immediately began working for US intelligence. The first Czechoslovak section became operational in March 1948.<sup>123</sup>

The American intelligence effort directed against communist Czechoslovakia was headed by two men, both trained as historians before the war. The first was Spencer Laird Taggart, a native of Idaho who for three years (November 1931 to November 1934) worked as a Mormon missionary in Czechoslovakia, where he learned to speak Czech well.<sup>124</sup> He returned home and pursued a doctorate in history from the University of California at Berkeley, where he studied with the historian Robert Joseph Kerner. When the war broke out Taggart joined the OSS and was put to work on the Czech desk. In the Spring of 1945 he arrived in Prague with a mission: "I was sent there," he said, "with a long-term objective—to help the Czechs guard their independence and to promote Western democracy."<sup>125</sup>

The communist *putsch* took place in February 1948, just as Taggart was just returning with his wife from a motoring tour of Italy. When they crossed the border, he noted, it "was as if a gigantic funeral gloom had enclosed the entire country. There was very little traffic. It seemed we were virtually alone. The Czechs are great walkers, but this Sunday [29 February 1948] we saw only a few, their bearing solemn and mournful." At the US Embassy Taggart learned that the "whole power structure had been turned upside down and shaken out. Almost all our friends in the government had been ousted. Several had been arrested and were in prison. One had attempted suicide as a political statement. Others were under house arrest, including Petr Zenkl, the leader of the democratic opposition. Others were in hiding or seeking safety across the border."<sup>126</sup> Taggart's mission—to promote and defend democracy—had failed.

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<sup>123</sup>AMI, H-235.

<sup>124</sup> Spencer L. Taggart, "Becoming a Mormon Missionary," unpublished MS.

<sup>125</sup> Personal interview with Spencer L. Taggart, 23 April 1999.

<sup>126</sup> Spencer L. Taggart, "Witnessing Freedom's Loss," unpublished MS.

Taggart's colleague in Prague was Colonel Charles Katek, who served in the Czechoslovak capital from May 1945 to March 1948.<sup>127</sup> He was a tall, powerfully built soldier who, like Taggart, spoke fluent Czech. His family owned a moving company in Chicago that specialized in pianos.<sup>128</sup> He was an attractive and outgoing man with a large and loyal following in wartime Czech circles in London and later in Prague.<sup>129</sup> He usually did not even bother to hide his involvement in intelligence matters.<sup>130</sup> The StB hated him, of course, but he was highly regarded by the Czech democrats with whom he worked closely during his tour of duty in Prague. They speak highly of him even half a century later.<sup>131</sup>

But the Czech officers gathered in Germany wanted operational independence, and the Americans—possibly by default—provided it. Shortly after the communist coup d'état, General Frantisek Moravec escaped from Czechoslovakia and went to Washington for talks with the intelligence community. He then took command of the Czechoslovak officers who fled to the West to launch operations against the victorious CPC.<sup>132</sup>

General Moravec moved the main unit to Bensheim, a German town between Darmstadt and Mannheim. Its code name was OKAPI.<sup>133</sup> It had a U.S. Government

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<sup>127</sup> AMI, Z-621.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Walter W. Birge, Kingston, MA, 11 September and 2 November 1998. Mr. Birge knew Colonel Katek well during his service at the U.S. Embassy in Prague and later in Germany.

<sup>129</sup> SCA, 61-19-5. On 26 January 1945, Major Katek, chief of the Czechoslovak section of the OSS, was awarded the Order of the White Lion by the Benes government in London. The citation noted his dedication to the Czech cause.

<sup>130</sup> AMI, 310-66-14 and AMI, Z-651, vol. 13. Katek maintained in Prague many – more or less – transparent covers. Initially, he claimed his job was to search for war criminals. Later, he headed a Commission repatriating U.S. citizens. This was transformed into the Military Mission with headquarters on Loretanske Square. In this capacity Katek was supposedly in charge of efforts to exhume U.S. soldiers who died on Czechoslovak territory during the war. Czech counterintelligence officers were furious at the openness with which Katek conducted himself and at his apparent successes.

<sup>131</sup> Interviews with General Knorr and General Seda, various dates.

<sup>132</sup> US NA RG 59, LOT 54D426, Records of the Office of East European Affairs.

<sup>133</sup> An okapi looks like a cross between a zebra and a giraffe. It is shy, prefers darkness, and lives primarily in today's Congo. General Knorr believes that the title was invented by General Moravec who wished to stress that OKAPI was a dual, Czechoslovak-American operation and he liked the nocturnal, secretive habits of the real okapi. Telephone interview, 11 May 1998. Spencer Taggart suggested he came up with the name. Personal interview, 23 April 1999. The okapi has been adopted as a symbol of the International Society of Cryptozoology, William J. Broad, "One Legend Found, Many Still to Go," *New York Times*, 2 October 2005, wk, 3.

address (APO 175) and an American liaison section.<sup>134</sup> But Moravec took only the most general of directions from the Americans. He considered himself an intelligence professional and resented their attempts to control his team. He did all he could to maintain a wall between his operations and the US liaison officers. Specific operations were designed and run by him and his staff officers at Bensheim without discernible American supervision.<sup>135</sup> “Who controlled Moravec?” Taggart was asked. “No one. We brought him to Bensheim and put him to work. That was the best arrangement for all concerned,” he replied.<sup>136</sup>

Those were the pioneering days of anticommunist intelligence and it is thus hardly surprising that the Seda brothers and other Czechs in Germany turned to their military colleagues still in Czechoslovakia with requests for information. Soon, young couriers began carrying messages written in invisible ink. Written mostly by Lt. Colonel Seda, now in Germany, the letters went to Frantisek Ostry in Prague. Inevitably, the StB managed to “turn” one (and later two) of the couriers it captured into double agents. This was the beginning of Operation ZOBAK.<sup>137</sup> Ostry did his best to pick up information for his war-time colleagues in the American zone and they in turn kept him up-to-date regarding political developments in the Cold War. StB officers read most of the correspondence and were undoubtedly looking forward to the day when Ostry would be at their mercy in any one of the many torture chambers they operated in Prague. They knew he was a man of considerable determination: in one letter to Seda in Germany Ostry asked for poison pills “in case of emergency.” For the time being, the StB kept its target under observation while it waited to penetrate deeper into the organization Lt. Colonel Seda was hoping to build in Czechoslovakia.

But Major Ostry was an intelligence professional. In September 1949 he realized that his activities had been compromised and, without hesitation, escaped from

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<sup>134</sup> PFO. According to Ostry’s notes, the chief of the American section was one L. P. Fitzgerald. There was also Howard Emmunds with an address in Washington, D.C. (P. O. Box 8143, SW Station). Finally, OKAPI had a liaison officer in New York City, Walter Freund.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with General Knorr, New York City, 15 May 1997 and with General Seda, Watsonville, CA, 9 March 1997. Knorr: “It was hard to control Moravec.” Seda: “We operated on our own. The Americans had no idea what was happening around them. Intelligence operations inside Czechoslovakia were our initiatives.”

<sup>136</sup> Personal interview with Spencer L. Taggart, 23 April 1999.

<sup>137</sup> AMI, H-235-1. The first agent was “Robert,” the other was “Adam” or AKP-308.

Czechoslovakia for good. Once he reached the West, he arranged the escape of his wife and children from under the noses of the furious StB. After some time in Vienna, where he worked for the US Counter Intelligence Corps, Ostry was ordered to join OKAPI.<sup>138</sup>

Daily life at Bensheim was hard. The StB imagined that Ostry and others lived the grand American dream. In reality, no one was on a regular payroll, and only the top officers received small stipends. Others were merely provided with daily meals at a mess-hall, and they were grateful for the right to shop at U.S. Army stores. Ostry loved his dangerous job, even though it paid next to nothing. One day he carried documents identifying him as Johann Gratzler, a musician, then as Michael P. Steinhardt, a US Army employee; on another occasion, he was Frank Oliver or Richard Graetsch. His regular cover name was “Ridgeway.”

At the end of July and in early August 1951 Ostry carefully studied the CPC daily *Rude Pravo*. He noticed that the newspaper celebrated Slansky’s fiftieth birthday by printing celebratory statements from largely irrelevant Czech regional party organizations. There were surprisingly few telegrams from other communist parties. There were none on 31 July 1951 and only two brief ones from Poland and East Germany the next day. On 2 August 1951 Slansky’s birthday was the subject of only three telegrams from such minor players as the communist parties of Romania, Belgium, and Austria. Many more telegrams could have been expected, especially from other East European countries. Given Slansky’s standing as the CPC general secretary, protocol called for a telegram from Stalin himself. It never arrived.

Ostry, a skilled analyst, instantly saw the relevance of the missing telegram from Stalin. He decided to keep an eye on the general secretary. Once Slansky lost his position in the CPC in September 1951, Ostry was able to place his situation within the context of the arrests and trials among other Eastern European communist *apparats* and also in Czechoslovakia. It was then that Operation Great Sweeper was born.

The plan could be summed up simply: OKAPI would use the growing uncertainty around Slansky to encourage his defection. If Slansky were to escape to the US zone he would be of great benefit to Western intelligence. Moreover, the escape of a recent General Secretary of the CPC would have a detrimental impact on the communist

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<sup>138</sup>AMI, H-253/2.

movement worldwide. Slansky, of course, could decline to accept the offer. In that case, OKAPI's approach to him would by itself accelerate his demise and deepen the distrust among the CPC leaders. Ostry was therefore convinced that Great Sweeper could only benefit OKAPI and the West, no matter how Slansky reacted when he received a sign from OKAPI inviting him to escape.

Herbert Kauders, a Czechoslovak citizen recruited by OKAPI, told Ostry of one Daniela Kankovska in Prague, who insisted she was a mistress of Rudolf Slansky.<sup>139</sup> Ostry learned that Kauders and Kankovska sometimes referred to the CPC boss as the "great sweeper," an allusion to his penchant for purges.<sup>140</sup> It is important to note in this context that Kauders's contribution to the operation was limited to the link he provided to Daniela Kankovska and the hint that she would recognize the term "great sweeper" as referring to Slansky. Kauders had nothing to do with the idea to invite Slansky to defect to the West. General Moravec and Major Ostry strictly controlled access to information regarding Operation Great Sweeper.

OKAPI decided to invite the Great Sweeper's defection to the West with a letter to be delivered by an agent to Kankovska, who would then hand it to her friend Slansky.<sup>141</sup> Ostry drafted the letter; it was then edited by General Moravec. It read:

We have information indicating that your situation has become difficult. Concern regarding your future has been expressed here, and it is supported by information from well-informed circles that you've been marked for a trial, facing a fate similar to that of Gomulka's.

We hope this letter reaches you in time. We offer you a secure passage to the West, guaranteed asylum, a safe haven, and support, excepting a political career.

If you agree we are in a position to arrange your immediate departure. As proof of your acceptance please tear off the lower half of this letter and write on it the date when you are ready to go. You will receive further instructions through

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<sup>139</sup>AMI, H-784-13. Kauders and his wife, Anna, escaped to the West between April and May 1951. Kankovska, b. 1922, met Kauders in 1947. It is entirely possible that she made up her relationship with Slansky. She told the StB on 24 November 1962 that she had invented it because she wanted to appear important. However, she talked about the alleged relationship not only with Kauders when she was free but also when she was in jail. A fellow prisoner who spied on Kankovska reported: "Kankovska boasted of having had intimate relations with Rudolf Slansky." AMI, H-784-13, Zdena Dittrichova, 23 November 1962.

<sup>140</sup> A glance at newspaper headlines from that era suggests that "to sweep" was used quite frequently in a political context. "It is Necessary to Sweep the Army Clean of Enemy Elements" (*Rude Pravo*, 9 January 1948) or "Slansky Sweeps the Army Clean" (*Svobodne slovo*, 11 January 1948).

<sup>141</sup>PFO. The following is based on the account of Operation Great Sweeper by Frantisek Ostry that he prepared for the CIA in 1953 and on a set of notes in his personal papers.

the same channel. Be careful and don't talk. This letter's courier [i.e., Daniela Kankovska] knows nothing.

To verify that this operation is arranged by the West, a message for you will be broadcast by Radio Free Europe at 48,9 m on 10, 17 and 24 November and on 1 December 1951, always at 19:53 hours. The message: "Bad things happen all at once. This message from Podpora."<sup>142</sup>

For a courier to take the letter across the Iron Curtain, Ostry turned to Rudolf Neveceral. This proved to be a fateful choice.

### **Rudolf Neveceral: On Both Sides of the Cold War**

Neveceral, born in 1922, escaped from Czechoslovakia in March 1951 after he had been sentenced for making an anticommunist joke in a pub.<sup>143</sup> The Americans interrogated him the next day. Their first question was: "Are you hungry?" After some food, three Americans and Neveceral drank through the night, Neveceral later told the StB. This accomplished, and after a cursory questioning, Neveceral accepted the offer to become a US agent. More serious and in-depth interrogations followed.<sup>144</sup> Eventually, the Americans decided to test him. They sent him to Czechoslovakia on two successive missions. The first one went well. During the second one, however, Neveceral visited his wife, saw his children, and decided that the kind of work he chose was far too dangerous. He consequently surrendered to communist authorities.

What followed reads like a tall tale from a Central European beer hall. Neveceral traveled to Prague; there he went to the back entrance of the Ministry of Defense and handed the officer on duty a piece of paper with a short statement he had prepared in advance: "I have important military information and need to talk about it with competent people." The officer read the note and went looking for someone fitting Neveceral's expectations. A gentleman appeared who told Neveceral rather casually that he himself was busy at the moment and everybody else was having lunch in the cafeteria. He asked the would be defector to come back in two hours. Then he showed him the door. Neveceral went to a nearby restaurant and enjoyed a fine meal. When he returned to the

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<sup>142</sup>AMI, fond H-784-13, file 13/2, page 11. "Podpora," Ostry's code-name, means "support."

<sup>143</sup>AMI, H-780.

<sup>144</sup>AMI, H-780. Neveceral crossed the border into the US zone in March 1951 near Hundsbach. The CIC formally recruited him in Weiden.

Ministry, he again explained his business. This time, he was taken to the Pankrac prison. Soon, he was speaking with Jaroslav Saksl, chief of StB's section 28 (enemy agents) and Jaroslav Skrivanek. Neveceral made a full confession and accepted an offer to become a double agent. His code-name would be "Rudla" and Skrivanek his case-officer.<sup>145</sup>

When Neveceral returned to Germany, the CIC, suspicious that his mission had taken much longer than planned, prudently released him from service.<sup>146</sup> At that point, Neveceral was recruited by OKAPI. As a result, the letter to Slansky would be delivered to Prague by an agent of the StB. Carrying the letter to the Great Sweeper, Neveceral crossed the German-Czechoslovak border at night on 8 November 1951.<sup>147</sup> The manila envelope he carried contained various documents. One was a letter from Kauders to Kankovska, another from OKAPI to the Great Sweeper for Kankovska to give to Slansky. Neveceral carried a pistol and two hand-grenades. He crossed the border successfully but he contacted an officer of the Czechoslovak border guards and identified himself as a communist agent. The envelope with the two letters arrived at StB headquarters in Prague in the morning of 9 November 1951.

The StB officers stared at the manila envelope before them and felt mystified. They knew only that Neveceral was instructed by a Czech-speaking intelligence officer in Germany to deliver it to Kankovska. He did not know what was in it. The StB found in it two letter-size envelopes, and opening those proved to be surprisingly difficult, since each was secured by a new kind of tape, and the letters inside the envelopes were wrapped in carbon paper.<sup>148</sup> This caused problems with one of the letters because steam, the most common technique for opening letters, stained the envelope. It required many hours before the letters could be photographed and resealed.

The StB read Ostry's letter several times, but still did not understand its meaning. To begin with, who was the Great Sweeper? A high-level meeting was organized by the chief Soviet advisor. The participants concluded that the most likely addressee was—

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<sup>145</sup> AMI, H-780, Neveceral's interrogation on 6 May 1951 and 24 September 1956. Also, AMI, H-784-13. Neveceral signed the contract with the StB on 15 May 1951.

<sup>146</sup> AMI, H-784-13. The mission that the CIC had designed for Neveceral was supposed to take 6 days but he came back only after 17 days in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>147</sup> AMI, ZV 119 folder 13/5, Interrogation of Rudolf Neveceral, 12 June 1956.

<sup>148</sup> AMI, H-784-13. Bohumil Miller's interrogation on 20 October 1962.



because of the reference to the former Polish communist boss Wladyslaw Gomulka—Rudolf Slansky.<sup>149</sup> The tensions at the StB Headquarters rose higher:

Immediately after the letters had been opened by technicians, they went to [Kamil] Pixa, StB sector chief. On the same day, there was a meeting in his office that was attended, as I heard, by [Deputy Minister of National Security and Deputy StB Chief Antonin] Prchal, [Soviet] advisor Smirnov [. . .] The meeting went into the night and its conclusion was a ban on any discussion of the letters, even within the section. As I remember, it was then that the rumor was started that the Great Sweeper was probably Slansky.<sup>150</sup>

By November 1951 the purge had already begun to decimate the ranks of the purgers, the StB. One sign of this was that the officers did not dare to interrogate Neveceral in their headquarters. To avoid any possibility of speaking within the range of hidden microphones, they took Neveceral for a walk in Sarka, a nature preserve on the outskirts of Prague. When they received the letter, an StB officer recalled later, they sensed that something was fishy. They worried lest they fall into a trap set up by their own people or by the Soviets. StB veterans feared for their lives and even made provisions about what to do in case they were suddenly arrested by their colleagues. Remarkably however, even this development did not cause them to start thinking critically of the regime they served.<sup>151</sup>

### **From the Great Sweeper Letter to Slansky's Arrest**

Through the night, OKAPI's letters for Kankovska and the Great Sweeper moved up the chain of command until they landed on the desk of StB chief Josef Hora. They did not stay there for long. They were translated into Russian and sent to Moscow.<sup>152</sup> In the Kremlin, the packet from Prague had the impact of an explosive device. The day after Neveceral brought the letters from OKAPI to Prague, 10 November 1951, General Alexei D. Beschasnov, the newly appointed chief of the NKVD advisors in Prague reached the city. He went from the airport straight to the StB Headquarters, where he was shown the Great Sweeper letter. On the next day, 11 November 1951, Anastas Mikoyan,

<sup>149</sup>AMI, H-784-13. Josef Novotny's interrogation on 5 November 1962.

<sup>150</sup>AMI, H-784-13. Josef Novotny's interrogation on 7 November 1962.

<sup>151</sup>AMI, H-784-13. Jaroslav Saksl's interrogation on 19 October 1962.

<sup>152</sup>AMI, H-784-13. The translator was Petr Bechyne, interrogation on 2 November 1962.

troubleshooter for the Soviet Politburo, flew to Prague to tell Gottwald that Stalin demanded Slansky's arrest. The Soviet leader's decision was to be regarded as evidence of the former general secretary's guilt; Mikoyan refused to provide any explanation as to why the former general secretary had to be imprisoned.

Gottwald courageously rejected Stalin's recommendation—no small achievement. Mikoyan rose to his feet and told the president that they would meet again soon. Gottwald called his daughter and son-in-law to the Castle, where the “first proletarian president” lived surrounded by aristocratic opulence. As soon as they arrived, he took Cepicka to his study and briefed him on the recent development. Just as he had promised, Mikoyan reappeared; he had gone to the Soviet Embassy and telephoned Stalin. According to Cepicka: “Mikoyan announced that he had informed Stalin regarding Gottwald's rejection. Stalin, however, must insist on his recommendation, [he] explains the need for action by the danger of [Slansky's] escape, and reminds Gottwald of his grave responsibility in the matter.” Gottwald replied that he had seen no evidence that would call for such a drastic step. Mikoyan refused to discuss it. He replied that Stalin “demands that the arrest take place sooner rather than later.” At this point Gottwald surrendered. He asked Mikoyan to assure Stalin that he would obey.<sup>153</sup>

On Wednesday, 14 November 1951, Neveceral, acting under StB directions, delivered the envelopes to Kankovska.<sup>154</sup> She read the letter that was addressed to her after Neveceral had left. She consulted two friends and told them she thought they were for Rudolf Slansky. One of them, an army officer, stated she was honor-bound to deliver the letter, and he even volunteered to take it to Slansky himself.<sup>155</sup> However, on 23 November 1951, Kankovska found out that StB officers had been asking about her. Without hesitation, she burned the letters.<sup>156</sup>

Slansky therefore never saw the missive from OKAPI, but this was not the end of Operation Great Sweeper. Gottwald had known since July 1951 that Stalin had doubts about Slansky's loyalty. But now he learned from Mikoyan that the former General Secretary of the CPC was a traitor planning his escape to the West. The pressure from

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<sup>153</sup>Fond Komise I, vol. 2, unit 12.

<sup>154</sup>AMI, H-784-13. Kankovska's interrogation on 24 November 1962.

<sup>155</sup>AMI, H-784-13. The officer was Lt. Ladislav Doubravsky.

<sup>156</sup>AMI, H-784-13. Kankovska's interrogation on 24 November 1962.

General Beschasnov also could not be ignored. Still Gottwald played for time and kept postponing the decision to have his friend arrested. Consequently, the NKVD advisors and the StB decided to show him the Great Sweeper letter.

When they did so remains unclear. Beschasnov claims to have carried the letter to Gottwald personally on 11 November 1951, but that is incorrect.<sup>157</sup> Cepicka says that “shortly after Mikoyan’s visit, the StB presented Gottwald with proof regarding preparations for Slansky’s escape.”<sup>158</sup> An StB study noted that Gottwald received the letter some “hours” before he authorized Slansky’s arrest.<sup>159</sup> A special commission that looked into the Slansky case in 1957 found that Gottwald had received the letter from the StB “shortly” after he had received Stalin’s warning that Slansky’s escape was imminent.<sup>160</sup> Minister Ladislav Kopriva testified that he and Beschasnov had delivered the letter to the Castle “some twenty-four hours” before Slansky’s arrest. On that occasion, Kopriva added new information for Gottwald’s benefit: the StB had found out that Slansky had had a new suit made and had pressured the tailor to hurry up with the final alterations.<sup>161</sup>

Gottwald still hesitated and asked the StB to verify that the two codes mentioned in the letters to Slansky and Kankovska were in fact broadcast by RFE. The StB section responsible for monitoring the Munich station soon reported that both were in fact heard and recorded. The StB brought a tape-recorder to the president’s quarters and let him hear the evidence for himself.<sup>162</sup> This was the crucial development that finally broke Gottwald’s resistance to authorizing Slansky’s arrest.

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<sup>157</sup> AMI, H-784-13. Beschasnov states he gave the letter to Gottwald on 11 November 1951, hours before Slansky’s arrest. In reality, Slansky was arrested almost two weeks later.

<sup>158</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, vol. 2, unit 12.

<sup>159</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, vol. 12, unit 202.

<sup>160</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 14, unit 382.

<sup>161</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, vol. 12, unit 202 and NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 6, unit 72. According to Murashko, “Delo Slanskogo,” *Voprosy istorii*, 3 (1997): 16, the Soviet Embassy heard that Mrs. Slansky had withdrawn 200,000 Kcs. The Czech currency would have been worthless in the West, and it is hard to see why Mrs. Slansky would have bothered making the transaction. It is likely that the story was invented by the Soviet advisors who needed to put still more pressure on Gottwald to order Slansky’s arrest.

<sup>162</sup> AMI, H-784-13. Officers of the department that monitored the RFE broadcasts in 1951 recalled that they had been ordered to listen specifically for “Bad things happen all at once. Message from Podpora” and for “Greetings to my child from Kabes.” To everyone’s relief both sentences were in fact broadcast from Munich and were successfully recorded. Lt. Jaroslav Zeman was ordered to take the

There may have also been other channels through which Soviet representatives in Prague pressured the Czechoslovak president. Anatolii Yosifovich Lavrentiev, the new Soviet Ambassador, arrived in Prague on 15 November 1951, just a day after Neveceral approached Kankovska with the Great Sweeper letter.<sup>163</sup> Gottwald formally received his credentials just as Kankovska was trying to make up her mind what to do with the letter.<sup>164</sup>

Advisor Beschasnov recalled, “Gottwald stated that we had had enough time to think and consider the whole affair. It was no longer possible to postpone the decision [. . .] and he immediately so instructed Minister Kopriva.”<sup>165</sup> Kopriva stated that Gottwald authorized the arrest “with resignation.”<sup>166</sup> In the evening, the minister assembled in his office Bohumil Doubek, Karel Kostal, Antonin Prchal, Josef Cech, and two NKVD officers. The Soviet advisors told the Czechs that they had been selected to carry out Slansky’s arrest.<sup>167</sup> They stated they were in possession of a document showing that Slansky had been in touch with centers abroad and that “he was an enemy preparing to flee the country.”<sup>168</sup>

Major Ostry’s dream was about to come true. The importance of the letter OKAPI had sent to the Great Sweeper and the role it played in Gottwald’s decision to arrest Slansky cannot be overestimated. Even the StB later marveled that a full thirteen days had passed before Gottwald acted on Stalin’s urgent call for Slansky’s arrest. He did so only after he had seen the letter and had heard a recording proving that the codes mentioned in the letter had been broadcast by Radio Free Europe.<sup>169</sup>

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then precious reel tape-recorder (it was called “Paratus”) and bring it, with the tape-recording of the two messages, to the StB chief, who then took it to Gottwald.

<sup>163</sup> The ambassador’s arrival was announced in the official party daily, *Rude Pravo*, on 16 November 1951. Next to the report was an article with a characteristic title “Truman In Hitler’s Footsteps.”

<sup>164</sup> OSA 300-30-22/box 5. Radio Prague, 16 November 1951. “President Gottwald today . . . received the new Ambassador of the USSR in Prague A. Y. Lavrentiev.

<sup>165</sup> AMI, H-784-13. “Report Regarding the Circumstances that had Preceded the Arrest of Slansky,” by A. D. Beschasnov.

<sup>166</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 6, unit 72.

<sup>167</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 5, unit 44.

<sup>168</sup> Josefa Slansky, *Report on My Husband* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969), 14.

<sup>169</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, unit 504. Report of the Drahomir Kolder Commission, 19 March 1963. The report stated that it was not clear “whether the letter had been faked by StB officer in order to obtain Slansky’s arrest or whether it was not a sophisticated provocation of intelligence organizations staffed by post-February [1948] refugees acting under the auspices of the USA.”

### **The Long, Unfortunate Day: Slansky's Arrest**

That Friday, 23 November 1951, was a special day for several reasons. The first among them was that it was Klement Gottwald's fifty-fifth birthday. Many collectives—from coal miners in Kladno to steel workers in Ostrava—had taken it upon themselves to fulfill their annual quotas not by the end of December, but by Gottwald's birthday. For days in advance, the state-controlled media reported that some had been able to improve upon this already ambitious undertaking.<sup>170</sup> Those who turned on Radio Prague on the day of Gottwald's birthday were treated to a seemingly endless reading—slow and solemn—of the text of Stalin's telegram to Gottwald, i.e., the sort of telegram Slansky had failed to receive when he had turned fifty at the end of July.<sup>171</sup>

The Slanskys had given much thought to what present might please their friend Gottwald. In the end they settled on a novel idea. They commissioned a fashionable artist to paint a romantic portrait of Dedice, the village where Gottwald was born in 1896. The president's memories of the village were complex, to say the least. He had never met his father and his single, teenage mother had given him up when he was only one year old. When she took him back again, Gottwald was nine, and he was put to work. Hard work. When he turned twelve, his mother again gave him up, this time sending him to Vienna, where he was to apprentice as a carpenter for the next six years. He was forced to work from eight in the morning until ten at night. When he wanted to read, he had to go out on the street and read under a lamp. His boss disapproved of his taste for radical literature, he strongly discouraged wasteful use of electricity, and candles were not allowed.

Gottwald received his formal certificate as a trained carpenter in 1914, just as the Great War broke out, and he was drafted a year later. He saw his native Dedice again only in the summer of 1918, when he was granted a short leave from the front—for good conduct. Gottwald used the occasion to desert from the Austro-Hungarian Army and never went back.<sup>172</sup> Soon after the war Gottwald briefly considered a military career, but

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<sup>170</sup> OSA 300-30-22/box 5. Radio Prague, 22 November 1951.

<sup>171</sup> OSA 300-30-22/box 5. Radio Prague, 23 November 1951.

<sup>172</sup> Karel Kaplan and Pavel Kosatik, *Gottwaldovi muzi* (Prague: Paseka, 2004), 11-13.

instead he moved to Prague to take part in the politics of the newly emerged Czechoslovakia.

The painting had been finished well in advance of Gottwald's birthday and now the Slanskys were eager to present it to him in person. To their great dismay they heard from the Presidential Office at the Castle that Gottwald was not well and would not be receiving any guests. Yet, Slansky found out almost immediately that others from the CPC leadership had been able to see him. Gottwald was not sick.

It was some consolation to the Slanskys that they were invited that evening to the spacious villa of Prime Minister Antonin Zapotocky. But when they arrived, there was another bad omen. They learned that they were to sit not at the central table in the main dining room, but at a lesser place in an adjoining room. And worse, Zapotocky told them that he had spent the afternoon with Gottwald. The warm greeting they received from one of several Soviet guests, Ambassador Lavrentiev, was probably the one good thing that happened to them on that day.<sup>173</sup>

Understandably, the Slanskys were not inclined to prolong their stay at their uncomfortable table, and as soon as the ambassador and other Soviet guests departed, they got up to leave. But their host, Prime Minister Zapotocky intervened. It was too early, he insisted, and he treated them to a grand tour of his house, describing in detail each painting and work of art, mostly stolen from their arrested or exiled owners or borrowed from the National Gallery. It was only when the clock struck midnight that the host finally relented and offered to call their driver.

Zapotocky, who had known Slansky and his wife for some twenty-five years, walked out with his guests, thanked them for coming, and wished them both a pleasant evening. As soon as they got in their car, he hurried back inside the house to place the call: Slansky was on his way.<sup>174</sup> Members of the arresting squad took up their positions.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Slansky, *Report on My Husband*, 133.

<sup>174</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 6, unit 72. Minister Kopriva testified: "It was agreed upon that comrade Zapotocky would telephone us when Slansky had left on his way home."

<sup>175</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44. Bohumil Doubek, a member of the arresting party, testified that they had isolated Slansky's body-guards, disarmed them, and waited for Slansky to summon his official driver to come and pick him up at the Zapotocky residence.

The Slanskys entered their villa after midnight on Saturday, 24 November 1951. The former general secretary noticed that the house was dark. And where was their security detail who normally greeted them on arrival? This was unusual. Slansky opened the door, but then stepped aside to let his wife go first. When they entered they were blinded by lights, heard shouts and stomping feet. They were each held by several hands and handcuffed. Mrs. Slansky, frightened, shouted. It was more, she recalled, an “inhuman howl.” Someone covered her mouth, and she was suffocating; she stopped resisting. She saw men with automatic weapons coming toward the scene from the dark edges of the large sitting room. Her husband was held by several StB agents who pressed him against a wall. For the rest of her life she would remember his bulging sad eyes.<sup>176</sup> The confused man, a life-long atheist, began repeating: “Jesus Maria, Jesus Maria.” Soon he was in a car with a hood on his head and a rag stuffed in his mouth.

Mrs. Slansky was convinced that they had been seized and kidnapped by American agents. She feared they would be killed on the spot or smuggled across the border. Even blindfolded, her husband knew that their situation was worse. He could sense that the car took off in the direction of Ruzyne prison on the outskirts of Prague. He remembered the correspondence regarding the financing of this building he had exchanged with Karel Svab and Josef Frank. At that time, they were all in agreement that “the importance of this construction project is self-evident.”<sup>177</sup> He also remembered his October 1949 visit to Ruzyne, just as the facility was about to receive its first group of arrested victims. On that occasion, he accompanied Gottwald and Zapotocky. His two colleagues were now resting at home, but he was about to make his second visit—with a black hood on his head and his mouth gagged.

### **Slansky’s Second Trip to Ruzyne**

The car reached the large court yard of Ruzyne. Soon the former general secretary stood naked in front of StB officers, who reacted to his protestations of innocence with contempt. Like so many of his victims, Slansky now became a number—2359/865. His first job, the prisoner was told, was to surrender his parliamentary immunity. Slansky did

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<sup>176</sup> Slansky, *Report on My Husband*, 139.

<sup>177</sup> ACC CPC, 100/2, vol. 56, unit 614.

so without hesitation or protest in a letter addressed to Prime Minister Antonin Zapotocky, the man who had smiled at him so warmly only an hour ago.<sup>178</sup> The former general secretary had no illusions about his future. He told a fellow prisoner (who was, naturally, a professional StB informer) that he “knows the Ruzyne methods and understands that nothing can save him; he knows what’s in store for him.”<sup>179</sup>

At ten in the morning, Gottwald informed a small group of his colleagues that Slansky had been arrested. He said little himself and allowed the Minister of Interior Kopriva to tell others that Slansky had functioned as “chief of a large-scale conspiracy. Its purpose was to wreck socialism and restore capitalism.” “A letter had been captured urging Slansky to escape to the West. Therefore, measures were taken at night to arrest Slansky.” He then read the OKAPI letter and said: “This is what has forced us to make the decision.” All agreed that the case was “politically extremely unpleasant.” But it was impossible to keep it secret; an announcement would have to be made.

Then Cepicka spoke. There had been hints from interrogations of those detained that the West had organized a large conspiracy against the communist government in Prague. It had been slowly unfolding since the end of the war. Now the party had “completely objective facts” to support this point. Others began chiming in: they too had noticed that Slansky had developed an unnatural interest in military and security matters, he resented it when Soviet advisors arrived in Prague, and tried to keep them away from certain sensitive areas. Gottwald admitted that he had seen the “errors” that Slansky kept making, but they did not amount to crimes. Then he started getting information from Ruzyne charging Slansky with being a member of an “illegal center.” He dismissed such information: “I took it that the enemy wishes to water down his guilt, enlarge the circle of people who are investigated, he wants to disorient us.” But that was then. Now Gottwald knew that Slansky was an enemy. Gottwald called for a vote to approve Slansky’s arrest. It passed unanimously.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, vol. 2, unit 16. “I hereby resign my post as deputy prime minister. Rudolf Slansky.” There is also a draft of another letter. It contains the sentence quoted above and continues: “At the same time, I wish to assure you . . . “ and here the draft ends.

<sup>179</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 25, unit 504. The informer was Karel Benda. His mission was twofold — to report Slansky’s statements and to destroy him psychologically.

<sup>180</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, vol. 2, unit 18.



President Gottwald had one other task to attend: he signed a single-sentence statement addressed ominously to *Mr.* (not Comrade) Rudolf Slansky: “According to article 74, paragraph 1, no. 6 of the Constitution you are relieved of your post as deputy prime minister.”<sup>181</sup>

So far, OKAPI could not have imagined a better outcome, especially since Slansky’s downfall triggered yet another purge of the ruling class of communist Czechoslovakia. Altogether 220 were arrested “in connection with Slansky.”<sup>182</sup> The best known among them was Bedrich Geminder, an old Comintern operative.<sup>183</sup> Also taken was Jarmila Taussigova—one of the first CPC *apparatchiks* to warn that imperialist enemies, spies, and saboteurs had penetrated the party.<sup>184</sup> Slansky’s relatives and coworkers were rounded up, including his brother Richard, a former Czechoslovak ambassador to Teheran,<sup>185</sup> his brothers-in-law, Antonin Hasek and Bedrich Adler, and their families.<sup>186</sup> Others followed, such as Eduard Golstücker, Rudolf Margolius, Ladislav

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<sup>181</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 17.

<sup>182</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 3, unit 36.

<sup>183</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 28, unit 505. Geminder, born 19 Feb. 1901, in Ostrava. His mother died early, his father committed suicide. Young Geminder studied at a commercial academy in Berlin and joined the CPC in 1921. He lived in the Soviet Union as chief of the press section of the Communist International. When the Comintern was abolished, Geminder worked for the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. He was awarded several Soviet medals, including the Order of Lenin. He came to Prague only in 1946, following a request of the CPC leadership and took over the important International Department of the Central Committee.

<sup>184</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 19, unit 384. Taussigova played a leading role in the party Control Commission. NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, unit 504. Report of the Drahomir Kolder Commission of 19 March 1963. This document notes that Taussigova was unsatisfied even after the arrest of Otta Sling on 6 October 1950. She claimed that Western intelligence agencies had prepared for Sling’s possible arrest and the roll-up of his alleged network. There was a second, larger, more damaging espionage and wrecking center, she argued. Sling’s close ally, it was generally known, was Rudolf Slansky. See also AMI, 305-737-5, Taussigova to Svab, no date, strictly secret, for Svab’s eyes only. In this analysis Taussigova speculated that the party had been penetrated by two enemy groups, of which the first consisted of “cosmopolitan Jewish bourgeoisie.” They had survived the war in the West and joined the CPC only because the Nazis were anti-Semites. Their objective now was to sabotage the socialist economy. Taussigova named 37 names. Some in fact would play roles in the Slansky trial: Frejka, Hajek, Löbl, Margolius, Novy, and London. NA ACC CPC, Fond 100/45, volume 13, unit 311. A colleague described Tuassigova’s last moments before she was arrested: She burst into an office at the Central Committee: “Gottwald has just signed a warrant for Slansky’s arrest. Now I’m going to be arrested.” She gave her apartment keys to a friend and asked her to take care of her daughter.

<sup>185</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise [no number], volume 46, unit 1122. Richard Slansky was arrested with his wife, Anna, on 23 November 1951.

<sup>186</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, union 44. Interrogation of Bohumil Doubek, Pankrac Prison, 15 December 1955.

Frejka, Josef Goldman, Eduard Outrata, Jiri Karny, Josef Frank, and Andre Simone. Most of their spouses and children were arrested as well.<sup>187</sup>

The script for the spectacular events in Prague was conceived primarily by the three Soviet advisors—Alexei Beschasnov and his deputies Yesikov and Galkin. Now that Slansky and others had been arrested, additional advisors arrived: Ivan Chernov, Georgii Grigorievich Gromov, Gregorii Morozov, Yanov, and Smirnov. Their job was to prepare and carry out a show-trial with Rudolf Slansky as head of a large anti-state conspiracy.<sup>188</sup> The whole group lived together in a house in Troja, a suburb of Prague. Although they wore civilian clothes, they strictly observed the principles of military discipline and hierarchy.<sup>189</sup> They required the services of four full-time translators who had to be available at all times to translate protocols and other documents from Ruzyne before they were sent to one very attentive reader in Moscow: Joseph Stalin.<sup>190</sup>

On Sunday, 25 November 1951, the remaining CPC leaders met again at the Castle. No one protested Slansky's arrest. Zapotocky noted that "the [OKAPI] letter was not addressed directly to [Slansky] but it seems that the addressee could not be anyone else."<sup>191</sup> Gottwald had not bothered waiting for the investigation results, let alone for the trial to take place. He stated that Slansky was a traitor and the leader of an anti-party and anti-state conspiracy. The CPC, he said, had "irrefutable evidence that an intelligence service of Western imperialists had organized and prepared Rudolf Slansky's escape to the West." This is why he was placed under arrest. Villains of his kind would be dealt with sternly, Gottwald promised.<sup>192</sup>

Slansky had been at Ruzyne for two days before he persuaded his jailors to give him a piece of paper and pencil so that he could write a letter to the party:

Comrades!

I understand that the decision to arrest me must have been caused by some serious reasons. I know also that it's sometimes necessary to arrest a person under suspicion because a culprit hardly ever confesses when he is free.

<sup>187</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 3, unit 37.

<sup>188</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, union 44. Interrogation of Bohumil Doubek, Pankrac Prison, 15 December 1955.

<sup>189</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 6, unit 72.

<sup>190</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44.

<sup>191</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Piller Komise, file 32, information no. 23.

<sup>192</sup> *Svobodne slovo*, 7 December 1951.

But as far as I'm concerned, all suspicion that I may have committed crimes against the party must have been caused by a horrific error.

Never in my life did I betray the party or deliberately cause it harm. I never conspired with enemy agents.

I know that there are people who were later revealed to have committed crimes who initially claimed they were innocent. But that won't be my case. Nobody can know it better than I, because in my most private thoughts I never let the party down [ . . . ] I have never, never deliberately hurt the party.

I have one request to make: please don't dismiss me publicly as an enemy in advance. I'm not an enemy. I'm rock-solid certain that all charges against me will prove to be false.

Rudolf Slansky, 26 November 1951<sup>193</sup>

We do not know whether Slansky believed that his letter would be taken seriously by the CPC Politburo or whether it would even be delivered. He had every reason to be skeptical. After all, when similar letters had landed on his desk he had invariably dismissed them, sometimes with a cynical comment in the margin.<sup>194</sup> In any case, his letter never reached the Politburo. Only Gottwald, Zapotocky, and Cepicka read Slansky's plea from Ruzyne. The StB told the former general secretary that comrade Gottwald had a message for him: he should stop writing silly letters and start confessing his crimes.

Slansky's arrest was announced to the public on 28 November 1951 in the party daily, *Rude Pravo*. Under the generic headline "Official Announcement" the paper revealed that Slansky had resigned from his post. It stated further that new "interrogations of anti-state conspiracies revealed previously unknown facts proving that Rudolf Slansky played an active role in anti-state hostile activities. Therefore, he has been placed in detention."

From the start, the Slansky case in Ruzyne was directed by Soviet advisors. "Slansky was not asked even a single question or requested to explain a document without the consent and decision of the main Soviet advisor," concluded a commission

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<sup>193</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 16.

<sup>194</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 28, unit 505. For instance, one Vlasta Vesela was charged with being a spy recruited by the Field brothers. She denied the charge. The StB refused to believe her and she went on a hunger-strike in Ruzyne. When she was down to 40 kg, she attempted suicide by swallowing pills she had been assembling for a long time. This failed to kill her and she collapsed in her cell in excruciating pain. Karel Svab and Rudolf Slansky corresponded about the case and agreed against a transfer to a prison hospital. She should be allowed to die a slow death in her cell. "Such people have no right to live," wrote Slansky.

that studied the affair in the fifties.<sup>195</sup> The former general secretary proved to be a tough opponent. The years he had spent in politics had undoubtedly raised his self-esteem, increased his ability to control himself, to formulate his thoughts carefully, to judge others. His ego, though wounded by the most recent events, was still considerable. By contrast, most of his interrogators had achieved nothing outside the walls of Ruzyne, they had but the most basic education, some were barely literate. No wonder they initially felt intimidated by the prisoner.

Following Bolshevik tradition, Slansky acknowledged that he had made mistakes in his work, but he stubbornly refused to acknowledge the preposterous charges of high-treason, sabotage, spying, and conspiracy. He was particularly unyielding about the claim that he was a Zionist, a pet theme persistently pushed forward by the Soviet advisors. Rather courageously, Slansky reminded the interrogators that charges of Zionism were often but a mask of fascist thinking. When the interrogators pointed out that he had staffed the CPC apparatus with Jews, Slansky replied: “The point is not that they were Jews, the point is that they were in the resistance.” Those who failed to see this, Slansky told his tormentors, were racists.<sup>196</sup> He fought over every formulation that the interrogators tried put in the protocols.<sup>197</sup> Clearly, Slansky was neither London nor Löbl.

But no one could withstand the Ruzyne treatment forever. Slansky was only one middle-aged man facing rotating groups of interrogators. When a team had done its shift, its members could rest. Slansky remained standing in the office, unable to sit down, let alone sleep, facing a fresh interrogator. He could not relax even in his cell, where his cell-mate, Bohdan Benda, was ready—on StB instructions—to strike up conversations meant to keep him awake and depressed.<sup>198</sup> His job, Benda testified later, was “to make Slansky despondent, to make him angry, to call him a traitor, to remind him of his guilt, and to let

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<sup>195</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 26. The advisors is in various documents, including this one, identified as Georgii G. Gromov.

<sup>196</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond 100/45, volume 13, unit 211. In a remarkable display of courage Karel Kreibich wrote to the Secretariat of the CPC's Central Committee that the term “Jewish origin”, that appeared so many times during the Slansky trial, had been used in Czech courts only once before: in the infamous trial of Leopold Hilsner in 1899. He pointed out further that the recent Honorary Chairman of the Society for Czechoslovak-Israeli Friendship was Vaclav Kopecky, whose voice was now prominent in the anti-Semitic barrage against Slansky. See Karel Kreibich to the Secretariat, 2 December 1952.

<sup>197</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 32. Bohdan Benda, 19 January 1962. Benda was Slansky's cell-mate and StB informer.

<sup>198</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 32. Discussion with Bohdan Benda, cell-mate of Rudolf Slansky, 19 January 1962.

him know that the only way out was to make a full confession.”<sup>199</sup> Several weeks of sleep-deprivation, physical abuse, and psychological torment eventually destroyed Slansky’s personality and made him more and more willing to accommodate the wishes of the StB.

Nevertheless, he made the interrogators work for every inch of territory before he surrendered it. Concessions on his part were always preceded by large-scale moral crises. An interrogator recalled that on one such occasion, Slansky “would get extremely excited, he would start shaking, waving his clenched fists and shouting: ‘I didn’t do that!’ or ‘That’s not true!’ Once Slansky had a fit [ . . . ] and screamed: ‘Give me an atomic bomb! Give me an atomic bomb!’”<sup>200</sup> One day—it was just past four in the morning—a group of interrogators surrounded him and kept shouting in his face that he had to confess. Slansky turned very red and veins on his neck became prominent. His eyes were bulging as he stood in the corner, screaming in an unnaturally high voice: “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.” He turned toward the wall and started smashing his head against it. The interrogators tried to make him sit down. But although three were hanging onto him, Slansky generated so much strength they had difficulty keeping him under control. Then, just as suddenly as he had risen, he collapsed and turned silent, indicating with gestures he would say no more. The interrogators sent him to his cell and ran to the advisors with the news. The experienced Russians were delighted: Slansky was about to break down. Bring him back, keep going, the advisors told the Czechs.<sup>201</sup> But the record fails to indicate whether they immediately obeyed their masters. Perhaps they were so shaken by the sight of this shell of a human being who had suddenly put out so much strength and energy. They had had enough and needed a break.

The Soviet advisors were unhappy about the slow progress, as they saw it, of the trial’s preparations. They decided the interrogators needed a brief break so that they would return to work with redoubled energy. On 31 January 1952 they invited the StB officers to see a hockey game. When it was over, they went right back to Ruzyně where

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<sup>199</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 82. Bohdan Benda.

<sup>200</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 82. LT COL Jan Musil, 3 May 1956.

<sup>201</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44. Interrogation of Bohumil Doubek, Pankrac Prison, 15 December 1955.

Slansky was, as usual, undergoing interrogation. The team refreshed by the hockey outing took over—only to come very close to presiding over a catastrophe.

StB Staff Captain Karel Kostal was on duty when Slansky said he needed to use the bathroom. The StB officer opened the door to summon a guard who would take him there when, suddenly, Slansky pushed him out of the office and locked the massive door. The helpless Kostal found he could not get back in. Slansky knew that his tormentor carried a weapon in his brief-case and he rushed around the desk to search for it. But Kostal had been to the hockey stadium and had taken the revolver with him. It was now in the pocket of his winter-coat that was hanging in the adjacent office. In desperation, Slansky searched the office for any other tool that he could use to end his life. Eventually, he ripped a cord from the alarm system off the wall, tied it around his neck, attached it to a window handle, and fell down holding onto his ankles with his hands. It was a tough way to commit suicide: once he passed out he involuntarily let go of his legs, they touched the ground and that decreased the pressure of the cord on his neck. Still, Slansky was desperate enough that he would have succeeded had he had more time.

Meanwhile, Kostal had alerted the whole prison. The door proved too solid to break open even when two officers threw themselves against it. But a locksmith was found and he was able to unscrew and remove the lock. When they burst into the office they saw Slansky unconscious, hanging by his neck. But as luck would have it, the sadistic Ruzyně doctor Josef Sommer, M.D., was nearby. He applied first aid and resuscitated the prisoner with injections of some kind. When Slansky came to and realized that he had failed, he thrashed his arms and legs with such superhuman force that no one could hold onto him or even approach him. It took the StB considerable time to subdue him. He was sent to the infirmary wearing a straight jacket.<sup>202</sup>

After three days under the care of Dr. Sommer, Slansky returned to his cell. Having been silent for half a day, he turned to Benda, pointed out the red mark visible on his neck and said: “I hanged myself. I couldn’t take it anymore. Nobody could take it.” The StB had learned a lesson. A metal ring was cemented into the wall of the office, and the former general secretary would be chained to it by his leg at all times. He considered it most degrading; he became even more depressed. He muttered he felt “like a dog, like a

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<sup>202</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44. Interrogation of Bohumil Doubek, Pankrac Prison, 15 December 1955.

dog,” unaware, perhaps, that he was repeating the final words of *Landvermesser* Josef K. from Franz Kafka’s *Trial*.<sup>203</sup> Slansky was now a broken man. He was ready to sign whatever the StB put before him.<sup>204</sup> He was ready for the final show.

## The Trial

Slansky and his co-defendants appeared before the state tribunal in November 1952. Nothing had been left to chance as the spectacle was being prepared. The first job facing the Soviet advisors and their StB colleagues was the selection of the participants in the fictitious conspiracy headed by Rudolf Slansky. What criteria were applied in the selection process? A party commission that later investigated the Slansky affair asked this very question and found: “The members of the so-called center were chosen on the basis of where they were employed so that all the decisive sectors would be represented.” The Soviet advisors were determined to show that the “Slansky gang” had found recruits across the broad spectrum of the political system, in the CPC apparatus, in the economic sector, in the Army, security, press, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade, and other institutions.<sup>205</sup> Another important criterion was whether they could be relied upon to follow the script faithfully.<sup>206</sup> The final round of auditions took place in the spring of 1952.<sup>207</sup> The advisors and the top StB interrogators determined that the cast would consist of Rudolf Slansky [Figure 1], Bedrich Geminder [Figure 2], Otto Sling [Figure 3], André Simone [Figure 4], Karel Svab [Figure 5], Otto Fischl [Figure 6], Rudolf Margolius [Figure 7], Josef Frank [Figure 8], Vladimir Clementis [Figure 9], Ludvik Frejka [Figure 10], Bedrich Reicin [Figure 11], Artur London [Figure 12], Evzen Löbl [Figure 13], and Vavro Hajdu [Figure 14].

With the actors assembled, a script was now needed. The advisors chose Major Bohumil Doubek, the Ruzyne chief, to prepare the indictment. But it was one thing to beat a prisoner into a state of hallucination and resignation, it was another to put together

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<sup>203</sup> “Mit brechenden Augen sah noch K. wie nahe vor seinem Gesicht die Herren Wange an Wange aneinandergelehnt die Entscheidung beobachteten. ‘Wie ein Hund!’ sagte er, es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben.”

<sup>204</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, volume 2, unit 82. Bohdan Benda.

<sup>205</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44.

<sup>206</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond II, volume 25, unit 504 and Fond Komise II, volume 5, unit 44.

<sup>207</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, unit 504.

a reasonably plausible text. Doubek kept trying, but the disgusted advisors finally realized they would have to do the job themselves.<sup>208</sup> The indictment was written by Beschasnov and Yesikov. Some parts were reviewed and revised personally by Klement Gottwald.<sup>209</sup> The rest of the script was simply lifted from files with interrogation protocols. The StB immediately started rehearsing each actor in his role. As a precaution, even the offices of the four state prosecutors and the court-assigned defense attorneys, of whom at least two were StB informers, were bugged. Transcripts of their recorded conversations were reviewed daily in the office of Minister of National Security Karol Bacilek.<sup>210</sup>

After seven days of well-rehearsed recitation from a script, Slansky and ten other defendants in the trial were sentenced to death on 27 November 1952. The former general secretary did not appeal the verdict. He did not bother writing a last letter. His wife was allowed to see him the night before the executions. The visit did not go well. Slansky threw himself against the chain link fence and cried as the guards rushed Mrs. Slansky out. He then calmed down. When the guards took him to the prison yard it was a little foggy; it would snow gently later in the day.<sup>211</sup>

Since eleven men had to die that night, two gallows were used. This allowed the officials and the executioner to receive the next prisoner while a team of attendants removed the lifeless body of his colleague a few yards away. Slansky was hanged as the last of the eleven condemned men. His final words, uttered very quietly were, “Thank you. I’m getting what I deserved.” He was declared dead on 3 December 1952 at 5:42

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<sup>208</sup> The Russian identity of the script’s author is apparent in the selection of the main themes – they are mostly copied from the Soviet show-trials. But it is imprinted also in the detail. For instance, names that start with the letter “h” appear in the transcript as starting with “g”, since the Russian alphabet substitutes “g” for the non-existing “h”. For instance, one finds “Goldos” for “Holdos”.

<sup>209</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond II, volume 25, unit 504.

<sup>210</sup> The prosecutors were Josef Urvalek, Miloslav Kolaja, Vaclav Ales, and Frantisek Antl. Minister of National Security Bacilek replaced Ladislav Kopriva while the Slansky trial was being prepared in Ruzyně. In 1963, when he was questioned about the crimes of the Stalinist era, Bacilek asserted that he was “wholly ignorant regarding the interrogation methods” of the StB. But he admitted that “influenced by the environment, I carried out everything that was required of me and I believed I was serving the party. It was for me, comrades, the saddest time of my life.” See, Karel Kaplan, *Kronika komunistického Československa: doba tani, 1953-1956* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2005), 82-83.

<sup>211</sup> Weather of the day is taken from Radio Prague, 3 December 1952, news at 5:00 a.m. See OSA 300-30-22/box 5.



a.m.<sup>212</sup> The StB had the remains of the eleven secretly cremated. Their ashes were mixed together in a sturdy paper bag and emptied on the outskirts of Prague.<sup>213</sup>

### **Rewards**

The StB rewarded those responsible for the spectacle. Exactly 321 officers received financial bonuses of 2,000, 3,000, 5,000, 6,000, 8,000, 10,000, 15,000 or 30,000 Kcs; the chief of Ruzyne interrogators, Major Bohumil Doubek was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, and his two deputies, Staff Captains Karel Kostal and Vladimir Kohoutek, became Majors. Josef Sommer, M.D., whose timely intervention had kept Slansky alive for the executioner, received a bonus of 15,000 Kcs. Another 154 officers were promoted in rank. The Order of the Republic went to 14 officers, the Order of Labor to 6, and 47 got the Medal for Bravery. Slansky's 14 guards received honorable citations, together with 56 guards who had kept an eye on the other members of the fictitious conspiracy.<sup>214</sup>

The CPC bosses also rewarded themselves. Immediately after the executions, those whom the purge had bypassed divided among themselves the property that Slansky, his alleged co-conspirators, and their now exiled families had left behind. All was purchased at rock-bottom prices. For example, Antonin Novotny, who in 1953 de facto succeeded Slansky by becoming the CPC "first secretary," used the occasion to buy the bedclothes and a china tea service of one of the hanged men.<sup>215</sup>

### **The Great Sweeper Letter from OKAPI**

Josef Urvalek, the chief prosecutor, brought up the OKAPI letter on the first day of the trial.<sup>216</sup> He accurately quoted Ostry's text and asked: "What do you have to say about this?" Slansky replied, candidly, that he had never received the letter in question. But its

<sup>212</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 49, unit 93. The executions were witnessed by Bohumil Doubek and Karel Kostal, who reported on the event to Colonel Antonin Prchal on 3 December 1952.

<sup>213</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, volume 25, unit 504. Report of the Drahomir Kolder Commission, 19 March 1963.

<sup>214</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise I, vol. 2, unit 23. The only date on the document is "1953".

<sup>215</sup> Zdenek Mlynar, *Nightfrost in Prague: The End of Humane Socialism* (New York: Karz Publishers, 1980), 66.

<sup>216</sup> US NA RG 84. Spencer M. King, US Embassy, Prague, to the Secretary of State, 21 November 1952. King noted that the prosecutor read the [Great Sweeper] letter and suggested it showed the "interest of Amer official circles" in bringing about Slansky's escape. "Prosecutor then presented additional evidence that Amer intelligence operators prepared Slansky's flight to West. Signal to mount operation allegedly given several times over [Radio Free Europe] 'which belongs to Amer intelligence operators.'"

existence, he conceded, testified to the fact that the West wanted him to defect and to use him for activities against the communist regime in Czechoslovakia.<sup>217</sup>

The letter from OKAPI gave the whole gruesome spectacle the appearance of legitimacy in the eyes of the StB interrogators, the prosecutor, the so-called judges, and especially the CPC leadership. All the insiders knew well that Slansky was forced to confess to crimes he could not have committed, since they were being invented by the team of Ruzyne script writers. But there was the letter! The StB thought—understandably—that it came from the Americans, and knew that it was addressed to Slansky. Therefore, Prague had reason to believe that his escape was a possibility.<sup>218</sup> The regime may have even taken measures in the border area to prevent escapes by other V.I.Ps.<sup>219</sup> Therefore, the StB believed that there had to be *something* to the charges. Klement Gottwald’s secretary testified that her boss believed Slansky was guilty. “He used to say that Soviet security workers had information we did not have, they had information from the days of the Communist International, so he was convinced that the charges were correct.”<sup>220</sup>

The importance of the Great Sweeper letter was emphasized also by Václav Nosek, the first communist minister of interior, who was just barely balancing on the edge of the abyss himself because of his wartime association with Hermann Field. In his speech on 12 December 1951 he could have not been more explicit regarding the centrality of OKAPI’s letter: “An espionage service of Western imperialists had organized and prepared Slansky’s escape to the West. Only after this was found out was it possible to take action against Slansky. Naturally, without these discoveries and facts no action against Slansky was possible.”<sup>221</sup> The man who replaced him, Minister Kopriva, agreed. He told the five StB officers who had been chosen to arrest Slansky that Gottwald had hesitated to authorize Slansky’s arrest for a long time. “Now, however, the

<sup>217</sup>Ministerstvo spravlnosti, *Proces s vedenim protistatniho spikleneckeho centra v cele s Rudolfem Slanskym* (Prague, 1953), 88-89.

<sup>218</sup>AMI, H-784-13. Statement by MUDr. [medical doctor] Frantisek Klima who worked as an agent of Czechoslovak intelligence in Austria (code name: agent Trinact).

<sup>219</sup>US NA 749.00/12-1351, Ellis O. Briggs, US Embassy, Prague, to the Secretary of State, 14 December 1951. The US Military Attaché reported seeing eight roadblocks between the border and Pilsen. He “was informed in strictest confidence in Germany of rumors of the impending flight of important Czech.”

<sup>220</sup> Kaplan, *Zprava o zavrazeni*, 264.

<sup>221</sup> NA ACC CPC, fond 60, unit 5/1. Nosek’s speech on 12 December 1951.

Operational Section has obtained a document proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that Rudolf Slansky is indeed a conscious enemy with ties to a foreign country. On the basis of this document the president has authorized Slansky's immediate arrest."<sup>222</sup> Kopriva confirmed later that the former general secretary had been under suspicion for some time. "But what we had on Slansky before we got the letter had not been enough to warrant his arrest."<sup>223</sup>

Kopriva's emphasis on the Great Sweeper letter fails to take into account Stalin's dislike of Slansky and the role that had played in his downfall, which was known only to Gottwald, Cepicka, and, possibly, Zapotocky. It was the combination of Stalin's desire to have a show trial in Prague, his distrust of Slansky, and OKAPI's letter to the Great Sweeper that drove Gottwald and the StB toward Slansky's arrest, confession, trial, and execution. Jaroslav Saks, one of the StB officers who recruited Neveceral in May 1951, came very close to the truth when he speculated: "It is possible that the whole business involving the letter for Slansky was a 'combination' prepared in the West and that we fell for it. It is also possible that somebody in the Ministry of Interior needed it [Ostry's letter for Slansky] and that he deliberately exaggerated its importance."<sup>224</sup>

A 1963 StB study of the Great Sweeper concluded that there were two options regarding the origins of the letter Neveceral had brought from Germany. Either it had been forged by StB officers who wanted to cause Slansky's downfall or "it was a sophisticated provocation designed by an intelligence unit of Czech anticommunist émigrés operating under the auspices of the United States."<sup>225</sup> The latter alternative, however, was never publicly discussed. The very existence of OKAPI remained a closely guarded secret until the 1990s.

### **Operation Great Sweeper, OKAPI and the Americans**

General Moravec, Major Ostry and other officers of OKAPI in Bensheim could not have been happier with the news from Prague. Rudolf Slansky, Karel Svab, Bedrich Reicin, Stepan Placek, Osvald Zavodsky, Karel Vas, and others had driven them out of the

<sup>222</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 5, unit 44.

<sup>223</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, file 14, unit 377.

<sup>224</sup> AMI, H-784-13. Jaroslav Saks's interrogation on, 19 October 1962.

<sup>225</sup> NA ACC CPC, Fond Komise II, vol. 25, unit 504.

country and turned them into stateless refugees. Now those men got a taste of their own medicine. Years later Ostry still took delight that the Great Sweeper letter helped launch a purge not of innocent patriots (as was the case during the Nazi occupation) but of those who had delivered his beloved country to Stalin. “It was,” Ostry claimed, “the largest purge of the *apparat* of all the Soviet colonies.” Having murdered its own general secretary and scores of other loyal Stalinist bosses, the CPC had lost its appeal to the public as well as its original Bolshevik drive and convictions. This contributed, Ostry speculated, to a general weakening of the communist system and other dramatic events in the future, including the Prague Spring of 1968.<sup>226</sup>

It would be hard to imagine that Colonel Katek and Spencer Taggart felt anything other than satisfaction as they watched the bosses of the communist regime in Prague insanely killing each other. Like Moravec and Ostry, Katek and Taggart were defeated and driven out of Czechoslovakia. Worse, they helplessly watched as all their intelligence gathering networks were rolled up, they agonized when they learned that some of their Czech friends (especially Jaromir Nechansky and Veleslav Wahl) were executed, and they saw the United States scandalized in the headlines of the Czechoslovak communist press.<sup>227</sup> As Katek and Taggart inevitably saw it, many of those involved in the Slansky affair were simply getting what they richly deserved.

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A man who admired Operation Great Sweeper was Allen Dulles, head of the Central Intelligence Agency. When Taggart briefed him on the whole complex affair in the CIA Headquarters, Dulles thought about it for a while and then said: “I wish we had had someone who could have thought that one up. I would like to claim credit for it.”<sup>228</sup> From the perspective of U.S. intelligence and OKAPI, the Great Sweeper was an elegant operation. During World War II, General Moravec trained in Great Britain a team of commandos who parachuted into occupied Czechoslovakia and assassinated SS *Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich (Operation Anthropoid). This time, no

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<sup>226</sup> PFO, unpublished letter of 2 May 1983.

<sup>227</sup> Personal interview with Spencer L. Taggart, Logan, Utah, 23 April 1999.

<sup>228</sup> Spencer L. Taggart to Ronald Parker, OKAPI’s chief-of-staff, 15 April 1996; I am grateful to Mr. Parker for giving me a copy of the letter. Spencer Taggart repeated Dulles’s statement to me during my visit to his home in 1999.

commandos were dispatched from the West to kill Slansky. OKAPI weakened the Communist government in Prague by discerning its murderous momentum, providing just the right provocation, and allowing the regime's darkest impulses to inflict the damage itself.

**About the Author:**

Dr. Igor Lukes is University Professor, Professor of History and International Relations at Boston University. He earned a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Charles University in Prague, as well as a M.A.L.D. and Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy of Tufts University.

Professor Lukes is a historian of Central Europe in the twentieth century. He has written about Europe between the world wars and about contemporary developments in East Central Europe, Russia, and the Balkans.

His work has been published in five countries and in such periodicals as *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, *Stredni Evropa*, *Historie a vojenstvi*, and *Slavic Review*. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Professor Lukes has systematically worked in the newly opened archives in Prague. This work provided the foundation for his book, *Czechoslovakia Between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Benes in the 1930's*. Published by Oxford University Press in 1996, the book won the Boston Authors Club Award as well as the Kahn Award. He is also a co-author and/or co-editor of *The Munich Conference, 1938: Prelude to World War II* (1999), *Inside the Apparatus: Perspectives on the Soviet Union* (1990) and *Gorbachev's USSR: A System in Crisis* (1990).

His work has won the support of various prestigious institutions, including the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, IREX, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has also been the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship for research, and in 1997 he won the Metcalf Award for Excellence in Teaching at Boston University.

## Abbreviations

AFL-BU	Archives of Flora Lewis, Boston University
AMFA	Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague
AMI	Archives of the Ministry of Interior, Prague
AVH	Hungarian Secret Police
CPC	Communist Party of Czechoslovakia
FOIA	Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts
LOC	Library of Congress, Washington, DC
NA ACC CPC	National Archives, Archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Prague
OBZ	Czechoslovak Military Counter Intelligence
OSA	Open Society Archives, Budapest
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PFO	Private Papers of Major (later Colonel) Frantisek Ostry
RFE	Radio Free Europe, Munich
SCA	State Central Archives, Loreta, Prague
StB	Czechoslovak Secret Police
UB	Polish Secret Police
USC	Unitarian Service Committee

Photograph Appendix  
Figure 1: Rudolf Slansky





Figure 2: Bedrich Geminder



Figure 3: Otto Sling



Figure 4: André Simone



Figure 5: Karel Svab



Figure 6: Otto Fischl



Figure 7: Rudolf Margolius



Figure 8: Josef Frank



Figure 9: Vladimir Clementis





Figure 10: Ludvik Frejka



Figure 11: Bedrich Reicin



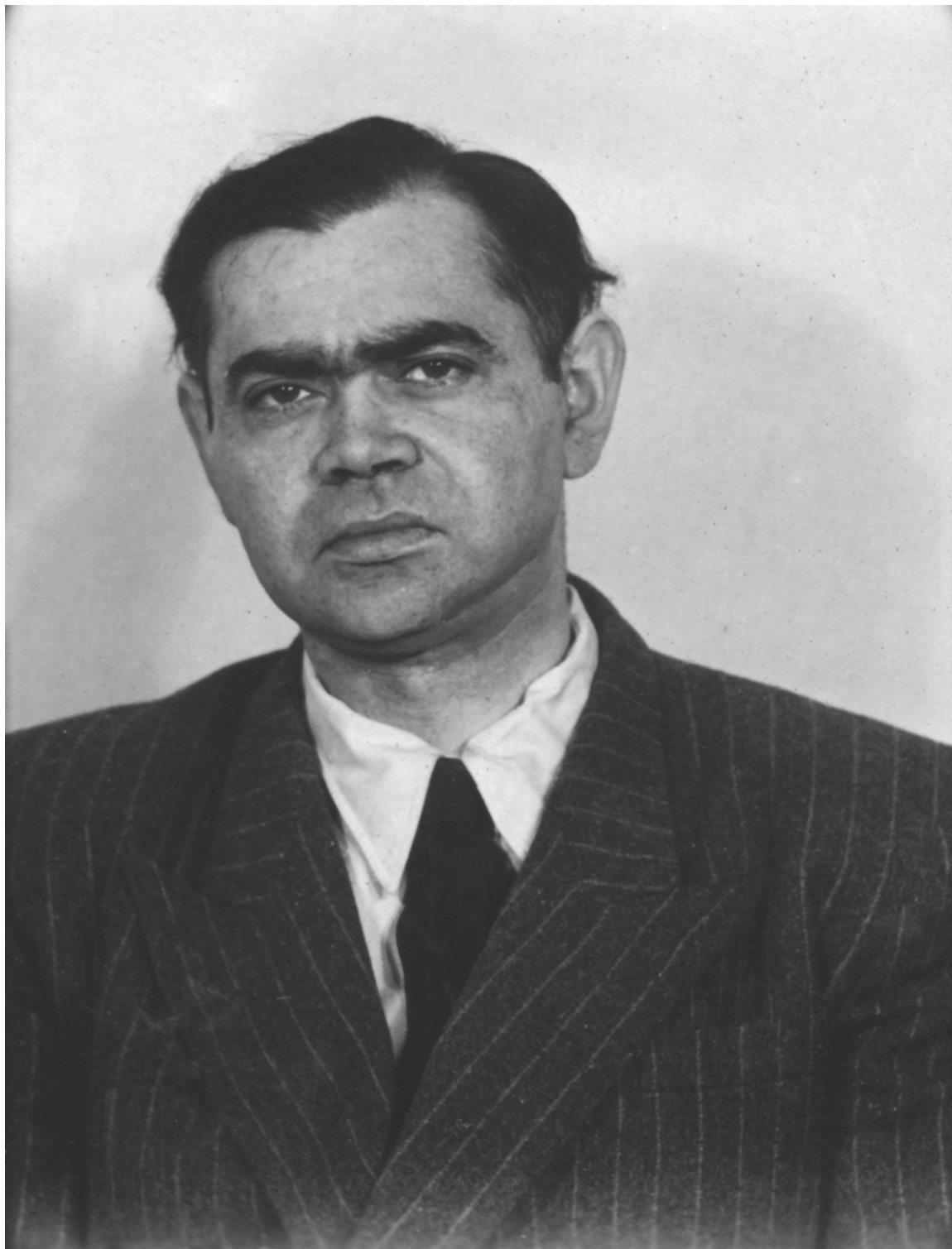
Figure 12: Artur London




Figure 13: Evzen Löbl



Figure 14: Vavro Hajdu





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