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FINAL REPORT: VISEGRAD SCHOLARSHIP AT THE VERA & DONALD BLINKEN OPEN SOCIETY ARCHIVES

Project title: Rudolf Slansky's Trial from the Perspective of Radio Free Europe

Research area: The informational environment of the period of the Cold War, East and West

Research period: 30/6-31/7/2016

Research description

Early 1950s were in the light of the political processes with the real or alleged opponents of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. The worldwide attention received especially the show trials with Rudolf Slansky, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and fourteen of his co-workers in 1951-1952 (sometimes known as Prague Process in western media). The political processes in Czechoslovakia were not the first example of the purges in the communist parties in the countries of Eastern Block (e. g. the former ministry of foreign affairs of Hungary Laszlo Rajk was sentenced to death penalty in October 1949; Trajco Kostov, the former General Secretary of Communist Party of Bulgaria, was executed in December 1949).

The research conducted in Open Society Archives in Budapest in July 2016 aimed to explore and to analyze the perspective of Radio Free Europe (RFE) on Rudolf Slansky's trial in Czechoslovakia (November 1951 – November 1952). Two basic research questions were set in order to specify the research area:

- What information about the processes did RFE have at their disposal?

- What was the perception of the contemporary situation in Czechoslovakia by RFE?

A special attention was dedicated to the cases of two Israeli citizen Mordechai Oren, Shimon Orenstein, and the American reporter William N. Oatis who were arrested in Prague in 1951 to provide a testimony against Slansky and his co-workers. These cases were extremely important as they influenced the mutual relations between Czechoslovakia-Israel/Czechoslovakia-USA significantly.

Political processes in Czechoslovakia in 1950s

Rudolf Slansky, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and in fact the second most powerful man of the country after president Klement Gottwald, was arrested in November 1951 and went through a long series of the interrogations led by the State Security (StB). Finally, in autumn 1952 Slansky and his co-workers were convicted as the traitors of communist regime in Czechoslovakia who had strived both to sabotage the policy of socialist construction in Czechoslovakia, and to break the cooperation between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Last but not least, the group was blamed from the espionage activities in favour of the western countries. Eleven of the defendants, including Slansky, were sentenced to death penalty, three defendants were sentenced to life imprisonments. The executions took place on December 3, 1952 in Prague (see more Ströbinger 1991, Kaplan 2009: 149).

An entirely new phenomenon that appeared during the process with Slansky was the growth of antisemitism in Czechoslovakia. Such attitude of the official authorities was a significant change of discourse because after the Second World War the Zionist movement had the full support of Eastern Block. This support was based on a hope of Soviet political leadership that a new-born State of Israel might have become their important ally in the Middle East. In 1951, it was obvious that these hopes should have not been fulfilled in the near future. Since this moment, the Jews living in the territory of Eastern Block were perceived as a priori suspicious entity for their possible ties to Israel and western world. For these reasons, the public proclamations of anti-Semitism became the integral part of Slansky's trial. The fact that Rudolf Slansky himself and eleven of his co-workers were of Jewish origin was emphasized during the trials and also in Czechoslovak media repeatedly despite the fact that all

men profiled rather as anti-Zionists in their political careers (Rucker 2001: 200-212). Slansky's affair is closely connected to the cases of two Israeli citizens who both were detained in Czechoslovakia in December 1951. Mordechai Oren and Shimon Orenstein were forced to provide a testimony against Slansky and the other former communist leaders. Later, in their own trials they were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment (Sachar, H. 1999 316).

The cases of Shimon Orenstein and Mordechai Oren

Shimon Orenstein was born in 1904 in the Jewish family in nowadays western Ukraine. During his studies in Breslau, Germany, he got involved in the Zionist movement. In 1930s, Orenstein decided for the emigration to Palestine where he was one of the founding members of Kibbutz Kfar Masaryk. During World War II, Orenstein joined the British Army. Ideologically, Orenstein always held the leftist views. In addition to active participation in the kibbutz life, he worked for several years for Histadrut. Later, he became a member of Israeli leftist party Mapam. As a member of Histadrut, Orenstein was sent to Czechoslovakia in 1947 where he was authorized to negotiate the supplies of necessary goods for the Zionist movement, including the supplies of arms. There was a belief that Orenstein might have been a perfect middleman thanks to his knowledge of Czech language and Czechoslovak political environment. After the establishment of Israeli embassy in Prague (hereinafter IEP) in July 1948, Orenstein was appointed as the head of the Commercial Section where he worked until May 1950. After leaving his job at the embassy, Orenstein focused on the mediation of the trade between East and West. Due to these activities, Orenstein took the frequent trips to Vienna, Austria. On December 8, 1951 Orenstein made another business trip to Vienna but he was arrested on Austria-Czechoslovakia borders.

Mordechai Oren was born on March 16, 1905 in Austria-Hungary. During his grammar school studies in Lviv, he became a member of the youth Zionist organization Hashomer Hatzair. In 1922, Oren was selected as a member of Hashomer Hatzair's central committee where he worked until late 1920s. In 1929, Oren decided for an emigration to Palestine. After his arrival to the Holy Land, he worked in agriculture in Kibbutz Mizra for three years. In 1931, Oren was appointed to the central committee of Hashomer Hatzair, and also became an editor of the journal published by this organization. Due to this job, Oren made several trips abroad mainly to European countries. His main task was to mobilize Jewish youth and to encourage their

emigration to Palestine. After the end of World War II, Oren worked for Histadrut. In 1948-1949 he was sent to Paris as a branch manager of World Jewry Congress. Upon his return to Israel, Oren joined the newly formed political party Mapam. Soon he became a member of the Central Committee and Political Bureau of Mapam. Oren was considered missing from the end of December 1951 when he was travelling through Czechoslovakia on his journey from World Union Conference in Berlin.

Both Oren and Orenstein were jailed in Ruzyne prison and regularly interrogated by May 1953. Concurrently, the State Prosecutor's Office worked on the preparation of the lawsuit. In autumn 1953 the two men were accused of supporting western imperialism, being the Zionist agents, and thus the traitors of the communist regime. Both of them were sentenced to long imprisonment. Shimon Orenstein was given a life sentence while Mordechai Oren was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. In response to the intense international pressure, Orenstein was released in 1954 while Oren was freed in May 1956. In 1960s, both men were cleared from all accusations by the Supreme Czechoslovak Court.

The case of William N. Oatis

William N. Oatis was born in 1940 in Marion, Indiana, USA where he started his journalist career during his high school studies working for the school newspaper. After his studies at the DePauw University, in 1937 he started working for Associated Press in Indiana. His journalist career was interrupted by World War II as he was called up to the military service in US army. After the end of the war in 1945, Oatis returned back to his job for Associated Press. In early 1950s he was appointed as Associated Press bureau chief in Prague where he was arrested in May 1951. Similarly to Oren and Orenstein he was accused of espionage and the hostile intentions against socialism in general and communist government in Czechoslovakia in particular. He was also forced to testify in the trial with Rudolf Slansky and his co-workers. In July 1951, Oatis was sentenced to 10 years in prison by Czechoslovak court.

Oatis's case had very significant impact on the contemporary mutual relations between Czechoslovakia and the western countries, especially USA. The situation became highly politically sensitive and it resulted in various trade and travel embargos against Czechoslovakia. Famously, the Voice of America called Oatis to be "the first American martyr to press freedom behind the Iron Curtain". In the end, Oatis was released in May 1953 shortly after the deaths of the Soviet leader Joseph V. Stalin and

Czechoslovak president Klement Gottwald. In 1959 Oatis was cleared from all accusations by the Supreme Czechoslovak Court.

Preliminary findings

The information that I was able to get during my internship at the Vera & Donald Blinken Open Society Archives shall be compared and contrasted with the existing secondary literature and also with the information from Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, National Archives of the Czech Republic, and Security Services Archive that I analyzed in my previous research. So far the history of Slánský's trial has been processed by the scientists only partially (e.g. Kaplan 1990, Kaplan 2009, London 1990, Rucker 2001, Ströbinger 1991), the perspective of RFE to these events has not been analyzed at all. Thus the proposed research would fulfill the gap in the existing knowledge.

What it is obvious even from my preliminary findings is that Radio Free Europe seemed to be quite well-informed about the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1950s thanks to various sources of information. The sources of information included the translations of contemporary Czechoslovak media – especially the newspapers, radio broadcasting, and TV broadcasting – contemporary Yugoslav media, the interviews with the emigrants who recently left Czechoslovakia, the information from the employees of the western embassies in Prague, and also the observations of the foreigners who occurred to be temporary in Czechoslovakia. All these sources of information were carefully analyzed, some of them were qualified as most probably rumors. I would conclude that in comparison to some other contemporary western media RFE had a more realistic view on the political processes in Czechoslovakia.

Outputs of my research at the Vera & Donald Blinken Open Society Archives

The data from my research in OSA shall be used in various publications that I have been preparing such as:

- Taterova, E. The Development of the Political Relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel in 1960-1967. *Czech Historical Journal*.
- Taterova, E. The Impact of Mordechai Oren and Shimon
- Orenstein's Cases on Diplomatic Relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel in 1950s. *Judaica Bohemiae*.

- Taterova, E. Foreign Policy of Czechoslovakia towards the State of Israel in 1948-1967. Book.

OSA SOURCES

HU OSA 300-1-2: GENERAL RECORDS: Information Items

- Boxes: 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, 17, 19, 44, 46, 57, 66, 67, 68, 70

HU OSA 300-10-4: BALKAN SECTION – ALBANIAN AND YUGOSLAV FILES: Yugoslav Biographical Files I

- Boxes: 56

HU OSA 300-7-7: US OFFICE: Czechoslovak Subject Files

- Boxes: 2, 7, 12, 19, 24, 25

HU OSA 300-7-5 US: OFFICE: Subject Files Relating to Eastern Europe

- Boxes: 13, 14, 17

HU OSA 300-30-2: CZECHOSLOVAK UNIT: Old Code Subject Files I

- Boxes: 31, 33, 43, 47

HU OSA 300-30-3: CZECHOSLOVAK UNIT: Old Code Subject Files II

- Boxes: 52

HU OSA 300-30-19: CZECHOSLOVAK UNIT: Biographical Files I

- Boxes: 101

References:

Kaplan, Karel (1990). *Report on the murder: of the general secretary*. London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd. ISBN 1-85043-211-2.

Kaplan, Karel (2009): *Kronika komunistického Československa: Klement Gottwald a Rudolf Slánský* (The Chronicle of Communist Czechoslovakia: Klement Gottwald and Rudolf Slánský). Brno: Barrister & Principal. ISBN 978-80-87029-53-4.

London, Artur Gerard (1990): *Doznání: v soukolí pražského procesu* (The Confession). Prague: Čs. spis. ISBN 80-202-0213-7.

Rucker, Laurent (2001): *Stalin, Izrael a Židé* (Stalin, Israel and Jews). Prague: Rybka Publishers. ISBN 80-86182-53-3.

Sachar, Howard Morley (1999): *Dějiny státu Izrael* (History of Israel.). Prague: Regia. ISBN 80-902484-4-6.

Ströbinger, Rudolf (1991): *Vražda generálního tajemníka : poslední Stalinův exemplární proces, soud s Rudolfem Slánským* (Murder of General Secretary: Stalin's last exemplary process, the trial of Rudolf Slanský). Brno: Petrov. ISBN 80-85247-26-7.