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THE SLÁNSKÝ TRIAL OF 1952 : SOME NEW PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

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This article is intended to provide a certain amount of new information with regard to the so-called Slánský Trial which was held in Prague in 1952. The information derives mainly from a collection of farewell letters written by ten of the eleven men condemned to death shortly before their execution. Some of these letters were addressed to the families of the defendants, and these will not be explored here in any detail for ethical reasons. It should be stated, however, that they contain little new evidence relevant to the study of the trial as a historical event. Other letters were addressed to Klement Gottwald, then president of Czechoslovakia and party chairman, who had been a close collaborator and even personal friend of the condemned prior to their frame-up. It is to the letters to Gottwald that I will pay most attention.

The collection of letters has been obtained in typescript form from a *bona fide* source in Prague and about their authenticity there is absolutely no doubt. With the exception of excerpts from some of the family letters (e. g. by Clementis) and brief quotes from one or two of those addressed to Gottwald in the so-called Piller Report on Trials and Rehabilitations (1968), none of the letters has been published so far.

If I am to do justice to this new material, I cannot present an overall description and analysis of the trial itself, let alone a history of political persecution in communist Czechoslovakia. Neither is it possible for reasons of space and focus to relate the Slánský case to similar occurrences in other East European countries and to Stalinism in the USSR before and after the war. All this has, after all, been treated by others already¹⁾. I will simply take it for granted that the basic facts and essential circumstances are known. Only a list of names of the defendants in the Slánský trial, with their personal data, is appended at the end of this paper. It has been taken over from the official Czechoslovak minutes of the proceedings²⁾.

The one thing that needs to be repeated for the less initiated reader is that all the charges in the trial were trumped up and that, whatever else these people may have had on their collective and individual consciences, it was not an anti-state and anti-party conspiracy of which they were convicted. All of them did, however, confess to their being guilty of every heinous crime of which they were accused. This

1) The two most detailed Czech accounts of the entire story of political persecution can be found in Pelikán, J., ed., *The Czechoslovak Political Trials 1949-1954*, containing the so-called Piller Report prepared in 1968 (London, Macdonald, 1971), and in a series of three articles by Karel Kaplan in *Nová mysl* (Prague), Nos. 6, 7 and 8/1968.

2) *Proces s vedením protistátního spikleneckého centra* (Prague, Ministry of Justice, 1953).

was a show trial *par excellence*³⁾.

Their last letters do not possess the quality of new evidence, such as would change substantially the established body of knowledge about the trial. Their nature is more that of a supplementary illustration or corroboration, and it has the additional dimension of a psychological insight into the final stages of this horror story.

The letters were written on 3 December 1952, evidently at the invitation of the authorities but probably not on request from the party politburo. The hangings took place in the small hours of the following morning. Thus the letters were written after the defendants had fully realized that there would be no reprieve, something which they were led to believe was still possible when the death verdicts were pronounced at the end of their trial a few days earlier. When they were sitting down on their bunk beds to write the letters, the stress of the trial itself had passed, but a new pressure had set in, that of impending and inevitable doom⁴⁾.

The reader should also bear in mind that the eleven members of the Slánský group who died on the gallows were only one group among many more victims, communists and non-communists. Practically all defendants in this trial had been directly involved in setting the grisly machine in motion before being caught in it themselves. Altogether some 300 persons were executed in the years of Czechoslovak Stalinism and uncounted thousands died in prisons.

The collection of letters now in hand contains twenty-one letters, one statement and six brief drafts (fragments). Fifteen letters were addressed to wives, children and other relatives, and six to Gottwald. Slánský alone declined to write a farewell note to anyone. Among the others, Clementis, Fischl, Frank and Margolius wrote to their next-of-kin only; Frejka and Geminder to Gottwald only; and Reicin, Simone, Šling and Šváb to both. The letters vary in size from half-a-page to several pages; the longest being André Simone's letter to Gottwald, some 2,500 words.

The letters were eventually delivered to Gottwald on 13 December, i. e. ten days after they had been written and nine days after their authors had been executed. No action on his part is on record; apparently the letters did not even rouse him to initiate a reconsideration of further prosecutions, then already on the drawing board. The families received the letters only several years later.

A final word on style: the authors were instructed to address Klement Gottwald as 'Mr. President' and use the polite second person singular even if several had been his intimate friends.

3) I discussed some aspects of the guilt-cum-party-loyalty syndrome in a review article in *Soviet Studies* (Glasgow), April 1971, pp. 623-30.

4) I am aware of the attitude held by many people in Czechoslovakia who regard the trial as a self-mutilating affair inside the communist family which did not concern the nation as a whole, and I am not going to argue about this or any other interpretation as it remains outside the scope of this article. I respect the fact that immeasurably more non-communists died and suffered than did party members. Their plight in general, and the show trials of selected personalities from among their ranks, are still awaiting scholarly analysis.

CHARACTER OF LETTERS

One can distinguish several different approaches. Reicin wrote tersely and only on matters relating to his family; he asked Gottwald to grant an invalidity pension to his wife and an orphan's allowance to his son:

'... I address myself to you, Mr. President, knowing your generosity and kindness of heart ... Please believe me that my wife ... does not bear the slightest responsibility for, and took no part in, my criminal and hostile activity ... and that she is bringing up our son as a useful citizen of the people's democratic republic'.

There is no argument in Reicin's letter about the case or his own behaviour in the past and before the court. He evidently had no illusion about the possible effect of what he wrote on his own fate, having supervised a number of frame-ups himself before getting under the wheels. He was of course right: the party presidium under Gottwald had decided before the court actually met not only what the verdict and sentence should be but also that, should any of the condemned men ask for clemency, the request would be denied. Intimate knowledge of the machinery of terror was presumably also responsible for Slánský's decision not to write any letters at all.

On the opposite end of the stylistic spectrum, Frejka wrote at length, almost verbosely, stressing that he had tried hard to cooperate with the investigators and implicate others in the hope that his own life would be spared. He suggested that he would go on unmasking other acts of political and economic sabotage, should he be given the opportunity to do so.

'When, some four days after my arrest, I realized that you, esteemed Mr. President, appeared to regard me as a subverter and traitor ... I said to myself that I personally must have had a wrong notion of what I had really wanted to do. From that moment on, I put myself ... honestly and mercilessly behind the objective viewpoint of the Czechoslovak working people and compelled myself to see all my past activities through the eyes of the interrogating officers.

Accordingly, I testified in the severest possible manner against myself ... and I also had the impression that I succeeded in uncovering misdeeds in others. ... I only beg of you, esteemed Mr. President, to believe that I did this for good reason, realizing that only in this way could the people and the party in their just fury put right relatively soon what I had caused to go wrong. I knew that only in this way could the Western imperialists be dealt a heavy blow, and so I acted accordingly to bring at least some small contribution to the preservation of peace. ... I had the impression ... that my approach was being appreciated ... and that I would be given an opportunity after the trial to go on assisting still further to put right the terrible harm which I had unwittingly caused, by being allowed to uncover further sabotage in the Czechoslovak economy'.

Contrary to Frejka's abject tone and rambling style (the quotation is excerpted from a much longer sequence of convoluted writing, but only his own words are used), André Simone went into a much more disciplined detail to prove his inno-

cence on all counts. His only guilt, he claimed, had been to confess under duress. Simone's letter will be quoted later.

GUILT

This brings us to the way the condemned men approached the question of their guilt or innocence on the eve of their death and, as it were, privately, for the eyes of the party chairman only. They did not have to lie or pretend any more. There were two extremes and many shades of partial self-accusation in between. Perhaps the most interesting and frightening conclusion is that the majority could apparently no longer distinguish between a lie which was imposed on them at first but then became internalized, and the truth which was first self-evident but then became suppressed. As stated above, Simone was the only one to deny his guilt absolutely, and Geminder the one to admit it fully. Geminder wrote as follows:

'... I have been in the party long enough and witnessed the historic events in the USSR and our country well enough, to know that my action and behaviour constituted the gravest crime against the working class and the party. I shall rightly pay with my life. ... I am walking to the gallows with a heavy heart but relatively calm: my liquidation means the elimination of one of those who caused so much harm; the air is becoming purer and one obstacle on the victorious road to socialism is being removed. The party is always right, which my case corroborates once again'.

Frank and Šváb evaded the question of guilt and innocence; Clementis, Frejka and Šling refuted the charges levelled against them but admitted having been guilty of something else, either equally heinous or vague and silly. Take for example Šling:

'Before my execution I hereby state truthfully that I have never been a spy. ... I further declare that I have never been a millionaire. ... I was unaware of the criminal activity of the members of the conspiracy to the extent to which it became apparent during the trial. ... I subordinated myself to Slánský and for this I fully deserve capital punishment. ... I regret my crimes, that is my collaboration with Slánský'.

The last two quoted sentences can of course be read as a coded denial of guilt. What kind of a crime for a regional party secretary to collaborate with the general secretary?!

Clementis, Fischl, Margolius and Reicin accepted their guilt in a still more general and nebulous sense.

SLÁNSKÝ

As the quotation from Šling shows, several of the accused (six of ten) saw Slánský as the real villain of the piece even in these last letters and either said so or implied that they still considered as correct - in the face of death - the assertion that there had been an anti-state and anti-party plot. For them guilt lay in identifying the

party with its representative who turned out to be a gangster. Šváb had the following to say:

'My case was not one of confession to collaboration, but of recognition, even if a belated one, that Slánský did have the intentions he had. ... The whole of my life I had but one objective, to serve the party. Alas, I served a villain and his masters instead'.

Fischl, Frank, Margolius and Reicin remained silent on this point.

SENTENCE

As for the 'logical' consequence, the death penalty, Clementis saw it as a political necessity, while Geminder, Margolius, Reicin and Šváb called it 'justified' or 'substantiated', albeit with a varying measure of concreteness. A quote from Šváb on this score:

'... I consider the verdict fully justified and I shall pass away with the knowledge that this solution is the only correct one'.

We have already quoted Geminder as saying, 'I shall rightly pay with my life'. Reicin wrote similarly, 'I have been justly condemned'. But Fischl, Frank, Frejka, Simone and Šling did not comment on their own gruesome demise, now only hours away. None of them questioned the discrepancy between 'crime' and 'punishment'. All appeared to remain content with paying the ultimate price because the party so demanded.

WHY CONFESS ?

Perhaps the most frequently asked question in connection with this and similar trials is why did the defendants confess or, given the now well known torturous procedure applied during their interrogation, why did they not withdraw their confessions once they were paraded before their judges. Fischl, Frank, Margolius and Reicin had no comment on this point in their last letters, while Clementis mentioned pressure by the investigators, and Simone violence, both without much elaboration.

Simone made an interesting, though also not quite novel point: he had decided to confess and even exaggerate his own guilt when he realized that the investigating police officers simply blocked his protestations of innocence. By inflating his guilt beyond any fathomable possibility, he hoped to attract the attention of 'superior organs', i. e. the party leadership, to the wrongness of the entire case. Here is a quotation from his long letter to Gottwald in which, as we said, he also painstakingly retraced his innocence on all points of the accusation.

'Why did I confess? ... The interrogator told me that I had been expelled from the party, that my arrest meant that the party had already condemned me, that I had no right to bring forward evidence, and that should I not confess he would take turns with a colleague and interrogate me throughout the night, and should I collapse he would pour cold water over me; he threatened to put me

in a dark cell and to beat me up. I was frightened, but one threat above all had an effect on me, notably that my wife would also be arrested if I refused to confess. But I still stuck to my guns and defended my innocence. After a mere fortnight I realized however that all was in vain, that the interrogating officer took no notice of what I was telling him and that he was twisting my words against me. ... The staff captain then told me that in case my two interrogators failed to get a confession out of me, another pair would be sent over, and yet another, and yet another, even if it were to last five years. I gave a thought to this prospect and decided that a turn for the better could only be brought about by superior organs. And I therefore resolved to confess everything the officer desired, but to make such confessions which would cause his superiors to think, to reconsider the case and to give me a chance to prove my innocence. Unfortunately, this hope - which I see today as foolish - did not come true. ... Had I consistently spoken the truth and had I not made fabricated admissions, I need not have come to my sad end. ... I then thought I might withdraw my depositions before the court, but I decided not to, as I told myself that in doing so I would cause terrible harm. That is why I learned the protocol by heart and played my role before the court to the very end'.

The immediately following passage in Simone's letter bears witness to the attitude of total subservience which most of the defendants displayed towards Gottwald. Not one of them decided to slam the door on his own communist past in this last moment, or to spit in Gottwald's face, understandable as both reactions would have been. Simone went on :

'Why am I writing all this to you? ... I have always held you in deep respect, esteemed Mr. President. I saw in you a shining example of a communist, of wisdom, firmness and humanity. There is pain in my heart when I imagine that you look at me as an enemy, and I had to write this letter. ... Forgive the bad handwriting, I am writing this on a small stool, sitting on a bed'.

Frejka and Šváb said that they had been promised to be spared if they signed false confessions. Both of them, as well as Šling and Geminder, saw in fabricated confessions a political necessity and a means of rectifying their mistakes and wrongdoings, even if they had not been the same as those with which they had been charged. Geminder put this belief into simple words :

'Immediately after my arrest I recognized the tremendous political significance of the event. And so I said to myself: my life is at an end and the only thing I can do is to embark on a road of truth and thus help the party ... to uncover the plans of the imperialists. ... Maybe these lines will be considered empty phrases. But one does not tell lies before mounting the gallows. This is what I feel, and I depart feeling it. The party has triumphed and will triumph'.

FAITH

As can be seen, practically none of the letter-writers questioned their basic com-

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minist beliefs and the tenets of the system which set the machinery of political persecution in motion. Only Frank had an oblique word of criticism in the letter which he wrote to his son: 'You ... will grow up in another time and in a different society from the one in which I lived. And in this new society, cases like mine cannot happen again'. Fischl remained on the personal level when referring to the future, and Frejka, Geminder, Reicin and Šling had practically nothing to say on this count. On the other hand, Clementis, Margolius, Simone and Šváb predicted, in differing ways, a glorious victory of communism in the world and a happy future for the Czechoslovak nations.

The last paragraph of André Simone's letter to Gottwald runs as follows:

'I wish you much happiness, good health and long life. May the Czechoslovak people enter communism under your wise guidance. And should you, in the course of your rich and successful life, ever recall that somewhere in Prague they buried a man who brought his own end onto himself but who had never betrayed the party, the state and the Soviet Union, then this letter will not have been written in vain'.

Gottwald was, however, to survive Simone and the others by a mere three months and ten days. Burying Stalin in Moscow the following March, he caught a cold which turned out to be fatal.

CONCLUSIONS

It is generally recognized that political trials of top communist figures, be it in Russia before the war or the so-called People's Democracies in the late 1940s and early 1950s, served essentially the dual purpose of being a crude substitute for political power struggle of a more normal fashion, and of intimidating the party cadres as well as the public at large lest they deviated from imposed political and economic precepts.

I would submit that these trials had yet another dimension, associated with the then widely held belief in a kind of mythical quality of the party. The contents of the macabre letters quoted here provide a telling example of such otherworldly belief. The party, treated as a sacrosanct fetish and a mythical embodiment of all virtues, seemed to be in need of the ordeal of the trials in order to emerge lean and hardened, self-flagellated into a posture of grim readiness for the tasks to come. The party could not be allowed to appear simply as a measurable sum-total of its defined functions. The member, the low-level functionary and the man in the street had to be induced to believe, indeed to take for granted, that the party had a mythical inner purpose and momentum. One of these irrational experiences lay in the notion that the party was infallible even if the men who comprised it, and indeed masterminded its policies, made mistakes and could even turn traitors to the cause.

So, the defendants identified themselves with the quintessential substance of the party even when being sent to die innocently. In a sense they were their own judges. As Jean-Paul Sartre put it: '...if the defendant succeeds in viewing himself through

the Gorgonian eyes of the power-wielding Medusa, he will let go even that pitiful defect which separates him from her: his life. Guilty! How fascinating! At long last peace, mesmerization, death!⁵⁾.

This kind of trials, where the prosecutor and the accused were one, is unlikely to be repeated on any large scale. *Tempora mutantis*. The change from communism as a chiliastic order to communism as an established system of government has made trials of this nature look archaic even to the most ardent proponent of the creed. For one thing, the revolution had already devoured most of its children or they have passed away peacefully, and it now has to learn the operational modes of a pragmatic ruler. The machinery is, of course, still there, now and then emitting an ominous noise, and occasionally swallowing a stray sheep in the family. The edge of political persecution has, however, long been directed against genuine oppositionists and dissenters of whom there are more today than at the time of the Slánský trial.

Appendix

DEFENDANTS IN THE SLÁNSKÝ TRIAL, STATE COURT, PRAGUE, 20-27 NOVEMBER 1952

Name	Born	Position	Family	Origin	Sentence
Rudolf Slánský	1901	Secretary-General CzCP	Merchant	Jewish	Death
Bedřich Geminder	1901	Head, International Dept. CzCP CC	Merchant & innkeeper	Jewish	Death
Ludvík Frejka	1904	Head, Economic Dept. Presidential Chancery	Physician	Jewish	Death
Josef Frank	1909	Deputy Secretary-General CzCP	Worker	Czech	Death
Vladimír Clementis	1902	Minister, Foreign Affairs	Bourgeois	Slovak	Death
Bedřich Reicin	1911	Deputy Minister, Defence	Bourgeois	Jewish	Death
Karel Šváb	1904	Deputy Minister, Security	Worker	Czech	Death
Artur London	1915	Deputy Minister, Foreign Affairs	Tradesman	Jewish	Life
Vavro Hajdu	1913	Deputy Minister, Foreign Affairs	Owner of a spa house	Jewish	Life
Evžen Löbl	1907	Deputy Minister, Foreign Trade	Wholesale merchant	Jewish	Life
Rudolf Margolius	1913	Deputy Minister, Foreign Trade	Wholesale merchant	Jewish	Death
Otto Fischl	1902	Deputy Minister, Finance	Merchant	Jewish	Death
Otto Šling	1912	Regional Chief Secretary, CzCP, Brno	Factory owner	Jewish	Death
André Simone	1895	Editor, <i>Rudé právo</i>	Factory owner	Jewish	Death

CzCP=Czechoslovak Communist Party

CC= Central Committee

5) Preface to *Trois générations* by A. J. Liehm (Paris, Galimard, 1970). Here quoted from a Czech translation in *Svědectví* (Paris), No. 39, 1970, p. 347.