

Changing Patterns of Power in Cold War Politics:

The Mysterious Case of Vladimír Komárek

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This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of the Cold War by analyzing events in Communist Czechoslovakia in two different periods: 1948–1950 and 1966–1967.¹ Rather than dealing exclusively with conflicts between the political, military, and intelligence elites in the Soviet Union and the West, as other authors tend to do, this study focuses on the opposite end of the power spectrum by examining the life of a Cold War foot soldier. The findings enable us to discern significant changes in the balance of power between the two competing systems during the years separating the two periods.

At the center of this study is Vladimír Komárek, a Czech who became involved in Cold War intelligence operations. His name appeared in the headlines for the first time in connection with some of the Stalinist show trials in Czechoslovakia, including one involving the American journalist William Oatis, whom the authorities in Prague arrested on charges of spying for the United States. Although the U.S. government exerted strong pressure on

1. The article is based on information drawn from the following sources: (1) the newly opened archives in Prague; (2) documents obtained from the U.S. State Department, Defense Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act; (3) diplomatic papers found in the U.S. National Archives; (4) Komárek's private papers; and (5) interviews with Komárek's brother in Prague, his wife, his friends in the Boston area, and his one-time cellmate, Karel Zámečník, who now lives in Paris. The following abbreviations have been used in footnotes: AÚV KSČ (Archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Prague); AMZV (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague); AMV (Archives of the Ministry of Interior, Prague); FOIA (Freedom of Information and Privacy Act); FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947 (Papers released by the U.S. Department of Justice); FOIA-USDS, No. 199800789 and No. 188504947 (Papers released by the U.S. Department of State); FOIA-USISC, No. 890F-98 (Papers released by the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command); PP-VK (Private Papers, Vladimír Komárek); and SÚA (State Central Archives, Prague).

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Czechoslovakia in retaliation for its treatment of Oatis, the reprisals had no discernible effect.

Komárek's name emerged in the international press for a second time in 1966, when his kidnapping and arrest in Prague caused a short but fierce confrontation between the United States and the Soviet bloc. By the mid-1960s, as this article illustrates, the balance of power between the two camps had changed significantly. Although the Prague regime remained loyal in its role as a Soviet satellite, all but the most diehard elements of the *Státní bezpečnost* (StB), the Czechoslovak secret police, had come to understand that membership in the socialist system could not compensate for the lack of ties with the West in general and the United States in particular. Protected under the Soviet umbrella, Czechoslovakia was willing to stand up to the United States in the first phase of the Komárek case in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Sixteen years later, however, the Prague regime no longer believed it could easily withstand a U.S. embargo. This sense of vulnerability altered Czechoslovakia's behavior toward the United States considerably. The pressure that had failed to bring freedom for Oatis in the early 1950s opened the prison gates for Komárek in early 1967.

The account below provides evidence that in the first phase of the Komárek case, from 1948 to 1950, senior Czechoslovak officials were united in their determination to take the confrontation with the United States to the brink, regardless of the political or economic consequences. In 1966–1967, during the second phase, a schism emerged at the top of the political hierarchy in Prague. On one side were retreating Communist hardliners who insisted on ignoring the growing technological gap between Czechoslovakia and the capitalist West; on the other were advancing modernizers who wanted to close the gap. This conflict within the Prague political elite flared into the open just a few months after Komárek's release, and it eventually culminated in the short-lived Prague Spring.

The Komárek Affair: Phase One

Vladimír Komárek was born to a Czech family on 5 October 1924 in ethnically divided Opava, in the Czechoslovak Sudetenland.² Shortly after Adolf Hitler's 1933 *Machtergreifung*, the family moved to Prague. Komárek was a young high school student when the war broke out. In 1943 he and thousands of other Czechs of his generation were sent as slave laborers to work un-

2. Vladimír Komárek's indictment before the Municipal Court, Prague, 14 January 1967, PP-VK; and Vladimír Komárek, 23 March 1963, AMV, 10-450.

der hellish conditions in the Reich. He ended up at a factory in Halle, where his closest friend was another Czech, Josef Pavelka, whose fate would be closely linked with Komárek's. When the enterprise in Halle was leveled by allied bombardment in early December 1944, Komárek took advantage of the initial period of confusion and escaped. This was a risky decision: Under the laws of the Reich he had committed an act of desertion from his assigned post, which was punishable by death. Komárek headed home, but his first attempt to cross the border illegally was disastrous: He was captured by the Reich border police. He told his captors a partly true story involving bombardment and plausibly blamed his lack of documents on the Allied air force. He was kept for three weeks in a local jail and then released on 1 January 1945. Eventually he made it back to Prague, where he survived in hiding until May 1945. At the end of the war, Komárek found employment as a translator for General George Patton's Third Army in Plzeň. He was later transferred to Nuremberg where he worked for fifteen months as a staff interpreter for the American team preparing the Trial of Major War Criminals.³

Komárek came back to Prague in the late summer of 1946 to fulfill his obligatory military service. When he returned to civilian life in 1947, he became convinced that the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) was planning to impose a dictatorship. Hoping to leave the country before it was too late, he applied for a passport to study in Sweden. But before all the necessary documents could be assembled, the KSČ carried out its February 1948 coup d'état. Komárek decided to escape to the West and to join the forces arrayed in opposition to Communist rule. He crossed the Iron Curtain just days after a new regime under the KSČ leader, Klement Gottwald, assumed power. Komárek served as a guide for two opponents of the new dictatorship: Adolf Klimek, a high-ranking official of the People's (Catholic) Party, and Father Antonín Bernáček, who had served as a captain in the Czechoslovak Army in Great Britain during the war before becoming a Catholic priest in 1947.⁴ The trio made it safely to the U.S. zone in Germany and were processed as refugees in Frankfurt.

In September 1948 Komárek moved to Paris, where he met Major Svatopluk Janouch, a highly decorated Czechoslovak air force officer who had served in France and with the Royal Air Force during World War II and had

3. Vladimír Komárek's indictment before the Municipal Court, Prague, 14 January 1967, PP-VK.

4. Vladimír Komárek's indictment before the Municipal Court, Prague, 14 January 1967, PP-VK, p. 4, states that he escaped at the end of February 1948; Vladimír Komárek, 23 March 1963, AMV, 10-450, p. 2, claims that he left in early March 1948. The AMV documents identify the priest incorrectly as Fr. Cyril Bernáček. Fr. Bernáček is mentioned in Bořivoj Čelovský, *Emigranti: dopisy politických uprchlíků z prvních let po "Vítězném Únoru" 1948* (Šenov u Ostravy: Tilia, 1998), pp. 157–158.

escaped from Communist Czechoslovakia to the West in April 1948.⁵ Janouch recruited Komárek for intelligence work within the hierarchy of the Second Bureau (military intelligence) of the French General Staff. After Komárek passed a physical test, he became a French agent with a monthly income of 25,000 French francs. This did not escape the attention of the other Czechoslovak exiles in Paris who later told the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that “KOMAREK seemed to have plenty of spending money and it was generally known . . . that [he] had some affiliation with the Second Bureau.”⁶

The French taught Komárek to operate a transmitter and use invisible ink and other means of secret communications; he was also trained to use weapons and to evade border guards.⁷ In December 1948 he embarked on his first mission. He crossed the border into Czechoslovakia and sought friends from his student days, Jaroslav and Zdeněk Libeňský. They did not let him down, and he accepted their invitation to stay in their apartment.⁸ Komárek and the Libeňský brothers went to see another of their friends, Josef Pavelka, Komárek’s old friend from the war, and Josef’s brother Radomír. Komárek told them that he worked for a “Western intelligence service,” but did not specify which one. Zdeněk Libeňský surmised that Komárek worked for the French Second Bureau, whereas Radomír Pavelka believed that he was acting on behalf of U.S. intelligence.⁹ Many of Komárek’s friends were committed to working against the stifling Communist regime, and they accepted his invitation to form an intelligence unit. Komárek then headed back across the border to the American zone.¹⁰

Komárek’s next trip to Czechoslovakia took place in June 1949. This time he crossed the border with a radio transmitter. By coincidence, while he was on a train to Prague he ran into a longtime friend, Marie Hufová, a medi-

5. For his bravery during the 1940 campaign in France, Lieutenant Svatopluk Janouch was designated a Chevalier of the *Légion d’honneur* by the French Government. He then fought as a fighter-pilot with the Czechoslovak 310th Squadron in Great Britain. He returned to Prague in 1945 as a Major. At the time of the Communist takeover in February 1948 Major Janouch was a professor at the Air Force Academy in Hradec Králové. See, for instance, Zdeněk Šmoldas, *Českoslovenští letci v boji proti fašismu* (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1987).

6. A CIA Memorandum on Vladimír J. Kazan-Komárek furnished to the FBI on 2 December 1966, FOIA-CIA No. 199600025.

7. Vladimír Komárek’s indictment before the Municipal Court, Prague, 14 January 1967, PP-VK.

8. “Návrh na uložení osobního svazku číslo 22499 do archivu SEO, ve kterém byly soustředovány poznatky a rozpracovaná osoba: Kazan-Komárek Vladimír,” 31 March 1971, AMV, V-8495.

9. Report on Zdeněk Libeňský, n.d., AMV, 2294/8; and Report on Radomír Pavelka, n.d., AMV, 2294/6.

10. The entry is dated 28 March 1949. He made it, but it was far from easy. According to a report by the U.S. Army Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), “Vladimír Komárek, French Intelligence Informant, using the cover name Rudolf Rijman, was admitted to the City Hospital at Zwiesel with frozen feet.” FOIA-USISC, No. 890F-98.

cal student.¹¹ Hufová later recalled that Komárek remembered she had worked as a telegraph operator during the war for the state railroad company, and he asked whether she remembered Morse code. She responded affirmatively, and he requested her to serve as his radio operator. “I answered that I might give it a try,” Hufová later confessed to the StB.¹²

From August through September 1949 Komárek taught Hufová how to use the transmitter just as he had been trained in France during the spring and early summer. In October 1949 he decided it was time for their first attempt to establish radio contact with his base in the West. He mobilized his small crew—the Libeňský brothers, Josef Pavelka, and a new recruit, Vladimír Schoř—to act as guards. They were equipped with small arms he had brought with him from the West.¹³ Although the first attempt did not work, the next one did. Soon Hufová started sending messages that Komárek had written in English and then encoded. Before Komárek left again at the end of November 1949, he had prepared clear but elaborate emergency measures for the unit to adopt in his absence.¹⁴

Komárek made it safely to the West, but on 24 November 1949 he was arrested by the West German police at Zwiesel, a few miles beyond the border. Although he explained that he was an agent for an allied intelligence service, the West Germans took him into custody and found he was armed with a pistol. He also was carrying a cyanide capsule, a chemical agent designed to throw dogs off a trail, a map, a compass, and a copy of the Bible. His papers identified him as Karel Hájek, and he said his permanent address was in Paris, France. The West Germans sent him to a jail at Straubing.¹⁵

When the Americans picked up Komárek, they kept him in a prison at Regensburg while they tried to verify his identity. On 28 November 1949 he was transferred to the custody of the 66th Detachment of the U.S. Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC). During an interrogation, he told the Americans that “he was a member of Department II of the French Intelligence in Paris and was on a mission for that agency in Czechoslovakia.” He also told the CIC that he had been using the names Karel Hájek and Rudolf Rijman as aliases. His overall mission was “to establish radio communications between Prague and Paris.” They discussed his future plans (Komárek said he wanted to study film in Paris), and they put him up at the Sternbrau Hotel on

11. Summary of interrogation of Marie Hufová, 26 February 1951, AMV, V-2294.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.* The summary contains photographs of the weapons Komárek brought with him from the West for his group.

14. *Ibid.*

15. The arrest is noted in a memorandum from HQ 66th CIC DET, USAEUR, to CIC Liaison Officer, Heidelberg, 29 November 1949, FOIA-USIS, No. 890F-98.

Marianstrasse in Regensburg under the name of Johann Schultz, giving him twenty Deutschmarks as pocket money. On 6 December 1949 a French officer showed up—the CIC knew him only as “Blondie.” He introduced himself as a Captain of the Second Bureau in Paris, and he carried “a yellow identification card which stated he was a member of a French Intelligence organization operating from Baden-Baden.” The French captain—a CIA document later identified him as Rémi LeDoux—reimbursed the CIC for its expenses and left with Komárek.¹⁶

In January 1950 Komárek returned to Czechoslovakia. He brought with him a more powerful radio transmitter and additional pistols. By this point, Komárek’s group had attracted more volunteers and became a full-fledged intelligence unit. He and Hufová immediately started encoding messages for the West, taking care of material that had accumulated in Komárek’s absence. When Komárek left in mid-March, he took Jan Španiel, a Czechoslovak employee of the Associated Press (AP) in Prague, with him across the border mountains. The AP office had become one of the last places in Prague where people hostile to the regime gathered and exchanged information—partly for the benefit of the Bureau’s American personnel. (This was well known to the StB, which therefore had sought to discredit and ultimately destroy the enclave.) The two made it safely out on 19 March 1950, and Komárek was reunited with the French control officer and Major Janouch.¹⁷

Komárek’s last border crossing took place in December 1950. This time the mission had two objectives. First, he was to find a small airfield that would be convenient for French intelligence operations. Second, he was to smuggle several people across the border: Lt. Colonel Karel Krepl, Krepl’s fiancée, her eight-year-old boy, and Jaroslav Zajíc, a noted painter.¹⁸ The French Second Bureau had previously tried to use Komárek’s network in Czechoslovakia to help these people escape. The operation had fallen through when Sudeten German guides failed to show up. Komárek therefore had to carry out the mission himself.

Using a transmitter, Komárek informed the French that the escape would take place on 23 December 1950.¹⁹ With the assistance of Josef Pavelka, who returned to Prague after he delivered the four people to Komárek, all of them

16. The quotation is from a CIC Agent Report, 19 December 1949, FOIA-USISC, No. 890F-98. The same is described in a CIC memorandum, unsigned, 23 January 1953, in *ibid*.

17. Vladimír Komárek’s indictment before the Municipal Court, Prague, 14 January 1967, PP-VK.

18. “Žaloba,” September 1951, AMV, 310-102-3. Lt. Colonel Krepl was a graduate of the École de Guerre in Paris, Zajíc was married to a French woman who was on friendly terms with the French wife of Hubert Ripka, a prominent Czech exile politician with good connections in Paris.

19. Report on Vladimír Komárek, 23 March 1963, AMV, 10-450.

reached the border area safely. The crossing, however, turned out to be a disaster. The little boy was unable to negotiate the heavy snow by himself and had to be carried; he was frightened and cried often. After hours of slow progress in the dark, dawn broke and border guards with a dog appeared. Komárek started firing in the air while running away from the group, evidently in the hope that this would increase their chances of escaping. The guards arrested the civilians, radioed for help, and unleashed their attack dog on the fleeing gunman.

Komárek turned in time, aimed his gun, and killed the dog.²⁰ He then cleverly ran away from the border to avoid the closure maneuver of the guards and waded a freezing brook to confuse tracking dogs. Komárek hid in one of the many houses in the border region ruined by war and neglect, but after two days he started to suffer from extreme exhaustion and frostbite. When he saw the guards approach his hideout, he swallowed the cyanide pill that he always carried. It turned out, however, that the capsule was old and the contents had leaked out or evaporated. Komárek miraculously survived.²¹

The guards bypassed his hiding place, allowing him to summon his strength and flee across the border. When “Blondie,” his French control officer, found him in the U.S. Zone, Komárek was in a hospital undergoing treatment for frostbite. The captain took Komárek to a French military base at Baden-Baden, where he received six months of physical therapy after losing all the toes on one foot and parts of the toes on the other.²² Meanwhile, Komárek’s associates in Czechoslovakia were instructed by a prearranged radio code to change their residences and jobs as frequently as possible and to hide the transmitters.²³

By 1951 the situation in Europe had begun to change. The Berlin crisis of 1948–1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in mid-1950 had stirred

20. Report of StB at Susice, 25 December 1950, “regarding the attempted escape of Jaroslav Zajíc, Karel Krepl, Jindra Saidlová, and Saidlová’s eight-year old son. The group was guided by CIC agent ‘Rajman.’” AMV, V-8495.

21. Karel Zámečník, Komárek’s cell-mate from the Prague Ruzyně prison in 1966, discussed this episode with me on 4 November 1999. He and Komárek had analyzed it repeatedly and in detail during their time in jail. Zámečník clearly recalled the strange conclusion of the episode: When Komárek was reunited with his control officer from the Second Bureau, he told him about the capsule’s failure. The French, Komárek told Zámečník in Prague, had panicked and promptly arranged for a similar capsule to be tested before his eyes on a cat. The animal died instantly. Eventually, Komárek and the French agreed that the capsule had a micropuncture. Zámečník, a skeptical and highly rational judge of human character, never doubted that Komárek was telling him the truth. Josef Staša and his wife, Marta, arrived at the same conclusion. Interview by author, 15 April 1999. A retired U.S. intelligence officer considered this episode and stated: “[It’s] not the first time I’ve heard of this. I’d heard of faulty pills either in World War II or in the Cold War. It’s probably true.” Interview by author, 12 June 2000.

22. U.S. military intelligence, statement on the hospitalization of Vladimír Komárek, FOIA-USISC, No. 890F-98.

23. Indictment, 14 January 1967, PP-VK.

Western fears that the Soviet Union intended to launch a large-scale attack against Western Europe. But by 1951 those concerns were diminishing. The importance of intelligence networks along the East-West border in Europe declined compared to the heyday of 1948–1950, and Komárek decided to leave his espionage career behind. He explained later that he had lost his cover and thus his “usefulness to the French as a border crosser.”²⁴ The French upheld their part of the deal with him: The Second Bureau gave him back pay of 150,000 francs for the six months of hospitalization and a French residency permit in the name of Vladimír Kazan, born 15 March 1925 in Kovno, Latvia.²⁵ The French also approached William Johnson Taylor, an American who served in wartime intelligence and subsequently became the owner of the Taylor Travel Service in Paris. An officer of the Second Bureau asked Taylor “to provide employment for Komárek, whose intelligence cover had been blown and who was being resettled.” Taylor subsequently testified that Komárek had been his friend since 1949 and had worked for his travel agency from 1950 to 1955.²⁶

Although Komárek had apparently left the espionage business, he was about to acquire notoriety as a prominent soldier of the Cold War. It started in connection with the Oatis case. On 23 March 1951 Miroslav Husták called on William Oatis, the AP bureau chief in Prague. Recently, Husták had made several attempts to get a job with the AP. Although Oatis was looking for Czechs who were fluent in English, he turned down Husták’s requests. Now Husták, wearing only a thin shirt despite the bitterly cold weather outside, stood at the door and tried to give Oatis a small photograph showing the Koloděje castle, which had recently been taken over and refurbished by the StB. It was being used as a holding, interrogation, and torture center for deposed Communist officials who had been arrested on various trumped-up charges. Although Oatis refused to take the photograph, Husták thrust it into his hand and ran out while saying: “Oh, you can keep it.”²⁷ Seconds later six StB officers burst into the office, seized the photograph, and arrested Oatis for spying.²⁸ After being subjected to extreme psychological pressure,

24. Memorandum for the Director of the FBI, 2 December 1966, FOIA-CIA, No. 1996-0025.

25. Komárek was a great movie fan, and he chose the name of his favorite director. Marta Staša, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, 23 December 1998.

26. United States Government Memorandum, 26 November 1968, To: Chief, FIOB/Security Research Staff, From: [Deleted], FOIA-CIA, No. 1996-0025.

27. William N. Gates, “Oatis Recalls Day He Was Arrested,” *The New York Times*, 16 September 1953, p. 8. The obvious suspicion that Husták was an agent provocateur is strengthened by an examination of Memorandum to the Minister of National Security regarding the trial of William Oatis, 9 July 1951, AMV, 310-95-2.

28. U.S. embassy in Prague to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 April 1951, AMZV, Fond (F): U.S. Political reports, Washington, DC.

sleep deprivation, and isolation from the outside world, Oatis confessed to spying.

The United States imposed tough sanctions against Czechoslovakia in retaliation for Oatis's arrest. In the summer of 1951 the U.S. consulate in Prague stopped issuing permits for commercial transactions between the two countries, bringing the flow of merchandise to a near standstill. In November 1951 Czechoslovakia lost its most-favored-nation trade status, and the tariffs imposed on Czechoslovak exports to the United States rose by an average of 100 percent. The U.S. State Department invalidated U.S. passports for travel to Czechoslovakia, and the American Embassy in Prague was instructed to withhold visas from all officials of the Czechoslovak regime. The Czechoslovak Airline was no longer permitted to fly over Germany, and by 1952 no Czechoslovak products were allowed to pass through American ports.²⁹ To the Americans' dismay, the Communist regime in Prague took such measures as a badge of honor and a sign of Czechoslovakia's fidelity to the Soviet Union.

The Oatis trial took place between 2 and 4 July 1951. The defendant cooperated with the Communist authorities and repeated the script prepared by the StB.³⁰ Even so, the court passed steep sentences. Oatis was given ten years in jail, and his Czechoslovak "collaborators" received sentences of sixteen to twenty years each.³¹ Nine other people were tried at the same time, mostly on fictitious charges of having taken part in the espionage activities of the AP bureau in Prague.³²

Although Komárek at the time was far away in Paris, his name was mentioned frequently by the prosecutor in the Oatis trial, who insisted that Komárek was an agent of "the United States Counter Intelligence Corps" as well as an important link between the AP bureau in Prague and the West and

29. "Report on the Situation in the United States," n.d. [c. end of 1953], AMZV, F: U.S. Political Reports. This provides data on the volume of U.S.-Czechoslovak commercial transactions. In 1948, the year of the Communist takeover, Czechoslovakia imported goods from the United States valued at 317 million koruny (Kč), while its exports amounted to 167 million Kč. In 1951, the year Oatis was arrested in March, imports dropped to 43 million Kč, exports to 150 million Kč. In 1953 (Oatis was released in May), imports declined to 18 million Kč and exports to 13 million Kč.

30. "Žaloba," 23 June 1951, AMV, 310-95-2. According to a report by an StB informer in the U.S. Embassy, the American diplomats generally believed "that Oatis had not committed any act of espionage and that he had been forced to confess. Colonel Atwood maintained that Oatis had been deprived of his endurance by some chemical means, which had rendered him pliable to admit to any crime at all. Regarding his alleged participation, Atwood states that all was made up, that Oatis as a journalist naturally gathered information, but not for him or on his orders." See *ibid.*

31. When the Oatis case was reopened during the Prague Spring of 1968, the court found that it "was artificially constructed, evidence was falsified, legal procedures were flagrantly violated and confessions [of Oatis's Czech colleagues at the AP Bureau, Prague] were obtained by force." "Woydinek rehabilitován," *Svobodné slovo*, 18 January 1969, p. 1.

32. "Žaloba," 23 June 1951, AMV, 310-95-2; and Gates, "Oatis Recalls Day He Was Arrested," p. 8.

the murderer of a Czechoslovak “security guard.” Oatis said that Komárek had acted as an informer for the AP bureau in Prague, and he and several other defendants confessed to spying with Komárek.³³ American journalists tracked Komárek down in Paris and asked him about his ties with Oatis. He insisted that he had never met Oatis, and he defended the American as an innocent newsman “caught in the gears of the Communist police machinery.”³⁴ However the *New York Herald Tribune* carried an interview in which Komárek said that although he had never met Oatis, he knew all twelve Czechoslovak defendants. He admitted he had been engaged in espionage against the Communist regime in Prague but insisted that it was not in connection with any Western government agency.³⁵ The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency noted the view of others that Komárek’s statement may have helped Oatis, but it had hurt the Czechoslovak “accomplices” who were tried with him.³⁶

Oatis had been led to believe by his interrogators that as long as he behaved himself during the public trial, he would soon be released on humanitarian grounds. Although he had scrupulously played the role assigned to him, the StB failed to deliver on its promise. In prison Oatis soon became suicidal. In early September 1951 a police informer who played the role of a fellow inmate persuaded Oatis that he might be able to ask for a presidential pardon “if he could do something to advance the interests of the Republic.” On 19 September 1951 the American formally requested political asylum in Czechoslovakia. He changed his mind the next day after realizing that he had once again been tricked. Oatis accused his cellmate of being an StB collaborator and declared that he would rather spend ten years in prison than live in Communist Czechoslovakia as a citizen.³⁷

It is worth recalling that after the disastrous border crossing in December 1950, when Komárek managed to escape, he had left behind Lt. Col. Krepl, his family, and Jaroslav Zajíc. By early 1951 the StB had learned not only the true identity of “Rajman,” Komárek’s *nom de guerre* on that occasion, but also that of Josef Pavelka, the man who had taken the group from Prague to the border area. On 11 February 1951 the StB closed in on Pavelka, but approached him cautiously, knowing that he was armed. Just after Pavelka left

33. Washington, D.C., 1945–1954, AMZV, F: Political Reports, sixth section, USA, case: Oatis, box 18. This contains a transcript of Oatis’s interrogation by a judge on 14 March 1952.

34. “Mystery Czech Says Oatis Was Not a Spy,” *The New York Times*, 21 March 1952, p. 5.

35. See the interview with Komárek in *The New York Herald Tribune* on 21 March 1952.

36. CIA to the State Department, 24 March 1952, FOIA-CIA, No. 1996–0025.

37. Lt. Col. Jaroslav Hora, StB chief, to Stanislav Baudyš, Deputy Minister of National Security, 27 October 1951, AMV, 310-99-8/103-110,

for work that morning, StB agents took over his apartment and waited for him to come home. But Pavelka learned through a prearranged signal (possibly the position of a window) that it was unsafe for him to return, and he decided to deal with the intruders by force. In the evening he posted four other members of the group in the vicinity of his apartment as a cover and rang the bell. As soon as the door opened, Pavelka shot and killed one officer, Josef Rytíř, and then quickly escaped.

The StB mobilized all its resources to capture the gunman and his friends. All 28 members of Pavelka's group were hunted down in less than a week.³⁸ Their trial, in March 1952, was little more than a charade, as indicated in an official document from the prosecutor to the judge: "The defense attorneys will be instructed by the Chief of the State Court, Comrade Richter, together with the presiding judge and the state prosecutor on Wednesday."³⁹ Under coercion, Oatis was a star witness against the twelve defendants. He was brought before the tribunal to testify that members of the Pavelka group had "acted as his informants," and that he, Oatis, "a spy on behalf of the United States intelligence," had arranged a scheme involving Vladimír Komárek.⁴⁰ On 15 March 1952 Pavelka was sentenced to death and subsequently executed.⁴¹ Karel Hájek, Pavelka's deputy, was sentenced to life. Other members of the Komárek group were sentenced to forced labor in the notorious uranium mines in western Bohemia.⁴² This marked the end of the network Komárek had built for the French in Czechoslovakia.

The StB regretted that Komárek was not among those captured. Therefore his mother and brother Miroslav had been arrested as proxies on 13 February 1951. Marie Komárek knew nothing about the whole affair. As far as she was concerned, her younger son had simply disappeared in February or March 1948. But the StB had obtained evidence that Miroslav, an aspiring concert pianist, had met his brother on two occasions when the latter was on one of his intelligence missions in Prague. In April 1952, after thirteen months of detention, often in solitary confinement, Miroslav was tried for being an accessory to espionage. Having failed to capture Vladimír, the StB

38. The number of agents—28—in the group Komárek had built in Czechoslovakia is taken from the press release of the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington, DC, 21 November 1966, and from "Bezpečnostní orgány zatkly nebezpečného agenta: vyšetřuje se Komárkova trestná činnost," *Rudé Právo*, 19 November 1966, p. 1.

39. "Žaloba," September 1951, AMV, 310-102-3.

40. "Oatis Said to Aid Trial of 12 'Spies,'" *The New York Times*, 16 March 1952, p. 1.

41. Pavelka was executed on 9 September 1955, after more than three years in the death cell.

42. "Rozsudek, Státní soud v Praze," 15 March 1952, AMV, V-8495. The sentences were 25, 24, 23, 21, 20, 20, 18, 16, 15, and 12 years in jail.

sought revenge on his older brother. Miroslav was sentenced to ten years of forced labor, which he served in various uranium and coal mining camps: Jáchymov, Příbram, Kladno, Ilava, and Mírov.⁴³

After the destruction of the Komárek-Pavelka group, the StB had no further use for Oatis. By this point, moreover, he had become dangerously moody and unpredictable. On 15 May 1953 the new Czechoslovak president, Antonín Zápotocký, informed President Dwight Eisenhower that Oatis was free to go.⁴⁴

Komárek was not formally sentenced in absentia, but he was clearly a prominent target of the regime. The trial of the Pavelka group made clear that Komárek was deemed to be the leader of the whole enterprise. The authorities alleged that Komárek had brought to Czechoslovakia the weapon that Pavelka used against the StB officer. Radio Prague's commentary on the Pavelka trial described Komárek as "the main defendant."⁴⁵ His decision to open fire at the border during the December 1950 crossing was another irritant for the authorities, whose heavily armed guards much preferred arresting helpless civilians. The StB was not willing to forget Komárek's role in the Pavelka affair easily.

While this drama was unfolding in Prague, Komárek was in Paris working for the Taylor Travel Service.⁴⁶ In 1954 Komárek married an American woman whom he had met in 1953 during his first visit to the United States. The two of them moved from Paris to the United States in 1955. Komárek hoped to settle down and start a family in his new country, but in early 1956, soon after his daughter Marie was born, his wife committed suicide.⁴⁷ Despite the loss, Komárek decided to remain in the United States, where he established his own Harvard Travel Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and proved to be a successful businessman. He and his second wife, Dorothy (Dana) Hunt, settled down in nearby Wellesley Hills and eventually had four

43. Miroslav Komárek, interview by author, 17 June 1999.

44. International Department of the Central Committee, 1945–1962, Diplomatic correspondence between Czechoslovakia and the United States, 1953, Antonín Zápotocký, Prague, to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 15 May 1953, SÚA, AÚV KSČ, F. 100/3, 179, 605. Officially, Oatis was released because of a plea submitted by Mrs. Oatis to Zápotocký. See SÚA, AÚV KSČ, F. 02/5, 56, 152. Politburo meeting of 20 April 1950.

45. "Oatis Said to Aid Trial of 12 'Spies,'" p. 1.

46. Indictment, 14 January 1967, PP-VK.

47. The death was treated as a suicide by the local press. See the FBI report of 2 December 1966, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947. Only the Czechoslovak correspondent for the KSČ daily *Rudé Právo* implied that Komárek had murdered his wife. See "Temná minulost Komárka-Kazana: nervozita amerických úřadů," *Rudé Právo*, 22 November 1966, p. 3. Yet, the Acton Police Log Book shows that Mrs. Komárek had personally mailed a suicide note to her husband at the South Acton Post Office—only moments before the factory guard saw her park her car and walk into the wooded area.

children. Komárek's transition to American life was complete when he acquired a pilot's license.

The Komárek Affair: Phase Two

As Komárek adjusted to life in the United States, the StB plotted to capture him. A Ministry of Interior document of February 1957 outlines a scheme the authorities devised to learn Komárek's address from his older brother, who was still in prison. StB Lt. František Krmela suggested that Miroslav's mother should be allowed to visit her son in the Mírov prison. A listening device was to be installed in the meeting room, and the security guard, normally at hand to monitor all conversations, was to be recalled "under some plausible pretext." Krmela also proposed that a professional StB informer posing as a prisoner be assigned to Miroslav's cell. The purpose was to "uncover the whereabouts of the agent Vladimír Komárek and the channels through which he communicates with his family."⁴⁸ The plan was doomed to fail, however, because Miroslav had been digging uranium and coal as a prisoner since early 1951 and had no information regarding his American brother.⁴⁹

Vladimír Komárek knew nothing about what Krmela and his StB colleagues hoped to achieve. He kept building up his travel company and spending time with his growing family. When Komárek was naturalized as an American citizen in November 1960, he acquired his first U.S. passport. This allowed him, for the first time ever, to cross international borders as any normal tourist would. Komárek soon embarked on a series of international trips. He visited England, Denmark, Norway, and France, returned for a while, and then traveled to Burma, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Martinique, Mexico, Thailand, Tahiti, and Trinidad.⁵⁰

In February 1963 one of Komárek's employees at Harvard Travel Service, who was of Lithuanian extraction, needed help arranging his mother's trip from the Soviet Union to the United States. The employee himself was too scared to go. Komárek, without hesitation, suggested he would be happy to travel to the Soviet Union and assist the lady as much as he could.⁵¹ Komárek's

48. Regional directorate of the Ministry of Interior, Olomouc, 25 February 1957, prison Mírov, Lt. František Krmela, AMV, V-8495. In the inimitable language of the StB, Lt. Krmela proposed "to execute measure 103 to monitor the conversation" of Miroslav and Marie Komárek.

49. Miroslav Komárek, interview by author, 17 June 1999.

50. The date of naturalization is derived from Komárek's passport application of 13 April 1961 and from a Department of State telegram to the U.S. embassy in Prague, 24 November 1966, FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947. The passport application also contains lists of countries Komárek had already visited and planned to visit in the near future.

51. Josef Staša, interview by author, 15 June 1999.

journey initially seemed uneventful. He went to Moscow, did all he could to help the Lithuanian woman, and returned safely to his American life. But the trip drew the attention of the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB). In March 1963 Lt. Břetislav Zeller of the StB summed up the situation for his boss:

Our Soviet friends have informed us that on 28 February 1963 the American citizen Vladimír Kazan-Komárek, born 1924, Opava, Czech nationality, came to Moscow as a tourist. He is very interesting from the operational perspective, and our friends have requested his speedy vetting.

Resolved: We have sent our Soviet friends Vladimír Komárek's photograph from the time of his activities in Czechoslovakia to enable his identification. We propose to inquire with all our friends [i.e., Communist intelligence services] whether Komárek has taken trips to socialist countries. The intention would be to launch an operation aimed at Komárek. We shall consult the state prosecutor and request our friends' assistance with his arrest if he appears on their territory.⁵²

Just a few days later Lt. Zeller stated for the record that he had opened a file on the Vladimír Komárek case. The subject, Zeller asserted, had been active in Czechoslovakia as a CIC agent, had set up a terrorist and intelligence organization, and had worked hand in hand “with the American intelligence operative Oatis.”⁵³ Only a fraction of this was true, but the information gradually moved up the chain of command. In July 1963 the chief of StB counterintelligence put the case before Lubomír Štrougal, the Minister of Interior:

In February 1963 we received a request from our Soviet friends for information regarding Vladimír Kazan-Komárek, born 5 October 1924 in Opava, domiciled in the United States, Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, 12 Bemis Road.

I request that you write to the chairman of the KGB, Comrade [Vladimír] Semichastny, and propose launching an operation [*kombinace*] designed to lure Vladimír Komárek onto the territory of the USSR so that he can be arrested. The Czechoslovak Ministry of Justice is presently forwarding to the Soviet Ministry of Justice the order for his arrest and all other relevant materials.⁵⁴

On 17 July 1963 the Prague district court issued a warrant for Komárek's arrest. He was charged with high treason, espionage, accessory to murder, and

52. First Lieutenant Břetislav Zeller, Second Directorate, first section, second department of the Ministry of Interior, 19 March 1963, AMV, 705353.

53. First Lieutenant Břetislav Zeller, Second Directorate, first section, second department of the Ministry of Interior, 26 March 1963, AMV, V-8495.

54. Col. Viktor Hladný, chief of the Second Directorate, to Lubomír Štrougal, Minister of Interior, 22 July 1963, AMV, 705353. Vladimír Semichastny was the KGB chief from 1961 to 1967.

attempted murder.⁵⁵ The Komárek affair could now be brought officially to the international level. In early September 1963 Štrougal signed a letter addressed to Semichastny:

Dear Comrade Chairman,

Allow me to approach you with a request pertaining to Vladimír Kazan-Komárek, a Czechoslovak citizen, now residing in the United States, Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, 12 Bemis Road.

According to comrade [Soviet] advisers, the Soviet security organs are in a position to arrange an operation with the help of which Komárek could be arrested on Soviet territory.

In 1948–1950 Komárek was active in an antistate espionage organization. Eventually, he escaped abroad, having used a weapon against border guards. Therefore, we would be interested in his arrest and extradition.

If you concur I will authorize an exchange of all the necessary documents between the Czechoslovak and Soviet ministries of justice.

With comradely greetings,
Lubomír Štrougal
3 September 1963⁵⁶

The Soviet reply came promptly. Although Semichastny delegated the case to one of his deputies, Nikolai Zakharov, the KGB letter must have pleased Štrougal:

Dear Comrade Minister!

The [Soviet] Committee for State Security has agreed to arrest and extradite to the [Czechoslovak] Ministry of Interior the Czechoslovak citizen [sic] Vladimír Kazan-Komárek, born 1924, residing in the United States, when he appears on the territory of the Soviet Union.

To achieve this objective we shall take measures to bring Kazan-Komárek from the United States to the Soviet Union.

With comradely greetings,
N. Zakharov
21 September 1963⁵⁷

55. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, to the Czechoslovak Embassy, Washington, DC, AMZV, Teritoriální odbor (TO) Tajné (T), 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

56. Lubomír Štrougal, minister of interior, Prague, to Chairman of the Committee for State Security, 3 September 1963, AMV, A-9-742.

57. N. Zakharov, deputy head of the Soviet KGB to Lubomír Štrougal, Czechoslovak minister of interior, 21 September 1963, AMV, A-9-742.

The letter gave the impression that everything would be handled in a professional manner. Neither the KGB nor the StB could have realized that the CIA would learn of the plan within weeks. The plan to kidnap and extradite Komárek was reported in a CIA memorandum of 12 November 1963: “The Source noted that a plan was being prepared whereby Komárek would be invited to the USSR where he was to be arrested and turned over to the Czechoslovakians.”⁵⁸ Unfortunately, this document was completely blacked out before it was declassified and released under the Freedom of Information Act in July 2000. The sentence quoted above remains legible, as do fragments of several sentences throughout the text.

On the basis of the legible fragments in the 1963 CIA document, it is safe to assume that the information originated from a source either in the StB or in the Foreign Ministry in Prague. It is more difficult to gauge why the security of Komárek, a travel agent from Boston, was a topic discussed by the CIA and its Czechoslovak agent in the first place. The U.S. government repeatedly insisted that Komárek had never been affiliated with any U.S. intelligence agency. Whatever the case may be, the CIA document proved to have no discernible impact on the Soviet “plan” it had described so accurately.

The StB was unaware that the *kombinace* aimed at Komárek had been discovered by the CIA. The StB was also kept in the dark by its KGB ally and, after waiting 27 months, was ready to give up. In December 1965 Břetislav Zeller, who by this point had been promoted to a captain of the StB, proposed to close the case and send the “Vladimír Komárek” file to the archives. He stressed that a warrant for Komárek’s arrest was on file and pointed out that the Soviet “friends”—the abbreviation “KGB” is nowhere to be found in the Prague archives—had agreed to “lure Vladimír Komárek to the Soviet Union, arrest him, and hand him over to the organs of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Interior.” However, wrote Zeller, “the Soviet friends have failed to lure Vladimír Komárek to the Soviet Union, and it is unrealistic to expect that he would travel to Czechoslovakia. Therefore, I propose to deposit his file in the archives of the Ministry of Interior for the next twenty years.”⁵⁹

Zeller’s pessimism turned out to be premature, but it was understandable at the time. Nothing seemed to work. In the spring of 1966 Komárek received a letter, ostensibly from his aunt, Olga Wassermann, suggesting that his mother was desperately ill and needed to see him one last time.⁶⁰ On 17 May

58. CIA memorandum on Komárek, 12 November 1963, FOIA-CIA, No. 1996-0025.

59. Cpt. Břetislav Zeller, Second Directorate, first section, second department of the Ministry of Interior, 20 December 1965, AMV, V-8495.

60. FBI debriefing of Vladimir Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947.

1966 Komárek wrote to the Czechoslovak embassy in Washington and inquired whether he would be eligible for a visa. The response was prompt and encouraging: “Since you have acquired U.S. citizenship by naturalization six years ago, you have automatically lost your Czechoslovak citizenship. . . . Your American citizenship will be honored in *Czechoslovakia*.” Such was the case, he was told, even if “you left *Czechoslovakia* without the approval of the Czechoslovak authorities or without a valid passport.” Komárek sent the embassy his U.S. passport, two photographs, and a fee of four dollars. All correspondence was carried out in English, but a 2 June 1966 missive from the embassy contained a hand-written marginal note in Czech: “Mr. Komárek, forward your passport to us.” He did, and his passport came back with a valid tourist visa.⁶¹

In reality, Komárek’s mother was fine—she was to live for another seventeen years—and Olga Wassermann had not written the letter. It could have come only from the StB or KGB.⁶² Komárek must have sensed that the letter was a fake: He called the Department of State and consulted the desk officer responsible for Czechoslovakia. Komárek frankly “advised this desk of his identity and background of activities in 1948–1950.” After a long conversation the State Department official warned him “that possibly nothing would happen to him, but this could not be guaranteed.”⁶³

We now know that what the State Department told Komárek was untrue, and we also know that, at the time of the conversation, someone in the CIA had known for two and a half years of the KGB/StB scheme. It is not clear—and may never be clear—why the CIA failed to make this information available to the State Department. In the end Komárek prudently decided not to go. Nevertheless, the Czechoslovak visa in his passport proved to be legally significant. In September 1963 the Foreign Ministry in Prague informed the U.S. embassy that the “issuance of [a] Czech visa in [a] U.S. passport would henceforth be tantamount to [a] guarantee of safety of [the] passport bearer, regardless of previous ‘political crimes,’ illegal escape, or failure to complete military service.” To be absolutely certain, the Americans inquired whether a visa might be issued to entrap people who had allegedly committed crimes on other visits. Karel Vojáček, the chief of the consular section of the min-

61. Czechoslovak embassy to Komárek, 2 June 1966, PP-VK.

62. Miroslav Komárek, interview by author, 3 July 1999. Mrs. Komárek died in July 1983. When I asked Miroslav Komárek whether it was possible that Mrs. Wassermann had written the letter, his reply was unequivocal: “Out of the question, absolutely out of the question. That letter was written by the StB or the Russians or both.”

63. FBI debriefing of Vladimír Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947.

istry, waved his hand and suggested that “such cases are now ‘history’ and will not be repeated.”⁶⁴ State Department officials accepted these assurances.

The Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry, however, had no control over the StB, which took its orders primarily from the Soviet Union. Only three years after Vojáček announced the new visa policy, the StB provoked a new rift between Washington and Prague. On 13 July 1966 Walter Stoessel of the State Department summoned a representative of the Czechoslovak embassy in Washington and read him a statement charging two Czechoslovak diplomats, Jiří Opatrný and Zdeněk Pisk, with espionage.⁶⁵ It turned out that in 1961 Czechoslovak intelligence operatives in Washington had tried to establish illicit ties with Frank John Mrkva, a Pennsylvanian of Czech descent who held a clerical job in the State Department. When they approached him, he played along but immediately informed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). For the next five years FBI agents successfully engaged the StB in a complex espionage game. It came to an end on 29 May 1966 when the Czechoslovak “diplomats” gave Mrkva a sophisticated electronic listening device made to look like a piece of ordinary furniture and instructed him to install it in the office of Raymond Lisle, the director of the State Department’s Office of East European Affairs.

Ordinarily, the State Department was discreet in its handling of East-bloc espionage in Washington, fearing that publicity would lead to increased counterintelligence pressure against foreign diplomats in Washington, which in turn would provoke reprisals against Americans serving in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where conditions were already difficult enough.⁶⁶ In this case, however, the attempted installation of a bug in the office of a high-ranking State Department official could not be overlooked. Stoessel placed the device before the representative of the Czechoslovak embassy, and next to it he put a surveillance photograph of Opatrný shaking hands with Mrkva during one of their secret meetings. The evidence spoke for itself. The State Department demanded that Opatrný leave the United States within three days. The

64. Department of State, Incoming Telegram, U.S. embassy in Prague, to the Department of State, 17 September 1963, The John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston (JFK Library), file on U.S. relations with Czechoslovakia, 1961–1963.

65. Karel Duda, Czechoslovak Embassy, Washington, to the Sixth Territorial Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 July 1966, AMZV, T, USA.

66. Official records of U.S. complaints about the treatment of U.S. diplomatic personnel in Prague, early 1960s (various dates), AMZV, TO-T, 1960–1964, USA, box 5. This contains evidence of the heavy pressure under which the personnel of the U.S. embassy had to function in Prague. In the 1960s each U.S. diplomat was usually followed by two or three cars, and the cover typically included six to eight Czechoslovak agents. In the 1980s this was increased to six to eight cars per diplomat and a correspondingly higher number of agents. Martin Wenick, interview by author, 18 June 2000.

Czechoslovak ambassador in Washington, Karel Duda, initially was unable to find Opatrný, but eventually, more than 48 hours later, the embassy located him on the Canadian border, 700 miles from Washington, DC, supposedly on vacation. Opatrný's partner, Pisk, was attached to the Czechoslovak United Nations (UN) mission in New York and was therefore arguably outside the State Department's jurisdiction. A conflict ensued in Prague between the Ministry of Interior, which opposed Pisk's recall, and the Foreign Ministry, which favored it. Ultimately, the Czechoslovak president and KSČ First Secretary, Antonín Novotný, called the Foreign Ministry, Pisk's ostensible employer, and demanded that Pisk return home immediately. Novotný explicitly overruled an order issued by the Minister of Interior for Pisk to stay in New York.⁶⁷

The Czechoslovak authorities refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing in the affair and retaliated by expelling Edward Reynolds, the second secretary of the U.S. embassy in Prague, for alleged espionage.⁶⁸ Even so, the bungled effort to plant a bug in the State Department was a public-relations setback for the Prague government. At a press conference in Washington, Mrkva eagerly displayed the listening device before the cameras of the world and explained how he was told to attach it to the base of a State Department bookcase.⁶⁹ Ambassador Duda suggested in a frank analysis of the case that the scandal had made the embassy staff appear "clumsy, thoughtless, and dumb." The affair, he added, was bound to harm Czechoslovakia's interests in the United States.⁷⁰

As it turned out, Duda was right. But neither he nor anybody else in Prague could predict the subsequent turn of events. The KGB and StB had been waiting to lay another trap for Komárek. On 5 September 1966 Komárek received a Western Union telegram from Intourist, the Soviet travel agency, inviting him to attend an international conference of travel agents in Moscow from 24 to 29 October 1966. The ostensible purpose was to prepare for a series of events observing 1967 as the International Tourist Year. The telegram concluded: "Your company invited. Reduced rate arrangements."⁷¹ Through either naïveté or a thirst for adventure, Komárek decided to attend the conference. Evidently, his earlier, seemingly uneventful trip to the Soviet Union had lulled him into a false sense of security and reinforced his mistaken

67. Memorandum, 17 August 1966, AMZV, T, 1965–1969, USA.

68. Czechoslovak embassy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 July 1966 and 22 August 1966, AMZV, T, 1965–1969, USA, box 9.

69. Susanna McBee, "Hot Week in the Spy Trade," *Life*, 22 July 1966, pp. 20–23.

70. Karel Duda, Czechoslovak embassy, Washington, to the Sixth Territorial Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 July 1966, AMZV, T, USA.

71. Telegram, Intourist to Komárek, 5 September 1966, PP-VK.

belief that the KGB and the StB either paid no attention to him or saw him the way he saw himself—as a successful travel agent whose American citizenship put him beyond reach of the Communist security services.

Komárek embarked on his trip without any apparent concern and arrived in Moscow on 24 October 1966.⁷² He was met at the airport by an Intourist representative who took him to the Metropol hotel. When he walked out of the hotel for the first time, he noticed a young woman waving at him from a parked cab. She offered to buy dollars from Komárek at an exchange rate well above what was available at the state-owned Soviet banks. He turned down the offer, pointing out that he had already acquired all the rubles he thought he would need for the duration of the trip. Undaunted, the woman in the cab became a permanent fixture at the Metropol, always waving at Komárek whenever he walked through the entrance. On one occasion Komárek and a French colleague needed to take a cab. The hotel provided one with the smiling lady, who again wanted to exchange money. When the two declined the offer, she invited them to her apartment, but they refused.⁷³

Two days later, on 26 October 1966, the StB in Prague informed the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry about the operation to capture Komárek. StB Lt. Col. Miloslav Gvozdek, a counterintelligence officer, told Zdeněk Trhlík, the chief of the Foreign Ministry's Sixth Territorial Section, that Komárek was a criminal wanted for high treason, espionage, and the murder of a fellow StB agent. Several warrants had been issued for his arrest, the latest in 1963, but the suspect had escaped from Czechoslovak jurisdiction. Now, however, the StB had found a way to bring him to justice. He had been tricked into attending a conference in the Soviet Union, and a joint operation had been worked out to seize him and bring him before a Czechoslovak court. The case, Gvozdek warned, had one sticky aspect, namely, Komárek's American citizenship, a status that automatically stripped him of his original Czechoslovak citizenship under a U.S.-Czechoslovak agreement.⁷⁴ The StB wanted to know whether "from the international political perspective, a reason existed for Czechoslovakia to give up its pursuit of this dangerous spy."⁷⁵

72. "Arrest in Czechoslovakia: An Unscheduled Stop, and Police Are Waiting with an Old Warrant," *The National Observer*, 21 November 1966, p. 7.

73. FBI debriefing of Vladimír Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947. Unless otherwise indicated, details of Komárek's second trip to the Soviet Union are taken primarily from this source.

74. The agreement falls into the category of the so-called Bancroft treaties, named after the American diplomat George Bancroft (1800–1891).

75. Record, Lt. Col. Miloslav Gvozdek, chief of the Second Section, First Department, 26 October 1966, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4; and Record, Lt. Col. Miloslav Gvozdek, 26 October 1966, AMV, V-8495.

Trhlík advised Gvozdek that the arrest should be carried out in a manner that would not provide Washington with undue leverage against the Prague government. He also demanded that the role of the “Soviet friends” in the operation be properly concealed.⁷⁶ By the time Gvozdek left the Foreign Ministry, the stage was set for the outbreak of a serious Cold War crisis, one that would escalate into a confrontation involving the United States and both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.

The next day, Komárek and other travel agents attending the conference flew to Tbilisi in Soviet Georgia. On 29 October the conference ended, and all the participants were supposed to return to Moscow and continue to various destinations in Western Europe and Asia. As instructed by the organizers, the travel agents gathered at the Tbilisi airport at 5:50 a.m., yet it was only around noon that they were finally allowed to board a plane. Twice the pilot taxied to the runway for takeoff, and twice he came back. On the third try the airplane finally took off for Moscow. The delay proved to be important because Komárek had been scheduled to leave the Soviet Union that day on a Pakistani airline flight to London via Riga.

As soon as Komárek returned to the Metropol, he rushed to the Intourist office to learn about his flight to London. Despite the delayed arrival from Tbilisi, it seemed that he could still make the connection, but he ran into problems with the Intourist employees. Komárek later recalled his “exasperation because he was unable to get a proper explanation from the Russians.” He turned for help to an Indian travel agent with the group, who quickly found out that the Pakistani airliner on which Komárek was scheduled to fly that evening had been diverted from Moscow to Leningrad, whence it proceeded via Riga to London. The plane never even touched down in the Soviet capital. By all indications, the delay at Tbilisi and the diverted flight were aimed at the same objective: Komárek was now stuck in Moscow. Frustrated, he wrote a postcard to Harvard Travel Service: “From Russia with love. 007.” The next day he also cabled his wife that his departure was postponed.⁷⁷

Komárek tried to reserve a seat on any flight out of the Soviet Union to Western Europe, but everywhere he turned he was told that all seats were sold out. Finally, Aeroflot, the Soviet state airline, told him that it had a first-class seat on a flight to Paris, scheduled to depart Moscow the following morning, 31 October.⁷⁸ Komárek accepted the offer.

76. Record, Lt. Col. Miloslav Gvozdek, 26 October 1966, AMV, V-8495.

77. Postcard, Komárek to Harvard Travel Service; and Cable, Komárek to wife, 29 October 1966, PP-VK.

78. Ticket to Moscow, found in PP-VK.

In the morning he took a limousine to the airport. On the way, he began to suspect that something was amiss when the driver deliberately went at an unusually slow pace. Cars with other guests from the Metropol were passing the limousine on both sides, but the driver ignored Komárek's pleas to speed up lest he miss another flight. When Komárek checked in at the airport, he noticed that his suitcase was kept separate from the luggage of all the other passengers. He became convinced that something was wrong when he was held back until all others had boarded. On the plane, the flight attendant led him to a seat in between two burly men who struck him as KGB thugs.⁷⁹ Komárek had a first-class ticket, but the seat between the two men was in the tourist class. He ignored the flight attendant's protests and found himself a first-class seat next to two French travel agents whom he had met at the conference. After the pilot reached cruising altitude, Komárek, himself a pilot and endowed with a good sense of orientation, noticed that the plane was on "a completely wrong routing for the flight. He turned to the Frenchman and remarked that . . . something was going to happen."⁸⁰ He was right. An hour and fifteen minutes into the flight, the pilot announced he was going to land in Prague because of bad weather in Paris. Upon hearing this, Komárek gave the Frenchwoman his business card and asked her to inform the U.S. embassy in Paris if something were to happen to him during the stopover in Prague.

After the Soviet airliner landed in Prague at 9:40 a.m., all passengers were asked to disembark. Some twenty minutes later, each was called individually and invited back on board. When all but Komárek had been invited to return to their seats, he tried to sneak in behind the last passenger. At this point two men appeared and said: "Mr. Komárek, we want you to explain a few things. We hope you won't create a scene; just follow us." Within minutes he was in a small office where his luggage was already waiting for him. He was frisked, and then one of the arresting officers declared: "Well, the cage has dropped." Komárek was formally placed under arrest and taken to the nearby Ruzyně prison, the same institution in which Oatis and members of the Pavelka group had been incarcerated fifteen years before.⁸¹ He was charged with having established in Czechoslovakia a treasonous intelligence network. The authorities alleged that, "as an agent of a foreign intelligence agency, [Komárek] provided the organization with firearms, transmitting devices, and funds." Further charges against him included being an accessory to Pavelka's killing of

79. The point about the appearance of the two men is from Marta Staša, who heard it directly from Komárek. Marta Staša, interview by author, 23 December 1998.

80. FBI debriefing of Vladimír Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947.

81. *Ibid.*

an StB officer and being responsible for opening fire at border guards during the crossing in December 1950. These crimes, noted a U.S. embassy officer from Prague, carried a maximum penalty of death.⁸²

Meanwhile, the flight from which Komárek had been removed in Prague landed at the Le Bourget Airport in Paris. As promised, the Frenchwoman called the U.S. embassy and reported what had happened in Moscow and Prague.⁸³ This set in motion a crisis that grew so tense that it caught both parties by surprise.

On the day Komárek was arrested, the State Department contacted Harvard Travel Service. It verified Komárek's name and his passport number and then called his family. Initially, Washington advised everyone to remain silent in order to make a peaceful resolution possible.⁸⁴ Still, it was clear from the beginning that there was no intention of downplaying the seriousness of the affair. No one in the State Department knew precisely what Komárek had done some sixteen years earlier on the distant Czechoslovak–West German border, for what cause and under whose flag. But his arrest was a violation of a solemn promise given by the Prague authorities to the American embassy in 1963, namely, that the issuance of a Czechoslovak visa in a U.S. passport was supposed to provide a guarantee of safety for the duration of the visit, no matter what the bearer might have done previously against the regime. The U.S. embassy had promptly reported this Czechoslovak promise to Washington, and President John F. Kennedy had brought it up with Karel Duda, the newly appointed Czechoslovak ambassador in Washington, praising it as a very welcome step.⁸⁵ Komárek's case involved the kidnapping of an American citizen, and Washington was not prepared to ignore it.

On 31 October 1966, only hours after Komárek's arrest at the Prague airport, the State Department contacted the embassies in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and requested an immediate investigation of the case.⁸⁶ All further correspondence pertaining to the Komárek case was to be given “most

82. U.S. embassy in Prague, to the Department of State, Washington, DC, 3 November 1966, FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947.

83. FBI debriefing of Vladimír Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947. The episode involving the French travel agent is also mentioned in many newspaper stories. See, for instance, Richard Eder, “U.S. Travel Agent Seized in Prague,” *The New York Times*, 16 November 1966, pp. 1, 9. But neither the FBI document nor any newspaper identified her. Her name is excised in FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947. Dean Rusk, Washington, to U.S. embassies in Paris, Prague, Moscow, 17 November 1966: “Despite considerable pressure from newsmen we have of course withheld name of [excised] as your original informant.”

84. Joseph Staša, handwritten note, PP-VK.

85. Department of State to Mr. McGeorge Bundy, the White House, 6 November 1963, JFK Library, file on U.S. relations with Czechoslovakia, 1961–1963.

86. Department of State, Washington, to U.S. embassies in Prague and Moscow, 31 October 1966, FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947.

serious consideration,” noted the State Department in a circular note. Anything pertaining to it was to be conveyed by “IMMEDIATE or PRIORITY telegrams.”⁸⁷

In Prague Komárek was being “interrogated six days per week during the first thirty days of imprisonment, with sessions beginning at 9:45 a.m. and ending at 10:00 p.m.”⁸⁸ Yet Komárek proved to be a tough opponent of the StB. He merely repeated his main points: that he was an American citizen; that he wanted to see the American consul; and that he wanted a simultaneous interpreter because he no longer understood Czech.⁸⁹ He also kept asking for a toothbrush, vitamins, and something to read. During the interrogations, Komárek admitted what was plainly obvious, but he firmly denied everything else. As far as the French Second Bureau was concerned, his line was a simple one—he had once worked for Major Janouch, who Komárek knew had passed away. He did not know anybody else because the supervisors always used pseudonyms. He denied ever having worked for U.S. intelligence.⁹⁰ When the StB interrogators pressed him for specifics, Komárek did not hesitate to give deceitful answers.⁹¹ Despite long interrogations, the StB in the end learned nothing new.

This does not mean, however, that Komárek was “better” than Pavelka, Oatis, and the others. By 1966 Czechoslovakia was no longer the Stalinist country it had been in the early 1950s when the StB was free to employ any means to achieve its goals. Komárek was never beaten, let alone tortured, and the death penalty, traditionally the best argument the StB had, was only a theoretical possibility in his case. After a strong intervention by the U.S. embassy, Komárek was also allowed three consular visits. Ambassador Jacob Beam reported to Washington that Komárek protested the legality of his arrest and the trial on all occasions. He told Martin Wenick, the U.S. consul, that he was prepared to offer proof that he had been kidnapped.⁹² Such meetings would

87. Department of State, Washington, DC, to U.S. embassies in Prague and Moscow, 17 November 1966, FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947.

88. United States Government Memorandum, 26 November 1968, From:[deleted] To: Chief, FIOB/ Security Research Staff, FOIA-CIA, No. 1996-0025.

89. Komárek, of course, understood Czech perfectly well. But his claim to the contrary acquired a degree of plausibility in the eyes of his interrogators because his English was flawless and virtually accent-free. Martin Wenick, interview by author, 28 June 2000.

90. United States Government Memorandum, 26 November 1968, From:[deleted] To: Chief, FIOB/ Security Research Staff, FOIA-CIA, No. 1996-0025. This indicates that Komárek may have initially signed a statement admitting having worked for U.S. intelligence, but he retracted it. He subsequently denied the allegation during his trial.

91. FBI debriefing of Vladimír Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947.

92. Confidential telegram, Ambassador Jacob Beam, U.S. embassy in Prague, to Secretary of State, Washington, DC, 23 January 1967, FOIA-USDS, No. 199800789, released on 14 April 1998.

never have taken place in the early 1950s. Undoubtedly, they strengthened Komárek's resolve.

For two months, from 31 October to 27 December, Komárek was assigned to a cell with another political prisoner, a 24-year-old filmmaker named Karel Zámečník. Zámečník had recently been to France, where he had been involved with a Czechoslovak resistance organization associated with the journal *Svědectví*, edited by Pavel Tigríd.⁹³ When Zámečník returned home, he was arrested. Komárek and Zámečník spent hours discussing the beauty of Paris, American jazz, and contemporary film, and this made the jail seem more bearable. (Komárek later told the FBI that, on occasion, there was a third prisoner in the cell whom neither he nor Zámečník trusted.⁹⁴ There is no evidence regarding the role—if any—of the third man, but it would not be unreasonable to assume that his job was to inform on the other two.)

During the many hours of conversations, Komárek learned that Zámečník's uncle was Jaroslav Zajíc, the artist who had taken part in the disastrous border crossing in December 1950. After serving a long sentence, Zajíc came to live with Zámečník's family. He talked often about the failed escape and about Komárek, the man he knew as "Rijman" or "Rajman." Komárek was able to determine that Zámečník was familiar with the most obscure details of the episode. Evidently, though, the StB was unaware of the link between the two men. They became friends, and this fortified them for the long hours of interrogations. Komárek impressed the younger man with his "steely determination and courage" and became something of a role model for him. But Zámečník also had something important to offer: He told Komárek that, according to Zajíc, no one had been killed during the 1950 border crossing. This information strengthened Komárek's position considerably. The interrogators had originally charged him with the death of one or even two border guards. Although Komárek doubted that he had killed anyone during the confrontation, he had no evidence. Zámečník now helped him counter the StB's allegations.⁹⁵

Compared to the late 1940s and 1950s, the conditions for Komárek at the Ruzyně jail were remarkably lenient. This was a sign of the positive changes that had taken place since the early 1950s, when the country was in the firm grip of its Stalinist leadership. The KSČ had penetrated so deeply into the fabric of Czechoslovak society that it, unlike its Polish and Hungarian

93. In the wake of the Velvet Revolution of November 1989, Pavel Tigríd had the pleasure of closing down the *Svědectví* enterprise in Paris and moving back to Prague, where he served at the Castle as an adviser to President Václav Havel and, briefly, as a cabinet minister.

94. FBI debriefing of Vladimír Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947.

95. *Ibid.* Komárek confirmed to the FBI in Boston that "with regard to Zámečník he felt that he was a genuine person and not a plant."

counterparts, was able to weather the eventful year of 1956 without much difficulty.⁹⁶ By the mid-1960s, however, Czechoslovakia was in a state of flux, as reformist sentiment made inroads into the KSČ and government circles. Reformers were prominent in official academic and research institutes and even occasionally found their voice in the state-controlled media.

The emergence of a reform movement was unwelcome for the status quo-oriented regime of Antonín Novotný, which presented Czechoslovakia as a stable and prosperous socialist country. In September 1963 Novotný had told the U.S. secretary of commerce, who came to the presidential castle accompanied by the U.S. ambassador, that Czechoslovakia had “achieved the highest industrial production per capita, right after the U.S.A. and West Germany, which undoubtedly is not a bad result.” The guests did not challenge the assertion.⁹⁷ Novotný and his aides pointed to official statistics that showed an economy capable of producing millions of tons of steel as well as a plentiful supply of consumer goods. They stressed that Czechoslovakia’s membership in the Warsaw Pact protected it from German revanchism, a source of permanent danger in the eyes of many Czechs, whatever their ideological orientation. Moreover, they claimed that their country, thanks to its socialist system, had no unemployment and provided social benefits to all citizens.

The reformers, however, had access to information that allowed them to see behind the façade, and what they found was alarming. They saw that the West was making rapid advances in natural sciences, medicine, engineering, and management, while Czechoslovakia was unable to advance because of its Soviet moorings and was tied to a mostly early twentieth-century style of industrial production. The economists among the reformers sensed that the Czechoslovak economy, with its emphasis on heavy industry, was becoming obsolete. To the reformers, it had become impossible to pretend that Czechoslovakia could ignore the world beyond the confines of the Warsaw Pact.⁹⁸

The reformers’ skepticism was reinforced by a new trend that KSČ leaders viewed as embarrassing and worrisome. With the expansion of world tourism came a corresponding increase in the number of Czechoslovak citizens re-

96. John P.C. Matthews, “Majales: The Abortive Student Revolt in Czechoslovakia in 1956,” Working Paper No. 24, Cold War International History Project, Washington, DC, September, 1998.

97. Novotný met with Luther H. Hodges and Ambassador Outerbridge Horsey on 9 September 1963, AÚV KSČ, 02/1, 35, 38, information No. 1.

98. This trend is discussed in a number of publications, e.g., Radovan Richta, ed., *Civilization at the Crossroads* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1969); Peter Hruby, *Fools and Heros: The Changing Role of Communist Intellectuals in Czechoslovakia* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980); Galia Golan, *The Czechoslovak Reform Movement: Communism in Crisis, 1962–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971); and Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

questing political asylum in the West. All Czechs and Slovaks were carefully screened before they obtained a passport with an exit permit for a specific Western country, and most had to travel in closely supervised groups. Nevertheless, from January 1964 to the end of 1967, the year of Komárek's trial in Prague, almost 7,500 Czechoslovak citizens, along with an unknown number of their children under fifteen, escaped to the West, leaving behind the material benefits of what was allegedly the third most productive economy in the world.⁹⁹ Among the defectors were a medical researcher, a specialist in bacteriological warfare, a nuclear engineer, a cartographer, and 63 reserve officers. But by far the largest group among the escapees were workers, supposedly the most direct beneficiaries of the Communist system. KSĊ leaders seemed mystified by the trend, which contradicted the view of the conservative and status quo-oriented elements in Prague that all was well.¹⁰⁰

The Komárek case reveals that one of the centers of cautious reformism was the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry. Diplomats did not seriously question the need for Prague's subservience to Moscow, believing that it was a natural consequence of the postwar division of Europe. But they understood that their country would have to improve relations with the West, if only to gain access to new technology, styles of management, and lines of credit. They hoped to regain the most-favored-nation trade status that the country lost during the Oatis affair, a sanction that had almost eliminated exports to the United States. They wanted to reclaim the gold that had been first stolen in Prague by the Nazis and then captured at the end of the war by the Allies. The gold was being held by an Allied commission until the Prague government agreed to pay fair compensation for Western property confiscated during the various waves of nationalization after the Second World War.¹⁰¹

Finally, many officials at the Foreign Ministry hoped that both Washington and Prague would undo the severely limiting measures they had imposed against each other in 1950, when Prague insisted on closing the U.S. consulate in Bratislava and reducing the U.S. embassy staff by two-thirds. Washington obliged but applied identical or more severe restrictions on Czechoslovak diplomacy in the United States.¹⁰² There was little doubt that Czechoslovakia had fared worse in this quid pro quo. Eighteen Americans could easily cover

99. The meeting of the Secretariat of the KSĊ Central Committee, 2 September 1970, AÚV KSĊ, 02/4, 54, 95, item 2. The exact number of escapees was 7,403.

100. The KSĊ Secretariat considered on 12 May 1967 a report "Zpráva o opuštění republiky čs. občany v roce 1965 a 1966." It concluded that the escapees had three characteristics in common. They had a lukewarm attitude toward socialism, they suffered from individualism [*trpí individualismem*], and they were not properly patriotic, AÚV KSĊ, 02/4, 15, 23, item 7.

101. Record of KSĊ Politburo meeting, AÚV KSĊ, 02/1, 48, 51, item 14.

102. Dana Adams Schmidt, "Breaking Relations with U.S. Held Aim of Czech Spy Trial," *The New York Times*, 2 June 1950, pp. 1, 7.

small Czechoslovakia, whereas eighteen Czechoslovak Communist officials were all but invisible in the United States. By the end of the 1950s, the number of personnel had been increased to twenty, but the United States insisted on including not only diplomats but also all accredited Czechoslovak correspondents, and even representatives of the state travel agency ČEDOK, since East-bloc journalists and travel agents were routinely thought to have come to Washington on an intelligence mission.

Most important was the economic dimension of the bilateral relationship. The American economy could easily do without goods from Czechoslovakia, but the reverse was not true. Czechoslovakia was able to withstand U.S. economic sanctions only during the early stages of the Cold War by relying more heavily on Moscow. The Soviet Union at the time was both willing and able to provide most of the raw materials, minerals, metals, and fuel that Czechoslovakia needed to keep its industry moving along. But even by the mid-1950s, the economic needs of Czechoslovakia began to change along with the evolving nature of the world economy. The country needed access to new technologies, materials, and styles of marketing and decisionmaking—as well as financial resources—that the Soviet Union was no longer able to provide.

The growth of industrial automation and information processing, and the emergence of new plastic materials with readily obvious applications, created a new kind of gap between East and West. In 1954 the Czechoslovak Ministry of Health issued an urgent appeal to the Czechoslovak embassy in Washington: It needed two flash bulbs for a medical stroboscope and 200 pieces of infusion tubing. “We have been unsuccessful in trying to develop our own kind” of infusion tubing, the ministry reported, whereas it was readily available in the United States and was sold as electric wire insulation. The estimated price for the whole purchase was three dollars. It is apparent from the attached documents that the ministry had tried but failed to obtain the articles from the Soviet Union.¹⁰³

The technological gap between the two systems became wider still in the 1960s.¹⁰⁴ In 1963 the Czechoslovak ambassador in Washington, Karel Duda, suggested that Prague ought to pursue the “normalization” of relations with the United States by abolishing the limits imposed in 1950. He noted that the Foreign Ministry had recently asked him to provide information on the use of computers in power plants, nuclear energy, and the shoe-making industry, but

103. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, to the Czechoslovak Embassy, Washington, 28 June 1954, AMZV, U.S. Political reports. The Ministry of Health request is dated 17 June 1954.

104. Internal memorandum of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding Czechoslovak-American relations and the arrival of the new American ambassador, 24 July 1961, AMZV, TO-T, 1960–1964, USA, box 2.

he had only one diplomat capable of delving into this kind of research, and the man was an obstetrician by training. “The majority of the assignments we receive from Prague,” Duda stated, “are incomprehensible to my staff.” The situation struck him as a “bad joke.” He implied that Czechoslovakia should focus on sending technicians and specialists for training to the United States, rather than continuing a meaningless confrontation over an old issue.¹⁰⁵

Eventually, Duda’s reporting made an impact on Václav David, Prague’s foreign minister, who told the KSČ Politburo in 1964 that the existing policy deprived Czechoslovakia of countless opportunities, especially in the economic sphere. He pointed out that some other socialist countries, such as Poland, had long ago abandoned the harsh attitude that once characterized the Soviet bloc’s relations with Washington.¹⁰⁶ While the Komárek affair was still in progress, the Czechoslovak embassy bought an advertisement in *The New York Times* that called for stronger East-West ties and claimed that Czechoslovakia was “taking all steps required to eliminate, finally, the remainders of the obstacles put in the way of [East-West] trade at the time of the Cold War.”¹⁰⁷ Such ideas were heretical since the KSČ’s ideological platform, to which the orthodox StB elements fully subscribed, postulated Soviet technological superiority and assumed that socialist countries could not profit from increased commercial contacts with the West.

Komárek’s arrest had added fuel to an already tense situation inside the Prague political elite, as documented by reports from StB informers among the diplomats. Agent “Šedý” reported to his StB control officer in November 1966 that Komárek’s arrest caused “considerable debate” at the Foreign Ministry. A high-ranking diplomat was said to be worried lest the case worsen U.S.-Czechoslovak relations, and Ambassador Duda was reportedly angry that he had not been consulted about the plan to arrest Komárek.¹⁰⁸ Agent “Rabas” reported that Zdeněk Trhlík, the section chief at the Foreign Ministry, had written statements warning that Komárek’s arrest would cause “unforeseeable harm to Czechoslovakia . . . and therefore it is necessary to release Komárek before the end of the year.” The informer reported the view of the deputy foreign minister that the arrest was part of a conspiracy by the StB and that Novotný was beside himself with anger. “Komárek’s arrest,” speculated

105. Karel Duda, Czechoslovak ambassador in Washington, DC, to the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 November 1963, AMZV, TO-T, 1960–1964, box 2.

106. Václav David, minister of foreign affairs, to the KSČ Politburo, 1964 [no other date], AMZV, TO-T, 1960–1964, box 2.

107. “Development Czechoslovak Relations with West European Countries,” *The New York Times*, 16 January 1967, p. 62. See also “Rockefellers, Eatons to Sink Funds in Soviet Bloc,” *The Boston Globe*, 16 January 1966, p. 4.

108. Maj. František Ježek, Agent’s Report No. 2, 16 November 1966, AMV, V-8495. The report discusses Komárek and his arrest.

the deputy minister, “was a wild operation of StB officers. They will have to be punished for this one in order to prevent them from running such operations in the future.” With a touch of irony, the report summed up the reaction of the Foreign Ministry (MFA) after the StB had carried out its *kombinace* against Komárek: “It appears that some MFA personnel have been seized by an inexplicable fear of ‘unforeseeable political, economic, and perhaps other kinds of harm to Czechoslovakia’ unless the criminal Komárek is released as soon as possible and handed over to the Americans.”¹⁰⁹

The firmness of the American response to the Komárek affair played directly into the hands of the reformers at the MFA. On 1 November 1966, the day after Komárek was detained, the U.S. embassy in Prague submitted a sharp note protesting the incident. Three days later the embassy demanded access to Komárek. On 8 November the State Department presented Ambassador Duda with an even sterner note of protest. The next day another Czechoslovak diplomat in Washington had to discuss the case at length with U.S. officials. The State Department had many questions for him, none of which could be answered without admitting that Komárek had ended up in Prague as a result of the KGB-StB joint operation. Why had the Aeroflot pilot claimed he had to land in Prague because of a sudden bout of bad weather in Paris when he had set off in the direction of Prague, not Paris, from the beginning? Why was there no evidence that the weather in Paris was inclement? Why did the pilot blame the weather when the official Czechoslovak statement identified engine trouble as the reason for the emergency landing in Prague? Or was it faulty radar on board, as another version had it? Why was Komárek’s luggage separated from the rest of the baggage in Moscow? Who had taken Komárek’s suitcases off the Aeroflot plane to the police area at the Prague airport even before Komárek was supposedly discovered and arrested during the reboarding? And for what reason? On 14 November 1966 the State Department issued an ultimatum: Unless Prague offered a convincing explanation within 24 hours, the affair would have to be made public.¹¹⁰

On 15 November, after no explanation was forthcoming, Robert McCloskey, a State Department official, launched a public campaign for Komárek’s release.¹¹¹ The campaign was unprecedented in its intensity, surpassing the effort on behalf of William Oatis. As instructed by Prague, Ambassador Duda sought to persuade the State Department that Komárek was a

109. Senior Referent Jaroslav Pešek, Agent’s Report No. 26, 6 December 1966, AMV, V-8495.

110. U.S. embassy in Prague, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 November 1966, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4. The timetable of the Komárek affair is taken from this document.

111. Eder, “U.S. Travel Agent Seized in Prague,” pp. 1, 9. Komárek’s seizure was regarded “with utmost seriousness.”

common criminal and that his fate should not be allowed to cause tensions between Czechoslovakia and the United States. But Assistant Secretary of State John Leddy told Ambassador Beam to inform Prague that Americans were united in their disgust over Komárek's kidnapping, and that the affair was bound to harm Czechoslovak interests in the most direct manner. The White House joined the campaign the next day. Duda was told at the National Security Council that the kidnapping of Komárek was "the worst incident of the Cold War."

This same point was stressed in Czechoslovakia by emissaries from the U.S. Congress. In late November two young members of Congress, John Culver and Lee Hamilton, descended on Prague with a message that was as simple as it was credible: The kidnapping of Vladimír Komárek posed a grave danger to the future of Czechoslovakia's relations with the United States. Culver and Hamilton did not get to see the highest-ranking officials in Prague, but their warnings resonated throughout the Communist hierarchy.¹¹²

On 18 November 1966 the State Department broadened its reach. The department's chief expert on the Soviet Union, Llewellyn Thompson, told the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, that Moscow's official denial of any involvement in the affair was "most disappointing and quite unsatisfactory." Thompson pulled out "the route map published by Aeroflot, which showed that this flight normally went from Moscow via Riga and Copenhagen." He informed Dobrynin that Washington was "greatly concerned" that the Soviet Union had "delivered" Komárek to the StB. Thompson warned that the incident was bound to harm U.S.–Soviet relations. Dobrynin wanted to know why. Thompson dismissed the question, saying that the answer was obvious.¹¹³ Although Moscow again denied its role in Komárek's seizure, Washington did not take this claim of innocence seriously.¹¹⁴

The next day, Secretary of State Dean Rusk personally intervened with a blanket warning that the incident would have a severe impact on Washington's overall relations with the Soviet bloc. In early December 1966 the Secretary sent a telegram to the U.S. embassy in Moscow with instructions to inform the Soviet Foreign Ministry that Washington did not accept the official explanation for the unscheduled landing in Prague. Rusk told the embassy "to

112. Martin Wenick, interview by author, 28 June 2000.

113. Memorandum of Conversation, Llewellyn Thompson, meeting with Anatoly F. Dobrynin, 18 November 1966, FOIA-USDS, No. 199800789. Another record is in Outgoing telegram, Dean Rusk, Department of State, to U.S. embassies, in Prague and Moscow, 19 November 1966, in *ibid.*

114. "Soviet Denies Part in Prague Seizure," *The New York Times*, 19 November 1966, p. 3.

protest strongly” Komárek’s “impermissible treatment,” and to charge Aeroflot with “direct responsibility . . . in this matter.”¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, the U.S. embassy in Prague posted the following sign in the consular section: “As a result of difficulties in connection with the protection of an American citizen detained in Czechoslovakia, the Department of State has determined upon a policy of more intensive review of visa applications. This may result in a delay in the issuance of individual visas.”¹¹⁶ The new procedure, described as “foot-dragging” by the embassy telegram, did not hurt the average Czechoslovak citizen. After all, very few ordinary Czechs and Slovaks could obtain a passport to travel to any Western country. The delay, however, did harm the plans of political officials, business representatives, and state-sponsored scientists and scholars who had been selected to spend time at various American research institutions. On 2 December 1966 Rusk summoned Duda to a meeting in which he rejected Prague’s argument that the Komárek case would have to be decided by the courts. This was a political case, he insisted, and Washington expected a political solution. The Secretary invited Duda for yet another discussion of the case on 21 December. He inquired about the Pakistani airliner that had been diverted to Leningrad and demanded to know why the Aeroflot pilot set out from the beginning toward Prague, not Paris.¹¹⁷ To ensure that the message got through, Ambassador Beam posed the same questions in Prague and warned the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry that Washington expected Komárek to be released soon.

U.S. counterintelligence agencies in the Washington area also helped in putting pressure on the Czechoslovak authorities. The FBI announced that Evžen Vacek, a Czechoslovak intelligence officer working as a UN diplomat, had sought to purchase classified documents for two thousand dollars from a researcher at the Hudson Institute on 17 November. Vacek claimed that he was an innocent victim of a ploy by the CIA, which had tried to recruit him, and that when he turned down the offer he was framed. But in the atmosphere created by Komárek’s kidnapping, he was considered guilty as charged by all the mainstream media.¹¹⁸ Jacob Beam went to the Prague Foreign Ministry, where he informed Trhlík that the United States had deliberately

115. Dean Rusk, Washington, DC, to the United States embassy in Moscow, 3 December 1966, FOIA-USDS No. 199504947.

116. Ambassador Beam, U.S. embassy in Prague, to the Department of State, Washington, DC, 19 November 1966, FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947.

117. Karel Duda, Washington, DC, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, 21 December 1966, AMZV, T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

118. See, for instance, Robert Estabrook, “Czech Accused as Spy to Be Sent Home,” *The Washington Post*, 31 December 1966, p. 6; and “Czech Spy Suspect is Said to Leave U.S.,” *The New York Times*, 10 January 1967, p. 7.

downplayed the Vacek affair to avoid “complicating” the Komárek case even further. The United States, Beam stated pointedly, hoped that Prague would appreciate Washington’s restraint in this matter.¹¹⁹

Komárek’s father-in-law, Donald Hunt, and the personnel of Harvard Travel Service launched their own parallel campaign. They set up The Committee to Free Vladimír J. Kazan-Komárek and enlisted several well-known personalities, including a prominent historian at Harvard University, Richard Pipes. The committee urged all Americans to protest Komárek’s kidnapping.¹²⁰ The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) also launched a campaign on Komárek’s behalf. Hundreds of travel agents and airline employees, as well as Komárek’s business partners, joined the effort. Protest letters, telegrams, and resolutions flowed into the Soviet and Czechoslovak embassies in Washington, Aeroflot offices in the United States, and the U.S. State Department.¹²¹ As long as Komárek stayed in jail, ASTA members were instructed not to arrange trips to the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and not to book flights on Aeroflot.¹²²

The member of Congress representing Komárek’s home district, Margaret Heckler, devoted her first speech in Congress to the kidnapping of her constituent. Her stern warning to the Prague Communists was popular with the American press, which from the beginning had denounced the kidnapping.¹²³ Senator Edward Kennedy, from Komárek’s home state of Massachusetts, lodged a protest with Ambassador Duda on 17 December 1966.¹²⁴ The senator subsequently met with a go-between in Washington, Jiří Hochman, the correspondent of the KSČ official daily *Rudé Právo*, and urged him to let the authorities know that they must free Komárek as soon as possible.¹²⁵ Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts added his prestige to the campaign by calling on Ambassador Duda and urging that Komárek be released.¹²⁶

The combined protests from the White House, Congress, the State De-

119. AMZV, “nezařazené dokumenty,” [unfiled documents], Zdeněk Trhlík’s memorandum pro domo regarding his meeting with Ambassador Jacob Beam, 17 January 1967. The American record of the meeting is in Ambassador Beam, U.S. embassy, Prague, to the Secretary of State, Washington, 17 January 1967, copy to the White House, FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947.

120. Letter of 24 January 1967, PP-VK.

121. Komárek’s private papers contain copies of many such petitions and protests. See PP-VK.

122. “Cestovní kanceláře mají rozmlouvat zájemcům cesty do ČSSR,” *Americké listy*, 6 January 1966.

123. “Czech Trick Nabs Wellesley Dad of 5,” *Record American*, 16 November 1966, p. 2. Also see the articles in *The Boston Globe*, on 15 and 26 November 1966, and on 14, 16, and 17 January 1967.

124. Senator Edward Kennedy to Karel Duda, 17 December 1966, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

125. Karel Duda, Washington, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, 24 January 1967, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

126. “Czechs Hold Bay Stater as Spy,” *The Boston Globe*, 15 November 1966, p. 1.

partment, the intelligence community, Komárek's family and friends, and his professional colleagues at the ASTA had a considerable effect. By early January 1967 Duda reported to Prague the view shared by most Americans: that the arrest in Prague was the result of "a combined operation of Soviet and Czechoslovak security."¹²⁷ When Congress focused its attention on the Komárek case in mid-January 1967, the Czechoslovak embassy reported: "What has just happened is what we had feared the most, and what we had predicted. The discussion was from the beginning very unfavorable to our interests." The situation reminded one, the report warned, of the days following Oatis's arrest in 1951.¹²⁸

By now only the StB still unequivocally defended the scheme that had landed Komárek in Prague. The security agency chafed under all the restrictions that had gradually been imposed after Josif Stalin's death in 1953. Supported by its Soviet "friends," the StB sought to stem any further erosion of its prerogatives and interests. However, its ability to influence Czechoslovak politics had been declining for quite some time. Between 1953 and 1963 the number of StB personnel shrank from 13,000 to 9,257, and as late as 1966 only four percent of StB officers had a college degree, whereas 50 percent had not even made it to high school.¹²⁹ The StB's ties with Soviet intelligence made it impossible for the organization to become irrelevant; far from it. But the StB's ability to determine the course and outcome of decisionmaking in Prague happened to be at its lowest point when Komárek was pulled off the Aeroflot plane.

All other major figures on the Prague political scene, including Novotný, soon concluded that the operation was misguided and that it was time to reverse course. On 25 November 1966, just three weeks after Komárek's arrest, the KSČ Presidium acknowledged that the consequences of the StB *kombinace* proved "greater than anticipated," and that it was essential to "bring the case to a quick conclusion."¹³⁰ In December Foreign Minister David wrote—in the stilted language of Communist bureaucracy—to Minister of Interior Josef Kudrna and to Attorney General Jan Bartoška:

Reference is made to my conversation with the KSČ First Secretary and President of the Republic, Comrade Antonín Novotný. I hereby inform you that the following decision has been made regarding the case of arrested spy Komárek.

127. Karel Duda, Washington, DC, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, 3 January 1967, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

128. Jaroslav Mercl, Washington, DC, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 January 1967, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

129. František Koudelka, *Státní bezpečnost, 1954–1968: základní údaje* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1993).

130. Protocol of Politburo meeting, 25 November 1966, SÚA, AÚV KSČ, F. 02/1, 18, 19.

The latter should be tried and expelled by Christmas or, at the latest, before the end of 1966. In this way we might be able to avoid a possible intensification of the anti-Czechoslovak campaign in the United States during this Christmas season.¹³¹

This proposal was confirmed by another decision of the KSČ Presidium on 20 December 1966.¹³² Despite these clear instructions for a speedy resolution of the matter, Komárek languished for another month in jail awaiting trial. The StB sought to hold onto its prisoner for as long as possible.

The trial opened on 30 January 1967, and the sentence was passed two days later. Although the proceedings originally were supposed to be closed, two high-ranking U.S. officials, the deputy chief of mission, Edward Burgess, and the Czech-speaking consul, Martin Wenick, eventually were allowed to attend. The American observers noted that the defendant behaved with considerable dignity and courage.¹³³ Komárek argued that he had worked neither for the French nor for the Americans, but on behalf of the “Czech cause” for Major Janouch. The prosecutor insisted that Komárek had in fact worked for a foreign intelligence service. However, the court reduced the charge from espionage to “undermining the socialist regime of Czechoslovakia.” The prosecutor listed some of the relatively minor transgressions, but remained silent on the larger ones. Komárek was not charged with having given Pavelka the pistol that the latter used in killing an StB officer, and he also was not charged with shooting at the border guards (let alone killing them) during the Christmas 1950 crossing.¹³⁴ This went directly against the charges published in *Rudé Právo* right after Komárek’s arrest.¹³⁵ Komárek later wrote that the authorities “showed willingness to drop certain charges which were, more or less, proven. I believe they were dropped quite intentionally, to lessen the overall penalties.”¹³⁶

Ultimately, the court found the defendant guilty as charged, but took into account that the crimes had occurred some sixteen years earlier and that Komárek had five dependent children. It sentenced him to eight years in jail.¹³⁷

131. Václav David, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Josef Kudrna, Minister of Interior, and to Jan Bartuška, Attorney General, n.d. (December 1966), AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

132. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs Memorandum for comrade Minister, 26 January 1967, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

133. Martin Wenick, interview by author, 28 June 2000.

134. Komárek’s debriefing by the FBI, Boston, MA, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947.

135. “Bezpečnostní orgány zatkly nebezpečného agenta,” *Rudé Právo*, 19 November 1966, p. 1. The article charged that during the Christmas 1950 border crossing, Komárek had “attempted to liquidate a unit of border guards with the use of his firearm.”

136. Statement written by Komárek, 24 February 1967, PP-VK.

137. The indictment and the sentence are in Komárek’s private papers, PP-VK.

Observers from the U.S. embassy noted that a representative of ČEDOK, the state travel agency, sat in the audience.¹³⁸ It is easy to surmise where his sympathies lay in this business: His career, trips to the United States, and access to consumer goods and hard currency depended on a quick resolution of the affair.

Neither side appealed the sentence, and Komárek was taken back to prison, though not for long. The municipal court reopened the case in a closed session and ruled that he was to be expelled. He was released on 3 February 1967 after 94 days in jail.¹³⁹

Martin Wenick met Komárek at the airport and made sure that he was allowed to board the plane. Although Komárek had come to Prague as a result of kidnapping, he was now forced by the Czechoslovak authorities to purchase a first-class ticket on a Czechoslovak Airlines flight to Paris. This made an American diplomat who witnessed the scene so furious that he advised Komárek to put a stop payment on the check when he arrived home.¹⁴⁰ From Paris Komárek immediately continued on a Pan Am flight to New York City under the fictitious name of “Stachovský.”¹⁴¹ At the airport in New York he was greeted by his family and by Robert Kennedy, who happened to be present.¹⁴²

Upon his return home Komárek found a note, in English, from his old Second Bureau control officer, “Blondie,” who signed as Didier: “Let me tell you first how glad I was and all your friends here when I heard the news of your release! What an experiment . . . but how on earth did you manage to take the risk of going to Moscow? I am deeply interested in what they knew about our deals in the past. Did they hear about me? Well, tell me as much as possible.” The Frenchman even suggested a meeting, but Komárek did not take up the offer.¹⁴³

The Aftermath: Komárek’s Mysterious Death

After his release Komárek never recovered his passion for Harvard Travel Service. “He was a different man when he came back from Prague,” was the view

138. Martin Wenick, interview by author, 28 June 2000.

139. Chronology of the Komárek Case from 28 October 1966 to 4 February 1967, AMZV, TO-T, 1965–1969, USA, box 4.

140. Martin Wenick, interview by author, 28 June 2000.

141. U.S. embassy in Prague to the Department of State and the White House, 4 February 1967, FOIA-USDS, No. 199504947.

142. FBI debriefing of Vladimír Joseph Kazan-Komárek, 10 February 1967, FOIA-FBI, No. 432,947.

143. Letter, 20 February 1967, PP-VK. The sender lived at 81, rue de Grenelle, Paris.

of people who knew him well for years. As they recalled it, he became secretive, aloof, temperamental, and, on occasion, uncharacteristically arrogant.¹⁴⁴ He abandoned long-held friendships, even ones forged under the most special circumstances. As soon as Komárek returned to the United States, he sent a moving letter to Karel Zámečník's father in Prague expressing his high esteem for his former cellmate; he even enclosed a generous check.¹⁴⁵ Zámečník was eventually released, whereupon he escaped from Czechoslovakia for good on 4 November 1967. He quickly wrote to Komárek and sought to restore their friendship. The two met in Paris and went to the very bars and nightclubs they had dreamed about in the Ruzyně jail. Soon, however, Komárek severed all ties with his friend. Eventually, the latter had to accept that for some reason Komárek was not interested in maintaining any contact with him. "Something must have changed in his life, something that changed his attitude toward me. What it was, I still don't know."¹⁴⁶

Komárek continued to pursue his love of flying. In addition to scores of private trips to faraway countries, he completed an around-the-world air race in May 1969. But a series of disasters unfolded shortly thereafter, beginning with a car accident in October 1969. One of the motorists, apparently dazed, walked away from the scene. The officers learned that it was Komárek, but he did not turn up until the next day in a disoriented state. When brought to a nearby hospital, Komárek was found to be suffering from "severe head injuries" and exposure after spending twelve hours roaming around.¹⁴⁷ The reasons behind his disappearance were never properly explained.¹⁴⁸

Komárek recovered quickly and by January 1970 was back to flying. On a trip to the Netherlands, however, he crashed during takeoff at Gander, Newfoundland. He survived unhurt and checked into a motel. On 15 January 1970, two days after the accident, he sneaked out without filing an accident report with the authorities, boarded an Air Canada plane, and disappeared.¹⁴⁹

About a month later Komárek surfaced in Laos, or at least someone using his name attended a Rotary Club meeting in Laos. In line with the Club's pol-

144. Josef and Marta Staša, interview by author, 5 July 1999.

145. I am grateful to Karel Zámečník for providing a copy of the letter. It is dated 18 April 1967.

146. Karel Zámečník, interview by author, 4 November 1999. Zámečník's letter to Komárek of 25 February 1970 opens in medias res: "I assume you're doing well and that you're busy, which is why you don't have time to reply to my letters." PP-VK.

147. The Weston Police Department, Log Book for 1969, 22 October 1969, 11:30 p.m.

148. After ten years the Weston police routinely destroy records of car accidents in which there was no fatality.

149. E. Savard, Regional Superintendent, Air Regulations, to V. J. Komárek, 21 January 1970 and 23 February 1970, PP-VK. The accident took place on 13 January 1970.

icy, the Laotian Rotarians informed the Wellesley Club that their member had been a guest of the branch in Laos. (At this point Zámečník wrote one last time to his friend's Wellesley Hills address. Komárek's wife replied in her husband's stead. He was, she wrote, missing in Laos.)¹⁵⁰ Canceled checks and hotel bills enabled the staff of Harvard Travel Service and Donald Hunt to trace him to Africa, where he boarded a round-the-world cruise. Some time later Hunt received a call from a hospital at Fort Lauderdale: Komárek had been found unconscious on a ship, and the doctors were at a loss trying to figuring out the cause. Hunt remembers sitting for three days next to his son-in-law's bed before they were able to return to Boston.¹⁵¹ What really happened on the ship remains a mystery.

As soon as Komárek fully recovered, he threw himself back into the whirlwind of international travel. In April 1971 he was in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Lagos, Nigeria, and Greece. The next month he went to India, Afghanistan, England, and Canada.¹⁵²

In October 1971 Komárek suddenly decided to leave Wellesley Hills in Massachusetts, his home town, and move to Spain. In November 1971 he took a small apartment in Estepona, Spain.¹⁵³ The Spanish police later reported that Komárek kept busy by writing a manual for pilots and occasionally flying private planes wherever their owners needed them, even as far as Australia. He apparently fit in well with the small international community in the area, making friends with an American, Sam Berman, and Canadian R. A. Duncan and his wife. The Duncans and Komárek agreed to meet at the Estepona airport on 11 May 1972 to fly back to North America together. When he failed to show up, the Duncans left without him.¹⁵⁴ On 5 June 1972 Berman went to the American consulate in Seville and reported his friend's disappearance. The consulate contacted the Civil Guard but decided to drop the case upon learning that Komárek had been seen just a few days before.

On 7 September 1972 a body was discovered at Finca "Monte El Quejigal," near Estepona.¹⁵⁵ An American foreign service officer later visited the spot and described it as a "relatively flat clearing." It was a place, he wrote,

150. Karel Zámečník, interview by author, 4 November 1999.

151. Jonathan Randal, "Searching for Joe," unpublished manuscript. Josef and Marta Staša also remember the event, but not the details that Hunt recalled for Randall.

152. Information regarding Komárek's travel is taken from a photocopy of his last passport. See PP-VK.

153. John W. Finney, "Body Found in Spain Thought to Be American Once Jailed in Prague," *The New York Times*, 12 December 1972, p. 2.

154. Finney, "Body Found in Spain," p. 2.

155. Department of State, Report of Death of an American Citizen, 13 December 1972, signed by Richard L. Stevens, Vice Consul, PP-VK.

“where one might stop to rest and enjoy the scene—a magnificent view.”¹⁵⁶ The body was badly decomposed. Moreover, the face, finger tips, and other parts had been eaten by wild animals. The authorities identified the remains only by the pilot license number, 1385182, which the Federal Aviation Administration had issued in 1968 to Vladimír Komárek, and an apartment key. The body was examined by a forensic specialist, Rafael Torroba Rodriguez, who estimated that death had taken place approximately three months before it was discovered. Having found no signs of violence, Dr. Rodriguez ordered that the body be buried at the Municipal Cemetery of Estepona.¹⁵⁷ The official document gave no indication that the doctor took note of the dental record or examined the body for the presence of digested, inhaled, or injected poison.

Although the gruesome discovery was reported in the Spanish press, the U.S. consulate in Seville and the embassy in Madrid failed to notify Washington. But the Duncans picked up the news and wrote to Komárek’s wife and Donald Hunt at the end of October 1972. It was from Hunt that the State Department learned that Komárek, the man on whose behalf the U.S. government had battled some five years earlier, was now declared dead under mysterious circumstances.

Finally, on 22 November 1972, a U.S. consular officer went to the Marbella District Court. The authorities told him that the forensic physician had determined that the cause of death was “natural and due to unknown causes.” The diplomat failed to find either Sam Berman or the Duncans at that time.¹⁵⁸ According to *The New York Times*, which learned about the mystery in December 1972, the Duncans later spoke with the Department of State and “expressed some doubt that the body was that of Mr. Kazan-Komárek.”¹⁵⁹ They wrote to Vladimír’s wife that her husband “was last seen in late Spring [1972] getting into a black limousine with two men they had not seen before.”¹⁶⁰ In response to this publicity, the State Department instructed the consulate in Seville to look into the case once again. But even the new investigation failed to produce any definite or new information. Sam Berman

156. Priority Telegram, U.S. Consulate Seville, Spain, to the Department of State, Washington, DC, 14 December 1972, FOIA-USDS, No. 199800789.

157. Department of State, Report of Death of an American Citizen, 13 December 1972, signed by Richard L. Stevens, Vice Consul, PP-VK. Komárek’s death was duly recorded in Section III, Vol. 75, p. 67 of the Civil Register in Estepona.

158. Priority Telegram, U.S. Consulate Seville, Spain, to the Department of State, Washington, DC, 27 November 1972, FOIA-USDS, No. 199800789.

159. Finney, “Body Found in Spain,” *The New York Times*, p. 2.

160. Randal, “Searching for Joe,” p. 2.

was nowhere to be found, and the forensic surgeon refused to discuss the case. The consulate reported that the local officials had “no doubt that the body was that of Komárek. Some of his friends do but can offer no substantive reasons for their doubts.” The only way to gain more insight, concluded the consulate, would be to exhume the body.¹⁶¹

Mrs. Komárek, who over the years had experienced enough of newspaper headlines and photographers camping in front of her house, saw no reason to disturb the grave. She concluded that her husband took his own life. This went against the finding of Dr. Rodriguez, who had insisted that the cause of death was natural. Nor was it at all clear how he might have taken his life. Only a small aspirin bottle was found at the scene, the body showed no obvious signs of gunshot or stab wounds, and death by falling was out of the question because of the terrain. Mrs. Komárek decided not to have the body brought to the United States for a full examination and positive identification by an American forensic professional.¹⁶²

Karel Zámečník says he still has no idea how his friend from the Ruzyně jail died, but he insists that “the man I knew would never have taken his life. Even in the Ruzyně jail, Komárek had shown no tendency toward depression or self-pity.” In Zámečník’s view Komárek was a man of “terrific courage and discipline.” Komárek’s ability to take a cyanide capsule during the 1950 border incident, Zámečník argues, demonstrates that he was a decisive figure, not inclined to wallow in sorrow and depression.¹⁶³

Komárek’s brother, Miroslav, learned about the discovery in Estepona from Father Antonín Bernáček, one of the first two men Komárek had helped across the Iron Curtain some 25 years earlier. Fr. Bernáček, who lived in Paris at the time, saw the news in a French newspaper and immediately informed Vladimír’s family. When Miroslav now ponders the mystery, he admits frankly: “I do not know what to think about the cause of his death.” However, he forcefully rules out suicide.¹⁶⁴

Martin Wenick, who as U.S. consul got to know Komárek during his imprisonment and trial in 1966–1967, remains fascinated by the case to this day: “It was the most intriguing issue I dealt with throughout my career.” Wenick recalls that when the news from Estepona reached him, he “was not surprised.” Like others, he is not at all sure how Komárek died.¹⁶⁵

161. Priority Telegram, U.S. Consulate, Seville, Spain, to the Department of State, Washington, DC, 14 December 1972, FOIA-USDS, No. 199800789.

162. Dana Komárek, interview by author, 14 June 1999.

163. Karel Zámečník, interview by author, 4 November 1999.

164. Miroslav Komárek, interview by author, 3 July 1999.

165. Martin Wenick, interview by author, 28 June 2000.

Marta and Josef Staša knew Komárek both as his close friends in the Boston area and as associates of Harvard Travel Service. They expressed doubt that “his death was natural.”¹⁶⁶ Jonathan Randal, a *New York Times* correspondent who knew Komárek in the early 1950s and investigated the whole affair in the 1990s, reported that “most of those who studied his case came away convinced that he was killed.”¹⁶⁷

In Estepona, Spain, the trail of evidence concerning Vladimír Komárek grows cold. Until the Czech foreign intelligence archives become available, and until the CIA stops withholding crucial documents, one can only note that Komárek’s life mirrors the complexities and intermittent ferocity of the Cold War, while his puzzling end is a metaphor for its inconclusive outcome. At the moment there is no archival evidence providing even a hint of the cause of Komárek’s death, and the serious reader is therefore likely to agree with the view not infrequently expressed by Sherlock Holmes: “I do not know what to believe.”

Conclusion

The Komárek case suggests that in the East-West competition after World War II, the West was more successful sooner in the game than is commonly assumed. In the early 1950s Washington’s actions in defense of American citizens who were unjustly persecuted in Czechoslovakia seemed only to encourage the Prague regime’s confrontational approach. By the second half of the 1960s, the Czechoslovak authorities found—upon calm examination of the options Washington placed before them—that surrender to the demand for Komárek’s immediate release was their only viable option. This new attitude reflected a shift in the Cold War balance of power in favor of the West. At its root was the East European countries’ growing need for access to Western science, technology, and finances. The method chosen by the KGB and StB to apprehend Komárek was enough to unite all the foci of power in Washington against Czechoslovakia: The White House, Congress, the Department of State, the CIA, the FBI, and the press all joined forces and coordinated their actions. The desired outcome was produced in short order.

The Komárek affair also reveals the widening cracks in the façade that the KSČ was struggling to maintain on the Czechoslovak domestic scene in the mid-1960s. Viewed against the background of the sweeping political changes in Czechoslovakia that began within months of Komárek’s release in 1967,

166. Josef and Marta Staša, interview by author, 22 December 1998.

167. Randal, “Searching for Joe.”

the case can be seen as a harbinger of things to come. Manifest in it were the growing tensions between the reformers, who sought to normalize relations with the West in order to obtain access to American technology and to humanize the regime in general, and the conservatives, who were determined to maintain the status quo as long as possible.

The most retrograde among the conservatives in Prague were the StB officers who provoked the Komárek affair. Leading personnel in the counterintelligence directorate, who oversaw the whole operation, continued to resort to tactics they had learned in the late 1940s and early 1950s from Soviet advisers. They resented and sought to get around the restrictions imposed on them after Stalin's death. Until the Komárek fiasco, they operated with the support of the conservatives, but in late 1966, however, the StB found itself in isolation. The secret police were the only institution that appeared willing to ride out the storm caused by the kidnapping. Both the reformers and the conservatives saw the need to solve the crisis by political means as quickly as possible.

The Komárek operation ultimately backfired against the interests of the antireformist camp as a whole. Less than a year after Komárek walked free from the Ruzyně jail, the reformers disposed of the orthodox regime of Antonín Novotný, elected Alexander Dubček, and unleashed the forces that produced the Prague Spring. The Komárek affair thus helps to illuminate the fault lines that came to the surface in 1968, precipitating a crisis so serious that Moscow resolved it by a military invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, an invasion that many elements in the StB actively abetted.

By the time of Komárek's death in Estepona, the StB had regained its position of authority in Prague, while those who had favored Komárek's early release had been purged from the KSČ, expelled from their jobs, and turned into manual laborers. Almost two decades would pass before the reformers' point of view would prevail for good in the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

Note

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