

The Oatis Story

# Reds Close in on AP Offices In Series of Strange Arrests

EDITOR'S NOTE: William N. Oatis, the Associated Press correspondent who spent more than two years in a Communist prison in Czechoslovakia, has written a series of articles about his experiences. In the one below he tells of his arrest and the start of his long quest for freedom.

By WILLIAM N. OATIS  
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Monday, April 23, 1951, was a bad day for me. In one month, the Czech staff of The Associated Press bureau in Prague, Czechoslovakia, had been cut in half as three men had been arrested, one by one.

I had to run the bureau with only two translators to help me cover the news through the 18 hours every day that it was made available by the official Czechoslovak News Agency, newspapers and radio.

I had to look for new help, keep books, write letters. I had to get a tire fixed. And I had promised to go see Tyler Thompson, counselor of the United States Embassy, to talk to him about my personal safety.

All morning I was involved with office detail, and it was 2 p.m. before I was ready to go to the embassy.



Oatis

Just at that moment, a caller walked in. It was Miroslav (Mike) Hustak, a Czech who had lost his job as an operations officer for Pan American Airways when the line had stopped flights to Prague the previous fall.

"X" Marks the Window  
He had come to my office about a month before, asking for work. There was some question about Hustak. I was not going to hire him, though I needed another translator badly and his English was good. But he had kept coming to see me.

Though it was chilly that April day, Hustak, a husky young man with a low forehead and eyes that joined above his nose, was in shirt sleeves and hatless.

He told me he had a story for me, and she showed me a photograph.

It was a picture of the front of an old castle, fenced off by iron bars and guarded by police dogs. Hustak said this was Kolodziej Castle, northeast of Prague. On one barred window was an "X" in green ink.

Pasted on the back of the print was a typewritten note in Czech, which Hustak translated for me. It stated that Dr. Vlado Clementis, former Czechoslovak foreign minister, had been held until recently in the chamber marked. The note said the information came from "a militiaman named Jan."

Hustak told me he had got the picture from an acquaintance who knew about the interrogation of Clementis, arrested the previous January on spy charges. He said the man wanted to sell me the story: I told him I did not buy stories.

They Didn't Knock  
He promised to try to pry it out for nothing. Then he started for the door.

"Hey," I called after him, "you left your picture."  
"Oh, you can keep it," he said hastily, and dashed out.

I laid the picture in a desk drawer and put on my hat and coat to go to the embassy.

Before I got to the door, it opened suddenly and some men in trench coats walked in. There were six of them, as I remember. They surrounded me.

A short, blond man in glasses, with a freckled pokerface, flashed a blue card from his pocket.

He looked like the kind of little boy that breaks windows and writes bad words on fences.

"Spionaz!"  
But the card told me that he belonged to the Státní Bezpečnost (State Security), the most widely feared group in Czechoslovakia—the Communist secret police.

The little man, apparently the only one that spoke English, had me throw everything from my pockets onto a table.

Another plainclothesman, who seemed to be directing things, picked up a little black notebook.

"Pavel! Ha-ha!" he shouted, reading from the notebook. "Vesely! Ha-ha! Pokorny! Ha-ha!"

Those were the names of high security officers reported arrested in a purge that had begun in October with the imprisonment of a Brno Communist leader named Otto Sling.

A third man went to my desk,

quick, swaggering stride, came a lean, spectacled man in a tan trench coat. He was blond, with a long, pale face and pale fanatical eyes, pouched like a lizard's. He frowned at me and, talking through an interpreter, said, "We have met before, on a happier occasion."

I remembered him. This man, who called himself "the Boss," had talked to me the previous November at a Prague permit office about whether I should be allowed to stay in Czechoslovakia. "We Ruin Them!"

He had let me stay and work, even though I had been deprived of official accreditation as a foreign correspondent in Czechoslovakia and did not get the accreditation back till three months later.

"You promised me then," he said, "that you would not do 'unofficial reporting.' You broke that promise."

I remembered making no overt promise to confine my reporting to official news sources. I told him so. He cited instances of "unofficial" newsgathering that he could have got only from my missing employes.

He said something about "nose strana," two Czech words I knew to mean "our party." The interpreter skipped that, but I got the next sentence in plain, un-

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grammatical English: "If anyone opposes us, we ruin them!" "Talk! Talk!"

"You are here," the man went on, "in two roles: As a witness against your employes, and as a defendant yourself."

"Do you know why your employes are here? Murder-foul murder! They protected an enemy agent. An accomplice of that agent took a human life. He killed one of our men in cold blood, a man with a wife and children."

I said I had nothing to do with any murder. I insisted I had never even met the agent he spoke of. He replied, "We will prove to you that you did."

The Boss hunched forward, shot a bony finger at me and yelled, "Spy!"

(Tomorrow: Reds Set Trap.)

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