

The Oatis Story

Red Twists to Rules Are Trap, Oatis Finds in Weary Sessions

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Here is another N. Oatis, Associated Press correspondent, who is telling what happened to him in Czechoslovakia. He returned to this country last May after two years imprisonment by the Communists.)

By WILLIAM N. OATIS
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A slim man with puffed eyes—a man who always reminded me of a lizard—leaned across a desk and said, "This is the best prison in Europe."

He belonged to the Communist secret police of Czechoslovakia. They had arrested me six days before on suspicion that I, the Associated Press correspondent in Prague, was also a spy.

They had questioned me at the police station day after day until finally, weary from 24 hours of steady grilling, I had balked. Then they had brought me here, handcuffed and blindfolded in the back of a car.

Now, with the blindfold off, I found myself in a sparsely furnished office in the dim light of dawn—the dawn of Sunday, April 29, 1951. Through the window I saw a courtyard and, beyond, a new building going up.

"How many steps are there on the way up here—the man asked. 'Ninety.'"

"You're still a spy," he said, smiling.

Sign Here
I smiled back. It was supposed to be a joke.

The men from the police station went on interrogating me all that day. We all staved off hunger with fat slices of bacon sent from downstairs.

Many questions concerned an incident of a few weeks earlier: an Indian diplomat had heard that apartments in his neighborhood of Prague were being taken over for army officers. I asked Lt. Col. George L. Atwood, American military attaché, if he had heard this, too. He said he had, and more. And he gave me a list of supposed military sites in and around the city.

The police already had my signature on a statement to the effect that, in thus picking up "military information," I had committed espionage. Now they wrote another statement for me to sign.

This would have had me admit that I gave military information to Atwood and in so doing committed espionage. I refused to sign it.

"I want to go to bed," I said. "Just rewrite this for us the way you want it, and then you can go to bed," said the lizard-faced man.

Sleep at Last
I rewrote it. They brought it back to me, rewritten again, and asked me to sign it.

I had been up 42 hours, and I

was desperate for sleep. So I signed.

Then I was blindfolded and taken downstairs and when I took the blindfold off I was in a cell.

I had some smelly blankets and a straw mat. I made a bed on the floor, tied my handkerchief across my eyes to keep out the electric light and went to sleep. I was awakened only once—to get a number: 2091.

The next day, the men from headquarters questioned me morning and afternoon in the upstairs office, and I had vegetarian noon and evening meals in my cell.

After supper I was taken back upstairs. This time all my old acquaintances were gone except a pudgy little curly-haired interpreter.

A Rewrite Job
Seated at a desk was a new man. He was a rangy, brown-haired young man with a sardonic look—sunny yellow eyes, high cheekbones, hollow cheeks and a narrow mouth with the corners turned down.

He might have passed for a small-town roughneck, but he was in the red-trimmed olive-drab uniform of a police lieutenant.

He was taking over my interrogation. In that prison, every inmate has a "referent," who questions him and prepares him for trial. This referent sat bolt upright, looking serious. The interpreter translated:

"Make no mistake. Your American citizenship will not help you here."

That was how I met Lt. J. J. Ledl (I learned his name later, from his signature on a paper).

Early next morning, he called me from my cell and began putting my testimony in writing.

The document was called a protocol. From time to time, I was presented with finished pages and asked to write on each, "I have read this. I have approved it. I have signed it. William Nathan Oatis."

I did so readily as long as the protocol kept near the facts.

Then the referent and interpreter began to rewrite my account.

Out in 10 Weeks?
"This is not right," I said one day, pointing to an inaccuracy. "What difference does it make?" The referent showed exasperation.

Such arguments became more and more frequent. Gradually it became apparent he wanted not the facts as I knew them, but as he would have liked them to be.

Meanwhile, I was trying to find out what was likely to happen to me. Four people now were at work on my interrogation.

The referent and three interpreters in turns. One interpreter,

a young woman, asked me, "How would you like to go home on the Fourth of July?"

Another, a dapper little man named Vilda, said, "You won't be here 10 weeks."

"I don't believe you," I told him.

A Letter Home
He insisted he knew what he was talking about.

The referent said a foreigner could be punished with "a sentence, or expulsion."

I knew that my wife in St. Paul, Minn., must be worried about me. I asked the lieutenant to let me write her. He put me off.

One night Vilda suggested I try again. The referent asked me what I wanted to say in the letter. I told him, and he left the room.

Pretty soon he came back with something written in Czech. The interpreter put it in English and handed it to me. The referent had written my letter for me.

It was fantastic. It made me say that I had been "caught in espionage," that I had told all and that I wanted to live "a clean, new life."

"Keep your hopes high," it wound up, "and trust in the justice of the Czechoslovak people, who are working for peace."

The Captain Takes Over
I said "When my wife reads this, she'll think I've gone crazy."

But Vilda reminded me, "Your wife is clever—she'll understand."

The referent insisted the letter would go out that way or not at all. So I copied it in my own handwriting, and he sent it.

That was the first statement I signed that was quite out of character and patently phony. Once they had got me to sign that one, it was easier for them.

That talk about high hopes and a clean, new life was encouraging. So was Vilda. He said "Don't worry about a trial."

A few nights later, about a month after my arrest, a police staff captain sat down at the desk and I sat down in my chair facing him. He smiled and began to talk, smoothly and courteously.

He asked me what connections the AP had with the United States government. I said it had none. "Oh, Oatis," he said, dubiously.

My referent, standing by, must have felt he had muffed the case, since his commander, the captain, had had to intervene. He now exploded.

He twitched, frowned and screeched at me something interpreted as "You dirty bastard!"

He accused me of backtracking on testimony.

In due course the captain asked me about a card found in my ef-

fects. It was an off-duty pass from the Military Intelligence Service Japanese language school at Ft. Snelling, Minn.

I had been there briefly in 1944 enroute to a year's study at a similar school at the University of Michigan. At Michigan, I continued training in Japanese that I had begun in the Army Specialized Training Program at the University of Minnesota.

Though Military Intelligence ran the Michigan school, I was never in that branch. At the school I was a corporal on the detached enlisted men's list. And I never got into it, for after I finished the course I was discharged from the Army.

Sign Again
But the commander told me to write about the school and the men I had known there, and put me back in my cell with a typewriter and cigarettes. I wrote several pages, sent them to him and went to bed.

The next night's questioning brought out that Col. Atwood had been in the language school while I was there but that we had not met there.

Some 24 hours later, the commander laid a long document before me and said, "Sign this and you don't need to worry."

The first part was a garbled version of my account about the language school. The second part was something new. It introduced Atwood as an old fellow student. It had me saying that he was a spy and that I gave him information because "I knew he was interested in espionage reports of all kinds."

It was so weird I smiled. I thought, "This looks as if it were all aimed at Atwood. If I sign it, they'll expel him—but maybe



AP Artist Ed Gunder sketches scene as William N. Oatis, after 42 hours without sleep, prepared to sign a "confession" in Prague jail.

they'll expel me, too, without a trial."

I signed that statement—and hooked myself properly. Because, as I saw with chagrin later, they were not trying to get Atwood out of the country; they were trying to keep me in prison.

Resistance Lowered
By now, I had signed so many papers that it had become a habit. I went on signing them almost au-

tomatically, seldom questioning even the wildest departures from fact.

I had come to the conclusion that many prisoners—I dare say most prisoners—come to in that place: You are in the hands of the secret police. You will never get away from them until you give them what they want.

Once my will had faded away in that fashion, the referent had plain sailing. He rewrote all my

protocols from the beginning, introducing changes.

Finally I was ushered into an office of the prison where a fidgety woman interpreter sat with a baldheaded, cross-eyed man in shirtsleeves and a bow tie.

"I am Judge Novak, the chairman of the Senate of the State Court in Prague," he told me. "Your behavior here has been good. If you behave well before the court also, you don't need to worry."

How often had I heard that line! The Indictment
The judge read what he said was the indictment. Nowhere was there any mention of the paragraphs of the law under which I was indicted. I stood accused formally of espionage for the U. S. government. Words that the referent had put into my mouth, by putting them into my protocol, were used to show that I had sent news stories on the arrests of former Foreign Minister Vlado Clementis and Otto Sling, deposed Brno Communist leader, with intent to advise "the American espionage net" which of its strong-points in Czechoslovakia had fallen, so that it could regroup.

Judge Novak said a lawyer had been assigned me.

"The function of a lawyer," he said, "is not to help the defendant escape sentence. It is to help him get a lighter sentence."

(This seemed to mean that I should convict even before I went to trial. And it was the presiding judge that was giving me the news.)

Four days later, I met a rabidity, poker-faced man who his interpreter introduced as "your lawyer, Dr. Bartos."

Dr. Bartos told me, "I think you have a good chance to go home this year." He advised me to testify according to the protocol and said his defense would be that I did not go into espionage deliberately but "just fell into it."

That week the referent had me in his office almost daily, and we rehearsed the protocol. He asked the questions and I gave the answers more or less as written. At length, I got it down pat.

And on Monday, July 2, three of my employes and I went on trial before Judge Novak's court at Pankrac Prison.

(Tomorrow: Prison Like Tomb.)

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