

9. The Year 1948

I would like to share my experience of the communist coup d'état that took place between 20 and 25 February 1948. I will begin with Friday, 20 February. Mr. Krajina, MP and secretary general of the National Socialist Party, delivered the resignation of the democratic members of the government to the President. It was received by the President's Chancellor Jaromír Smutný who, before taking it to the President, telephoned this to Gottwald¹. I learned this information from General Hasal² whose office was next to Smutný's. The door to Smutný's office was open and Hasal heard him reading out the resignation to Gottwald. Only then did he take it to the President. I talked about this with Smutný later on in London, but that's another story.

That same day, a ball of some women's society was being held at Autoklub. I believe it was the Council of Czechoslovak Women. Petr Zenkl³ called me around six in the evening to ask me to accompany him and his wife to the ball. I didn't want to go as we had lots of galas and balls in the Municipal House but when Petr's wife, Mrs. Pavla, took over the telephone, I promised her that we would come.

The Zenkls picked us up at the Municipal House and we went to Autoklub. We shared a box with Mrs. Laušmanová⁴. Around ten o'clock, the director of the establishment came to see us and told the Zenkls that Mrs. Beneš⁵ would like to speak with them. Mrs. Beneš sat in a box with Chancellor Smutný at the other side of the hall. Zenkl and his wife were getting ready to go there when Petr told me: "Come with us." In Mrs. Beneš's box, Zenkl made an attempt at introducing us, but both Mrs. Beneš and Smutný said that we already knew each other.

At first, we were just talking about the gala and how nice it was and such. But soon Mrs. Beneš said to Mrs. Zenklová, "Mrs. Pavla, please look after Petr's health. He carries great responsibility now. He has to stay in good health." Zenkl retorted, "No Mrs. Hana, the entire responsibility lies with the President. We have done what we had agreed with him. Now it's up to him to carry out his part."

We didn't speak about it anymore. A little later we went back to our seats where my wife had been talking with Mrs. Laušmanová and they were just talking about Laušman being in Pardubice. It was his constituency. Zenkl said that he was going to Moravia the following day. He was to get an honorary citizenship from some small town, I'm not sure which one but I think it was Lanškroun.

¹ Klement Gottwald (1896-1953), communist leader and politician, president of Czechoslovakia after the 1948 communist coup.

² Antonín Hasal (1883-1960), general of Czechoslovak army, minister of transport after the war.

³ Petr Zenkl (1884-1975), mayor of Prague, minister before the war, imprisoned during the war, leader of the National Socialist Party and deputy prime minister.

⁴ Julie Laušmanová, wife of Bohumil Laušman (1903-1963), social-democratic politician later imprisoned by the Communists.

⁵ Hana Benešová-Vičková (1885-1974), wife of Edvard Beneš.

We stayed at the gala until midnight. The Zenkls took us back home to the Municipal House and then continued onto Letná. The following morning, Zenkl went to Moravia but he never got the honorary citizenship. The Communists had scuppered it so Zenkl went to Svatý kopeček to see the Andrs⁶ along with his secretary František Ambrož.

On Saturday, 21 February, there was a gala held at the Municipal House of some organization belonging to the National Socialist Party. I think it was a workers' organization. I was walking across the ballroom when I bumped into Minister Jaroslav Stránský. He said, "Jaroušku" (we called each other Jaroušek) "you look sad."

I answered, "Why shouldn't I be in such a situation?"

He told me, "Everything will be fine. You can rely on me."

I said I didn't like the fact that the President was leaving Prague under such grave circumstances. Stránský doubted that the President had left but I had heard otherwise. Although Drtina writes in his book that the President had left for Lány, my friend Jaroslav Kuncman who had been invited to lunch at our place saw the President in a car near the National Theatre at midday. The question was where he was going.

On the morning of Sunday, 22 February, a meeting of Czechoslovak – Soviet Friendship was held at the National Theatre. I sat in a box with Jožka David. Some Soviet general was speaking. He said they wouldn't meddle in our affairs. Then, Minister Nejedlý⁷ spoke. His speech was so terrible that I said to David, "Jožko, this is a coup d'état." He tried to calm me down by saying that Nejedlý always spoke like this. The Soviet general had really said that they wouldn't meddle in our affairs. I didn't speak Russian myself but Jožka, who had been in Russia as a legionnaire, spoke the language.

On Monday, 23 February, I drove to the National Council and after 10 a.m., I phoned the Council's headquarters to tell them what had happened at the National Council the previous day. I spoke with Secretary Karel Hacker, who told me that he had already spoken with Jožka, so they already knew.

On Tuesday, 24 February, I was in my office at the National Council from the morning. Around 10 a.m., Otakar Urbánek⁸, a MP from Ceske Budejovice, stormed into the room and exclaimed, "Lojza will become Minister!" I told him not to speak such nonsense and I sent him away asking him to come back in half an hour after I had finished attending the gentleman I was with.

⁶ Josef Andr, owner of the ASO Olomouc department store.

⁷ Zdeněk Nejedlý (1878-1962), university professor, politician, communist leader.

⁸ Otakar Urbánek (1898-?), member of the National Council for the National Socialist Party

Urbánek came back just as agitated and repeated that Lojza was going to become minister. I knew who he was talking about, it was Alois Neuman⁹. Urbánek told me that Neuman had been invited to see the President at 11 a.m.

I called the Secretariat to speak with Krajina. Karel Hacker told me that it was impossible, that there were many people with Krajina and asked me what was going on. He said he would let Krajina know that I wanted to speak with him.

The meeting of the National Council was supposed to begin at midday every Tuesday, but it kept being postponed. Around 1 p.m., Dr. Milada Horáková¹⁰ visited me. She sat opposite me and said, "Jardo, I came to see you because Petr told me that you don't believe the President will hold his position. Listen, I'm coming from the President. I went to see him at 11 a.m. and he told me, "Milado, I would rather die than betray Masaryk's democracy and my personal friends."

Milada looked me in the eyes and said "So? Do you believe it or not?" I told her, "Miládko, it's not whether I believe or not believe, sometimes I just have a strange hunch when it comes to situations like this. It hasn't failed me yet. I have to tell you that it came in handy during the Occupation. Miládko, don't be angry at me but Beneš won't last."

Milada poked me in the forehead with her index finger and said, "You're so hard-headed!" She got up but as she was leaving, she turned around, wagged her finger at me and then blew me a kiss. It was the last time I spoke with her.

After 2 p.m., Chairman Kopřiva¹¹ finally arrived and said, "I am opening the meeting of the National Council and I am relieving all the elected officials of their functions. I am taking all the power in Bohemia into my hands."

Upon hearing that I got up and said, "Mr. Kopřiva has just pronounced himself the King of Bohemia because no one has held all the power in Bohemia in their hands ever since the time of the Czech Kings."

Then, Professor Machotka¹² got up and said, "Mr. Chairman, this is a coup d'état."

Kopřiva only said, "I am ending this meeting of the National Council" and left. This was outrageous behavior.

Afterwards, we, the National Socialists, met up with the members of the Peoples' Party and one Social Democrat, Dr. František Kostiuk¹³ in Machotka's office. We discussed what we were

⁹ Alois Neuman (1901-1977), national-socialist politician who collaborated with the communists after the 1948 coup.

¹⁰ Milada Horáková (1901-1950), member of parliament for the National Socialist Party. Executed by the communists after one of the largest show trials that followed the 1948 communist coup.

¹¹ Ladislav Kopřiva (1897-1971), communist functionary and politician.

¹² Otakar Machotka (1899-1970), sociologist, national-socialist deputy until the 1948 coup.

¹³ František Kostiuk (1899-?), social-democratic politician and member of the National Council after the war.

going to do and we came to the conclusion that we were going to ask the President to see us. This was agreed and his political secretary, Dr. Jan Jína¹⁴, told us to come at 4 p.m.

When we got there, Jína told us, “Boys, I can’t let you see the President, but I have to tell you that everything is lost.” He put his hands on the table and started crying.

On Wednesday, 25 February, I was walking across the Bridge of the Legions and I saw Gottwald driving from the direction of the Charles Bridge. He was coming with the list of the members of the new government. As I saw later on, a large gathering had already been organized at the Old Town Square to which Gottwald announced the names of the new ministers. This is all I can say about the events of February 1948. Historians can only answer whether the coup d’état was inevitable.

When I came home that day, I was crying but I have to say, I wasn’t crying because I was about to lose everything but because the nation was losing its freedom. I really felt like crying and my wife was very worried. She thought I would jump out of the window, but I wasn’t going to – that was out of the question. I soon learned that I was on both the long and the short list of the enemies of the State, already on 25 February, the moment the President confirmed the new government to the Communists.

I found out about this at the British Embassy from someone that I don’t need to name. I went there to get a British visa for my family and myself. They told me that they couldn’t give me a visa because I needed special permission and besides, my passports had expired. Furthermore, they told me that it was good that I had come and they told me to stay at the Embassy, that I would leave that night with their soldiers. They would get my family out later. However, I told them, “I’m not going anywhere without my family.”

They said, “It’s dangerous, your name is on both lists.” It was then that I asked what it was about. They told me that there were two lists of names, one of which included 70 names and the other, some 700. Those 70 in Prague were to be made to disappear, while the 700 were from across the country in case the coup d’état didn’t go according to plan.

Later on, I heard the same information at the end of March or at the beginning of April from the Deputy General Secretary of the Communist Party whose name was Josef Frank¹⁵. He told me, “You have to leave. You’re on both lists.”

I became acquainted with Frank in 1945. Krajina had called me and told me that he needed me to go sort something out in Liberec and that he would send Pepík Frank with me. He was known in concentration camps as a Communist, but also as an honest man. We went together in my car with my driver. We drove through a village called Tuřice and by the side of the road there

¹⁴ Jan Jína (1890-1962), diplomat and head of the president’s office at the time of Edvard Beneš.

¹⁵ Josef Frank (1909-1952), deputy general secretary of the Communist Party.

was some fresh grass and a goose with six baby geese sitting there. I asked the driver to stop and said, "Look at that beauty."

Frank said, "But it's only a goose with her babies."

"But what a beauty, there is beauty in everything", I replied.

We got to Brodce, where I was born, and where Frank thought I had a villa where I wasn't allowed to go. I told the driver, "Turn around, we're going to Horky." When we got there, all the men I knew gathered around and asked me why I didn't come back more often. I told them, "Because you put men from the brickworks in my house. How is such a beautifully furnished house going to look?"

Their foremen said, "We will move everything out for you."

But I wanted to know, "You are all Agrarians and now I hear that you have become Communists. How is it possible? Mr. Frank here is the Deputy of your General Secretary."

They welcomed him and then asked me again why I wasn't coming back more often, and I said, "Look, because you are an impossible lot. How can you be Communists?"

So then they asked me, "Will you give us a tractor?"

"Of course, I won't give you one."

"Ďuriš¹⁶ gave us one" they claimed.

But I told them, "He's only lent you one and will come back for it and will take it away from you along with your house and yourselves." They shook their heads in disbelief.

After that, we drove on with Frank and he didn't speak and neither did I. Then, all of a sudden, he said, "You were right about what you said about Ďuriš, Ďuriš and the tractor. It'll definitely happen like that."

The problem in Liberec was about the Communist party and the National Socialist Party had been fighting over previously German owned businesses. During the negotiations, one Communist MP kept shouting that everything would become Communist. Pepík Frank said, "Whatever we agree to here today will be respected and you can't say a word more." The MP wanted to add something, but we went ahead with the proposal we had come with. That's how Pepík and I became close. On the way back, we didn't speak about politics but about our youth and I have to say that we became good friends. I was very sorry to hear when the Communists executed him.

¹⁶ Julius Ďuriš (1904-1986), Slovakian communist, minister of agriculture.

So, getting back to the beginning of this story, this was the Frank who told me to leave. Then, at the beginning of May, President Benes sent word to me with the same information through Jan Jína.

In the week between 1 and 5 May 1948, I received a call from Dr. Jína, who said that he needed to speak with me urgently. We agreed to meet in front of his flat. He lived near Palacký Bridge. We walked along the riverbank and he said to me, "The President sends word that you should have gone long ago. You are on both lists, the short and the long one."

We spoke about many other things, including the situation in which the President found himself. I was of the opinion that he should have resigned right after the February event to make it clear that he didn't agree with what was happening. We both felt miserable.

After the coup, I met up with Vašek Čihák, my closest collaborator from my time with the Resistance, who had been willing to risk his life for me several times. Whenever he hears this, he always says, "You risked yours for me only once, but it was at the Gestapo, so we are even." Sometimes we also told each other that if we had known what was going to happen, we wouldn't have risked our lives and those of our families during the war, but that's already behind us.

Since that time at the end of February 1948, I knew that I had to leave but as I said earlier, I stayed put even though I had a failsafe solution ready. A good friend of mine who had helped me during the war was to warn me when the time was to leave. It was Karel Sušanka, who I've mentioned several times already. In July, during the gathering of the members of Sokol that was now being used as Communist propaganda, I was invited by someone to his flat. His name was Otto Klička¹⁷ who as it turned out later worked for the Communists in Germany, but also did things for the Americans. He was sentenced to twenty years of imprisonment in Germany for betraying people who wanted to leave Czechoslovakia. However, General Klein commuted his sentence to 5 years because he was also in the service of the Americans.

Otto told me that he had an escape route prepared for me and that he wanted me to go along with the Zenkls. I was convinced that it was a trap and that they wanted to get to Zenkl that way. I pretended to agree and he told me that his brother would visit me and that he had an escape route ready across the Šumava Mountains. I agreed and told him I was ready to leave. However, I didn't even mention this to Zenkl and I never told him about this set-up against him.

When I came out of that house, I saw a motorcycle parked outside. I wrote down the number and gave it to someone I knew at the Ministry of Interior. He confirmed that it was a number from the Ministry of Interior. That meant that the trap was about to fall.

¹⁷ Otto Klička (1913-2008), Czechoslovakian diplomat.