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**Communism on Trial:
The Slansky Affair and Anti-Semitism
in Post-WWII Europe**

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Abstract: In 1952, hardly a decade after the Holocaust, Communist Czechoslovakia staged one of the post-WWII era's most blatant acts of state-sponsored anti-Semitism. The Prague Political Purges put on trial fourteen defendants. Eleven of the fourteen were of Jewish origin. All were found guilty, and eleven of the fourteen were condemned to death. The remaining three were sentenced to life imprisonment. All of the defendants were devoted Communists, having shed any religious, ethnic, or national identity in their pursuit of a socialist utopia. Yet, the trial's main ideological thrust was anti-Semitism. The Slansky Trial of 1952 came as a sharp blow to Jews across a spectrum of political, religious, and national affiliations. The Purge Trials forced many Jews to reexamine their positions vis-à-vis Zionism, Communism, and the Left as a traditionally popular choice for Jews. The trial held unique significance as Jews sought to redefine what it meant to be Jewish in a post-Holocaust world. Despite the trial's overt use of anti-Semitic tropes, historians have yet to properly explore how Jews, both within and beyond the Iron Curtain, experienced the trial. The impact of the Slansky affair remains a glaring omission both in the history of post-war Jewry as well as post-war Eastern Europe. I will explore how Jews, in a post-Holocaust era, experienced and reacted to officially sanctioned acts of anti-Semitism.

In 1943, on what would have been the twenty fifth anniversary of Czechoslovak independence, Dr. Stephen S. Wise, President of the American Jewish Congress wrote,

No people has stood out more resolutely, more mightily against Nazi tyranny and Nazi brutality than Czechoslovakia. The joyous thing to remember at this period of celebration is that the end of enslavement is at hand. The day of liberation will soon be here. The spirit of Masaryk still lives in the souls of the sons and daughters of Czechoslovakia.¹

Dr. Wise expressed these words while Czechoslovakia ceased to exist as an independent entity. The first Czechoslovak Republic had been torn asunder by Nazi Germany. The Czech lands became directly occupied by Nazi forces, while Slovakia seceded only to become a puppet regime of the Nazi dictatorship. Notwithstanding its tragic fate and in spite of the fact that Czechoslovak Jewry was being systematically annihilated as part of the Nazi “Final Solution,” Dr. Wise retained his belief in the Czechoslovak state and people as a formidable ally of the Jews.

Unlike the majority of interwar Europe’s states, Czechoslovakia remained a functioning democracy until its dissolution by Nazi Germany in 1938. This multi-ethnic, confessional, and linguistic state, carved from the recently dissolved Austro-Hungarian Empire, stood firm as an island of tolerance and liberal parliamentarism in what was largely a sea of rightist, authoritarian, and fascist regimes. While the question of minority rights still loomed large in the public life of interwar Czechoslovakia, with tensions often running high between the various national groups of this heterogeneous state, its relative stability and democratic character shown that much more brightly as such characteristics grew ever fainter across the European continent.

¹ Czechoslovak Jewish Representative Committee, Czechoslovak Jewry: Past and Future (New York: Spett Printing Company, 1943), 9.

For Europe's Jews, the above image of Czechoslovakia held unique significance as anti-Semitism became an increasingly prominent reality in their everyday lives. The Czech lands, where Jews tended to be assimilated, were, by no means, free of anti-Semitism, and in Slovakia, where Jews tended to be more religious and where the population adhered more strongly to conservative Catholic doctrines, anti-Semitism was even more pronounced. However, Jews, in interwar Czechoslovakia, alone among the states of post-WWI Europe, were recognized as a national minority and received state-backed legal protection. While many Jews chose to identify themselves as Czechs, Germans, Slovaks, and Hungarians, they were given the option of declaring "Jewish" as their chosen nationality. As Hillel Kieval has written, "In the context of interwar East Central Europe, Czechoslovakia's concessions to Jewish nationalism were, in fact, unprecedented."²

Stemming from interwar Czechoslovakia's favorable posture towards its Jewish citizens, many leading Jews and Jewish communities outside of the country held the first Czechoslovak Republic in high esteem. Their positive regard was further deepened by Tomas G. Masaryk, the country's first president, and his well-known defense of Jewish rights and nationhood. "Czech Jews on the whole {writes Kieval} demonstrated the greatest enthusiasm for Masaryk and his small party, seeing in him a staunch opponent of antisemitism, a defender of Jewish aspirations for social and political acceptance, and a promoter of the democratic secular state."³ Many Jews saw the Czechs as kindred souls, and believed that the Czech struggle for national independence held much in common with their own. As Kieval notes, Czechs likewise saw in the Jewish national movement, a

² Hillel Kieval, *Languages of Community: The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 213.

³ Kieval, *Languages of Community*, 200.

“version of their own national renaissance, an echo of their own efforts to secure a Czech future through cultural and political autonomy.”⁴

Dr. Leo Zelmanovits, a Czechoslovak representative of the World Jewish Congress, echoed this sentiment while exiled in London during the Second World War,

Jews, the world over, deplored “Munich”; they deplored the treatment meted out to, and the misfortune which had overtaken the Masaryk and Benes State. During the twenty years of the State's existence, this was one of the few countries in Central Europe—if not the only country—in which the treatment of the Jewish community had given no cause for concern or complaint on the part of world Jewry. On the contrary, it was well known to the Jews, wherever they resided, that the statesmen of Czechoslovakia were always ardent supporters of the principle that there should be justice and equality for the Jewish people. From 1933, and after the occupation of Austria, the Czechoslovak Republic became a haven for many thousands of Jews who were able to escape from the fiendish clutches of Hitlerism. Jews deplored the destruction of this “island” of democracy and tolerance. They regarded it as a blow against themselves.⁵

Despite previous episodes of anti-Semitism in the Czech lands, such as the Hilsner blood liable trial of 1899, the perception of interwar Czechoslovakia as a safe haven for Jews achieved widespread popularity within many Jewish circles, and far from being diminished by the tragedy of Munich, this sentiment intensified during the war years. As one Czech Jew put it, “It is to be hoped that the German hangman will not succeed in his resolve to break forever the ties that have united generations of Israel and of the Czechoslovak peoples...”⁶

It is hardly a surprise then that when little more than seven years after WWII and the Holocaust, Jews, worldwide, were shocked as Communist Czechoslovakia staged one of post-WWII's most blatant acts of state-sponsored anti-Semitism. The Prague political purges of 1952, also known as the Slansky trial, put on trial fourteen defendants. Eleven

⁴ Kieval, *Languages of Community*, 214.

⁵ Czechoslovak Jewish Representative Committee, *Czechoslovak Jewry: Past and Future*, 15.

⁶ Czechoslovak Jewish Representative Committee, *Czechoslovak Jewry: Past and Future*, 5.

of the fourteen were of “Jewish origin,” and the Communist Party, the state, and media lost no opportunity in emphasizing this fact. Among those arrested were leading Communist officials, men who had abandoned their Jewish identities for Communist ones and devoted their lives to the revolutionary cause. Rudolf Slansky, for whom the trial is named, was the party’s General Secretary, one of the most powerful and prominent leaders in post-war Czechoslovakia as well as a staunch Stalinist.

As Karel Kaplan has written in his thorough investigation of the trial’s proceedings, the case’s main ideological thrust was “anti-Semitism pure and simple”.⁷ The crimes for which they were accused, namely Zionism, bourgeois nationalism, Titoism and Trotskyism, were all fabricated. Responding to the trial, B’nai Brith issued the following statement,

Anti-Semitism is the distinguishing feature that sets off the Prague affair from all previous Soviet purge trials. The prosecutor's indictment and the robot-like testimony of the doomed defendants made clear that neither “bourgeois nationalists” nor “Zionists” alone — but Jews — are the target of the most vicious anti-Semitic attack by a major power since Nazi Germany.⁸

Such an utterance would have been inconceivable just five years earlier, when Czechoslovakia showed itself as one of Zionism’s most ardent supporters. While Jewish reactions to the Slansky trial were varied and complex, the overall sentiment expressed by Jewish leaders and organizations was that of disappointment and disillusionment with the once revered Czechoslovak people and, perhaps even more significantly, with Communism as a viable solution to the “Jewish question.”

It is beyond the scope of this study to properly explain why Communist Czechoslovakia embarked upon a wholesale campaign of anti-Semitism. While this

⁷ Karel Kaplan, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary*, Trans. Karel Kavanda (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 133-4.

⁸ Anti-Defamation League of B’nai Brith, *The Protocols and the Purge Trial* (New York, 1952-1953).

question is crucial in fully grasping the Slansky story, the necessary documents to do so, are currently unavailable to the author. The following pages will primarily deal with the effects of the Prague trial on a Jewish population still struggling with the ravages of WWII and the Holocaust. I will use a variety of sources, including documents issued by leading Jewish organizations, both Jewish and non-Jewish periodicals and publications, memoirs, and I will seek to build upon the work of others. Many have investigated the Slansky trial, but little is known about its impact on post-WWII Jewry. It is my hope to fill in this historical gap.

As Bradley Abrams has written in his investigation of Czechoslovakia's immediate post-WWII intellectual life, "The equation is simple: no Second World War, no Soviet-style communist Eastern Europe."⁹ Nazi occupation and the vast destruction wrought by World War II transformed Czechoslovak society.

The experiences of 1938 to 1945 {writes Abrams} ripped the fabric of the interwar societies, reconfigured social hierarchies, reorganized economies, reshuffled political allegiances, caused a reevaluation of both foreign and domestic political priorities, triggered a rethinking of the meaning of the nations involved, and catalyzed forces aiming at the fundamental restructuring of the states of the region.¹⁰

Expanding upon Abrams assumption, the same may be said of the Slansky trial – No Stalin, no Soviet style political purges in the satellite states of East/Central Europe. However, in its 1968 investigation into the Slansky trial, Debcek's regime admitted that, "While the causes of the Czechoslovak trials can undoubtedly be found in external agencies, these in themselves do not explain the magnitude and savagery of the operation

⁹ Bradley Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 10.

¹⁰ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 10.

– something utterly alien to the country's traditions.”¹¹ Stalin alone, therefore, cannot explain the tragedy of 1952. The Czechoslovak state, Communist Party, and population at large showed themselves to be willing participants in the witch-hunt for enemies of the socialist cause and especially for those of Jewish origin.

In all the countries of interwar East/Central Europe, the Communist Party was banned from participating in public political life. Despite its desire to overthrow the very regime in whose parliament it sat, the Communist Party of interwar Czechoslovakia was permitted to and actively participated in the democratic process. In 1925, it received 13.2 percent of the vote and in 1929, this number dropped slightly to 10.5 percent.¹² While these figures indicate that the majority of Czechoslovak society aligned itself with non-communist factions, it did not share the same revulsion for Communism as did its Hungarian and Polish neighbors.

The experience of World War II along with its pre-war status as a legal political party contributed to the sweeping electoral victories of the Czechoslovak communist Party in the immediate post-war era. Its electoral rise to power set it apart from other post-war states of East/Central Europe where Communists, with indispensable aid from the Soviet Union, seized the reigns of government. In the beginning years of their political dominance, it seemed as though the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia might embark upon their own “Road to Socialism.” Their rise to power was accompanied by a revision of the Party’s public face. As Abrams remarks, “The Czech radical left performed a simultaneous two-sided transformation: the Communist Party became super-

¹¹ Komunistická Strana Československa, Ustřední Vybor Komise pro Vyřizování Stranických Rehabilitací, *The Czechoslovak Political Trials, 1950-1954: the Suppressed Report of the Dubček Government’s Commission of Inquiry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971), 22-3.

¹² Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 54-5.

patriotic, and Czech history was reinterpreted to make the communist movement the logical inheritor of the best values of the nation, by portraying the Communist Party as walking in the footsteps of the greatest figures of Czech history.”¹³ Building upon their social and political authority, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia achieved a type of national legitimacy. The national conflicts between Czechs and Germans that had often plagued political life before WWII, took on a violent character in the post-war era, as approximately three million “Germans” were forcibly expelled from the states of Eastern Europe. In the Czech case, it was imperative that the Communists adopt a uniquely Czech brand of the Marxist doctrine as nationalism resurged immediately following the war.

The Czechoslovak Road to Socialism would build upon a culture which the Communists declared to be particularly well-suited for the transition to a Marxist-Leninist society. At the same time, however, the transition to socialism could only take place once the Czechoslovak people had purged themselves of all those characteristics which led to their downfall and occupation by Nazi Germany. Perhaps with more foresight than he realized, the party ideologue Nedely wrote, “We must not think that we were as immune to fascism as we told ourselves. We have more of this fascism in ourselves than we think. ... We must destroy it also in us.”¹⁴ Political purges had played an important role in the Soviet Union since the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Stalin, with the show trials and Great Terror of the late 1930s, rendered the political purge an integral part of party life. As the Communist hold on power strengthened in the post-war states of East/Central Europe, purge trials became an increasingly prevalent feature of public life. Well before the Slansky trial, the Rajk trial in Hungary and the

¹³ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 89.

¹⁴ Quoted in Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation*, 115.

Kostov trial in Bulgaria attained significant coverage throughout the Soviet sphere of influence. The same type of paranoid vigilance which characterized the Communist Party of the Soviet Union besieged the satellite states of East/Central Europe. Czechoslovakia, with its widespread popular support for socialism, had the largest Communist Party in the Soviet bloc. Leading Communists saw this not as a sign of victory, but rather as a wake-up call to rid the party of non-Communist elements.

Among those countries drawn into the Soviet sphere of influence after WWII, Czechoslovakia was the most historically liberal, free, and, west-oriented. In 1949, C.L. Sulzberger, reporter for *The New York Times*, wrote,

Upon terminating a visit to Czechoslovakia, one is forced to conclude that this most recent people's democracy represents rather an anomaly.

A Westerner certainly encounters a more amiable reception there than is typical in Eastern Europe nowadays... There is not much visible indication that President Klement Gottwald heads a "police" state... Superficially, life is easy and bourgeois. Baroque Prague is filled with comfortably dressed people... Strolling beneath seventeenth-century palaces, one can watch swimmers and rowers enjoying the lovely Vltava (Moldau) River.

Plump youngsters gulp enormous sandwiches—cheap with ration tickets—in the cafeterias. Workers obtain huge meals of dumplings and meat, in factory messes... There is no obvious atmosphere of fear or terror, either in Prague or in the country towns.¹⁵

As Sulzberger's remarks indicate, Czechoslovakia retained much of its prewar character. Moscow, as a result, feared that Czechoslovakia might stray too far from the Soviet center, providing a precedent for other satellite states to do the same. As the Dubcek report put it, Czechoslovakia was "the weakest link in the community of People's Democracies. Simultaneously they stressed her special position as an industrially advanced and strategically important country. And so, seeing her both as a key member

¹⁵ C.L. Sulzberger, "Czechoslovakia as Viewed as Anomaly in Soviet Bloc," *The New York Times*, August 3, 1949, 3.

of the community and as its weakest link, and possessed as they were by a belief in imminent war, they were, inevitably, obsessed by the aim of raising Czechoslovakia to a level that would really safeguard her key role.”¹⁶ Rakosi, the leader of Communist Hungary, confirmed this sentiment when in 1949, he remarked, “Considering how broad an attack they launched against relatively small and insignificant Hungary, one has to assume that international imperialists are even more interested in the greater and more important Czechoslovakia.”¹⁷

It is crucial that we see the Slansky trial in the light of Czechoslovakia’s dual existence as one of the most important assets within the Soviet bloc and as the sole satellite population with real democratic experience. The hunt for political enemies in Czechoslovakia began in 1949 when Rudolf Slansky, with an unforeseeable tragic irony, announced before a meeting of regional party secretaries, “We cannot be satisfied with not having found our own Rajk or Kostov, for plenty of them have been planted here. We have to realize that we are far from uncovering and unveiling the complete network of agents in our midst. As the Cominform resolution states, our entire party has to heighten its revolutionary watchfulness and vigilance and systematically uncover agents.”¹⁸ As Karel Kaplan describes, the Czechoslovak purges went through many revisions before authorities decided upon naming Slansky as head of a Zionist led conspiracy against the state. The trial’s anti-Semitic character would emerge a bit later as Stalin launched his own anti-Jewish campaign within the Soviet Union.

Stalin began his anti-Jewish assault in the late 1940s as the Soviet Union grew increasingly antagonistic towards the newly created state of Israel. In the late 1940s and

¹⁶ Komunistická Strana Československa, *The Czechoslovak Political Trials*, 49-50.

¹⁷ Quoted in Kaplan, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary*, 48.

¹⁸ Quoted in Kaplan, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary*, 62.

early 1950s, he attacked all manner of Soviet Jewish life. His attacks first sought to dismantle and discredit the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) which had played an important role during WWII. These individuals had been encouraged, during the war, to make contacts with western Jewish agencies and individuals in the hope of gaining funding for the Soviet war effort. After the war, like many other Soviet citizens who had returned from the west, they were persecuted for their exposure to western values and culture. Following the JAC trials, Stalin then sought to rid the Soviet Union of all forms of Jewish culture. He struck out against the country's leading Jewish intellectual and cultural figures. The anti-Jewish activities of Stalin culminated in the January, 1953 announcement of the so called "Doctor's Plot," in which a number of Jewish doctors were accused of using their medical access to harm and kill some of the Soviet Union's leading personalities. Like the accusations levied in the Slansky trial, the above attacks were all fabricated by Stalin and other leaders within the Bolshevik Party.¹⁹

That the Slansky trial and the anti-Jewish activities of the Soviet Union derived, in large part, from the personality of Stalin himself is indisputable. As Brent and Naumov have written, "The Doctors' Plot was the logical culmination of Stalin's entire illogical system."²⁰ It is no surprise that the Doctors' Plot was denounced and dropped from public discourse within weeks of Stalin's death in March 1953. The victims of the Slansky trial, however, were not so fortunate. They were convicted in November 1952. Eleven of the fourteen were hanged, while the remaining three received life imprisonment. As G.

¹⁹ For a detailed account of the Doctor's plot and Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign within the Soviet Union, see G. Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows: Anti-Semitism in Stalin's Russia* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995) and Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Pavlovich Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: the Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003)

²⁰ Brent and Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime*, 54.

Kostyrchenko has expressed, “No clear answer, however, has as yet been provided by researchers to the key question: What was the predominant factor in Stalin's anti-Semitism...”²¹ The same can be said of the wave of anti-Semitism which swept Czechoslovakia both during and following the Slansky trial. Stalin may have instigated the anti-Jewish campaign, but he found ample support both within and beyond the borders of the Soviet Union.

In November 1952, The American Jewish Committee (AJC) stated, in a pamphlet entitled – “The Anti-Semitic Nature of the Czechoslovak Trial,” “The trial of Rudolf Slansky and thirteen co-defendants- which took place in Prague November 20-27, 1952, and ended with the hanging of eleven defendants on December 3, 1952, has very serious implications for the security of the Jews throughout the world.”²² In a statement prepared by the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington D.C., published in the Washington Post, the previous sentiment took on an even graver character,

AS WE REFLECT on the meaning and background of the Communist purge trials in Prague, we experience a sense of alarm at the Communists' open, brazen use of anti-Semitism in connection with the trials. There is deep anxiety about what this deliberate use of anti-Jewish propaganda may portend! for the fate of the 2.5 million Jews in Eastern Europe who managed to survive the Hitler holocaust and are now sealed behind the Iron Curtain.²³

The Prague Political Purges, from their outset, inspired fear and outrage within Jewish communities worldwide. Less than a decade after the Holocaust and with the creation of a Jewish state, acts of state-sponsored anti-Semitism took on new meaning for a post-war Jewry still coping directly with the ramifications of the Nazi genocide. Pre-war fears of

²¹ Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows*, 11.

²² American Jewish Committee, *The Anti-Semitic Nature of the Czechoslovak Trial* (New York, 1952).

²³ Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington, “Reds Boldly Display Nazi Anti-Semitism,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1952, B2.

pogroms were supplanted by very real and palpable anxieties over the prospect of future attempts at mass extermination. The AJC candidly asserted, “The Prague trial having declared that the Jews are a criminal group, there is the terrible danger that mass deportations and mass exterminations will follow. The Prague trial may be a prelude to a pogrom of genocidal proportions.”²⁴ In a report from Israel on the rise of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, the author exclaimed,

The Russian outbreak of “purges” among Jews had come to Israel as a grave blow... Russian communism has gone over to racial persecution, thereby shedding the cloak, of a claim to higher values of equality... Israelis are ever conscious of the recent loss of 6 million Jews. They therefore do not wish to lose any more... Jews are persecuted qua Jews - Jewry, qua Jewry», is being eliminated».²⁵

In a speech before the Knesset in February, 1953, David Ben Gorian pronounced,

The cry of the millions butchered and burnt by the Nazi hangmen and their accomplices in various European countries still ring in our ears; and still in those very countries the age-old hatred against the people scattered abroad and dispersed” still burns... I have no accurate and complete knowledge of the motives and purposes of the anti-Jewish campaign that began in Prague and has continued, with all the powerful resources of a totalitarian regime, in many other countries, but as a Jew with a long and bitter experience, I cannot help knowing the appalling consequences of an anti-Jewish campaign for millions of our people--the remnants of European Jewry, and perhaps not only for them.²⁶

The achievement of a Jewish nation-state coupled with Hitler’s attempts to exterminate all Jews endowed any future bouts of persecution with a global character. The above statements suggest that many Jews came to see national borders as meaningless barriers against anti-Semitic designs. Whether the above statements reflect a shift in Jewish modes of self-identification, is difficult to say. However, what is clear is that the

²⁴ AJC, *Anti-Semitic Nature of the Prague Trial*, 2.

²⁵ American Jewish Committee, Report from Israel (New York), January, 1953, 1.

²⁶ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*.

experiences of the Holocaust and World War Two caused many Jews to view acts of persecution as potential preludes to total annihilation.

As Kostyrchenko has written, “The Stalinist regime's attitude toward so-called Jewish bourgeois nationalists and “stateless cosmopolitans” reflected its phenomenal hypocrisy and perfidy.”²⁷ The Slansky trial branded its Jewish defendants as individuals incapable of truly absorbing socialist values and of participating in the construction of a socialist society namely because of their Jewish-bourgeois upbringings. At the same time, these very same defendants were accused of harboring vast international designs, of being, at once, masters of and slaves to the West. As the AJC asserted, “Cosmopolitanism and Jewish bourgeois nationalism are in fact only two sides of the same coin, and a bad coin at that.”²⁸ Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaign, therefore, found its citizens of Jewish origin guilty of being, on the one hand, too Jewish and on the other, individuals uncommitted to one particular people or nation.

The trial presented its eleven Jewish defendants as entirely alien to the Czechoslovak people. Their Jewish origins prevented them from truly assimilating into Czech society, and moreover, had rendered them incapable of understanding the workers’ plight. Such accusations were further complemented by historically well-established conflicts between Czechs and Germans, and of the close association of Jews with the latter. The testimony of Bedrich Geminder, former Director of International Affairs in the state apparatus, provides us with the most glaring example of Soviet attempts to present Jews as non-national and ideologically corrupt.

The judge: What nationality are you?
Geminder: Czech.'

²⁷ Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows*, 168.

²⁸ AJC, *The Anti-Semitic Nature of the Prague Trial*, 20-1.

The judge: Can you speak Czech well?'
Geminder: Yes.'
The judge: Do you want an interpreter?
Geminder: No.'
The judge: Can you understand the questions and will you be able to reply in Czech?'
Geminder: Yes.'
The judge: Are you fully aware of the crime of which you have been accused in the bill of indictment by the public prosecutor?'
Geminder: Yes, I plead guilty to every charge.'
The prosecutor: What was your attitude towards the workers of Czechoslovakia?'
Geminder: 'I was indifferent to the interests of the Czech people, and I have never felt any affinities with them. Their national interests have always remained alien to me.'
The prosecutor: What school did you go to?'
Geminder: 'I went to the German school of Ostrava. I left Czechoslovakia in 1919 and ended my secondary studies in Berlin where I took my certificate. At the end of my studies I frequented petty-bourgeois, cosmopolitan and Zionist circles, where I met people of German nationality. This all contributed to the fact that I don't really know the Czech language well.'
The prosecutor: In all this time you never really learned to speak Czech well, not even in 1946 when you came to Czechoslovakia and occupied important posts in the Communist Party?'
Geminder: No, I didn't learn to speak Czech properly.
The prosecutor: What language can you speak perfectly?
Geminder: German.'
The prosecutor: Can you really speak German properly?
Geminder: 'I haven't spoken it for a long time, but I know it well.'
The prosecutor: Can you speak German as well as Czech?'
Geminder: Yes.'
The prosecutor: So you can't really speak any language properly. You are a typical cosmopolitan. As such you sneaked into the Communist Party.'
Geminder: 'I joined the Czech Communist Party in 1921 and remained a member until I was unmasked in 1951.'²⁹

Geminder, as neither German, nor Czech, nor Communist, represented Soviet efforts to capitalize on the intense nationalism of its post-war satellites with its violent anti-German character, while advancing Communist ideology within nationally acceptable terms.

However, what disturbed and shocked many Jews more than the accusation of “bourgeois-nationalism,” and “cosmopolitanism” was the relentless insistence that the

²⁹ Artur London, *The Confession* (New York: Murrow, 1970), 248-9.

Slansky defendants had organized and participated in a worldwide Jewish conspiracy to topple Soviet regimes. As one pamphlet on the anti-Jewish character of the Prague trial argued,

THE feature of the Prague Trial which disturbed Jews deeply in Britain and other countries was not that the large majority of the accused were Jews. In former purges Jews also figured conspicuously without that fact producing any repercussion in Jewish circles. In the present instance, however, a difference was detected which struck the average Jew as portentous, ... One Jew was accused of appointing other Jews to office in key positions... so that the impression was given that a man of Jewish upbringing or origin was in fact alien to the true spirit of Czechoslovakia, and that there was a world-wide conspiracy in which Jewish Communists like Slansky, and other Jewish Communists, worked together with Jewish capitalists for the same purpose.³⁰

Another report concerning public opinion on the Prague trial declared,

{The Prague trial} is unique, not because the majority of the defendants were Jews; not because of the absurd and abominable charges readily confessed to; not because Zionism and Israel were the chief objectives of the ad hoc police contrivances, but because, for the first time in the contemporary history of socialism — and its heirs — the traditional formula of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy participated in by Jews as such, regardless of their apparent dissimilarities, has been resurrected openly and consciously by a responsible Communist source.³¹

Many Jewish leaders and organizations saw in the Slansky trial the resurrection of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a concept broadly circulated early in the twentieth century and employed widely by the Nazi regime. The anti-Defamation League published a pamphlet devoted entirely to the trial's overt use of the Protocols. In it, the ADL declared,

HALF-CENTURY AGO, the Russians invented one of the biggest and crudest lies in the history of mankind. It was a political lie, diabolically conceived and viciously spread to the point where it became a world wide hoax. That lie was the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, a fantastic forgery that has since become the sacred book of anti-Semitism. Hitler borrowed it as a propaganda weapon for

³⁰ *The Prague Trial: Its Anti-Jewish Implications* (London: Woburn, 1953).

³¹ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial* (New York, 1953).

fascism. Now, in a new generation, its creators, the Russians, are reviving the lie. This time as propaganda for communism.³² One commentator in *The New York Post* wrote that “We are witnessing in Prague the Red version of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, in a form reminiscent of Goebbels and Himmler.”³³ In its official response to Czechoslovakia’s request to have recalled from his post the Israeli ambassador to both it and Poland, the Israeli government declared, “The indictment, the so-called admissions and evidence as well as the prosecutor's summary read like a new edition of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” fabricated in their time by the secret police of Tsarist Russia.”³⁴

That eleven of the fourteen defendants in the Prague trial were Jewish is not what alarmed many Jews beyond the Iron Curtain. The Soviet Union had demonstrated anti-Semitic tendencies before the Czechoslovak purges with the attack on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and on Soviet Jewish intellectual and cultural life. However, the Slansky defendants had long since shed their Jewish identities. They were Communists first and foremost, totally and completely devoted to the building of socialism within Czechoslovakia and eventually throughout the world. The ADL further asserted,

Unlike Hitler, the Kremlin, for staging purposes, pinned the hoax not on practicing Jews, but on dedicated Marxists of Jewish birth who had disavowed their heritage to serve as apostles of communism.³⁵

The absurdity of the charges levied against Slansky and his co-conspirators – that they, the most devoted of communists, had organized and carried out a Zionist-backed plot to overthrow the Czechoslovak government – signaled to many Jews that the real crime was not cosmopolitanism nor bourgeois-nationalism, but Jewishness alone.

³² B’nai Brith, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

³³ Max Lerner, “The Slansky Trial,” *The New York Post*, November 24, 1952 quoted in *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*, 25.

³⁴ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*.

³⁵ B’nai Brith, *The Protocols and the Elders of Zion*, 3-4.

Those outraged by the Prague political purges held little compassion for Slansky and his co-defendants. Their concern derived not from the tragic fate of the trial's fourteen victims, but from the ominous message the trial's anti-Semitic character presented for those Jews perceived to be trapped behind the Iron Curtain. The JCC of greater Washington D.C. asserted that,

As to those who were sentenced and executed in these recent Communist trials. Jews in the free world will feel no special urge to mourn for them. They were not Jews at all. Indeed, they were traitors to Judaism. Only through disavowal of all the principles of Judaism could they have been led to the service of Communist totalitarianism and, by an all-too-familiar route, through positions of power to the hangman's scaffold.³⁶

Another Jewish commentator on the Slansky trial wrote that,

{The} Jewish defendants were well-known and life-long servants of the Communist movement and had, as executives of the Communist apparatus, helped in the suppression of the Zionist movement in Czechoslovakia. They were notoriously responsible for the stoppage of Jewish emigration from Czechoslovakia, amongst other things, and had never done anything to distinguish them in the slightest from quite subservient running-dogs of the Kremlin leadership.³⁷

Deep animosity sprang up between those Jews who remained faithful to the Communist cause and those who saw the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe as successors to Nazi Germany. The Slansky trial and later the Doctor's Plot in the Soviet Union caused significant, if not irrevocable, rifts in relations between Jews, Israel and the whole of the Communist world.

Czechoslovakia, in the immediate post-war era, had been one of the most vocal and instrumental supporters in the creation of the state of Israel. It had offered a key voice in calling for an end to the British mandate in Palestine and was one of the first country's to recognize the Jewish state. Czechoslovak support for the creation of a Jewish

³⁶ JCC of Washington D.C., "Memorandum on Anti-Semitism in Czech Purge Trial".

³⁷ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*.

homeland in Palestine was more than political, however. They supplied Ben Gorian's Haganah forces with much of their post-war arsenal when the rest of Europe flatly denied military aid to the Zionist cause. The Czechoslovak government undertook significant measures in transporting the arms to Palestine after Poland denied passage through its borders.³⁸

Given these actions as well as Czechoslovakia's aforementioned historically friendly attitudes towards the Jews, the Slansky trial came as a sharp blow to Jews who had felt sincere bonds with the Czechoslovak people. Moshe Sharett, Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs and second prime minister, in responding to the trial, exclaimed that,

Israel has always entertained a sincere sympathy for the Czechoslovak people. Israel has sought to establish and foster friendly relations with the present Czechoslovak state. Israel obtained valuable aid from Czechoslovakia during her War of Liberation for which she paid in full. The liberation of Czechoslovakia from Hitler's storm troopers stands desecrated before the whole world by this attempt to revive his vile spirit within her borders.³⁹

In one of its official responses to the Prague trial, Israel wrote that,

{The Slansky trial} stand{s} in striking contrast to the cordial relations which, until recent years, prevailed between Czechoslovakia and Israel. The people of Israel, in common with Jews throughout the world, have always been animated by feelings of sincere friendship for the Czechoslovak nation, of deep sympathy for its struggles for freedom and of joy in its liberation. At the same time the leaders of modern Czechoslovakia — from President-Liberator Thomas Masaryk onward — have upheld Zionism as one of the most progressive and creative movements of the present era and gave full support to its aim of achieving for the martyred Jewish people security and freedom in its own country. Those at present at the helm of the Czechoslovak Republic expressed profound understanding for the tragedy inflicted upon the Jews of Europe by Nazi barbarism and hailed the emergence of the State of Israel as a great act of restitution and liberation. During its War of Independence Israel received invaluable help from Czechoslovakia... Such having been only so recently the attitude of Czechoslovakia to Israel it is profoundly regrettable that during the past two years the notes of the... Czechoslovak authorities reflected utterly different and ever less friendly conceptions. The people of Israel are deeply shocked by the brutal affront thus

³⁸ Kaplan, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary*, 238.

³⁹ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*, 10-11.

caused to its national self-respect and by the violent hostility with which its feelings of friendship towards the Czechoslovak people have been reciprocated.⁴⁰

The Slansky trial, in sum, shattered the myth of Czechoslovak particularism for many Jews. Rather than paragons of democracy and toleration, the Czechoslovak people stood before the world as one of the worst offenders of anti-Jewish activities. Sharett further lamented,

Our people is endowed with a long memory. It will never forget any act of help and kindness extended to it in its hour of need. It will ever recall all aid received for its salvation and the defense of its freedom. Yet the Prague trial has cast a dark, ugly blot on the glorious record of friendship between the peoples of Israel and Czechoslovakia. It has imposed a heavy, a grievous burden on the memory of the Jewish people.⁴¹

As Ezra Mendelsohn has written, “The left, however it is defined, has had a profound impact upon the modern Jewish community.”⁴² From the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, communism had become closely associated with Jewishness, and for many, the two became inseparable ideas. Why so many Jews were drawn to the left is not so difficult to understand. Communism, Jonathan Frankel has written, “promised an escape from the realities of life within a minority marked off variously by ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic boundaries into a new world where all such boundaries would be eliminated.”⁴³ “The Left” encompassed a broad range of opinions and ideologies and perhaps even more so for those Jews who embraced it. Members of the Bund rejected Soviet style Marxism as well as Zionism, seeking to create a socialist-Jewish territory within European boundaries. Groups, such as Poale Zion, adhered to the Soviet line, but

⁴⁰ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*.

⁴¹ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*, 9.

⁴² Ezra Mendelsohn ed., *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 2.

⁴³ Jonathan Frankel ed., *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

held fervent Zionist aspirations, and yet still more Jews hoped to shed their national identities all together and assimilate fully into the working populace of the Soviet Union. Whether pledging allegiance to the Soviet Union or not, Jews on the left could not ignore the only self-described socialist state in human history. Even for those Jews who rejected the Stalinist regime, few could deny that it was Stalin and his vast Soviet army who ultimately defeated Hitler and liberated what remained of European Jewry. Despite its authoritarian character, however, few could imagine that the Soviet Union “also had its own cruel blows to strike at its Jews.”⁴⁴

The Prague purges sent a disruptive ripple throughout the Jewish left. Those Jews and organizations unaffiliated with the left, while alarmed by the Slansky trial, did not hesitate in their condemnation of the overt anti-Semitism being displayed in the Soviet world. Jews, however, who had cast their lot with the socialist cause and in particular, with the Soviet Union, were dealt a grave blow by the trial proceedings. As James Waterman Wise, son of the well-known and here previously quoted Jewish leader Dr. Stephen S. Wise, wrote in the wake of the Slansky trial,

These lines are hard to write. They constitute not only the personal admission that I was wrong in a conviction earnestly held, but that the basis of that conviction was utterly false. I refer, of course, to the status of the Jews in the Soviet Union, and to Russia's adoption of anti-Semitism as a political instrument., »... A little late to say all this? Ought I not to have seen and understood long, long ago that any nation which treats human beings as means to “social” ends, would eventually find it “expedient” and “dialectically necessary” to sacrifice the classic victim of oppressors — the Jew? The answer is a humble and penitent “Yes.” But it must not be a silent “Yes.” Because < the error of mind and heart which it confesses was not a silent error.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows*, 13.

⁴⁵ AJC, *Reaction of American Communists to Soviet Anti-Semitism*, (Library of Jewish Information, 1952), 6.

As one Israeli observer put it, “There is this additional aspect of the- new appearance of anti-Semitism in Russia: It shatters the belief of all the many reds, purple reds, pinks, near pinks and white pinks in Israel, who until recently still granted Russian communism a place among the higher ideals of the times. For once, dialectic materialism has failed to give, the answer.”⁴⁶ More than sever the perceived tradition of friendly relations between the Czechoslovak and Jewish peoples, the Slansky trial compelled many Jews to rethink and ultimately, abandon their faith in the Soviet Union and in the socialist cause.

In addition to the crisis of conscience triggered by the Prague trial, political upheavals and realignment also ensued. Communism became widely condemned throughout Jewish circles and in particular, within Israel. The Slansky trial came as a dual assault to those Israelis who had previously towed the Soviet line. The trial charged its defendants not only as agents of bourgeois-nationalism, but as Zionist conspirators seeking to overthrow Communism. The Prague purges suggested to many that Zionism and Communism were incompatible. The effects of the Slansky trial proved particularly harsh upon Israel’s Mapam party, whose political identity revolved around a synthesis of Zionism and Communism. While Mapam remained independent of the Communist Party, it supported the Soviet Union. Mapam, perhaps more than any other party, was thrown into a state of turmoil with its fundamental ideological outlook shattered by the very regime to whom they looked for guidance. As Pinahs Ginossar notes, in his study of Moshe Sneh, one of Mapam’s leaders, for a time, many believed, Jews and non-Jews, alike, that the Soviet Union might permit a degree of national autonomy in its post-war satellites. This instilled in many Jews with both Zionist and Communist aspirations the

⁴⁶ AJC, *Report from Israel*, 2.

hope that these two ideologies might find expression in the new state of Israel. As Sneh himself wrote in 1951,

It is a completely false claim that the Communist world absolutely rejects the process of the territorial concentration of the dispersed Jewish people and its transformation into a normal nation in the state of Israel. True, there is as yet no absolute acceptance, whether in thought or deed, of the Zionist solution to the Jewish national problem, but there is also no absolute rejection of this solution, either in some ideological declaration or in the practical arena.⁴⁷

As Ginossar describes, Mapam split into two factions in the wake of the Slansky trial. Sneh chose to join the faction unwilling to abandon its allegiance to Moscow. Increasingly marginalized from political life, Sneh with other leaders of Mapam who continued to deny the existence of Soviet anti-Semitism, later joined the Communist Party of Israel (Maki). It was, as Anita Shapira writes, “almost as if attitudes to the Soviet Union operated at one and the same time on two separate levels, that of empirical knowledge and that of political consciousness.”⁴⁸

While the Soviet Union, since the late 1940s, had gradually shown itself to be increasingly hostile to the new state of Israel, the Slansky trial and the short-lived Doctor’s Plot proved to be turning points in the future of Israeli-Soviet relations and, to a large extent, issued a fatal blow to the left as a refuge for the world’s Jews. Istvan Deak has argued that it was the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956 which “forever ended the symbiosis between Jews and the Communist party, not only in Hungary but everywhere.”⁴⁹ I would argue, however, that the Slansky trial, four years prior, dealt a fatal blow to the faith that many Jews held in the Soviet Union, and while some Jews

⁴⁷ Quoted in Pinahs Ginossar, “From Zionism to Communism and Back: The Case of Moshe Sneh (1948-1967)” in *Dark Times Dire Decisions*, 237-238.

⁴⁸ Anita Shapira, ““Black Night-White Snow”: Attitudes of the Palestinian Labor Movement to the Russian Revolution, 1917-1929,” in *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left*, 241.

⁴⁹ Istvan Deak, “Jews and Communism: The Hungarian Case,” in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions*, 55.

remained loyal to the Soviet regime, their position became increasingly marginal and untenable. In a report from Israel, circulated by the AJC, one author proclaimed that

It {the Soviet Union} once again throws Jews into one camp, by making it the enemy of the other. This statement has no ideological implication. It does not mean that Jews were ever pro-Russian, rather than pro-West. But, until recently, Israel had the choice, at least in theory, between East and West... {Israel has} been thrown by Russia into the western camp.⁵⁰

While some Jews, such as Sneh, still attempted to reconcile their Zionist and Communist ambitions, the Prague trial of 1952 forced most Jews to choose between the two, and as one author put it, “Most Israeli fellow travelers are Jews first and socialists second.”⁵¹

The Slansky trial, while having caused many Jews to reevaluate their stance towards the left and the Soviet Union, did not shake the faith of all Jewish adherents to Soviet ideology. For those Jews who had previously rejected Zionism as a suitable solution to the Jewish Question, the Prague trial further strengthened their commitment to Communism and specifically to its Soviet adaptation. Communist publications, including those devoted to issues relevant to the Jewish people, upheld the Slansky trial as an example of Soviet justice and condemned western criticisms of its proceedings. In the Jewish-socialist monthly journal, *Jewish Life* (later renamed *Jewish Currents*), managing editor Louis Harap wrote an extensive article presenting, as he put it, “The Truth About the Prague Trial.” Harap declared without reservation, “The widely publicized charge that Jews are being used as a “scapegoat” is false, for one reason, because the alleged need for it does not exist.”⁵² Harap went on to exclaim, “What we here wish to emphasize

⁵⁰ AJC, *Report from Israel*, 3.

⁵¹ AJC, *Report from Israel*.

⁵² Louis Harap, “Truth About the Prague Trial,” *Jewish Life* (New York), 1953, 3-4.

is that the target was not Jews but adherents of an ideology, which is only one of a number held by Jews.”⁵³

For Harap, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism constituted two completely distinct ideologies. The former, as a devoted Communist was a defensible, if not requisite, position. The latter was entirely anathema to the Soviet cause. He continued, “In the Soviet Union and the people’s democracies, anti-Semitism is a crime against the state, explicitly written into the constitution, together with a prohibition against all forms of racism and discrimination. What is more, this prohibition against anti-Semitism and racism is enforced.”⁵⁴ As evidence Harap urged his readers to “Consider: Jews occupy some of the highest and most important positions in the socialist countries. What anti-Semitic government has ever placed Jews in the highest posts? What sense can there be in the accusation that these countries are “officially anti-Semitic”; more, that they have now stepped into Hitler’s shoes in relation to the Jewish people?”⁵⁵

Harap, and others like him, believed truly and fully in a Soviet Union incapable of folly. Communism to individuals such as Harap was a righteous truth, and if the Czechoslovak state found guilty fourteen of its citizens, the majority of whom happened to be Jewish, then so be it. Harap took at face value the totally scripted testimonies of Slansky and his co-conspirators. “It is hard to believe {wrote Harap} that 14 men, who possessed considerable ability and were noted public figures, would all confess to something for which they knew the penalty was death... The only sane conclusion at

⁵³ Harap, “Truth about the Prague Trial,” 4.

⁵⁴ Harap, “Truth About the Prague Trial,” 5-6.

⁵⁵ Harap, “Truth About the Prague Trial,” 7.

which one can arrive is that these men confessed because they were confronted with irrefutable evidence of their guilt.”⁵⁶

Harap concluded that,

The truth is that the general press and leaders of middle class Jewish life, in their zeal to further hysterical war propaganda against the socialist countries, have promoted certain confusions that are not entirely innocent. Hatred of socialism, of the Soviet Union, of those who are fighting for negotiations and mutual concessions between the United States and the Soviet Union to achieve a desperately needed peace have led these forces to give the impression that anti-Zionism is tantamount to anti-Semitism...⁵⁷

Harap represented that generation of Jewish intellectuals for whom the Soviet Union and the Peoples Democracies promised a future bereft of injustice and inequity. Moreover, such individuals believed that their convictions were right and irrefutable. The Bolshevik Revolution, as Anita Shapira has written, “was real for them, part of their own personal history, and even if they had witnessed acts of cruelty, wanton destruction and callousness, their image of the revolution remained, to a surprising extent, untarnished.”⁵⁸ Heda Margolius-Kovaly, in her memoirs, best described this mentality when she wrote, “Communism was the eternal ideal of humanity, we could not doubt the ideal, only ourselves.”⁵⁹ It is perhaps, in figures such as Harap, that we discern most vividly the tragic nature of the Slansky trial and of the Soviet experience as a whole. Worse than disillusionment, such individuals remained faithfully devoted to a regime in which Jews faced ongoing discrimination and the looming threat of physical violence, and it was this very faith which blinded them to these and other unfortunate realities.

⁵⁶ Harap, “Truth About the Prague Trial,” 14.

⁵⁷ Harap, “Truth About the Prague Trial,” 5-6.

⁵⁸ Shapira, “Black-Night, White Snow,” 237.

⁵⁹ Heda Margolius-Kovaly, *Under a Cruel Star: Life in Prague, 1941-1968* (New York: Holmes & Maier), 62.

Like their Soviet mentors, Harap and others like him revealed certain contradictions in their modes of thinking. Religion and nationality would find no place in the Communist paradise for which they strove. However, their communism and Jewishness were inextricably linked. After all, the journal which Harap edited was entitled “Jewish Life,” and directed towards an audience interested in matters both Jewish and Communist. Perhaps Jews like Harap saw in the Soviet Union a place, not where Jewishness would be eliminated, but where being Jewish simply didn’t matter.

As Harap alluded to in his scathing attack on western capitalists, the Slansky trial quickly became embroiled in Cold War politics. Politicians and Jewish organizations alike saw in the Prague purges an opportunity to organize their various constituencies. On November 25, 1952, the AJC’s Committee on Communism convened to deal directly with the Slansky trial. The minutes from this meeting underscore how sincere the belief held by its attendants was that the Slansky trial presented a serious threat to the safety of Eastern Europe’s Jews. The meeting’s participants proposed a three pronged course of action in response to the Prague trial:

- 1) the possibility, however slight, that an intensive public campaign might lessen the probable danger of deportation of the Czech Jews; 2) an intensive educational campaign among Jews on the facts of the trial, together with the past facts of Soviet anti-Semitism, will be the most effective means of awakening Jews to the reality of Communist totalitarianism; 3) tremendous Jewish public outcry on the subject will serve to dissociate Jews from Communism in the public mind.⁶⁰

Members of the committee, while stressing the necessity for action, also cautioned that they must tread carefully, lest their protests further endanger the already vulnerable Jewish population behind the Iron Curtain. The group was particularly interested in repudiating the trial without giving any further support to the notion of an international

⁶⁰ AJC, *Staff Committee on the Communist Problem*, (New York), May 19, 1952, 3.

Jewish conspiracy. It is clear, however, that the program suggested by the committee was not solely intended to effect change for those Jews under Soviet rule. In fact, the proposed agenda was as much for Jewish consumption as it was for a non-Jewish audience. The AJC saw in the Slansky trial an opportunity to not only expose the treatment of Jews in the Soviet Union, but to disassociate Jews from Communism, a prevalent theme during the Cold War era. The Prague purges enabled the AJC to demonstrate that Jews were Communism's victims, not its masters, and as such, they posed no threat to the American way of life.

The outbreak of overt anti-Semitism embodied in the Slansky trial enabled the new state of Israel to, as one *New York Times* reporter put it, “fulfill the basic task for which it was created—to defend the Jew who is persecuted because he is a Jew.”⁶¹ The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that police were called to protect the Czech delegation in Israel in the face of mass demonstrations.⁶² Zionists worldwide called upon the Soviet Union to allow her so called “bourgeois-Jewish” citizens to leave that country, arguing that they would undertake the operation themselves if need be.⁶³ Golda Meir (then Myerson), as Israel's delegate to the U.N., argued before the world's leading international body for widespread condemnation of the Prague trial and of the general display of anti-Semitism within the Soviet Union. As Israel's first ambassador to Moscow, Meir possessed first-hand knowledge of the condition of that country's Jews.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Dana Adam Schmidt, “Israel Pondering Anti-Czech Action,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 1952, 8.

⁶² “Prague Court Sentences Eleven to be Hanged,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 28, 1952, 1.

⁶³ “ZIONISTS ASK REDS FOR 2,500,000 JEWS,” *The New York Times*, January 19, 1953, 4.

⁶⁴ CHESLY MANLY, “Israel's Delegate to U. N. Rips Red Attacks on Jews,” *The Washington Post*, March 25, 1953, 8.

Non-Jewish voices also expressed their indignation at the Slansky trial. Then President Elect Dwight D. Eisenhower issued a statement read at a labor rally assembled in New York to protest the anti-Semitism seen in the Prague purges. He wrote,

The trial in Prague of Rudolf Slansky and his associates was a mockery of civilized and humanitarian values... their trial and execution, like every undertaking by a dictatorship, had to be a political act. This particular political act was designed to unloose a campaign of rabid anti-Semitism through Soviet Russia and the satellite nations of Eastern Europe... I am honored to take my stand with American Jewry, the trade unionists and all the other men and women of decent instincts.⁶⁵

Harry S. Truman, likewise condemned the Slansky trial in a statement closely echoing the sentiments of his successor.

The Prague trials follow closely the pattern established in the Moscow purge trials of the Nineteen Thirties. The pattern of purging its own ex-leaders has since been duplicated in nearly every European area under the control of the Kremlin. The purge trials have all been characterized by false charges, forced testimony and induced confessions. To these, the Prague Communists now added anti-Semitism. The tragic fate of 6,000,000 Jews at the hands of other totalitarian regimes does not permit us to witness the use of anti-Semitism without protest. The Jewish people are not alone in their concern over the implications of the Prague trials for the Jewish communities in Czechoslovakia and in the other Soviet satellite areas in Eastern Europe.

Decent men everywhere are disturbed by the revelations of the Prague trials. We Americans cannot condemn these procedures too forcefully.⁶⁶

In his first speech as president of the American Federation of Labor, George Meany launched a scathing attack on the Czechoslovak state and the Soviet Union for its use of anti-Semitism in the Prague trial. He charged Soviet Russia with, “the crime of genocide before the world on a scale unparalleled in human history.”⁶⁷ Meany added, “To the crimes of Trotzkyism, Titoism and deviationism they have now added the crime of

⁶⁵ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*, 12-14. Also quoted in *The New York Times*, December 22, 1952.

⁶⁶ American Zionist Council, *Public Opinion on the Prague Trial*, 14.

⁶⁷ “Meany Denounces Intent at Prague,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 1952, 26.

Zionism.”⁶⁸ Meany’s denunciation of the Slansky trial enabled him to at once condemn the Soviet regime while further disassociating the American labor movement from Communism in public opinion.

Despite the protests from leading politicians, Jewish leaders, and Jewish organizations, what the Prague trial revealed to most Jews was the futility of their outcries. The Slansky trial proceeded as planned, unencumbered by international protestations. Those defendants condemned to death were hanged in early December, 1952, and the remaining three remained in prison until the late 1950s. The Slansky defendants did not receive full rehabilitation until 1963, long after the crimes of Stalin had come to light. The Doctors’ Plot, launched in January, 1953, ended only because Stalin did not live long enough to see it through. While no records have yet been found to corroborate this claim, many believed that Stalin was planning a wholesale deportation of the Soviet Union’s Jews to labor camps under construction in the far eastern portions of the empire.⁶⁹ In a world consumed by Cold War fears of total war, condemnations of the Prague trial were just that – words and little more.

While the majority of sources so far used in this study have dealt with the impact of the Slansky trial upon Jews living beyond the Soviet sphere of influence, I will, in this final section, attempt to provide some insight into the minds and hearts of those Jews affected directly by the trial and of the shift toward political anti-Semitism within the Soviet bloc. Because censorship and fear of persecution prevented Jews living in Czechoslovakia from freely expressing their views, I will use the memoirs published by several of the defendant’s wives and of Artur London, one of the three Slansky victims

⁶⁸ “Meany Denounces Intent at Prague,” 26.

⁶⁹ Brent and Naumov, *Stalin’s Last Crime*, 295.

not condemned to death in the trial. These individuals were the trial's immediate victims. Their lives were forever changed by the verdict announced on November 27, 1952. They of course cannot fully illuminate the attitudes of Czechoslovakia's Jewish population at large, but their experiences provide us with important inroads into the climate of anti-Semitism present in Czechoslovakia at the time of the trial.

Lying in the hospital, recovering from a serious illness contracted largely from the poor living conditions foisted upon her after the arrest of her husband, Heda Margolis, wife of Rudolf Margolius, one of those condemned to death in the trial, recalled the following upon reading headlines about the trial of her husband.

Then I skimmed down to the list of the accused. There were fourteen names. Eleven of them were followed by the note "of Jewish origin." Then came the words "sabotage," "espionage," "treason," like salvoes at dawn.

One of the names on the list was Rudolf Margolius. Rudolf Margolius, of Jewish origin.

With unusual clarity I heard the woman in the bed beside me whispering to her neighbor, "You have to read this—it's *Der Stuermer* all over again!" and then the voice of the lame news vendor in the corridor, "You have to read this to see how those swine sold us out to the imperialists, the bastards! They should all be hung! In public!"⁷⁰

In assessing the trial, Heda wrote, "One of the saddest phenomena of that time was the reemergence of anti-Semitism which usually remains buried deep below the surface in Bohemia and erupts only in response to a signal from above."⁷¹ She further recalled a conversation she had overheard in a doctor's office between two women. One said to the other that her ailment was finally cured, after all other doctors had failed, by "Oh, you know, one of those dirty Jews." The circumstances around Heda and her husband Rudolf were rendered that much more tragic as both had survived the Nazi death camps and returned to Czechoslovakia to take part in the construction of socialism.

⁷⁰ Margolius-Kovaly, *Under a Cruel Star*, 138.

⁷¹ Margolius-Kovaly, *Under a Cruel Star*, 149.

Artur London, one of the three defendants sentenced to life imprisonment, offers us insight into the mentality of those officials charged with the task of soliciting from the defendants admissions of Zionist conspiracy. Describing one of his first interrogations, London writes,

Four men were standing in front of me, one of whom, Major Smola, was in civilian dress. He seized me by the throat and shouted with hatred: We'll get rid of you and your filthy race! You're all the same! Not everything Hitler did was right, but he destroyed the Jews, and he was right about that. Too many of you escaped the gas chamber. We'll finish what he started.' And stamping his foot on the ground he added: We'll bury you and your filthy race ten yards deep.⁷²

London, a lifelong Communist and veteran from the Spanish civil war, expressed total disbelief at the blatant display of anti-Semitism accompanying his interrogations. He further wrote,

This was the first time in my adult life that I was insulted because I was a Jew and was held to be a criminal because of my race, and that by a man from the State Security of a Socialist country, a member of the Communist Party. Was it possible that the mentality of the SS had arisen in our own ranks? This was the mentality of the men who shot my brother Jean in 1941, who deported my mother, my sister Juliette and her husband, and dozens of members of my family to Auschwitz and sent them to the gas chamber. I had concealed my race from the Nazis, should I do the same thing in my own socialist country?⁷³

London, like the other defendants, quickly discovered that his interrogators were not seeking the truth. He was informed that, "The mere fact that you, a Jew, returned alive, is sufficient proof of your guilt and therefore proves us right."⁷⁴ Men, such as London, were self-proclaimed atheists. Their identities revolved around Communism. Their solution to the Jewish question had always been socialism, rejecting Zionism as an ideology of capitalist extraction. Marian Slingova, wife of Otto Sling, one of the eleven

⁷² London, *The Confession*, 38.

⁷³ London, *The Confession*, 38.

⁷⁴ London, *The Confession*, 121.

condemned to death, confirmed this when she wrote, “Otto and I, in ranging over the whole field of politics, had talked about the Zionist programme, I knew that he had always seen socialism, and not Zionism, as the ultimate solution to the problems of the Jewish people.”⁷⁵ It seems that like their Jewish counterparts outside the Soviet bloc, the defendants and their families could not make sense of the trial’s anti-Semitic character. They hoped, above all, that it could be traced back to a few individuals and that the regime, if it only knew, would punish such people accordingly. However, as London writes,

Soon after my arrest, when I was confronted by a virulent, Nazi-type of antisemitism, I thought it was limited to a few individuals. The Security Services couldn't be expected to recruit saints for such a dirty job. But I now realized that even if this mentality only appeared sporadically during the interrogations, it was nevertheless a systematic line.⁷⁶

Kaplan further describes how authorities trained interrogators in the use of anti-Semitism, and how anti-Semitic outbursts became increasingly prevalent at party meetings.⁷⁷

While the above accounts only provide glimpses into the environment in which the Slansky trial took place, we can discern that at the very least, anti-Semitism became an attitude tolerated, if not encouraged in Czechoslovak society. Whether these tendencies arose as popular reactions from below or were triggered by encouragement from above as Heda Margolius wrote, it is likely that the Jewish population of Czechoslovakia, while only a fraction of its prewar size, experienced, only that much more intensely, the sentiments expressed throughout this paper.

Conclusion:

⁷⁵ Marian Slingova, *Truth Will Prevail* (London: Merlin Press, 1968), 85.

⁷⁶ London, *The Confession*, 174.

⁷⁷ Kaplan, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary*, 134-137.

That the Slansky trial was a tragedy, is difficult to dispute. Eleven men lost their lives, while dozens others experienced endless hardship and persecution as relatives and associates of the condemned defendants. Millions of Jews behind the Iron Curtain faced a virulent campaign of state-driven anti-Semitism, while their co-religionists elsewhere could do little to alleviate their situation. A crisis of political consciousness beset many Jews who had truly believed in the promise of Communism. Their disillusionment made it virtually impossible to remain devoted to both the causes of Zionism and Communism. Vast rifts sprung up between Jews who condemned the trials and those who found its verdict just. Anxieties over the possibility of future genocides were acutely felt as yet another state power took up anti-Semitism as a political weapon. Images of the Czechoslovak people as friends of the Jews were shattered, and the new state of Israel came to realize that it could no longer rely upon this once hospitable state for support.

It is likely that the Slansky trial, being one of the gravest crises to beset the Jewish people in the post-Holocaust era, resulted in changes in Jewish senses of self-identification or at the very least, revealed some of the psychological effects wrought by the Nazi genocide. Jewish identities in the post-WWII era of course continued to embrace a broad spectrum of religious, ethnic, racial, and cultural attributes. However, the racialization by Nazi Germany and the anti-Semitism launched by Soviet powers, confirmed for many Jews that Jews worldwide shared a common story. Despite the creation of the state of Israel, persecution of Jews still raged, suggesting to many that complacency was not an option.

That some Jews remained loyal to Communism even after the revelations of the Slansky trial and the Doctor's Plot, is a true testament to the hold that this ideology had

over many of its adherents. Even as they faced the gallows, none of the Slansky defendants ever entertained the idea that the Communist regime had erred. As Heda Margolius wrote,

For them, the struggle for the ideal took on the meaning of a struggle for personal redemption. It was a victory over one's own smallness, an unselfish subordination of an individual's interests to the good of all society. To give up this ideal would be to disclaim the meaning of one's whole life.⁷⁸

Many Jews had devoted their lives to the Communist cause for the very reason that it promised a world free of anti-Semitism. Such a political and moral paradigm made it impossible for some Jews to see the Slansky trial as anything other than true.

The Slansky trial struck at the core of identities. It resulted in wide scale suffering, and dislocated the moral and political foundations of many individuals, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. However, above all, the Slansky trial marked the triumph of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia, and that Moscow, not Prague was in charge. Czechoslovakia posed the greatest challenges to Soviet domination, and its ultimate submission to the Kremlin was, as a result, that much more complete. It would take Czechoslovakia far longer than the other satellite states to recognize and condemn its Stalinist misdeeds. From start to finish, the Prague political purges lasted only one week. Its consequences would be felt for decades.

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⁷⁸ Margolius-Kovaly, *Under a Cruel Star*, 61.

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