

Published in Open: Journal of Arts and Letters  
Spring 2018

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A Tiny Little Historical Mystery

When I embarked on the research for my World War II novel, I never imagined that I might uncover the key to a lingering historical mystery. The novel—*When it's Over*, (She Writes Press, 2017)—is based on my mother's experience as a Czech Jewish refugee who fled to England in 1940. The idea of writing the book didn't come to me until after her death, so I couldn't ask her to fill in the gaps in my knowledge. I decided, therefore, to write it as fiction.

But I wanted it to be as historically accurate as possible, and to highlight the key elements of her story. Fortunately, I had recorded an oral history with her twenty years before she died. I retrieved the cassette tape from the back of my closet, and had it transcribed, and returned to this document many times while working on the novel.

In the interview, my mother told me she had worked in Prague as a secretary for a small organization that was supposedly an economic development bureau for Spain, but which was in fact conducting espionage for the Spanish Republican government; this was at the height of the Spanish Civil War. She would type up reports of shipments of arms and planes being sent from Nazi Germany to Franco's side in Spain. These reports came from partisans inside the Third Reich, and were passed on to the Spanish Embassy in Prague. My mother said her job was to just type and keep her mouth shut.

One day, in May 1938, the reports suddenly changed: they spoke of German troops advancing toward the Czech border. This was a few weeks after the *Anschluss*, the Nazi annexation of Austria; tensions were high. My mother typed up these reports, and her boss, who was by then my mother's boyfriend, passed them on to the Spanish Embassy in Prague. The next day, the newspaper headlines announced that the Czech government, acting on intelligence received from a foreign embassy, was mobilizing a massive show of military strength on the northern border. Standing on the street corner reading the headlines, my mother now understood why her typing work was top secret.

The Czech mobilization appeared to have been successful, and the threat of German invasion was averted—for a while. This incident eventually played a significant role in my mother's life. She left Czechoslovakia the following month with her boyfriend, when his organization relocated to Paris. But when World War II started, she became stuck in France. Her boyfriend and many of her friends had succeeded in reaching the relative safety of England, but my mother's application for a British visa was denied multiple times. Her friends in England then came up with a last-ditch effort: they exaggerated her role in the May 1938 leak, and convinced the Foreign Office that my mother was a Czech agent whose services were needed in Britain.

It worked—and my mother escaped Paris just in time. A great story: I obviously wanted to include it in the novel. She never spoke of the intelligence connection until I did the interview, and even then she was self-effacing, laughing softly at the memory. On the tape, I can be heard struggling to understand who told what to whom, and how the events in Germany, Prague, Spain, and England were connected. It's hard for me to envision my soft-spoken mother as part of an international spy ring—but her story didn't come over as a boastful yarn.

And yet, many years later, when I tried to research the events of May 1938, I found no mention of the Spanish connection. In retrospect, the episode had paled into insignificance, overshadowed by the Munich agreement four months later, and then the Nazi invasion of Prague the following year. There's not much information about the May 1938 crisis. I unearthed a reference to the mobilization in one of Alan Furst's novels, and discovered an old memoir by General Moravec, the head of the Czech military intelligence during WWII. Both of these mention the event, but not the source of the intelligence. Odd, I thought.

I did a ton of research for my novel, but it was not until I was editing the final draft that I came upon an article in the *Journal of Contemporary History*: *The Czechoslovak Partial Mobilization in May 1938: A Mystery (almost) Solved*. Written by Professor Igor Lukes of Boston University, this academic article explained, in sixteen pages and sixty-eight footnotes, that the mobilization was, in fact, based on false intelligence: there were no German troop movements toward the Czech border at that time. The Czech government believed it to be true, but was deliberately misled, Dr. Lukes argued, by a still-unidentified professional intelligence organization.

This article had been published in 1996: six years before my mother's death. How I wished I had come upon it while she was still alive. Instead, it fell to me to contact Dr. Lukes and tell him about my mother's testimony. I emailed him and attached the relevant section of the tape transcript, excited to see his response. But I heard nothing for three weeks, and concluded he must have dismissed me as some sort of crackpot.

But then he did reply, with apologies for the delay; he had been traveling. He was most interested in my mother's story. When I told him I would be in Boston the following month, we arranged to meet in his office. We had a fascinating discussion. He explained his analysis of who might have stood to gain from provoking a German-Czech military conflict at that moment in

history, and his conclusion that it was most likely the Soviets. The leak of information to the Czech government definitely had the ‘fingerprints’ of a professional intelligence organization, but there was no evidence it came directly from the Kremlin. The notion that Moscow might have used the Spanish Republican secret service as a pawn to be fed the false intelligence was both plausible and intriguing to Professor Lukes.

Maybe my mother didn’t need to know that the intelligence she helped deliver was false. The May 1938 mobilization was—and still is—viewed with pride by the Czechs: they stood up to the Nazi monster. This made the subsequent betrayal at Munich even more poignant. But I love the idea that she and I may have unlocked a tiny little historical mystery.