Dear Folks:

The reason SHMATE is so late is that it has been sold to "The National Review", and Bill Buckley has decided to hold off publishing until he completes his conversion to Judaism this spring. The $340,000 I obtained from the sale will go for the down payment on a Caribbean island I am retiring to.

The reason SHMATE is so late is that The Jewish Welfare Federation has purchased the magazine in order to suppress it. The $340,000 I received for the rag will go to purchasing a clandestine keffiyah factory in Jerusalem.

The reason SHMATE is so late is that the bankruptcy of Drexell Burnham Lambert coupled with the overall softness of the junk bond market have reduced the value of the collateral against which I planned to borrow to pay the printer. The $340,000 tax writeoff I am taking will be used to finance my campaign for Congress.

The reason SHMATE is so late is that it took eight months to get the photos to go with the article on George Bush's affair with Morton Downey Jr. The $340,000 I just received for not publishing the article will go to finance research to determine another spot south of the border which 99% of the American population can't find on a map, but which the U.S. can invade right before the 1992 election.

The reason SHMATE is so late is that I have decided to stop publishing it. To put it simply, I'm burned out. I probably wouldn't mind continuing to edit the thing, but after eight years of putting out the magazine alone, the 60% of the time and energy which go to non-editorial functions have become too much. I never planned to do SHMATE alone. It just sort of worked out that way.

For those of you relatively new to the rag, a few words of explanation. Distribution, distributors, individual book stores, billing, rebilling, rerebilling, subscriptions, postal idiocy, design, layout, returns, address changes, crank mail, publicity, address lists. And that doesn't even get into the typesetting and printing. Easily lost in the shuffle is the whole editorial process of putting together the actual contents of the magazine which, presumably, is what all the other stuff is for. There are two ways a publication gets a staff. One is money for salaries. The other is to have a political cult organized around one monumental ego or a correct-line, 10 point program which provides all the answers before the questions are asked. This usually produces a staff who work for the ego gratification of associating with a "heavy" or who work for the joyful security of not having to think, secure in their revealed knowledge and arrogant chosenness. The former method of staffing has not been an option. There never has been any money to pay the writers, artists, or myself, let alone hire a staff. I've been lucky when I could pay the printer. The second method of staffing makes me barf and, never having been a fraternity, I don't enjoy barfing.

It's tempting to write a retrospective of what I think SHMATE has accomplished, its strengths, its weaknesses. But, that's a temptation easy to resist. First, I'm lazy and hate to write. Second, I've always believed that a magazine should speak for itself. Pronouncements from editors and publishers usually amount to a self-serving bunch of crap. You folks know what you did and did not get out of the rag. It seems to me that it is at least patronizing and probably downright insulting to have someone tell you
what a magazine means or should mean to you.

There are those out there who will exult at SHMATE’s demise and those who will mourn. Both responses are, I believe, inappropriate. My decision is neither a defeat nor a victory for myself or anyone else. I do have one regret, however. I’ve always had this fantasy that I’d like to win the lottery, so I could finance a convention of SHMATE readers. No speeches, no resolutions, no non-negotiable demands. Just a get-together where folks could meet each other. I’ve written to, spoken with, and met many of you over the years. SHMATE readers turned out to be a very unusual, very interesting lot. I’ve been able to put a number of you in touch with others for various purposes. (Never did get the “Personals” column going, though!) A convention would have been a real trip.

Issue #23 of SHMATE, in its original form, had a lot of stuff which I’m not publishing. In addition to some excellent short stories and an article on German resistance during the Holocaust that were sent in, there were a number of things I solicited, including an Israel Shahak interview by Burton Levine, an article on Jews in baseball by Mitch Abidor, followups by Noam Chomsky and Alan Dershowitz, a book review by Burton Levine, and myriad letters to the editor. To all of those folks, my sincere apologies, but one of the unfortunate realities about burnout is that you don’t always end up drawing the lines where you’d like to draw them.

It’s not without mixed feelings that I end the rag. I expect if somebody had offered to take over publishing, offered to buy the thing, even offered to just take it, I would have agreed. But my feelers yielded zilch. Going through your letters is rough; a lot of energy and feeling on all our parts went into this magazine. Some of the connections I’ve made with you folks have been very touching; there are quite a few of you who I consider friends, even though we’ve never met. And then there are the moments when it seems like SHMATE is the perfect vehicle for something, such as the other day when I saw a newspaper headline which bannered “U.S.-Japan Crisis Talks”. It was obvious to me that the next day’s headlines should be featured in SHMATE and would say, “Japan Buys Pearl Harbor”. Clearly that would necessitate a followup campaign to draft Morton Downey Jr. for President. The rag also is clearly useful to disseminate the important news to those of you who missed it, such as the “San Francisco Chronicle” headline that informed all of us in big bold letters that “SOCIETY’S HAVE-NOTS GETTING WEARY OF HAVE-NOTS” or the odds established by the vice president of the Las Vegas Hilton Sports Book on the capture of Noreiga before Christmas. And sometimes the magazine can be useful to me; like maybe one of you could translate the following singles ad into English: “Non-linear, creative-edge twosome (WM 53, WF 37) seeks a lively bi-lady or M-F twosome (kids fine) to marry us. We are: a computer diviner; an exceptional performance researcher; consciousness evolutionaries; veteran adventurers in psycho/sacred inner spaces (rough psychodynamics, too), using mystical and chemical technologies. Smokers, terminal niceness cases, New Age helium-heads, save your postage.” (O.K. all you East Coast smartasses, the ad does have a Marin address on it.)

A little business. Everyone says it’s obvious, but this is one case where I feel the need to state the obvious: there will be no refunds for incomplete subscriptions because there simply is no money for it. However, with your approval I will see if another magazine is willing to take over the subs. At the moment, the only magazines I am considering are “Jewish Currents” and “Z”. (Too bad “MAD” is owned by a conglomerate.) I have not checked with them yet. Please let me know if it is not o.k. for me to pass on your address to either of those publications. I have been very protective of your names and addresses over the years, refusing to trade or sell them to others. The only times they have been out of my hands was when labels were to be made. I couldn’t avoid that, so four other people have had access to parts of the info over the
years, though not since the last issue came out. I will continue to make back issues available to those who are interested. A few copies of Issue #1 have turned up recently. For those of you who can’t resist a complete set of the rags, those will go for $10 ($20 to libraries). If you would like any issues bound, I will do that for $5 per issue, with a minimum of three issues. Those of you whose subs have not expired (see last two digits on address label) and who can’t afford it, let me know and I’ll try to send you the back issues you want anyway. No promises though, since I really can’t afford it either. My car has 219,647 miles on it. One of these days, I’m going to have to dig up the bread to buy it a gallon of Geritol.

I have always given SHMATE subscriptions free to anyone who had seen the magazine, but couldn’t afford a sub. And I’ve always carried expired subs for one to three years after expiration. If any of you feel that you can now afford what you couldn’t afford previously, I’ll be glad to engage in a little redistribution, sending issues to those who can’t afford them. And if any of you, after eight years, want to contribute to my personal fund to buy a Caribbean island, keffiyah factory, Bill Buckley Bar Mitzvah gift, or Geritol, just mark it on your check:

Item: This machine I’m writing on doesn’t seem to be able to put in the accents necessary for foreign words. So, apologies for their absence on the Czechoslovak names which follow. Also, either the machine or I can’t do italics. Thus, magazine titles and foreign words, which I usually italicize, appear in quotes, except for SHMATE. Item #2: It is possible that I will try to begin a new magazine in a year or six. For those of you who might be interested, keep sending me your changes of address.

There is one irony in stopping SHMATE I can’t quite overlook. Though I don’t like to write, there have been a number of instances when I have wanted to do just that. The pile of junk surrounding me here is replete with little scraps of paper torn out or scribbled upon to remind me of something I wanted to note in the magazine. Always that was left for "later", a time framework apparently coinciding with "after the revolution". Invariably my "Ragtalk" comments were written at 4 a.m., ended soon thereafter by the need to convince my kid he should eat his oatmeal before I took him to school (whether the needs were those of his nutrition or my neurosis isn’t clear), followed by my ritual imposition on the typesetter for a dozen just-one-last-things before the 45 mile drive to get to the printer by 11. Thus the irony: when I had the perfect opportunity to publish whatever I wanted to say, I did not have the time to do it. Now that I will (theoretically) have more time to write, I will have no place to publish.

Which leads me to the one item I really do want to comment on before I climb on my non-high horse and ride the ragtag off into the sunset: Czechoslovakia! In my first prepublication public letter about SHMATE (Chanukah, 1981), I stated that one of the things I intended to cover was the Slansky trials, which occurred in Czechoslovakia in the early Fifties. What struck me most about the trials --and what I wanted to cover in SHMATE-- were the similarities to what was going on in this country during the same period: the Rosenberg, McCarthy, and H.U.A.C. witchhunts, trials, and executions.

In both countries paranoia about non-existent conspiracies, the desire to "explain" away the political failures of ruling groups, and fear of "foreign" influences combined with base personal motives to produce a major sociopolitical convulsion. In both cases contamination was inherent in contact with, or even expressed sympathy for, ideas or foreign nationals of countries which were, often post facto, out of favor. This reached its most sublime absurdity with regards to the Spanish Civil War. Those who fought there or actively supported the Republic against the Nazi-supported fascist insurgency were under the greatest suspicion. Guilty by association, by the opportunity for
ideological corruption, by voluntary immersion in the intellectual ferment of the Spanish cause.

In both countries Jews were singled out. This stemmed more from a belief that Jews were inherently alien and paid primary allegiance to non-patriotic entities, than to an effort to "get the Jews". In addition to the Rosenbergs, the history of the American hysteria is laced with a very disproportionately large number of Jewish victims. In Czechoslovakia the main show trial (Slansky, a Jew, was General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist party) consisted of fourteen people, eleven of whom were Jews. Of the eleven executed, nine were Jews.

In both countries, though vast condemnatory public hysteria was whipped up by governmental, party, and media institutions, the leaders were so insecure about the prosecutions and persecutions, and so confused about what constituted political reality, that confessions by the accused, no matter how obviously coerced or phony, became a much more important objective than "convictions".

Few Americans have ever paid much attention to Czechoslovakia, let alone the Slansky trials. My own view of the country was limited to the image of a grey-brown factory, a picture probably gleaned from a high school social studies text. In 1968 I and three friends headed off on a trip around the world to climb mountains. After three weeks in Germany outfitting a VW van to sleep one couple, one 200 pounder, and myself, we headed off to Paris, because the group's newly-wed female thought it would be fun to see Paris in the springtime. Outvoted, the three guys agreed to a quick trip through. Twenty minutes after arriving, my buddy and I were walking down the street and were jumbed by a dozen cops, C.R.S. to be exact. That was May 6. A dozen blows of their nightsticks put me down for the count, but did have the salutory affect of establishing the fact that my back, broken while on a toboggan a couple months earlier, had healed. My friends left to continue our itinerary. I stuck around to find out why I had gotten my ass kicked in. Once I found out, I joined up with the Movement and did my best to give the cops a reason for having beaten me. But that's another story.

When July came, the revolution asked for a time-out and headed to the seashore on vacation. The Gaullists stayed home and did their homework. Malraux realized the large ritualistic component of the events, paved over the sacred cobblestones of the Latin Quarter, and effectively ended the traditional barricades. Meanwhile, the Communist Party, justifiably afraid of being outflanked and outrun by events, did its best to keep the students out of the factories.

Disheartened by the way the momentum of "les evenements" was being pissed away, I decided to abandon my role as "pavillion clandestin", give up my floating crash space on the floors of the Cite Universitaire, and, at the suggestion of some S.D.S. folks in Wiesbaden, head off to Czechoslovakia.

The following month was the proverbial breath of fresh air. All that I had found stultifying in Paris, I found invigorating in Prague. The city was as beautiful as Paris, but much more alive, more human. In Paris everything was History with a capital "H". The entire culture was surrounded by red velvet ropes, with little plaques indicating what the date and wind direction were when Napoleon had farted there. The present was lived in the past; the future was navigated through a rear-view mirror. The city I found to be populated by a horde of museum docents, unwilling even to communicate with non-members of the tribe. (Which, after awhile, was o.k. by me, since there were plenty of more interesting and more communicative African, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian Francophones, compliments of French imperialism.)

Prague, on the other hand, I found populated by living human beings. Though equally proud of their history and culture, they lived their past as part of the present, rather than the other way around. The flow of time was not compartmentalized for the Czechs and Slovaks; it existed as a continuum. Their culture was something to be lived,
not something to be exhibited. In Paris, where I could speak the language, I could not communicate with the locals; in Prague, where I did not speak the language, I had no trouble communicating.

Prague was alive in the Summer of ’68. I felt more free there, more like I belonged, than I ever had in New York or Paris. I spent most of my time walking around soaking up the people and their city, the politicos and hippies on the Karlovo Most plying their ideas on the Vltava’s 600 year old span, the baroque gem of the Loreta, the perpetual forum surrounding the statue of Jan Hus in the Staromestske namesti, the Redouta Club (jazz home for many of the progressive intellectuals), the alleys of Mala Strana and Stare Mesto, Hradcany with the Prague Castle, the millenium-old symbol of the Czech nation, the cheap eateries and the pilsener parlors. And everywhere people wanted to talk, from the man who had worked in the chancellery with Masaryk to the woman interested in the merits of morphine.

The city was also alive with international ferment. I certainly was not the only person to sense the importance of Prague at that point in time. There was the old French couple, members of the Communist Party, busily telling the Czechoslovaks about the glories of "L’Humanite", the French Communist Party newspaper. I jumped in to suggest that "Le Monde", newly available in several locations, would be a better source of information. But that’s a bourgeois paper exclaimed the French! Yes, but it’s a lot more accurate, exclaimed Fankuchen. But it is not the true voice of the working people! Granted, but it’s more accurate. How can it be more accurate than the people’s paper, which represents the interests of the workers? Beats me, but if I’m in a demonstration with 5,000 people and "L’Humanite" says there are 25,000, while "Le Monde" says there are 5,000, .... Ad nauseum! The locals took it all in with the excitement of a kid from the boonies let loose in his first big city candy store.

There was the Hungarian woman I spent an evening with, who had come to Prague looking for a job and the future. And the officials at the North Vietnamese Embassy, where I had gone to give a statement to be broadcast over Radio Hanoi, a statement directed towards Americans fighting in Viet Nam. While at the embassy, I delicately asked the indelicate question: what would be their position if the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. Probably hopefully, definitely diplomatically, and clearly unrealistically, they said it just wouldn’t happen.

And then there was the East German woman, a Jew whose family had returned to Germany after the War. She found her life there intolerable and wanted to go to West Germany to join her brother. Some longhairs I had met on the Karlovo Most decided that I was the person to arrange her escape. She was turned over to me with an expired Czechoslovak visa, unable to return to East Germany without being busted and, in any case, absolutely unwilling to go back, hoping no one would ask to see her papers.

I developed a plan which, I believed, had a fair chance of success. In any case, I figured that if it failed, I’d probably end up doing less time than she would and probably have the assumed advantage of a Czechoslovak jail over an East German one. Several days previously an American friend had joined me. The two women both had long, dark hair and were of similar build. The plan was basically simple. I would get a sleeper on a night train to Vienna, have her put her hair up in rollers, put on lots of make-up, and stash her in bed. When the border officials came to check our papers, I would make some suggestive comments about how she was fast asleep from all the late-night playing in bed, hand them my friend’s passport, and hope they didn’t wake her up. If they did wake her up, we had a serious problem. The woman did not speak English. If we were lucky, they’d talk to her in German, a fairly common second (or third, after Russian) language for border cops. She was to pretend to know just enough Deutch, so they wouldn’t go looking for an English translator, but not so much to
arouse their suspicions. And at all times there was the pervasive realization that any deviation from the plan was likely to lead to disaster: the woman and I did not share a language in common.

The stage was set, arrangements to meet made, good-byes readied. And then, in the middle of the night, on August 20, 1968, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia.

In the United States, analysis of the invasion has been limited by the exigencies of Cold War ideology and our generally simplistic approach to international events. Usually explanations boiled down to a trivial truth: Czechoslovakia wanted its freedom and the Soviet Union wouldn’t allow it. A fact without context supplies little, if any, useful information. In this case it is necessary to ask why, beyond the perceived advantages of economic domination, the Soviet Union wanted to "keep" Czechoslovakia.

The first answer lies in military reality. The Soviet Union suffered a level of devastation in World War II unknown in the U.S. Its fear of Germany certainly didn’t evaporate with the advent of the West German "economic miracle". The East European "satellites" existed, as such, as a buffer for Soviet perceptions of threats from the West, as much as the American perception of a staging ground for aggression from the East. In this scheme, Czechoslovakia was a weak link. Historically the Czech (Bohemia and Moravia) and Slovak (Slovakia) lands have been the doormat of Central Europe. Anybody who wanted to invade anybody or have a buffer against anybody else was likely to go through Czechoslovakia. By and large the Czechs and Slovaks didn’t start a lot of wars nor win many started by others. For most of the last thousand years they have been ruled by others, mainly, for the 450 years preceding independence after World War I, by the Habsburgs. The last battle they celebrate, Bílá Hora, is one they lost in 1620.

The Czechoslovaks have less military ego than (almost?) any other people. Whether this is a cause or effect of their history is, at present, irrelevant. What is relevant is that the Soviet Union was worried about Czechoslovakia becoming a freeway for Western, especially German, aggression into the Ukraine. This fear was undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that the Czechoslovaks, after being mutilated by the Germans during the War, didn’t seem to hold much of a grudge a quarter of a century later. The prospect of a liberal regime largely disarming and asking Soviet troops to withdraw was not exactly pleasing to the Kremlin. The renegade Yugoslavs and recalcitrant Roumanians were not to be joined by any more loose pieces in the Soviet defense perimeter.

The second major reason for the Soviet-led invasion had to do with European secessionist movements. In 1968, throughout the continent, there were demonstrations and organized movements for "national" independence. In the Basque provinces, Normandy, and even in the Jura of Switzerland people took to the streets to demand independence. Though operating in synergy with and often catalysed by the student-led movements of '68, these manifestations of ethnic separatism were rooted in realities of their own. In each case these movements were put down, sometimes with force, always through a further affirmation of central power and authority.

Except for Czechoslovakia. The Czechs comprise about 64% of the people and the Slovaks about 30% (with the remainder mostly Hungarians and some Germans). The two languages, though different, are similar enough, so that knowing one enables you to understand the other in almost all situations. The history and culture of the two peoples, though closely intertwined, are different. The Czechs have been more urbane, industrialized, and Western oriented. The Slovaks have been more attuned to the East and more agricultural. One could say that in the Habsburg Empire, the Czech provinces looked toward Vienna and Slovakia toward Budapest. The Czechs dominated the country and the Slovaks felt somewhat like second-class citizens. Or as the stereotypes might have it, there were the intellectuals and the peasants.
To deal with the aspirations of the Slovaks for greater equality and autonomy, the Czechoslovaks decided on a course of action diametrically opposed to all of the other countries with ethnic unrest. To put it somewhat simplistically: the country would federate. Most day-to-day decisions would devolve to the provinces, leaving military, international, and genuinely national economic affairs in the hands of the national government.

This was just too much for the Kremlin leadership. If the Czechs and Slovaks got away with this, all hell could break loose in the Soviet Union. The Baltic republics were never enthusiastic about being ruled from Moscow. And the Ukraine and Byelorussia might decide to take their votes in the United Nations General Assembly seriously. Though the prospect of insurrections in the Muslim republics had yet to come to the fore, the Georgians, Moldavians, and Armenians provided further reasons for the Soviet leadership to nip in the bud any examples of meaningful decentralization. And then there was Ruthenia, a chunk of Czechoslovakia annexed by the Soviet Union after the War.

Perhaps most galling to the Soviets was the fact that changes in Czechoslovakia were being lead by the Communist Party itself, and by a Moscow-trained Slovak, Alexander Dubcek, at that. The Czechoslovak Communist Party was the only communist party in Eastern Europe that came to power without being installed by the Soviet army at the end of World War II. The country had survived an attempt by the Nazis to destroy it: Slovakia was to be granted "independence" in exchange for collaboration. Czechoslovakia was liberated by Soviet troops from the east and American troops from the west. The people by and large looked favorably upon both countries.

The Gottwald, Zapotocky, and Novotny regimes, which came to power after the Communist takeover in 1948, turned out to be among the most repressive of the Eastern European communist party/government apparatuses, this despite the fact that Czechoslovakia was the one country with a democratic and socially progressive history. Nonetheless, there was genuine popular support for what the Party was trying to do -- and even for the Party itself-- in the Spring of '68. There was even trust. Sometimes leading, sometimes racing to catch up, the Party tried to restructure society by encouraging genuinely popular institutional voices outside of the Party. Major changes were being made by the Party according to established rules and laws, day by day making it harder for the Soviet Union to claim that events in Czechoslovakia were all a counterrevolutionary plot, the traditional Soviet cover for invasion. To make matters worse for the Soviet Union, the Fourteenth Party Congress was due to begin in Prague on August 22. It was clear that this Congress would give its official blessing and encouragement at the highest and broadest levels to the reform movement. If the Soviet Union was to establish the myth of counterrevolution and prevent the example of a genuinely popular reformist Communist Party from taking hold and spreading to other countries, it would have to act before the Party Congress.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia was as militarily efficient as it was politically inept. In short order, the Warsaw Pact troops were there. However, the puppet government that was to provide the "invitation" for the rescue of the revolution by the fraternal socialist countries from the machinations of the imperialists' counterrevolutionary lackeys was no where to be found. The S.O.S. didn't go out and the welcome didn't occur. Obviously the K.G.B. was taking its lessons from the C.I.A. (or was it the other way around) when it came to finding stooges.

The Soviet soldiers were, themselves, quite confused by all this. My friend spoke Russian. They wanted to know where the dances and parties welcoming them were going to be held. They believed they really were liberators. Those that knew where they were, that is. Some thought they had invaded Poland; one was sure he had just
attacked West Germany. It was only when, a day or two later, the soldiers finally realized they were not welcome, that their trigger fingers got real itchy. Perhaps in a year or two we will see that great, soon-to-be-thought-of smash Soviet film, "Born On The 17th Of November".

In general Czechoslovaks liked the Russians. Granted, they didn't consider them too swift; nonetheless neither anti-Russian nor anti-Soviet antipathy was a pervasive current within the democratization movement. The people's reaction to the invasion reflected that. They viewed what was happening as unnecessary and, thus, incredibly stupid. As far as they were concerned, they had not set out to confront, let alone threaten, the Soviet Union. And they responded in a traditional manner, with creative, courageous, contempt. An example: I was down by the Vltava checking out a Ministry that had been shot up the night before. The Soviets had all the bridges over the river closed to vehicles and most closed to pedestrians. A long-hair of about 17 started to head toward a blockaded bridge. A soldier stopped him, saying the bridge was closed. Instantaneously, what had become almost a ritual within hours of the invasion occurred. A crowd surrounded the two of them, everybody arguing with the soldier. "I want to cross the bridge." "You can't; it's closed. Use the next bridge; it's open." "But that's another half mile and I live just over the bridge." The scene was playing itself out for about three or four minutes, not very menacingly, much as had occurred earlier in the day when, due to a little lack of subtlety on my part, a couple of machine guns wanted my camera, and a crowd instantaneously appeared to support me. This time, however, something different occurred. With everybody arguing loudly and shoving people around, a little old babuska separated herself from the throng and headed across the bridge. Ever so slowly, hardly able to walk, she stepped onto the bridge. Suddenly the ante had been upped and everyone froze. The soldier who had been in the middle of the argument turned and yelled at her to stop. The woman just kept going, literally inch by inch. The soldier raised his automatic, pointed it at her, and said, one last time, "Stop, or I will shoot you." With utter contempt, without deigning to reply to him or even acknowledge his presence with a glance, the woman stepped forward between the two rows of tanks.

As it turned out, the soldier did not shoot the woman. And as it turned out, a little later I ran into the East German woman who I had planned to smuggle out of the country. I had assumed I would not see her again. Neither she nor I knew where the other was staying; our meetings were prearranged rendezvous destroyed by the invasion. I agreed to try to develope a new plan to get her out. Trains were cut off and communications were spotty, at best. It was clear that at this point a clandestine border crossing would be necessary; deception would not suffice.

There was some specific information I needed, so I headed for the American Embassy to find the military attache. The guy was a consummate asshole, ranting and raving about how he could have defended Prague with a company of Marines and sent the Soviets packing from the country with a division. I managed to sit on my tongue long enough to find out which border might be the easiest to crack, where the mines, guard towers, fences, and other goodies were. I decided on the Austrian border parallel to a line from Ceske Budejovice to Brno. The next problem was how to get there. I rounded up a couple of American guys with a car, who agreed to help. The British Embassy was organizing a convoy to try to take "Westerners" out to Vienna. I verified the time and location of the departure and set out to organize things.

Once again the plan was superficially simple; only this time, there were many more unknowns. We would take the woman in the trunk of the car to within a few kilometers of the border, sufficiently above the checkpoint so that we could engineer a stop with no one, including others in the convoy, knowing that what we pulled out of the trunk was a person, not a spare tire. At that point she would head inland, away from
the road for a couple kilometers and then to what, as best as I could determine, was a minimally guarded border. With the Soviets still pretending they had been invited into the country, border and some other police functions were, in many instances, still in the hands of the Czechoslovaks. Since the East German army had come marching into the country looking very much like the old Nazi army, I figured that it was a reasonable risk --given the alternatives-- to assume that border villagers and, possibly, even border guards would be sympathetic to the East German woman's desire to escape, should she accidently run into one of them.

And then, once again, the unexpected happened. We met at the appointed time and location for the convoy, only to find no one there. I went to the British Embassy and learned that the woman at the Embassy I had previously spoken with had given me the wrong information. The convoy had left an hour earlier!

It has been twenty-two years and yet I can still see that woman walking away, walking down the hill, face impassive, saying not a word, heading nowhere in particular, and I can still feel monumentally stupid for thinking of nothing else to say other than, "I'm sorry."

In April, 1968, the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party appointed a special committee to inquire into the political trials of the Fifties and the coverup that occurred long after it was common knowledge that the trials were phony. The committee did its work well, too well for the taste of the Soviet leaders, pre-Dubcek holdovers who were compromised by the committee's report, and some middle-level leaders who were afraid that the report was so devastating, it would totally undermine the Party. The Presidium stalled on presenting it to the Central Committee. It was at that point the invasion occurred. When Dubcek subsequently tried to have it introduced in the Central Committee, it was too late, the report destined to be stashed away, its conclusions buried under the treads of the tanks and the dust of secret archival shelves.

The Report is a fascinating document. It begins, after describing its mandate and methodology, with a brief, yet penetrating analysis of the evolution of post-War East-West politics and the effects of the advent of the Cold War on internal politics within each camp. The pervasive nature of Party cannibalization throughout Eastern Europe is identified, followed by direct confrontation with the anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist aspects of the process, which resulted, partly, from the change in the Soviet-Israeli relationship. The acceptance of anti-Semitism as a reality apart from (though often intertwined with) anti-Zionism is an ongoing theme of the Report though, appropriately, not the dominant one.

After some description of domestic political, social, and economic tensions, the Report gets into the trials themselves and their pervasive influence on all facets of Czechoslovak society. Perhaps what stands out most in this section is the degree to which the whole process was very much more than a simple attempt by various people to aggrandize and consolidate personal power.

The next section presents a reassessment of the events surrounding the trials, as well as a rehabilitation of the victims. The final part of the Report is concerned with the assignation of political responsibility and, stretching its mandate, recommendations for preventing a repeat of the period of the trials. It is here that the work of the committee created a unique document, giving a glimpse into the essential nature of the Prague Spring, providing us with a vision of a true "Socialism With A Human Face", an ephemeral hint of what might have been and what, as a result of the Soviet invasion, was lost. It is therein that lies the true tragedy of the actions initiated in the Kremlin. It is impossible to go into details of the political analysis here. But consider what it would have been like if the Watergate Committee and Senate Intelligence Committee had
issued a joint report and, instead of the self-congratulatory, self-serving conclusions justifying the status quo which the individual reports contained, had stated that what had happened could not simply be explained as the result of mistakes, overzealousness, minor dishonesty and some bad people, but rather an inevitable product of the political order itself.

The committee’s Report goes far beyond a condemnation of the past. Instead of merely blaming individuals or indicating "deformations", it goes on to pick apart, piece by piece, the very system which governed the country. A group of Communist Party members, appointed by and accountable to the Party Central Committee, lays on the Party itself, on the arrogation by the Party of governmental functions, major blame for two decades of oppression. And then it proceeds to restructure institutional relationships, genuinely trying to preserve the Party while guaranteeing a multitude of independent, democratic institutions.

In terms of human suffering, the invasion and repression of Czechoslovakia might not even make the decade’s worldwide top-ten list. Yet in a world where it often seems that brutality in human relations is the rule rather than the exception, the crushing of the Czechoslovak experiment must end up near, if not at the top of, the list of the top-ten tragedies.

Poetic justice usually focuses on its negative, punitive aspect. In the case of Czechoslovakia, however, it exists in its most positive form. The Prague Spring, a movement of the spirit as much as one of institutions, is dramatically crushed. Alexander Dubcek, its leader, is cast aside. But a dissident movement remains alive, one of its leaders a frequently-imprisoned playwright, Vaclav Havel. Then in the space of a few months the old order disintegrates. Havel becomes President. Dubcek is chosen Chairman of the National Assembly. Rita Klimova, a Jew who spent the War in the U.S. and who was booted out of her job as a university lecturer in Prague after the invasion, is appointed Ambassador to the U.S. And, with the greatest sense of symbolic irony of all, Rudolph Slansky Jr. is appointed Ambassador to the Soviet Union. Once in awhile, the good guys actually win. At least for awhile.

Sometimes the little absurdities in life teach us much more about the generic nature of paranoid bureaucrats, of psychological and political reality, than all the books and lectures put together. In 1951, when Rudolph Slansky was arrested, his wife, Josefa Slanska, was also arrested and interrogated. During her questioning, the Security Police demanded to know the meaning of the different colors of the index cards in the Slansky library. In their paranoid fantasies, each color signified a different message, obvious proof of a plot to pass information on to the bad guys. Several decades later the F.B.I., America’s Security Police, approached me, demanding to know the meaning of the different colors on the pages of a magazine I published. They were convinced the colors were messages, a plot to pass information on to the bad guys.

Happy Trails,

Steve Fankuchen

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IF YOU DON’T LIKE THE NEWS, GO OUT AND MAKE YOUR OWN!