



(někdy známých pod označením „pražští vězni“) na vzájemné vztahy Československa a Izraele v 50. letech 20. století.

**Klíčová slova:** Československo; Izrael; Mordechaj Oren; Šimon Orenstein; antisemitismus; pražský proces;

**Keywords:** Czechoslovakia; Israel; Mordechai Oren; Shimon Orenstein; anti-Semitism; Prague Process;

## Introduction

The political relations between the State of Israel and Czechoslovakia went through a very dynamic development in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1948 when independent Israel was declared most of the East European countries provided some support to the Jewish state. At that time Czechoslovakia was known as a faithful ally of newborn Israel. However, the initial successful collaboration and support were soon replaced by a more or less disguised hostility. The early 1950s were in the light of the political processes with the real or alleged opponents of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. The worldwide attention received especially the show trials with Rudolf Slánský, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and his co-workers (known as the Prague Process in western media).

A very problematic aspect of the process as seen by Israeli representatives was the repeatedly emphasized Jewish origin of the defendants. Concurrently Slánský's affair was closely connected to the cases of two Israeli citizens who were detained in Czechoslovakia in December 1951. Mordechai Oren and Shimon Orenstein<sup>1</sup> were forced to provide testimonies against Slánský and the other former top communist leaders. Later in their own trials, they were sentenced to long imprisonments.<sup>2</sup> The contemporary public proclamations of anti-Semitism harmed the status of the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia. People of Jewish origin were perceived as a priori suspicious for their possible ties to Israel, and USA. Therefore, many of them were systematically monitored by the agents of State Security (StB), and some of them were persecuted. As they did not have Israeli citizenship at the time of their arrests, the instruments of Israeli diplomacy to intervene in their favor were very limited. Moreover, the cases of Oren and Orenstein demonstrated that the diplomatic means were quite ineffective regarding even the protection of Israeli nationals.

This article aims to analyze and to introduce the stories of Mordechai Oren and Shimon Orenstein by using Czech archival sources that has not been yet published. Based on these findings, the further impacts of this affair on the diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel in the 1950s shall be analyzed. Due to the difficulties to access the sources from the Soviet archives as well as Israeli archives<sup>3</sup>, the study shall focus exclusively on the perspective

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes also spelled as Shimon Ornstein or Shimeon Orenstein.

<sup>2</sup> SACHAR, Howard M. *Izrael: Dějiny* [History of Israel]. Prague, 1999, p. 316.

<sup>3</sup> Russian Federation provides only a limited access to the archival documents to the foreign researchers. Israel declassifies the sensitive archival documents related to foreign policy and national security with a delay of 70 years since their creation.

of contemporary Czechoslovak diplomacy. The research is based mostly on the documents available in Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (hereinafter AMZ), Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest/Vienna (hereinafter OSA), and Security Services Archive of the Czech Republic (hereinafter ABS). It is important to emphasize that especially the Czech contemporary archive sources need to be analyzed very carefully in terms of the reliability of presented information. There was a given narrative of Czechoslovak communist authorities on how to see and to interpret the events of the Cold War by the diplomats and other state employees. For these reasons, both the official and unofficial reports were often manipulated to comply with the state ideology. Thus, in some cases these documents might present inaccuracy or even obvious falsity. Still, they need to be considered as a valuable sources of information as they provide a very authentic insight to contemporary Czechoslovak diplomacy.

### **Mutual Relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel after World War II**

World War II and the tragedy of Holocaust had the fatal consequences for most of European Jewry including the Jews from Czechoslovakia. The full statistics are not available but according to the reputable estimations more than 75.000 out of 120.000 Czechoslovak Jews perished due to this genocide<sup>4</sup>. This fearful experience strengthened the effort of the Zionist movement to establish the independent Jewish state where all Jews would be safe and free from any oppression<sup>5</sup>. From the very beginning, it was obvious that this idea would need the support of the international community. After World War II the international politics was already tense due to the complicated relations between USA and USSR. Later this tension culminated in the Cold War when the two ideological blocks competed against each other in all areas of life. In this context, the region of Middle East was considered as one of the crucial battlefield of the Cold War. For these reasons, Czechoslovak diplomacy was very active in developing the mutual political relations with the local states.

Following the communist coup in February 1948, Czechoslovakia became the integral member of the Eastern Bloc controlled by the Soviet Union. The cohesion of Czechoslovakia within this alliance apparently formed their official diplomatic relations with the Zionist movement/Israel. In this context, we can distinguish two basic phases of mutual relations. The first phase dates to late 1940s and it can be labelled as the era of friendship. The friendly attitude of Czechoslovakia towards Zionist movement/Israel was in compliance with the politics of the previous political leadership<sup>6</sup>. The features of the close cooperation between

<sup>4</sup> KREJČOVÁ, Helena - SVOBODOVÁ, Jana - HYNDRÁKOVÁ, Anna. Židé v protektorátu: hlášení Židovské náboženské obce v roce 1942: dokumenty [Jews in the Protectorate: Reports of the Jewish Religious Community in 1942: Documents]. Prague, 1997, p. 581-582.

<sup>5</sup> Since the early beginnings of Zionism there have been some minor Jewish groups refusing the idea of the independent Jewish state from either religious or ideological reasons. See LANDY, David. Jewish Identity and Palestinian Rights: Diaspora Jewish Opposition to Israel. Chicago, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The political leadership of Czechoslovakia in 1918-1938, including the first Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, was well-known for their supportive attitude towards the

Czechoslovakia and Jewish representatives were both official and unofficial support of the Zionist leaders.

On the official level, Czechoslovakia supported the establishment of the independent Jewish state on the platform of international organizations especially the United Nations (UN). The crucial body was the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) that was created in May 1947 with the assignment to propose a suitable solution for Palestine after the expected end of the British mandate a year later. Six months later the committee presented the famous *United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine*. This plan devised the establishment of two states<sup>7</sup> in the disputed territory with Jerusalem as the international city (*corpus separatum*)<sup>8</sup>. Czechoslovakia represented by diplomat Karel Lisický voted in favor of this proposal (UN Resolution no. 181) at the United Nations General Assembly meeting in November 1947<sup>9</sup>. In the end, however, this plan was never implemented due to the rejection of Arab representatives<sup>10</sup>.

The other well-known example of the official Czechoslovak support for the Zionist movement in the late 1940s was the formal recognition of the newly born State of Israel on May 18, 1948. This act was following the diplomacy of the Soviet Union that granted official recognition to Israel a day earlier. In this period, Czechoslovakia set almost no limits on the emigration of Czechoslovak Jews to Israel. According to the available statistics, about 20,000 Jews emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1945-1947, and this trend continued even after the communist coup. The report issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia on May 25, 1954, stated that within the first year of Israel's existence more than 18,000 Jews had relocated from Czechoslovakia to Israel<sup>11</sup>. We can interpret these numbers as another proof of the Czechoslovak willingness to encourage the State of Israel.

The unofficial military support that Czechoslovakia provided to the Zionist movement/Israel had a similar importance. The supplies of the weapons, ammunition, and the other military material that were sent to Hagana<sup>12</sup> in 1947-1948 had a value of 144,757,928 USD. It is crucial to emphasize that these supplies were illegal due to the existing UN embargo<sup>13</sup>. This massive trade was organized

---

Zionist movement (ZBOŘIL, František. *Československá a česká zahraniční politika: minulost a současnost* [Czechoslovak and Czech Foreign Policy: The Past and the Present]. Prague, 2010, p. 277.)

<sup>7</sup> Arab state should have received 42.88% of the former British mandate while the Jewish state was to obtain 56.47% of the original territory.

<sup>8</sup> RABINOVICH, Itamar – REINHARZ, Jehuda. *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present*. Waltham, Mass, 2008, p. 61-63.

<sup>9</sup> ZBOŘIL, František. *Československá a česká zahraniční politika*, p. 276.

<sup>10</sup> GILBERT, Martin. *Israel: dějiny* [Israel: A History]. Prague, 2002, p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. *Návštěva I. tajemníka izraelského vyslanectví* [Visit of the First Secretary of the Israeli Embassy], Call No. 102595, 22/1/1952, Fabianova, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> AMZV TO-T, 1945-1954, Israel. *Emigrace do Izraele od roku 1948* [Emigration to Israel since 1948], Call. No. 419481, 25/5/1954, Bartůšek, p. 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> Hagana, established in 1920, was a paramilitary Jewish organization that preceded the Israeli army.

<sup>13</sup> DUFEK, Jiří – KAPLAN, Karel – ŠLOSAR, Vladimír. *Československo a Izrael v letech 1947-1953: studie* [Czechoslovakia and Israel in 1947-1953: A Study]. Praha, 1993, p. 51.

by the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovak companies that mostly produced the exported weapons were Zbrojovka Brno and Avia<sup>14</sup>. In addition to these supplies, the Czechoslovak army organized military training for Jewish volunteers who were recruited in the countries of the Eastern Bloc with an expectation of them to engage in the future war against the Arabs. The training mostly focused on the aircraft forces, and thus took place in Žatec and České Budějovice airports. The estimates suggest that more than 200 members of Hagana were trained in Czechoslovakia, altogether more than 1,200 people of various nationalities got some sort of a military training organized by Czechoslovak army.<sup>15</sup>

The mutual friendship between Czechoslovakia and Israel was not to last for a long time. In the early 1950s, the initial hopes of the Soviet leadership for potential integration of Israel in the communist alliance were already over. This political disillusion led to a change of attitude towards Israel respectively towards the Jews in most of the countries of the Eastern Bloc. While the local Jews were considered as a foreign and potentially dangerous entity, Israel got a label of an imperialist and a hostile state. The hatred culminated in the anti-Semitic purges firstly in the Soviet Union<sup>16</sup>, and then in Czechoslovakia.

The worldwide attention received especially the trials with Rudolf Slánský, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and fourteen of his co-workers in 1951-1952<sup>17</sup>. Rudolf Slánský once the second most powerful man of the country was arrested in November 1951, and then went through a long series of the interrogations led by the State Security (StB). Finally, in autumn 1952, Slánský and his co-workers were convicted as the traitors of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia who had strived both to sabotage the policy of socialist construction in Czechoslovakia, and to break the cooperation between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Last but not least, the group was blamed for the espionage activities in favor of the western countries. Eleven of the defendants including Slánský were sentenced to the death penalty, three defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment. The executions took place on December 3, 1952 in Prague<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> AVRIEL, Ehud. *Open the Gates! The Dramatic Personal Story of Illegal Immigration to Israel*. New York, 1975, p. 335.

<sup>15</sup> DUFEK - KAPLAN - ŠLOSAR, *Československo a Izrael*, p. 61-65; ZÍDEK, Petr - SIEBER, Karel. *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948-1989* [Czechoslovakia and the Middle East in 1948-1989]. Prague, 2009, p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> For more information about the so-called Doctors' plot see BRENT, Jonathan - NAUMOV, Vladimir Pavlovich. *Stalin's Last Crime: The Doctors' Plot*. London, 2004; RAPOPORT, Luis. *Stalin's war against the Jews: the doctors' plot and the Soviet solution*. New York, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> The political processes in Czechoslovakia were not the first example of the purges in the communist parties in the countries of Eastern Bloc. E. g. the former minister of foreign affairs of Hungary László Rajk was sentenced to the death penalty in October 1949; Trajčo Kostov, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Bulgaria, was executed in December 1949.

<sup>18</sup> STRÖBINGER, Rudolf. *Vražda generálního tajemníka: poslední Stalinův exemplární proces, soud s Rudolfem Slánským* [Murder of General Secretary: Stalin's last exemplary process, the trial of Rudolf Slánský]. Brno, 1991; KAPLAN, Karel. *Kronika komunistického Československa: Klement Gottwald a Rudolf Slánský* [The Chronicle of Communist Czechoslovakia: Klement Gottwald and Rudolf Slánský]. Brno, 2009, p. 149.



An entirely new phenomenon that appeared during the process with Slánský was the growth of antisemitism in Czechoslovakia. Such attitude of the official authorities was a significant change of discourse regarding the prevailing trends after the Second World War in the countries of both Eastern and Western Bloc. The fact that Rudolf Slánský himself and eleven of his co-workers were of Jewish origin was emphasized during the trials, and also in Czechoslovak state-controlled media even though all men profiled rather as anti-Zionists<sup>19</sup>. Slánský's affair is closely connected to the cases of two Israeli citizens Mordechai Oren and Shimon Orenstein who both were detained in Czechoslovakia in December 1951.<sup>20</sup> Their cases and the consequences for the diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel shall be analyzed in the further parts of this article.

### **Detentions of Shimon Orenstein and Mordechai Oren in Czechoslovakia**

Shimon Orenstein was born in 1904 in the Jewish family in nowadays western Ukraine. During his studies in Breslau, Germany, he got involved in the Zionist movement. In the 1930s, Orenstein immigrated to Palestine where he was one of the founding members of Kibbutz Kfar Masaryk; during World War II, Orenstein joined the British Army. Ideologically, Orenstein always held leftist views. In addition to active participation in kibbutz life, he worked for several years for Histadrut.<sup>21</sup> Later, he became a member of Israeli leftist party Mapam, a pro-Soviet Marxist political party which became with 19 mandates the second most successful political party after Ben Gurion's Mapai in first Israeli parliamentary elections 1949. As a member of Histadrut, Orenstein was sent to Czechoslovakia in 1947 where he was authorized to negotiate the supplies of necessary goods for the Zionist movement, including the supplies of arms<sup>22</sup>. There was a belief that Orenstein might have been a perfect middleman for this trade due to his knowledge of the Czech language and Czechoslovak political environment.<sup>23</sup>

Following the establishment of the Israeli embassy in Prague (hereinafter IEP) in July 1948, Orenstein was appointed as the head of the Commercial Section where he worked until May 1950. After leaving his job at the embassy, Orenstein focused on the mediation of the trade between East and West.<sup>24</sup> Due to these activities, Orenstein took frequent trips to Vienna, Austria. On December 8, 1951, Orenstein made another business trip to Vienna however this time he was arrested on Austria-Czechoslovakia borders. Initially, he was accused of the unauthorized

---

<sup>19</sup> RUCKER, Laurent. *Stalin, Izrael a Židé [Stalin, Israel and Jews]*. Prague, 2001, p. 200-212.

<sup>20</sup> Oren and Orenstein were neither the first Jews nor the first foreigners arrested in Czechoslovakia for the alleged cooperation with Slánský's group. Already in February 1951, US reporter William Nathan Oatis was detained by StB and later sentenced to 10-years imprisonment. Another victim of these political purges was the former Czechoslovak ambassador in Israel Eduard Goldstücker who was also accused of spying for British secret service. Goldstücker was sentenced to life imprisonment, however, in mid-1950s his sentence as Oatis' was commuted.

<sup>21</sup> Jewish labor union.

<sup>22</sup> DUFEK - KAPLAN - ŠLOSAR, *Československo a Izrael*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> ABS, *Vyšetřovací spis ORENSTEIN ŠIMON [Investigation File ORENSTEIN SIMON]*, Call No. ZV-171 MV, Box 2. *Záznam výpovědi [Statement Record]*, 13/12/1951, p. 1

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

crossing of the borders without proper travel documents. Soon it was obvious that this accusation was made purposefully as the further investigation stressed Orenstein's hostile activities to Czechoslovakia and espionage sponsored by the western states. Based on these allegations, Orenstein was detained in Ruzyně prison in Prague and repeatedly interrogated for the whole year of 1952.<sup>25</sup>

After his release Orenstein described these interrogations as follows: „But it seems that the investigators used anything that would help them in the PRAGUE trials. They even changed the history of Czechoslovakia to prove that I had committed a crime against something that never was. They claimed that I had always been an international spy. This indeed is the most fantastic story of all.”<sup>26</sup> Orenstein interpreted his case as obviously made by the StB: “They meant to use me to prove that Zionism was and had always been a criminal movement. I was brought forward as a witness against SLANSKÝ, whose main guilt was that he had been a Zionist. In the end, I was introduced simply as a criminal, a Zionist spy, who had come there to undermine the Socialist Democratic regime in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>27</sup>

Both IEP and Orenstein's family were informed of his arrest with a considerable delay. On December 28, 1951, Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter CMFA) received the diplomatic note (PR-345/1879) where IEP complained of not being informed about Orenstein's detention. Concurrently, the embassy asked for official permission by Czechoslovak authorities to contact the detainee. This note alike the later notes from January 11, 1952 (PR-345/1963), and February 12, 1952 (PR-345/2138) were not responded by Czechoslovak representatives.<sup>28</sup> The absence of the official response was the main issue of the personal visit of Israeli first secretary and commercial attaché Yehuda Gera at CMFA on January 22, 1952. At this stage, the IEP had some information about Orenstein's detention. It was assumed that he was detained for an attempt to cross the Czechoslovak border with an invalid visa. Czechoslovak representatives promised to discuss these issues with the competent authorities and to inform IEP thereafter.<sup>29</sup> Israel received more accurate information on Orenstein's arrest on February 19, 1952, when CMFA sent to IEP a short diplomatic note. This note informed the embassy that “Orenstein was arrested because he committed very serious crimes on the territory of Czechoslovakia”<sup>30</sup>.

At this time, the attention of Israeli diplomacy and also Israeli society focused on the fate of another Israeli citizen Mordechai Oren. Oren was considered missing

<sup>25</sup> ABS, Vyšetřovací spis ORENSTEIN ŠIMON [Investigation File ORENSTEIN SIMON], Call No. ZV-171 MV, Box 2. Návrh na zatčení [Arrest Proposal], 14/12/1951, p. 1

<sup>26</sup> OSA, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items. Simon Orenstein about the Background of His Trial. Call No. 300-1-2-75977, 30/10/1956, p. 20-21.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Shimeon Orenstein - zajištění [Shimeon Orenstein - detention], Call No. 105408, Pudlák.

<sup>29</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Návštěva I. tajemníka izraelského vyslanectví [Visit of the First Secretary of the Israeli Embassy], Call No. 102595, 22/1/1952, Fabiánová, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box. 7. Shimeon Orenstein - zajištění [Shimeon Orenstein - Detention], Call no. 105480, 20/2/1952, Pudlák.

from the end of December 1951 when was traveling through Czechoslovakia on his journey from World Union Conference in Berlin.<sup>31</sup> Mordechai Oren was born on March 16, 1905, in Austria-Hungary. During his grammar school studies in Lviv, he became a member of the youth Zionist organization Hashomer Hatzair. In 1922, Oren was appointed as a member of Hashomer Hatzair's central committee where he worked until the late 1920s. In 1929, Oren decided for emigration to Palestine. After he arrived in the Holy Land, he worked in agriculture in Kibbutz Mizra for three years. In 1931, Oren was appointed to the central committee of Hashomer Hatzair, and also became an editor of the journal published by this organization. Due to this job, Oren made several trips abroad mainly to European countries. His main task was to mobilize Jewish youth and to encourage their emigration to Palestine. After the end of World War II, Oren worked for Histadrut. In 1948-1949 he was sent to Paris as a branch manager of the World Jewry Congress. Upon his return to Israel, Oren joined the newly formed political party Mapam. Soon he became a member of the Central Committee and Political Bureau of Mapam.<sup>32</sup>

### **Diplomatic Communication regarding Oren and Orenstein**

On February 29, 1952, the Israeli chargé d'affaires Gera delivered to CMFA another diplomatic note (PR-345/2166). This note raised a question of the fate of still missing Mordechai Oren.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, he submitted a visa application of Oren's wife Rivka who had intended to search for her husband on her own. For obvious reasons, Rivka Oren was not granted the entry visa to Czechoslovakia by the Ministry of National Security.<sup>34</sup> On March 20, 1952, CMFA stated that Mordechai Oren was arrested because he came to Czechoslovakia without the authorization of the relevant authorities. What was considered even more serious was the suspicion of Oren's subversive activities to damage Czechoslovakia. The IEP responded by another diplomatic note (PR-345/2371). This note was personally handed to CMFA by Israeli ambassador Arie L. Kubovy<sup>35</sup> on March 26, 1952. The note expressed the astonishment of IEP about being informed about the arrests of two Israeli citizens with eleven weeks delay. At the same time, the embassy attached a request for clarification of the charges against Oren and permission to visit him by consular staff. A similar note regarding Orenstein was sent as well.<sup>36</sup> CMFA, however, regarding the allegedly rude tone of both diplomatic notes recommended not to respond at least for a month, and then

<sup>31</sup> OSA, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items. Israel Citizen Oren Disappeared in Prague. Call No. 300-1-2-16731, 11/3/1952, p. 1-3.

<sup>32</sup> ABS, Zvláštní vyšetřovací spisy - archivní protokol [Special Investigation Files - Archival Record], Call no. ZV-82, Protokol o výpovědi [Statement Record], 8/1/1952, p. 1-3.

<sup>33</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Mordechai Oren - Pobyť v Československu [Mordechai Oren - Stay in Czechoslovakia], Call no. 107528, 3/3/1952, Fabiánová.

<sup>34</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Rivka Orenová, vstup do ČSR [Rivka Oren, Entry to Czechoslovakia], Call no. 110501, 29/3/1952, Chalupa.

<sup>35</sup> Arie Leon Kubovy (1896-1966) was an Israeli diplomat and lawyer. In 1952-1952 he served as a chargé d'affaires of Israel in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Later he served in various Israeli diplomatic missions in South America.

<sup>36</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Mordechai Oren - zatčení [Mordechai Oren - Arrest], Call No. 110510, 29/3/1952, Fabiánová.



to refuse all requests of IEP. Subsequently, this procedure was approved by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Viliam Široký.<sup>37</sup>

Due to this strategy of CMFA, the frequency of the diplomatic communication regarding Oren and Orenstein was slowing down in spring 1952. Israeli diplomacy complained again about Orenstein's case on May 13, 1952, when another diplomatic note (PR-345/3064) was delivered to CMFA. The main issues of the note were as follows: More than five months after the arrest of Orenstein, IEP had not received accurate information about the nature of his crimes. At the same time, IEP asked whether Orenstein was assigned a lawyer. The last request referred to the possibility to visit Orenstein by a consular staff of IEP. All these requests, however, were immediately rejected by the Ministry of National Security. Three days later, a similar diplomatic note (PR-345/3065) regarding Mordechai Oren was delivered to CMFA. CMFA replied to these notes on May 16, 1952, stating that due to the Czechoslovak legislation determining the investigation process all these requests had to be denied at the moment.<sup>38</sup>

What we can consider as the only concessions by Czechoslovak authorities was the permission to exchange the short letter between the detainees and their families. Even the frequency of these letters exchange was criticized by Israeli diplomacy as inadequate. E.g. Oren's first letter to his wife was handed over to the Secretary of IEP Zeev Shek as late as on August 18, 1952.<sup>39</sup> In May 1952, Oren's family submitted a medical report that proved the long-term health problems of the detainee. CMFA refused any reliefs stating that according to the findings of the local doctors Oren was of good health.<sup>40</sup> Due to the absence of any replies to the previous Israeli notes, IEP sent two other diplomatic notes regarding Oren (PR-345/1001) and Orenstein (PR-345/1004) on June 11, 1952. These notes repeated the same requests as earlier but they all were refused by CMFA with a reference to the ongoing investigation.<sup>41</sup>

Chargé d'affaires of Israel Arie L. Kubovy urged the need to get an official response to the received diplomatic notes on his visits at CMFA on June 30, August 6, September 11, and September 22, 1952. Kubovy also warned that the absence of any if only a courtesy reply to the notes would violate the common diplomatic conventions. He also emphasized that such manners would put the

<sup>37</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Shimeon Orenstein a Mordechai Oren – zatčení [Shimeon Orenstein and Mordechai Oren – Arrest], Call No. 110151, 29/3/1952, Fabiánová.

<sup>38</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Shimeon Orenstein, Mordechai Oren – zatčení v ČSR [Shimeon Orenstein, Mordechai Oren – Arrest in Czechoslovakia], Call No. 116566, 20/5/1952, Fabiánová.

<sup>39</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 2. Návštěva Zeev Sheka, tajemníka izraelského velvyslanectví [Visit of Zeev Shek, Secretary of Israel Embassy], Call No. 127742, 20/8/1952, Jobánek-Šimonovič, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Mordechai Oren – zatčení v ČSR [Mordechai Oren – Arrest in Czechoslovakia], Call No. 115179, 20/5/1952, Fabiánová.

<sup>41</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Shimeon Orenstein, Mordechai Oren – zatčení v ČSR [Shimeon Orenstein, Mordechai Oren – Arrest in Czechoslovakia], Call No. 120052, 18/6/1952, Fabiánová.

attitude of Czechoslovakia towards Israel to a very unfavorable light <sup>42</sup> Kubovy repeated the requests of IE on a personal meeting with the representatives of CMFA in October 1952 but once again without any success.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Culmination of Tension in Czechoslovak-Israeli Relations**

The mutual relations between Israel and Czechoslovakia were close to the official break-down in December 1952. On December 6, 1952, Israeli attaché Zeev Shek received a diplomatic note claiming that IEP under the leadership of Arie L. Kubovy had interfered repeatedly in the domestic affairs of Czechoslovakia, and thus violated the principles of international law. Kubovy himself was accused of the acts of sabotage, and espionage activities against Czechoslovakia. The meeting between Kubovy and Oren in December 1951 when Kubovy had instructed Oren to congest as much information about Rudolf Slánský's case as possible was stated as a concrete example of such activities. This information came from the interrogation of Oren but it remains unclear to what extent it was based on truth given the fact that Oren's confession was probably forced by the secret police. After his release, Oren stated that he was submitted to throughout brainwashing by being interrogated constantly for 22 months. According to his testimony, the never-ending interrogations lead to his mental collapse resulting in a situation when he was willing to confess anything he had been asked for.<sup>44</sup>

In result, Kubovy was proclaimed as *persona non grata* and expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1952.<sup>45</sup> In March 1953, Shlomo Kaddar was accredited as the new first secretary of IEP. He arrived in Czechoslovakia in June 1953.<sup>46</sup> The political situation in Czechoslovakia was observed very carefully both by Israeli politicians and Israeli media. Especially the antisemitism that appeared during the political processes with Rudolf Slánský and his coworkers provoked the intensive disapproval and resistance in Israeli society. Concurrently, there was a process with a group of Jewish doctors in the USSR who were accused of plotting to assassinate the top political leaders of the country, including Josef V. Stalin, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As a result, many Jews were imprisoned, executed, or sent to the gulags.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 2. Návštěva izraelského vyslanca 6.8.1952 - Záznam [Visit of Israeli Ambassador 6/8/1952 - Record], Call No. 126441, 21/8/1952, Šimonovič, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box. 7. Intervence izr. velvyslanectví v Praze ve věci Oren a Orenstein [The intervention of the Israeli Embassy in Oren and Orenstein's Case], Call No. 114745, 18/4/1953, Šimek, p. 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> OSA, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items. Oren Intends to Fight for Complete Rehabilitation. Call No. 300-1-2-71591, 1/6/1956, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> ABS, Zvláštní vyšetřovací spisy - archivní protokol [Special Investigation Files - Archival Record], Call no. ZV-82, Záznam o výpovědi [Statement Record], 19/11/1952, pp. 8-9.

<sup>46</sup> AMZV TO-T, 1945-1959, Israel, Box. 7. Záznam o návštěvě izraelského chargé d'affaires Kaddara; [Record of Israeli Chargé D'Affaires Kaddar's Visit], Call No. 125541, 1/7/1953, Jobánek, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> BRENT, Jonathan - NAUMOV, Vladimír Pavlovich. Stalin's Last Crime: The Doctors' Plot. London, 2004; RAPOPORT, Luis, Stalin's war against the Jews: the doctors' plot and the Soviet solution. New York, 1990.

In response to these events, a group of right-wing radicals called the Kingdom of Israel<sup>48</sup> decided to express their hostility to Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union publicly. From December 1952 to February 1953, there were three bomb attacks targeted to the embassies of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in Tel Aviv. While the two attacks on the Czechoslovak embassy caused only property damage, a bomb explosion in the building of the Soviet embassy led to the injuries of three people, including the wife of Soviet ambassador Yershov.

From the beginning, CMFA blamed the Israeli government not only from launching a negative campaign in the media against Czechoslovakia but also from the responsibility for the attacks. Chargé d'affaires of Czechoslovakia Alois Bartůšek wrote in his periodic report to the CFMA: „It is also quite clear that throwing a stone, and then a bomb to the embassy building was either the work of Israeli police or it was performed under the police protection“<sup>49</sup>. The same report also indicates, however, that this accusation was rather a presumption. The fact that neither Israeli police nor Israeli government was involved in the attacks is supported by a later statement of Yaakov Heruti, a former leader of the Kingdom of Israel. Heruti explained the motives of the attacks on the embassies of Czechoslovakia and the USSR as a form of a protest against the oppression of Jews in Eastern Europe at the moment when the Israeli government failed to protect their rights.<sup>50</sup> According to the available documents, this situation was perceived as serious, CMFA even considered the immediate cut of mutual diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>51</sup>

Another Israeli note (PR-345) regarding Oren and Orenstein was delivered to CMFA by a new Israeli chargé d'affaires Zeev Shek on February 10, 1953. Shek asked in particular for the clarification of the offenses by both detainees. CMFA responded to this diplomatic note a few weeks later stating that all requests of IEP were already answered in a previous communication. Concurrently it was promised that in a case of the new facts, IEP would have been informed immediately.<sup>52</sup> Both Oren and Orenstein were interrogated till May 1953, and then the State Prosecutor's Office worked on the preparation of the lawsuit. In autumn 1953 the two men were accused of supporting western imperialism, being the Zionist agents, and thus the traitors of the communist regime.<sup>53</sup> Both of

<sup>48</sup> Kingdom of Israel was founded by the former members of a revisionist group Lehi that had operated during the British Mandate in Palestine. Lehi was known for using violence to promote their political agenda.

<sup>49</sup> AMZV Political Reports, Embassy Tel Aviv [Politické zprávy, Zastupitelský úřad Tel Aviv], 1952-1953. Řádná politická zpráva za měsíc prosinec 1952 [Regular Political Report December 1952], Call No. 143053, 17/12/1952, Bartůšek, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> PEDAHZUR, Ami - PERLIGER, Arie. Jewish Terrorism in Israel. New York, 2011, p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> AMZV TO-T, 1945-1954, Israel, Návrh na úpravu vzájemných vztahů mezi ČSR a Izraelem [Proposal of the Regulation of Mutual Relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel], Call No. 414306, 5/7/1954, Bartůšek-Jobánek, p. 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. Shimeon Orenstein a Mordecai Oren - zatčení v Československu [Shimeon Orenstein and Mordechai Oren - Arrest in Czechoslovakia], Call No. 105804, 4/3/1953, Fabiánová.

<sup>53</sup> OSA, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items. Oren Intends to Fight for Complete Rehabilitation. Call No. 300-1-2-71591, 1/6/1956, p. 3.

them were sentenced to long imprisonments. Shimon Orenstein was given a life sentence while Mordechai Oren was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.<sup>54</sup>

### **Negotiations for the Release of Oren and Orenstein**

Even before the beginnings of the trials, there were the pleas by various respected personalities calling for less severe treatment of Oren and Orenstein by Czechoslovak state authorities. One of the first supporters of the detained Israelis was Jacob Majus, a secretary of Israel Peace Committee, and a member of Mapam party. In February 1952, Majus visited the Czechoslovak embassy in Tel Aviv to plead for Mordechai Oren, his fellow in Mapam. Majus highlighted the fact that the imprisonment of Oren in a communist country would damage the public image of Mapam. At the same time, he offered a guarantee of Oren's good behavior if he had been released from prison.<sup>55</sup> Concurrently Pitro Nenni, the leading Italian socialist and recipient of Stalin Peace Prize, sent a personal letter to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia with a request to obtain the detailed information about Oren's case for Mapam party. Both requests, however, remained unanswered by the Czech side.

The effort to achieve the release of both Israelis intensified after the end of the trials. Not surprisingly, the families of both men had the leading role in this process. With a help of Israeli diplomacy, Elisheva Orenstein and Rivka Oren sent the personal letters to the president of Czechoslovakia Antonín Zápotocký in May 1953<sup>56</sup>. The wives of the prisoners demanded the presidential amnesty for their husbands. However, this appeal did not even receive the official response.<sup>57</sup> On contrary, the initiative of Israeli President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi who also sent a letter to President Zápotocký was more successful. However the communication between Ben-Zvi and Zápotocký was rather slow as IEP complained frequently, so in the end it took almost a year to achieve a positive result.<sup>58</sup>

In October 1954, a presidential amnesty was granted to Orenstein who arrived to Israel on October 31. In a letter to Ben-Zvi, Zápotocký explained that at the moment the amnesty for Oren is not possible due to the nature of his crimes.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> ABS, Vyšetřovací spis ORENSTEIN ŠIMON [Investigation File ORENSTEIN SIMON], Call No. ZV-171 MV, Box 2, Rozsudek v mene republiky [Judgement in the Name of the Republic], 7/8/1953, and ABS, Zvláštní vyšetřovací spisy - archivní protokol [Special Investigation Files - Archival Record], Call No. ZV-82, Rozsudek ve jméně republiky [Judgement in the Name of the Republic], 9/10/1953.

<sup>55</sup> AMZV TO-T, 1945-1954, Israel. Záznam rozhovoru s Jakobem Majusem, dne 14. XII. 1954 [Record of the Interview with Jacob Majus on 14/12/1954], Call No. sine, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> OSA, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items. Mrs. Oren Appeals to Western Communists for Husband's Release. Call No. 300-1-2-65849, 31/12/1955, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 7. R. Orenová, A. Orensteinová - dopisy prezidentu ČSR [R. Oren, Orenstein - Letters to President of Czechoslovakia], Call No. 122494, 17/6/1953, Fabiánová.

<sup>58</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box 2. Záznam o návštěvě izraelského chargé d'affaires 5. 5. 1954 [Record of Visit of Israeli Chargé D'Affaires 5/5/1954], Call No. 411055, 5/5/1954, Šimonovič.

<sup>59</sup> AMZV Political Reports, Embassy Tel Aviv, 1954. Mimořádná politická zpráva č. 4: Ohlas návratu Orensteina v izraelském tisku [Special Political Record no. 4: Return of Orenstein in Israeli Press], Call No. 484, 9/11/1954, Jobánek, p. 1.

The release of Orenstein was interpreted as an ice-breaker in contemporary Czechoslovak-Israeli relations. It was expected that a release of Oren and the revision of the political processes should follow soon after. This hope was expressed by the representative of IMFA Zeev Shek on his meeting with chargé d'affaires of Czechoslovakia Zdeněk Jobánek in May 1955 who then reported back to Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "The main issue was the emphasis on the belief that the relations with Czechoslovakia would develop gradually once Oren was released"<sup>60</sup>.

At the beginning of 1955, Oren's wife Rivka made a trip to Western Europe with the hope to gain political support for her husband. She was able to meet with the representatives of the important leftist political parties such as Barnett Stross, Harry Pollit, Édouard Herriot, and Pietro Nenni.<sup>61</sup> After discussing her husband's case with them, they sent the letters to president Zápotocký with a plea of his prompt release.<sup>62</sup> Increasing international pressure and also the revision of the period of Stalinism<sup>63</sup> in Czechoslovak politics led to a change of attitude regarding Oren. In his response to Israeli president in June 1956, Zápotocký informed Ben-Zvi that State Prosecutor's Office had decided not to insist on Oren's further imprisonment.<sup>64</sup> Finally on May 12, 1956 Oren was after more than 4 years allowed to leave Czechoslovakia.<sup>65</sup>

The revisions of Oren and Orenstein's cases came in September 1963 when the Supreme Court of Czechoslovakia declared the original sentence from 1953 to be invalid. The Presidium of the Supreme Court stated inter alia that there was no conspiracy center in Czechoslovakia and that all allegations were made for the purpose by the StB.<sup>66</sup> We can interpret this statement as the official cleansing of Zionism in the countries of Eastern Bloc which was something Israel had long sought for.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to analyze the impact of the imprisonment of two Israeli citizens Mordechai Oren and Shimon Orenstein in Prague in 1951 on mutual rela-

<sup>60</sup> AMZV TO-T, 1945-1954, Israel. Telegram ze ZÚ Tel Aviv [Telegram from Embassy in Tel Aviv], Call No. 416913, Jobánek, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> OSA, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: General Records: Information Items. Nenni Intervenes for Oren. Call No. 300-1-2-70216, 20/4/1956, p. 1-2.

<sup>62</sup> AMZV TO-O, 1945-1959, Israel, Box. 1. Izrael - přehled styků s ČSR za IV. čtvrtletí 1955 [Israel - Summary of the Relations with Czechoslovakia for IV. Quarter 1955], Call no. 08243, 9/1/1956, Poláček, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> As a key moment is considered the famous "Secret Speech" by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956. Khrushchev denounced the personality cult and dictatorship of Joseph V. Stalin, predecessor in the office.

<sup>64</sup> AMZV TO-T, 1945-1954, Israel. Mordechai Oren - odpověď čs. presidenta izraelskému prezidentovi [Mordechai Oren - Response of President of Czechoslovakia to President of Israel], Call no. 013476, 20/6/1956, Poláček.

<sup>65</sup> AMZV Political Reports, Embassy Tel Aviv, 1956. Řádná politická zpráva za II. čtvrtletí 56 [Regular Political Report for II. Quarter 56], Call No. 0188, 23/7/1956, Louda, p. 3-4.

<sup>66</sup> ABS, Zvláštní vyšetřovací spisy - archivní protokol [Special Investigation Files - Archival Record], Call no. ZV-82, Rozsudek jménem republiky [Sentence on the behalf of the Republic], 19/9/1963, pp. 1-5.



tions between Czechoslovakia and Israel. The diplomatic relations between these two countries were extremely tensed in the 1950s. The imprisonment of Mordechai Oren, Shimon Orenstein, and many Czechoslovak Jews were not only a demonstration of the power of the Czechoslovak authorities but also confirmed a growth of antisemitism in the countries of Eastern Bloc. It was an entirely new phenomenon that denied one of the key ideas of communism highlighting the equality of all people as officially stated in the Constitution.

The political processes in the 1950s that culminated with Rudolf Slánský's trial started a new phase of Czechoslovak-Israeli political relations where no longer was a place for mutual friendship and support. In this context, we can consider the trials of Oren and Orenstein as a breaking moment. Even before their arrests, there were some hints that the diplomacy of Czechoslovakia towards Israel had been changing significantly. The imprisonment of two Israeli citizens based on the purpose-made allegations and the further development of their cases only confirmed these assumptions. Since then, more or less explicit anti-Semitism became an integral part of the official state discourse in communist Czechoslovakia, and Israel was seen as a member of the opposite ideological bloc and a hostile state. Inevitably this shift affected the political relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel and deepened the mutual estrangement.

A good example of a diplomatic rift between the two states was the proclamation of Israeli chargé d'affair in Prague Arie L. Kubovy as a persona non grata in December 1952. Another reaction to Oren and Orenstein's detentions was the activities of the radical right-wing Zionist movement the Kingdom of Israel. The member of this group attacked the building of the Czechoslovak embassy in November and December 1952. Even though the Kingdom of Israel had no verifiable ties to the Israeli government, CMFA interpreted these attacks as a result of a negative campaign in Israeli media against Czechoslovakia. CMFA even considered the cut off official diplomatic relations with Israel but in the end, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia preferred not to make such a dramatic move.

Some partial improvements in Czechoslovak-Israeli relations came after the release of Oren and Orenstein in the mid-1950s however the overall picture of relations between these two states remained rather negative for the rest of the Cold War. The ultimate declaration of Czechoslovak disapproval of Israel came in June 1967 when in response to Six Days War, Czechoslovakia cut the official diplomatic relations with the Jewish State that could be restored only after the fall of communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1989.

### **Abbreviations:**

AMZV - Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

CMFA - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia

IEP - Israeli Embassy in Prague

IMFA - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel

OSA - Open Society Archives at Central European University

ABS - Security Services Archive

StB - State Security

TD-O – Territorial Department Regular  
TD-T – Territorial Department Secret  
UNSCOP – United Nations Special Committee on Palestine  
USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

### List of references and literature:

#### Archives:

Archive of Security Services, Praha, Collection Vyšetřovací spis ORENSTEIN ŠIMON [Investigation File ORENSTEIN SIMON], 1951-1953, Call No. ZV-171, Box 2.  
Archive of Security Services, Prague, Collection Zvláštní vyšetřovací spisy - archivní protokol [Special Investigation Files – Archival Record], 1951-1953, Call No. ZV-82.  
Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Collection Political Reports – Embassy Tel Aviv, 1952, 1954, 1956.  
Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Collection Territorial Department – Regular 1945-1959, Box 1, Box 2, Box 7.  
Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Collection Territorial Department – Secret 1945-1959, Box 1, Box 7.  
Open Society Archives at Central European University, 1952, 1955, 1956, Collection General Records.

#### Memoirs:

AVRIEL, Ehud. Open the Gates! The Dramatic Personal Story of Illegal Immigration to Israel. New York, 1975.

#### Monographs:

BRENT, Jonathan – NAUMOV, Vladimir Pavlovich. Stalin's Last Crime: The Doctors' Plot. London, 2004.  
DUFEK, Jiří – KAPLAN, Karel – ŠLOSAR, Vladimír. Československo a Izrael v letech 1947-1953: studie [Czechoslovakia and Israel in 1947-1953: A Study]. Prague, 1993.  
GILBERT, Martin. Izrael: dějiny [Israel: A History]. Prague, 2002.  
KAPLAN, Karel. Kronika komunistického Československa: Klement Gottwald a Rudolf Slánský [The Chronicle of Communist Czechoslovakia: Klement Gottwald and Rudolf Slánský]. Brno, 2009.  
KREJČOVÁ, Helena – SVOBODOVÁ, Jana – HYNDRÁKOVÁ, Anna. Židé v protektorátu: hlášení Židovské náboženské obce v roce 1942: dokumenty [Jews in the Protectorate: Reports of the Jewish Religious Community in 1942: Documents]. Prague, 1997.  
LANDY, David. Jewish Identity and Palestinian Rights: Diaspora Jewish Opposition to Israel. Chicago, 2012.  
PEDAHZUR, Ami – PERLIGER, Arie. Jewish Terrorism in Israel. New York, 2011.  
RABINOVICH, Itamar – REINHARZ, Jehuda. Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present. Waltham, Mass., 2008.  
RAPOPORT, Luis. Stalin's war against the Jews: the doctors' plot and the Soviet solution. New York, 1990.  
RUCKER, Laurent. Stalin, Izrael a Židé [Stalin, Israel and Jews]. Prague, 2001.  
SACHAR, Howard M. Izrael: Dějiny [History of Israel]. Prague, 1999.  
STRÖBINGER, Rudolf. Vražda generálního tajemníka: poslední Stalinův exemplární proces, soud s Rudolfem Slánským [Murder of General Secretary: Stalin's last exemplary process, the trial of Rudolf Slánský]. Brno, 1991.

ZBOŘIL, František. Československá a česká zahraniční politika: minulost a současnost [Czechoslovak and Czech Foreign Policy: The Past and the Present]. Prague, 2010.  
ZÍDEK, Petr – SIEBER, Karel, Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948-1989 [Czechoslovakia and the Middle East in 1948-1989]. Prague, 2009.

Word count: 7727

Number of characters, including spaces: 50 829