

Made in Czechoslovakia:

Punishment for holding a Liechtenstein passport

In 1945-1951, Czechoslovakia confiscated properties from thirty-eight Liechtenstein citizens. Simply speaking: from one prince, seven of his relatives and thirty "common" holders of Liechtenstein passport. These people lived, ran business and worked in Nitra, Bratislava, Opava, České Budějovice, Jablonec, Karlovy Vary and many other places. They were not necessarily rich people. Because of the forced label of "German", some of them lost a Skoda car, other a bank account or a family house. Johann Alexander von Königswarter was rich. However, according to the Nazi laws, he was also a "pure Jew". The passport of neutral Liechtenstein protected Königswarter from a concentration camp only to let him experience the irony of history - because of the same passport and mainly because of the application of the Beneš Decrees...

"Celebrating today the establishment of Czechoslovakia is mainly an invitation to so much delayed discussion about the Czech history in the 20th century, about what is called national identity," wrote Jan Urban a few weeks ago on the occasion of 28th October. "In the moment of collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian empire," continues the text, "the irresponsible longing of some of the Czech elites to acquire, under any name, the status of the reigning "nation" over as biggest territory as possible became the driving power. These new Czech elites did not ask at all more than one half of population speaking other language...., (because) in reality they were never willing to lower themselves to the level of equality with a numerous, other-language-speaking majority in the common state."

According to Urban, the real situation was hidden for a long time by imminent economic, cultural and, at first, even political successes of the new state. Despite its inner problems, Czechoslovakia, contrary to all its neighbours, managed to formally maintain a democratic political system. In 1918-1928, it reportedly seemed as if the winners of World War I maintained their interest in the democratization of Central Europe for ever: "A life in illusion may last for very long - especially when it becomes a state doctrine, supported by state-controlled education, censorship and the vast majority of mass media. The Czechoslovak state doctrine, or rather national propaganda", writes Jan Urban, "took over the worst from the tradition of the Czech revival movement - the blind self-absorption and creation of myths."

Prestigious confiscation

Let's stay with the Liechtenstein family: is there any other family surrounded by more myths in the Czech environment? These myths are to cover a simple truth. Czechoslovakia - and later its successor republics of Czechia and Slovakia - have been always interested mainly in their property. In legalizing or at least forgetting the way how it was seized.

The first lot of land, roughly about 90 thousand hectares, was appropriated by new Czechoslovakia between the wars. At that time, it was at least a civilized approach within the first land reform and, in an agreement, the state undertook to pay the family a compensation totalling roughly to one fifth of the official price of the land at that time. However, Czechoslovakia never paid its contractual obligation; why would it do when an opportunity occurred after World War II to take the rest, this time without an agreement and without any compensation: let's make all people with Liechtenstein passports German!

As historians have already proved several times, the Czechoslovak and Czech officials, journalists and politicians have used many myths against the Liechtenstein family in past one hundred years. When communicated to a crowd, the confiscation of the family property was justified with "revenge for the White Mountain"; when Communist-oriented workers prevailed in the crowd it was necessary "to finish off the enemy of the class - the oppressing nobility"; when a lawyer was nearby, it was said that "it is generally known that the Liechtenstein family is German" and this truth does not have to be proved (in an archive ministerial circular note, it was even said that "the Liechtenstein family show exterior signs of germanship"). And so on.

It is obvious from many facts that the Czechoslovak authorities were not sure about their "truths" when chasing the princely property. For example:

1. The newly established Czechoslovakia recognized Liechtenstein as state definitely and aloud only in 1938, i.e. when the land reform was finished.
2. The post-war Czechoslovakia argued since 1945 that the mutual recognition had ceased to exist due to the war and the country had no intention to renew it.
3. To cover the fact that the reason was mainly the princely property, Czechoslovakia labelled all holders of Liechtenstein passports in its territory as German; including Jews to whom these passports saved lives.

4. There have been doubts about the legitimacy of the approach against the Liechtenstein family among lawyers as well as ministerial officials since 1945.
5. Czechoslovakia after November 1989 conditioned the recognition of Liechtenstein by giving up their claims for property recovery and compensation.

The fact that Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic refused to recognize Liechtenstein on international level, reveals the biggest weakness, i.e. the international law. According to period documents, various legal commissions of government ministries warned against legal consequences of the confiscation still in 1950, because since 1945 they had been aware of the fact that "no undisputed state interest gives the right to a state to confiscate properties of foreigners unless fully compensated". In other words: the Decrees could have been defended on the international field but only as a punitive measure against Czechoslovak Germans and citizens of enemy states but not against citizens of neutral states. In the case of the Liechtenstein family, it was a breach of international law even according to Czechoslovak authorities of post-war times.

Why was the confiscation done despite this all? Politics. The Minister of Agriculture, Communist Július Ďuriš, shouted in Prague that the confiscation of Liechtenstein property was "a prestigious act" and Josef Životský, a member of the Communist Party and an official of the Regional National Committee in Brno, who is signed under the confiscation regulation for the Liechtenstein family, said that "even the Soviet Union was interested in the confiscation."

It is not only about the Prince

If Johann Alexander von Königswarter anticipated more, he might not have made so much effort to gain the Liechtenstein citizenship in March 1930. But as Jan Županič, a historian and member of the Czech-Liechtenstein commission of historians, writes, although the Königswarter family had for generation supported the residents at their estate in Šebetov in Moravia and financed many public buildings at that place (including the foundation to establish a nursery school), at the end of 1918, the latent anti-Semitism of local people grew into an open animosity. And when the land reform took about 40% of arable land from the young baron, he settled in Switzerland in 1928 and managed his business in Austria and Czechoslovakia when travelling.

"In the period between the wars", writes Jan Županič, "holding Liechtenstein citizenship has no obvious impact on Königswarter's life story, however the situation changed after the annexation of Austria in March 1938, and a year later, after the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was established. Johann Alexander fell under the provisions of the Nuremberg Laws, based on

which he was a pure Jew....Under usual circumstances, he would face a forced purchase of his properties and emigration in a better case, in the worst case a concentration camp..." However, the "Liechtenstein passport protected him from deportation in the territory of the Protectorate and annexed Austria.

During the war, Königswarter refused to join the German working front and, as an unreliable person, he was several times heard by the Gestapo. However, the history waited for him. With an ironic sneer. Within political justification of the confiscation of the property of Prince of Liechtenstein, even Johann Alexander Königswarter was labelled as German - and Czechoslovakia took his property. He had tried to reach justice in vain for several years. In 1955, his lawyer received a letter explaining that the Prague government cannot treat his case differently "because it would contradict the thesis on the German ethnicity of Liechtenstein citizens".

In August 2020, the government of the Principality of Liechtenstein filed an international complaint against the Czech Republic with the court in Strasbourg. According to the government in Vaduz, labelling Liechtenstein nationals as German "equals to a flagrant disrespect for the sovereignty of Liechtenstein and personal identity of its citizens". Among the reactions on the Czech side, there was also a statement of an official who said to the media: it is anyway only about the Prince... An attempt at a new myth? Perhaps. Self-absorption? Maybe. Contempt to the lives of other thirty-seven? Surely. Unfortunately.

Box 1:

The citizens of neutral Liechtenstein who were declared German and whose properties were confiscated by Czechoslovakia in 1945

Baroness Hedwig von Berg und Wurmbrand-Stuppach

Dr. Albert Bloch

Ida Brändle

Marie de Charmant

Pierre de Charmant

Baroness Antonia von Falz-Fein

Maria von Frankl

Gertrud Hartmann

Dorothea von Janotta

Johann Alexander von Königswarter

Prince Alois Liechtenstein

Prince František Josef II Liechtenstein.
Prince Bedřich Liechtenstein
Princess Irma Liechtenstein
Prince Emanuel Liechtenstein
Prince Jan Liechtenstein
Princess Ludmila Liechtensteinu, neé Lobkowitz
Princess Olga Liechtenstein
Franziska Näscher
Dr. Hans Nissl
Renate Nissl
Alfred Nitsche
Melanie Nitsche
Günter Nitsche
Harriet Nottebohm
Hermann Nottebohm
Baroness Marie von Reitzes-Marienwert
Adolf Risch
Gertrud Schädler
Stefanie Marianne Schädler
Albin Seemann
Peter Seemann
Minka Strauss
Olga Tomala
Anton Wanger
Antonie Weiss
Count Ferdinand Wilczek
Countess Mignon Wurmbrand-Stumpach

Box 2:

Why no settlement has been found?

Five theses by Peter Geiger, a member of the Czech-Liechtenstein Commission of Historians

Why were not the citizens of Liechtenstein treated as citizens of a neutral state? For example, in the case of Swiss citizens, whose properties were confiscated after the war, an international agreement on compensation was made already at the end of the 1940s. In relation to Liechtenstein, there was on contrary a long blockade, the reasons for which can be formulated in five theses.

Thesis no. 1: The huge extent of expropriated princely properties is the first and, most probably, the most important reason. The Czech state surely did not want to miss these properties and saw this acquisition as a sort of completion of the first land reform.

Thesis no. 2: The Czechoslovak state probably would not be able to compensate the Prince due to financial reasons. The confiscation was a simpler and economically more convenient measure.

Thesis no. 3: If the Czechoslovak state recognized all other persons with Liechtenstein passports as citizens of a neutral state, it would have to treat the Prince in the same way, which would be undesirable from the view of Czechoslovak authorities. That was the reason why Czechoslovakia did not treat equally the Liechtensteiner and Swiss. On contrary, all the Liechtensteiners were treated as if they were members of the princely family.

Thesis no. 4: The arguments related to the confiscation process in relation to the Liechtensteiners were based on the area of history and law and referred to concrete politics of Prince Karel Liechtenstein in the 17th century, alleged "German nationality" of the Liechtensteiners and the demand for legitimacy of the general expulsion of German population which included also the expropriation of their properties.

Thesis no. 5: Failing to recognize the Principality of Liechtenstein as a subject of international law by Czechoslovakia, and after 1993 also by the Czech and Slovak Republics as the successor states, was a way how to avoid the urge of settling the issue of confiscated properties. It was an approach similar to that applied already in relation to the first land reform after World War I.

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