

Czechoslovak forest experts in Cold War Angola¹



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ABSTRACT

The first Czechoslovak pioneers of tropical and subtropical forestry appeared in the nineteenth century. Yet, only after the onset of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1948, in connection with the advancing decolonization of the Global South and the culmination of the Cold War, did the dispatch of forest experts in post-colonial countries become a targeted and centrally-controlled policy of Prague. The first educational institutions focused on tropic forestry and Polytechna, a Czechoslovak foreign trade corporation whose task was to send Czechoslovak experts abroad, were established in the late 1950s. By the mid-1970s, when Angola gained independence, Czechoslovak authorities already had considerable experience with the dispatch of their forest experts in the global South. Such experts became part of the extensive Czechoslovak assistance to new pro-socialist Angolan government. This article, based on interviews with the former Czechoslovak experts sent to Angola after 1975, complemented by archival documents, analyzes their individual trajectories and experiences to show how this policy looked in practice.

INTRODUCTION

Angola's independence in 1975 marked a milestone in the development of its relations with socialist Czechoslovakia. Until then, Prague's semi-legal military and humanitarian aid to the local People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), which began with the outbreak of the Angolan war of independence in the early 1960s, turned into an officially declared, large-scale Czechoslovak assistance program. In practice, this meant implementing various policies, including development aid, trade, and transfer of skills and knowledge. The goals of Prague were to help build socialism in Angola, strengthen the Angolan alliance with the Eastern bloc, and, not least, contribute to its own economic enrichment. One of the main areas of cooperation was the dispatch of Czechoslovak experts to Angolan companies and the public sector, including paper mills, breweries, forestry, and healthcare. By the end of the Cold War, several hundred Czechoslovaks had gained work experience from Angola, and a little later from Mozambique. In the case of Angola, these promising develop-

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ments were interrupted by the abduction of Czechoslovak experts and their relatives from the Angolan town of Alto Catumbela in March 1983 by the rebel National Union for the complete independence of Angola (UNITA). This incident had a severe impact on the mutual relations, especially in the area of Czechoslovak expertise. By the end of the Cold War, the number of Czechoslovak experts working in Angola was up to ten, most of whom worked in or around Luanda.²

For socialist Czechoslovakia, sending experts to the Global South had become an established practice by the 1970s. Following advances in decolonization and the culmination of the Cold War, such cooperation had become a targeted and centrally managed part of Czechoslovak foreign policy. In the late 1950s, Polytechna, a Czechoslovak foreign trade corporation (*podnik zahraničního obchodu*), was established to coordinate it. Even then, according to historian Petr Zídek, the increased presence of socialist experts in Africa disturbed Western European states, which perceived them as another means of spreading communist influence.³ Tropical and subtropical forestry was one of these fields from which Czechoslovak experts sent to the countries of the global South were recruited. The first Czech pioneers in this profession appeared in the nineteenth century, but its biggest expansion occurred after the onset of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1948. In the late 1950s, the Department of World Forestry was established at the Forestry faculty of the University College of Agriculture (today Czech University of Life Sciences) in Prague, later renamed the Institute of Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture. In the 1960s, a Commission for Comprehensive Research in Developing Countries was set up under the presidium of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.⁴ From this decade until the end of the Cold War, the main destination for Czechoslovak experts in tropical and subtropical forestry were African countries.⁵

The dispatch of Czechoslovak experts to countries of the Global South remains an under-explored topic in Czech and Slovak historiography. Although several case studies have been published in recent years⁶ and other researchers have started focusing on this topic, as evidenced by this special issue, there is still a lack of broader empirical research to assess the role of experts in Czechoslovak foreign policy. It is also complicated by the fact that the archival files of Polytechna as the main coordinating organization have not yet been organized and made publicly available. Concerning the Czechoslovak policy towards Angola after 1975, in addition to the rather

2 AMZV ČR. TO-T Angola 1980–89, Karton 1. Zaměření a hl. úkoly čs. zahraniční politiky vůči ALR. 18. 2. 1986. For more information about the abduction see Zídek, Sieber, *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1989*. 41–47. Or Lubomír Sazeček, *Zajati v Angole: Přepadení a pochod*, (Vlastním nákladem, 2008) and *Zajati v Angole: Rok v buši* (Vlastním nákladem, 2009).

3 P. ZÍDEK, *Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–68*, Praha 2006, pp. 33–34.

4 V. ERICH (ed.), *Přínos českých lesníků v poznání a rozvoji světového tropického a subtropického lesnictví*. Praha 2007, p. 6.

5 Ibid., pp. 51–2.

6 See for example A. JÚNOVÁ MACKOVÁ, *Export of Experts. Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and Iraq in the 1960s*, in: *Práce z dějin Akademie věd*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2018; Or B. BUZÁŠ-SYOVÁ, *Building and Testing Trust Within a Socialist Dictatorship: The Case of Czechoslovak Experts in Africa Pre- and Post-1968*, in: *Forum Historiae*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, pp. 69–85.



descriptive publication of Petr Zídek and Karel Sieber,⁷ two more detailed studies on this topic were published in 2019. At that time, Czech historian Jan Klíma published the second edition of *History of Angola*, where he also wrote about Czechoslovak-Angolan relations after 1975.⁸ In the same year, Pavel Szobi published his study about Czechoslovak relations with independent Angola as a chapter in the monograph of editors Anna Calori et al.⁹ Both show that there existed numerous contacts between Czechoslovakia and independent Angola in various areas including transfer of expertise. However, the primary objective of these studies is to analyze the general development of bilateral relations; and in the case of Pavel Szobi, the focus is on the economic dimension, and not on Czechoslovak policies in detail.

This study of Czechoslovak experts in the subtropical forestry and wood technology in Angola in the 1970s and 1980s contributes to the current academic debate about the form of Czechoslovak expertise in the global South. Based on the author's interviews with three former experts,¹⁰ complemented by archival documents, this article analyzes their trajectories and experiences to explain just how these policies operated in practice. The second aim of this study is to introduce some general features of this policy, which helped Czechoslovakia not only to deepen its political alliance with Angola during the Cold War but also to secure its own economic interests.

Concerning the sources and methods, the memories of former experts and their private archives are often the only source of information on this issue, owing to the current inaccessibility of the Polytechna files. There are some problematic aspects of the credibility of their memories associated with the subjectivity of their statements, selectivity of memory, and the effort to emphasize personal benefits and conceal failures.¹¹ For these reasons, where possible, the information provided by the respondents was verified from other sources.

BEFORE THE DEPARTURE TO ANGOLA

Josef Grus, Josef Klička, and Karel Rokyta were among the many Czechs and Slovaks sent to Angola in the 1970s and 1980s as the experts in subtropical forestry. Their experience shows that the ways to get abroad, even though they worked in the same or a similar profession, were diverse at the time. Neither of them initially expected Angola to become his first foreign destination. What initially united them was the desire

7 P. ZÍDEK — K. SIEBER, *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1989*, Praha 2007.

8 J. KLÍMA, *Dějiny Angoly*, Praha 2019.

9 P. SZOBI, „Czechoslovak Economic Interests in Angola in the 1970s and 1980s,” in: A. CALORI (et al.) *Between East and South*, Berlin 2019, 165–96.

10 Unless otherwise indicated in the reference, the information in the article was obtained from interviews with Josef Grus, Josef Klička and Karel Rokyta. The author's interview with Karel Rokyta was conducted on September 24, 2019, the interview with Josef Grus on August 24, 2021, the interview with Josef Klička on August 26 and October 7, 2021.

11 For more on oral history, see e.g. M. VANĚK — P. MÜCKE, *Třetí strana trojúhelníku: Teorie a praxe orální historie*, X 2015, p. 22.



to work abroad. However, their residence, education, and work location in Czechoslovakia differed.

Josef Grus was initially a forest expert who graduated from the Faculty of Forestry at the University of Brno and did not come into contact with wood technology until the late 1960s. Before leaving for Angola, he worked at what was then the North Bohemian Wood Technology Company in Jablonec nad Nisou as a sawmill production manager. Josef Klička, after graduating from the University of Forestry and Wood Technology (now the Technical University) in the Slovak town Zvolen, worked as a wood technology expert at the Timber Research and Development Institute in Prague. The only forest expert is Karel Rokyta, who has worked all of his life and continues to work at what was then Lesprojekt (today's Forest Management Institute), first in Prague and later in Brandýs nad Labem.

The motivation for all of them to leave for Angola was the desire to gain work experience abroad, even though their circumstances varied. The initial impulse for Josef Grus was a job offer from a foreign company to build a dam in Brazil, which was rejected by the Czechoslovak authorities. As Josef Grus recalls: "At the General Directorate (of Wood Industry, author's note), they laughed, telling me, you are crazy. We can't let a man who studied here go to work in Brazil." Josef Klička was initially attracted to French-speaking African countries. For this reason, he also started studying French, but as he states: "I did not manage to go there because my bosses went there." The motivation of Karel Rokyta was a bit different. After entering the Lesprojekt, he was disappointed with the local environment. According to his memories, the then director of the company was a trained stonemason who focused mainly on controlling the work attendance of his subordinates. The possibilities of career advancement without joining the Communist Party, which Karel Rokyta refused to join, were also limited in Czechoslovakia. As he adds, "I came to Angola basically out of anger and a kind of helplessness." Interestingly, none of them mention financial enrichment, although Karel Rokyta states that for many experts, a higher salary than what was available in Czechoslovakia was the primary motivation for their departure to Angola.

However, the journey to Angola was not straightforward for either of them. Josef Grus and Karel Rokyta first applied for the above-mentioned postgraduate study of tropical forestry and wood technology, organized by the University College of Agriculture. At that moment, they already knew that after graduating, they had the opportunity to work in the Global South. However, they did not know what state or even continent it would be. After completing their postgraduate study, they got an opportunity to attend language courses. The courses were provided by the Faculty of Education of Charles University within the program called Language and Social Science Training of Experts (JASPEX). At that time, two-year courses in English, French, and other languages were offered, ending with state exams. Likely at the end of the 1970s, when cooperation with Mozambique also developed, a two-year Portuguese course was also opened there.¹² Josef Grus originally studied English at JASPEX. In the early

12 The two-years Portuguese course at JASPEX was relatively intensive. The study was dedicated to one weekend a month and a 14-day training once every six months. In the end, the graduates had to write a professional thesis in the language they studied. In addition to



1980s, all these experts met there on a Portuguese course led by a lecturer and, in later years, a university teacher, Marie Havlíková. They had already returned from Angola at that time, and the work possibility in Mozambique was opening up. Josef Klička does not mention postgraduate forestry in his interview, but as mentioned above, he first studied French hoping that he could go to French-speaking African countries.

Josef Grus and Karel Rokyta initially thought they would be sent to a completely different destination. Rokyta was first prepared to leave for Peru. For this reason, he studied Spanish, but after the political changes there, the cooperation between both states ended. Josef Grus had other job offers before Angola, including Yemen and Cambodia, but they were not implemented due to political complications in both countries. Czechoslovak cooperation with Angola in subtropical forestry started in the second half of the 1970s. When Czechoslovak authorities offered these experts the opportunity to go there, all three were already preparing to travel to a tropical destination. However, as they recall, information about work and stay in Angola from Czechoslovak authorities was very fragmentary. “When I asked what was expected of me, I was told that I would see it on the spot and that I was smart enough to handle it.” Josef Grus explains with a laugh. Josef Klička also states that his knowledge was negligible. “The Polytechna did not provide me with any information. I was only transported there.” Josef Klička obtained further information about Angola from another Czech working there in previous years.

Concerning language skills, only Karel Rokyta completed the entire Portuguese course before leaving. Josef Klička had completed six months of a two-year course, but as he recalls, he was initially saved by his wife with knowledge of French in Angola. Josef Grus did not speak Portuguese at all. “The offer to go to Angola appeared while completing my English course at JASPEX. I interrupted the course just before the state exams and left. I only went to Angola with knowledge of English. I didn’t know a word of Portuguese.”

In all cases, the work in Angola was arranged by the Polytechna, with whom experts also signed an employment contract. Further, the Polytechna provided them with air tickets and accommodation in Angola, and paid part of their salary in local currency on the spot. The other part of their salary was transferred to Tuzex vouchers¹³ and sent to their Czechoslovak accounts.¹⁴ According to Karel Rokyta, the Polytechna was “a super-successful enterprise for the socialist economy, which pro-

language teaching, the course also included so-called social science training, which consisted of lectures on Marxism-Leninism. According to the memories of the former Portuguese lecturer Marie Havlíková, the students of this course were primarily forest experts and geologists. Source: Interview with Marie Havlíková, Josef Grus, Karel Rokyta, Josef Klička.

13 Tuzex, at the foreign trade corporation, managed stores in Czechoslovakia. There were sold luxury foreign and selected domestic “export” products. Only hard currency or special vouchers (bony) were accepted as means of payment there. See A. HAVLÍK. *Místo jedněmi zbožňované, jinými zatracované. Podnik zahraničního obchodu Tuzex a jeho působení v socialistickém Československu*, in: *Securitas imperii* [online]. Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, Vol. 34, 2019, pp. 198–223.

14 NA ČR, Fond Federální ministerstvo zahraničního obchodu, Karton 1651, Angola. Protokol o všeobecných podmínkách vysílání čs. expertů do ALR.



duced one US dollar for nine Czechoslovak crowns. The actual price was about 40 to 50 crowns per dollar, but by fraud, through Tuzex vouchers, the value dropped to 25 to 31 crowns. If you have entered a so-called indirect contract with the Polytechna, the Polytechna has deprived you of three-quarters of your income. If you had the direct contract, a loss for the expert was 30 to 35 percent. Therefore, the Polytechna logically preferred indirect contracts.” Josef Grus confirms Rokyta’s words about high levies: “After the taxation of experts and the transfer to Tuzex vouchers, Czechoslovakia gained hard-currency, which was a highly valued state income.” For this reason, according to Grus, the authorities also sent abroad nearly anyone. The unfavourable exchange rate operated in effect as a kind of tax. However, nonetheless, the work in Angola still yielded a significant financial enrichment for the experts, as Rokyta further explains. “Despite all the thefts (meaning levies by the Polytechna, author’s note), I earned twice as much as our director in Czechoslovakia.”

Concerning political and other restrictions that would prevent them from leaving, only Josef Klička mentions that membership in the Communist Party was a condition. Neither Karel Rokyta nor Josef Grus was a member of the Communist Party, but they stated that this was not an obstacle, as follows from the arguments mentioned above. Rokyta adds that the Polytechna preferred young candidates aged 30 to 40. Another condition was a forestry experience of 10 years. Josef Grus only met the requirement to graduate from the Evening University of Marxism-Leninism.¹⁵ But as he adds: “In the end, I agreed with the director that the graduate from the Tropical Forestry had priority.”

WORK AND ACCOMMODATION IN ANGOLA

Although they were experts in subtropical forestry and wood technology, they had different tasks and came at other times to Angola. The first was Josef Grus, who arrived in the country on a four-month contract in 1979. According to Klička’s article from 1982, Josef Grus was probably a member of the first three Czechoslovak forest experts sent to Angola. Their findings then served to develop Czechoslovak-Angolan cooperation in these sectors.¹⁶ Josef Grus himself, however, does not explicitly state this in the interview. He was sent to Angola as a part of the so-called integrated technical assistance, where Czechoslovakia paid the costs associated with his stay there. “My task was to find out the state of the Angolan timber industry after decolonization. I went there to see sawmills and plywood plants. The base was in Luanda, and I always drove with the military escort to such a distance that it was possible to return within two days. Later, we flew to the capital Cabinda of the Angolan province of

¹⁵ The Evening University of Marxism-Leninism, known by the acronym VUML, was a form of three-year on-the-job course, ending by an exam. More J. CUHRA (et al.), *Pojetí a prosazování komunistické výchovy v Československu 1948–1989, Česká společnost po roce 1945*, Vol. 18, Praha 2020.

¹⁶ Josef Klička. Angola-země nepřebných možností (3). Rozvoj techniky a ekonomiky v dřevařském průmyslu. 5/1982. Praha. Gen. Ředitelství Dřevařského průmyslu. S. 103–108. s. 106.



the same name. I was housed in a mission and traveled the same way around, mainly towards the border with Congo. The forests there were far more extensive and more attractive. In the capital Cabinda, there was a vast plywood factory and the city was the main Angolan port to export tropical woody plants.” In this province, establishing a Czechoslovak-Angolan society for the extraction, processing, and export of these plants was also considered. However, it was probably never implemented for security reasons.¹⁷ Josef Grus’ activities should have been followed by twenty-seven of his colleagues, who were scheduled to come to Angola in 1980.¹⁸ Even on his recommendation, they did not go there. One of the critical reasons for their non-dispatch may have been the deteriorating security situation in Angola associated with the intensification of the activities of the opposition UNITA from the early 1980s, especially in the rural areas.¹⁹

Josef Klička arrived in Angola with his wife in July 1980. Initially, two more experts from the same profession should have gone with him, but they did not. Josef Klička does not know the reason, and it is also not specified in the official documents.²⁰ The essential task was to put a line into operation to produce plywood at the Research Agricultural Institute. The institute itself was located in the village Chiango, twelve kilometers from Huambo, the second largest city in Angola. The Portuguese founded this institute in 1961 as the country’s central institution for agricultural and forestry research. This institution was also affected by the departure of most skilled workers during decolonization. At the beginning of the 1980s, the number of employees had already reached the number from the time before the Angolan independence. But compared to the situation in 1974, when the institute had 54 employees with a university degree, in 1981, it was only five. For this reason, the Angolan government asked for foreign aid. Ten Bulgarians, five Yugoslavs, three Portuguese, two Cubans, and one Hungarian worked with Josef Klička there. The line for plywood production was delivered to the institute between 1974 and 1975 by the Belgian company VERKOR. It was a highly modern facility, the sort of which did not exist in Czechoslovakia at that time.²¹ Josef Klička recalls his arrival at the institute: “When I arrived there, all the machines were packed in boxes. My task was to unpack, assemble and make a line. I managed to unpack the machines during that year and tested the individual parts. I also designed a connecting pipe. ... But they did not manufacture the connecting pipe during that year, so it didn’t even work out.” At this point, his memories differ from the information in his article from 1982, where he writes: “Upon arrival in

17 NA ČR. Fond Federální ministerstvo zahraničního obchodu. Angola. Karton 1651. Zpráva o poskytování pomoci a o spolupráci ČSSR s ALR v různých odvětvích národního hospodářství. 1980.

18 NA ČR. Fond Federální ministerstvo zahraničního obchodu. Angola. Karton 1652. Vyhodnocení výsledků čs. obchodní relace a VTS s ALR. 27. 2. 1980.

19 For more on the deteriorating security situation in Angola, see e.g. O. A. Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 2007, pp. 331, 335.

20 Usnesení vlády ČSSR ze dne 8. listopadu 1979 č. 304 o dlouhodobé koncepci československé komplexní pomoci a spolupráci s Angolou. Soukromý archiv Josefa Kličky.

21 Josef Klička. Angola-země nepřeborných možností (3). Rozvoj techniky a ekonomiky v dřevařském průmyslu. 5/1982. Praha. Gen. Ředitelství Dřevařského průmyslu, 103–108. 106.



Huambo, they showed me a laboratory line under construction. ... Some machines were already installed, but others were not, so it was necessary to complete their placement and connection to the line, the introduction of electricity, the design and manufacture of a connecting pipe.”²² Klička’s next task was to train local staff. When asked how it went, he answers that “everything took a very long time there.” After ten months in Huambo, Josef Klička went on a planned vacation to Czechoslovakia, from which he did not return to Angola due to family reasons. He doesn’t know if the line for plywood production was ever launched. However, no Czechoslovak continued in his work. He was later interested in returning to Huambo but failed.

Karel Rokyta was the last to go to Angola with two other Czechoslovak foresters. They worked at the Angolan Ministry of Agriculture. “We had two tasks there. One was the forest inventory, the other was the training of the employees of the ministry.” The first task then proved problematic. According to the contract, experts should carry out an inventory of forests in the four provinces north of the Angolan capital Luanda. Then other Czechoslovaks were to follow up on their work. “Our task was to prepare the project, and then other colleagues, about seven people, were to come to continue our work.” But that did not happen. According to Karel Rokyta, the project was “theoretically desirable, but it was not much mapped there. At the same time, it was naive and a hoax. ... We had set up 25 campsites (forest term, author’s notes), which covered four provinces, but it turned out that most of the area was inaccessible for security reasons. We could not go there. There was the Front (opposition movement FNLA, author’s notes).” According to Karel Rokyta, the provinces of Huige and Zaire, where they did not reach, were especially dangerous. They partially carried out an inventory of forests in Bengo and Kwanza-Norte provinces.

All three experts remained in Angola at the agreed time. Josef Grus had a contract for four months, Josef Klička and Karel Rokyta for one year, including a holiday in Czechoslovakia. As mentioned above, Josef Klička was interested in returning to the Huambo Institute later but failed. Karel Rokyta, on the other hand, wanted to leave Luanda earlier due to a lack of work, but he was not allowed to do so. On the contrary, the Czechoslovak authorities were interested in continuing the project in the following years, despite its impracticability, and persuading Karel Rokyta and his colleagues to support them. “We wrote in the report (final report on the project, author’s note) that the project is unfeasible due to safety. ... The commercial counselor at the embassy persuaded us not to write it so strictly. They were interested in the project continuing at all costs because of its financial profit for Czechoslovakia. They didn’t understand the logic that it didn’t make sense if it didn’t work on the ground. They suggested that another project be devised at the Angolan ministry. “However, it did not happen because the leader of Rokyta’s group also refused to continue the project. “But the group leader, a communist but such a stubborn one, revolted and said that it was of no value.”

The experience of experts with the local accommodation was also different. Josef Grus lived in the embassy building in Luanda. Laconically, he adds: “as it was a Czechoslovak integrated aid, they (Czechoslovak authorities, author’s note) did not want to pay a hotel for me yet.” Karel Rokyta, who was paid by the Angolan state, lived with

22 Josef Klička. Angola-země nepřeborných možností (3), 106.

his two colleagues in an apartment in a prefabricated panel house in Luanda. “The panel houses were mostly inhabited by Angolans, in our case soldiers, and two to three flats were reserved for foreigners. ... The apartments were well built during the Portuguese rule but simply furnished.” Josef Klička lived with his wife in the hotel for the first four months, after which they also moved to an apartment in a prefabricated panel house in the city center. As he recalls, it was decent living. The apartment was on the second floor and had three rooms, a kitchen and a balcony.



THE MAIN DIFFICULTIES OF EXPERTS IN ANGOLA

Poor security conditions in Angola were a frequent topic of conversation with experts. In his case, Josef Grus also pointed out a paradox: although he was not sent to previously agreed destinations for security reasons, he was sent to Angola in the civil war. “In the end, Angola came out, and they told us it was safe, which was the funniest thing because when we went out into the woods, the Cuban soldiers rode in front and back in jeeps. Under the feet, we had small arms, and a bulldozer in front of us went to detonate any mines.” (Josef Grus) Karel Rokyta also describes similar experiences. “Even in those places in the provinces where we got, there was often shooting at night. We then had to run away from the dwelling and sleep in the forest or the car.”

According to Grus, the situation in Luanda was calmer but not entirely idyllic. “Shortly after my arrival, the boys from the brewery took me to dinner and said that we had to return before dark for closure and security. But in the end, the meeting dragged on, and we did not return until after dark. Suddenly someone put a sub-machine gun in our car and asked where we were going. I didn’t understand him at the time, but it was pretty clear. ... But the brewers told me, calm down, we’ll give him a bottle of beer, and he’ll give up. He wants a beer.” Karel Rokyta also soon encountered poor security conditions in Luanda. “When they accommodated us (in the apartment mentioned above, author’s note), they said, you’re ok, you’re three guys, a thief won’t come to you at night. But if so, throw him out the window, the cops will pick up the corpse in the morning, and you pretend to know nothing.”

According to Josef Klička’s memories, it was not much safer in the other Angolan city Huambo, where the rival political movement UNITA had numerous supporters. When he and his wife arrived at the hotel, he found that half of the building was missing. “A week before we arrived, they threw a bomb there.” And with a laugh, he adds: “So we thought maybe another bomb wouldn’t fall there.” According to Klička, the shooting was commonplace at night. “In the beginning, we went to the cinema in the evening, but once we experienced a shootout on the way home, we stopped.” He concludes his account of this aspect of his stay in Angola by observing that, “and then they shot through our balcony. My wife was terrified. “

Securing enough food was another major challenge for the experts. Particularly in Luanda at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, the situation with supplies and basic food-stuffs became critical due to the culminating civil war, the influx of internal refugees, and the deepening economic crisis. As Josef Grus recalls: “Getting something to eat was a major problem in Luanda. ... When we arrived at the sawmill, there was food, but in Luanda, it was worse.” He later made friends with Baltic fishers, who fished in



trawls on the Angolan coast. He received fish from them, and in return, he brought them fresh meat from antelopes and other animals from inland trips. Sometimes other Czechoslovak experts helped him. For example, Czechoslovaks working in the Luanda brewery had several privileges in Angola due to their access to beer, a highly valued product in the tropics. According to his memories, there was also a shop for experts in Luanda, but it accepted only hard currency, which he did not have.

The lack of food is also mentioned by Karel Rokyta, who, even after a two-month stay without meat, started a hunger strike. "Although we brought food from home, such as canned meat, we ate it, and we could buy nothing new in Luanda." The hunger strike did not make the situation much easier for Rokyta, but he became a little more familiar with the local system later. Opportunities to get food in the capital, however, were limited. There was a shop for experts, where Rokyta, unlike Grus, could shop for vouchers, but only once a week and for rations and only what they had just imported. He recalls with a laugh that he had many razor blades. The purchase in the shop for experts was further complicated by the Russians working in the capital. According to Rokyta, the Russians had a sophisticated system for securing first places in the goods queue. "They had the most accurate information. No matter how fast we were, at least one Russian was in the queue in front of us, and the others were coming behind him." "Another option for the purchase was a butcher shop, where most of the time only empty hooks hung. In rare instances when they imported meat, the butcher's style of slicing became an unforgettable memory for Karel Rokyta. "They cut a piece of a cow from hoof to leg. Some got two kilos of beautiful hams. Some got two kilos of bones." Josef Grus had a similar experience later in Mozambique.

Another option to purchase was in the so-called *loja franca*, similar to Czechoslovak *Tuzex*, where it was possible to pay only in US dollars. If Rokyta and his colleagues had some dollars, they bought alcohol there. "The best were Yugoslav brandy, which was excellent and cheap compared to whiskey." The last option to buy was the black market, where you paid in local currency. They had this at their disposal, but market prices were disproportionately high. "One pack of cigarettes there cost a sixth of our local currency salary. Someone must have been desperate to buy it there." (Karel Rokyta) Supply problems do not appear much in the memories of Josef Klička, who lived in Huambo. But he also recalls the lack of meat he was looking for in the city together with the Bulgarians. Another shopping option in Huambo, where, in addition to a shop for experts, there was a local market, where Josef Klička bought mainly fruits and vegetables.

LEISURE AND SOCIAL CONTACTS IN ANGOLA

In terms of leisure and social contacts, the experiences of all experts are again diverse. Josef Grus spent his free time when he was not traveling with another Czech expert living also at the Czechoslovak embassy. They went shopping and cooked together. As mentioned above, he was also in contact with other Czechoslovaks living in Luanda, such as brewers. Different nationalities were also the above-mentioned Baltic fishers. In addition to them, Josef Grus also recalls a Portuguese colleague from work who helped him with Portuguese.



Josef Klička and Karel Rokyta, who stayed in the country for one year contracts, mention more contacts and activities. Josef Klička had the advantage over his colleagues, in that he could bring his wife. He adds that he insisted that he would not go to Angola without her. Others, however, mentioned that due to the poor security situation in Angola and the nature of their work, including frequent traveling, staying with family members was impossible. Josef Klička also became friends with the Portuguese working in the Huambo brewery, with whom he got in touch before leaving for Angola from another Czech expert. They helped him a lot at the beginning of his stay, and he visited them until his departure. He also spent his free time with Bulgarian experts who worked in the same institute as him and later lived in the same house with their families. Klička also mentioned Russian soldiers in Huambo. At that time, no other Czechoslovak worked in the city except him. “I was alone there under the protection of the Soviet embassy. They had a detached workplace there and took us under protection if there were any problems. Fortunately, there were none.” Klička and his wife also occasionally spent time with the Russians, and according to his memories, higher politics intervened in these meetings. “At that time, the Olympics were in Moscow²³, and we were watching them with these Russians on TV. And the Czechoslovaks won, the Russians were furious, and we didn’t know what to do. ... But otherwise, they were friendly, the chief befriended us.”

Unlike his colleagues, Klička stayed mainly in Huambo for security reasons. “I was closed there. ... I was banned from traveling because all the forests around were full of UNITA guerrillas.” According to his memories, he left the city only a few times during his one-year stay. Once, he went on business to Luanda for a week, once to visit Czechoslovak experts from the Czechoslovak company Zetor in Angolan town Malanje. On his wife’s initiative, he also went with the Bulgarians on a trip to Calandula Falls upon the Kwanza River. Even during this trip, the poor security situation in Angola was evident. “We rode in a convoy accompanied by soldiers. We had rifles under our feet if something happened.” But as he adds, “it wouldn’t help us anyway.” Fortunately, there was no attack. Klička was also interested in visiting the Angolan town Alto Catumbela, where the largest Czechoslovak group in Angola worked in the local paper mill. However, the Czechoslovak authorities forbade him to do so for security reasons.

Karel Rokyta describes his stay in Luanda as “relatively sad.” There was a cabin fever in the three-person group, and fun moments were rare, he said. The lack of food and money did not contribute to the overall mood. One of the few possibilities was the activities of the Czechoslovak embassy in Luanda. The embassy organized a so-called Czechoslovak club every Saturday, where the Czechoslovak community living in the capital met. It was a relatively large group of about 50 people at that time. Beer was also available at the club, but they had to pay for it in US dollars. “We didn’t have dollars, so we said we wouldn’t go there. ... But the Czechoslovak embassy did not like

23 The Olympics in Moscow took place in the summer of 1980. Due to the previous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the lowest number of countries participated in them since 1956. It was the first Olympics held in the Eastern Bloc country. Moskva 1980. Olympijské hry. Official Website of the Czech Olympic Committee, <https://www.olympijskytym.cz/olympic/moskva-1980>.



it, and in the end, another solution was found, but we had to pay. They didn't even give us a free beer." Rokyta also mentions citizens of Western countries who worked in Angola mainly as volunteers. In his opinion, there were not many of them, but compared to Czechoslovak experts, their background was incomparable. "They had their supplies. They didn't go to the shop for experts. ... They received 200–300 US dollars a month to spend. ... In their opinion, it was a beggar. In our view, they were millionaires because we didn't have any dollars." A specific advantage was that Rokyta and his colleagues had a car at their disposal, which allowed them greater mobility and trips outside Luanda. "The inland saved us a little. There was also a better supply." But he adds: "The last two months have been very desperate. We couldn't work outside Luanda anymore. The work at the Angolan ministry wasn't more than it was. It was such a wait for departure."

Experts came into closer contact with the Angolans, especially at work. Josef Klička specifically mentions a young Angolan, who helped him assemble the machines and communicate with other local employees at the institute. Karel Rokyta also remembers a young Angolan from the Angolan Ministry of Agriculture who graduated from high school and spoke Portuguese, which was not the rule. "He was universal, indispensable in the field, reliable. ... He was the only guy who had something valid for us." He describes other Angolan workers as lazy guys but adds that they did not have much motivation to work due to low wages. Similar evaluations of local workers, especially their low labor productivity, appear in the case of two other experts.

As for contact with the Czechoslovak embassy and other Czechoslovak state institutions, including the Polytechna in Angola, Josef Grus, and Karel Rokyta, since they lived directly in Luanda, met with them frequently. Rokyta, in particular, remembers them, but rather critically. Most of the embassy staff, including senior diplomats, did not speak Portuguese and did not even try to learn it. According to Rokyta, this led to unpleasant, even embarrassing, situations when meeting with the Angolans. The representatives of the Czechoslovak embassy also treated the experts rather contemptuously. They forced them to do activities, such as guarding the embassy building on weekends, for which they were not authorized. Josef Klička, on the other hand, came into minimal contact with the Czechoslovak authorities due to his location in Huambo. As he states: "They took care of me by bringing me a salary once a month, that was all."

AFTER RETURNING FROM ANGOLA

According to experts, none of the projects they worked on in Angola continued. Although plans of Prague to develop cooperation in this sector with Luanda had been substantial, they had largely failed to be implemented, mainly due to deteriorating security and economic crisis in the country since the early 1980s. On the other hand, all of these experts used their experience from Angola in Mozambique in the 1980s. Josef Grus spent three years in Mozambique, first building a local sawmill in the Mozambican town of Nampula of the province of the same name, and later driving another mill built by the Swedes in the city Pemba in the neighboring province of Cabo

Delgado. Josef Klička and Karel Rokyta worked on probably the largest Czechoslovak project in Mozambique — in a wood technology company known under IFLOMA (from Portuguese *Indústrias florestais de Manica*) in the Mozambican town of Villa de Messica in the province of Manica. It was built by the Swedes, but they left in 1982 for security reasons, and the project was taken over by Czechoslovakia, which sent its own experts. Karel Rokyta worked as a forest expert there. Josef Klička's task was to put a line for plywood production into operation.

After returning from Mozambique, Josef Klička no longer traveled abroad for work. As he puts it: "After returning from Mozambique, my appetite for Africa has passed. And I didn't want to go without my wife." After 1989, he even changed his profession completely. On the contrary, for Josef Grus and Karel Rokyta, their first stays in Angola and Mozambique marked only the beginning of their foreign careers. Before the Velvet revolution, Josef Grus was sent to another Lusophone African country, Guinea-Bissau, at the request of a Swedish company with which he had already collaborated in Mozambique. In the 1990s, he worked in Ghana. At the turn of the millennium, he used his experience as a consul dealing with the business at the Czech Consulate General in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo. Karel Rokyta eventually spent eight years in Mozambique. After the end of a working contract at IFLOMA, he was recruited by Eduardo Mondlane University in the Mozambiquan capital Maputo. From 1989 to 1995, he worked there as a university teacher focusing on forestry. After this experience, he returned to work several times in Angola. He also participated in the project of the University College of Agriculture, implemented in the Angolan city Kuito, where an agricultural secondary school was opened. He admits that despite this long-term experience with Angola, he does not have a good relationship with the country, unlike with Mozambique. In his opinion, Angola was morally destroyed by both its civil war and its immense but corrupting natural resources. Josef Grus describes his stay in Angola and Mozambique as "a huge experience, both professionally and linguistically." But as he adds, the presence of Czechoslovak experts did not have a significant impact on local development. "We called ourselves in our profession white elephants. There was nothing left of us."

CONCLUSION

This article analyzing the experiences of three Czech experts in Angola at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s is just one of the pieces of a very diverse mosaic of stories of Czechoslovaks working in this sub-Saharan African country. It is also a small example of Czechoslovak expertise in tropical and subtropical forestry during the period of its greatest prominence in the Global South. Although this is only a small range of experience, this article demonstrates how this policy has been organized in practice. It indicates some of the shortcomings, such as the chaotic preparation for the departure and missing information about Angola's living and working conditions. At the same time, however, this sometimes unprofessionally-run policy, where experts were hastily and without sufficient preparation sent to destinations that showed interest, worked relatively successfully in practice and brought the Czechoslovak state considerable financial gains.





The experts' testimonials are also valuable that they bring us knowledge about their life in Angola in the 1970s and 1980s. They indicate the living and working conditions in this country, what obstacles they had to face, and how they perceived the local reality. Their memories often reflect the same prominent issues, such as security complications and lack of food. However, it also turns out that experience differed in some respects, such as leisure and social contacts, depending on the length of the contract, location, and job description. Interestingly, the numerous complications in Angola did not deter the experts from further working abroad. On the contrary, all three experts were interested in going out again upon their return to Czechoslovakia. The experience of Angola was so strong compared to the conditions prevailing in socialist Czechoslovakia, as to make it a unique experience, as the words of Josef Grus illustrate at the end: "I was euphoric that I came to Africa, the experience of the environment and the world. We drove inland among the local tribes — it was a Stone Age for me, not a 20th century. I felt like Emil Holub."²⁴

24 Emil Holub was a Czech physician and explorer who traveled on the African continent in the second half of the 19th century. More information on the Official Website of African Museum of Dr. Emil Holub, <https://www.holubovomuzeum.cz/historie>.