



Margins of Everyday Life of Czechoslovak Experts in Africa. Motivation — Nomination — Preparation — Emigration?¹

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ABSTRACT:

Since the 1960s, Czechoslovakia was very active in providing development aid to the newly established states in Africa. One of the most widely used instruments of this aid was the sending of expert groups from various fields. In view of the lack of reliable, yet sufficiently professional and linguistically equipped cadres available to the Czechoslovak government, emigration to the West was not uncommon among the experts sent. A more significant increase in emigration occurred immediately after 1968, when Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia.

This article attempts to present the daily reality of Czechoslovak experts sent to Africa. It will focus on their motivations for going, the functioning of their communities and, through the stories of several experts, it will also outline the motivations and methods of emigration to the West through the country to which they were sent or reflections on emigration.

The article is based mainly on materials from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs and interviews with the experts or their close relatives. The stories of two water engineers, Antonín Petlach and René Sameš (Ghana), pharmacists Zdeňka and Otomar Věříš (Tunisia), and physician Jan Foustka (Ghana) will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Jan Foustka came from Prague. After finishing the studies of medicine, he started working as a surgeon at the hospital in Litoměřice in 1957.² The conditions in the small regional hospital were miserable — both in terms of salary and teamwork. Because Jan could speak English and had 4 years of experience as a surgeon, he applied for

1 This research was financially supported by Charles University Grant Agency, project no. 106120, entitled “*Studenoválečná technopolitika ve třetím světě — příklad vodního hospodářství v Ghaně*,” implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. This research was also financially supported by the program “PRIMUS (21/HUM/011): African and Middle Eastern Elites Educated in former Socialist Countries: Studies, Trajectories, and Mindsets”.

2 Archive of Security Forces (ABS), f. V/MV, Vyšetřovací spis: Jan Foustka a Eugenie Foustková, V-5113 MV.



an expert mission to Ghana.³ He went abroad with his wife Eugenia, who worked as a nurse, in the autumn of 1961 with the intention of emigrating. In a later interview on Radio Free Europe, he mentioned the desire for freedom — in thought, decision, and action — as his main reason of their escape. On their mission in Ghana, at the hospital in Sekondi-Takoradi, the Foustka's family spent almost two years, and even had a son.⁴ On September 14, 1963, they decided to complete their plan to escape. With the help of a West German friend, Pawletski, working for the Accra branch of the YMCA, they emigrated by plane to West Germany with a vision of later continuing to the United States where they had relatives.⁵ They were not the only ones.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, several new states were born, particularly in Africa. These former colonies, often suffering from underdeveloped infrastructure and weak economies, began to attract the attention of both Eastern and Western bloc states almost immediately. It was not only the superpowers or former colonial powers that were involved; the smaller countries of the Eastern bloc were also very agile towards the new states.⁶ Among such countries was socialist Czechoslovakia, which from the early 1960s was active in providing development aid to the newly emerged states in Africa.⁷ One of the basic instruments of this aid was the so-called “development technical assistance”, consisting, in addition to the supply of various capital items and equipment, of sending experts. These experts, doctors, teachers, technicians, geologists, etc. were to promote Czechoslovakia, socialism, pave the way for further cooperation and, finally, bring hard currency (mostly dollars or pounds) to the state treasury.⁸ Through their activities, they co-created the image of Czechoslovakia in African countries and the image of Africa at home in Czechoslovakia.⁹

3 National Archive (NA), f. Monitor, Přehled zpravodajství zahraničních rozhlasových agentur sledovaných MV, Radio Free Europe (RFE), Rozhovor Františka Tomáše s lékařem MUDr. Friskem, 19. 4. 1964. Frisk was the code name of Jan Foustka, changed for the purpose of this interview for security reasons. The interview was broadcasted as a sequel in April and May 1964, about half a year after the expert's escape.

4 NA, f. Monitor, RFE, Rozhovory, Reportáže, 19. 4. 1964.

5 Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMZV), TO-T 1960–64, Ghana, k. 2, Dr. Foustka — Expert PZO Polytechna, 20. 1. 1964.

6 P. MUEHLENBECK — N. TELEPNEVA (eds.): *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World. Aid and Influence in the Cold War*, London 2018.

7 More about Czechoslovak activity in Africa e.g. P. ZÍDEK, *Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–1968*, Praha 2006; P. MUEHLENBECK, *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968*, London 2016.

8 The Czechoslovak crown (koruna) was non-convertible currency until 1991, for this reason the possibility of gaining convertible „hard“ currencies (dollar, pound) during contracts with third world countries was crucial for Czechoslovakia. It was not possible to buy Western goods with the Czechoslovak koruna.

9 More about Czechoslovak experts e.g. A. MACKOVÁ-JŮNOVÁ, *Export of Experts. Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and Iraq in the 1960s*, *Práce z dějin Akademie věd*, 2018, No. 2, pp. 47–76. K. MÁDROVÁ *Development and Strategy of the Czech Technical University's Contacts with Third World Countries in the 1960s*. *Práce z dějin Akademie věd*, 2018, No. 2, pp. 21–44.



One possible classification of Czechoslovak experts is into civil and military. This study focuses on civilian experts.¹⁰ In the first and second parts, it examines their motivations for deployments, selection, pre-departure preparation and the reality of everyday life in the host country — contacts with the local environment, with other experts (both local and foreign) and possible sharing of expertise and mutual inspiration. In this direction, it builds on the work of Petr Zídek and Barbara Buzássyová.¹¹ Czechoslovak government wanted to fulfil promises about development technical assistance made to third world leaders quickly. The often chaotic and sloppy selection of experts, especially in the 1960s, led to hundreds of Czechoslovak experts have used their foreign missions to emigrate to the West. This study therefore also focuses in its third part on the reasons and chosen ways of escape of these experts.

The study is based mainly on materials from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) — on the fonds of the territorial departments under which Tunisia and Ghana fell, on materials from the Archive of Security Forces (files of selected experts), and the National Archives (fonds of President Antonín Novotný and Monitor). Unfortunately, the reconstruction showing the picture of the activities made by Czechoslovak experts is still complicated by the inaccessibility of the collections of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and its subordinate foreign trade corporations (Podnik zahraničního obchodu, PZO), especially Polytechna, which mediated most expert exchanges.

Interviews with several experts or their relatives are an important source of information used in this study. I have decided to choose two experts families working in one country in sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana) and one country in the Maghreb (Tunisia). In both families served both partners as experts (physician and nurse / two pharmacists). Both selected expert families were sent to their missions during the 1960s; I chose this period because it is the richest era in terms of Czechoslovak activities in Africa.

Regarding the subsequent choice to emigrate, the testimonies of Jan Foustka, a surgeon who emigrated with his wife Eugenia who worked as a nurse from Ghana to West Germany in 1963, are crucial. For the period after the turning point of 1968, it is the story of pharmacists Otomar and Zdeňka Věříšová, who fled Tunisia for Switzerland in the same year. Further additional information comes from the circle of experts on water works René Sameš and Antonín Petlach. These interviews do not form an extensive dataset, but rather serve as a supplement to the archival materials.

10 More about Czechoslovak military experts e.g. D. RICHTEROVA — M. PEŠTA — N. TELEPNEVA, *Banking on Military Assistance. Czechoslovakia's Struggle for Influence and Profit in the Third World, 1955–1968*, in: *The International History Review*, Vol. 43, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 90–108.

11 B. BUZÁSSYOVÁ, *Socialist Internationalism in Practice: Shifting Patterns of the Czechoslovak Educational Aid Programmes to Sub Saharan Africa, 1961–1989*, PhD dissertation, Department of the History of Science and Technologies, Institute of History of Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava 2021.

**“HERE IS THE MAP, HERE IS GHANA AND HERE IS THE EQUATOR.
WHAT MORE CAN I SAY ABOUT IT?”**



Petr Zídek, one of the first to address the topic of civilian experts, divides Czechoslovak experts sent to Africa during the Cold War into four basic groups. We can only estimate the absolute numbers of experts deployed because key archival collections (especially those of the Ministry of Foreign Trade) have unfortunately not yet been sorted and made available.

The first, largest group consisted of experts sent through the Ministry of Foreign Trade, or one of the PZOs that fell under it. The most prominent enterprise that arranged for teachers, doctors, pharmacists, and other experts to travel was the PZO Polytechna. The trips of technical experts, typically engineers, builders, or hydrologists, were mostly arranged by PZO Technoexport. These were in the order of thousands of experts. The second, much smaller group included experts sent directly by a specific ministry, for example the Ministry of Health. The third group consisted of experts sent to developing countries under the umbrella of a UN agency and it could number in the tens to lower hundreds. The last group consisted of military advisers and specialists from the Ministry of the Interior sent by the intelligence service.¹²

The nomination for a foreign trip could take various forms. Ever since the conclusion of the first cooperation agreements with African countries, in which Czechoslovakia usually promised to supply a certain number of experts, the MFA, in cooperation with other ministries, tried to create a kind of “cadre reserve” of suitable experts.¹³ “Suitability” depended primarily on three criteria — sufficient professional expertise, language skills and political reliability. However, it soon became apparent that there was a serious shortage of professionally proficient speakers of Western languages who did not have any bad political reputation. Thus, the criterion of political reliability was often overlooked to ensure that Czechoslovakia was able to fulfil its treaty obligations, at least partially towards developing countries without losing. The language criterion was also not so strict, for example if the expert was going on a short mission as part of a group led by an experienced, linguistically equipped colleague.¹⁴ Sometimes the receiving country set its own specific parameters — for example, Ghana in the early 1960s preferred English-speaking surgeons and obstetricians among the doctors on offer, of whom it had the greatest shortage. Furthermore, the Ghanaian government insisted that these doctors were accompanied by their wives. This was because of the bad experience of doctors who came alone and then, due to the difficult working conditions and the foreign environment, broke their contracts in local hospitals to return to their families in Czechoslovakia.¹⁵

However, experts were not only recruited from the often-inadequate cadre reserve lists. Many of them — like the pharmacist Otomar Věříš, then working at the Research Institute of Antibiotics in Roztoky near Prague, or the mechanical engineer

12 P. ZÍDEK, *Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–1968*, p. 34.

13 This cadre reserve was led and supplemented from 1964 by PZO Polytechna. ZÍDEK, *Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–1968*, p. 36.

14 Interview with Antonín Petlach, 9. 5. 2019.

15 NA, f. Monitor, RFE, Rozhovory, reportáže, 19.4. 1964.



Antonín Petlach from the Hydroprojekt Brno company — were approached by one of their superiors.¹⁶ Some of them even learned about the possibility of going to Africa from a newspaper advertisement or applied for various intra-company competitions, such as the surgeon Jan Foustka. Such candidates then faced a procedure lasting many months with an uncertain outcome, in which their nomination had to be discussed by the management of the enterprise or institution, the enterprise party organisation, the unions, the district and regional party committees, the relevant ministerial department. In case of positive assessment was the nomination forwarded to PZO Polytechna, which arranged the trip. According to Jan Foustka, one must not show impatience or excessive interest during the endless waiting for the outcome of the procedure, lest one aroused suspicion — this would have probably led to the application being rejected.¹⁷

If one successfully passed through the bureaucratic labyrinth of selection, one was involved in the actual pre-departure preparations. In addition to administrative tasks such as the processing of a passport, a travel permission, or a foreign currency account in Živnobanka, the experts also had to undergo various training sessions, the ideal aim of which was to prepare them for life abroad. It should be remembered that for most experts, especially those who left during the 1960s, this was their first trip not only outside Europe, but outside Czechoslovakia altogether. The system did not foresee this at all at first, and before 1961 Czechoslovak doctors went to Africa without any professional training. After that year, they all had to take a 14-day course in tropical medicine at the Institute for the Further Training of Doctors at the Královské Vinohrady University Hospital. Later, the course time was increased to 11 weeks, including 3 weeks of language training sponsored by the University of 17 November.¹⁸ The professional course, led by the prominent epidemiologist professor Karel Raška, was intended to convey theoretical topics in microbiology and epidemiology relevant to African regions to several dozen participants.¹⁹ For example, Czechoslovak doctors working in the Congo at that time shared their practical experience with their colleagues. In 1965, pre-departure training of nurses began.²⁰

Given the limited availability of information, Czechoslovak experts had a very poor understanding of sub-Saharan Africa, and even the apparatus of the sending institutions often failed to prepare them adequately, let alone equip them for their missions. All the preparation in this respect usually took place in a few meetings in the relevant ministry or FTE, which were usually of very little use. Jan Foustka recalls

16 Interview with Zdeňka Věříšová, 20. 9. 2021; Interview with Antonín Petlach, 9. 5. 2019.

17 NA, f. Monitor, RFE, Rozhovory, reportáže, 19. 4. 1964.

18 More about the University of the 17th November: M. E., *Univerzita 17. listopadu (1961–1974) a její místo v československém vzdělávacím systému a společnosti*. FF UK, Praha 2019.

19 Prof. MUDr. Karel Raška (1909–1987) was a prominent Czech epidemiologist and microbiologist, who was particularly responsible for the suppression of so-called childhood diseases such as whooping cough, diphtheria, and polio. In the 1960s, he also served as Director of the Infectious Diseases Section of the WHO.

20 NA, f. Monitor, RFE, Rozhovory, Reportáže, Rozhovor s Dr. Friskem, 19. 4. 1964; NA, f. Polytechna (nezpracováno), Rozbory a plány, Ministerstvo zdravotnictví, Koncepce zdravotnické pomoci rozvojovým zemím, 13. 8. 1966.



that the relevant Ministry of Health official, when asked practical questions about Ghana and the tropics, replied, “*Comrade doctor, I was not there. Here is the map, here is Ghana and here is the equator. What more can I say about it?*”²¹ Antonín Petlach was not particularly prepared for his trip either — he tried to find information about Ghana in libraries and in the press, even though Czechoslovakia had had a diplomatic mission in Ghana since October 1959.²² This might have been caused due to the absence of a directive or other systemic measure comprehensively dealing with expert missions in the early years, the desire to meet the demand of developing countries as quickly as possible, which exceeded the capabilities of Czechoslovakia. In addition, there was a desperate lack of experts on Africa among the staff of the sending institutions. A separate African Department was not established at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs until 1 November 1959, by which time the African countries were under the joint Afro-Asian Department. This reflected, among other things, the low priority given to mutual relations.²³ It can be assumed that in the absence of experienced Africa specialists in the MFA, other institutions were even worse off.

Part of the pre-departure preparation, in which the family members accompanying the expert also participated, was also political briefing — sometimes a series of seminars, sometimes just a cadre interview provided by the sending institution. It was a set of recommendations on how a proper Czechoslovak expert should behave abroad in order to represent his socialist homeland well. The recommendations related, for example, to limiting contact with foreigners (especially from the West), or urging caution, especially in conversations with them, lest the expert become a victim of provocation. Experts were to promote socialism through work and diligence rather than direct agitation.²⁴ Most experts, however, were essentially apolitical technocrats and did not perceive the political dimension of their mission very much or did not address it purposefully because of their own lukewarm or even anti-communist convictions.

In terms of other amenities, the experts could count on a financial contribution for household furnishings. Other equipment, such as basic medicines, was worse, and in the early 1960s even doctors did not receive them. This could be very unpleasant in countries with bad water quality, exotic cuisine, and tropical diseases.²⁵ At the beginning of their mission in 1968, Otomar Věříš and Zdeňka Věříšová received from the Czechoslovak Embassy in Tunis, besides a contribution for representation, also festive clothes — Otomar a new suit and a long coat, his wife a black coat (Persian) totally unsuitable for the hot Tunisian climate.²⁶

21 NA, f. Monitor, Rozhovory, reportáže, 19. 4. 1964.

22 PETLACH; *Národní archiv* (dále jen NA), Archiv ÚV KSČ, f. Antonín Novotný, k. 99, Ghana, Jednání o navázání diplomatických styků mezi Československem a Ghanou, 19. 9. 1959, p. 17.

23 ZÍDEK, *Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–1968*, p. 30. The Department of African states had only 10 staff in its first year of operation, which quickly proved as inadequate given the creation of 17 new states.

24 NA, f. Monitor, RFE, Rozhovory, Reportáže, 25. 4. 1964.

25 NA, f. Monitor, RFE, Rozhovory, Reportáže, 19. 4. 1964.

26 Interview with Zdeňka Věříšová, 20. 9. 2021.



The motivations for going and staying abroad were individual. However, several more general reasons prevailed among the Czechoslovak experts. One of them was finance — one could earn considerably more abroad than at home, especially the salaries of university-educated people were more in line with the level of education attained. However, it was also much easier to spend money there; unlike in Czechoslovakia, there was usually no need to wait in a queue for buying a car or some household equipment. Another reason was the desire to travel abroad, which was otherwise virtually impossible given Czechoslovakia's border regime since 1948, especially into countries outside the “socialist camp”. Some experts took their trip as an opportunity to fully realise their expertise — for example, hydro-engineers. The desire to develop and modernise Third World countries, however, was rather sporadic among experts.

For some of the experts, the idea of escaping the grey of socialism, of a life without a more interesting future (career, family, social), played a significant role in their departure. In the minds of some, this was a temporary escape, while in the minds of others, thoughts of permanent escape, i.e., emigration, were already born when trying to get nominated for the exit.

FAR AWAY FROM PRAGUE: THE DAILY LIFE OF CZECHOSLOVAK EXPERTS

Czechoslovak experts spent several weeks or years in Africa, depending on the nature of their mission. The usual length of a trip was two to four years, during which time it was possible to go on leave back to the homeland. In the case of proper contract performance, the contract could be extended, with exceptions beyond five years usually decided by the Minister of Foreign Trade.²⁷ Some experts worked directly in the capitals of African countries, but others were sent to remote locations, which made communication with them, for example for pay, very difficult. It also reduced the ability to control them.

It was possible to earn significantly better money abroad than at home in Czechoslovakia. Experts were usually not paid directly by the government of the host country. The government usually sent the money (in hard currency) to the PZO, which kept part of it as commission and only then distributed the payments to the experts based on a prearranged contract. Of the £180–300 sterling that the Ghanaian government paid to the Czech physicians in 1962, only £135 per month appeared on their pay slips; the rest, i.e. 25–55%, remained with the Polytechna. The Ghanaian government was probably unaware of this. President Kwame Nkrumah discovered this fact by chance when a Czech doctor Chmel complained to him personally about his pay conditions while treating him after the failed assassination attempt in Tamala in the summer of 1962. The President then made thorough enquiries directly of the ambassador about the situation of the physicians.²⁸ Salary levels and forms of contracts varied from country to country. Usually, they exceeded the salaries of the locals, but almost never reached the amounts paid to Western experts, which the Czechoslovaks,

²⁷ NA, f. Polytechna (unsorted), delegátská síť, hodnocení, úkoly delegátům (1982–1989).

²⁸ AMZV, f. TO-T, 1960–64, Ghana, k. 2, Technická pomoc Ghaně, 3. 9. 1962.

to the chagrin of their own socialist government, understandably resented. In 1974, the Czechoslovak ambassador to Tunisia criticized the doctor Řeřicha, who expressed dissatisfaction with the material conditions compared to those of Western doctors. In a letter addressed to the headquarters in Prague, the ambassador bitterly stated that Řeřicha and his wife who worked as a nurse “live in a villa” and in total earn more per month than he or his Soviet colleague, even after the Polytechnic’s levies (about 10%).²⁹ PZO Polytechna’s annual profit from sending experts amounted to about 10–15 million foreign exchange crowns.³⁰

It also seems to have been a common practice of Polytechna to interfere in the contracts signed with experts and to change them in various ways — often without the experts’ knowledge.³¹ The experts, in turn, sometimes tried to negotiate with the authorities of the host country themselves without Polytechna’s knowing and to secure for themselves, for example, a better job in a less remote location, various benefits, etc.³²

Experts and their families abroad often lived within the city not far from each other, forming a kind of community. In these communities, they would meet, organize joint events such as dinners, celebrations of birthdays, holidays, etc. The community was also a way of coping with living in a foreign, often very different, environment and with homesickness or homesickness for relatives. One such community of about ten Czechoslovak experts in various fields existed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the European district of El-Menzah in Tunis. According to Zdeňka Věříšová, experts from other European countries, who were working in Tunis at the time, especially the French and Belgians, formed similar communities. The nations stuck together, the communities generally did not mix too much, but there were exceptions. In her villa in the El-Menzah district, a French widow, Professor Neli Bonant, ran a kindergarten, to which even some Czechoslovaks sent their children.³³ The Czechoslovak embassies did not always like this practice, as they felt that non-Czechoslovak education weakened the ties of the children of experts to their homeland and its culture and socialist way of life.³⁴ To compare, the experts from China seem to have been a very closed community. The five-member group of doctors from the hospital in Mahdia practically did not leave the two villas in which they were staying outside their work duties. They ate exclusively at home and had no contact with other experts at all.³⁵

29 AMZV, f. TO-T, 1979–74, Tunisko, k. 2, Poznatky čs. lékařů působících v Tunisku, 21. 1. 1974.

30 In 1970, for example, it was 16 million Czechoslovak crowns. AMZV, f. Porady kolegia 1953–1989, book No. 142, Vědecko-technická spolupráce ČSSR s rozvojovými zeměmi, Praha 31. 3. 1971.

31 NA, f. Monitor, RFE, Rozhovory, Reportáže, 25. 4. 1964.

32 AMZV, TO-T 1960–64, Ghana, k. 2, Hodnocení vědecko-technické spolupráce s Ghanou, 6. 4. 1962.

33 Thanks to this, their son learned to speak excellent French. Interview with Zdeňka Věříšová, 20. 9. 2021.

34 AMZV, TO-T 1970–74, Tunisko, k. 2, Rozbor politické situace mezi čs. experty pracujícími v Tunisku a návrhy na opatření, 4. 6. 1971.

35 AMZV, TO-T 1970–1974, Tunisko, k. 2, Informativna správa MUDr. Pleváka /Monastir/, 18. 1. 1974.



And what was the relationship with the local population like? In general, Czechoslovak experts enjoyed a positive reputation with the governments of the host countries, but this was not always the case among local experts. In 1966, for example, the situation escalated at the hospital in Sfax, Tunisia, where several Czechoslovak medical staff were wrongly suspected or even accused of various crimes as part of a hate campaign by local Tunisian doctors. The income of the doctors, which has been collected directly from patients in excess of their salaries, was reduced by the arrival of Czechoslovaks.³⁶ The hydro-experts Sameš and Petlach also encountered local customs, which they found strange but which had to be respected, during their mission to Ghana in 1961. When working with the locals to measure river profiles, they were only allowed to work on Tuesdays, because on other days the river in question was controlled by the spirits of the natives called “ju-ju”, and they were not to be disturbed.³⁷

Czechoslovakia tried to maintain regular contact with its experts, especially through its embassies. From time to time, the embassies held various meetings for their citizens, and in some cases contacted them personally or by telephone at their places of work. Some experts have been used by the MFA (through the embassy) to obtain information about persons or places — de facto industrial espionage. Although their observations were often haphazard, as they had no intelligence training, they could be useful to the headquarters in Prague.³⁸ Experts were also required to report any serious disputes or accidents to the embassy. This was done very sporadically, however, because they were afraid that they might be removed from their mission.³⁹ The PZOs, including Polytechna, also had a network of delegates abroad. In 1989, the tasks of the delegate of this enterprise included, for example, visiting the remote sites of the experts’ activities on a quarterly basis, visiting all of them semi-annually, solving the experts’ problems or negotiating with the employers. In addition, they were to, inter alia, keep careful records of the movements and whereabouts of the experts and their family members.⁴⁰

Living abroad also brought with it the opportunity to compare their level of expertise with that of local or other foreign experts. The concentration of experts from different parts of the world often created natural conditions for sharing and mutual inspiration — but there was not always much to take away. Memoirs agree that the

36 The case involved a paediatrician, MUDr. Nagyidal, accused of killing of a Tunisian citizen in a car accident — the prosecution was eventually dropped by the Tunisian Ministry of Health with manipulated evidence. The obstetrician MUDr. Chalupa, suspected of negligence of care and a series of deaths of newborns, the midwife Zdražilová, who was saved from trial only by the fact that she prudently kept X-ray images, which showed that she did not cause the death of a newborn, and other Czechoslovak medical workers in Sfax. AMZV, TO-T 1965–1969, Tunis, k. 1, Soudní stíhání dr. Hany Nagyidaiové, 3. 3. 1966.

37 A. PETLACH, *Vzpomínky blanenského rodáka na půlroční působení v Ghaně v roce 1961 v rámci československé komplexní skupiny techniků pro hydroenergetický průzkum*, in: Sborník Muzea Blanenska, Muzeum Blansko, Blansko 2006, p. 104.

38 For example: AMZV, TO-T 1970–1974, Tunis, k. 2, Správa čl. lékaře s. Vrečku o vnútropolitické situácii Tuniska, 30. 10. 1973.

39 AMZV, TO-T 1965–1969, Tunis, k. 1, Řešení případů čs. expertů — soudní stíhání dr. Hany Nagyidaiové, 31. 3. 1966.

40 NA, f. Polytechna (unsorted), delegátská síť, hodnocení, úkoly delegátům (1982–1989).

level of local expertise and working conditions in developing countries was usually not very high. Many Czechoslovak experts viewed the level of local expertise (as well as the practices of some other foreign experts) with considerable doubt or even disdain. Otomar Věříš who helped build the *Pharmacie Centrale* pharmaceutical plant in Tunis did not encounter any innovative practices or technologies that he was not familiar with. On the contrary, the experts speak of a very lax attitude towards work and working hours on the part of local professionals.⁴¹ Czechoslovak surgeon Plevák encountered the work of the group of Chinese doctors during his time in hospitals in Monastir and Mahdia, Tunisia. In his report to the MFA, he mentioned their lack of language skills, ignorance of new (French) medicines, considerable arrogance, irresponsible use of antibiotics and poor surgical performance.⁴² During his visits to Ghana in the 1960s, the hydro-expert René Sameš had the opportunity to see the construction of the giant Akosombo dam, designed by the American company *Kaiser Engineers* and built by the Italian consortium *Impreglio*. In his biography, Sameš wrote that the Czechoslovak water works expertise certainly had nothing to be ashamed of in terms of design and construction technology.⁴³



AFRICA AS A GATEWAY TO THE WEST – REASONS AND WAYS OF EMIGRATION OF CZECHOSLOVAK EXPERTS

The expert mission to Africa became an opportunity for some experts to emigrate to the West. Escape through a third world country was considerably easier than from Czechoslovakia itself with its closed border regime. Some of the experts had already considered emigration when trying to get a nomination or during the pre-departure preparations, others decided to emigrate only in the country of posting. Newly acquired contacts in the West may have played a role in this, but also the change in the internal political situation in Czechoslovakia, especially after the occupation of the country by Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968. In more than half of the cases, the experts only fled as the end of the contract approached, usually in the last quarter of the year. This was probably due to the desire to secure more funds for a fresh start.

The case of Jan Foustka and his wife confirms that emigration of experts took place even before 1968. The report of Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the situation in Tunisia, however, states that these were isolated cases. Between the second half of 1968 and 1971, the number of emigrants increased to several dozen a year.⁴⁴ The total numbers of expert emigration speak similarly, with 147 experts (104 of them physicians) sent under bilateral treaties and 8 experts working in international organizations fleeing between 1968 and 1970.⁴⁵ Barbora Buzássyová estimates the percentage

41 Interview with Zdeňka Věříšová, 20. 9. 2021.

42 AMZV, TO-T 1970–1974, k. 2, Informativna správa MUDr. Pleváka /Monastir/, 18. 1. 1974.

43 R. SAMEŠ, Curriculum Vitae, Private Collection of Sameš Family, p. 2.

44 AMZV, TO-T 1970–74, Tunisko, k. 2, Rozbor politické situace mezi čs. experty pracujícími v Tunisku a návrhy na opatření, 4. 6. 1971.

45 AMZV, f. Porady kolegia 1953–1989, book No. 142, Vědecko-technická spolupráce ČSSR s rozvojovými zeměmi, Praha 31. 3. 1971. Ve zprávě FMZV z roku 1973 je toto číslo ještě



of the total emigration of Czechoslovak civilian experts after 1968 at 18.7%.⁴⁶ As a result of the events of 1968, not only anti-communist or ideologically lukewarm experts emigrated; party members and officials left, but also collaborators of the State Security Service, who were supposed to “guard” other experts.⁴⁷ After 1968, cases of emigration even occurred among the generally better-qualified military experts. In July 1969, Colonel Jaroslav Plíhal and his family fled by train via Belgrade to West Germany. Plíhal worked as an advisor at the military academy in Cairo and returned home to Prague. The Military Academy of Antonín Zápotocký, which sent Plíhal to Cairo, subsequently, to limit opportunities for emigration, forbade its experts to travel except by air, ideally without transfers.⁴⁸ In its reports, the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs downplayed the political reasons for the experts’ emigration in the spirit of party rhetoric and explained the escapes by the misconception of an easy life of comfort and prosperity in the West.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the increase in emigration in the context of the deteriorating political situation in Czechoslovakia is evident — and interviews with survivors confirm that “the 1968 factor” played a significant role in the decision to flee.

Another important factor when considering the emigration was the family factor. Many experts sought to emigrate to secure a better future with more opportunities for their children. All the experts who fled Tunisia were also in the country with their families. The family factor is also evident in the case of Jan Foustka, who fled with his wife Eugenie and their young son, born during Foustka’s stay in Ghana.⁵⁰ The family situation, however, may have been an argument against emigration for some. On example is the hydro-expert René Sameš, who at the end of his work in Ghana (1963–1967) received a favourable offer from the American Kaiser Engineers designing water works on the Volta River. He refused the job and emigration after careful consideration in view of his family that would remain alone in Czechoslovakia.⁵¹ The MFA analysis identified it as risky to send divorced or young and single experts abroad, who were more likely to establish deeper relationships with locals and more likely to choose emigration because of this. According to the analysis, it was inappropriate for children of experts to leave if there was no possibility of providing them with Czechoslovak education. That could

vyšší. V rámci multilaterálního systému se do ČSSR odmítlo vrátit 12 expertů působících v agenturách OSN (NACR, f. KSČ UV 1945–1989, Praha předsednictví 1971–1976 (02/1), sv. 73, ar.j. 69/8, ČS. personální politika vůči sekretariátům mezinárodních organizací, 1973.

46 BUZÁSSYOVÁ, *Socialist Internationalism in Practice*, p. 191.

47 This is how František Buben and František Majer, StB confidants who were supposed to guard other experts in Tunis, left. Interview with Zdeňka Věříšová, 20. 9. 2021.

48 M. PEŠTA, “Expert Knowledge and Socialist Virtues: Czechoslovak Military Specialists in the Global South,” in: Kristin Roth-Ey (ed.), *Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War: Global Socialism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular*, London 2022 (forthcoming).

49 AMZV, TO-T 1970–74, Tunisko, k. 2, Rozbor politické situace mezi čs. experty pracujícími v Tunisku a návrhy na opatření, 4. 6. 1971.

50 AMZV, TO-T 1960–64, Ghana, k. 2, Dr. Foustka — Expert PZO Polytechna, 20. 1. 1964; ABS, f. V/MV, Vyšetřovací spis: Jan Foustka a Eugenie Foustková, V-5113 MV.

51 SAMEŠ, Curriculum Vitae, p. 2–3.

have caused the children to drift away from the ideals of a socialist society.⁵²

Other possible factors for emigration were considered by the MFA to be the excessive length of stay abroad, thus weakening ties to Czechoslovakia, inconsistent adherence to the criterion of political reliability in the selection of experts, and the absence of subsequent political evaluation during the time of the assignment.⁵³

It should be remembered that emigration was a step into the unknown for most experts. Not all of them had pre-established backgrounds, job offers, family or friends in the West. The existence of such connections played a role in the case of Jan Foustka's family, who were helped to West Germany by a friend, Pawletski, a West German working for the YMCA branch in Accra whom they met during their mission.⁵⁴ Otomar in Tunisia, working for *Pharmacie Centrale*, began corresponding with the Basel-based pharmaceutical company F. Hoffmann-La Roche during his mission; a subsequent job offer from Switzerland was a significant argument for emigration.⁵⁵

In some cases, the Czechoslovak administration tried to force emigrants to return by coercing family members. This also concerned Jan Foustka's father, Jiří Foustka, a dentist, who had to write to his son (probably at the instigation of the StB) to return for his sake, as he had no one else here to take care about him, which Jan refused.⁵⁶ From 1961 until the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1989, it was a criminal act to leave the country illegally. Those who committed it faced up to five years in prison and could have their property confiscated. Confiscation affected most experts who emigrated.

CONCLUSION

From the second half of the 1950s until 1989, Czechoslovakia sent thousands of civilian experts to African countries. Their selection was often unconceptual and wild in view of the desire to meet the demand quickly and fulfil the obligations laid down in bilateral or multilateral treaties. Especially in the first half of the 1960s, the Czechoslovak administration was unable to provide adequate pre-departure training and equipment of experts. This was due to the lack of competent experts on Africa in the institutions responsible for expert exchanges (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and its subordinate enterprises, especially Polytechna and Technoexport), and the situation in the specialist ministries (e.g. the Ministries of Education and Health) was even worse. On policy issues, most experts were typical technocrats with lukewarm or no passion. In addition, given the lack of linguistically

52 AMZV, TO-T 1970–74, Tunisko, k. 2, Rozbor politické situace mezi čs. experty pracujícími v Tunisku a návrhy na opatření, 4. 6. 1971.

53 Ibid.

54 AMZV, TO-T 1960–64, Ghana, k. 2, Dr. Foustka — Expert PZO Polytechna, 20. 1. 1964.

55 ABS, f. V/MV, Vyšetřovací spis: Otomar Věříš, Zdeňka Věříšová, V-26987 MV; Interview se Zdeňkou Věříšovou, 20. 9. 2021.

56 ABS, f. V/MV, Vyšetřovací spis: Jan Foustka a Eugenie Foustková, V-5113 MV.



equipped experts, outright political disloyalists were also often sent out. This affected the number of emigrations.

Experts' motivations for going were usually 1) finances, 2) the opportunity to travel outside the republic, 3) the desire to escape the stereotypical reality of everyday life, 4) the opportunity to fully realize their expertise. For some experts, emigration was the motivation for leaving from the very beginning.

The clash with living, climatic and working conditions in African countries was often harsh, many experts adapted for a long time and with difficulty. In terms of the development and transfer of expertise, much depended on the specific country and field; for example, in the health sector, which was relatively high in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, chances for inspiration and innovation in African countries were scarce.

Emigration of Czechoslovak experts occurred *de facto* from the beginning of their postings. There was a significant increase of emigration immediately after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, when almost one fifth of all experts, including military experts, party members and officials, and intelligence collaborators, fled. In addition to (1) the "1968 factor" and the prospect of a bad future in Czechoslovakia (including the financial situation), the following factors played a role in the experts' decision whether to flee: (2) the family factor — especially whether they were present with the expert abroad; (3) the length of stay; (4) the strength of the connection to Czechoslovakia or to relatives or companies, etc. in a Western country.

In conclusion, we can only hope that more information and insight into the workings of the system of Cold War expert exchanges that Czechoslovakia implemented prior to 1989 will be provided by access to hitherto unorganized collections, especially those of the Ministry of Foreign Trade.