

Preface

It was June 2005 in Gdańsk, Poland. A conference on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II was taking place at the Faculty of History of the University of Gdańsk. I presented a paper on the contacts between representatives of the democratic opposition in Poland with American diplomats and journalists at the time of the Soviet-rigged post-war elections of 1947. The script of the communist takeover was analogous to other countries of East Central Europe. In the three years following the end of World War II, the members of the anti-communist opposition in the Soviet-dominated nations faced similar choices: prison, escape to the West or compromise. At the time of the Gdańsk conference, sixty years after the war, but less than twenty years since Communism's collapse, the historiography was just picking up the story of exile political activities. In most cases, exiles' political résumés came to an abrupt end with their departure from Poland, especially if their migration path led to the United States. During the deliberations of the Gdańsk conference, Józef Łaptos, who presented a paper on the attitude of the Council of Europe to the countries of East Central Europe, mentioned the organization of political refugees in New York, which existed throughout the entire Cold War. In a brief remark he mentioned one name, which over the thirteen years that followed served as nothing less than Ariadne's Thread for my research: Stefan Korboński (1901–1989). Following Korboński – wartime leader of civilian resistance and a member of the anti-communist opposition in Poland in 1945 and 1947 – into exile seemed like a logical continuation of the project that I had just completed.¹

The organization mentioned by Łaptos was the Assembly of the Captive European Nations (ACEN). Its history begins with the arrival in the United States of the exiled leaders of parties and political groups from East Central Europe. Some of them left during, or right after the War. Others escaped between 1945 and 1948 once it became obvious that the promise of “free and unfettered” elections made at Yalta had become a flagrant sham. In every country that was later represented in the ACEN, except for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which were annexed by the Soviets before Yalta, a similar electoral pattern occurred:

¹ Anna Mazurkiewicz, *Dyplomacja Stanów Zjednoczonych wobec wyborów w Polsce w latach 1947 i 1989* (Warsaw: Neriton, 2007).

- Albania – the election of December 1945 featured one ballot;
 - Bulgaria – the elections held in November 1945 were boycotted by the opposition, the ones in October 1946 solidified the rule of the Communist-led Fatherland Front;
 - Czechoslovakia – the elections of May 1946 served as a test of the Communists' popularity, the façade being dropped following the coup in February 1948;
 - Hungary – an electoral test took place in November 1945, elections marked by coercion/fraud in August 1947;
 - Poland – a referendum used as a test held in June 1946, rigged elections in January 1947; and
 - Romania – coercion and fraud marked the elections of November 1946.
- By 1948 there was no room for domestic opposition in any of the countries of the region.

The United States did not recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltic States. There were no diplomatic relations between Albania and the U.S. between 1946 and 1991. Washington did, however, recognize all other Communist-dominated governments, and diplomatic relations with the Bulgarian government were established after the elections of November 1947 (broken off in 1950, restored in 1959). In the case of the other countries that were represented in the ACEN, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania the United States recognized the interim governments (before the first post-war elections took place, 1945–1946).

Most of the political leaders who were able and decided to leave for fear for their lives, facing long prison terms, or not wishing to stand show trials, hoped that they would be able to exert influence on the course of events from abroad. Their plan was often very similar: to gain the support of the free world for the cause of liberation of their homelands from Soviet domination. The gruesome fate of those who stayed, or could not leave in time, provided them with ample evidence that their fears were justified. Looking at the same countries mentioned above in the context of electoral shams, another pattern of prison, torture, judicial murder, and labor camps recurs. In Albania, professor Gjergj Kokoshi, a former minister of education, faced trial in 1946 (he died in prison in 1960). In 1947 the East Central European agrarian leaders were singled out and tried; in Bulgaria (Nikola Petkov, trial and death in 1947), in Romania (Iliu Maniu, three times a prime minister, 1947 show trial, death in internment in 1953), in Hungary (Béla Kovács, sent to a camp in Siberia in 1947, released 1956) etc, etc. In Poland, Jerzy Braun (a Christian Democrat) who replaced Korboński as the last delegate of the Polish government-in-exile to Poland in March

(through June) 1945 was imprisoned in 1948, tortured until he lost all teeth and one eye, and released in 1956. In Czechoslovakia, Jan Masaryk's enigmatic defenestration in 1948 epitomized the end of an era. No change was to be effected by martyrdom under the Soviet regime. The exiles assumed the role of surrogate opposition abroad.

As I began to examine the emergence of unusually diverse, highly educated, experienced and well-connected groups of East Central European exiles in the United States, I noticed a certain pattern. In the case of many leaders who became important to the ACEN story, leaving the home country took place with the help of diplomatic representatives or intelligence employees of the United States or Great Britain. The list below represents a select sample of political leaders from East Central Europe who escaped their homelands with the help of the Americans and/or the British and entered the United States. I have chosen those leaders who later played important roles in the ACEN. But these were not the only ones, and some Americans listed below, like James McCargar, were instrumental in extracting tens of political leaders from the Soviet yoke.

- Georgi M. Dimitrov “Gemeto” – left Bulgaria 1945 with the help of the chief of the U.S. mission in Sophia (Maynard Barnes). Died in Washington in 1972.
- Petr Zenkl – left Czechoslovakia in 1948 with the help of the chief of CIA station in Prague (Charles Katek). Died in Raleigh (NC) in 1975.
- Ferenc Nagy – left Hungary in 1947 with the help of James McCargar (The Pond, G-2). Died in Herndon (VA) in 1979.
- Stanisław Mikołajczyk – left Poland in 1947 with the help of the U.S. Embassy's First Secretary George Andrews. Died in Washington D.C. in 1966.
- Constantin Vișoianu – left Romania in 1946 with the help of Ira C. Hamilton and Thomas R. Hall (OSS). Died in Washington D.C. in 1994.

The leader of the Albanian National Committee – Midhat Frashëri – left the country in 1944 and was instrumental in legitimizing MI6 special operations in Albania. He died in New York in 1949. In the case of the Baltic countries which were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and then again in 1944, the exiled political leaders that established the national councils while in exile relied on the support and cooperation of their diplomatic representatives. The Baltic “diplomats without countries” were continuously recognized and supported by the U.S. government.² They assisted the efforts of the political leaders of the

² Povilas Žadeikis (Lithuania), Alfrēds Bilmanis, since 1948: Jules Feldmans (Latvia), and Johannes Kaiv (Estonia).

three national councils, all of which were in place by 1944; Lithuanian (Vaclovas Sidzikauskas, died in New York 1973), Latvian (Vilis Māsēns, died in New York in 1964), Estonian Leonhard Vahter (died in 1983 also in New York).³ Thus the relationship with the American authorities must have been of great importance to the nature of the refugees' actions, their positions and the roles they played overseas.

Inquiring into the nature of this relationship, I realized that the early context in which American cooperation with political exiles from East Central Europe was designed and inaugurated deserved a separate and thorough study. The resulting book entitled: *Political Exiles from East-Central Europe in American Cold War Policy, 1948–1954* appeared in Polish in 2016. It covers the immigration of the exiled leaders, the birth of American psychological warfare plans for their employment, a description of the political organizations – committees and councils – established in the West, as well as detailed records of the initial years of American-exile cooperation.⁴ It took me more than five hundred pages to explain the early beginnings of this peculiar Cold War alliance and show that they were not particularly encouraging to either side. By 1954 both sides agreed that a transnational, multiethnic representation of exile organizations was the best way to rise above politically fragmented national groups and strengthen its broader appeal.

The ensuing story of “an exile organization speaking in one voice for almost a hundred million silenced peoples”⁵ will open with the words of Stefan Korboński, whose biography inspired me to write this book:

It never occurs to the crowds of New Yorkers passing daily along West 57th Street that, in the heart of Manhattan, at No. 29, there is an island in the American ocean, inhabited by foreigners using many foreign tongues which sound exotic to the American ear. [...] Among them may be met Monsignor Béla Varga, the last post-war Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament and the constitutional Deputy President of Hungary, as he talks to Béla Fabian, a member of the Hungarian parliament imprisoned for five years by the Germans in Auschwitz. Peter Zenkl, former vice Premier of the Czechoslovak government and mayor of the city of Prague, also a prisoner in Auschwitz, hurries past them to the phone. He is regarded by the Czech Communist government as their main enemy. Beyond a partition is the former

³ “Dr. Vilis Māsēns, an Exile Leader. Latvian Chairman in Group of Captive Nations Dies,” *The New York Times*, 16 VII 1964, 31; “Vaclovas Sidzikauskas, 80: Sought Liberated Lithuania,” *The New York Times*, 3 XII 1973, 42.

⁴ Mazurkiewicz, *Uchodźcy z Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w amerykańskiej polityce zimnowojennej (1948–1954)* [Political Exiles from East-Central Europe in American Cold War Policy] (Warsaw-Gdańsk, IPN-University of Gdańsk, 2016).

⁵ Vilis Māsēns, Speech, 15 III 1957, Immigration History Research Center (IHRC), ACEN Papers 136, b. 23, f. 3.

Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Constantin Vișoianu, who held on in his country to the last minute alongside King Michael and is now discussing current affairs with his younger compatriot, chief of staff of ACEN, Brutus Coste, and his deputy, the Albanian Nuci Kotta. Here also it is possible to meet the president of the Lithuanian National Committee, Minister Vaclovas Sidzikauskas, who like Fabian and Zenkl spent five years in Auschwitz; Vilis Māsēns, the former Latvian diplomat; Leonhard Vahter, former member of the Estonian parliament; Vasil Gërmenji, the Albanian professor; Bolesław Biega, former Polish diplomat; Feliks Gadowski, a district judge from Warsaw; Władysław Michalak, once a trade union leader; and many others [...] a Tower of Babel on a small scale.⁶

⁶ Stefan Korboński, *Warsaw in Exile* (New York-Washington D.C.: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 103–104.

