

Extract from:

Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War

Oxford University Press, 25 October 2007

6. Making out in the Camp of Peace: on Dr. J. H. Cort and other Americans in Prague – from chapter 19

The early American newspaper reports on the Cort's new life were not concerned with science as it was now divided by the Iron Curtain. Instead, they grouped the Cort with other Americans who had moved to Prague. This largely reviled company included Herbert Ward, a musician who had joined a Czechoslovak jazz orchestra, and also the gifted Vienna-trained African-American baritone, Aubrey Pankey, who would soon take up permanent residence in the German Democratic Republic, where he would remain (a singer of Schubert who found his niche in the Soviet bloc as a performer of spirituals in the tradition of Paul Robeson) until his death in a traffic accident in 1971.

George Shaw Wheeler was also featured in this gallery of fugitives: the *New York Times* described him as an economist who had moved to Prague with his wife and four children in 1947, after losing his job with the U.S. military government in Germany on account of his alleged membership of organizations now placed on the Attorney General's list of 'subversive' agencies. Wheeler, however, had earlier offered a very different view of his relocation. In the immediate post-war years he had been in charge of the deNazification of labour institutions in the American zone of Germany. He claimed that his endeavours had been thwarted by senior American officials and representatives of 'international cartels and trusts,' who ordered that certain out-and-out Nazis be retained in key positions, where they would prove helpful to those trying to bring about a 'remilitarization' of Germany and organize bases for espionage against the Soviet Union.

Having moved to Prague before the Stalinist coup of 1948, Wheeler and his wife had eventually asked for political asylum in Czechoslovakia in April 1950. They made their request in protest against the rough treatment received by fifty-eight Czechoslovak passengers who had arrived in Munich airport after eight air staff co-ordinated the hijack of three airliners, but failed to ask for political asylum in the west as the American officials expected. As Wheeler announced, 'I want to have nothing in common with the Gestapo methods of the executors of American policy . . . I place myself proudly in the camp of peace and progress.' His wife Eleanor was of the same mind, insisting that Communist Czechoslovakia was providing a better education for their four children than the American school in Berlin, which had 'a rowdy Coca-Cola, chewing gum and comics culture' and raised its pupils in a 'super-race' atmosphere.

A year or so after his arrival in Czechoslovakia, the *New York Times* tracked Cort down in Prague, and reported that, like George Shaw Wheeler, he was by now willing to return to the United States if he could find appropriate work. Cort knew, however, that as a former Communist, he would not be allowed to work in the army; and he understood from friends in the United States, that medical researchers with political pasts like his own were reduced to 'earning a living ghosting other people's scientific papers'. As for his parents in Brookline, Boston: 'Our folks think we are just a couple of crazy kids, but we are quite satisfied here to be able to do work that we want.' So there he was, living in 'a two-and-a-half room flat in a new apartment building', with a four-month-old baby, born in Prague. Looking forward optimistically, Cort anticipated 'In a few years the publicity will die down and maybe the situation will change'.

Thanks to the ongoing Cold War, Cort's bid to return to the USA would prove an inordinately

long-running affair. By 1959 he was satisfied that the McCarthy era was over and, in the words of the New York Times, that 'the national psychology finally had restored the prospect of a fair trial in this country.' So, in April that year, he took his long-expired passport to the American Embassy in Prague and applied for a renewal. His request was denied on the grounds that he had forfeited his right to American citizenship by repeatedly refusing to return to face the doctors' draft. The decision of the passport office was later affirmed by the State Department's Board of Review and Cort was left 'expatriated'.

In 1963, Cort sued the American government with the help of Leonard B. Boudin, a lawyer well known for his defence of radical figures. By this time it was being said of Cort that 'for years he has been trying to get an American passport, return here and pay the criminal penalty for his acts, if any.' He won the case in the Supreme Court, which struck down the Federal statutes that had been used against him – provoking one Democratic representative to condemn the decision as an insult to 'every American who bore arms in the defence of his country'. In reality, the Supreme Court's action made little difference to Cort for many years. The 1960 ruling was upheld through the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and it was not until 1975 that the indictment was dismissed and Cort was enabled to apply for a new passport.

The fact that Cort did not return to America empty-handed can largely be attributed to the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences, where he worked for many of his 22 years in Prague. Established in 1952 on the model of the Soviet Academy, this institution was run by its founding President, František Šorm, a man of strong Communist convictions and also a gifted scientist who used his good standing with Novotny's autocratic government to build a research establishment which owed nothing to Soviet pseudo-science of the kind represented by Lysenko and Lepeshinskaya. Šorm was responsible for appointing Cort, but the American fugitive also worked with Josef Rudinger, whose brilliantly productive Peptide Laboratory was part of the Academy's Institute of Organic Chemistry and Biochemistry, which Šorm had established through a departmental merger in 1953 in order to combine research into chemical structure and biological activity . . .