

## The Slave Labour of Architects and Technicians in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s

by Šárka Koukalová

The fifties in Czechoslovakia are so firmly connected with images of political processes and the persecution of real and presumed political opponents that it would seem impossible to add anything new to the subject. However, evaluation of communist persecutions post February 1948 is continuing and there are still areas waiting to be studied. One of them is the secretly-kept network of technical and research institutes and project departments established and run from Czechoslovak prisons, using the work of imprisoned experts, who were often political prisoners. Even though a large number of people, important personalities in their field among them, had been through these institutes, we still know very little about the centres' histories and how they functioned. This is partly because the field affected by this form of persecution – architecture, construction, heritage work and art history – were almost completely erased from memory. This vacuum in our history has been recently illuminated by a series of contributions to the magazine *Paměť a dějiny* (*Memory and History*)<sup>1</sup>.

The persecution of political and ideological opponents of the new post-1948 regime affected all social strata but focused specifically on the elites. As a result many highly qualified specialists in engineering, construction or indeed architecture

*Ruzyňě Prison near Prague. The prison opened by October 1949 in order to house the Slánský trial victims. By the end of 1957 it hosted one of the technical institutes*



<sup>1</sup>*Paměť a dějiny* (*Memory and History*), *Review for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes*, 2019/04, Year of studies XIII, pp 3-47

were caught in a net of unfair arrests and fabricated trials.

After the communists came to power, architects and engineers had to leave private companies and studios and move to state enterprises and project institutes. Here the non-communists, especially in the 1950s, had very limited career prospects, low wages and no chance of selecting which commission to work on. However for the architects who needed to earn some extra money or who wanted to work on more interesting projects, there was a way forward. A few companies could semi-officially, and evidently legally, arrange for various investors to have their projects carried out. It was exactly the specifically selected companies, together with technical universities, that the communists then targeted, charging them with the so called 'theft of property in socialist ownership'. One of the major constructed cases in the second half of the 1950s was the case of IPRA (Advertising and Promotion Agency of the Czechoslovak People's Party), where some 1,900 external workers were drafted into the project section, all of them being employees of project and research institutes<sup>2</sup>. According to the written testimony of František Bäumelt, a prominent statistician imprisoned in connection with this case, 540 people were sentenced. The others could buy themselves out. Fines of over 10,000 Czechoslovak Crowns (even 80,000) had to be taken by the sentenced person to the StB (the State Security Police) in cash, in an envelope. This added up to a multi-million sum in total. Many of the over 500 people imprisoned were then included in the specialist work sections.

The potential value of practical professions was recognised by the communist regime. It well understood that sending specialists to do hard manual labour would be a pointless waste of strengths. This was the reason for establishing specialist sections in individual prisons where the knowledge and skills of these prisoners were intensively exploited.

The idea of the whole system came from the Soviet Union with its rich experience of imprisoning 'class enemies' and exploiting their expertise and work

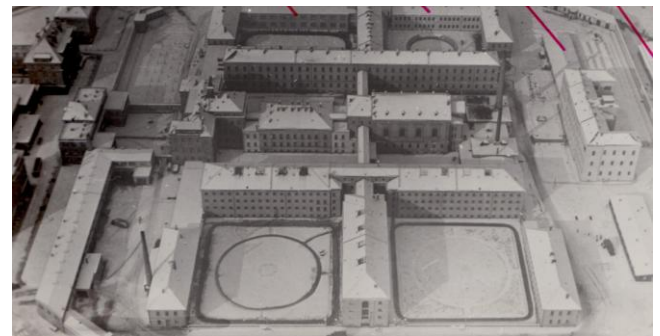
---

<sup>2</sup> *Archive of Security Files, Collection of Administration of StB Investigation – Investigation Files of the Ministry of the Interior, File V – 3500MV, Revision of the IPRA Enterprise ended 30.09.1958. Cited are also documents for the trial of František Bäumelt at the Supreme Court in Prague 14.11.1991*

potential. Already in the 1920s in the USSR special camps for scientists, construction experts and engineers were being established within Gulags (the main administration of correctional labour camps), creating working science research and project institutes that were kept secret. They were called *sbarashky* or *sbaragy* (most likely from the Russian word *sbarachtsja*, to be invisible). Given the estimate of people sentenced to the Gulag to be 15-20 million, these work places could have had hundreds of thousands of workers<sup>3</sup>.

The first technical institute in a detention centre in Czechoslovakia was established on 1st November 1952 in Opava and started functioning on 1st January 1953, while both Stalin and Gottwald were still alive. Already at the end of 1952 the main group of the best technicians was placed there with 291 people employed. In 1955 the regime found "*a more effective way of using the work of experts*" sentenced to years in prison. This meant setting up a control and management bureau – the Ministry of the Interior Technical Bureau – that kept a check on the 'specialist departments' while focusing on the highest possible concentration of convicts in each workplace. Based on this concept, even in 1956 just before the reorganisation of the entire prison system, the Pankrác Prison in Prague gradually increased the number of experts to 54. According to witnesses, even before the establishment of a technical institute at Pankrác, the Ministry of the Interior had a section of project specialists there, which the prison officers called *Plánovačka* (Planning) and which was presumably not yet run by the Technical Bureau. Apart from architects, there were specialists in construction and other fields also working there. After the prison reorganisation in 1957 the Ministry of the Interior opened further technical institutes in correctional facilities in Pankrác prison (alongside the

*Aerial view of Pankrác Prison in Prague*



<sup>3</sup> *Chlebnuk, Oleg V.: Historie gulagu (History of the Gulag), Prague 2008, pp 229-231*



*One of studios in Pankrác Prison*

Plánovačka) and in Plzeň prison. It was at Pankrác where the project department of the technical institute acquired the name *Basoprojekt*<sup>4</sup> which started originally with ten technicians in the middle of February 1957. Later on some 200 people could have been working there. The department was divided into various sections according to different fields (construction projects, engineering, development centre etc.). Archives and witnesses confirm that in the second half of 1959 a new wing was added to Pankrác prison to house all the professions needed for the projects<sup>5</sup>.

By the end of 1957 four technical institutes were already working with 27 work centres in prisons in Opava, Prague-Pankrác, Prague-Ruzyně and Plzeň-Bory. It seems that by October 1957 some 650-700 experts worked in them, and by 1st January 1958 about 1,000. In 1958 five prison-based technical institutes were fully functioning (Prague-Pankrác and Prague-Ruzyně counted as one) with additions in Bratislava and in Boreč near Mladá Boleslav. Seventy percent of all imprisoned technicians from different fields worked in them. With the amnesty in 1960 the number of experts had plummeted and on 1st January 1965 technical institutes in prisons were abolished. Only one technical department remained in Plzeň-Bory but after a further amnesty in 1965 it too was closed. But research, construction and project design work carried out by convicted specialists held by the Ministry of the Interior continued until 1989.

<sup>4</sup> *The origin of the slang name Basoprojekt or Basoprojekt is not clear: it was used neither by the prisoners or the jailers. The expression appeared sometime in the 1960s when people started talking about the project section in prisons.*

<sup>5</sup> *Top-secret Annual Report of the Administration of Correctional Facilities 1960: Documentation and History Cabinet of Prison Guards of Czechoslovak Republic, Operation of Correctional Facilities of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1959. MV (Ministry of the Interior) Report of Correctional Facilities, Prague 1960*

All in all, technical institutes in prisons were being developed in Czechoslovakia under the influence of Soviet advisers during the 1950s when, as a result of emigration and political persecution, science and research institutes lacked erudite, experienced people who would drive technical development and on whom the progress of the national economy depended. The technical expertise of prisoners was therefore to be harnessed for the benefit of the state. At the beginning the work of imprisoned experts was used for the needs of the Ministry of the Interior under the motto “*who understands the significance of what is on offer, makes use of it*”<sup>6</sup>, but later even civilian staff in prisons abused their position and used prisoners to do their civilian work. After the reorganisation in 1957 the prison technical departments would be working on essential design and construction projects for which there was no capacity in civil enterprises (defence of the country, heavy engineering, reconstruction of the backward industrial base).

Thus in prison technical institutes a large number of “*innovation plans and patent applications were produced as well as studies passed for publication by civil organisations*”. Great success was achieved by engineering projects, e.g. “*construction and making prototype models of machinery and equipment for presentation abroad*”<sup>7</sup>. The system also relied on another essential element – a construction company that was established by the Ministry of the Interior in 1959 and financed from its own funds (any extra spending was covered by the increased income of prisons). The main goal of the system using forced intellectual work was to complete projects quickly, using cheap labour. Even though the technical institutes were to a certain extent privileged prisons well supplied with enough Czech and foreign publications, for many prisoners it meant many years working in a vacuum without creative freedom.

For example, imprisoned architects would be given a contract without specifying place and coordinates and without knowing the environment where the building would be constructed, which is a basic condition of architectural work. They had to use their ingenuity to solve this. Some of the more

<sup>6</sup> *Archive of Security Files, fund A 2/1, inventory.no. 227,19, meeting of the Board of the Ministry of the Interior, 6.9.1956.*

<sup>7</sup> *As above, inventory no.1297, Operation Report of the Technical Bureau and Technical Institutes of the Ministry of the Interior, 5.2.1959*

interesting contracts even provided work satisfaction. "Great creative enthusiasm"<sup>8</sup> was possible, for example, in the project to adapt the former Barnabit monastery in Hradčany Square in Prague, a representative area for the Communist Party and the government, intended mainly for use during state visits. Called Barnabitky, prisoners gave it a nickname *bar na pitky*, meaning a drinking bar. The job of a chief project manager of Plánovačka at Pankrác prison in 1957 was given to a prisoner with a ten-year sentence, a prominent Slovak architect Eugen Kramár, who saw the project as the rehabilitation of a significant historical building and he therefore demanded more imprisoned specialists to work with him. Unfortunately the extensive and valuable documentation of this work has not been found. Kramár's name still remains unconnected to the rehabilitation of the monastery and doesn't appear even in specialist texts. It is also worth mentioning the sports hall project in Stromovka and a vast recreational centre for foreign government visitors and top communist officials in Orlik (on the River Vltava), a project carried out at Plánovačka and at the technical institute at Pankrác. Its origin is connected with the birth of the political and cultural thawing period proclaimed in architecture by the Czechoslovak pavilion at the world exhibition EXPO 58 in Brussels (František Bäumelt, a statistician later imprisoned, was one of the contributors to the realisation of the pavilion). In this way top officials of the Czechoslovak government were seen in the reflection of the progressive architecture of the West. The centre at Orlik immediately caused a multiple paradox. The communist regime was imprisoning the best architects and builders for their pro-Western modernist orientation only to use their technical and aesthetic know-how to build a centre following the best traditions of Czech modernist as well as Western architecture (both already enriched by sculptural and organic tendencies). In this way a body of work was created that ranks among the remarkable achievements of post-war architecture in Czechoslovakia. The

greatest paradox is that after the legendary exhibition EXPO 58 in Brussels, where Czechoslovakia shone with a high level of architecture and culture and received a number of awards, it was decided to move the pavilion to Prague's Letenské sady where the restaurant *Praha EXPO 58* still stands today, a national cultural monument. The reconstruction and positioning of the exhibition hall and the related restaurant in the new location was again carried out by prisoners at Pankrác. It was technically demanding work because the building had to be open for business by April 1960. Within a few months this project clocked up some 24,000 working hours<sup>9</sup>. Not many architectural historians, let alone laymen, are aware of the dark circumstances surrounding the fate of the famous Brussels pavilion that became a symbol of the new directions of Czechoslovak post-war architecture. The history of this building is an apt example of how the state presented itself to the outside world, in contrast to the conditions under which some Czech and Slovak architects contributed to its success. Today these people's fates are almost forgotten. We still don't know the names of a vast majority of experts imprisoned in the technical institutes or the authors of the most important prison projects. And of course, we have no idea about all the realised projects and innovations that the prisoners with technical expertise had to work on and that touched many areas of life.

**Mgr Šárka Koukalová** is an architectural historian. She works in the Central Bohemian department of the NPÚ (National Heritage Institute) in Prague

---

<sup>8</sup> Kramár, Eugen: *Poézia a galeje, spomienky architekta* (Poetry and Gallies, Memoirs of an Architect), Prešov 2014, pp 53-59.

<sup>9</sup> *Documentation and History Cabinet of Prison Guards of the Czechoslovak Republic, Operation of Correctional Facilities of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1959, Administration of Correctional Facilities, Prague 1960*

---

Article translated from the Czech by Jana Sommerlad



The 'Barnabitky' on Hradčany Square in Prague, a former monastery of the Order of St. Barnabas and later of the Discalced Carmelites; behind on the right, the Church of St. Benedict forms part of the complex and was once the parish church of the Castle Quarter