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# Voskovec and Werich in the service of the United States Government

One of the lesser explored chapters in the life and work of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich is their collaboration with The United States Office of War Information (OWI) during the Second World War.[1] Under its auspices, together with other Czechoslovak exiles, they participated among other things in processing selected American propaganda films for distribution in Europe and Czechoslovakia. Preparations for this project had apparently been underway since 1941 when the Film Censorship and Advisory Board of the Exiled Ministry of Trade and Industry was established in London. The board received a list of films offering entertainment value, showing the vastness of the American landscape, and the military and economic superiority of the country. At the expense of OWI, selected titles were to be translated to Czech.[2] That later became the task of the Czechoslovak section, namely Voskovec and Werich.

In the late 1930s, the possibilities for Voskovec and Werich to work as artists in their homeland gradually diminished. As authors of openly anti-fascist work, they faced a ban and imprisonment at the very least. In December 1938, Jiří Voskovec and his wife therefore left for France. In January 1939, Jan Werich and Jaroslav Ježek followed them, making their way to Paris via Switzerland. Their American agent William Morris arranged a fictitious contract for film production in Hollywood which enabled them to sail to the United States. In the beginning of 1939, they found themselves in New York, thousands of kilometres away from home, with a couple dozen dollars in their pockets.

To make a living abroad, Voskovec, Werich and Ježek organized performances for compatriots in various American cities. While travelling around the United States, they also improved their English, gained valuable contacts and new work offers such as recording gramophone records and collaborating with the radio in 1939. Their work at the acclaimed Cleveland Play House where they performed their plays *Heavy Barбора* (Těžká Barбора) and *The Monkey and the Shadow* (Osel a stín) in 1940 would prove crucial for their future careers. In 1941, they received an offer to collaborate with BBC London. This offer meant regular work in the form of recording five-minute performances and sending them to London where they would subsequently be broadcast on shortwave as a part of the BBC Czechoslovak Programme.[3]

After much hesitation, in May 1941, they decided to try their luck in Hollywood. Thanks to another talented agent Paul Kohner, they met many people from the film industry such as producer Hal Roach and director Orson Welles. They also met their compatriot, Hugo Haas. It was with Haas that Voskovec and Werich made a test recording for the American government after their return to New York in February 1942 when they were approached about a potential collaboration with its information department. Six months later, in August 1942, Voskovec and Werich officially became employees of the US government. The offer they received was attractive both ideologically and financially. Until 1945, the OWI would pay almost 4 thousand Dollars a year for their services. Contrary to popular belief, it's unlikely that they would have been short of work in the second half of the war and barely scraped along as they had immediately after their emigration.

In 1944, Voskovec, Werich, and also Adolf Hoffmeister, Otto Rádl and Karel Mázl were tasked with translating and dubbing American non-fiction (documentary, propaganda and educational) films from the abovementioned list. The United States National Archives holds detailed records of their employment including questionnaires with information about the scope of their work and financial compensation. For instance, the questionnaires of Jan Werich and 'George' Voskovec state that in addition to their own radio production, they were also supposed to translate and dub film voice-overs for the OWI.

In total, more than 60 titles presenting the American culture, values and beliefs had to be translated. Copies of many of these films are now stored in the National Film

Archive. About half of them were feature films by big Hollywood studios, the rest were short and feature-length reports from the battlefields of the Second World War ( *Memphis Belle: A Tale of a Flying Fortress*, *Battle for the Marianas*) and also informational films about electrification ( *Power and the Land*), oil extraction and processing ( *Pipeline*) and other topics. According to the internal communication between the exiled Ministry of Foreign Affairs in London and the OWI, the films were supposed to be screened in Czech cinemas during the first six months after the end of the war. Only after this period, the Czechoslovak market was to be opened for private American companies.

The OWI endeavoured to flood European countries with American production right after their liberation by the Allied forces, before normal film distribution and contacts with other film markets would be fully restored. For these purposes, the OWI compiled a handbook specifying how their films should be handled, contextualised and what programme blocks should be composed.

The distribution, however, took place in several waves and Czechoslovakia, although being one of the first countries the Americans negotiated with, came as one of the last, after Italy, Greece and France, due to its geographical position. For this reason, the production of Czech dubbing was postponed and many films were only subtitled.

The American film expansion was also hampered by the nationalisation of the film industry by a presidential decree issued in August 1945 which meant the American side had to adopt an approach different to doing business with private subjects they were used to from other European states. According to reports from the American press, Hollywood companies initially refused to do business with countries where there was a government monopoly on film production and distribution.[4] A satisfactory agreement between the American export cartel, the Motion Picture Export Association, and the Czechoslovak Film Company was eventually reached in September 1946.[5]

Films with Czech dubbing or subtitles made by Czech exiles entered Czech cinemas in 1946. Information about their upcoming release was published for instance in *Filmové zpravodajství* magazine from 5<sup>th</sup> March 1946. A several-line-long note promised that the following week, Prague cinemas Alfa and Koruna would show ‘footage from unique

invasion battles on islands occupied by the Japanese, air battles involving flying fortresses, bombing of Japanese airfields and military bases.’ The final line is what’s important to us as it specifies that ‘these magnificent films filmed on the frontlines’ are accompanied by a commentary provided by Voskovec and Werich.[6]

More films provided by the Americans were screened by the Koruna and Alfa cinemas in the summer of 1946. The first block was a series of reports and news titled ‘Fighting America.’[7] In the second one, the audience could see the story of the flying fortress Memphis Belle, a film titled *A Better Tomorrow* about the ‘education of American youth in public and progressive schools’[8], a film about building a dam on the river Columbia and animated slapstick starring Popeye the Sailor.[9] The period press indicates that some American films found their way into other Prague cinemas such as Blaník and Kinema.[10] However, there are no available information that would confirm the nationwide distribution that the American government sought.

Films from the OWI collection were screened in Czech cinemas in the following year as well. The premiere of the docudrama *The Forgotten Village* (1941) made by Herbert Kline and Czech filmmaker Alexander Hackenschmied based on a script by John Steinbeck was held at the Lucerna cinema in March 1947. Film news reported that that the commentary to the film about ‘life in a poor Mexican village’ was provided by Voskovec.[11] The screening was supposed to be introduced by the Minister of Healthcare Adolf Procházka, who managed to escape to the USA after the events of February 1948.[12] After a futile attempt to restore the Liberated Theatre, Jiří Voskovec also left for the USA. This time permanently.

*This text is based on the research conducted by Filip Šír, coordinator of audio document digitalisation at the National Museum.*

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## Notes:

[1] Beginning with 1942, the Office of War Information centralised all printed, audio and film propaganda, both internal, intended for the American territory, and external. The director of the Bureau of Motion Pictures was Hollywood screenwriter Robert Riskin.

[2] The final selection of suitable titles was apparently made by the Americans themselves without any input of the Czech side which expressed reservations about some of the selected films.

[3] As shortwave broadcast directly from the US wasn't technically possible, the recordings had to be shipped to London and broadcast from there with a delay of several weeks.

[4] E.g. Czechs Make Overtures To U. S. Distributors. *Motion Picture Herald* no. 7 (16. 2.), 1946, p. 29.

[5] Viz Jindřiška Bláhová, Hollywood za železnou oponou. Jednání o nové smlouvě o dovozu hollywoodských filmů mezi MPEA a ČSR (1946–1951). *Illuminace* 20, 2008, no. 4, pp. 19–62.

[6] Barevné americké válečné snímky v Československu. *Filmové zpravodajství* 1, 1946, p. 45 (5<sup>th</sup> March), p. 3.

[7] „Bojující amerika“ v kinu Koruna. *Filmové zpravodajství* 1, 1946, no. 126 (4<sup>th</sup> July), p. 2.

[8] Ze země pruhů a hvězd. *Filmové zpravodajství* 1, 1946, no. 112 (13<sup>th</sup> June), p. 2.

[9] It was apparently the controversial profoundly xenophobic and racist slapstick *You're a Sap, Mr. Jap* from 1942.

[10] O. K., Další americké pásmo. *Filmová práce* 2, 1946, no. 29 (20<sup>th</sup> July), p. 5.

[11] Hlas J. Voskovce v americkém filmu. *Filmové zpravodajství* 2, 1947, no. 44 (4<sup>th</sup> March), p. 2.

[12] Slavnostní představení Zapomenuté vesnice. *Filmové zpravodajství* 2, 1947, no. 45 (5<sup>th</sup> March), p. 1.