

The Czech Adventure - Chapter Two

The General grunts and sits down. His heavy features and small eyes are obviously not used to smiling a lot. He and Slama talk in Russian for a few minutes, the General frequently shooting a glance at me and then Dobri.

“General Kakonin does not speak English,” says Slama, “So I translate for you. Please to look at the list now.”

I produce the list, unfold it and see that it is indeed a list of precious metals, each with a \$ price per gram after it. Tellurium, Osmium, Roberidium, Hafnium, Cesium and a whole lot more. The General leans over and takes it from me. With a large black pen he laboriously changes one of the prices, increasing it by 50%. He laughs loudly.

“Price change all the time,” says Slama. “Up.” He laughs and the General laughs again.

“Wodka,” says the General, pushing two glasses towards us, which he fills to the brim. Slama helps himself. I raise my glass to them.

“Good Luck.”

“Hah!” shouts the General and we drink.

“Where are these metals currently held?” I ask.

“Switzerland. In special vault. Very safe,” replies Mr. Slama.

The General raps out a few words to him. Slama listens dutifully and then turns to me.

“General Kakonin wish to know if your consortium have funds to buy. They are capable?”

“Our consortium is very interested in your metals. But we shall need a great deal more information before we can arrange a purchase.”

Slama translates this to the General, whose face assumes a stony impassivity.

“What kind of information?” asks Slama.

“Firstly, our consortium would like to have sight of documentation concerning the title to the metals.”

Mr. Slama translates this with some difficulty but apparently the General has understood. He turns in his chair.

“Karenina!” he bellows. From the door behind him a young woman enters. She is wearing thigh length white boots, a black and very short, plastic mini-skirt and matching tank-top. Her blonde hair is cropped and she has a face tattoo of three small gold stars. The General says something to her and she turns round and exits. Slama watches her go with a hungry look on his face, which he quickly conceals when he sees the General watching him. Dobri and I both take another sip of vodka. The girl returns with a sheaf of papers, looks at us with a sneer, turns on her heel and struts off. Slama coughs on his cigarette. The General bends his head down to the papers, carefully selects one, peers at it and then passes it over. It is written in Kyrillic script which means nothing to me, but it has a large red seal and two flourishing signatures on it. I survey it and nod wisely.

“Ah ha,” I say, “May I keep this to show to my Chairman?”

Slama asks the General if this is in order. The General looks foxy, but then signifies his agreement.

“O.K. Prices are good, no?” says Slama.

I look at Dobri and he nods his head soberly.

“They seem acceptable,” I reply.

A quick glance passes between the General and Slama. The General raises his glass again.

“Good!” he shouts.

“Good!” I respond.

“Good!” says Slama.

“Jolly good!” adds Dobri.

We all chink our glasses across the table and drink. The girl comes back into the room and the General leers at her. He gives Slama a significant look.

“We go now,” says Slama. “Conclude future arrangements later.”

The fog is now very thick and I back the car slowly away from the cliff edge. I can't see anything behind.

“I can't see anything behind,” says Dobri. The rear of the Tatra hits a rock. I drive slowly forward and eventually find the way out.

“Is Corbusier prizewinner,” says Slama.

“What?”

“Hotel Jested.” This guy Slama is too much, the General is too much and the vodka was also too much. I open the window to get some fresh fog and plan that Dobri and I should pin Mr.Slama down a little more. When we finally get back to Prague, we arrange to meet him at “The Three Violins” cafe for breakfast tomorrow.

“We also have gold. And industrial diamonds,” whispers Slama as we part.

On the back of the menu at “The Three Violins” is a notice which reads:

‘Already in the 16th. Century this famous building belonged to the Court Painter of Emperor Rudolf II and violins were made here. It became later the most important violence workshop in Prague.’

Mr. Slama and I sit at a small table and order coffee and buns. Dobri has gone to see someone concerning the restitution of his family property.

I tell Mr. Slama, through his usual cloud of cigarette smoke, that I would like to have further documentation concerning the metals.

“No problem,” he says and produces a letter which appear to be a confirmation by a Swiss Bank that they hold the metals, then another which lists the quantities concerned and finally a third which gives technical specifications.

“Excellent,” I say, feeling a little surprised.

“Is enough?”

“I think so.”

“Good. We also have gold. We can provide six tonnes every month. 24 carat full purity. 12 point 5 kilo bars. Is easy to carry. From Swiss bank.”

He pulls a used envelope from his pocket and consults the back of it.

“Price is London Gold Exchange less 11%. Normal discount is 7%, no? Please to ask your Chairman if interesting.”

“Where does it come from?”

“Bosnia Herzegovina,” he whispers. “Also 200,000 carats industrial diamonds. You can sell to India.”

“Why don't you sell to India?”

“Problems.” he replies.

“I will tell all this to the directors of the consortium and we will get back to you,” I say.

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you. We’ll be in touch,” I add

He produces more papers from his brief-case.

“About the gold and the industrial diamonds, these,” he says, laying them on the table.

“Please to read later.”

I gather them up and pay for the coffee and buns.

“Please to remember my fee,” says Slama. “One per cent, payable in Islands of the Canaries.”

“I’ll certainly mention it to the Chairman.”

Dobri and I meet for lunch in a Czech family restaurant in an arcade off the beautiful Old Town Square. There are no tourists, just the locals enjoying their stew and dumplings, washed down with a lot of good Czech beer. We order the same.

“How did the restitution go?” I ask him.

“Good, thanks. It’ll take a while. Lots of bureaucracy. But at least the process is set in motion. I won’t get all of the property back though.”

“If you got all of it, Dobri, you’d be a rich aristo.”

“Right. But I could get the smaller house and maybe even the lake.”

“Tough. Why can’t you get the rest?”

“I’m not sure. They were a bit vague. Something about ownership rights subsequent to mine. Anyway, I’ll be happy with what I can get. How did you get on with the amazing Mr. Slama? These dumplings are good, aren’t they? My meeting wasn’t long, so I went down to the gym.”

“They certainly are substantial. What gym?”

“In the Globus Hotel. The manager’s an uncle of mine.”

I look at Dobri’s muscular frame. I can’t see any reason why he should need to go to a gym. I guess it’s to keep himself in shape. He always looks as though his biceps are about to burst out of his suit. He told me once he was a seventh jing in Kung Dwong Fah - at least, that’s what it sounded like. He also speaks four languages fluently and can bore your socks off on the subject of fencing with sabres, which he apparently learnt from yet another of his uncles - the one in Slovakia.

“Listen,” I say. “This Slama business is ridiculous. He’s crazy. His General friend is a definite no-no. And even if we found a customer for the metals - and the diamonds and the gold and probably next year’s sugar crop - how could we ever rely upon Slama and Co. to deliver the right stuff? You know, this sort of people are A-1 unreliable and untrustworthy. So, great fun as they are, I say forget it.”

“My sentiments entirely. Except for the industrial diamonds.”

“Come again?”

“That could be straightforward enough.”

“Nothing is straightforward with these jokers.”

“O.K. I agree. But I have a friend whose business is diamonds. We could show him the information you have and see what he thinks. If there is anything interesting, then we get my friend to come over here and look at samples and do whatever is necessary to check provenance, quality, etc. and tell us where we could sell them. Worth a try, maybe. Could be worth a few pennies.”

“Where’s your friend based?”

“Tel Aviv.”

“Oh, great. Very convenient.”

“He travels a lot. He could probably fit in a visit here on a trip to Amsterdam or wherever else he goes. I’ll e-mail him and see if he’s interested. What do you think?”

“Why not? It would be good to get something out of this Slama affair. And by the way. I know you have a lot of uncles. But do you have any aunts - young ones, that is?”

Chapter Three will follow, next month.....