

Copy: Jenny Strauss

Helen Ferber
45 Park Drive
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Dear Linda Souter,

In 1945 when I was working for a UN relief agency in Belgrade an English member of BFUW, Dr Doreen Warriner, and I were asked by the IFUW if we could find out the fate of the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak Federations. I managed to get to Prague in November 1945, Doreen went later, and we visited the Yugoslav Federation people together.

These are the notes on the visits I made for IFUW at the time. From memory I sent them to the BFUW and AFUW, so they are perhaps in the archives somewhere but I thought they might interest you. I have no record of Doreen's visit, which is a pity, as she had pre-war contacts in Prague, having been there just before the German invasion, helping people to escape.

I hope you enjoy your stay in Australia,

Sincerely,

H F.

Helen Ferber

Czechoslovak Women's Organizations
at the end of World War II
Helen Ferber
November 1945

While in Prague I made a point of contacting members of various leading women's organizations to learn what had been their fate during the war. The International Federation of University Women had contacted Doreen Warriner, the head of the UNRRA Yugoslav Mission's Food Program and Economic Reporting Division, and me and asked if we could trace former IFUW members in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and see how they had fared. Doreen and I did contact some women in senior positions in the Yugoslav Federation but they felt they could not carry on as before, as the Federation would be obliged to join the National Liberation Front. Doreen had hoped to come to Prague with me but her work did not permit so I did what I could to find out for the IFUW the fate of the Czech Federation of University Women and other women's organizations.

In Prague I met and talked to the following:

Dr Milada Horakava, President of the National Council of Czechoslovak Women, and a member of parliament.

Dr Demetrova, the new President of the Federation of University Women

Mrs Zdenka Potocka, Secretary of the National Council of Women.

Dr Swarzova and Mrs Eva Kasalicka, Members of the National Council of Women

Dr Fuxova, an economics graduate and University librarian.

I wrote:

'First of all the Federation of University Women, since that it our main interest. It now forms a unit of the National Council of Women, within which all women's activities are now coordinated. Together with the National Council the Federation voluntarily dissolved itself in 1942, to prevent itself being compelled to take part in the Nazi-sponsored women's organization, in which all existing bodies were forced to participate, often by brutal means. The FUW made no attempt to preserve its identity, although many of its members continued their individual resistance work. At the present moment a list is being compiled of all former members and their fate since the beginning of the war, as their casualties were considerable. Like the rest of the population they seem to have suffered greatly.

'Soon after the liberation, last May, steps were taken to reorganize the FUW. The pre-war president, Dr Tumlirova, resigned because she was a member of the Agrarian Party, which was accused of collaboration, and for her to have continued as President would have embarrassed the organization as a whole. The new President, Dr Dewetrova, is a practising doctor of medicine. She squeezed me in for a short talk between a number of patients, so we made it snappy. She had just got an IFUW journal 1942-43, from London I think, and was delighted with even this small sign of life from outside. She is very anxious to exchange all such published material with the Australian body. Her association's main interest at the moment is to collect what is left of its members together and renew its outside contacts.

'I asked Dr Horakova about the future status of German women graduates in Czechoslovakia, and of non-German graduates of German universities in the country. She told me that since all the German women - without exception - were being expelled from the country, they would automatically leave the Czech FUW. She said the German universities had always only been attended by Germans. I asked her for her views on the wholesale expulsion of the Germans. She said that since the Czechs could not, after all they had suffered at the hands of the Germans, bring themselves to allow the Germans their own schools and universities and other minority rights it was better for them to go altogether. Most bitter on this subject were Dr Schlechtova and Mrs Kasalicka, both members of the National Council. Dr Schlechtova had lost her entire family during the occupation. She said that no one would ever realise what the Czechs had suffered from the Germans in the last six years. The day before I met her her husband had been lecturing to some American soldiers stationed at Pilsen and was questioned rather critically from the audience about the execution by the Czechs of a 16-year-old German on some charge. She said: 'They talk to us about the killing of one German, one German, after what we have been through with the Germans.'

'Now for the National Council of Women, Rada Ceskoslovenskych Zen. As I said, it liquidated voluntarily in the summer of 1942. The members of its board continued to hold secret illegal meetings until the end of the war. The last pre-war President, Mrs Plaminkova, was executed in June 1942, one of a number of prominent Czech men and women executed by the Germans in revenge for the assassination of Heydrich. Dr Horakova, the present President, was with Mrs Plaminkova in prison, and even saw her being taken away in a car to the place of execution. She was decapitated. Horrible! Dr Horakova herself was arrested by the Gestapo in August 1940 for her active resistance work. She was questioned and cross-questioned, tortured

and sent from prison to prison. In the autumn of 1944 she appeared before the police court in Dresden and was sentenced to eight years' hard labour (originally the death sentence was proposed for her). From Dresden she was sent to the prison of Aichbach in Bavaria, where she was liberated by the U.S. Army on April 29 1945. While in prison she did various sorts of hard labour, working in different factories, always on the scantiest of diets - bread and water for breakfast, badly cooked saltless vegetables for lunch and watery soup and bread for tea. She returned to Prague to find all the contents of her apartment, every single thing she and her husband owned in the world, looted. Absolutely nothing left. Yet there she sat last week in the Council room in Prague, beautifully dressed and groomed, apparently serene, apparently well, calmly telling me all this in rather bad French. It was obvious from the constructions she used that her knowledge of German was much better, but she struggled along, as so many do in Czechoslovakia now, rather than speak in the forbidden language.

'In the early days of the "revolution", in May of this year, the first steps in the revival of the women's organizations were taken, with the setting up of the so-called Revolutionary Movement, composed of the National Council of Women, the Association of Working Women, the Health Organization, the Syndicate of Trained Women, the Association of Women and Girls (all underground organizations), as well as of individual members. Its representatives were sent to the Czech National Council, the Centre of the Home Revolution Movement against the Nazis. After the Revolution was over, the National Council of Women was set up. It incorporates all the women's bodies in the country (F.U.W., Housewives' Association etc.) and has representatives of the four political parties in the country, of the syndicates and cooperatives, as well as professional women as individual members in their own right. I asked Dr Horakova whether the inclusion of the party representatives mean that they would have political interference, but she said they would have none at all. They publish a weekly newspaper, Rada Zen, and run a number of committees - cultural, economic, technical, educational, press, social, home industry etc.

The National Council of Women is publishing a booklet shortly, giving an account of the activities of the various women's organizations during the occupation. Dr Horakova has promised to send some extracts as soon as she can get them translated into something other than Czech, and if there is anything likely to interest you I will let you have it.

Jugoslav Federation of University Women
December 1945
Helen Ferber

In December 1945 Doreen Warriner and I looked up the last President of the Yugoslav Federation of University Women, before the German occupation. Doreen was formerly a lecturer in economics in the School of Slavonic Studies in London and a member of the British Federation of University Women.

The former President of the Yugoslav federation was a Dr Karadzic. I wrote what she told us in a letter to an AFUW friend in London who was in touch with the IFUW: 'Their story is this. They were forced to disband when the Germans came, along with a lot of other bodies. Shortly afterwards a number of organizations received permission to continue with their activities but the FUW, to their relief, did not receive such permission, since the conditions under which they could have carried on would not have been to their liking. Still later they received orders from the authorities to submit a list of their members, a statement of their assets and their complete archives. Fortunately, most of their funds had gone in publications, so that the surrendering of the balance was not such a loss. The matter of the archives was more serious. Suffice it to say for now that the secretary's house was burnt down just at that time and with it went the archives.

'Since the liberation they have not applied for permission to reorganize. The political situation here is, as you know, difficult. Dr Karadzic told me that they feel that if they were to start their activities again now they would not be able to carry them on "in the true spirit of the IFUW". So she and the others (they numbered about 500 before the occupation) feel that it is better to wait a while and see how things go. If they put their necks out now, and their necks are cut off, so to speak, the door will be closed for good and all, whereas later the situation may improve or clarify and they will have a better chance.

'There is a small matter of a parcel which throws an interesting light on the present set-up. The British Federation sent a parcel to the Yugoslav Federation some time ago and were worrying whether it had been received and distributed,. Actually the parcel was received and an acknowledgement was sent from here to London with Dr Shukoff, a Russian bacteriologist with UNRR and we don't know why London didn't get it.

'I should have liked to suggest that we arrange to send her parcels from the Australian Federation, since most of the 'members' are badly in need, but the sending of parcels raises a whole lot of problems. The former secretary of the Yugoslav Federation, Miss Tamaskova, on one occasion received a parcel from another source (not IFUW), and distributed it among members of the Anti-Fascist Women's League here. She was subsequently called up before OZNA (the political police) and asked to give an account of where the parcel came from, how it was distributed etc., and had to answer a number of unpleasant questions. When the parcel from the British Federation arrived it was distributed secretly among members, with considerable trepidation. They did not dare send an acknowledgement through the regular post for fear of drawing the attention of the authorities to the parcel's arrival. Despite their need, they do not want to receive parcels because of the dangers associated with their distribution. Even if they were mailed to Dr Warriner or to me and passed to Dr Karadzic for distribution, they would be an embarrassment, and Dr W. and I would not be in a position to undertake the distribution ourselves because of UNRRA regulations which prevent us from distributing privately. Everything in the way of relief goods must be handed to the government for distribution, and for us to transgress might endanger UNRRA's status in this country. So all we can suggest is that the British Federation might perhaps like to send some of the books in its excellent little booklet of British wartime publications; these could be addressed to Dr Warriner or to me. I shall be here till May and will see they reach the right people. Only care must be taken that the package does not indicate for whom the books are intended.