

## THE BUREAUCRAT

ONE bleak December day during the first World War, my mother sent me to get the family's bread-ration cards at the *Bezirkshauptmannschaft*, the office of the Austrian District Commissioner, in my home town in what is now Czechoslovakia. I was ten years old, and this was my first contact with the *Behörden*—the Authorities—about whom the grownups used to talk in frightened voices.

With considerable apprehension, I climbed two flights of creaking stairs, made my way past innumerable doors, studying the complicated signs, and finally wound up in a grimly overheated office, where I joined a long line of citizens.

Behind a waist-high barrier, I saw a gruff, misanthropic civil servant enthroned in a chair at a high desk. His detachable cuffs stood near the inkwell, and he wore sleeve-protectors of black cloth that extended up over his elbows. He was a drab little man, not at all what I had imagined he would be, but the people in line spoke to him in lowered voices, bowing their heads as if he were the Emperor himself. He never looked at them while he listened to their requests.

When my turn came, he gave me a complicated form and ordered me to fill it out in triplicate. A few questions baffled me—I didn't know the last two addresses of my deceased grandparents or the age of Marie, our elderly cook. I explained to the official that Marie guarded the secret of her age more jealously than the recipe of her famous cheese dumplings. A few people behind me giggled. The official knocked his knuckles on his desk and said severely, "You go home and tell your mother to come here right away. One doesn't send stupid youngsters to the *Behörden*."

The people continued to giggle, in an effort to ingratiate themselves with the official. My ears burned and I was so ashamed that I was afraid I would burst into tears. I stumbled past the waiting line and ran down the stairs as fast as I could. I swore to myself that I would leave Austria and its *Behörden* at the first opportunity and escape to America, where nobody would call me a

stupid youngster and bureaucrats could be thrown to the lions, like the Christians in "Quo Vadis," which I was then reading.

AFTER my graduation from law school, I went to work for a Prague law firm that specialized in citizenship cases. Many of our clients had lived in border regions before the war and had lost their original citizenships in the course of the peace settlements. Now they were applying for Czechoslovak citizenship. First, they were investigated at great length, and then their applications were sent to the Ministry of the Interior in folders swollen with documents. These included questionnaires and birth certificates, reports of city councils, the police, and special investigators, and endorsements by clubs, chambers of commerce, and influential individuals. It was part of my

job to persuade the officials at the Ministry to dig out our clients' files from stacks of folders labelled "Interim" and put them on top of stacks labelled "Urgent."

Visits made by lawyers for this purpose were known in the Ministry as "interventions by interested parties" and were permitted only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from ten to one. It was always difficult and sometimes impossible to locate the files I was looking for. Often it would take me two hours to find one, and since I was likely to have as many as ten cases on my hands at one time, I never caught up with my work.

My ordeal would start at the *podatelna*—the reception files—where unfriendly underlings were hanging around drinking beer, discussing football matches, griping about taxes, the Jews, or the government, massaging their chilblained feet, and ignoring all queries not accompanied by cigars or money. When, eventually, I got one of



"Just try this with any ordinary wheelbarrow."

them to pay attention to me, he would look up the record of the file I wanted in one of the big, old leather ledgers, full of cabalistic symbols and cross references. Finally he would write down, usually on a shred of newspaper, the name of the councillor supposedly handling the case. I would then go off to find that official, knowing already that he would fiercely disclaim any knowledge of the file and would send me on to a colleague.

The lower-ranking councillors had their offices on the street level. Their rooms were never aired, for there was a belief among the councillors that fresh air caused heart attacks and pneumonia. The windows had bars, presumably as a protection against burglars, but it was rumored that they were really there to keep the officials from escaping. Many of them were disappointed little men who had been unable to afford the education necessary for promotion or had failed in private jobs. They knew exactly how much money they were going to make in the next month and in the next five years, and what their retirement pay would be. They had a saying, "A civil servant makes no money, but at least he has that for sure." All there was to alleviate their bitterness was a little power over other citizens, exercised in the name of the Republic.

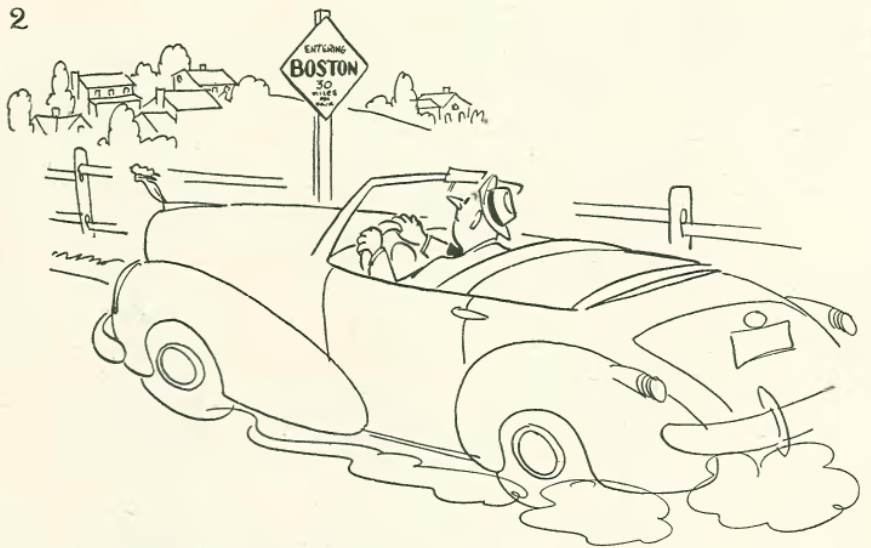
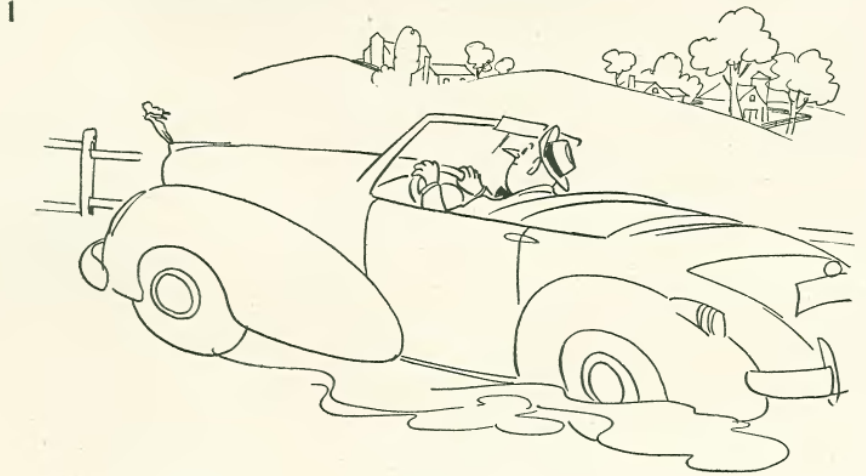
I would wander desolately from one councillor's office to another in quest of files. For the most part, the councillors would ignore me, but once in a while I would manage to get one of the files sent up to the second floor for examination by the higher-ranking councillors who, at least theoretically, would take action. It was always a red-letter day when one of my files finally reached the office of the section chief in charge of all citizenship cases.

**I** SHALL call the section chief Dr. Karel Doubek. He was in the third rank of government officials, with only cabinet ministers and the prime minister above him. Consequently, he was surrounded by all the awe-inspiring trimmings of an exalted civil servant. His office had a tiny vestibule, the inner door of which was upholstered. In contrast to lesser officials, he had two inkwells on his desk instead of one, a Persian rug instead of a piece of linoleum, and a water carafe and two glasses. (Ordinary councillors had only one glass and no carafe, and had to get water from the faucet in the corridor.) Doubek also had a large Biedermeier table, a black leather couch, and two leather chairs. When he was in a jovial mood, which

was rare, he would invite me to sit down, but the majestic sweep of his hand was a meaningless gesture, since both chairs and the couch were already completely occupied by stacks of folders, all waiting for his decision.

Doubek was a dehydrated, wiry man with a bobbing Adam's apple, plenty of hair on his hands, and little on his head. His face had taken on the color of his folders. He always wore stiff collars

and black suits, even during the hot summer months, and his pince-nez and short beard were exactly like those of President Masaryk, whose picture hung on the wall directly behind his desk, next to his law diploma. He had a sonorous voice, and he spoke in clipped, noncommittal sentences, often pausing in the middle of a phrase to convey the impression that he was meditating. He made it a point never to answer any question



with yes or no, and when I would implore him to look over a file, pointing out that it had been sleeping in his office for years, he would put his wrists together, spread his fingers, and sigh deeply. "Can't help it; we're all alone here, and the agenda are increasing every week," he would say, always speaking in the first person plural and sprinkling his sentences with official jargon. "Instead of taking up our time, you taxpayers should herewith induce Parliament to allot us higher budget appropriations, so we could expand our personnel."

Doubek read all the morning papers, but he never commented on the political situation. He was slightly anti-Semitic during office hours, in order to please the Minister of the Interior, but at night he often drank beer with Jewish lawyers. Cabinets fell, ministers came and went, but he was always there, unperturbed by passing events.

Sometimes, Doubek would lean back in his chair and talk to me. He told me that he came from a long line of distinguished civil servants. His father had been a court councillor in the Ministry of Justice—a dignified gentleman with whiskers, according to a picture his son showed me, who faintly resembled Emperor Franz Josef. Karel and his two brothers had been educated for civil careers, and Alois, the oldest, was now an official in the Austrian Ministry of Justice. The youngest brother, however, had turned to medicine. He was a well-known surgeon in Vienna, but the family considered him a black sheep.

"Father never spoke to him again after he took up medicine," Doubek once said with bitterness. It was the only time I ever heard him express emotion. Apparently, the subject was deeply painful to him. "Father retired after forty-two years of distinguished service," he said. "He had a house in Linz, and his garden, but he missed the office hours, his colleagues, and"—Doubek made a sweeping gesture toward the

stacks of folders all over the room—"the companionship of his files. Fortunately, he made friends with the librarian in charge of the Linz city archive. He often went to the archive and borrowed some old files. He used to study them at home and return them after a week, with recommendations. He discovered quite a few flagrant violations of procedure, but the librarian didn't want to pass the files on for reinvestigation."

Every summer, Dr. Doubek told me, he and Alois and their wives spent their two-week vacation at a small, inexpensive spa, where the brothers took long walks and discussed their files. In Prague, a file was called a *spis* and in Vienna an *Akt*, but red tape knows no linguistic barriers.

One day, as I went into Doubek's office, his phone rang. He said "Hallo!" gruffly, and then his face colored and he bowed deeply to the voice coming out of the receiver. "Yes, *pane ministrě*," he said, bowing again. "Yes, yes, yes. I'll bring it over myself right away. Of course, *pane ministrě*." It was the first time I'd ever heard him say yes. He put down the receiver and wiped his forehead. He was breathing rapidly. "Sorry, but we can't see you today," he said to me coldly. "The Minister needs us." He motioned toward the door, and I left.

The next time I called on Doubek, he was in a benignant mood, and I asked him for his decision on a certain case. He stared dreamily around the room at the files that were heaped on his desk, on the table, on the two leather chairs, on the couch, and on the floor behind his chair. Then he started to go through them, one stack after the other, casually at first but gradually becoming more and more nervous, tossing the folders aside after he had looked at the file number in the upper right-hand corner. "Can't understand it," he kept saying. "Had that folder here only yesterday. Some-

body has made a mess in our absence. . . ."

I talked frantically, in an effort to keep him in a good humor. I knew that if he got fed up he would throw me out. Then a miracle happened and he actually did find the file. He sat back in his chair and looked through the folder in a vague, detached way for some time. "Don't know," he said at last. "Can't promise anything."

He placed the file carefully in a pigeonhole on his desk marked "For Immediate Decision." I went away thinking the case might actually be settled soon, but it wasn't. Later, one of the minor councillors told me that once in a while Doubek took all the files from the pigeonhole marked "For Immediate Decision" and threw them back on the chairs.

ON the day after the Germans marched into Austria, in March, 1938, I dropped in at Dr. Doubek's office to inquire about his two brothers in Vienna. I expected him to be as panicky as everyone else in Prague, but he was completely unperturbed. "There's no reason to worry about Alois," he said. "There may be a short period of changes and uncertainty, but they won't do anything to him. They can't manage without Alois."

"But," I said, "I understood he was a Schuschnigg man."

Doubek took off his glasses, closed his eyes, and rubbed the end of his nose. Since Dr. Beneš had become President, Dr. Doubek had been wearing horn-rimmed glasses, which he often took off and played with, as the President did in newsreels. "A servant of the people cannot afford the luxury of political opinions," he said. "We must keep things going."

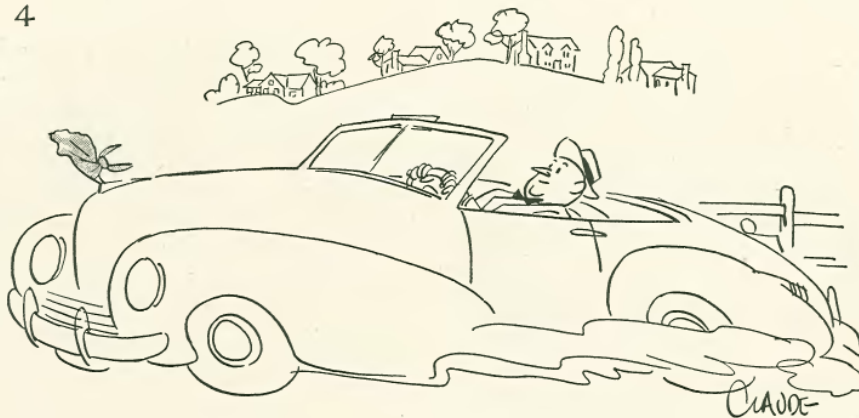
"What about your younger brother?" I asked. I remembered having seen the surgeon's name signed to an anti-Hitler proclamation.

"He could be sitting pretty today if he had followed Father's advice and gone into the civil service," Doubek said. "Every regime needs civil servants." He straightened the pencils on his desk, indicating that he considered the subject closed.

A FEW months later, I was getting ready to leave for America, and I complained to Dr. Doubek about the maze of red tape I had to go through to get my exit documents. He seemed pleased.

"America," he said, taking off his glasses and thoughtfully rubbing his

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eyes. "Let's see. First, you have to have a permit from your military outfit through the Ministry of National Defense. The police will not issue a passport without this permit. Then the National Bank must issue the necessary licenses to secure steamship tickets and currency, which means you have to apply to the Export Institute, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Trade Board. All requests to be made in quadruplicate, of course."

"Of course," I said.

"If I were you," he said, "I would try to secure a letter from the Prime Minister's office, in order to ensure effective coöperation by all subordinate authorities. Unless the Ministry of Commerce concurs with the Political Section of the Prime Minister's Office and the Public Relations Department of the Foreign Ministry about the essential rating of your trip, as specified by Government Decree two-twenty—of April 5th, I believe—the National Bank will not be authorized to issue the currency license. Consequently, the steamship company..." He rambled on, completely happy.

I GOT to America in spite of everything and forgot all about Dr. Doubek. During the war, I served with the United States Army in Europe. Then, after the war was over and I'd spent far too many months with the occupation forces, I was back in America, waiting around Washington for my discharge. The five Army outfits I had been part of were all disclaiming my existence, and my 201 file had got lost somewhere in the E.T.O. A terse, gloomy lieutenant colonel at the Adjutant General's office expressed grave doubts that I would ever be discharged.

One afternoon I was walking across Dupont Circle when I heard somebody call my name. I turned around and saw Dr. Doubek. I knew him at once, though he had changed. He had shaved off his beard and looked younger without it; he wore a gray suit and smoked a cigarette in a long holder—the kind President Roosevelt had used.

"Dr. Doubek!" I said. "I didn't know you were in this country."

"Just *Mister* Doubek, if you please," he said. "Yes, a few years ago we wouldn't have thought it possible that we would ever be in America." Doubek and I walked along together, and he told me that his younger brother, the surgeon, had been deported to a Polish camp and was probably dead, but that Alois was still at the Ministry of Justice in Vienna.

## SONG

This is the song of those who live alone,  
who, when the boat has sailed, the plane has flown,  
the train is gone,  
turning from an open space to a closed one,  
are confronted by other visitors—  
promiscuous affection, impotent devotion.

Too little and too late! Too much and much too soon.  
When the heart has lost its wisdom,  
how shall it be educated?  
How, living in a room of more than ordinary view,  
can the view be delimited  
or the room contain two—  
not one and a multitude?

Watchers from behind curtained windows,  
receivers of a monthly letter,  
lingers under the arches of bridges,  
driftwood and fine-editions collectors,  
artists, all of you, in all save living,  
pariahs and saints—this song is for you.

—WILLIAM JUSTEMA

"We never doubted that the new government would need him as much as the old one had," Doubek said. "They just couldn't do without Alois at the Ministry of Justice."

Doubek and his wife had left Prague shortly after the Germans had occupied the city. "It wasn't easy to get the necessary documents," he said. "Fortunately, we had connections in most governmental offices."

I was wondering why Doubek, who I knew had no political convictions, hadn't just stayed where he was, like Alois.

"What else could we do?" he said, as if he'd guessed my thoughts. "The Germans moved into the Ministry of the Interior and abolished our section, on the ground that there was no such thing as Czechoslovak citizenship. They transferred us to the section for Economic Statistics. Imagine! After twenty-one years of service in the Citi-

zenship Section! There's gratitude for you."

We had arrived at the entrance of a large government building, and Doubek asked me to come in with him. While we rode up in an elevator, he told me that things had been rather grim when he came to this country, and that he had had to work hard to improve his English. Later, fortunately, he'd managed to make connections in Washington. During the war, he had worked for various agencies. I think he mentioned the Office of Censorship, the Alien Property Custodian, and the O.W.I.

"Since May, we're an American citizen," he said. "We've passed the civil-service examinations and have a new job here." He opened a door and we went into a spacious office. It was furnished with a large desk, a dark leather couch, two leather chairs, a table, and a Persian rug. On the desk were two inkwells, a carafe of water, and two glasses. The table, the couch, the chairs, and part of the floor were covered with stacks of folders. On the wall hung Doubek's law diploma, his certificate of naturalization, and a picture of President Truman.

"Sit down, sit down," Doubek said jovially, making a sweeping gesture toward the chairs. "Just let us glance over these interoffice communications."

He picked up a handful of light-blue, dark-gray, white, and yellow papers. "Great country, America," he said. "And Washington! Ah!"

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

