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Intrigue and Countercharges Mark Case of Purported Spies

By SELWYN RAAB

It was, the Federal Bureau of Investigation says, a cat-and-mouse game designed to trap a Soviet-bloc spy, identified by authorities as Karl Frantisek Koecher.

The game lasted for 12 days in November. Sometimes it consisted of

lie-detector tests and long separate interrogations of Mr. Koecher — a former Central Intelligence Agency employee — and his wife, Hana, in suites used by F.B.I. counterintelligence agents at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel on Central Park South.

At other times, for undisclosed reasons, the agents played the game differently. Believing the Koechers were planning a permanent move from their East Side apartment to Austria, agents helped them with their last-minute arrangements.

As a final gesture, the F.B.I. volunteered to drive the Koechers to Kennedy International Airport for their flight to Austria.

A Surprise Arrest

On the evening of Nov. 27, the Koechers, with packed suitcases, showed up at the Barbizon Plaza for a lift to the airport. It was then that the couple was arrested.

While much about the case remains undisclosed, an account of the Government's pursuit of the Koechers and their lives in the United States has begun to emerge from court statements, affidavits and interviews with friends and co-workers of the couple.

Mr. Koecher said through his attorney, Michael Kennedy, that he had cooperated with the F.B.I. because he believed he might be used as a C.I.A. "operative" in Europe. Rudolph W. Giuliani, the United States Attorney in Manhattan, declined to explain the F.B.I.'s tactics.

According to Federal prosecutors, however, the F.B.I.'s main motive during those 12 days was to extract as much information as possible from the

couple about damage their purported espionage might have caused to national security. The Koechers came to the United States 19 years ago, saying they were Czechoslovak defectors.

Last month, Mr. Koecher pleaded not guilty to an indictment on espionage charges by a Federal grand jury in Manhattan. If convicted, he faces a sentence of up to life in prison.

Mrs. Koecher was arrested as a material witness, and she and her husband are both being held in prison without bail.

Mr. Koecher, through Mr. Kennedy, asserted that he was a double-agent for the C.I.A. Mr. Kennedy, in court statements and interviews, said Mr. Koecher was duped by the F.B.I. into signing a false confession in November that he was a Czechoslovak spy who was assigned to infiltrate the C.I.A.

The confession, according to Mr. Kennedy, was part of a cover story shaped by the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. to enable Mr. Koecher to resume espionage work in Europe for the United States, not for Czechoslovakia.

Documents Passed in 1975

In an interview, Mr. Kennedy acknowledged that Mr. Koecher gave C.I.A. documents to Czechoslovak agents in 1975. But he said it was done at the behest of the C.I.A. and was false information to mislead the Czechoslovaks.

Federal prosecutors have denied that Mr. Koecher was a double-agent for the C.I.A.

Bruce A. Green, an assistant United States Attorney in Manhattan who is in charge of the prosecution, said that during the 12 days in November, both Koechers admitted being trained as spies in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960's. Mr. Green said Mr. Koecher also confessed to using false passports to return secretly to Czechoslovakia on two occasions.

Court testimony, affidavits and interviews have disclosed the following points about the case:

¶The F.B.I. said it uncovered the Koechers' espionage activities "several years ago," but it apparently made no attempt to put the couple under surveillance until Nov. 15.

¶The F.B.I. said it confronted the Koechers on Nov. 15 only after learning they were about to leave the country. Friends and co-workers of the Koechers, however, said they traveled abroad frequently and their plans to sell their cooperative apartment and move to Austria in November had been openly discussed for almost one year.

¶Although Mr. Green and the F.B.I. have said that Mrs. Koecher helped deliver C.I.A. secrets to a Czechoslovak agent in 1975 and that she was a paid courier for the Czechoslovak intelligence service until 1983, no criminal charges have been brought against her. Even without criminal charges, she can be held as a material witness under Federal law. Mr. Kennedy said Mrs. Koecher's constitutional rights were

violated

purported admissions are therefore inadmissible as evidence against her.

¶Mr. Kennedy said that during questioning by the F.B.I., both Koechers passed lie-detector tests proving their loyalty to the United States.

¶An F.B.I. agent testified at a bail hearing that Mr. Koecher reported to the bureau in 1970 and again in 1973, after he went to work for the C.I.A., that Czechoslovak agents had tried to recruit him. This testimony, Mr. Kennedy said, supports Mr. Koecher's contention that he was assisting American intelligence services.

¶Friends said that in the United States both Koechers had frequently expressed militant anti-Communist views and supported conservative causes. The Koechers had indicated to friends that they were leaving the United States primarily because he had been unable to find a permanent job in the last seven years.

Mr. Koecher, who is 50 years old, and his wife, 40, were born in Czechoslovakia.

Mr. Koecher, a lanky, gray-haired man, grew up in Prague and in 1958 received a degree in physics from Charles University in Prague, one of the country's major universities.

Later, he taught mathematics, edited technical books for a state-run publishing company and wrote radio plays and film reviews.

Came to U.S. in 1965

The Koechers immigrated to the United States in December 1965. They said they were political defectors from Czechoslovakia and both became naturalized citizens. But, friends and co-workers said, they disclosed few details of their departure from Czechoslovakia.

Michael Reinitz of Manhattan, an executive for a Long Island printing company who met the couple soon after they arrived in the United States, said that Mr. Koecher at the time talked about having worked clandestinely in Czechoslovakia for Radio Free Europe. Until the early 1970's, the C.I.A. secretly financed Radio Free Europe's broadcasts to Eastern Europe.

"He talked about making reports to Radio Free Europe from a farm outside of Prague," Mr. Reinitz recalled, "and that he had to get out of Czechoslovakia because of political problems."

Mr. Koecher's first job in the United States was as a freelance writer for Radio Free Europe in New York, and over three years he wrote occasional scripts for broadcasts to Czechoslovakia.

Studied Under Brzezinski

In 1969, Mr. Koecher completed a two-year course at Columbia University's Russian Institute, where he studied under Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Mr. Koecher, in applying for a teaching post in 1979, cited Mr. Brzezinski, who was then national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, as a refer-

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ence. Mr. Brzezinski, through an aide, said he had "a vague recollection, nothing specific" of Mr. Koecher.

From 1969 until 1973, Mr. Koecher taught philosophy at Wagner College in Staten Island. While at Wagner he obtained a doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University.

The Koechers moved to Washington in 1973 when he was hired by the C.I.A. as a temporary or contract employee. For two years he was a translator. In 1975, still as a contract employee, he was transferred to New York, where he was employed by the agency until 1977. Justice Department and C.I.A. officials declined to specify what Mr. Koecher did in New York for the C.I.A.

Kenneth M. Geide, an F.B.I. counter-intelligence agent, said in court affidavits that from February 1973 to August 1975, Mr. Koecher passed on to Czechoslovak agents classified materials, including the names of C.I.A. personnel.

Tests of Loyalty

Federal officials declined to specify the importance of the information Mr. Koecher is accused of funneling to Czechoslovakia.

Kathy Pherson, chief of media relations for the C.I.A., said Mr. Koecher, like all agency employees, underwent a lie-detector test and a background check before being employed.

Stansfield Turner, a retired admiral who was Director of Central Intelligence from 1977 to 1981, said all employees were given periodic lie-detector tests to measure their loyalty. If Mr. Koecher had worked secretly for Radio Free Europe in Czechoslovakia while the agency was subsidized by the C.I.A., that might have helped him obtain security clearance, Admiral Turner noted.

Acquaintances of Mr. Koecher described him as scholarly, quarrelsome and, in recent years, increasingly embittered because of his inability to secure steady employment. He was turned down for full-time jobs by the C.I.A., Radio Free Europe and the State University of New York.

The last job he is known to have held was as a teacher of humanities at the State University at Old Westbury, L.I., from September 1979 to August 1980.

Philip A. Camponeschi, who is chairman of the humanities department at the Old Westbury campus, recalled that Mr. Koecher seemed eager to obtain a teaching post there. But he was released after one year, partly because of disputes with other faculty members over curriculum matters and Mr. Koecher's anti-Communist positions.

While Mr. Koecher was having difficulties finding employment, his wife was building a career in Manhattan's diamond district. For the last 10 years she worked in the small, dingy office of Savion Diamonds at 30 West 47th Street.

Joseph Savion, the owner of the company, said Mrs. Koecher had begun as a "girl Friday" and later became a partner with him in the Novissa Corporation, a company that sold pendants and earrings wholesale.

'A Great Saleswoman'

Mr. Savion said Mrs. Koecher drew an annual salary of \$20,000 from the Savion company but nothing from Novissa. "She had a few thousand dollars in Novissa and was hoping to see it grow," he said. "She was a great saleswoman — everybody on the street loved her."

Mr. Koecher told friends that he advised his wife in her business and identified himself as the president of Novissa. Mr. Savion, however, said Mr. Koecher had no role in the company.

Until the day before she was to leave for Europe — the day before her arrest — Mrs. Koecher showed up for work, Mr. Savion said. She told Mr. Savion that she would return in the spring to decide whether to continue their partnership.

According to friends of Mrs. Koecher, she said her father was an official of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Mr. Geide of the F.B.I. testified that the Koechers told him that her father had been "briefed" about their espionage mission for the Czechoslovak intelligence service before the couple left their homeland.

A friend of the Koechers, Irving Peck

of Manhattan, said Mrs. Koecher's father visited New York last summer and the Koechers traveled with him to Washington and Florida. "They said this would be his last chance to see America and compare capitalism and communism," Mr. Peck added.

For 10 years the Koechers, who are childless, lived in a 12th-floor, two-bedroom cooperative apartment at 50 East 89th Street on the corner of Madison Avenue. They paid about \$1,000 a month for maintenance but otherwise appeared to live modestly.

The apartment, which they bought a decade ago for \$40,000, was sold in November for about \$280,000. The Koechers confided to friends that they planned to use the money to invest in a hotel or supermarket in Europe.

Up to the day of their arrests, friends

who met or spoke on the telephone with the Koechers said, they behaved normally and without a trace of anxiety.

Five days before the arrests, Dr. George Kukla, a Czechoslovak defector who is a senior research scientist with the Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory in Palisades, N.Y., was at a Thanksgiving dinner with the Koechers and other Czechoslovak émigrés in West Milford, N.J.

"He was quiet, calm, absolutely relaxed," Dr. Kukla said of Mr. Koecher, whom he has known for 12 years. "There was no indication from either one of them they were under stress or in trouble."

Later, Dr. Kukla learned that the

Koechers had been escorted to the dinner and driven home by two F.B.I. agents.

Mr. and Mrs. Koecher are being held in separate cells at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Lower Manhattan. No trial date has been set for Mr. Koecher.

For refusing to testify before a grand jury after being granted immunity from prosecution, Mrs. Koecher was sentenced last month to an indeterminate prison term of up to 18 months on a civil contempt citation. A Federal Court of Appeals on Tuesday ordered a new hearing on the contempt charge.

Mrs. Koecher has said she would never testify against her husband.

Referring to statements by prosecutors that the F.B.I. suspected several years ago that the Koechers were spies, Mr. Kennedy, their lawyer, said: "How can we imagine a circumstance where the government knows they have an agent such as they claim Mr. Koecher to be and they continue to allow him to operate, to allegedly pass secrets, unless, in fact, he is working for the C.I.A.,"

Both Mr. and Mrs. Koecher have declined to be interviewed. But in a letter sent from prison, Mr. Koecher said that since coming to the United States his "intentions and efforts" were "to be a good and loyal American and to help the American cause."