

July 21, 1968

**Shelest's Account of His Secret Meeting on Lake
Balaton with Vasil Bil'ak, 20-21 July 1968**

Citation:

"Shelest's Account of His Secret Meeting on Lake Balaton with Vasil Bil'ak, 20-21 July 1968", July 21, 1968, Wilson Center Digital Archive, RGASPI, Fond 666, Shelest Diary, Da ne sudimy budete: Dnevnikovye zapisi, vospominaniya chlena Politbyuro TsK KPSS" (Moscow: Kvintessentsiya, 1995). Translated for CWHIP by Mark Kramer.
<https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/117113>

Summary:

Excerpt from diary of the First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Petro Shelest. Shelest recounts his secret meeting with the Slovak Communist Party leader, Vasil Bil'ak, on the shore of Lake Balaton in Hungary. The meeting took place late in the evening of 20-21 July, exactly a month before the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Sometime after noon, L. Brezhnev telephoned me from Moscow and said that today, 20 July, I must urgently fly to Budapest, where I would have a meeting and discussion with J. Kadar: "He will tell you everything and what you need to do." And Brezhnev added: "You are to have a meeting on Lake Balaton with Bil'ak. He's vacationing there with a group of Czechoslovak comrades. You must act cautiously and discreetly there so that you don't attract the attention of the rest of the Czechoslovak group. During the meeting with Vasil, act independently and try to gauge what V. Bil'ak's situation and mood are like." A special military transport plane of the Air Force had left from Moscow at 1:00 p.m. to fly to Kyiv, and I would fly on that plane to Budapest, landing at a military airbase of our Southern Group of Forces. Guards from the KGB, a technician with hidden recording equipment, and my assistant, A. Pakhareno, will fly with me.

From Borispol airport, we left for Budapest at 5:00 p.m. At the military airbase I was met by representatives of the military administration and a representative of the Hungarian Party's CC. One of Kadar's automobiles was driven up to avoid attracting attention with an embassy car, and no one from our embassy met me. Nonetheless, after the meeting with Kadar, I stopped by our embassy and met and talked with Ambassador F. Titov and all the embassy staff. They told me a good deal about the reaction in Hungary to the Czechoslovak events. Hungary itself had many problems of its own, and J. Kadar had to do a lot of finagling.

The meeting with J. Kadar was held in the CC building in his office, in the constant presence of his attractive and charming Nadja. J. Kadar's mood was good, and he was expecting me. At L. Brezhnev's instruction, I conveyed greetings to Kadar from Brezhnev, Podhornyi, Kosygin, and the other members of the Politburo. Kadar thanked me for the greetings and best wishes. Then he and I discussed all matters pertaining to my trip to Lake Balaton to meet with V. Bil'ak. Kadar assigned a trusted aide, the head of the MSzMP CC's International Relations Department, to accompany me.⁴¹ "You'll stay at my dacha," Kadar said. "This will be a good cover. You are my guest. As far as the meeting with Bil'ak is concerned, you yourself must take care of it. He knows that you must fly to Budapest and that you must be on Lake Balaton, but he doesn't know when and where the meeting must take place. You'll need to arrange all of that once you arrive at Lake Balaton."

At L. Brezhnev's instruction, I informed J. Kadar about the recent CPSU CC plenum and about the consideration being given to the plenum documents around the country and in the republics, territories, and provinces.⁴² At the CPSU CC Plenum our delegation's actions at the Warsaw Meeting were endorsed. Kadar, in turn, told me that their CC Presidium had just endorsed the actions of their delegation at the Warsaw Meeting. He has information that overall the Party and the people support measures aimed at regulating the situation in the KSC and the country. Continuing the conversation, Kadar said: "It's too bad that the Czechoslovak comrades so far don't understand or don't want to understand the full seriousness and, above all, the danger for the KSC and their whole country."

Kadar told me that this morning, 20 July, he had spoken for around two hours in the CC with some Czechoslovak comrades, including Svestka, the editor of Rude pravo. "The conversation took place by chance under the following circumstances: Our editor of the Party newspaper long ago knew Svestka very well; they even became good friends with one another. For some days with our permission he visited Prague and had detailed conversations there at various levels. Our editor invited Svestka to visit us in Budapest, where he could meet with journalists and have a bit of a vacation on Balaton.⁴³ Svestka mentioned that the situation was quite complicated in the KSC and the country, as well as in the CC itself and in the mass media, where the rightist elements have seized all the key positions and are successfully carrying out their activities."

After a long but extremely important conversation with J. Kadar, which was very

useful in clarifying all points, I left for Balaton. We arrived there when it was already dusk, around 7:00 p.m. local time. We stayed at Kadar's personal dacha. It was a modest, two-story house that was quite comfortable and cozy, and was located on the very shore of the lake. The weather we encountered on Balaton was not very hospitable; it was cold and a strong wind was blowing, causing yellowish-gray waves to rise up on the lake amidst a great roar. I went out onto the shore for a walk in the hope of meeting V. Bil'ak, since the Hungarian comrades had told me that, at the moment, he was out for a walk. Although I also knew which dacha Bil'ak was staying in with his family, I decided not to go there lest I attract the attention of the Czechs.

Time passed, it was already 9:00 p.m., but I hadn't yet succeeded in making contact with Bil'ak. I decided to send my comrades who arrived with me, A. Pakharensky and K. Glushko, to the club to see Bil'ak. They reported to me that Bil'ak was there, and that they, the Czechoslovaks and Hungarians, were having some sort of heated and lively conversation. I had to solicit the help of the Hungarian comrade who had been assigned to me by J. Kadar. He went to the club and discreetly informed Bil'ak that I had arrived and was waiting to meet him at Kadar's dacha. But Bil'ak requested that we arrange to meet on the shore of the lake at 10:00 p.m.

I went out along the shore: It was dark and there was noise from the waves and the wind. It was hard even at a close distance to notice anyone, much less hear his voice distinctly. The designated time passed, and Bil'ak was still not there, when suddenly, close beside me, a man came up. I was about to call out to him "Vasil," but I restrained myself. It turned out that this was a man who had been sent out on a "reconnaissance mission." Within a certain time Vasil himself showed up; I called out to him, and he responded. That is how we met. We initially decided to hold the meeting on the shoreline by Kadar's dacha, but the wind and the noise of the waves on Balaton interfered too much with our talk, and besides that, it was impossible to record our conversation.

We went inside the dacha, and our conversation lasted from 11:00 p.m. until 5:00 in the morning. This is what I heard and recorded, and how I kept track of our discussion and the entire conversation:

In his side of the conversation, V. Bil'ak dwelt mainly on the general situation and the state of affairs in the KSC and in the country as a whole. He said that in the KSC CC and in the country, and especially among rightist elements, the publication of the letter from the five Warsaw Pact countries had caused shock, terror, and even panic. Kriegel had ordered an overseas passport for himself, and Dubcek had said that the letter was like a knife stabbing him in the heart. In addition to this a nationalist frenzy had surged; they spoke a good deal about how the letter of the five Parties infringed on the sovereignty of Czechoslovakia. This gave a strong fillip to anti-Soviet hysteria.

"The situation is such that even the fiercest and most notorious enemies of the Party are ready to support us, the Communists, so long as we are united in opposing the Soviet Union. But Dubcek and Cernik are persuaded that these people support their policy." Continuing the conversation, V. Bil'ak said: "I will frankly tell you that you were quite fortunate in having chosen Warsaw as the place to hold the conference. There are many reasons for this, but one of the most important is the vehement position that Gomulka has adopted toward our leadership.

It is of the utmost importance to hold a bilateral meeting with you, the Soviet Union. If there isn't one in the near future, this might lead to the final rupture and the departure of the KSC from our common line, which means it will collapse. We-and I have in mind here my comrades-are speaking in favor of the soonest possible meeting with you. But you are correct in insisting that you don't want to come to Prague for such a meeting and negotiations. If you were to come to Prague, these 'Schweikists' would think they had triumphed.

I think that they won't come to bilateral negotiations with you with the full membership of the Presidium-they're afraid. Indeed, Cernik, Smrkovsky, Kriegel, and Dubcek are afraid to travel to the Soviet Union at all for a meeting with you: They're afraid that they won't be permitted to go back to Czechoslovakia.⁴⁴ If a bilateral meeting with you is to be held, the issues must be discussed sharply, precisely, and concretely, a timeframe must be set for rectifying the situation in the country, and they must be warned about the possible serious consequences. Undoubtedly, a demand must be put forth to seal off all of Czechoslovakia's borders on the West."

Continuing his line of thought, Bil'ak said: "I say to you personally and directly that you must shield us with your 'umbrella' against the acrimonious attacks of the leaders of Poland and the GDR. These attacks have provoked well-founded annoyance and indignation, since they say a lot that is non-objective."⁴⁵ Bil'ak further said: "Our economy is stretched to the limit; you must give give us help through solid credits. Preparations for the 14th KSC Congress are going badly, and we're not sure that we'll be able to win out at this congress; although A. Dubcek is placing all his hopes on victory, there is no basis for such hopes. The KSC statutes are revisionist; rightist elements helped draft them. If we publish these statutes, all the Communist and workers' parties will criticize us and not one of them will come to our congress."⁴⁶

I asked Bil'ak to express his opinion about Smrkovsky. He did so in four words: "He's a political prostitute." He said no more about Smrkovsky at this point. Continuing the conversation, Bil'ak said: "Cernik is under the complete influence of the Yugoslav ambassador; he won't do anything without him and consults with him about all matters. We even were waiting for Tito to arrive in Prague; we'd prepared a grandiose reception and lavish meeting for him. Tito was at the airport all set to take off, but for some reason, Prague didn't end up receiving him." (V. Bil'ak didn't know the real reason that Prague had declined to receive Tito's plane. Essentially it was because we had expressed an ultimatum against Tito's arrival in Prague, and the leadership in Czechoslovakia became frightened and beat a retreat.⁴⁷)

I asked Bil'ak a question: "Tell me who among you in the KSC CC Presidium supports correct positions, and which of you is it possible to depend on in organizing a strong bloc of healthy forces?" Bil'ak named about a dozen-and-a-half people. Of these, the top spot goes to Indra, Kolder, Svestka, Rigo, Barbirek, J. Piller, and Kapek. Not to mention Bil'ak himself. After that I asked him: "Why haven't you been making a greater effort?" Bil'ak thought a bit and said: "We're afraid that they'll accuse us of betraying the motherland, with all the consequences that implies. We're prepared to support you with all possible means, but we don't know what we need to do." I said to Bil'ak: "We need a letter from you containing your request for assistance. We give a full guarantee that neither the letter nor its authors will be revealed in public." To this, Bil'ak responded: "You must understand our position; we are ashamed that, having done nothing in our country, we are appealing to you for help. What must you think about us?"

Bil'ak continued: "We have certain measures in place, and our devoted, pro-Soviet party activists are mobilized. The Workers' Militia and many military officers support us and, in the event of danger, will come to our defense.⁴⁸ Our program and declaration are all ready to go." (When he was saying all this, I sensed that he was speaking with a degree of ambivalence, and it seemed to me that he was conflating what he wished with what was actually the case.) I said to V. Bil'ak that they are clearly letting the chance slip away to put up an active struggle. "No," said Bil'ak firmly, "we won't permit this. We simply don't have enough forces on our own. We will appeal to you for help." "But wouldn't it be better if your group now wrote us a letter requesting help? For you, won't this provide a guarantee that you will be bolder and more organized in your struggle against the nefarious activities of the rightists, and won't it strengthen your actions?" "Yes, this would strengthen our cohesion and our resolute actions." I openly raised a question with Bil'ak: "Perhaps we could act

through Slovakia?"⁴⁹ Bil'ak said: "We'll see; if there's an absolute necessity for that, we can proceed without the Czechs in order to save Czechoslovakia." Bil'ak further said that they had frittered away time, including the moment when they could have put up a resolute struggle against the rightists with their "2000 Words Platform." In response to this I said to Bil'ak: "You made a mistake; you let the moment slip away when you could have strengthened your influence and the solidity of the struggle against the nefarious activities of the rightists, the moment when they refused to take part in the Warsaw Meeting. The KSC CC plenum, which you sought and proposed, essentially gave no greater hopes to you and created even deeper fissures in the ranks of the KSC."⁵⁰ In response to this Bil'ak said: "That wasn't a plenum, it was a carnival or a circus. Pressure was brought to bear against us, and we were unable to do anything at that plenum." I said to Bil'ak: "Perhaps you can do something at your forthcoming KSC Congress?" He answered: "We will appeal then to you for assistance." I responded to him: "Your request for assistance might come too late. We need an appeal today." Bil'ak fell silent in response to this.

Taking the discussion further, he said: "We need a conflict; we can get into gear within a week, but you're right that time is already working against us. When we gave final consideration to the question of a possible trip to the Soviet Union for negotiations with you, three of them-Cernik, Smrkovsky, and Kriegel-said they're afraid to travel to Moscow, and Dubcek, for his part, said 'I won't go without you.' That's how the most important issues and complex questions get decided in our country."

Bil'ak spoke about "freedom of speech" and the press and cited this instance: "After the ill-fated CC Plenum I returned to Bratislava. Representatives of the press, radio, and cinema asked me what I could say about the recent Warsaw Meeting and the letter from the five Parties of socialist countries belonging to the Warsaw Pact. I said that I had a positive view of the meeting and the letter from the five socialist countries, and that we should pay heed to their voice and their reason. Following this, the entire press assailed me with invective and threats; the radio didn't broadcast my words; and the television suddenly found that all the lamps in its cameras had 'burned out.'"

"Everyone of course knows that we have an alliance treaty with you, and indeed the journalists asked Cernik and Smrkovsky to express their views about the Warsaw Pact and the letter from the five socialist countries. Cernik and Smrkovsky were unable to say anything more intelligent than to recommend to the journalists that they not write anything about this anywhere before the 14th of August." I asked Bil'ak: "What's so important about the 14th of August?" Bil'ak was unable to answer me directly, but later he said: "Cernik and Smrkovsky said to the journalists: 'Then you will write about how the Soviet Army is occupying our country'."

My conversation with V. Bil'ak was open and candid, but nonetheless there was a certain inhibition and guardedness about it, and Vasil failed to clear up certain questions and did not fully discuss certain things.

Dawn came, and we both were exhausted, but both of us were satisfied by the meeting and the conversation we had had. He and I drank a glass of Hungarian port and warmly bid farewell. I promised V. Bil'ak that I would personally convey to L. Brezhnev the content of our entire meeting and our whole discussion, as well as give a presentation about it to the CPSU CC Politburo.