

Ladislav Porjes Interviewing Walter Ulbricht



In this photo I (on the left in the foreground) am interviewing Walter Ulbricht (on the right in the foreground) in March of 1967 at the Leipzig Exhibition.

I almost caused an international catastrophe! It happened in March of 1967 at the Leipzig Exhibition. Here there were relatively banal press conferences going on, where East Germany was boasting of its successes in all fields. Not exactly the most interesting visitors were walking around - however, only up until one of the members of the Czechoslovak exhibition told me in confidence that our pavilion will be visited by the prime minister Walter Ulbricht, the head of the East German state of 'workers and peasants.' This news caused commotion at the Czechoslovak pavilion. I went to see the head of the press department of the East German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Schwab, and asked him if I could do an interview with Walter Ulbricht. He resolutely refused: 'Comrade, that's absolutely out of the question. It's only a private visit.' Then he became alarmed, as to how I had come by this information. I didn't answer him, and only assured him that I didn't have the information from any of his underlings.

After about a half hour, Ulbricht really did walk into the Czechoslovak pavilion accompanied by his bodyguards and minions from all possible ministries. Ulbricht had barely begun to have a look around, and I already pressed the button on my tape recorder thrown over my shoulder, and brandishing a microphone I started towards the distinguished guest. One of his armed bodyguards immediately shoved me aside, and I flew back against a wall. However my over six and a half foot co-worker threw me back with all his strength. I braked to a stop right before the prime minister, and sang out a banal introductory question: 'How does the chairman of the State Assembly like the Czechoslovak exhibition?' Though Ulbricht was surprised by the unexpected extempore, he signaled his bodyguards to step aside a bit. He began to formally, but willingly reply to my question. His monolog was full of monotonous hackneyed phrases, from which the chairman awoke

only after my next question - what does he intend to do to improve the mutual relations of East Germany and the CSSR? 'That's a good question, and has come just in time. Tomorrow I'm flying to Prague, so that comrade Antonin Novotny and I can together analyze the causes of the current stagnation, and find a road to the improvement of our relations.' Then he uttered a few lyrical sentences about the importance and significance of cooperation between our two countries. I politely thanked for the interview, immediately got into my company car, and quickly sped to the local radio studio, so that I could send this sensational news to Prague. Because it was an unheard of and premature revelation of a state secret!

After being away for two hours I returned again to our pavilion. There my friends told me that after my departure a frantic search had broken out. Members of Ulbricht's bodyguard, agents of the 'Stasi' secret state security, and officials from the East German foreign ministry were all furiously looking for me. Finally the Germans found me - they pleaded and then threateningly asked me to give them the tape in question. When they found out that I had already transmitted it from the Leipzig studio to Prague an hour ago, they started dragging me to a phone, for me to immediately call Prague Radio, that due to the highest interests of state the interview cannot be broadcast, for comrade Chairman had let out something he shouldn't have, that premature disclosure of his flight to Prague could seriously endanger his security. I had to tell them that I was sorry, but that my interview with Ulbricht, as an exceptional breaking news item, had already been broadcast twice by Prague Radio.