

## **ABSTRACT**

The work studies a very specific period of the Czech-Cuban relations: the period of World War II and the Czechoslovakian refugees in Havana. For its creation, materials from two archives were used: the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, the so-called "London Archive" which keeps the documentation of the Czechoslovak government in exile, and the National Archive of Cuba.

In the first half of the 20th century, Cuba was not for the Czech society a distant country on the other side of the world. It was its partner and competitor on the world sugar market, and the echoes of Cuban independence were still fresh in its memory. The young Czechoslovak republic was looking for markets for its industrial and consumer products, while Cuban exports generally did not exceed a few dozen tons of unroasted coffee. In the inter-war period, some 20 Czechs and Slovaks were living in Cuba.

The Munich Treaty, the occupation and then the application of the Nuremberg Laws created an atmosphere of suffocation and drastically reduced the living space for the Jewish population in the occupied territory of Czechoslovakia. Many decided to leave their homeland, but the world around them was unwilling to receive larger numbers of Jewish refugees. The original idea of getting to a safe place beyond the Atlantic, to the U.S.A., with the advances of the Hitlerite army, was turning into a desperate effort to get a life anywhere. The records of the Czechoslovak consulate in Havana reveal the routes: Brussels, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Lisbon, Casablanca.

By the end of 1941, some 200 refugees from occupied Czechoslovakia were already living in Cuba. In many cases they were well-to-do people, before the war they had been merchants, bank officials and private businessmen with their families.

Cuba, at the beginning of the 1940's, was living a period of relative tranquility, the recently approved constitution guaranteed a series of civil rights unaccustomed in the region, with Fulgencio Batista as president, and in agreement with Roosevelt's policy, gave the impression of being a democrat. Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Cuba declared war on the Axis countries. The war events filled the pages of the newspapers and were a good topic of conversation over coffee, but really, the war interfered little in the daily life of Cubans.

The destruction of the village of Lidice, in Czechoslovakia, had a great repercussion in the Cuban public opinion. For the Czechoslovak community in Havana it was a challenge: they were in another continent, many even without resources, but they felt the need to do something for their distant homeland and for themselves. A month later, in July 1942, the Czechoslovak Union of Cuba was constituted. In the same period, the Czechoslovak government in exile in London, within the framework of the argument about the uninterrupted existence of the republic in the form of its representations abroad and in order to serve the resident community and create favorable conditions for future business interests, once the republic was liberated, approved Eduard Kühnl as Chargé d'Affaires for the planned embassy in Havana.

The Czechoslovak Union on the one hand created a space for the meeting and mutual support among the refugees in a country where most of them had no intention of settling down, and at the same time organized a whole series of activities directed to the Cuban society: concerts of Czech music, collections for the Czechoslovak soldiers fighting in the allied armies, charity bazaars, as a copy of the its mimeographed magazine Zprávy informs us. The Union maintained a close collaboration in the embassy with the media campaign, and hundreds of articles were published in the Cuban press and radio broadcasts.

In spite of some controversies, even of personal character, the common effort of the Union and the embassy had succeeded in creating, in the Cuban society, an awareness of Czechoslovakia, its struggle for freedom and its culture and history.

The Czechoslovak Union of Cuba disappeared shortly after the war, most of the emigrants continued on their way to the United States (their status as political refugees guaranteed them residence in Cuba only during the war). The embassy closed its doors in 1947 and the cold war and crucial events in both countries kept Cuba and Czechoslovakia apart for years.

**Key words:**

Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Second World War, Jewish refugees, Czechoslovak Union of Cuba, Czechoslovak Economic Association, emigration, Czech-Cuban relations, Czechoslovak embassy in Havana