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Demise of the Cameraman. The Death of Peter Lysiuk in Khust on 14 March 1939

Abstract. This paper is the investigation of the events surrounding the death of Peter Lysiuk in Khust on 14 March, 1939. The young ethnic Ukrainian, US citizen filmmaker lost his life while filming the firefight between the Karpatska Sich and the Czechoslovak law enforcement forces. According to my research and analysis it seems he was not killed accidentally by crossfire, but was murdered because of the high amount of cash with him.

Keywords: Carpathian Ruthenia, Peter Lysiuk, cameraman, movie, murder

Резюме. Це дослідження присвячене обставинам смерті оператора Петра Лисюка, що загинув 14 березня 1939 року в Хусті. Молодий українець, що був американським громадянином, втратив життя під час зйомок сутички між стрільцями Карпатської Січі та чехословацькими правоохоронними органами. Як показав детальний аналіз подій, його смерть найімовірніше була не випадковою – юнака застрелили. Припускаємо, що причиною вбивства була велика кількість валюти, яка знаходилася в оператора.

Ключові слова: Закарпаття, Петро Лисюк, оператор, фільм, убивство.

Rezümé. Ez a tanulmány a Huszton 1939. március 14-én meghalt Peter Liszjuk operatőr halálával foglalkozik. Az amerikai állampolgárságú fiatal ukrán filmes a Kárpáti Szics és a csehszlovák rendvédelmi erők közötti összecsapás filmzése közben vesztette életét, de – mint a részletes elemzés mutatja – halála minden bizonnyal nem véletlen volt, hanem szándékosan lőtték le. A gyilkosság oka – feltehetően – a nála lévő jelentős mennyiségű deviza volt.

Kulcsszavak: Kárpátalja, Peter Liszjuk, operatőr, film, gyilkosság

Introduction

Being a war correspondent or reporting conflict-stricken areas can be a very dangerous task. Just between 1992 and September 2019, according to Committee to Protect Journalists, 2001 cases are known, when journalists and media workers were killed either deliberately or by crossfire in dangerous areas while doing their duty.¹

There was such a case in Carpathian Ruthenia as well, when during the turbulent March of 1939, a cameraman was shot and killed by Czechoslovak law enforcement forces. The victim, Peter Lysiuk was an American citizen, so his death was investigated upon the request of the United States authorities. It is his story.

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¹ Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ): https://cpj.org/data/killed/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motiveUnconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker&start_year=1992&end_year=2019&group_by=year (Accessed: 14 September 2019).

Picture 1. *The portrait of Peter Lysiuk which was published in numerous US newspapers after his death*



Source: Lysiuk family photo

Family background and the tragic fate

Peter Lysiuk was born on 21 April 1918 in Odessa.² His father, Kalenyk Lysiuk³ was a prominent figure of the Ukrainian diaspora. During the Ukrainian War of Independence in 1917–1921, he fought in the ranks of the Army of the Ukrainian People's Republic as an officer. He then immigrated to the United States in 1923 and became a businessman and also became a very active member of the Ukrainian–American community. He was a member of various Ukrainian organizations in the USA and after the Second World War he founded the Ukrainian National Museum and established the Ukrainian–American Foundation as well.

² Svoboda Ukrainian Daily 22 March, 1939. p. 4.

³ Kalenyk Lysiuk (1899–1980) later settled down and passed away in Ontario, California (it is situated between Los Angeles and San Bernardino). He published a book in 1954 with the title 'For Land and Freedom – A story of the never-ending struggle of the oppressed' (it is available here in PDF: <http://diasporiana.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/books/5930/file.pdf> (Accessed: 14 September 2019)). His papers (17 linear in.) are available in the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University.

Picture 2. Peter Lysiuk is posing with his camera in front of Khust's Greek Catholic Church of the Ascension. This photo was taken in early March 1939 by his father. Peter Lysiuk was shot very close to this place, a few hundred yards to the east



Source: Lysiuk family photo

Peter Lysiuk also had a younger brother, Walter.⁴

Kalenyk Lysiuk was naturalized on 8 January 1929 in New York, presumably his sons were naturalised on the same date. The family lived in Plainfield, N.Y. for a while, then moved to Passaic, N.J. in 1935. Peter Lysiuk had attended Peekskill Military Academy, later New Brunswick and Richmond Hill High Schools, prior to join Passaic High School. He was mentioned as a star left end of Passaic High School's 1936 football team which finished the season as co-champion of the State with Bloomfield.⁵

Peter Lysiuk graduated from the Passaic High School in January, 1938. He was mentioned in the class Who's Who as the „Handsomest Boy” and „Athletic Hero”.⁶

His parents divorced, and Peter lived with his mother, Zina, and younger brother, Walter in Passaic, N.J. His mother ran there a beauty parlor.

⁴ Walter Lysiuk (1923–2010) passed away in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

⁵ Svoboda Ukrainian Daily 22 March, 1939. p. 4.

⁶ Lysiuk Warned of Peril, Father Cables Newspaper. *The Herald News* 18 March, 1939 pp. 1–2.

Kalenyk Lysiuk planned to go to Carpathian Ruthenia with his older son, Peter to make a movie there. They left the United States on 18 February, 1939 and arrived to Carpathian Ruthenia still in February, 1939, where they stayed in the Central Hotel of Khust.

Then the life of this tall, handsome, young promising man ended tragically. In the morning of 14 March, 1939 a firefight broke out between the Ukrainian paramilitary Karpatska Sich and the Czechoslovak military and law enforcement in Khust. Albeit his father warned him not to do so, Peter Lysiuk left the hotel to film the engagement. He never returned. Peter Lysiuk's body was found in Khust with a fatal shot through his heart.

His brother, Walter said to a journalist about his older brother's intention for the trip and the result of the devastating news on their mother: „*Peter wanted to earn money to pay tuition in an engineering college. The news of his death made mother hysterical and now she can't see anyone.*”⁷

The Royal Hungarian Armed Forces seized Khust on the 16th of March (at this time, there was no combat in the settlement). The next day the entire Carpathian Ruthenia was under the control of the Hungarian armed forces.⁸

Peter Lysiuk was buried in the Greek Catholic cemetery of Khust (which is situated just north of the Castle Hill of Khust).

I did not find Peter Lysiuk's record among the 1939 Khust state death certificates (presumably his father did not report it to the local authorities – maybe he was not familiar with the process).⁹

⁷ U. S. Photog, 20, is killed in Czech battle. *New York, Daily News* 18 March, 1939 p. 8B.

⁸ For further details see B. STENGE, CSABA: Magyar hadműveletek Kárpátalja visszacsatolása során, 1939. március I. fázis (2. rész). *Seregszemle* 1/2018, pp. 117–131.

⁹ The official death certificates are available at the State Archives of Transcarpathian Oblast (DAZO) in Uzhgorod.

Picture 3. *The grieving Zina and Walter Lysiuk are looking at Peter Lysiuk's photo after the news of his death*



Source: AP Wirephoto in the Philadelphia Inquirer 18 March 1939 issue

Official investigation

In early July of 1939 the Hungarian Regent's Commissioner of the Governorate of Carpathian Ruthenia (this position was an actual governor), Baron Zsigmond Perényi received a formal inquiry from the United States Embassy in Budapest to investigate the events related to the death of Peter Lysiuk.¹⁰

The main questions were the following:

- the circumstances of the killing of Peter Lysiuk
- when, on what day and where Peter Lysiuk was killed
- Peter Lysiuk had 2,016 USD cash with him. What happened to this money
- Where was Peter Lysiuk buried. The embassy asked for a photo of his grave.

¹⁰ Dazo Beregovo fond 340 opis 1 delo 72. Az Egyesült Államok budapesti követségétől Lissiuk Péter elhalálozási körülményeinek megállapítása.

According to the embassy an individual named László (Vladislav) Tatinecz from the Central Hotel in Khust may know more about the death of Peter Lysiuk.

On 11 July, 1939 Zsigmond Perényi forwarded the request to the local public administration of Khust. He asked for an urgent investigation and answer and gave 15 days for it.

On 19 July, 1939 the Hungarian gendarmerie station of Khust filed a report about the result of their investigation for the local public administration, and it was forwarded to the Regent's Commissioner of the Governorate of Carpathian Ruthenia as well. The report was filed by Master Sergeant (tiszthelyettes)¹¹ Szabados, commander of the station. In his report, he stated the following:

„United States citizen Peter Lysiuk sojourned in Khust in March along with his father. They were staying in the Central Hotel. On 14 March, 1939 at 7 am in the morning, when the Sich and the Czechoslovak armed forces clashed in the settlement, he ran to the streets and went to the grassy area at the end of the Streets of Endre Tóth and Nagykőrösös, close to the former Czech gendarmerie barracks. (I identified that Nagykőrösös Street is the recent Vulytsya Keramichna and Endre Tóth Street is Vulytsya Brativ Brayshchykiv – Author.) Here he started to film the firefight between the Czech law enforcement and the Karpatska Sich. Having seen this, Sergeant Antonín Otradovec, who was born on 3 April, 1898 in the village of 'Velky Semtiu in Olbnovice-Sedchany distict on the Czech territory (The correct settlement must be Semtín, which is a very small village just 2 km to the east from Olbramovice and a part of it, it is situated to the east from the Sedlčany district, and belongs to the Benešov district – Author.)¹², a Czech member of the gendarmerie force who was living in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia at the time shot and killed Lysiuk. He may have thought that Lysiuk was a member of the Karpatska Sich.

The killing of Peter Lysiuk happened on 14 March, 1939 between 9 and 10 am in Khust, at the grassy area at the end of Nagykőrösös and Endre Tóth Streets, close to the Czech gendarmerie barracks, exactly 105 steps from it.

Lysiuk's money and personal belongings were taken by György (Georgy, in Czech Jiří) Hapik, resident of Turica (Turitsa is a Rusyn village to the east of Perechyn – Author), former Czech probational gendarme and Rudolf Veleki (evidently also a member of the Czechoslovak gendarmerie – Author), resident of Prague (Breznov Street 74.). These personal belongings were the following: a pocket watch, a letter, addressed to the United States, a lighter and a significant amount of money. These items and money were taken with them on the 15th of March when

¹¹ The different rank comparisons in this material are just approximate.

¹² The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Július Baláz, Csc., director of the Military Archives of the Czech Republic, who helped to identify the area and settlements. The original Hungarian report definitely contains typos (Otradovec's name was also mentioned as Otradovec, which must be a misspelling).

they left for the Czech territory. It was confirmed by László (Vladislav) Svajka, resident of Fenyvesvölgy (Stavne, a Rusyn village in the Uzh valley, northeast from Velikiy Bereznij – Author) house number 83, who was also a probational gendarme of the Czechs and was present at those events. The exact amount of cash Lysiuk had was not counted and therefore was not established.

Peter Lysiuk's body was buried at the Greek Catholic cemetery of Khust. I am enclosing the photos of the grave. (The original attachments were not available in the letter, presumably the photos were sent to the US Embassy – Author.)

László (Vladislav) Tatinecz was not available for questioning, since his residence is not known.

Samuel Friedmann, resident of Khust (Kelemen Mikes Street 1), owner of the hotel said, that Lysiuk left the hotel on 14 March, 1939 at around 7 am. He did not know where Lysiuk went, since he did not inform him. At around 10-11 am individuals arrived to the hotel and said to his father that his son was shot in Khust. He does not know more about the case. He remembered well that Lysiuk had a significant amount of cash with him.”¹³

The author's opinion and conclusions

The local Czechoslovak gendarmerie and police units were part of the State Defense Guard (Stráž obrany státu, SOS).¹⁴ The State Defense Guard's 38th Battalion was stationed at Khust, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Antonín Zeman. (Avgustyn Voloshyn's government also had a very small independent police force there, led by Yurko Biley.)

The most detailed Czech book on the State Defense Guard's activity in this area barely mentions the case of Peter Lysiuk. It cites only a reminiscence of a chief non-commissioned officer of the Czechoslovak gendarmerie, Staff Sergeant (vrchní strážmistr) František Kolenčík, who said without any details on the circumstances of the death that the body of a US citizen named 'Luskiev' was found in front of the barracks, who was filming the engagement.¹⁵

The main source of the information of the above cited Hungarian report was definitely the local Rusyn Vladislav Svajka, a former probational member of the Czechoslovak gendarme, who was present at these events and knew all of the mentioned participants, since he was able to name the perpetrators. In one hand,

¹³ Dazo Beregovovo fond 340 opis 1 delo 72.

¹⁴ The Czechoslovak State Defense Guard was formed in 1936 and functioned until 1939. Its main tasks were to carry on customs duty, being the local law enforcement force and to protect the borders until the more powerful army units can intervene. The manpower of SOS based on gendarmerie and police members, finance guards and army soldiers. For further details about the organization, see BENEŠ, JAROSLAV: *Stráž obrany státu 1936–1939*. Mladá Boleslav, FORTprint, 2007.

¹⁵ MAREK, JINDŘICH: *Hraničářská kalvárie. Příběhy posledních obránců Masarykovy republiky na severu Čech a Podkarpatské Rusi v letech 1938–1939*. Cheb, Svět Křidel, 2004, p. 211.

he was definitely a key witness and source of information. However, on the other hand, as a former member of the same unit, he most probably varnished the role of the State Defense Guard members in Peter Lysiuk's death, concealing the sensitive facts.

Albeit Peter Lysiuk was definitely too keen and imprudent to take some real combat footage, he was aware of the danger of the firefight. That's why he positioned himself far from the combatants in an open place to help everyone recognize him. His small camera with a tripod was easily recognizable, not similar to any kind of weapon, especially for a law enforcement officer with vast experience, like Otradovec (since he was 41-year-old, Otradovec was definitely a very experienced law enforcement officer with a long service time).

According to the surviving photos, that particular camera was a 16 mm Filmo 70 Model A, produced by Chicago-based Bell & Howell Company. It was a very popular, widely used camera of its time, especially for amateur and home movie shooting. Its ruggedness and compact size made it a common „travel” camera.

The presence of the American filmmakers in Khust was widely known by locals and authorities alike, including law enforcement units. The presence of the US citizen filmmakers was definitely a kind of attraction in Khust for weeks, so the involved gendarmerie members obviously knew of their presence and accommodation well in the centre of the settlement.

Despite this fact, State Defense Guard members did not enter the Central Hotel either to inform Lysiuk's father about the death of his son or to return his personal belongings and money, albeit it was the official protocol. Peter Lysiuk had an undisclosed amount of Czechoslovak money (korunas) with him and also the mentioned 2,016 USD. The amount of the dollars was a really significant sum: 2,016 USD would cost 36,878.19 USD¹⁶ today (or 37,210.14¹⁷ according to a different online calculator). It is well over the annual real median personal income in the United States (which was 33,706 USD in 2018).¹⁸

In Central Europe, where wages and earnings were much lower than in the United States, this amount of money was really a small fortune.

To analyze the events, surrounding his death it looks that Peter Lysiuk was shot not accidentally by crossfire, but rather deliberately. The high value of the money with him suggests the most plausible explanation of Peter Lysiuk's death: he was shot because of the money.

Actually, there is a reminiscence, which states exactly this. Alexander Sevryuk (1893-1941), former Ambassador of the Ukrainian People's Republic of the Cen-

¹⁶ Creator & Maintainer: <https://westegg.com/inflation/> (Accessed: 20 September 2019).

¹⁷ US Inflation Calculator: <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/> (Accessed: 20 September 2019).

¹⁸ Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis: <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEPAINUSA672N> (Accessed: 20 September 2019).

tral Rada in Berlin, who arrived to Khust from the Third Reich stated that witnesses saw how 'Czech soldiers' arrested, robbed and then shot Peter Lysiuk.¹⁹

It is important to mention that such dirty deeds by local law enforcement were not so rare as most of the readers think. It was a similar case just two months before in Carpathian Ruthenia, when an unarmed, peaceful civilian was shot deliberately by another State Defense Guard member. On 6 January 1939 Czechoslovak regular troops: two infantry companies of the Czechoslovak 12th Infantry Division's I/36 Infantry Battalion assisted by State Defense Guard and supported by armoured cars and artillery attacked the Hungarian city of Munkács (today Mukachevo) through its suburb Oroszvég (Rozvegovo – today it is part of Mukachevo already). Here, in Rozvegovo a Czechoslovak State Defense Guard member, Jaroslav Kotouček deliberately shot and killed a local civilian, 19-year-old Fülöp (Philip) Weisz (they probably knew each other personally, since Kotouček was a police officer of the city before the First Vienna Award). The stepfather of the young Jewish victim wanted to sue the Czechoslovak state because of the murder.²⁰

Local people state, there were other civilian victims of this clash in Khust, but I was not able to find any details on the other cases (most probably the other civilians became victims of crossfire).

As for the Karpatska Sich losses, according to a local leader, Ivan Sarvadiy, around 120–150 Karpatska Sich members were killed on that day in Khust.²¹

Such a high number of casualties in an engagement which was strictly limited in time and area sounds extremely high and it suggests, that a larger group of them were actually captured and then shot after, not killed in the firefight directly.

A number of wounded Hungarian regular soldiers of the Hungarian 24th Border Guard Battalion were also murdered by Czechoslovak troops on the 15th of March, 1939 to the west and southwest of Khust.²²

My final conclusion on Peter Lysiuk's death is that he most probably became victim of few local Czechoslovak law enforcement officers' greed because of his significant amount of cash. It proved to be too tempting to the perpetrators and he was murdered deliberately because of his money. Perhaps the perpetrators thought that in those turbulent times, they could escape any legal consequences, which was actually the case.

¹⁹ His reminiscence is cited in this site: https://gazeta.ua/articles/history-newspaper/_vsetaki-tilyudi-ne-skavulili-i-ne-sklali-zbroji/891082 (Accessed: 22 September 2019).

²⁰ For further details see B. STENGE, CSABA: A „vízkeresztí csata” – csehszlovák-magyar határincidens Munkácsnál 1939. január 6-án. *Honvédségi Szemle* 1/2019, pp. 128–129.

²¹ SHANDOR, VINCENT: *Carpaho-Ukraine in the Twentieth Century. A political and legal history*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997. p. 187. He cites Ivan Sarvadiy's book, *Zmova proty uriadu Karpats'koï Ukraïny* (Chicago, 1984, p. 24).

²² B. STENGE, CSABA: Magyar hadműveletek Kárpátalja visszacsatolása során, 1939. március I. fázis (2. rész). *Seregszemle* 1/2018, pp. 119–120.

Picture 4. *Still image of Peter Lysiuk from the beginning of the film of 'Tragedy of the Karpatho Ukraine'. Presumably it was one of the favourite pictures of his father about his older son, that's why it was chosen to show there*



Source: 'Tragedy of the Karpatho Ukraine'

The film

Despite of the family tragedy, Kalenyk Lysiuk continued to film. He made footages of the Soim's only session on the 15th of March and in April and May on the Czech and Slovak territory some staged footage was made about the combat in Carpathian Ruthenia and about government members, like telephone conversations of Avgustyn Voloshyn.

The film was released in spring, 1940 under the title „Tragedy of the Karpatho Ukraine”. Albeit it is a propagandistic material, it contains some historically and ethnographically important footages, like the mentioned Soim session and some footage about the Hutsuls. It was produced by Kobzar Film Corporation, its producer was Vasile Avramenko, a Ukrainian immigrant actor, dancer, choreographer, balletmaster, director and film producer, mostly known for spreading Ukrainian folk dance across the world.²³ The Internet Movie Database lists it as a lost film, without surviving (known) copies.²⁴

²³ About Vasile Avramenko (1895-1981) see MARTYNOVYCH, OREST T.: *The Showman and the Ukrainian Cause: Folk Dance, Film and the Life of Vasile Avramenko*. Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 2014.

²⁴ Internet Movie Database (IMDb): <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0448162/> (Accessed: 24 September 2019).

However, it is not the case. One copy of the 79-minute-long film is even available on YouTube. At the beginning, from 1:50, it was dedicated to the memory of Peter Lysiuk.²⁵

Picture 5. *The grave of Peter Lysiuk in the Greek Catholic cemetery of Khust*



Source: "Tragedy of the Karpatho Ukraine"

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