



Match program

ARTYKUŁ

A football match under the shadow of March protests

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On March 13th, 1968 Manchester United faced Górnik Zabrze in the second-leg quarter final of the European Champion Clubs' Cup. However; at the same time, in a nearby city of Gliwice crowds of young people gathered for the so-called "March protests". Western journalists not only had to struggle to get into Poland, but were also under constant observation of the Communist secret services, which tried to stop them from reporting on the manifestation.

Today, Manchester United is one of the top football clubs in the world. It was no different in March, 1968 when

the famous Red Devils came to Poland for the second-leg quarter final of the European Champion Clubs' Cup. The first match played at Old Trafford on February 28th ended 2:0 for the English team. Even so, the Polish fans hoped for a successful rematch and the commentators for a great sporting event. With 90 thousand spectators present, on Wednesday of March 13th, Górnik won 1:0 (after Włodzimierz Lubański's goal) at the Silesian Stadium in Chorzów, but it was not enough to go through to the semi-finals.

Footballers welcome, journalists not so much

Fans and journalists were excited about the event, but the Communist government had bigger issues than one of the most important football matches in Polish history. After all, March of 68' was a very tense time for the country. It is understandable, that the protests, so uncommon in other countries ruled by the Communists, gathered a lot of attention in the West. News agencies after news agencies applied to the Polish authorities for visas for their journalists and reporters. Since the very beginning, they were all being rejected. On March 14th, 9 journalists from France, Norway, USA and Great Britain were denied visas. Furthermore; on March 19th, the Third Division of the Border Traffic Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected visa appeals of the next 40 journalists from Australia; France; Netherlands; Israel; Japan; Canada; Federal Republic of Germany; USA; Switzerland; Sweden and Great Britain. Among the people who were not allowed to enter the country was a French journalist from the "Paris Match" daily magazine, a daughter of the French ambassador in Cracow, who wanted to visit Poland for the first time in her life, Patricia Marie Michele Le Caruyer de Beuvais. A two-day temporary visa was issued for one of the Greek reporters, who also had never been to Poland before.

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Not until the 13th of March had "The Times" magazine journalist, Richard William Davy come to Poland. He intended to spend his holidays in the Polish mountains at Zakopane between March 5-9, and then for the next week or two gather information in Warsaw for articles describing the economy of the Communist ruled country. Even though, he was allowed to come on March 4th, Davy did not spend his furlough in the mountains. Immediately after landing in Poland he focused on his work. General Eugeniusz Dostojewski from

the Border Traffic Directorate complained about the journalist: “during his stay in Poland, he prepared several tendentious articles which were, among other things, exploited by the Radio Free Europe, basing them on his own observations and many personal connections.” It is easy to guess, how such articles could have been received by the Communists in light of March events. As a result, the journalist had to leave Poland already on March 16th, since his visa was shortened. It is quite clear, that our country was being extremely (and efficiently!) isolated from the outside world.

The sports journalists arrive

Given the fact, that it was very difficult to get a visa to Poland during that time, foreign media agencies had to rely as much as they could on all the journalists who were already in the country for different reasons, e.g. because of the football match mentioned before. 4 documents were found in the archives after the Communist secret services, prepared for the high command by the warden of the Second Division Secret Service of the Citizens’ Militia in Katowice, Lt Col Józef Baszkiewicz. The documents revealed a lot not only about the situation in Poland at the time, but also about their author who seemed to have trouble spelling English names. For example, in a telegram from March 13th, the football team from Old Trafford was called “Manchester Junitet”. Someone, probably in Warsaw, later corrected the name with a green pen, changing it to “United”. Lt Col Baszkiewicz kept his commanders up to date on almost everything the English players and the people accompanying them did.

From his reports, we know that on March 11th 20 Manchester United football players came to Poland, along with 7 accompanying people and 20 British journalists, 5 of whom represented the BBC radio and television, and 15 of them from newspapers. At 5:45 p.m. all of them took two buses from Cracow to Katowice, where they stayed at the “Katowice” hotel.

When the guests from Albion reached Katowice, 30 km further, in the city of Gliwice college students were in the middle of a protest. At around 4 p.m. at the Cracow square next to the Gliwice University of Science, 250-300 students gathered and shouted: “We want freedom!”, “We want democracy!”, “We want freedom of speech and free media!”. Then, they marched to the statue of Adam Mickiewicz (famous Polish poet; trans. annotation) where they laid wreaths and – as described in a coded message to the Wojewódzka Citizens’ Militia Station in Katowice – “once again raised chants, sang the national anthem and the Internationale (Communist anthem; trans. annotation)”. On their way back, the college students were joined by primary and high school students as well. According to the militia archives: “[...] college students from Cracow and Warsaw were present at both the Cracow square and during the march.” However; according to Lt Col Baszkiewicz – the British knew nothing about this.

In his report from March 12th, we can read:

“When they came to Katowice, around 200 people gathered in front of the hotel – mostly teenagers – trying to get autographs from the players. However; no incidents or other commotions took place. The English players, officials and journalists believed this kind of interest in them was normal.”

Today, it is a natural phenomenon for us, that young fans try to get autographs from their idols. Back then, they could get the signature of e.g. one of the stars of the 66’ world champions and the best European player of that time, Bobby Charlton or the Irish George Best, who a couple months later was named by “France Football” the best European player of 1968. However; it seems as if the tradition of hunting for autographs was not so obvious to the officers of the Communist secret services.

At 6 p.m. the English players had their training in Chorzów. Prior to that, they had gone shopping, but there were no reports of them meeting anyone suspicious. It was also noted in the documents, that after they checked in at the hotel “the players, their accompanying people and 5 of the Górnik Zabrze officials” took part in a dinner party in the banquet hall of the hotel’s restaurant. The Communist secret services even noted, that “the British journalists paid for their meals at a local restaurant, while the officials and their dates stayed in a restaurant and a lunch bar, where they drank alcoholic beverages with some of the Górnik Zabrze representatives. [...] The operative control check of these people did not show any tendencies towards making suspicious contact with parties not involved with the sporting event.” – we can read in the report.

At 10 p.m. all the English players “went to their assigned rooms to rest”, while “a group of officials” along with the representatives of Górnik Zabrze partied until 11:40 p.m.



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English guests under observation

According to Lt Col Baszkiewicz, English journalists were mostly interested in the football match. They were only wondering if the game would take place at all, due to a frozen pitch. It was also noted, that prior to the match the British journalists described Manchester's coach Matt Busby as not in the best of moods, due to the fact that a great, Scotch striker (the best European player of 1964) Denis Law was not in the squad. The thorough officers of the Communist ministry of interior also wrote:

“one of the more interesting journalists is Wiseman, the BBC <<Eurovision>> reporter, who deals with all matters regarding the transmission between Warsaw and London. He's of Jewish origin, he speaks fluent Polish, his parents are from Warsaw.”

It is very likely, that at least for some of Lt Col Baszkiewicz's commanders, this type of information was of utmost importance.

In the conclusion of the document describing March 12th the officer optimistically wrote: “The behaviour of the visiting Englishmen is appropriate. There were no reports of them meeting suspicious people”. Of course, we cannot say what “suspicious people” meant for sure, but it is very unlikely, that the Communist officers meant the hotel prostitutes or swindlers trading currencies, although they did note that:

“when performing operational tasks at the “Katowice” hotel we noticed that to both the restaurant and the café came individuals looking to buy a foreign currency. Those individuals aggressively pressed on the English to persuade them to sell foreign currency and products. The English; however, did not agree to any illegal transactions”.

From the Communist secret services' standpoint, especially undesired were any meetings between the foreigners and Poles with even partial political backgrounds.

The secret service begins to worry

Unfortunately, the officers of the ministry of internal affairs also noticed a rising interest of the British journalists in political events. Until the afternoon of March 12th they were invested mainly in the upcoming match, but it later changed. The journalists started asking questions about everything that was happening at the Warsaw universities. It came as a surprise for the ministry, as “they were warned in England [by whom? The Polish embassy?] not to address these subjects”. In the ministry’s archives it was also noted, that after 5 p.m. – instructed over the phone by the British embassy – three correspondents flew to Warsaw: Donald Saunders from the “Daily Telegraph”, Thomas Manning from the “Daily Mirror” [in another document it was stated that he was from the “Daily Mail”] and Allan Thompson from the “Daily Express”. In opinion of the secret services, they were summoned to write articles about the student protests at the Warsaw universities. This information was passed to the counter intelligence services.

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It was also noted, that the correspondent of “The Observer” Hugh Montgomery McIlvanney (in the document: “Mc Iiwanny”) was to go to the capital after the match to “gather materials regarding the events that took place at the Warsaw University of Science”. In the end, he drove there in a car a day after the game. It is worth mentioning, that the visa of the reporter, who stayed at the “Grand” hotel in Warsaw, was to expire – similarly to his colleagues – on March 15th. In order to prolong it, McIlvanney went to the Border Traffic Control Division of the Citizens’ Militia, on March 18th. There, he was instructed to prolong his visa to the very same day, March 18th and at the same time to “send his case to the council of judges to determine an appropriate punishment”. Unfortunately, it was impossible to gather what happened to him later and when did he leave the Polish People’s Republic.

The case of the previously mentioned “man of Jewish origin” Wiseman illustrates under how much scrutiny were the foreign journalists in March of 1968. According to the archives of the secret services, on March 14th, after 5 a.m. Wiseman went to Łódź, where he was supposed to:

“meet – as was discovered – with his old friend, prof. Mol. He will stay in Łódź until the evening of March 14th. After that, he will travel to Warsaw, where he booked a room in the “Metropol” hotel. On March 15th, Wiseman plans to meet with the editor of Telewizja Polska television in Warsaw, citizen Maryla Wiśniewska, who is to be a director of some division, although it hasn’t yet been established which one. In his journey to Łódź, Wiseman will be accompanied by the editor of the Warsaw television, citizen Ostrowski Andrzej”.

Despite certain spelling mistakes, like the misspelling of the surname of one of the greatest heart surgeons, prof. Jan Moll (not Mol) and the negligence in learning the name of the division directed by editor Maryla Wiśniewska, it cannot go unnoticed how huge was the scale of invigilation of foreign journalists in Poland, in March of 1968.

According to the secret service’s archives, the British sports journalists were not too keen with their extra responsibilities. What is more, as noted in the ministry of interior, they complained that:

“they are being taken away from their work for football fans in England. Some of them also pointed out, that student protests happen more frequently in England and no one makes such a big fuss over it”.

It appears, that according to the Communist secret police, some of the British journalists did not understand the difference between street protests (even violent ones) in a democratic state and street protests in a country under dictatorship. According to the ministry of interior, the Manchester United players did not understand it either. The fact that 3 journalists left Katowice for Warsaw and the next few were to leave right after the match “alarmed the management, officials and players of Manchester United”. It was supposedly demotivating and raised the question whether “the public opinion in England would be sufficiently informed” about the match.

The English leave, the troubles disappear with them

On match day, March 13th the English players stayed at the hotel until 9 a.m. After breakfast, until 4:15 p.m. they had free time, which did not mean they were unsupervised. The commanders of the surveillance team were responsible for keeping an eye on the players. In the report from March 14th it was noted that the commanders “even forbid the players from meeting with a group of British fans from Manchester who came just for the match”. However, as Lt Col Baszkiewicz observed:

“using operational means it was discovered, that there was general anxiety among the officials and players of the [English] team and a very strict discipline. In fact, it was so strict, that they spent most of Polish zlotys on crystals and fur hats with the aid of the Górnik Zabrze football club caretakers”.

On the other hand, “some reporters read the Polish press with much interest, trying to find some news about the events taking place at the Warsaw University of Science”.

The secret services noted, that the BBC correspondent Brian Moore did not leave for Warsaw until the early hours of March 13th, even though he was summoned there a day before. Not hiding his satisfaction, Lieut. Col Baszkiewicz wrote that the British journalists who at first intended to prolong their stay, in the end decided to “go back to Cracow, from where they will fly back to London”.

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Before the final conclusion, it is worth adding one more detail. Lt Col Baszkiewicz noted, that “in the process of free observation it was discovered that some of the British journalists stayed away from the English fans, which, in their opinion, looked poor in comparison to the citizens of Katowice”. Of course, it is impossible to confirm whether any British fans actually presented themselves in such a bad way or if any British reporters perceived them as such. What is certain to be true, is the fact that the officers of the ministry of interior, who had very little knowledge of the West, would not hesitate for a second to spread views which were surreal – but pleasing for their political superiors.

One last piece of information needs to be presented. Two months later, Manchester United defeated Benfica Lisboa 4:1 after extra time and won the European Champion Clubs’ Cup. Górnik Zabrze had the satisfaction of being the only team which managed to prevail against the Red Devils in the whole 1967/1968 cup.

The article is an updated version of the text, originally published under the title „Marcowe napięcie. Górnik Zabrze – Manchester United, 13 marca 1968 r.” (“March tensions. Górnik Zabrze – Manchester United, March

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