

## THE COLD WAR BEGINS IN OTTAWA

*By Eric Koch*

Many people believed that Karl Marx had all the answers and that in theory communism would be a perfect recipe for postwar Canada. One of them was my friend and neighbour on Lisgar Street in Ottawa, Charlie Topper, a teacher of math at the Dufferin Collegiate. He came from a well-to-do Montreal family, was tall and almost completely bald and had a slight double-chin. Charlie was about ten years older than I and was a champion golfer.

Though the Russians were still our allies, communism remained highly unpopular among respectable Canadians. So, naturally, he scrupulously refrained from revealing his beliefs to the staff and students at his school and he never reminisced about his experiences in Spain during the Civil War. It seemed incongruous that a man of his social background, not to mention his convictions, should be a mere math teacher. When I asked him about this, he said he wanted young people to learn to think straight. The rest would follow.

It would have been highly unwise if I had mentioned to my new employer, C.D. Howe, the ebullient Minister of Reconstruction in the Mackenzie King Cabinet, that Charlie Topper, a fellow member of his golf club, was a communist. C.D. Howe was without doubt the second most powerful man in the country, a human dynamo who had brilliantly orchestrated Canada's industrial mobilization during the war. By now, war contracts had been cancelled and war plants, including John Inglis, were being converted to peaceful uses. It was C.D. Howe who was in charge of steering the delicate transition between the war and the postwar economy and making sure that there would be "jobs for all" – that was his promise – and, in conjunction with the Bank of Canada, to keep inflation in check.

Through various contacts, I had managed to get a job in his office in mid-July, ostensibly doing economic analysis but mainly serving as an unofficial private secretary. I was on contract, not on staff, which suited me fine. The position enabled me to pick up important investment tips, and, generally, information not available elsewhere, of interest not only to myself but also to my friend André Lavigne in Montreal, and his business associates in Chicago and in Sicily.

"Why do you always say 'in theory' when you talk about the communist party?" I asked Charlie one evening in late August. We were having a beer together in his backyard and had just been discussing the Russian role in the recent surrender of Japan.

"Ah, but this is different, Quentin. Other parties don't have a Stalin. Soviet communism means tyranny. As the poor inhabitants of the territories the USSR just snatched from Japan will soon find out."

“I realize Stalin is no angel,” I replied, deliberately downplaying what I knew about the show trials in the thirties and the mass murder in the Ukraine and other horrors. I just wanted to draw him out. “But surely when you build a brand-new society you have to step on a few toes?”

He looked at me, not sure whether I was kidding.

“I’ll let that go for the moment,” he observed magnanimously. “Remind me some time to tell you about the way the Stalinists stepped on a few Trotskyist toes in Madrid in 1937. You’d wonder who their real enemies were, General Franco or their brothers-in-arms.”

“Yes, I would like to hear that,” I replied. “You must also tell me why you keep in touch with the Soviet embassy here. Surely it’s full of Stalinists. Are you spying for them?”

“No, I’m not spying for them, Quentin.” The idea seemed to amuse him. “Although, now that I come to think of it, if I did, I would certainly cultivate you, my friend, with your direct access to C.D. Howe. You’d be the perfect source. You could tell me all about the atomic bomb. After all, some of the research was done here in Canada. My masters would dearly love to know how to make one.”

I always enjoyed teasing Charlie.

“Yes. Naturally I would tell you all about it. For a hefty fee, of course. And not in rubles. Now please answer my question. Why do you see these people?”

“I like to keep myself informed. They are nice to me and I am nice to them.”

I mulled this over.

“If I were you,” I said after a moment or two, “I would try to make use of my opportunities and try to persuade one or two of your good friends to defect from Stalin. You would earn the gratitude of the entire civilized world.”

“I’ll think about it,” he laughed.

“Now please tell me whether one can have communism without a Stalin.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied emphatically. “One most certainly can. If I didn’t believe that I would happily obey my father and join the Liberals.”

“Some people think a Stalin is inherent in communism.”

“That’s nonsense. Read Rosa Luxemburg. She believed in democratic communism. Just as I do. That’s why I went to Spain.”

I was delighted he mentioned Spain.

“I’ve often wanted to ask you, Charlie, did you actually enlist in the International Brigade?”

“Yes, I did.”

A week after this conversation, late in the evening of September 5, Igor Gouzenko, a cipher clerk in the Soviet embassy, stuffed one hundred and nine papers into his briefcase. They contained the names of all the people the embassy had engaged to spy for them, as well as things, such as Soviet code books and deciphering materials.

Thus equipped, he left the embassy with his wife, Svetlana, and their baby son and went straight to the offices of the *Ottawa Journal*. In broken English and very excited he tried to convince the night editor that the revelations he was prepared to make would be of great interest to the *Journal's* readers and, incidentally, earn him, Igor Gouzenko, and his family, political asylum in Canada. The editor did not know what to do and sent his visitors to the Department of Justice. There, nobody was on duty. So they went to the RCMP. They did not believe his story. Terrified that his embassy by now had discovered his defection, he went to his apartment building, asked his neighbours to let him and his family in. From there he watched through a keyhole as a group of Soviet agents broke into his apartment and ransacked his belongings. The next morning, at last the RCMP believed him. The case made headlines all over the world. At last Canada was playing in the big leagues. The Cold War had started.

For the next six months Gouzenko was debriefed. As a result, thirty-nine Canadians named in his papers were immediately detained under the *War Measures Act*. Canada did not have a Bill of Rights. None of the suspects were allowed legal representation. Eighteen of them were eventually charged and convicted.

C.D. Howe was kept informed of all these developments. He was of course interested in the names. There was Fred Rose, the Montreal M.P., and Sam Carr, the national organizer of the communist party. The rest were mostly public servants. Howe knew most of them.

I happened to be in his office when he was told of a little black book containing telephone numbers of embassy contacts, distinct from the list of people recruited as agents.

“Well, what do you know,” he mumbled to himself. “Charlie Topper.”

“Did I hear you say Charlie Topper, sir?” I asked.

“Yes, do you know him?”

“Yes, he’s my neighbour.”

“Just a second.” He reached for the telephone. “Jane, would you please get me Morrison at the RCMP.”

He turned to me.

“How well do you know him?”

“Quite well, sir,” I replied.

“Well,” he suddenly smiled. “So do I. I play golf with him. Maybe the RCMP should investigate *me*.”

I laughed politely.

The telephone buzzed. It was Morrison of the RCMP. Howe suggested to him to have one of his men pay Charlie a visit, and ask him a few questions.

Then he turned to me.

“Don’t you whisper a word to Charlie about this.”

After that he proceeded to deal with the shortage of tractors in Northern Alberta and gave me a number of specific instructions on other matters.

The next evening, over our usual end-of-day beer, Charlie told me about the visit he had that morning from an RCMP officer.

“The man was a complete blockhead,” he said. “When I told him that Gouzenko would be sent to Siberia if the embassy people got hold of him, he thought Siberia was a prison in Moscow.”

“Well,” I said with my usual generosity, “he’s only a policeman. Did he ask you why you kept in touch with those people?”

“Of course. But I had trouble getting my reasoning into his thick head. I said it would do them good to get a whiff of the real world, and I told him a few things. He didn’t know what I was talking about. But there was one thing he did understand. And that’s where you come in, Quentin.”

“I?” I asked. “But I wouldn’t touch these people with a barge pole.”

He ignored that.

“I told him it was you who had given me the idea to persuade a few of them to defect. To be honest, this had never occurred to me until you mentioned it. So, when one day, in the men’s room, I ran into this insignificant little cipher clerk, I asked him why he looked so miserable. He answered, in his impossible English, that he been called back to Moscow. That was the last thing he wanted. He and his wife liked it here, he said. And they wanted their little boy to grow up here. I told him how to go about achieving this highly laudable objective. So the credit for this little episode goes entirely to you.”

Two days later, in recognition of this historic service to my country, C.D. Howe gave me a ten percent raise in salary.