

The Professor Who

By William Endicott
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Denver

IT HAS been more than seven years now since Thomas Riha had a quiet dinner at the home of friends in nearby Boulder, said his goodbyes, drove off alone in the darkness — and vanished.

Riha, an associate professor of Russian history at the University of Colorado, had confided a week earlier that he thought he was being followed, adding mysteriously that the life of a government agent is "ten years at best."

Was he a government agent? A double agent? Is he dead? Or is he alive and living now in Eastern Europe?

All of these questions were raised again here in the last few weeks as a result of an effort by Riha's nephew, Zoenek Cerveny, to have his uncle declared legally dead.

The effort has produced a suit against the CIA and resurrected again the bizarre circumstances surrounding Riha's disappearance.

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AS PIECED together through interviews, court records and newspaper clippings, the Riha story unfolds like a James Bond thriller — with hints of foreign intrigue involving the CIA, the FBI, a suicide, cyanide poisonings, forgery and the intervention of a U.S. senator.

"I have a strong feeling," said Cerveny, "that my uncle was involved one way or the other with some intelligence agency because he was an expert on modern Russian history."

Although the CIA has admitted it once had a "general counterintelligence interest" in Riha, the agency has consistently denied he was ever used as an agent. The FBI also has denied he ever was in its employ.

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A NATIVE of Czechoslovakia, Riha came to the U.S. when he was 17, won his citizenship, pursued his education and made his way to Boulder to teach Russian history. When he disappeared, he was 40.

That was March 15, 1969, and since that time the only trace of him was his wedding ring, discovered shortly after he vanished in the home of a local plastics manufacturer who three months later died of potassium cyanide poisoning.

The last person reported to have seen Riha was Galva Tannenbaum, an ex-convict who reportedly had convinced the professor she was an officer in U.S. military intelligence who could help him get his nephew, Cerveny, into the United States.

Riha and Mrs. Tannenbaum apparently met in late 1968 and, according to friends, Riha referred to her as "the colonel."

Cerveny was in Vienna at the time, having fled from Prague in Russian-occupied Czechoslovakia, but in late 1968 he was admitted to this country.

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AFTER RIHA'S disappearance, Mrs. Tannenbaum told the Denver Post he had gone to Montreal, Canada, because of domestic troubles. He and his wife, Hana, were in the process of getting a divorce. But he was never seen in Montreal.

Then, early in 1970, Mrs. Tannenbaum was charged with forgery in connection with Riha's signature on a check and other documents. She also was charged with forging a name on the will of another friend — the plastics manufacturer who died of cyanide poisoning.

But she was declared legally insane after a hearing in Boulder

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Drove Off Into Thin Air

District Court and committed to the Colorado State Hospital in Pueblo, where eight months later she committed suicide — by swallowing cyanide.

Before she died, hospital authorities said she uttered a profane farewell:

"I didn't kill him (Riha). That son of a bitch — he's in Russia. He just made it."

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CERVENY'S ATTORNEY, Martin Buckley, said his theory of the case is that Mrs. Tannenbaum did kill Riha. "But I have no evidence of that," he said, and Cerveny said he is convinced she was working for either the FBI or the CIA. Both agencies have denied any involvement with her.

Not long after Riha vanished, the then-president of the University of Colorado, Dr. Joseph Smiley, said he had been given assurances by reliable federal sources that Riha was "alive

and well" but was pledged not to reveal the sources.

And a Riha colleague at the university said he was told by the Denver office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service that Riha was alive. Four months later, however, the office, asked again about Riha, said it was "better not to be interested in the Riha matter."

Court documents show that an FBI agent in Denver at the time told a CIA agent, "Calm this thing down. Get out to the press that Riha is alive and well."

But the CIA refused a request by the late-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to reveal the FBI agent's identity. This further complicated the already shaky inter-agency relations and ultimately led to a breaking off of formal liaison between the FBI and the CIA.

"The breaking off of formal FBI-CIA relations in 1970," confirmed U.S. Senator Gary Hart (Dem.-Colo.), "re-

sulted . . . from the bureaucratic handling of the Riha case by local FBI and CIA officials in Denver."

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IN THE intervening years, the Riha case was all but relegated to obscurity.

Then, at the request of the Denver Post, Hart brought up the question of Riha's disappearance last year as the Senate select Committee on Intelligence Activities was questioning the CIA's former chief of counter intelligence, James J. Angleton, and by an ex-director of the FBI's intelligence division, Charles Brennan.

Angleton furnished a CIA memorandum concerning a "possible sighting of Riha in Czechoslovakia in 1973."

The agency admitted that in 1958 it had considered using Riha as an intelligence source while he was an exchange student at the University of Moscow but claimed that he was never employed by the CIA, and never reported to the agency.

A report prepared by the staff of the Senate committee also stated that the CIA "has no information to suggest that Riha was a Soviet agent, or, for that matter, a double agent." The staff also said it found no evidence that the CIA or the FBI had any kind of relationship with Mrs. Tannenbaum.

On the basis of information received by the Senate committee, Hart concluded that "Riha, is most probably, living somewhere today in Eastern Europe, possibly Czechoslovakia . . . Why he left the U.S. remains unclear. Personal reasons were probably the basis for his decision to leave."

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IT IS HERE that the mystery might have ended had not Cerveny hired Buckley several months ago to establish Riha's death so his estate could be submitted to probate court.

Under Colorado law, a person absent for a continuous period of seven years and whose absence, after a search, is not satisfactorily explained is presumed dead.

In late July, Buckley filed a suit against the CIA in Federal District Court here to compel the agency to turn over all its information, uncensored, on Riha so that it might be determined once and for all whether the professor is alive or dead.