

CZECH LITERATURE

Possibilities and
Limits of Freedom:
Charter 77, Underground
Culture, and Exile



Photo by Leipziger Messe GmbH

Dear Readers,

Culture transcends walls – something in which the founders of the Czech civil rights movement firmly believed in 1976. With their Charta 77 hundreds of artists and intellectuals denounced the violation of human rights and basic liberties in their home country.

Two of the most prominent signatories were the dramatist, essayist and later President Václav Havel and the writer Pavel Kohout. Like the writer Milan Kundera, both achieved world fame.

3 Charta 77 played a part in the collapse of walls in 1989. 30 years after the borders

opened, as the focus country of the Leipzig Book Fair 2019, the Czech Republic presents a new generation of authors who are aiming to build lasting cultural bridges to their German publishers and readers.

We cordially invite you to become acquainted with new literary voices and their works in Leipzig, and help strengthen German-Czech cultural dialogue.

Oliver Zille
Director, Leipzig Book Fair



Czech Year in Leipzig: 2018–2019

Photo by Jan Kašpar:
The music group The Plastic People of the Universe,
Hrádeček, beginning of the 1980s

The Czech Republic will be the leading participant at the 2019 Book Fair in Leipzig. A cooperation contract has been signed by the Minister of Culture, Daniel Herman, and the Director of the Leipzig Book Fair, Oliver Zille. The preparation and realisation have been entrusted to the Moravian Library, which will present the Czech Year in Leipzig project to the German public. Contemporary Czech culture and the themes, which have been part of the development of Czech society in the last thirty years, will be presented within the framework of this project by means of authors' readings, theatrical performances and film screenings, specialist colloquiums and conferences, music concerts, book and art exhibitions and other cultural activities, from October 2018 to November 2019.

5 The project, which draws on the existing partnership relations between the cities of

Leipzig and Brno and the long-term relations between Saxony and the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, also enjoys further partnerships with, for example, the City of Leipzig, the Goethe Institut, the City Library in Leipzig, the Institute of Western Slavic Studies in Leipzig, the Czech Centres, the Czech-German Fund for the Future, the National Theatre in Brno and a number of other Czech and German cultural institutions. The Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic is preparing to expand support for the publication of Czech literature in translation and the creation of support programs intended to stimulate interest in Czech literature and culture upon this occasion. The project's website will be launched and the program will be introduced at the beginning of 2018. We are looking forward to meeting you in Leipzig, and not only in 2019!



Photo by Helena Wilsonová:
Kolář's table at Café Slavia, from the right: poet
and artist Jiří Kolář, poet and translator Josef
Hiršal, painter Václav Boštík and painter Milan
Grygar, 1976

THE LEGACY OF CHARTER 77: DISSENT, THE HELSINKI EFFECT AND THE EMERGENCE OF A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPACE

Jacques Rupnik

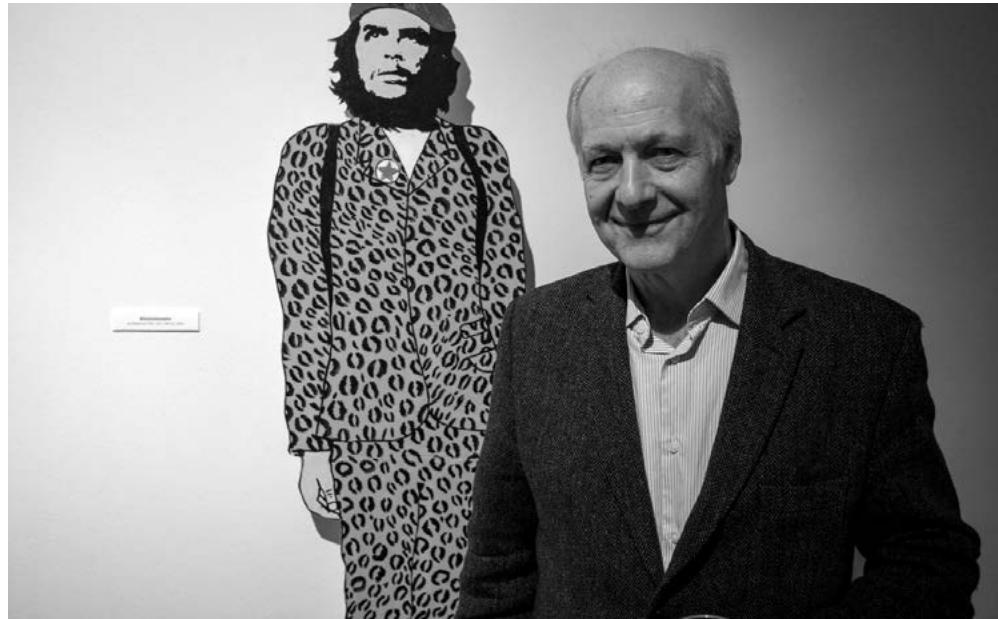


Photo by Michael Wellner-Pospisil

In 1956 Leszek Kolakowski published a famous essay entitled "What is alive and what is dead in the socialist idea"? Today, 40 years after the death of Jan Patočka, the first spokesman of the Charter 77, we can ask: What is alive and what is dead in the Charter legacy and, more broadly that of Central European dissent?

The questions concerning these legacies are by no means just a matter for historians, but have relevance for those in Europe and beyond who seek to understand the background to the changes of 1989 and the reinvention of democracy in Central Europe after communism. And the perceptions have not always been congruent in Prague and abroad.

CHARTER 77 AND THE "VELVET REVOLUTION" OF 1989

In Prague we've gone through roughly three phases in the reception of the Charter 77 experience: First, the celebration of former dissidents in the immediate aftermath of the "velvet revolution". Then followed the rapid marginalisation of ex-dissidents after their eclipse from political life and the emphasis on the alleged irrelevance of their thinking for the new agenda of the 1990's dominated by the dismantling of the Czechoslovak state, the return of party politics and the privatisation of the economy – not to mention the privatisation of concerns: "ngoism" and "humanrightism" (President Vaclav Klaus dixit) have become words of contempt.

We are now in a third phase with the return of the Charter 77 in public awareness when a more sober assessment of the contribution of the Charter 77 legacy seems possible in connection with its 30 anniversary.

Outside of Czech lands this lack of interest or even scorn for the Charter 77 often baffled observers who note a pattern of difficulty Czech political elites, the media and perhaps the public at large seem to have with the two major, and indeed very different "democratic moments" in post-war Czech society: the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Charter 77 human rights movement.

To be sure, we often find in the Western perceptions the opposite, a powerful if somewhat simplified narrative of Charter 77 as the foundation of the human rights movement seen as a prelude to the November 1989 democratic revolution. The fate of Vaclav Havel, from dissident to President, is meant to embody this story of resistance with

a democratic happy end. Such a version of the Charter story and its identification with the figure of Vaclav Havel helps to account for its widespread international impact. It is obviously too neat to be true. And it is useful to examine the evidence with 40 years hindsight and to try overcome the dilemma between debunking and myth-making which is implicit in the two main thesis on the Charter 77.

The first saw the Charter as a virtuous ghetto of courageous intellectuals who remained largely isolated in a society atomised by a mixture of fear and the lure of an admittedly mediocre version of a consumer society.

The second saw the Charter as the tip of the iceberg: the articulation by a dissident minority of the democratic aspirations of the silent majority.

The latter version prevailed in the immediate aftermath of 1989. With the birth of the Civic Forum Havel and his Chartist friends were propelled to the center-stage of the reinvention of democracy. This did not last long and the eclipse of the dissidents from political life brought back the former thesis about the virtuous ghetto: the marginality of the ex-dissidents after 1992 as the logical extension of their marginality under the Communist regime. And this found its translation in the new reading of the events of November 1989. It is not the former dissidents who helped to bring down the old regime, said in substance president Vaclav Klaus on the 15th anniversary of November 1989, but rather all of you legendary green grocers, made world famous in Havel's "Open letter to Gustav Husak", you ordinary Czechs with short working hours and long drinking hours, you in the silent majority who have through a mixture of indifference and Schlamperei turned the old system into an empty shell and thus prepared its demise.

This anti-heroic version of 1989 may have quite a powerful resonance at home, though not really abroad. It is partly due to the fact that Vaclav Havel's 13 year presidency obscured the political eclipse of the former dissidents. It also has something to do with the way the significance of Charter 77 and, more broadly Central European dissent, had been perceived in the West since the 1970's.

DISSENT AND THE BIRTH OF A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPACE

The international dimension of the Charter 77 was embedded in its very concept.

The Charter was both: a new response to the repressive policies which followed the crushing of the Prague Spring and as an offspring of the Helsinki Agreement in 1975 establishing a new framework for East-West relations in Europe. Among the principles formally subscribed to by the governments involved were: "the respect for human rights and basic freedoms, including freedom of thought, of conscience or faith". In other words, human rights had become part and parcel of East-West relations which was a major departure from both Brezhnev's and Kissinger's concept of détente on which the 1975 Accord was based. This was known as the "Sonnenfeld doctrine" (the name of Kissinger's main adviser) – renamed by critics as the "Brezfeld doctrine"- postulated that stability in East-West relations depended on the stability within each bloc. Soviet and American archives only confirm this really was the underlying assumption on both sides so it can be argued that the formal human rights provisions were not actually meant to be implemented.

However, Helsinki also, almost inadvertently, opened the possibility of monitoring human rights provisions at regular review conferences and thus legitimated the attempts by citizens groupings in the Soviet bloc (such as the Charter) to take their governments at their word and challenge their violations of human rights. Simultaneously, it opened the possibility for diplomatic interference in the internal affairs of all signatory states. The Charter 77 and similar committees elsewhere which used this opportunity have contributed to the derailing of diplomatic routine of East-West relations. It became part of an increasingly effective interplay in relations between states, between governments and public opinion which slowly but surely eroded the status quo which it was meant to preserve and in this sense helped to prepare the ground for 1989. It is in this sense that the story of human rights within the Helsinki process will remain a classic case study of unintended consequences.

The Charter 77 defined itself as "a free, informal, open community of people of different convictions, different faiths, and different professions united by the will to strive, individually and collectively, for the respect of civic and human rights in our country and throughout the world". This commitment to a culture of pluralism, diversity and tolerance was

a major source of the Charter's appeal abroad and mirrored the diversity and pluralism among its external supporters. The Charter represented an attempt to recreate –even on a limited scale- an independent public opinion under a dictatorship, To the extent that it depended on the interplay of domestic and international actors it became part of an emerging European public opinion concerned with fate of democratic politics and the overcoming of the partition of Europe.

However, there is, beyond the above-mentioned interaction in the Helsinki process, another reason for the significant impact of Czech dissent in the West and that concerns its underlying political philosophy. It can be summarized in three issues:

1

The first concerns the ethics of responsibility and the crisis of modern civilisation. The primacy of ethics over politics means that under any circumstances the ends do not justify the means. Jan Patočka's writings attracted broader readership abroad once he became Charter spokesman and, like Socrates, prepared to die for truth. His message was that "the care for the soul is not limited to one's own soul, but also to the soul of the City"¹. This notion of responsibility gives its true meaning to rights and therefore to the defence of human rights which also entails duties: Co-responsibility for the fate of rights and the fate of the world we live in.

To understand why Jan Patočka and Vaclav Havel as the founding fathers of the Charter has such profound and lasting impact on the Western intellectual milieu you have to go beyond political circumstances or sympathy for men of courage and take seriously the ideas they profess. To commemorate the 40th anniversary of Jan Patočka's death after extensive police interrogation should not dispense us from actually reading him. Because what we find in his writings is not just a denunciation of communist dictatorship, but also deep insights into its close connection with the crisis of modern Western civilisation or what he called "hypercivilisation". It is also this idea which was also at the heart of Vaclav Havel's writings. In "Politics and Conscience" (1984). For Havel the totalitarian communist system was only the extreme form of the crisis of

¹ Jan Patočka, *L'Europe après l'Europe*, Paris, Verdier, 2007, p 213 and following

Western or global civilisation itself:

“So, too, the totalitarian systems warn of something far more serious than Western rationalism is willing to admit. They are, most of all, a convex mirror of the inevitable consequences or rationalism, a grotesquely magnified image of its own deep tendencies, an extreme offshoot of its own development and an ominous product of its own expansion. They are a deeply informative reflection of its own crisis. Totalitarian regimes are not merely dangerous neighbors and even less some kind of an avant-garde of world progress. Alas, just the opposite: they are the avant-garde of a global crisis of this civilization, first European, then Euro-American, and ultimately global.”²

When Western intellectuals – or for that matter students in Paris, Amsterdam or Harvard- discussed and still do with great involvement Havel’s essays such as the “Power of the Powerless” it is not because they are keen to discover details of the well known turpitudes of Husak’s secret police, but because they also find out something about themselves, about their societies and about the world we live in.

² “Politics and Conscience,” p.260 in Vaclav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990* - Selected and edited by Paul Wilson, Vintage, 1992. “... totalitní systémy jsou necim daleko varovnějším, než si je ochoten přiznat západní racionalismus. Jsou skutečně především vypouklým zrcadlem jeho zákonitých důsledků. Groteskně zveličeným obrazem jeho vlastního hlubinného směřování. Extremním vyhonkem jeho vlastního vývoje a varovným produktem jeho expanse; hluboce poučnou informací o jeho vlastní krizi. Nejsou to tedy pouzí nebezpeční sousedé a tím méně předvoj nějakého pokroku. Bohužel právě naopak: jsou předvojem globální krize této civilizace (původně evropské, pak euroamerické a posléze planetární). In “Politika a Svedomi”, in V.Havel, *Do Ruznych Stran 1983-89*, Scheinfelf, Cs. Stredisko nezavisle literatury, 1989, p. 42

2

The second, perhaps most influential feature of dissident political legacy concerns the language of rights and civil society as key ingredients of a democratic polity. Central European dissidents helped to shape the post-socialist liberal ethos of the 1980’s away from the ideological utopias of the late 1960’s. Liberals on the Right tended to stress the rule of law, liberals on the Left the democratic dimension of civil society. There was undoubtedly a dissident contribution to the rediscovery of political liberalism which should not to be confused with economic liberalism and the apology of free markets as has often been the case in East-Central Europe in the 1990’s.

3

The third important aspect of Charter 77 impact in the West concerns its involvement in the 1980’s discussions on the overcoming of the division of Europe. This too has several dimensions which are here merely sketched out.

What the Czech (but also Polish and Hungarian) dissident intellectuals did since the late 1970’s was to put Central Europe back on the map. Europe for them was not just a “Common market” it is based on culture and values to which Central Europe seemed all the more attached since they were under threat. Kundera’s “Central Europe as a “kidnapped West”, the idea that the boundaries of civilisations cannot be drawn by tanks as well as Havel’s essay “the power of the powerless” become the indispensable companion volumes in the intellectual debate about Europe. The re-discovery of Central Europe through its independent culture as well as through its dissident movements as a space distinct from the Soviet East has reinforced the de-legitimation of the division of Europe.

This is the intellectual context of the intense political dialogue between Charter dissidents and Western peace movements during the so-called “Euromissiles” crisis of the early 1980’s: the deployment of American cruise missiles in Germany in response to the Soviet deployment of SS 20 missiles.

It included several lively exchanges such as the one between Miroslav Bednar (alias ‘Vaclav Racek’) and the British historian E.P. Thompson or Vaclav Havel’s response to the Western peace movements published all over Europe under the title “The Anatomy of a Reticence” (1985).

Though most participants on both sides in the debate shared the premise that there is a fundamental link between the nature of inter-state order and that of the internal order of the states concerned: international peace is best guaranteed by peace between state and society; when general Jaruzelski declared the “state of war” inside in December 1981 it also enhanced the risks of confrontation outside. But there was fundamental disagreement on the false symmetry between the political regimes and thus between dissidents in the East and peace activists in the West. The latter enjoyed relatively free expression and means to influence their governments’ defence policy which simply did not exist in the East.

Probably the most significant statement on the European stalemate coming from Charter circles was the 1985 “Prague Appeal” which called for a simultaneous dissolution of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The dissidents broke a taboo which nobody in Western Europe was then prepared to touch: they saw no objection to a democratic reunification of Germany; rather it was a necessary condition for the peaceful and democratic reunification of Europe.

The ethical and philosophical underpinnings of dissent, the rediscovery of liberal values and the overcoming of the partition of Europe were the three elements, of admittedly uneven importance, which were the substance of a remarkable European dialogue across the iron curtain from the mid 1970’s. It explains why dissent had such an echo, disproportionate with its numbers and why the “velvet revolution” of 1989 captured the Western imagination.

Hence the question: Whatever happened to that European dialogue since then? The short answer is that it has more or less vanished. In the 1980’s the direct contact was difficult if not impossible but the writings and statements of Havel, Michnik or Konrad were published and discussed in the West. Today, we have easy contact and endless conferences but not much of a transeuropean debate.

HOW TO ACCOUNT FOR THIS PARADOX?

The first explanation argues that the eclipse of the dissidents and of their message after 1989 is due to the fact that with changed circumstances their message became irrelevant: just as “antipolitics” or the “parallel Polis” seemed out of date with

the return of pluralism of competing parties so have the transeuropean networks of human rights activists after the end of the cold war. As if, with the loss of a common problem (the division of the continent) and of a common enemy (communist totalitarianism), we no longer had much to say to each other.

ABANDONED OR “KIDNAPPED” LEGACY OF DISSENT?

The second explanation is not so much that the legacy of dissent has become irrelevant as that it has been abandoned. The philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida published a joint article considering the demonstrations against the American war in Iraq in most European capitals in February 2003 as a possible founding moment of a European public opinion. The debatable argument (is it plausible, let alone desirable, to build a European public opinion on an opposition to the US?) had a major snag: most ex-dissidents in East-Central Europe either supported the war or remained silent. First of all, they rejected the very idea of building a European identity on opposition to the United States. Anti-Americanism, as a relic of pre-1989 official ideology, was certainly a non-starter in post-communist Eastern Europe. More importantly, the “dissident legacy” applied to new circumstances was supposedly that a fall of a dictatorship cannot be a bad thing. Hence the ex-dissidents’ support for the “war on terror”, the struggle of “good vs. evil” and the “politics of values” which may have precedence over international legal constraints and, sometimes, the protection of civic freedoms. Trapped by such an interpretation of the legacy of their anti-totalitarian struggle many of the ex-dissidents found themselves at odds with most of the international human rights community which had supported them in the old days.

Beyond the debate about the irrelevance, the abandoning or the misinterpretation of the dissident legacy there is an entirely new predicament of post-1989 Europe. In both halves of the Old continent we have witnessed the decline of the role of intellectuals in a context shaped by the building of institutions, markets and meeting the requirements for joining of the European Union.

There is also the impact of globalised environment. The terms which structured the international intellectual and political debates of the post-cold war period such

as “the end of history”, “the clash of civilisations”, “the Americans are from Mars, the Europeans from Venus” were established by “great simplifiers” overseas... Europeans have mainly provided variations on these themes. Paradoxically, just as they reached the aim of the continent’s unification through the enlargement of the EU, they gradually became less interested in each other and, perhaps, in Europe as such.

There are, however, several aspects of the dissident legacy associated with Charter 77 around which the interrupted dialogue may be revived and remain relevant. The first concerns the indivisibility of human rights from Belarus to China or the Arab world which requires abandoning diplomatic niceties and double standards. Second, there are new challenges facing the democracies in East Central Europe such as the rise of illiberal nationalism and populism. Just as dissident cooperation prepared the ground for the Visegrad

group (Poland, Czecho-slovakia, Hungary), it may now be the time to revive and redefine the ‘dissident agenda’ in the face the new populist and anti-liberal backlash in Central Europe, particularly in Orbán’s Hungary and Kaczyński’s Poland. Both leaders are former dissidents now overtly engaged in a rollback the democratic achievement of the post-1989 era. Finally, there is one of most important legacies of dissent: an attempt to think of Europe not just as a “common market” but as a culture, a civilisation and values without which shared European institutions risk becoming an empty shell. To address these three issues supposes to revisit the question “what is alive and what is dead in the dissident legacy” and return to the unfinished task of creating a European public space.

Jacques Rupnik, Sciences-Po (Paris)

Jacques Rupnik was born in Prague. He was educated at the University of Paris and at Harvard, is currently Director of Research at CERI and Professor at Sciences Po in Paris as well as visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges. Since he joined CERI, Sciences Po in 1982 he has been writing and lecturing about East European history and politics and European integration. He was advisor to president Vaclav Havel in the 1990’s. Executive director of the International Commission for the Balkans, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1995-1996) and drafter of its report *Unfinished Peace* (1996), member of the Independent International Commission on Kosovo (1999-2000) and co-drafter of *The Kosovo Report* (Oxford UP, 2000). Among the various positions held: advisor to the European Commission 2007-2010. Member of the board of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation in The Hague since 2010. Member of the board of directors of the European Partnership for Democracy in Brussels (2008-2013). He has been a visiting Professor in several European universities and in the Department of Government, (2006) at Harvard University where he is regularly Visiting Scholar at the Center for European Studies.

J. Rupnik has published a number of books and scholarly articles including *The Other Europe* (1989). Among the most recent: *Western Balkans and the EU: ‘the hour of Europe’*, Paris, EUISS (2011), *1989 as a Political World Event: Democracy, Europe and the new international system*, London, Routledge (2013), *Géopolitique de la démocratisation, l’Europe et ses voisinage*, Presses de Sciences Po (2014).



Photo by Vincent Mentzel, AJP: A meeting between the Charter 77 spokesperson, Professor Jan Patočka, and the Dutch Foreign Minister, Max van der Stoel, and journalists at the Hotel Intercontinental, 1st March 1977

Petr Král

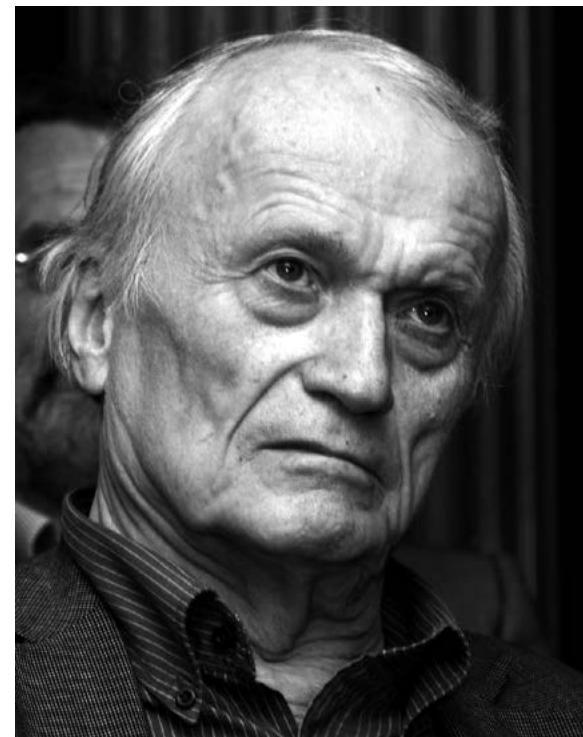


Photo by Jindřich Nosek

SUNDAYS' WRECK

I stayed at an abandoned castle
alone with a few distant echoes so share with me this hollow moment

Sunday passes by with a blind gleam of a tin-clad
barge let's toast at least to summer
that definitely doesn't belong to us let's launch a godforsaken arrow
into a crowd of details indifferently composing the world

I entwine your immemorably white thigh
as if circumnavigating the equator

New York evenings during premieres at the Metropolitan Opera
are still ceremonially aroused although ladies
in loges have but tanktops under their fur coats
It'll be worse when after nightfall silence spreads and in the open mouths
of singers
only rows of rustling blue flames will rise
like the ones in heaters

(Translated by Dorota Bachratá)

THE RECORD

I didn't bring a city in my teeth
it was in me the same way an ocean was anytime I could glance inside it
Even in love I saw myself disappear into it
behind an unknown corner Red flags marking puddles beautified it
no less than the pool table cloth sunken to the bottom of the cellar than the
pre-Spring legs of young actresses
hung in an empty theatre orchestra pit

From a block of flats on the outskirts of Brno late at night in summer
Jupiter could be seen A pole jumper at the stadium stuck his pole in the ground
he reared back on it the pole paled the jumper flew over the rod - it paled as well -
and threw his body over to the other side It paled there alone
Only the record he accomplished sticks out above it all
as a monument let his body rot let his anus burn
and his bladder blubber coccyx wail

Only the record towers alone at night faces the shining indolence
of the Big Dipper

(Translated by Dorota Bachratá)

WE BLOOM

The city changes further now my new teeth belong to it as well

From moving ashes of the crowd
a peep floats out
and disappears back in them again

There is a tiny red plush chair
albeit only between two toes
of a distracted mushroom picker

An alternately gilded leaf
a slice of excited flesh
a thin grin
of rippled air
And so on
until we run dry

(Translated by Dorota Bachratá)

THE CITY AGAIN

I saw the window washer's rag on the end of a long stick
greedily licking the plastic letters
on UNIBANK's façade

Even after summer holiday the city is complete with milk spilt over
marble stairs
and with cobweb lace on stale cakes
with a hair on the palm and a surrealist in the bathtub

All along the track on the refuges
brief but poignant pantomimes take place
The tree on the park's edge as always sticks out into the sky
before us and inside us at once

nothing beyond that God is out for a ciggy break they say
but he's been gone for a long time
Chaplin's tramp's suit still hanging somewhere seems to be made from
better cloth than the colourful jackets
of today's entrepreneurs When it's taken out in the rain
a plastic map of a yet undestroyed world emerges from its folds

Out of the broken eggshell, the Creator
peers through the yolk of a soft-boiled egg let's wish him good morning
at least before we swallow him

(Translated by Robert Hýsek)

EVERYTHING

A raw steak with an impressed pattern
of a ladies' sweater
the naked hams of the butcheresses
in the flour of beaques
it was worth it

The thick honey of the late sun
pouring through the chair's wicker
the map of coffee and milk
spread across the table
by the commanding finger
Almost
everything could be seen

the glowing kohlrabi on the plate
the baking hot nothing
in the throat of existence
or at least the eyeglasses
laid aside by the one
who has finished speaking

(Translated by Robert Hýsek)

CORNERS

In one of my life's corners at night I have at hand a bartender from an English
novel
with whom I discuss opera over wine eventually he even quotes D'Annunzio's
poem
about the rain in the pine wood

in another only by a hospital with a break under short trees
I sail into a pothole in the creased overgrown pavement
made out of good old bumpy cobblestones

In my flat I'm particularly fond of the paper beer mat
with an ad for *Bourgogne des Flandres*
when gilded with the late sun I can grasp more with him than with Rimbaud
Books lining the walls keep me within them in the dark I only need to lend
an ear
to their silence in order to take shelter in rocks' welter

Outside while it drizzles blindly in the morn
a wet dog feverishly rushes away with my last aspirin

(Translated by Robert Hýsek)

Everyone in the city crowd may they know it or not
follows other pedestrians near or far one follows a gloomy father
the others a stern beauty a drunk minister
or a pair of undercover plainclothesmen
Of course when those before him disappear into a building
or a taxi few know what happens next
A number of them are seen thus standing awkwardly in front of the entrance to the
 Slavia café
or the stairs of the parisian Opera

I probably walk in the tracks of an unknown doppelgänger
or an unseen woman maybe just a worried accountant or cashier
The white sun hardly soaks through the grey sky
Only the one who carries the clothes iron to have it repaired
drags it along all alone

(Translated by Dorota Bachratá)

Translated by Robert Hýsek and Dorota Bachratá.
Revised by Matthew Sweney.
Ateliér uměleckého překladu / Literary Translation Atelier
Palacký University Olomouc, 2017

Born in Prague in 1941. He studied dramaturgy at the Film Faculty of the Academy of the Performing Arts in Prague and was later employed as an editor at the Orbis publishing house. He lived in France from 1968 to 2006 and had a number of jobs during his time there. A poet of surrealist roots and a pedestrian metaphysicist with a passion for rain, nightfall and the periphery. Author of dozens of collections of poetry, prose and essays, translator and editor of several anthologies of modern Czech poetry. Recipient of the State Award for Literature for 2016. His most recent published titles are *Kolem vejce* (Around an Egg) (2016), *Vlastizrady* (Treason) (2015), *Město je náš les* (The City Is Our Forest) (2015), *Pařížské sešity* (Paris Notebooks) (2013), *Přivítat pondělí* (Welcome Monday) (2013) and *Sebrané básně I* (Selected Poems I) (2013).



Photo by Jaroslav Kukal:
Václav and Olga Havel, Hrádeček, 1986

CHARTER 77: PAST ELITES AND PRESENT-DAY TRAUMAS

by Martin C. Putna

There is a problem with anniversaries. Our civilization is now very old. It has a long history and often lives “from anniversary to anniversary.” In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with that: Even Charter 77, under the Communist regime, often lived “from anniversary to anniversary,” from event to event, using each one to commemorate some odious aspect of the regime — with a declaration signed by the Charter’s trio of spokespersons, a typewritten samizdat collection, or a demonstration.

The question is really what comes of this commemoration. It is not enough to note that Charter 77 was the most important movement of civic opposition to the Communists in Czechoslovakia and one of the most important movements in the whole East bloc. It is not enough to name all the important writers and intellectuals who were involved in its activities, from Václav Havel and Pavel Kohout to Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Jaroslav Seifert. It is not enough to list all the samizdat book publishers and unofficial study groups. It is not enough to emphasize the role of the Chartists in the Velvet Revolution, which in November 1989 brought a close to the embarrassing history of the Czechoslovak Communist regime.

To be more precise: It is fine, but it is not enough. Every anniversary, every meritorious act, is claimed for commemoration by left and right alike. It is not just a question of what happened in the past, though, but what it means for today: What is the Charter’s legacy for the issues, traumas, and dilemmas our society faces now?

One contentious point is the question of elites. Who are the current elites? Have they become ossified and self-satisfied? Are they now mere pseudo elites? Are they inhibiting the development of society? Do the elites not in fact bear some of the blame for the current crisis of democracy and the liberal order in Europe? In extreme form, these questions are often tossed about by those who in fact wish to deepen the crisis and do away with the liberal order in the name of some “better,” “enlightened” authoritarianism. Yet that doesn’t mean the questions aren’t worth asking.

The answer that emerges from the experience of Charter 77 is clear: Of course there is an elite. The Charter signatories unquestionably constituted the moral elite of Communist Czechoslovakia.

29 They were the ones who raised their voices

against the lies of the regime and paid the price for it. Yet, in social terms, who made up this moral elite? Typically, when we talk about Charter 77, we mean writers and intellectuals. And yes, it is true that writers and intellectuals spoke and wrote on its behalf — because that is their profession, their mission. Yet whoever reads the full list of signatories will see that the profession appearing most often is “worker,” and the professions “secretary,” “technician,” and “housewife” appear repeatedly. To be sure, in some instances these were “bogus workers,” that is, intellectuals forced by the regime into working-class positions, or gifted young people who were not allowed to study at university. But oftentimes they were “true workers.” People who had no external reason to protest the regime, yet consistently voiced disagreement with the public lies and injustice. People who did not possess the gift of eloquence, yet were gifted with a capacity for moral action. These people are the moral elite in the purest sense of the term.

The experience of the Charter thus confirms one of the premises of Europeanism, so often emphasized by the philosopher Jan Patočka, a founder of the Charter: Europeanism is guided, across philosophical and theological systems, by the notion of “care for the soul.” Because every human being is gifted with free will and what the Platonic tradition calls “immortality of the soul,” the norms and values of society depend on the moral decisions of each individual. In this sense, everyone can be part of the elite — in the best sense of the word, the moral elite. Updated for today, that means an elite who will not succumb to the lure of demagogues who claim that what we need is a “better,” “enlightened” authoritarianism.

Another big present-day topic is the conflict between left and right: Does it no longer make sense? Or does it in fact make more sense than ever? What counts as left today, and what counts as right? Where do the left and the right stand on the issues of European unity, on authoritarianism in Russia and China, on Islam, and, most important, on the growing temptation toward a “better,” “enlightened” authoritarianism?

In this regard, the Charter offers a noteworthy example. Charter 77 was established as an alliance of individuals who under normal circumstances would never have met and come to know one another. This

was evident, symbolically, in the state's 1979 trial of members of the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted (known by its Czech acronym, VONS). Václav Havel, Petr Uhl, Václav Benda, Jiří Dienstbier, and Otta Bednářová were given jail terms; Dana Němcová received a suspended sentence. Taken as a whole, the group is representative of the pluralism that existed within the Charter community: Journalists Jiří Dienstbier and Otta Bednářová both started out as reform Communists. Dienstbier over the years shifted toward the liberal left, while Bednářová first converted to Catholicism, then renounced her Party membership as the worst mistake of her life — even declining the state honor bestowed on her by Havel in 1997, after he became president of the Czech Republic. Uhl was a radical Trotskyite who opposed the Communists “from the other side,” i.e., the left, and had been imprisoned by the regime once before, in the early '70s, for his involvement with the Revolutionary Youth Movement. After 1989, faced with a rising tide of interest in religion, he became a fierce opponent of political Catholicism and the influence of the Church. Both Benda and Němcová moved in Catholic intellectual circles, albeit opposite wings: Benda was politically and theologically more conservative, whereas Němcová was deeply involved with the cultural underground, characterized by its wild lifestyles and provocative art. Havel, in the scheme of this miniature Charter, represents the notional center.

There was nothing idyllic about the alliance. Both sides, Catholic and ex-Communist, protested that “the others” had too much influence. Many members of the Catholic persuasion, especially former political prisoners, chose not to join the Charter because they considered it mainly an organization of ex-Communists, and refused to sit at the table (either symbolically or literally) with their former persecutors. Meanwhile other Christians defended the idea of cooperating with them, stressing that the former Party members who joined the Charter were, like former sinners, performing an act of repentance. Either way, the Charter put an end to internal tensions between ex-Communists and Catholics, as well as any others.

Clearly, this experience cannot be mechanically applied to today's social problems, which involve many more parties, identities, and dividing lines than existed in the past. Yet, even today, when it comes to what is most important — protecting democracy from demagogues and authoritarians — the Charter may serve as an example of the need to set aside everything that divides people of differing opinions who nevertheless share a common interest.

If only one idea from the Charter could be chosen, one notion of Václav Havel's, both relevant and urgent for the times we live in, that would be it.

(Translated from the Czech by Alex Zucker)

Martin C. Putna

Editor, literary historian, comparatist, critic, translator, teacher, author of works on history and religion. He is the recipient of the Tom Stoppard Prize. He was born in Písek on 30 May 1968. After secondary school he studied Russian and Latin at Charles University's Faculty of Arts in Prague. He became a practicing Catholic in 1987 and attended theological and philosophical seminars held secretly in people's apartments. After the Velvet Revolution (Putna was one of the leading activists at Charles University's Faculty of Arts) he taught old Russian literature and studied theology. He is a professor of cultural and social anthropology. From 2008 to 2011 he was the director of the Václav Havel Library.



Photo by Hana Rysová



Photo by Helena Wilsonová:
Julian and Ivan M. Jirous
in Stará Říše, 1989



Photo by Jaroslav Kukal:
A musical performance in the flat of Dana and Jiří
Němec, second from the left: Jana Hlavsová, politi-
cian and diplomat Martin Palouš, Veronika Němcová
and musicians Ladislav Leština and Josef "Pepa"
Janiček from The Plastic People of the Universe,
Ječná Street, Prague, 1979

A LAUDATIO ON SYLVIE RICHTEROVÁ'S ESSAY ON CZECH LITERATURE

Adam Borzič

"The function of art is to disperse blindness, to illuminate the unseen...", writes the novelist, poet, literary scientist and thinker Sylvie Richterová in her book *An Essay on Czech Literature*. Sylvie Richterová has a close knowledge of the arts, by touch from their inner side, and she recognises them with the acrobatic courage of a supreme creative talent. Her book of essays, which has been awarded the Tom Stoppard Prize, would not have been created if perhaps all types of literary talent and especially the ability to create literature directly and to grasp things and think conceptually had not uniquely coalesced in its author. Essays arising from such a creative workshop can hardly be anything other than great works of art. Great literature. Given her deep theoretical knowledge of literature, her exceptional erudition with regard to its history and her excellent philosophical education, Richterová's essay-writing is purely evocative and initiating, because the initiator is herself a great writer.

If we are looking for a signpost pointing the way within her labyrinth consisting of dozens of authors, it can be no coincidence that her "canon" opens with Jaroslav Hašek, in whom Richterová makes a detailed investigation of the dark relationship between power and absurdity, from whose tragedy we are only freed for a moment by the interrupted language of laughter, which thus unmasks the entire metaphysics of human stupidity. And it is also certainly no coincidence that the section on Hašek is immediately followed by a section dedicated to Karel Čapek, in which Richterová reveals an existential drama of religious dimensions concealed behind the seeming modesty of his questioning. For Richterová, Čapek's garden utopia bears prophetic features in the face of the robotizing of the world. Likewise, the amount of space which Sylvie Richterová has dedicated to Milan Kundera, in whose novelistic world she also reveals a paradoxically religious question, albeit somehow asked back-to-front, cast out from the

heart of doubt and culminating in the paradoxical play of the fate of the author and his work in a world without God, is also no random act. And finally, it certainly makes sense that the journey through the labyrinth of Czech literature culminates with an essay on Comenius' Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart. We not only have to thank Sylvie Richterová for returning a theological depth to Comenius and for rejecting the oversimplified reading which has neglected the original spiritual world of this thinker, but also for revealing one of the first teachers of a holistic view of the world in this "the last medieval philosopher", as he has been understood by positivistic know-it-alls.

Sylvie Richterová presents to us the story of Czech literature as a fundamental and fascinating drama, in which the human word, if it relates to truth and springs from the search for truth and is thus liberated from kowtowing to dehumanizing power, represents a supreme creative act which exceeds the nonsense and madness of history. In her words: "*Chaos and freedom shake hands and only an individual act may be a true answer. This answer is known in Greek as poiesis: creation.*" The great merits of this book of

Essays lie in the fact that it raises the question of aesthetics, ethics and noetics in their original connectivity corresponding to the platonic Triad of beauty, goodness and truth. I would, however, hasten to add that Richterová's Platonism is baptized Platonism. And as such, these ideas not only mirror the struggle with the historical demons of alienation, no matter whether they involve the totalitarian ideologies of the past, the inexorable market mechanisms of today or the general stupidity and loss of consciousness of contemporary man, but also directly embody the struggle for good, truth and beauty in human speech. It becomes the human word, perhaps because the Word of God has become the human body. And this incarnation is fragile, vulnerable. For this reason, too, the search for the sense of this word in the Essays of Sylvie Richterová becomes manifest with a deeply humble and precise reading between the lines of the Czech poets and novelists whose works are shown to us by her interpretation as if they were at the very act of creation. And it is not only due to this freshness that her Essays constitute a supreme work of contemporary Czech literature which disperses blindness today.

THE TOM STOPPARD PRIZE

The prize was established by the Charter 77 Foundation in Stockholm in 1984 on the basis of a donation from the British dramatist Tom Stoppard. A five-member jury used to award it every year in May for significant poetic, prose or dramatic work which could not be published in Czechoslovakia. Since November 1989, the jury has awarded the prize to original works published in the last two years. The Tom Stoppard Prize for 2016 was awarded to Sylvie Richterová.

JAROSLAV SEIFERT PRIZE

The Jaroslav Seifert Prize has been awarded since 1986, a year of its establishment. It was founded on the initiative of František Janouch by the Charter 77 Foundation in Stockholm. The Prize recognises a work of poetry or prose published (or released in a different way) in the Czech Republic or abroad within the last three years. The Prize has been awarded every year so far (with the exception of years 2013 and 2014). In 2013, the administrative council decided that the Prize will be awarded every two years. The Jaroslav Seifert Prize is announced on September 22nd, the eve of the Seifert's birthday.

SYLVIE RICHTEROVÁ: MY LIVING CZECH LITERATURE

I will tell you how I imagine literature: as a living being permeating the spiritual environment, society, human beings. It creates space for imagination, existential questions, ethical issues, beauty. Literature is neither letters nor words, it is a spiritual organism open to everyone and nourished by both authors and readers. It is inhabited and mutually reinforced by the unique and irreplaceable method of knowing the world and ourselves that is art. The author enters it through language, which grows out of experience, history, traumas and tragedies, but especially from the power to create a living work of universal value. There are no boundaries in terms of space, language or time; national literatures permeate one another; no national literature is separate from others; all poets, all writers can be present in the same way. An ancient philosopher or a Chinese poet from the days of yore inspires Czech authors, just as Goethe or Cervantes may inspire novelists. In addition, literature

blends with all other areas of human cognition. At any moment a new author can transform it, but it can also be transformed by new knowledge gained from an author of the past. Laws that apply here are completely different from chronological or geographic, physical, social or legal laws—nothing obtains more fully than the work itself: neither probability nor psychology, neither natural sciences nor sociology. A book as such is the universe that opens up other universes, its alchemy and its radiation are endless and, at the same time, tangibly present. In literature, there are laws that we can perceive and feel, that we can test using various experiments and, in a given book, that we can reveal as well as transform. Above all known and latent laws, however, there is the beautiful truth that a work of art is born, one that is-like a child—unpredictable, unique and free. That is why I insist that literature is a living being consisting of particular living beings, i.e. books that are not only material objects but that have their

own identity while having the ability to create as many unique constellations as there are readers. Reading is a creative process, after all, one that is in sync with the work of the author. The life energy of literature is related to the intensity of the reader's emotions, thinking, and aesthetic and ethical response, which is why the great novelist Milan Kundera repeatedly suggests that reading is to be meditative.

From a materialistic point of view, the spiritual essence of literature is only a metaphor. Of all scientific notions, I believe the one closest to the artistic spirit must be the theory of indeterminacy, which is the awareness that all knowledge is affected by the one doing the knowing. An individual. A creator. A genius. A unique personality is born, a work is born, and it is in its power to take our experience of the world into which we are thrown by our birth, by our existential choices and our fate, and turn it into irreplaceable knowledge.

The deeper the involvement with specific ethical questions, the stronger the work. Of course authors live above all in the world, and their fates are bound to their times. Yet they are free with respect to the universe of art. They must be free. They may then choose literature as their monastic order, as their religion. The great experimenter Jiří Kolář expressed it this way: "I'm writing to save my life". And as a motto of one of his books, he offered Luther's statement: "Here I stand. I can do no other". He did not consider the risks to his life that his courage to be a witness to evil times entailed. Bohumil Hrabal gives eschatological meaning to his writing; for him, the book is "the messenger of death and the instrument of resurrection" and his method is "rapture". Great is the mission of the novel also for Jiří Gruša, for example, whose protagonist declares: "I am here the Eyes of the World". Kolář, Hrabal and Gruša are the opposite of all that is full of pathos, and Czech literature is definitely not full of pathos. It tends, rather, to be ironic and absurd: Gruša's protagonist narrates his own cruelly grotesque death at the end of the novel in order to be able to exclaim: "I see the light".

Throughout the twentieth century, Czech literature was also rather eccentric; starting with Ladislav Klíma and Josef Váchal, it experimented with the novel's form and ignored models. The prescient Jaroslav Hašek placed before the eyes of

the modern world a magical mirror of idiocy, cruelty and lack of imagination in the character of Josef Švejk. It is possible to see in him the phenomenon of stupidity as the driving force of every social pathology, but only on the condition that we ourselves escape its captivity. Hašek's phenomenology of stupidity is prophetic and awaits more profound appreciation. But the greatest contribution of the creator of the famous Švejk was the talent and the courage to discover the comic in things where no one had been laughing before him. It is the power I would call the "noetic value of laughter". It is the surest detonator for breaking the power of institutions and regimes. That is why Hašek is the literary brother of Karl Kraus, and it is why he has many descendants in the Czech absurdist theatre and in world literature.

With a great sense of humour and with a great interest in science and philosophy, Karel Čapek recognized almost 100 years ago the destructive potential of modern science and he discovered dystopia for world literature (and for film). He foresaw the risks inherent in the paradise from which robotisation would expel the sacred mysteries of man. With irony he asked the new creators whether they wished to be like gods. This was before World War II. There was many a "god" during it and after, and it was those who lied more and hid crimes better that lasted longer. An epoch started in which it has been increasingly difficult to distinguish good from evil.

In a totalitarian regime, literature was an openly ethical act, and an ethical choice necessarily required new aesthetics. The author took risks, but literature became richer. Jiří Kolář "studied" the history of literary and visual arts by cutting, mixing, recomposing and connecting books and pictures (reproductions of both pictures and texts), thus creating new forms. He also demolished the bridge between verbal and non-verbal art. Bohumil Hrabal preferred to live at the bottom of society rather than compromise his way of seeing and writing. His *Too Loud a Solitude* is a parable, but so is all his work: focusing on persons expelled to the margins of society and transforming their lives into great destinies through the power of wonder and compassion. And through the power of terror.

In the grip of the totalitarian regime, the Czech novel broke both traditional and socialist canons in many ways; the collective name I have for the

creations of this period is “realism of the absurd”. Jiří Gruša imposed the novel’s form and contents on a police questionnaire by transforming an instrument of power into grotesque nonsense. Ludvík Vaculík opened his personal diary to the unpredictable things of a dangerous era in such a sophisticated manner that his testimony acquired the qualities of a novel without ceasing to be a testimony. Other penetrations beyond the world’s surface can open fantastic worlds such as those created by Jiří Kratochvíl, Michal Ajvaz and Ivan Binar, each in a different way. Even political exile transformed the aesthetics of literature; this was demonstrated on one hand by the polyglottic short stories of Josef Škvorecký and on the other, for example, by the meta-linguistic adventures of Věra Linhartová. But I mention here only those qualities of the life-giving literary presence that I consider to be of the utmost importance, and I would remind the reader that they have been created by authors, not to mention poets, of older and more recent generations alike.

In libraries we place novels, short stories, poems, and essays one next to the other; books are the physical bodies of literary works, rows of books form walls, and walls form labyrinths; these can be both endless and oppressive, as Borges wrote. Free movement and light in the living organism of literature, however, mean that books do not merely accumulate but rather permeate each other, forming a dynamic whole. I would almost dare to call such a whole a “pleroma,” since this gnostic notion best describes infinite and unlimited fullness, as well as the power to mediate and interconnect. I daresay I have read several books well: I can therefore testify with authority that we can succeed on our path to living literature only if guided by wonder and love. The starting point is usually a specific work of a particular author. Here the first stage is a labyrinth, one that opens before us within the work: we pass through stories and reflections, finding persons who bear thoughts, feelings, and will. It is not a labyrinth that is trivially three-dimensional, for it may happen that one corridor will always bring us to a different place or that we will return to a single central point from various places. All unexpected routes are possible. The labyrinth will let us go further only when we begin to experience its architecture, intent, snares and traps, its secret passages and its certainties, as if we ourselves were

the labyrinth’s creators. By entering living literature, the reader thus becomes the creator. The materialistic concept of art is a contradiction in terms.

Finally, I wish to cite Milan Kundera as one of those most important creators of Czech literature, one who realized that the novel “tears the curtain” of prejudiced thought, that it treats existential blindness and underscores paradoxes. It is a game played with high stakes, because paradoxes make one cross the threshold leading to new consciousness. Kundera’s work has strong Czech roots, nourished by deep layers of great European novels and permeated by the art of musical composition, philosophy and personal experience from the most recent chapters of European history. The main architects of the inner labyrinths in his books are irony, paradox, and laughter: those wishing to spare themselves will be lost, but those who are lost can be found—thus might we paraphrase a sentence of the New Testament for the world of the novel. Kundera is convinced that the novel may be the ultimate tool of knowledge in today’s world, fettered by technologies and mired in the judgments and prejudices that form and “format” people from the earliest age. How can this be so? First, because the knowledge to which the novel leads is not as abstract as philosophy, and it is not dangerous either. The reason is that it cannot be misused (which cannot be said about scientific knowledge).

Kundera’s aesthetics is paradoxical in its very foundations: the wisdom of the novel stems from the wisdom of uncertainty. A novel may not know, it can doubt, it can afford not to take the world seriously. It is an experimental model of the world inhabited by experimental selves and, thanks to this special statute, we can enter it at any time and freely as participants in an experiment whose goal is precisely to “tear the curtain” that hides the real meaning of things. The only risk posed by literature stems from the disintegration of stereotypes and the presence of urgent existential questions. Unlike all intellectual paths of knowing, art acquires knowledge by creating—through “poiesis”.



Photo by Lucia Gardin

Sylvie Richterová

Prose writer, poet and literary theorist and émigrée - since 1971 she has lived in Italy, and since the Velvet Revolution alternately in Prague too. She is the winner of the Annual Prize of the Foundation of the Czech Literary Fund for prose (1994, and for her *Essays on Czech Literature* (2016), and the Tom Stoppard Prize (2017). Her books have been published in Italian, German and French. She was born on 20 August 1945.



Photo by Michael Dus:
Lutheran theologian and teacher Milan Balabán,
Střelecký ostrov, Prague, 1987



Photo: Jáchym Topol

I keep seeing tree branches

An interview with writer
Jáchym Topol

Jáchym Topol has been one of the major Czech writers since 1989. He was born in Prague in 1962, the son of poet and playwright Josef Topol (1935–2015) and Jiřina Topolová (1931–2016); his brother Filip (1965–2013) was a musician and leader of the band *Psí vojáci*. Jáchym participated in the Czech underground's musical and literary activities in the 1980s, worked as a journalist after 1989 (*Revolver Revue*, *Respekt*, *Lidové noviny*), and has been chief dramaturge of Prague's Václav Havel Library since 2011. He started his career as a poet, and his prose works (*Sestra [Sister]*, 1994; *Anděl [Angel]*, 1995; *Noční práce [Nightwork]*, 2001; *Kloktat dehet [Gargling Tar]*, 2005; *Chladnou zemi [The Devil's workshop]*, 2009) have been translated into more than fifteen languages. He has won the Tom Stoppard Prize (1988), Jaroslav Seifert Prize (2010) and the Vilenica Prize (2015). He is married, has two daughters, and lives in Prague. His new novel, *Citlivý člověk [A Sensitive Person]*, was published by Torst in spring 2017.

Your novel *Sister*, published in 1994, has been mentioned again in relation to *A Sensitive Person*. What has changed in literature, society and in the world over that period of almost 25 years?

43 While today I live in the media world, I'm reflected in it, I grumble at it – like everyone

else – because never in history has humankind been exposed to so much information, and at the same time I'm convinced that there is a human archetype which has not changed very much over thousands of years. When I was writing *Sister* in the early 1990s, I had absolutely no problem finding what's essential for the writer, i.e., isolation and peace. I wrote *Sister* in a hut amid a German forest, where the nearest phone booth was some three kilometres away and calling Prague was so expensive that I phoned home once a week; letters also took a week to be delivered – and all of us were comfortable with this. I could concentrate on writing. This is impossible today – you've got Facebook, email, and you use them. This is a huge change.

How did you succeed in writing
A Sensitive Person then?

I believe that I could tune myself up so that I always shook off those things during the important hours when I was writing in my semi-trance. What helped me was that I wrote most of the book in my old rural shack away from Prague. It has a wood-burning stove. This may sound romantic, but those who have wood-burning stoves know that operating them is hard work: you're constantly soiled with ash, you have to watch over the fire, you have to get wood. And wood is expensive today. I bought some, but more often I collected dead wood from the forest. You have to trim that wood, chop it up into small sticks, and then you have

heat and you write for a few hours. I kept that rhythm going for several months. Telling someone that you're sitting at your computer for hours, weeks, months is boring – when I recall writing *A Sensitive Person*, I keep seeing tree branches. By contrast, when I was writing in Prague, I regularly went swimming.

So, the scene changed, but you as an author remained unchanged...

I feel that I somewhat learnt to live the writing. *A Sensitive Person* is a book rewritten over and over again, which is something that I partly learnt when I worked for a newspaper as a reporter – on a daily. You come to the newsroom and hear: “a 4,000-character-long article!” Now you feel you're starting to sweat, but you simply have to prepare the story, you have to write it. I've always been scared by Karel Čapek's statement that journalists should be able to write as quickly as they talk. That's a scary, maximalist requirement, but I've trained myself: When I had problems writing something, I simply sat out my writing session. When I was writing *Sister*, I had a youthful desire to experiment, I had previously read Burroughs, Joyce, and the words gushed out of me like hot magma. *A Sensitive Person* was written piecemeal and rewritten over and over.

Is literature a must for you? Is it excess pressure that needs to be released – onto paper?

I feel like that. There's probably pressure inside me to write several more books. Most of my life, sometimes more and sometimes less desperately, I have sought time and money to write a book. Twenty-five years ago, I was young, I had no children; with children, you perceive time completely differently; you have to be responsible and bring money home every month. My life consists of 'zigzagging' to be able to write. That's simply a fact, and it will not change.

Which contemporary Czech authors are you a fan of? Who is close to you?

I feel some affinity with Emil Hakl. I love his dialogues. I feel that both of us have

been influenced by Bohumil Hrabal. I'm not saying that a Hrabal book is lying on my bedside table at home, especially not during my youth, when I was a radical underground person, which is something that makes me laugh today, but I like his style, his immersion. I also like Matěj Hořava and his *Pálenka [Distilled spirit]*. And Petr Mano, who wrote the novel *Šarlák*, which is the name of a pond on the outskirts of Písek. And I read poems a lot; I recently opened *Tomáš Fürstzeller's Objektiv [The Lens] in a bookshop, and I had to sit down there and read the whole book.*

You work in the Václav Havel Library. Do you feel a greater affinity with his work, plays, poetry, essayistic writings, or with his more general human legacy?

I'm one of those who knew Havel in person. For me, Václav Havel and Ivan Martin Jirous were the men who shaped my personality, just as they did for many people of my generation. I actually like him more and more, which is linked to Czech politics today. I'm not here to judge, analyse or condemn his particular political acts, but what I still find in his texts is a sort of cheerful fellow with a sparkle in his eye, who is interested in world events, is kind-hearted, intelligent. Moreover, he spent five years in jail. That keeps me in the Library. When we prepare shows, for example, about Tatars, Roma or about Jaroslav Foglar, I'm just amazed at all the things that are possible here, at Havel's enormous breadth of scope. The same is true when we present some of his one-act plays or hold a thematic evening on the occasion of publishing a book – people always visit these events. That's simply pleasure. Havel is no relict, especially not abroad. There is huge scepticism about Havel in our country; in any debate, you will find people who hate Havel; I can read about myself that I'm a Havel Satanist; however, Havel is hugely esteemed, for example, among Ukrainians, Tatars, simply among people whose freedom is not commonplace.

Charter 77 celebrated its fortieth anniversary this year. Which of the ideas that its signatories presented are needed in today's society? Which of them should society endorse?

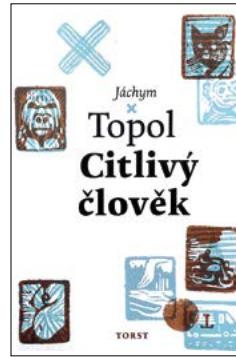
There was something fantastic that worked in the Charter – friendly relations. Exposed to pressure from the era and the regime of that time, the Charter put together people who would normally not communicate with each other: Protestants, ex-communists, long-haired hippies. For instance, the word “feminism” was not popular at all at that time, but women such as Dana Němcová, Petruška Šustrová and Otta Bednářová did a great deal of work in the Charter and enjoyed prestige. In other words, it's the legacy of a community where people are solidary to each

other, help each other, stand by each other – this is where Charter 77 lives today; where it's eternal. When we make shows about the Charter, about Poland's Solidarity or about communist camp prisoners of the 1950s in the Library now, they are attended not only by old people who remember those events; we can find members of all generations here in the audience. That's where we've succeeded.

Interview prepared by Radim Kopáč

A Sensitive Person

Jáchym Topol



1. Bristol Globe. Why he addresses both. Night swarm. Mama in the morning. The notebook. The tattooed lad. Burning camp. Piss off! Eleanor and her boys. And onward.

How the hell am I supposed to concentrate here?!

Papa squats behind the wheel of the traveler's caravan, bottle in hand's reach, notebook open on his knees, scribbling away.

Almost finished a chapter last night, but there was such a ruckus, I only got an outline down! And here Bristol always used to be such a fine place! *Treasure Island*, boys, d'you ever hear of cabin boy Jimmy Hawkins? He addresses both his boys, because, as he puts it, he wants to get them talking. Both the one in baby diapers and the one that's all grown up.

You know what's funny, though? he says, turning to Sonya, who's heating a spoon over one of the flames on the stove. On the other, she gives an occasional stir to the little nipper's porridge.

Now I identify more with Long John Silver!

That just comes with middle age, says Sonya. She continues her morning ritual, rolling up the sleeve on her flamboyantly colored mandala shirt.

Papa's tattered notebook, covered with coffee and wine stains, goes sailing over the still sleeping little one and lands amid the piles of junk.

He stretches out his legs, lets his neck sink into the headrest, and relaxes, taking in the other nomads stationed around them. On his body, a splattered T-shirt and shorts; in his eyes, a relentless shine of curiosity. On the historian's head, a crocheted hippie hat, his ginger hair pushing out from underneath, laced with clumps of gray.

His gaze settles on the gated entrance to the campsite, a miniature replica of the Globe Theatre, covered with a tremendous quantity of light bulbs that flare to life only at night to form the numeral 400, a rather comical portrait of the playwright himself, and the inscription HIS WORDS: WISDOM, FREEDOM AND BEAUTY!

What with the nighttime arrivals, there is an unusual level of activity on the site of the traditional festival, this year dedicated to the life and work of William Shakespeare. Here, once upon

a time, Papa and Sonya marked the anniversary of the Czech Republic's accession to the Community with an ingenious performance, dancing their way to a splendid three hundred and thirteen pounds. But now everything is different.

Papa stares, gapes, considers. Sniffs the wind. He might even be taking his bearings by the movements of his beak. Once upon a time, he thought about having his nose lined with a thin coating of precious metal, but he wasn't that successful.

An urgently summoned team of immigration officials are stationed at the entrance gate. Their desks, computers, and forms are stacked with donuts, plates of pastries, cups of java.

The grounds were empty yesterday, but now the surface is sprinkled with groupings of people. Rows of sleepers on mats, women in long frocks with babies, clusters of humans sitting and gesticulating. Old ladies plod along with jerricans needing filling. The adolescents hanging out in their tattered T-shirts and jeans look as if they're overseeing the women's work.

Police cars sit on the edges of the crowd, whose largely black garb make them appear to be a solid mass. Most of the nighttime arrivals had stumbled in and bedded down right on the spot, all night long attacked by waves of uncertainty and fear.

I really do love Bristol! Though we never did get a peek at the harbor, maybe we can manage it today, do you think? Papa hollers at the boy shuffling off with the jerricans for water.

The line for the hydrants extends past the gate. Could be the hose burst or someone damaged one of the water sources. Moving single file, the dark, veiled women inch forward through the mud with their barrels and bags of refillable bottles, water squirts up around the boy's tennis shoes.

Hey you... the boy raises his head, a smiling young woman with a mane of blonde hair cascading down to her shoulders hands him a chocolate-frosted donut out the window of the illuminated Globe replica.

He stretches up on his tiptoes, feels the jelly dripping down his fingers, but just then someone socks him in the shoulder. Two boys, tall, thin, and dark. The taller one, with sleepy eyelids, grabs the donut and wolfs it down.

He, oh well... the young lady leans out and hands over the whole box of treats, the sun beating down on its multicolor icing.

A scuffle breaks out, chasing the boy away from the jerricans, suddenly there's a whole swarm and he's lost in a sea of pants and T-shirts and blow-dealing elbows, reeling like a puppy tossed by its merciless master into the midst of a Doberman fight.

He sees overturned jerricans disappearing under skirts, glimpses women's flats, the sneakers and sandals of the water line, edges toward the women, they dodge away, screaming madly, like he was a stinging insect. To his amazement he discovers he's holding a box against his belly with the donuts squished into the corners: he won.

The boy holds the spoils close, now suddenly in the sleepy crowd. Someone, still half buried in their sleeping bag, takes a swing at him, he jumps out of the way.

And finds himself staring straight into the face of a naked boy. Roughly the same age and height as him. His hard little face is not only grubby but also completely black. His cheeks, arms, and thighs are tattooed, strewn with inflamed pinpricks. The crowd pours by, giving them a long look. It's a long way to the fortress on wheels, where his parents are. He hands the boy the box. Turns

around and picks up one of the jerricans, claws the other one from under someone's feet, waits his turn in line, then sticks the hose in them and fills them to the brim. The way he's always done.

The evening performance in Bristol is cancelled under the clause covering unexpected events, catastrophes, and natural disasters (plus sixty-two pounds for Papa and Sonya).

Well, we wanted to blow this rainsville and head south anyway!

They fall in with the caravan of other cars and spend the day traveling on to a new campsite.

After the trip, Sonya and the boys are exhausted, so they get ready for bed right away. They don't even bother with the tent, just snuggle up with each other in back.

Mama cradles the little nipper in her arms, whispering in his ear. As the older boy falls asleep, he catches a glimpse of his papa in the front seat, scratching away in his notebook with his chin thrust forward.

That night, someone sets fire to the pikeys' camp. The assailants hurl a bottle rocket into a tent, another lights up the wooden watchman's hut. The caravan crews dash about, putting out the fires before they even have a chance to start flickering, while the rest rapidly pack their things. Papa urges the family to remain calm.

They intentionally threw it in a tent where nobody was. They've got it scoped out, they aren't looking to hurt anyone.

They sure enough want us out of here though!

Can you blame em?

Hey, let's get movin, we're goin too! Mama says with her one seeing eye, still glued shut and in a considerable state of morning disarray.

Papa objects that he really wants to finally finish this

chapter. But maybe I'll end up makin it into a play, he grumbles. Just then some pebbles fly into the windshield. Cast from a distance they land without force, drumming like raindrops.

Goddammitall! Papa shouts, flinging his notebook into the back, where it lands on a heap of remains of other unfinished work.

LEAVE MEANS LEAVE! POLISH VERMIN!

A group of angry women and a few scowling older men hold up a homemade banner with those words, along with several others.

At the head of the procession, pouring out of the street toward the devastated campsite, swarms a pack of boys.

Leading the way is a severe-looking man, dressed in black, with a megaphone at his mouth. He chants the slogan at the top of his lungs from under his pencil-thin mustache, waving a black umbrella to conduct the passion-swollen chorus behind him.

They look like they just walked out of a Beatles video, don't they? Papa says to Sonya.

A toddler nails one of their fenders with a piece of brick. The others howl with pleasure.

Eleanor Rigby, that's it!

Another lad wings a brick at the caravan, but it falls short.

We're not Polish vermin, we're Czech vermin! Papa yells out the window. We fought for you! Battle of Britain! Doesn't that mean anything to you? he screams at the head of the swarm, quickly drawing near.

I know you were already born by then, you old cow!

Take it easy!

You heifer!

He starts the engine. Sonya takes the older boy's hand. With the other she points to the street where more citizens are heading toward them through the

postcard-perfect redbrick homes. Men and boys in T-shirts and jeans stomp across the trampled and crushed lawn, baseball bats in hand.

The fastest of the bunch, an elegant-looking fellow with colorfully tattooed arms, in a T-shirt with stripes slicing the suspenders holding up his shorts, spits on the hood and proceeds to step around to the vehicle's rear.

I think we'd better go, says Papa. And they go.

(Translated from the Czech by Alex Zucker)



Photo by Jaroslav Kukal:
Filip Topol, composer and musician from the band
Pší vojáci, with Monika "Marilyn" Kafková, musician
Martin Choura from the music group Ženy is in the
middle, Prague, January 1989

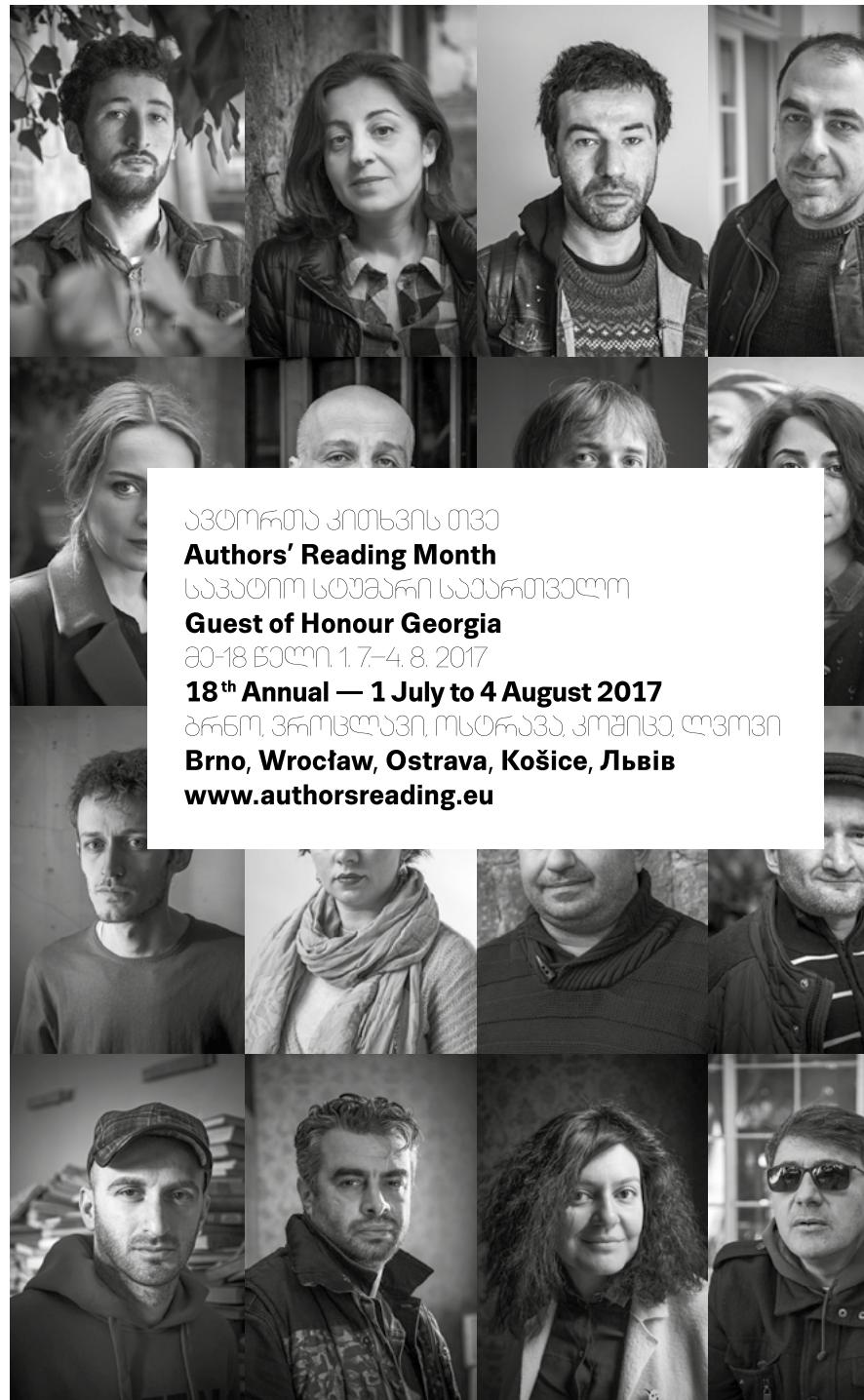
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CzechLit – Czech Literary Centre is a state-funded organisation supporting and promoting Czech literature abroad and in the Czech Republic.

CzechLit:

- Promotes prose, literature for children and young adults, poetry, drama, comics, non-fiction and new forms of literature
- Acts as an information hub for foreign publishers, translators, Czech studies specialists, event organisers and others interested in Czech literature and book culture
- Provides grants for authors to attend cultural events abroad and in the Czech Republic
- Organises residencies for foreign translators, Czech studies specialists and authors
- Runs the bilingual website www.czechlit.cz with information about books, authors, grants, residencies and Czech literature news
- Cooperates with the network of Czech Centres, which promote Czech culture abroad, as well as with other governmental and non-governmental cultural and non-profit organisations and individuals
- Is involved in the presentation of Czech literature at book fairs abroad in cooperation with its parent institution, the Moravian Library
- Holds the annual Susanna Roth Award for young translators of Czech literature
- CzechLit – Czech Literary Centre was established in Prague in 2017 on behalf of the Czech Minister of Culture, Daniel Herman, as a separate section of the Moravian Library.

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SUPPORT PROGRAMME FOR THE PUBLICATION OF TRANSLATIONS OF ORIGINAL CZECH LITERATURE ABROAD

Organiser

Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic
Arts and Libraries Department
Maltézské náměstí 1
118 11 Prague 1
Czech Republic

Conditions

– the grant is designed exclusively for the support of the publication of translations of original Czech literature abroad; it is possible to ask for a grant to publish a translation of:

1) an **entire book** (or a thematic issue of a magazine where at least 50% of the total content is dedicated to original Czech literature);

2) **an extract** of between 10–25 standard pages of text (a standard page is 1800 characters with spaces);

– the grant is applied for by the publisher (if a book is involved) or the publisher of the magazine, literary agent or translator (if an extract and a thematic issue of a magazine are involved);

– the applicant for a grant for the translation of an extract does not need to have a signed contract with a publisher for the publication of the extract;

– the applicant for support for the translation of an extract agrees that, if the translation is supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, the extract will also be used for the purposes of the presentation of the Czech state;

– **Within the application for a grant to publish the translation of a whole book, it is possible to ask for a translation grant** (up to 50% of the total cost of publishing), **cover design costs, graphic design, typesetting, printing** (up to 50% of the total cost of publishing) **copyright costs** (up to 15% of the total cost of publishing) and **promotion costs** (up to 25% of the total cost of publishing); **the total amount of support must not exceed 70% of the total cost of publishing.**

– The grant includes the genres of poetry, prose, literature for children and young adults, comics, drama, essays and more;

– priority is given to contemporary literature;

– the source language is Czech;

– there are no restrictions regarding the target

languages;

– if the book/extract is not published in the year in which the grant was awarded, the right to the grant will expire (if there are compelling reasons, documented in writing, this time limit may be extended);

– the final decision on the grant will be taken by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic on the basis of the recommendations of an expert commission of the Arts and Libraries Department consisting of representatives of the literary and cultural communities;

– when assessing applications, the commission is guided by the following criteria: a) the documented professional quality and experience of the translator, b) the quality of the translated text, c) the publisher's interest in publishing Czech literature, d) the promotion and distribution strategies (items c) and d) do not apply to applicants asking for a grant to support the translation of an extract);

– the application has to contain the filled-in form and all the listed attachments;

– the application must be typed on a computer;

– the budget currency is the euro;

– the preferred language of the application is English;

– **applications for the next calendar year have to be submitted to the Ministry of Culture always as at 15 November of the current year or 15 April of the year that follows**, in either an electronic form or in a printed version at the address below;

– if the submitted application is incomplete, the applicant has the opportunity to immediately provide the missing materials otherwise the applicant's grant application will be excluded from the grant proceedings;

– if there are any changes in the conditions and circumstances mentioned by the applicant in the grant application, the applicant (publisher, translator or literary agent) shall be obliged to immediately report such changes to the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic;

– in the publication, thematic issue of a magazine or extract whose publication was supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, it is necessary to mention this fact together with the logo of the Ministry of Culture CR (for example: "This publication has been supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic");

– **the official results of the grant proceedings will be made public on the website of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic** (www.mkcr.cz) at the end of February / beginning of March (the November deadline) or in May (the April deadline); a brief justification will be attached to unsuccessful grant applications.

– **the grant for the translation of an extract is transferred to the bank account of the publisher or literary agent in Czech crowns**, according to the current CZK/EUR exchange rate, after the translation has been completed and sent, in an electronic version, to the address below, together with a document proving the settlement of all of the applicant's financial obligations to the translator (signed by the translator);

– **the grant amount for the translation of an extract is transferred to the bank account of the translator in Czech crowns**, according to the current CZK/EUR exchange rate, after the translation has been completed and sent, in an electronic version, to the address below;

– **the grant amount for publishing the translation of a complete book (or a thematic issue of a magazine) is transferred to the bank account of the applicant (publisher) in Czech crowns**, according to the current CZK/EUR exchange rate after:

1) the publication of the book and delivery of 6 copies of the title to the address below;

2) delivery of documentation proving the settlement of all of the publisher's financial obligations to the translator of the book (signed by the translator);

3) delivery of the final report on the project and the accounting report (individual items to be listed in a table);

4) delivery of copies of receipts related to the costs of the cover design, graphic design, typesetting and printing, copyright costs and promotional costs, if these items were supported by the Ministry

More information:

<https://www.mkcr.cz/literature-and-libraries-1123.html?lang=en>

Czech Literature
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Culture, and Exile

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Photo by Michael Dus:
From the left: David Němec, Filip Topol and Ivan
M. Jirous, who is holding Olinka Hochmanová
(now Fleková) in his arms, a concert by Psí vojáci,
Na Dobešce, Prague, 1987

