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The Poetry of Jaroslav Seifert

Translated by Ewald Osers

Lovers, those evening pilgrims . . .

Lovers, those evening pilgrims,
walk from darkness into darkness
to an empty bench
and wake the birds.

Only the rats, which nest with the swan
on the pond's bank under the willow branches,
sometimes alarm them.

Keyholes are glittering in the sky,
and when a cloud covers them
somebody's hand is on the door-knob
and the eye, which had hoped to see a mystery,
gazes in vain.

– I wouldn't mind opening that door,
except I don't know which,
and then I fear what I might find.

By now that pair were falling down together
in a close embrace,
and in that state of weightlessness
were reeling in spasms of wonderment.

The mists are dancing, wearing wreaths
of daisies, bird droppings, and rust
their swirling cloaks
still red from the extinguished evening sky.

But those two, lips to lips,
are still beyond this world,
beyond the door of heaven.

– When you start falling, hold to me tight
and hang on to your scarf!

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Sometimes we are tied down . . .

Sometimes we are tied down by memories
and there are no scissors that could cut
through those tough threads.
Or ropes!

You see the bridge there by the House of Artists?
A few steps before that bridge
gendarmes shot a worker dead
who was walking in front of me.

I was only twenty at the time,
but whenever I pass the spot
the memory comes back to me.
It takes me by the hand and together we walk
to the little gate of the Jewish cemetery,
through which I had been running
from their rifles.

The years moved on with unsure, tottering step
and I with them.
Years flying
till time stood still.

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Halley's Comet

I saw nothing at that moment,
nothing but strangers' backs,
heads under their hats craning.
The street was crowded.

I'd have liked to scramble up that blank wall
by my fingernails,
the way addicts of ether try to do,
but just then my hand was seized
by a woman's hand,
I took a few steps
and before me opened those depths
we call the heavens.

The spires of the Cathedral down on the horizon

looked as if cut out
from matte silver foil,
but high above them the stars were drowning.

There it is! See it now?
Yes, I see it!
In trails of sparks which would not die out
the star was vanishing without return.

It was a spring night, sweet and mild,
after mid-May,
the balmy air was laden with perfumes
and I inhaled it
together with the stardust.

Once when in summer I had tried to smell
– and only furtively –
the scent of some tall lilies
– they used to sell them in our market-place
in kitchen jugs –
people would laugh at me.
For on my face was golden pollen.

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St George's Basilica¹

If in the white Basilica of St George
fire broke out,
God forbid,
its walls after the flames would be rose-coloured.
Perhaps even its twin towers: Adam and Eve.
Eve is the slimmer one, as is usual with women,
though this is only an insignificant glory
of their sex.
The fiery heat would make the limestone blush.

Just as young girls do
after their first kiss.

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¹ Romanesque church, older than St. Vitus' Cathedral, which adjoins it.

Once only . . .

Once only did I see
the sun so blood-red.
And never again.
It sank ominously towards the horizon
and it seemed as if
someone had kicked apart the gates of hell.
I asked at the observatory
and now I know why.

Hell we all know, it's everywhere
and walks upon two legs.
But paradise?
It may well be that paradise is only
a smile
we have long waited for,
and lips
whispering our name.
And then that brief vertiginous moment
when we're allowed to forget
that hell exists.

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If you call poetry . . .

If you call poetry a song
– and people often do –
then I've sung all my life.
And I marched with those who had nothing,
who lived from hand to mouth.
I was one of them.

I sang of their sufferings,
their faith, their hopes,
and I lived with them through whatever
they had to live through. Through their anguish,
weakness and fear and courage
and poverty's grief.
And their blood, whenever it flowed,
spattered me.

Always it flowed in plenty
in this land of sweet rivers, grass and butterflies
and passionate women.
Of women, too, I sang.
Blinded by love
 I staggered through my life,
tripping over dropped blossoms
or a cathedral step.

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To Be a Poet

Life taught me long ago
that music and poetry
are the most beautiful things on earth
that life can give us.
Except for love, of course.

In an old textbook
published by the Imperial Printing House
in the year of Vrchlický's death
I looked up the section on poetics
and poetic ornament.

Then I placed a rose in a tumbler,
lit a candle
and started to write my first verses.

Flare up, flame of words,
and soar,
even if my fingers get burned!

A startling metaphor is worth more
than a ring on one's finger.
But not even Puchmajer's Rhyming Dictionary
was any use to me.

In vain I snatched for ideas
and fiercely closed my eyes
in order to hear that first magic line.
But in the dark, instead of words,
I saw a woman's smile and

wind-blown hair.

That has been my destiny.
And I've been staggering towards it breathlessly
all my life.

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Verses from an Old Tapestry

Prague!
Who has seen her but once
will hear her name
always ringing in his heart.
She is herself a song woven into time
and we love her.
So let her ring!

My first happy dreams
glittered above her rooftops
like flying saucers
and vanished God knows where
when I was young.

Once I pressed my face
against the stone of an ancient wall
somewhere below the Castle forecourt,
and in my ear, suddenly,
sounded a gloomy booming.
That was the roar of bygone centuries.
But the moist, soft soil
of the White Mountain
was whispering gently in my ear.

Go forth, you'll be enchanted.
Sing out, they're waiting.
And don't lie!

I went and did not lie.
And to you, my loves,
only a little.
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View from Charles Bridge²

The rain had long since stopped.
In the pilgrimage church in Moravia
where I had sought shelter from a storm
they were chanting a Marian song
which stopped me from leaving.
I used to hear it back home.

The priest had genuflected at the steps
and left the altar,
the organ had sobbed and fallen silent,
but the throng of pilgrims did not move.
Not until minutes later did the kneeling rise
and, singing,
 without turning their heads,
all move backwards together
toward the open portals.

Never did I return there, never
again stand under the foliage of lindens,
where white banners waved
under the buzzing of bees.
I was homesick for Prague
even though I'd only briefly stayed
outside her walls.

Day after day I gaze in gratitude
on Prague's Castle
 and on its Cathedral:
I cannot tear my eyes away
from that picture.
 It is mine
and I also believe it is miraculous.

At least it assigned me my fate.
And each time twilight falls
 into Prague's windows
with stars in translucent darkness

² Marian song – songs of devotion to the Virgin Mary, associated with Baroque, Counter-Reformation times.

I hear her ancient voice
and I hear poetry.
Without that voice I would be silent
as the bird
called the kiwi.

There are days when the Castle
 and its Cathedral
are gloomily magnificent,
when it seems
they were built of dismal rock
brought from the moon.

An instant later, though, the towers of Prague
are once more wreathed in rays
 and roses
and that sweet delusion
of which love, too, is woven.

My frivolous steps along the streets,
my rose-red adventures
and loves and all the rest
are buried under light ash
since Time burnt down.

A few steps from the Royal Road
was a dark corner
where tousle-haired prostitutes appeared
to walkers in the evenings,
luring into their dead wombs
young inexperienced boys,
as I was then.
Now all is silent there.
And only television aeriels haunt
the ridges of the roofs.

But whenever I step on the pavement
of Charles Bridge
I am reminded of those pilgrims
in the pilgrimage church.

What bliss it is
 to walk upon this bridge!
Even though the picture is often glazed

by my own tears.

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Our Lady of Žižkov

When May arrived at last,
and spring
soiled its flowery rays
on the roofs of the tenements,
my mother would sink to her knees
in the church of St Procopius
and pray to the Holy Virgin.
In May she felt closest to her.

Huddled before the altar
she resembled a bundle of cast-off clothes
left behind by someone.
– It's you I'm praying for, ungrateful boy!
But I smiled inwardly.

I enjoyed Latin at school.
We were reading Virgil,
and in my head echoed the rhythms
of the Roman poets.
I also started writing poetry.
I walked along and sang.
Softly and badly.

I hated mathematics.
Whenever we had to write an essay
I was terrified
and during the night would toss
from side to side.

Sometimes I thought of praying
but soon rejected the idea. It would be shameful
to ask Heaven for help.
Until one day I came to know
what terror was.
Terrifying terror.

I remembered my mother's faith

and calculatingly I thought:

Just suppose!

Soon I was walking up the cold stone steps
to the Žižkov church,
to the altar decked with lilies.
But their smell turned bitter on my tongue
like the milky sap
of dandelions.

Hurriedly I asked the Virgin
to have mercy!
To have mercy and intercede
so that the girl I loved,
who was barely eighteen
and was walking about in deep despair,
not eating and not sleeping,
unhappy and in tears,
and would rather die,
should not, for Heaven's sake, be pregnant.

The statue of the Virgin gazed
stolidly into my eyes.

But a few days later the flowers
on the altar smelled
sweet as before.

And once more I felt on my lips
the taste of happy kisses.

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REMINISCENCES

On My Parents³

I know that nobody will ask me about this, that is obvious, but if it did interest somebody after all, and he were to ask me about my parents' marriage, I would have to describe their marital union in contemporary terminology: it was the cohabitation of two individuals with different world views. My father was a Social Democrat, while my mother was a quiet, lyrical Catholic who obeyed divine and ecclesiastical laws as much as possible. She liked to go to church. It was a diversion from the routine of her weekdays, from the mechanical sequence of daily work. It was her poetry. She only rarely took communion – mostly when misfortunes occurred. She regarded them as God's punishment, and so she wanted to pacify the heavens.

My parents reacted to life differently, but in harmony and not without self-sacrifice and, during the war, not without going hungry. I remember well how my stomach used to growl. My mother surely found moments of contentment when she threw herself on the cold, moist stones of the floor in the church in Žižkov, and told the Virgin Mary openly about her troubles, trying, probably in vain, to hang on the Virgin's long, beautiful hands a rosary made of her tears. And I would walk back and forth between the two of them, from Red Flag meetings to "Thousandfold We Greet Thee" in a single day or evening. . . .

If I were to complain, I would be lying. Their different world views did not cause me any special difficulties. I liked to go with my father to political meetings and popular assemblies, and liked equally well to go with my mother and sing long hymns about the Virgin Mary, standing by the stall where she sat. . . .

Today when I stand over the urns of my parents, I must confess I loved my father more. My father was closer to me in the make-up of his character. Of course I loved my mother, but I catch myself thinking that what I felt was actually compassion for her bitter lot.

The Schoolboy and the Prostitute

A friend who sat next to me in school told me about a small street in the Malá Strana section of Prague, where there were several brothels. People call it Corpses Street. The girls are not allowed to go outside the houses at all, he said, and they are strictly guarded. Mainly, drunk Hungarian soldiers go there. The girls wear negligées and sit on the soldiers' knees, and the soldiers kiss them whenever they feel like it. That was all he knew. I promised him with a handshake I would not tell anybody.

Those were the last months of the First World War, and Prague was full of Hungarian soldiers.

As soon as I could, the next day, I went to Malá Strana, partly out of curiosity and partly for another reason. It is a long way from Žižkov. My heart beat furiously. At the market place several vegetable and fruit stands were still open. The butcher, who

also kept a shop, was still selling at his stand in the street, out there with his butcher's block. A few pale white lambs hung in his small shop window, with pink bows around their slit throats. I loitered for a moment amidst the stands in the market and hesitated a little. Then I made a quick decision and went in the direction of Corpses Street, which was only a few steps away. I had a feeling I knew which street it was. I was right. The metal street sign said Břetislav Street but, as I later found out, nobody called it that. It was called Corpses Street because funeral processions used to go up it to the cemetery on John's Hill. The street kept the name long after the cemetery no longer existed. It was a short, narrow street.

And deserted, not a person anywhere. I went up the little street close to the houses and looked with curiosity into the ground-floor windows. The smudged curtains did not move. Obviously, early afternoon was not the time of day for love. The girls were probably sleeping after lunch. At John's Hill I turned around, disappointed, and walked back. When I reached the last house at the bottom, I heard a soft knock on a window. I had to look in. The curtains parted, and standing by the window was a girl with a dark braid hanging over her shoulder. Surprised, I remained stockstill.

When she saw my frightened look, she smiled and said something to me, but I could not hear her voice through the glass. The street is so narrow that two steps were enough and I was on the other side of the street. One can jump across it easily. Again, this time more calmly, I peered through the window. The girl was good-looking, at least I thought so. She was smiling at me so kindly that some of my fear left me. As soon as she realized that I was afraid and hesitant, she unbuttoned her white blouse in one motion. I felt myself turn pale with fright, then immediately afterwards blood rushed forcefully into my head again. Terrified, I looked into the window at the bared girl's breasts. I stood there confused, as if lightning had struck the pavement next to me. The girl continued smiling at me and I trembled. This lasted only a few seconds. The girl slowly buttoned up her blouse and with her hand beckoned me inside. Then the curtain closed again.

I fled in confusion.

I wanted to be alone. I rushed through Italian Street and stopped only at the bottom of the stairs, in Seminary Park. The garden was in full bloom. How fortunate that the trees were blossoming just then. I felt comfortable under their blossom-wrapped branches. Beauty makes us feel at peace with the world. In the musical humming of bees I put my thoughts in order a little, and I calmed down. I forced my heart to be quiet.

From my youth on, even before I had become quite aware of it, I belonged among the faithful believers in one of the most beautiful myths in the world. I believed in the myth of love of woman. Today it is hard to find. Women have thrown away their invisible halo, and therefore comb their hair differently. A pity. There is nothing more beautiful in the world than a naked flower and a naked woman. I know people are familiar with these beauties, but they are always mysterious to us, and we want to discover them again and again. . . .

The first vision of a woman's body held out to me by that dusty ground-floor window slipped into my heart like a time bomb. I kept its image, bright and shining,

³ The titles of the excerpts from Seifert's reminiscences are the editor's.

before my eyes. It was always with me, and for the time being it was what I desired most; for the first time I began really to beg for love.

How chaste and maidenly blushing the two round blossoms seemed to me, the way a girl's body slowly blooms towards love when the time of childhood is approaching the movable boundary of womanhood. I desired nothing else than to be able to lay my head between them and to press my mouth to that delight and to that fragrance. But fear tied my feet with an invisible rope . . . I did not dare enter the dark hallway leading to the girl. . . . In the end, however, I compelled myself to try. I decided firmly that I must take those few fateful steps. Desire was forcing me. After I had summoned my courage and pressed the door handle, everything would be easy. Only those few steps. I will shut my eyes and clench my teeth. It will take only a few seconds. With this resolution, I returned to the house. In the doorway, however, I found an old woman. She noticed my fear and hesitation right away and caught me by the sleeve. With her toothless mouth she whispered something lascivious about the beautiful girls inside who were waiting for me to choose one of them. I tore myself from her and rushed away again.

I did not go to Malá Strana for several days. And then I took another oath that I would conquer my weakling's fear, my cowardice. But this time, when I reached the street, right on the pavement in front of the house was a fat rat. It was dragging some filthy thing in its mouth. It noticed me immediately, but stopped and calmly, slowly looked at me with its pink eyes. After a while it slunk across the stone threshold and vanished into the hallway I was going to enter myself. I turned away in disgust and never again returned to that street. I was convinced for a long time that never again in my life would such happiness await me and that never again would I see anything so miraculously surprising as I did that beautiful day in the dusty window in sad Corpses Street in Malá Strana, when almost all the trees were blooming in April in old Seminary Park and the weather was so fine.

What a fool I was.

Often when I recall that adventure, I sigh – how could I have been so mistaken, how could I have been so mistaken.

How I Became a Poet⁴

The first publication of Ivan Suk's poems (by S. K. Neumann in *June*) woke me out of the dream in which my desire and determination to become a poet had been lulled to sleep. Jealousy possessed me. It never occurred to us that *June* was a magazine that would print our little poems.

When Suk arrived with a copy of the magazine and even showed us his fee, I could hardly keep myself from showing my impotent envy. For several days I walked around all alone, making speeches to myself full of tears and despair. A hundred times I picked up paper and pencil, and a hundred times I put them down, overcome by impotence.

⁴ Translation of an excerpt from Jaroslav Seifert, *Ještě jednou jaro* (*Spring Once More*) (Prague, 1961), ed. by František Hrubín and Jiří Brabec.

When Suk published more poems in Hora's Saturday supplement to *Právo lidu*, my sadness and powerlessness increased still further. A while later, when the first witty and amusing poems by Němec also appeared in *June*, I decided that whatever the cost, despite everything, I must write some poetry.

It was a long night. I tore a mountain of paper into shreds and immediately threw it all into the stove to be rid of the nonsense I had written. I wrote verses about every possible thing: love, Prague, cemeteries, life – some cheerful, others sad, some tragic, others comic – but they all burned in the fire in just a few seconds. Finally, when I could no longer think up anything at all, I wrote about the things in front of my eyes: the windows, the stove, the bed. The poem about my bed turned out so well that I sent it to Hora. I compared my bed to a mule walking up a narrow trail towards the stars, in the Nevada mountains.

Hora sent me word by return mail that I was an idiot and that I should stop writing immediately. I was completely demolished. I crawled into a hole and, seeing no other way out, threw myself at my textbooks, which till then I had neglected with a contemptuous smile, thinking I was a poet.

I decided to become a scholar: perhaps a mathematician, or an historian. Or maybe even a biologist? The upshot of it all was that I thought of myself as an ugly hunchback who had fallen in love with a queen, saw her all the time in his dreams, and wept. Meanwhile Němec and Suk climbed from one success to another. Suk was already putting together his first book for Mínařík's publishing house, and young, genuine laurels of poetry were winding themselves around Němec's dusty hat.

After the ointment of resignation had somewhat cured my wound, I found consolation in my algebra and geometry classes. Not that I understood those fields of knowledge very well; I didn't, but they were the subjects that reminded me least of my sad catastrophe. How could I have chosen Greek or Latin, when Catullus's pleasing poems continually evoked in me the desperate night that I spent doggedly defacing sheets of white paper with my lyrical banalities. Even the flying swallow and the velvety bat in the zoology textbook, and the pictures of blossoms with cross-sections of seed pods and petals were so lyrical that they forced me to think of poetical evenings and the spring that just then was filling the whole town with light and fragrance.

At that time I used to carry a heavy walking stick, and I took up smoking cigars, because both of those affectations were characteristic of our math teacher. I slouched when I walked and I dressed carelessly, because that too was typical of this sloppy teacher.

Have you ever seen spring on Petřín Hill? It is amazing. Hardly has the snow disappeared, gurgling hurriedly along the paths leading steeply downhill, when the cherry trees in Strahov Gardens burst into bloom. To walk down the middle of the park on a beautiful day and to reflect stubbornly on the principles of equations seemed to me a very appropriate protest against the poetry that I hated. The blossoms of the golden rain tree poured from the low branches behind the blouses of girls sitting on benches reading Mácha's *May*, but this couldn't shake my conviction

that love, so closely connected with lyrical yearning, must be resisted with the elevated, superior, haughty cynicism of a Peruvian executioner.

Prague looked like a chess board at the beginning of a game. The king and queen stood over there, here was the golden rook. The apartment houses and villas were the pawns. My weak cigars slowly drugged my eyes. Without knowing just how it happened, I found myself on the small observation platform on Hunger Wall. The chessmen on the board moved slowly, deliberately before my eyes. On the horizon stood the frostbitten tower of the Žižkov church. The dial of its clock glittered fiercely.

The alpha, beta, gamma, delta of angles, the infinity of the circle, and the alphabet of algebraic paradigms lost something of their urgency. It seemed as if the pigeons that were flying around loudly clapping their wings had eaten the pygmy letters out of my hands. I sat down on a round stone with the four points of the compass and the names of Europe's cities inlaid in gold. Paris to the West, followed by London, Bremen, Hamburg, Leipzig, Berlin, Bucharest, Budapest, Milan, Genoa, Monte Carlo, Nice. It was the rose of Europe.

At that moment I felt that I was holding Europe in my hands, that I was lifting it to my lips and nostrils, that I was smelling the perfume of remote distances, the perfume of the world. Clouds, awesomely beautiful clouds, sailed above Prague, and the perfume of spring excited the centers of my thought. The glory of the town lay at my feet. On this relief map, tied like a knot and looking like a massive stone stage prop, I thoroughly savored the dramatic day. Gold and kisses. Women in front of mirrors. Treason and love. Heroism and roses. Passions and deaths.

No, it was impossible to be a mathematician.

Well, boy, dip the pen once more into the cerulean blue of the sky and write, even if only off the cuff. Try one more time to be a poet. Write something about the beauties that pass before your eyes as you lie on this stone which lets you sense the hitherto unknown beauty of the world. Strew the dust of stars on your writings so that they will dry, and see what happens.

That evening I wrote a poem and, with a pounding heart, sent it to Hora.

He printed it the next day.

With my poem on the table in front of me, I wrote another with miraculous ease and sent it to Neumann. It came out in the next issue of *June*.

When Neumann gave me his hand, I was afraid to shake it. It seemed too great a joy for me. And when he even invited me to have lunch with him, my knees shook and I was not able to swallow the food.

Neumann's friendly reception gave me courage, and I decided to go see Hora, with a new little poem written in beautiful calligraphy. Phlegmatic, wearing glasses, his eyes eternally glazed, Hora received me rather coldly. He seemed to be of the opinion that a little poem is no great event, particularly when written by a twenty-year-old.

After these successes I looked up Němec and Suk. I was now able to look them calmly in the eyes. I walked with them into the center of Prague, stepping lightly, talking about poetry.

By the end of the school year I had hopelessly failed mathematics.

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A Few Minutes Before Execution: May 1945

There surely does not exist a single biography of Dostoevsky anywhere in the world which does not describe how Dostoevsky was sentenced to death and how he felt during those moments when he was face to face with death. That goes without saying. Who can fail to remember the description of those overwhelming minutes when the condemned prisoners, including Dostoevsky, were taken to Semyonov Square in Petersburg and in the last seconds the Tsar granted them a pardon? What a horrifying and earthshaking moment for the author, a literary genius who knew how to lay bare the human soul and to penetrate to the very bottom of human passions in turmoil.

Dostoevsky, however, writes about that climactic moment of his life surprisingly simply. In later letters from Siberia, where he was sent after he was pardoned, he wrote to his brother many angry letters in which he described in detail all the cruelties the prisoners suffered, but which are really not the same as the terror of imminent death. However, he wrote on the whole calmly and simply about those few minutes. "They dressed us in white execution clothes, and tied us in threes to the posts." In the last moments Dostoevsky was able to embrace his colleagues. Then they let the prisoners kiss a cross, and finally swords were broken over their heads, because they were noblemen.⁵ In the very last seconds he became aware how much he loved his brother. That is all. He described it as concisely and calmly as I am writing it myself.

May 1945 found several editors, employees, and officials of the administration at the People's House on Hybernská Street, where we were already planning a new, liberated Social-Democratic daily. Others were working alongside us on the first number of the new, liberated, Communist paper *Rudé právo*. On Saturday, May 5, people began to tear down German shop signs in the streets of Prague, and to arrest Nazi soldiers. The Prague Uprising had begun. We stayed in the editorial offices. Others joined us: typesetters, layout men, and staff. Other editors also hurried to join us, and we immediately started to work. Soon the presses began to hum, and paperboys distributed the first copies. When the first shots were fired in the street, even some passersby, who could no longer run across the street towards either Žižkov or the Powder Tower, took shelter in the People's House. The Czechoslovak flag and the red flag waved over the building. Chestnut trees blossomed in the garden. Amidst the chestnut trees there also grew a *Ginkgo biloba*, a rather rare tree in our country, a relic of the times when the palace belonged to the Kinskýs and possessed an aristocratic garden.

⁵ A ritual performed before executions of noblemen in Tsarist Russia to indicate their being deprived of their status before their deaths.

The Masaryk Railway Station was occupied by the Czechs, and the Germans were shelling it. A shell hit the People's House, too, and shell fragments and bullets were flying around the courtyard. Because the Germans fortified themselves not only in the YMCA but also next door in the Anglobank, shots whistled over our typewriters and over the hairdos of our typists. We moved the entire editorial office downstairs into the basement, where the presses were, and then still further down, to the paper storeroom. I wrote verses about May on rolls of newsprint in the storeroom. It was a good way to write. It went well. Who needs desks? Nights flowed into days. Dramatic days went by. Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday.

The Czech unit assigned to the People's House by the Revolutionary Command Post was small and poorly armed. They had seized some weapons when they disarmed the German soldiers who had been occupying the Monopol Hotel across from the railway station. However, the situation changed quickly to our disadvantage. The Germans took the station and shot everybody they found there. Only a few, unarmed people saved themselves, at the last moment, by taking refuge in the People's House. After that, things happened quickly. The Germans captured the building at the corner of Havlíček Street. There in the gourmet shop they found stores of wine and champagne. Because the walls between the cellars had previously been broken through to link the buildings, on German orders, the German troops found themselves in the People's House, and the tiny Czech unit had to divide itself between the cellar and the main entrance. Germans approached the House in an armored car. One of the defenders in the cellar used his rifle to shoot the first soldier who came through. The soldier dropped immediately in front of me, and I had my first opportunity to see how death looks close up. Lying on the ground, he still called to his comrades to shoot, but he himself could not raise his rifle. He did not even have the strength to pull the trigger. That is how quickly life escaped through the wound in his stomach.

For a confused minute we were walking around in his blood, but a German officer appeared in the gap in the wall and ordered us to raise our hands. He had the women stay in the cellar and ordered the men to leave through the rear exit onto Havlíček Street, and go into the vestibule of the burning Masaryk Station. The soldiers who escorted us assured us with a smile that at the railway station we would immediately be shot.

First we had to sit down on the tracks. A few steps away from us was a pile of dead Czechs who had been shot a moment before. We were only waiting for the departure of a long hospital train which stood on the tracks behind us. The train was full of badly wounded people lying on cots, one on top of the other. The Germans shot a boy before our eyes, on the spur of the moment – an ancient Austrian bayonet unfortunately happened to be sticking out from under his coat – and then they shot an older man, because some German soldiers said that they had seen him firing. Both were shot with a revolver in the back of their necks. When blood spurts from a hole in the nape of the neck, it is not a pretty sight. The old man was silent, but the boy whined pitifully until he died.

I don't know why, but probably because they could not get the hospital train to leave the station quickly enough, and because the fire in the station was spreading fast, they ordered us to get up and led us in twos to Žižkov. The heat of the fire was so fierce that we had to protect our faces with handkerchiefs. . . .

How often I used to run happy and content on this street near the station, from my earliest childhood on. This was where I used to rush along when I was happily leaving for all my vacations in Kralupy, and where I returned into my mother's arms. And now we were walking there in silence, full of fear, not knowing what was ahead of us.

At the George of Poděbrady Barracks they stood us against the wall, and we waited again. They told us one more time that we were going to be shot, in the courtyard of the barracks. But in the courtyard the Germans were preparing their flight from Prague, and their preparations were not yet finished.

Walking along Hrabovka Street, the spring breezes were filled with the scent of lilacs from the park on Vítkov Hill, where I once spent days and evenings wandering above the smoke of the railway station, my fingers interlaced with a girl's, my mood one of innocent joy, my laughter carefree. I remembered clearly the summer violets, whose scent never satiates me, even today. The lookout pavilion, which still exists today, offers one of the most beautiful views in Prague, although it is sometimes a little smoky because of the locomotives.

Negotiators carrying white flags on their shoulders passed the barracks twice, coming and going. They did not even look at us. We did not have an inkling what they were doing, or what issues were involved in their negotiations, which lasted quite a long time.⁶ We experienced tense moments until the last minute the Germans decided to exchange us for a group of German women, children, and old men, whom our people had caught as they were fleeing. I had no idea how long we had stood against the wall of the barracks. A German soldier had pulled my watch off my wrist when we were walking up from the People's House. It seemed like eternity to me.

The Germans gave us a sharp command to scatter in all directions. After a long walk past the barricades, Piša and I and two others found ourselves at the Troja Bridge. There we stayed at a friend's place through the last stormy night. From the windows of the apartment house, which in those days stood there almost alone, we could see Schornhorst's unit, some of whose troops occupied the road sloping down from Bulovka to the Troja Bridge. The unit's assignment was to destroy the town and flee into American captivity. In the first task fortunately they did not succeed. In the second, only partly. But that is well-known history.

⁶ Negotiations – The German General Toussaint was ready to surrender to leaders of the Czech Uprising, but his superior general refused to do so. The leaders of several Czech revolutionary organizations, which had formed a coordinating Revolutionary Committee, finally, on May 8, negotiated an agreement under which the German Army was permitted to withdraw westward in order to surrender to the United States armies west and south of Prague.

The Germans gave up all weapons except sidearms. The first unit of the Soviet Army reached Prague at 6 a.m. on May 9.

Aware of the impossibility of comparing a world-famous genius with a lyrical poet from a small country, still I used to envy Dostoevsky's unique experience: to be sentenced to death, to come to know the moment when one must necessarily leave his life, accept that inexorable fact, and then to be saved and to taste again the security and the sweetness of life, to experience that couple of terrible minutes when time is quickly pulling one towards annihilation, and then to gaze at the broad expanse of time that lies ahead like a beautiful landscape. What drama must run through a person's mind in those few minutes! What does such a moment mean to someone, especially to a writer, who has the ability to articulate such an experience accurately?

Without comparing anything except just this human event, I should like to say this on my own behalf:

When Píša and I stood by the wall of the barracks, I pulled out of my pocket a piece of bread and some cheese I had taken from the German supplies when I was leaving the Hotel Monopol. Neither the bread nor the cheese were fresh anymore, but we ate them hungrily. Then I thought of my family at home. I knew that on the whole they were safe. Yet somehow in my subconscious I did not at all admit the idea that I should not see them again. I decisively chased this from my thoughts. I looked at the sad, ugly buildings facing me. All the windows were shut, apparently out of caution. Once in a while a curtain was pulled aside somewhere and a face appeared. Then near the Karlín overpass I noticed a metal sidewalk toilet, which awakened a grotesque memory.

Many years before, an unknown but obviously quite skilled painter had painted on that toilet wall, with tar, a naked woman in a most risqué position. When we were boys, we often came to look at this picture. It was there for quite a long time. It excited us. For boys it was quite an extraordinary experience. While we were standing by the barracks, that picture appeared clearly before my mind's eye, although until then I had almost forgotten that rather inelegant artifact.

I looked again at the gray windows across the street. Smoke came out of the small chimneys. I wondered, what are those happy people cooking for lunch today? They did not have to stand against the wall of the barracks; they just looked out at us from time to time through the curtains. Please, for goodness' sake, do not take this to be courage, but in those moments I really did not think about death, although death was waiting for us a few steps away in the courtyard, and we somehow took that fact for granted.

When they scattered us in all directions and we breathed the sweet air of freedom and heard the Prague radio announce in loud tones that the Germans had surrendered, I can say that then we immediately forgot the hours we had lived through.

And years later?

Recently I happened to be in those exact places where we survived those very difficult moments, and I did not remember them at all. Only after I returned home did I realize I had walked through those places and had not been aware of it.

Today I do not remember those terrible moments any more than a child running after a new ball remembers the measles he had the year before.

Yes, believe me. That's how it is. Take care. Good-bye. And let there be no more wars!

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