

# Growing up as Vicar's Daughter in Communist Czechoslovakia: Politics, Religion and Childhood Agency Examined

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## Introduction

During the communist regime, there was a great difference in how people treated and experienced private space of their families and public space of their other existence. Children and childhood were perceived in both spaces as a symbol of hope for a better future. However, while in private space children were often seen as one day being able to overcome the regime, thus symbolising a tool of empowerment and resistance, the public space presented them in an opposite way: as strong and cheerful supporters and promoters of current political situation. Children were often torn in between family and ideology interests, navigating their lives within both fields and actively influencing their mutual interaction and meaning.

In this chapter, I wish to examine my childhood memories, describing symbiotic but mutually exclusive fields of religion and socialism. I grew up as a protestant minister's daughter in a small border town in North Bohemia, Czechoslovakia.<sup>1</sup> While Protestantism and dissent culture formed my existence and interaction within the proximate family, religion was overlooked, denied, forbidden, or even persecuted at school.

Under communist Czechoslovakia, rural hilly boarder regions were traditionally considered a periphery, where opponents of the regime were secluded – be it voluntarily or under pressure. My hometown Klickov however, was somehow different. The more meaningless the town was within the geographical map of the country, the more active role did its communist leadership assume in erasing the apostles of the 'opium of the masses' from its ranks, manoeuvring them to the underground/dissent culture located at the very outskirts of this periphery. These practices included the school principal not allowing his teachers to attend Sunday services in town; as a result, teachers had to travel secretly to other cities in order to take part. Similarly, parents of children who took part in religious activities in town were threatened by the town leadership with receiving 'unfavourable cadres' opinion for their children, once applying for further education. Cadres were likewise important in a local job market: despite her abilities, education and experience, my mother – the priest's wife - could not hold a principal post in local musical school and had to satisfy herself with regular teacher post, being happy to have such a job at all.

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<sup>1</sup> The town is a part of the Czech Republic today.

Events described below took place during the 1980s, the last decade of a socialist state.<sup>2</sup> I lived here until I was 17 years old, when I left for Scotland to study. My socialist childhood experience became the source of a culture shock there. However, over the years and with added anthropological training, the culture of my childhood gradually became a rich ethnographical material. It helps me up to the present day to envision the plasticity of everyday human experience.

During the 1980s, Klickov had about 5000 inhabitants. Looking back, it provided a perfect site for ethnographic work of any anthropologist: large enough to encompass most social institutions and infrastructure available in the society as a whole and small enough for an individual to be able to penetrate into most of them. Due to our unique status of the only vicar's family in town, we were public figures, known to most people of the town. As vicar's family, we represented values and ideology unfavourably received by the communist leadership; as such, associating with us was never a risk-free relationship. In our mutual interaction, people had to take an active stance towards us, displaying their fears, protests, consent or despise. These life episodes became part of my formal (school, health system, church, organised activities for children) as well as informal learning and local knowledge. My memories were captured in my diaries and draft letters to my Russian penfriend, which I kept over these years.<sup>3</sup>

While reading through my memoirs, various episodes of my childhood came across to me as scenes of a never-ending life performance unfolding slowly. As de Saint-Exupery expresses: "No single event can awaken within us a stranger whose existence we had never suspected. To live is to be slowly born" (1969, p. 74). One scene led to another, the latter embracing the spiritual experience as well as material requisites of the former, the scenes through which I was slowly born. Thus, I explore my childhood as it unfolds through my memories with the *theatre framework* of Marc Abélès (1997).

Abélès draws attention to various devices traditionally associated with theatre, such as costumes, requisites, stage, and precision in direction, well-played roles, and charisma of actors, and applies them to politics. A theatre play is an outcome of director-actors-spectators interaction. Likewise, in public events, political establishment as well as individuals interchange upon the director's post. In symbiosis, they make a play powerful enough to move people and believe they are part of its reality. My childhood memories are full of these episodes, ranging from large events like staged celebrations of national days to very intimate and daily events, like a formalized greeting of our teachers at school. Theatre and political action were inseparably intertwined during

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<sup>2</sup> Velvet revolution, which set off the change of a socialist regime into a democratic state took place in November 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Since they were in foreign language, I have always composed a draft first, to avoid mistakes.

this period. As such, they penetrated all public actions, however meaningless and routinized they may have seemed at the time.

In addition, I propose to use the lens of *serious play*, as introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1988). *Serious play* is tangential to the theatre framework in the sense that a self-observed play, often starting as an experiment, adventure or a game, absorbs its actors to the extreme that soon they stop being actors only and take on the part of directors, as well as producers and critics of the play. Out of it, a serious play is born, a play which replaces reality. In my memories, this role was assumed mainly by politicians, as well as teachers and school principals. A self-contained system nevertheless provides a space for opposition by those who are not part of it. Several forms of resistance become available, depending upon innumerable variables. Occasionally, this may transform resistance into another version of a serious play. This paper is a story of resistance of a thirteen-year-old girl, growing up in a religious family. While the theatre framework of Abélès contributes more towards understanding of processes and actions resulting from this symbiosis, the latter theory searches for meaning and brings forward philosophical texture of the argument.

Last, I draw attention to current anthropological research on concepts of socialist childhood. Using developmental discourse and placing communist order at the peak of its evolutionary chain, the regime not only socialised children into proper future citizens, but it turned occasionally to an overpowering approach to childhood, typical for pre-19<sup>th</sup> century period (deMause, 1995). Thus children were both moulded and shaped through education and ideology and when not successful, they were physically overpowered and restrained from active participation. This gives away the fact that the regime acknowledged a great deal of children's agency and regarded them as strong political allies or enemies. My text offers several examples of such events.

### **Tools and methods**

The main sources of data that build up this text consist of my own teenage diaries and draft letters to my Russian penfriend, as well as my current memories and interpretations, set against interviews with my parents and siblings in order to widen the analytical perspective. Out of a vast material, I focused on the parts, which relate directly to schooling or learning experiences, setting them against the intimacy of our family life of the time.

I have selected a genre of autoethnographic short stories, where school/life episodes are discussed and mirrored in a family context. Text in italics is an English translation of a collage I have composed out of the original diary entries and letters, as recorded by myself some twenty-seven years ago. The narrative is written in the first person, from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old girl, attending the seventh grade of

*Základní škola.*<sup>4</sup> I believe that its authentic boldness and coarseness has a unique power to approximate a child's experience of society at that time. The absence of analysis associated with these memories makes the readers pause, to question, and to think without any ready answers at hand. This tactic intends to simulate the situation back in the 1980s, when no single answers and explanations were available.

The plain text on the opposite site makes a leap more than quarter of a century forward and provides a commentary and time-distance analysis of the diary entries. It reflects historical and geographical circumstances of the location and it is framed in the wider context of current sociological and anthropological literature. I attempt to do this exploration in a manner similar to Richard Price's (1983) method, who introduced the powerful dialogue of emic and etic<sup>5</sup> accounts of a narrative to the public. Although both of my accounts are emic narratives, they are written in a diachronic perspective and are presented to the reader on a different but near-enough space – one on even pages, the other on odd. By such physical proximity, I hope the reader gains a sense of these accounts' mutual dependence and interconnection, while being aware of the fact that they are experiences of two different worlds, times and lives, interlocked in a single body.

All the events and persons presented in the paper are real, although their names have been altered in order to provide as much anonymity as possible in any autoethnography.

### ***On decisions and consequences***

*My name is Mira and I am thirteen years old. When I grow up, I do not want to be a minister like my dad, because ministers cannot travel anywhere. On weekends they have to serve in church and during holidays they are not allowed to go abroad, since they are politically not in favour and they never receive any visa from the government. On the other hand, there are so many interesting people in the ministry. They talk about interesting things like the meaning of life, discuss death and soul. Today I discussed Jesus's resurrection with Pavel. The debate made me shiver inside my chest, I could picture people's souls in my mind. This feeling scared me and filled me with unspeakable joy at the same time.*

*I love to listen to my parent's friends when they come to visit and sit throughout the night and debate all this. Our bedroom is next to the kitchen where they sit, so I get to hear most of it. Ministry is definitely more exciting than being a musician like my*

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<sup>4</sup> During the 1980's, education was compulsory for children from age 6 (grade 1) up to 14 or 15 (grade 8). After this period, children sat entrance exams for high school (4 years), or apprenticeship (3 years).

<sup>5</sup> Emic narrative represents a personal memory, while etic narrative describes the event from the perspective of an authority – a historian, politician etc. Author shows on several examples that it is the latter which changes more dramatically over the time, copying the changing ideological framework of a society.

*mum. I hate practicing my flute every day. It is horrible to envision myself to have to do this for living. But if I do not get all A's on my next two reports, I will have to go to conservatoire, because the communists will not let me study anything else but music.*

*I think you must really like your job in order to spend so much time of your life doing it. Otherwise, what is the point in life? Both my parents love their jobs, they say it is their mission. I want to take after them in this... My dad wanted to become an acrobat and to join a circus when he was young, because he loved to travel but then his friends changed his mind and he became a protestant minister instead. Occasionally, he reminds us (and himself) that he is not so far off his original ambition, because constantly, he is juggling with fire when preaching on Sundays, since our state is one big circus and you never know, who is sitting in the audience.*

*My grandma says I am a lucky child, because I did not have to live throughout the war like she did, or throughout the Stalinist 1950s like my mum. My grandparents are Protestants, whose forefathers fled the country after 1620s, when Habsburg catholic dynasty started to reign in Czech lands. Both my maternal grandparents were born in Poland but after the end of the Second World War they illegally escaped back to Czechoslovakia.*

*Now they work in a textile factory, my grandad as a mechanic and my grandma as a tailor. She also does a lot of tailoring privately, because she lives in a town which is a famous spa and where many tourists come and ladies want to look beautiful, so they spend a lot of money on clothes. It is not allowed to have a private business but grandma does not declare it anywhere. She says she is not afraid, because she makes clothes also for two wives of communist party leaders in her town, so they too would have a problem if she would.*

*She is a good tailor but she also has brains for business. In Poland she had a house, which she was unable to sell legally, because she is not a Polish citizen anymore. So she traded it for nylon scarfs and other fashionable textile items. Every summer, when she went to Poland for her holiday with my mum and my aunt, they have smuggled part of this back to Czechoslovakia in their suitcases, which were specially altered for this purpose. Patiently, over the years, she managed to smuggle it all to Czechoslovakia, selling it illegally to the ladies and tourists in her spa home-town. Together it was worth the house!*

*I would be absolutely terrified to do this. I envision my small mum, sitting upon the suitcase full of smuggled goods, trying to keep a poker face when the soldiers at the borders come to check the luggage and I am absolutely sweaty all over. I get butterflies in my stomach and I feel ill just from the idea. However, I think granny was*

*very brave to stand up like this for herself and her family. My dad does not approve of this; he says bad rules should be changed but sometimes not even a lifetime is enough to do that.*

*There are many rules in our school. For example, during the big break, we must eat our sandwiches, while strolling all the time in a double file along the school corridors. It looks like ice-skating on an ice-ring, only without skates. Everybody moves forward in the same speed, without a possibility to overtake. Once in a while a supervising teacher says we must turn around and change direction. We must stay only with our classmates, unable to visit others. The big break strolling law is causing me a lot of trouble, since my best friend, Lucie Maliřová, attends a parallel class C, situated one floor up from our class B. Every week we take turns and dare to come and see each other. When it happens, we have to hide at the girls' toilet, to be able to speak for a while, prior to setting upon the risky way back.*

*Some while ago, I have seen a film with Robert Redford, who is our idol, Lucie's and mine, and the most handsome man on earth. The film is called Brubaker. It is about a prison and changes that take place within it. Redford arrives to the prison disguised as a prisoner, only to turn out to be a new director of the prison later, installing new order. In this film, the prisoners walk about the yard in the very same manner, supervised by the prison guards, like we do at our school during our long break.*

*I told all about this to Lucie and we made a little game out of it. Each one of us cut a picture of Robert Redford out of a magazine, the best picture we could find. Then we folded it carefully and hid it in a decorated envelope inside a pocket of our school clothes. When we walk the corridors now, we narrow our eyes, holding the picture of Redford inside our pocket and we imagine Redford is walking with us. Like in the film, very soon he will reveal his true identity and bring down this nonsense, so we could go and see each other freely and talk like normal people, without having to hide.*

*My mum found the picture in my trousers when she was washing it, so I told her about this game and my dad asked about the reason for walking the corridors during the parent's meeting at school. Principal told him that this is to ensure we get enough exercise, since most parts of the day we have to sit at school benches motionless. Teachers are supervising us, because without this – especially boys – would start running about – and this could be dangerous and cause injuries. So walking practice combines both exercise and safety. My dad was laughing when he was saying this to us after the school meeting but it was a sarcastic smile, rather than finding it really funny. He said we will just have to bare this, until he manages to get some support from other parents and tries to offer a different solution at the next parents' meeting. I hope this is really soon and I hope this will last for some time too, since the exciting things do not tend to last for long in our school.*

## On decisions and consequences

The socialist Czechoslovak state exercised an overt control of public religious life. After university graduation, all priests-to-be had to preach in front of communist party members. They observed their social as well as intellectual activities both throughout their study and then later on during their service. Should they find them more or less in line with socialist teaching, the minister candidate was given approval to attain a parish. Once in post, communist party members, especially assigned to this task, inspected ministers randomly during their weekly public activities and Sunday preaching, and could take away their approval any time, labelling them a threat to a socialist ideology. This eventually forced many ministers to move to remote parts of the country or to change their profession and to take on some meaningless manual jobs, since no intellectual jobs were granted to them<sup>6</sup> should they be officially labelled a danger to the regime.

I remember my father improvising and changing texts he prepared for Sunday sermon on several occasions, because he spotted a communist church secretary in the audience. It was the same man all the time, his presence was not a secret. My father remembers these visits as tests of him staying alert. Like a clown in a circus, he had to respond to the demands of the audience. However, unlike a circus, he did not do it for the audience's amusement. Under socialist regime a sermon became a political play, with real dangers involved in this theatre-like performance. The threat of crossing an acceptable line and bearing its consequences was an integral part of every minister's job: preaching spiritual freedom within a state governed by spiritually restrictive ideology. Although my father approached these occasions with declared ease of a game, its real life consequences were always implicit. After each of these incidents, we expected a postman with anxiety, should she bring my father an order to come to the regional communist headquarters to explain himself. An order that could change the future of us all.

Additional control was exercised through the minister's children, held hostage by the regime to certain extent. Many of them were prevented from entering higher education of their choice, because of their parents' occupation. Their symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977) was undesirable by the state and the best way to stop it spreading was to prevent the children from attaining jobs that required education and thus promised not only personal development but also a possibility to influence others. Protestant families had several possibilities how to deal with this measure. One possibility<sup>7</sup> was to move to a

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<sup>6</sup> The 'unemployed' status did not exist during the communist time

<sup>7</sup> Other two possibilities were: A) to achieve only A's (1st grade) on all school reports throughout the entire school history. Such child was accepted for higher education of his/her choice without having to sit entrance exams. B) to pass talent exams and to be admitted into a conservatoire. In the 1980's, in this segment of schooling, talent was considered more important than political profile of students.

remote region of the country, where there was often more benevolent communist leadership, fewer inhabitants, and thus less competition for school places.

Proximity to a well-sealed border zone aroused in some of Klickov's inhabitants feeling of isolation, expressed in popular idiom, describing the region as in the boondocks. Others, on the contrary, were inspired to break through the seal, by a rare possibility to trade or even to smuggle goods from the outside world.

As such, the seal of the border was only illusory and impulses for change came both from within as well as from the outside of the communist system. In my memories, this idea is personified by a smuggler, one of them being my own grandma. A smuggler is a traveller between the worlds, trading goods, ideas, ideologies, while displaying both compliance as well as resistance to the regime, bringing its still waters into movement. Over the fifteen years granny managed to smuggle goods worth a house, taking ownership of what the communist regime had taken away from her. In order to gain justice, she had to break the law. I learned at an early age that a law can protect, as well as discriminate, and that making choices has its consequences which you have to be prepared to bare.

In Klickov, most smugglers came from families who lived in this region for generations. As such, their knowledge of natural environment was much deeper than that of the soldiers, who usually came for only a short period of a year or so as part of their compulsory army service. It was a public knowledge that the soldiers were silent benefactors of this black market trade, receiving their share in return for protection. This put many smugglers into an awkward position of double agents. In order to be able to keep up their illegal trade and to earn valuable extra income, they were frequently asked to collect information and hand it over to the communist establishment. While great part of the public considered buying smuggled goods as a means of resistance to the state and displayed their action by wearing these clothes publically, others have seen the danger that accompanied the benefits of foreign goods and chose to abstain from this possibility, not giving the establishment any pretext for subsequent counter action.

Smuggling did not restrain itself to movement of physical goods only. It encompassed also movement of immaterial things, such as information and ultimately also ideas, which represented the most lethal threat to the regime. Under such restrain, information became more than ever before a valuable article, which could be traded for personal benefits. It was never value free. By giving information away you gain for yourself but hurt others. In public discourse, informers were considered traitors and a great deal of social stigma was attached to them. Since early age, children were



brought up not to tell on others;<sup>8</sup> at school, children informers were always persecuted and ostracised by others.<sup>9</sup> While sharing information assumed compliance, withholding it was a powerful form of resistance. This is well illustrated in dissent literature of the time, including the plays by Vaclav Havel (1963, 1975).

Like adults, children were not merely silent observers of life under socialist regime but its active participants. They too had many occasions upon which to practice their choice of response to the regime. *To tell or not to tell* was a modified existential question that both children and adults had to answer for themselves.

The story of compulsory school strolling mentioned in the accompanying diary entry portrays several layers of such resistance at once. At the heart of the issue, there is a conflict in the form of a rule, which sensibility is questioned by those to whom it is meant to benefit. Abélès (1997) sees conflict as one of the two<sup>10</sup> constitutive settings for any political play, where common enemy becomes a cohesive part that connects all the actors and guides their responsive action. Children must stroll, because it is an exercise for them, which compensates for the movement-free periods spent in school benches. Movement is managed and supervised by adults in order to prevent injuries. Under organised modernity there is a hierarchical relationship between an adult and a child, the former having the upper hand. While socialisation and persuasion are state's chief disciplinary methods (deMause, 1995, p. 62), physical restriction can be applied when the former is not working (Wagner, 1994). Children's action mattered and their agency was taken seriously by the state. Children were also seen by the regime as potential smugglers of ideas. A child's disobedience had the same disruptive effects upon the state system as that of an adult regardless of their hierarchical inequality. Thus, I believe, studying children's means of resistance has high informative value about the whole society and its state of affairs.

Children's resistance is well illustrated with the story of visiting my school friend during the break. It shows intertwining of resistance to the physical movement with particular set of cultural/societal norms adopted both by individuals as well as the crowd. The child is aware of the existing school hierarchy and recognises the unlikely possibility of having the rule changed upon direct negotiation. Different resistance strategies are therefore employed. First of all, there is the actual breaking of the rule by physical trespassing. The child runs away to meet her friend, taking turns with her, thus playing even with each other by spreading the risk and reinforcing mutual equality. Once they are successful, they hide in a private place (in a toilette) in order to satisfy their need to be able to speak to each other. The private space of the toilette

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<sup>8</sup> One of the most frequent child's commands in Czech is 'nežaluj!', which translates as 'do not tell on other children!'

<sup>9</sup> Example of such behaviour can be seen for example in a Czech film *Cesta to hlubin študákovy duše* from 1939.

<sup>10</sup> The other being compliance

provides a sanctuary, like home, where they consider themselves to be safe from school rules and create a world of their own. They associate school with a prison, where their basic need (to speak to each other) is violated. No classmate gives them away, since they too are taking part in their game. Playing an important role of a protective anonymous crowd, children are united against a common enemy personified by supervising teachers. They are safe but vulnerable, alike smugglers in the forest, which surrounds the world of adults.

Like a smuggler, in addition to physical trespass children daydream about a better world, where forbidden goods and ideas are available. Inspired by a film, they imagine a saviour, embodied by their favourite actor, who is here already among them, with them in hiding. He will rise one day and set them free to see each other whenever they want. They carry among themselves physical objects (his picture) to remind them of this idea and to fuel their belief.

Despite obvious similarities with religious beliefs, there is a profound difference, since this is recognised to be a game only, a device, which helps the two school friends to endure the situation, or even to make the absurd situation enjoyable for some time. Likewise, the smuggler was not envisioned as a saviour but rather an opener of possibilities and easer of difficult times. Similar role was assigned to communist mass entertainers.<sup>11</sup>

Klickov school was a perfect example of a serious play (Bourdieu, 1988) in praxis. During the lessons, to be on the safe side with the regime, most teachers taught only the content of approved textbooks, minimising discussions, questions, and disagreements. In breaks they supervised the quiet marching of children. Outside the lessons, there were spaces to show resentment by all actors involved. In such a system, simply being a part of the school meant to receive a role in a staged political performance (Abélès, 1997). Despite the political will of the principal, the teachers, not the political leadership itself, were the final executors of the regime, which was often bended according to their personal favours, dislikes and subject to improvisation, like my father's Sunday sermons. Likewise, falling out of the assigned limits of the role had real political consequence for all involved, be it the loss of profession for teachers or prohibition for further study for students.

### ***On dangers of the periphery***

*Two out of the three roads that run through our town end with wooden poles, barbed wire, and a police patrol in the nearby forest. Soldiers are dressed in green and brown uniforms, they wear heavy boots and guns to protect the borderlines. Sometimes we go*

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<sup>11</sup> Prominent communist pop singers and actors regularly performed at foreign socialist variety shows, broadcasted over the communist bloc. The most famous being Ein Kessel Bunes from East Germany.

*with Novák and observe them from behind the bushes and when they see us, we run away. I think their job must be really boring. No cars or busses ever cross the line, since about three kilometres behind our town the roads change into forest tracks, not used for official transport. At least they get to chase smugglers. When there was a shortage of toilet paper, smugglers got much of it from Germany. It was remarkably soft, compared to the grater-like type we only had in regular shops or the newspaper cuttings that we have used. They also smuggle clothes from Poland, especially glittering leggings and nylon scarfs. They are very fashionable and popular among my classmates but we don't buy things from them, because they are spies and dangerous people. But I think smuggling is a really adventurous job. Running fast and soundless through the secret passages of the forest like Vinnitou<sup>12</sup> and Old Shatterhand, scouting and reading the landmarks left by animals and humans, visiting foreign lands and meeting people speaking different tongues. I wish I would lose my fear of soldiers, so I could become a scout too, crossing the borders whenever I please.*

*Behind the forest, there are different countries, with people speaking different languages. They could as well be Marsians, because we never get to see them. I only met Poles on my mother's cousin's wedding. I never met any Germans. But I know they exist, because my friend Eliska Neumannová has a granny who speaks only German, because prior to the war everybody in this town spoke German, but after the Nazis were defeated, all the Germans went to Germany. Eliska's granny did not have to, because Eliska's granddad was helping the Czech partisans during the war. Once a year she travels across the border to visit her German family. She always brings Eliska a Milka chocolate and up to date Burda<sup>13</sup> catalogues. German people have much nicer clothes. We like to sit together in her room and flick through it over and over again.*

*I wish I also could speak German to somebody. Meanwhile, I can only speak Russian to you<sup>14</sup> but letters are not the same as speech. I like the sound of foreign languages, I feel like having a special power, when I speak it. English my dad is teaching me is nice but there is nobody to speak to in English except him, no English films<sup>15</sup> in the cinema or television, so it is pretty useless. But perhaps not. Mum still speaks good Polish that she learned as a child. It is a very funny language; it has many 'gg' sounds. Anyways, I wish I had somebody to practice it with.*

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<sup>12</sup> Literary character from the book of Karl May. Vinnitou is a headman of Apache Indian tribe, Old Shatterhad is his brother-in-blood, coming originally from Germany. Together they attempt to keep piece between American Indians' tribes and settlers from Europe. Karl May's books were also a source of screenplays for numerous films, popular in the East-European block since 1960's.

<sup>13</sup> Catalogues of mail selling company called Burda Moden, originally from West Germany. Used and dated catalogues were much treasured by Czech women and tailors.

<sup>14</sup> Stepanova Ljudmila from Kiev was my penfriend during my childhood, this is an extract from a letter to her.

<sup>15</sup> Most foreign films had Czech dabbing.

*For maths we have a teacher I really like. His name is Luboš Hložek and he is very bad in memorising our names, so he gave most of us a nickname. Mine is a European brown bear, since I am very tall and I am sitting in the very last row of the class, which he regards to be kind of a cave. He is only a student of a pedagogical faculty, reading Czech history and literature but our school was short of maths teachers, so they hired him. Now we are singing maths formulas, writing poems about multiplies. When we are naughty, we get to write a long essay about some mathematical problems. It is very exciting but some of my classmates are scared of him and some parents complain about his teaching methods.*

*Mr. Hložek was not allowed to forbid us to call him 'comrade,' since this is the rule from the principal's office, we have to greet all teachers with 'Good morning teacher comrade,' but we always have to say this word as silently as possible. When he hears somebody's voice saying the 'comrade' word out loud, he has to go to the blackboard and perform some mathematical task and receive a grade for it, so we are all very careful and observe silence, when this word comes in. His periods are very different. We can ask him questions any time and as many times we want. We can come freely to the blackboard to write upon or to bring our exercise book, if in need of explanation. We can even get into groups to work together and he does not mind when we give hints and help each other! That especially is a great relief for me, since this is the only rule I have always been breaking at school and now in his periods –this ceased to exist! I can freely explain to my neighbour Dáša and we can both turn sideways for help to Aleš Zejda, our class's Maths and Physics genius.*

*The best thing in our town is our school amateur theatre. We are putting on a show about a crazy town, called *The Chronical of Monkey Business Town*,<sup>16</sup> where people think themselves to be the cleverest people in the world but everything they do goes wrong somehow. They believe everybody should be equal, so they make the educated people work in the fields and the farmers to lead the town. They build up a new school without proper planning and they forget to make the doors and the windows. In order to bring light into it, they try to catch the light into canvas sacks outside the school and empty the sacks inside it. I play a part of a bull and that of an ancient pillar and at one point I get to scratch myself as a bull by myself as a pillar, knocking myself down at the end. It is very funny.*

*We rehearse four times a week, since at the end of the year we took part in a national competition of children amateur theatres in Kaplice. We won it and we were selected to go to Almelo in Holland in spring this year! Yes! Yes! I am so incredibly happy! I am going to the West! We will go by bus through West Germany and Holland. Mum and dad think it is an excellent play and they are amazed how we could win it with this*

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<sup>16</sup> In original, it was called *Kronika města Kocourkova* by Ondřej Sekora

*play, since it is a parody about the communist state, especially my part of a bull and the column. But since Sekora is a popular writer among the communists, perhaps they do not see it the way my parents do. To me the play is really funny.*

*The director of the play is my Czech language and literature school teacher, Mr. Král. He knows everything about Czech literature and at home he has so many books that they cover all the walls of his house. He is very funny during our rehearsals, making many jokes. At school he is very different. He spends most of the time sleeping on his desk, while we read our books. My parents say communists had given him hard times. At the beginning of each morning lesson, Eva Žižková, who sits in the first row, always has to go to the shop to fetch him a bottle of mineral water, which he drinks at once and then he puts his forehead onto the table and sleeps again. Sometimes he even snores and his eyes are full of water. I don't know, if other teachers and the principal know. We do not tell them.*

### **On dangers of the periphery**

Periphery of the country represented a rim of a centrifugal space. Besides priests, members of many other professions disliked by the regime were secluded there. Considered too disruptive for a town community, they were transferred to the periphery of the country, where their activities were considered less harmful. There they had a chance to smuggle in their individual ideas, approaches and pedagogical methods, which perhaps would have been unacceptable in big towns and cities. This encompassed all 'problematic' intellectuals, including late former president Havel, who during the 1970s worked as a labourer in a brewery in Trutnov, a town my family lived prior to being transferred to Klickov. Due to this natural and forced migration, the opposite of the intended effect was created. During the 1970s, the border zones became centres of underground culture and ideology, where intellectuals met in vicarages, private houses, and flats to discuss politics, culture, philosophy and religion (Jirous 2008; Kriseová 1991).

Abélès (1997) labels this as backstage politics, since the frontstage<sup>17</sup> was cleared of all the undesirable characters for the staged performances of political visits and other political acts. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, the undesired were not extinguished as during the Stalinist 1950s.<sup>18</sup> They were pushed aside, to the backstage, where they created a necessary mirror and a critical environment, within which the staged performance had to develop. Two fields were thus mutually constitutive, not exclusive. That is why the effect of intellectual underground upon the communist regime was much more profound and destructive than was the dissent formed abroad.

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<sup>17</sup> Here meaning the central area of the country and cultural cities and sites where tourist travelled

<sup>18</sup> See Vejražka, 2012

During the 1980s, the panopticon of state surveillance (Foucault, 1995) was ever present and comprised of controlling places where people moved, as well as ideas that people held. School textbooks, literature, and culture in general were censored, public life was possible only with the approval of local communist organisations. Yet, there were multiple resistance strategies employed by those who were meant to be the objects of state/school politics, like dreaming about permeable borders while watching European western films.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, observing silence when the word 'comrade' was ought to be heard or employing unusual teaching methods was possible since the student-teacher Hložek's work contract was limited to the period of one year and he had no fear of losing his job.

Foreign contact was scarce. Within the border zone of the country, the oldest generation who could speak and/or understand German would occasionally tune on the TV to foreign signals. However, devices were built to disturb foreign TV signals to make this unlikely. Apart from closely monitored foreign tourists, who visited mainly the cultural sites of the country, foreigners were rarely present and so was the possibility to practice any foreign language, apart from Russian. It was the only compulsory language learned at school and children were encouraged to have pen friends in the Soviet Union, to write to each other and to learn about each other's culture. However, this correspondence was censored too and letters often arrived in open envelopes.

Linguistic isolation was accompanied by physical seclusion, felt especially at the border zones and periphery regions, like in Klickov. Crossing the border was always accompanied by a sense of fear, since soldiers in uniforms, carrying guns, checked all passports and inspected each piece of luggage for anything prohibited – be it foreign books, music, films, alcohol, cigarettes or medicine.

Natural barriers in the form of deep forests, high mountains or rivers surrounding the borders created a sense of inaccessibility of the world behind but at the same time giving the illusion of impermeable wilderness in which you can hide or be hidden from the eye of the communist government, which was not possible in towns and cities. However, the state, through the institution of secret police and double agents, observed closely both movement and action of all its citizens, bringing the panopticon to its perfection (Havel, 1963, 1975).

Social theorists associate socialism with organised modernity (Wagner, 1994). It is based upon conventionalization and standardization of action and behaviour of the masses, directed by a limited number of leaders, personified by the protagonists of the state. It values children mainly as future adults. To bring this value into life, they have to be trained, socialised, and schooled accordingly (deMauss, 1995). The space within

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<sup>19</sup> Vinnettou was filmed in Yugoslavia by a German director.

which this is taking place is assimilated to a cage - a space surrounded by walls or an 'Indian'-like reservation (Holý, 2001; Verdery, 1996). An artificial semi-sealed world was created, where the microclimate rarely allowed a fresh breeze in a form of new political, cultural, or scientific ideas (ibid). Such spatial and intellectual isolation led to the production of two types of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). One that was awarded and encouraged by the state, and the other that inspired resistance towards the regime and was especially valued by dissenting individuals and groups. While compliance with rules and order was the mean to receive material favours, the real wealth resided in knowledge and information, carefully protected by the state (Holý, 2001; Verdery, 1996).

However, there were occasions when the habitual balance between children and adults became disturbed. As a result, children gained direct political agency with direct possibility to become, for a while, directors of a political play. Our theatre performance provided an excellent occasion for such an event. This form of resistance described in the diary entries represents a theoretical twist, most vividly embodied in work and personage of Havel. No longer is politics theatre-like but the other way around. Theatre becomes politics itself, carefully staged with its several layers. In Klicov, politics begins with the name of the ensemble. PiDivadlo is an abbreviation of Pioneer Theatre (*Pionýrské Divadlo*), despite the fact, that during the years I have participated, more than half of us were not members of this youth communist organisation and as such there was a constant threat of us being dismissed and the play scratched. Nevertheless, once it won the national competition, the fact that it is a Pioneer theatre was stressed a great deal by the press without knowing and/or commenting upon the real situation.

PiDivadlo theatre politics continued with choosing the script, which later became the winning performance on the national youth theatre festival in Kaplice and as such gained the right to represent Czechoslovakia on the international festival in Almelo in the Netherlands. It was based on the novel by Ondřej Sekora, a popular writer of children's books, who joined the communist party after the Second World War and became its political activist. However, most of his books were published prior to his activism and reflect satirical criticism of human folly and restrictive regimes in general. Thus, his books were not considered by the communist party as a direct critique of the regime, while carrying a potential of strong political satire, once updated and contextually modified. Chapters dramatized in the play resembled very much the dissent critique of the socialist regime, as portrayed by others (Havel, 1963, 1975), highlighting the absence of a positive hero, using language as a tool for misunderstanding, discussing banalities and depicting people in a very embarrassing manor in their folly and narrow-mindedness. We devoted many hours of practice during rehearsals to bring this folly and narrow-mindedness of our characters to

perfection. This ignorance and/or innocence of the characters was even further underlined by the fact that we were children playing adults, whom the author portrayed as child-like in their simplicity, fulfilling the socialist ideal of a child as an object in need of adult socialisation and education.

Yet, the choice of the script and the possibility to present itself in the capitalist West was seen as an excellent opportunity by the communist establishment to spread the socialist message abroad, since the author was a communist himself and the ensemble was composed of Pioneers. On the other hand, the followers of the dissent, more concerned about the message of the play than the political adherence of the author, were both amazed and amused by the short-sightedness of the communist officials and the director of the play was praised among them for his ability to disrupt the system from within. To my parents and other followers of the dissent in the town, our ensemble personified a small victory over the system, adding a sparkle of hope for future changes.

Seen from an adult perspective today, I believe the theatre play staged by PiDivadlo gave us children-actors political power previously unprecedented. Theatre became politics, as text, symbols, and acts gained double meaning that went unexpected and/or undetected by the political establishment. The regime was caught off guard by a group of presumed Pioneer children and a drunkard teacher, whose lost existence had long been considered harmless. Few years later, it really has been children, or at least whom the General Secretary of the Communist Party Milouš Jakeš called children,<sup>20</sup> who changed the fate of socialist Czechoslovakia and opened it up for a different future.

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<sup>20</sup> In his speech on Červený Hrádek, General Secretary of the Communist Party Milouš Jakeš called students who started the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 ‘some children’. This terminology was used in order to diminish reasonability of their action, as well as an appeal to the general and political public to take counteraction, since nobody wants to live in a country, where children rule the adults. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkVvPLXN2xo> (21.1.2016)



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