

"Ideal" Socialism (1948–1968)

After the communist victories in the elections of 1946 and 1948, a new Czechoslovakian constitution proclaimed on May 9, 1948, a "people's democracy," as opposed to the outgoing "bourgeois democracy." The text followed the original 1920 constitution, with parts inspired by the 1936 constitution of the Soviet Union. President Beneš protested in vain against its undemocratic character. However, elections organized at the end of May demonstrated the enormous prestige of the communists. Only candidates of the National Front, now run by communists, were eligible, but the voters had a choice: they could submit "white" (blank) ballots. In the Czech part of the republic, only 9.3 percent voted "white"; among the Slovaks, 13.9 percent did so—a decided victory for the communists.

When Beneš resigned for reasons of health on July 14, Klement Gottwald was elected president, first in a long line of presidents who were also heads of the Communist Party. Gottwald wrote one of the darkest chapters in the history of Czechs and Slovaks. In political show trials, 253 innocent people were sentenced to death by Gottwald's court, and 178 of them were executed. About 280,000 people were condemned in rigged trials for crimes such as "bourgeois nationalism."

Milada Horáková, a prominent democratic politician before the communist takeover, was the only woman executed in the political trials in the communist bloc. Gottwald insisted on unconditional conformity to the Soviet model, and when Rudolf Slánský, at that time general secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, opposed him, he orchestrated a huge show trial in 1952. Slánský and other high functionaries of the Communist Party were accused of "Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy" and executed.

Most of those persecuted were former entrepreneurs, members of democratic parties and clerics, but also soldiers of the Czechoslovak army in exile, especially pilots who had risked their lives on the western front just a few years earlier. In 1950 forced labor camps were established, where anyone could be sent without trial; the decision of a "national committee" was sufficient.

Translated from Czech by Jarmila Milnerová and Ian Milner

They cut off the hair of the little boy
he sees how it looks he mustn't move
he must not move on his chair of steel

Now he's in for it.

longing that itches after the little usherette
sitting in the café under the line of coats
looking like lads who've been hanged

National committees had replaced local self-government in 1945, and after 1948 they were controlled by communists. State and party authorities were formally independent, but in the national committees all positions were assigned by the district committees of the Communist Party. At the communists' command were not only the national committees, but also leading positions in all economic, cultural, educational and social organizations. A "personnel policy code" assured that even, say, the chief of a local club of bee-keepers had to be approved by communists.

Czechoslovakia became a police state where civic rights were heavily restricted. Access to information remained strictly controlled, travel was banned, mail was regularly checked, foreign books and journals were forbidden, and foreign radio transmissions were disrupted. Every citizen over the age of fifteen had to carry a red identification book at all times. It contained all essential information about the bearer and blank pages intended for records of employees, landlords, and other authorities. To be caught without one's red book was to risk arrest, and to damage it was also a punishable offense.

The complete nationalization that eliminated all privately owned businesses was primarily a political act; all workers became state employees in order to be easily controlled and corrupted by wage and social policy. The collectivization of agriculture had a similar effect. In the communist takeover, workers clearly profited. Their preferential treatment in wages, to the detriment of "intelligentsia," was accompanied by social benefits like free vacations in mountain resorts in winter and by the sea in summer for the "best workers." The working class further enjoyed cheap meals in factories, free medical care and child care, cheap rents and services. Communist reforms, which heightened the sense of social security, were strongly supported by the Czechoslovak citizenry. But after the political trials, and the economic crisis in the early fifties, the regime began to be criticized. It survived only through massive repressions. This intimidation was effective, and protests against the communist regime were only local and thus promptly silenced.

The Czechoslovak economy was ruined by central planning policies and incompetence, but above all by direct interventions from the Soviet Union. Most disastrous was the large metallurgical industry drawing in almost half a million new workers, for which iron and other ores now had to be imported. The Soviet Union assigned a new priority for the Czechoslovak economy—as supplier of weaponry for the eastern bloc, which was under Soviet leadership busily preparing for a new war. The production of consumer goods and services, traditionally the thriving basis of the Czech economy, was badly damaged.



Monument of the Soviet Soldier, by Konrad Babroji, 1952, Mariánské lázně, Znojmo. The combination of naturalism and classical allusions (e.g., the Doric

column) was typical of socialist realism. After the Second World War, territories liberated by the Russian army were, unsurprisingly, marked by stone or bronze statues of soldiers, which are still to be seen in many Czech towns. The message was clear—the Soviet army has left the territory, but it could return any time. In the representation of these soldiers, the most important features are the soldier's uniform and the weapon he is carrying, characteristic of the victorious army. In the case of the Znojmo soldier, it is the famous "Schpagin" machine gun, which he raises triumphantly. Note that the soldier is not greeting the town, but raises his gun toward Austria. In this way, not only recent events, but also the distant past were recalled, when Znojmo was founded to protect the Czech state from enemies coming from the south. Photo used by permission of Jan Bažant.

Even after years of communist rule, the just society, in which culture and education would be accessible to all, lay still out of sight, in the distance. Instead of the promised paradise, there were ever-longer waiting lines in front of stores. Czechoslovakia was threatened with bankruptcy. This was averted by the monetary reform of June 1, 1953, which the Western press justly called "the great monetary robbery." The reform, which followed upon the nationalization of real estate, killed two birds with one stone: communists accumulated badly needed financial reserves and they ruined the Czechoslovak bourgeoisie. Antonín Zápotocký, at that time president, assured all citizens that the currency was stable, but the next day everyone could exchange no more than three hundred Czech crowns, at a rate of five old for one new; beyond that, old crowns became practically valueless—the higher one's deposits, the more unfavorable the rates. Overnight, the entire life savings of many families were irretrievably lost.

Culture in communist countries was markedly deformed, because their rulers wanted not only social and political revolution but also revolutionary art. In the Soviet Union, socialist realism was the only style permitted from 1932 through the mid-1980s. In architecture, it was academic classicism; in painting, sculpture, and literature, nineteenth-century realism was combined with the romantic cult of heroes put into the service of communist propaganda. In many Czech and Moravian cities one can still find statues or paintings of those fearless, handsome, and youthful heroes of the new communist society, whose realistic features are transported to a timeless world of ideal values. Architects, writers, painters, and other artists who rejected socialist realism were not allowed to present their work publicly. Today, the majority of these creations are dismissed as being at best kitsch—but kitsch will always find an audience.

After 1948, publishing houses, theaters, and galleries in Czechoslovakia were nationalized and thus entirely state-controlled. One of the most famous authors in postwar Central Europe was Jiří Weil, but after 1948 he lost his job in a publishing house and in 1951 he was expelled from the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, which meant that officially he ceased to be a writer. Only members of newly founded unions of artists and writers could earn their living by selling their works. These associations were very selective; a limited number of absolutely loyal intellectuals were privileged with membership. Catholics and liberal democrats were a priori exiled, as well as left-oriented writers like Halas, Kolář, and many others.

Works of art were interpreted politically, not only by communist authorities, who watched closely for ideological correctness, but also by their audience, who read political statements into the most innocent remarks. Art was



Stalin monument in Prague, Letná Park (Ortakar Švec, sculptor; Jiří Štursa, architect), 1949–55; at 15.5 meters tall and 22 meters long, this was the largest group statue in Europe. While all the figures look toward Prague, the soldier at the end looks watchfully back, in the direction of Berlin and capitalist Western Europe. The destruction of this monument in 1962 marked the long-awaited end of the Stalinist era in Czechoslovakia. Today in its place stands a giant kinetic sculpture of a metronome (Vratislav Karel Novák, 1991) with its obvious but complex allusion to the rhythmic cycles of Czech history. Photo by Leoš Nébor, used by permission of ČTK.

in the limelight, closely watched by the whole nation. Because it was permanently endangered, it had a privileged position, and artists were able to influence society to a far greater degree than their colleagues in the West. The power of a single Czech or Slovak word was incomparably greater than in established democracies. It was only logical that when communism finally fell, the first president of democratic Czechoslovakia would be a writer. There was, however, a long road to the end of European communism.

Gottwald died in 1953, in the same year as Stalin, but he was replaced

as party head by Antonín Novotný, a hard-line Stalinist. Czechoslovak dependence on the Soviet Union was reinforced by formal alliances—in 1949, membership in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and later in the Warsaw Pact, founded in 1955 to counter the NATO alliance. In 1955 the biggest Stalin monument in the world was built in Prague's Letná Park, looming above the entire city. Only one year later, however, the entire communist system was shaken to its foundations. In February 1956, at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev started a process of de-Stalinization.

For some communist countries 1956 was a year of great hopes. In April, during the Second Czechoslovak Writers' Congress, many of those present, especially poets Jaroslav Seifert and František Hrubín, openly criticized official literature and the persecution of "unapproved" writers. In Poland, June protests brought moderate liberalization by October. That same month, the anticommunist Hungarian revolution erupted, only to be crushed on November 10 by Soviet tanks. Atrocities in the Budapest revolution shocked the population of Czechoslovakia and made any attempt at democratization extremely difficult. Any criticism of the party line was labeled as an attack by "antisocialist forces," and it was soon silenced.

Nevertheless, in the mid-fifties, books by contemporary foreign authors were beginning to be published, their plays appeared on theater stages, and American, British, Italian, and French movies were shown in Czechoslovak cinemas. Since isolation from Western culture had lasted for only a few years, the connection could be quickly reestablished. In 1958 Josef Škvorecký's *Zaběháci* (The cowards), written in 1949, could finally be published. In the same year the first collection of poems by Miroslav Holub, *Devět služba* (Day duty) appeared. Holub belonged to a group of poets around the literary journal *Květen* (May), published 1955–59, which fought for the poetry of the everyday, in sharp contrast to superficial rhetoric of communist literature. This program paralleled trends in other European poetry, as well as the neorealism of Italian cinema. Holub was a scientist whose matter-of-fact, unrhymed poetry was very popular in English-speaking countries.

After 1956, the Czechoslovak party chief Novotný adopted the de-Stalinization rhetoric, but the totalitarian regime was preserved intact. Lively discussions in literary journals and publication of long-silenced authors ended abruptly after liberalization was brought to a halt in the Soviet Union. The 1959 congress of Czechoslovak writers was again dominated by conservative communists, but the new wave of repressions of writers was far less destructive.

In the second half of the fifties, there were signs of economic recovery in Czechoslovakia, which allowed Novotný to continue his rigid authoritarian rule. Because war damages in Czechoslovak territory had been relatively small, the communists profited from the industrial potential of Masaryk's republic. Moreover, the communists inherited a country with a highly educated public. Professor Otto Wichterle, obsessed with his laboratory research, produced the world's first serviceable contact lenses on Christmas Day, 1961—in his home and with the help of his children's Meccano construction kit. To these advantages must be added a revolutionary novelty imported from Soviet Russia—a very high percentage of female workers. Already in 1956 Kamila Moučková, the world's first female newscaster, appeared on Czechoslovak TV screens.

In communist Czechoslovakia, changes in the Kremlin directly affected its economy. Soviet militarism, which nearly ruined the economy of the eastern bloc, eased up in 1956. Soviets gave up the idea of imminent military confrontation and started to promote peaceful coexistence with the West. Demands for armament production in Czechoslovakia were radically reduced, and instead of tanks Czechoslovak factories could produce more and better consumer goods.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1960s the economic situation in Czechoslovakia again became alarming and Novotný was urged toward reforms—by the Soviet Union as well as his own party. Novotný's regime responded not with reforms, but with an intensive propaganda campaign. The extravagant claim was that after its necessary political and social transformation, the country was finally prepared to prove the superiority of socialism, and by 1980 would overtake even the most developed capitalist countries. To celebrate this bombastic plan, in 1960 the state changed all its logos, from state symbols to currency. The crown of the Czech heraldic lion was replaced by a red star, and the state was renamed the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. According to Marxist ideology, socialism is the last stage before the final goal of the revolutionary movement, namely, communism.

Soviet Russia had proclaimed itself a socialist state already in 1936; in belatedly following their example, Czechoslovakia was declaring symbolically that the most difficult stage of creating socialism was over. Acknowledging the communist power monopoly, which had existed de facto since 1948, the new constitution of July 11, 1960, established Czechoslovakia as a unitary state, curbing drastically the power of Slovak state organs. Notwithstanding the elevation of Czechoslovakia to a socialist state, the economic crisis persisted. In Central Europe, Czechoslovakia was outpaced by East Germany and Aus-

tria. Worldwide, it began to trail behind Japan. Electricity and coal shortages meant that Czechs and Slovaks got used to power outages lasting hours at a time and "coal holidays" in winter.

In 1962, Czechoslovakia reacted promptly to Moscow's latest wave of liberalization. The reformers, who began in 1963 to get publicity, pleaded against bureaucratic control and for greater freedom of opinion. The political trials of 1949-54 were officially denounced, and some unjustly accused victims were even rehabilitated. Changes at the top of the communist hierarchy enabled more freedom in the media as well as in private life, censorship was loosened, and people were allowed to travel to capitalist countries. In 1965, the "New Economic Model" was formulated, where central planning was limited and market-oriented production was encouraged. To provide incentives for better management, it was proposed to differentiate wages, at that time drastically leveled. At the same time, the Czechoslovak Communist Party promised greater democracy in political life and a lesser role for itself in managing the state—even though the party was determined to retain the leading role. Slovakia was offered greater autonomy. Although reforms were to have been fully implemented in January 1967, the communists hesitated, provoking unrest in economic, political, and cultural circles. Novotný and his Stalinist comrades countered with repressions, sparking a new wave of protests, which finally brought about Novotný's fall.

In this new "thaw" the cultural journals played a crucial role. In Prague the *Literární noviny* (Literary news) and its authors—Milan Kundera, Ludvík Václavík, Ivan Klima, Antonín Jarošlav Liehm, and others—had enormous prestige. Incredibly, about one hundred thousand copies of each issue were sold weekly, and there were other equally popular journals—in Brno, *Host do domu* (Guest in the house), in Bratislava *Kultúrny život* (Cultural life), and others. Translations of such contemporary American authors as Salinger, Styron, Ferlinghetti, and Kerouac appeared in bookshops, together with Latin American authors such as Borges and Márquez; the French "nouveau roman" and the theater of the absurd had a great impact on Czechoslovak culture.

A ground-breaking conference on Franz Kafka was organized in 1963 by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences at Liblice Castle; its importance was duly acknowledged several years later by communist propaganda, proclaiming it officially as one of the ideological inspirations of the 1968 counterrevolution. The beatnik poet Allen Ginsberg visited Prague in 1965, although he was soon expelled by the police. In the 1960s American hippies found many followers among young Czechs who provoked the regime with their blue jeans and above all their long hair. In Prague, they liked to gather under the statue of Saint Václav at the upper end of the eponymous square. In autumn

1966, however, the police raided the Prague "beatniks"; they were beaten, their hair was shorn, and some of them were arrested. A special decree was issued forbidding anyone with long hair in public places.

Reforms proposed in 1965 by the Czechoslovak Communist Party included no changes in party control over cultural policy. In 1967 the Congress of Writers was therefore transformed into a political forum, and writers such as Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, Ludvík Václavík, Antonín Liehm, Pavel Kohout, Ivan Klima, and Karel Kosík sharply criticized the political system in socialist Czechoslovakia. Kundera put forth a provocative question: did Czechoslovakia in its present form have any reason for existence? The reaction of Novotný's regime to these speeches was ferocious: the writers and their union, which had organized the congress, were persecuted. Its journal, the widely read *Literární noviny* (Literary News), was banned. By the end of 1967, however, Novotný's regime had to bow to enormous pressure. Censorship was partly abolished, the border was opened, and Czechs were finally allowed to travel abroad freely. The wall between culture in Czechoslovakia and that of Czechs in exile was partially dismantled—and also, forbidden authors living in Czechoslovakia were allowed to publish. Catholic authors were still strictly taboo, although the Catholic art historian Růžena Vacková was released in 1967 after sixteen years in jail.

All artists were divided, according to their loyalty to the regime, into officially approved or forbidden. "Semiofficial" artists, like Bohumil Hrabal, could publish only during short periods of political liberalization. In 1952 Hrabal wrote *Jarmilka*, which was not published until much later. It is a coarse record of the life of people at the margins of society; its combination of documentary matter-of-factness and poetic vision is a heritage from Group 42. In this early text we already find the harsh tenderness typical of Hrabal's later works. In 1963, after years of writing only for his friends, Hrabal's books began to be published—every year at least one book, until 1968, when he was again silenced. His books fascinated and provoked readers with their language, which combined vulgarities, poetic metaphor, and seemingly random quotations. Continuous narrative was replaced by an unarticulated stream of situations and images without any evaluative commentary. His book *Taneční hodiny pro starší a pokročilé* (Dancing lessons for the advanced in age; 1964) is actually only one (unfinished) sentence.

Around the mid-sixties Czech novelists such as Kundera, Václavík, and others resumed the tradition of the great novelists of Masaryk's republic, publishing polyphonic and philosophical works in the spirit of Karel Čapek. In history, the fifteenth-century Hussite revolution and the nineteenth-century national renaissance, glorified by communist historiography, were replaced

by previously ignored epochs—early medieval Bohemia, and the baroque period. More important, historical novels were used to comment on recent political history, a good example being Václav Kaplický's *Kladivo na čarodějnice* (Witches' hammer) of 1963, dealing with seventeenth-century Inquisition trials in northern Moravia. In 1969, the director Otakar Vávra, who had begun his successful career in the 1940s, turned the book into a successful film.

Among Czech Jewish authors reflecting on their war experiences, Ladislav Fuchs attracted the greatest attention at home and abroad, perhaps because of his love of the absurd and fascination with the mysteries of life. The hero of his 1963 novel *Pan Theodor Mundstock* (Mr. Theodore Mundstock) is an ordinary clerk who systematically prepares himself for life in a concentration camp. When he heads for the meeting place from which he is to be transported, he stops in the middle of the street to follow his method of regularly changing hands holding his luggage. At this moment a German car hits him and Mr. Mundstock dies.

In 1959 Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr founded the Theater Semafor, for which Suchý wrote scripts and Šlitr the music. Performances, inspired by the Central European tradition of cabarets and by American slapstick, had no logical order. From 1962, Suchý always appeared on stage in a white Panama hat, as a dreamy harum-scarum type; Šlitr wore the characteristic black bowler of a slow pedant. Semafor was the most popular new kind of theater, offering small informal scenarios with no other goal than to delight its audience with poetry and unfettered play of imagination. These largely improvised performances, in the prewar tradition of the "liberated theater" of Voskovec and Werich, were immensely popular. Songs like "Klokoči" (Bladderhut) of 1964 are the common property of Czechs of all generations and are still often sung around campfires.

The cultural explosion in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s featured three legendary avant-garde theaters in Prague. People could choose between Semafor, Theatre on the Balustrade (*Divadlo na zábradlí*), and the Theatre beyond the Gate (*Divadlo za branou*), founded by the director Otomar Krejča and his colleagues: the playwright Josef Topol and the actors Jan Tříska and Marie Tomášová. Krejča's theater was more traditional than the other two, staging classical plays and Chekhov. The first Czech play in the Theatre beyond the Gate was *Kočka na kolejích* (Cat on the Rails) by Josef Topol, in which a banal situation becomes a parable of the creation of life and its unavoidable destruction.

In the sixties, cinema exploded in the Czechoslovak new wave as it was called after the French *nouvelle vague*. Among the first Czech cinéma-*vérité* films were Miloš Forman's *Audition* and *Black Peter* (premiers in 1963). Be-

fore Forman emigrated to the United States, he made two exceptional films without professional actors, *Lásky jeiné plavovlásky* (Loves of a blonde, 1965) and *Hofí, má panenko* (Firemen's ball, 1967), movies that mocked the pettiness and stupidity of ordinary people and "humanists" on both sides of the Iron Curtain—communists from Soviet Mosfilm as well as capitalists from America's Paramount. In explaining Forman's "misanthropy" Josef Škvorecký pointed out that his Jewish parents were killed in a Nazi concentration camp and that the experiences of Czech intellectuals in their Stalinist state did not encourage them to idealize "the people."¹ Forman's colleagues also produced excellent films in which no actors dominated; Jaroslav Papoušek, for instance, gives another penetrating analysis of Czech character in his movie *Écce Homo Homolka* (1969).

In 1965, *Obchod na korze* (The shop on Main Street), a movie about the Slovak Aryanzation program during the Second World War, won the Academy Award for best foreign-language film. It was made by Elmar Klos from Brno and Jan Kadar, a Hungarian-speaking Slovak; the main actress was a Polish Jew. Two years later the Academy Award went to Jiří Menzel's *Ostře sledované vlaky* (Closely watched trains), based on Hrabal's tragicomic tale of coming of age in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. Menzel was a fresh graduate of Prague's Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU), as were other Czech new wave directors—Věra Chytilová, Jan Němec, and others.

Remarkable animated movies were produced, notably by Jiří Trnka, founder of the modern puppet film. Karel Zeman was the originator of "special effects," making his name through movies like *Cesta do pravěku* (Journey to the beginning of time; 1955), a precursor of *Jurassic Park*, and *Vynález zlatý* (Deadly invention; 1958) adapted from a Jules Verne novel. Besides such experimental films, Czechs also tested daring combinations of theater and film. The Magic Lantern Theatre (Laterna magica) premiered triumphantly at the 1958 World Fair in Brussels, where it won a gold medal. In this highly original creation of director Alfred Radok and Josef Svoboda, the stage designer, the performance of live actors and dancers was integrated into a film show. Because of its success, a permanent theater for Laterna Magica was opened in Prague. It also toured the world as a very lucrative export article. An interesting variation on the Laterna Magica principle was Kinoautomat, opening at Montreal's Expo '67, in which the audience voted on how the movie would proceed. Such creative enterprises came to an abrupt halt when Russian, East German, Polish, Bulgarian, and Hungarian tanks crossed the Czechoslovak border on the night of August 20–21, 1968.

In January 1968, a Slovak, Alexander Dubček, had replaced Novotný. Like

Mikhail Gorbachev, he was young, charismatic, and naive, because he genuinely believed that communism could be reformed. He gave socialism a smiling face, people loved him, and the intellectuals supported him. While it would have been impossible for people outside the Communist Party to overthrow the oppressive regime, it was at the same time foolish to expect even reform communists to support the restoration of capitalism and parliamentary democracy. "Socialism with a human face" was a compromise platform for all those who wanted some change. With Dubček's accession, Stalinists began to be expelled from positions in the central, regional, district, and local organizations. Nevertheless, they managed to hold on to key posts for many years. Dubček abolished censorship in hopes that the media would discredit Novotný's "conservative" camp. To his great surprise, the media immediately became independent players in the political scene and began to determine its development. They were breaking one taboo after another, on a daily basis, and the politicians were unable to keep the pace. The new era of mass media had begun.

On March 22, 1968, Novotný also resigned as president, and the whole nation welcomed his successor, General Ludvík Svoboda. The so-called Prague Spring began on April 5, with the publication of the Czechoslovak Communist Party's *Akční program* (Action program). It rejected Stalinism and promised an economically effective and "democratic" socialism. To oblige the Slovaks it also promised federalization. Nevertheless, it reaffirmed the ascendancy of the Communist Party, affiliation with the Soviet Union, and the ultimate goal of attaining a communist state. Communist reformers soon came into conflict not only with Stalinists, but also with those who wanted a plurality of political parties, freedom of press and association, and other basic human rights. At this point the powerful manifesto *Dva tisíce slov* (Two thousand words), giving voice to workers, farmers, clerks, artists, was initiated by scientists from the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and written by Ludvík Vaculík, a literary celebrity and also a reform communist. It was published on June 27, 1968, in three dailies and in *Literární listy* (successor to *Literární noviny*, which had been banned by Novotný's regime).

The Czechoslovak attempt to implement "socialism with a human face" became very topical worldwide and the events were closely watched by politicians abroad. Nevertheless, in the context of student revolts in France and Germany, and—in the United States—the movement against the Vietnam War, one could not expect any support from the West. It would have been rejected anyway by reform-oriented politicians in Czechoslovakia, who could not imagine a world without "brotherly" communist states commanded by the mighty Soviet Union.

In the Soviet bloc, the torrent of Czechoslovak reforms caused panic, especially in East Germany and Poland, whose leaders, Walter Ulbricht and Władysław Gomułka, called for radical action. On July 15, 1968, the Soviet Union, German Democratic Republic, Hungary, and Poland, sent a collective letter to the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in Prague, describing possible military intervention, for which plans had existed since that June. The manifesto *Two Thousand Words* is explicitly mentioned in this letter. Replying to the Warsaw Pact letter, Dubček rejected the criticism of Czechoslovakia as wholly unfounded, and condemned the idea of a conference in which one supposedly "fraternal" Communist Party is criticized in the absence of its delegates.

On August 21, 1968, the endeavor to combine Marxism and democracy ended dramatically with the invasion of all the Warsaw Pact armies, excluding only the Romanians. About 750,000 soldiers moved into Czechoslovakia, in the largest military operation in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The invasion was presented by the Soviet Union as "helping" Czechoslovakia resist its internal counterrevolutionary movement. The official declaration of the Soviet Press Agency TASS stated that the highest representatives of Czechoslovakia had asked the Soviet Union and other states of the eastern bloc to invade the country. The alleged request, signed by five top Czech communist functionaries, was intended to legitimize the Soviet military occupation of the country—but the plan failed totally. The signatories vehemently denied the existence of the letter, but in 1992 the Russian president brought a copy to Prague, together with other secret documents, and gave it to the Czech president, Václav Havel.

It could have appeared to the Russians that the Czechoslovak army would not oppose them, because it was in fact commanded by Soviet marshals, but they underestimated popular support for the reform movement in the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and among Czechs and Slovaks in general. The invasion was immediately condemned as a violation of international law—first by the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which actually ruled the country, and then by the Czechoslovak government, by the Presidium of the National Assembly, and finally by a plenary vote of the National Assembly, the highest legislative body of the state.

During the invasion, people attempted to stop heavily armed intruders with their bare hands, and nervous Soviet soldiers killed dozens of Czechs and Slovaks. Later, people avoided confrontations but unanimously rejected the Soviet military presence in Czechoslovakia, which was covered with imaginative anti-invasion posters. On the other hand, traffic signposts and

even street signs disappeared, to confuse the invasion troops. This general resistance forced the Soviet Union to change tactics.

Since regard for world opinion did not allow them to tame Czechs and Slovaks through force, the communists concentrated on the leaders of the reform movement whom they had arrested already on August 21. Dubček, Smrkovský, Černík, Kriegel, and other men of the Prague Spring were brought to the Kremlin. Supported by President Svoboda, who arrived in Moscow on his own, the Soviets put so much pressure on Dubček and his "delegation" that they capitulated in exchange for permission to return to their offices, where they fondly imagined continuing their reforms. In reality Dubček's fall was only delayed for a few months. The "temporary" occupation by the Soviet army lasted twenty-three years; its mere presence helped the Czechoslovak Communist Party to effectively control the fate of every citizen.

Note

1. Josef Škvorecký, *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of Czech Cinema* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), 67.

"Real" Socialism (1968-1989)

"Real socialism" was the term used in Soviet propaganda of the 1970s to distinguish the form of socialism that actually existed in communist countries from the final stage of socialist utopia—yet another stepping stone inserted between the present ("actually existing socialism," "developed socialism," or "state socialism," as it was called) and the promised utopia of communism. Anticommunists used the same term in a different sense: to describe the state of affairs in communist countries, in which one party controlled the culture, economy, executive power, the law, and law enforcement. A democratic façade was preserved, but in reality the communists ran everything.

The only outcome of the ambitious plans of the Czechoslovak communist reform movement was the formal federalization of the Czechoslovak state, declared in October 1968. In the 1960s, the Slovak economy and culture caught up more or less with the Czechs, and during the so-called Prague Spring, the Slovaks vehemently demanded greater autonomy. The Czechoslovak Socialist Federative Republic, as it was then called, was nominally formed by two largely autonomous states, Czech and Slovak, but in reality both were subjected to the strictly centralist Czechoslovak Communist Party. Grandiloquent renaming aside, everything remained exactly as it had been in 1960, when the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was proclaimed. All the extravagant hopes of the Prague Spring went down the drain, and feelings of helplessness and apathy began to dominate the country, which was filled with Russian tanks. National solidarity, which had seemed invincible at the time of the Soviet invasion, began to evaporate.

In December 1968 an essay by Milan Kundera, "Český úděl" (Czech destiny) appeared in *Listy*, in which Kundera praised the peaceful Czechoslovak resistance to the Russian occupation as an epochal event in world history, encouraging hope for Dubček's reforms. Václav Havel responded to Kundera in an article with the same title, but added a question mark.¹ It was a sharp criticism of Kundera's defense of the Czechoslovak reform movement. Havel also rejected any glorification of the Czechoslovak reaction to the Rus-



Socialist education class, Lomnice, 1988. During the period of "real socialism," communist instruction was completely ritualized: rows of empty seats did not deter the lecturer from performing his ideological duty. Audience and lecturer were prepared to leave the very instant the lecture ended; the instruments of propaganda in front of the lecturer (papers and wrist watch) are ready to be packed into his briefcase. Photo by Jindřich Štříteš.

sian occupation that risked masking the gravity of his country's situation. Kundera answered Havel's criticism, and their differences revealed the basic incompatibility of reform communists and the rest of the population, who no longer believed in socialist visions.

During the Prague Spring, students formed the most radical group. On January 19, 1969, a student named Jan Palach immolated himself in a desperate effort to provoke some sort of Czech resistance. The place he chose was one dear to all Czechs, between the National Museum and the statue of Saint Václav on Wenceslas Square in Prague. The whole nation was in shock and Palach received all funeral honors, but people were already too intimidated by brutal police repressions to respond to his drastic appeal. By that time, many people were already in jail, and half a million opponents of the regime had been sacked.

In March 1969, the streets of Prague were once again filled with people, but this time to celebrate the victory of the Czechoslovak hockey team, which had twice defeated the Russians. Anti-Soviet protests included slogans such as "They had no cannoballs and we scored two goals" (Neměli tam

tanky, dostali dvě branky). Soviet buildings all over the country were attacked, and the windows of Aeroftot, the Soviet travel agency on Wenceslas Square in Prague, were destroyed (but probably by agents of the secret police). Brezhnev decided to use this as pretext to break with the Czech reformers. In April, Dubček was replaced by Gustav Husák, a "reformer" who promptly switched sides and used this opportunity to make a brilliant political career. In 1975 he became president as well as party chief.

On the first anniversary of the Soviet invasion, people got a full taste of resurrected Stalinism. Demonstrators in Prague, Liberec, Brno, and other towns were attacked by freshly trained antiriot units of the army, leaving several dead. Although Husák had himself been tortured and condemned to death as a Slovak "bourgeois nationalist" in the 1950s, he came to endorse repressive measures that revived illegal practices from the time of his own imprisonment. Behind this rapid restoration of Stalinist dictatorship were two Moscow agents in the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Vasil Bil'ak and Alois Indra.

On August 22, 1969, a special law, *A Legal Measure for Maintaining Public Peace and Order*, was issued to back up arbitrary police brutality. It was a historical irony that this law was signed by Alexander Dubček, by then relegated to the post of president of the parliament. A year later, he reached bottom and became an insignificant official of the Forestry Service of Western Slovakia. The law signed by Dubček allowed imprisonment of opponents of the regime without a court order, and prevention of any "subversive" activity by summarily banning a publication, dissolving a social organization, or firing individuals with an hour's notice. Thousands of "dissidents" were soon prosecuted on the basis of the "billystick law," as people called it.

The main document of the "normalization" era was published on December 12, 1970, with the awkward title *Lessons from the Crisis Developments in the Party and Society after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia*; until 1989 its interpretation of the Prague Spring as a counterrevolution was the official line. In 1972, during a writers' congress, the new head of the officially approved union of writers, Jan Kozák, in all earnestness proclaimed a return to the Stalinist aesthetics of social realism as the only mode of literary expression. "Normalization" was the official term, a euphemism for restoration of authoritarian Stalinism. This goal was achieved in 1971, but "normalization" continued for two subsequent decades, in which the neo-Stalinist status quo was successfully defended.

When compared with the 1950s, however, the repressions of the 1960s and 1970s were far less bloody. On August 21, 1969, a group of Czech intellectuals protested against the antidemocratic measures of Czechoslovak government



Training session, Jiřkov, 1979. One of innumerable ideological on-the-job trainings in a cooperative farm, the *raison d'être* of which was not instruction, but forced attendance, which turned the entire population into collaborators. Photo by Jiřdřich Štřeit.

houses were operating in exile. One of them, Sixty-Eight Publishers (run by Zdena Salivarová-Škvorecká and Josef Škvorecký, in Toronto), published altogether more than two hundred titles, and Index, in Cologne (run by Adolf Müller and Bedřich Uitz), about 170. The print runs were modest, five hundred to two thousand copies, because the majority of emigrants quickly assimilated in their host country. The exile culture also had an impact at home, especially Pavel Tigríd's journal *Svědectví* (Testimony), founded after 1948 in the United States and later published in France, where Tigríd resettled. The Czechoslovak communists considered Tigríd the deadly enemy of their regime.

When the Czech writer Milan Kundera emigrated in 1975 to France, he intended to inform Western intellectuals about his native land. Czechoslovakia was not a Russian satellite, Kundera stressed, but belonged wholly to Western Europe. In his book, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (The unbearable lightness of being)—an international bestseller that came out in French and English translations in 1984, and in the Czech original in 1985, in Toronto—he tried to explain to Western intellectuals not only who Czechs were, but above all what a totalitarian regime is like. He compared it to kitsch, which is, exactly like a totalitarian regime, catchy, unambiguous, and easy to understand. This clever

in a petition titled *Deset bodů* (Ten points) and on October 14, 1970, its signatories, Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík, and others, were set to stand trial on the charge of "subversion of the republic." They could have been sentenced to as many as ten years in prison, but at the last minute the trial was postponed indefinitely. The order arrived in all probability from the Kremlin; at that time, the Soviet priority was the reduction of tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, and Czech writers as martyrs for freedom was the last thing they wanted.

After Dubček's "socialism with a human face" came Husák's "Stalinism with a human face," as his era was aptly dubbed. While Gottwald had demanded enthusiastic and active support from the people, Husák was content if they merely abstained from active opposition. Unlike Gottwald's repressions, Husák's harassments were highly selective and concerned only well-chosen individuals and a few groups. In 1972, for instance, a series of trials of opponents of the regime resulted in sentences of up to six and a half years of imprisonment. It was cruel, but there were no life imprisonments, no death sentences.

In his struggle with opponents, Husák's chief and very effective weapon was social discrimination. Opponents of the regime were sacked, or their careers were curbed, and artists could not present their works to the public. A peculiarity of the normalization era was the existence of window cleaners, night watchmen, garbage collectors, and boilermen with university degrees; the only consolation was that in socialist Czechoslovakia they did not receive significantly less compensation than in their former jobs. A very guileful tool was the punishment of children: you refuse to cease your "subversive" activities? Very well, but do not be surprised when your children are not accepted at the university. Thousands of young people were punished for the political stances of their parents.

The average Czech and Slovak reacted to the restoration of Stalinism after 1968 with passive resistance or escapism. But even escape was difficult. You could not travel abroad, and even if you had money, you could not buy real amusement. Therefore, townspeople began to buy cottages in the country where they could invest their surplus money and energy, and above all enjoy freedom out of sight of the omnipresent police. In these second homes they did hard manual work on weekends and returned to their jobs only to "rest up" for the next weekend. Many Czechs and Slovaks escaped literally; people emigrated in great numbers—mostly physicians, scientists, and writers. The total number of Czech emigrants in the two decades of normalization was about 300,000, including almost the entire intellectual elite of the country.

Emigration was so massive that already in 1971 three Czech publishing

strategy allowed Kundera also to mock the kitschy views of the communist countries then widespread among left-wing Western intellectuals. From 1991, Kundera ceased to write in Czech; he switched to French, and Czech themes mostly disappeared from his work.

Other exiled Czech writers took similar paths, but they never formed a homogeneous block. Libuše Moniková, who died in 1998 in Berlin, was a brilliant Czech writer who published in German. Sometimes exiled writers ceased to write altogether, or found a completely different vocation. After the fall of communism Jiří Gruša became a diplomat and politician; Karol Sidon, who studied Judaism in his German exile, became a rabbi in Prague.

Not all the émigrés were intellectuals. Martina Navrátilová, the greatest female tennis star in the world for four decades, lost the U.S. Open in 1975 but defected that year from Czechoslovakia. She always remained staunch in her opposition to Soviet-dominated communist regimes. However, since becoming a U.S. citizen in 1981, she has not been uncritical of her adopted country. She has continuously supported gay and lesbian rights as well as ethical treatment of animals, and in 2002 she criticized (on CNN) what she saw as increasing government centralization and waning personal freedom in the United States. "I'm going to speak out because you can do that here," she said.²

Those Czechs and Slovaks who remained in their country lived in a world of distorted moral values, opposed by only a few. Besides political opposition, there was also important cultural opposition. Independent underground publishing (samizdat) was a new phenomenon; bound typescripts were sold for no more than the cost of the paper, typing, and binding. Even though authors received no royalties, samizdat books were still several times more expensive than printed books. One typing with carbons produced a dozen copies, which then went from hand to hand, but it is estimated that only about 130 to 150 people read each manuscript. Given their high price and limited circulation, samizdat was no competition for the tens of thousands of cheap books from state publishing houses.

In 1972, Ludvík Václík founded the most successful series of samizdat literature called *Petlice* (Latch), a humorous allusion to the official series of belles lettres called *Klíč* (Key). Before the end of the communist regime, 410 titles were published by *Petlice*—works of Bohumil Hrabal, Ivan Klima, Pavel Kohout, Oldřich Mikulášek, Karel Šidon, Jiří Šotola, Jan Trefulka, and Ludvík Václík himself. The most important centers of samizdat were *Kvart* (Quarto), directed by Jan Vladislav, and Václav Havel and Jan Lopatka's *Expeditice* (Dispatch). The growing self-confidence of the alternative publishers was clear; all copies from *Expeditice* contained full bibliographic descriptions, the number of the copy, and the signature of Václav Havel, testifying to the

authenticity of the text. Cultural reviews were also published in samizdat; the underground *Vokno* (Through the window) was published in several hundreds of copies until 1989, with occasional silences caused by imprisonment of its editors.

Unofficial cultural centers not only published books, journals, and (later) video journals, but also organized exhibitions, concerts, and lectures. The unofficial culture collaborated with Czech exiles, who were thus informed about free culture's survival in their fatherland; the exiles in their turn supported the Czech underground culture—morally and materially—by smuggling in books, computers, and copy machines. Abroad, several organizations were created to this end, the most important being the Foundation of Charter 77 and the Hus Foundation. Special prizes, named for Jaroslav Seifert, Jan Palach, or Egon Hostovský, were awarded to support Czech culture. In this "other" Czechoslovakia, religious life was also revived, especially Catholicism. A network of unofficial churches was administered by secretly ordained priests.

The Iron Curtain fluttered open for music, which was especially difficult to censor when Radio Luxembourg, Voice of America, and other stations were broadcasting the latest music to every home in Czechoslovakia. Already in the late 1960s, Prague and Bratislava pop music kept pace with London and New York—a motif of Tom Stoppard's hit 2006 play, *Rock 'n' Roll*. Hippie culture, which originated in the late sixties in the United States and Western Europe, immediately found an audience in Czechoslovakia, where people had even more reasons for hating the establishment. Young Czechs and Slovaks distanced themselves from their parents in exactly the same way as in capitalist countries, by rejecting consumer culture and provocatively neglecting their appearance, and by enjoying free love, drugs, and above all, their loud rock music. In Miloš Forman's earliest films, rock music is already a form of rebellion for Czech youth.

The main representatives of the Czech underground were the Plastic People of the Universe, founded just a month after the Russian invasion in 1968—although its members repeatedly denied political engagement. They stressed that they cared only about music, especially Frank Zappa, the Velvet Underground, and the Fugs, not widely known in the United States. The manager and art director of the Plastic People band was Ivan Martin Jirous, the Czech Andy Warhol, and the band leader was Milan (Mejla) Hlavsa. The group provoked with their nonconformism and vulgarity, and even with their religious fervor. The collection of poems *Magorovy labutí písně* (Magor's swan songs), written during Jirous's five-year imprisonment, shows a clear tendency to religious mysticism.³

The last public performance of "The Plastics," as they were called, was

announced for March 30, 1974. In a restaurant appropriately called America, in Rudolfov, near České Budějovice in southern Bohemia, a rock festival was to be held, but before The Plastics could appear onstage, the police ended the show and assaulted the audience; large-scale arrests followed. The group continued to perform covertly, at private wedding parties, but in 1976 all of the Plastic People of the Universe were arrested. In protest, Charter 77 was founded—in a way a late development of Masaryk's concept of "unpolitical politics."

Charter 77 somehow united people of very diverse political persuasions and religious views, who had in common only a handful of humanistic ideals and a strong will to oppose the degraded political regime. Activists of Charter 77, like the dramatist Václav Havel, enjoyed international renown and their actions managed to raise an international wave of solidarity with young artists from Czechoslovakia, who were still completely unknown abroad. The first action of organized opposition to Husák's regime was successful—the majority of those arrested were released, and those put on trial were punished for "organized disturbance of the peace" with eighteen months of imprisonment.

In the initial document and the subsequent proclamations, the members of Charter 77 very carefully avoided any violation of the Czechoslovak law. Since organized opposition was illegal in Czechoslovakia, the group characterized itself as a "loose, informal, and open association of people" that "does not form the basis for any oppositional political activity." Nonetheless, Charter 77 began to criticize the Czechoslovak state openly for failing to implement the human rights provisions that were contained in documents it had pledged to respect. It systematically referred to the constitution of Czechoslovakia, and above all to the Helsinki Agreement duly signed by Husák on August 1, 1975.

No wonder that this activity was furiously attacked in the Czechoslovak media, even though the text of the initial proclamation of Charter 77 was never published. Czechs and Slovaks knew it only from the foreign press or from Radio Free Europe and other foreign stations with transmissions in the Czech language. On January 6, 1977, it appeared in West German newspapers, but the text was never made public in communist Czechoslovakia. Signatories of Charter 77 were repeatedly interrogated by police; most of them lost their jobs, and their children were denied higher education. Several of them, including Václav Havel, were repeatedly jailed. In October 1979, several leaders of the committee were arrested and sentenced to as long as five years in prison. Charter 77 managed to survive, thanks to support from the exile community of Czechs and Slovaks, which garnered it worldwide publicity

and, perhaps even more important, supported signatories financially to compensate for their social persecution.

The harsh treatment of the signers of Charter 77 by the communist authorities led in 1978 to the creation of *Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných* (Committee for the defense of the unjustly persecuted). Its mission was to alert people to any state measures against individual signatories of Charter 77. In an attempt to discredit Charter 77, Husák organized a meeting in the National Theatre where famous Czech artists, writers and actors signed a document condemning it. Everyone knew that those who did not sign would be silenced, and only a few dared to refuse. One week later, a similar meeting was organized for popular singers; the main speeches were by popular stars loved by the whole country, Eva Pilarová and Karel Gott.

Husák's Czechoslovakia was not exactly culturally inspiring. It was a country in which politically motivated manipulations by the state and moonlighting and bribery among the citizenry were absolutely normal. Theft or damage of public property was a heroic deed; as the popular saying went, "Who does not steal from the state, takes from his own family." In desperation, the whole nation launched into "consumerism," even though shops abounded only with long lines. There were chronic shortages of everything, toilet paper included. Still, Husák was perfectly aware that as long as at least something was in the shops, his regime would survive. So he exported weapons, heavy industry products, and engineers or doctors to the Middle East or South America in order to be able to import bananas and coffee. The return to central planning was moderately successful, as was renewed orientation toward the Soviet bloc, with which about 80 percent of foreign trade was conducted. After the initial revival, the Czechoslovak economy stalled between 1978 and 1982, but again it revived, and in 1983 and 1985 achieved an impressive annual average growth of more than 3 percent.

This relative economic prosperity was based on cheap exports of Czechoslovak machinery and arms to Soviet bloc countries, which could not afford the superior but more costly products from Western European countries. The state also invested in the electronic, chemical, and pharmaceutical industries. Husák profited from the state monopolies, and Czechs and Slovaks were forced to buy the poor-quality products of local light industry because there was no other choice in state shops. Czechoslovakia also benefited from a steady supply of millions of tons of Russian crude oil, imported for a small fraction of the price on the world market—but Husák's regime profited from it only until 1984, when Russia dramatically raised the price. Nevertheless, after the mid-eighties, nuclear power began to be produced in Czechoslovakia and eventually supplied about 20 percent of the country's electricity. Czechoslovakia

slovakia was an important producer of uranium, and nuclear power seemed a rational choice.

In the seventies, Professor Otto Wichterle, mentioned earlier, filed a series of lawsuits against American firms that had violated his rights concerning contact lenses, illegally depriving him and the Czechoslovak state of tens of millions of U.S. dollars in royalties. In 1982 the U.S. court in Los Angeles confirmed Wichterle as sole inventor of contact lenses, but Czechoslovak authorities forced Wichterle to drop the case. They simply could not endure the idea of a politically unreliable man, a signatory of Charter 77, becoming a millionaire.

During Husák's era, passive loyalty was rewarded with moderate material well-being and stupefying amusements; like ancient Roman emperors before him, Husák bribed Czechs and Slovaks with bread and diversions. The dominant figure of popular culture in the seventies was Jaroslav Dietl, author of screenplays for popular TV serials that conformed to communist ideology and at the same time offered people characters who seemingly coped with the same problems experienced by everybody in work, family, or erotic life. The first series was released in 1978-79, and the second in 1982. Every Sunday evening, Dietl's serial *Nemocnice na kraji města* (Hospital at the end of the city) glued the whole nation to their TV sets. The serial was shown also on West German TV, and its success on both sides of the Iron Curtain was due to the fact that it represented a charming idyll. Dietl's source of inspiration was not so much Husák's Czechoslovakia as American soap opera, the poetics of which he thoroughly appropriated and adapted to Central European tastes.

Czechoslovakia of the normalization period was full of paradoxes. The culture of this state that preached fundamental Marxism and absolute loyalty to the Soviet Union was to a surprising degree Americanized. The American influence was visible everywhere, from clothing to the immense popularity of ubiquitous bands with Stetsons on their heads playing American country music. Nowhere in Europe was this music as popular as in the Czechoslovak Socialist Federative Republic. While Czech enthusiasm for country music went back to the local "tramping" movement of the early twentieth century, its popularity in Husák's Czechoslovakia was an explicit manifestation of pro-American feelings—the United States representing above all the opposite of Soviet Russia and communism.

In 1970, a country music band called The Rangers, who had first appeared in 1964, sold their first million records. The following year, an otherwise sympathetic reviewer raised the question of why this excellent band was named after the "American killers in Vietnam." The state agency Pragokonzert, on which all bands were absolutely dependent, reacted promptly and forced The

Rangers to adopt a Czech name, so they began to perform as Plavci (Swimmers). Another Czech country music band had the same experience—The Greenhorns, who had begun in 1965, had to translate their name into Czech (*Zelenáci*). Change of name notwithstanding, *Zelenáci* continued to perform, and their country songs from the early seventies are still immensely popular in the Czech Republic. American bluegrass had arrived in the sixties in Czechoslovakia, and it was no accident that in 1972 the very first European festival of this music genre was organized in Kopidlno, Bohemia. The most popular bluegrass band was—and still is—Poutníci (Wanderers), founded in 1970 by Robert Křesťan, who now make annual tours of the United States.

Officially approved Czech and Slovak literary culture, on the other hand, came to a standstill. Only loyal authors were allowed to publish, but most of them offered only the most routine works; those who were allowed to write could confront actual issues only through allusions. In 1969 Jiří Šotola's *Tovaryšstvo Ježíšovo* (The Company of Jesus) appeared. This historical novel describes Jesuits fighting with heretics in eastern Bohemia, but is actually about the inevitable decline of any victorious ideology. It was read as an analogy of the tragic fate of an honest intellectual who enters into the service of political power; his good intentions notwithstanding, sooner or later he becomes a criminal. Karel Steigerwald's 1980 play, *Dobové tance* (Period dances) was a biting satire on Czech patriotism. Set in 1852, its plot concerns Austrian persecution of Czech patriots after the failed revolution of 1848; everyone in the audience knew that it was actually about Czech cowardice in normalized Czechoslovakia, and that is why the play was such a success.

In the exalted period 1967-69, the traditional conception of the artist as the "voice of the nation" had revived and was reaching its absolute height. *Literary News* had taken over the role of a political tribune, actors like Jan Werich had become political commentators, and all engaged Czech intellectuals acquired enormous authority. By the seventies this attitude had changed dramatically, and in the eighties an entirely different mindset prevailed, especially in the younger generation: the new view was that artists had a duty to engage in political life, but exclusively as citizens, never through their work. These two spheres were to be kept apart; far from being "voices of the nation," writers and artists should defer in their work to an enlightened public. A typical case is the famous surrealist filmmaker Jan Švankmajer. Earlier, he had also worked in the theater, including the Semafor and Laterna Magika, but he is known above all for haunting animated films such as *Možnosti dialogu* (Dimensions of dialogue, 1982) starring two mutating globs of clay. He also made a surrealist feature film, *Alice* (1988).

The struggle of the writer Bohumil Hrabal with Husák's regime was

exceptional, like everything about this author. After 1970, although he was already internationally famous, Hrabal was not allowed to publish his works. Then in January 1975, an interview with him appeared in *Tvorba*, at that time the only literary journal. Hrabal spoke about soccer, but also said in passing that in the coming elections he would vote for candidates of the National Front, as the forced coalition of all parties was euphemistically called. This sop was sufficient; his loyalty declaration could be manipulated, but he did not protest, and his books reappeared in bookshops.⁴

Hrabal's new books were published only in heavily censored and mutilated form, but his older works could appear in reprints—and most important, two films were made from his novels by Jiří Menzel, which everybody in the country saw several times. In 1981, *Posvázený* (Cutting it short) was released, based on Hrabal's gentle comedy about his parents, set in Austria-Hungary (1976); another book, *Slavnosti sněženek* (The Snowdrop Festival; samizdat 1974, officially 1978) was turned into a movie; this time the plot was set in the present, in Kersko, Hrabal's summer home.

Of equal importance for citizens of Husák's Czechoslovakia were the comedies, sometimes alarmingly sweet, written by Zdeněk Svěrák and Ladislav Smoljak. The most successful of these were also directed by Jiří Menzel, *Na samotě u lesa* (Secluded dwelling near forest; 1976) and *Vesničko má středisková* (My sweet little village; 1985), which won various awards and was nominated for an Oscar. To this we might add a kind of melancholic comedy, from Svěrák's script of *Kulový blásek* (Ball lightning), directed by Smoljak and Zdeněk Podskalský (1978), and many other films that cheered people in depressing times of ubiquitous hypocrisy, lies, and superficiality.

Svěrák and Smoljak were also behind the promotion of Jára Cimrman, a singular Czech genius from the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, existing only in the twisted minds of his creators. Cimrman, a Czech with a German name, excelled in every imaginable discipline, but the world outside the Czechoslovak borders did not give him due credit. This caricature of a Czech luminary, the "unforgettable Czech who fell into oblivion," became immensely popular. He is in fact the funniest literary figure since Hašek's Švejk, and no wonder that the *Theater of Jára Cimrman*, begun in 1966, after more than ten thousand performances is still sold out. The format remains the same as in the beginning; in the first half there is a "scientific" lecture ("cimromanologues") and, after a pause, a reconstruction of one of Cimrman's "lost plays." In 2005, when Czech TV asked people to choose the greatest Czech among its kings, politicians, artists and other notables, Jára Cimrman received the most votes.

During the Husák era, mystification and parody were omnipresent in



On weekends Czechs found welcome escape in private cottages miles from socialist reality. Some chose to collect in ersatz American-Indian settlements in the Brdy forests; replicating prehistoric garments was both an enjoyable hobby and a protest against the regime. Photo taken in Dobříš, 1989, by Jan Malý from the series *Czech People of 1982-96*, by Jan Malý, Jiří Poláček, and Ivan Lutterer. Photo used by permission of Jan Malý.

culture and social life; everybody was ready to play any game with a stone face. All were excellently trained for it, because everybody took part in empty rituals at school, in offices, in workshops, or on public squares during state holidays. People were accustomed to nonsensical speeches, stupid May 1 parades, superfluous elections, hypocritical ovations. Then, in 1989, Husák's regime fell, and with him disappeared its absurd world, almost overnight. How was this possible? No doubt family played a key role in it. In Czechoslovakia everyone understood from childhood that he or she would live in at least two worlds with incompatible norms of behavior. It was normal that before you went to bed you knelt with your grandmother to say prayers, while in the morning your mother wrapped you in the red scarf of the Communist Pioneers and sent you to an atheist school.

What you heard from your relatives was often diametrically opposed to what teachers or media told you. In your education, a pivotal role was played by grandparents, who remembered not only Masaryk's republic, but also Emperor Franz Josef and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These grandparents were as a rule anticommunists and Catholics. In Czechoslovakia, children and their grandparents were very close, because most mothers were employed and the help of grandparents was vital. An equally important factor was the chronic housing shortage, which resulted in extended-family households, sometimes including even great-grandparents. Additionally, the number of divorces more than doubled between the seventies and eighties, and in households without father or mother (or both) the role of grandparents of course increased. In any event, at the end of 1989, Czech and Slovaks brushed off the communist dust and cheerfully returned to the way of life that they had been forced to renounce forty years earlier.

Notes

1. Václav Havel, "Český úděl," *Tužň (Face)* (1969).
2. *Coroniz Chung Tonight, CNS*, July 17, 2002.
3. Published in Czech (samizdat, 1985; official publication, 1990).
4. When the banned writer Jiří Lederer asked other banned authors what they thought about Hrabal's "collaboration" with Husák's regime, the majority said that the work alone matters, not the actions of its author. This was the new conception of literature that formed during the normalization era. Cf. Jiří Lederer, *Czech Conversations*, concerning the case of Hrabal (published in Czech, samizdat 1978, under the title *Český rozhovor*).