

PROOF OF LOVE

PART 1: ETERNITY LASTS FOR EIGHT YEARS

Mrs. Kvitková the goose plucker plucked seventy-two geese in eight hours and went into the history books.

At an academic conference in Brno, Minister of Information Václav Kopecký said that Europe's highest mountain was Mount Elbrus, and defined the previously held view that it was Mont Blanc as "a relic of reactionary cosmopolitanism."

A definitive list was compiled of authors who would never be published again, including Dickens, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and several hundred others.

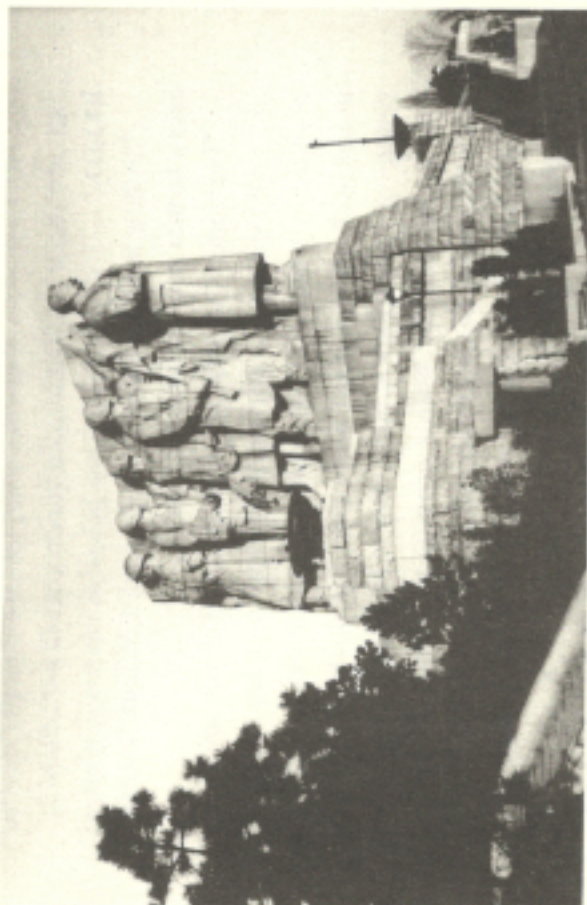
The poet Michal Sedloň wrote that "nourishment" and "production" were now poetic words.

The number of individual copies of books destroyed in the country during these years is estimated at twenty-seven million.

As Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký diagnosed the new age: "It's impossible to live the old way—now life is better and happier!"

In two years—at Stalin's suggestion—the most eminent leaders will be condemned to the gallows.

At the Zlatá Husa hotel on Wenceslas Square—where Andersen wrote his most famous fairytale about the idle rich, *The Princess and the Pea*—there hung a sign that said: "With the Soviet Union Forever."



Every day at midnight, at the end of its broadcast, Radio Prague played the Soviet national anthem.

This is how the 1940s end and the '50s begin in Czechoslovakia.

As part of the celebrations for Joseph Stalin's seventieth birthday held in December 1949,* the authorities decide that nine million of the country's population of fourteen million citizens will sign birthday wishes for him.

They manage to collect the signatures in four days. To mark the occasion, a decision is taken to erect the world's largest statue of Stalin on a hill above the Vltava River in Prague.

No sculptor can refuse to take part in the competition. Fifty-four artists are given nine months to design a statue. Thank God, the top Czechoslovak sculptor Ladislav Šaloun is lucky enough to be dead (as they say about this particular death in Prague). In order not to win, Karel Pokorný, regarded as Šaloun's successor, draws the leader with his arms spread in a friendly gesture, making Stalin look like Christ.

Most of the other artists make the same mistake. "They

* Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin should have celebrated his seventieth birthday in 1948. It seems that he falsely gave 1879 as his date of birth in many documents, and thus it was accepted as the official date during his lifetime. This is discussed by Russian historian Edvard Radzinsky in his book, *Stalin: The First In-Depth Biography Based on Explosive New Documents from Russia's Secret Archives* (Doubleday, 1996).

have presented Stalin in an affected way," says the panel of judges.

Fifty-six-year-old Otakar Švec, son of a confectioner who specializes in sculptures made of sugar, is a frustrated sculptor.

After a strong debut, when as a student he sculpted a motorcyclist and successfully captured movement in stone, he designed a statue of the father of the republic, T. G. Masaryk, and then a statue of Jan Hus. Both were destroyed by the fascists during the war. After the war, he designed a statue of Roosevelt, but never completed it, because the communists took power. Before the war, he used to exhibit his avant-garde sculptures in the West. He thought he would never get another commission.

Now—so rumor has it—Otakar Švec throws together a model under the influence of a couple of bottles of vodka. He is a decent man, so he deliberately plagiarizes a well-known pre-war idea for a statue of Miroslav Tyrš, a bourgeois public benefactor whom the communists don't like.

Unfortunately, he wins.

Stalin is standing at the head of a group of people. In one hand, he holds a book, and he rests the other hand on his chest, under his coat.

On the left—Soviet—side, Stalin is followed by a worker holding a flag, then an agrobiologist, then a female partisan and finally a Soviet soldier who is looking round behind him.

On the right—Czechoslovak—side of Stalin comes: a worker with a flag, a woman from the countryside, a scientist and a Czechoslovak soldier also looking backwards.

Some people start to whisper boldly that "there's Stalin with everyone crawling up his ass."

Just one of his buttons—they say—will be the size of a loaf of bread.

The monument will be one hundred feet high, and Stalin fifty feet wide, altogether the size of a ten-story pre-war building. His foot alone will be over six feet long.

The whole thing, made of granite (not at all suitable for sandstone Prague, but unlike sandstone, granite lasts for centuries) is to stand on Letná hill and provide competition for the castle. Its vast scale is to crush the past. It will be visible from the Old Town Square, and will stand on the other side of Čechův Bridge, across the river from the top of Pařížská Street.

To make a Stalin of this kind, 260 blocks of granite are needed, each well over six feet by six feet by six feet in size.

The fact that a quarry is found with thick enough walls from which to cut out such large blocks of stone of exactly the same color is little short of a miracle.

The two architects helping Švec—a married couple called Stursa—have to devise a way to prepare the weak sandstone hill for this colossus.

They decide that the hill will be filled from the inside with gigantic blocks of concrete, which will form something like underground halls.

Two years after the competition is announced, people start to voice their concerns about the statue. Švec's sketches, models

and drawings are exhibited to the citizens for their consultation, and a debate is held about "Prague's new jewel."

"I'm worried that from a distance the figures will merge into one and Stalin won't be sufficiently visible."

"Why are the last figures in line looking backwards? I find that too avant-garde," people say, as the doubts increase.

"They're looking back for ideological reasons," replies Švec. "It's to do with the guarantee of living in peace, it's about defense. They're also looking round for compositional reasons, so the monument will have a nice view from the back, not the rear end of a soldier."

"Why as an artist do you want to defend our people on the monument, comrade?"

"A rearguard defense is necessary so that the people in the vanguard can feel calm," explains the sculptor.

Later on, people will say that the figures behind Stalin are standing in line for meat.

Many citizens are still implacable. "As a symbol, we find the monument disturbing. It's not a joyful, faithful depiction, but instead looks like a tombstone," four people who signed the exhibition visitors' book noted.

"Whom is Comrade Stalin leading? The people are literally creeping after him as if they're up against a wall. The design should be torn up and a new competition announced."

"The monument will be in bad taste. More care should be devoted to the depiction of one of the greatest giants in history."

Otakar Švec doesn't yet know that he is a prisoner.

The models posing for the monument were apparently extras from the Barrandov Film Studios.

Later, it was said that the man who posed as Stalin drank himself to death. Nobody knew his name, but the whole of Prague called him "Stalin," and his psyche couldn't take it.

Švec and the architects build a series of models of the monument in clay. First, three feet high, then ten.

The Party and the government have their eye on Švec. The record of comments made about him at a meeting between the authorities and the artist on January 4, 1951, fills twelve typewritten pages.

The figure of Stalin isn't towering over the rest of the monument! Prime Minister Zápotocký says that it should already be plain to see in the clay models that this is a monument to Stalin—a courageous man. "Now that he's getting down to work, perhaps the artist is starting to be afraid of his own ideas," he adds.

Zápotocký and eight of his ministers discuss whether to lower the figures behind Stalin, or raise the leader on an extra pedestal.

The monument must not look like a sarcophagus from afar!

The figures behind Stalin are too decorative.

Can't the artist take a more profound approach to his work?

Why does he refuse to make more clay models and show them to the authorities?

Finally, the prime minister concludes that Otakar Švec is indeed afraid of his own monument.

The sculptor doesn't hear all of this; he and his colleagues are invited to join the meeting forty-five minutes later. First the architect, Vlasta Štursová, gives her explanation: they have deliberately not raised the figure of Stalin, because that would mean distancing him from the people, but in fact he is leading the people, and they stem from him.

Švec explains to the authorities that if they wish for Stalin to be different in height from the rest, the monument will have two different scales. "From the artistic point of view, that is untenable," he says.

The government buys him a bigger studio, because his old one is turning out to be too small. Now, Party representatives will hold their meetings at his workshop.

They come with their own penknives.

Each time, they stick them in the clay and trim down the heads of the people behind Stalin.

The first man with a penknife is the minister with radical views on Mont Blanc and Mount Eilbrus.

Wielding the second penknife is the most virulent of them all, Professor Zdeněk Nejedlý, author of *The History of Czech Music*. He was an art historian, and had even been a democrat; during the occupation he illegally escaped to Moscow and became a professor there. He came back to become a theoretician of everything in socialist Czechoslovakia.

In 1951, he is minister of schools, the sciences, and the arts. He writes a famous essay about new art and love. "People will still fall in love," he predicts, "but we expect that, under socialism, as the working class, they will love each other more and better than before. They'll no longer come up with any of that fake stuff about 'unhappy love affairs,' or the sensual deterioration in which bourgeois romance so often wallowed."

For instance, he can't bear the fact that Czechoslovakia was famous before the war for avant-garde photography. When he sees shadows or smoke photographed out of context in Jaroslav Rössler's photographs from the 1920s, he flies into a rage.

(When Stalin dies, Nejedlý will state that from now on the Czech monument makes the most important statement about the Father of Nations: Stalin lives forever.)

Four months after the first reprimand, Švec receives another. The authorities upbraid him again in 1952, in 1953 and in 1954.

Four years go by, the stonemasons have been working on the blocks of granite for a long time now, the scaffolding and the crane are in place, and the artist is still being advised to "soften and change some of the figures, so they won't look despotic." Švec takes women back to his studio and drinks with them.

He comes forward with explanations.

A year before the monument is unveiled, his wife can't bear the situation any longer, and turns on the gas in the bathroom.

Švec finds her dead in the bathtub.

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New doubts arise, which luckily have nothing to do with the sculptor. The concern is that it looks as if the stone Stalin has come to Prague, stopped at the river and is gazing at the wonderful city.

However, he has come from the east, so why is he standing on the western riverbank?

If he were on his way in, he would have to stop at the river, but with his back to the city. So he's not on his way in.

If he isn't entering the city, perhaps he's leaving it?

But for what reason?

What doesn't he like about socialist Prague?

Has he only just crossed the Vltava and is already turning back?

Why is he looking east?

Or perhaps he has in fact entered the city, and is merely looking behind him out of nostalgia?

From the hundreds of pages typed on Czechoslovak typewriters, pages filled with comments about the monument and then treated as classified, it appears that the proliferation of doubts is a race without a finish line—nobody can possibly predict when and how it will end. And each idea can instantly change into its own contradiction.

It is the spring of 1955, more than two years since Stalin's death.

The monument is to be unveiled on May 1. A seventeen-page deed of erection has been prepared, which not only

states that from now on the Father of Nations presides over Prague, but also stresses that Stalin "is looking at the Bethlehem Chapel."

A remarkable statement for the communist era.

This is the chapel where Jan Hus preached his sermons. Communist propaganda has appropriated religion: it says Hus was a revolutionary, the Hussites were the first communist organization, and their pillaging expeditions were nothing more than disinterested incitement of the local peoples to fight against feudalism.

Now, between Stalin on Letná hill and Hus in the chapel on Bethlehem Square, an almost visible red thread is to be stretched.

The sculptor knows that his monument is aesthetically hideous. Pompous and overblown.

He knows the authorities don't like the monument either, but for different reasons. They are so disgusted with the sculptor that by now they only communicate with him through the architects.

But the press gushes: "From the ideological point of view, this is the only composition that shows Generalissimus Stalin as a statesman, a builder, a victorious leader, a teacher of the people, and at the same time as Comrade Stalin and Stalin the man, as one of us."

It is evening, some time before the unveiling.

Otakar Švec leaves his studio, takes a cab, and goes to Letná hill to look at the monument incognito.

He asks the cab driver what he thinks about it.

"I'll show you something," says the cab driver. "Take a good look at the Soviet side."

"What's there?"

"I think you can see it. The partisan girl has her hand on the soldier's fly."

"What?"

"I'm telling you, sir, when they unveil it, the guy who designed it is one-hundred-percent sure to get shot."

Otakar Švec goes back to his studio and commits suicide.

News of his death is kept secret; nobody is allowed to publicize it.

The name Švec does not appear on the monument.

On May 1, 1955, during the unveiling ceremony, it is announced that the monument was created by the Czechoslovak People.

There are rumors about victims.

"A total of seven people were killed during construction," the sacristan went on. "The first was the sculptor who designed this statue, and the last was the unskilled laborer who arrived on Monday, still well-oiled, and a board on the sixth floor broke under him—he fell head downwards and was killed when he hit the statue's little finger."

In fact, the sacristan from Bohumil Hrabal's story "The Treachery of Mirrors" is wrong. Prague's Stalin had no protruding finger. If somebody was killed, maybe he hit the whole hand.

The statue stands there for almost eight years, until 1962. It outlives the thaw of 1956 and the condemnation of Stalin by seven years!

He is condemned, but only in the USSR, Poland and Hungary. French historian Muriel Blaive wrote a book about 1956 in Czechoslovakia entitled *Une déstalinisation manquée* ("A Missed Opportunity for Destalinization").

There is an astonishing lack of strong reactions to what is happening in the neighboring countries, and the regime in Prague even digs itself in more firmly. For example, as we know from Security Service reports, in private conversations people are saying things like "we should implore God not to let those beasts from Hungary come here, because they'd kill us all." Attempts at student demonstrations don't prompt any major public response.

Whereas there is a demonstration of loyalty to the Soviet Union, and the Soviet ambassador is greeted by 25,000 people in Prague. "The Czech government itself is surprised by society's conformism," reports a correspondent for *Journal de Genève*.

Why?

Three years earlier, monetary reform was introduced, which for the average citizen proved to be a swindle, so people came out onto the streets and a large number of industrial plants went on strike. There was no Stalin around anymore to threaten a third world war, so to improve the nation's sense of well-being, Czechoslovakia's arms factories switched to manufacturing television sets, gramophones and refrigerators. Now the market is flooded with goods.

On the day when Khrushchev delivers his famous secret speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, President Zápotočký (the man who as prime minister had supervised Švec's work), who has been invited to attend, has a meeting in Moscow with Czech and Slovak students. The students have been here for some time, and they already know that Khrushchev regards Stalin as a murderer, so they want to talk to their leader about this.

"Do you really want to poke around in all that?" asks the president. "The right policy is not to interfere," he adds.

The team of Stalin's faithful disciples from Prague has a problem. In Moscow, people talk openly about his crimes, but the Czech visitors have no interest in publicizing Khrushchev's speech on their return home—that would mean their own end.

Besides, there is nobody in Czechoslovakia capable of assuming the new leadership, nobody like Poland's Władysław Gomułka, first secretary of the Party and de facto leader of the country.

A newsreel.

The journalist asks a middle-aged man walking past Letná hill what heroism means today. "Once upon a time, brave men went to war," she says, and thrusts the microphone his way.

Laborer Josef Král thinks for a while, and then says: "These days, heroism means doing everything that's demanded of us."

This we know: in order to survive in unfavorable circumstances, a small nation has to adapt. It has carried this down

from the days of the Habsburgs and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

Writer Pavel Kohout points out that, after the war in Czechoslovakia, there were no Soviet troops, there was no putsch, the communists had genuine support, and in the 1946 elections they gained more than 40 percent of the votes. In 1938, the Czech nation had experienced annexation and occupation, and had been betrayed by Great Britain and France, so when the communists took power, it looked as if the Soviet Union was their only reliable means of support.

Besides, a hundred years earlier František Palacký, the man who awakened Czech national consciousness, predicted that if the Czechs ever moved closer to Russia, it would be an act of desperation on their part.

"That's why, later on," says Pavel Kohout, "it was so hard to admit to those who had supported the communists that they had unwittingly done the devil a favor. And of course it all happened very quickly."

Underneath Stalin, in the concrete spaces inside the hill, prostitutes receive their clients. Earlier, a famous painter kept a folding bed in there. But only until it came out that he was taking underage girls there. Earlier still, tons of potatoes were stored there.

In 1961, Moscow holds another Party Congress and Khrushchev is still criticizing Stalinism.

Stalin's mummified body is removed from Lenin's mausoleum on Red Square, and Zápotocký's successor as president of Czechoslovakia, Antonín Novotný, must respond to this.

In 1952, he had personally divided among himself and his colleagues the valuables left behind by their comrades who died on the gallows. Now he must be ready to rehabilitate them and admit that the Party was wrong.

The monument that stands "forever" was another mistake.

The man who is to eliminate Stalin—engineer Vladimír Křížek—hears the strangest sentence of his entire life from the authorities: "You are to demolish the monument, but with dignity."

The top expert at an elite engineering enterprise, Křížek asks them to explain. The monument is a concrete monster, clad in granite, and it is fixed to the inside of the mountain by a reinforced concrete structure. Nobody foresaw that it would ever have to be destroyed. It can only be blown up.

"Destroy it in a dignified way, so that the gravity of the USSR isn't harmed," the secretary of the district Party committee instructs him, and spells out the conditions.

No explosive materials may be placed inside Stalin's head. Nobody is to fire at it.

No gunshots are to be heard at all.

Nobody is to talk about it, film it or photograph it. Anyone who breaks this rule will be arrested on the spot.

Engineer Křížek's entire enterprise is paralyzed with fear.

The grounds are strictly guarded day and night. The whole thing will be blown up, but someone has the idea of taking the head apart manually. Two stonemasons (father and son)

are suspended from it, chipping off five-inch chunks at a time with hammers. They dare not throw them to the ground, so they are removed by hoist.

The explosion is prepared by the country's best pyrotechnician, Jiří Příhoda. He knows that any mistake could send half the downtown area sky-high.

He spends two weeks thinking, and not sleeping; now and then he just drifts off for three minutes. He prepares 2,100 charges.

He wants to blast the whole monument in one go, but he is pressured by the military, whom the government has sent along just in case. They force him to do it in three stages—they are afraid pieces of the monument will fly out over the city and kill people. They dog him every step of the way, never letting him concentrate and constantly nagging him.

First, Jiří Příhoda has a fit of hysterics and starts shouting. Then he downs six glasses of slivovitz and presses the firing button.

When it's all over he sits on the grass, weeping loudly.

An ambulance takes him away to the mental hospital.

The explosions were a great success. Clearing the metal and concrete from the surrounding area takes a year.

Not a single line about the monument's destruction appears in the press.

Prague's monument to Stalin never existed.

PART 2: LIFE-SAVING FRUIT JUICE

Stalin left behind a thirty-six-foot-high pedestal. Nowadays, there is a metronome on it. The big red pointer oscillates from the Soviet side to the Czechoslovak side and back again. Skateboarders rampage around it, and on the old steps, someone has used white paint to try to communicate with, someone else, writing: it-wont-work-katerinarybova@seznam.cz.

Sometimes there are no sponsors to pay for the electricity, so the pointer comes to a standstill.

"Look, time has stopped again," people say.

But that's not a good metaphor for this place—quite the opposite.

Because time has picked up so much speed that Otakar Švec's death, for instance, ten years after the Second World War ended, feels as if it happened in the days of cuneiform script.

I've always been bothered by the fact that the Czechs have never written a reliable history of the rise and fall of the greatest proof of love in communist Europe.

However, it turns out that to do this you have to become an archeologist.

When, at the Central Archive of the Czech Republic, I am handed a file marked *Stalinův památník v Praze* ("The Stalin monument in Prague") with stamps on the documents which show that they were only declassified three days ago, I feel a pleasant thrill—it was done at my request, nobody has taken an interest in them before.

There are dozens of protocols about the monument, many of them marked "Confidential." But there's nothing about the victims of the construction work or anything else about the

sculptor, apart from the fact that he was horribly oppressed. Not a word about him having ended his own life.

If he really was found in his studio, the secret police must have gone in there. They must have questioned his neighbors, they must have sniffed about, so there ought to be at least a note about it. They must have written down the circumstances in which the body was found.

I put in a request to search the archives of the former Security Service for Otakar Švec's file. From October 2003 until January 2004, I wait for a response.

They reply that they can't find a single sheet of paper with his name on it.

Sculptor Olbram Zoubek says Otakar Švec gassed himself, just as his wife did, in the bathroom. (This may be true, as for many years Zoubek had an employee called Junek, who worked in stucco and was Švec's loyal assistant.)

Television documentary director Martin Skyba says he shot himself. (He may be well informed, as he makes historical documentaries.)

An art historian called Petr Wittlich who specializes in that era says the sculptor hanged himself. (This may also be true, as Professor Wittlich wrote the one and only monograph on Švec not long after his death.)

"But where did he do it?"

"In his studio, in the loft of the Koruna Palace on Wenceslas Square."

I spend three days trying to find out if the sculptor really did have a studio at the Koruna. He did not. He had two, but

not downtown—besides, there's no trace of Švec left in either. I tell this to the professor.

"I wrote about him, but I didn't know him personally. He had no children, and you won't find anybody in Prague who knew him because they must've all died by now."

Despite some Frankovka red wine, Jiří Přihoda, the explosives expert, is economical with his words. If I hadn't known in advance that he was taken off to the hospital, I'm sure he would never have mentioned it.

"That was the most dreadful event in my entire life, demolishing that thing, though I had some tough assignments afterwards too. But there's no point in going back to it," he says. "So much pain . . ."

We don't go back to it. —

Yet, a week later, in a little-known novel called *Café Slavia*, I come across a description of the explosion. It was written by Ota Filip, a writer who in 1960 was forced by the regime to become a miner.

I call the explosives expert. I tell him I have found something about his explosion.

Next morning, Mr. Přihoda's wife informs me in the hallway that last night was hell. "Who could have written that?" — he kept repeating, trembling all over.

"But it's 2003," I say.

"What difference does it make?" asks his wife.

I read out loud: "The next night there was a full moon. The Vitava looked like a silver snake that had lain down to sleep beneath the bridges. And then there was an earthquake."

"Well, well . . ." says Mr. Příhoda, clutching at his heart.
 "A gray cloud of smoke shielded Stalin right up to the neck. Suddenly it lit up with all the colors of the rainbow. His head was still protruding amid that strange light, but he tipped forwards, as some dreadful force broke his neck. Stones drummed on the roofs and fell into the Vltava, opaque by now. The echo of the explosion returned to the city and broke through the cloud of dust which was hanging over the downtown area like a gray bell."

"But the explosions were in the daytime!" Příhoda rages.

"Then silence fell. Only Helena von Molwitzová screamed and fell to the ground. She wasn't found until morning, lying on the lawn . . ."

"Good God, what are you reading?"

"They carried her into the embassy on a stretcher. Her face was covered in blood."

Jiří Příhoda can't get over it. "Only one man was killed during the demolition, and that was before the explosion. He was from the committee. He went into the chambers underneath the monument, stood on a plank in the wrong place, fell over and never got up again. Why on earth invent other victims?"

"Because Stalin demands victims," explains his wife.

"They once wrote that his head fell off and rolled down the bridge into the marketplace. And then I get blamed for it all!"

"Straight after Stalin he had a heart attack," Mrs. Příhodová tells me. "Ever since he'd had sleepless nights for two weeks before the explosion, my husband hasn't slept properly, for forty-one years."

"I fall asleep, like last night, for five minutes. And then I have a dream, I don't know what it's about, I just know I grit my teeth and say: 'I won't allow it!'"

In its weekend edition, the newspaper *Lidové noviny* publishes my small ad, with a photograph of the models who posed for Švec. I came across their picture in Prague's Museum of Communism, but I couldn't find their names.

I write that I am looking for these people, or relatives of theirs.

Five letters arrive. All more or less about the fact that somebody has very troublesome neighbors and asking if I could do something about it.

Two years ago, Czech television showed some footage taken by a daredevil who illegally filmed the explosion on an amateur camera. There was a reminder that the totalitarian state was just as afraid of cameras as it was of firearms.

He is a Mr. M., the same age as everyone concerned, around eighty. He is wearing a tartan jacket and a cravat. He shows me a magazine for which he writes about Moravian wines.

"A friend and I filmed the explosion. He had an eight-millimeter camera, and we hid in the bushes on the hill opposite. One filmed, the other kept watch. The friend was my foreman, because we'd worked together as laborers building a tunnel, right next to Stalin."

"What sort of laborers?" I ask, glancing at the cravat and the magazine about wine.

"I was a road worker."

"With a camera?"

"I mean I was a workman in the mornings, and at night I wrote the screenplays for TV programs, under a pseudonym of course. I was already middle-aged when I graduated in journalism. But I really don't want to talk about it."

"But you've already started."

"All right, I'll finish: I had to be a workman, and please don't badger me about it."

"Why not?"

"Those are things best not mentioned," he says, and lowers his voice, as if somebody undesirable might really be listening. We are talking at the Café Arco, where Kafka used to sit, and where the Ministry of Internal Affairs later had its own canteen.

Mr. M. fetches out a file with a photograph of the Soviet side of the monument.

"You see, I set up the camera to get the best possible shot of the partisan girl's gesture as she grabs the soldier." He shows me. "Some people were informed that Švec killed himself because of that fly."

"Who told them that?"

"I think about fifteen of Prague's cab drivers said, naturally in the greatest confidence, that they had driven him up to the monument that night."

The sculptor Olbram Zoubek is seventy-seven years old, an energetic man who has no ungrounded fears.

He was a student when Švec was working on Stalin.

After the self-immolation of history student Jan Palach in 1969, Zoubek managed to get inside the morgue and make two death masks of the national hero, who was being guarded by a whole herd of secret policemen, and so too shall I succeed in discovering some facts about Švec.

Zoubek knows a sculptor who worked with Otakar Švec on Stalin, and whose name is Josef Vajce. He is the only man still alive who knew him personally.

Fantastic!

To make sure I don't give the old man a shock, Zoubek calls him at home for me.

"Listen, Honza," he says, "there's a guy from Poland here who's going to call you in an hour . . ." ("He'll see you," he mutters across to me.)

I leave Zoubek's place, and in an hour the phone is answered by a man who sounds elderly.

"I'm afraid Mr. Vajce has been away in Ukraine for a week and I'm not at all sure when he'll be back." —

I have found a list of the names of the radio commentators and technicians who worked on a live broadcast from the unveiling ceremony.

Most of them aren't in the phone book, but several are still alive.

"We know you well, brave partisan, raising your head on our monument . . ." said editor Sylvie Moravcová.

"I can hardly hear you," she says today, "because I've gone deaf, there's no point in you coming to see me, I can't remember anything, unless you'd like a glass of fruit juice!"

"Lines of people are slowly ascending the steps, paying tribute to the great Stalin and swearing to defend the freedom brought to us by the Soviet soldiers, and to make our homeland a paradise on earth," said editor Vladimír Brunát. "I'm eighty-five now and I'm blind, on top of which I'm in a wheelchair, but I'm happy to help," he says today. "The designer? I reported on the unveiling, but I'm sure I never knew the sculptor's name. There was no talk of any suicide. What's that you're saying? Nothing was known about it at the time."

Taking note of linguistic details in the Czech Republic can offer clues. Thus, in a situation where someone ought to say: "I was afraid to talk about it," "I hadn't the courage to ask about it," or "I had no idea about it," they say:

"THERE WAS NO TALK about it."

"NOTHING WAS KNOWN about it."

"That WASN'T ASKED about."

I often hear the impersonal form when people have to talk about communism. As if people had no influence on anything and were unwilling to take personal responsibility. As if to remind me that they were just part of a greater whole, which also had some sin of denial on its conscience.

I mention the Czechs' reluctance to remember the past to my friend Piotr Lipiński, who has been writing about the executioners and victims of Stalinism for years.

"It's out of fear," he says.

"Fifty years on? Nowadays, when they shouldn't be afraid of anything?"

"All the people you met are about eighty. The last fifteen years of independence are just an episode in their lives. Too short a time for them to be sure that it's a permanent state of affairs and can't change."

Prague's monument to Stalin does exist.

VICTIM OF LOVE

In the summer of 2006, I get an e-mail from an employee of the archive at the Czech Ministry of Internal Affairs. He writes that he has finally managed to find a file inscribed "Suicide of the artist Švec."

When the Security Service investigators and agents broke down the door (double locked, with the keys on the inside) of Švec's apartment, the sculptor was lying on the same sofa bed as his wife had been when she poisoned herself (and so he had not found her dead in the bathtub, as rumor had it).

The blinds were down. They could smell gas in the air.

On the table, he had left a letter to a notary called Dr. Dvořák.

The letter began with the sentence: "I am going after my wife Vlasta, and I am leaving my entire property, including the final installment for the Stalin monument, to the rank-and-file soldiers who lost their sight in the war." He asked for his body to be cremated using money left in the house, and for his car to be sold.

He didn't write a word about what had compelled him to commit suicide.

The investigators tracked down the notary. He turned out to be a friend of Švec's. "Vlasta did a good thing by poisoning

herself," the sculptor had said to the notary. "At least she won't grow old. Why should I bother unveiling the monument if she's not here?"

He had apparently complained to the notary that he had dreamed of being appointed a professor, but hadn't been. He had also expected to be given a State Prize, but hadn't been awarded one.

A sculptor who worked with Švec on the monument told the investigators that "without a doubt, the specialists' comments on his work had an influence on his death." Additionally, Švec had heard people saying that he was too costly an artist, and that for the money assigned to his monument they could have built two housing estates for workers.

The sculptor also said that Švec was worried that the hill underneath Stalin was too weak, that it should be reinforced with concrete fill, and that it might collapse under the colossus he had designed.

The cleaning woman who looked after his apartment had noticed "the master" was nervous. Apparently, he had told her that lately Minister Kopecký "had come to hate him for some reason and no longer paid him as much attention as before, and that Vlasta had shown him the way".

Second Lieutenant Kraus, who conducted the inquiry, conveyed the following official explanation to his superiors: "Otakar Švec's suicide was brought about by the death of his wife, loneliness, and critical comments about his work which were made by some experts."

Among his documents, prescriptions for anti-depressants were found, and "photographs of several highly placed people from the USA."

The militia broke into the sculptor's apartment on April 21, 1955 (nine days before the monument was unveiled). He had committed suicide on March 3—that was the date on the letter, and that was the conclusion the inquiry came to. (Later on—for reasons unclear to me—dictionaries and encyclopedias gave the date of his death as April 4.)

Otakar Švec was lying dead in his apartment for fifty days. All that time, the gas was escaping.

And so for fifty days, in the run-up to the unveiling of the largest Stalin on the entire planet, nobody was actually interested in the whereabouts of its creator.

THE MOVIE HAS TO BE MADE

47

The SS *Marine Tiger* is sailing from Southampton to New York. Jarka (short for Jaroslava) Moserová from Prague is sitting beside Sárka Šrámková from Prachatice in a thirty-person cabin. She is describing how astonishing she finds her own family.

Jarka's grandmother addresses both her granddaughters in the informal second person, as "you," but addresses her own son and daughter in the third person, a form which is becoming old-fashioned. Jarka's grandfather calls his children "you," but his son calls him "sir." The son addresses his own sister in the third person, but talks to his mother informally as "you." "Would my daughter come here . . ." "Has my son served himself some cake yet?" says Jarka, imitating her grandmother. "And no one knows where all this confusion comes from," she tells Sárka.

03

Zdeněk Adamec wakes up early and sees that there aren't any cheese sandwiches on his table yet. But Mom has already put out clean shorts for him (she ironed them last night), socks (ironed), and a thermos full of tea (sweetened). She has just run out to the store.

47

"And now I'll show you our pictures," says Jarka Moserová, fetching out the family photographs from her case to show Šárka.

In every single one, there is a middle-aged woman trying to escape. She is either turning her head away, or trying to shield it with a hand, or moving her entire buxom body out of the picture.

"That's Hilde, my favorite maid," says Jarka. "Whenever someone filmed her or took her picture, she ran off. We've got lots of movies with Hilde running away. She doesn't work for us anymore, because my sister and I grew up, and besides, she was a Sudeten German."

03

Zdeněk Adamec has P.E. today. Awkward. Overweight. Sniggers. Sneering.

47

They sail into New York. Before the war, the Moser family subscribed to *National Geographic*, and Jarka sees that the American grass is exactly the same as in the pictures. So it wasn't lies—the grass really is darker than in Prague, it really does verge on blue.

From New York, they immediately take the train to Swannanoa in North Carolina. They are scholarship students sponsored by the American Field Service. The organization invites young people from countries which are under fascist occupation to visit schools. It is 1947, and the organization

wants young Americans to hear from their contemporaries what it is like to live under threat.

The two girls enter the dining hall at the art school in gray woolen suits. The American girls are wearing long, loose shirts and denim dungarees. Jarka has never seen denim jeans before, or forks held unashamedly in the right hand.

03

The Adamec family's apartment is on the ground floor of a shabby block built in the 1970s. Last year, in June, Zdeněk planted five sunflowers under the window.

Once they had grown tall enough for him to see them from his room, two boys from the block came up one night and chopped them to pieces.

47

The head teacher at the American school suggests that Jarka enter her drawings and sculptures for an art competition in North Carolina.

In eight categories, Jarka wins seven first prizes and goes to Raleigh, the state capital, to collect seven Golden Keys. The eighth key is won by a black girl called Nora Williams. She is unsociable and hardly says a word. They are traveling home from Raleigh in the same direction. They board an empty bus, and Jarka wants her new friend to sit with her in the second row.

"I'm not allowed," says Nora. "Even if the bus is empty, we only have the right to sit in the back row. And only as many of us as can squeeze in at the back."

"Then I'm going to sit with you," says Jarka, and Nora gradually becomes more talkative.

During the journey, the whole bus turns to stare at the back. Finally, the situation is so tense that a passenger tells the driver to stop and sort it out.

"Are you black?" he asks Jarka.

Jarka thinks it's funny. "Of course I'm not," she replies.

She doesn't know she's not supposed to say that. Anyone who regards themselves as black is black. It's enough for them to have a single drop of black blood in their system. If she had said she was black, she would have been entitled to sit with Nora.

Two men get up from their seats, their faces are turning red, and they start breathing heavily. "I'm not black," says Jarka suddenly, "but I am from Czechoslovakia!"

And that remark saves her from a lynching.

03

Zdeněk Adamec switches on his cell phone. He knows all about phones. If a friend has an old, broken cell phone, even if it's in ten pieces, Zdeněk is the only person who can fix it for him. In a single afternoon, a cell phone can change people's minds about Zdeněk entirely. Tomorrow, they're all going to be reminded who Zdeněk really is anyway.

48

Out of the entire school, Jaroslava Moserová comes third in her final high-school exams. She should be on her way home

to Czechoslovakia, but four months have gone by since February, when the communists took power there.

She reads that Czechoslovakia has refused American aid, in other words the Marshall Plan, and that the Soviet Union is its only friend. Even the symbol of democracy, government minister Jan Masaryk, has bitterly said of himself that he has become a Soviet lackey.

The head of the American school persuades Jarka that if she goes home, she will never leave the country again. He adds that as soon as she arrives in Prague, before being allowed to see her parents, she's sure to be sent to a re-education camp, because she is the granddaughter of the director general of a major investment bank.

At the camp, they will undoubtedly subject her to a change of consciousness.

03

Zdeněk's mom is sure he got up early to be at school an hour before classes.

49

The Americans have extended the Czechoslovak students' scholarships by a year, so Jaroslava Moserová is studying at the Art Students League. She earns a living at a lamp factory, where she paints roses in two colors onto the lamp stands.

In the spring, she finishes her studies and wants to earn the money for a trip. She is given a three-month post at the home of a manufacturer of dried-fruit vending machines. She

will take care of his children. At their home on Long Island, there are already three black servants, including a cook. But no black hand is allowed to touch the children's beds, the children's bathroom or the children's clothes. "Of course, the children cannot enter the blacks' kitchen!" the machine manufacturer's wife explains to her. "You must make sure of that!"

03

At seven in the morning, they unlock the computer room at the industrial technical college in Humpolec, and every day before classes Zdeněk spends some time in there. He also spends time there after classes. Yesterday he was in a chat room until it was closed. He was chatting with Tomáš B., whose tag is *Cooldarebák*, meaning "Cool-rogue."

The topic was this: "I'm fat and I haven't got a girlfriend."

("So we were both fat guys," *Cooldarebák* will later say, "but he was the only one who didn't have a girlfriend.")

49

Jaroslava Moserová doesn't have complete faith in American civilization. In September, she wants to go home to her parents. She is nineteen now, and she decides that before being shut in a cage, she'll take a trip around the world. She sails on cargo ships from San Francisco to India, and then to Europe. She plays cards with the sailors, fails to make any real friends, and brings home parasols made of fish membrane which she bought in the Philippines.

On the train from Zurich to Prague, she is the only

passenger. Nobody is going into Czechoslovakia, and nobody is coming out of it.

She immediately wants to write to Nora Williams, but she realizes that in Czechoslovakia you don't write letters abroad. That is, you can write them, because there's freedom and the people's democracy, but nobody wants to do that.

Why not?

Because you don't know what sort of an answer you might get.

Someone once wrote back from Canada: "You've never liked red, and now what?" and this harmed not just the woman who got the letter, but her entire family. A journalist from Prague wrote a letter to the *Times* about how much the price of cigars had risen, and how the stores named *Lahůdky* ("Delicatessen") had been changed to *Pramen* ("Source"), and he was tried as a spy.

No, she won't be studying fine arts. Who knows whom they might order her to sculpt?

"But I'm going to be a plastic surgeon, Daddy. I'll make use of my talent, and surely they're not going to tell me to remodel my patients' faces to look like Marx and Engels?"

03

Zdeněk Adamec is getting dressed.

His father makes gravestones, and in Humpolec, a town of eleven thousand in the central Czech Republic, he is known for it. His mom is on a state allowance and devotes herself to her son. Right up to the sixth grade in elementary school, she used to walk him to school and come to fetch him. The head

teacher noted at the time that it was the only case he knew of where a mother carried a schoolbag for a healthy thirteen-year-old boy. He shared his observation at a meeting of the school board.

"It looks to me as if the woman sticks to her son in an unhealthy way," he said.

51

By now, even students are obliged to address their teachers as "comrade."

As clerks at a state bank, Jaroslav's mom and uncle go to a community action event where everybody addresses each other as "comrade."

"And you know what, Jarka," her mom says afterwards, "in front of those people my brother didn't dare to ask, in the third person as usual: 'Would my sister like something to eat?' We stopped addressing each other normally! We started to feel embarrassed, so we spoke to each other impersonally, saying 'one could have something to eat,' or 'one will have a bite to eat later.' It's not as if we called each other 'comrade,' but we did come to a sort of compromise. Does making this sort of small compromise gradually lead to making big ones?"

03

Apparently, one of the teachers had said (though not in Zdeněk's presence) that his mother did things for him which every other boy does for himself.

Because his surname is Adamec, the boys call Zdeněk "Ada." "Ada!" they shouted recently. "We know your mom even spansk your monkey for you!"

Zdeněk went blue and stopped breathing.

51

Jarka's father, Jaroslav Moser, has four weaknesses: his wife, skiing, good cars and blondes. He is not in the Party. Nevertheless, as a lawyer and iron-working expert, he becomes a manager at a mining and steelworks syndicate in Ostrava. For unknown reasons, its Party-member boss commits suicide in his small garden, and Jaroslav's father is arrested. He gets out after a year. With no charges brought against him, no trial and no day in court.

Though haggard and deprived of a job, he is always happy about something. He says that in prison he sang arias from Wagner's operas. ("And if I hadn't ended up in there, it never would have occurred to me to sing.") He finds a job as a clerk at an incineration plant. He is proud that Jarka is studying surgery, and her older sister gynecology.

03

Zdeněk prefers leaving the block in the morning to coming back in the afternoon. In the morning, no one is playing soccer in the yard yet, and there's no fear of a ball accidentally flying towards him. Whenever he sees a ball coming his way, which he's supposed to kick back, he feels himself go weak.

(Later—once it's all over—one of the internet chat-room users will recall that Zdeněk confided in him that he was afraid of the ball because he couldn't kick it straight. "It's awful when a ball comes flying at me.")

55

Jarka Moserová is looking forward to receiving her diploma. She has no opportunity to read the thoughts of a writer from Poland on life under communism in a chapter entitled: "How do you go through university without losing faith in life?" (The Polish author's answer is that it can't be done.)

In the fifth year of her studies at Charles University, Jaroslava Moserová finds out that she won't get the title "doctor of medicine." The college authorities inform her: "The Party and the government have decided that graduates of the medical faculties throughout the country won't be called doctors of medicine, but 'graduate physicians.'"

A student delegation goes to see the president of the republic with a petition. They explain that patients will react badly to this, and it will reduce a doctor's authority.

The next day, all the students are summoned to the auditorium. The deputy minister of education and the head of the president's office make speeches. The chairman of the student delegation reports that the comrade president listened to their petition and said: "In principle I agree with you, but . . ."

At this, the head of the president's office stands up and says that it isn't true: The comrade president said, "In principle I do not agree with you, but . . ."

At that, the chairman of the delegation glances at his

fellow students, who handed in the petition with him, and says: "But I have witnesses!"

A couple of weeks before their graduation ceremony, the chairman shows his fellow students from the medical faculty a summons from the Security Service. On the sheet of paper, there is a charge: "Falsely misrepresenting the words of the Head of State."

He goes to the interrogation and disappears.

He is simply nowhere to be found, and nobody ever hears of him again.

The entire fifth year class in Medicine sits and waits for the graduation ceremony in silence.

Nobody is surprised by anything.

"Why are we keeping quiet?" wonders Jarka.

"Maybe because too many people keep disappearing," says a friend.

03

If Zdeněk goes anywhere after classes, it's with his mother, to polish the hood of the car.

Of course, his parents know the boy should have somewhere to go. They persuaded him to join a fishing club. Fishing and beer are two hobbies for real men in the Vysočina region. Zdeněk did go to the club for two years, and his father even joined it too.

And to improve things for Zdeněk, his father made an effort and became chairman of the club.

60

Now Jaroslava Moserová works in the burns unit at the Charles University hospital in Prague.

Her life includes an increasing number of the sort of incidents where all you can say is: "Oh . . . my . . . God!"

Mr. J. was a typographer, but he committed a mortal sin: he had his own printing press. In this situation, the Party decided that he would become an electrician.

They took away his printing works and told him to get used to his new profession. A month later, he was electrocuted so badly that he lost his brow, nose and cheekbones, and his eyeballs melted.

"Just imagine," Jaroslava tells her sister, "the current damaged his brain but in a merciful way."

"What do you mean, in a merciful way?" wonders her sister.

"Just slightly," explains Jarka, "so for a long time he remained in a state of—how can I put it?—misplaced optimism. He told me he'd go back to printing, so I started encouraging him to learn Braille. But he wouldn't hear of it! He said that these days, when man is getting ready to fly to the moon, doctors will soon know how to transplant eyes. And not only did the man saying this have no eyes, Boženka, he had no face either!

"Our professor made him an artificial face, modeled a nose, and was getting ready to give him eye sockets. So that glass eyes could be put in them. Then, if Mr. J. put on a pair of spectacles, nobody would realize . . .

"And before doing the eye sockets, we let him go home. Because it was the summer vacation, and his daughter said

he'd be able to rest in a fragrant garden. Just imagine, despite being completely blind, Mr. J. installed all the electricity in the house his daughter had just built! And to finish it off he put a TV aerial on the roof himself."

"That's wonderful!" says her delighted sister, who has no gynecological stories as spectacular as that one.

"But once the house was finished and the vacation ended, when the grandchildren had gone back to school and the daughter to work, Mr. J. was left on his own. And you know what? They came home one afternoon, and found him in the yard, dead. He hanged himself."

03

Zdeněk Adamec can't live without the Internet.

Yesterday, for instance, he looked at some websites about the mindless pollution of the global environment. He left a comment: "Mankind horrifies me."

He left traces on websites where there is proof that democracy is ineffective. ("Because it just means being ruled by civil servants and money," he added.)

He left traces on sites for supporters of the view that television is a tool of the devil.

He left them on sites for people who object to *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. ("These apparently innocent cartoons contain more violence than any others.")

On sites which predict a major energy crisis, to be followed by the outbreak of several wars over the remaining crude oil. ("That was the only reason for the attack on Iraq.")

On some chat sites and in some addresses, Zdeněk hides

behind the name "Satanic." (Afterwards, some people will claim that Adamec was also "Satanic666," whose comments were more aggressive.)

He agonizes over the imperfection of human nature. "What do we need the law for?" he asks. "Isn't each person capable of understanding what's allowed and what isn't? Evidently, we're not a mature civilization yet, and we have some learning to do."

Conspiring Thieves

60

For once in their lives, Jaroslava's parents are going abroad. At the invitation of their former maid, Hilde. She and her gynecologist husband live in West Germany. They greet each other. She with a sense of shame for the war, and they for the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans.

"It's like a scene from a movie, Boženka," Jaroslava tells her sister, "two impoverished old people going to see their maid, who receives them in a beautiful apartment. And all three are in tears."

Her sister shows her some photographs of her friends. In a group picture, Jaroslava sees a man and a boy, neither of whom she has ever met.

Her sister explains that the man is a lawyer called Milan David, and the boy is his son Tomáš. The man is divorced, and has custody of the twelve-year-old boy.

"I like that," she says, "a man with a ready-made child."

They go skiing with the people from the photo. Jaroslava takes cans of soup from Milan and sets them next to her own

can on the electric cooker. After a week, they feel as if they belong to each other, and two years later they get married.

Milan and Tomáš live in a single room with Milan's father, also known as Grandpa Josef. The proposal goes like this: "Grandpa and Tomáš would love you to come and live in our room with us," says Milan.

Before the communists came to power, Grandpa—in other words, Milan's father—was the chairman of parliament. The day after the putsch he withdrew from politics, and for the past twelve years he has been solving crosswords. Now the chairman of parliament will sleep behind a curtain stretched on a string between the closet and the wall.

03

His mother notices that Zdeněk takes a backpack full of books.

So far, the head of the technical college has been very pleased with Zdeněk. In fact, he isn't doing well at Czech and P.E., but he's very good at physics and math. And he already knows all about computers. He was even going to offer him a paid job taking care of the Internet room, if not for that surprising incident with the police.

The police had discovered that Zdeněk Adamec was advising Internet users on how, for example, to make themselves a permanently charged payphone card. ✓

There is also evidence indicating that Zdeněk Adamec lent access codes to his sites to alter-globalists. They used them to promote a method of interrupting the electricity supply. In ✓

order, obviously, to break the monopoly of the all-powerful capitalist state.

After his first police interview, Zdeněk immediately removed the websites.

63

One day, Jaroslava Moserová sees Czechoslovakia's most famous plastic surgeon, Professor František Burian, and cannot believe that he is smaller than she is. Standing on her right leg, she is only five foot six and a half inches tall, on her left five foot five and a half and on both five foot six.

"You've seen the smallest giant ever born," one of the associate professors explains to her.

Professor Burian is small, but he has a great big idea: the Atlas of Plastic Surgery. He wants it to have 850 illustrations, and in addition the drawings are to show real patients, which has apparently never happened before in the field of illustrated reference books. The professor will not allow any anonymous faces to be included. He provides old photographs and descriptions of operations, and Jaroslava Moserová, junior surgeon and member of the artists' union, spends four years illustrating the atlas.

The professor wears a hearing aid. Whenever he finds Jaroslava boring, he switches it off and starts to whistle. He is constantly dissatisfied. He makes her re-draw each illustration several times. After a while, before each meeting begins he asks her: "Are we going to have coffee first, or quarrel?"

She always prefers to quarrel first.

The housekeeper serves them the coffee. Professor Burian

lives with his daughter, his son-in-law and the home help. The housekeeper leaves when, for unknown reasons, the professor's son-in-law is arrested. The professor probably understands her; even in a dentist's waiting room, friends won't sit next to the family of someone who's been arrested. People are entitled to be afraid. Now the professor's daughter brings in the coffee.

Professor Burian won't live to see the atlas published; he'll die only two days after writing the introduction.

03

There are computer printouts lying on Zdeněk Adamec's desk. They are about Torch Number One.

Last year, Zdeněk started reading about an unusual student. He was known as Torch Number One. If, in August 1969, an exceptionally nasty era hadn't begun, if the Soviets and four other armies hadn't invaded the country, and if they hadn't become more and more tyrannical, Torch Number One wouldn't have had to resort to extreme measures.

Because, first of all, people gave in, and then they sold out. They were no longer allowed to say things that during the Spring were said freely. Torch Number One was a student in the philosophy faculty. He wanted to wake them up.

Zdeněk found the statement of a female student from Prague who later became a world-famous director, saying that the choice of those who were to be the top ten for self-immolation was made with great care. The point was for good students to set themselves on fire, young people who didn't have psychiatric problems, neuroses or broken hearts, so it

wouldn't be possible for the propaganda to disavow the motives for their act. The best of the best were chosen. And then they drew lots.

Zdeněk read the letter written by Torch Number One before his death: "If our demands—including the lifting of censorship—are not met in the next five days, that is, by January 21, 1969, and if the nation does not additionally support them through a general strike, the next torches will burn."

Signed, "Torch Number One."

Zdeněk takes these printouts with him.

65

At the burns unit, mirrors are not allowed in the patients' rooms.

Not all the patients want their nearest and dearest to look at them. They would prefer to talk to them from behind screens.

Dr. Jaroslava Moserová collects material for her book *Skin Loss and Compensating for It*. She is interested in burned skin.

In places where skin has been charred, the patient's own skin is grafted, for the time being. It is cut out, stretched to a scale of one to three, and applied. Where there is a lack of the patient's own skin, for a couple of weeks skin from dead bodies is applied, like a natural dressing. But, in a few years' time, before Jaroslava Moserová finishes her book, a method of supplementing losses using skin from piglets will be developed. Pig skin is the most similar to human skin, closer than that of chimpanzees.

In the field of skin-loss compensation, Jaroslava Moserová

collaborates with some Polish scientists, who award her a gold medal.

She is also granted a scholarship to go to the University of Texas at Galveston.

She notices that she suffers from a strange affliction: she has no memory of the patients whom she has helped. She only remembers the ones in whose cases she failed.

Being ineffective is what she finds most horrifying about herself.

03

Mom asks if he took the sandwiches.

Zdeněk knows that Torch Number One bought a white plastic bucket somewhere in downtown Prague, and then filled it up at a gas station. He's not going to take a canister with him, because Mom will immediately ask what it's for. He too will buy himself a container in Prague.

He has already composed a letter, which begins with the words: "Dear Citizens of the World..." He posted it on a website called www.pochodnia2003.cz.*

69

A wave of burn victims injured during clashes with Soviet tanks has already passed through the unit.

On January 16, Jaroslava Moserová is on call when they

* The name of the site now is www.pochodnen2003.nazory.cz. *Pochodnia* means "a torch."

bring in a young man. She hears the paramedics saying that this is Torch Number One. His name is Jan Palach. He set himself on fire outside the museum on Wenceslas Square. Almost the entire surface of his body is charred, as are his airways.

The orderlies, who always call young people by their first names, address him as "sir."

The nurses say he is Jan the Second, because he wanted to remind people of Jan Hus.

Jan Palach's death throes last for seventy-two hours.

People bring hundreds of flowers to the hospital for him, and hundreds of letters arrive. The nurses read the letters to him. Jaroslava Moserová reads them too. And in his fever, he opens his eyes and asks in a hoarse, suffering voice: "It wasn't in vain, was it?"

"No, it wasn't," they reply.

"That's good," says the patient.

The secret police are standing outside the hospital.

Despite the Soviet occupation, the coffin is set out in the hall of Charles University's Karolinum building, and there are candles in apartment windows. Crowds of people weep as they come to visit the deceased until midnight. All over the country, there are labor strikes, hunger strikes and rallies.

The funeral is a demonstration, and the grave in Prague's Olšany cemetery is a site of pilgrimage.

A few years later, the authorities force Palach's mother and brother to sign an exhumation agreement; then they remove the remains at night, cremate them, and give the urn to the family.

They will keep it at home, because the cemetery in Palach's native town of Všetaty refuses to accept it for a year.

In 1990, President Václav Havel will ceremonially return the urn from Všetaty to Olšany. ✓

03

Zdeněk has a choice: he can travel from Humpolec to Prague by bus or by train. If he went by rail, he would have to change trains and would only get there in the afternoon. In Kolin, he would have to board the express train "Jan Palach." So he takes a direct bus, leaving at 6:30.

The road to Prague is a freeway—fifty-six miles down a narrow pass running between trees and meadows. What could have stopped him on this road? The only things visible, apart from the dark brown woods, still without leaves, are gigantic billboards saying: "Now's the time! Follow your heart. Get the benefit of a facelift."

"It's the right time to make a good investment. The New Phone Book . . ."

"Let me get my clothes off—0-800 . . ."

Fifty minutes later, Zdeněk is in Prague.

76

After patients injured by the invasion, patients injured by the normalization start to appear—the first victims of the process of creating the new, obedient man. Mr. K., for example, one of 750,000 people who after 1970 are forced to change jobs.

Mr. K., who went to university and speaks three languages, was employed in foreign trade. The Party decided that he would lay asphalt on the streets. One day, a tank valve couldn't withstand the pressure and boiling tar came shooting out, straight at Mr. K.

It melted his entire body apart from his face.

People who deal with monstrosities have to find ways to prevent themselves from going mad.

For example, at first Jaroslava Moserová used to draw different versions of a little girl walking along with a sunflower held high.

Now she is protected from madness by Dick Francis—the Queen Mother's top jockey.

He competed in the Grand National, riding the Queen Mother's favorite, a horse called Devon Loch. The entire royal family was sure he would win. Suddenly, on the final straight the horse fell. Then it seemed to come to its senses, got up and ran on, but it could no longer win. Afterwards, it was examined—it wasn't injured or sick. For years, people debated this astonishing incident, although the Queen Mother was typically stoical about it, commenting: "Oh, that's racing!"

And the demoted Dick Francis wrote a novel in which it featured.

Then he started thinking up detective stories. Most of his novels are set at the horse races, and Jaroslava Moserová translates them all into Czech.

By 2003, she had translated forty-four of his novels, and won a prize for the art of translation, while in the Czech Republic Dick Francis has outsold Agatha Christie herself.

"What helps you to unwind?" ask the journalists. "Why

do you translate these particular books? And why only this author?"

"Because good always triumphs in them, and evil is punished. Apart from that, he's reluctant to send anyone to jail," replies Jaroslava Moserová.

"If a bad guy does have to be punished, he's more likely to fall off a cliff or get killed in a crash," she adds.

It's the 1970s, and the word "jail" puts the Czechoslovak journalists on their guard; maybe they'd rather not see it in print, so they'd like her to give them a different reason.

"Well, all right," the translator does her best to satisfy them, "I also like the fact that in his books the only person who has to try and think up an alibi is the murderer."

03

Mrs. Adamcová calls Zdeněk on his cell phone. She called earlier, but he didn't pick up. "Where are you, son?" she asks.

"Where do you think?" replies Zdeněk, and hangs up.

77

To Jaroslava Moserová, Václav Havel is the small boy in short pants, standing next to her and her sister Božena in a photograph. Their families were friends. The girls are about seven and nine years old, and Havel is three.

Her stepson looks at the photo and asks: "What did you and your sister talk to Mr. Havel about, Mom?"

"Nothing, Tomáš!" says his stepmother indignantly. "We took no notice of him at all. He was too young for us."

03

Zdeněk Adamec has a full canister now.

87

Apparently, Jaroslava Moserová has treated a patient who suffered burns in a gas explosion, affecting not just the flesh under his thick shorts, but his hands too, because he had them in his pockets. He is a young violinist, and before the explosion he studied at the conservatory. A year after the skin graft he has started to practice again, but he can't stand and hold the bow in his hand for long. After only ten minutes, he loses heart. As his doctor comes from a home where the children had to know the difference between Monet and Manet, and play the piano, she starts practicing with him, playing duets by Corelli.

To catch up with the qualified violinist, the surgeon in her fifties signs up for piano lessons. When they practice together, the boy can keep going for a whole hour.

They play like that for three years.

Then they appear at the Congress of the European Society of Plastic Surgeons, where they perform Janáček.

Now Jaroslava Moserová has an idea for a screenplay.

A mother has unintentionally injured her daughter's cheek. The story begins when the girl is already grown up; she has a scar on her beautiful face, a good job and lots of friends. Everything is fine, except for the mother's sense of guilt. She plagues her daughter by being morbidly overprotective. Guilt is her life.

The screenplay idea appeals to Ewald Schorm, an icon of the Czechoslovak New Wave in cinema who has been silent for almost twenty years, roughly since the death of Palach. He wants to direct it, but he has no desire to write the script. He says she should write it. When Jaroslava tries to make excuses, Schorm explains how to write it: everything that's heard, such as a car hooting, goes on the left-hand side of the script, and everything that's seen, such as a curtain moving, goes on the right.

The role of the mother will be played by a friend of Jaroslava's. She is the ex-wife of the nice orphan boy who used to visit the Mosers after the war. He had nobody, and he wanted someone to spread butter on his bread, and even to shout at him now and then, which is understandable—what he needed was a substitute family. The actress friend is called Jana Brejchová, and the name of her former husband with the bread and butter is Miloš Forman.

The movie is going to happen, but it can't have the title the screenwriter wants. She'd like it to be called *White Lie*.

The word "lie," like the word "truth," is banned in art, and during the normalization neither of them can be used. Another iconic director of the Czechoslovak New Wave, Věra Chytilová, has been unable to use the words "I think" in a movie. "I think that ..." the actor said quite slowly, but the pre-screening inspection committee ruled that he shouldn't think so meaningfully, because that could be interpreted in various ways. And at another point, when a man locked himself in the bathroom and shouted, "I'm trapped," Věra Chytilová had to cut the entire scene out of the movie.

So Ewald Schorm's latest picture is called *Nothing Really Happened*.

03

Zdeněk Adamec goes up the wide museum steps.

It's eight in the morning and it's cold, at the beginning of March.

89

Seriously ill, Ewald Schorm dies a month before the premiere of the movie.

Coincidentally, it is scheduled for January 19, at the movie theater in the Lucerna Palace on Wenceslas Square.

But that day, no trams or subway trains are running there. It was on January 19 twenty years ago that Jan Palach died, and in the square several thousand demonstrators have just been surrounded by militiamen.

There is no audience at all for the premiere of *Nothing Really Happened*.

In May, *Gazeta Wyborcza* comes out for the first time in Poland—the country's first independent newspaper—but in Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel is still in jail. But by November, when the Civic Forum is formed, he is at the head of it. Actors, philosophers, journalists and doctors join . . . She joins too. "But I have lots of fears—after all, I'm not a politician," she says.

"Thank God, Mrs. Moserová, none of us are politicians," her colleagues reassure her.

03

Just like Torch Number One, Zdeněk Adamec soaks himself, from the head down.

He jumps onto the stone balustrade and fires up a cigarette lighter.

He leaps.

Contact with the air in motion causes the fire to engulf his entire body evenly.

01

Seventy-one-year-old Jaroslava Moserová writes her memoirs, *Stories: People You Never Forget*. She sets up www.moserovala.cz, as she needs to account for the past twelve years.

She has been vice president of the Civic Forum, Czechoslovakia's and then the Czech Republic's ambassador to Australia and New Zealand, and vice president of the Senate of the Czech Republic.

She has also been president of the General Conference of UNESCO, which supports education. Jaroslava Moserová believes there are simple ways to help even the poorest parts of the world. If there aren't enough resources for education, the first thing you need to do is set up a radio station. The radio will be an attraction, and at the same time it can teach people about hygiene and birth control.

Now Moserová is a senator for the ODA, or Civic Democratic Alliance, representing the Pardubice constituency. The ODA competes with Václav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party.

Her party doesn't have huge support. So what if they wanted to reduce annual tax returns to a single sheet of A4?

(People liked that.) So what if they wanted to register same-sex partnerships? (Not everybody liked that.) When at the same time they wanted complete exemption from paying rent. (Hardly anybody liked that!)

Jaroslava Moserová only won because people in Pardubice reckoned she was a decent woman.

03

Zdeněk Adamec falls four yards away from the spot where Palach set himself on fire.

His lips are burned, but he is still trying to say something. Later it will be reported that, like Torch Number Two—Jan Zajíc—Zdeněk Adamec drank corrosive acid to stop himself from screaming.

02

Now and then, Jaroslava Moserová comes up against a certain issue.

It concerns the fact that in 1977 she did not sign a document which was very important for any decent person to sign. Especially as the campaign and the document were initiated by the boy in the photograph, the one in short pants, who thirty-six years earlier had been too young for a serious conversation with the Moserová sisters.

Why didn't she sign Charter '77?

Jaroslava Moserová could give an answer in the style of Bohumil Hrabal: "I have so much trouble dealing with myself,

and so much trouble with my own friends and relatives that I haven't enough time to follow changing political events in any way. I don't even know what the people who want those changes are talking about, because the only thing I would want to change is myself."

She could say something of the kind, as Hrabal did, and she would probably be understood.

But Jaroslava Moserová says: "If the Charter had come to me, I certainly would have signed it, but as it didn't come, I didn't go looking for it."

"So I admit: I was being cautious."

At the suggestion of a rather overly self-confident journalist from Poland that a person is only what he pretends to be, and it's impossible for her nowadays as a politician and diplomat never to have told a lie, Jaroslava Moserová replies that there are situations in which a politician cannot always tell the entire truth, but he should never tell a lie.

At least in her opinion.

As she's always done—for decades—she goes to church.

In the Senate, they say she is quite appalled by Klaus, who said a while back that for him the Church is the same sort of organization as a walking club.

03

Zdeněk Adamec is lying in a pool of water, doused by the firefighters, and the temperature is below freezing.

People stand there helplessly. None of the curious onlookers calls an ambulance.

Three doctors only come after a call from the firefighters. They carry him to an ambulance.

He lives for another thirty minutes.

03

Jaroslava Moserová tells a friend that Milan, Tomáš and the grandchildren are the best things that have ever happened to her. She tells her family she has decided to stand as president of the country.

She prepares a speech to give to parliament: "I know that dishonesty is what offends young people the most. And they blame us, the politicians, for the rise of immorality. In a way, they are right . . ."

And she ends it like this: "In our country, politicians aren't trusted. I hope this will change. Please have trust in me."

The serious press isn't interested in her. Not a single analysis of her electoral chances or her views is published, and nobody does a major interview with her.

But a journalist from a women's glossy magazine tells a reporter from Poland that the candidate, as a plastic surgeon, could have far fewer wrinkles than she does.

After all, an interview in her magazine has to have a really stunning picture to go with it!

03

Senator Jaroslava Moserová hears about the death of Zdeněk Adamec a month after losing the election.

She is sitting in the conference room at Wiston House in Wilton Park, Great Britain. She's taking part in a world anti-corruption conference.

She opens her laptop, logs on to www.pochodnia2003.cz, and reads:

My whole life has been a complete failure. I feel as if I don't fit in with the times. As I am just another victim of the System, I have decided my suffering is going to end for good. I can't go on anymore. Other people aren't interested. They're indifferent. And the politicians are like little lords who trample on ordinary people. I want everyone to stop and think about themselves and limit the evil they commit each day. You'll find out the rest about me from the press afterwards.

And the final sentence of the letter: "Don't portray me as a madman." Jaroslava Moserová closes her computer. The thought that occurs to her is that none of the countries here at the world anti-corruption conference has presented a sensible remedy for it.

03

The press notes that in his farewell letter the boy did not make a single mention of his parents.

A famous writer points out that Zdeněk Adamec's sacrifice is like a repetition of Jesus' sacrifice.

A famous bishop writes that, on reading Zdeněk's

statement, we would instantly like to label his story as "pathology." Unfortunately, this is just the tip of the iceberg. The iceberg is a sense of pointlessness among the younger generation.

Next day, people lay flowers and messages at the site of the suicide. They burn votive candles.

They also lay flowers and light candles for Palach.

Foreign tour groups line up to have both islands of flowers visible in their photographs.

Unfortunately, there is some resulting confusion. At the site of Palach's death, messages appear saying: "Zdeněk, you're right!"

03

On the evening of the third day, there's a gantry standing by the museum steps. A crew is fitting it with television spotlights.

It's as bright as day.

The cameras are on standby.

There's a crowd of people. Right in the middle stand three men in smart black overcoats, who have just got out of a car. One of them is holding flowers.

Everything is ringed with red-and-white tape. A policeman is keeping watch to make sure nobody crosses it.

There's an atmosphere of anticipation. "There's going to be a broadcast about that boy," the passers-by explain to each other, and each of them cranes his neck as high as possible.

They ask the policeman for details. "Is it a ceremony? In honor of that Zdeněk guy from Humpolec?"

"Zdeněk who, sir?" says the policeman. "They're making a biopic about Hitler here. The Canadians are filming it."

"But this spot was covered in flowers and candles. What happened? Have they put out the vigil lights? Removed them? Three days after his death, that's awful!"

"Nobody put them out," the policeman explains patiently. "Take a look over here, please—they've shielded the candles behind a car, so they won't appear in the film. As you know, a contract's a contract, this sort of movie can't be called off. A movie's a movie, sir. The movie has to be made."