That Was Then, This Is Now

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> [In 1968] *it was normal for all newspapers to be sold out at 6 A.M., while millions tuned in daily, with great expectations, to the most daring radio commentators, such as Milan Weiner and Jiri Dienstbier, and to the popular 7 o'clock television news program in the evening*.
>
> — Harry Schwartz

A year later, after the Prague Spring, under Soviet occupation, Jiří Dienstbier (1937–2011) lost the right to have his voice used in broadcasts. By the end of 1972, 40 percent of the Union of Journalists membership had been expelled. On his descent to shovelling coal in the boiler room of a heating plant, he had worked as a librarian in a technical school and then sat for three years in prison as a subversive of the social order. He had been and would be again active in Charter 77 and the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted, or VONS, of which he would himself become a case in point when he was arrested in 1979, along with Václav Havel and eight other VONS members, and brought to trial under Article 98 of the Penal Code. Dienstbier was convicted of subversion "in collusion with foreign powers" and "on a large scale."

His is an honourable profession

It is 1988, and Dienstbier is not demoralized by his situation. On the contrary. He cites the case of

IT'S OVER!
CZECHS ARE
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6.

the Hungarian dissidents who are allowed to carry on with certain intellectual labours—editing, translating, tutoring—and who as a result suffer the anxiety of losing even these precarious perches in the official world. Worse, they lose touch with the everyday lives of the working class. Heaving coal all night long into the belly of a furnace, mired in sweat, he does not have this problem.

(She made that up. Not the whole thing, just the bit where she imagined him beefy and filthy at the red-hot furnace doors, an image that conflates with a number of others, including the bronze proletarian superman outside a Bucharest supermarket and the Thor from her girlhood book on Norse mythology.)

Milan Kundera tells the story of the dissident philosopher Karel Kosík, who was accused of counter-revolutionary activities and then expelled from his post at Charles University. Immediately he was besieged by admiring women. (Kundera says “admiring young women,” but why only the young?) A hairdresser explained her own infatuation to Kundera: “All defendants are handsome.”

The facts

She first met him and his very nice wife in their capacious, high-ceilinged apartment on a Sunday afternoon in 1986. It had been Marketa’s idea—that she meet a “real” sixties person, Marketa herself being a decade younger. They all sat together and chatted, in English, holding pretty blue cups of coffee. Life in this apartment was what you’d expect: lots of books and paintings, foreign guests, good coffee.

> *According to the Press Group of Soviet Journalists in Czechoslovakia right after the invasion: “Found in the Prague House of Journalists, whose leadership had lately been exercised by highly reactionary figures, were 13 machine-guns, 31 tommy-guns and 150 cases of ammunition.”*

In his former life, Dienstbier had made broadcasts from Hanoi and Washington, right in the thick of the war in Vietnam. He says the sixties were the best years of his life, but in 1969, when he had to make a life-altering decision whether to stay in Washington in exile or return to a Prague under occupation and hostile to his best interests, he chose to return home.

She interpreted this to mean that his sense of professionalism as a journalist prevailed over mere self-preservation—where was there a better story in the autumn of 1969 than in his hometown? And how was he to have foreknowledge of the disbanding of the journalists' union and his own expulsion from the fraternity?—although, she thought, he might have sensed what was to come or taken a wild guess.

It was the *problems* that he had wanted to return to—she jotted down in her notebook—and the problems that he wanted to write about. He didn't elaborate nor did she, later, in her notebook. They were both journalists; he knew that she knew what the stories were: the Free Prague Radio transmissions; reports of the forty thousand armed resisters; Soviet troops confiscating the last edition of *Mladá Fronta* at gunpoint; the hijacking of the reformist party leadership, in handcuffs, to Moscow; the deaths, the shrines, the Schweikian manoeuvres of tearing down street signs to disorient the tankmen, replacing them with graffiti that read "Dubček Avenue."

"I wanted to write about the problems," he had said, then paused, adding, "You don't have any."

(She wrote this down too: You don't have any. Did she argue? No. Why not? Well, picture it. Here's a guy who lived in the United States in the 1960s and who says "you" don't have any problems: either he's mischievous or mad. He's not stupid. What is the appropriate response? Tableaux of the problems in her country flash in her mind like animated cartoon strips; the figures are shrunken, their gestures histrionic in proportion, their voices like those of the singing Chipmunks, not bearing comparison with the catastrophes of Czechoslovakia and the Big Themes of history—occupation, terror, imprisonment, collaboration, betrayal—that are no longer simply rooted in the material world but have become the transcendent categories of an epochal tragedy. Besides, she had her pride. Damned if she was going to peddle her country's *problems*, lay out the contents of her Canadian journalist's bag to see if anything interested him there. How about the collapse of the inshore fishery on the Atlantic? Acid rain in Saskatchewan? Not dire enough? How about prison suicides? The massacre of young women at a polytechnique? Fuck it. Let him ask.)

But there were others in Prague who did think that people like her had problems. Westerners with their insoluble moral dilemmas: Do Art and Politics mix? Is exile in the underground good or bad for Literature? Is the Writer the true Tribune of the People? Westerners choke on our dilemmas. When do we find the time to write?

One fine day not long after the occupation in 1968, the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal was strolling on a downtown street in Prague with a visitor from the West, the writer Heinrich Böll. They stopped across from the writers' union building. There was a cannon on their side of the street, aimed at the front doors.

That's it. That's the whole story.

Recovering a sense of humour

Dienstbier admits to being regularly harassed by the secret police: followed openly in the streets; subject to impromptu interrogations in the middle of the night; the apartment ransacked for illegal papers, documents of the underground, and samizdat. It's become an expensive proposition in more ways than one to collect samizdat. Of a library of some one hundred samizdat volumes not so long ago, he now has fifteen on his shelves. He knows very well that the police purloin the books for their own private collections. The only reason he still has fifteen is that the police had already read them.

It was those eighty-five volumes gone missing that constitute the real gap in his library. He still has lots of books—novels and reference materials in several languages—but the underground publications are irreplaceable, their preciousness intensified by knowledge of the stubbornness and fear and exhaustion invested in each one. So she imagined. On first browsing, she hadn't in fact noticed this particular gap—how would she have known to look for it? Later it would come back to haunt her that, if a reader has never heard of a book, then its disappearance has never occurred. It was never there.

There was a gap in his library that she did notice, in titles of current American and British literature, volumes of the stuff she had seen in other private libraries in Prague: Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, V. S. Naipaul, Iris Murdoch . . .

"Since Graham Greene," he said, "there has been no Anglo-Saxon writer worth reading."

Perhaps, she thought later, giving him the benefit of the doubt, when the thefts at the hands of the police are a war of attrition waged against contemporary Czech and Slovak literature; when cassettes, private notes, correspondence, tape recorders, and telephones can be confiscated on spot checks; then the leisurely evolution of the Booker–shortlisted British novel occurs at a rate below the level of Central European perception.

The anniversary

Dienstbier is at work in a pool of light in the thick darkness of his nineteenth-century study. The sickening congelation of Czech culture over the past twenty years, frozen in its tracks in 1969, is well known, but here in this study it is as though an exemption has been granted, for he sits humbly at the base of high, wide bookcases lining the entire room.

He's banging on an old manual typewriter, finishing an article for the *Christian Science Monitor*. This being two weeks before the twentieth anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, he has been besieged by representatives of the Western media to write something up "about twenty years after."

She did the same, asked him what demonstrations he and his comrades in Charter 77 were planning to mark the lugubrious anniversary. Perhaps she should have had more imagination—something other than the formulaic street riot as the archetypal assembly of the fed-up and oppressed, something other than this flashback to her own epiphanies during festive marches against war and for women?

This idea of going forth into the streets to demonstrate, with banner and the rhythmic couplets of "people's verse," were, he argued, the brainchild of "overly-stimulated westerners" who, condemned to death by boredom in their home countries, live vicariously in the thrilling torments of Eastern Europeans hosed down, beaten, and dragged away from the grey and foggy streets of Stalinist cities.

> *From issue 2 of* Kajet*: "Speaking of Eastern European artists who entered the globalised art world shortly after 1989, Boris Buden [of the Chto Delat art collective] identified one strategy of resistance to their marginal and peripheral position as self-Easternisation. It found expression in fulfilling the expectations of Western audiences through constant allusion to the trauma of life under repressive socialist governments, effectively constructing the East as a museum of history curated by the West."*

(Well, all right, she was filling in. He *did* say "overly-stimulated westerners," and she amplified the description with features she recognized, sheepishly, as her own: the pleasant social democrat from Canada, *under*stimulated, actually, by the long march of the 1980s through the federal institutions, who does a tour through the Communist capital cities, absorbing the frissons of danger and atrocity and wishing for a really big street demo in Prague to top it off.)

It wasn't the *only* reason she was in Prague but . . . when she did come across an atrocious story and an endangered person, she had to admit she felt a little excited: adrenalin shot into her system and she was on a bit of a high—overstimulated, you could say.

I did not envy them their persecution — Philip Roth

It's our guilty little secret, those of us who did confess to "persecution envy," with a slick self-mockery, making fun of it even as we indulged the shiver of dreamed-up fright. "If the police came hammering at *our* doors in the middle of the night," we would say with a smirk, "at least we would know we counted." It was understood, of course, that if any such thing were to happen, we would raise an unholy racket in the half-despised forums of Canadian society—the writers' unions, the press, the press conference, the civil liberties associations—but we would not be wholly displeased (nor even wholly frightened).

But it was a measure of her discomfort with this envy that she never divulged it in Prague.

Gone fishing

Dienstbier has been visited by the police and advised to take his summer holidays within the next two weeks; it would not be "healthy" for him or anyone he knows to be in Prague on August 21, 1988. His fellow-stokers are understanding blokes; he's switched holiday times with one of them and in two weeks he expects to be at rest in his cottage in the country, drinking homemade wine and fishing for speckled trout.

A peroration on the party

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia is beyond help. It is pathetic, stiff, fossilized. To make his point, Dienstbier paces around his desk, striding in and out of the pool of light cast by the desk lamp, counting off the symptoms on his fingers. One: No discussion takes place in the party. Opinions are neither offered nor solicited. Two: The younger generation, which joined up after 1968, are not "engaged." They are hucksters, opportunists, babes at the statist teat. Three: The apparatchiks were put in place, trained, and promoted during the worst period ("normalization" in the 1970s), were sent quickly through party schools and instructed there by intellectual imbeciles and moral pygmies. They have no culture. Four: The natural allies of democratization lost their positions in the party in 1968 and 1969 and are now silenced, exiled, or dead. It is a neat list. He holds up his four fingers. Stiffs, cretins, fossils.

She imagines the satisfaction of his ultimate revenge on a party that sentenced him and his companions to the cellars, to the boiler rooms, to the underground. They will go down, the apparatchiks, like rodents into a disused mine shaft. Dienstbier will stand at the lip of the pit, waving bye-bye, until nothing more can be seen of them, not even the yellow flicker of their flabbergasted eye.

A few days later, she is in London, reading the morning *Guardian:* "The centre of Prague . . . thousands of Czechoslovaks marched . . . a crowd of mainly young people . . . Shouting at police 'We have the truth, you have the dogs.'" Next day's paper: "By contrast, Charter 77, which for more than ten years has been the leading organization to speak up for human rights, has been little in evidence in the last few days. Three of its spokespeople were arrested at the weekend . . . but others have been out of town, avoiding arrest."

So, he had gone fishing then.

A year and a bit later, in a Canadian newspaper, she saw his photo. He was standing in Red Square in Moscow with Václav Havel: two former political prisoners doing a spot of tourism before their appointment in the Kremlin to draw up an agreement for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia.

Well, well.

Photos of him and his German counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, cutting the barbed wire that separated Czechoslovakia and Germany during the Cold War, went around the world.

To be persecuted in real life is to live in fear "for your manuscript." It is that swift, stealthy, practised plucking of the sheet of paper from the platen of the typewriter at the unexpected ringing of the doorbell and the now-instinctive secretion of the papers into a cunning place of concealment. It is the rush of relief—of pleasure!—at the opening of the door to the rent collector.

Is normal life not worth something? It is not life set aside. It is no basement. It is the front porch, and the guy ringing the doorbell is the neighbour, returning your hedge clippers. In Prague, too, now, when the doorbell rings, it's him.