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1968: Prague, Paris and Josef Škvorecký

By MILAN KUNDERA When in September of 1968, with my eyes still filled with the image of Russian tanks parked along Prague streets, I arrived for a few days in the West, a rather sympathetic young man asked me with an aggressiveness he did not try to conceal, "What exactly do you Czechs want? Are you already tired of socialism? Would you have preferred our society of mass consumption?" Today, over ten years later, the Western Left is almost unanimous in its approval of the Prague Spring. But I am not certain that the misunderstanding has been cleared up.

The Western intellectual in his proverbial egocentricity often takes interest in certain issues not so much in order to have a thorough knowledge of them as to integrate them, like a pebble, into the mosaic of his own theoretical speculations. Alexander Dubček is thus confused, according to the situation, sometimes with Allende or Trotsky and sometimes with Lumumba or Che Guevara. The Prague Spring is acknowledged and placed—but really it remains unknown.

I would like, above all, to emphasize this fact: the Prague Spring did not come as a revolutionary explosion succeeding the night of the Stalinist era; it had been prepared by a whole process of liberalization, long and intense, that developed during the sixties. It is even possible that it all started slightly earlier, maybe in 1956 with the revelations of the Twentieth Congress in Moscow, or even in 1948, at the birth of Czech Stalinism. Its origins were with the critical minds that gradually decomposed the dogmas of the regime, called Marx to witness against Marxism, common sense against ideological delirium, humanist sophisms against inhumane ones. By dint of laughing at the system they led the system to be ashamed of itself; sustained by an overwhelming majority of the population, they slowly but inevitably laid the guilt at the feet of the state which was gradually less and less capable of believing in itself and in its truth.

At home we would say cynically that the ideal political regime is a dictatorship in decomposition; the oppressive machinery functions more and more defectively, and yet its existence alone suffices to keep the national spirit in a maximally creative tension. A dictatorship in decomposition, that was the sixties. When I look back I see us as incessantly dissatisfied and protesting, but at the same time filled with optimism. We were certain that the cultural traditions of the nation (its skepticism, its sense of reality, its deeply rooted incredulity) were stronger than the oriental political system imported from abroad, and that sooner or later they would overcome it. We were the optimists of

skepticism: we believed in its subversive strength and its eventual victory.

It was during the summer of 1967, after the explosive writers' congress, that the heads of state, estimating the decomposition of the dictatorship had gone too far, tried to enforce a harsh policy. But they could not succeed. The process of decomposition had already spread even to a guilt-ridden central committee that in January 1968 refused the proposed political hardening and decided to allow itself to be led by the unknown Dubček. What we now call the Prague Spring began as follows: the critical spirit, until then limited to corrosive criticism, exploded; the country refused the way of life imported from Russia, censorship disappeared, and the borders were opened; all the social organizations (syndicates, unions, associations) originally intended to transmit unquestioningly the Party's will to the masses became independent and began to change into the unexpected instruments of the unexpected democracy. A system was thus born (more or less without any preconceived plan) that was really without precedent: an economy completely nationalized, an agriculture in the hands of the cooperatives, a relative equality without castes, without rich and poor, and without the stupidity of money-grabbing. We had, at the same time, the freedom of expression, a plurality of opinions and an extremely dynamic cultural life that was the motive force of the whole movement. (The exceptional influence of culture—of literature, theatre and magazines—gives to the whole of the sixties a character that is special and irresistibly attractive.) I do not know to what extent this system was viable and what were its prospects; but I do know the moment during which it existed, and that moment was superb.

Since today's Western Left defines its goal as a *socialism in freedom*, it is logical that the Prague Spring has become part of its political discourse. I am made aware, more and more often, that the Prague Spring is compared to the Parisian May as if the two events had been analogous and convergent. The truth, however, is not so simple. I do not want to speak of the difference, almost too evident, between the lengths of time that the two lasted. (In Prague we had an unprecedented political system for eight months; its destruction in August signified a tragic turning point in the nation's history.) Similarly, I have no intention of sinking into "politological" speculations about the two events. Such speculations bore me; and worse still, I find them repugnant, for I have spent twenty years of my life in a country whose official doctrine regarding any human problem knew no better than to reduce it to a political question. This doctrinaire passion for the

reducing of man is the evil that anyone who comes from “over there” has learned to detest the most. All I want to do is narrow down a few reasons, without concealing their hypothetical character, that explain why in spite of the same nonconformity, in spite of the same desire for change, a difference in “climate” separated the two springs.

May 1968 was a revolt of youth. The initiative of the Prague Spring was within the hands of adults who were basing their action on their historical experience and disappointment. Youth, indeed, played an important role during the Spring, but not a predominating one. To claim the contrary is a myth fabricated *a posteriori* with a view to appending the Prague Spring to the pleiad of worldwide student revolts. The Parisian May was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism. The Prague Spring was the explosion of a postrevolutionary skepticism. That is why the Parisian student looked toward Prague with distrust (or rather with indifference) and why the Prague citizen had but a smile for the Parisian illusions, which he considered, rightly or wrongly, as discredited, comical or dangerous. (A paradox on which one should reflect: the only successful realization—again ephemeral—of a socialism in freedom was not achieved in revolutionary enthusiasm but in skeptical lucidity.)

The Parisian May was radical. That revolt which, during long years, had prepared the explosion of the Prague Spring was a popular one of the moderates. Like the headmistress in Škvorecký's *Mirákl* (Miracle in Bohemia) who replaced Marx's most offensive statements with less objectionable ones, everyone tried to dull, lessen and lighten the weight of the political system. “Thaw,” the actual word one sometimes uses to designate that process, is very significant. It was a question of melting the ice, of softening what was hard. If I speak of moderation, I do not think of a precise political conception but of a human reflex that is deeply rooted: radicalism as such, whatever it was, was an irritant rather like an allergy; for most Czechs it was tied in the subconscious to their worst memories.

The Parisian May questioned what one calls European culture and its traditional values. The Prague Spring was a passionate defense of the European cultural tradition in the broadest and most tolerant sense of the term. It was a defense as much of Christianity as of modern art, since that state denied both to us in a similar manner. We have all fought to have a right to that tradition, threatened in Czechoslovakia by the anti-Western messianism of Russian totalitarianism.

The Parisian May was a revolt of the Left. As for the Prague Spring, the traditional concepts of left and right do not really apply. This division of right wing and left wing still has a very real sense when applied to the lives

of people in the West. From the viewpoint of worldwide politics, however, it no longer does. Is totalitarianism left-wing or right-wing? Is it progressive or reactionary? These questions make no sense. Russian totalitarianism is above all a different culture—thereby also a political culture—where the European distinction between those of the Left and those of the Right loses all its significance. Was Khrushchev to the left or to the right of Stalin? The Czech citizen is confronted today neither with a leftist terror nor a rightist one, but with a new totalitarian culture that is foreign to him. If some of us consider ourselves as rather left-wing or right-wing, we can only become aware of this distinction in relation to the problems of the West, but not at all in relation to the problems of our own country, which are already of a different order.

The Western reader can only be surprised by Škvorecký's novel. Surely he expects that a Czech writer who emigrated after the invasion of 1968 will write a plea for the Prague Spring? It is precisely because Škvorecký is a child of his country and remains faithful to the spirit which produced the Prague Spring that his look at it is charged with a constant irony. Immediately apparent in “Miracle in Bohemia” is his criticism, primarily through anecdotes, of all the revolutionary gestures and illusions that, as the weeks passed, forced themselves upon the scene of the Prague Spring. In Czechoslovakia the look that Škvorecký casts upon the Spring has already triggered violent polemics. In Bohemia not only is his book prohibited (as is all of his work), but he is also criticized by numerous opponents of the Husák regime who, while living in trying and tragic circumstances, are no longer capable of looking at themselves ironically. Under the circumstances this is understandable. Each of us is free to engage in a polemic with this novel, but only on this understanding; one must not forget that Škvorecký's book is the fruit of a rich experience and in the best spirit of the realist tradition.

Everything in “Miracle in Bohemia” bears the stamp of truth, and Škvorecký's fictional characters and events have their real-life counterparts. That also applies to the principal plot, a “miracle” staged by the police, who later murder the priest involved and mount a violent anti-religious campaign. The village's name has been transformed from Čihošť to Písečnice. Ivana the Terrible, headmistress of a girls' school who selected the least offensive quotations from Marx, is one of the true and unheralded heroines of the “moderation”—and I have known dozens like her. She led a silent struggle against a given radicalism (the Communist revolution of 1948) only to become a victim of the opposing radicalism. (By the way, no Communist author has managed to create a Communist character more moving than the one Škvorecký, a convinced non-Communist, has given us here.) The poet Vrcholáb, the dramatist Hejl, the chess master Bukavec are portraits of individuals actually alive and well known in Europe. I do not know if this is true of Arachidov, the Russian novelist; but whether or not he is based on a

Ed. Note: Milan Kundera's essay originally appeared as a preface to the French edition of Josef Škvorecký's novel *Mirákl*, entitled *Miracle en Bohême* (Paris, Gallimard, 1978) and translated by Petr Král. The present English version of the article was first published in the August 1979 issue of *Canada Forum*, pp. 6–9. We are grateful to Kundera, Gallimard and the editors of *Canada Forum* for permitting us to reprint the essay here.

real-life model, he seems to be more real than reality itself. And if you believe his character to be exaggerated, I can assure you that reality exaggerates much more than does Škvorecký. If all these portraits are marvelously mischievous, even wicked, the hero of the novel, Daniel Smiřický—a stylized self-portrait of the author—is far from being simply a representative of the truth and a “positive hero.” Even though Smiřický often appears in an attractive light, Škvorecký doesn’t spare him from the irony which pervades the novel. All this created a spiritual atmosphere a little different from the one with which the revolutionaries to the west of the Elbe were acquainted, and Josef Škvorecký re-creates this atmosphere better than any other writer.

Škvorecký made his debut in literature with *The Cowards*, an exceptionally mature novel written just after the war when he was only twenty-four. The book sat in his drawer for a very long time and was published only during the thaw that followed the revelations of 1956. Its publication immediately let loose a violent ideological campaign against Škvorecký in the newspapers as well as at various writers’ meetings, where he was vilified and slandered. The book was banned, and he had to wait for another “thaw,” the one of the sixties, before it was reprinted in an edition of a hundred thousand copies. Not only did Škvorecký become the first “bestselling” author of the young postwar Czech literature, he also became the symbol of a free and anti-official literature.

But why, exactly, had there been a scandal? *The Cowards* denounced neither Stalinism nor the Gulag, and it didn’t really correspond to what one calls in the West dissident literature. The novel tells the story of a young schoolboy who plays in a jazz band and attempts, not without some bad luck, to make love to a reluctant girlfriend. Everything takes place during the last days of the war, and everything is described from the point of view of a disrespectful, often sarcastic young man. And this is precisely what was found to be so objectionable: the novel was a non-ideological discourse which dealt with sacred topics—the Liberation today has its place in the golden showcase of all the museums of Europe—without the obligatory gravity and respect.

If I have lingered over Škvorecký’s first novel, published in 1958, it’s because the author is already completely present in it; he’s the same writer we meet in “Miracle in Bohemia,” written twenty-five years later in Canada: in both he shows us a way of looking at history from below, a look ingenuously plebeian, a harsh humor in the tradition of Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Schweik*, an extraordinary sense of the anecdote, mistrust of history’s ideologies and myths, little taste for the affectations of modern prose, and a simplicity that borders on the provocative while simultaneously giving evidence of a very refined culture—in short, allow me to say it, an anti-revolutionary spirit.

I hasten to explain that term: Škvorecký is not a reactionary and would doubtlessly never have wished that the nationalized factories be returned to their former owners or that the agricultural cooperatives be dissolved. If I associate him with an anti-revolutionary spirit, I mean that his works present a criticism of the spirit of the revolution, with its myths, its eschatology, its attitude of “all or nothing.” That criticism is not concerned with claims and concrete revolutionary platforms but with the revolutionary attitude in general as one of the basic attitudes man adopts with regard to the world. For now, “Miracle in Bohemia” is the only work that gives a comprehensive account of the extraordinary story of the Prague Spring.

Jan Palach’s suicide by fire in January 1969 to protest the fate of country—an act as foreign to Czech history as the appearance of the Russian tanks—brought an end to a historical period. Besides, is what I have said just now about the spirit of the Prague Spring really true? Can one still speak today of the revolt of the moderates? The Russian invasion was too terrible by far. Moreover, the state power is no longer what it was in Bohemia. It is no longer fanatical, as it was during the fifties, nor guilt-ridden, as it was during the sixties, but openly cynical. Can a plebeian cynicism contend with a power more cynical than itself? The time has come when Josef Škvorecký, the skeptical ironist, no longer has a place in his own country.

Paris

Translated from the French by Anne-Marie La Traverser

The Writer’s Job and the Fiction of Josef Škvorecký

By SAM SOLECKI One way of reading Škvorecký’s novels is as works that are written in opposition to the Marxist or neo-Marxist assumptions about literature and interpretations of twentieth-century history current in Czechoslovakia since 1948. His comically realistic novels both resist the officially sanctioned call for a socialist realist literature and offer a view of modern

Czechoslovak life or history at variance with approved versions. Škvorecký’s attitude to the function of the writer or artist—almost all his works have a musician or writer as hero—is most clearly evident in the well-known statement of Ernest Hemingway quoted in three of his books (*The Cowards*, *Miss Silver’s Past*, *All the Bright Young Men and Women*): “The writer’s job is to tell the truth.” Telling the truth within the context