

Questionnaire [1985]

In spring 1985, the following text and questions were sent to a number of writers, artists, journalists, and scholars living in Czechoslovakia. The editors would like to express their thanks to all who answered them. They apologize that due to the limited volume of this book, it was impossible to publish all the received contributions, and that it was necessary to shorten some of them.

The questionnaire was also sent to three writers, who were recently deprived of Czechoslovak citizenship during their legal stay abroad. Only Jiri Grusa submitted his answer. Pavel Kohout and Milan Kundera are represented in this book by other texts.

Introductory text and Questions

For over one and a half decades a particularly oppressive, indeed a crisis situation has reigned over the cultural scene in Czechoslovakia; in its duration and unchanging character it has no parallel in the country's modern history. Hundreds of artists, writers, film, stage and television actors and directors, hundreds of journalists, historians, philosophers and scholars in other disciplines have been dismissed from the institutions that had been created by the world of culture, art and science to provide links between the creators of spiritual values and the public. Their books are not printed and are not available in public libraries, their works are not performed in theatres, on the radio or television, as actors and directors they have no engagements, they are not allowed to exhibit their works in public, they find no employment in their own fields.

Many of them can barely scrape a living, some have been imprisoned or otherwise persecuted, often their families as well, many have emigrated and the same ban has been placed on their works as on those of their colleagues who remained. Regimentation, injunctions and prohibitions, all kinds of manipulation by the state have made freedom of intellectual life impossible, preventing communication between the creative people and the rest of the population and blocking the development of creative powers among new generations.

First question: How does the situation briefly described here affect you personally, from the standpoint of someone (artist, etc.) whose work achieves fulfilment only at the moment when it comes into contact with the public?

Second question: How does this situation affect you as a member of the national cultural community? How do you come to terms with it?

Third question: What practical steps on the part of the state power and its official institutions could provide the beginning of a way out from the existing oppressive and critical situation? Is it within your powers to influence the cultural policy of the state, or to contribute in other ways to overcoming the present situation?

Fourth question: A feature of the intellectual situation in Czechoslovakia is the endeavour by the state institutions to prevent the free flow of intellectual impulses, ideas and information from the rest of the world. What do you miss most of all in this artificially-created isolation? Do you expect any concrete steps by the European Cultural Forum towards overcoming this isolation?

Fifth question: What positive steps by foreign cultural institutions and personalities could, in your view, contribute to overcoming the stagnation in Czechoslovak culture?

Ladislav Hejdiánek

1. Even though I am a socialist by conviction, as a result of my Christian orientation I could not work in the fields in which I had received my professional

training (philosophy and sociology; the latter discipline was actually eliminated after 1948 as "bourgeois"). It was not until the nineteen-sixties that I was able to publish reviews and articles, almost exclusively of course in literary journals. In 1968 I was accepted along with one other non-marxist colleague by the Philosophic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science, as an expression of a new policy approach. Already in 1970, however, there was a wave of mass dismissals affecting the majority of the scientific and technical staff of the Institute. Thus, during my entire life I was able to work in my proper field for less than three years. Before 1968 I was employed in the documentation section of a medical research institute, and after 1968 I have been working as a night doorman, stoker, and most recently, stock-room clerk. During most of my life I was able to devote myself to philosophy only in my leisure hours away from my job.

2. Throughout the period in question, I witnessed two striking features with respect to the situation of philosophy. First of all, during the entire period (except for a brief interval in 1968) all non-marxist types of philosophy were excluded from schools and other institutions of learning, as well as from public cultural life (moreover, as to marxism, it was only a narrow interpretation of it, defined and controlled by non-philosophers). This had especially important consequences for Christians, who were and are more numerous than marxists: since 1968, there has not existed any function or employment for a Christian-oriented philosopher, not even in general pedagogic areas. (The same is of course true for all Christian-oriented persons in creative fields.) Christian cultural activity is being expelled from all aspects of social life and is limited to strictly controlled, closed, ghetto-like existence within the churches. (Theologic faculties were ejected from the university framework; more recently, the 1980 law regulating higher education stipulates that theologic faculties are no longer considered a part of the higher education system.)

The second noteworthy feature has been the enormous, catastrophic decline in philosophic thought as such. In the period immediately following 1948, this was due to the dearth of sufficiently educated, competent marxist scholars and teachers. After a few years this situation improved, particularly as a result of marked improvement in the Philosophic Institute in the nineteen-sixties. In 1970, however, the best marxist thinkers were expelled from schools and research institutes. As early as 1956, young marxists started to develop a capacity for independent thinking. Nowadays, almost three decades later, places where official philosophy is practiced are vegetating either in reality, or at least in appearance. To the extent that if philosophy in our country is at all alive and working, it is happening outside of official centers, and in spite of them.

3. Under present conditions, one cannot expect any practical steps for the improvement of the situation to be taken by the state apparatus (or Party organs). The Czech situation - unlike the

Slovak - is characterized by the totally unrepresentative nature of Czech leadership, and the lack of any "feed-back" channel of communication whereby citizens could exert pressure on their political representatives. Any progress in our country is dependent upon progress in the entire bloc, and is a reflection of the over-all situation; the tail cannot wag the dog. Any tendencies to independent political development, if they exist at all, are immediately suppressed. Appropriate moves on the part of other nations in the cultural field or other areas of diplomacy can at times result in certain concessions; on the other hand, inadequately planned policies are likely to cause more harm than good.

4. The policy of hindering free flow of spiritual and cultural ideas from abroad is of course in sharp conflict with the need for the greatest possible flow of scientific and technical information. (Viz the problematics of Japan.) For this reason, in the long run the policy is doomed to failure. Sooner or later, this faulty approach must be abandoned if the Soviet bloc is to avoid stagnation and obsolescence in all areas, including science and technology. However, human life is not long enough to permit us to wait passively for this to happen. Moreover, for those of us living here, such stagnation is hardly a desirable solution. With the help of the rest of the world, especially the democratic forces of Europe, we need to break down all the various artificial barriers within which we are isolated. I don't believe that at present such help should primarily take an institutional form, even though some institutional - or rather organizational - aid is certainly needed. At the present time personal contacts and personal initiatives are the most feasible and most effective types of help, for such activities are least vulnerable for harassment and disruption. We thus welcome all kinds of personal and individual projects. In the area of philosophy, for example, this could take the form of visits by individual philosophers and lectures in private homes, possibly gifts of scholarly literature, and so on.

5. It is not possible to spell out concrete plans in advance, because that would be the best way of destroying them. The basic criteria are inventiveness, freshness, non-routine thinking. Once something gets underway, however, it is essential to exert every effort to keep it going. On the part of international cultural institutions and personalities this will require some sacrifice; we, too, cannot avoid making sacrifices. In my judgement, we have already succeeded in moving beyond dead center, and now it is up to the initiative and tenacity of both sides to keep the momentum going. Devotion to the basic goal is more important than specific practical guidelines. This goal is mutual understanding and cooperation of cultural leaders and scholars, particularly in Europe, without regard to any borders that separate them. The first principle ought to be the necessity for combatting and surmounting isolation, no matter where it may exist and no matter who may be trying to impose it. We already have some experience in this struggle; those wishing to join or to try something new can now consult colleagues who can offer advice. Europe, fortunately, no longer has ambitions in the nature of power politics; however, Europe has by far not yet fulfilled its great historic mission.