Ladislav Hejdanek on Czechoslovakia Today [1988]

On Aug. 21, 1968, armies from five Warsaw Pact states invaded Czechoslovakia, bringing an end to the reformist regime of Alexander Dubcek. Ladislav Hejdanek, 61, is a leading member of the Protestant Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. During the "Prague Spring" he was a founder-member of the Society for Human Rights and the Ecumenical Movement of Intellectuals and Students. He was also the first nonMarxist employed at the Philosophy Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.

In 1972, following his dismissal, Hejdanek was jailed for nine months, He has served twice as a spokesman for Charter 77, a group created to work for the observance of human rights. Despite a serious spinal illness, he also runs an unofficial philosophy seminar. But in 1984 his disability pension was withdrawn and he now works as an accounting clerk. He spoke with the Register recently in his Prague apartment.

Register: Twenty years have now passed since the "Prague Spring" was crushed by Warsaw Pact tanks, and the Brezhnev Doctrine set out the principle of "limited sovereignty" among states of the Soviet bloc. How should we interpret this much-heralded anniversary?

Hejdanek: Anniversaries are only a symbolic way of treating historical episodes. Of course, this anniversary has a certain importance in the consciousness of the people; but it's nothing out of the ordinary. What's much more important is that the Soviet Union should now exert some positive pressure on our political development. But anniversaries like this do at least give us an opportunity to look at particular events again. It's been extremely difficult for our present political and ideological establishment to offer convincing interpretations: They've all been the result of an outmoded and often very silly compromise.

Only a few months ago, for instance, we witnessed another anniversary - that of the communist takeover in February 1948. It's been necessary to depict this event as a "victory for the people." But it was, at the same time, just one of many episodes in Stalin's attack on the satellite territories and their traditions, democratic traditions in our case. So interpreting such events is a complicated process, and the official standpoints tend to be confused and unsatisfactory.

Register: Are there indications that the new leadership of Milos Jakes, which replaced that of Gustav Husak last December, may be considering changes in direction?

Hejdanek: Evaluating Jakes himself isn't a simple matter. We still don't really know him. Indeed, we don't know anyone in the political leadership until he reaches the highest functions and embarks on new projects. This was the case with Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, for example. Originally he was regarded as one of Stalin's closest collaborators. Then he criticized Stalin. So we have to wait.

For us, Jakes seems to be someone who merely accommodates himself to any given situation. He's done nothing particularly special up to now; and we don't anticipate any new opportunities from him in the short term. But we can't exclude it entirely. In my view, Jakes does embody a kind of political compromise. He hasn't made any fundamental political decisions so far; but if further personnel changes come, perhaps something comparable to events in the Soviet Union could begin to happen here too.

Register: Since Gorbachev's Prague visit in April 1987 there's been speculation about strong disagreements between the Soviet and Czechoslovak leaderships. Is this adding to pressure for change?

Hejdanek: I can't imagine that Gorbachev could regard Jakes as his man. But he has no reason to complicate his own situation even more. He has quite enough problems to contend with in his own homeland and other countries. And there are no troubles in Czechoslovakia comparable to those in Hungary and Poland. So why start in Czechoslovakia too? There's time enough to worry about changing the people concerned. But developments in the Soviet Union have already had some effect. In the past, support for the Czechoslovak political establishment has come only from Moscow, not from any substantial section of our own society. Over the last two years, however, our leaders have seen their base in Moscow contract, and this has made them more uncertain. This uncertainty is a positive factor in our cultural development.

Register: Is there any sign that direct popular support for Charter 77 may be broadening in the face of social discontent?

Hejdanek: I'm afraid not. But this has a special meaning. Charter 77 should not be regarded as an organization or movement as such. Indeed, it can't "move" at all: It only represents a standpoint. At the very beginning it wasn't expected to survive for more than a few months. And this was taken into account when the basic document was formulated. As it happens, though, Charter 77 has survived for more than a decade - and should survive well into the future, too. But it can't be moved in any particular direction.

Nor can it provide the initial base for a political party or opposition group. Something like this is needed. But it's not a role for Charter 77. The formation of a political opposition would require a change in the system in such a way as to permit real political parties. It could begin with new political initiatives based on an acknowledgement of Charter 77's two premises: that human rights should be respected and that international documents like the Helsinki Final Act should be observed. But Charter 77 has no strategic priorities of its own. It can't initiate a political process.

Register: Recent months have witnessed an upsurge of protests in support of religious freedoms. Why is this happening now? And what kind of people are becoming involved?

Hejdanek: This is an important phenomenon. The real motives, in my view, are more political than religious or rather, more social and political than specifically Christian. Christian theological reflection is not very advanced here, and there were no signs of any clear theological motivation for such events as the mass protest in Bratislava last March.

Rather, I think the phenomenon is connected with the growing selfconsciousness of Catholics, perhaps partly inspired by the case of Poland and the Polish Pope. It doesn't necessarily reflect anything new in the relationship between members of the Catholic Church and the party-state apparatus as such. But what is new is their self-understanding, their ability to reflect on their situation and their capacity to express themselves.

As for those involved, there are various groups. But the people who are seen and heard most don't necessarily represent the dominant tendency within the Church. The most vociferous Catholics are conservative people who represent a minority of Church members. Despite this, however, social changes have affected the Church substantially, and nowadays the protestors are not only from the intelligentsia but from all active sectors of society.

Register: Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek, the Czech primate, has pledged support for the religious demands. The state has also consented to the

appointment of new Catholic bishops, which may reflect some readiness to compromise. Where are these developments leading?

Hejdanek: It's too soon to say. But I can see at least one important trend. Tomasek's open letters on the subject particularly his letter last May have been much more ecumenical in spirit than before. This must be evaluated very positively.

Protestants are only a very small minority in Czechoslovakia. But they can offer a high level of intellectual attainment. And by raising the general level of intellectual and theological reflection, the Protestant Churches - at least some of them could play an important role in Catholic developments as well. As a social force, the Catholic Church is immensely important. But to ensure maximum possibilities it's necessary to strengthen the ... [nenaskenovaný řádek - pozn. red.] ... to function. But in Czechoslovakia the theology faculties were excluded from the universities in 1951. And legally - under the High School Law, whose formulations contradict the Helsinki Final Act and other international documents - they still don't exist. This is just one example. The great contrast was due to the special political approach adopted by the government toward the churches and toward the Catholic Church in particular. And in some senses at least, it was accepted by the people. If it had evoked protests, they wouldn't have done what they did. But people accepted it.

Register: Why?

Hejdanek: It's hard to say. In part, it was a reaction to five years of Nazi wartime occupation. People were desperately fearful. Two or three generations back we all came from the land; and we still react as peasants quite unlike Poles, who react as nobles. We lost our nobility, our clerks and our intelligentsia, after the 30 Years War. The only Czech inhabitants left were peasants. And we've lived until now within this peasant mentality.

Register: Some observers have predicted a drastic upsurge of mass social protests throughout Eastern and Central Europe, as the effects of glasnost and perestroika filter through. Recently, the former U.S. national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, argued that a combination of political liberalization and economic deterioration were creating a situation ripe for revolutionary upheavals in the region for a new "Spring of Nations."

Hejdanek: It can't be ruled out. Of course, I hope we can avoid any such disorders. It would be a catastrophe. But we can't exclude the possibility. I hope that our governments and political leaderships will be wise enough to avoid such eventualities.

Register: In the last two years closer links have been discernible between independent opposition groups in the region. Several joint declarations have been signed, for example, by Czechoslovak, Polish, East German, Hungarian and other figures, the first of which marked the anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. Representatives of Charter 77 have also held meetings on the CzechPolish border with members of Solidarity. Is this cross-border cooperation growing?

Hejdanek: The "technical" problems are immense, and this makes our encounters highly unpredictable. But it is without ... [nenaskenovaný řádek - pozn. red.] ... doubt, something very important for the future. I hope the meetings and contacts will be much more frequent; and that more people will be able to come together, to discuss mutual concerns and collaborate internationally. There are still

illusions to be overcome and a lack of real knowledge about the situation in other countries.

I'd like to see more regular contacts between the Churches, too, not only between members of the Catholic Church, but also ecumenical contacts between different denominations. Up to now this has been impossible because of the terrible complications involved in obtaining passports and other permits. For Czechoslovaks, Poles and others it's still far easier to travel to the West than to visit another East European country. But we have a duty to present our ideas to the West as well. In some senses the Central Europeans are more aware of what Europe signifies than their Western neighbors, who often regard themselves as the only Europeans.

Register: In Poland, Solidarity's emergence in 1980 required years of work. Links had to be forged between different social groups, based on a common language and common values. Could a similar united front be formed in Czechoslovakia?

Hejdanek: Yes, it could. But this is not as necessary as it was in Poland. It's natural and if the political situation really changed, then collaboration between a wide variety of social groups would assume tangible form overnight. It wouldn't need a lot of preparation. What does need much preparation, however, is a framework of political thought. This is still at a very low level here, and it will take a long time to improve. But cooperation and understanding between different sorts of people are something natural for us. We are a smaller and more integrated nation than the Poles.

Register: But it would require people to lose their fear and to gain greater social energy. Perhaps Czechoslovakia's repressive apparatus would prevent this.

Hejdanek: Fear isn't the greatest impediment. What's much more important is that there are no clear perspectives. We don't know what to do. There are no acceptable personalities who would have the moral and political respect of the people. That's the problem. We must first prepare the way with new ideas.

Jonathan Luxmoore, who conducted this interview, is the Register's Eastern Europe correspondent