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Revolutions and Revolutionaries, Lessons of the Years of Crises

Three Czech Encounters with Freedom

Forty years have already passed since 1968 and there is no doubt that what happened during this year of promises and hopes turned into illusions and utopias, leaving behind a significant trace—both locally and globally—in our recent history. That the legacies of 1968 are worth being explored and discussed today, not only from the historical point of view, but also in the light of our current political experience. The present volume's declared aim is to put forth a discussion of 1968 as both a global event and a local moment of crisis.

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In 2007 we commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of Charter 77, a Czechoslovak human-rights movement initiated by a small group of people who decided to make a stand against the post-1968 "normalization" process. In 2009, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the revolutionary events of 1989 that brought

our Babylonian captivity to its end; that reversed, abruptly and unexpectedly, what looked in 1968 as our inescapable fate—to remain forever a satellite vegetating on the periphery of the Soviet "evil empire." Is it possible at all to understand the significance and meaning of 1968 without also taking into account the other two recent Czech anniversaries?

It needs to be said that all three years just mentioned—1968, 1977, and 1989—were also turning points in my own biography. Is it something that makes me unfit to perceive and analyze them now as their unbiased observer? I frankly do not know. Being aware of this dilemma, I have decided not to aspire to an observer's detachment and instead to hold onto my experience. Instead of attempting an impartial analysis of these three Czech encounters with freedom in the second half of the twentieth century, I will offer three short sketches of 1968, 1977, and 1989, based primarily on my personal memories, three "anamnetic experiments" (to borrow the term from Eric Voegelin), in the hope that they may be capable of revealing something of general relevance.

1968

In 1968 I was a teenager just entering the world of grown-ups. I certainly was not shocked nor too surprised when the "process of renewal," announced by the "progressive" reformist leadership of the Communist Party, which replaced its "conservative" wing, got into full swing in early 1968. On the contrary, I perceived the sudden burst of freedom into our closed society as a logical, one would say almost natural, outcome of the "thaw" which had been taking place during the 1960s, when I myself, born in 1950, was progressing through my teens. Growing up in the environment of an intellectual, non-communist family, I became during this decade (later symptomatically nicknamed "golden") an avid consumer of everything—books, essays, and articles published in "progressive" journals and periodicals, films, theater plays, music—that was bringing a fresh breeze to our socialist everydayness. I hoped to learn more about the world beyond our borders, which was getting more accessible thanks to the gradual removal of ideological barriers. I desired to travel to the West and to establish

new lines of communication. I had the same basic feelings as all other youngsters anywhere else in the world, believing, because of their age, that the future is a kind of reservoir of opportunities; that what one should expect realistically as an essential part of the human condition is the arrival of the unexpected; that tomorrow may always be different from today, because the very essence of human life is the human capacity for new beginnings.

As Czechoslovak society was awakening in the 1960s from the Stalinist nightmare, I was following this trend in my own way, discovering the world out there, seeking guidance and inspiration from the ever-growing group of thinkers and public intellectuals, both Marxists and non-Marxists, who were influencing Czechoslovak public discourse at this time. I never believed in socialism of any kind; it was not a matter of creed for me, but just a reality experienced. I did not feel at all to have been "brainwashed" or indoctrinated by the communist education and certainly did not need to sober up from the previous temporary intoxication by Marxist-Leninist ideology. My political convictions were, indeed, products of the "mind of the new one" in Plato's sense;[1] fuzzy, regrettably uninformed, and certainly not clearly articulated. In this receptive, open, but rather messy and eclectic state of mind, I did not hesitate for a second to agree that the project to "endow socialism with a human face"—if it meant to free our society from worn-out and debilitating ideology, to introduce at least some rational economic reforms, to start respecting freedom of speech and other fundamental human rights, to allow civic associations to arise freely with their initiatives, to let people travel abroad—was a very good idea, indeed.

The Soviet-led invasion of August 21 was a shock for me as it was for the whole nation, although many political realists were apparently not surprised at all by this act of imperialist aggression. After it happened, I was as amazed as anybody else by the spontaneous collective reaction of Czechs and Slovaks to this situation. The national response to the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies was, indeed, unforgettable. The days which followed after the military occupation of Czechoslovakia turned, contrary to the designs of those who planned this act of

[1] Plato's *Theaetus*, "the mind of the young man" (or more exactly, the mind of the new one, *tou neou hê dianoia*).

"fraternal international assistance," into a genuine, although short-lived, revolution.

People started immediately, without any official appeal or order, to struggle both collectively and individually against the official Soviet propaganda. They launched their own public campaigns, not only protesting loudly against the unlawful occupation, but also debating with the occupiers, jumping on their tanks, trying to explain to them that there was no "counter-revolution," no civil war, no enemies of socialism in Czechoslovakia, but just peaceful freedom-loving people who wanted to live their lives in their own way. It was absolutely fascinating to observe the whole nation standing united behind its communist, but at this moment genuinely popular government, ready to act in defense of its rights, committed to its values and principles, well-organized, disciplined, unresigned, and unfrightened.

This revolution quickly invented its own "language," with its specific message and semantics, its specific means of free, unhindered communication. Looking at it retrospectively forty years later, I would say it was the language of our "golden" sixties at its best: starting with improvised posters and leaflets displayed in practically each shop window on the streets, through the regular newspapers and journals made in the clandestine printing works and regularly distributed by the network of volunteers, and ending in a couple of days with the functioning system of independent radio and TV broadcasting. The leading members of the progressive wing of the Communist Party who managed to escape arrest by the Soviet occupation forces joined the spontaneous revolutionary stream without hesitation. They even succeeded in organizing the extraordinary clandestine Party Congress, in a Prague factory under the protection of local workers, that condemned the aggression against Czechoslovakia and set out the program of continuation of reforms of the Prague Spring. The conservative members of the Politburo, the agents of the Secret Service who participated from the very beginning in the pro-Soviet conspiracy, and all the old-fashioned, Stalinist "comrades" throughout the country, who were ready to cooperate with the occupiers, were desperately isolated and stigmatized as traitors.

Hannah Arendt, in an unsurpassed analysis of the phenomenon of modern revolutions, points to the three fundamental principles animating them and inspiring their participants. She calls them, "following eighteenth-century political language": public freedom, public happiness, and public spirit.[2] If I am to characterize the course of events in Czechoslovakia after August 21, 1968, in a nutshell, it was, indeed, as if some miraculous trigger was pulled and all three Arendtian principles, otherwise dreaming somewhere in the depth of our collective soul, suddenly woke up and were set, by the very power of the revolutionary spirit, into a spontaneous, smart, and concerted action.

The higher the revolutionary emotions that burst out in the days after the Soviet-led invasion, the deeper the fall which followed. In fact, the retrogression from freedom back to the slavery of totalitarianism started at the very moment when the arrested leaders of the Prague Spring were finally released and returned from Moscow, after they had signed a protocol there that not only decided their own political future but sealed our national fate for the next twenty-one years. Actually, the role of the "Men of January"—who were then for a short time on the pedestal of national heroes—in the suppression of the spirit that brought the whole nation together in a spontaneous revolutionary action was the saddest and the most tragic part of the story of our 1968. Their repeated promises to remain faithful to the principles and ideals of the Prague Spring, their repeated appeals to the nation to understand the current difficulties, and to accept all the concessions that had to be made, supposedly in order to preserve the main objectives of the "process of renewal," turned out to be nothing but empty words and later, even sheer lies of experienced party apparatchiks. A treaty was signed and duly ratified in Parliament under their watch to legitimize the "temporary" stay of the Soviet troops on our territory. Contrary to all their proclamations and assurances, the Soviet justification of the August intervention—that the socialist order in Czechoslovakia had to be "rescued" by the "fraternal international assistance"—won recognition in the Czechoslovak Communist Party as its new official political line. It was shocking and sad, indeed, to observe the "Men of January" voluntarily playing an active role—until they themselves were forced to step down—in making this U-turn. The results of their "defense" of the legacies of post-January developments in the period that followed August 21 were simply indefensible. The measures first

[2] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 223.

to limit and later to entirely eliminate the influence of "counter-revolutionary" forces began to be implemented with their explicit approval. Those in the communist leadership who did not want or were not able to embrace again the dogmas of Marxism-Leninism and return to the old ways of thinking and familiar habits of communist totalitarian rule were forced to resign one after another. The conservative wing of the Communist Party got back into the saddle. Human freedom discovered and growing during the previous months started to shrink again, and our short-lived revolution was, first inconspicuously, but later openly and explicitly, superseded by the long period of "normalization." The thorough screening in all ranks of the Communist Party, and later even in the non-communist silent majority of the population, began with the aim of punishing all rebels and cleansing the Czechoslovak society from all "revisionist" and "counter-revolutionary" elements. The law used to suppress by force the spontaneous demonstrations that broke out on the occasion of the first anniversary of the invasion was signed by Alexander Dubček himself.

I observed this regressive trend with disbelief and frustration. I had just begun my university studies in the fall and had participated enthusiastically at the students' protest strike in November 1968 and at the big students' demonstration which followed the martyr's death of Jan Palach. The worst surprise, however, was that the atmosphere changed gradually under the pressure of normalization, even in the student environment. Within less than two years from August 1968, most of my colleagues at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Charles University were also showing readiness to follow suit and adapt themselves to the new political situation, in order to secure for themselves undisturbed professional lives and university careers. They joined, one after another, a renewed official student organization loyal to the normalization regime; even worse, in all possible interviews and questionnaires—used by "normalizers" not so much to find out what people really thought, but rather to break their resistance—they were ready to express their agreement with the official criticism of "grave political mistakes" made by the "revisionists" during the "period of crisis," and their consent to the August invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies. No matter what they had said before, what they thought or felt inside, they also dumped easily the Arendtian principles of "public freedom, public happiness, and public spirit" discovered during our revolution,

and fell in line with the changed political circumstances, accepting with little hesitation a "social contract" that was offered by the triumphant "normalizers."

I was well aware that there was still a clear and stark choice available at the time. One could either agree to play this "game" (and the vast majority of people in Czechoslovakia decided to do so), or to go into exile. In the summer of 1969, I also briefly considered taking the latter step, but in the end, I did not. My question, then, remained. Was there some other option besides emigration or adopting an opportunistic attitude? What about those who decided, for whatever reason, to stay? What about those who either did not have this choice at all, or found it unacceptable or problematic from the standpoint of their moral principles? Or those who simply did not have the stomach to swallow such an overdose of pragmatism and refused to maximize their personal benefits under the given circumstances?

1977

To evoke the atmosphere and the spirit of Charter 77 and also to clarify my personal reasons for adding my signature to this document without much hesitation, I have to depart from the end of my previous anamnetic experiment on 1968, from the depressing atmosphere of normalization of the 1970s. But first things first: according to its original declaration, made January 1, Charter 77 was "a free, informal, open community of people of different convictions, different faiths and different professions united by the will to strive, individually and collectively, for the respect of civic and human rights, both in Czechoslovakia and in the world."[3] What must be mentioned is, however, the connection which emerged for me in this context between the primarily political problem of human rights—violated in a specific manner by our totalitarian regime which metamorphosed in the normalized Czechoslovakia of the 1970s, as Václav Havel put it in one of his best essays from the late 1980s, from its earlier forms in its

[3] Quoted from the English version of the Charter 77 Manifesto (http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/19/documents/charter.77/).

"advanced" stage[4]—and the essentially theoretical realm of European philosophy.

The man who was the most outspoken and most effective in articulating this connection was one of the first three spokespersons of Charter 77, a retired university professor of philosophy—Jan Patočka. And it needs to be said right away: when he was confronted with this connection in the concrete circumstances of his life under the conditions of late totalitarian regime, he felt obliged to tackle it with adequate philosophical precision. He entered the shaky terrain of dissidence from a *polis* he belonged to as a real philosopher. He brought about an emphasis on maximum existential truthfulness and profundity.

Originally, it was perceived as quite surprising that it was Jan Patočka who assumed, of all other possible candidates—together with playwright Václav Havel and former Czechoslovak minister for foreign affairs in 1968, international lawyer Jiři Hájek—this challenging role, and stood in the forefront of the "dissidents'" revolt. Up until the creation of Charter 77, Patočka enjoyed, even among his Marxist opponents, the reputation of a profound theoretical thinker and a renowned academic scholar. He was not regarded as a public intellectual accustomed to expressing his opinions in political discussions, and certainly not as a politician. He was highly thought of in the informed circles of the intelligentsia as a master in his field of study and a great teacher, endowed with exceptional capability to elucidate the history of philosophical ideas, from ancient beginnings to its present state, and to open for his students the gate leading to the wonderful world of Western philosophy. As one of the last pupils of Edmund Husserl, Patočka was perceived not only as an interpreter, but also as an original philosopher. Departing from his teacher's phenomenological method, he both worked on the history of philosophy, and lectured in his unique manner in front of students. He was simultaneously engaged in his own philosophical investigations focused on the *Lebenswelt* (the natural world of human life) and other fundamental problems of contemporary phenomenology.

[4] See Václav Havel, "Stories and Totalitarianism," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965–1990* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 328–354.

For most of his life, Patočka was used to approaching his topics *more philosophico*—following his teacher in making phenomenological "epoche" and observing everything that "is" (*ta onta*) as phenomena (*ta phainomena*). But upon accepting the role of Charter 77's spokesperson, he significantly altered his previous attitude. He decided, metaphorically speaking, to step down from his philosophical "observatory," to enter the public realm of his *polis*, which was then going through a serious crisis, and set himself in action. He therefore became one of the leading figures of a movement that openly criticized the political practices and manners in Czechoslovakia at the time, as far as respect for human rights was concerned, and announced his readiness to lead the dialogue about it with the Czechoslovak government.

From the standpoint of international politics and international law, the creation of Charter 77 was inspired by two events: a) the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was adopted in the summer of 1975; and b) two major international human-rights treaties, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, came into force in Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1976. All these documents provided clear information on the international obligations of the Czechoslovak state to fulfill these covenants "in good faith" and accommodate its legal order and practice to their normative framework.

Surely, the international context played a very important role in Charter 77's origins and enabled the drafters of its founding document to come up with a number of strong arguments that could be used as the legal basis for its proposed dialogue about human rights with the government and for all its other oppositional activities. Nonetheless, what was crucial in bringing together a group of committed individuals, who were ready to join the initiative and to express support for it by putting their signatures on Charter 77's original declaration, was not so much Charter 77's justification, grounded in international politics or law, but the domestic situation in Czechoslovakia, the poisoned atmosphere that prevailed there in the 1970s, the deep spiritual crisis experienced by Czechoslovak society because of the policies of normalization. It was primarily this crisis and not the changed international situation that compelled philosopher Patočka to engage the communist regime and to enter the proposed public debate between the Czecho-

slovak government and Charter 77 with his existential reasoning. And, one has to admit, for the majority of Charter 77's signatories—people who came from all walks of life, Christians of all denominations, Jews, ex-communists expelled from the party for their revolt in 1968, independent liberal intellectuals and quite often just young people without any specific past, creed, goals, or expectations—the "reasons" behind philosopher Patočka's decision to publicly fight this spiritual degeneration were quite compelling even for non-philosophers.

These reasons can still be found in six short texts Patočka wrote in the last weeks of his life, shortly before he died following prolonged police interrogation in March 1977. These articles defend the cause of Charter 77 against its enemies and can be regarded as Patočka's political testament. When these texts are put into the overall context of his life's work, it becomes evident that what he articulated in his capacity of spokesperson of Charter 77 was in a way nothing new, but corresponded to what he set out as the basic mission of all philosophy already in the 1930s. He argued then that the latter's task is not *in abstracto* speculation, but the ability "to criticize life in all its components and manifestations;"[5] the willingness

> to give expression to what society still rudely wants to say, to give its voice to still mute tendencies, but also to expose what is behind them, to demonstrate their genesis, to mark cross-roads, to identify problems, even to try to resolve them.[6]

And indeed, this idea is formulated repeatedly, though in different way, in Patočka's Charter 77 texts: in publicly defending human rights, Charter 77 was not intended to interfere into politics *sensu stricto*—with politics conceived as a power struggle whose basic aim always is and must be to replace those who are momentarily in government. Charter 77's activities had to be strictly limited to a non-political goal, yet one that, for the sake of our humanity, was of crucial importance: by pointing to the individual violations of human rights and proposing the dialogue about it to the ruling power, to resist the devastating conse-

[5] Jan Patočka, "Kapitoly z současné filosofie" [Chapters from contemporary philosophy], in *Sebrané spisy, Svazek 1, Péče o duši 1*, 96.
[6] Ibid., 92.

quences the late totalitarianism of the 1970s had for those exposed to its "radiation."[7] The Charter 77 activities had to be founded, according to Patočka, on what should not be given up, even under such unfavorable political circumstances, that is, on the moral claim made on each of us to live with integrity. This claim not only turned all participants in the Charter 77 movement into political "dissidents," thus undermining the totalitarian communist regime, but it also extracted them from the world of sheer lies, pretentions, and endless manipulations. It was a return journey on the path for truth. This claim opened for them the door into the largely forgotten and abandoned realm of classical political philosophy.

In the text *What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not*,[8] Patočka decided to bring "to everyone's clear awareness" the "truths of which we are all in some sense aware"[9] and also his own philosophical definition of human rights:

> The idea of human rights is nothing other than the conviction that even states, even societies as a whole, are subject to the sovereignty of moral sentiment: that they recognize something unconditional that is higher than they are, something that is binding even on them, sacred, inviolable, and that in their power to establish and maintain a rule of law, they seek to express this recognition.[10]

According to conventional wisdom, the concept of human rights in the international covenants the authors of the Charter 77 Manifesto were appealing to is rooted in the European Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century. Patočka's moral argument, however, his cautious reference to "the truths of which we are all in some sense aware," sounded, when it appeared in January 1977, rather like a voice coming to the present from a distant past, bringing to life something that did not fit

[7] The metaphorical term "the radiation of totalitarianism" is used in Havel's essay *Stories and Totalitarianism* (see footnote 15), 349.
[8] Jan Patočka: "What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not," in Erazim Kohák, ed., *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 341.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

well in the contemporary human-rights discourse, but instead belonged to premodern and largely abandoned spiritual traditions. His argument that respect for human rights represents the moral foundation of any human society—that it is our recognition of the sovereignty of moral sentiment and not just our human nature which constitutes them—shifted the focus from the modern emancipated individuals who simply possess human rights as his/her "entitlements," to the ancient conflict between politics and philosophy. It turned the attention to the trial of Socrates, who seemed to have been the inspiration for Patočka's approach to political matters in general, and, for his own activities in the public realm, his great example and predecessor.

What is the actual source of political order? What enables a political body, asks Patočka in these texts, notwithstanding recognized customs, valid laws, form of government and all practical aspects of its daily politics, to exist as political body? No matter what politicians themselves have to say on this point, their answer is from the Socratic/Patočkian perspective either insufficient or irrelevant. The adequate response to this question simply cannot come from their realm, but from the sphere outside politics. Even states endowed with the sovereignty to create binding laws, to execute them and to supervise their observance, must first honor something above them. Even sovereign states have to respect the elementary fact that being human precedes any political role one may be assigned as citizen. Not only individual human beings, but states and whole societies must be "subject to the sovereignty of moral sentiment."[11] Signing Charter 77 could not then be perceived, Patočka argued, as a "political act in the strict sense."[12] Charter 77 "constitutes no competition or interference with political power in any of its functions."[13] That is why it is "neither an association, nor an organization,"[14] but just "an outgrowth of the conviction"[15] that society "cannot function without a moral foundation."[16]

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 342.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 341.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

Patočka not only reopened the basic question of Socrates in his Charter 77 texts, but also revived in them his spirit. When he said that the Charter 77 Manifesto was "an expression of joy"[17] of our citizens and "also an expression of (their) willingness... to do their part in bringing about the realization and public fulfillment of the principles proclaimed,"[18] it was a Socratic irony that had to fly directly in the face of communist power holders. Considering their ferocious onslaughts against the Charter 77 signatories, it is obvious that they took the statement that "our people have once more become aware that there are things for which it is worthwhile to suffer, that the things for which we might have to suffer are those which make life worthwhile"[19] not as a moral proclamation, but as a kind of declaration of war. When the organs of state security went after Patočka openly, interrogating and trying to intimidate him day after day until he died, his speaking out was a clear act of Socratic courage.

In December 1976, I became acquainted with the text of Charter 77 through a friend, and I was invited to sign it and join others in this adventurous undertaking. I said yes without much hesitation. I did that not so much because of my personal courage, but because at that moment I had already been trapped in the realm of Patočka's philosophy. It was my response to the marasmus of normalization in the first half of the 1970s, when the entire public domain in Czechoslovakia was again fully manipulated by the totalitarian communist government. Seeing no future for myself in the official academic institutions, or anywhere else where a declaration of loyalty to the regime was required as a kind of admission ticket, and having decided not to emigrate, I decided to forgo the career of scientist or researcher. Instead, I immersed myself in the depths of philosophical literature, reading somewhat eclectically everything from the basic writings of classical Greek philosophers to the works of their contemporary successors and interpreters.

Inspired and occasionally tutored by Patočka and his disciples of the older generations, I tried to become acquainted with the history of philosophical and political ideas: as they emerged for the first time,

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Jan Patočka: "What We Can Expect from Charta 77," in Kohak, E., ibid., 346.

were forgotten, but re-discovered later, discussed again, interpreted, transformed, and often distorted in the great dialogue of mankind, which started at the very beginning of European history and went on and on over the centuries. In this context, I should add, I also came for the first time upon the names Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin.

Looking back from a distance of more than thirty-five years, what I chose could be called hyperbolically *consolatio philosophiae hodierna*, to paraphrase the title of the famous text by Boethius. The first thing I discovered in my search for a kind of Boethian consolation, however, had nothing to do with the content of the philosophical ideas I was keen to study. What I realized instantly was that I certainly was not alone setting out on the journey of philosophy for this reason. On the contrary, the existential and not just academic attitude towards philosophy became quite common in the Czech intellectual environment of that period. In fact it is still preserved in a way—for better or for worse—today. I came to know a number of like-minded philosophical apprentices and started to circulate among various reading or lecture groups, debating societies. But most importantly, at the time my education was founded on the private lectures or seminars of Patočka, who for all of us, represented the highest authority in philosophical matters and became in our world a kind of genuine philosopher-king.

My signature on the Charter 77 Manifesto at that time was nothing more than one step in my journey to philosophy. I started along this road inspired by Patočka and there is little to add. All that followed after January 1977 was just the consequences of my original decision. I realized immediately that I threaded quite dangerous and risky waters. Like any other Charter 77 signatory, I had to accept the status of social pariah. It was a form of exemplary punishment for one's revolt against the ruling power. I had to get used to becoming an occasional target of the attention of repressive organs of the state. I lost my white-collar job and had no other choice than to work, first in a Prague hospital and then, after I was fired again, in a hotel, as a stoker.

But like most other Charter 77 signatories, I could not care less about all these matters. This decision was not only an act of liberation for me, but it enabled me to get acquainted with the most exciting group of like-minded people. Patočka died in March 1977, but an unusual body politic, later named by one of its leading activists, Vaclav

Benda, a "parallel polis," came into being. It brought together not only the signatories of Charter 77, with all different convictions, faiths, and professions, but also all of those who decided to resist totalitarianism on their own terms.

This body politic—surrounded by the greater whole of which it was a tiny part, finding itself in a permanent state of siege by repressive organs of the state, having no territory, no protective walls, but just its self-appointed citizens—was certainly incapable of independent existence in the world, yet managed to exist until the end of the communist regime in 1989, for almost thirteen years. Thanks to the nature of its foundation, thanks to its rules, citizenship, and, most importantly, because of the external environment in which it had to operate, the "parallel polis" was, indeed, a rather bizarre entity—a "merry ghetto," as it was also nicknamed. I would certainly hesitate to identify any new political idea whose emergence could be attributed to its existence and which could eventually, when the opportune moment finally came in November 1989, be considered to have inspired our revolutionary action. Nonetheless, there is something here, and I believe that Timothy Garton Ash's consideration of the matter is quite telling in the context of our discussion. He argued that the very fact that the "parallel polis" came into being represented a new beginning.

Those who signed Charter 77 might have been motivated *more Socratico*, but surely, they did not take this step alone. They discovered immediately what it meant to leave the protective walls of their private lives, to step into the public space and to reach out to others. They discovered the binding power of acting together. They discovered that the essential political virtue is not the one leading to immediate political success, but the readiness to build relationships of trust, the ability to act in concert, the willingness to support each other in confrontation with all dangers, to keep alive the spirit of solidarity. In short, they discovered, each and every one in his/her own way, on his/her own terms, the fact that, according to Hannah Arendt, creates an elementary precondition of political life: the fact of plurality which is essential to our human condition and which the normalized life of the totalitarian state aimed to obliterate.

As a member of this colorful crowd and becoming, in turn, one of the spokespersons of Charter 77 in 1986, I still tried, in the middle of all other independent or dissident activities, to stick to phi-

losophy. The change after 1977 was only that our "Geistkreisen,"[20] operating since then in the environment of the "parallel polis" and for this reason occasionally threatened by repressive operations of the secret police, had become open to all the new instigations and impulses coming from the newly discovered public sphere. It therefore gave us the opportunity of being exposed not only to new questions and new themes, but also to so badly needed new books that were smuggled to us by our friends from abroad. It also offered us the opportunity to listen to distinguished Western philosophers who began to come to visit our "parallel polis" and gave their lectures at our "flying university."[21]

The Socratic foundations laid down by Patočka that opened, at least for me, the world of classical political philosophy have remained the elementary point of departure for my philosophical journey ever since. I am not sure whether I should be called a Central European phenomenologist as Timothy Garton Ash has presented me in our controversy, because actually I have never been a disciplined student in any school of philosophical thought. When it comes to the debate about political ideas, however, what I simply cannot set aside is the non-academic context in which these ideas were sought, debated, and thought through by us. The thing is that our primary goal in this search was never to study them as such and *in abstracto*, but to understand better with their assistance our own situation. Our fundamental goal was to make better sense of what we had been experiencing. And in this regard I have to add a slight touch of Socratic irony: when we eventually encountered these ideas, and tried to increase with their assistance our otherwise poor capacity of understanding, they were always shining—no matter what Timothy Garton Ash, Francois Furet and many other distinguished interpreters of the 1989 revolutions thought about their age—as if brand new.

[20] The *Geistkreis* or "Mind Circle" was a leading Viennese seminar of science and ideas founded by Friedrich Hayek and Herbert Furth in the early 1920s. Among its members were Alfred Schutz, Felix Kaufmann, Fritz Machlup, Gottfried Haberler, Eric Voegelin, Friedrich Engel-Janosi, and Franz Ollick.

[21] Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers* (London: Claridge Press, 1999).

1989

> The role the professional revolutionists played in all modern revolutions is great and significant enough, but it did not consist in the preparation of revolutions. They watched and analyzed the progressing disintegration in state and society; they hardly did, or were in a position to do, much to advance and direct it. Even the wave of strikes that spread over Russia in 1905 and led into the first revolution was entirely spontaneous, unsupported by any political or trade-union organizations, which, on the contrary, sprang up only in the course of the revolution. The outbreak of most revolutions has surprised the revolutionist groups and parties no less than all others, and there exists hardly a revolution whose outbreak could be blamed upon their activities. It was usually the other way around: revolution broke out and liberated, as it were, the professional revolutionaries from wherever they happened to be—from jail, or from the coffee house, or from the library.[22]

I chose to start my third anamnetic experiment with this sobering remark of Hannah Arendt concerning all "professional revolutionists" of the modern era, because I consider it reasonable advice when the role of dissidents in the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 is to be discussed and evaluated. It certainly corresponds to my own recollection. The story of the Velvet Revolution has already been told so many times, and I am not going to revisit it. What I will do, instead, is make the three following points.

Point one: What, in fact, is a revolution? According to conventional wisdom, it is a historical event *par excellence*, an event that literally makes history, one that radically and irreversibly changes the social and political condition of human life. Most important, though, is the revolution's subjective element. It is an event that has to be recognized as such, not only by its immediate participants, but by all those who are going to be affected by it. Based on my personal experience with revolution in 1989, Arendt is absolutely right that it is not something that

[22] Hannah Arendt, op. cit., 263.

can be "made" by men. Revolution is certainly not a man-made thing, but a radical break, a discontinuity in the human perception of time, a dramatic moment of truth, when we realize that our tomorrow will be different from our yesterday, that from this moment we are going to be living in a new world. To illustrate this point and to demonstrate the drama in our souls in a moment in which such recognition occurs, I will quote again from Arendt's *On Revolution* again:

> The date was the night of the fourteenth of July 1789, in Paris, when Louis XVI heard from the Duc de La Rochefoucald-Liancourt of the fall of the Bastille, the liberation of a few prisoners, and the defection of the royal troops before a popular attack. The famous dialogue that took place between the king and his messenger is very short and very revealing. The king, we are told, exclaimed: "C'est une révolte," and Liancourt corrected him: "Non, Sire, c'est une révolution.'"[23]

By recalling this conversation in the context of my own anamnesis, I certainly do not intend to place, without any further qualification, the events I was part of in Prague, in November 1989, into the same category with the events in France two hundred years earlier. And what I would least like to do is compare my own "dramatic" encounter with history at that time with the truly tragic situation of French king Louis XVI, not only bearing in mind the incomparable consequences which the confusion of the terms "révolte" and "révolution" had for him and could have, obviously in the opposite direction, for me and other "Velvet revolutionaries."

I actually remember very well the moment when I, at least intuitively, started to feel that what we were experiencing could be *"révolution,"* and not just another *"révolte"*—despite the fact that in the days ahead we had to expect realistically and to be prepared that the revolutionary process in which we played quite a significant role, could be forcefully reversed. It happened at one of these first big demonstrations on Wenceslas Square, organized by Civic Forum, a revolutionary steering body of which I was a member. Speeches were delivered and songs sung from the balcony on the third floor of a house on the square.

[23] Ibid., 40–41.

The intention was to send a clear and straightforward message to the crowd, at first a little surprised, but later absolutely excited and ever-growing. It was at the third of these public rallies, if I am correct, that Alexander Dubček arrived. Brought from Bratislava, he appeared in public for the first time after twenty years of invisibility and addressed the jubilant revolutionary gathering. I do not know why, but I decided that day not to stay with the other rally organizers in the area around the rostrum for speakers, who were quickly lining up as the revolution was progressing, but to go down and observe the scene from the square. I already knew what was approaching. In the evening twilight a singer, Marta Kubišová, appeared on the balcony and started to sing "Prayer for Marta," a song that became, as Václav Havel recently put it, a kind of unofficial anthem of 1968. People on the square, I think, most of them with tears in their eyes, started spontaneously to light candles they brought with them, without being "officially" instructed to do so. That was it. The message could not have been stronger. I realized that the revolution that had died in the streets of Prague more than twenty years ago had finally returned. To be understood correctly: as far as "ideas" are concerned, no one I know of, except for a few '68ers, desired to revive the project of "socialism with a human face," which had been once and for all buried in August of 1968. What had to be brought back to life, if we wanted liberty, and not a reformed version of illiberal order, were the three Arendtian principles of public freedom, public happiness, and public spirit, so easily abandoned and forgotten in the years of normalization. And what I saw on Wenceslas Square that night was that they were back, indeed, and at least for some time were ready to "inspire" Czechs and Slovaks, to wake them up, to bring them into a disciplined, well-organized and bold collective action.

Point two is the noetic dimension of revolutionary action itself and the corresponding epistemology. I will start with the observation of Petr Pithart, a leading activist of the revolution of 1989, one of the few Charter 77 signatories with some political experience and qualifications, who was to become Czech prime minister immediately after the victorious Velvet Revolution. I remember that he once told me, trying to articulate the experience he had as one of the negotiators of Civic Forum with their counterparts of the *ancien régime*, the following: being in the very center of revolutionary action during the days that fol-

lowed November 17, 1989, could hyperbolically be compared to being at the center of a nuclear explosion. Therefore, to continue his metaphor, dragged by forces released in a moment when two subcritical amounts of radioactive material combined, with their vision paralyzed by the blinding flash of the chain reaction, the representatives of Civic Forum—a group of hastily selected individuals, some of them certainly not very well prepared for this job—had to cope with, and prudently react to, an absolutely new and largely unexpected situation. Sitting at the round table with their well-trained opponents, who were backed by the repressive organs of the state, still ready to intervene in its defense, they had to proceed without a clear democratic mandate, master plan, or strategy thoroughly prepared in advance, just feeling their way, applying trial and error, not knowing well their opponents and their real intentions. This negotiation evolved day after day, not only with all Czechoslovak citizens around and the whole democratic world watching, but also with major international actors playing their game of balancing power, communicating through their secret lines and carrying about their geostrategic "national interests." The only democratic feedback the negotiators could rely on was the daily consultations with other members of the broader leadership of Civic Forum. However, the steering body of the Velvet Revolution itself had only a very limited mandate, being composed of representatives of loose networks of civic initiative, comprising a number of self-appointed individuals who either had credentials from their past activities within the "parallel polis" or were co-opted in the course of the Velvet Revolution. The negotiators were obviously not only supposed to keep this body informed of their interim achievements. They also needed to obtain approval for the next steps, and that could happen only after a thorough and, for the most part, protracted but hardly productive or result-oriented discussion.

The lesson to be drawn from what I described above, using just quick brush strokes to evoke the picture of daily routines of the Velvet Revolution, is as follows: those who would like to explore the political ideas animating revolutions should first consider the inherent, or one can say, using the medical terminology, "endemic" features of the human situation in which all the "revolutionists"—either professionals aptly described and mocked by Hannah Arendt, or amateurs like most Czechoslovak dissidents in 1989, who could be in many ways ridiculed

as well—were finding themselves. What should not be forgotten is the blindness that strikes all who are doomed, as Pithart, to act and make decisions in the middle of a nuclear explosion. Revolutionary action is taking place in a state of epistemological chaos and total uncertainty. To talk about a "surprising" absence of new political ideas in the European revolution of 1989, as Francois Furet and Timothy Garton Ash did, may make sense from the standpoint of an outside observer of revolutionary events. However, it simply ignores the basic nature of the revolutionary's playing field. It is out of touch with the immediate experience of those who, for some reason, happened to have played the game. The question, then, is how to consider their perspective and reconcile it with that of the *spectateurs engagées*. How can one increase the participant's capacity of understanding and judgment in the context of an event primarily experienced as a discontinuity in time? And, in reality, the interchangeability of these roles does belong to human nature, doesn't it? Are we not both actors and first observers of events that comprise the history of our lives? Do we find ourselves suddenly caught up in these events, or, to return to Hannah Arendt, are we situated in such moments in a "gap" between our past and our future? Is it surprising that she quotes, when referring to this gap, Alexis de Tocqueville, who also apparently saw no new political ideas when he arrived in America to study its revolution? And in the conclusion of his lengthy work, which is still an unmatched masterpiece of the discipline, he had nothing more to say than to express his noetic uncertainty:

> Although the revolution that is taking place in the social condition, the laws, the ideas, the opinions and the feelings of men is still very far from being terminated, yet its results already admit of no comparison with anything that the world has ever before witnessed. I go back from age to age up to the remote antiquity, but I find no parallel to what is occurring before my eyes; as the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.[24]

[24] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 1945), 331.

And finally, point three. In the two previous remarks I tried to recall the direct experience of revolution—the situation we were a part of, caught in its enormous power, where the only thing we could do was wait and see where we would end up. My third remark concerns my realization for the first time, in the middle of all the hectic activities, typical of the months following November 17, 1989, that our revolution was already behind us. I still remember the shock I experienced sometime in the spring of 1990 when I first read an article, written not by a professional propagandist from the previous era, trained to distort reality in conformity with its official ideological interpretation, but by someone who apparently spoke from the bottom of his heart. The author was explaining what happened in the Velvet Revolution and especially Charter 77's role in a way at odds with my own perceptions and experiences. According to this version, what happened was not revolution at all but just a plot on a large scale, a secret deal made between the forces of the *ancien régime* of the Communist Party and their Charter 77 counterparts, who only pretended to be in opposition and only wanted power. Even if this particular article was crazy enough to be tossed aside—bringing in the old and well-worn arguments of Zionism and Judeo-Masonic conspiracy—the moment I read it, I realized an inconvenient truth. Paradoxically, thanks to its success, the Velvet Revolution, as a genuine historical or, rather, history-making event, was no longer in the hands of those who had taken part in it, who had become, whether by choice or necessity, temporary "revolutionists." It was a legacy that no one could claim. In this sense, the Velvet Revolution was still "ours," but only as expressed in the aphorism of French poet and writer René Char, quoted at the very beginning of Hannah Arendt's *Between Past and Future*, where he "compressed the gist" of what four years in the *résistance* against the Nazis meant for those who took part in it: as "our inheritance" that "was left to us by no testament."[25]

[25] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 3.

IRENA GRUDZINSKA GROSS

1968 in Poland

Spoiled Children, Marxists, and Jews

The forty years of historical distance should bring some equanimity to the protagonists of 1968 and their stern judges. Yet the blame and (self-)accusations are as bitter as ever. I would like, therefore, before I talk about Poland, to start with a general defense of 1968.

I am speaking as a member of the 1968 generation, and my memory is not only individual but also generational. Such memory, and all autobiographical history, has its obvious limitations, but it should not be discarded, particularly today, when the '68ers are being pushed out of the limelight by the following generations. Nineteen sixty-eight now belongs to history, yet in judging an event of the past, intentions, illusions, aspirations of the participants do matter. Hungarian theater director Ivan Nagel once wrote that our own biography is not a finished book in which we have access simultaneously to all the pages. In writing about 1968 in Poland, I want to contribute not to my biography, but to the way in which the 1968 generation remembers itself.

The generation of 1968 matured in the shadow of World War II and in the chill of the Cold War. Perhaps the most important aspect of its generational rebellion was the breaking of the barrier of fear that circumscribed, slightly differently in each of our countries, the possibilities of social intercourse. And since the rebellion was generational, that barrier was broken also horizontally, across geographical and political barriers. It is secondary in this context that the students in Poland or in Czechoslovakia demanded more parliamentary democracy, while students in France or Germany were anarcho-communist. This difference serves to attack the Western '68ers as spoiled children and extol their Eastern peers as proto-dissidents or freedom fighters. The East European students, by the way, were also routinely accused in their