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Conversations across the Prison Wall

Islands of Freedom and the Dawn of Democracy

THERE ARE TWO WORDS, among others, that permeate the disputes of historians, politicians and political theorists: *freedom* and *totality*. In meaning, you could hardly find two words that stand in a more radical opposition to one another. As a lover of paradoxes and contradictions, I would like to start with one admittedly peculiar but important question: Is there a type of freedom that can coexist with totality?

First, I will try to present my personal reflections on this question, referring especially to the case of unofficial and semiofficial intellectual life in my country, the former Czechoslovakia and now Czech Republic, in the not too distant past, namely during the period of the seventies and eighties of the previous century, just before the communist totalitarianism collapsed. I will then focus on my personal experience regarding the correspondence with my imprisoned brother Václav Havel, who was to become the country's first post-communist president. Finally, I would like to comment on the general issue of the role of intellectuals in politics in my country.

Let me first remind you of the situation in former Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion of 1968 that crushed an audacious but half-hearted attempt to merge socialism with humanity, and the new leaders of the Communist Party, supported by and under the control of the Soviet Union, assumed complete power. They established an episode of the socialist regime called "normalization" by them, and "Totality" or "Totalitarism" by us, the latter term perhaps not quite grammatically correct. My brother would call it "post-totality". It lasted until the Velvet Revolution" in November 1989.

The era of Totality and of the Totalitarian regime was characterized, not only by the overt and total hegemony of the Communist Party and its ideologically biased bureaucracy, but also, and more importantly, by the covert but omnipresent and all pervasive power of the secret police.

The instruments of enforcement used by the post-1968 secret police involved not so much direct imprisonment of individuals (the police pretended a certain legality in that respect); instead, a rather extensive set of incentives and subtle or not-so-subtle pressures that succeeded in raising various fears among people, like the fear of losing a job, of their children being deprived of secondary and university education, or of rude and frequent home searches, to mention the most notorious ones. Not everybody was lucky and brave enough to withstand such various types of harassment.

In consequence, we—those of us in unofficial and semiofficial culture—were effectively deprived of our various freedoms and rights, supposedly tied to the idea of democratic society: freedom of press, freedom of assembly, freedom of travel abroad, freedom of education, of choosing one's own profession, of the right to private ownership and so on. Above all—not surprisingly—we were definitely not allowed to be engaged in any free (meaning non-communist) political activity or anything that mighy be interpreted as such. Any expression of nonconformity with the *status quo* was eliminated.

Yet, there *was* freedom. And I don't mean the ultimate freedom that no totalitarian regime can restrict, namely the freedom of one's own immanent thoughts and imagination (for now I leave aside ideological brain-washing, which is perhaps an issue more psychological than political). I wish to speak about something different and less obvious. Even in the milieu of a totalitarian regime there may emerge, as it happened in our country, various small "islands of intellectual freedom."

I am luckily able to share with you some personal experiences with such islands of imagination and creativity. To write an overview of all the activities deserving attention, or even those I was aware of, would be far beyond the limits of this essay. We could talk about unofficial home lectures and seminars, intellectual retreat sessions, samizdat publishing, improvised exhibitions of non-conformist visual art, underground rock music "festivals," and occasionally even disguised theatrical performances in private apartments or gardens, or the production of amateur, home-video films.

What I consider particularly important are the home lectures and seminars where people involved in the arts, sciences and philosophy could freely interact. The seminars mostly had the form of regular meetings, on a fixed day of the week and usually in the late afternoon, in private apartments. Some of them were thematic, for instance, a thorough

reading of a book by a forbidden philosopher, some others consisted of lectures on diverse topics, always followed by free discussion. Having a relatively spacious apartment in the townhouse built by our grandfather on the embankment of the Vltava river, I was able to host such a seminar twice a month, from 1977 till 1989. I mention it here in order to emphasize how I gained a long-lasting, direct experience of the friendly, open-minded, and imaginative atmosphere that prevailed at such gatherings. Lecturers were mostly mature, forward-looking thinkers and writers who were forbidden to teach and publish (except in samizdat, of course) or who lived and acted at the periphery of official culture.

Interestingly enough, the spectrum of attendees at the lectures and seminars ranged from members of what we called the "gray zone," i.e. people who continued to survive, barely, in official structures—at university departments or research institutes—on the one side, and persecuted intellectuals, including those who openly criticized the official ideology, on the other. Even my brother was among the participants, whenever he happened not to be in jail. Such a diverse mixture of people would make the secret police rather nervous, and indeed, from time to time they harassed the participants—checked their identity cards, called them in for questioning, and sometimes initiated the dismissal from their employmens.

We were well aware that other, analogous goings-on in our country were persecuted much more forcefully. We therefore tried to keep our meetings as much under wraps as possible—perhaps, as appeared later, more than would have been necessary, since the secret police knew quite a lot through their informers. Ironically, there were activities we did not hide too much, for we were convinced that they already knew about them; however, as we learned much later, they knew nothing about them.

I must say that those who regularly participated in our meetings enjoyed them very much. Once they had overcome a feeling of risk, such meetings became for them a real oasis of free and open debate, often at a high level of scholarship and creativity, and often accompanied by a cheerful atmosphere. This made me choose the term "islands of intellectual freedom," and give it a more general significance.

Here then is the paradox: freedom under totality! And even more paradoxically, such islands of intellectual freedom would lose their flavor if there were no totalitarian ocean all around them.

As the very term may suggest, owing to the islands of freedom, a specific species of individuals evolve, whom I shall call *free intellectuals*. Nor-

mally the term "intellectual" is used for educated or generally intelligent people who, due to their ability to think critically and reflect, acquire a social and cultural influence and prestige, and frequently are in one or another way active in the public sphere. Well, such an idea and definition is not quite fitting for the inhabitants of our islands of intellectual freedom, because at that time "social influence" and "prestige" were circumscribed rather narrowly and any activity aimed at the "public sphere" was illegal. However, I have three reasons in mind for calling these people, somewhat paradoxically, "free intellectuals". For one, they had a strong sense of *freedom* deeply rooted in their minds (or when surrounded by friends of the same disposition), second, they were able to establish their *free* zones while living in a divided, bipolar world, and, finally, because of my belief that they would have become academic or public intellectuals in the normal sense of these words, if they had been living in a *free* democracy.

What I have said up till now may give the wrong impression: that everyone in our country was either silent or had joined a small secret group of islanders. That is not exact. There was also a certain number of free intellectuals who ignored the threat of the oppressor's judgement and launched public protests. We call them *dissidents*. My brother Václav was one of them, and this brings me to my next topic.

Thousands of books, articles and research studies have been published dealing with his theatrical work, his political essays and dissident activities, and, most of all, with his presidency. Various mutual relationships between his different roles have been analyzed, as well. Hence there is not too much left for me to contribute. Except one thing – my correspondence with him across the prison wall, during his four-and-a-half years of imprisonment in the period between October 1979 and February 1989.

In fact, the "prison wall" may have a double metaphorical meaning in this instance. Obviously, it may be a metaphor for the unavoidable barrier that divides the life and thoughts of the prisoner from the life and thoughts of others (who live outside the walled prison), and thus drastically hinders mutual communication. However, even more metaphorically, the "prison wall" may refer to another barrier, the one that divides us, prisoners of the communist block, from others living in the free world outside. Of course, I mean nothing other than the notorious Iron Curtain.

Yet let me say first a few words about the "prison wall" of an *actual*

prison. The circumstances of Václav's detention in January 1977, and the subsequent sentence of four and a half years in prison (as a member of a dissident group, the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Prosecuted), are relatively well known. I will focus here on our correspondence. A collection of almost all his letters from prison was published in samizdat editions before he was released, later they were published abroad and translated into dozens of languages. The English title is *Letters to Olga*.

Olga, his wife at the time, was not an overly active letter-writer, and hence the primary responsibility of writing letters remained with me. Fortunately, I wrote them on my typewriter, and I always saved the carbon copies. In 2010 they were collected, edited and published in Czech by the Václav Havel Library in Prague under the title *Dopisy od Olgy* (*Letters from Olga*). The title is figurative and alludes to the title *Letters to Olga*.

Because I suspected that Václav would certainly suffer from the lack of intellectual stimulation and interesting literature, I decided to write him relatively long letters, where I would combine popularized versions of themes I was interested in those days. In my first letter I listed a score of topics I was going to stuff him with (they included quantum theory, logical paradoxes, non-standard science, lucid dreams, and even the works of the bestselling anthropologist and researcher on Indian shamanism, Carlos Castaneda). For the most part, I delivered on the promises in several subsequent letters, where I wrote further—about the Czech feminist and mystical philosopher from the early twentieth century Anna Pammrová, about Tolkien's book *The Hobbit*, about C. G. Jung and other spiritual literature. Somewhat later I gave him a report on Douglas Hofstadter's *Escher, Gödel, Bach* but also on Big Bang cosmology, and the anthropic principle and self-organization. Obviously, my writing largely benefited from themes of our home seminars and from discussions with my scientific and philosophical friends.

But this was not all. I appealed to my colleagues to suggest further texts to me, or even better, that they write a few paragraphs that I would copy into my letters. (As Václav's close relatives, only Olga, my wife, and I had the right to write letters to him.). Gradually I was able to copy into my letters quite a few samples of intellectual texts, including, for instance, essays by Martin Heidegger and, in particular, Emmanuel Levinas. The thoughts of the latter thinker made a far-reaching impact on him. Hence he also had indirect contact with the thoughts of "free intellectuals," primarily philosophers, beyond the prison walls.

However, by no means do I wish to suggest that his life in prison was something akin to a "scholar-in-residence" retreat where, in solitude, shielded from the distractions of the world, he could ponder the deepest philosophical issues. Even though, in harshly real ways, he *did* ponder the deepest philosophical issues!

Writing letters was a sensitive matter, not only regarding letters *from* prison (where strict rules were in place for what was and was not allowed to be written), but also regarding letters *to* prison. Remember that we all, even those outside of the prison wall, were so to say prisoners of Totality, deprived of most freedoms, and particularly, of the freedom of speech. Of course, I could not write to Václav about political affairs or about dissidents. Hence, I preferred writing more about science, innocent scholarly matters, and performances of his plays abroad. There was the overt prison censorship, which might lead to confiscation of a whole letter simply due to the inclusion of an unfamiliar foreign word, or a complicated phrase, something not fully transparent to the censor. However, there was a covert danger, as well. We had no doubt that specific secret-police experts were scrutinizing our letters to prison, looking for hints about our milieu, especially about dissident activities.

At first, I did try to invent a sophisticated encoding of some messages into the letters, but it appeared (and later was confirmed by Václav himself) that he was unable to break the code. Then, in later letters, I restricted myself: avoiding all references to living people by their full names and only alluded to them through their initials or by reminding him of shared little stories from our past. As I already mentioned, my main intention had been to provide him with a good deal of material for his own thought.

The intellectual exchange with me, however, did not have the form of an actual dialogue. Let me quote, in this respect, from one of his letters from prison: "Ivan complains that I do not react to his letters enough, and he is right. Of course, I always read his letters with great interest, and if I do not react adequately, it is partly because I agree with them, or because they relate to areas in which it is not for me to do more than pose questions and listen. In part it may be out of a certain amount of fear of losing my own thread." Fortunately, as I mentioned, my letters included various passages written for this purpose by my intellectual friends, as well as short excerpts from philosophical essays of others. This contributed a good deal to his philosophical and literary "threads". His *Letters to Olga* are a lesson on the fragments of intellectual freedom behind the wall of

a prison within a prison.

In 1989, totality in our country collapsed and was replaced by the dawn of democracy. What did this imply for our "free intellectuals?" Should they enter the arena of real politics? Would they really remainy"free" when all the various freedoms connected with democracy are restored, but official daily routines and obligations prevail? I will conclude my talk with several very tentative and general reflections on the issue of intellectuals in the public sphere and politics.

One statement made by the British historian and publicist Timothy Garton Ash still rings in my ears. Shortly after the revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe, he said to us, "You may, in the course of your life, be both intellectuals and politicians. Try to be both at once and you'll be neither." Political historians will undoubtedly continue to make a detailed analysis of the situation in our country after the November 1989, when a transition to full-fledged democracy became a most desirable perspective. Most likely, the historians would not be surprised that, after the change, quite a few formerly suppressed "free intellectuals" entered the public and political sphere with enthusiasm and became involved in a variety of official public roles as well as positions in government posts.

However, would the historians also notice and question why, somewhat later, the majority of intellectuals dropped out of active politics entirely? I recall an international political science seminar that took place, if I remember correctly, in the spring of 1990. The discussion circled around the democratization process in our part of Europe and, at one point, the question was raised about the involvement of intellectuals in politics. In fact, this phenomenon was quite typical for our country in those days. A well-known British philosopher and political scientist, Lord Dahrendorf, said to us, the representatives of countries in transition, "You will recognize the arrival of democracy to your country by the disappearance of intellectuals from politics." I did not fully grasp his statement at the time. Now I would like to give it some consideration.

An intellectual under normal circumstances devotes himself to tasks requiring rational, intelligent, and creative thoughts that are constantly tested in professional debates. This is a person endowed with three necessary prerequisites. First, the ability of observing things and events from a reflecting distance and within a larger time-frame, second, the competence of talking and writing about such observations, and third, the ability to reflect on oneself as a person with such prerequisites. You may ar-

gue that those are also characteristics that a good politician has (or should have). That is certainly true. So let us instead look for differences between politicians and intellectuals of another kind: not at the characteristics of individuals as such, but at the role they play in their relationship to others and to the whole of society.

Politicians, unlike intellectuals, have to strive for power. Whenever they succeed, they must do their best to hold onto it – otherwise they would never be able to make effective decisions in matters of common interest. Thus politicians have to consider things preferentially in their immediate context, they should not only declare their opinions but enforce them as well and, last but not least, they must reflect upon themselves through the eyes of a public which may, or may not, vote for them in future elections.

The most overt difference between intellectuals and politicians is observable in the way they communicate with the public. What caught our intellectuals in politics off guard was, among other things, the fact that whatever they allowed to escape from their lips, regardless of whether it was wise or stupid, immediately became public property. Treated as such, it was widely distributed, discussed, and commented upon by the public at large—rather than by a closed circle of intellectual colleagues.

The audience of politicians is composed of people who might not admire a sophisticated intellectual's thoughts and speech—often full of metaphors and allusions, and confessing doubts, hesitancies, as well as considerations of alternatives. Intellectuals make an effort always to be original and never to repeat themselves, while the majority of people demand self-assured, clear, and comprehensible speech, statements always formulated in the same, easily memorable way, and decisions that are quick and rock solid. Where intellectuals lean toward explanations, politicians must turn to persuasion. Does this mean that intellectuals have no role to play in the political arena? Of course, there are exceptions. Here and there, an intellectual may spring up who happens to be an excellent politician at the same time. No doubt you expect me to mention my brother. Certainly, he was a dramatist *and* a politician. Dramatist by heart and politician by fate and mission. I do not think, however, that he would be happy with my describing him as a traditional, ordinary, or even professional politician. In fact, he was always critical of the behavior of professional politicians. I would prefer to say that he, perhaps unwittingly, viewed politicians as would-be characters of his upcoming imaginary drama or film. Should we take him for an author or stage director of this sort of a drama of politics or political drama?

Let us turn now to intellectuals, not as individuals but rather as a group, as a component of the society, through which the society as a whole reflects upon itself. After all, it is the intellectuals who may have the ability to distinguish the good from the bad, the clean from the dirty, the true from the false, the healthy from the sick, the emerging from the decaying. They are the ones who can recognize when a political power truly serves the people, and when it tries to make people its obedient servants. And thereby emerges the dedicated role of intellectuals in politics: to observe, from the gallery, politicians jostling for power. To be always on guard and recognize immediately when it is necessary to sound a warning. Intellectuals possess the gift of thoughtful language. Consequently, they should be given the right and the obligation to use it in order to point their finger at key issues and problems. Only exceptionally it may happen, here and there, that they leave their gallery seats and join the fracas in the middle of the political arena – in that case they create inspiring alternatives, helping to resolve urgent and emerging problems, rather than blindly following public demand.

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