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The Will to Walk Upright: The Prague Autumn 1989

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"If not now - when?" These words stood on one of the banners carried in the large demonstration of Prague students on November 17, 1989. This day was the beginning of a movement which in the course of a week changed the face of Czechoslovakia. The date was not coincidental. Exactly 50 years ago Jan Opletal, a Czech student, was murdered by Nazi occupying forces. All Czech universities were thereafter closed and many members of the universities executed or taken to concentration camps. The students wanted to commemorate these events in a special ceremony. The demonstration was approved. After the participants decided to move in a procession to the downtown area, however, they were brutally beaten, this time by Czech Communist police. The blood of Czech students flowed in Prague once again. It was this event that mobilized the public. Not only young students, but also broader sweeps of Prague youth and citizenry in Czech and Slovak cities soon followed, banding together in the protest and reform movement in increasing numbers.

Both banner messages indicated the path to be taken. They call attention to a painful experience. For a long time, much too long, it seemed as if Czechoslovakia had been passed by in the movements which were unfolding dramatically in Eastern Europe. While the Hungarians, Poles, and GDR citizens (and of course those supporting Soviet renewal) were engaged in surprisingly well-directed, energetic democratic experiments, the "Dead Sea" of normalized Czechoslovakia remained unaffected.

For many Czechs and Slovaks both at home and in exile, this was a painful, even embarrassing experience. Reasons for the political lethargy were sought in Czechoslovakia itself, the very country which more than other East European nations is home to a respectable form of democracy. And several such reasons were found. There was, for
example, the fact that the Czechs and Slovaks were doing better economically than the Poles and Hungarians and therefore had more to lose "than just their chains." There was also the paralyzing trauma of 1968 when the creative attempt at social renewal was shattered with force by the intervention of power politics outside of this country.

The End of the Schweik Strategy

Going even deeper were the historical experiences of a nation which again and again had to suffer under foreign rule. It often tried in an indirect way (e.g. in the strategy of "Schweik the good soldier") to resist in the hope that, under changed constellations of political power it would someday be able to receive help from outside. Consequently, it seemed smarter to most that they avoid risks and await the proper moment.

It was this passive stance which, on November 17, 1989, the young people turned. They linked up with smaller civil rights groups and dissidents, especially Charter 77, whose members for years had made personal sacrifice to test open support for human rights. Thus, "If not now-when? If not us, who else?" the seriousness of these questions and above all the readiness to back them up with personal sacrifice and without force, suddenly created turbulence in the political atmosphere of Czechoslovakia.

In all of the country's universities, students declared and carried out a week-long strike. They did not remain alone. The artist associations answered particularly quickly and unequivocally. Most theaters "converted" their already scheduled performances. Instead of performing according to the programs, protest statements were read by actors and others and discussed at length with the audience. Actors and artists who had been condemned to remain silent for decades now spoke out. Even the world famous Czech Philharmonic and other orchestras refused under the given circumstances to appear in state television.

The Churches to spoke out in an impressive way. On the day the Prague demonstration was suppressed by force, the small Protestant Church of the Czech Brethren was just holding its synod. In the middle of the negotiations the synod was interrupted by theology students, who were visibly the victims of police brutality, and they now informed the synod what had happened. The synod did not hesitate a bit and passed an emphatic protest addressed to the government.

This church was not the only one. The participation of the Catholic Church was also unequivocal. Cardinal Tomašek, although over 90 but very alert and possessing great authority, sided clearly with the protesters. And Václav Malý, who had been persecuted by the state, proved to be a uniquely prudent and credible moderator at large gatherings, and in doing so never denied his Christian faith. An especially memorable scene took place when Malý concluded one of the largest gatherings with the Lord's prayer, touching the masses in
a very moving way. Hence, one can see the willingness to reconcile even former enemies (policemen) as well as the relaxed spirit of friendliness which has thus far characterized important events in such a powerful way. Students, artists, churches--an amazing alliance. It is especially because of this "Alliance Spirit" that the movement has carried on in an exemplary, nonviolent, fashion in the midst of such tension and that from within the movement goals and responsibilities have been articulated from the very beginning which are intended to strengthen the intellectual and moral backbone of the people.

This intention, this will, was mentioned again in the banners: "No more living in lies"--the maxim which the unforgettable spokesman of "Charter 77," the philosopher of European stature Jan Patocka, represented with such authentic energy and in the end paid for with his life. And there is the old Hussite religious slogan, which the nation's humanist founder, Thomas G. Masaryk, honored by inclusion in the national coat of arms: "Truth is victorious." It's astounding: not primarily economic needs, but rather the will to truth, to the possibility of leading a life without stifling overrepresentation or humiliation and of giving it shape in accordance with personal accountability--this human need brought the young people onto the streets--the will to walk upright.

Here the question is raised: Can an "Alliance of Spirit" be translated into something which is also politically viable? Is its strength not also at the same time its weakness? Can students, artists, and churches stand up to the powerful, hitherto omnipresent machine of the privileged party monopoly? Things are happening more and more frequently which give nourishment to this hope. The formerly split dissident circles have created a common platform, the "Citizens Forum," and this quickly found a widespread response.

This Movement is the People

The "Alliance of the Spirit" did not remain in academic-intellectual circles. It succeeded in appealing to the masses. The unbelievable series of everyday mass gatherings is in recent Czech history, including the Prague Spring, and unrivaled event. Even blue collar workers were aroused. The classic weapon of the workers' movement, the two-hour general strike, which seemed at first to be too risky to be called by the students and the Citizens Forum, was carried out with great success.

The popular movement still lacks effective structures which would even come close to matching the fully developed structural possibilities of the Communists. But without a doubt this movement is the people.

If it succeeds in overcoming its structural handicap, the Czech awakening would (as did previously the dramatic transformations in Poland, Hungary and the GDR) represent a genuine democratic phenomenon at birth, one which would let those tired democrats in
Western countries awaken and find new courage.

If there is a person who represents the Czech popular movement in a pivotal and especially credible way, then it is the dramatist Václav Havel. Persecuted for decades and constantly in and out of prison, he does not give in, but rather tests his "upright walk" in artistic and political life. Not long ago at the premiere of one of his plays in Switzerland, he was criticized because of the extent of his prison experiences and for being out of touch with the real world. I see that quite differently. Especially in the West, we can learn from Havel how to confront reality in the world of people. But what does "reality" mean?

A few years ago Václav Havel wrote texts—in prison—in which some sentences testify to the deepest motivation not only of the author but also of the Czech "attempt to live in truth" (after a well known writing of Havel's): "If I thought I were what the world makes me out to be, namely, a tiny screw of that gigantic array of machines which robs us of our human identity, I really would not be able to do anything at all. Then, of course, I would not be able to stop the destruction of the globe, the intellectual and spiritual indifference of nations, and the creation of thousands of new thermonuclear bombs. If, however, I think about what every one of us is originally, that is, about each person's possibilities for growth independent of the world, then I can, of course, do many things. For example, I would try to act in a way I think is right and according to my most sincere convictions—responsibly. Answering to the objection that there is no sense in doing that, I say quite simply: But it does make sense."

Translation by David Odell
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