



Irena Dousková, Leo Pavlát

Both believers and liberals can be destructive zealots

An interview with Leo Pavlát (abridged version)

"I have a feeling that any living Jew is a sort of spokesperson for those who died prematurely, that somehow he or she is an expression of their experience and dreams." Leo Pavlát on the "Jewish character", what it means to "be chosen", and the dangers of relativism.

Irena Dousková: Only this week, the Czech government called off extraordinary security measures. Supposedly, a synagogue or some other Jewish institution was to be the target of a terrorist attack, and the threat was deemed to be more real than ever before. I listened to a few answers to an opinion poll on the radio asking listeners whether it was correct for the government to have taken any measures at all and to have informed the public about them. Most callers answered that they believed nothing the government said and that it was all nonsense meant to distract attention from current problems. Are there unconfessed fears hiding somewhere behind these opinions? Is it less horrifying to believe in a new conspiracy theory than to admit to oneself that there are groups of people who look at you as an enemy?

Leo Pavlát: The weakness of all general judgments is that they are general. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the opinions you mention may relate to a few circumstances. One of them is the fact that during the communist years a very negative attitude towards authority became a norm for many people. It is true that we have been gaining political experience since November 1989, but political development has not always strengthened people's trust in the advantages of a democratic system. Not everybody accepts democracy as a value that must be defended if need be. Scandals and corruption have helped create the perception that politics is dehumanized and above the individual. With such an approach, no matter what a politician says, it will look untrustworthy. And there is another undercurrent to this terrorist threat. We are a small country that struggled with the Soviet power for a long time; now that role is occupied by the United States in many people's eyes. Quite undeservedly, because while the US is a superpower, it is a democratic power too, which deserves a lot of credit for making Europe free: they crucially helped defeat the Nazis as well as bring down the communist regime. However, according to the simplified, primitive vision of many, the US is but another overlord that draws us into his games, including the war on terror.

ID: When someone browses through the various reactions to your articles and interviews, a feeling of futility settles on a reader at moments. Socially unacceptable, blatant anti-Semitism is mostly replaced by more acceptable anti-Zionism, which does not change the heart of the matter. Concord between opinions on both extremes of the political scope is, however, touching.

LP: Sometimes I am no longer willing to enter polemics. Encountering spite is tiresome and sometimes also exasperating. At the same time I know that, owing to my position as director of the Prague Jewish Museum, a lot of my knowledge has been gained from Jewish history: I meet with complete ignorance of Jews, of their culture, history, historic experience. This ignorance is occasionally not devoid of reservations made *a priori*. And it is important to keep in mind that although we can connect anti-Semitism with certain historical-religious, ideological, economic, social, national, or psychological undertones, it is still a very irrational state of mind. Anti-Semitism is also referred to as a disease that constantly mutates into new variations and spreads in the most varied political and social environments.

A few months ago something very interesting happened at a public discussion to introduce a Czech translation of the American book *Auschwitz*. The discussion was presented by two journalists and among the participants were Robert Jan van Pelt, a co-author of the book; Pavel Barsa, a professor at Charles University; a Supreme Court judge; and myself. By my estimation, the audience was made up of both rightists and leftists with attitudes ranging from pronounced to extremist. It was a real surprise for me to see in attendance a representative of the extreme Right, Filip Vavra, and an editor of the anarchist *A-kontra*, Ondrej Slacak. How much both groups were in absolute harmony was particularly apparent in the reactions to Filip Vavra's deductions, which forcefully argued that the Holocaust needs to be separated from Israel because Israel and Jews actually abuse it. People who otherwise threaten each other over a police cordon sat next to each other and applauded in unison. It was apparent that all present shared the view that Jews are blackmailing the world by means of the Holocaust, that the very existence of the State of Israel is not to the liking of either the Left or the Right, and that Israel is a product of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy.

ID: Why is it that when some people in Europe speak about the situation in Israel and its existence, it often seems as if they intentionally overlook its connection to the Holocaust and to the persecution of Jews in the centuries before? Is this some kind of historical European guilt at having taken part in this persecution?

LP: Nobody wants to think of the past too much, especially if it can be unpleasant. Many people cannot see a connection between the *Shoah* and the creation of Israel. Israel is primarily regarded as an occupational power, the Arab-Israeli conflict does not start for them with an attack on Israel on the day of its proclamation in 1948 but with the Six-Day War in 1967. They do not take into account that this conflict was instigated by a publicly proclaimed attempt by the neighbours of Israel to destroy the Jewish state. The extremist, often neo-Nazi Right is anti-Semitic in its essence. But as regards Israel, the extremist Left is often in agreement with the Right. Europe lives in democracy, but the radical Left protests against the capitalist establishment and considers Israel to be its exponent. It is also viewed as a colonial power; anti-globalizers will often add that Jews are behind "malignant globalization". It is an old tune that blames all evil in the world on Jews — and Israel is a collective Jew now. Every populist knows that in order to manipulate they need simplified truths. Hence the statement that, were it not for Israel, or more broadly for Jews, the world would be peaceful. There would be no terrorists and that would be it.

ID: I will ask you a question similar to the one discussed from various angles at the Archa Theatre at a recent event commemorating the centenary of the Prague Jewish Museum. Can one talk of Jewish literature in Bohemia today?

And what are its characteristics?

LP: Some characteristics are obvious. There have been authors in this country, as well as elsewhere, who declare their Jewishness, by which I not only mean explicit reference to their family roots, faith, community, and common destiny. All of this resonates one way or another in their work. What is characteristic of Jewish literature? It is certainly marked by humanism, which we can see by looking at Israeli authors who have been published in Czech translation so far. It is literature with humour, paradox, and irony. It usually has notable social accents, which in their own way develop the heritage of Judaism as well as a special notion of reversibility and an opposing quality of things, a possibility to turn them around from various sides. Yet again, what I have said is only true with the reservation I have already mentioned: the weakness of all general judgements is their generality.

ID: If we look at how a "mere" sixty years of bondage and totalitarianism have left their mark on a few generations of the Czech nation and, one might say, on its national character, can we also say that hundreds of years of persecution, uncertainty, and fear are reflected in the Jewish character in some way?

LP: Among other things, Jewishness has been a matter of choice for some time, at least since the emancipation. The German occupation showed that the choice may only be illusory. But felt from the inside, according to feeling and reason, Jewishness has had a changeable individual character for quite some time. People with Jewish roots have faced the decision of whether to remain Jews or to denounce their Jewishness since long ago, and we know there have never been too few of them. Many can return to Jewishness after some time, missing a few generations, but there is still, thank God, enough families where Jewishness has remained alive in some way.

What do these people have in common? Perhaps an intensified notion that nothing around is self-evident: even if all seems good, it can very quickly change for the bad. That is to say: it does not pay to rely on what appears to be, but it is important to divine what is not yet apparent. I believe we can find some keenness of view, a quality of foresight in Jewish experience. Next, the Jewish story is characterized by willingness to take risks, by mobility and solidarity, while keeping in mind that one has to depend firstly on oneself. This may be linked to an innovative quality, an effort to figure things out. On the whole, I can see immense authenticity in an individual Jewish destiny.

When in Israel, I always realize, for instance, how scarcely you come across utterly uninteresting people. Not that there are not stupid and rude people, as in any other nation. But mostly, if you ask a person in Israel what they have experienced, what their families have been through, you encounter unusually remarkable biographies. It's as if one feels multitudes of others behind each person, those who were murdered or who miraculously survived, and this not only during the last world war or in the Middle East conflict. Those invisible multitudes are thousands of years old. I have a feeling that any living Jew is a sort of spokesperson for those who died prematurely, that somehow he or she is an expression of their experience and dreams. This is in connection with the above-mentioned awareness of the reversibility of everything and a notion of life's uniqueness. Jews drink a toast to *le chaim* — life — because they know that being alive is not just something ordinary. We live only once, you can lose your life easily, and if you are lucky enough to be allowed to live, you should do something good for the world, you should pay your dues.

ID: Since we are on the subject, what is your view of the myth of the Jews as a chosen nation? This is a question that is on the mind, or alternatively in the stomach, of many an uninformed person. Sometimes I have the feeling that Jews themselves do not entirely know what to do about it. From time to time it must occur to some Jews that it is rather a kind of a curse. You must know the famous joke: "...and you couldn't choose someone else for a change, could you?"

LP: I often meet with this question at various discussions and can only answer that it is a religious concept with a very precise object. It is also valid in a religious context exclusively and cannot be transferred into social or other relations. [...] Jews believe that they are supposed to live according to certain rules, to which they obliged themselves in their covenant with God, and this is how they differ from others who do not have to live in that way. However, this does not mean that those who do not profess to Judaism are less dear to God. Judaism is not missionary, Jews believe that everybody who lives in accordance with the seven laws of Noah's sons, which are the laws of common morals and justice, will be saved. So if we want to speak about a Jewish quality of "being chosen", we can do so in this sense only, and not, God forbid, in the sense that Jews are somehow better than others, as if someone was picked out and another doomed *a priori*. The statement that Jews are racists, based on the fact of them "being chosen", is sheer anti-Semitic malice. It only takes a look at Jewish history to see that being a "chosen" Jew has never constituted a privilege of any kind, one that would pre-destine you to an easy life.

ID: Don't you have a feeling that postmodern relativism, so widespread these days, can also be dangerous in its consequences, in the same way as various ideologies which preceded it and which we have already mentioned here? Be it in the media, humanities, or literature and arts, we are told that there are so many different truths that there is actually no truth at all...

LP: I believe it is necessary for one's life to have a clearly worked out concept, beginning at a certain age: what my place here is, what my responsibility is, what my life journey is, what my principles are. As far as I am concerned, I derive my concept from Judaism to a large extent; at the same time, everything I do on this basis is in accordance with common morals and does not separate me from others. The Jewish codex is ancient and it is advisable to keep in mind when judging it that, regardless of the period, it has always been a thorn in the side of the world's great empires and its brutal ideologies. This reveals something about the essence of Jewishness. A person who has clear judgement and firm principles must inevitably come into conflict with those who say that everything and nothing holds and that every opinion is truth. I can consider anything, I can learn a lesson from everything. But I cannot change the basic concept of my own journey and the values connected to it according to a majority or in order to suit current fashion. Jewishness is able to impress this on people in a good sense. I do not mind another view, another attitude, as long as it does not lay claim to me, as long as I am not attacked for thinking differently. It is a paradox, since often those who criticize the narrow-mindedness of others so vigorously follow a herd while appearing to be open-minded at the same time. It doesn't mean much if someone claims to be tolerant and open to everything. Both a believer and a liberal can be a fanatic.

ID: How can a civilization doubting its own foundations, feeling guilty, and disliking itself put up a successful defence in case of a serious threat or even a

conflict? This is at least what contemporary Europe appears to be to many people.

LP: I am sure a lot has been expressed on this topic by people better disposed to do so than me. It is quite obvious that Europe today has not got its basic values clear. Verbally, to a large extent yes, we can read about them in every constitution. But it looks as if they are getting emptier in everyday life. Europe is lacking ideals. It is gradually getting rid of the religious ones without replacing them with others. It is indulging in wellbeing and luxury. Nobody wants to be more modest, to give something away, and nobody even has the feeling that they should. Moreover, it is beginning to become clear that the way Europe should open up to other cultural influences was not thought through. It is obvious that unless a change occurs, Europe might become completely estranged from its historical and intellectual direction as well as its democratic heritage in the future. There is no sense in concealing the fact: fanatic Islamism is a threat, it is necessary to hold out. As I see it, the solution is in the integration of minorities into society, not in their marginalization into separate communities, the rules and customs of which may not comply with a democratic legal system. It is easy to say, harder to carry out. Multiculturalism, as we understand it today, can throw Europe into endless conflict. If it is possible in Germany to ban Mozart's *Idomeneo* because there is a fear that someone in the Muslim world will regard it as an insult, it means we have already let Europe down and given in to thugs. That decision has a symbolic value and it has been the worst so far.

ID: It has looked for some time as if a certain unrecognized desire for catastrophe resounds in some intellectual reflections. Don't you think so? I'm afraid that if such a wish lasts long enough and with enough intensity, even if it is only unconscious, we may expect its eventual fulfilment.

LP: I am deeply convinced that the Euro–American civilization is so strong economically, militarily, and in its supply of educated and free people, that if it decides to solve the problem labelled by many as a clash of civilizations it will sort it out. This does not necessarily mean that it will result in major conflict. It will suffice if we take this topic seriously. There may be an escalated crisis for a short time, we may need to drive our cars less because oil and diesel will get more expensive. Such a sacrifice is immeasurably lesser than that which is at stake, though. So far, totalitarian thugs have only pushed their way into democracy when democratic regimes lacked decisiveness. Today, European democracies introduce censorship of their own accord, political correctness has become an idol. One has a feeling that it is necessary to make apologies all the time while we should insist on everybody's respecting the rules uncompromisingly. If someone wants to achieve full acceptance and makes claims, they must be willing to provide the other side with the same acceptance and respect. And this does not happen very often in contemporary Europe. The situation will become better the moment Europe and the United States set out for a coordinated and serious advance in their relation to violent ideologies and totalitarian threats. The Euro–American part of the world has huge human and material potential at its disposal, which only needs to be fully utilized.

ID: Unless this part of the world disintegrates from inside by itself...

LP: I hope it's not cheap optimism if I say I don't believe this despite all hints of a serious crisis. It would be hard to imagine the United States capitulating to such an extent that they would denounce their responsibility for the world's fate. And there is absolutely one country that will never capitulate because it

simply cannot afford it, and that country is Israel. The Muslim world is going through a deep crisis and its gradual resolution can bring relief to everyone. [...] Our civilization behaves in an aggressive, devastating and cruel way, which does the world no good.

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