



Ivan Klíma

Seeds of spring

A rebellion against censorship

When Ivan Klíma and fellow writers spoke out against censorship in Czechoslovakia at the 1967 Writers' Congress, the literary weekly *Literární noviny* was taken out of the hands of the writer's union and its editorial board dismissed. Yet the seed was sown for the Prague Spring of 1968.

In 1967, I worked, together with a number of fellow writers, on the literary weekly *Literární noviny*, which had become by then a kind of opposition mouthpiece. Above all else, it was our experience with censorship that led us, at the June 1967 Writers' Congress, to devote so much space to issues of power and methods of suppressing freedom of speech. The speeches made on that occasion came to be viewed as the prelude to the Prague Spring of 1968.

Although *Literární noviny* acted rebelliously, it could not escape the constraints of the socialist system: it had its due quota of newsprint, and it was distributed by PNS (*Postovní novinová služba*, the postal news service), the only body set up for the purpose. In its advertising, PNS prided itself on importing some 5,000 titles from the Soviet Union and other "friendly" countries. Since *Literární noviny* was a licensed periodical, the editor received daily reports from CTK (the Czechoslovak Press Agency), including those to which only a privileged minority of functionaries and journalists had access. These reports, duplicated on red paper, usually carried commentaries broadcast by Radio Free Europe, which was otherwise subject to constant jamming, or translations of articles that had appeared in leading west European or American newspapers and magazines and concerned countries of the Soviet bloc. We were granted access to this kind of information so that we could better counteract "enemy propaganda". We were not minded to counteract it; for us, these "red reports" were a major source of information and knowledge.

Our most important and obvious source was, however, the very reality in which we lived. *Literární noviny* began to carry more and more reports and articles that spoke without embellishment of the problems of contemporary life. I was in charge of the opinion pages, so I sought to enlist the best qualified experts to write for us.

Over time, a huge group of collaborators formed around the paper. Its contributors included leading experts in all the humanities — philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians and lawyers. Writing or soliciting a good article was of course only the first stage in an editor's task. The second was to secure publication. The more important an article's topic, and the more original and "non-conformist" its conclusions, the lower the likelihood that it would get past the regulatory authority.

We gradually adopted the practice of tendering several such articles at once, making it more likely that we would win the case for at least one of them. We also made prior agreements with our authors as to the clauses, sentences or paragraphs that might be deleted or otherwise negotiated with the censor. Because the office of censorship was only interested in the printed page, whoever of us was on duty in the composing room would dash out to our driver, who would be parked somewhere nearby. We would wait to see if he would return with or without the stamp of approval. How it actually worked is best revealed by one of my diary entries from March 1967:

This afternoon I was on duty in the composing room. Whenever I'm on duty (or so it seems) it strikes me that the censors carry on even worse than usual. They stopped a gloss on academic titles (why that, for goodness sake?); a leader on the callousness of people and dehumanised officialdom; an excellent account of the housing situation — no generalisations, just facts and statistics, unless the view that people are entitled to somewhere to live, but lack the opportunity, is a dangerous generalisation. Or that there's a ten-year waiting list for a flat. That young people, if they want somewhere to live, have to put down a deposit that is beyond the means of many. Then they stopped a report on prostitution. The maker-up said: "As if there were any prostitution in this country." And he laughed. He said he'd have to read it, that he liked reading articles stopped from being published, because there's always something in them. This maker-up likes a joke.

The production process dragged on and the issue was going to be so shoddy that I could weep. Mrs H moaned that she wasn't going to get away before eight — another 14-hour shift — and that she'd had enough. The proofreader complained of flu, that he'd wanted to stay at home, but the doctor wouldn't give him a sick note. If only it wasn't taking so long, he was getting feverish. The maker-up had to put down his tools because his last train went at six. The new maker-up was more patient — we've never yet failed to publish, he consoles me.

Usually, the censors' objections were not explicit; instead they tended to claim that society was not mature enough to accept the views expressed in a given article, or that what was in the article might be true, but it wasn't the whole truth, and because it wasn't the whole truth (the concept of the whole truth being nonsensical anyway), they blocked the piece. At other times, the excuse was that the Party had more important concerns, so it was inappropriate to open up new subjects (such as the death penalty).

Our paper's disputes with the press regulator grew worse and more frequent, culminating in early June 1967, after the Six Day War. Official Czechoslovak policy, like Soviet policy, responded brusquely and one-sidedly. It broke off diplomatic relations with Israel as the aggressor, following this up with a vicious campaign in the press. The utter one-sidedness of official propaganda, which completely ignored the fact that the Arab states had been preparing for a war in which Israel was to be "wiped off the map", led a number of us writers to hold a debate; Pavel Kohout and Arnost Lustig were among us, as well as prominent party official and writer Jan Procházka. We tried to discuss the causes of the war and Israeli policy generally without prejudice, that is, unlike the official policy of the day, whether Czechoslovak or Soviet. The minutes of

the discussion, which we hoped to publish, were confiscated and the editors were warned that they had overstepped the mark. All this took place just before the Fourth Congress of the Union of Writers.

Deputy Pruzinec, in a declaration presented to parliament a few weeks before the Congress, provided evidence of the relationship between art and freedom of expression, as seen by party officials. It may have been targeted at young filmmakers, especially the outstanding *Daisies* by Vera Chytilová and other remarkable films by Jan Nemeč, Antonín Máša and Juraj Herz, but it applied to art in general. The declaration said:

Respected National Assembly, I am tabling this question in the name of 21 deputies; in it we wish to demonstrate how resources needed by the budget are being squandered... We are convinced that two films that we have seen and that *Literární noviny* says "show the way our cultural life is going", which no honest worker, peasant or member of the intelligentsia wants to, can or will go to see, because the two films, *Daisies* and *The Party and the Guests*, made by Czechoslovak Film Studios at Barrandov, have nothing in common with our Republic, Socialism or the ideals of Communism.

We therefore demand that the minister of culture and information, the culture committee of the National Assembly, the People's Central Auditing Commission and indeed the entire National Assembly deal radically with this situation and adopt appropriate measures against all those involved in the film's making, especially those who were willing to finance such trash. We ask directors Nemeč and Chytilová... we ask these "culture hangers-on" how much longer they intend to poison the lives of honest workers, how much longer they mean to trample underfoot the gains of Socialism, how much longer they are going to play on the nerves of workers and peasants? And, anyway, what kind of democracy are you bringing in? We ask you why you think our Frontier Guard carries out its combat duty of preventing enemies getting to us, while we, comrade minister of defence and minister of finance, pay a small fortune to our internal enemies, letting them trample and destroy, comrade minister of agriculture and food, the fruits of our labour...

The denunciation then names two other films and ends with the appeal: "We demand that these films be withdrawn from our cinemas!" This reactionary onslaught (with the passage of time it now sounds like a parody) enraged most of us. Fourteen directors signed an indignant protest that ended with the words:

Creative freedom is indivisible. If one of us is subject to restrictions, we're all restricted. This is why we categorically reject Deputy Pruzinec's speech and point out the dangers of imperilling fundamental civil rights and freedoms, an integral component of which is the enjoyment of the freedom of speech.

It remained to be seen how writers would respond to such views at their Congress.

I shall attempt a broad outline of our views in those days. We were in no doubt that the communist regime that held sway in the Soviet Union, and other countries that had adopted its political system, had nothing to do with either socialism or democracy, and so it was in no sense a rule of the people. It had committed grave crimes, admitted to few of them, and apologised for even fewer. Those responsible for the crimes had gone unpunished, and some of them were still ruling over us. The dictatorship — called pseudonymously a personality cult — endured, though if in a slightly more sophisticated form, and there was no guarantee that past crimes would not be repeated at any time. We were incensed by the mendacious propaganda and the manipulated elections at which an absurd 99 percent of the vote went to candidates between whom there was no actual choice. Yet we were still not entirely convinced that socialism was an unrealisable utopia. We knew that the nationalisation of all private property had been not only unjust and violent, but also senseless, and that it was why barely anything worked as in democratic countries. Yet it never crossed the mind of any of us that the banks, mines and large industrial concerns should be returned to private ownership. (After all, in certain traditionally democratic countries large enterprises had been passing into state ownership.)

We wished to do everything to ensure that basic freedoms were renewed and that political parties ceased to be sham organisations that hid the totalitarianism of the region from the uninitiated. We knew that the Communist Party, which had had its perpetual rule enshrined in the constitution, ran every single organisation and planted its own members in positions of authority. At the same time, we knew from our experience as journalists that Communist Party unity was only superficial; in reality, its members held quite disparate views. Many were disquieted by developments in the country and despised the politicians of the day.

My colleagues at *Literární noviny* and I agreed that one of the most important things we needed to do at the Congress was to speak out against the censorship that kept an anxiously watchful guard on the dogmatism that so characterised the current political leadership.

On 27 June, the Congress convened in Prague. Obligatory invitations to the proceedings went out to a large Party delegation. First to speak was Milan Kundera. He avoided direct criticism of the prevailing political conditions, but stressed that the union's main task was to facilitate free encounters of differing views, recalling Voltaire's famous passage in a letter to Helvetius: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Then he spoke of the huge upsurge in Czech art, in particular literature and film, and stressed that "insofar as there has been this great upsurge in Czech art, it has come about because of the expansion of intellectual freedom. The fate of Czech literature is at this moment critically dependent on the measure of intellectual freedom". Then he moved on to Vera Chytilová's film *Daisies*, one of those attacked in Pruzinec's complaint. The film deals with vandalism, and Kundera asserted and used it as a pretext to expand on the subject. A vandal "isn't the illiterate peasant who has burnt down the squire's great house in a fit of rage". He went on:

A vandal, as I see him around me, is socially secure, literate, smug and on the whole has nothing to avenge himself on. A vandal is an arrogant obtuseness, content within itself and willing to appeal to its democratic rights at any time. This arrogant obtuseness believes that one of its inalienable rights is

to re-shape the world in its own image, and since the world is primarily that immeasurable quantum of all that lies beyond its grasp, it adapts the world to its own image by destroying it.

This definition of vandalism, which in essence applies to this day, was correctly understood by all present (including the Party delegation) as a criticism of the Party's current attitude to literature, art and all independent thought.

My colleague Alexandr Kliment spoke about censorship and the freedom necessary to creativity: "I understand plenty, but not necessity as freedom." He hinted at Marx's assertion that "freedom is the consciousness of necessity":

... especially when those things that enter our lives as necessary, inevitable and indispensable are in fact only ever at the discretion of people... Ever since literature has been literature, writers have been more or less subject to administrative and psychological pressure to fall into line with the current needs of society... Yet while the needs of society are represented by the collective ideal of a group, a writer always expresses an independent, personal viewpoint... Thus the word of a writer has been and ever will be uncomfortable; he will always be more likely to poke a finger in society's wounds than seek to bandage them... The relations between a writer's individual conscience and work and official doctrine will therefore always be strained... However, culture is a public matter and the writer, no matter that he works alone, can exist physically and intellectually only in dialogue.

And he demanded that literature be given the space to be independent and free to commit as it would, "because the way in which censorship works in practice is incompatible with the constitution of the Republic, this union's articles of association, and above all with the conscience of each and every writer. I move that it be abolished... and that a specific proposal in that sense be sent from this Congress to the National Assembly..." Here his address was interrupted by applause, but what incensed the Party delegation even more was his next, really quite legitimate, demand:

I propose that the secretariat adopt effective measures by which to ensure that the membership is kept better informed. It gives pause for thought that we first learn of certain things that have a direct bearing on literature from *Le Monde* or West German radio. I think particularly of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's letter to the Fourth Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers.

Pavel Kohout spoke next to announce that he had the text of that letter with him and, if Congress wished, he could read it out. A vote was taken, and with a single dissenting voice, the writers asked for it to be read. The reading of a letter so deeply critical of the Soviet regime clearly alarmed, or rather enraged, the Party delegation, who flounced out of the proceedings, at least for that day.

On the second day of the Congress, another critical speech came from an editor of *Literární noviny*, Antonín Liehm, who analysed official culture policy. "Protection of the interests of the state", to which politicians habitually appealed with respect to culture, "must be clearly delineated and defined and can never be veiled under the kind of skeleton declaration or general law that

only breeds arbitrary rule." Then Liehm formulated a programme for culture in which he demanded "cultural freedom limited by nothing but criminal prosecution, and an undertaking by the socialist state that it will become the material guarantor of such freely emergent culture and do all in its power to ensure that the national culture in all its aspects become the property of the broadest possible strata of the nation". This apparently utopian demand was being met at the time by social–democratic governments in Scandinavia. And our experience of events following November 1989 has shown that the new vandalism of the market is equally capable of destroying cultural values, and that culture left at the mercy of the market is in mortal peril.

The next contribution to infuriate the Party delegation was my own disquisition on *Literární noviny*, above all, my criticism of the press law, which fully legalised prior restraint:

The other day I was talking to a Party official who insisted that the law was a good one. When I begged to differ, he was amazed, saying that it had to be incomparably better than the previous situation, when we'd had no press law at all. This is not an isolated view. It assumes, of course, that we should see our entire history as beginning in 1948... But our history goes further back. Permit me to quote: "It is the right of everyone to express his opinion freely in words, writing, print or by pictorial representation. The press must not be subject to censorship."

To the delight of the audience I pointed out that "this quotation comes from an imperial patent issued for the Bohemian Crown Lands under No. 151 of the imperial statute book". Censorship had been restored under the absolutism of Bach, but that did not last long and "under the December constitution of 1867, press freedom was guaranteed and censorship and the licensing system abolished". I added that those who issued the latest law "were not lacking in a certain sense of absurd humour" when they passed censorship regulations which, as a ridiculous survival of Bachian absolutism, had been abolished exactly one hundred years previously. I wound up with a number of proposals that were at once judged by Party bodies as provocative. I asked that the union protest with all vehemence "against any abuse of power by an administrative body... and that the Congress should express its disagreement with the literal wording of the law that, among others, instituted pre–censorship, surpassed decades before..."

When Ludvík Vaculík stepped up to speak — and he was unknown to most of those present — what came from the platform was something that had never been heard in a public forum for the entire time that the communists had been in power, namely an analysis of the totalitarian nature of the regime.

Vaculík opened with an analysis of the concept of the citizen and the manner in which he exerts his influence on the powers that be. "The preservation of a formal system of democracy," he said, meaning how a democratic system can be judged, "does not bring particularly solid government with it; it merely brings the conviction that the next government might be better." He went on:

So a government falls, but the citizen is renewed. But, conversely, where a government stands constant over time, the citizen falls. Where does he fall? I won't oblige our enemies and say that he falls on the gallows. That's only a few dozen or

hundred citizens. But even friends know that that is plenty, for what can follow is the descent of an entire nation into fear, political apathy and civic resignation... I think that we have no citizens in this country.

This introduction was sufficient for the entire Union of Writers (not to mention the present author) to be anathematised. But Vaculík pursued his analysis further. Power relies exclusively on the most compliant and most mediocre; everything is controlled by people less competent than those whom they control, and this situation has gone on for 20 years. On the status of art he said:

Just as I do not believe that the citizen and power structures can become one, that the rules and the rulers can sing from the same hymn sheet, I do not believe that art and power structures will ever delight in how well they get on together. They will not, cannot, ever. They are different, incompatible.

Everyone knew that Vaculík meant our contemporary communist power structures, but to leave no one in any doubt, he added:

Are they really masters of all? And what, then, do they leave in other hands than their own? Nothing? Then we needn't be here. Let them say, let it be entirely visible, that in essence a handful of people seeks to decide on the being and non-being of everything, on what is to be done, thought, wanted. This speaks of the standing of culture in the state, it gives an image of how cultured the nation is. A policy of un-culture... creates a focus for struggles for freedom and is even offended that freedom is repeatedly said to be only really present when it doesn't have to be talked about the whole time...

All of this imperils the one thing that is worth some passion, that is "the dream of a rule that is identified with the citizen, and of a citizen who rules almost by himself". In conclusion, Vaculík voiced that famous appraisal of communist rule to date:

It has to be seen that in 20 years no human problem has been resolved in this country — from such primary needs as housing, schools or a flourishing economy to the more delicate needs that non-democratic regimes cannot satisfy — such as a sense of one's worth to society, the subordination of political decision-making to ethical criteria... the need for trust among people, a rising standard of education on a mass scale.

When Vaculík finished, the hall rang to enthusiastic applause and I believe most of us felt hugely relieved at the liberating articulation of exactly what we ourselves felt, but were unable or lacked the courage to put into words. For their part, the Party delegation did not even wait for the ovation to end, but rose and flounced out a second time.

At that moment, many colleagues woke from their ecstasy and descended into gloom. It was all very well for us to have had our say, but they held the reins of power. Now they had shown that we had overstepped the mark. What was likely to follow? The various speeches I have mentioned ended in the apparently total defeat of all who harboured different ideas as to how the country might be ruled.

The proposal put before the new committee of the Writers' Union was torn up by the Party bureaucracy, who then filled the committee with people it considered compliant. *Literární noviny* was taken out of the union's hands and the editorial board dismissed. None of the above speeches could be published, though they were copied — especially Vaculik's — and circulated in their hundreds among the populace.

At the same time, it transpired that the regime no longer dared resort to more brutal repressive measures; no one was either arrested or interrogated. And a mere six months later, the Prague Spring began. One of its main acts was to abolish censorship absolutely.

Forty-one years after our fight with the communist censors I can declare, with satisfaction, that since the November 1989 fall of the totalitarian communist regime in this country, there has been total freedom of expression and of the press, the sole exceptions being manifest breaches of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and any promotion of racial, national or religious violence. Even then, any interdiction would have to be reached by an independent court. Since there is no apparatus for stopping anything in advance, a translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* appeared, for example, and before the court could reach any decision, the entire print-run of 80,000 copies sold out. After the experience of communist censorship, the courts are largely hesitant about stopping anything printed, so it is practically impossible to cite a single instance of a text or book — and that includes the most repellent emanations of communist propaganda — that could not be published.

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