NB: A catacomb culture

(*TLS* February 16-22 1990, p. 170)

**Roger Scruton** describes the underground “university” through which a distinguished international network of academics has enabled Czechoslovak scholars and students to continue working

Following the Helsinki accords of 1975, the Czechoslovak government ratified the International Covenant of Political and Civil Rights, which it had signed in 1968 during the Prague Spring. Freedom of information, and the basic rights defined by the United Nations Charter, thereafter became law in Czechoslovakia (in so far as anything can become a law in a country whose rulers are exempt from it). Charter 77, published in January 1977, denounced the activities of the Secret Police (who had been for thirty years the effective sovereigns of Czechoslovakia) as involving fundamental breaches of the law. Henceforth the defence of “human rights” was not to be an abstract appeal to principles of morality unrecognized by the Communist Party, but a concrete application of the written law of the Communist State.

Emboldened by this new atmosphere, the stokers and road-sweepers of Prague began to urge their Western colleagues not to accept the official distinction between the “legal” gatherings that took place in universities (under the auspices of professors chosen more for their political credentials than for any tendency to scholarship), and the “illegal” gatherings organized by themselves. Following the example set by Kathleen Wilkes – an Oxford philosopher of intrepid character – academics began to visit their Czechoslovak colleagues, many of whom they met in the seminar organized by Julius Tomin. The visiting continued for little more than a year, during which period many people, including the Master of Balliol College, were summarily expelled from Czechoslovakia. The publicity-conscious Tomin then emigrated and, so far as Western press and the majority of Western academics were concerned, that was the end of the matter. However, a small sum of money had been given for the relief of our Czechoslovak colleagues. Four of the philosophers who had visited Dr Tomin’s seminar – Kathleen Wilkes, Alan Montefiore, Bill Newton-Smith and myself – used this money to establish an educational trust. We decided that, although our purpose was charitable, and in violation of neither English nor Czechoslovak law, it should not be openly pursued, and that we could henceforth best help our Czechoslovak colleagues by working secretly.

The names of Oxford University and Bohemia had been linked before, when a previous Master of Balliol, John Wiclif, had inspired the thought and doctrine of the reformer Jan Hus. In taking Jan Hus’ name we acted more impulsively than wisely. Considerable explanation was sometimes necessary in order to persuade our predominantly Catholic colleagues in Moravia and Slovakia that we were not just another exercise in Bohemian evangelism. Eventually, however, through hard work and through obeying the simple but necessary rule that no Czech or Slovak should be a member of our trust, we won the confidence of a large network of people, none of whom knew the full extent of our operations.

The people with whom we were first in contact were so-called “dissidents”. At the time, they were accorded little respect either by Western embassies or by Western academics, most of which cravenly accepted the Communist monopoly of publication and scholarship. By no means the least guilty were the departments of Slavonic languages, many members of which would avoid any venture that might jeopardize their cherished official contacts. When it came to an invitation to a “disgraced” colleague, or a visit to a secret seminar, they were not interested. And if you suggested that it would be a public service to recognize in print that the true culture of Czechoslovakia existed only underground, the response was usually one of mocking irritation.

In fact the “dissidents” were the only normal people in a society of Gadarene madness: the only ones who had refused to follow their countrymen to the trough of corruption into which the Party poured their daily feed. This is why they are now entrusted with the highest offices of State.

The first of them to invite our collaboration was the theologian Ladislav Hejdánek, whom I met in 1980, and who invited me to speak at his weekly seminar. This gathering was attended by young people deprived of a university education, by teachers who had lost their jobs, by underground priests – even by undercover Franciscans, members of whose order ran serious risks, should they be discovered by the secret police. Often – and especially when the authorities got wind of a Western visitor – the seminar was raided, and the students forced to spend two days in jail. And all who attended were subject to petty harassment, such as being deprived of those privileges – from housing to education – over which the Communists exercised their monopoly. Yet the seminars went on, the students arriving at the appointed hour in carefully staggered cohorts, tip-toeing on the stairs and whispering at the door to gain admission. Visitors came from Holland, France, Britain, the United States and Germany. Many of these were nervous, and with good reason – for arrests and expulsions were by no means rare. One visitor – Jacque Derrida – was even imprisoned on fabricated charges, until released under threats from François Mitterand. It encouraged us to learn that the secret police had done so little homework on Derrida’s high connections.

Hejdánek’s bravery was of inestimable benefit. So long as the authorities believed that our interest lay in Hejdánek’s eye-catching gatherings, they assigned to us a merely symbolic function. We appeared as a quixotic group of Western academics, making periodic protests on behalf of human rights and choosing the eccentric means provided by Hejdánek through which to do so. Behind this cover we were able to set up a network of secret classes – not only in Bohemia, but also in Moravia and Slovakia. We began with philosophy, a field in which our original trustees were most expert, and in which we enjoyed the self-sacrificing co-operation of Petr Rezek – a night-watchman-cum-concierge, and the most open and learned of Czech philosophers. Soon, however, we were providing courses in as many subjects as our Czechoslovak colleagues demanded: social and political thought, theology, history, Hebrew, literature, art, music and architectural theory. Many of our visitors were extremely well known in their own countries: Richard Rorty, Alain Finkielkrout, C. H. Sisson, David Pryce-Jones, Michael Berkeley, Judith Weir, Julian Mitchell, Jean-Paul Vernant, Jürgen Habermas, Leon Krier, Quinlan Terry, Peter Fuller, Carol Rumens, Thomas Nagel, Steven Lukes, David Selbourne, and many others. Each would travel with books, tapes and transcripts while, through independent channels, we would smuggle printing equipment, photocopiers, binding machines, and the countless other requirements of the “catacomb culture”. We also encouraged our French, German, American and Canadian colleagues to establish sister trusts, thereby acquiring an international dimension which was to prove invaluable in the hard years to come.

Like many of our contacts, Hejdánek worked as a stoker – the latest of a series of menial jobs which had begun, for him, in 1952, when he was briefly imprisoned as an active Christian. In 1981 a disease of the backbone began to cause him trouble. He could not sit, and was eventually disabled from his work. The authorities took the view (for which there were no legal grounds) that a signatory of Charter 77 was not entitled to an invalid’s pension. They told Hejdánek that he must return to work or else face a charge of “parasitism”. Furthermore, since Chartists could not be invalids, he would have to work full-time. With some trepidation, and not knowing what the consequences might be, we took the unusual step of paying him an official stipend through the Czechoslovak National Bank. Hejdánek received the money reluctantly, and only on condition that he could distribute it among people poorer than himself.

It would have been safer to pay such a stipend under the name of some institution enjoying the overt recognition of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Unfortunately our approaches to such institutions (including the Anglican Church) led nowhere. The prevailing attitude was that our activities were “provocations”, dangerous to the political balance, and harmful not only to the cause of peace, but also to those whom we wished to help in Czechoslovakia. We were frequently told that we should work “with” the regimes of Eastern Europe, and not against them.

Our trustees were of no single political persuasion (though inclining to the left). Nevertheless, none could accept such a view. We were obliged by our trust to support educational and cultural activities in Czechoslovakia. Those activities were expressly permitted by Czechoslovak law, and could be considered to be political only because the secret police chose to disrupt them. Personal experience had shown us the extent of the fraud that had been practised on the Czechs and Slovaks, and had awoken us to the fact that, if their cultural and educational traditions were to survive, it could only be through the work of our friends. We therefore began to establish other, purely nominal organizations through which to pay official stipends, so that the names of our beneficiaries could not be linked either to us or to each other. In this way we helped many people to renounce wearisome jobs and return for a while to the world of scholarship. By the mid-1980s an underground university was in full operation. Its scholarship was produced in *samizdat*, or else published by the Athenaeum Press which we had established in Oxford, and smuggled into Czechoslovakia. However, it was a university without power to award degrees.

So why not assume that power? We counted among our friends some of the most respected of Western academics, all dedicated to our work, and with a proven capacity as examiners. Our contacts begged us to grant qualifications to their students who, usually because of their parents’ political profile, had no other way to test their abilities or salvage their self-esteem. Surely, they asked, we could persuade the Freie Universität or the Open University to allow Czechoslovak students to sit secretly for their examination? Nothing dismayed us more than the reluctance of those institutions – a reluctance shared by the supposedly freedom-loving University of Buckingham – to help us. After fruitless letters and lunches, we had to abandon a project which, if the Open University, the Freie Universität and Buckingham stand for anything, ought to have been of the first concern to all of them. Eventually we were able to persuade an English university (or rather, certain people within it) to allow us to teach for one of its external awards, conducting examinations secretly and smuggling the scripts to London.

In the mid-1980s, thanks to a generous grant from George Soros (who will surely be commemorated in future years, not only as a great Hungarian patriot, but also as one of the saviours of Central Europe), we had expanded into Moravia. Three people played a crucial role in building our network there: Milan Jelinek, a former professor of French, expelled after 1968 from Brno University; Petr Oslzlý, the dramaturge at Brno’s Theatre on a String, and Jiří Müller, a worker in a fire-extinguisher [*continued on page 176*] factory who, after five and a half years in prison, devoted his life to the creation of a nation-wide alliance – reaching into the citadels of power – against communist government. Müller ran a *samizdat* publishing house, Prameny, to which we supplied equipment. Eventually, with the help of a local computer expert, he was able to develop a Czech and Slovak software programme which could be used by Amstrad machines. Thereafter our whole operation was transformed.

It was through Jiří Müller that official academics could consult and advise their underground colleagues, that official ecologists could exchange research with their excluded counterparts, that judges could give advice to the Party’s victims, that artists, writers and musicians could form links to their Western equivalents, that opposition activists could consult one another, and experts offer their knowledge to the anti-Communist cause. Yet Müller himself was always hidden. Few of those he brought together would even meet him, and fewer still knew the extent of what he did. Under his influence our operation expanded so much that we were obliged to divide our labour, appointing two artists, a composer, a theologian and a journalist to our board of trustees – all of them already enthusiastic visitors. We found ourselves with a wholly new range of tasks: arranging concerts of Czech music in which the works of banned composers were cunningly inserted among the official offerings; mounting exhibitions (such as that given for Jan Šimek in London last year) of work that could not be displayed in Czechoslovakia; creating a nation-wide network of ecologists, linking official to underground researchers and both to their Western colleagues, in an attempt to counter what will perhaps be the most lasting legacy of Communism. And so on.

Then we were struck by a heavy blow. By this time most of our trustees had, one way or another, lost their visas. But since the arrest of Jacques Derrida there had been no attempt by the authorities to threaten our operations directly. Last summer, however, the organizer of our work in Slovakia, Ján Čarnogurský, was arrested, charged with “subversion in cooperation with foreign powers”, and subjected to months of interrogation (which, however, he withstood with exemplary firmness). Yet, by a miracle, the judge defied his instructions and passed a verdict of innocent. The prosecution appealed and Čarnogurský was detained at the Communist Party’s pleasure. But the blessed Agnes of Bohemia had just been canonized, and it was time of miracles. Two weeks later Čarnogurský was released under an amnesty and made Deputy Prime Minister of his country, entrusted with amending (or rather, re-creating) its law. By then another of our beneficiaries was President, and within weeks we were to see our friends occupying the highest offices in the land, their tousled Bohemian heads rising from newly acquired suits and ties. Among those who had worked with us we could count the new rectors of the Charles University, of the Masaryk University (as it is once again called) in Brno, and of the Palacký University in Olomouc. This has its ironic side; for a glance of our list of trustees would reveal that there is nothing remotely like Vice-Chancellor material contained in it. Had there been, indeed, we should never have done what we did.

What value should we attribute to this “catacomb culture”? Czechoslovakia has produced, and continues to produce, more aspiring writers, artists, musicians and scholars per head than any other country in the world. It was therefore almost impossible to gauge just how many of those said to be banned or marginalized were truly victims of censorship. However free the Czech press, it would never be possible to publish more than a fraction of those aspiring to write for it. Hence the *samizdat* press abounded in productions which were decidedly mediocre, and which, in the absence of any “market forces” to control the flow of words, stood forth beside works of genius demanding an equal share of the world’s attention.

But the works of genius were also there. Among banned authors were the prose writers Ladislav Dvořák and Ivan Klíma, the exiled novelist Jiří Gruša, Václav Havel, the critic Václav Černý – not to speak of Vaculík, Kundera, Škvorecký, Reynek, Holan, Uhde, Kanturková, Šimečka and a dozen of others. Their writings were often translated, sold readily to exiles, and were eagerly read in their homeland. But none of them was officially published. Some measure of the disaster can be obtained by comparing the officially published dictionary of modern Czech writers (*Čeští spisovatelé 20 století*, edited by M. Blahynka, Prague, 1985), with the unofficial dictionary published by the 68 Press in Toronto (*Slovník českých spisovatelů*, edited by J. Brabec, 1982). This exercise gives a stunning indication of the extent to which the official and the unofficial cultures diverged, with the important talents increasingly gravitating towards the unofficial realm.

In assessing the unofficial realm one should never forget the mediating influence of the semi-official culture, represented by such institutions as Oslzlý’s Theatre on a String, and by the Jazz Section of the Musician’s Union and its offshoots. It was in this twilight zone that much of our work was conducted, and when the Jazz Section was criminalized and its leaders imprisoned, we helped to establish new semi-official structures, which would cast their chains of mutual support from city to city. In academic and scholarly life, too, the important work was often done neither officially nor unofficially, but semi-officially, as librarians unearthed for the perusal of their more talented, but excluded, colleagues the materials which neither of them could officially refer to. Articles appearing under pseudonyms in the *samizdat* journals (two of which – Kritický Sborník a Střední Evropa – were of a quality and interest unmatched by the overground press) would often be the work of people precariously employed in official places. Several of them taught in the secret “Evening University” – a branch of our network which offered examined courses in Czech language, history and literature – while others devoted themselves to translating forbidden authors like Hayek and Voegelin and to providing information to their colleagues in the West. (Thus, writing an article on Czechoslovak law, I was able to correspond with a practicing judge, herself part of Jiří Müller’s network, using encrypted computer discs.)

Of course, “education” can always be a mask for politics; as it was in Czechoslovak schools and universities over the past twenty years. It is always possible to surrender critical intelligence to ideological dogma, and to offer foregone conclusions in the place of intellectual inquiry. We therefore took special care to ensure that in all controversial matters our visitors should not be biased in any one direction. We remained as a trust detached from political controversy, and despite deep difference of political opinion, never once disagreed on political grounds. Indeed our work offered a remarkable vindication of the distinction made in our common law between the controversial and divisive realm of politics, and the conciliatory work of charity.

Is our work now finished? We were half-inclined to hope so. But our Czech and Slovak colleagues had other ideas. Their educational system, standing for decades on the brink of annihilation, has at last been placed in the hands of the people who can save it. But they need expertise, books and equipment; they need to rebuild the curriculum in all those subjects where Marxism was an obstacle to learning, or where party privilege ensured that only favoured children could be accepted for study. They need to restore those disciplines – law, economics and political science – which were effectively stifled by political decrees. Our work, they tell us, is not ending but beginning.

The Jan Hus Educational Foundation is acquiring an office in Brno. All who wish to work through that office, or to help us in supporting the rebuilding of Czechoslovak universities, are invited to get in touch with our Secretary, Dr Barbara Day, 4 Offord Road, London N1 1DL.