

# THE PUB PHILOSOPHER

*When Julius Tomin, the then celebrated Czech dissident, fled to Oxford nearly 10 years ago, he was welcomed as a hero and an intellectual star. Now he is reduced to giving his philosophy lectures in a Swindon saloon bar*

BY NICK COHEN

The judgments passed by Oxford dons on Julius Tomin seem outrageously brutal. "I don't wish to sound East European," said one, "but perhaps he does need psychiatric help."

Philosophers who were prepared to risk arrest and deportation in order to visit him behind the Iron Curtain will not pop round the corner to his dismal bedsitting room now he is in Britain. As the "pub philosopher", whose poverty forced him to earn a living by delivering lectures in a Swindon saloon bar, Tomin is once again being written about in the newspapers, but as a curiosity rather than a hero.

The Czech dissident fled to Oxford in

1980 and was received as an intellectual star. He came to join the university's philosophers who for two years had gone to Prague to lecture at the "unofficial" seminars Tomin organised in his flat - a snub by the world community of scholars to the neo-Stalinist Czech state. That community is now generally too embarrassed to speak about Tomin openly. "We bent over backwards to help him when he came here," is a phrase used so often that it sounds like an official line.

One professor gave him full credit for his boldness in reviving the spirit of intellectual freedom in the terrorised atmosphere which pervaded, and continues to

pervade, Czechoslovakia after the crushing of the Prague Spring reform movement by the Russians in 1968. Then he added: "But you can disguise paranoia in the East. There are so many real conspiracies. There aren't the same excuses when you come to the West."

Younger philosophers, who do not have the personal ties, will go on the record. Jonathan Barnes, Professor of Ancient Philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, impatiently brushed aside the suggestion that the Conservatives' reduction in funding

*Julius Tomin lives alone in a tiny bedsitting room in Banbury Road, Oxford*



Brian Harris

for British philosophy since 1980 might explain why there was never an academic post for Tomin at Oxford. "That's not the point at all," he said. "He would not be accepted as a graduate here, let alone be given a teaching job. He's like a recalcitrant student who can't admit he's wrong."

How dare pampered Oxford dons condemn a man who has been sent to a psychiatric hospital for his beliefs and who has been in and out of jail since he was 18 for standing up for humanist values? It sounds scandalous until you hear Tomin happily accuse classical philosophers of conspiring to destroy him because he could expose their ignorance, or of collaborating with the Czech authorities.

"They're getting more and more fraudulent," he said. "They all pretend to their students they can read and understand Ancient Greek, but none of them can."

Julius Tomin's life is not a simple story for a journalist looking to provoke outrage. It is sad and bitter. No one likes to hear it. No one apart from the government of Czechoslovakia.

Tomin's father had planned to study philosophy, but the Germans closed the

universities when they invaded in 1939. By the time the War was over he had a wife and three children and had to settle for a life as a secondary school teacher. "If you had asked me what I wanted to be when I was five," said Tomin, "I would have said a philosopher – just because of my father and the books lying around the house."

Much of Tomin's early life explains his later intellectual confidence in the face of crushing misfortune. His father taught him English and Russian when he was five. At nine his Russian was so good that his primary school teacher stopped competing with the precocious linguist and let him teach his classmates.

He was a natural dissident. "I was anti-Communist because they closed the border," he said. "When I was a boy my hero was Jack London. My dream was to travel and write about it – to have adventures. I was always thinking of great schemes to escape to the West. I used to go into the forests to train."

Russian literature brought him into contact with Tolstoy's writings on non-violence. In the mid-Fifties, when the Stalinist grip on Czechoslovakia permitted no dissent, he refused to do military service and was jailed for three months. As

soon as the 19-year-old was released, he tried to escape to Sweden. He walked through the border forests into Poland, where he sold his watch and bought a train ticket to the port of Szczecin. Before he could find a boat to take him across the Baltic, the police caught him. He was sent back to a four-year sentence in a coal-mine labour camp. Conditions at the mine were relatively mild and Tomin has never, in any case, been daunted by physical hardship. His fellow inmates put him in touch with the intellectual currents which would dominate his thinking in the next decade. Talks with imprisoned priests overcame his dislike of Catholicism. A first reading of Marx revealed to him the philosopher's "craving for humanity". Although he never joined the Communist Party, he was able to associate himself with those Party intellectuals using Marx to fight for socialism with a human face.

His new interest made the philosophy courses in Prague, where Marxism was the only permitted subject, seem worthwhile. He enrolled when he was released after serving a year of his sentence. The two

*Tomin in the King's Arms pub, opposite the Bodleian library, Oxford*



Stuart Franklin

strands came together in 1964 when he published, in a leading literary journal, a condemnation of state atheism and a call for a Marxist-Christian dialogue.

Tomin, on his own admission, did not play a great part in the blossoming of freedom in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Significantly, the event he remembers most is an academic dispute in Charles University's philosophy department.

"A lot of the philosophers were only there because better men had been kicked out in the Stalin era," he said. "I proposed that Professor Patocka, who had been expelled in 1949, should be asked back. Oh, you should have seen the reaction. It was out of the question. All those free-minded men criticised the central committee and wanted free learning. But as soon as their own ignorance was touched ... they would make allies with Stalin or the Devil himself to protect themselves. Isn't it glorious? Just like Oxford."

Tomin, to the envy of his colleagues, had found work in the University of Hawaii at the time of the invasion. To their astonishment, his and his wife's "sense of responsibility" for the ideas behind the Prague Spring brought them back. He was not, of course, allowed to work at the university and found a job as a turbine operator in a Prague power plant. He did not object. There was little to do and while the other workers gossiped, he read Ancient Greek literature and philosophy.

The "unofficial" philosophy seminars he organised at his apartment were non-political. But that did not stop the police seeing them as subversive. Zdena Tomin, his wife, was a spokesperson for the group supporting the Charter '77 human rights manifesto. Julius was challenging "one of the most important weapons the state had" – the ability to deprive opponents and their children of an education. What was more, he was asking teachers from the West to help.

"A letter came out of the blue to our sub-faculty," said one of the Oxford philosophers who went to Prague. "We thought: 'If they want us, we'll go.' It took 30 seconds."

Western philosophers are still teaching, discreetly, at unofficial seminars in Prague and Brno. Tomin and his family left in 1980 after prolonged persecution. Visiting Oxford philosophers were detained and encouraged to leave Czechoslovakia. Zdena Tomin was badly beaten up while her husband was briefly forced into a psychiatric hospital.

Tomin had two offers from the West: the promise of Cambridge University's

hospitality and an invitation to deliver lectures at Balliol College, Oxford. He and his family went to Oxford in August 1980.

It is impossible not to admire Tomin as he talks in a loud, determined voice which cuts through the polite mumbles of the English around him. But it is not just the story of his life he wants to tell.

There are other stories of conspiracy. Or rather there are broad hints of conspiracy. Here are the main allegations. Tomin tells two English academics that he wants to go back home. The next week he is stripped of his Czech citizenship. A national newspaper reporter makes a disparaging reference to him. The next thing Tomin hears, the reporter has been made his paper's Moscow correspondent. As he left Czechoslovakia in 1980, the border police tried to steal Tomin's certificate that proved he had been made a doctor of philosophy. Later "the highest philosophy circles in America" claim that Tomin had never received a doctorate.

But whenever you ask Tomin if he is implying that, for example, the highest philosophy circles in America were collaborating with the Czech security police, he says: "I am not implying anything. I am just giving you the facts."

Whether Oxford University had a moral obligation to support Julius Tomin is a question none of the philosophers I spoke to would answer. Fellow philosophers paid from their own pockets for his two sons to go to public school and Tomin received an institutional grant of between £400 and £500 a month for three years. However, all his applications for academic jobs were rejected.

Tomin has been isolated or has isolated himself after vitriolic arguments with Oxford academics. Because his charges are specific and have been specifically rejected, there has been no room for compromise.

His most serious accusation is that British classical philosophers cannot understand Ancient Greek and are deliberately misleading their students. "I'm the only classical philosopher in Britain who can read Plato without having to translate it in my head," he said. "They all put barriers up between their students and the texts. They force their students to read the books they have written rather than the texts themselves."

As philosophers at Oxford are among the few left in the English-speaking world who still insist that students must study

Greek philosophy in the original, Tomin's criticism has not been well received.

"It's crap," said Jonathan Barnes. "I have absolutely no idea how he can say it. One of the relatively decent features of this university is that people have to read the original texts, not the translations. I will be lecturing on Plato this term and I will not mention the secondary literature."

Tomin's work has raised a second controversy. He has revived an ancient tradition that *The Phaedrus* was Plato's first dialogue, written soon after Socrates's trial and death. Barnes thinks that even if Tomin's views were not "baloney", there are no interesting consequences. Tomin believes that they could change utterly philosophers' understanding of Plato.

Tomin is now 50. He lives alone in a tiny bedsit on a main road on the outskirts of Oxford. He shares a toilet with a loud-mouthed drunk who disturbs his studies. He and his wife have separated. He wants to go home but cannot.

"I went to a lot of drinks parties when I first came," he said. "I haven't been invited anywhere for many years now. It is difficult sometimes. But I am learning to live in a desert. I hope one day it will end."

Last year the Department of Social Security cut off his benefit of £67 a week because he refused to take a job as anything other than a philosopher. He is able to continue his work in Oxford's libraries solely because Noel Reilly, the landlord of the Beehive pub in Swindon, read of his plight and decided to pay him £5,000 to deliver three lectures a year to the regulars. The talks are very popular. About 350 came to the last lecture at the Beehive.

Tomin does not want academic charity. He thinks Oxford should "help itself" by recognising that he is right. There is not the faintest possibility that this will happen.

The leadership of Czechoslovakia has done its best to resist glasnost. It remains harsh and unreformed. Last October *Rude Pravo*, the mouthpiece of the Czech Communist Party, happily reported Tomin's story. Under the headline PAID TO MAKE SPEECHES, it said: "Even in a public bar words can earn money, or rather make money. The recipe for this was found in Britain by the Czech emigrant Julius Tomin. Since 1980, when he emigrated, he has struggled as hard as possible to keep going since no university has shown any interest in him. Only now has he found an audience interested in his disputations – namely a public house in Swindon. No other milieu will put up with him." ●