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During Communism I didn't really work as a journalist. My path to working on various publications, and the work I now do at *Respekt*, was a bit complicated. I don't belong to the generation which studied journalism when it was possible, and when it made sense, in the 1960s. I'm a child of the seventies – or, rather, I grew up in the seventies and came to the conclusion that I didn't want to have anything to do with the Establishment, with communism, or any official state structures. I really didn't know what it all meant when I was 19. I only knew that I was interested in words, books, writing, free speech and freedom of expression. I knew I wanted to pursue all of this, but I didn't know how. It was just a subtle desire I had, without ever having written anything. I then wrote some poems when I was 19 which were confiscated during a search by the police, who found they weren't sufficiently optimistic or pro-regime. So, when I was 19, even though I had no links to any opposition groups, which didn't really exist at the time, I found a path of individual opposition. This path led pretty quickly to prison, and things developed gradually from there. I lived in [the city of] Zlín, which was a fairly strong community where there were several dozen people who either signed [the dissident declaration] Charter 77, or who somehow tried to oppose the regime. It was there that a group of several more people developed around Ivan Lamper and Stanislav Devátý, who didn't actually print any periodicals but who tried to spread information about the Charter. Then VONS, the Committee for the Unjustly Persecuted, was created and we informed people about that, or we self-published books.

For example, we reprinted George Orwell's *1984* by hand with a print run of about 200 copies. So, if this can be considered journalistic work, then this was the sort of journalism I did up until 1989. I experienced being spied on with a great deal of apprehension, and my task was to be followed as little as possible and to put others at risk as little as possible with my movements and activities. Because things were being printed at my place in Prague, where I moved in 1984, I was one of those protected people who had to remain unseen and not mentioned in any publications. I didn't find out about many cases of surveillance until after 1989, because the younger generation who then started publishing periodicals like *Revolver Revue* and the like – I worked at *Lidové Noviny* in the 1980s and *Sport*, which came out briefly in 1989 – sometimes got arrested. The writer Jachým Topol told me about a case when he was still in prep school when State Security officers came to arrest him and pulled him right out of class. I think he spent 48 hours in jail. While it obviously wasn't pleasant, they didn't kick him out of school, and he remembers it rather fondly, since he said it gave him a big name at the school. After all, to have the secret police [StB] come and drag you out of class didn't happen to just anybody.

That's how it was. But if I can talk about journalism, I'll skip to 1985, when *Revolver Revue*, a cultural periodical which published young Czech writers who are well known today, but who could not and did not want to publish officially back then, first came out. They published translations of works by [well-known] foreign writers, mainly American or Russian, and Russian underground writers who were also forbidden to publish in Czechoslovakia. *Revolver Revue* was a carefully structured publication, and it was one of the first periodicals which publicly recognized its editorial board, although it was still underground. There were three names there: Ivan Lamper, Jáchym Topol and Viktor Karlík. There were also a large number of people involved with creating the publication who wrote under pseudonyms and made various contributions – some minor, which was my

case – who also found authors to translate, or rewrote existing pieces. While the editorial board was publicly acknowledged, they met clandestinely at Joska Skalník's flat, which became the main place where things were discussed. We found out after 1989 that Joska Skalník had been recruited to work as an StB agent. It was strange to discover this, but it was even more odd to find out that, despite working as a secret police agent, he never told his handlers anything about publishing *Revolver Revue*. They never found out about anything – about the meetings that were held at his place, when things were organised, what was being delivered, where it was being sent, what was being brought in from Poland, what was being delivered by car from France, what was being printed and where. He never told them anything.

When I look at it with hindsight, it was a great cover-up operation. For example, Ivan Lamper, whom I'll speak about now because he was a co-founder, or rather the main founder – I was the co-founder – of *Respekt*, where we now work. He was already writing publicly, which clearly meant he was spied on and interrogated. The surveillance was partially meant to scare you – it wasn't brutal, and they weren't beating him. It was about intimidation through the use of information. For example, he would be at an interrogation, probably around September or October 1986, and they would say: "We saw you stacking coal with Jáchym Topol, Petr Placák and a few others, and then you went to this pub to drink beer..." They wanted you to think they know everything about you. They'd get the information partially from surveillance, but mainly from various agents who would say: "Yeah, we saw him here, and we saw him there..." That was the main form of surveillance that I experienced.

My wife was a very skilled transcriber, and in one room I had a very efficient Cyclostyle duplication machine which I used to print various materials. After that I had a really big copy machine we got from the west. They brought three of them: two stayed in Prague and one went to Zlín. All of the important *samizdat*

publications were printed on them. It would have been a real shame if someone had somehow revealed what was going on in my flat. So we agreed that I would go to events like demonstrations or Charter meetings as little as possible so nothing would be found out. After all, I often had original transcripts, source copies, things that were being copied and prepared, and it would have been a terrible shame had we lost everything, including the copier, since that would have meant losing one-third of everything we were producing. So, you can see from this that I wasn't really a journalist. I was basically a printer.

How do you think the obligation to cooperate with the secret police affected your colleague psychologically? How did you find out about what he did?

I found out about it in 1990. Some archives were opened to the public and his name was there. He denied it at first, but later admitted it. I recently attended a debate with middle school students dealing with media education and historical commemoration and, coincidentally, there was a documentary film in which Joska Skalník speaks in detail about his collaboration. On the one hand, he doesn't admit that much, on the other, although he did agree to cooperate, whether it was in writing or verbally – it's been officially recorded, in any case – he didn't tell them anything important. A part of the population sometimes had this tendency – at one time even I thought about it, not that I would have done it or thought it was OK. Many people signed up to cooperate with the StB but didn't tell them anything. They'd go to meetings [with their handlers] and not say anything. Psychologically, it must have been complicated in the 1980s. On the other hand, I have enormous admiration for [Joska Skalník], since he was a bit older than we were and he really managed to keep things secret without saying anything about anyone during all of those years, or about things that were going on at his home, which was really the centre of all of these publications put out by younger authors

who weren't part of the generation of 1968 who were somehow born or raised into the opposition. He never revealed anything.

Is it possible to forgive someone?

Yes, of course. Being an StB officer, or being [an effective] collaborator, clearly can't be forgiven. But there were often people who agreed to cooperate with the StB during moments of weakness who didn't tell them anything. People who, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, were able to reflect on their collaboration and openly speak about it, who didn't deny it, who admitted everything.

Forgiveness was clearly there in such cases, even when that person had informed on someone. You felt sorry for them. It's not possible to forgive people who didn't reflect on what they did, who to this day act as if nothing happened. For example, the Moravian singer-songwriter Jaromír Nohavica clearly betrayed people and still acts as if he did nothing. There are many more examples of such people. They can't be forgiven, since the seventies and eighties were fairly black and white. There were communists, there were people who weren't communist, and there were people who in some way fought against communism. At the same time, things were very mixed up. I would say that communism affected us all to some extent, from Václav Havel to [the famous dissident philosopher] Jan Patočka to some of the young people as well. We lived in a time that, if nothing else, hindered our education, our access to information, to any analysis, and so on. And certainly all of us – even people like Václav Havel, Jan Patočka, Charter 77 spokespeople and others, including us younger people – we grew up under communism and, whether we like it or not, we were in some way marked by communism, even though we were often free spirits. So we lived in a reality that was communist and we were cut off from the current – today we would say

“online” – happenings in the world, and we weren’t able to perceive it very accurately.

When I look at the seventies and eighties, I see it as a time of totalitarian rule, as a dark period. But despite everything, I’m still able to forgive many people. Thirty-three years have obviously passed since then, and it’s important to me what those people did in the nineties and later, how they established themselves and how they managed to look back on the eighties. We need to find out as much as possible about the period I experienced in the seventies and eighties. We need to find out as much as we can about the principles of the oppression then, about the principles of what was happening... It wasn’t the 1950s, when they locked people up – innocent people – and sent them to prison for 10, 15, 20 years, or executed them. [The seventies and eighties] were a completely different time. Persecution wasn’t so visible, and it’s difficult to describe exactly how we suffered. It’s easy for me to say this because I spent time in prison. But I have a number of courageous young friends who weren’t really persecuted, but who were denied admission to school, who were unable to work in the jobs they wanted, or who couldn’t get a driver’s license.

Little things like that. And I think that – even with 30 years of hindsight – we still haven’t adequately described that era, with all of its guilt, innocence, forgiveness and mechanisms surrounding these things. We’ve failed to do it.

Interview by Jonathan Terra, 2023

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