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### A Secret in the Words Tales of Literature and Dissent in Communist Czechoslovakia

Thea Toocheck  
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***A Secret in the Words: Tales of Literature and Dissent in Communist Czechoslovakia***

Toocheck, Thea  
Academic Director: Brock, Sarah  
Project Advisor: Fischerová, Sylva

Gettysburg College  
Major: Globalization Studies

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**Abstract**

In order to better understand the parallel culture of the 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia, this paper aims to tell the stories of six members of the Czechoslovak samizdat community: Marie Klimešová, Ivan Lamper, Ladislav Šenkyřík, Tomáš Tichák, Jáchym Topol, and Jarka Vrbová. Through personal interviews with these individuals, we understand how editors, typists, artists, writers, translators, and readers played significant parts in this parallel culture as well as how these people continue to play important roles in society today. While the tales told here are only parts of the lives of six individuals, they help reflect the impact of an entire culture that led to the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

**Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Sylva Fischerová, my advisor for this project, who connected me to four of my wonderful interviewees and whose wisdom helped shape my research into its final form. Endless thanks to Ivan Lamper, Tomáš Tichák, Ladislav Šenkyřík, Jarka Vrbová, Marie Klimešová, and Jáchym Topol for taking time out of their busy schedules to tell me such amazing stories about their days as dissidents. Their actions were inspiring and humbling, and I hope to have done their tales justice. Thanks to Sarah Brock, whose support and enthusiasm helped narrow my interest in samizdat to a more concrete research topic, and to Dr. Tomáš Vrba, whose knowledge about and experience in the samizdat community gave me a vision of what this project could be.

## Research Question

I wanted to study literature and dissent in the Czech context and to tell the stories of the readers and writers whose lives were impacted by samizdat. How did they get involved in the world of samizdat? What was their favorite book, and how did it change them? How did the literary scene change once books were no longer precious, smuggled cargo? To do this, I analyzed the impact of samizdat literature on culture through the lens of personal experiences during the seventies and eighties. It was fascinating to trace the societal issues of Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation, as well as before and after, and the reflection of these issues in national literature.

There are, of course, writers who became quite famous for their publishing and writing, but samizdat had an impact that can not clearly be traced, due to its secretive and hand-to-hand nature. Therefore, there are hundreds of stories yet to be told—stories of typists, students, and nervous readers. Literature is inspired by culture, of course, but it also creates culture; examples of this in Czech culture include the works of Karel Čapek, Jaroslav Hašek, and Václav Havel. Yes, figures like these are key to the story, but they do not make up the whole picture. Everyone who was involved had an impact on samizdat in the country.

Today in the free Czech Republic, the idea of samizdat is less relevant. In one of our meetings, Dr. Fischerová commented that the barista in the cafe probably could not tell me anything about why samizdat was important to him if I went up and asked. While to some this may seem to be a natural progression of history, to me, it is disheartening because samizdat was so important in the Czech Republic during the seventies and eighties, and that alone deserves recognition. However, it is more than that; all history must be remembered and learned from, and stories of courage and freedom in a time of oppression are especially inspiring. Therefore, telling

these stories one at a time can stave off, even for just a moment, the march of time that threatens to erase them.

### **Context and Literature Review**

While doing background research, I was fortunate to find some excellent sources in English to support my interviews.

The first source I thought of was Václav Havel's *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvižd'ala*. I read this in May of this year, and even then it inspired me to research samizdat upon my arrival in Prague, for throughout the book he discusses the importance of literature and dissent.

Two other very important sources were Jonathan Bolton's *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*, and Jiří Holý's *Writers Under Siege: Czech Literature since 1945*. *Worlds of Dissent* details the struggle and the practicalities of dissent in Czechoslovakia. This book was extremely useful for understanding how samizdat functioned and was understood. It also gives background on Charter 77, which is an important term for the purpose of this paper. After the communist government arrested the band Plastic People of the Universe, a document was drafted petitioning the government to adhere to the international standards of human and civil rights detailed in the Helsinki Declaration, which the Czechoslovakian government had signed in 1975. The government ultimately condemned the signatories, declaring that spreading the document was a political crime, and several signatories were tried or imprisoned. *Writers Under Siege* gave similar information to *Worlds of Dissent* on the topic of samizdat, but this information was presented through the lens of specific authors and literary pieces. This book was important for understanding individuals' roles in samizdat and the shift in literary culture over time.

*Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism* is an anthology of essays edited by Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov. Not all of this anthology was of direct use to me because its essays consider the samizdat of all of the Eastern Bloc. However, the essays “‘Video Knows no Borders’: Samizdat Television and the Unofficial Public Sphere in ‘Normalized’ Czechoslovakia” by Alice Lovejoy, “The Danger of Over-interpreting Dissident Writing in the West: Communist Terror in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1968” by Muriel Blaive, and “The Legacies of Dissent: Charter 77, the Helsinki Effect, and the Emergence of a European Public Space” by Jacques Rupnik were informative about different aspects of Czech dissent and politics.

Gordon Johnston’s essay “What Is the History of Samizdat?” is a useful piece for understanding the types of samizdat and their place in the wider world of literature. Barbara Falk’s “Learning from History: Why We Need Dissent and Dissidents,” meanwhile, was important for visualizing how samizdat functioned as dissent and why such dissent was needed in communist Czechoslovakia.

*Good-bye, Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing* is another anthology, this one edited by Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz. Its contents include fictional, political, and philosophical essays first published as samizdat, and it therefore creates an illuminating window into the world of samizdat and what, exactly, this unofficial writing included. Another window into the world of samizdat was perhaps my most valuable source, *A Czech Dreambook* by Ludvík Vaculík. Over the course of 1979, Vaculík kept a diary describing his everyday life, including the management of his samizdat publishing house, Edice Petlice. “I’m an editor and a journalist; I just lack a newspaper,” he wrote in this diary, and so saying, he simply created one himself when he published the diary as *Český snář* in 1981 as samizdat (Vaculík, 2019, p. 115).

It created an uproar in the samizdat community because of the intimate detail he included about many of his friends and associates—some, in fact, are referred to only by initials because so many details are disclosed. It is mentioned in both *Worlds of Dissent* and *Writers Under Siege*, as well as being two of my interviewees' favorite samizdat book. Therefore, I knew I had to read it myself. Fortunately, it was published in English this year, demonstrating the continued importance of samizdat almost forty years after the book's original publication. It is a substantial book, my copy clocking in at five hundred and seventy-two pages, and while I was not able to finish it before composing this paper, what I have read has been illuminating. It is in itself an interview of sorts, one that describes the small moments and the important occasions for Vaculík. Ladislav Šenkyřík was delighted to hear that it was finally translated; he recalls that Vaculík has received many offers over the years but always declined them for personal reasons. A translator himself, Šenkyřík is interested to see "how it could be translated because the play with the language is quite fine" (L. Šenkyřík, personal communication, November 16, 2019).

Discussion of my sources leads me to my background research itself. The Normalization Period in Czechoslovakia, 1968-1989, was a huge cultural shock after the more liberal sixties, but the literary community adapted to its new, more regulated state. While state-approved, "official" literature continued to be published, an entire parallel culture presented itself and has come to be known as samizdat.

Samizdat, from a Russian word meaning "publishing for/by oneself," dates back to the fifties in Czechoslovakia but did not take off until the seventies. Early examples of Czech samizdat include *Edice Půlnoc*, begun by Egon Bondy and Ivo Vodsedálek to preserve their poetry, and the anthology of unofficial literature *Život je všude*, which was published in 1956 and included works by only men. The first Czech samizdat publishing house was Ludvík Vaculík's

Edice Petlice, and Vaculík continued this work from 1973 until 1990. Vaculík's *A Czech Dreambook*, mentioned above, describes some of what this publishing house entailed. Two other important publishing houses, both founded in 1975, were Edice Expedice, run by Václav Havel, his wife Olga, and his brother Ivan, and Edice Kvart, founded by Jan Vladislav, Jiří Kolář, and František Kautman (Bolton, 2012). The term “publishing house” may be contested, for these operations were often found inside people's flats, making them private operations rather than what readers today associate with large-scale publishing firms.

Reading samizdat involved a certain amount of physical risk, so it follows that publishing it was even more perilous. For one thing, publishing samizdat was quite expensive. There were costs for paper, binding, and typing—paper had to be kept on hand in fear of shortages, typewriters often had to be bought or fixed, and white-out was limited but necessary. On top of this, publishers had to be conscious of making little to no profit in order to avoid illegal business charges (Bolton, 2012). All of this was exhausting and time-consuming, and on top of this, threats from the authorities were always possible—unexpected visits from the secret police could result in a lot of hard work being confiscated as well as more severe punishments. Police activities were usually directed at production workers, such as typists and editors, as they were the direct source of the dissent (Bolton, 2012).

Government censorship of literature had very little in terms of legal justification, but this did not stop the application of bans and the withdrawal of books from libraries. Literary journals were also banned and subsequently replaced with *Literární měsíčník*, a journal published by the Writers' Union, which allowed only government-approved authors to publish. Official authors had decent salaries and security but also heavy censorship, resulting in a nationwide decline in literary quality in official literature. Some of the criteria for officially published works included



allegiance to Marxism, a proper class orientation, and popular appeal (Holý, 2008). It is not surprising, then, that with such specific demands and lighter nature of official work, samizdat novels were often in greater demand, despite being up to ten times more expensive than official books, which were heavily subsidized (Bolton, 2012). Still, some authors such as Bohumil Hrabal published both officially and unofficially; his work *Too Loud a Solitude* had multiple different versions, as the government believed that the shocking original conclusion, made available in the samizdat edition, was unacceptable for an official novel (Holý, 2008). Other passages were altered as well, for ideological reasons, and the text was not available as it is today; it was published as *Kluby poezie*, in which passages alternated between *Too Loud a Solitude* and another of Hrabal's works, *The Tender Barbarian*. The odd flexibility of this novel reflects a larger pattern within official publishing. Official authors were not always poorer writers, and the criteria described above were not absolute. Writers who were friendly with the regime were allowed to publish items that may have been seen as slightly more radical, and the literary scene in Slovakia was different than that in the Czech Republic. Like everything else, the literary scene was stratified overall and exceptions could be found to every rule.

It was not uncommon to find differences between samizdat editions of books. A phenomenon known as wild samizdat was partially responsible for this; individuals who thought texts should be circulated took it upon themselves to transcribe them, sometimes resulting in copy errors (Bolton, 2012). Key words could differ from book to book, sometimes dramatically changing the meanings of key sentences (Blaive, 2013). Edice Expedice began formatting the author, title, and copy number a certain way, in addition to including one of the editors' signatures, to show the copy's legitimacy (Holý, 2008). However, the very nature of samizdat contributed to the uniqueness of each copy as well. Copyists, usually women, would type up to

twelve onionskin pages at once (Bolton, 2012). This made some pages extremely difficult to read, and, in fact, Edice Expedice offered discounts on eleventh and twelfth copies (Bolton, 2012). Some books were even written in and corrected, though it was impossible to know who may have had the book before. One estimate claims that approximately 130-150 people read each copy of Edice Petlice books (Holý, 2008). However, there is no fixed number because books were passed from reader to reader, even lent to friends who had to read quickly to finish the book by its agreed-upon due date; meetings could hardly be rescheduled, as this would draw the attention of the secret police (Holý, 2008). It was, of course, possible to avoid their suspicion, but it was substantially more difficult in communities that were already being tracked, such as that of the Charter 77 signatories.

The short reading period and rarity of copies made it difficult for literary critics to do their jobs as well; so-called reviews were more often summaries (Bolton, 2012). Literary criticism overall declined at the beginning of Normalization due to a purge of universities, editors, and journalists that silenced many critics. In addition, negative criticism tended to play into the government's idea that alternative literature was worthless (Holý, 2008). Government public statements regarding the parallel culture of literature were rare but extremely hostile (Johnston, 1999). Even in official literature, criticism of approved authors was avoided and only positive reviews were published (Holý, 2008). Nevertheless, reviews make up a significant part of literary culture, and in 1981, *Kritický sborník* established a framework for criticism and discussion (Bolton, 2012).

It is important to note that there were many different types of samizdat. *Videomagazín* and *Originální videojournal* were active in the second half of the eighties as video news sources. Reports would be recorded and put onto tapes, and these tapes would be circulated in the

samizdat community (Lovejoy, 2013). In “What is the History of Samizdat?” Gordon Johnston compiles a comprehensive list of types of samizdat. It includes:

Literary works; literary translations; news and information bulletins; open letters, appeals, and declarations; analytic texts and research findings; official documents; press; censored material; surveys and questionnaires; individual complaints; religious material; programs, manifestos, and statements from organizations and campaigns; pornography; polemics, lampoons, and satire; reviews and summaries; interviews; and miscellaneous items, such as posters, cartoons, and stamps (126).

During my research, I was privileged to visit the Václav Havel Library in Prague. Here, I was able to browse Havel’s personal samizdat collection and observe for myself the variety of materials published as samizdat. Included in this collection was tennis player Martina Navrátilová’s biography, an edition of a Catholic periodical, a large edition of *A Czech Dreambook*, and a copy of *Některé stručné legendy*, which was written by Tomáš Tichák, one of my interviewees.

The idea of literary discussion alludes to the strong communities that were created by samizdat literature. Readers united over their common interests and their clandestine nature (Johnston, 1999). Readership of samizdat was not homogenous, but the small, interlocking networks of people were certainly self-selecting. Feuilletons, short personal essays, often with a political slant, were usually published in anthologies, demonstrating the community on the writing and publishing side (Bolton, 2012). These networks and communities differed across Czechoslovakia. In Prague, of course, the network was the largest and most complex. People could meet to discuss their latest work or recent news, and the large dissent community made it more difficult for individuals to be tracked. In smaller cities, the corresponding smaller size of

the communities made participation more dangerous for those involved in samizdat. Meanwhile, Slovakia found its censorship to be less strict than in the Czech Republic.

Writers and publishers sometimes collaborated with exiled authors, from whom they received material and moral support (Holý, 2008); the Charter 77 Foundation paid production costs, supplied new technology, and created stipends for samizdat authors (Bolton, 2012). These authors and editors also saw themselves as carrying on Czech culture and literary tradition, for they filled more than literary functions; they reminded people of democratic ideals, refuted the official establishment, and revived historical traditions (Holý, 2008). This is why political connotations are often ascribed to unofficial writings (Blaive, 2013). Václav Havel expands on this idea in *Disturbing the Peace*.

More is expected of writers than merely writing readable books. The idea that a writer is the conscience of his nation has its own logic and its own tradition here. For years, writers have stood in for politicians: they were renewers of the national community, maintainers of the national language, awakeners of the national conscience, interpreters of the national will. This tradition has continued under totalitarian conditions, where it gains its own special coloring: the written word seems to have acquired a kind of heightened radioactivity—otherwise they wouldn't lock us up for it (78)!

Indeed, it was Havel who became the first president after the fall of the communist government, and he came to power alongside fellow dissidents. For the first time since the 1930s, there were no artificial barriers or outside control of art and literature. Official, unofficial, and exile literature all converged into a single stream, and many new publishing houses opened, overwhelming readers with previously banned literature; some of these publishing houses, including smaller, previously extant ones, were forced to close due to the over-saturation of the

market. Literary criticism returned in full force, as did books on more traditional intellectual thinking (spirituality, Christianity, German and Jewish Czech literature), but both were accompanied by a flood of new ideas (Holý, 2008).

Still, the events and literature of the Normalization period affect the citizens of the Czech Republic even today. Samizdat influenced or reinforced parts of Czech culture that can be detected in how many people still look at the world. To gain a greater understanding of this phenomenon, I have spoken with people who had personal experiences with samizdat both in and out of Prague, typing, writing, and editing what they felt important for their fellow citizens to see. It is their stories that make up the heart of what samizdat truly is and prompt one to consider what samizdat means to the Czech Republic today.

## **Methods**

To learn more about personal experiences, I conducted formal interviews of people who were active in the samizdat community. Given my research question, I thought it was important that the selection of interviewees was representative, and I believe I achieved that goal; I spoke with writers, editors, publishers, typists, translators, and artists, and all of the interviewees actively read samizdat in addition to creating it. In addition, four of them were at one point active in the samizdat scene outside of Prague, a component that received less attention in many of my background sources.

I expected a challenge of this methodology to be finding people who were willing and able to talk about their experiences in a recorded, research setting. With the help of Dr. Sylva Fischerová, Sarah Brock, and Dr. Tomáš Vrba, I was able to identify possible interviewees quickly. Despite my concerns about finding people whose stories to tell, I was surprised and grateful to find that all of my interviewees responded quickly and enthusiastically to my email

requests for their help. At the beginning of the interviews, I received their permission to record the conversation, and following the interviews, transcribed the recording.

## **Ethics**

My interviewees told me very personal stories about times in their lives when they were rebelling against the Czechoslovak communist government. While they were clearly proud of what they had done, this is nevertheless a sensitive topic. Fortunately, they no longer live in a society where they can be punished for these actions, but it was ethically important to be sensitive nevertheless. In some cases, it was possible that samizdat participants may not have wanted such stories recorded or used as research. It was, therefore, made clear that their stories would be used for the purpose of the project only.

## **Results**

To comprehend samizdat on a large scale, it may be useful to begin on a smaller one. By hearing the stories of individuals, readers can grasp what samizdat looked like across Czechoslovakia. Of course, there are always exceptions to rules and stratifications within societies, but by speaking to people about their experiences, we can ask large questions in smaller contexts, providing a reflection of the larger society. By hearing the stories of individuals who were involved in the samizdat community, we appreciate the ability of these individuals to make meaningful choices that impacted the people around them.

One of these individuals is Ivan Lamper, who in the 1970s and 1980s was a dissident, a signatory of Charter 77, and a co-founder of the samizdat magazines *Revolver Revue* and *Sport*. He tried to emigrate to West Germany in 1981, but the government confiscated his passport a week before his planned departure. Lamper became involved in samizdat soon after this failed departure because he was determined to live a normal life doing what he thought was right. He

signed Charter 77 in 1982, and this began his involvement in the samizdat community. Signatories' names were published by broadcasters from abroad, meaning there was no hiding his dissident status from the government. It also meant that others in the dissident community could find him: "Charter 77 was an excellent source for meeting, for communication, and so on. Maybe the only one open source," Lamper recalls. After signing Charter 77, in fact, two men came to his parents' house in search of him. They were not secret police, as his parents feared, but others who wanted to make a difference, "and we connected, we started something, we started typing books and copying it and so on," Lamper explains. This human connection was a large part of why he helped found the samizdat magazines *Revolver Revue* and *Sport*: "To have friends, it was a fundamental thing. Or somebody you can trust, somebody who can discuss, somebody you can grow with and be smarter." This may seem trivial today, but Lamper says that, for him, the main characteristic of the communist regime was that people were alone; outside of childhood friends and family, no one was sure who they could trust, and true information was hard to come by given that the only media was state media.

While today Lamper is known for his work in journalism, he recalls that there was no news reporting before 1989. "You cannot do anything in digging information, in asking—what can you do? To go and ask? You are immediately in trouble. So it depends only on publishing opinion," he elaborates. His first news story came to him about a month before the 1989 Revolution, when uranium miners came to Prague seeking coverage on their terrible working conditions in Tachov. Lamper is adamant about the importance of news and of knowing what is going on in the world because "when you don't know that something valuable exists, you cannot have desire for it." One example of this problem in his life was when the parents of his girlfriend at the time did not understand the significance of literature in the fight for freedom. Despite

being educated scientists, they did not see why “instead of doing something important to help the society, you are doing something in a basement,” Lamper recalls. They encouraged him to do something openly, never mind the communists. Of course, not minding the communists was exactly what Lamper was doing.

He also pointed to the significance of being in a city when working with samizdat. “Prague was exceptional—was an exception. Big city ... More people to meet, to talk, to do something,” he explains, and compares Prague to cities like Olomouc, where fewer were involved with activities of dissent.

When asked what his favorite samizdat book was, Lamper brought the question back to the idea of resisting the regime. “It was not a question of ‘I love this novel,’ but it was a question of ‘I think this book is useful in this holy fight against this awful regime in the battle of freedom’” (I. Lamper, personal communication, November 15, 2019).

Translator Ladislav Šenkyřík and editor and playwright Tomáš Tichák were schoolmates who began their involvement in parallel culture during their high school years in Olomouc. In 1972, when Tichák was fifteen, he and some friends started a rock group called Water-Supply Specters, their name chosen to embrace the absurdity of the parallel culture. “I was not involved in the group because I am a much better listener than musician,” Šenkyřík jokes. However, he was involved in the student theater that evolved out of the band. Tichák and another friend wrote many of the plays that the group performed. Šenkyřík thinks that one of the biggest reasons why theater is important that people hear “some secret in the words”; the audience found what they were looking for when he and his friends performed, even if the actors did not know what that was. However, the theater soon disbanded because of the close attention of the secret police.



“This is one thing in which the communists were pretty good: to feel freedom in anything,” Šenkyřík comments wryly.

The disbanding of the theater, however, led them into the world of samizdat literature. Šenkyřík, Tichák, and two other friends began *Ječmínek*, a literary magazine named after the fairy tale prince born in a field of barley; the Moravian legend says he will return as king in the time of the country’s greatest need, and here he was, reincarnated as a samizdat journal. “It was our only interest—school was stupid, the political life was absolutely devastating,” Šenkyřík says of publishing the magazine. Both men wrote for the magazine in addition to editing it, and Šenkyřík also began translating pieces by other authors. After all the cultural journals were banned in 1968, the editors believed sharing literature of utmost importance. “I believe it is very important in any dictatorship, you know? Because in any dictatorship, the word has weight,” Šenkyřík muses. Today, he believes that literature is part of life and that people do not read any less than they used to, but that the weight of the words they are reading has decreased.

His favorite samizdat book is *A Czech Dreambook* by Ludvík Vaculík. The book is Vaculík’s diary during the year 1979 and includes photos from that year as well as Vaculík’s musings. When Šenkyřík first read the book, it seemed to him a “true novel” because he did not know the people Vaculík wrote about, though he would later meet almost everyone mentioned. He recalls even visiting Vaculík in his apartment in Prague and asking to borrow some of the negatives for the photos, which Vaculík graciously granted him for the samizdat copy Šenkyřík was producing in Olomouc.

Tichák, meanwhile, loves Jiri Gruša’s *Questionnaire* and Bohumil Hrabal. Hrabal’s *Too Loud A Solitude* was published both officially and unofficially, and Šenkyřík and Tichák describe the changes made to the official version as “brutal” (L. Šenkyřík and T. Tichák,

personal communication, November 16, 2019). This recalls the government's selectiveness of official media and Ivan Lamper's reflections on it; he recalls how communists chose, for example, to play certain American films with a goal: "This is *Easy Rider*—come and see the awful things that happen in America!" (I. Lamper, personal communication, November 15, 2019).

The government made Šenkyřík's and Tichák's education difficult as well. While Šenkyřík eventually graduated from Charles University, he was conditionally expelled at one point and went through a two-year battle with the university to get back in. Tichák studied in Brno and also graduated, but when he was twenty-two, his parents received a letter from a faculty dean advising them to reign in their son, as he was involved in supposedly dangerous activities. Targeting or appealing to family members was a tactic the government used often, and Tichák was personally afraid of how his parents would take his involvement in the parallel culture. Meanwhile, their two fellow editors of *Ječmínek* studied in Olomouc and were expelled for their dissent. These experiences recall the significance of location within the samizdat community. In Prague, there were many people involved in samizdat, including most of the Charter 77 signatories. The network was complex and useful for anyone who was hoping to become involved in dissent, which also made the job of the secret police that much more difficult. As a result, they had to focus "on one hand, on the famous ones, and on the other hand, on, let's say, beginners, students," Šenkyřík explains. Meanwhile, in smaller cities and towns, it was easier to focus on the smaller communities of dissenters. Everyone was equally at risk from the secret police because the authorities had fewer people on whom to keep tabs.

Still, the group in Olomouc tried to do more. Šenkyřík recalls when Ivan Klíma visited Olomouc and how he and his friends told Klíma they wanted to sign Charter 77. "Please don't do

it—you can study and do your activities, it is much more valued than to only be against something,” Klíma told them. “And I believe that it was true. It was much better than to be only in jail,” Šenkyřík says now. Looking back now, he does not believe he would do anything differently (L. Šenkyřík and T. Tichák, personal communication, November 16, 2019).

Another dissident, now professor and translator, is Jarka Vrbová. Vrbová had already graduated from Charles University when a classmate’s husband asked her if she was interested in typing copies of samizdat. “I knew to type very well and very quickly, so ... I said, of course ... it is very useful,” she remembers. She met her future husband, Tomáš Vrba, in 1977, and because he too was involved in the production of samizdat, her participation increased from there. The couple even had a small workshop in their home: “I was typing, he was editing, and then we made the books together.” Vrbová was writing nearly every day to ensure that she kept up with production demands; she copied not only books but informational leaflets about Charter 77 as well as recent events and arrests. Most of what she typed was on thin onion skin paper; she would type ten sheets of it, layered with nine sheets of carbon paper, at a time. Her typing strokes, therefore, had to be very strong, “and then my wrists were aching! I had to wear wrappings here,” Vrbová recalls, laughing.

Personally, she had very few troubles with the secret police. She said she behaved quite thoughtfully and carefully to avoid their suspicion, for “I was afraid that I would be expelled into a kind of ghetto. Maybe old friends would be afraid of speaking to me, or maybe my brother would have troubles at his school or in his work, or things like that.” However, her husband signed Charter 77, and as a result, she was called to the police station on occasion. They asked Vrbová if she knew what her husband was doing, and she pretended she did not. “Sometimes it helps that I was pretending to be a silly young woman who’s preparing food and waiting for her

husband,” she recalls with a roll of her eyes. Her colleagues, too, pretended that they did not know the aspects of dissent in which she and her husband were involved.

Vrbová admits there has been a shift in the way literature is treated over the years. As a translator who studied Scandinavian languages, she has a close understanding of the market for literature. Today, she believes, people prefer light, entertaining literature because they have such readily accessible sources for news and truth, whereas the truth about the world was guarded closely under the communist regime. The readers of light literature are concerned with their own problems rather than that of society, “but there are people who would prefer to have a life of good quality. We want good behaved politicians, for example,” she concedes.

Like Šenkyřík, Tichák, and Lamper, Vrbová commented on what literature was allowed under the communists. Around 1980, she translated Astrid Lindgren’s *The Brothers Lionheart*, which she submitted to an official publishing house. She recalls how a commission was called to judge if the book was “healthy enough,” and how they decided it was not. “It could be taken as an example of a good and bad world divided by a wall—imagine! One could maybe think that [Lindgren] is maybe thinking about the wall in Berlin which divides our two worlds,” Vrbová explains. Because of issues like this, Vrbová did not translate officially until after 1990.

Meanwhile, one of her favorite books that she read as samizdat was Jaroslav Seifert’s memoir, *All Beauties of the World*. She actually typed three editions of it herself, and “although I was writing it three times, I think I liked it all the times,” she says. This book is another example of one that was published both as samizdat and by official publishing houses—with some changes, of course.

Reflecting on her participation, she says, “I’m really grateful I learned to type ... it was a good feeling to be able to do something” (J. Vrbová, personal communication, November 20, 2019)

Today, Marie Klimešová is a professor and a curator, but at the end of the 1970s, she was working in the National Gallery, where times were slow and “nothing was happening.” Because she often finished her work before the end of her eight-hour shift, she began learning new artistic skills in her free time. One of these skills was making book covers, passed on to her by her friends in the Framing Department. She soon found herself making a samizdat edition of Paul Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook*. Friends translated the original and recreated the sketches, and Klimešová typed the translation herself on a “very strong,” pre-war Italian typewriter. She tried very hard to respect the original design of the book in her edition of it. It was not ideological samizdat, she claims; there was simply no other way for people to read the *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, and she felt a responsibility to share it. In addition to that, she found herself making things “to save myself” in a time when art was so restricted.

Like Jarka Vrbová, she typed out leaflets and copies of Charter 77 for circulation, but she also began organizing unofficial exhibitions. She recalls one that was intricately planned but that never happened; it was supposed to be an artist and architect collaboration in Ostrava, but it was canceled at the last minute. Ostrava, due to the many coal mines and the local industry that was dependent on the government, was a very ideologically strong area, and the exhibition’s participants decided that they did not trust the area to host their show. However, the show’s catalogue was still printed as samizdat, entitled *Prostor, Architektura, Výtvarné Umění*. Klimešová notes that the catalogue’s spiral binding was created in a prison and that the project of

Kurt Gebauer, one of the exhibition's participants, still exists in Ostrava as a children's playground called Fifejdy.

Another notable exhibition was one that occurred in a hops field called Chmelnice 83. It was a field used for state agriculture, but the artists co-opted it during the offseason when the field and its harvesters' cabins were empty. The field itself was covered in litter; people did not have the "sensibility" to keep the countryside clean in those days, Klimešová remembers. Klimešová was able to participate because she was not working at the time, as she had a ten-month-old son. All of the participants were required to come to their symposium with a concrete idea of how they wanted to transform their space in the field; each artist received a nine-by-nine-by-nine meter block, each one set apart by huge posts planted in the ground. As the exhibition progressed, pictures were taken and artists' statements written, and these were all compiled in a samizdat catalogue that was distributed amongst the participants. At one point, a storm blew through and damaged many of the exhibits; however, the exhibition truly came to its end when the secret police ordered the field's official workers to dismantle the entire thing. One of the exhibits was a room constructed of plants, and the workers decided to burn it down. However, the conflagration spread to the other objects on the field, ultimately destroying the area and rendering it useless for agriculture.

Like Ladislav Šenkyřík, Klimešová's favorite samizdat novel was *A Czech Dreambook*. She says that it was important for her to read and be involved in the samizdat community in order to survive. After all, during the communist period, she could not do what she liked in terms of art, and she felt out of touch with the contemporary world. Being on her guard all the time was "exhausting," but for her, the Revolution did not bring only positives to the art world. While she is grateful that now she can travel freely to see art, read anything she wants, and participate in

international projects, Klimešová feels tension from art's commercial market. Also, she recalls being more in touch with the local art society during the communist period, and she misses the slowness of the era, which granted her the time and ability to think. Nevertheless, she knows it is necessary never to forget the difficulties of that period and to take advantage of today's world (M. Klimešová, personal communication, November 21, 2019).

Finally, novelist and journalist Jáchym Topol comes from a family of dissidents. His maternal grandfather, Karel Schultz, was a Catholic writer who opposed the Nazis during World War II when Czechoslovakia was the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. His father, playwright Josef Topol, was a signatory of Charter 77. Topol grew up entrenched in a community of dissenters; he learned from his mother to hide samizdat under the floorboards of their flat, as she had done with her father's writings during the war. His younger brother, too, adapted to this lifestyle. Filip was the frontman of the band *Psí vojáci*, and Topol recalls that even at thirteen years old, his brother was being interrogated by the secret policemen. Because of his family's history, Topol was not permitted to attend university and worked as a stoker, among other things. He signed Charter 77 himself in 1986 when two men were imprisoned; their last names were Chromý and Mrtvý, which, respectively, translate to "lame" and "dead." While drinking at the famed Němec family's flat on Ječná Street, he declared that in a regime that imprisoned even the lame and the dead, he had no choice but to sign the Charter.

Topol's first experience writing samizdat was copying the poems of Pavel Zajiček, whose lyrics were used by the Plastic People of the Universe. He made fourteen copies and gave them to his friends. "His poetry was very important for me, and today, for me it's incredible it was forbidden. And when you were typing it, even in the age of twenty, you could go to prison, it was fantastic, stupid," Topol says. This was by no means his last interaction with samizdat,

however. In the 1980s, Topol met Ivan Lamper, whose own experience with samizdat is described above. Topol was part of a group of friends who opposed the regime, but they had little organization as a whole, though the anthology *U nás ve sklepě* compiles some of the group's work. Lamper became the driving force behind what the friends would achieve: "He was teaching our group of bohemians and artists how to work," Topol laughs. They co-founded the literary magazine *Jednou nohou* and then *Revolver Revue*, and Topol, who was twenty-five at the time, chose the texts; he likens his role to that of an editor and Lamper's to a publishing house director. Together, they embarked on "a paper war against stupidity."

Topol was able to spend as much time as he wanted writing and working on *Revolver Revue* because, by that point, he had been excused from work. In order to avoid the obligatory two years of Czechoslovak military service, he checked himself into a psychiatric hospital and spent four months there before achieving his goal: he received a blue booklet, the official health excuse from the army. In addition to that, he received a certificate excusing him from work as well as a pension. "Plenty of time and money! ... Best time in my life," he jokes. Soon after his release, he was perusing the personal collection of a friend who was a samizdat dealer in addition to her official job at the National Library in Klementinum, and it was in this samizdat collection he found what would become his favorite samizdat book: *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. It was fascinating for him to compare his experience under communism to that of the inhabitants of the Soviet Union's forced labor camps, and he concluded, despite the country's troubles, "we had a beautiful life." In fact, "we were lucky," he reflects, because by the eighties, the government's policies were shifting. While dissenters ten or fifteen years older than he were sent to prison for two or three years, his generation received much lighter sentences, which were days at a time rather than months or years.



Today, Topol works at the Václav Havel Library, where Havel's personal samizdat collection is kept. While he admits that literature seems to be just another commodity in the market whereas before writers were something of freedom fighters, literature remains the most important thing for him. He continues to write novels and in 2017 received the State Award for Literature. Despite adopting a "typical Czech attitude" by asking what the point of samizdat was even as he created it, Topol reflects now that it was "a witness of the force of human spirit" (J. Topol, personal communication, December 2, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Interviewing individuals about their samizdat experience was quite enlightening in regard to understanding samizdat as a whole. While there are always exceptions to rules and stratifications within societies, by speaking to people about their experiences, we begin to view trends within the larger society.

While each of the interviewees had different experiences within the world of samizdat, there are a few common themes that they experienced. These include the reasons why each person became involved in the samizdat community. All six people interviewed expressed a desire to live normally and participate in cultural activities that members of free societies may take for granted. However, the interviewees were very well aware that they did not live in a free society and were wary of being arrested or punished. Nevertheless, their fear was transcended by the feeling that they had to do something to improve the world in which they lived. They all commented on either enjoying their work or appreciating the fact that it was making a difference, showing that the motivation to be involved in samizdat was not only about the greater good but for more personal reasons as well. The simple act of freely reading or writing was itself an act of rebellion against the regime. Therefore, the interviewees explained how their dissent activities

impacted their everyday lives. Those who were involved in samizdat outside of Prague also noted the differences between the scene in the city and that outside of it. Prague's network was larger and more complex, allowing more opportunities to engage in more radical activities under the radar.

All of the interviewees had some interaction with Charter 77 as well: Ivan Lamper and Jáchym Topol signed it, Ladislav Šenkyřík and Tomáš Tichák wanted to but ultimately did not, and Jarka Vrbová and Marie Klimešová typed and distributed information about and copies of the Charter. In terms of larger trends in society, this does not reflect that every dissident was involved in Charter activities. In fact, the Charter ultimately had fewer than two thousand signatures, and most of these were of residents of Prague. Rather, the commonality shows how important the Charter was and how widespread its influence was within the dissident community.

The interviewees also commented on the way national treatment of literature has changed over the years. Together, they have concluded that for society at large, literature seems to be less important and less serious while being more impacted by the market, though this not necessarily mean it is read any less. Perhaps, however, it is as Ivan Lamper muses: it is about the information one takes from books that makes the difference. Perhaps, as the samizdat community was self-selecting, so too is the literary community today. Indeed, all of the interviewees are still writing or translating in some capacity.

This research would be fascinating to continue in other, similar capacities. First, of course, we must consider the other regions of the Czech Republic, as well as Slovakia and the rest of the Eastern Bloc. While some of the interviewees discussed samizdat outside of Prague, there is still much more to learn about samizdat within Czechoslovakia, as well as the other regions of the former Soviet Union where samizdat was present. In addition, there are more than

thirty previous communist and post-Soviet states around the world today, not to mention five states that are still communist. It is likely that they, too, have developed parallel cultures and local versions of samizdat.

No matter the context, underground literature is an important part of culture, parallel or not; literature creates culture, and culture inspires literature. In the Czech Republic, samizdat is a significant part of a difficult time in the country's history, but it is important to remember this time period, and it is fitting to do so through underground literature. As Jáchym Topol told me, samizdat is representative of the unbreakableness of the Czech spirit, and this is something to celebrate.

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