

## Interview with Petr Uhl, January 1979, by Gus Fagan



### Introduction

Born in 1941, Petr Uhl qualified as an engineer and, at the time of the Prague Spring, was a teacher in the Prague Technical College. Between 1965 and 1968 he spent considerable time in France. In Paris in 1968, he became actively involved in student politics and in the movement that led up to the May general strike. As an activist in the student union he first came into contact with the ideas of the French revolutionary left.

Back in Czechoslovakia he went on to play a key role in the events around the Prague Spring, the development of opposition during the period after the Soviet invasion, and the formation of the civil rights organisation, Charter 77.

When Uhl returned from France in 1968, he brought with him a copy of the famous *Open Letter* of the Polish oppositionists, Kuron and Modzelewski, which he translated. In June the student parliament of Charles University in Prague published 1,000 copies of this *Open Letter* which was very influential among the students.

In November 1968, he founded the Movement of Revolutionary Youth. The MRY, although it had only 100 members in Prague, had a very wide influence among the students and among sections of the working class. Of the 30 members of the Student Council of Prague University 6 were members of the MRY and another 12 were sympathisers. Prominent leaders of the Metal Workers Union and the factory committees were also members. Its founding Manifesto called for the destruction of the bureaucratic state machine, the establishment of a system of self-management and a mass working class struggle for socialist democracy.

On the first anniversary of the invasion, in August 1969, the MRY distributed 100,000 copies of an Appeal (*To All Young People*) and, under the name of the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Czechoslovakia, produced a Manifesto which clearly differentiated itself from the reform communists.

He was arrested in December 1969 and sentenced to four years in prison. Released from prison, he became a co-founder of Charter 77. He was arrested again in May 1979 and sentenced to five years in prison. Released in 1984, he continued as an activist in Charter 77 and in the Committee for the Defence of Unjustly Prosecuted People (VONS) which he had founded following his first imprisonment in 1974.

During the decades following the collapse of the Communist regime, he was elected twice to the Czech parliament and became a prominent journalist (editor of the daily, *Pravo*, from 1996-1998), but his main activity has been in the area of human rights where he has served on a number of national and international bodies, including the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva and the Czech Human Rights Council. In September 1998, he was appointed to the newly created position of Czech Commissioner for Human Rights.

In the following interview, conducted just a few months before his second imprisonment in 1979, Uhl describes his involvement and those of young radicals in the events surrounding the Prague Spring. It also paints a picture of what Uhl calls "the real Prague Spring, the real democratisation process", the changes in the consciousness of ordinary people and workers and why this happened.

Extracts from this interview were published in a pamphlet by the International Marxist Group in Britain in 1979 but the full interview has not been published. It was translated into French and published as an introductory text in Petr Uhl, *Le socialisme emprisonne*, La Breche, 1980.

*When did you become a Marxist?*

I became a Marxist while I was still at college. I was very much influenced by the courses on Marxism, especially those of Professor Jiří Hermach, who was professor of Marxism. This was 1958-63. It is interesting for me that today Professor Hermach is one of the signatories of the Charter.

At the beginning I was a reformist. I had a critique of the bureaucratic system but I thought that the faults could be overcome gradually. I was very politicised by my experiences in France during the 1960s. I was there for two months in 1965, then again in 1967, and 3 times in 1968. In Paris in 1965 there was this internal crisis and debate in the student union, the UEC. There were three tendencies, a 'pro-Italian' (Togliatti) tendency, the Trotskyists, and the Stalinists. The pro-Italian tendency was, of course, reformist and polycentric (i.e. Moscow is no longer the centre, national roads, etc.). The leader of this tendency was a person called Kahn. This is where I first met Alain Krivine, the leader of the Trotskyist tendency. I took part in all the big battles. I prepared myself for the discussions and I intervened. I also took part actively in their work. I used to hand out leaflets with the pro-Italian tendency.

I could speak French much better then than now. I knew Paris, the country, its culture, art, and so on. For me Paris is the second city in the world after Prague.

In the struggle of tendencies I met many comrades like Krivine and I knew and discussed with the comrades of the JCR [La Jeunesse Communiste Revolutionnaire]. I brought back with me from France the famous letter of the Polish dissidents Kuron and Modzelewski. When the Prague Spring, the democratisation process, began in Czechoslovakia in 1968 I translated it into Czech and the Student Parliament in Prague published it and distributed it. We made about a thousand copies. It was possible to do that then; the bureaucratic structures were loosening up. There was an office in every faculty where we could distribute such things. The letter was sold for only 5 crowns, during the invasion it cost 10 crowns! The translation and publication of the Kuron letter was my first important political act

*What was your personal involvement in 1968?*

In Prague, in the spring of 1968, there was a left-wing discussion club organised by Zbyněk Fišer, a philosopher, poet, at the time a Maoist, a propagandist of the Peking line, but also in favour of self-organisation and workers' councils. This question of self-organisation and workers' councils was in fact the main issue of discussion in the club. I played an active role in this club and was the editor of its Information Bulletin, which was called, by the way, *Informační materiály*. The club was really an amalgam of the far left, the Stalinists, a few Khrushchevites, and so on. We had about one hundred in Prague, more in the provinces. The club disintegrated at the time of the invasion.

I was also active in the trade union movement. At the time I was a teacher in the Prague Technical College. There was a Trade Union Committee of 8 people elected by the college and I was elected to this Committee in April 1968. Through my position in the union structure, I was able to participate in union activity at a national level. I was a delegate to national conferences, for instance, and was able to intervene at this level.

After August I looked for a new milieu to work in. The club had disintegrated. My union was far too weak and also too reformist to offer any real possibility. I was a teacher, and not in industry, so the question of workers' control didn't arise in such an immediate way in my union. At this point I linked into the student milieu. I had many friends in the Arts Faculty and also in my own faculty from student days. I played an active role in the student strike in November 1968 and out of this strike we formed the Movement of Revolutionary Youth (MRY).

*What role did you play in the creation of the MRY? What were its activities and how did the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) develop out of it?*

I played a very central role. My comrades were generally about 24-25 years of age. I was 28, experienced, had been abroad, knew the revolutionary movement in Western Europe, had read, and so on. So I had a prestige plus élevé. In the beginning the MRY was a discussion group. It was open; its manifesto was distributed publicly, read publicly at student meetings. But we also formed a

parallel club with about 80 members which we called the Club for History, Sociology and Futurology. This was a legal club. It was public and met openly once a week. Remember this was in the autumn of 1969 and it was the repression which made us use this tactic. The link between the club and the MRY was, of course, secret. But it provided us with a legal basis and it made discussion of the political and social system a bit easier than it would have been in the openly revolutionary Youth Movement.

But gradually it became more and more clear that we couldn't appear publicly at all. The club lasted for about three months. We produced at this time and distributed a 100-page document which was mostly extracts from Trotsky, Bukharin, 3 or 4 articles from Czech Marxists, the Praxis group, Djilas, and so on. These all dealt with political, social and philosophical questions and the goal of this action was to promote discussion on the nature of the political and social system. This was done by the MRY and done clandestinely.

The MRY had no stable structure. It was very spontaneous. We attempted to form cells but that failed. In June 1969, we discussed what we would do for the first anniversary of the invasion in August. Some tracts of a nationalist character already existed so we decided that we would prepare a Marxist tract. There was no committee which decided this, it was a result of very spontaneous discussions in the group. But under which name could we produce such a tract? It wasn't possible for us to publish it as the MRY because everyone knew who we were and the police would know who to go for. So we picked on the name Revolutionary Socialist Party as a cover-name for the MRY. So RSP was really a synonym for MRY. So our tract, or Manifesto, was published in the name of the non-existing Central Committee of the non-existing Revolutionary Socialist Party.

There were two tracts produced, a Manifesto and an Appeal to Youth. I was the principal author of the Manifesto. When it was finished there were a few people who were not happy with it. They then wrote the Appeal to the Youth. But the Appeal was actually a very good text. It was less ideological, but good.

After August 1969 the brutality of the police was so great, and was increasing, that we decided to establish an illegal movement. It was still not a party but we were much more rigidly organised. We had cells, a co-ordinating committee, a division of labour and of responsibility. We were very much against spontaneism

but we didn't yet make any attempt at democratic centralism. We were about 100 people. We had a clandestine journal and in the autumn of 1969 we were able to distribute leaflets. But the political situation was generally very unfavourable.

Because we were clandestine we were penetrated by the police. One of our members was an informer. His name was Josef Chechal. The police discovered more than half our membership. Soon 19 out of 100 were in prison. The trial lasted for 3 weeks. There was international solidarity. In Paris, Alain Krivine held a press conference on the premises of the Czech Embassy. There were other actions as well. I got 4 years in prison.

*What kind of balance sheet would you make now of the MRV(RSP) experience?*

It was a very positive experience. It was one whole year of concentrated political activity, political activity in a free movement, freely associated. This was something extremely important for us. All our organisations before that time were controlled by the state, just as they are now once again.

We were also a very important stimulus within the rest of the opposition. We were in fact an opposition within the opposition. In our Manifesto of August 1969, we made criticisms of Dubček and the Dubček leadership. The intellectuals from the Prague Spring began their opposition much later than us. We were the first. Ours was also the first trial, except for some individual cases. It was important, and interesting to note, that it was in solidarity with us that the ex-CP opposition first began to organise. The first or second leaflet of the Socialist Movement of Czechoslovak Citizens (the organisation of the ex-CP opposition) was in solidarity with us.

But it was, nevertheless, wrong to found this clandestine organisation in August 1969. Not because of the danger of prison, but rather because this clandestinity, this exceptional and 'sensational' manner of existence, can only lead to sectarianism, passivity and isolation. I don't say that clandestinity is wrong in general, or that it is always wrong in the states of the Eastern Bloc. But clandestinity is a phenomenon linked to the retreat or the defeat of the revolutionaries. Positively it can conserve revolutionary consciousness. But in

the 20th century, in the bureaucratized and degenerated states of Eastern Europe, it is not possible to wage an effective struggle against the political system if we exist in clandestinity.

*In the MRY in 1969 you were no longer, shall we say, of the 'pro-Italian' tendency of 1965, but you were a Trotskyist, a revolutionary Marxist. How did you come to Trotskyism?*

Already during the Prague Spring in 1968 I was a revolutionary Marxist and I said so openly in the Club. I wasn't a member of the Fourth International but I received all the documents of the F.I. and my best friends were in the French section, the Ligue Communiste. Also, shortly before 1968, in 1966-67, I had read Trotsky in Czech. Of course, I couldn't buy Trotsky in the shops here but his books had been published in Czechoslovakia before the Second World War, and were still to be found in the libraries of many individuals. I read *The Revolution Betrayed* and a collection of Trotsky's writings from 1927-28. But most important for me were his histories of the Russian Revolution, both 1905 and 1917. Those two works are a great 'school of revolution'. For instance, the question of the trade unions in Russia, Kronstadt, the Workers' Opposition, and so on, are still today the key issues for us. We face the same questions today. I am not a nostalgic Trotskyist. I make a critical analysis of what Trotsky has written and done. There can be no question of idolatry in revolutionary Marxism.

Actually I don't like the word Trotskyism and I prefer to speak simply of revolutionary Marxism. It is wrong to say that there are two antipodes, Trotskyism and Stalinism. I am part of a movement which opposes capitalism and imperialism and consequently I oppose Stalinism. Historically, in Russia, Trotskyism took the form of anti-Stalinism, but in essence it is anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism.

In my discussions here in Czechoslovakia with the comrades of the Charter 77, I always underline the situation of the workers in Western Europe and in the third world and I underline the necessity of overturning the social and political system there. Trotskyism emerged in Russia as an anti-Stalinist opposition, and that history is very important, especially for us here. But it is my anti-capitalism which

is the basis of my political consciousness, and it is this anti-capitalism which takes me to Trotskyism.

The other members of the Charter are also anti-capitalist in the sense of social justice, egalitarianism, but they have many illusions in the democratic structure of bourgeois society. But I am totally against this capitalist system and I maintain that the only solution to the Czech situation is not bourgeois democracy, although it has more freedoms than we have here now, but a completely different social system, based on self-organisation, with the political structures of a direct democracy, with a real emancipation of the working class, of youth, of women.

The development of a direct democracy is only possible in a democracy of workers; it is not parliamentarism, but a democracy of the producers which makes the transition to direct democracy possible. When I speak here of organs of direct democracy, of self-organisation, this does not mean I am against parties. What I am against is a system where people cannot make their own decisions but someone else makes decisions for them. I am in favour of political parties, with clubs, papers, radio and television, agitation and propaganda and the freedom for parties to make proposals, suggestions, present political alternatives which people can choose to follow if they wish, not only follow but participate in. Parties are a means of politicisation, of education. But they are not organs or exercisers of power. Power must be in the organs of the working class and not in the parties. The workers in the councils, in the organs of direct democracy are not responsible to any parties but only to those who elected them.

I am not an orthodox Trotskyist. I think the Leninist theory of the party, the vanguard party that 'represents' the working class, is open to discussion. Of course one can't reduce Leninism to this theory of the party which 'represents' the class. Leninism for me is a clear analysis of the state, a clear knowledge that all institutions of bourgeois power must be destroyed, the old apparatus, and that a new structure must be built, based on the working class. The idea that the party takes power on behalf of or instead of the class is perhaps conditioned by the situation that existed historically in Russia in 1920. But today in Europe and in Czechoslovakia, it's not the same. The vanguard I see as more of an ideological, intellectual grouping or layer which represents and defends best the



interests of the labourers. It is not a vanguard by saying so; it becomes the vanguard through how in practice it represents and defends the interests of the labourers. But this vanguard cannot have power. Power does not belong to the party or parties, but to the councils of workers.

*How do you see the role of a revolutionary party or parties in Eastern Europe?  
How does this differ from Western Europe?*

There will be many parties, and not just one revolutionary party but maybe a number of revolutionary parties. It is different in the West. There the task is liquidation of the bourgeois state, defeat of a powerful social class, complete transformation of social and economic structures. But it isn't like that here in Czechoslovakia. We are not in a bourgeois state. There is no capital and no capitalist class. The means of production are statised but not socialised. It is not necessary to destroy a social class so it won't be a social revolution. The state bureaucracy is not a social class.

Maybe we can make a political revolution without parties but, in the process, they would grow anyway. However, although our revolution is a political revolution, we have enormous tasks, not only of a political nature but also of a social-economic nature. Although basically a political revolution, we have the great task of passing from the situation where the means of production are statised to a society in which they are truly social, socialised. The vast social change in which the economic object becomes economic subject has still to be achieved.

We discuss this question in the Charter, for instance, whether we should speak of a vanguard *before* the political revolution. And there are two opposite positions. One group says that we must make a political party which will take power. This group is mostly one-time members of the Communist Party and the socialists. Then, on the other extreme, there is a very spontaneist element. They don't want any organisation or any kind of party at all. They are oriented towards alternative life styles, alternative culture, etc. They say people must find their own individual solutions, find their own structures, their own alternatives. Of course, in Czechoslovakia, this is not such a reactionary position as it might be in the West. In Czechoslovakia, every such activity from the 'underground',

music, culture, meetings, etc., provokes a conflict with the power of the state. And conflict with the state power mobilises people.

I am not a partisan of either group. Organisational structures are necessary. And alternative structures are an important method of struggle. I am completely for the construction of alternative structures, whether they be among national minorities, youth, women, workers, in music and culture, theatre, and so on. That the agricultural workers in a few villages should get together and organise their own production, in their own interests, - such things are good and must be supported. I must point out that I have never been a member of any party. I am a revolutionary Marxist and I regard myself as part of the international workers' movement.

For some years now I have observed and studied the documents of groups in Western Europe, not just the Fourth International but also groups such as Lutte Ouvriere and the Lambert group in France, I must say that it is the positions of the Fourth International that I feel myself closest to. Sometimes I have something against 'orthodoxy' but what I find most disturbing is the superficiality of a lot of the things that are written on Czechoslovakia or the Soviet Union. The programmatic positions of the F.I. on the nature of the social and political systems in Eastern Europe are good. But such general programmatic positions are not adequate to the complex reality that confronts us daily in the political struggle. I am very suspicious of the Fourth International when I hear some comrades speak of building clandestine sections of the International in Eastern Europe which will emerge out of the crises as a real political force to lead the struggle against the bureaucracy. Life is not so simple. It is even difficult here in Czechoslovakia to use a Marxist terminology because the people confuse Marxism and the official propaganda. It makes it even difficult to talk about capitalism, imperialism, workers' democracy, not to mention soviet democracy.

This orthodoxy is even more incredible in the case of the Lambertists. I read an article in their press recently in which it was said that the workers in Czechoslovakia will defend the conquests of the proletarian revolution and will never allow a return to capitalism. But what conquests? They have lower wages, no instruments of self-defence, no parties, no unions, no papers, no schools. They had those things under capitalism. So it is nonsense to speak like this. The consciousness of the workers is not like that. The workers here are socially and

psychologically more oppressed than under capitalism. So this position of Lambert is laughable.

*What is your own position then on the question of formation of parties in Eastern Europe?*

Parties are not possible now. I am against any attempt to create a secret conspiratorial party. This can lead only to passivity. If today thousands of people or even hundreds could speak out critically and discuss things like security at work, ecology, etc., if that could be done openly and publicly, then the founding of a small clandestine party would be reactionary. I am not against parties, quite the opposite. They must exist if we are not to pay too high a cost for our revolution. As I said earlier, maybe we can make a revolution here without parties. But the costs of the revolutionary process would be much too high if, already beforehand, the parties could not prepare the masses, discuss ideas, alternatives, strategies, and so on. But the founding of parties is organically linked to the development of alternative or parallel structures, like independent unions, organisations of youth, of women, literary and cultural groups. In a milieu in which these things are possible, then parties will be possible too as the highest level of political thinking.

*Let us deal with the history of 1968 and of the opposition that has developed since then. What is your attitude now to the Prague Spring, to the democratisation process?*

There are two different positions here, two ways of approaching the question. For example, there's a man who lives here in Prague, Josef Sládeček, who wrote a book called simply *1968*. The last chapter of this was published in a Czech journal in Paris. I know him personally. His position is very critical of the CP leaders of 1968 but the point is that he studies only the leaders, their illusions, their naiveté, their ideals, and so on. He says that the responsibility for the failure of the Prague Spring is a great responsibility borne by the Communists. Because of their naiveté, their illusions, the Prague Spring failed. He makes a very sharp critique of the Dubček leadership but, unfortunately, he substitutes the

leadership for the whole party. He gives excellent details from the life of the party elite at the time, the Dubček leadership. It was the first time that anyone had written things like this. Of course, the reform Communists are very angry about this text. The centrists, people like Jaroslav Šabata don't mind. But, anyway, this "history" of 1968 looks exclusively at what happened within and to the party leadership.

The second approach can be seen in an article which was published in Paris, in *Information Ouvriere*. It is an article by Jan Kavan and appeared in May 1978. Kavan describes the trade union movement in 1968, the movement for self-management, the attempt to set up workers councils, the student movement, the papers, the street meetings (Hyde Parks, as we called them). He describes how the consciousness of the workers and the ordinary people changed and why this happened. And it is this process described by Kavan which was the real Prague Spring, the real democratisation process. It was not the process described by Sládeček. I must point out that this article by Kavan deals not just with 1968 also with the opposition movement of the 1970s and the Charter. It is a very good article.

*What was your attitude to the Soviet union in the spring of 1968?*

As far as my personal attitude to the Soviet Union is concerned, I considered the Soviet people to be oppressed and politically expropriated by the Soviet bureaucracy. But it is a nonsense to say that Czechoslovakia was or is a colony or satellite of the Soviet Union. I don't think that everything Soviet is bad. I'm against this way of thinking.

Like many other Czechs, I thought that military intervention was possible, therefore I was prepared for it. I had no illusions, as did the Dubček leadership, about the Soviet leaders "understanding" or misunderstanding the democratisation process. Even today, there are people in the opposition who say "the Soviet Union must understand us. If they would understand, then it would be alright." But this is not the question. It is a question of power. The Soviet power was, and still is today, an enemy of the Czechoslovak people. It is an enemy of the Soviet people, first of all, and an enemy also of the Czechoslovak people. When the invasion happened, it was, of course, a shock. But it had a

different effect on me than on many of the others. After the invasion, some of them turned anti-communist, became social-democratic, and so on.

*What did you think of the Action Programme of April 1968? And the 2000-word Manifesto of Ludvík Vaculík in June?*

I regarded the Action Programme as very positive. It was a big change in the Stalinist bureaucratic leadership. It was very democratic. I criticised it as inadequate and insufficient. What mattered most to me were the few sentences that spoke about self-management. They were very general, very careful, and not very concrete, but I felt that the workers, without the authorisation of the state, would form their own organs of self-management. After all, the Action Programme stated that this was one of the ways to socialism. At the time the Action Programme came out, it was already behind the events. The situation in the country was more advanced and the initiatives of the people, of the workers and youth, were more advanced than the Action Programme.

About the Vaculík manifesto in June: I had a very long discussion with Livio Maitan about this in Paris and with other comrades as well. I criticised the Manifesto as anarchistic. It is a text in which revolutionary leadership is not mentioned, only popular initiatives. But the comrades in Paris had a much more positive assessment of the text. It was democratic, appealed to self-management, etc. Their position was more correct than mine then. I was a bit sectarian in relation to the Manifesto. The Charter, in reality, is doing what is written in this Manifesto.

*Could the invasion have been dealt with and by what means?*

It is a bit speculative to talk about what could have happened but didn't. In Czechoslovakia we had a situation in which a bureaucratic leadership was reacting under pressure from the mass movement, from the initiatives of the citizens and from the movement inside the party. The best way to avoid the invasion would have been the broadest extension of the organs of self-

management of the working class and a system of workers' militias. In such a situation, the Soviet Union wouldn't have invaded.

There are two tendencies here on this question. One tendency says it was a mistake to go so fast. We should have gone more slowly, more carefully, so as not to provoke the Soviet Union. The other tendency says if we had actually carried out the democratisation process faster, and proceeded more rapidly with self-management, the Soviet Union couldn't have invaded. I think this second tendency is correct.

If the leadership in Czechoslovakia had refused to implement the normalisation process, then the invasion couldn't have changed much in the country. The people had such great confidence and trust in the Dubček leadership. If this leadership had adopted a position like František Kriegel did in Moscow, then the Soviet soldiers and their weapons couldn't have done much. They couldn't have a Vietnam here.

There was another possibility, namely, the installation, in August, of a government made up of the pro-Soviet element. This would then be a clear occupation power. That would have been much clearer and much better for us. What happened was actually the worst possible situation. They said both yes and no. The compromises became bigger and bigger. First Kriegel, then Smrkovský, and then Dubček himself had to go.

The situation we are in today in Czechoslovakia, politically and culturally, is a direct consequence of how the Dubček leadership, the Czech bureaucracy, behaved in 1968. Of course, I'm not saying the Soviets aren't responsible. But, without the Czech bureaucracy, they couldn't have done it. Dubček had a very broad social base. His section of the bureaucracy defended many different interests in society. Husák had a base in the bureaucratic apparatus. The stabilisation of power lasted from about ten months to one year. The Soviet intervention provided the impulse for that, it made it possible, but the main work was done by the Czech bureaucracy.

So, you see, the slogan, "Soviet Union out of Czechoslovakia", was not really a solution. Czechoslovakia is not an occupied country. It is "occupied" by its own bureaucracy. The Soviet army is only a reserve.

I read a statement by a Swedish journalist which said: "If the Soviet Army were out tomorrow, Husák wouldn't last a week." Some of us just laughed at this. The solution of "national sovereignty", which is often demanded abroad, is ambivalent. What is this "national sovereignty"? The situation is different in Ukraine or in the Baltic Republics. In these countries, there is Russification and real national oppression. But here in Czechoslovakia, there is no Russification. There are no Soviet soldiers in the streets. I don't think the Czech nation is threatened.

In the opposition now, there are many people who were in the party in 1968, who had important functions, and who bear a big responsibility. It was only because of the intervention of the Soviet Union that they now find themselves in opposition. These people say that, before 1968, everything was good and in order in the country. Perhaps a few mistakes, etc., but basically everything was fine. But this wasn't the case at all. The political system that exists now has remained basically the same since 1948, not to mention May 1945. The same methods, the same political-social relationships, the same production relations, and so on. And we can't blame it on the Soviet troops before 1968.

*Could you describe what happened in November 1968?*

The November resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party made too many compromises between, on the one hand, the progressives (Dubček leadership) and on the other hand the Soviet leaders with the Czech conservatives. The resolution says we are behind the Action Programme and behind the Moscow Protocol. Until this November meeting of the Central Committee, the Moscow Protocol had not been officially accepted by the Party.

When the session of the Central Committee was over, I remember I was in the audimax in the philosophy faculty. There were a few hundred of us there. Then two people came in to speak to us and made a report on the Central Committee meeting. One was the Dean of the Faculty, Kladiva, and the other was Professor Karel Kosík. They both spoke for ten minutes. Kladiva said this is a compromise but we must accept it. It is a solution, we may not all agree, etc. but let's be

realistic. Then Kosík spoke. He is one of the best known Czechoslovak philosophers.

Kosík said the resolution was a catastrophe. Referring to Jakes, one of the Stalinists who had made a very conservative speech at the Central Committee meeting, Kosík said he and Jakes couldn't be in the same party. Today Jakes is head of the Control Commission of the Central Committee of the Party. After a year both Kladiva and Kosík were out of the faculty and both out of the Party.

It was at this session in the Auditorium Maximum that the student strike was in effect decided - it was the student reaction to the decision of the November resolution. The Philosophy Faculty was the first to strike but within 2-3 days all the other faculties had joined in. It was a protest strike but, at the same time, it raised many demands of a democratic character, for instance, against censorship, against the occupation, and against the normalisation process. It was 11 days after the plenum that the strike began.

On 7 November, in the Engineering Faculty, there was a public meeting held outside the building. Štěpán Müller came and spoke. There were three speakers on the platform, myself and two others. And when Müller intervened, he said we are all for Dubček and that is why now we have to be against Dubček. Because Dubček isn't the same thing any more. You see, Dubček had become a kind of symbol. The conservative Stalinist wing of the bureaucracy knew where it was going. They were clear what the Central Committee resolution meant. But the workers were confused. After we had spoken the Dean and the President of the Faculty answered. It was the Dean who spoke first. In the meantime, in order to see and hear better, one of the students had climbed onto a roof. So the first thing the Dean said was: 'He shouldn't sit there. He should come down.' But the student refused to come down. Then Müller intervened and he said that the student on the roof was the symbol of their activity. He is resisting the rules so that he can hear better. That is what we must do. This was on 7 November.

On 17 November we set up an Action Committee in the student movement in Prague. The 17 November was an important date for us because on that date in 1939 some students in Prague had been executed by the Nazis. Ever since then 17 November is International Students Day. The International Students Union (ISU) was founded in Prague.



Around 1955-58, Jiří Pelikán had been Chair of the ISU. He had two deputies. Do you know who they were? They were Enrico Berlinguer and Eric Honecker. Anyway, on 17 November we set up an Action Committee and we were meeting in a cafe discussing what to do about the November 7 resolution. We were about 30 people from different faculties in Prague. Then two, students from Nitra came in. Nitra is a small provincial town in which there is only one college, an agricultural college. And they told us that in Nitra all the students are already on strike. How come in Prague you are hesitating? Well, that decided us. The next day was the strike.

The strike lasted for a week. The atmosphere created, not only in the Philosophy Faculty, but also in engineering and other faculties, was very similar to the atmosphere in Paris in May '68. It was an occupation-strike, that was also the term we used then. The students stayed there 24 hours. There were at least 100 students in the building every night. We held conferences on political themes. The same happened in Brno. There are eleven faculties in Brno and Šabata gave lectures and spoke to most of them, about nine. Many people from outside were invited in to speak, political people, writers, intellectuals. The seminars were organised thematically. For instance were 5 seminars on the New Left movement in Western Europe. I gave a seminar on the situation in France.

Delegations came from the factories. Müller and others had made this famous contact between the student unions and the workers committees. First it was with the workers in the machine-construction industry but it spread. There were also people from foreign countries and many different languages were spoken. In the student centre, self-management was put into practice. It wasn't all organised or decided by some small committee. There were always at least 20 or 30 people constantly there making suggestions, preparing decisions, and so on. I must say that we had created a very revolutionary atmosphere but in what was overall a counter-revolutionary situation.

The strike spread into the secondary schools as well. In November a red flag went up over the Philosophy Faculty in Prague. Just to indicate to you the kind of atmosphere created, I remember one day I walked into the Philosophy Faculty and I saw the red flag. There were two very young female students there and I went over and said, 'what is this?'. And one of them answered with complete naiveté, 'But it is a symbol of revolution!'

Of course the strike was not a success. But in the consciousness of the students it played a very important role. The link created between the students and the workers' movement was also very real and important. In April 1969 the same thing was repeated, though not on the same scale because some of the students had become a little bit worn out or tired. In April the strike lasted for a few days. In the science faculties a committee was formed in April of about 100 people, which also included delegates from the factories and in which our comrades from the MRY played an important role.

When Husák took over we called a mass meeting which was chaired by two people. In our milieu, we referred to it as the Petrograd Soviet and the two chairpersons played the role of Lenin and Trotsky. Out of this strike we set up a co-ordinating committee and this committee worked for a whole year after that, even after many of us were already in prison. It is not so easy to break people. But of course the work had to become more and more conspiratorial.

*The opposition went underground. Was this the only possibility?*

It's not that it became clandestine but it became more atomised. For instance, when the Central Committee members were expelled in the autumn of 1969, even then their speeches to the Central Committee could be read on decibus in all the faculties. But it became atomised and moved more and more towards conspiratorial methods.

After April 1969, we in the MRY decided to consciously build a conspiratorial structure. The rest of the opposition didn't take this step. Perhaps later, in 1970-1971, they began to organise but, even then, they didn't have any real structures. They didn't have cells, for instance. It was more of a milieu than an organisation. It's hard to say if more public activity would have been better or made much difference. The Democratic Movement of Czechoslovak Citizens was formed sometime in 1970. In October 1970, a few people wrote a text. A lot of people read the text and discussed it but they were not, in fact, organised. This Democratic Movement didn't exist as an organisation. There were, in fact, many such texts and groups. We don't even know who some of them were or whether they represented anything.

The main activity at the time was political samizdat - although we didn't call it that at the time. It was discussion around texts. Of course, we from the MRY were already in jail and couldn't organise any discussion. The discussions took place mainly among the ex-Communists. They discussed, for instance, whether the Communist Party should or should not play a "leading role" in society. It was, at times, a very sharp discussion. Eventually the "should" people said, well yes, perhaps it would be more democratic if the party had to establish for itself this leading role by its own activity. You see, two years after the Prague Spring, and three years after the Action Programme, they were still discussing the "leading role of the party". Never in the discussions did any of them say that there should be the right of fractions in the party, a right of minorities, or even how such questions should be dealt with. In 1970, the de-Stalinisation begun at the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party was still very unfinished in Czechoslovakia, even in the opposition. It is still not finished today.

As I said, these discussions took place in the ex-Communist milieu. But there were also ex-members of the Socialist Party in Brno, some young people who were never in the CP. There were also the Christians. The opposition had potentially a very large base. The two main groups among the ex-Communists then were the Reform Communists and the Communists in Opposition who considered themselves as Communists and were represented by Šabata. This centrist group, if we could call them that, acted as a kind of bridge between the ex-Communists (one-time members of the Stalinist apparatus) and the Socialists, non-party people, and the Christians. Šabata played a very big role in all that. In 1971, he worked on the Small Action Programme with the Socialists in Brno. But he also had friends and sympathisers in Prague. The whole milieu of centrist intellectuals have great sympathy with Šabata.

*Why did the Reform Communists, ex-members of the Central Committee, organise their supporters so late?*

This group of half-million oppositions expelled from the party is an illusion. They were never organised. You must understand that we had almost twenty-five years of Stalinism here before 1968. For Hayek, Mlynar, and the other ex-bureaucrats, these half million expelled members were simply an objective

*mass*. They were not considered as political *subjects*. They were supporters of the democratisation process, but to *organise* them, this idea never occurred to these leaders. They have no conception of democracy, of open discussions, etc. The idea that the Central Committee should come to a decision on something only after the masses have discussed and participated, this idea is alien to them. Later, in 1975, we used to speak of the "party of the expelled". But this party never existed. And there was no tendency to found such a party. Each individual who had been expelled found his or her individual solution. Ninety-five per cent of them were workers who fell a level or two in their job but they continued to work as before.

I don't know this rank-and-file party milieu very well. Their aspirations, their experience, I can understand and guess but I was not directly in this milieu. I hadn't been in the party. But those who were at the top, who had been part of the apparatus, they fell not just one or two levels down but all the way to the bottom. They had to work then and this "radicalised" them. Now they complain - "we are discriminated against" - but all the workers are discriminated against in exactly the same way. All the workers live in exactly the same conditions that these ex-leaders now have to live with. They've had to do this now for almost ten years but what about all the Christians who were thrown out of the universities in 1948 and had to get along as workers for over thirty years?

*Jiří Pelikán says in his book that the Revolutionary Socialist party was "out of tune", isolated from the masses. Would you comment on this?*

There were two different periods. In the period December 1965 to August 1969, this was not true. The MRY grew organically out of the student movement. I have already described for you the atmosphere in November 1968 and in April 1969. We had very thorough discussions, we distributed leaflets for the first anniversary of the invasion in August 1969 and there were very many people who took part in distributing these leaflets.

Pelikán wasn't here then. He had left already in June/July 1968. For a one-time Stalinist bureaucrat, perhaps it is difficult to imagine that young people can take Marxist theory and ideology seriously. We were a minority, of course, in the

student movement but we were not an alien corpus. We had a very large periphery who supported us and took part in our activities.

After April 1969, Pelikán statement is true. That was when we had a secret structure. But two years later, the rest of the so-called socialist opposition began to use the same conspiratorial methods.

*The MRY didn't sign the ten-point Manifesto. Why not?*

Firstly, we weren't invited to. The ten-point Manifesto came from a group of intellectuals (Vasulík, Havel, Battek, etc.). Many from our own milieu might have signed it if they had been asked, many would not have. Personally, at the time, I wrote a text against it.

For me, it was the same old melody we had heard so often. An appeal to individual courage, keep up the small day-to-day work, give good example to others, overcome the problems privately in your own lives. The same tune was heard in France after Vichy and here after the invasion. But I think ordinary people have an aversion to "brave people".

Of course, it had positive things in it. But in many ways, for instance in regard to the economy, it represented a kind of reactionary utopia. The people who speak like this today are the people who are opposed to the Charter.

*You personally didn't sign the document of the Independent Socialists. What is your attitude towards them?*

The April document, "100 years of Czech Socialism", is a very different thing concerning the workers movement here in Czechoslovakia. I could easily have signed that but, once again, I wasn't invited to. They prepared a text which anyone could have signed who is in favour of the workers movement. But they invited only those to sign it who could be part of an eventual Socialist Party. Battek and Müller are at the heart of this, with the Socialists from Brno. They fished a little bit in the waters of the ex-Communists, for instance Kriegel and Šabata. Two or three people from our milieu supported it as well.

I don't think we can say that all who signed it want to found a Socialist Party or that they would ever do so. That's nonsense. What do they actually do? Well, Battek and Müller and the others write, from time to time, a letter to Callaghan, Brandt, etc. and say "we are Independent Socialists, help us". But these people have no programmatic document. Politically they are not all in agreement. I suppose, politically it could eventually be a current of Social democracy.

In August 1978, Šabata did an interview for a paper in Vienna. In this interview, he says that Uhl says that, as a revolutionary Marxist, he could sign the "100 Years" text. This is true, as I explained. But what he said next wasn't true. He said that, among the politically conscious in Czechoslovakia now there was a real socialist alternative. But that is not at all the situation. Šabata says the "100 Years" text expresses the policy of democratic self-management and that the whole milieu agrees with this. But he doesn't say what he means by democratic self-management. I know from discussion with him that he thinks in terms of two levels that run, as it were, parallel - parliamentarism and self-management. The latter happens in the economy and then later perhaps politically. He sees it as a kind of co-existence of two powers. I think this is completely wrong. But the main thing I want to say now is that nobody but Šabata has this idea of self-management. For instance, Hejdanek or Havel have completely different political conceptions. It is not correct to say that politically conscious people in the Charter are in favour of this document or in favour of democratic self-management.

In my opinion, it is dangerous to attempt to identify the Charter with any one political platform. The Charter is politically and ideologically pluralistic. Ninety per cent of the signers have no political conception and don't want any. They are in it because it defends human rights. For the Christians and the youth in the underground, it is mainly a moral and not a political thing. It is therefore wrong to say that the Charter now has a political platform.

Šabata was sympathetic to the Independent Socialists. Of course, he is in prison now. But he criticised their relations with the Socialist International. He is a Eurocommunist and he wants this socialist milieu to adopt his conception of self-management. The ex-Communist structure is sterile today. There are some who are still active but, as a milieu, there is nothing one can do with it. But this socialist milieu is more active, more lively, and Šabata wants to orient it in his

direction. He wants to make some kind of bridge between parliamentarism and self-management because, in this milieu, parliamentarism is very strongly anchored. That's why he's with them.

*What role is being played now by the Reform Communists or the Eurocommunists?*

First it is wrong to say that the ex-Communist opposition are Eurocommunists. It is better to understand them as simply the ex-Communist opposition. They don't see themselves as Eurocommunists.

There is the group of one-time members of the Central Committee, a kind of club, a group of veterans. Mlynar was their leader. Politically, this group is differentiated. Some are Marxists of a reform orientation. Some are no longer Marxists and say so privately. I think their partners in the West, the people to whom they write, are the Communist Parties of Italy and Spain but they are not in agreement on many things. There is no political discussion in this milieu. Sure,, they talk about Carter's foreign policy, about what Brezhnev is doing, and so on but there is no programmatic discussion, no discussion of orientation.

The Šabata wing, the centrists, are not part of this club. This wing is more middle-cadre - intellectuals, historians, etc. They are Marxists and call themselves so. They criticise the CP from the left. When they have relations with groups in the West, it is with the PSU, Il Manifesto, and so on. (Šabata is the exception - for tactical reasons, he orients to the Eurocommunists).

The club of veterans (fifteen or so people) has an influence over about forty to fifty signers of Charter. The Centrists (about ten) have a similar influence. But it would be wrong to draw sharp borders. There are two hundred ex-CP members who signed the Charter. The majority of ex-CP members are not political at all. So, altogether, less than one hundred people in the Charter are politically in this ex-Communist milieu.

*What was the dispute inside the Charter in September 1977, and, what is the significance of the new committee which was declared publicly, the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS)?*

In the Declaration of the Charter it is written that the Charter has no organisational structures. Soon, however, we found - I personally and some others - that the absence of an organisational element is negative for the Charter. Especially if we are to have political action. So, since the summer of 1977, we have discussed this. Many suggestions were made, but turned down by the conservatives and by the less active members. Finally, after a long struggle, we succeeded in getting the 'working-group' principle accepted and written into the communiqué of September 1977. We also had a long struggle to get accepted that there should be three spokespersons for the Charter. For months it had been Hayek alone. Those were the main issues of dispute in September.

So in September-October we already set up this Committee to Defend the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS). It wasn't declared but it was already functioning. We gathered information on people in jail, we brought cases to the attention of Amnesty International, and we used to pass on information to the Charter spokespersons. That's why, from the end of 1977 to April-May 1978, there were many communiqués concerning such cases. We often prepared those texts for the spokespersons. We were 5 to 8 people, about another 20-30 knew who some of us were, but the committee was not public. We weren't 'secret' in the total sense, but we were not a declared committee. We never said who the members were.

We had discovered that the Charter spokespersons were being heavily influenced by people who didn't want everything widely publicised, who were more oriented to doing things behind the scenes. So in April 1978 we finally declared ourselves. There was a big discussion at first around the question whether we should or should not be a committee of the Charter. We knew we couldn't be completely independent - after all, we were all Charter signatories. But formally we are not an organisation of the Charter, because we are an organisation, with members and rules. We have good relations with the Charter spokespersons and often sign communiqués jointly with them, but we are not a Charter organisation.

It was hard at the beginning and some people said we would not succeed. But we have functioned openly now for nine months and it's working. Now there are other groups that will perhaps declare themselves as well. They are already organised and doing things, for instance, on ecology, on conditions of work, on



unions, on rights of children (there is already a document on children's rights). There is also now a committee handling the relations between Charter 77 and the Polish Social Self-Defence Committee, KOR. I am naming now, of course, only the initiatives that defend human rights. There are many other initiatives that realise those rights in practice by their own activity, for instance, in music, culture, papers, literature, theatre, etc.

I think the most important such initiative concerns work in the trade unions. We are having a discussion tomorrow on the possibility of an independent trade union. And the day after tomorrow, we will form such an independent trade union. We have already had correspondence with the ILO, CGT, etc.

*How would you sum up your conception of the Charter?*

The Charter is a human rights movement. It is a citizens' movement, a kind of permanent citizens' initiative, with sub-initiatives. The Charter, for me, is a protection for those initiatives which realise human rights in practice, in culture, etc. Charter 77 protects these. Thus it can't be an organisation but it must have organisational elements. These organisational elements cannot be obligatory for all Charter signatories but only for those who want them. Charter must in no case be united around a political platform.

