



Views from the Inside

Czech Underground
Literature
and Culture

(1948–1989)

Martin Machovec
(ed.)

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Czech Underground Literature and Culture (1948-1989)

Manifestoes - Testimonies - Documents

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Ivan Martin Jirous
Report on the Third Czech
Musical Revival

In the great cultural revolutions there is only one way for the people – to free themselves by their own efforts. Nothing must be used that would do it for them. Believe in people, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast away fear! Don't be afraid of commotion. Let people educate themselves in the great revolutionary movement.

MAO TSE-TUNG¹

(I)

At the end of 1974, a day before New Year's Eve, we went by train to a concert in Líšnice, a small village west of Prague. We got out at the nearest station and went the remaining few kilometres on foot, through the dusky, half-frozen muddy fields. There were about forty-five of us: we knew that another crowd of our friends were approaching Líšnice from the bus stop on the other side, and that many more were coming by car. Our mood was one of sheer joy. There was a tangible hope that we would be celebrating the end of the year with music: we were going to the first concert of a group called Umělá Hmota (Artificial Material),² and after that the Plastics and DG 307 were to play. As we walked through the bleak countryside, many of us experienced an intense feeling, which some expressed in words. It reminded us of the pilgrimages of the first Hussites into the mountains. When this was said, we made jokes along those lines and developed the theme. As soon as we came

1) The epigraph is taken from "Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution", 4, "Let the Masses Educate Themselves in the Movement." See *Peking Review* 9, no. 33 (1966): 6-11; online at <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1966/PR1966-33g.htm>.

The English translation in the *Peking Review* is a bit different: "*In the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the only method is for the masses to liberate themselves, and any method of doing things in their stead must not be used. Trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast out fear. Don't be afraid of disturbances. Chairman Mao has often told us that revolution cannot be so very refined, so gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. Let the masses educate themselves in this great revolutionary movement and learn to distinguish between right and wrong and between correct and incorrect ways of doing things.*"

2) Sometimes translated as Artificial Matter or Synthetic Material.

to Líšnice, we said, the lords – today the establishment – would be waiting to drive us away.

And that was what happened. In spite of the fact that the concert was sponsored by a group of local firemen (with whom the musicians often play football), in spite of the fact that local council had approved the event, we were told to disperse at once, or else force would be used. We dispersed, because today people who want to listen to the music they like (just like the people in the days of Hus who went to the hills to listen to words they wanted to hear) have no other recourse for the time being but to retreat from violence. As we were leaving the hall in the Líšnice restaurant, there was a party of hunters in the next room with a brass band that produced as many decibels as a rock group, and there they were celebrating the New Year under a decorated evergreen, that loving symbol of Christmas. One member of this group was the man who forbade others to enjoy themselves in the way they wanted. Arrogantly, he refused to speak to any of us and called the police. He was vice-chairman of the local council.

In the past, they would have called him a servant of the Anti-Christ; today, he is a representative of the establishment. He doesn't deserve the attention he is getting here. He is just one of the many nameless bureaucrats who, since the beginning of the seventies, have frustrated, banned or broken up many such musical gatherings. He is symptomatic of a time that turns its hatred and suspicion against people who desire nothing more than to create the type of art and environment that they must create, who stubbornly refuse to let their art be used in any other way than to speak to those who, with the artists, wish to live in truth.

(II)

I am not as interested in describing what these people do – for the music must be heard to be appreciated – as I am in explaining how and why they do it. I have called it the third Czech musical revival, a period that began in early 1970s, most probably about 1973.

It is not important when the first Czech musical revival took place (if there ever was one): our term comes from a statement once made by Karel Voják, a friend of the Primitives Group. He

referred to the late sixties as the “second musical revival”, a time when there was an unexpected boom in rock music (or Big Beat, as they called it then) – mainly in Prague, but elsewhere in Bohemia as well.

In Prague alone, there were several hundred rock groups. Few of them achieved public recognition, let alone fame. But that’s not the point. The most important thing was their sheer numbers. For the first time, people who would normally have no access to art – because of their social origins, their ignorance of what education is, or their unwillingness to continue in school, given the difficulty of getting a real education in the present school system – now had this opportunity. And regardless of quality, the profusion of these groups made natural selection possible. Bands formed, played, disbanded and regrouped into new ones. How else can people with similar opinions and natures get to know about each other except when they can display what they know in a relatively public forum?

I consider one of the greatest crimes of the present establishment to be the information blockade surrounding young people at that most important age – from 16 to 19 years of age – when their minds are taking definitive shape. I get furious when I hear people saying that anyone who really wants to achieve something can do it, regardless of the obstacles. Where are these young people and how can one find what they are looking for when they are being surrounded by an impenetrable wall of silence and misinformation? Josef Janíček, now the bandmaster of The Plastic People, played with group called The Swimmers for three years before joining The Primitives Group at the age of 19. Milan Hlavsa first performed with The Undertakers and two other short-lived bands that he had established, The New Electric Potatoes and Hlavsa’s Fiery Factory, before forming The Plastic People of the Universe in September 1968 at the age of 19. How can the people in Czechoslovakia today form bands with a decent chance for survival when there is no spontaneous musical milieu in which they can meet, compare notes, play together, or follow their own path while being guided by their own freely felt musical sense and, above all, by a feeling of kinship? But whatever the case, those times are gone forever. The main purpose of this brief excursion into the history of Czech rock music is to