

# Cultural Figures in Czechoslovakia's "Gentle Revolution"

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*The democratic revolution in Czechoslovakia was spearheaded by members of the cultural community, some of whom have been catapulted to positions of political leadership. The revolution has dramatically enlarged the scope of cultural freedom in Czechoslovakia and transformed virtually all cultural unions.*

Since November 17, when the "gentle revolution" began to unfold in Czechoslovakia, virtually all the restrictions imposed on Czechoslovak culture during the era of normalization have been lifted. Cultural unions, which were formed on Stalinist principles at the beginning of the 1970s, have disintegrated and been replaced by new syndicates and associations determined to express and defend the real interests of their members. Phenomena typical of the stifling atmosphere of the previous era, such as censorship, regimentation, cultural taboos, and lists of banned authors and works, have disappeared. Publishing houses, theaters, and galleries and museums have been competing to obtain the rights to publish, perform, or show works that a few months ago could have been distributed only in samizdat form.

More important, cultural figures have not been mere onlookers in the political revolution that has made the changes in Czechoslovakia's cultural life possible. From the first days of the popular upheaval, they have played an active political role; and some of them, such as the playwrights Vaclav Havel and Jiri Krizan and the actor Milan Knazko, have been catapulted to positions of political leadership. The revolution itself, although triggered by a student demonstration, was to a certain extent made possible by the pressure put on the Jakes leadership by thousands of prominent cultural figures who joined the dissident community in protests against the leadership's policies.

## Artists Before the Revolution

Before November 17 the atmosphere had been slowly changing in all Czechoslovak cultural circles,

particularly in the theater and the film industry. Some previously banned authors, artists, and playwrights had been allowed to publish their books, exhibit their works, and put on their plays. The distinction that had long been made between "official" and "dissident" cultural figures slowly disappeared. In some unions, the cultural thaw was accompanied by changes in personnel; officials from the period of normalization were replaced by more liberal administrators. These changes took place mainly as a result of pressure from the cultural figures themselves.

In the first half of 1989, unorthodox ideas were mainly gestating in cultural circles. In fact, the growing dissent and outspokenness of many cultural figures actively opposing the regime put art and literature on a collision course with the ossified political structure. Hundreds of actors, musicians, painters, film and theater directors, and playwrights signed petitions supporting dissidents persecuted in the spring of 1989. Thousands of them signed the "Just a Few Sentences" petition calling for democratization in Czechoslovakia. In September a number of Slovak cultural figures endorsed petitions demanding that the criminal prosecution of leading Slovak dissidents stop immediately.<sup>1</sup>

The authorities reacted to the growing opposition from cultural figures by condemning their activities and selectively persecuting activists among them. The government ordered that about 30 of them be refused work and recommended the same punishment for hundreds of others.<sup>2</sup> A number of cultural figures who had not been singled out for punishment responded by announcing that they would boycott Czechoslovak Television in November. The growing conflict between cultural figures

and the authorities reached a climax on October 25, when members of the Czech Philharmonic, arguably the most prestigious body of performing artists in Czechoslovakia, voted to follow the example of their artistic director, Vaclav Neumann. Two days earlier Neumann had announced that he was stopping any cooperation with Czechoslovak Television and Radio in protest at the persecution of cultural figures.<sup>3</sup>

### Reaction to the Events of November 17

After the brutal police suppression of the student demonstration on November 17, virtually the entire cultural community went on strike in support of the students' demands for an investigation into the police action and for democratization in Czechoslovakia. Some 600 actors, theater directors, and playwrights, including officials of the Union of Czech Dramatic Artists, gathered on November 18 in Prague and expressed their full support for the students' demands. They issued their own statement condemning the police and suggested that theater performances be called off for one week as a sign of protest. They also offered theaters as places for "free discussion" of the situation in the country. As a result of this decision, virtually all theaters in Czechoslovakia canceled performances and, until December 10, when the strike was called off, the theaters served as meeting places for the public.<sup>4</sup>

On November 19 a number of cultural figures participated in a founding meeting of the Civic Forum, which has since become the leading independent group in Czechoslovakia. Vaclav Havel, Jiri Krizan, and the actor Jiri Bartoska became members of the unofficial leadership of the forum. Jiri Svoboda, the Chairman of the Union of Film Artists, was among those who signed the founding manifesto of the Civic Forum, and the Czechoslovak PEN Club was among the organizations that jointly created the Civic Forum alliance.<sup>5</sup> The role of cultural figures in the setting up of independent groups was even more pronounced in Slovakia; on November 20 cultural figures and scientists formed a group called the Public Against Violence, which immediately became the leading opposition force in Slovakia. Milan Knazko became one of leaders of the group. Cultural figures were among the members of delegations representing the Civic Forum and the Public Against Violence in round-table talks with the government and other major

political forces in the country. These talks led to major political concessions on the part of the old regime, including the abolition of the leading role of the communist party in society, the nomination of governments not dominated by Communists, the election of Vaclav Havel as President of Czechoslovakia on December 29, and the simultaneous appointment of Milan Knazko and Jiri Krizan as Havel's advisers.

Although the most active role in the initial phase of the revolution was played by actors and performing artists, other cultural figures quickly joined them. Statements condemning the police violence on November 17 and demanding democracy in Czechoslovakia were eventually issued by virtually every group within the cultural community.

### The Disintegration of Old Structures

Within a few days after November 17, cultural unions formed during the era of normalization began to disintegrate. For example, the Union of Czech Dramatic Artists disbanded on December 3. The responsibilities of the union's Central Committee were transferred to members of provisional committees of individual sections of the union. An emergency congress of dramatic artists was called for the end of January 1990.<sup>6</sup>

On December 1 the Central Committee of the Union of Slovak Graphic Artists resigned and was replaced by an action committee that will steer the union until an extraordinary congress can be held. A similar development took place in the Union of Czech Graphic Artists.<sup>7</sup> The Central Committees of the unions of Slovak and Czech composers and musicians also resigned on December 1.<sup>8</sup>

### New Structures

While some unions have disintegrated completely, others are trying to remodel themselves. In the meantime, many people have left some of these surviving unions and joined cultural figures who were banned in the past in order to form new groups. On December 3 writers banned after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia were joined by some of their "officially sanctioned" colleagues in the founding of a so-called Community of Czech Writers. A similar group was founded in Slovakia.<sup>9</sup> The official unions of Czech and Slovak writers reacted by holding emergency congresses on

December 7, during which they opted for a thorough democratization of the inner structure of the unions. The Union of Czech Writers renamed itself the Association of Czech Writers. On December 18 the writers' unions jointly created a new federal interest group called the Syndicate of Czechoslovak Writers.<sup>10</sup> The Congress of the Czech PEN Club was held in Prague on January 3; it adopted new statutes and elected a new leadership.<sup>11</sup>

On December 17 more than 2,000 architects from the Czech Republic held a congress in Prague at which they created the Community of Czech Architects and disbanded the Union of Czech Architects, which had represented them in the past.<sup>12</sup> The Union of Television and Film Artists, which had been forcefully disbanded after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia, was revived at the beginning of December. The Union of Film Makers was founded in Prague on January 6.<sup>13</sup> Five days later a constituent meeting of an independent Federation of Artists took place in Prague.<sup>14</sup>

### New People

The institutional changes have been accompanied by a large number of resignations of cultural officials associated with the old regime and by the appointment of new ones. Vaclav Havel, for example, was named honorary chairman of the newly founded Community of Czech Writers. Ivan Klima, who had been blacklisted for more than two decades, was elected Chairman of the Community of Czech Writers. Directors of various theaters have resigned from their positions under pressure from branches of the Civic Forum formed in theaters. Karel Sys, the Editor in Chief of *Kmen*, which during the past two years was considered one of the most progressive literary periodicals, was dismissed from his post on December 2 and replaced by a team of editors who were regarded as more liberal.<sup>15</sup> Milan Lukes, the liberal Chairman of the Union of Dramatic Artists, which organized the strike of theaters after November 17, was named Minister of Culture in new Czech government. Ladislav Chudik, an actor enjoying a great amount of prestige, was named Minister of Culture in Slovakia.<sup>16</sup>

### Other Developments

All the books that had been banned during the era of normalization and held in special library deposits

were released to the public at the beginning of December. Some books that had been printed but never released appeared in bookstores. Many books published by publishing houses in exile, the possession of which could have constituted a crime in the past, were brought to Czechoslovakia and sold openly. Some emigre publishers, for example Alexander Tomsy, have returned to Czechoslovakia with the intention of publishing books there.<sup>17</sup> Prominent emigre authors, such as Pavel Tigrid, Antonin Liehm, and Jiri Grusa, all of whom were for many years among the most vilified persons in Czechoslovakia, visited the country and gave interviews to the Czechoslovak media. Books by these and other emigre authors will be published in Czechoslovakia in the foreseeable future. In December a book of interviews with Vaclav Havel was published by an official publishing house and was sold out within a few hours. On December 6, Havel's play *The Audience* was broadcast by Czechoslovak Radio.<sup>18</sup>

Several theaters have begun rehearsing plays by previously banned authors. Publishing houses have been competing with emerging independent publishers, such as Tomsy or the recently legalized publishing cooperative Atlantis, to sign contracts with authors who were blacklisted only two months ago. Films kept under lock and key for two decades have been released to the public, and a number of previously banned film makers have been officially rehabilitated.<sup>19</sup>

### Assessment

The Czechoslovak cultural community is in a state of flux caused by the democratic revolution that the artists themselves helped to start. When the current stage of the process of forming new interest groups is over, cultural figures will be represented by unions looking after their needs and not subordinated to political interests. Even the present changes may not be final, however, as proposals have begun to emerge to revive some of the unions that represented the interests of the cultural community before World War II, in the democratic First Republic. Whether such an institutional transformation will take place remains to be seen. What is already clear is that Czech and Slovak cultural figures have gained a degree of cultural freedom unequalled since the communist takeover in 1948.

## Notes:

- See Czechoslovak Situation Report/23, *Radio Free Europe Research*, 30 November 1989, item 9.
2. See Czechoslovak SR/21, *RFER*, 20 October 1989, item 7.  
Dpa, 26 October 1989.
  4. See Czechoslovak SR/24, *RFER*, 6 December 1989, item 2.  
See Czechoslovak SR/24, *RFER*, 6 December 1989, item 3.
  6. Czechoslovak Television, 3 December 1989, 7:30 P.M.
  7. Radio Prague, 1 December 1989, 12:30 P.M.
  8. *Ibid.*, 3:30 P.M.; and Radio Hvezda, 6 December 1989, 4:50 P.M.
  9. *Kmen*, no. 50, 14 December 1989, pp. 1 and 5.
  10. *Rude Pravo*, 23 December 1989, p. 2.
  11. Czechoslovak Radio, 4 January 1990, 10:30 P.M.
  12. Radio Prague, 17 December 1989, 6:30 P.M.
  13. Radio Hvezda, 14 December 1989, 6:30 A.M.; and Czechoslovak Radio, 6 January 1990, midnight.
  14. Czechoslovak Radio, 11 January 1990, 4:00 P.M.
  15. Radio Hvezda, 2 December 1989, 9:00 P.M.
  16. *Svobodne Slovo*, 13 December 1989; and *Smena*, 15 December 1989.
  17. Czechoslovak Radio, 5 January 1990, 6:30 P.M.
  18. A review of the radio broadcast of the play appeared in the communist daily *Rude Pravo* on 8 December 1989, p. 5.
  19. Czechoslovak Radio, 6 January 1990, 4:00 P.M.

# Diplomatic Relations with Israel To Be Resumed

Jiri Pehe

*In a foreign policy move that reflects the country's changing political situation, Czechoslovakia has agreed to resume diplomatic relations with Israel. The move marks a return to democratic traditions and signals Czechoslovakia's growing independence.*

After more than 22 years, Czechoslovakia and Israel have agreed to renew diplomatic relations.<sup>1</sup> The agreement was reached during negotiations in Tel Aviv from January 9 to 11 between officials of the Czechoslovak and Israeli Foreign Ministries. The resumption of relations could take place as early as February. The move is not only part of the overall trend in recent months toward improved relations between Israel and Eastern Europe but also reflects the changed political climate in Czechoslovakia. With Jiri Dienstbier as the new Foreign Minister and Vaclav Havel as President, Czechoslovakia has taken a number of unusual foreign policy steps. These moves have

marked a radical departure from the ideological precepts on which Czechoslovak foreign policy had been based prior to the democratic revolution that started on 17 November 1989.

## Historical Background

Czechoslovakia broke off diplomatic relations with Israel on 10 June 1967, after the Six-Day War between Israel and Arab states. Relations had originally been established on 10 May 1948. Indeed, at the end of the 1940s Czechoslovakia was a strong supporter of Israel and one of the main champions of a Jewish state. In early 1950,

however, affected by the dramatic deterioration in relations between the USSR and Israel, Czechoslovak-Israeli relations became strained and were often tense until they were severed in 1967.

After 1967, and especially after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Czechoslovak media repeatedly criticized Israel, and Czechoslovakia gave full support in its foreign policy to Israel's adversaries. Only in 1988, within the framework of improving relations between Israel and the European communist countries, did Czechoslovakia make the first moves toward improving relations. On 27 September 1988 the Israeli and Czechoslovak Foreign Ministers, Shimon Peres and Bohuslav Chnoupek, met during the 43rd session of the United Nations General Assembly and discussed the possibility of re-establishing diplomatic relations. The meeting, however, which was the first between Czechoslovak and Israeli officials in 21 years, did not, however, lead to an agreement on the matter.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, a Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry spokesman asserted that the meeting had been held at Israel's suggestion and that "diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel could be restored only within the framework of a broad normalization in the Middle East."<sup>3</sup> Although the meeting allegedly produced an agreement on sending a group of Czechoslovak consular experts to Israel, and although Israeli radio reportedly quoted Peres as saying after the meeting that formal relations between the two countries would be re-established within a year, neither of these things happened.

### New Initiatives

On 14 December 1989, only four days after his appointment as Foreign Minister, Dienstbier said that the issue of relations with Israel would have to be dealt with "very soon."<sup>4</sup> Dienstbier also said that the new Czechoslovak government believed that the issue of peace in the Middle East should be settled through dialogue but that Czechoslovakia could not take a central role in peace efforts.

This amounted to a reversal of part of the previous political leadership's policy. In 1988 Czechoslovakia had attempted to organize a Middle-East conference and thus to play an important role in settling the Middle Eastern conflict.<sup>5</sup> (Czechoslovak officials also asserted at the time, however, that Israel was "responsible for the continuing

Middle-East crisis."<sup>6</sup> A strong Arab bias, accompanied by the anti-Israeli rhetoric of the Czechoslovak government, was undoubtedly among the reasons why many dignitaries, including former US President Jimmy Carter, canceled their acceptance of the invitation to take part in the conference. Although the conference did go ahead, on 6 and 7 December 1988, only junior officials from various countries and academics took part.<sup>7</sup>)

The statement made by Dienstbier on December 14 was echoed by President Havel, who in his New Year's speech called for the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. A Czechoslovak Radio correspondent in Israel said that Havel's statements had been welcomed there but had not come as a surprise, because "Havel's affection for the Israeli people is well known." The correspondent noted that, as a dissident, Havel had said that it was absurd that Czechoslovakia had no library or museum dedicated to Tomas G. Masaryk, the first President of Czechoslovakia, whereas Israel did. "This makes my respect for the Israeli nation all the greater," Havel was reported as having said. According to the same correspondent, Havel has frequently been linked with Masaryk in the Israeli media. The President of Israel, Chaim Herzog, congratulated Havel on his election to the post of President and reminded him of the democratic traditions of the Czechoslovak Republic.<sup>8</sup>

### Why a Rapprochement?

A Czechoslovak foreign policy commentator said that "the decision to renew our relations with Israel is a result of the re-evaluation of our policy toward the Middle East."<sup>9</sup> The commentator explained that the decision of communist countries to sever relations with Israel in 1967 had been short-sighted. "A highly developed and well-armed Israel should not have been isolated." He said that whereas the agreement reached at Camp David had destroyed the unity of the Arab states, the attitude of East European countries had not change and had led to the gradual isolation of Soviet and East European foreign policy toward the Middle East. The commentator added that while some other East European countries had decided on gradual steps in improving their relations with Israel, Czechoslovakia had opted for a more radical solution. He emphasized that Hungary had established diplomatic relations with Israel last year and that Poland would do so in the near future.

The commentator also reacted to the fears expressed by Samih Abdul Al-Fatah, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Palestine, who is officially recognized by Czechoslovakia. During his visit to Bratislava on 5 January 1990, the ambassador said that "Israel could present the resumption of diplomatic ties as its victory or even as an expression of support for the anti-Arab orientation." The Czechoslovak commentator contended that by establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, "our diplomacy will in fact win more room to help find a just solution to the Palestinian question and the entire Middle Eastern crisis."<sup>10</sup> On January 16 Dienstbier met with the ambassadors of Arab states and assured them that Czechoslovakia had a "lasting interest in mutually beneficial relations with all Arab states."<sup>11</sup>

Explaining the Czechoslovak decision to renew relations with Israel, Vaclav Jizdny, the Director for Middle Eastern Affairs at the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry and leader of the Czechoslovak delegation in Tel Aviv, emphasized in the Czechoslovak media that the decision was based on the new foreign policy principles of "our country, which stress democratic and humanitarian approaches and an opening to the entire world—without discrimination." Jizdny said that "our step is in line with the philosophy of President Masaryk, who rejected anti-Semitism."

According to Jizdny, the Czechoslovak delegation in Tel Aviv also discussed economic, trade, and scientific cooperation with Israel.<sup>12</sup> He said that as a first step on the road to "normal economic cooperation," Czechoslovakia and Israel had agreed to re-establish commercial air links.<sup>13</sup> It was also agreed that Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens and Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Shimon Peres would visit Czechoslovakia to discuss details of the two countries' rapprochement.<sup>14</sup>

### Peres in Prague

Peres arrived in Czechoslovakia on January 21 for

a two-day visit. He met with top Czechoslovak officials, including President Vaclav Havel, National Assembly Chairman Alexander Dubcek, and Prime Minister Marian Calfa. Peres discussed details of the resumption of diplomatic relations with Czechoslovakia and held talks with Czechoslovak Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus on possible economic cooperation between the two countries. After the talks, it was announced that Havel would visit Israel at a date to be announced later. According to Radio Czechoslovakia's correspondent in Israel, Peres's visit to Czechoslovakia was considered in Israel an "historical event."<sup>15</sup>

### Assessment

Like many other domestic and foreign policy initiatives of the new Czechoslovak leadership, the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel and the overall improvement in relations between the two countries mark a return by Czechoslovakia to political traditions established during the First Republic (1918-1938). Although the state of Israel did not exist at that time, prewar Czechoslovakia was a supporter of the idea of the Jewish state and, until its annexation by Hitler's Germany, the country served as a haven for Jews escaping from Nazi persecution.

Above all, the resumption of diplomatic relations is another step by Czechoslovakia along the road to political "normality." For four decades Czechoslovakia's domestic and foreign policies were dictated by the strategic needs of the communist bloc; and these needs were often defined in Moscow and not Czechoslovakia. Breaking off relations with Israel was an example of this state of affairs. The prompt resumption of diplomatic relations with Israel in the wake of last year's revolution is, therefore, clearly symbolic of a return to democratic traditions expressed in good relations with democratic states; it is also a sign of Czechoslovakia's growing independence.