

Documents

Charter 77 Spokesman: Dr Vaclav Benda

Dr Vaclav Benda, a Roman Catholic and former professor of philosophy, was named as a new spokesman for Charter 77 on 8 February 1979. On 12 March he and his wife were charged with "subversion of the Republic" and incriminating evidence, planted by the police, was photographed in their flat two days later. Dr Benda is also a member of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, set up by members of the Charter 77 movement on 1 May 1978. On 29 May 1979 he and nine other members of this committee were arrested and charged under Art. 98 of the Penal Code ("subversion of the Republic"). On 23 October 1979 he was sentenced to four years of imprisonment.

Before 1977 Dr Benda published articles on literature and philosophy as well as essays on logic and mathematics. He has also written some poetry and a novel, The Black Girl, published in samizdat by the "Padlock" publishing house in 1978.

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FROM MY PERSONAL FILE

In about an hour I will have to stop work and leave for my place of employment – or vice versa, depending on how you look at it. I was born a year after the end of the Second World War; I am white, a Catholic, a non-Party man, and I am irrefragable before the law. In August 1968 my wife and I, knowing full

well the "unforeseeable consequences", decided not to use our valid passports, but to remain in Czechoslovakia. Moreover, in 1977 – after I had signed Charter 77 – we several times rejected offers of an assisted passage to Austria. We live relatively happily and contentedly, considering the circumstances: after all, if a man is so eccentric as to willingly allow himself to be thrown to the lions, it would be very silly of him to complain that their teeth were not clean enough. Let me make it very clear, though, that by saying this I am not defending either the lions or their use as a political weapon in civil life.

Since the age of 18 I have been (often out of necessity rather than from choice) a student of philosophy, an assistant lecturer in philosophy, a schoolmaster, a hydrobiologist, unemployed (on unemployment benefit), a student of mathematics, a mathematician with the railway, a programmer and a stoker. I have also had temporary jobs as a worker in a brewery and on a building site, a cow-herd, an assistant arts editor, a linguist, a translator, a teacher of logic and a computer expert. None of these enforced moves were due to any inconvenient dissident activity on my part. Rather, they occurred because I was not willing to become involved enough in the political activities prescribed in changeable directives from the top.

I was perhaps guilty of being far too patient. I silently accepted that all literary activities could be abolished at the stroke of a pen (even officially at one point) and so I devoted myself to philo-

sophy instead. I quietly realized that one had to be a member of the Communist Party in order to find employment as a philosopher and so I retrained as a mathematician. I silently noted that as a believer I could not be the editor of a mathematical journal, nor could I gain scientific status (I mention here only the restrictions which I personally came up against), and so I devoted myself entirely to programming. My conscience was jolted only when the perfidious powers that be, in all their proclaimed absolutism, decided to vent their dislike of a certain art form not on its well-known, recognized representatives, but on a peace-loving group of powerless and destitute young musicians [the "Plastic People", tried in 1975. *Ed.*]. After all, we have been given a commandment to defend widows and orphans against violence. And it was only because of the frenzied and crude attacks on Charter 77, in which all citizens were compelled to participate, that I finally decided to join this civil rights movement. We are also commanded not to bear false witness against our neighbour. Let your "yea" be "yea" and your "nay" be "nay".

So for the time being I am working in a boiler-room during the day, and trying to divide the rest of my time between sleeping, family life, civil rights activities, mathematics and philosophy. Owing to the patriarchal structure of our family, my wife abstains from public activity and has therefore so far been able to carry on working as a mathematician. Thanks to this family structure I am also quite certain (and this has been proved by experiment) that in the event of my imprisonment, everything possible and more will be done on my behalf.

For our four older children – five-year-old Marta, three-year-old Patrik and the schoolboys, nine-year-old Mark and seven-year-old Martin – the occasional visits from the police are a welcome adventure: last year their repertoire was enriched by two new games, "Belonging to the Charter" and "Being unemployed". Our "Benjamin" (for the time being), one-year-old Filip, is best at being an alarm-clock. Nevertheless, he is already potty-trained, he can run around, babble away and destroy the furniture.

The conflict with the State into which I have entered will be long, exhausting and, by all human standards, hopeless and in this country means that my

whole family down to the third generation will also be brought into the conflict, together with all of my friends who were not quick enough to disown me publicly. Whenever I say "for the time being" and "at present", I am merely indicating that things could get worse. Even capitulation or desertion fail to offer any hope; and I can't help seeing the hand of Providence in this. The state power, against which we are making our stand, has two main characteristics – it prefers to strangle its victims in deserted spots and under cover of darkness and it never forgives or forgets. To quote the most harshly-treated victim of the struggle so far, the late Professor Patocka, who died in the Lord (though almost in the offices of the security police):

This is not a battle, but a war. Winning one battle does not mean winning the war, but it is also true that losing one battle does not mean losing the war.

It is a strange war (and please understand that it is only with difficulty that I attain the mentality of a victim or a martyr – a tank division, an urban guerrilla detachment or simply an attempt to hoist a banner with a cross on it and march on the capital are more my style). It is a war waged exclusively with words – and moreover for each typewriter we possess the State has at its disposal ten printing presses.

Furthermore, we are thrown back many centuries into an age before the invention of the motorcar, the telephone, the printing press, the postal service and so on. We have to spend several hours running around the town in order to achieve something which, in the 20th century, would require just two short telephone calls. We spend thousands of hours repeating and copying factual details which could have been summarized in one newspaper column. We abide by the law, we act legally and publicly. The State contradicts the law, it takes action against us illegally and in a conspiratorial manner. This is a war of nerves: how they shout with delight when one of us is struggling against ten senseless and illegal measures, when someone responds to a hundred insults with another insult, or has to get drunk out of weariness in order to relieve the constant pressure.

Fortunately, the world around us is

real: the children get up, get dressed and have breakfast and go off to school, the family really exists, it is united or separated, it has its joys and its sorrows, its friends and interests. Whereas they, these others, are mere phantoms who incongruously don a human mask and occasionally emerge from the mists, meticulously concealing their actions and especially their names. They try to ensnare us in their spiders' webs, taking advantage of the fact that everyone is afraid of them. For them, a telephone call or a short conversation is enough (no, they never give you anything in writing): your rights no longer count, your claims will not be considered, your qualifications and contracts will be annulled, you will be dismissed from your job or thrown out of college without a chance of being accepted elsewhere, you will be denied medical care (and all this has already happened). It is not possible for officials to disobey such orders, but it is possible to misunderstand them, to let them disappear in the blind alleys of complex bureaucratic channels, or at least balance their execution with covert expressions of good will – the Czechs are very adept at this. But we are fortunately, notwithstanding the claims of the media, protected by the stout armour of public sympathy – out of the many hundreds of people with whom I spoke last year (discounting "conversations" with officials, of course) only three professed to be against Charter 77 – and one of these latter came back to me some time later to say that he had read it and that he could not understand what was wrong with it.

In fact we encounter only one serious objection: we are right, but we are lunatics, we don't have a chance of winning this fight between a dwarf and a troop of giants, we are voluntarily entering the lions' den and the fiery furnace; a sane person does not risk his neck in such a futile manner. Incidentally, certain unexpected failures by the establishment in the course of the year have notably reduced the numbers of those who raised this objection.

Nevertheless, I should explain in conclusion whether I act as I do merely

because we have been given such a commandment or because I expect any concrete results. I consider (and this is an extremely personal view) that all injustices, illegalities and social evils are so bound up with the system as a whole, that I do not entertain too much hope of any substantial improvement. I see my own task as somewhat different. In the present era a system of double-truth has been almost brought to perfection in Czechoslovakia (far surpassing the '50s and even Orwell's "doublethink"). Outwardly everyone is obliged to conform, to be optimistic and to join in periodic rejoicing; behind closed doors everyone (including the Party activists and officers of the security police) expresses objections, pessimism and deep scepticism.

The system is deeply immoral, for it not only causes suffering, but also denies that suffering a name (and therefore a purpose). This system is dangerously stable (so stable that it eliminates historical development). By proclamation it has elevated the stick and carrot from being a mere means of government to an ideological principle and this guarantees the state authorities and their doctrine a secure power base (perhaps Caligula's horse, elected as a senator, is too primitive and naive a model here). However, this system faces one mortal danger – it is based on the assumption that everybody must recognize the stick and carrot as an argument (and it really is a weighty argument). The cry that "the emperor is naked" can lead to quite uncontrollable and unexpected consequences and can fundamentally change the state of affairs. Of course, in an Empire governed by a deceitful tailor surrounded by a host of imperial guards and courtiers – all quite naked as well – only fools or children can insist on shouting that. Well then, I am convinced that to be a fool or a child is the only way to the Kingdom of Heaven – unless you become like these little ones, you will not enter. The wisdom of this world is foolishness and its foolishness is wisdom – but in the present circumstances it is our only temporal political hope.