

Reading with dissidents

Weronika PARFIANOWICZ-VERTUN

It's striking, how people here care about having complete works of classic masters of literature, how universal the ambition of having them in beautiful, solid editions is – and not for decorative purposes only. People only talk about books they really read. Maybe it's unjustified to generalize, but it seems that those discussions concerning literature are here more profound. And even if this romantic vision sounds a bit false, it's still the best proof that culture may exist beyond the official cultural life with its official institutions.¹

These lines by German historian Karl Schlögel described impressions received during visits in countries behind the “Iron Curtain” and meetings with Central European intellectuals. The image of Central Europe as a region where people prefer to read classics, rather than lose their time for “ordinary” entertainment, and where the written word is a weapon in the fight for freedom, started to gain popularity at the turn of the 1970s. To this day, it remains a cliché concerning dissenting intellectuals’ activities, political opposition and parallel culture in states such as Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary.

There are at least two reasons why the space of the home library could serve as a relevant symbol of Central Europe. First of all, as an attribute of the well-educated class, it speaks of a social group known to epitomize this region – the “intelligentsia”. Scholars disagree on whether the term was first used in the Polish, German or Russian context. Regardless, most agree that this specific group could only emerge in Central (or East-Central) European conditions. According to Andrzej Walicki “this relatively autonomous group, sharing common values and a sense of mission is a phenomenon typical of the underdeveloped countries at the beginning of their economic and social modernization [...]. In those countries, where the authority of the nobility was already questioned and the bourgeoisie, in comparison with Western Europe, was not developed yet, the elites consisting of well-educated people with different social backgrounds felt an increasing sense of responsibility for the rest of society and shared an ambition to become social or national leaders”². For historian Jerzy Jedlicki, it was also the “overproduction” of well-educated people who could not find employment in their professions, and therefore had to create work areas for themselves, that is responsible for the phenomenon, in addition to the fact that as an “intelligent proletariat”, intellectuals often tended to join revolutionary movements³.

The need to sustain a national identity when independent states did not exist also justified the increasing role of “intelligentsia” in this region. What we call an “intelligentsia ethos” manifested itself in educational institutions, the local press, national heritage policies, and the

¹ Karl Schlögel, *Środek leży na wschodzie. Niemcy, utracony Wschód i środek Europy*, in: idem, *Środek leży na wschodzie: Europa w stadium przejściowym*, [Die Mitte liegt ostwärts: Europe in Übergang, Munich, 2002], transl. Andrzej Kopacki, Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2005, p. 65. All translations are by the author.

² Andrzej Walicki, *Polskie koncepcje inteligencji i jej powołania*, in: idem, *O inteligencji, liberalizmach i o Rosji*, Kraków: Universitas, 2007, p. 45.

³ Jerzy Jedlicki, *Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują. Studia z dziejów idei i wyobraźni XIX wieku*, Warszawa: PWN, 2002, p. 331

animation of artistic life. In this context, literature and the written word in general gained a privileged position, both as the medium of a threatened national identity, and as the educational instrument and means of communication between various social groups. A solemn attitude towards books and literature, described by Schlögel, may be traced back to those times.

In the 1970s and 1980s, home libraries were seen as the most obvious attribute of the intelligentsia and once again became the center of the revolution that eventually changed Central Europe. Away from Communist institutions of power and censorship, the unofficial culture in Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary was created in private flats and houses. One of its earliest and most important manifestation was an unofficial publishing movement that resulted in hundreds of illegal, home-made books and reviews. I will focus here on examples of Polish and Czech/Czechoslovakian unofficial culture in order to examine the status of books and literature among people who were involved in unofficial culture, the most popular reading customs or literature trends, and the circulation of books and the written word in general.

Writing and reading

The sentence “I have never in my life read more than in those days”⁴ seems to be a chorus in the memories of participants of unofficial culture in Poland and Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s. This statement seems to be self-evident since it was a declaration by people who often defined themselves as “intellectuals”, but we should also consider traditions related to banned books and the illegal press going back to the 19th century, for they created an important background for Central European independent publishing movements. However, it is only in the 1970s and 1980s that they became a well-organized, relatively widespread social activity. The second half of the 1970s in Poland and Czechoslovakia was a time of increasing control over cultural institutions and literary production. In Czechoslovakia it was part of the aftermath of the Soviet invasion and the “normalization” process; in Poland acts extending the power of censorship coincided with the economic crisis and the workers’ protests of 1976. The restricted access to information or publishing opportunities resulted in the intensification of independent publishing activities.

The phenomenon of *samizdat* (“second circulation” in Poland)⁵ is usually shown as an element of the political opposition that developed in countries such as Poland or Czechoslovakia, but I would like here to emphasize its cultural meaning. *Samizdat* was not only a medium of communication within dissenting circles or a way for them to inform society about their activities or the abuses of the communist state. It was also a platform to reflect the ideas of “independent” or parallel culture and the identity of its participants.

⁴ Karel Strachota, “Výkvět vojsk varšavské smolovy. O roce života v rakr’áků v Jihlavě a v Mariánských Lázních, *Naše normalizace*, 2011, p. 91.

⁵ Cf. Johanna Posset, *Česká samizdatová periodika 1968-1989*, [Tschechische und slowakische Samizdat-Periodika 1968-1988, PhD Thesis, Vienna, 1990], transl. Zbyněk Petráček, Brno, Továrna na sítotisk, 1993; Tomáš Vrba, *Nezávislé písmennictví a svobodné myšlení v letech 1970-1989*, in: *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945-1989*, ed. Josef Alan et. al., Praha, Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny, 2001; Jiří Gruntorád, *Samizdatová literatura v Československu sedmdesátých a osmdesátých let*, in: *Alternativní kultura; Drugi obieg. Zbiór referatów wygłoszonych na seminarium poświęconym niezależnemu wydawnictwu w Łodzi. Łódź, 6 czerwca 1991 r.*, Łódź, 1991; *Literatura drugiego obiegu w Polsce w latach 1976-1989. Materiały konferencyjne*, ed. Leszek Laskowski, Koszalin, 2006; *Papierowa rewolucja. Les éditions clandestines en Pologne communiste 1976-1990*, ed. Claudio Fedrigo, Jacek Sygietyński, Freiburg, 1992; Paweł Sowiński, *Zakazana książka. Uczestnicy drugiego obiegu 1977-1989*, Warszawa, 2011.

Authors of *samizdat* often alluded to the tradition of illegal publishing. In Poland the term *bibuła* (“blotting paper”) serving as a synonym of “samizdat” was an allusion to the legendary illegal political bulletin *Robotnik*. Authors of *Kritický sborník* drew inspiration from the famous *Kritický měsíčník*, edited by Václav Černý even under Nazi occupation, and young artists created the *Revolver Revue*, which referred directly to the illegal press *Edice Půlnoc*, funded by underground legend Egon Bondy and other avant-garde artists in the late 1940s.

The very term “samizdat” was controversial because of its associations with Russian culture. In Poland, the term “bibuła” seemed to be more accepted because of its patriotic associations and the whole phenomenon is known as “second circulation”, emphasizing technological progress and mass production. In Czech the term “samizdat” was accepted, with some stipulations however. Overall it concerned hundreds of titles, ephemeral as well as long-lasting, with some editions reaching thousands of copies (*Revolver Revue*) and others several dozen thousands (“*Tygodnik Mazowsze*”). Some continued after 1989 and remain important today: the *Revolver Revue*, *Kritický Sborník*, and the biggest Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* have their origins in “second circulation”.

There were various topics and formats of unofficial publications, but since it was mostly intellectuals, writers and academics who initiated those activities, they preferred specific literacy genres such as essays, open letters and studies to convey their ideas and programs. Some commentators would even identify the opposition’s activities with writing above all. But those activities were not limited to sophisticated literary forms. The multitude of manifestos, leaflets and graffiti on the walls, created by anonymous people during those two decades, and especially during the protests, means that writing turned out to be one of the most universal and – unexpected – egalitarian political activity. It was in particular the case in Poland, where the mass workers’ movements also featured writing activities – unofficial circulation consisted in great measure of illegal newspapers published by trade unions.

A Post-Gutenberg’s revolution?

For cultural historians, samizdat press itself and the fact that people from different backgrounds were actively involved in the process of writing, copying, producing and distributing unofficial books and periodicals, constitute an exceptional case study, one that made Gordon H. Skilling wonder whether it could not, in fact, “represent [...] a return to the pre-Gutenberg process of communication.”⁶ The authors of self-published books and press in Central Europe shared the same intuition. Petr Pithart compared the efforts of Czech intellectuals retyping texts on old typewriters to the efforts of medieval scholars⁷. Skilling, inspired by Marshall McLuhan, described the phenomenon of the independent press, as “a transformation in media of communication” that “has been due not to technological factor [...] but to political factors”⁸.

Following Walter Ong’s view that each transformation in the means of communication implies a radical change in the whole system of a culture, in its social relations, models of gathering and transfers of knowledge, writing and reading customs, and even economic

⁶ Gordon H. Skilling, “Samizdat. A Return to the Pre-Gutenberg Era?”, in *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Benjamin Stolz, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1982, p. 64-80.

⁷ Petr Pithart, “Průklepový papír bílý 30 gr/m²“, *Spektrum*, 1978, no. 1, p. 20-23.

⁸ Gordon H. Skilling, *op.cit.*

system,⁹ I'm more interested in elucidating how *samizdat* press and the return to less advanced technologies for making texts (sometimes of modern origin, such as typewriters) created an entire parallel culture. The censorship in official culture paradoxically strengthened the culture of the written word. It opened the access to literary works/productions to the people, who otherwise would never have had a chance to publish their own works (and not only due to political reasons). It was a time when "anyone who only has two hands, writes", as Ludvik Vaculík put it¹⁰. The mere possession of a typewriter allowed one to join the unofficial publishing movement as an author, publisher and distributor all in one. Samizdat also changed the economy of the book market. Petr Fidelius in *Kritický Sborník* emphasizes the paradox of *samizdat*: the process of making books was very demanding, dangerous and expensive; books were hardly legible, published only in a few copies, and much more expensive than the ones one could get from official bookstores¹¹. If printed books were, from their very advent, commercial products¹², then *samizdat* was the opposite of a normal "book market", freeing books not only from the power of censorship, but also from commercial constraints.¹³ Authors displayed an impressive ingenuity in their search for new ways of multiplying texts, building duplicating machines with the mangle rollers of washing machines and children's toys, smuggling professional presses from the West, or stealing some from state-run print-shops. This active, creative attitude towards every-day life objects, was built on a praxis of self-sufficiency, hand-made, DIY, gray market circulations that were characteristic of Central European societies long familiar with shortages of basic goods.¹⁴

There were of course differences between political, cultural and social situations in each country. In Poland, except for the growth of censorship in 1975 and with the coming of the "Martial law" in 1981, the distinction between the sphere of what was official, legal, supported by the regime, and what was forbidden and persecuted, was rather shifting. The decision of joining the "second circulation" was often a sign of protest against the Communist power, rather than the direct outcome of censorship. Some authors published in "second circulation" to demonstrate their solidarity with persecuted writers and journalists. In Poland, the access to world literature classics and to academic works was (with some exceptions of course) quite wide. Also many of the official cultural and scientific reviews (such as *Dialog* or *Odra*) kept high standards over those decades.

In Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, the process of "normalization", started after the 1968 invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops, had changed the culture profoundly. With 75% of all Czechoslovakian writers active before 1968 banned from publishing¹⁵, *samizdat* was not as much a matter of individual choice—it was the only way to publish. The persecutions affected journalists and scientists, but the purges in humanities university departments were particularly harsh, unsettling for two decades the landscape of Czech academia. If Polish *samizdat* press was presented mostly as a political activity, for its Czech counterpart the

⁹ Cf. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, London; New York: Routledge, 1991.

¹⁰ Ludvik Vaculík, "Łańcuszek szczęścia", *Krytyka*, 1987, no. 2, p. 39.

¹¹ Fidelius, "Otazníky kolem ineditní literatury", *Kritický sborník*, 1982, no. 4.

¹² Cf. Lucien Febvre, Henri-Jean Martin, *L'apparition du livre*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1958.

¹³ Fidelius, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ Cf. Krzysztof Kosiński, *Samowystarczalność. Życie „udomowione” w mieście lat osiemdziesiątych*, in: Błażej Brzostek et al. (ed.), *Niepiękny wiek XX. Na siedemdziesięciolecie urodzin prof. Tomasza Szaroty*, Warszawa, Instytut Historii PAN, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010; Petr A. Bílek, Blanka Čínátlová (ed.), *Tesilová kavalérie Popkulturní obrazy normalizace*, Příbram, Pistrous a Olšanská, 2010.

¹⁵ Jiří Gruša, *Cenzura a literární život mimo masmédiá (text vydaný k příležitosti výstavy V.Z.D.O.R Vystava nezávislé literatury samizdatu 1945-1989*, Praha, Muzeum české literatury-Památník národního písemnictví, 1992.

cultural functions were constitutive, implying different modes of publications, subjects, styles and aesthetics. Polish “second circulation” included many political journals and cultural periodicals, such as *Kultura Niezależna*, interested above all in the current political questions and their influence on institutions of culture, while in Czechoslovakia it was literary criticism, philosophy, history and cultural issues that were addressed by reviews such as *Spektrum* or *Kritický Sborník*.

Manic readers

Regardless of those differences, both Polish and Czech participants of unofficial culture have equally tended to present themselves as enthusiastic readers. “In 1980, I was working in a factory [...] and I was paid 120 crowns for one shift. It was a huge amount of money. I spent it all in Prague’s antiques shops. In those days, men invested in paper filled with letters. The word was the most valuable thing”, recalls Jan Šicha¹⁶ -- and his memories echo other statements made by participants of unofficial culture, both in Poland and Czechoslovakia. According to Czech writer Jáchym Topol, the 1970s and 1980s were a period of “maniac reading of books”, from Homer, Dante and Villon to Prévert, the Beat Generation and Mandelstam.¹⁷ Hanna Samson, a representative of the same generation in Poland, similarly reminisced that:

I don’t know how it happened, but we all knew exactly what to read. Maybe it was because the choice was limited, maybe it was because of “book snobbery”? Anyway, we were all reading and we knew, what’s “in”. Cortázar, Marquez, but also Hlasko, Bursa, Stachura. The books, that we read, defined us and created the background for communication. I think all of us knew Ginsberg’s *Howl*. We read *Literatura na świecie* as well as second circulation books. In some milieus, discussions concerning literature were almost obligatory.¹⁸

People shared not only the passion for literature and favourite titles, but even habits of reading. As Josef Mlejnek recalls:

In the Orwellian year of 1984 I was 15 and I read George Orwell. It was a *samizdat* edition, twentieth copy of a copy, almost illegible even if you knew the trick of inserting a sheet of paper between the pages. On the front cover there was a picture of group of people – prisoners apparently, as the caption indicated that this edition was dedicated to Petr Uhl, who had been sentenced to 5 years in 1979¹⁹.

The reading of samizdat was indeed a highly demanding activity. Samizdat was usually produced on bad paper, set in small-sized font; the print was too dense and ink faded with each new copy. Even the technologically more advanced productions of Polish “second circulation” were often almost illegible. Leszek Szaruga recalls how he struggled to read the first volume of *Zapis*²⁰, which he had been allowed to borrow for one night only. And Czech literary critic Miroslav Červenka described the reading of samizdat as a “never-ending

¹⁶ Jan Šicha, “V tunelu bez panáčků. O práci v továrně národního podniku Sfinks a zvláštní škole v Krásném Březně”, *Naše normalizace*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Tomáš Weiss, *Jáchym Topol. Nemůžu se zastavit. Rozhovory*, Praha, Portál, 2000, p. 37.

¹⁸ Hanna Samson, *Subiektywny alfabet (ducha) lat siedemdziesiątych*, in: Anka Grupińska, Joanna Wawrzyniak (ed.) *Buntownicy. Polskie lata 70. i 80*, Warszawa, Świat Książki, 2011, p. 458.

¹⁹ Josef Mlejnek, “O Orwellowi, branných cvičeních a pocitu života na prahu apokalipsy”, *Naše normalizace*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

²⁰ *Zapis* was a literary review created among others in “second circulation” in 1978, by poet Stanisław Barańczak. Known as one of the most ambitious literary magazine focusing on literature and culture, some commentators have however accused it of being too conservative and of avoiding experimental arts.

torture”²¹. But the very effort that was put in decoding the illegible text was of special meaning as a heroic gesture of political protest.

What to put on the bookshelf?

The canon established by Central European intellectuals included works accessible in official bookstores and libraries. In Poland, the Ibero-American literature “boom” alluded to by Hanna Samson was one of the most striking literary phenomena of the 1970s. But banned anti-totalitarian literature was of course a particular “must-read” for dissidents. Let us only mention Czesław Miłosz’s *Captive Mind*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, for example, Hanna Arendt’s essays and of course Orwell – his *Animal Farm* was even published in Polish second circulation in “luxury” editions, with illustration by famous graphic artist Jan Lebenstein. The unofficial circulation even created its own literary trends. In Poland, for example, Czech literature (Hrabal, Kundera, Škvorecký) was one of the most translated and read.

The fact of possessing forbidden books was in itself a symbol of opposition and a sign of participation in unofficial culture. The more “raw” the appearance of unofficial publications, the more authentic a symbol of protest against the communist regime it was. But sophisticated editions were not unheard of, so much so that the activity of unofficial publishers resulted in a revival of bookbinding craft. Books were often made with remarkable attention and care. Mariusz Szczygieł describes the gift from Czech friend – the poems of Jaroslav Seifert, “four untypical volumes hidden in a box decorated with old-fashioned wallpaper”, the covers of each volume covered with the same paper²². Publishers from Cracow’s “Oficina literacka” mentioned their edition of Dürrenmatt’s *The Coup* “published [...] in dark green cover, illustrated and with blotting-paper dividing illustrations from text” and special editions of philosopher Leszek Kołakowski’s children’s book *Who would like to cheer up an unlucky rhinoceros? (Kto chciałby pocieszyć nieszczęśliwego nosorożca)*²³. Such publications were objects of desire and, as rarities, exposed by their lucky owners. The fact, that they were hand-made and distributed in unofficial circuits only increased their value and the feeling of possessing something special and unique.

Second circulation or second-rate literature?

Given the conflation of author, designer, editor and printer, *samizdat* could also have meant “aesthetic” revolution. Traditional ideas concerning the appearance of a book and its graphic design turned out to be stronger, however. According to the words of Jakub Szerman, former representatives of new avant-gardes preferred unsophisticated visual means of expressions, especially numerous signs of martyrdom, instead of more experimental and ambiguous rhetoric.²⁴ Similarly, *samizdat* literature was not uniformly innovative. For young underground artists there was no question, that *samizdat* was the only way to publish their works. Jáchym Topol, Petr Plácak or Viktor Karlík, who strongly influenced the Czech artistic and literary scene after 1989, made their debuts in the underground periodical *Revolver Revue*, and are a good example of the link between *samizdat* and avant-garde. But for Leszek Bugajski, young *samizdat* writers in Poland simply did not make any major

²¹ Miroslav Červenka, “Dvě poznámky k samizdatu”, *Kritický sborník*, 1985, vol. 4.

²² Mariusz Szczygieł, *Po obu stronach okna*, in id., *Zrób sobie raj*, Wołowiec, Czarne, 2010, p. 56.

²³ Grzegorz Nawrocki, *Struktury nadziei*, Warszawa, Pokolenie, 1988, p. 134.

²⁴ J. Szerman, “Naturalna śmierć kultury niezależnej”, *Pogląd. Miesięcznik*, «Towarzystwa Solidarność», 1988, nr. 6-7, p. 39.

literary contribution—even the works of famous writers written for “second circulation” were worse than those they published legally²⁵. Lidia Burska is even more critical: for her, the success of samizdat literature meant that “literature became ‘the hostage’ of the needs and expectations of mass readers. It started to depend on their tastes and stereotypes of their imagination. It lost its criticism.”²⁶ In the late 1980s, readers, authors and distributors of independent publications were already complaining about boring, poorly written texts, untidy publications, editorial errors, and reports of persecutions in Soviet Union. But what attracted the most criticism was... the lack of criticism. As Dawid Warszawski²⁷, declared, “One of the biggest problems is that publishing in the independent press gained a value in itself. Even if you don’t agree with some texts, and you find them worse than communist propaganda press, you have to admit, that, as underground, it’s ‘ours’, and you resign from polemics.”²⁸

Unofficial culture simply could not be identified with alternative culture. It was rather conservative and concentrated on saving the continuity of cultural traditions rather than searching for new paradigms of social coexistence. More importantly, it was not a unified whole. Although the Chart 77 was created as an act of protest against persecutions imposed on members of the underground band Plastic People of the Universe, the representatives of dissent and alternative culture constituted separate milieus. Some intellectuals, such as Václav Havel or Jiří Němec admired underground artists, others, like literary critic Václav Černý, were rather critical of them. Underground members, on the other hand, distanced themselves from the political opposition, such as the Chart 77. In Poland those divisions and conflicts were even clearer: young alternative artists, representatives of the so-called “third circulation” opposed not only the communist system, but also (or even, above all) the conservative taste and aesthetics of “Solidarity”.

As we now celebrate the 25th anniversary of the democratic transformation of Central Europe, the complexity of the *samizdat* phenomenon is worth being remembered. Instead of believing that manic readers of high literature and underground avant-garde were the norm under communism, we should treat such memories as constructs of the very Central European social group known as “intelligentsia”—a group that preceded the rise of *samizdat*. It is perhaps no coincidence that samizdat flourished at the time when the very concept of Central Europe received new attention from intellectuals on both sides of the “Iron Curtain”. Indeed, Central Europe was an important subject in samizdat press, the only space where it could be discussed freely, with multiple essays and even titles such as the Polish *Obóz* or *ABC*, and Czech *Střední Evropa* entirely devoted to the issue. The articles published in those periodicals often created idealistic images of Central Europe. The romantic vision of Central Europe as a region, where everyone, regardless of economic or social status, read passionately, was part of this myth created by intellectuals and for their own consumption. Being in a constant crisis of identity is indeed one of the “intelligentsia’s” typical features. Discussions concerning “ethos of intelligentsia” did not end in 1989, as well as those on Central Europe. Responsibility, obligations and ethics of a “committed observer” or a “cultural animator” are current reformulations of the problem.

²⁵ Leszek Bugajski, ‘Puls zapisu’, *Polityka*, 1989, nr 9, p. 8.

²⁶ Lidia Burska, “Znowu w okopach”, in: Alina Brodzka, Lidii Burska (ed.), *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury współczesnej*, Warszawa, Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1998, p. 46.

²⁷ Dawid Warszawski is the pseudonym of Konstanty Gebert, a popular journalist and editor of second circulation magazines such as *KOS* or *Tygodnik Mazowski*, who also collaborated with *KOR* and other opposition initiatives, and after 1989, with *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

²⁸ Interview with Dawid Warszawski, *Tygodnik Mazowski*, no. 200, 25/02/1987, p. 3.

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