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**Thank you, samizdat!**

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## Thank you, samizdat!

Hana Waisserová  
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This autumn we celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, when a chain of events all across Central and Eastern Europe gradually brought the weakening yet persistent Communist system to its knees. Though the melt was paradoxically coming with Gorbachev's reforms from the Kremlin, the Czech hardliners seemed to resist. They had a much stronger grasp over the society than the Communist governments of Hungary and Poland. Nevertheless, the domino effect was there and change finally came.



Libri Prohibiti, photo Hana Waisserová.

The geopolitics notwithstanding, sometimes we might forget that samizdat and independent literary culture played a major role in toppling the totalitarian regime. It reflects a deeply rooted, centuries-old belief of Czechs in the power of the written word. “This wicked people,” admitted Pope Pius II in the fifteenth century, “has one good quality--it is fond of learning. Even their women have a better knowledge of Scripture than Italian bishops.”<sup>1</sup> Centuries later, the writer Ivan Klíma agreed with this notion: “The appearance of being cultured and civilized is particularly important in the Czech lands, where centuries of national and cultural repression have made the culture, and especially literature, popular and highly respected.”<sup>2</sup> Klíma added that the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Albright, Madeleine. *Prague Winter: A Personal Story of Remembrance and War, 1937-1948*. New York: Harper, 2014, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Klíma, Ivan. “Culture versus Totalitarianism.” in *The Spirit of Prague*. London: Granta, 2010, 111.

communist regime was well aware of this fact and tried to counter it by controlling all aspects of independent culture. In the post-1968 era, this control culminated in the trial of the Plastic People of the Universe. The 1970s also marked the proliferation of samizdat as an outlet for oppressed culture, creating a variety of underground publishing houses, magazines, revues, films, and tapes.

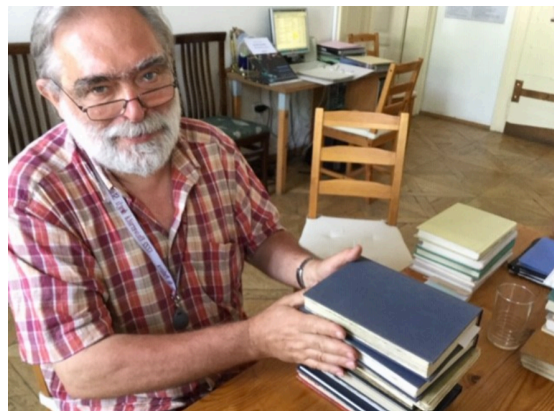
Some authors claimed writing was their own private space that could not be invaded and that represented an island of ultimate freedom. Eda Kriseová articulated this in the following way:

*Writing saved my life, because it gave a sense to my life ... I changed from a journalist into a writer, in order to keep my sanity ... Writing became my rescue island; it became my psychotherapy and it helped me to get through the worst moments of my life. Writing became an island in which nobody can get to me, and only I can spoil the experience.*<sup>3</sup>

This summer, students from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln visited the Libri Prohibiti library in Prague, a specialized library and archive focusing on samizdat. Jiří Gruntorád, Charter 77 signatory and publisher of samizdat series *Popelnice* (*The Garbage Can Edition*) during the so-called normalization after 1968, founded Libri Prohibiti in 1990. Along with the Czechoslovak Documentation Center, founded in West Germany in 1984, it holds the largest collection of Czechoslovak samizdat materials, books, tapes, and magazines, as well as materials from other countries from the former Soviet bloc.<sup>4</sup>

The visit had a powerful impact on the students--they realized the meaning of books and writing in spaces of limited freedom and the power of literature for spreading free thought. In the library, we met with the writer Eda Kriseová, who was seated next to a pile of her samizdat titles that were preserved in the library. She published twelve texts in *Padlock Edition* (1972-1990); re-editions of her texts were published in

other underground presses, such as *Krameriova Expedice* (1978-1990; organized by Vladimír Pistorius) and in *Dispatch Edition* (1975-1990; established by V. Havel). Other works by Kriseová were published abroad by foreign and exilic publishing houses. The young American students were taken aback at being able to speak with a journalist who was banned at the peak of her career, being able to publish solely in samizdat and in exile.



Jiří Gruntorád, photo Hana Waisserová.

The students were intrigued by the ways that samizdat and exiled publishers dealt with the peculiar needs and danger that producing and reading such literature brought to its readers. One samizdat edition in the exhibit was published in tiny letters in a pocket *Kolibřík* edition. It contained a small magnifying glass to facilitate reading, as well as legal advice on how to respond to a police investigation if caught with samizdat literature, such as not to disclose from whom it was received. Readers were informed there was no legal obligation to report to the police that such an item was received, and they were instructed to say that they had not passed it on to others, including their family, who had the right to remain silent.

Most of Czech samizdat was typed. Many typists were harassed and persecuted. In addition, making multiple copies on manual typewriters was strenuous. For example, Kriseová told us how typists damaged their fingers by having to hit the keys hard enough to type six to twelve carbon copies at once. The title page of samizdat copies of the *Padlock Edition* contained a general statement pertaining to distribution with a particular wording that would serve as a secret code to identify the particular typist. Other editions would contain a note that the particular volume was typed for friends by a person signed (like Olga Havlová or Václav Havel in *Expedice*). The usual copyright information page thus varied

<sup>3</sup> Kriseová in personal interview with HW in summer 2016

<sup>4</sup> See studies by Gordon Skilling (1989), Vilém Prečan (1988), Martin Machovec (2004, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2016), Tomáš Vrba (2001), Jiří Gruntorád (1994, 1998, 2001, 2018), Jitka Hanáková (1997), and most recently, Martin Machovec (2018).

vastly among editions.

Kriseová, who contributed to the samizdat literary journal *Obsah* (Content) confessed that for each meeting of the circle of the writers, she had to bring her own short text typed in a required number of copies. It was hard and even frustrating to get it done: for example, if she inserted the carbon paper wrongly between the onionskins, the text was mistakenly copied on the back of the sheet. The task of typing would always make her aware of the length of her text. At the same time, readers knew about the hard work behind the physical production of samizdat and felt apparently even more obligated to read the text. These material conditions of samizdat make us aware of the differences in readers' perceptions, so relevant in contemporary culture of online resources.

The library director Gruntorád presented a wide variety of texts and mentioned that samizdat also included translations of previously published authors who became blacklisted later, when the impact of their work suddenly met the censorship criteria that kept changing (J. R. R. Tolkien serves as a good example).<sup>5</sup>

Unofficial publishing represented an important platform for many authors. For example, the samizdat literary companion *Slovník českých spisovatelů. Pokus o rekonstrukci dějin české literatury 1948–1979*<sup>6</sup> contains biographical and bibliographical entries of more than four hundred Czech writers. Gruntorád pointed out that the officially published literary companion included only around two hundred names and that this disproportion reveals that numerous Czech writers were either banned or silenced, and thus unrecognized on the official literary scene.

Czechs have a rich historical experience with banned literature. As an addendum, in 2014, a Nebraskan family of Czech heritage approached the Czech program at the University of Nebraska with a precious family possession, a family Bible. Nearly a thousand pages, the Bible was missing a number of front pages and thus had no author or title, but the date 1542 was handwritten in pencil on the inside of the leather cover. The family had passed on various stories, such as that in the “old country” they would hide the manuscript in the chimney, bury it in the ground, and even hide it

inside a large loaf of bread so as not to have it discovered and burned. We determined that the book was a Lutheran postil from 1557 by Johannes Spangenberg from Luther's circle, translated into Czech by Jan Stráněnský. This book, brought along by the Czech ancestors, underscores the belief in the power of letters that has persisted among Czechs for centuries. The significance of samizdat may go far back in history, yet it continues to be relevant to us today.

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<sup>5</sup> Machovec 2009, 1-26.

<sup>6</sup> It was published in Petlice and the editors were Jiří Brabec, Jiří Gruša, Petr Kabeš, and Jan Lopatka. It appeared also in the exilic publishing house Sixty Eight Publishers in 1982.

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