

Writing Underground

Reflections on Samizdat Literature
in Totalitarian Czechoslovakia

Martin Machovec



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1. THE GROUP OF WRITERS AROUND THE PŮLNOC SERIES (1949–1955): A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE OF UNDERGROUND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Nowadays there is quite an extensive literature, comprising literary history, essays and memoirs¹ on the activities of the underground group of poets and prose writers who brought out their works in one

1) BONDY, Egon, “Kořeny českého literárního undergroundu v letech 1949–1953” [The Roots of the Czech Literary Underground, 1949–1953], *Haňta Press* 2, no. 8 (1990); in MACHOVEC, Martin (ed.), *Pohledy zevnitř. Česká undergroundová kultura ve svědectvích, dokumentech a interpretacích*, Praha: FF UK, 2008; In English in MACHOVEC, Martin (ed.), *Views from the Inside. Czech Underground Literature and Culture (1948–1989)*, Praha: FF UK, 2006; 2nd edition, Praha: Karolinum Press, 2018; BONDY, Egon, *Proních deset let* [The First Ten Years], Praha: Maťa, 2002; BOUDNÍK, Vladimír, *Z literární pozůstalosti* [From the Literary Papers], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1993; HRABAL, Bohumil, “Co je poezie?” [What is Poetry?], “Made in Czechoslovakia”, “Blitzkrieg”, in *Jarmilka. Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala 3* [Collected Works of Bohumil Hrabal 3, Jarmilka], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1992; JELÍNEK, Oldřich, “Jak to všechno začalo...” [How it All Began], *Haňta Press* 5, no. 14 (1993); MACHOVEC, Martin, “Pokus o nástin geneze a vývoje básnického díla Egona Bondyho” [Attempted Outline of the Birth and Development of Egon Bondy’s Poetic Work], *Vokno*, no. 21 (1990); MACHOVEC, Martin, “Šestnáct autorů českého literárního podzemí (1948–1989)” [Sixteen Authors from the Czech Literary Underground], *Literární archiv PNP*, no. 25 (1991); MACHOVEC, Martin, “Několik poznámek k podzemní ediční řadě Půlnoc” [Several Notes on the Underground Midnight Series], *Kritický sborník* 13, no. 3 (1993); MACHOVEC, Martin, “Vídeňská bohemistika o Půlnoci (Česká podzemní literatura 1948–1953)” [A Viennese Student of Czech Literature on Půlnoc (Czech Underground Literature 1948–1953)], *Kritický sborník* 18, no. 2–3 (1999); MACHOVEC, Martin, “Náčrt života a díla Egona Bondyho” [Outline of Life and Work of Egon Bondy], in *Bouda Bondy. Projekt Bouda IV.* [Czech National Theatre Summer Stage], Praha: Národní divadlo, 2007; MAINX, Oskar, *Poezie jako mýtus, svědectví a hra. Kapitoly z básnické poetiky Egona Bondyho* [Poetry as Myth, Testimony and Game. Chapters from the Poetics of Egon Bondy], Ostrava (Czech Republic): Protimluv, 2007; PILAŘ, Martin, *Underground*. Brno (Czech Republic): Host, 1999; TROUP, Zdeněk, “Poezie totality” [Poetry of Totality], *Rozeta* 1, no. 1 (1991); TYPLT, Jaromír E., “Dvě svědectví o Židovských jménech” [Two Testimonies of Jewish Names], *Host* 13, no. 3 (1997); TYPLT, Jaromír E., “Absolutní realismus a Totální hrobař” [Absolute Realism and the Totalitarian Gravedigger], *Host* 22, no. 1 (2006); VODSEĎÁLEK, Ivo – MAZAL, Tomáš, “S Ivo Vodseďálkem o letech radostného budování 49–53” [With Ivo Vodseďálek on the Years of Happy Building up Socialism 49–53], *Vokno*, no. 18 (1990); VODSEĎÁLEK, Ivo, *Felixír života* [Felixir of Life],

of the first ever Czech samizdat series (discounting underground works under the Protectorate) in the Půlnoc [Midnight] series and as separate associated texts, in individual volumes sorted by names, which were dated 1951–1955, but which were mostly written between 1949 and 1953. As the actual literary work that was brought out in the Půlnoc series has been preserved more or less in its entirety and was then mostly published² as early as in the first half of the 1990s, the situation is now fairly clear.

Brno (Czech Republic): Host, 2000; ZAND, Gertraude, *Totaler Realismus und Peinliche Poesie. Tschechische Untergrund-Literatur 1948-1953*, Wien: Peter Lang, 1998; ZANDOVÁ, Gertraude, “Básník - svědek - aktivista: Poetický program a vydavatelský projekt Egona Bondyho v čase stalinismu” [Poet, Witness, Activist: The Poetic Programme and Publishing Project of Egon Bondy under Stalinism], *Česká literatura* 46, no. 6 (1998); KUŽEL, Petr (ed.), *Myšlení a tvorba Egona Bondyho* [Egon Bondy's Thoughts and Literary Activity], Praha: Filosofía, 2018; PŘIBÁŇ, Michal (ed.), *Český literární samizdat 1949-1989. Edice - časopisy - sborníky* [Czech Literary Samizdat 1949–1989. Series of Editions - Magazines - Anthologies], Praha: Academia - Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2018 [on Půlnoc series see pp. 208–210; on Boudník's Explosionismus series see pp. 183–185].

2) This primarily involves the first two volumes of the nine-volume work of BONDY, Egon, *Básnické dílo Egona Bondyho I.-IX.* [The Poetic Work of Egon Bondy I-IX], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1990–1993; or, more recently, the first volume of Bondy's *Básnické spisy I.-III.* [Collected Poetic Works I-III], Praha: Argo, 2014–2016; see also the first two volumes of the five-volume *Dílo Ivo Vodseďálka - 1. Zuřeni* [Fury], 1992; *2. Snění* [Dreaming], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1992; see also Vodseďálek's one volume *Dílo* [Works], Praha: Argo, 2019; see also a volume of texts by KREJCAROVÁ, Jana, *Clarissa a jiné texty* [Clarissa and Other Texts], Praha: Concordia, 1990; see also KREJCAROVÁ-ČERNÁ, Jana, *Tohle je skutečnost (Básně, prózy, dopisy)* [This is reality (poems, prose, letters)], Praha: Torst, 2016; see also a selection from the samizdat volume by SVOBODA, Pavel, “Poesie i prósy” [Poetry and Prose], *Haňta Press* 7, no. 17 (1995); see also an excerpt from a text by BORN, Adolf - JELÍNEK, Oldřich, “Urajt”, *Haňta Press* 7, no. 17 (1995); see also SVOBODA, Pavel - MACHOVEC, Martin, “Zapomenutý spolutvůrce ‘trapné poetiky’” [A Forgotten Co-Creator of ‘Embarrassing Poetics’], *Revolver Revue*, no. 93 (2013); Bondy's complete translations of Morgenstern from 1951 were published in a single volume: MORGENSTERN, Christian - BONDY, Egon, *Galgenlieder / Šibeniční písně* [Gallows Songs], Praha: Labyrint, 2000; 2nd edition, *Šibeniční písně*, Praha: Labyrint, 2010; Bondy's experimental “novel” *2000* (written in 1949–1950) was published in *Revolver Revue*, no. 45 (2001); another part of it is found in Bondy's memoirs *Prvních deset let* - see Footnote 1; a problem is presented by Karel Žák's literary work, which might well have been “passed down orally” by

Within the broad range of unofficial cultural activities which were originally given the avant-garde label and which existed at least in trace form after 1948 (hence leaving aside those writers who emigrated, fell entirely silent, were imprisoned or, of course, those who after “victorious February” attempted to comply or join the mainstream in one way or another), pride of place is taken by Teige and Effenberger’s surrealist group, which carried on its pre-1948 activities almost entirely in isolation. Its most prominent talents were clearly Mikuláš Medek and Karel Hynek. Activities also continued in Zbyněk Havlíček’s the “Spořilov” group and among some members of Skupina 42 [Group 42], particularly Jan Hanč, Jindřich Chaloupecký, and Jiří Kolář. Entirely isolated from the other posthumous children of the Czech avant-garde was the Záběhlice surrealist group known as the Libeň psychics (librarian Zdeněk Buřil, 1924–1994, varnisher Jiří Šmoranc, 1924–2003, radio mechanic Vladimír Vávra, 1924–2005, and bookbinder Stanislav Vávra, *1933), whose 1950s work was as a whole considered lost or destroyed, so that it only very gradually penetrated the Czech literary context after 1989.³ However, as

other Půlnoc participants, but which never actually appeared in the series. A couple of fragments from this work from between 1947 and 1955 were collected in 1979 by Ivo Vodseďálek in the samizdat volume *Hra prstíčků mých neklidných* [Game of my Restless Little Fingers], from which again only a couple of small samples were presented a/ in *Haňta Press* 3, no. 9 (1991), b/ in *Voknoviny* 1, no. 2 (2014); a curious second samizdat edition of Vodseďálek’s *Trapná poesie* [Embarrassing Poetry], 1952, richly illustrated by Adolf Born and Oldřich Jelínek in a single samizdat copy, has never been published by regular printing presses.

3) With regard to the Záběhlice (or Libeň) group see the memoir article by VÁVRA, Stanislav: “Záběhlická skupina surrealistů – Libeňští psychici” [The Záběhlice Surrealist Group – Libeň Psychics], *Jarmark umění*, no. 2 (April 1991); see also *Haňta Press* 3, no. 10 and 11 (1991); see also extracts from original work by S. Vávra and J. Šmoranc in *Haňta Press* 3–5, no. 14 – no. 17 (1993–1995); also an interview: VÁVRA, Stanislav – TYPLT, Jaromír F., “Ukázat pramen a podat pohár” [To Show a Spring and to Offer a Goblet], *Iniciály* 2, no. 17/18 (1991); the fictionalized memoirs of S. Vávra present a testimony that is rather late and highly stylized (VÁVRA, Stanislav, *Zvířený prach* [Swirling Dust], Praha: MČ Praha 8, 2004); see also the three following volumes of texts by the “Libeň Psychics”: VÁVRA, Vladimír, *Muž v jiných končinách světa* [A Man in Other Corners of the Earth], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1992; VÁVRA, Stanislav, *Snovidění* [Dreamseeing], Praha: Pražská imaginace 1992; ŠMORANC, Jiří, *Děti periferie* [Children of the Periphery], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1996.

early as 1948 the former avant-gardists became aware of Vladimír Boudník, with his first “explosionalist” manifesto on 14th August 1948. Bohumil Hrabal (and evidently Hrabal’s “neo-poetist” associate Karel Marysko, 1915–1988, who made a living as a performing concert musician) apparently got to know Jiří Kolář back in 1946, although awareness of Hrabal’s breakthrough 1950 texts that were so highly rated decades later⁴ only got through to this very limited “public” some time later, perhaps around the mid-1950s. Skupina Ra [The Ra Group] entirely ceased its activities. Of those mentioned above, Teige and Hynek died shortly afterwards and none of those remaining were able to obtain vocation relating in any way to literature at least from 1949 until the mid-1950s. Most of them were engaged in working-class occupations. Kolář, who from 1948 to 1951 eked out a living at the Dílo co-operative and then at the Propaganda Section of the SNKLHU [State Literature, Music and Art Publishers], was imprisoned from 1952 to 1953, and did not go back to work when he was released. Other “maladjusted individuals” in similar straitened circumstances during the first half of the 1950s included Josef Škvorecký, Vratislav Effenberger, Vladimír Vokolek, Ladislav Dvořák, and Jan Zábřana, while repudiated Czech literary grandmasters such as Vladimír Holan, Jakub Deml, Bohuslav Reynek and a large number of other authors were totally isolated with no hope of publication. Subsistence issues of a similar kind also affected all the members of the group whose work was brought together in the Půlnoc samizdat series.

The initiators, creators and most prolific authors of the series, Ivo Vodseďálek (1931–2017) and in particular Egon Bondy, actual name Zbyněk Fišer (1930–2007), were in a certain sense the “renegades” from Teige’s and Effenberger’s surrealist group. Bondy made his sam-

It was not until after the death of Vladimír Vávra in 2005 that his younger brother Stanislav Vávra managed to reconstruct from his surviving manuscripts an anthology of texts by the “Libeň Psychics” lost in the 1950s. This anthology was published under the title *Libeňští psychici. Sborník básnických a prozaických textů z let 1945–1959* [Libeň Psychics. Collected Poetic and Prose Works from 1945–1959], Praha: Concordia, 2009. 4) HRABAL, Bohumil, *Bambino di Praga – Barvotisky – Krásná Poldi* [Bambino di Praga – Color Prints – Beautiful Poldi], Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1990; see also *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, vol. 2 – *Židovský svícen* [Jewish Candleholder], also vol. 3 – *Jarmilka*, Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1991 and 1992.

izdat debut, for the first time with his Jewish pseudonym, in what was still an entirely surrealist anthology *Židovská jména* [Jewish Names], which came out in early 1949 with Vratislav Effenberger, Karel Hynek, Oldřich Wenzl, Jan Zuska, Zdeněk Wagner, Jana Krejcarová and others⁵ all represented under other Jewish pseudonyms. To a large extent, in spite of their manifesto for a radical schism with the poetics of surrealism, as documented particularly in the programme collections *Ich und es: totální realismus* [Ich und es: Total Realism]⁶ (Egon Bondy, samizdat 1951)⁷ and *Trapná poesie*⁸ [Embarrassing Poetry] (I. Vodseďálek, samizdat 1951). It is also possible to include their work from the early 1950s, like that of Hrabal at the same time and much of Skupina 42 (Kolář, Blatný and Kainar) among the work of those who repeatedly insisted on matching themselves with the surrealist legacy. In the case of Bondy and Vodseďálek, there remained the poetics of the *objet trouvé*, the idea of dreams being equal to life (and of course life being equal to dreams!), admiration for the poetics of horror and the *roman noir*, the requirement for “purity”, “nakedness”, the linkage of the unlinkable, the drasticity of testimony aiming to épater le bourgeois [shock the bourgeois], the stylization of “childish naiveté”, the inability to hierarchize values, and in particular dogmatic “leftishness”, faith in the socialist revolution (albeit of a Trotskyist anti-Stalinist kind) and resistance to “religious obscurantism”. Some of these traits are more evident in Bondy, others in Vodseďálek, and still others in Krejcarová, but all of them can be pointed out in the Půlnoc series texts as a whole. What was radical, however, was the retreat from metaphor and imagery in poetic language, the drastic “purification” and “de-aestheticization”. Key works from the Půlnoc series, some of which were to be of crucial importance to the aesthetic orientation of the 1970s artistic

5) MACHOVEC, Martin (ed.), *Židovská jména* [Jewish Names], Praha: NLN, 1995; see also MACHOVEC, Martin, “Židovská jména rediviva. Významný objev pro dějiny samizdatu” [The Jewish Names Revived. An Important Finding for the History of Samizdat], A2 3, no. 51-52 (2007).

6) For this and other cited texts from the 1950s see BONDY, Egon, *Básnické spisy I.-III.* (see Footnote 2).

7) Dtto.

8) For this and other cited texts from the 1950s see VODSEĎÁLEK, Ivo, *Dílo Ivo Vodseďálka I., II.* (see Footnote 1).

underground include Bondy's poem *Jeskyně divů aneb Prager Leben (Pražský život)* [Cave of Wonders or Prager Leben; Prague Life] (1951), the poetics of which are notably similar to those of Hrabal's *Bambino di Praga*, which was written around the same time, even though Bondy and Hrabal did not know of each other at that time and met first only by the end of 1951. In other respects, it hints at Bondy's future development as an implacable critic, a regular firebrand and a dogmatic "wielder of the truth". Also of importance is the collection *Für Bondys unbekannte Geliebte aneb Nepřeberné bohatství* [For Bondy's Unknown Love or Inexhaustible Wealth] (1951), which to some extent restores the direct connection to the poetics used by surrealists at that time (e.g., applying Dalí's paranoid-critical method and Hynek's "graphic poetry" principle), as well as *Velká kniha* [Great Book] (1952), which was to be highly popular in the *underground*, particularly with its groundbreaking section *Ožralá Praha* [Hammered Prague], its barbaric-style antipoetisms, its nursery rhyme pseudo-primitivisms and of course its "naive realist" testimonies of the absurdities of the era, which form a striking counterpoint, e.g., to Kolář's contemporary "eye-witness" poetics. The long poem *Zbytky eposu* [Remnants of an Epic] (1955), is outstanding for several of its highly de-tabooing passages, which show inadvertent parallels between Bondy's early poetical works and several elements in those of writers of American Beat generation, as well as being a splendid display of surrealist poetics linking the unlinkable and ultimately testimony of Bondy's return to some sources of Czech literary modernism (Erben, Mácha, and Havlíček Borovský).

In his *Půlnoc* texts, Ivo Vodsedálek is far more consistent in adhering to the poetics of "embarrassment", disrupting the traditional punchline and of course the imagery of the poetical text (e.g., in the collection *Cesta na Rivieru* [Trip to the Riviera], 1951, *Smrt vtípu* [Death of the Joke], 1951, *Pilot a oráč* [Pilot and Ploughman], 1951, *Americké básně* [American Poems], 1953) poetics, which in a reevaluation of the surrealist *objet trouvé* and in contrast to Bondy's poetic work anticipates all the pathos-free poetics of American pop-art and hyperrealism. He also, on the other hand, revives the beauty of surrealist spectrality and chimerality in novel contexts (in the collection *Krajina a mravnost* [Landscape and Morality], 1953, the prose work *Kalvarie* [Calvary], 1954), while generally in

a number of his texts he uncovers the appeal of “Soviet mythology” (e.g., in the collection *Kvetoucí Ukrajina* [Blooming Ukraine], 1950, 1953), while admitting to his defencelessness in the face of the myth accepted by the masses and the futility of any resistance, which he nevertheless does offer, even though he is aware of the absurdity of such conduct, thus again presciently anticipating the ideas of some of his underground successors. (However, Vodsedálek’s work was unknown to the underground circle surrounding the Plastic People.)

In hindsight, it is quite tempting to see this grouping as a more or less monolithic school of poetry, if not actually as some kind of latent resistance cell, even though circumstances around the late forties and early fifties, i.e., the political reality of the times and the personal situations of the majority of members of that group, who were mostly around twenty years of age, largely rules out anything of that nature. Zand⁹ calls them a “poetic circle” in an attempt to indicate the low degree of homogeneity within the group. The fact is that both initiators of the Půlnoc series – Bondy and Vodsedálek – were classmates at the Ječná Street grammar school in Prague, and they were brought together mainly by their interest in modern art in general and surrealism in particular, as well as ultimately to attempt a joint debut, which unfortunately took place during the period immediately following February 1948. These two artists, whose early works (i.e., at least until 1952) still bore many of the signs of juvenilia (e.g., experimenting and seeking out new forms, attempting a wide variety of genres, much “finding oneself” as it were, and almost desperate attempts to come up with something novel, independent and non-epigonic), had the good fortune to find a couple of congenial writers and artists among their contemporaries (poet and collagist Pavel Svoboda, 1930–2014, Jana Krejcarová-Fischlová-Černá-Ladmanová, 1928–1981, sculptor and poet Karel Žák, 1929–2015, and later book graphic artist and photographer Jaromír Valoušek, 1928–1993, in the early 1950s chemistry student and for a short time Vodsedálek’s wife Dana “Dagmara” Prchlíková, 1931–2006, at that time the “suprasexdadaists” Adolf

9) ZANDOVÁ, Gertraude, *Totální realismus a trapná poezie. Česká neoficiální literatura 1948–1953* [Total Realism and Embarrassing Poetry. Unofficial Czech Literature 1948–1953], Brno (Czech Republic): Host, 2002; ZANDOVÁ, Gertraude, “Básník – svědek – aktivista” (see Footnote 1).

Born, 1930–2016, and Oldřich Jelínek, *1930, later psychologist Miloš Černý, 1931–2018, poet Emil Hokeš, 1931–2000 and perhaps a couple of others), who showed appreciation for their creative ambitions and who at least to some extent responded to them by showing them their own works. Another who was close to this group, or at least to some of its members, during the first half of the 1950s (typically, not all the aforementioned personally knew all those named below!) was a quite unknown secondary graphic art school graduate, Vladimír Boudník (1924–1968)¹⁰ whom Zbyněk Fišer got to know as early as in 1948, as well as Mikuláš Medek (1926–1974), Emila Medková (1928–1985), Jaroslav Dočekal (1926–1975), Karel Hynek (1925–1953), Zbyněk Sekal (1923–1998) and Jan “Hanes” Reegen (1922–1952)¹¹ to name at least those whose familiarity with underground publishing

10) Regarding his work, see BOUDNÍK, Vladimír, *Z literární pozůstalosti* (see Footnote 1); BOUDNÍK, Vladimír, *Z korespondence* [From The Correspondence] *I* (1949–1956), *Z korespondence II* (1957–1968), Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1994; MERHAUT, Vladislav, *Zápisky o Vladimíru Boudníkovi* [Notes on Vladimír Boudník], Praha: Edice Revolver Revue, 1997.

11) The literary work of Mikuláš Medek, in which connections can be found with the Půlnoc writers, was published in the volume: MEDEK, Mikuláš, *Texty* [Texts], Praha: Torst, 1995; of great value with regard to Medek and Boudník's relationship to Bondy and his circle is the correspondence between Medek and Boudník: HARTMANN, Antonín – MRÁZ, Bohumír (eds.), “Boudník a Medek, korespondence” [Boudník and Medek, Correspondence], *Umění/Art* 45, no. 3/4 (1997); see also HARTMANN, Antonín – MRÁZ, Bohumír (eds.), “Boudník a Medek, dodatek ke korespondenci a další ‘texty pro Mikuláše Medka’” [Boudník and Medek, Additions to Correspondence and Other Texts for Mikuláš Medek], *Umění/Art* 45, no. 5 (1997); the work of the artist and writer Jaroslav Dočekal has not yet been successfully collected in its entirety, nor has it been appropriately examined. For samples of his work see: DOČEKAL, Jaroslav, “Smršťovače – hořké dávky. Z dopisů Jaroslavu Rotbauerovi” [Shrinkers – Bitter Doses. From Letters to Jaroslav Rotbauer], *Revolver Revue*, no. 29 (1995); see also *Dopisy Jaroslava Dočekala Vladimíru Boudníkovi I–II*. [Letters of Jaroslav Dočekal to Vladimír Boudník I–II], Praha: Jan Placák – Ztichlá klika, 2017; HYNEK, Karel, *S vyloučením veřejnosti* [With the Exclusion of the Public], Praha: Torst, 1998. Regarding Jan Reegen see the samizdat volume: REEGEN, Jan, *Listy příteli. Dopisy Vladimíru Boudníkovi (1949–1952)* [Letters to a Friend. Letters to Vladimír Boudník 1949–1952], published by Václav Kadlec as the 56th publication in his samizdat *Pražská imaginace series* in 1989 (Stream 4, vol. 8). Bondy provides a testimony of his friendship with Reegen in his memoirs: BONDY, Egon, *Prvních deset let* (see Footnote 1).

activities at Půlnoc can be verified in some way.¹² (The Medeks and Hynek formed a connection for some time at least between Bondy's and Vodseďálek's circle and Efferberger's surrealist group, to whom it seems otherwise Bondy had a rather ambivalent relationship). The late avant-gardist JUDr. Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997), who was quite isolated in the late 1940s and early 1950s, did not get to know Bondy until the end of 1951 (according to the latter's information), although the dating and content of Boudník's short story *Noc* [Night] – 10th October 1951 – indicate that they actually got to know each other somewhat earlier. Bondy recalls that (probably as early as 1951, but quite likely in 1952, evidently from 1951 or 1952) he met not only Boudník at Hrabal's, but also Karel Marysko.¹³

Surprisingly, however, the authors of the “Midnight Circle” did not have any demonstrable contacts with some of the other prominent artists and writers who at least for some time and in some respects “went underground”, and who were in frequent contact during the 1950s with Hrabal and particularly with Jan Zábřana or Jiří Kolář (whose work they knew at least to some extent according to various testimonies), and Kolář's artistic and human double Josef Hiršal, who stated himself that he got to know Bondy's translations of Morgenstern at Hrabal's maybe in 1952, but perhaps as late as 1955, i.e., at a time when contacts between Bondy and Hrabal were again very limited.¹⁴ Out of all the Půlnoc authors, Jana Krejcarová was the one who always led the most sociable life, and she evidently

12) In his memoirs *Prvních deset let* (see above) for the 1949-1955 period Bondy also refers to contacts with e.g. Alexej Kusák, Miroslav Lamač, Jaroslav Puchmertl, František Jůzek, Blanka Sochorová, Josef Lehoučka, Konstantin Sochor, František Drtikol, psychiatrist Václav Pinkava (Jan Křesadlo), or Andrej Bělocvětov. At Charles University, Faculty of Arts, where Ivo Vodseďálek studied aesthetics part-time, he got to know Milan Kundera, and even though he maintained occasional contact with him throughout the 1950s, he allegedly never told him about his literary ambitions.

13) The conspicuous similarity between some of Karel Marysko's poetic work and some of Egon Bondy's is pointed out in a study by MACHOVEC, Martin, “Literární dílo Karla Maryska” [The Literary Work of Karel Marysko], *Revolver Revue*, no. 34 (1997); Egon Bondy confirmed that he had met Marysko at Hrabal's home in Libeň in a personal conversation with the author.

14) HIRŠAL in MORGENSTERN, Christian, *Bim bam bum*, Praha: Český spisovatel, 1971, also in MORGENSTERN, Christian, *Morgenstern v Čechách. 21 proslulých básní ve 179 českých překladech 36 autorů* [Morgenstern in Bohemia. 21 Famous Poems in

had the most contacts with people outside the isolated circles of post-avantgardists, even though she evidently gained a reputation as the rather extravagant, albeit charmingly eloquent and forthright daughter of Milena Jesenská and Jaromír Krejcar, not as an underground writer, which is indirectly indicated by her alleged apprehension and indignation following the samizdat “publication” without her consent of her prose work *Clarissa* in 1951.¹⁵ A more remote awareness of the Půlnoc authors’ activities can be attributed to several more quite prominent writers who found themselves to be in more or less similar straitened circumstances in the early 1950s, e.g., Oldřich Wenzl, Zbyněk Havlíček, Ludvík Kundera (as testified for example, by correspondence between Kundera and Zdeněk Wagner¹⁶), Vratislav Effenberger, Jaroslav Rotbauer¹⁷, Jan Bouše, and Libor Fára. Until their premature deaths, Závaš Kalandra and Karel Teige were also allegedly in contact with Bondy at least, although hard evidence is thin on the ground, and for the most part we can only rely on the memories and indirect testimonies.¹⁸ Clearly, as

179 Czech translations of 36 authors], Praha: Vida vida, 1996; see also HIRŠAL, Josef - GRÖGEROVÁ, Bohumila, *Let let* [Flight of Years], Praha: Rozmluvy, 1993.

15) VODSEĎÁLEK in KREJCAROVÁ, *Clarissa a jiné texty* (see Footnote 2).

16) Extracts from the correspondence of Zdeněk Wagner (1923-1991), a former participant in the *Židovská jména* anthology who became a veterinarian, were printed in TYPLT, Jaromír, F. - WAGNER, Zdeněk, “Fascinantně divý muž Zdeněk Wagner” [The Fascinatingly Wild Man Zdeněk Wagner], *Host* 16, no. 5 (2000); an extract from a letter dated 3rd January 1949, entitled “Slovo o pluku Fišerově” [A Word on Fišer’s Regiment], testifies to the fact that at that time Fišer (E. Bondy) made a considerable impression upon Wagner (even if evidently a somewhat ambiguous one); though what is also rather conspicuous is that Wagner does not make the slightest mention of the *Židovská jména* project, which was to come to a head just as this letter was being written. Wagner’s complete work (including quoted correspondence) was published in book form: WAGNER, Zdeněk, *Virgule* [Rod], Praha: Cherm, 2007.

17) EFFENBERGER, Vratislav, *Moderní kultura v socialistické revoluci* [Modern Culture in a Socialist Revolution] (manuscript from 1965, whose existence is testified in TYPLT, Jaromír F., “Dvě svědectví o Židovských jménech” (see Footnote 1); concerning Jaroslav Rotbauer, see also DOČEKAL, Jaroslav, “Smršťovače - hořké dávky” (Footnote 11).

18) See BONDY, Egon, *Prvních deset let* (Footnote 1); [HERDA, Milan], *Protokolární výpověď o trockistech* [Protocol testimony on Trotskyists], Czech Interior Ministry Archive, file shelf No. 305-738-1 - “Trotskyist surrealists. Testimonies to the police

soon as the Půlnoc series was established, i.e., late 1950/early 1951, its creators kept their activities hidden for obvious reasons, even from some of their former friends from whom they had in any case gradually become artistically estranged one way or another.

Since the Půlnoc series was primarily the offspring of its two initiators, then again in retrospect it is possible to gain the somewhat erroneous impression that its primary contents were mainly meant to be Bondy's and Vodseďálek's "totally realistic", "embarrassing", "anti-poetic", "de-tabooing", "neo-Dadaist", often specifically political, or "witness" reactions to some surrealist practices, which as has become evident with the passage of time, already had its precedent in the somewhat similar reactions of some members of Group 42 and the Ra Group (in any case Bondy undoubtedly found an affinity with Hrabal and Boudník due to this similarity). What is more likely is that this (partly illustrated) typescript series was originally meant to serve more as a platform for **creative dialogue** with parallel unofficial artistic trends, and even more probably as a platform for attempts to continue this dialogue even under the extraordinary and absurd conditions of the day. Evidence of these efforts is confirmed by the "guest" appearances made by Hrabal, Boudník, Born and Jelínek. In 1950, it was still undoubtedly unclear where the artistic paths of these two - Bondy and Vodseďálek - were taking them and which of the other Půlnoc authors would produce works of lasting value that might compete with them one way or another, and in particular, in which political and social circumstances the work of all those involved might develop further. Back in 1950, everything was bogged down by doubts and uncertainties that were surely much greater than those which twenty years later dogged Bondy and Vodseďálek's "underground" successors, who were thrust into a situation that was otherwise quite similar. The fact that the creators of the series saw the early 1950s as some kind of stopgap situation whose duration could only be guessed at is confirmed by

and Gestapo on Trotskyists. Trotskyist leaflets", its part was published in a section in *Jarmark umění (Bulletin Společnosti Karla Teiga)*, no. 11/12 (1996); [HERDA, Milan], "Protokolární výpověď M. H." [M. H. Protocol testimony], in ALAN, Josef (ed), *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945-1989* [Alternative Culture. The Story of Czech Society 1945-1989], Praha: NLN, 2001, p. 523.

Vodseďálek's statement¹⁹ that the usual Půlnoc edition, represented generally by four typed copies (1 + 3), was primarily intended to **conserve** the texts that had been written, i.e., to preserve them until they could be published, which of course was ultimately to be four decades later, and the question arises whether just an intimation of this fact would not have entirely undermined the creativity of writers who were around twenty years of age. The similarities between the early 1950s and the early 1970s were considerable for debuting artists and writers, e.g., the loss of the option to publish freely and the imposition of political repression; however, the early 1970s had its precedent in the early 1950s, so then it was possible to look back and seek examples.

Hence, while **in retrospect** it is evident (from an art history or literary history standpoint) that the most prominent "core" authors in the "Půlnoc circle" were Bondy and Vodseďálek, while Hrabal and Boudník remained on its "periphery", this did not yet necessarily appear to be the case around the early 1950s. There is no doubt that much was expected from Jana Krejcarová, whose literary work has only come down to us in fragments, though the reputation of her output is enhanced by the legend of her life.²⁰

What might the **objective** of the Půlnoc series creators have been? Probably first and foremost to continue to address other non-conformists and modernists (hence in 1950 this could only take place "underground") and to enter into debate with them. They un-

19) VODSEĎÁLEK, Ivo - MAZAL, Tomáš, "S Ivo Vodseďálkem o letech radostného budování 49-53" (Footnote 1).

20) This is borne out not only by the Austrian documentary film by director Nadja Seelich made in 1992, *Sie sass im Glashaus und warf mit Steinen*, on Krejcarová's life, but also by a monograph which Krejcarová (Černá) herself wrote on her own mother: ČERNÁ, Jana, *Adresát Milena Jesenská* [Addressee Milena Jesenská], Praha: Divoké víno, 1969 (1st edition); Praha: Concordia, 1991 (2nd edition); Praha: Torst, 2014 (3rd edition). There are also numerous testimonies stating that the poet also used this text to project her own twists and turns in life onto her mother's fate, e.g. VODSEĎÁLEK, Ivo, *Felixír života* (Footnote 1); see also BONDY, Egon, *Prvních deset let* (Footnote 1); see also MILITZ, Anna, *Ani víru, ani ctnosti člověk nepotřebuje ke své spáse: příběh Jany Černé* [Neither Religion, nor Virtue are Necessary for One's Salvation: the Story of Jana Černá], Olomouc (Czech Republic): Burian a Tichák, 2015.

doubtedly wished to create a fitting and a true reflection of the times in which they lived, and not to succumb to the enormous pressure of mass psychosis and the general mythologization of reality, but rather to unmask the imposed myths with particular mockery, and thus somehow to actually “disarm” them. They also wanted to maintain the continuity of modern art and modern literature (to be specific, at the time this meant the continuity of artistic work, which was still understood as avant-garde, i.e., inventive, pioneering, and innovative). They might have also wanted a confrontation in which they could stand up for their particular articulated artistic credo and their own distinctive standpoint, but these efforts only succeeded to a limited degree: echoes of Bondy’s work (but almost to no extent that of Vodseďálek) can be found in some works by Hrabal, to some extent Boudník, as well as to a limited extent for example in Medek, Hynek, and Marysko. Only Bondy’s poetic work, and of course his later prose and philosophical work, exercised a profound influence on the younger generations of underground authors some twenty years later, even though this was all rather spontaneous and had little to do with the Půlnoc authors’ original aspirations. Hence Bondy’s and Vodseďálek’s attempt of some kind in the early 1950s to make their texts at least part of a substitute literary scene can be said for the most part to have been unsuccessful, as such a “practice” only emerged to a very limited extent even within the Půlnoc series itself; today it is clear that some of their publication activities between 1950 and 1955 were primarily rather **individual matters** of a “piratical” nature which the other Půlnoc authors did not necessarily know about (as was already the case for the compilation of the *Židovská jména* collection around 1948/1949; not all of these authors were informed about being involved in this “business”). Hence fear of prosecution clearly played a greater role here than the organizers cared to admit.

In the given circumstances, they could rule out any idea of accomplishing Bondy’s subsequent objective, as testified by Vodseďálek²¹, of making the Půlnoc authors into an artistic group which (doubtless on the model of the various surrealist groups!) would be highly homogeneous and would strive (as in the case, at least for

21) See VODSEĎÁLEK, Ivo, *Felixír života* (op. cit.).

some time, of André Breton's group) not only to achieve a "revolutionary change in human consciousness", but also for a material "revolutionary change throughout the world". However, it is also evident that the mere declaration and articulation of such an immodest ambition could have been conceived by Bondy in the early 1950s as an inspiring and stimulating necessity. In any case, a number of other "immodest" aims and ambitions showed up in his subsequent life and work.

The **reactions at the time of the Půlnoc authors' artistic fellow travellers** were, generally speaking, insofar as they can be followed at all, rather restrained.²² We might well include those of Boudník, who indeed maintained an aesthetic distance from Bondy and Vodsedálek – more in the graphic arts than in literature – but less with regard to "world view": his explosionism did not in the least lag behind Bondy's maximalist postulates in its radicalism and his artistic work and lifestyle were viewed even by those artistically close to him with some distrust if not disdain. The most prominent fellow-traveller of the Půlnoc authors was undoubtedly Bohumil Hrabal, who was also the only one to always have a full understanding of, and high appreciation for, Bondy's work. However, he was certainly not one of them, as his age, education and life experience alone inspired respect and kept him at a certain distance. It is doubtless little exaggeration to conclude that artists like Medek, Fára, Havlíček, Wenzl, Effenberger (and ultimately, Born and Jelínek too, who were still Applied Arts College students in the early 1950s) were above all apprehensive about Bondy's political explicitness and so rather sought to distance themselves from the Půlnoc "core". This might also have been caused by nothing more than a simple distaste for Bondy's and Krejcarová's (not to mention Boudník's) extravagant, eccentric behaviour and minimum social adjustment, which could appear quite dangerous in the early 1950s.²³ Bondy's ostentatious

22) HAVLÍČEK, Zbyněk – PRUSÍKOVÁ, Eva, *Dopisy Evě / Dopisy Zbyňkovi* [Letters to Eva / Letters to Zbyněk], Praha: Torst, 2003, pp. 45, 152-153; see also MEDEK, Mikuláš, *Texty* (Footnote 7); DOČEKAL, Jaroslav, "Smršťovače – hořké dávky" (Footnote 11), also EFFENBERGER, Vratislav in TYPLT, Jaromír F., "Dvě svědectví o Židovských jménech" (Footnote 17).

23) [HERDA, Milan], *Protokolární výpověď M. H.*, 2001 (Footnote 18).

leftish and “revolutionary” tendencies²⁴ could also have been off-putting, while for many Bondy and Vodseďálek’s “desertion” of “high” art was incomprehensible. The question remains whether the primary objections and aversions involved in their disassociation with them were of a purely personal nature (and this applies not just to Bondy, but above all to Krejcarová, whose “spontaneous animalism” simply frightened many of her contemporaries and friends, as a number of testimonies bear witness), or mainly aesthetic, artistic or relating to their world-view. Here, we are compelled to remain in the realm of speculation, as we cannot ascertain to what extent the later testimonies of the participants are influenced by their view of that period through the prism of later events. In any case, the Půlnoc group had fallen apart by 1955 anyway²⁵ and communications between its former participants were irregular and occasional in the following years, as they all went their separate ways.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Půlnoc series and the literary works published in it have become a tale, a pseudo-fiction and a legend, which was occasionally perpetuated, no doubt deliberately and consciously, by Bohumil Hrabal in his works published during the 1960s, but whose original creator was undoubtedly Egon Bondy: let us recall his cycle *Legenda* [Legends] from the collection *Für Bondys unbekannte Geliebte*²⁶. Several contemporaries testify to his numerous statements from the 1960s in “as the poet Bondy spake” mode. (Bondy’s “split” into “I” and “he”, which is well-represented as an autostylization throughout his lifelong work, was repossessed

24) For example, the graphic artist Vladimír Šmerda, who associated with the young Zbyněk Fišer 1947–1948 recalls how at that time Z. F. repeatedly assured a number of friends that after the victorious socialist revolution they would “hang them in their own interest”: whether he was serious, half-serious or only joking it was clear that such arguments were not necessarily to everybody’s taste (from a personal conversation between the author and V. Š. in spring 2000).

25) BONDY, Egon, *Prvních deset let* (Footnote 1); VODSEĎÁLEK, Ivo - MAZAL, Tomáš, “S Ivo Vodseďálkem o letech radostného budování 49–53” (Footnote 1).

26) BONDY, Egon, *Básnické dílo Egona Bondyho II* [The Poetic Work by Egon Bondy II], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1992; BONDY, Egon, *Básnické spisy I* [Collected Poetic Works I], Praha: Argo, 2014.

in masterly fashion by Hrabal in his *Něžný barbar*, 1973²⁷, which is actually a kind of legend of a legend.)

As regards **the State Security's (StB) familiarity** with Bondy's and Vodseďálek's activities, the only material that is so far publicly available at the Interior Ministry archive (now ABS) relates mostly to the 1948–1949 period, i.e., **before** the Půlnoc series was launched. There is an undated testimony from Milan Herda, imprisoned in the 1950s, evidently from the period between 1952 and 1954²⁸, which indicates two things: although the testifier attempted to rather trivialize the artistic (and indeed the political) activities of Bondy (always called Fišer in the report), Vodseďálek and Krejcarová (Fischlová), to portray them as grandiose mystifications, or as ordinary economic crime (especially in comparison with the “seriousness” of the activities of Karel Teige, to whom the entire testimony relates), although he provides facts which could definitely have been of some use to State Security. (For example, he mentions the plan – fulfilled later, in 1950, – to smuggle Czech glass to Vienna.) Hence it can be assumed that if the State Security had wanted, they could have monitored the Půlnoc organizers activities from an early stage.²⁹

Public reactions to the activities of one of the first and most original underground artistic groupings were general practically zero until the late 1960s: the Půlnoc works from the 1950s were not published and the activities of the initiators were only a “legend”.

27) See HRABAL, Bohumil, “Něžný barbar”, in *Obrazy v hlubině času. Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala 6* [Collected Works of Bohumil Hrabal 6, Images in the Depth of Time], Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1992; the book was to come out in the English translation by Stacey Knecht in 2017 under a title *The Tender Barbarian* by Archipelago Books – see their website <https://archipelagobooks.org/book/the-tender-barbarian/>, visited 26th Jan 2017, but has not got to print by 2019.

28) [HERDA, Milan], Protokolární výpověď o trockistech (Footnote 18). Another part of this testimony, this time dealing directly with the Fišer-Bondy circle and friends, was printed in the Documentation section in ALAN, Josef, *Alternativní kultura* op. cit., pp. 523–527. See also BONDY, Egon, *Prvních deset let* (Footnote 1).

29) Research over the last few years has confirmed that throughout the 1950s State Security monitored the activities of people connected to Půlnoc, not just because of their literary work, but also due to their political, i.e. anti-Soviet attitudes, which were considered “Trotskyist”. See the “Surrealists” file No. 11135 from the Czech Security Services Archive (Archiv bezpečnostních složek, ABS, Prague).

(One exception is Boudník's **artistic** work, but that is only rather indirectly related to the Půlnoc authors' **literary** activities, running in parallel to them.)

So again, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that if **Bondy's** poetic work had not been discovered in the late 1960s by director Radim Vašínka,³⁰ literary critic Jan Lopatka, and in the early 1970s art historian Ivan Martin Jirous, the Půlnoc underground would only have lived on as Bondyian and Hrabalian legend until 1989, if not to this day. It is only the fact that the early 1970s underground artists enthusiastically seized upon Bondy's poetry and began to put it to music and so to spread it among a public that was of a very different character, education, and social origin that allows the underground Půlnoc circle to be understood in retrospect as a kind of prelude to the greatly differentiated underground activities of the 1970s and 1980s. Without this capitalization, the Půlnoc circle would have remained a mere episode in the history of the Czech unofficial cultural scene, as was unfortunately the case with so many small groups and individuals, e.g., the "Libeň psychics" and the various regional activities. The public (albeit narrow and limited) only started to be aware of the importance of the Půlnoc authors' artistic and literary activities, in fact only those of Egon Bondy and perhaps also of Jana Krejcarová, in the late sixties and the early seventies. It was only many years later as the importance of the role played by this little group in the creation of the later Czech underground movement became evident.

The circle around the Půlnoc series can in any case be considered to be one of the most prominent examples of **underground artistic activities** in the 1950s. The main reason is that the group did not carry on its previous **public** activities underground, as in the case of the great majority of other unofficial activities performed by individual artists who after February 1948 were merely trying to **continue** illegally, i.e., underground, what they had been able to do legally up until that time, but now actually "making their debut" in the underground. Hence for the public it was now "dead",

30) VAŠINKA, Radim, "Vydolováno z nepaměti I-V" [Retrieved from Time out of Mind I-V], *Divadelní noviny* 10, no. 5-9 (2001); VAŠINKA, Radim, "Bondy a Orfeus" [Bondy and Orpheus], in *Bouda Bondy, projekt Bouda IV*, Praha: National Theatre, 2007.

“inexistent” and indeed “underground” in the true sense. Moreover, the Půlnoc initiators made their underground debut with artistic works that were for the most part so innovative that it would be difficult to find anything similar even in published literature before February 1948 (hence they were not weighed down by any concerns at all regarding censorship or the “acceptability of the work”, which any **publishing** author would have had to deal with to a greater or lesser extent). These were works which often very specifically, drastically, veristically, and realistically portrayed the times in which they were written, i.e., the Stalinist pandemonium of the early 1950s in Czechoslovakia: *ergo* **they could not have been written in any other way but in the underground**, and in a form which only a couple of decades later started to be called **samizdat**, thus - paradoxically - following the example of the Soviet Union.

2001, 2008

Translated by Melvyn Clarke

2. UNDERGROUND AND “UNDER-THE-GROUND”

*The standpoints of the underground community in Czech society in the 1970s and 1980s and the specific values of the underground culture*¹

The terms “underground” and “under-the-ground”² have not been clearly defined in Czech culture so far. Traditionally, “underground” comprises the community which emerged in the early 1970s around the rock band The Plastic People of the Universe. This community, which later became part of Czech dissent and to a great extent merged with the community around Charter 77, was composed of poets, musicians, artists, as well as philosophers, essayists, and samizdat publishers of various focus and political orientation.

Let’s start with a few quotes linked to the question of what is and what is not “underground” in Czech, or also even world culture, and what misunderstandings may arise and prevail with regard to this term, with all its historical, literary and, in the broad sense, cultural connotations.

The first comes from Ivan M. Jirous’s memoir *Pravdivý příběh Plastic People* [The True Story of the Plastic People]. There is a rather humorous passage in which the author remembers how, in the early 70s, he tried to explain to the less bright members of the Plastic People the difference between “psychedelic” and “underground” music:

I explained to them that psychedelic music is a matter of an artistic genre or style whereas underground is a spiritual attitude. As an example I named Lennon and The Beatles, who was underground, although

1) The study was first written in English, then translated into Czech and published abridged, then translated back into English and published again. See the details in Author’s Note.

2) In Czech: “underground” and “podzemí”; “podzemí” being the literal translation of the English word, carrying the same secondary meaning, referring to “unofficial cultural sphere”, “counter-culture”, “anti-establishment movements” etc., however, with a broader meaning, i.e. culture and art not necessarily inspired by Anglo-American “underground culture”, but by some domestic predecessors as well.