

Ivo

Možný

**Why So
Easily ...**

Some Family Reasons
for the Velvet Revolution
(A Sociological Essay)

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A Sociological Essay

Ivo Možný

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KAROLINUM PRESS

To Josef Škvorecký, author of *The Cowards*.

With great respect.

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Across the ponds the forest started to murmur, and as the shadow of the summer clouds amply fills the hollow with its little town, and then moves up the opposite slope, before halting for a long time beneath Kaňúr on the Slovak border - seemingly motionless due to the great distance - I have a premonition that suddenly everything will change: without us, simply due to its nature, or due to the Earth's regular rotation.

Ludvík Vaculík, July 1982¹

The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to improve the principles of the construction of reality - in particular, social reality - is a major dimension of political power.

Pierre Bourdieu

1 Transl. by Gerald Turner.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

As I introduce this booklet to the reader for the third time, I cannot help but notice how dramatically the times are a-changing. The entire political landscape has changed from when I wrote my essay twenty years ago. Where are the old foreign travel permits², where is the hope I had that in spring I would manage to get my hands on a bicycle and that fridges might be available in the run up to Christmas? Where is the capitalism described by the Communist Party newspaper *Rudé právo* that we were destined not only to catch up with but to overtake, where are the women fighting for peace?! What's more, the priorities of the age are different. Who back then had heard of energy dependency, the global war on terrorism, the ominously rising sovereign debt and the creeping distaste for parliamentary democracy...? The readers themselves have changed. They no longer have to wait in an endless queue for an apartment, though they now are burdened by a mortgage. They buy a car before they've even had their first child, and no longer send their underlings to represent them so they can carry on building their weekend cottage, but instead find themselves wondering how they will pay the mortgage if their business closes down in the crisis... Why are people still buying this essay?

Twenty years ago I attempted to understand a society characterised by despotic socialism and explain some of the mechanisms that had allowed it to function successfully for so long. As this society becomes history, the old regime is being transformed before our very eyes into something from a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. Or perhaps a comic puppet show. On the stage, in front of the flimsy scenery, a series of characters enter jerkily: the Communist, the Dissident, the StB agent, the Independent, the Apparatchik... and in

2 *výjezdní doložka*, a document that had to be accompanied by the recommendation of an employer, school, military command or national committee: translator's note, henceforth t/n.

the background, of course, a crowd of extras playing the Ordinary People. “Where would I fit in?” you ask yourself. Well, you’d probably be Škrhola³.

The protagonists of this puppet show must be cast carefully. If it were based in fact, there would be no one left in the group of extras. A large number of the Ordinary People over time played many different roles, sometimes simultaneously. In 1990, I learned that three of my best friends from the normalisation period (1970–80s) had been StB collaborators. One of these Agents was also a Dissident, one an Independent, and one a Communist. It goes without saying that all three were fundamentally decent people, punctilious professionals and upstanding intellectuals, and always had been. After all, the StB did not recruit rogues and kept well clear of nonentities. Instead, it blackmailed into submission people that enjoyed the respect of those around them.

This is all so difficult to understand from today’s vantage point. For those who were not around at the time, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the mega-narrative is so wonderfully logical, clear and compelling – not to speak of the fact that it is always so tempting to judge your parents. On the contrary, it is far more difficult to ask whether your own conduct does not include the same elements of opportunism by which our petty lives deal with the great movement of history, but now simply garbed in a flashier jacket. And for those who were there at the time, things remain difficult because the media fairy tale gets entangled in their own personal memories. The process of selective memory, with which we are all fortunately equipped, kicks in, since otherwise our inability to come to terms with our own past would drive us mad.

Our lives are lived in episodes and we can only understand them as a story. Each of these stories is at the same time constructed as an

3 A figure from puppet theatre a bit like Punch in English theatre, who represents the archetypal country bumpkin: t/n.

explanation – that is its hidden bonding agent. In order to make our explanation acceptable, or at least tolerable, not least to ourselves, we often employ somewhat convoluted but completely unconscious strategies involving the selective recall of lived episodes.

We also know that the story of our lives does not unfold in a wasteland. It needs its period scenery, i.e. the context in which it is narrated and in which it becomes comprehensible. Without a script we would be unable to piece together the dramas of our lives or replay them in our own memory, let alone recount them to others. However, once we begin to speak of these dramas and fables (and thus legitimise them) – once we attempt to communicate our story, even maybe to our loved ones – the background against which events are played out must be constructed in advance, clear and self-evident to all. Our story winds its way through the past, and this is a landscape our listeners did not figure in. Evoking the scenery of the past, that vanished context of our lives, is so difficult as to be impossible. No one is capable of fashioning such a expansive backdrop on their own. It is created by public discourse, to which our intimate discourses can but make reference. The background to the story of our lives is created by the media.

After every great coup, work begins on the construction of an overarching shared narrative of national history as if from scratch. Tearing down the old scenery is the first aspiration of every revolution, even of the most velvety variety. The new scenery is created quickly, because there must be a background from which narratives can detach themselves. The show must go on.

And thus emerge the lies of memory, the collective, national memory. However feeble and simplistic they may be as explanations, they do at least allow us to understand each other, which is a start. And as soon as the debate gets underway, an established version of the past is now indispensable. What we have before us today is this mainstream version of our national past.

However, one day there will have to be a reckoning with our shared past. This will not happen without a deconstruction of what are now valid and well established images from the recent history of the Czech nation. This is not the work of a few days and is a task for professional historians. It took the French until the late 1990s before Gallimard published the three-volume *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,⁴ which confronts the media discourse with a polemical, nuanced image of the 1940s, beginning with the stories of the French during World War II and continuing into the turbulent years that followed. We lack such a monumental work of self-reflection.

And so for the third time I am launching this little booklet of mine, now twenty years old, into the world in the hope that it might ring bells in the minds of older readers, and indeed younger readers who, though not actors in the events described, view the narrative presented by the media as being suspiciously simple. It may help them frame better the question of how things actually were.

Of course, the answers that the essay from 1990 offers have themselves already been subsumed into history. This text was, I believe, the first attempt in this country to understand what had just taken place and why. I have not changed a word of the original text. Now that we all know what happened over the following twenty years, we have the opportunity of learning from this text how everything that followed actually began. In this respect, I myself feel the main weakness or shortcoming of the text is that it did not pay more attention to the mechanisms of power and coercion in the old regime. These are age-old mechanisms, and it seems to me that a better explanation of how they work could have provided powerful inspiration for understanding the whole of this history up to the present day. I took it for granted, much to my regret, that the pernicious entanglement of politics, economics, governance and knowledge was dead and buried. Part of the optimism that followed in the wake of the revolution

⁴ Pierre Nora et al.: *Les lieux de mémoire*, vols. 1 to 3, Paris : Gallimard 1997.