

MINISTER AND PLAYWRIGHT

Milan Uhde (*1936)

In his memoirs Milan Uhde writes that when he was born on 28 July 1936 the trial of a darkening system, part of preparations for enemy bombing, was being held. It was nationwide so also affected his native Brno, with which Uhde has been associated his whole life, albeit with short hops to Prague.

His parents were lawyers and he grew up in a middle-class environment in Brno. His childhood was impacted by race laws as his mother was half Jewish. This brought uncertainty and worries, from which the family tried to shield little Milan. However, those years left a serious, deep impression on the young Milan and the later Mr. Uhde: playwright, poet, essayist, dissident and, post-1989, politician.

It could be said that Uhde's disposition made him an unusual literary artist within the context of the Czech milieu of the second half of the 20th century. He is – most consciously, declaring himself such several times in his memoirs – a conservative, a pedant, a perfectionist, the opposite of a bohemian. Not that he was in this regard exceptional in Czech literature. His friends Klíma, Vaculík, Kohout and even Havel were made of similar stuff, if to varying degrees. However, the concentration, purity and sincerity in which this is seen in Uhde are far from common. This disposition, perhaps even physically evident in rhetorical speech tending toward pathos, is however interestingly confounded by a tendency toward intellectual non-conformism, creativity and powerful obstinacy that have meant that he couldn't live such a bourgeois and moralistic life even if he wanted to.

After completing grammar school (1954) he studied Czech, Russian and literature at Brno's Faculty of Arts, graduating in 1958. The Hungarian revolt of 1956 had in the meantime changed Uhde's view of communism and a system that required tanks to defend itself. Until then he had been a convinced Communist Youth member, though in his case one cannot speak of zeal. During his studies he had penned various texts, above all poetry, and made his literary debut in 1962 with the collection *People from the Ground Floor*, which was part of a current of civilian poetry that came after militant poetry. By then he had for two years been an editor of *Host*, Brno's "review of books", where he was a colleague of Jan Skácel, Oldřich Mikulášek and the literary critic Oleg Sus, whom he regarded as his guru. In the 1960s Uhde published books in various genres, particularly poetry, song lyrics, short stories of a frequently allegorical type (*The Mysterious Tower in B.*) and became an ever more gifted playwright. His theatrical radio plays were for the most part based on the

principles of the Theatre of the Absurd, supplemented with political satire. His best known play was 1964's *King Vávra*, centred on a critical intellectual who clashes with the regime. Host was banned in 1970 and Uhde himself was officially banned in 1972. Two years later the Divadlo Husa na provázku theatre directors Peter Scherhauser and Zdeněk Pospíšil offered him incognito work in the form of dramatisations of well-known literary works: Párala's *Professional Woman*, Mrštík's *A May Fairytale* and Olbracht's *Nikola Šuhaj, Bandit*; under the title *Ballad for a Bandit*, the latter became one of the theatre's most successful productions and in musical film form became a virtual cult – without anybody knowing who had written the libretto. In those years the banned writer became close to a circle of similarly persecuted Prague writers, with whom he regularly met, exchanging and reading out texts. He signed Charter 77 and became active in the dissent.

After November 1989 Milan Uhde entered political office, being the most suited to that role of all the writers. He was minister of culture and an MP for the Civic Democrats. As the first speaker of the Chamber of Deputies he greeted the newly created Czech Republic with a speech entitled "Good day" on 1. 1. 1993. His politics developed from admiration for Václav Klaus (for whom he said he would run out for a beer) to mild criticism. He split from the Civic Democrats in the late 1990s and quit politics. He lectured at DAMU drama school and devoted himself to where he felt comfortable: writing and the theatre. And to his Brno.

Text by Jiří Peňás