

CHANGING SAMIZDAT

Ivan Lamper (*1957)

“Unlike Nazism, normalisation communism didn’t have victims in terms of lives. The only victims (...) are those millions whose spines are broken and brains washed, who don’t regard themselves as victims. I am not a victim of normalisation communism – I’m a happy person who lived through adventurous times. Of course I could imagine having had a different adolescence or youth, but it was an adventure. Look at photos from the 1970s and 1980s. How the people look, the expressions on their faces, how they were dressed... They’re the real victims of communism. But if you ask where those victims are, nobody puts their hands up, because those people feel like they’re totally fine,” says the Respekt weekly editor and one-time dissident Ivan Lamper in an interview conducted in 2016 by Tereza Matějková for her thesis (The Personality of Ivan Lamper in the Context of Czech Journalism).

Ivan Lamper was born in Pardubice in 1957. He grew up in Zlín, where his mother was a teacher and his father an engineer, *“a big noise in the chemicals industry”*. Lamper remembers the Soviet occupation in August 1968, when he was 11. It left its mark on him when his father was expelled from the Communist Party *“fortunately. (...) It was such an important experience, something that later stayed with me. Albeit in a family that had, in its own way, been disinherited. It helped you to resist (...) the regime. (...). At home nobody forced me to do anything, in the sense, that is, of kowtowing or sucking up to the regime. Quite the opposite. My parents regularly listened to Western radio, in particular Radio Free Europe, so I knew about things that were officially taboo.”*

After graduating from grammar school in Uherské Hradiště, Lamper studied economics for one semester. When he left university he spent around six months at a psychiatric clinic in a bid to avoid military service. Two-year basic service in the Czechoslovak People’s Army meant pledging loyalty to the Communist Party and the occupying Soviet authorities and was accompanied by ideological and often physical harassment. *“Two years locked up in such conditions didn’t appeal to me one bit. So I was in a mental hospital and received a blue book after eight years of trying.”* Blue books were documents that conferred exemption from military service.

Like many other young people, Ivan Lamper hoped to emigrate from Czechoslovakia to Western Europe. However, the Communist authorities confiscated his passport in 1981: *“I planned it intensively with my then wife. I learned English and we bought a tour to*

Germany with the money we got from our parents for our wedding. And then, totally incomprehensibly, because I was an absolutely normal young person, they confiscated my passport. (...) I was the son of a father they'd chucked out of the party, and perhaps I was a bit of a non-conformist who didn't like the Bolsheviks, but I didn't broadcast that in any way. I was still attending an Evangelical church and working at a theatre as part of some kind of rebellion. And four days before the trip the StB arrested me. They came for me at work, surrounded me in two cars and made up some pretext about me seeing a car accident and needing to make a statement to them. And then they confiscated my passport."

He earned a living as a worker and in 1982 signed the Charter 77 Declaration (the founding document of the most important Czechoslovak opposition initiative). It wasn't a difficult decision, he recalls. In fact, despite the interest of the secret police it spelled relief. *"It brought you out of a general solitude that even today is hard to describe, and also out of a dependence on what the state did or didn't permit. By signing it I crossed a line. I found myself among inspiring people, who weren't afraid, who had interesting ideas. I'd always longed for such a community. To paraphrase Václav Havel, history entered my life, something started happening with me."*

In Zlín, Ivan Lamper had begun to copy the poetry of Egon Bondy and the lyrics of The Plastic People of the Universe on a typewriter. He used those copies to create a samizdat publication. Ivan Martin Jirous, a poet, art historian and, for many years, the guiding spirit of the underground, became for him a crucial figure and partial model. Jirous was a man with distinctive opinions and, first and foremost, a principled outlook. In the first half of the 1980s Lamper moved to Prague, where he got to know Jan Ruml, Jáchym Topol and other dissidents of the younger generation. He started to devote himself strongly to samizdat and in 1985 became, alongside the writer Jáchym Topol and the artist Viktor Karlík, a founder of the magazine Revolver Revue (hereinafter RR; until 1987 it came out under the name Jednou nohou, meaning one foot, as in "one foot in prison").

The first edition was printed on a mimeograph and had a linocut cover by Karlík. It cost 25 crowns and had a print run of around 50. *"It was as if 20,000 of something were printed today. For us it was an absolute sensation. You're putting absolutely everything at risk. You do it in secret and you have every sheet of paper in that 100-page publication in your hands. (...) So we worked hard to publish the first edition and felt like we'd made a hole in the Czech samizdat world. And then nothing happened at all."* After a few more editions, however, RR focused on literature and essays banned in Czechoslovakia (whether original Czech texts or translations) and became a significant and increasingly well-known illegal magazine that gradually became more professional in difficult

underground conditions, a fact many who were involved attribute in large part to Ivan Lamper.

At the same time he and Jáchym Topol smuggled in literature from Poland, where there was a stronger and more active anti-Communist opposition, meaning also far more extensive and varied unofficial publishing. *"We got our hands on a kind of blue rucksack and, because it wasn't possible to enter even Poland without an invitation and checks, made use of the Peace and Friendship nature trail, which led over the ridges of the Krkonoše and was open to both Czech and Polish citizens. Though there were police all over the place, nobody checked us. These people from Warsaw or Wrocław had the same blue rucksack, which they crammed with their stuff. Ours was rather meagre. All that was in it was a few Charter documents and some books. As if by chance we met at some rest spot, dropped the rucksacks by our sides and then each took the other one. And somebody reported us, so they put Topol and me behind bars. They took us to Poland because we'd been caught by the Poles. I don't even know how long we were there. From custody in Poland they transported us over the border and locked us up in Hradec Králové."* Thanks to a spot of good luck that arrest didn't result in punishment (see the portrait of Jáchym Topol).

In 1989 Lamper, Jan Ruml, part of the RR editorial team, and others founded the unofficial samizdat magazine Sport (the name was meant as a joke; the magazine *Československý sport*, or Czechoslovak Sport, was then being published). The editor in chief was the poet Zbyněk Hejda. Unlike RR, which styled itself as an extensive and de facto "classic" arts review, Sport was more focused on journalism. It was intended to come out more often and have fewer pages (around 40) and a larger print run of 1,500 to 2,000. Between June and November 1989 four issues were published. Most frequently cited is issue three, which featured a lengthy interview by Ivan Lamper with the leading dissident and future president Václav Havel. *"I was aware that most domestic samizdat was oriented toward culture, history or feuilleton-style pieces, such as the then samizdat Lidové noviny. Reports about current events or life in Czechoslovakia appeared here and there on foreign radio. (...) We wanted to do normal journalism, to write truthfully about people and their stories,"* said Lamper in a 2016 interview with the Post Bellum civic association.

During the revolutionary days following 17 November 1989, editors at the magazines Sport and Revolver Revue (RR is still being published) set up the ground-breaking paper Informační servis (Information Service), which in 1990 gave birth to the weekly Respekt. With his work in the dissent, Ivan Lamper made a major contribution to the fact that free journalism could emerge after the fall of communism. Until 1994 he was editor in chief of Respekt, where to this day he is the main editor and writer of the regular Last Week

section. In 1991 the US magazine World Press Review gave him the Editor of the Year international award. In 1996 he published the book *Minulý týden: od voleb 92 do voleb 96 aneb historie naší současnosti* (Last Week: From the 92 Elections to the 96 Elections, or The History of Our Present).

Text by Adam Drda