

AS IS WELL KNOWN, INDIFFERENCE IS THE MOTHER OF DICTATORSHIP

Karel Schwarzenberg (*1937)

Though he lived in exile, Karel Schwarzenberg was an opponent of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. And he did his utmost to take on the totalitarian system in every way possible. *“As is well known, indifference is the mother of dictatorship,”* he explained once in an interview for Lidové noviny.

Schwarzenberg is very well-known, a member of a famous and wealthy Central European noble family, regardless of the fact that using aristocratic titles was banned in the First Republic. The Communists confiscated the family’s extensive properties in what was then Czechoslovakia. His response was that property is impermanent and succumbs to time. He acted in such a way as to not make his affluence apparent, chiefly using it to help develop society and support civic initiatives. *“My view is you shouldn’t either be ashamed or build yourself up on the basis of who you are. Just say – God has placed you here, get on with it as best you can,”* he said in an interview for Renáta Holčáková’s book *Ztráty a nálezy v životě* (Lost and Found in Life). Karel Schwarzenberg used his wealth to provide important backing to the anti-Communist resistance. He supported the dissent and helped create a documentation centre for independent literature as well as personally smuggling money into Prague for the independent Lidové noviny.

Karel Schwarzenberg was born in Prague in 1937, but grew up in a chateau in Čimelice near Písek in South Bohemia, where he attended elementary school. He is from what is referred to as the Orlík branch of the former noble family. He was 11 when the Communists took power and his family lost their property, along with their home. They emigrated to Austria, first living in the Salzburg area and subsequently in Vienna.

As was common in such families, he learned etiquette but above all languages, including the traditional German and Czech but also French and English. In 1957 he graduated from grammar school and went on to study law and later forest management, as the family were major owners of forested land. However, he had to take over the administration of the family property and did not complete his studies.

Schwarzenberg met his future wife Therese in Vienna in 1957 and they got married in 1967. His wife was a doctor by profession and also came from a noble family; she owed the Hardegg Castle, which is near Austria’s border with Moravia and close to the Czech

town of Vranov nad Dyjí. Though her father had supported the Nazi Party before the war, she distanced herself from Nazi ideology. However, when Schwarzenberg ran for Czech president his wife's father's history emerged and may well have harmed his chances.

In the 1970s and 1980s Karel Schwarzenberg met exiles driven out of Czechoslovakia by the Communist regime. Among them was Vilém Prečan, who was looking for a place to keep samizdat – banned literature that was smuggled across the Iron Curtain. Schwarzenberg offered him a chateau of his in Bavaria and it was there, in Scheinfeld-Schwarzenberg, that the Czechoslovak Documentation Centre for Independent Literature was established.

Prečan and Schwarzenberg had first discussed the possibility loosely during a visit. *“He was there with his children and wife. We had lunch together and spoke about Czechoslovakia and the situation. I informed him of what I was up to, meaning that I was receiving and collecting Czechoslovak samizdat,”* Prečan said in an interview for the Czech News Agency on 20 January 2013.

Schwarzenberg himself began receiving copies of samizdat. During a visit, Prečan reached an agreement with him that there would be a documentation centre at his place. *“I walked around the entire grounds with him [Schwarzenberg] and a steward, looking for a spot that would be most suitable.”* He added in the Czech News Agency interview that Schwarzenberg himself had financed the renovation of the space that would house the Czechoslovak Documentation Centre for Independent Literature, including 200 large cartons of written materials. The Centre existed in West Germany until 1986, gathering books by Czechoslovak exile publishing houses and the main exile magazines. It also collected materials from abroad and supported writers at home. Among its founders were Jiří Gruša, František Janouch, Ivan Medek, Jiří Pelikán and Pavel Tigrid. Schwarzenberg had work and study spaces at the chateau. Following the fall of communism, the centre moved to the Czech Republic and its collections became part of the National Museum.

In addition Schwarzenberg made financial contributions to dissidents and provided whatever help he could. Prečan says that he smuggled – sewn into his belt – a large amount of money sent by exile Jiří Pelikán to support Lidové noviny, meaning those independent of the regime, on a visit to Czechoslovakia to meet Václav Havel. The respect he enjoyed helped the dissidents' activities earn recognition, as well as attract other sponsors.

Immediately after the fall of communism Karel Schwarzenberg returned to Czechoslovakia, where he became very engaged in ongoing events. He became chancellor to Václav Havel, whom he had known from the previous era, and was restituted family property, including the Orlický Chateau. He set up the Respekt Institute, a foundation supporting civic society.

Meanwhile, the country that he had known was quickly changing in front of his eyes, dividing into the Czech and Slovak republics. In an interview with journalist Karel Hviždala, Schwarzenberg said: *“The departure of the Jews and the Germans greatly narrowed our outlook. All we look at now is our own navel. A few years ago we could see all the way to Michalovce. Now we only see as far as Břeclav. Naturally that’s another limitation. Things look as they do in our country because we don’t communicate with anybody.”*

He became a member of the Czech Senate and served as foreign minister from 2007 to 2009. He was also an MP and a leading light and chairman of the TOP 09 party, later becoming honorary chairman. He made a deep impression in the public consciousness when he ran in the first ever direct presidential election, receiving support from many leading personalities, artists and writers. He made it through to the second round where he was defeated by his opponent, Miloš Zeman.

Text by Luděk Navara