

## ***“IT’S NOT MY FAULT NOBODY LISTENED TO ME.”***

**Jan Tesař (\*1933)**

*“I was writing my articles about Czech political compromises and so-called lesser evil that becomes the greatest evil back in autumn 1967. They weren’t based on an impression of Dubček’s policies but the study of history and were intended as a warning. They were also circulated in spring 1968. It’s not my fault nobody listened to me. Many times I warned of outcomes that every reasonable person could have expected, always in vain.”*

The historian, essayist and one-time dissident Jan Tesař was born in Skuteč on 2 June 1933. After leaving school he studied history at the Faculty of Arts at Prague’s Charles University, graduating in 1956. *“They didn’t teach me anything at the faculty. It was brainwash central. I tried to transfer to Brno, which cost me my place in the halls, so I tried out the lot of the homeless [...] I slept in a forest park in Pisárky,”* he recalled in an interview for the magazine *Nový prostor* (no. 442). *“At the Brno faculty I found an even bigger den of idiocy, so a year later the Prague faculty accepted me back like a lost son, on the condition that I wouldn’t make any demands of the teachers. What more could one want in the given circumstances...”*

In the mid-1950s Jan Tesař began gathering documents relating to the history of the second resistance and recording the recollections of anti-Nazi resisters. He says this was due to a “desire to celebrate ordinary people as heroes”, which did not mean he abandoned a critical outlook. In those days it wasn’t common to work with eye-witnesses; historiography (regimented into conformity and subordinate to ideology in the Communist CSR) regarded personal testimony as inferior to written materials. Tesař pointed out that with illegal groups written sources were logically few and insisted that without knowledge of participants’ testimony it wasn’t possible to study the subject properly. This was a vexed question, in academic and of course political terms. *“I began working on it in 1954, two years after the execution of [general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Rudolf] Slánsky. He had headed a partisan team and relied on partisans in a struggle between party clans. On top of that, the leading Communists discovered after 1945 how deep the penetration of the Communist (just like every other) underground by Nazi agencies had been. This led to distrust and the gathering of materials, comrade against comrade. [...] When I was visiting participants and recorded their stories an StB man on a motorbike came after me and wanted to know what I was up to. I took it as a joke – it didn’t occur to me that it could be a problem.”* (*Nový prostor*)

From the autumn of 1956, Jan Tesař worked as a researcher at the Resistance Memorial of the Military History Institute (MHI). He was not a party man and did not have a protector with influence so was let go for political reasons in 1959. In 1960–1961 he worked at a museum in Pardubice and from autumn 1961 he was, thanks to the efforts of fellow historians Václav Kural and Oldřich Janeček, accepted back at the MHI. He was later a founding member of the Czechoslovak Committee for the History of the Anti-Fascist Resistance. In the 1960s the committee became a relatively independent forum for systematic historical work and the free exchange of experience among historians (it was dissolved at the end of 1969). Tesař joined the Communist Party in 1966. In spring and summer 1968 he was among the circle of advisors of then-speaker of the National Assembly Josef Smrkovský, who helped lay the groundwork for the planned general rehabilitation of Czechoslovak citizens who had previously suffered repression.

Tesař was wary concerning the reform Communist policies of that time. He sensed that Moscow would take action against the political liberalisation in Czechoslovakia and that the country's leaders would not resist the pressure but would instead yield, using the justification of preventing "incalculable repercussions". In 1968–1969 he published (chiefly in the publications *Listy* and *Dějiny a současnost*) essays about the WWII years that warned against the stereotyped responses of Czech society faced with the threat of occupation. He was proven right by the events that followed the invasion of August 1968, when the Czech political elite capitulated and participated in the renewal of the totalitarian regime (with so-called normalisation and consolidation): *"I was writing articles about Czech political compromises and so-called lesser evil that becomes the greatest evil back in autumn 1967. They weren't based on an impression of Dubček's policies but the study of history and were intended as a warning. They were also circulated in spring 1968. It's not my fault that nobody listened to me. Many times I warned of outcomes that every reasonable person could have expected, always in vain. Naturally I supported the Dubček leadership, even though I knew that it would capitulate. However, I always supported it as an independent."* (Nový prostor)

Following the occupation Tesař was once more forced to change jobs (again temporarily) and found a post at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences' Institute of History thanks to its director Josef Macek. In 1968–1969 he also served as a court expert in the revived trial of a group of former State Security officers, Čech et al. In his expert opinion, delivered in June 1969, he described it as a show trial and accused the Gottwald party leadership of being the chief culprit of the crimes in question. He quit the Communist Party in spring 1969. He came to the conclusion that one of the greatest political problems at that time was the lack of a coherent opposition and in summer 1969 began

working with independent unions organised by Rudolf Battěk as a kind of future platform of resistance.

*“The ROH [Revoluční odborové hnutí, Revolutionary Union Movement – author’s note] provided us with a political field. It was all that was left in 1969 – and also the last thing for intellectuals who didn’t wish to give up the fight,” Tesař writes in the book Withheld Diagnosis (Zamlčená diagnóza, Triáda, Prague, 2003). “There were no longer any free magazines or associations. That field didn’t remain to us because the Czech working class was particularly heroic but rather that it had the least to lose. Our revolutionary material was authentic Prague and Kladno workers [...] ... unlike academics and various laureates, they were ashamed to listen to publicly expressed disgraceful Dubčekian capitulation without acting.” Tesař was involved in other opposition activities and recalled that a serious problem he ran into among his colleagues was an overall underestimating of the situation and unwillingness to adhere to the principles of conspiracy. “For instance, my distaste for the telephone was the subject of joking; when in an emergency I used it and gave a false name it became a popular story. Discussing meetings by telephone was regarded as a sign not only of courage but of the absolute legality of the given meeting [...]. The perfect legality of a mimeograph was regarded as proven by the fact it was borrowed from an authority or official institution. This all attested to the naivety of people who had not yet encountered the StB and their practices.” (Withheld Diagnosis)*

In September 1969 Jan Tesař and Rudolf Battěk were arrested. They were jailed for 13 months and then released without trial. After their release they worked with Jiří Müller, Jaroslav Šabata and others to shore up opposition to the Husák regime’s policy of consolidation. In November 1971 the police arrested Tesař again and in July 1972 he and other activists were sentenced in a wave of political trials. He received a six-year term in connection with the Ten Points petition (August 1969) and the flyer Citizens (1971) and for corresponding with historian and resister Radomír Luža, who lived in exile in the US. Drawing on a network previously created at the Bory prison in Pilsen by Petr Uhl and Milan Daniel, he co-organised, in summer 1973, the sending of letters from political prisoners to the World Congress of Peace Forces in Moscow. *“... we definitely advocated for peace but at the same time we pointed out that there couldn’t be peace on Earth without respect for the rights of nations and individuals. I wouldn’t like to contort myself into the pose of a serious politician: as with my alter ego and chief accomplice Zdeněk Vašíček, what I most enjoyed in my cell was the thought of how we’d make things hot in the Kremlin for Gusta [Gustav Husák, then the most senior representative of the Communist Party and from 1975 president – author’s note] and for our jailers with Gusta.”* (Withheld Diagnosis). The Communists got revenge on Tesař via further harassment and abuse. He was released in October 1976.

Not long afterwards he was one of the first signatories of Charter 77 and initiated the establishment of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted. *“I signed the Charter but I wasn’t involved in drafting the text, which I wasn’t so impressed by. I had the idea of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted and was involved in its foundation, which, however, was mainly the work of the married couple Petr Uhl and Anna Šabatová. My other projects were almost all failures – which I don’t mean as self-criticism.”*

Tesař drew on his experience of studying the second resistance when documenting anti-normalisation activities. In May 1979 he was arrested once again and the following year decided to accept an offer of exile in the West.

In the above-mentioned book, Withheld Diagnosis, Jan Tesař writes that fear was the major reason a substantial section of Czechoslovak society became resigned to the post-occupation totalitarian regime. *“... we are closing our eyes to that which was and is obvious and which every person of today’s older and middle generation alive then knows with their own heart and perhaps for this very reason doesn’t wish to name – because its name is FEAR. It was the basic cause of the ‘political’ victory of the regime of ‘consolidation’. [...] We were silent about the panicky and, it transpired, unjustified fear of the gallows and camps, which admittedly were not functioning (physically) in that moment, but as a sign were real and effective. We are ashamed to say that it was just that fear that robbed society of the ability to behave rationally and defend itself. In avoiding it we resorted to a one-sided and vulgarising explanation of the success of ‘consolidation’ through the satisfaction of the most urgent everyday needs of ordinary people. In so doing we shifted the entire matter into a vulgarly materialistic sphere.”*

After going into exile Tesař first lived in Germany and later in France. In Paris between 1983 and 1987 he published the review Dialogy, the successor to a magazine of the same title originally issued in samizdat in Czechoslovakia from 1977 on. He was an editor with the Polish exile monthly Kontakt and cooperated with the Russian exile community magazines Kontinent and Russkaja mysl. He published the magazine Afghan Diary (1987–1988) within the Polish exile community.

Texts he wrote about the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s were published in book form as Withheld Diagnosis and Co počít ve vlkově břiše. Práce o vytváření struktur občanské společnosti 1968–1980 (Conceived in the Belly of a Wolf: Works on the Formation of the Structures of Civic Society, 1968–1980) (Prague, Triáda 2018). From the 1990s he published the Bulletin EIT/AET in Paris (the final issue came out in 2015). He produced three monographs on the tragic decade of Czechoslovak history running from the Munich Agreement to the Communist coup of 1948: Mnichovský komplex. Jeho

příčiny a důsledky (The Munich Complex: Causes and Results) (Prague, Prostor 2000), Traktát o „záchraně národa“ - Texty z let 1967-1969 o začátku německé okupace (A Treatise on the “Salvation of the Nation”: Texts from 1967–1969 on the start of the German occupation) (Prague, Triáda 2005) and Česká cikánská rapsodie. I–III (The Czech Gypsy Rhapsody I–III) (Prague, Triáda 2016). The third, an extensive edition of the memoirs of partisan Josef Serink with commentary, represents the pinnacle of Tesař’s work on the Czech partisan movement in WWII. In it he attempts to foster a debate on the possibility of documenting activities that took place in conditions of conspiracy and on the issue of collective memory as key to the building and maintaining of a nation.

*Text by Adam Drda (with contributions from Robert Krumphanzl)*