

ROMANCE WITH THE POLICE ON OUR BACKS

Jáchym Topol (*1962)

“I think we totally ignored official culture. At grammar school I had a class teacher, Hana Posseltová, who really influenced me. She translated Márquez and other international authors, so I knew that good books would by chance be published occasionally and were worth getting hold of. But that was the end of it. I had no interest in official cultural life, permitted writers or normalisation theatre. There was no reason. I remember one early personal experience of how culture operated then: In the Lesser Quarter, at the Rubín theatre, there was a programme, Green Feathers, done by the man of the theatre Zdeněk Potužil, who was trying to push rather ‘avant-garde’ stuff. Some acquaintance brought us, me and my brother Filip, to Potužil: Come on, it’ll be great, Filip will play the piano and sing Jáchym’s lyrics. We were terribly young and I was as nervous as anything. But Potužil said it was absurd, that no-one would take on that responsibility when our father was a Chartist, etc., etc. So my brother and I went home. Václav Havel, who was organising a Plastics concert, was sitting there and said: Forget it boys, you can play at my place (...) – and in a few weeks we went to play for Havel at Hrádeček,” says the writer Jáchym Topol of his situation in the latter half of the 1970s.

It’s necessary to explain the situation to those who were born after the revolution or lived in freedom elsewhere: in Czechoslovakia in those days there was a scarcely penetrable imaginary “wall” between independent culture and that approved by the regime, which was intensified by a massive anti-dissident campaign following the publication of Charter 77. Unofficial culture existed underground, beleaguered by the political police – official culture was controlled by totalitarian ideology, censorship and fear, and any “mistake” (such as cooperating with a dissident) would result in the loss of employment or some other punishment. Budding writers could drop their principles, begin wending their way around Communist institutions and publish harmless or servile verse. Alternatively they could not publish at all and write for themselves – or publish their work in typewritten samizdat with the considerable risk of state retaliation.

Jáchym Topol was born in Prague on 4 August 1962 into the family of the poet and playwright Josef Topol (1935–2015) and Jiřina Topolová, nee Schulzová (1931–2016), the daughter of prose author Karel Schulz. He and his younger brother Filip (1965–2013) grew up in an intellectual, opposition environment. Their father, an important and banned artist, was a Charter 77 signatory and for the Topol brothers there was no complicated path to the dissent – they found themselves in it naturally. They displayed

rare talent at a young age. Jáchym wrote poems and Filip, a pianist, began putting them to music. In 1978, Filip, then 13, played at the above mentioned private concert at Václav Havel's country house, performing before The Plastic People of the Universe. In 1979 he and some elementary school classmates founded the band Psí vojáci; he himself began writing prose and above all lyrics for his own compositions, becoming an important poet and musician of his generation.

The same year Jáchym Topol made his debut in samizdat, in the generational Sborník 79-1 (Anthology 79-1). At that time he was attending grammar school in Radotín and hanging out with similarly creative and independently minded friends: *“Our group of friends grew and toward the end of the 1970s included Marek Hlupý, Vít Brukner, Vít Krůta, David Sýs, Martin Socha, Vít Kremlička, Viktor Karlík, my brother, Ján Mlynárik, Lucie Kašová, Gábina Fárová, Betina Landovská and Milena Grušová... I've definitely forgotten various people and also I can't say when who turned up when and so on. (...) We were a proper independent, long-haired group. We read, wrote and partied a lot. Romance, guys and girls together – just what a lot of adolescents go through, I suppose. But in those days you had to count on the fact you could come into conflict with the cops very easily, and those cops could catch you, slap you about, lock you up. (...) Most of us took older underground types as our models, the genuine underground: Pavel Zajíček, Ivan Martin Jirous and others. It's almost hard to admit how much we longed to be like them.”*

Jáchym Topol frequently refers to his admiration for older people in the underground, to those who had earlier taken a strong civic and artistic stand against the Communist system – they were an artistic inspiration but also a necessary example of how one could stand up to police harassment: *“I recall one interrogation, a kind of personal moment of initiation. Sometime around the turn of the '70s and '80s the StB man Ducháč interrogated me; I can't remember why. I was kneeling on the ground and they twisted my arms and slapped me. This Ducháč threw in his own half-witted drivel, like: 'So are we violating your human rights?' I kept silent and received another slap... It strikes me as awful today but in those days I took it as, such and such has been through this, so I'm not facing anything that out of the ordinary... Later they showed me the so-called Rogues Album, photos of long-hairs. I shook my head to indicate I didn't know any of them, which fortunately was true. But suddenly Ivan or Váňa Bierhanzel appeared in a photo and naturally these trained cops immediately saw I'd hesitated. I got another slap but I held it together and didn't say anything. I was terribly proud about it afterwards.”*

In 1980–1981 Jáchym Topol was a member of a circle of writers who put out the samizdat collection X, which had a literary supplement named Violit (eight issues were published). In addition he and the visual artist Viktor Karlík put out the Edice Pro více in

book form (1980–1984). After graduating from school in 1981 he attended a secondary school focused on sociology and law but dropped out. The same year he was one of the founders of the band Národní třída, in which he was the vocalist and lyricist. He worked briefly in manual professions (warehouseman, stoker, coal carrier). To avoid compulsory military service he simulated mental illness with the help of sympathetic doctors and spent several months at a clinic. From 1986 to 1990 he received an invalid's pension.

Over time Topol got to know people from different dissident circles. He visited the poet and philosopher Egon Bondy (real name Zbyněk Fischer), hung out in the Němec family apartment on Ječná St. and frequented the Klamovka pub. *“I lived on the street U Lužického semináře in the Lesser Quarter. Egon Bondy lived a few hundred metres higher on Nerudova but it took me two years, maybe more, actually from the age of 15, to make that journey. Somebody who uses today's technology and lives in today's open society probably can't imagine it, but in those days it was pretty complicated to get in touch with somebody. You don't know anything, you've nowhere to find out, you're shy. I'm from a so-called privileged family, Václav Havel taught me how to use a knife and fork, but still I had to find my own way to Bondy. (...) Bondy later told me that he would introduce me to important people close to me in generation and thanks to him I got to know Petr Placák and J.H. Krchovský, which was excellent, because otherwise I don't know how I'd have met them.”*

In 1985 Jáchym Topol set up the samizdat magazine Jednou nohou/Revolver Revue with Viktor Karlík and Ivan Lamper, serving as editor in chief (until 1993) and as an editor (until 1994). Revolver Revue was important: With an ever growing print run, it was the first professionally produced underground magazine and alongside domestic output also delivered interviews, think pieces, excerpts from world literature “on the index” in Czechoslovakia, etc. Jáchym Topol highlights the importance of Ivan Lamper (whose portrait also features in this series): *“When Lamper appeared among us sometime in the mid 1980s our bohemian horde was joined by a person with a clear outlook. (...) An important person in every community is the one who formulates things that the others had perhaps only felt to that point but were unable to name or put in order, a person who sets the direction. Ivan led me to an interest in Poland and I signed Charter 77 under his influence. Ivan also knew why and how to do samizdat in a worthwhile manner.”*

Jáchym Topol published poetry exclusively in samizdat, often in anthologies and under pseudonyms (most frequently as Jindra Tma). He also put out in samizdat his first poetry collections *Eskymáckej pes* (Eskimo Dog) (1982), *Stěhovavá tvář* (Migratory Shape) (1983), *Noty pro podzimní bytost* (Notes for an Autumn Being) (1984), *Náhodnejch 23* (The Random 23) (1985), *Vlhký básně a jiný příběhy* (Dank Poems and Other Stories) (1988) and *Miluju tě k zbláznění* (I Love You Like Crazy) (1988). In 1987 he put his

signature to the Charter 77 declaration and a year later signed the Czech Children opposition group's manifesto. The same year he was arrested for crossing the Polish border and distributing materials hostile to the socialist system. At that time Topol and his friends were smuggling books; they would cross the woodland border into Poland and leave a backpack with Czech unofficial literature at a pre-arranged spot, pick up an identical backpack with Polish publications and go back. Once, as they were returning, Topol and Lamper were arrested by a border patrol: *"I don't know if they had a hunch we were 'political smugglers'. I think they more likely expected we had vodka, salami or something like that on our backs – and they were surprised when they found literature."* Thanks to an amnesty they avoided prosecution.

In 1988, when things in Czechoslovakia were loosening up slightly, Jáchym Topol was allowed to travel to the US. The Czechoslovak authorities may have counted on him remaining in exile but he returned home and in spring 1989 co-founded the dissident political magazine Sport. When communism began collapsing in Czechoslovakia Sport was transformed into the Information Service bulletin and later the magazine Respekt, where Topol was an editor until 1991. From around the mid 1990s he made a living as a freelance writer, from 1996 he studied ethnology at Charles University's Faculty of Arts (not completing the course), in 2005–2007 he returned to Respekt and in 2009–2011 he was at Lidové noviny. Since 1989 he has published a number of books, such as the poetry collection *V úterý bude válka* (War Will Start on Tuesday) (1989) and the prose works *Výlet k nádražní hale* (Outing to the Railway Station Concourse) (1994), *Sestra* (Sister) (1994), *Anděl* (Angel) (1995), *Trnová dívka* (Thorny Girl) (1997, 2008), *Noční práce* (Nightwork) (2001), *Kloktat dehet* (Gargling Tar) (2005), *Supermarket sovětských hrdinů* (The Supermarket of Soviet Heroes) (2007), *Chladnou zemí* (The Devil's Workshop) (2009), *Citlivý člověk* (A Sensitive Man) (2017) and more (this list is incomplete). He has received numerous international and domestic honours, including the State Award for Literature (2017). At present Jáchym Topol is programme director of the Václav Havel Library in Prague.

Note: Quotations are from the interview which the author of this profile conducted with J.T. for the magazine *Revolver Revue* in autumn 2011.

Text by Adam Drda