

DISTURBING THE PEACE

Do you feel like reminiscing about the prehistory and the origin of Charter 77?

For me personally, it all began sometime in January or February 1976. I was at Hrádeček, alone, there was snow everywhere, a night blizzard was raging outside, I was writing something, and suddenly there was a pounding on the door. I opened it, and there stood a friend of mine, whom I don't wish to name, half frozen and covered with snow. We spent the night discussing things over a bottle of cognac he'd brought with him. Almost as an aside, this friend suggested that I meet Ivan Jirous, and he even offered to set up a meeting, because he saw him frequently. I already knew Jirous; I'd met him about twice in the late 1960s, but I hadn't seen him since then. Occasionally I would hear wild and, as I discovered later, quite distorted stories about the group of people that had gathered around him, which he called the underground, and about the Plastic People of the Universe, a nonconformist rock group that was at the center of this society; Jirous was their artistic director.

I understood from my friend the snowman that Jirous' opinion of me was not exactly flattering either: he apparently saw me as a member of the official, and officially tolerated, opposition—in other words, a member of the establishment. But a month later, when I was in Prague, thanks to my friend the snowman, I actually did meet Jirous. His hair was down to his shoulders, other long-haired people would come and go, and he talked and talked and told me how things were. He gave me his “Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival” and he played me songs by the Plastic People, DG 307, and other Czech underground groups on a rasping old tape recorder. Although I'm no expert on rock music, I immediately felt that there was something rather special radiating from these performances, that they were not just deliberately oddball or dilettantish attempts to be outlandish at any price, as what I had heard about them before might have suggested; the music was a profoundly authentic expression of the sense of life among these people, battered as they were by the misery of this world. There was disturbing magic in the music, and a kind of inner warning. Here was something serious and genuine, an internally free articulation of an existential experience that everyone who had not become completely obtuse must understand.

Jirous' own explanations quickly dispelled the doubts I had harbored from the fragmentary and sometimes derisory accounts I'd heard before. Suddenly I realized that, regardless of how many vulgar words these people used or how long their hair was, truth was on their side. Somewhere in the midst of this group, their attitudes, and their creations, I sensed a special purity, a shame, and a vulnerability; in their music was an experience of metaphysical sorrow and a longing for salvation. It seemed to me that this underground of Jirous' was an attempt to give hope to those who had been most excluded. I was already very late for a party at Pavel Kohout's place, and I telephoned to apologize; Pavel was annoyed, but I couldn't very well explain over the phone why talking to Jirous was more important to me at that moment. Jirous and I went on to a pub, and we carried on almost until morning. He invited me to a concert that was supposed to take place about two weeks later somewhere just outside Prague, but the concert never took place: in the meantime, the authorities arrested Jirous and his band, along with some other singers in the underground, a total of about nineteen people.

I was at Hrádeček when I learned about this, and I came to Prague immediately, since it was obvious that something had to be done, and equally obvious that it was up to me to do it. I also knew it wouldn't be easy to gain some kind of wider support for these boys. Among the people who might have helped, almost no one knew them, and those who did, harbored similar doubts to those I had felt before meeting Magor (that is Jirous' nickname). I had almost nothing concrete to prove that they weren't the layabouts, hooligans, alcoholics, and drug addicts that the regime was portraying them as in the hopes of being able simply to sweep them out of the way.

At the same time, I felt we had to do something not only on principle—because something ought to be done when someone is unjustly arrested—but also because of the special significance this case seemed to have, a meaning that seemed to transcend the details. Political prisoners from the early 1970s were

gradually returning from prison. The high sentences they received had been an act of political revenge: the regime understood these people, correctly, as an opposition; it knew they would not surrender, so it settled its accounts with them as vanquished enemies who refused to behave as such. Their trials were essentially the last political trials for several years; everything seemed to indicate that prison would remain an extreme threat and that those in power had actually succeeded in developing more sophisticated ways of manipulating society. People had become somewhat used to this by now, and they were all the more inclined to treat the case of the Plastic People as a genuinely criminal affair. At the same time, this confrontation was, in its own way, more serious and more dangerous than those trials in the early 1970s. What was happening here was not a settling of accounts with political enemies, who to a certain extent were prepared for the risks they were taking. This case had nothing whatsoever to do with a struggle between two competing political cliques. It was something far worse: an attack by the totalitarian system on life itself, on the very essence of human freedom and integrity. The objects of this attack were not veterans of old political battles; they had no political past, or even any well-defined political positions. They were simply young people who wanted to live in their own way, to make music they liked, to sing what they wanted to sing, to live in harmony with themselves, and to express themselves in a truthful way. A judicial attack against them, especially one that went unnoticed, could become the precedent for something truly evil: the regime could well start locking up everyone who thought independently and who expressed himself independently, even if he did so only in private. So these arrests were genuinely alarming: they were an attack on the spiritual and intellectual freedom of man, camouflaged as an attack on criminality, and therefore designed to gain support from a disinformed public. Here power had unintentionally revealed its own most proper intention: to make life entirely the same, to surgically remove from it everything that was even slightly different, everything that was highly individual, everything that stood out, that was independent and unclassifiable.

My role, I saw, would be to make use of my various contacts to stir up interest in the affair and to stimulate some action for the support and the defense of these people. I knew that, some time ago, Jiří Němec, a philosopher and psychologist and a former colleague from *Tvář*, had become very close to the underground, and I knew I couldn't do anything without consulting him first. Initially our rapprochement was extremely cautious, mainly on his part, because I had broken with *Tvář* and this still hung between us; as far as the *Tvář* people were concerned, I was practically like Trotsky had been for Stalin. (To be fair, I should add that, when I was in prison after the Charter came out, the *Tvář* people issued a collective position paper in my support.)

Gradually Jiří and I began to get along very well, and we laughed at our old differences (in the meantime, he too had gone through some changes, and was no longer the orthodox *Tvář-ist* he had once been). In the months and years that followed, we became real friends—for the first time, in fact. So Jiří and I began to “direct” the campaign for the Plastics, at least for as long as it was still necessary. The work gave both of us a great deal, and in doing it we were able to give each other something as well. Up to that point, he had deliberately held back from civic, public, or political involvement; he considered his work with the underground, his inconspicuous influence in the Catholic milieu, and his stimulating participation in the independent philosophical movement more important, and he did not want to put all that at risk by coming out in public in a way that would be conspicuous and would certainly lead to conflict. Until that moment, he had been more in favor of working “internally” than “externally.” Recognizing that the Plastics could only be helped by a public campaign, he had to change his position, and I think that on this new terrain it was I—since I was more familiar with it, after all—who became his guide. And he, on the other hand, led me out of the confines of “established opposition” and helped me broaden my horizon.

We planned the campaign in detail. Beginning with modest, internal steps, it was intended to build toward more emphatic ones. We wanted to give the regime the opportunity to retreat with dignity. We didn't want to force it to retreat right away behind its own prestige, because then nothing could move it. So, in the initial phase, we went around to different people and tried to get their support. At first we encountered misunderstanding and even resistance, which in that state of affairs was only to be expected. But I have to say that this mistrust evaporated very quickly, far more quickly than we had expected. People in different milieus very quickly began to understand that a threat to the freedom of these young people was a threat to the freedom of us all, and that a strong defense was all the more necessary because everything

was against them. They were unknown, and the nature of their nonconformity was a handicap, because even decent citizens might perceive what they were doing as a threat, just as the state had.

The alacrity with which many of those whom we had not expected to have much sympathy for this kind of culture were able to throw off their original inhibitions was clearly related to the situation I've already talked about: this was a time when we were beginning to learn how to walk upright again, a time of "exhaustion with exhaustion," a time when many different groups of people had had enough of their isolation and felt that, if something was going to change, they had to start looking beyond their own horizons. Thus the ground was prepared for some kind of wider, common activity. If the regime's attack on culture had taken place two years earlier, it might have gone by unnoticed.

If I remember correctly, our efforts climaxed with an open letter to Heinrich Böll signed by myself and Jaroslav Seifert, Václav Černý, and Karel Kosík, and it ultimately resulted in a large petition signed by over seventy people. By that time, the case was known internationally and the media were covering it. (Czechoslovakia had been out of the news for some time, and so the excitement around the Plastics attracted even more attention.) The affair became so generally known that, from then on, the campaign more or less looked after itself. Almost as if we had planned it, which we hadn't, lawyers began to speak up, and finally (which must have been especially shocking for those in high places) even former party functionaries let themselves be heard through the mouth of Zdeněk Mlynář. Thus the spectrum was complete, and though you can't read this directly from the signatures on those protests, it was here, in some connection with the case of the Plastic People—through newly established contacts and friendships—that the main opposition circles, hitherto isolated from each other, came together informally. Later these same groups became the central core of Charter 77.

(At this point, I should perhaps interrupt my reminiscences with another important remark. I'm not giving a history lecture here, I'm merely recalling how I experienced and observed these events at the time. My view may be one-sided; in fact, it probably has to be one-sided. It's a view from the side on which I stood. Others may well have, seen differently and might reveal important things that I haven't mentioned. For example, during 1976 certain changes began to be felt among the former communists that had nothing to do with the Plastic People but might have contributed equally to laying the ground for their defense. Collective position papers were published, among them a letter to the Berlin Conference of Communist Parties.)

The state was caught off guard: obviously no one had expected that the case of the Plastic People would arouse so much response. They had assumed it could be settled routinely, as just another criminal case among thousands of others. First they counterattacked with a defamation campaign (a television program against the Plastics and newspaper articles, in *Mladý Svět*, a youth weekly); then they retreated. They began releasing people from custody, and the roster of defendants began to shrink until finally (not counting the smaller trial in Pilsen) they only sent four of them to prison, and their sentences were relatively short, enough to cover the time they had spent in detention or a couple of months longer. The exception was Jirous, who naturally got the longest sentence.

The trial was a glorious event. You may be familiar with the essay I wrote about it. At that time, people interested in the trial could still gather in the corridors of the courthouse or on the stairways, and you could still see the prisoners being brought in in handcuffs and shout greetings to them. Later these possibilities were removed with a speed that corresponded to the speed of the gathering solidarity.

The people who gathered outside the courtroom were a prefiguration of Charter 77. The same atmosphere that dominated then, of equality, solidarity, conviviality, togetherness, and willingness to help each other, an atmosphere evoked by a common cause and a common threat, was also the atmosphere around Charter 77 during its first few months. Jiří Němec and I both felt that something had happened here, something that should not be allowed simply to evaporate and disappear but which ought to be transformed into some kind of action that would have a more permanent impact, one that would bring this something out of the air onto solid ground. Naturally we weren't the only ones who felt this; it was clearly

a widespread feeling. We talked to Pavel Kohout about it, and he felt the same way. Zdeněk Mlynář, whom we approached through Vendelín Komeda, was thinking along these lines too.

Our probes ultimately led to the first meeting, which was held on December 10, 1976. It was attended by Mlynář, Kohout, Jiří Němec, me, the owner of the flat where the meeting took place, and Komeda who organized it. There were two subsequent meetings that also included Petr Uhl, Jiří Hájek, and Ludvík Vaculík. Please understand me: Charter 77 belongs to all the Chartists, and it's immaterial which one of them happened to have a hand in preparing the founding document. If I speak of these meetings at all—and this is the first time I've done so—it's only because I know that memory fades and one day perhaps, a careful historian might condemn us for having kept these matters secret so long that we eventually forgot the details. In any case, it was at these meetings that the Charter was prepared. Each one of us discussed the matter in general terms with the people in our own circles, so that even in this embryonic phase quite a few people knew about it. The former communist functionaries around Zdeněk Mlynář had discussed the possibility of establishing some kind of committee to monitor human rights, or a Helsinki Committee along the lines of the one that had been created in the U.S.S.R. But a committee has a necessarily limited number of members who have chosen each other and come to some agreement. The situation here, however, pointed in a different direction, toward the need for a broader and more open association. That was how we came to settle on the notion of a "citizens' initiative."

The point is that it was clear from the beginning—it was the reason for these meetings, not the conclusion they came to—that we should be trying for something more permanent. We were not simply here to write a one-shot manifesto. It was also clear to everyone from the beginning that whatever came out of this would be pluralistic in nature. Everyone would be equal, and no group, regardless of how powerful it might be, would play a leading role or impress its own "handwriting" on the Charter. After the first meeting, the outlines of what we were preparing were still not clear. We only agreed that by the next meeting the proposal for an initial declaration would be drafted. I recall that after this meeting Jiří Němec and I visited Hejránek, who pointed out that our declaration might be based on the recently issued pacts on human rights. Parallel with that, but also after the first meeting, Mlynář came up with the same idea.

That was how the first draft of the declaration came about. Although I know exactly who wrote it and who added which sentences—or, on the contrary, who struck which sentences out—I don't think it's appropriate to reveal this now, on principle: the original declaration of the Charter is the expression of a collective will. Everyone who signed it stands behind it. And it has become a nice tradition how to emphasize this principle symbolically in, among other things, the silence we maintain about its authorship, though it's clear to everyone that the first signatories could not have written it all at once and together. Perhaps I might say only this, that the name "Charter 77" was Pavel Kohout's idea.

At the next two meetings, the text was edited, every word was carefully considered, we agreed on who would be the first spokesmen, and we also agreed on a method of gathering signatures. It was still not really clear how the Charter would work in practice. As for the spokesmen, it was more or less clear from the outset that Jiří Hájek should be one of them; I understand that, when the ex-communists were thinking about their own committee, Hájek was thought to be the most appropriate chairman. It was Petr Uhl, I believe, who came up with the idea of having three spokesmen. This was generally agreed upon, not only because it would express the pluralistic nature of the Charter, but for various practical reasons as well.

Petr also suggested that I should be another spokesman, although I understand that it was his wife, Anna Šabatová's idea. I had no way of knowing what being spokesman would involve, though I had justifiable fears that it would fully occupy me for God knows how long and leave me no time to write. I didn't really want the job—none of the later spokesmen did either—but I had to accept it. I'd have seemed like a fool if I'd refused to devote myself to a cause I felt so strongly about and invested so much energy and enthusiasm in preparing and had helped persuade others to take up.

I don't know any longer who first suggested Jan Patočka as the third spokesman. Perhaps it was Jiří Němec. I only know that Jiří and I supported his nomination and helped explain why this was an important choice to the others, some of whom were not very familiar with Patočka. It seemed to us that Patočka, who

was highly respected in noncommunist circles, not only would be a dignified counterpart to Hájek, but, more than that—and we were almost immediately proved right—we felt that from the outset he, better than anyone else, could impress upon the Charter a moral dimension.

At the time, I paid him several visits, both alone and with Jiří Němec, and I must say that he hesitated for a long time before accepting. He had never before been directly involved in politics, and he'd never had any direct, sharp confrontation with the powers that be. In such matters he was reluctant, shy, and reserved. His strategy resembled the strategy of trench warfare: wherever he was, he tried to hold out as long as he could without compromise, but he never went on the attack himself. He was utterly dedicated to philosophy and teaching, and he never modified his opinions, but he did try to avoid things that might have put an end to his work. At the same time, he felt, or so it seemed to me, that one day he would have to put his thinking to the test in action, as it were, that he couldn't avoid it or put it off forever, because ultimately this would call his whole philosophy in doubt. He also knew, however, that, if he were to take this final step, he would take it completely, leaving himself no emergency exits, with the same perseverance he devoted to philosophizing. This, of course, might have been another reason for his reluctance. He was certainly not a rash person, and he hesitated a long time before taking any action, but once he had he stood behind it to the end.

I think there were others who tried to persuade him to become a spokesman too—I understand his son played an important role in this—but there were some who tried to dissuade him. I myself was involved in one incident, which perhaps was the decisive one: Patočka confided in me that he was also hesitating because of Václav Černý. Černý had been courageously involved in civic affairs all his life, and there were times when he had behaved more directly than Patočka had been able to. He had worked in the underground resistance during the war, and Patočka felt, in short, that Černý had a greater moral right to be a spokesman, and he believed that Černý would feel justifiably left out and resentful of Patočka if the position were not offered to him. It was as though Patočka was simply ashamed to do something he thought was more appropriate for Černý, and he also seemed worried about Černý's possible reaction.

So I went to Černý and laid the cards out on the table. I told him Patočka didn't want to take the job without his blessing, because he thought that Černý was in line ahead of him, but that it was essential to get Patočka for the position precisely because his political profile was not as sharply defined as Černý's and therefore he could function more easily as a binding agent, whereas Černý, who was prickly and outspoken, might well have created a lot of resistance from the outset, and there was no way of guessing how it would affect the work of the Charter. Černý accepted this at once, and I think his acceptance was sincere, without a trace of bitterness. I went back to Patočka and told him about my conversation with Černý, and he was visibly relieved, as though a great weight had fallen from him. So the final hurdle had been overcome: Patočka became a spokesman and plunged into the work, literally sacrificing his life to it. (He died on March 13, 1977, after a prolonged interrogation.) I don't know what the Charter would have become had Patočka not illuminated its beginnings with the clarity of his great personality.

But back to those preparatory meetings. We agreed that the signatures would be gathered slowly, over Christmas, during the normal friendly visits and encounters that take place at that time, so that we wouldn't attract unwanted attention too soon. We named about ten "gatherers," and we roughly outlined for them the circles in which they were to gather signatures. I looked after the technical side of things; I took the text around to the gatherers along with instructions on how it should be signed. I also collected signatures, mainly among my friends, most of whom were writers. We'd already agreed on the day—it was between Christmas and New Year's—and the hour when all the signatures were to be brought to my place and arranged in an alphabetical list, and everything was to be got ready to be sent to the Federal Assembly, and published. Meanwhile, enough copies of the initial declaration were typed out so that one could be sent to each of the signatories. Everything was supposed to be ready for January 1, 1977, but it was not to be announced until a week later, to allow time to prepare the appropriate publicity, which for various reasons had to be synchronized with the moment when the declaration was to be handed over to the officials.

The day the signatures were to be delivered to my place, I was rather nervous. There were indications that the police already knew something (and it would have been surprising if they hadn't), and I was afraid they

would break into my place just when everything had been assembled and we would lose all our signatures. I got even more nervous because, although the meeting was supposed to be at four o'clock, it was almost five and there was still no sign of Zdeněk Mlynář, who was bringing in signatures gathered in ex-communist circles. It turned out there had been a simple misunderstanding about the time, and he eventually arrived, with more than a hundred signatures, which took my breath away. The final tally for the first round was 243 signatures. The police did not show up, we got all the business out of the way, and then a small circle of us drank a toast with champagne.

In that dead period between the completion of our business and the actual explosion, there was one more big meeting at my place, attended by about twenty-five people. We discussed how the Charter would carry on its work and what should be done in what situation and so on. We knew that such a large meeting would probably be impossible to arrange later. Almost everyone was there. It was the first time, for instance, that I had seen Jaroslav Šabata since his recent return from prison. I was asked to run the meeting, and I felt rather strange, giving the floor to former university professors, ministers, and Communist Party secretaries. But it didn't seem strange to anyone else, which is an indication of how strong, even at the beginning, was the feeling of equality within the Charter.

Perhaps I should say something more about plurality within the Charter. It was not easy for everyone—many had to suppress or overcome their ancient inner aversions—but everyone was able to do it, because we all felt that it was in a common cause, and because something had taken shape here that was historically quite new: the embryo of a genuine social tolerance (and not simply an agreement among some to exclude others, as was the case with the National Front government after the Second World War), a phenomenon which—no matter how the Charter turned out—would be impossible to wipe out of the national memory. It would remain in that memory as a challenge that, at any time and in any new situation, could be responded to and drawn on. It was not easy for many noncommunists to make that step, but for many communists it was difficult in the extreme. It was a stepping out toward life, toward a genuine state of thinking about common matters, a transcendence of their own shadow, and the cost of doing so was saying goodbye forever to the principle of the “leading role of the party.” Not many former communists actually stood by that slogan anymore, but some of them still carried it in their blood or in their subconscious. It was to the great credit of Zdeněk Mlynář that, with great political subtlety, he recognized the urgency of taking this step, and then used the weight of his authority to persuade those around him to take it.

Was any plan of action worked out at that time?

For a long time, we knew nothing about how the Charter would actually work in practice. Until that larger meeting at my place, the prevailing opinion was that, in addition to various communiqués or position papers on current matters, the Charter should also publish longer and more general thematic documents dealing with various areas of public life. But not even that was very clear beforehand. For example, some of us felt that we should publish only precise documentation regarding particular, individual cases in which human rights had been denied, cases that were, however, somehow typical or significant. In other words, they felt the Charter should function more or less the way the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS) did later, the only difference being that the Charter's mandate would not be limited to monitoring violations by the police and the judiciary, but would encompass the whole life of society. At the time, too little was really known. For instance, I was afraid that, despite what it said, many signatories would understand the initial declaration as a one-shot manifesto, and not a commitment to participate in ongoing work. Fortunately, that did not happen.

One of the signature gatherers once said to me there were some signatures you didn't publish. How many people actually signed the Charter?

At this point there are around twelve hundred signatures; I don't know the exact figure, and for various reasons it's pretty difficult to determine. At the beginning there really were about twenty or thirty people who signed the Charter but didn't want their signatures published, at least not right away. We respected this, but later, when the police got their hands on the unpublished signatures as well (they even handed

some over for the propaganda writers to use—for example, the signature of Dr. Prokop Drtina), we stopped doing it. Not because it would have been impossible to keep such signatures a secret in future, but because unpublished signatures don't make much sense. If someone sides with the Charter within himself, but for some reason can't sign it publicly, he has dozens of better ways to show this than signing a piece of paper which is then hidden away. So there is no second, underground, super-Charter. Perhaps I should also mention that we tried to dissuade some of our friends from signing the Charter, precisely because their work was so important and so much in the spirit of Charter 77 already that it wasn't worth endangering that work with a signature. This was the case, for example, with Vlasta Třešňák and Jaroslav Hutka, both of whom later signed the Charter anyway.

What happened after the publication of the initial declaration of the Charter is generally well-known and well described, and the history of the Charter, its development and its social significance have already been written about by historians. I'd rather ask you, therefore, about your first arrest and the period before your third arrest, which is really the beginning of your years in prison.

After the Charter was published and the propaganda campaign against it had started (the state thus effectively gave enormous publicity to the Charter in its very early days), I went through the wildest weeks of my life. At the time, Olga and I were living in Dejvice, a part of Prague which is on the way to Ruzyně Prison, and our flat began to look suspiciously the way the New York Stock Exchange must have looked during the crash of '29, or like some center of revolution. There were interrogations that went on all day long in Ruzyně, but initially everyone was released for the night, and we'd all gather spontaneously at our place to compare notes, draft various texts, meet with foreign correspondents, and make telephone calls to the rest of the world. So ten hours and sometimes longer of being bombarded with questions by investigators was followed by this hectic activity, which wouldn't let up until late at night. Our neighbors were bravely tolerant of all this but, though I had no concrete reason for thinking so, I felt in my bones that the only way this could end for me personally was prison.

My anticipation grew stronger from day to day, until finally it became a fervent wish that it actually happen, to end the unnerving uncertainty. On January 14, late in the evening, after my "normal" interrogation had finished, I was taken into a large room in Ruzyně where various majors and colonels came in and threatened me with all kinds of terrible things. They claimed they knew enough about me to get me at least ten years in prison, that "the fun was over," and that the working class was "boiling with hatred toward me." Some time toward morning they shoved me in a cell. Later, when I was released, I wrote a report about a hundred pages long on the first days of the Charter, my arrest, and my subsequent imprisonment; I hid it somewhere, and to this day I have no idea where it is. Perhaps I'll find it someday.

It's pretty obvious, I think, what the main reason for my arrest at that time was: I was the youngest of the spokesmen, I was the only one who had a car, and, quite justifiably, they thought I was the main motive force behind all the activity, and the main organizer. Patočka and Hájek were treated as having a more symbolic significance; they were undoubtedly more restrained and mild than I was. The authorities obviously hoped that with my arrest the Charter would be crippled.

It was a terrible miscalculation. The Charter may never have functioned better than during my imprisonment! I know, from what people have told me, that Patočka and Hájek put all their strength and all their time into it, and that they personally acted as couriers and organizers. When urged by many friends to parcel out at least part of his agenda to others, Patočka apparently replied, "I'm a spokesman and I can still walk."

To give substance to the official position that the Charter would be dealt with "politically" and not by locking people up, the authorities had to formally justify my arrest with something that had nothing to do with the Charter. That's why I was tacked onto the case of "Ornest and Co.," which involved giving texts that had originated inside the country to the émigré magazine Svědectví in Paris. But 90 percent of the questions during interrogations had to do with the Charter. Moreover, the security officers hoped that by linking my case with that of Ornest they would have material support for the official thesis that the Charter was inspired and directed from abroad. They longed to be able to show that the introductory declaration

had been published outside because of my secret connections, via Ornest, with Pavel Tigrid. Of course they didn't manage to prove that—nor could they, because the whole thing was organized in an utterly different way, and far more simply.

For a combination of different reasons, my first period of imprisonment was very hard to bear, but I've already mentioned this in another place in our conversation, and I've written about it as well, and there's no point in repeating myself here. The worst time for me was the final week, when I already suspected that I was about to be released and publicly disgraced at the same time, partly through my own fault. I could only sleep about an hour a day, and I spent the rest of the time in my cell tormenting myself and my cellmate, a petty thief who robbed grocery stores (I wonder where he is now?). He bore it all with great patience, he understood me exactly, and he tried to help me; if I could, I'd buy him a supermarket of his own out of sheer gratitude.

The public disgrace was worse than I'd expected: they said, for instance, that I'd given up the position of spokesman in prison, which wasn't true; the truth is that I had decided to resign (naturally my resignation would have been submitted to those who had entrusted me with the job in the first place, not to the police) for reasons which I still believe were reasonable. But I did not resign while in prison: I merely did the immensely stupid thing of not keeping my intention to resign a secret from my interrogator.

The first days after my return, my state of mind was such that every madhouse in the world would have considered me a suitable case for treatment. In addition to all the familiar, banal symptoms of postprison psychosis, I felt boundless despair mingled with a sort of madcap euphoria. The euphoria was intensified by the discovery that things outside were completely different from the way I'd imagined they would be. The Charter had not been destroyed; on the contrary, it was going through its heroic phase. I was astonished at the scope of its work, at the response it had had, at the explosion of writing it had inspired, at the marvelous atmosphere of solidarity in its midst. I had the intense feeling that, during my few months in prison, history had taken a greater step forward than during the preceding eight years. (Much of the atmosphere of that time has long since evaporated; the heroic period of the Charter has been supplanted by an era of sober and often distressing everyday cares—and if this had not happened, it would have been against all the laws of life and nature.)

In time, of course, I recovered from the psychotic state of those first few days and weeks after my return from prison, but something of the inner contradictions and despair of that time remained within me and marked the two years between my release in May 1977 and my "definitive" imprisonment in May 1979. I became involved in all sorts of ways, and I may have gone somewhat overboard; I was too uptight, if not hysterical, driven by the longing to "rehabilitate myself" from my own public humiliation. I was a cofounder of VONS; I became a spokesman for the Charter again; I engaged in various polemics (about that time, the Charter went through its first crisis, one that was inevitable and completely useful: a new and deeper inquiry into its own meaning). I was even sent to Ruzyně Prison for six more weeks; it was an unsuccessful attempt to put me out of circulation, with the help of a fabricated indictment for disturbing the peace. They were very good weeks indeed. Each week I spent in prison I understood as another small step toward my "rehabilitation," and I took delight in that.

Another factor that contributed to my nervousness, understandably, was the increasing pressure the police put on the Charter and on me personally. I was constantly "shadowed"; there were interrogations; the local authorities plotted against me; I was under house arrest several times, and this was made more piquant by insults and threats; "unknown perpetrators" broke into our dwelling and vandalized it, or they did all sorts of damage to my car. It was an exciting time, what with attacks by the police, escaping from shadows, crawling through the woods, hiding out in the flats of coconspirators, house searches, and dramatic moments when important documents were eaten.

It was also at this time that we had meetings with the Polish dissidents on our common border (the notorious anti-hiker Havel was compelled to walk to the summit of Sněžka five times, but there was a reward: he was able to meet and establish permanent friendships with Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron, and other members of KOR, the Workers' Defense Committee). I can remember more than one incredible story from that period, the kind of story that to this day I would hesitate to make public, for fear of harming

someone. As all of this increased in degree, it became clearer and clearer to me that it would all come to a bad end and that I would most probably end up in prison again.

This time, though, I wasn't afraid of the prospect. I now knew roughly what to expect, I knew that whether my stay in prison was going to have any value in general terms depended entirely on me, and I knew that I would stand the test. I had come to the conclusion—and it may seem overly dramatic to put it like this, but I swear I mean it—that it is better not to live at all than to live without honor. (So there will be no misunderstanding: this is not a standard I apply to others, but the private conclusion of one individual, a conclusion which I have drawn from my own practical experience, and which has proved practical for me in the sense that in extreme situations it simplifies decisions that I have to make about myself.) If my intuition told me that I was headed for prison, as it had in 1977, then this time, unlike 1977, it was not merely a premonition of something unknown, but a clear awareness of what it would mean: quiet perseverance and its unavoidable outcome, several hard years in prison.

When they finally did lock me up during their campaign against VONS, all my former uneasiness suddenly vanished, I was calm and reconciled to what would follow, and I was certain within myself. None of us know in advance how we will behave in an extreme and unfamiliar situation (I don't know, for example, what I would do if I were physically tortured), but if we are certain at least about how we will respond to situations that are more or less familiar, or at least roughly imaginable, our life is wonderfully simplified. The almost four years in prison that followed my arrest in May 1979 constituted a new and separate stage of my life.