

**Milan
Šimečka**

**The
Restoration
of Order**

The Normalization
of Czechoslovakia
1969—1976

The Restoration of Order

Milan Šimečka

Translated from the Czech by Gerald Turner

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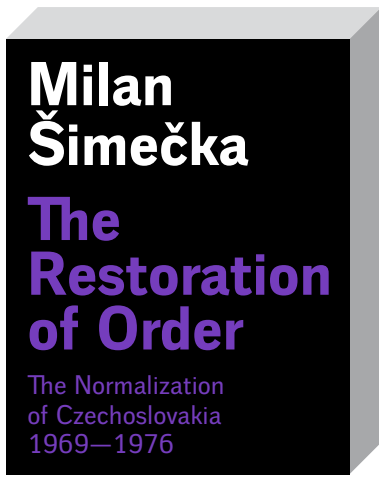
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THE GENESIS OF A FREE THINKER

I used to see my father sitting at the kitchen table after dinner, writing something in a green school exercise book so energetically that the whole table shook. He would write for two hours, smoking cigarettes and staring at the wall during breaks. Then he would go to bed early, because he got up at five in the morning. So did I. He went to his job as bulldozer driver, I went to the factory. I was seventeen, he was forty-five.

The year was 1975. We would have breakfast together, sleepy and silent, and we would leave the house together, each of us heading for our own bus. Those shared mornings brought us even closer together; we were bonded by fate. We were outcasts of the state, sent as punishment among manual workers, which was a form of exile, since Czechoslovakia had no Siberia, unlike great Russia.

I never heard a word of complaint from my father about his fate, so I didn't complain either. Those silent mornings together with my father taught me to resist with stoicism the hostility of those in power for the rest of my life.

At first he didn't talk about what he was writing. It wasn't until he was transcribing the chapters on his typewriter that he let us read them. It was immediately clear to all of us in the family that my father had written an extraordinary book, and we told him so, although my mother added that he would go to prison for it. She was right. In 1981, my father was imprisoned for a year and a half; it was the Communist regime's revenge for *The Restoration of Order*, though not stated formally.

When my father began writing the book, he had already spent five years in exile – five years living under a regime that had plunged society into a state of inertia. I watched my father as he struggled to cope with timelessness and also with hopelessness. I would never have admitted it to myself as a boy, because I saw my father as a

powerful and indomitable man with the gift of natural authority, but today I know that he went through years of helplessness.

In his search for something to hold onto, he found activities that helped him to forget. He learned to fish and used to take my brother and me to the branches of the Danube, where we would spend our days. We rarely caught anything. Or my mother would join us mushrooming in the woods. He used to play chess with me and became a member of the chess club. Thanks to his patient positional play, he often won local tournaments.

Today I see the first half of the seventies as a period when an intellectual was coming to maturity, undergoing a profound transformation from communist academic to free thinker, like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly.

My father was aware of this process of transformation. In letters to his friend, the historian Vilém Prečan, he wrote of his frustration as follows: 'They suddenly put us in an empty space. We stand here in the desert without tools or anything. They have deprived us of extroverted activity and so we have no choice but to turn inward. We are forced to be hermits. They have forced us turn to an introverted life. We never had time for that before, and all those people toiling away don't have time for that now. I'm trying to make the most of this opportunity, as much as I'd hate for it to last forever. But it won't.'

Those first five years of normalization were the most difficult. People expelled from the universities licked their wounds alone in boiler houses or with the few friends they had left. There was not yet a ramified community of dissent: the structure of samizdat literature was still in its infancy, at that time more in the form of typed feuilletons, read aloud to a few friends gathered in a cottage somewhere.

„Sometimes I really feel like some form of cattle, tied up in a stall patiently chewing the cud,' he wrote in his letter. 'I live a tedious existence, waiting for some jolt from outside.' That jolt came many times. First in the form of house searches and interrogations in the

gloomy State Security building, then the jailing of his close friends (until eventually he himself went to prison).

Those jolts also took the form of public hounding in the press and on television. There was no defence against it, but my father bore it with admirable calm.

‘It’s almost as straightforward as in the old cowboy movies: a man has no choice but to stand and watch with contempt while the Apaches cavort around the stake. Because what else can you do? It’s amazing that this age reproduces over and over again the model situations from the naive readings of our youth,’ he wrote to Prečan.

But those first five long years of intellectual limbo were as useful as the meditation of monks in Buddhist monasteries. ‘What we need is patience. An Asian patience that would allow one to watch without bitterness as the months pass and nothing happens,’ he wrote in another letter.

Gradually his mind freed itself from the communist jargon that even enlightened reformers like him had used until 1968. He often told me what a relief it was to write in a language that was not subject to the rules of academic writing or newspaper journalism. He was finding his own language and discovering his own talent as a writer whose style was inimitable. When I return to his books from time to time, I am amazed to read texts that are outstanding for their beauty and imagery even in the rich context of Czech essay writing.

During those five years, he came to realize the task he had assumed for the rest of his life. ‘I hope to recognize the moment when we will have to do something for ourselves, because nothing is likely to fall into our laps on its own,’ he wrote to Prečan. That task was philosophical, historical and psychological reflection about ‘real socialism’, which was the final totalitarian version of the erstwhile communist utopia.

The Restoration of Order was the first book with which he undertook that task. Later on, he followed up with others in which

he predicted the collapse of the totalitarian regime because of the hidden cracks he saw in it.

In his books, my father used not only his exceptional talent as a writer, but also his intimate knowledge of the system he had helped to build after 1948.

In the introduction to *The Restoration of Order*, he writes: 'There are no greater protagonists of order than victorious revolutionaries.' But one could also say: There are no greater critics of the regime than those who once helped construct it.

That was my father. He saw into the very entrails of the system like few others. And at the same time, he was driven by remorse for having helped build the totalitarian regime. It was conscience-driven intellectual obsession that created an author whose writing transcended the horizon of one regime. That is why it is still readable today.

The point is that my father was not content solely to describe individual social and political phenomena, he was constantly looking for how they impacted the human condition, regardless of the regime in which they occurred. He also lived in a democracy, albeit only virtually. In Bratislava it was possible to watch Austrian television, since Vienna was just round the corner, even if physically inaccessible. He would listen to Austrian radio while cooking dinner. He had a perfect overview of all the shortcomings of Western democracy.

It often occurs to me that there are many forms of inequality. It is not just social inequality that plagues most of the world today. There is also historical and geographical inequality. You may simply have the misfortune to be born in the wrong country at the wrong time. My father was born in Czechoslovakia in 1930, and lived most of his life under some form of dictatorship – Nazi during the war, Communist after it. He died in September 1990, so he lived in freedom for under a year.

He would argue, however, that life in any era and under any regime can be happy and meaningful, it is just a matter of personal

choice. I knew my father very well, he was my best friend. And that's why I know that despite the difficult times of normalization, about which he wrote so passionately, he led a happy life.

Martin M. Šimečka

INTRODUCTION

*There are no greater protagonists of order
than victorious revolutionaries.*

As soon as a new revolutionary power establishes itself, a state is formed, along with all its institutions. As soon as the leaders begin to harvest the fruits of their new status, 'order' becomes a holy of holies. Virtually overnight, former leaders of uprisings, organizers of strikes and street demonstrations, distributors of illegal literature, ingenious concealers of weapons, partisans and commanders of assault troops all become devotees of the strictest law and order. In addition, they display an abhorrence of all and every spontaneous rally, of the smallest typewritten leaflet and even of the slightest theoretical consideration on possible reform of the existing system. The self-same people who, in the old parliament, made their party famous with their fighting speeches, begin to express unfeigned shock whenever a poet or philosopher voices the mildest of reservations about the existing order. I recall how fastidiously one of our leaders took to task certain people who had had the confounded cheek to put out a crudely duplicated leaflet informing people of the actual terms of the electoral law. During the war, this person had run an illegal printing press. But I must add that I also knew timid rebels within the established system who, once they had obtained an official post within it, immediately joined the protagonists of order. Hence this change is not limited to the periods immediately before and after the revolution. It is not so much a function of historical laws as of the general laws governing human beings within historical events. And they apply equally to revolutionaries.

Of course the observation I made at the outset is no new discovery. But it does concern 'order' and this is the concept I have chosen as the basis for my considerations. I am aware that it is not a very precise term, but it is no worse, for all that, than the more scientific

terms offered by political science, sociology or philosophy. Neither is it, of course, my own concept, nor, for that matter, is it strictly a term used in Party resolutions, documents and directives. But that only goes to show even more that it is precisely ‘order’ (and I pronounce the word with sad and bitter irony) that explains best what has been going on over the past eight years. The idea of order conceals a whole set of factors which I am seeking to throw light on. ‘Order’ is merely the term that serves my purpose best.

The events of 1968 in my country have been given many different names. But I believe that from the point of view of the entire system of ‘existing socialism’,¹ what happened in Czechoslovakia can be most simply described as an outbreak of disorder: disorder both internal and external. At that time my country was like a planet which, as a result of a strange combination of circumstances, had slipped out of its orbit and was flying on its own course in the uncertain hope that it might find another orbit nearer the sun. Within the fixed European planetary system this undertaking was quite risky from the very outset. Hence its wayward flight attracted increasing attention, arousing excited anticipation among Western observers and giving rise to alarm in the East.

By now it is easier for me to appreciate that the men who felt a responsibility for the entire planetary system viewed the irresponsible manoeuvres of the Czechoslovak satellite with growing impatience, until the day when (rightly or wrongly as the case may be) they decided that my country was a threat to the order of the universe since it might lead to other planets one day escaping from their orbits. So they resolved to return my country back to where it had

1 “Real socialism, better known as actually existing socialism, was an ideological catchphrase popularized during the Brezhnev era in the Eastern Bloc countries and the Soviet Union. The term referred to the Soviet-type economic planning implemented by the Eastern Bloc at that particular time] From the 1960s onward, Communist states such as Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia began to argue that their policies represented what was realistically feasible given their level of productivity.” Definition from the Wikipedia article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_socialism

been and teach it a better sense of order. As we know, they went on to do this with such a degree of armed might that, ironically, they increased the historical importance of the brief period of Czechoslovak disorder.

When the drama had finished and the audience had gone home, along came the journalists, historians and sociologists who sat down to tell the story of what had actually happened. I have read a good number of books about the Czechoslovak events of 1968, and there are far more I have not read. It is always interesting to read about things that are out of the ordinary, which have a whiff of adventure about them, even when the adventure involves a whole country and its people. But many of these books were not written merely to satisfy a momentary readership. Many of them were undoubtedly written from a historical perspective, with an awareness that a certain tumultuous period of Czechoslovak history might well be the expression of more universal historical trends; that it might throw light on the hidden undercurrents in the social systems of Eastern Europe; and finally, that it might turn out to have been an omen of a future when adventure, having shed its more extreme aspects, might become the daily reality of social life.

Driven by all these urges, I set out, at the beginning of the 'consolidation' in 1971, to write a book about 1968. I completed the first few chapters quite rapidly, but then I found myself returning to the unfinished manuscript less and less frequently. I became depressingly aware, with the passage of time, that my work was merely going over the same ground as existing literature about Czechoslovakia written by authors with far more favourable working conditions than I had. Being employed, first as a driver, then as a skilled craftsman, and still later, as an excavator driver, certainly widened my horizons, but otherwise it increasingly exhausted my physical and mental strength to complete the work whose usefulness I had in any case begun to doubt. Thus it was that my book remained uncompleted and was seized during a house search, so that now it forms, together with many of

my other manuscripts, part of interrogation file no. VS-CSV-4/1975 in the interrogation section of State Security (StB).²

However, I must also admit that as years went by and my personal feelings became increasingly contradictory, I gradually lost the original clear-cut view I had had of the 1968 events. Gradually also, the strictness of my moral judgement and the rigid division between my sympathies and antipathies were eroded. Naturally, the mournful spectacle of mass conversions and my amazement at how lightly the same lips could so passionately condemn something they had so recently proclaimed, did much to desentimentalize my attitude to the entire question.

Five years of experiencing something completely new caused me to look slightly differently at the importance of journalistic testimony. I no longer felt such a burning interest in analysis of the Prague Czechoslovak Spring. Even my memory of that brief period began to fail me. As time went by it all began to look more and more like a legend. The pressure of official propaganda caused many people to doubt the truth of their very own experience. I would read magazines and newspapers from the period and the words we used then seemed inappropriate and quite inconsistent with my new experience. Historical detachment took its toll. Detachment is supposed to be necessary and even vital for sober historical evaluation but I had little stomach for such sober assessment. I hadn't the slightest desire to sort through the veritable mountain of errors and political naiveté which culminated in that explosion of national emotion. Others were bound to undertake that task.

It suddenly occurred to me that it would be far more useful to describe and understand the period following the disintegration of that emotion, a period officially termed 'consolidation' and 'normalization', that is, the period when the displaced planet was returned to

² Státní Bezpečnost (State Security) was the Czechoslovak secret police, commonly referred to by its acronym StB.

its old orbit. This new subject matter would permit me to deal with the typical situation in existing socialism: 1968 had been an atypical situation. It occurred to me that even from a long term perspective it would be more useful to be versed in situations typical for existing socialism than in historical exceptions which are highly unlikely ever to be repeated in such a form.

Of course, the basic functions of the system were no stranger to us before 1968. We knew its strength and weaknesses. We knew the rigid rules governing the internal life of the state. We knew, furthermore, the unwritten rules that had to be respected superficially. I myself was an expert in the use of the correct ideological expression. I knew the hidden meaning of congress speeches and editorials in the main Party newspaper. All the same, not everything was clear to me then. Frequently I would just accept unthinkingly the welter of words in which the naked truth was dressed up and cling to old illusions and various atypical positive aspects of the system, which were in fact the reflection of the purely Czechoslovak conditions that served to give the system more of a European appearance.

But by the time I was watching the system overhaul all its functions I no longer had any illusions. The very process of restoring order did not permit illusions. There was no longer any attempt at a gradual insertion of the new functions required for a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', into former conditions and national traditions such as there had been in the immediate post-war years. From 1970, long-dead functions of the system were restored ruthlessly and without any concern for preceding development. Rather, deliberate care was taken to expunge from the national consciousness even memories of the previously attained degree of ideological sanity, economic common sense, cultural tolerance and political realism. And for this reason, too, all the various components of the process unfolded themselves in an unprecedentedly clear and transparent fashion. This 'restoration of order' was hardly the stuff that myths are made of, and in truth, it made no efforts to be such. Hackneyed phrases

took the place of myths and no effort was even made to make them sound plausible. Everything was suddenly as clear as day to me, and I was tempted to get something of this clarity of vision down on paper before it was erased in the natural course of humdrum existence.

But one other aspect also tempted me to the subject. This was what we might call the human factor in the 'restoration of order'. Much earlier, in 1968 itself, I had had the feeling that the precipitous course of history in my country could well be described as theatrical in character. Many of the previous changes had occurred in the twilight typical of existing socialism: namely, in secret meeting rooms and in the politicians' well-guarded retreats. The faces of the actors in those political dramas remained hidden or they were covered by the drab masks of officialdom. In contrast, the drama of 1968 was played out on a brightly lit stage. People suddenly began to perceive the politicians and actors in the drama as human beings instead of cardboard cut-outs always spouting the same old platitudes. All of a sudden, people could see them cry. Fatigue, moral dilemma and human weakness were there on their faces for all to see (thanks, of course, to television). Almost in a single moment, public life came into existence and many people, for the first time in their lives, began to view politics as the work of human beings instead of a tedious, infinitely boring, inaccessible and anonymous annoyance coming from somewhere on high. Even the first phase of the restoration of order took place on the fully lit stage. People remembered the actors and knew their roles all too well. Therefore it was with a certain eagerness that they watched how they would act in a completely new play with a completely new director. I think I can state without exaggeration that for the people here the post-1970 events certainly did not appear as an abstract process of 'strengthening the leading role of the Party, removing right-wing elements, purging Czechoslovak culture, deepening cooperation between socialist states' but rather as a historical drama with live characters. It was a play about betrayal, love and hate, about sacrifice and deception, greatness and

baseness, revenge and forgiveness, cowardice and heroism, a drama of courage and cunning, decline and fall, about money, envy, and in fact everything that is splendidly human. I do not wish to conceal the fact that I myself viewed the historical events primarily in that manner, and only in that fashion did they fascinate me. It was not until later that I forced myself to view them with professional eyes and started to investigate abstract trends, lines of development, the intrinsicity of observed phenomena, historical generalization, parallels and lessons. Since I am aware of this, I do not intend to waste time with unnecessary generalizations.

To a certain extent this is making a virtue of necessity. I am well aware that I am no longer capable of writing a scientific treatise, and particularly not about that subject. I simply do not have the time to investigate sources, read old newspapers or go through books in search of quotations which would help me form an overall picture of people and events. I have no time to plough through statistics and speeches and verify facts which my memory might tend to colour. I get up for work at five in the morning and return home at four in the afternoon. They would not give me access to archives and my university library membership card, which once allowed me to read *libri prohibiti*, is long out of date.

But that is not the main reason. It is now seven years since I left my university post, or rather, was thrown out. Since then I have set foot inside educational institutions on only some three occasions with feelings which it would be better not to specify here. I have been a manual worker for the past seven years and that changes one. I have also been changed by my loss of rights over those years. I am no longer the university lecturer who was wont to write scientific treatises and maybe even believed that it gave a book weight and importance if the author was a member of the so-called scientific establishment and observed all the customary forms. Time has taken away my respect for precise subject limitation, a historical introduction, bibliographies, etcetera. I am even uneasy about

reading my own books of ten or fifteen years ago, so alien are they. I sometimes pick up studies and books which (amazingly) are still published here; some of them written by former friends of mine. I read them and am unable to overcome my amazement at what they are all writing about: future trends, humanism, the development of Marxism-Leninism, 'the scientific approach', 'socialist democracy', all manner of things, in fact. They defend their works at meetings of academic councils and thereby obtain academic titles and salary increases. After reading a couple of pages, I begin to think that official propaganda could be right in claiming that people like me are foreigners in their own country. What I read in the various books and journals seems like news from another world, which probably exists, but about which I know nothing. I inhabit another world and I remain convinced that my present world, the world of ordinary people without privileges, in which I never hear, from one day to the next, any of the newspaper clichés or learned bombast, is the real world, and the other world, the official one, is merely its Platonic shadow. I am aware that there exist other explanations, but I will come to those later.

I wrote during the period when the censor held sway. It was not as bad as it sounds. Although one could not exactly write from the heart, it made writing quite good fun. It was a matter of tightening the string and waiting for it to break. Quite often it would, but even when it did, the consequences were not particularly serious. I also wrote during the period when censorship had been removed. At that time every word you wrote was taken terribly seriously and you felt a burden of responsibility at the back of your mind all the time. I wrote in fear of how it would be received and what effect it would have. Now I have no such fears. I have no intention of submitting this work to the censor and I am not bold enough to believe in the return of a censor-free era in the foreseeable future. I maintain that there is no better time for writing. What a contradictory notion freedom is.