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Ludvík
Vaculík
A Czech
Dreambook

Translated
by Gerald Turner

Karolinum

“An
unclassifiable
book – history
as memoir, through
the imagination
of an artist.”

Tom
Stoppard

Ludvík Vaculík

A Czech Dreambook

Translated from the Czech by Gerald Turner

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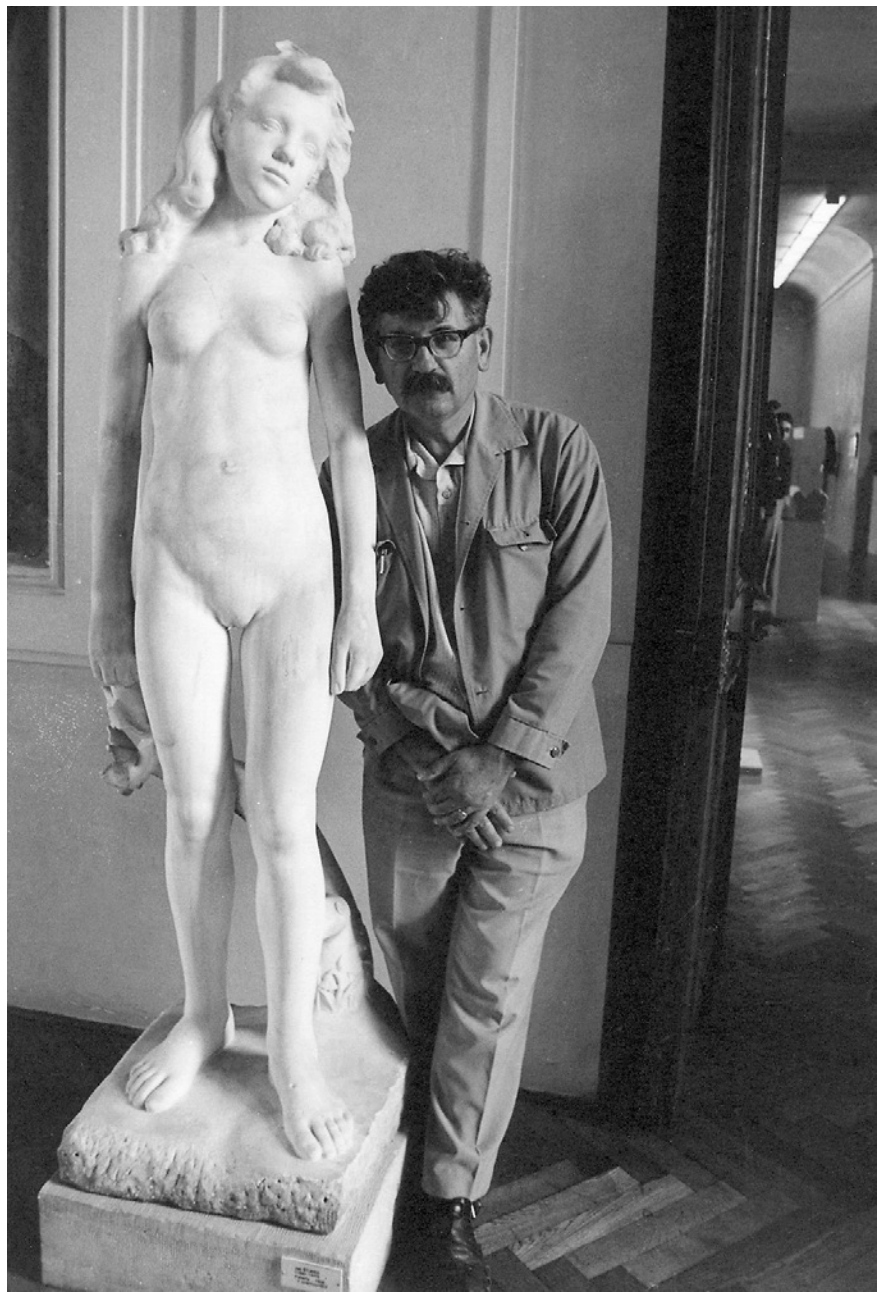
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To Jiří Kolář

MONDAY, 22ND JANUARY 1979

Last night, I don't know why, I couldn't sleep. I got up about six times for a drink of beer or milk, thinking my restlessness to be of chemical origin. I felt excited and tense, not tired, as if I'd had a strong coffee late in the evening, although that happens to be one thing that helps me sleep better. Anyway I had had nothing of the kind, just a cup of tea at Eda Kriseová's much earlier, during the afternoon. Then we all trooped along with our Hamburger to a mime performance which I very much enjoyed, and after it we went home at a very respectable hour. Next it occurred to me that my extreme distress might have been caused by the stroboscope which Hybner uses to such brutal effect in his performance.

The thought tossed around in my head the whole night and it struck me that one's biology and neurology really do start to rebel against one – against me. I am not aware of exerting myself, yet I end up feeling exhausted. I am not afraid, yet I shiver as if I were. I speak German all day with no bother, but then at night all sorts of phrases come back to me over and over again clamouring for grammatical corrections, which only goes to show how much it exhausted me. Only three years ago I was able, at interrogations, to suppress the onset of an insidious gall-bladder attack by stubbornly cursing to myself and willing it away with all my strength, causing, to my shame, beads of cold sweat to appear on my forehead. I have felt this past year to be a turning point for my strength, my resources, my sanity and my time. And to outward gaze, even my own, nothing has changed. So there are ascertainable thresholds we have to cross one by one. It looks as if my fiftieth birthday has finally caught up with me after two years. Or something.

These are joyful days for Jiří Gruša. He has received the German edition of his *Questionnaire*, together with the Czech one from the Škvoreckýs. He is delightfully over the moon about it, as if it were his *début*, and I observe how all those around him wisely and generously wish him well. Ivan prophesies him not only a reputation but also money, although he refuses to predict whether it will be a quarter or half a million. We all chuckle. Jiří rubs his little hands, comically feigning belief in Ivan's prophecy, and declares: "I can quit the housing co-op, at last."

So last night I was obliged (you won't catch me going to a psychiatrist) to do some investigation in this field too: Could I possibly be eaten up with envy? And once again I come up with the following conclusion: God be

praised – Jirka at last has what we sort of promised him when we coaxed him along our “wicked path” to Jürgen’s publishing house, which then kept him waiting interminably. It was a bit like encouraging someone with promises of astounding views over the next hill. Then at last you get there and they are overwhelmed, and your only fear is whether they are sufficiently so.

And so I discovered yet again that I most likely lack the requisite ambition to be a writer. I appease the equally requisite sense of duty by listing all the different things I do. I feel fully employed. But at night something comes, from time to time, to torment me, and I get the agonizing urge – desire would be an inappropriate word! – to switch the light on, sit down and write – anything. It was back again last night. But I did not do it because it would have worried the family. Yes, it’s perfectly all right for me to sit down and write into the night or all night, for that matter. But to begin writing in the middle of the night, or before dawn, even – that’s abnormal! And I know it full well. That is why last night I made myself postpone the urge until this evening. So shall I really start keeping a diary like this? After resisting it for years!

I’ve received notification from the State Security, the StB, that my regular monthly “official discussion” is tomorrow. The best name for it without quotation marks would be intimidation. There is just no way of getting used to it and pretending it’s of no account.

The temperature was up a bit today, as if a thaw was on the way. And I had originally planned to write a feuilleton about this “dreadful winter.” – I mustn’t let Spring steal a march on me!

TUESDAY, 23RD JANUARY 1979

It’s a quarter past eleven and the boys are not in yet. So it’s hard to feel I am finally alone today. I will be disturbed. I can almost never achieve solitude; there’s always someone here. It’s my state of mind, no fault of theirs. When *they* see me at my typewriter, they tiptoe through the room with nary a word bar hello. Through the glass of two doors I can see that Madla is still reading in bed too. She is reading Karol’s odd, Jewish – almanac, I suppose.

Karol Sidon was here this morning and brought the almanac, which is for the first quarter of the year. I leafed through it and was unable to make out what was serious and what was for fun. In most cases the names of the various contributors are not given, or there are only initials. It is nothing but

horoscopes, the Cabala, mysticism and such, alongside essays about anything and everything. “How many copies of it are you making?” I asked in pencil. He wrote me back a reply and chuckled at the paltriness of his output. I should like to send this curiosity to Šimečka in Bratislava, but also to keep one for myself, and I cannot get another copy. “You can write something for it too,” Karol said. “A simple soul like me?” I asked in surprise. “Precisely!” said Karol. “You’ll appear very exotic in such company!”

He told me that Dienstbier’s flat had been searched. Immediately I started sorting out what I had at home: Černý ready for binding, a parcel of author’s copies of *The Crime of Rebellion* for Jan Trefulka, several piles ready to be wrapped, in each of them a copy of Patočka’s essay “The Writer and his Cause.” And a number of manuscripts for reading, the most sensitive of which are Tatarka’s *Jottings*. And where will I hide this diary of mine every night?

It is midnight. Our Jan has come in. I ask him where he was. Helping the Administrator paint his flat. The Administrator of the Orfeus puppet theatre is convalescing after an illness and yesterday his heart acted up, exactly the way mine did, according to Jan, when I was doing the painting before Christmas. “How did you make out with the cops?” Jan asked. “The same old threats,” I said dismissively, and I will not talk or write about it here. I will reduce the whole business to insignificance. Jan will come back this way again – in pyjamas, with his pockets full of apples.

Madla has turned off her light. Every night she gets into bed with the comforting thought that she is another day nearer retirement. Today she came home from work angrier than usual, because on top of everything else she had had to clean the office. Some time ago the director came up with the idea that the institute’s employees should assume responsibility for cleaning the building. Madla refused, and just to be on the safe side, I specifically forbade her to. “Why doesn’t he want to take on a cleaning woman?” I asked. “How should I know?” she snapped. Then she said: “He wants to shore up his position at the top and his power-base below. At the top he can brag about how much he has saved on wages and below he can hand out bonuses.” – “But he’s still spending the same money.” – “No, he isn’t, that’s the point. The bonuses are supposed to differentiate the psychologists’ performance, but he uses the money for cleaning instead.” The older women refused, but the prissy young ninnies agreed to do the cleaning for four hundred crowns. And the building is filthy again. And why? Because the sort of things that a cleaning woman

will do after a fashion you will scarcely find doctors doing, because they are too fastidious. And all you hear is how terribly tired they are, and they still complain about having no money. And they leave their dirty crockery behind them in the kitchenette – who for? The cleaner? The fridge is in a disgusting state and the ash-trays are always full. Who’s supposed to clean them – the cleaner? No, the person who can’t stand to look at it any longer. And so, ever since the employees started “doing their own cleaning,” those who are obliged to make up for them, by working harder at their real jobs in the institute, receive lower bonuses. “But I’ll bloody well make sure it all comes out when my time is up and I take my leave of them!” said Madla. – “Well, what did you do the cleaning for, then?” I asked in astonishment. – “Because she is doing a post-grad course, and she’s not very clever and really can’t cope, so she called in sick, and if she doesn’t do it, who will?” Madla spat the words out. “So you’re not too clever either, then,” I said.

It is one o’clock. Ondřej is back. “What’s up?” I ask. He explains to me that his firm’s new director refused to sign a reference for his university application, even though the previous director had promised to do so when he took him on. “Why?” I asked. – “He says he doesn’t know me, and needs to get some background material on me.” – “Aha,” I said, “in other words he’s got plenty of material, but he needs to get some instructions.” – “A really vexatious case,” said Ondřej. “Good night.”

It is half past two, because I stopped writing. The thought of having to go everywhere sorting things out and the likely repercussions made me start tidying things up so they would not be here to be found. I had intended today to write a commentary to be included in *Dear Classmates* as a separate chapter, but I didn’t even start it. Apart from that I want to write a feuilleton about this winter that would mark a change of mood in my present series. But there is no way I’ll be able to consign this daily writing to a separate track where it won’t occupy my thoughts or distract me from more important work. It’s no joke.

WEDNESDAY, 24TH JANUARY 1979

Another afternoon gone to waste running around because of books. One package to take over to an author for him to sign the title pages, insert photographs and then take all the copies himself to be bound in such and such a

place. I ask him when he will have it finished. Well... as soon as he has done the photos... I realize that the fellow can't afford the supplies and I give him an advance of 600 Kčs. Then I take a tram to the other end of the city where I am supposed to pick up the bound almanacs today. A glance at the clock tells me I won't make it in time, because I am supposed to be in front of the Rudolfinum presently to meet Zdena who is bringing me some more things she has finished transcribing.

I walk to the Rudolfinum – it is biting cold. I am walking up and down when a green car pulls up alongside with Zdena in it. “It crossed my mind that you might have some more errands to do, so I took the car.” Quite, and she means that the time saved will be for her. She's wrong, at least for today. We drive through the centre of Prague. There is little traffic in the well-salted slush-covered streets, so I have no great difficulty keeping an eye on the cars behind us. “How did you make out?” I ask. Zdena took a day off work today for her doctors. She emits an expression of disgust and slaps the steering wheel. “I tell you what – we won't talk about it. I'm alive!” she declares with enthusiasm, and points towards the traffic lights as if they were a flowering meadow. In her case, though, such outbursts of euphoria could easily give way in a matter of minutes to a sullen silence if I insisted on asking her: So what did they say? We are driving to the bookbinders' for the almanacs. Zdena is just right for this particular job since R., who delivered them to the binders, for some unknown reason, gave the fictitious name and address of a woman. And if I, who am known to them, were to come to pick them up, such subterfuge might unsettle those innocent people.

We pulled up a short distance from the workshop. I gave Zdena the requisition slip and two hundred and fifty crowns, and off she went. I had a good look round: no other car had stopped anywhere nearby. The package was good and heavy, and worth over two thousand crowns – plus the two hundred and fifty. It would not be a good idea to take it home after yesterday's warning!

We therefore stopped at M.'s, where I stored the package, and agreed that I would come tomorrow afternoon and M. and I would organize a handicraft session. Seeing how smoothly and quickly it all went, I now regret not having brought Černý's *My Years in Dijon* with me for binding. Instead the copies are lying at home under my desk. But I was reluctant to handle two precious things at once. And I also thought it unwise to set the lady at the binders'

puzzling how it was that no matter whether the name given was Václav Černý or Alena Nováková, I'm the one who comes to collect everything.

Zdena asked me where I wanted to go now (at least 20 Kčs for petrol to add to the price of the almanac!) and I directed her to take me to Jiří Gruša's at the Novodvorská housing estate. Jirka was reading his German book, of course, and looking for translation errors. There were apparently few serious ones, though a good number of minor slips. Zdena talked to Ivanka in the sitting room, with the dogs dashing all around and their little boy Václav – whom I have deliberately christened Walter (lest he become another Good King Wenceslas, as Jirka ambitiously plans for him) groping around the flat wreaking havoc: breaking the radio aerial, slopping tea onto the writing desk, etc. etc. Meanwhile Jirka and I completed some business, which we conducted, as far as most of the proper names, numbers and certain verbs were concerned, with pencil and paper; for the most part my friends mock me for acting this way but I have already managed to make them think twice. It was evening by now and I decided to pay one further call: to Otka Bednářová who lives almost opposite. But there was no one in. I have a feeling that Otka is annoyed with me, and I know why. I went back to Jiří's for Zdena who then drove me home. Jiří wanted me to tell him what the StB had asked me about. I told him briefly and I ought to do the same here, but it's the last thing I feel like doing.

Our Ondřej took his driving test today. It'll be nothing unusual if he flunks it – they apparently fail half of the candidates – but it would hurt him rather more. Jan, for his part, was summoned to the director's office for a talk. He was there with five other trainees who had passed the necessary exams and they were all treated most affably: they are to be recommended for university study and they will even receive a scholarship from their third year onwards if they agree to remain with the firm. The whole family is stupefied: we all fear we know something the firm doesn't know – that they won't be allowed to put Jan's name forward.

THURSDAY, 25TH JANUARY 1979

We have a house in Dobřichovice, but we cannot live in it. A modest but fine house, it dates from the end of the last century, and would be comfortable were we allowed to reconstruct the interior to suit our needs. It has no bathroom,

for instance. It has six rooms, but we have the right to only one of them. In the rest there are tenants. When we bought the house six years ago, we naturally gave them notice to leave, but that is meaningless unless the local authority is prepared to rehouse them. And since we cannot expect any favours from this state, our boys have started to build their own place as part of a self-help housing co-op. It entails putting in about a hundred and twenty hours' work a month, Saturdays and Sundays. The idea we had was that as soon as the boys had their flat ready we would move there and swap the flat I am sitting in at this moment for some place in Dobřichovice for our old ladies. We have three old ladies: Mrs. Kopecká with her two cats, Mrs. Rohlenová with her scores of grandchildren from spring to autumn, and Mrs. Hermerková with her dog. There's the rub: they may be just three persons but they are three separate households and they need three separate replacement flats. And that is bearing in mind that someone might die (me, for example), but when?

Some time at the beginning of this month I made up my mind to call a meeting to seek expert advice. The topics: (i) The feasibility of moving the old ladies to a single – minimum three-bedroomed – flat seeing that they now live in a family house that is divided into three flats in an equally notional fashion; (ii) whether the authorities might have a trick up their sleeves enabling them to take the boys' flat away from them once they have built it; (iii) whether it might be advisable to have Jan or Madla registered as joint owners of the Dobřichovice house, which was bought in Ondřej's name. My being the owner of anything is something inconceivable both to the state and our family. As experts I invited Jiří Gruša, who also works in a housing office and knows the sort of trickery that might be used, Pavel Rychetský, because he's a lawyer in a similar co-operative, our lads, and Madla, of course, because she considers it possible that as soon as the boys have built the flat I will move into it with some woman or other.

The meeting took place at Pavel's, and Jiří failed to show up. We are not allowed to move three old ladies into one flat, but taking the boys' three-bedroom apartment and giving them a one-bedroom instead – if the boys are not married at the time of the final inspection – that's allowed. The next day I asked Jiří why he had not come. He said it had slipped his mind, adding with a grin that it was a Freudian lapse of memory because he was cross with me.

In December, I wrote my "Remarks on Courage," dedicating them to Karel Pecka on his fiftieth birthday, with the request that he let me have his



*And that is bearing in mind that someone might die
(me, for example), but when? (p. 13)*

comments, as I intended to circulate them. For my chosen topic – the meaning of courage for exceptional individuals and for the mass of normal people – Pecka seemed to me to be the best qualified to pass an opinion, having spent eleven years behind bars and being an unpretentious man free of all hatred, neuroses and affectation, one whose lifestyle more closely resembles ordinary people's than does that of other equally well-known opposition writers... He came to see me with a lot of reservations. Some points I was able to explain to him, others I changed; there were others that just dropped out of the text by virtue of that well-known law of nature that when we seek our opponent out, his very readiness to consider our criticism attenuates it.

Subsequently, everyone agreed with my text and some even congratulated me on it – from Madla and Kosík to Alexandr Kliment and Helena Klímová. In sorrow and trepidation I sent the text to Brno, but I have heard nothing from there yet. Jiří Müller, Jan Tesař...! My text caught Petr Pithart working on his own formulation of certain similar sentiments. In a roundabout way I heard tell that deeper within Charter 77 it was a cause of contention. At the Pitharts' I was apprised of a phrase quoted from some gathering: "...before Vaculík was demoralized by Martinovský..." The StB are bound to have read my article at that time too and I trembled lest some unforeseen smart alec among them should realize his opportunity. Otká took a copy, bore it away, read it – nothing. And then: "Listen, my friend, some people have got serious reservations about it and quite rightly, too!" Last month she told me that even Gruša had taken umbrage and was writing a riposte – and that it already ran to six pages.

When Jirka told me he was Freudianly cross with me, I knew the cause and wanted to talk about it. He told me he had started to write a reply but had then torn it up, because it's not right, he said. "What's 'not right'?" I asked. – "That the two of us should..." I had to finish the sentence for him: "... bicker under the eyes of the StB?" We were talking on Malostranské Square while waiting for a tram.

I said that once we had defined ourselves as free people – by signing the Charter among other things – it was up to us to act freely within this territory. We could not stay silent about certain matters just because the secret police were listening in. Jiří agreed, but said there was another reason why my article was unsuitable for open discussion: it was incredibly deceitful. He had subjected my text to a purely semantic analysis and could demonstrate to

me how I employ the basest journalistic techniques, identical to those which *Rudé právo* had used against me in 1977.

That really took me aback. I insisted that he give me a clue to the basis of his criticism – off the top of his head at least. He pulled some papers out of his bag – we were already on the tram – and started to read from them *sotto voce*. I observed that he had three beginnings: “Dear Ludvík!” And lots of crossings out. What I recall of it, more or less, is the following: that I slander the young Pecka, and from the relative immunity of my exalted position I fail to see how today’s youthful Peckas are again being jailed, and being jailed in my stead; that in my text I employ indefinable terms whose meaning I gradually modify so that by means of seemingly logical phrases I concoct a lie. For what are my “band of heroes” whose actions become incomprehensible for “sensible people”? Apparently I should not have spoken about heroes but gone right ahead and said “a handful of self-appointed has-beens,” and the sensible, normal people I spoke of are no more than the “honest working people led by the party”. And when I advocate “courageous honest work,” what is it but the “honest cooperation” required by the state and the police..? That was it, more or less, and I am endeavouring to reproduce it here because I don’t know whether he will ever let me have his ideas in writing.

I told him that I would very much like him to try and put down his comments on paper, all the same. Only he should try and do so without indulging in insults that would sour our relationship, give pleasure to the StB and summon up evil spirits. It was not my practice to speak that nastily about anyone, not even the secret police! If he would make an effort to express all those sensitive points in words that even I might be able to read, then he would probably find himself confronted by the same task as I had been, particularly if, like me, he tried to limit himself to three pages. He replied that he would not be writing anything now that he had said it to me, and my error might have been that some things just ought not to be said in three pages.

It sounds plausible, I thought to myself on the way home. But length depends on the genre. And everyone knows my genre, and it was obvious in this case too. And the very choice of genre implies certain assumptions on the part of author and reader alike.

That evening, I thought to myself how magnanimously I had taken it and how resilient I was. But then in the middle of the night came the usual awakening for no reason and a sense of anxiety about lack of success and

being under pressure, because I wouldn't even manage to complete *The Trip to Praděd* or the book about the Indians and I would have nothing to justify myself with. The main thing is to complete *Dear Classmates*, because it will cover everything from birth to eventual death. That is the main priority. But my most urgent theme, the one that really haunts me, is what is happening to me now. And in my case the best state of mind for work, as I have discovered again and again, is agitation, fear and rage, plus a feverish *fuite en avant* until the final culminating sentence.

It's a quarter to four in the morning; I can't believe it. I should have written this this morning, but I needed daylight to photograph diary entries for *Dear Classmates*. Then this afternoon I glued in birds at M.'s and cut out circles for the *Hour of Hope* almanac. This week I wanted to deliver my feuilleton about the present winter. Quite simply, from the moment I look at my ugly mug each morning while shaving, I feel like shaving off the moustache as well, thereby returning everything to its original form before all the things that have happened and grown on me. Another thing Jiří told me: it is out of the question for me, all of a sudden, before people's gaze, to remove the outfit, costume or coat that I once donned of my own free will. I didn't do anything, and the apparel that others may have clothed me in is their business. People have to be grown-up enough to put up with it. But oh, the anxiety it arouses, the simple threat of losing friends!

FRIDAY, 26TH JANUARY 1979

My sleep tends to end in hectic dreams. They are action-packed and very seldom to do with emotional states. Mostly I feel nothing during them. I am driving along in a bad car which, though scarcely moving, reacts sluggishly to the controls, so that slowly but surely I crash into something. Or I am running away and it is not that my legs are too heavy for me to move from the spot, but they're too light to carry me forward. I courageously and adventurously climb rocks or constructions which tremble and drop away beneath me and I save myself by catching onto things, taking me further and further away from where I want to go: in other words, I save myself by placing myself in an ever riskier situation. Then I wake into broad daylight. I am alone in the flat, I can hear clattering from the street and from the kitchen the voices of our birds. Philip sings lustily; Catherine only clucks vulgarly.

Yesterday I finished the almanacs at Mirka's: I pasted birds onto the covers and cut out round holes in the dust-jacket so that the birds could be seen. The members of the household helped. I bought a litre of white Kamenáč wine for the purpose and added it to the cost of the almanac (1 Kčs apiece) – even so nobody else would have done it that cheaply. One reason I have to give up this work is because occasionally I get the vague feeling that people suspect I am making money out of it. You see, someone with a different personality from mine might say to themselves: he wouldn't be doing it for such a long time, otherwise! Year seven. Some of my subscribers are starting to treat me indulgently, as if I were a tradesman they were wanting to keep in business. Yes, and in the meantime my real trade is falling into decay. Madla told me the other day what our boys say about me behind my back, i.e. that it's shameful really – all the things he could be writing, instead of traipsing around Prague with other people's nonsense!

Today I was out delivering *Hour of Hope*. I did not get back until this evening so was not here when Otká came. She left me a letter from Mr. Václav that opens with the words: "Dear Mr. Ludvík," in which he takes issue with my "Remarks on Courage." Dated yesterday, it is already here, even though it obviously had to penetrate the police blockade of Hrádeček. Otká delivered the letter open into Ondřej's hands and specifically told him it was a "feuilleton." That was her way of telling me to treat it as such and do the necessary. She need have no fears on that score! Mr. Václav is also only pretending to have written me a letter. He is sure to let his friends have a look at it, but will leave it up to me how I classify it.

He wrote to me nicely: clearly and properly. And the tone is friendly. I am not even sure there is anything I could disagree with, were it not for the fact that it's extremely clear in my mind why I wrote the feuilleton. Mr. Václav's letter is a telling record of his bemused frown; he knows I know what he knows. "After all you know better than anyone else..." he says.

"After all you know better than anyone else that Gruša needn't have gone to prison over *The Questionnaire*, but Vaculík could have over *The Guinea Pigs*... At one moment it is more tactical to jail Gruša and thereby intimidate Vaculík; at another it may be more convenient to jail Vaculík as a means of intimidating Gruša... You can't have forgotten, surely, that you – like myself, incidentally – are still formally indicted on a charge dating back to 1969? And surely you must realise that precisely the two of us, for instance, could have

spent the first half of the seventies in prison in place of Šabata and Hübl? Do you really think that miserable little text we both signed that time was worth it? Looked at that way, nothing is worth it. Neither leaflets, nor going to a ball, nor writing some novel. Let alone sending texts by Czech writers to exile journals! Was it worth Lederer's while? And he's lucky enough to have been one of those crafty heroes who enjoy only 'limited doses of repression.' After all, he needn't have been sentenced to just three years, he could easily have been given ten." – That is Mr. Václav's response to my view that the present regime's policy, unlike that of the fifties – when the aim was to raze society to the ground – is to jail its individual opponents almost reluctantly and for shorter terms, because among other reasons it has no desire to validate heroes. On the contrary, these days it needs to placate and even anaesthetise society. I go on to make the point that certain forms of resistance can actually foster greater cruelty in the regime.

"I am not sure what the intention of your feuilleton was," Mr. Václav writes. "I only know the impression it makes – on me at least. If you strip away its Havlíčekian, Peroutkavian and Vaculíkian elegance of phrase, what it seems to be saying in essence and in its implications is that decent people do not act the hero and are in no rush to go to jail – because there is something anti-social about being a hero; it isn't the sort of proper, honest labour that decent people like and that keeps society going; it is something that alienates and horrifies people. Moreover, heroes represent a danger in that they make things worse. After all, the cops are in general decent folk... the good fellows are only provoked into beating up women and dragging their friends off to the woods and kicking them in the guts! It is necessary to recognise their prestige and not keep on appealing in a provocative fashion to some international covenant or other, or even having the cheek to copy out writings by some Černý, Vaculík, Havel or other, which, as you surely know, is why three lads of your sons' ages are currently serving prison sentences in Brno. Some more heroes who only make things worse!" – Mr. Václav concludes with the statement that he does not resent it when people take a back seat – or even emigrate – when they have had enough. However, he does resent it when they (I) do not tell the truth.

It still strikes me that he managed to miss the main point of my comments and focused entirely on its "consequences." That is something I have heard throughout my life: the idea is one thing, comrades, its consequences are

something else entirely! So when are we to expect a more opportune moment to express ideas regardless of their consequences? At that most favourable of times – 1968 – the consequences were the most disastrous. But Mr. Václav knows what I know, after all, and in passing – and only in passing, so that he may dismiss it – he hints at it: “Maybe you wanted to say that the discreet, inconspicuous humiliation of thousands of anonymous individuals is worse than when they jail one well-known dissident now and then. Undoubtedly. But the question is: why was that dissident jailed?” he asks, immediately returning to our dissident cyclotron of thinking and acting.

When I got home today, everyone in the family had finished reading the letter from Hrádeček. “He put it well,” Madla said. “Yes, when you read it, you get the feeling that it all hangs together,” Jan said. “I have yet to finalise my judgement,” said Ondřej most elegantly of all. “Then I’m curious how you’re going to cope with what I’m writing now,” I said.

The only person that I am totally incapable of baffling and who believes in my good character would seem to be the ashenly menacing Major (?) Fišer who asked me in typical fashion last Tuesday: “So what are you up to now, Mr. Vaculík? What’s this about us being murderers and about people being shot here?” And he held up between finger and thumb, like an asp, a copy of my “Remarks on Courage” typed on yellow paper.

MONDAY, 29TH JANUARY 1979

On Saturday we drove to Dobřichovice. I got a fire going in the tiled stove. Inside it was three degrees – above, thank goodness. Outside it was one degree higher. It was thawing. Three hours later the equipment was already recording fifteen degrees of heat in the bedroom. Madla helped it as usual by diligently ironing the clean laundry brought from home. While engaged in such activity – she ironing, I heating – we listen to foreign radio stations. I find it enough to hear once a week what is going on in the world. In addition, I managed to type a few copies of Mr. Václav’s letter. It no longer struck me as so persuasive. I don’t intend to react to it at all, only if there are more along the same lines.

There was nothing to be done with the garden, as it was too wet. I spent a few moments aiming snowballs at the trees. Our hare had gnawed white the apple-tree branches I had prepared, and even started to nibble the cordon.