



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

WE attended a luncheon the other day at the headquarters of Helsinki Watch, on Fifth Avenue. The speaker was Zdeněk Urbánek, an energetic, rosy man of seventy-two—a man we would have taken, at a guess, for a retired professor of mathematics, or perhaps a modest dealer in maps and prints. Actually, Mr. Urbánek is a Czech translator, best known for his versions of Shakespeare. He is also an essayist and a novelist; one of the original signatories of Charter 77, the human-rights manifesto issued in 1977; an editor of the popular Czech opposition newspaper *Lidové Noviny* (formerly samizdat, now officially registered); and a close associate of Václav Havel. For the last twenty years, Mr. Urbánek's works, including the Shakespeare translations, were officially banned in his country, but in October, after extraordinary efforts on the part of the United States Embassy in Prague, he was allowed by his government to accept the invitation of an American literary foundation and come to this country for a lecture tour. In the weeks since his arrival, on October 16th, the political situation in Czechoslovakia has, of course, changed nearly beyond recognition, and he addressed the Helsinki Watch luncheon not on his usual subject—problems in translating Shakespeare—but on recent developments at home. Afterward, we had a talk with him.

We began by confessing we didn't know what, other than Shakespeare, Mr. Urbánek had translated.

"Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass,' Edgar Lee Masters' 'Spoon River Anthology,'" he said. He took a sip of coffee from a paper cup and went on with his list, pronouncing the English

names carefully. "'An American Tragedy,' Dreiser, which I must say I love. 'Dry September,' by William Faulkner—the most astonishing story ever written, I think. Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities,' though that had to wait twelve years for publication, because the Party couldn't decide. The first part is very strongly for the revolutionaries, you see, but the second part talks quite directly about their atrocities."

We interrupted to express amazement that even a regime that could dither for twelve years over "A Tale of Two Cities" would suppress translations of Shakespeare, and asked how that had happened.

"Ah, you have never lived in a totalitarian state," Mr. Urbánek said, and he laughed. "Not that I recommend it." Before 1964 or so, he explained, he had always been careful to circulate his more outspoken essays and stories only among friends. But in the middle sixties, along with many other writers, he had become bolder and had begun to publish almost all his writing. This period of greater boldness, he added, was the start of the wave that eventually became the Prague Spring. Then, in 1967, Mr. Urbánek addressed a memorable Writers Congress, at which there was much open talk against the Party line. A few

months afterward, a commission he had received from the State Theatre in Brno to translate "Antony and Cleopatra" was abruptly cancelled, and in 1970 use or publication of any of his translations or other works was expressly forbidden.

And Shakespeare himself? Was he forbidden?

"He was never blacklisted," Mr. Urbánek said. "But, you know, it's quite complicated. The censorship we were living with was also, unfortunately, self-censorship by the heads of the theatres. They were usually members of the Party, and there were certain plays of Shakespeare's—"Julius Caesar," for example—that the Party didn't like. From the Party's point of view, it's about the removal of a firm leader, which they consider bad. So, though I translated it in 1964, it was produced only once."

Earlier, at the luncheon, Mr. Urbánek had mentioned "Julius Caesar" in talking about whether there should be trials, or retribution of any sort, for government leaders and others responsible for past human-rights abuses. "People are often surprised that 'Julius Caesar' is called 'Julius Caesar,' because Caesar disappears after fifteen minutes of the show," he had said. "But in fact that is exactly why the play is called 'Julius Caesar'—because after he is removed in a violent way his shadow lies over all the rest of the play; his political influence remains. And that is why there should be no revenge—because revenge has a tendency to perpetuate itself."

We recalled something else that Mr. Urbánek had spoken of during the luncheon—a tradition whereby Czech intellectuals take on the role of politicians. "I think it is not a very fortunate tradition," he had observed. "Not



because the intellectuals make bad politicians but because their politics start to exert too much influence on their work. For example, Bedřich Smetana's devotion to the nineteenth-century Czech national revival left him almost no opportunity to do his best work, which was in chamber music. Instead, he wrote operas. There were no Czech operas, and so he felt compelled to compose as many as possible. Most of the librettos were unbelievably bad, yet there are passages of enormous beauty."

We asked whether Mr. Urbánek knew how his friend Mr. Havel was balancing his art with politics these days. Did he have time to write at all?

"I know that he started a new play last autumn," Mr. Urbánek said. "But then came the January demonstrations, and he found himself drawn in—first into the flux of new developments, then into imprisonment. Václav is in an absolute way a responsible man. He was perhaps the main personality who started the Charter movement, and so he feels responsible, both to the members of that small group and to the whole population addressed by the document, for seeing things through. He did actually write a libretto for a ballet while he was in prison in February. One is allowed to write whatever one wants while awaiting trial, you know, though only letters to family are permitted after sentencing. It's very interesting, the ballet—about a clown making fun of himself and of all pretensions." But the play that Mr. Havel began last year had been postponed, Mr. Urbánek said regretfully, adding, "I'm afraid he's forgotten by now even what it was about."

But surely Mr. Urbánek must be happy about the changes keeping Mr. Havel so busy now, we said.

"Partly happy," he agreed. "But also full of tension. Because, for all that it has said, the former ruling party doesn't wish to give up so easily. It is like a retreating army maneuvering to stay in power." He went on to tell us, "You know, last week, watching the demonstrations in Prague on TV, suddenly I found myself weeping. On the one hand, for joy. But also from anger, because the people of my country had for so long allowed a handful of others to speak for them—had allowed some of them, indeed, to suffer horribly. Not physically so much, though there was that, too, but in a moral way—being despised by the authorities, being talked

to as criminals. Everyone would come home from work or go out to the pub and blame the government—laugh at it, say what fools and incompetents were running it—but almost no one was willing to risk anything."

What if Shakespeare had been alive? Would he have spoken out, signed the Charter?

Mr. Urbánek laughed. "I think he would have preferred to express himself through his plays—to subvert the government by other means, by his wit and humor. Whether he would have succeeded is another question."



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