

## A LETTER TO A VELVET PHILOSOPHER

Barbara Day in *The Velvet Philosophers* (published in 1999 by the Claridge Press) indicates that Ralph Walker played a significant role in my exclusion from academic philosophy at Oxford. The letter which follows is still awaiting his reply.

Dear Ralph Walker,

In *The Velvet Philosophers* Barbara Day writes that in the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy you ‘voted against the invitation to Tomin, on the grounds that someone with his background would be ill-equipped to deal with the competitive academic world of the West’ (p. 67). May I ask you, what knowledge about my background prompted your doing so? Barbara Day adds that ‘The fact that some of his [i.e. Tomin’s] theories on Plato were dismissed by other academics was less important than the narrowness of his specialization; his knowledge of certain parts of Plato’s work was more thorough than that of any philosopher at Oxford, but his limited acquaintance with the breadth of western philosophy would have been unacceptable in any of the posts for which he diligently applied’ (p. 67). If Barbara Day expresses your opinion, who or what was your source of information concerning me?

Had you asked me, I would have told you that in my teens I read Bergson, Driesch, Rousseau, Marx and Engels in Czech translation, the philosophico-religious works of Tolstoy in Russian, and Gandhi in English. My study of Marxist philosophy began with the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which I read for the first time during the long months of a pre-trial confinement in prison in Banská Bystrica in 1957, when I was nineteen years old. (I did so to the great displeasure of the prison-guards: ‘How dare you think that you could understand *The Capital!*’). I would have told you that during my imprisonment I thoroughly improved my knowledge of German, and so after my release from prison I read in German most of Nietzsche, most of Husserl, Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, Kant’s three Critiques plus some of his minor works, that I was a co-translator of the second volume of Hegel’s *Vorlesungen ueber die Geschichte der Philosophie* (published in Prague in 1965), that in the early seventies I wrote a book on Descartes (published in samizdat edition Petlice), that I studied Masaryk and Patočka in Czech, Malebranche and Rousseau in French, Spinoza in Latin, Schelling in German, Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Russell, Wittgenstein, Santayana and Kierkegaard in English. I would have informed you that at the end of the sixties I decided to learn Ancient Greek and that during the seventies I read in the original Plato and Aristotle, the fragments of the Pre-Socratics, Xenophon, Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Plutarch. Had you known all this, could you have still maintained that I was not well prepared to compete with Oxford philosophers?

We met in the summer of 1983, if you recall? I asked for your advice and help. In those days, my sole income was provided by the Northern Dairies Educational Trust; I had been granted £2.500 a year. My fourteen year son Marek wanted to spend part of his holiday with me at Oxford. I hoped he could stay with me in my little flat at Lathbury Rd, but the landlord objected: ‘This was not agreed when you had rented the room.’ I did not know what to do, and in my desperation I went to the University Offices. I told the Porter that I had come to Oxford at the invitation of the Master of Balliol, that I did my best to do justice to that invitation by studying hard in my chosen subject, but that I ended by being unable to even provide for a fortnight holiday for my son: ‘Would it be possible for me to find someone at the University Offices with whom I could talk about my situation?’ The porter said that he remembered my case very well, having read about me at the time of my arrival at Oxford. He asked me to wait, and said that he would try to arrange for me a meeting with the Proctor or

his Deputy. That's how we met. After I had explained to you why I came to see you, you said to me: 'You cannot write, Mr Tomin. How could anybody offer you an academic post?'

I did not know on what grounds you had formed your opinion about me, but I was determined to do my best to provide you with reasons for correcting it. At the beginning of the 1990s I was deprived of the permission to lecture at the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy at Oxford University; I sent to you my lectures in the hope that you would find them worthy of presentation at the Sub-Faculty and that you would intervene on my behalf so that I could lecture at the Philosophy Centre for free (that is without any remuneration) as I had done during the 1980s. But you sent the lectures back to me, without even looking at them: without opening the envelope. My return address on the envelope was enough to make the content untouchable. Your opinion that I could not compete with the academics at Oxford, and that I could not write, could be in no way disturbed or undermined.

In the course of our interview in 1983 you asked me where I lived and who was my landlord. I refused to tell you that, for I did not want the landlord to be dragged into our dispute. Yet, after our meeting, as I approached the house in which I was living, the landlord was already waiting for me: 'Your son is welcome to stay with you in our house.' I admired the speed with which you had managed to obtain the information concerning my abode; it could not have taken me more than ten minutes to get back.

I appreciated the landlord's kindness, but I refused his offer, for I had found a solution to my problem. I decided that my son and I would go on a cycling trip to Lands End. It took us eleven days to arrive there; we slept rough, and our only cover was my old coat. And yet, it turned out to be the best holiday that I had with my son. The enjoyment of the unexpected beauty of the English countryside was not spoiled for me by your words 'You cannot write, Mr Tomin', although these words resounded in my ears as we cycled, and even entered my dreams. From day to day and from night to night my determination grew: 'I must write.' As soon as I returned to Oxford, I wrote the 'Pursuit of Philosophy' (published in *History of Political Thought*, vol. 5, No. 3, 1984), which remains one of the best short pieces that I have written so far.

After reading in Barbara Day's book that 'his [Tomin's] limited acquaintance with the breadth of western philosophy would have been unacceptable in any of the posts for which he diligently applied', I wrote a letter to ask her from what source she derived this information. She did not answer. In fact, in real life I had been accused of doing the opposite. The Master of Balliol wrote to me in a letter of August 24, 1983: 'Ever since the sad news of the deprivation of your citizenship, I have been advising you to look for an academic job, and have offered to help you find one. So far as I know you have never acted on this advice and indeed when an academic job was offered you by Lehigh University you decided not to take it up.'

Having thus informed her English and Czech readers of my scholarly deficiency - the book was simultaneously published in English and in Czech - Barbara Day goes on: 'For Julius, the rejection letters confirmed a suspicion that the world was in the grip of conspiracy; that he was being silenced by a similar "nomenklatura" as had kept him out of the academic world in Prague.' The paragraph in which she says these words begins

'Within the year the problems foreseen by the more sceptical philosophers began to make themselves felt. One of them was Ralph Walker, a philosopher from Magdalen College who became a trustee of the Jan Hus Foundation in 1983. He was to play an important role in preparing structural courses for the Czech students; but in the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy he had voted against the invitation to Tomin ...'

Is it possible that these two items, what she says about me and what she says about you, were somehow linked in her mind? When she worked on her book, she visited me at Oxford to discuss with me my encounters with Oxford dons. On that occasion I informed her of our

meeting at the University Offices. I told her that you asked me who paid the school fees for my son who studied at Radley College, and that when I told you that I did not know, that my son's education was arranged by Kathy Wilkes, you warned me that if I continued to raise complaints about my situation, my son might lose his place at the public school. I ended the story by noting that at that point I could not help seeing a similarity between you and the Communist functionaries who used children of Czechoslovak citizens as hostages: if one did not behave as one was supposed to, one's children had no chance of entering higher education. Is this how her words concerning 'a similar nomenklatura' came about?

I cannot deny that I did see certain similarities between my situation at Oxford and my situation in Prague, but when Barbara Day insists that 'His [Tomin's] reactions were the same as those in his previous life: he fired off bitter letters of accusation and denunciation in multiple copies to universities, individual philosophers and newspapers,' I cannot agree. For she and her sources would be hard pressed to unearth anything resembling a letter of complaint on my part prior to my meeting with you in 1983. And although shortly afterwards I did write to several British Universities, there is no bitterness in those letters. What saved me from feeling bitter was the combination of word with action with the help of which I confronted British philosophers. But let me give you an opportunity to judge for yourself. For comparison, I quote a substantial part from a letter to British Universities and from a letter to the Communist Party daily *Rudé Právo*. I begin with the latter.

In the 1970s I visited the French Library in Prague, where I discovered the complete Budé edition of Greek authors [in this edition the Greek texts are accompanied by parallel French translations]. One day, as I was going downstairs on the way to leave the Library, I saw that a door was open to a room in which there was a pile of newspapers. There were some French students in the room who did not mind my coming in. The newspapers on the table were issues of *Le Monde*. It was for the first time in my life that I saw it and could take it in my hands, for the only newspaper available to Czech readers in the public reading room in the library was the Communist Party daily *L'Humanité*. I took the first issue, the second, the third ... laying each aside. It was the sixth or seventh issue from the top that I opened and began to read. The issue was that of Sunday 29-Monday 30, June 1975. You can imagine my excitement when I found the heading: A la suite de la confiscation par la police d'une partie de ses manuscrits Le philosophe tchechoslovaque Karel Kosik écrit a J.-P. Sartre 'Mon existence a pris deux formes: je suis mort et en meme temps je vis.' [In consequence of the confiscation of some of his manuscripts a Czechoslovak philosopher Karel Kosik wrote to J.P. Sartre "My life has acquired two forms: I am dead and I live at the same time"] Kosik's letter was followed by Sartre's entitled: La reponse de Sartre: 'si Kosik est coupable, alors tout homme qui pense a ce qu'il fait est coupable'. [Sartre answered: "If Kosik is guilty then every person that thinks is guilty."] The title quotes Sartre's words from the penultimate paragraph, to which Sartre added: C'est a partir de cette idee simple qu'il faudra envisager les actions par lesquelles, en vous aidant, nous nous aidons nous-memes. [Beginning with this simple thought we will have to contemplate actions by which, in helping you, we shall help ourselves.]

The exchange of letters between Kosik and Sartre that prompted me to recount Kosik's main complaints in my letter to *Rudé Právo*: '1. For years Kosik has been prevented from performing work that would correspond to his abilities. 2. He has been excluded from participation in the activities of academic institutions. 3. He cannot publish. 4. One thousand pages of his manuscript were confiscated by the police.' Then I added: 'I should like to know, whether all this is happening in accordance with the laws of our republic. If it is not happening in accordance with our laws, what can I do as a Czechoslovak citizen to help promote the restoration of legality. If it is happening in accordance with our laws, which laws are these, and what can I do to facilitate such a change of our laws that this type of treatment

of a citizen of this country becomes precluded in future.’ (My ‘Correspondence with Rudé Právo’ was published in Samizdat Petlice in 1975.)

In ‘A Letter to British Philosophers’ from May 12, 1984 I wrote:

‘It was Rt. Hon. Norman Tebbit, while yet Secretary of State for Employment, who inspired me in one of his talks with the idea of getting on a bicycle. I simply want to express my wish to be accepted as a partner in an endeavour to involve students in philosophy.

Originally, I wanted to visit eight universities during this summer term, each week of the term one university. My plan calculated on my getting on the road without being invited. In the course of my preparations I lost the courage needed for attempting to visit British universities uninvited. I nevertheless informed the eight universities about my abortive plan, sending them my paper ‘Pursuit of Philosophy’ as a ‘sample’ of my thought. As a result, two universities invited me to come. Let me express my gratitude and admiration for philosophers of Lancaster and Aberdeen, for to be ready to listen to what an unemployed colleague has to say takes a lot of intellectual courage.

I shall leave Oxford on Thursday May 24, 1984; on Monday May 28 I will talk at Lancaster University on ‘Philosophy from the viewpoint of an unemployed philosopher’, on Tuesday on ‘Plato as he cannot be discussed’; on Monday June 11, I shall talk at Aberdeen University on ‘Philosophy with pleasure’. I chose my title for Aberdeen to counter Gosling and Taylor’s *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford 1982). Let me quote from their book: ‘Aristotle’s ecstatic language about the delights of philosophizing is not likely to arouse an answering echo among many practitioners, let alone among non-philosophers.’ (p. 5-6). With high unemployment among intellectuals for years to come it is the task of primary importance to rediscover philosophy as an essential intellectual activity, to rediscover delight in thought.’

Can’t you see the difference?

With best wishes, Julius Tomin