

THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND TO MY PROTEST

After the Velvet Revolution of 1990, I succeeded in obtaining a dossier of secret police documents, which allowed me to trace the roots of my exclusion from academic life back to the days of my unofficial philosophy seminar in Prague.

I opened the seminar in 1977 for young men and women who were deprived of higher education because their parents opposed the police state enforced on Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion of 1968 that ended our attempt at 'socialism with a human face'. In 1978 I invited Oxford dons to my seminar; Oxford visits began in April 1979 with a lecture on Socrates by Dr. Kathleen Wilkes. My seminar was directly attacked by the police for the first time on the 8th of March 1980. The police entered the flat where the seminar was to take place, and as the secret police report on the action says, W. H. Newton-Smith from Oxford was detained 'at the very moment when he began to give his lecture'. In the course of the four following months the police prevented my seminar from taking place six times, that is 8.3., 19.3., 2.4., 9.4., 12.4., and 7.5; those who intended to take part in the seminar on those occasions, including me, were taken to police custody for 48 hours.

In the end of July 1980 the Head of the Czechoslovak Philosophy establishment Radovan Richta received a letter from a West-German Professor Diemer, the President of the International Association of Philosophy Societies, who asked him to help me in pursuit of my scholarly work. The letter became a matter of intensive consultations between Radovan Richta and the top Secret Police officials. In a letter from September 3, 1980, the general-major RSDr. Vladimír Starek wrote to the first deputy Home Office minister general-major Jan Kováč:

'Within the framework of measures concerning the stay of J. Tomin abroad, especially concerning the preparations for his discrediting in terms of his "scholarly activity" it was agreed with academic Richta, that as a Member of the International Association of Philosophy Societies and the President of the Czech Philosophy Society he will prepare an answer to Professor Diemer, which I am sending you in the Attachment.

In September 1980 the Committee of the International Association of Philosophy Societies will take place in the Federal Republic of Germany, where according to academic Richta the "case Tomin" will undoubtedly be discussed, including his enclosed letter. We may assume that the content of the letter will find its way to England where Tomin works at present.

In the fall of 1980 Professor Diemer will be invited by the representatives of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, on which occasion Professor Diemer will be subjected to further tactical influence.'

A secret police document from September 15, 1980 is devoted to the meeting of the Committee of the International Association of Philosophy Societies that took place in Mexico in the days of September 5-8. The President of the Association Professor Diemer put on the agenda a protest against the infringements of human rights in Czechoslovakia in connection with Dr Tomin. Professor Semionov from the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union and Professor Koesing from the Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic read the letter that academic Richta addressed to Professor Diemer in answer to his written intervention, and demanded that the proposition should be withdrawn from the agenda; their motion was accepted by the Committee.

In the days when all this was happening I was already at Oxford. Not only was I not invited to take part at the meeting of the Committee, I was not even informed about it. About the

letter of academic Richta to Professor Diemer I learnt from the Czech Communist Party cultural weekly *Tvorba*, which printed it on October 15, 1980. Let me quote the relevant passages:

‘Tomin is worth nothing in philosophy ... It is self-evident that he would not find the means to live for a single week if he were interesting merely for what he did in philosophy ... I think that the people who supported and visited Mr Tomin will find themselves convinced, in a short time and on the basis of their own experience, that there has been no case of “suppression of freedom of philosophers in the CSSR”, but rather that it was a case of one person who wanted to profit from the hopes of some circles to intensify the world crisis and to poison efforts at international cooperation ... I hope that I need not mention that we would far rather discuss with you the question of further cooperation in philosophy, which is of course incomparably more important than this.’

The editors of *Tvorba* wrote in the ‘Introduction’ to Richta’s letter:

‘Some English, French, American, and West German bourgeois philosophers began – without any attempt to establish the truth – to write protests and even to put pressure on the President of the International Association of Philosophy Societies, Professor A. Diemer, to “interfere”. But it sufficed for the President of this International Association to do the most natural thing – that is to inform himself by asking the competent representatives of Czechoslovak philosophy – and the bubble of the “Tomin case”, blown up to monstrous dimensions, immediately flattened.’

The roots of my exclusion from academic life can be pursued further back, that is beyond Richta and Diemer, namely to the visit of Dr Kenny to my seminar in April 1980, and to Roger Scruton’s visit in September 1979.

Dr Kenny came to my seminar on Saturday April 12. He gave us a lecture in which he argued that according to Aristotle a man who insists on doing philosophy without having been called upon doing so is not a good man; he is *panourgos*, a wicked man. He came to my flat with his wife about half an hour before the beginning of the seminar. After a few minutes of a pleasant introductory chat he said that he wanted me to translate *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177a12-1177b6 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1218b31-1219a39 at the beginning of the seminar, for in his lecture he would be referring to these two texts. He made the request in such a matter-of-fact fashion, as if it were the most normal thing among classical philosophers when visiting each other. Could Kenny have expected anything other than my complete failure? Wasn’t his purpose to demonstrate that the Aristotelian term *panourgos* was applicable to me, and presumably to a number of my students? Among the established Platonic scholars there is not one who could have accomplished the task, for even the best of them would have needed much more time to do so, drilled as they were from their early years at Winchester, Eton, Rugby, and other Public Schools in translating Greek sentences into English, English sentences into Greek. (The method is well described in *Ancient Greek, a complete course* (published first in 1989 and many times republished since then; my copy was published in 1999):

‘In reading Greek the following steps should be followed:

- a. Look up each word in the vocabulary and parse it (i.e. define it grammatically; this is particularly necessary with words which vary in form).
- b. Mark all finite verbs as this will indicate the number of clauses.
- c. By observing punctuation and conjunctions used to join clauses, work out where each clause begins and ends.

- d. Take each clause separately and see how each word relates to the finite verb of its clause (subject, object, part of an adverbial phrase etc.).
- e. See from the conjunctions how the clauses are related to each other and work out the overall meaning of the sentence.’)

The police document of 2.4.1980 entitled ‘A Proposal’ indicates that the Czech Secret police was well informed about the intended exposure of Tomin as an imposter by Dr Kenny: ‘I propose that a lecture in TOMIN’s flat ought to be attended by 2 politically trustworthy students from the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, with good knowledge of English and of Ancient Greek History of Philosophy and one young secret police officer who too will be acquainted with these subjects.

In the discussion on the given theme these students will point out how poorly prepared TOMIN is, and how poorly prepared his audience is for such a lecture, which becomes unintelligible to them because of their poor knowledge. They will expose to ridicule the contributions of other members of the audience. They will then denounce TOMIN’s university as a fraud and waste of time.’

I do not know whether the secret police succeeded in finding two students and a young secret police officer for the proposed task; I never asked those who attended my seminars to give me the names. But if they were in the room, they never had an opportunity to fulfil their appointed task, for the lecture took a very different turn from what was expected.

In the ‘Pursuit of Philosophy’ (*History of Political Thought*, vol. v. No. 3, 1984) I wrote about the occasion:

‘Kenny chose to talk about the pursuit of happiness in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*. ... He would begin the talk by presenting some texts from the *Eudemian* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Would I have a look at the passages in Greek? I was relieved when I saw the *Nicomachean* passage (10th book, 1177a12-1177b6). In my text it was heavily underlined and marked by an exclamation mark. Though I had not read the text for years I was confident that little would be needed to get it revived in my mind. I began to sweat when I saw the lengthy passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1218b31-1219a39). I had never read the *Eudemian Ethics*. I would have loved to go through the text together with Kenny and benefit from his help, but there was no time for it. The students began to arrive. I excused myself and retired to the kitchen. I barely managed to read the text once when my wife summoned me to open the seminar.’ (pp. 527-8).

Dr Kenny opened the seminar by asking me to translate the two passages. I did so by reading each sentence first in the Greek original aloud, and then translating it into Czech. In the discussion that ensued I thus a great advantage over Dr Kenny, for I had both texts clearly in my mind, having read in the described manner the *Nicomachean* text once, the *Eudemian* text twice, once when translating it for the audience, and once immediately before the beginning of the seminar, while my reading the texts aloud in Greek was obviously of no help to Dr Kenny. He must have been sorely disappointed, seeing that instead of proving me an imposter he gave me some twenty introductory minutes of his time – the two passages were quite long – in which I could demonstrate that my knowledge of Greek was up to the task.

Let me return to my account of the event from the ‘Pursuit of Philosophy’:

‘If I remember it well Kenny began with the *Nicomachean* passage. There, he argued, happiness consists in the contemplative activity and philosophy becomes the primary source of happiness. For the *Eudemian Ethics*, to which he came afterwards, happiness consisted of

an ideal functioning of every part of the soul. Kenny argued that the *Eudemean* conception was critical of the *Nicomachean* conception. Let me quote from his book: “A person who organized his life entirely with a view to the promotion of philosophical speculation would be not wise but cunning, not *phronimos* but *panourgos*. The type of person whom many regard as the hero of the *Nicomachean Ethics* turns out, by the standards of the *Eudemean Ethics*, to be a vicious and ignoble character.” (p. 214)

We arrived at the point where I had to exchange the role of an interpreter for the role of a discussion partner: In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle considers the life in philosophy to be the source of happiness because the activity of the intellect is the highest one. Why should I see it opposed to the ideal functioning of the other parts of the soul in the *Eudemean Ethics*? May not Aristotle be pointing in the direction of the theory fully developed in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he says in our *Eudemean* passage: “The end (*telos*) is the best as being an End, since it is assumed as being the best and ultimate, for the sake of which the other things exist?” (1219a10-11) In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle puts forward reasons why philosophy is the accomplished source of good life, he points to its being most continuous and independent of external circumstances. Even if deprived of exchanging ideas with his colleagues (*synergoi*) he may continue doing philosophy (1177a12-b1). This is especially important for us in Prague who may face imprisonment any day. It further reminds me of Socrates. In the *Apology* he says: “as long as I live and as long as I am able to I will not stop doing philosophy.” (29d)

Kenny did not oppose the “Socratic” interpretation of the *Nicomachean* passage. He questioned instead the philosophic credentials of Socrates. Wouldn't I consider Plato a much better philosopher? I could not accept the question as simply as that. How could I accept that Plato was a better philosopher if Plato is full of Socrates? It would prejudice my reading of Plato. While reading the dialogues I try to understand what was Socrates' philosophy that it gave him strength to do philosophy “as long as he breathed” (29d). But should I not better return to my role of an interpreter? – At this point dozens of uniformed and plain clothed policemen stormed into the room.’

The police intervened only after it had become clear that the lecture and discussion did not develop as planned. The reason for the opportune timing of their action can be found in the Secret Police Report from 18. 4. 1979 concerning the implanting of an eavesdropping device in my flat. If ever it was listened to ‘live’ – and the documents show it often was – it must have been so on that occasion.

Barbara Day in *The Velvet Philosophers* gives the following account of the event: ‘Saturday 12th April, the Master of Balliol and his wife sat in the Tomins' flat in Keramická Street surrounded by Julius, Zdena and Lukáš, a French visitor (Jacques Laskar) and seventeen attentive students. They were looking forward to Anthony Kenny's seminar, a contrast between the ideals of Aristotle's *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemean Ethics*. As was always the case with the home seminars, they had assembled quietly, arriving in twos and threes in order not to disturb the neighbours. As was also the rule, no alcohol was being drunk, nor was anyone smoking. Kenny remembered that “Radim Palous [after the Velvet Revolution Radim Palous became the Rector of Charles University] objected to Aristotle's identification of philosophy with the good life. His argument was succinct: ‘If the good life was the same thing as philosophy, then a better philosopher would be a better man. But Plato was a better philosopher than Socrates, but he was not a good man.’” And then: “We had more than an hour reading Aristotle together and we had the impression that the police were

going to leave us alone. We were discussing the passage where Aristotle says that philosophy is the most noble of all pursuits when the police came in.” (p. 57)

Prior to his coming to Prague, Dr Kenny had received a letter from a prominent university professor from the USA who wrote to him that I never received a Doctoral degree. Anthony Kenny did not volunteer this information, I learnt it from Dr Kathleen Wilkes. Let me further add that the Czech border police did their best to confiscate my Doctor diploma. In the account of the incident the secret police says in its report from 25. 8. 1980:

‘On 22. 8. 1980 at 20.30 the prominent right-wing representative Julius TOMIN arrived at the border crossing at Rozvadov together with his wife Zdena TOMIN, sons Lukáš and Marek, and Kathleen VANGHAU-Wilkes /sic/ who accompanied the family TOMIN. In the course of a thorough customs search it was found that Julius TOMIN exported abroad a number of publications on Greek philosophers, a book on the history of Ancient Greece, and his Doctor diploma. There were found no illegal or hostile documents. When the custom officers attempted to confiscate Julius TOMIN’s Doctor diploma, which he wanted to export abroad, there was a danger that he would decide to stay in the CSSR. It was therefore decided to refrain from confiscating his Doctor diploma. At 22.00 Julius TOMIN left CSSR.’

Let me add that after we arrived at Oxford, Dr Wilkes was asked by Dr Kenny to provide for him a photocopy of my Dr diploma, for he had to send it to Professor Diemer, the President of the International Association of Philosophy Societies. Presumably, Dr Kenny on the basis of the ‘information’ from the USA had ‘informed’ Professor Diemer and wanted to rectify the mistake.

Here I must make a confession, which I am very sad to make. The university professor from the USA who wrote to Kenny was my uncle, Josef Brožek. In my subsequent visit to his place in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, I realized why he could have been induced to such an action. During the Second World War he frequently contributed to the emigrant Czechoslovak newspaper, published in English, in which he favoured a more pro-Russian direction of our post-war foreign policy than was the direction followed by our presidents Masaryk and Benes before the Second World War. The views and hopes he thus expressed could not have escaped the attention of the CIA during the McCarthy era. If he was to pursue a university career, I think, he had to become their man.

Why would the CIA be interested in thus discrediting me? To indicate a possible motive, let me quote the opening paragraph of my ‘Pursuit of Philosophy’:

‘My discussion with Anthony Kenny on the right pursuit of philosophy took place in Prague in April 1980. At that time my philosophy seminar had been harassed by the Czech police but we still managed to meet. The arrival of the Master of Balliol was anticipated with great expectations. Some expected a catastrophe which would definitely finish my seminar. I could not imagine the police interfering once Kenny was granted the visas. That is why I hoped for a breakthrough. If the police refrained from harassing us in this case they would hardly interfere on future occasions. My aspirations would have been fulfilled. Prague would have had a place where once a week young people could come and openly discuss philosophy. That would have given us strength to be as free as the physical parameters of the situation allowed, free enough, I felt – even without the possibility to travel abroad, to publish and to speak in public – to confront the system with a problem of governing a society with free people in its midst. I hoped the regime could grow up to the task and so get positively transformed without falling apart in the process.’

And even better, my first wife Zdena Tominová wrote on November 14, 1977:

‘What do we want? We want this state in the country in which we were born and in which we want to live to behave according to its name: in a socialistic way. Because we know that this is an impossible demand right now, we at least want the state to behave like a legal state, to adhere to its own constitution, its own laws and the covenants it has signed. We desire that this state does not give cause for ‘dirt to be thrown’ at it and that it does not deprive itself of the chance to fight effectively for the rights, justice and truly socialist order the world over. This is what we want, the two of us, and certainly not only the two of us.’

In other words, we advocated a moderate change of the system, without losing its socialist character – no Velvet Revolution opening the doors to rampant capitalism.

I had to go and be thoroughly discredited.

Is this too fanciful? Barbara Day writes in *The Velvet Philosophers* about the visit of a prominent right-wing British philosopher Roger Scruton to my seminar in September 1979. She says that he was unhappy that ‘the seminars were dominated by Tomin, and the young students were overshadowed by his powerful personality’, and that the day after his talk in my seminar he met some of my students, musing ‘how much more effective they [that is ‘the seminars’] could be if the teaching were freed from the influence of personality’ (See Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers*, p. 45.) In Scruton’s view I had to go, and so, shortly after Scruton’s departure, I received an invitation to Balliol College in Oxford and to King’s College in Cambridge.

In his article ‘A catacomb culture’, published in the *TLS* of February 16-22, 1990, Roger Scruton wrote:

‘Following the example set by Kathleen Wilkes – an Oxford philosopher of intrepid character – academics began to visit their Czechoslovak colleagues, many of whom they met in the seminar organized by Julius Tomin. The visiting continued for little more than a year, during which period many people, including the Master of Balliol College, were summarily expelled from Czechoslovakia. The publicity-conscious Tomin then emigrated and, so far as the Western press and the majority of Western academics were concerned, that was the end of the matter. However, a small sum of money had been given for the relief of our Czechoslovak colleagues. Four of the philosophers who had visited Dr Tomin’s seminar – Kathleen Wilkes, Alan Montefiore, Bill Newton-Smith and myself – used this money to establish an educational trust. We decided that, although our purpose was charitable, and in violation of neither English nor Czechoslovak law, it should not be openly pursued, and that we should henceforth best help our Czechoslovak colleagues by working secretly ... We won the confidence of a large network of people, none of whom knew the full extent of our operations ... The first of them to invite our collaboration was the theologian Ladislav Hejždánek, whom I met in 1980, and who invited me to speak at his weekly seminar ... Often - and especially when the authorities got wind of a Western visitor - the seminar was raided, and the students forced to spend two days in jail ... Visitors came from Holland, France, Britain, the United States and Germany ... Hejždánek’s bravery was of inestimable benefit. So long as the authorities believed that our interest lay in Hejždánek’s eye-catching gatherings, they assigned to us a merely symbolic function. ... Behind this cover we were able to set up a network of secret classes - not only in Bohemia, but also in Moravia and Slovakia ... We also encouraged our French, German, American and Canadian colleagues to establish sister trusts, thereby acquiring an international dimension which was to prove invaluable in the hard years to come. ... Personal experience had shown to us the extent of the fraud that had been practiced on the Czechs and the Slovaks, and had awoken us to the fact that, if their cultural and

educational traditions were to survive, it would only be through the work of our friends. We therefore began to establish other, purely nominal organizations through which to pay official stipends, so that the names of our beneficiaries could not be linked either to us or to each other ... In the mid-1980s, thanks to a generous grant from George Soros (who will surely be commemorated in future years, not only as a great Hungarian patriot, but also as one of the saviours of Central Europe), we had expanded into Moravia ... Last summer, however, the organizer of our work in Slovakia, Ján Čarnogurský, was arrested ... But the blessed Agnes of Bohemia had just been canonized, and it was a time of miracles. ... Čarnogurský was released under an amnesty and made Deputy Prime Minister of his country... By then another of our beneficiaries was President, and within weeks we were to see our friends occupying the highest offices in the land. Among those who had worked with us we could count the new rectors of the Charles University, of Masaryk University in Brno, and of the Palacký University in Olomouc.'

Could all this have happened without close cooperation with MI5 and CIA? Shortly after the Velvet Revolution, in January or February 1990, I listened to the BBC World Service – after midnight. An expert on East European police and armies was talking about the surprisingly easy demise of the Communist regimes. His thesis was that towards the end of 1970s the KGB realized that Communist system was untenable and began to cooperate with the secret services of the West in dismantling it. Was my seminar a chosen ground on which the cooperation of the Secret Services from the East and West developed, tested, and mutual trust established?

After the visit of Dr Kenny my students and I were never allowed to have another meeting. In November 1979 I received invitations from Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and so I asked the authorities for a five year leave to stay abroad. I asked for a permission to go to Britain, Greece, Italy, France, Germany, Canada and USA. In July 1980 I was visited by a philosopher from Australia, David Armstrong. When Dr Wilkes announced to me his forthcoming visit in May, she said: 'He is very right-wing; three goose-steps to the right of Attila the Hun.' David Armstrong took me, my wife and two sons to a restaurant, gave us a luscious meal, and then he invited me to his hotel. As we were entering the lift he told me: 'Julius, when you arrive at Oxford, write to me, and ask me to find you a job in Australia.' I answered: 'David, what do you know about me? Nothing. I have been promised two years at Oxford University. I shall use those two years to advance my learning and my scholarly work. I shall inform you about my progress. If on the basis of my work you learn that I could be of some use in Australia, write to me, offer me a suitable place at your University, and it may well be that I shall be only too glad to accept your offer.' He replied: 'Julius, it seems that there will be a lot of trouble with you in the West.' I answered: 'Yes, David, it seems that there will be a lot of trouble with me in the West.'

A few days later I got a letter from the Foreign Ministry informing me that my passport was ready. I was refused permission to visit any European country with the exception of Britain; one country, which I did not ask the permission to visit, was added: Australia.

In a letter of 19th April 1982 David Armstrong wrote to me from The University of Sydney: 'May I take a great liberty, and say that I think that you will never be happy in academic philosophy circles? Harsh as such advice is in the present economic situation, I think that you should try to live in some other way, if you possibly can, and continue your encounter with Plato in a private capacity.'