Interview with Jiri Pelikan

Could you tell us something of your background, how you became a communist, your experiences and what led to your present position?

I was born in Olomouc, a small city in Moravia with a mixed Czech-German population where, already before the second world war, a threat of fascism was felt very strongly. Therefore, as a secondary school student of 15, I entered an anti-fascist youth organisation “Svaz Mladych” (Union of Youth) in 1937. Together with some friends we founded, at our school, a newspaper under the name No Pasaran*, in which we explained to our colleagues that the only way to prevent Hitler’s aggression against Czechoslovakia was to stop him and Franco in Spain. Because of this I was expelled from the school, but reinstated after protests.

After the Munich agreement and the occupation of our country in March 1939, both teachers and students understood that we were right, and we were able to launch a large movement against the fascist occupation. We established relations with workers and with the underground communist party organisation, to which my brother belonged. When Hitler launched the war against Poland in September 1939, I saw the need to strengthen our resistance movement and I joined the Communist Party.

In April 1940 I was arrested by the Gestapo, together with many other comrades including my brother, and spent five years in prison. Immediately after the war I entered the university and, convinced that socialism was the only solution for our country, was active in the party, working with enthusiasm for the realisation of our ideals.

My first conflicts and doubts arose at the period of the break with Yugoslavia in 1948. We knew the Yugoslav comrades as good communists, and such people as our then General Secretary, Rudolf Slansky, who suddenly were branded as enemies. But at that time we suppressed all doubts, putting all our confidence in Stalin and the Soviet Party, which we regarded without hesitation as the “supreme conscience”. But we could not avoid the consequences: demoralisation of the party; its growing isolation from

* This slogan (“they shall not pass”) was used by the Spanish Republicans.
the masses; more and more power to the bureaucracy; de-politicalisation of the working class, which was asked merely to produce more and not interfere in politics; mistrust among old comrades and people in general, and imposition of the Soviet model of socialism as the only one, although so removed from our own reality, traditions and outlook.

In 1952 I was unable to talk to the people and was searching for the explanations. It was then that I was proposed as General Secretary of the International Union of Students to which I was elected in 1953. I accepted this work with pleasure, since it brought me back to the revolutionary traditions of the student movement and I had the feeling that I could really help once again to realise my ideals. These ten years (in 1955 I became President of IUS) were among the happiest of my life. I met many wonderful people and was able to participate in the fight against colonialism in Algeria, Sudan, Indonesia, Guinea, etc.; in democratic and national revolutions like in Iraq and Cuba, and in China after the victory of the revolution. I was working with young people, who followed their ideals despite persecution and without any personal ambitions, and this was such a contrast with the line of development in my own country.

At the same time I realised there were many contradictions between the reality and the official propaganda which revolted me. I was particularly upset with the fact that we were protesting against fascist persecution in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Iran and elsewhere — something I did with full conviction — but at the same time we were obliged to keep silent about the lack of freedom for the student movement in socialist countries or about known facts of trials and persecutions. For me this was not just a formal problem, but the source of moral weakness, since I felt that we were losing the moral right to condemn persecution elsewhere.

All these things brought myself and others into conflict with the leadership of the Communist Party in 1961, when we demanded rehabilitation of Slansky and other victims of the trials, restoration of normal relations with the Yugoslav CP, and criticised the methods of Novotny. We were punished for this, but were rehabilitated in 1963 when I was appointed Director General of Television and elected to Parliament.

At that time the struggle for the renewal of socialism had commenced in our country and I was fascinated by the great possibilities of such a mass medium as television in the activisation of the people. I was working with enthusiasm, starting such programs as “Res publica” and others, in which members of the
government or party were invited to answer questions from the people. But again, very soon I met the resistance of conservative forces and was obliged to fight for many programs against the censorship. But, despite the difficulties, we had the feeling that it was possible to achieve real changes, the more so since we hoped to be supported by the changes in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries and in the international communist movement. In fact, it was all this that led to the “Prague Spring”, to that wonderful period when we were again feeling proud to be communists, when we had the support of the majority of our people, and the conviction that now the chance had come to overcome all past mistakes and build a real socialist society, which would give socialism its real “human face” and wide attraction in the country and abroad.

The more terrible then was the impact of the Soviet occupation on the night of August 20. I was in the building of the Central Committee and saw the distress of Dubcek — his tragedy was our tragedy, the tragedy of all communists who had been always faithful to the Soviet Union and were therefore unable to anticipate anything like this.

Then a new hope awoke in me when I was among the 1,300 delegates to the XIVth Extraordinary Congress of the Party on August 22 in the factory of CKD. The discipline and enthusiasm of all these people, who came in the course of a single day to Prague and gathered in a secret place, their commitment to the cause of socialism, the support given to the congress by workers and the country as a whole, the consciousness that the communists were expressing the feelings of the people and were recognised as the leading force — all this was a great encouragement in the first days of the occupation. But then came the so-called “Moscow Protocol” and it became clear for me that one phase of our life had ended and a new one begun — that of the occupation and the fight against it.

Briefly, that is my background. When I was dismissed from my job as Director General of Television, under “normalisation”, and appointed Counsellor to the Czechoslovakian Embassy in Rome, I declared openly in Prague that I assumed this position only so long as the party maintained its position of not recognising the occupation as “legal” or as “fraternal help”. And immediately after the decision of the CC in September 1969, revoking the stand of the Presidium on August 20 and the XIVth Congress, I resigned my post and made a public statement about the reasons. Frankly speaking, I did not like the idea of staying abroad, but considering the campaign against me in the Soviet Union and
in the “normalised” Czech press, I was sure I couldn’t do anything useful at home, but would only complicate life for my friends. And since, as a communist, I was not able to accept silence or resignation and was convinced that we must continue our fight, which is an integral part of a world-wide movement for the renewal of socialism, I took this decision. Only the future will show whether it was right or wrong.

How would you describe the present situation in Czechoslovakia?

From the point of view of the relation of forces, after more than two years the occupation has achieved its main original aims; destruction of the popular movement for “socialism with a human face”; restoration of a bureaucratic regime which depends only on the occupation army and the local police; and installation of a party leadership following strictly the line and orders of the CPSU. But this achievement still remains in a political vacuum, since the majority of the population, including communists, rejects the “new reality” and is still attached to the ideas of the “Prague Spring”. The process of “normalisation” is still not finished and is going on with many contradictions which reflect the permanent fight between different factions in the Soviet leadership. On the one hand, Husak and his group is being supported by Brezhnev and his group in the CPSU leadership. This group is anxious to develop new contacts with Brandt, Pompidou, Heath and with other western countries (including Madrid and Athens), in the hope of achieving economic agreements which would help to solve the considerable economic problems existing at present in the Soviet Union. This group would therefore like to avoid new political crises in Czechoslovakia and other socialist countries, and consequently opposes political trials and blatant oppression.

On the other hand, the “ultras” or stalinists in Czechoslovakia are being supported by the command of the Soviet Army in Czechoslovakia (the so-called “central group”), by certain influential figures in the Soviet Embassy in Prague and, through them, by some important circles in the Soviet Army and Security and the party functionaries in Moscow. This trend demands a stronger fight against all forms of “revisionism”, “trotskyism”, “zionism”, etc., and considers the present “normalisation” as only formal and presses for political trials and repression and the continuation of the purges in Czechoslovakia. On the international level, this group opposes the “detente”, refuses any compromises over the Berlin issue, encourages the intransigent groups in Arab countries and is involved in a great effort to achieve the “revision”
of the XXth Congress of the CPSU and further restoration of Stalin and his theory of the "strengthening of the class struggle with the growth of socialism". Further developments in Czechoslovakia depend on the result of this struggle in the Soviet Union. The results of the last session of the CC in December 1970 in Prague indicate a strengthening of the "ultras" and the growing isolation of Husak, who previously liquidated all who might be able to support him against their pressure.

But this fight for power at top level cannot change the essence of the situation which is characterised by the foreign occupation, the demoralisation of the Communist Party by extensive purges, and the continuation of political repression, together with return to the old centralisation of economic, political and cultural life. According to official figures, during the last two years the Communist Party has lost 474,000 members (327,000 have been expelled and the rest, mainly workers, have left the party). The average age of CP members is 47, which indicates the loss of young people. Workers who, in the past, constituted more than half the membership, now comprise only 26 per cent. Ninety members of the CC have been expelled from the CC and from the party and others have been "co-opted" although there is no provision for this in the party's constitution. The same situation applies in other party organisations as well as in trade unions, student and youth organisations, and in parliament, where more than 100 deputies have been expelled and others installed without any elections!

Thousands of university professors, journalists, intellectuals, teachers, etc., are being sacked without the possibility of getting anything else except laboring jobs. Leading personalities of the "Prague Spring" are being publicly branded "imperialist" or "zionist" agents without any possibility of defending themselves, and political trials are still being prepared. A group of 30 young students and workers, accused of being "trotskyists", have been in prison for more than a year without being put to trial.

At the same time, the resistance of the people is growing; at present it is mainly passive resistance, but recently, more active steps, such as distribution of leaflets and documents, have also been adopted.

Some revolutionaries wonder why the people of Czechoslovakia did not resist the occupation more forcefully and they believe that if this had been done the situation would be different today. Can you give your view on this?
I have expressed my point of view in the conclusions about the results of the XIVth Extraordinary Congress of the CPC mentioned above. Despite my great respect for Alexander Dubcek, I consider it his shortcoming that he underestimated the danger of foreign intervention and refused to discuss any alternative should it happen. He had such a deep confidence in the USSR that he excluded any consideration of this kind and, consequently, took no practical measures. I am still convinced that it was possible to avoid the military intervention if Dubcek had declared openly to the Soviet leadership (for example on the last occasion at the Cierna meeting at the beginning of August 1968), that we were for friendly relations, that we had no intention of leaving the Warsaw Pact, etc., but that if an attempt was made to impose other solutions by force, then socialist Czechoslovakia would defend itself. Such a clear stand, together with the mobilisation of the masses, the distribution of arms, and the alerting of other socialist countries like Yugoslavia, Rumania and China and the international communist and democratic movement, would have halted the neo-stalinist forces in the Soviet leadership in their intention to invade the country, since that would mean another Vietnam in the centre of Europe. This opinion — shared by many of our comrades — is strengthened today by our knowledge that in the Soviet leadership there were forces which had doubts about this policy or which opposed that decision. There can be no doubt that the overwhelming majority of the communists and of the population would have supported such a firm stand, that the prestige of the Communist Party would have been strengthened and also the international support could have been only stronger.

But this problem remains for continued analysis. What is more important today is the question of what can be done in the present situation and in the future. Those who are defending the necessity of the acceptance of the diktat from Moscow of 1968 are convinced that we must wait on changes in Moscow. We are of the opinion that the changes in the Soviet leadership are very important, but that they will not come automatically but only through the pressures of all democratic forces in the socialist countries, including that of the Soviet people, and of the international communist movement. Consequently, we must struggle and act, despite the present unfavourable conditions, in order to contribute to this general change.

What do you hope to achieve in exile?

We communists and socialists in temporary exile consider ourselves an integral part of a movement, the base of which is
and will remain inside the country. We are only the external expression of this struggle, enjoying more possibilities of expressing our ideas than our compatriots at home. Therefore we consider it our main task to inform the world about the situation in our country, and our citizens about developments in the world, which are being distorted and falsified by the official censorship. At the same time, we aim to defend the ideas of the "Prague Spring", analyse its achievements and weaknesses and place our experience at the disposal of the international movement.

To realise this, we publish leaflets and newspapers at home and abroad, and the main documents of 1968, such as the "Moscow Protocol", documents of the XIVth Congress of the CP and the report of the commission of the CC on the political trials. (These will appear in English this year.)

You have been called a traitor by the Soviet press, yet you are personally well known to former student leaders, some now in high positions in many countries. How do they react to you now?

In general, I find a great sympathy and understanding for our struggle among those who know my political convictions and activities. Many of them regard my present stand as in full accord with my previous work and share the same opinion. This is true, not only of my friends in Western Europe, where I must now live, but also of those in Africa, Asia and Latin America, with whom I have good contacts and a mutual solidarity. Because they know me, they don't believe in stupid accusations of this kind.

You may know that the Communist Party of Australia opposed the intervention in Czechoslovakia and continues to oppose the results of that intervention. You are probably aware that recently Rude Pravo singled out the CPA for attack. Do you know of reactions of Czechoslovaks to the position of the CPA and to the attacks on the CPA?

The attitude of the CPA is well known in Czechoslovakia and appreciated by communists and patriots. In the situation where a strong censorship exists, Rude Pravo plays the role of the "negative truth" — people read the newspaper with the understanding that what is criticised is good and what is praised is bad. The positive role of that article in Rude Pravo consisted in the fact that its readers were able to know the position of the CPA.
The same is true of similar positions of the communist parties of Italy, Spain and other countries. Such clear stands as that of the CPA are considered by our people as great moral encouragement and as a real expression of international solidarity. We have recently published in our newspaper LISTY — which goes to Czechoslovakia.— an article about the policy of the CPA, written by Mavis Robertson, and its message, sent in November 1970, to the international meeting in Paris.

How do you think communists and other revolutionaries in countries like Australia can best help the struggle for socialist democracy in Czechoslovakia?

A partial answer to this question was already given by the above-mentioned example: to oppose the “normalisation” in Czechoslovakia and in the whole international communist and progressive movement, to support people’s struggle like that in Poland, to reject such oppressive measures as the persecution of communists in Czechoslovakia or the trial in Leningrad, together, of course, with strong protests against similar trials in Burgos, Los Angeles, Athens, Teheran and elsewhere in the world — to oppose any attempts at revision of the XXth Congress or for further restoration of Stalin and his theories and practice and, first of all, to develop in their own parties and movements the critical spirit of scientific socialism and real socialist democracy: this is one of the lessons of the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968: the deformations of socialism in one country weaken the whole communist movement and discredit socialist ideas throughout the world. On the other hand, the elimination of stalinism in one country or party increases the chances for the victory of socialism in the world.

Do you believe that the causes, social forces and ideas which led to the changes and events of January to August 1968 are still operating in Czechoslovakia? and do you think similar processes are operating in other Eastern European countries and in the USSR?

The events of 1968 did not come suddenly; they were maturing over many years as the result of contradictions between the ideals and the practice of socialism. The “Prague Spring” posed problems which exist in all socialist countries, of course with different degrees of urgency and possibilities for solution. The great advantage of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was that, due to the democratic traditions of the country, the maturity of its working class,
the progressive links of its intelligentsia, the high degree of industrialisation and other favorable aspects, it was possible to solve these contradictions in a democratic way without any violent explosions such as occurred in Hungary and Poland in 1956, with the Communist Party playing the leading role and with the support of a large majority of the population.

But this possibility was destroyed by the foreign intervention in August 1968, through which a real counter-revolutionary threat was created. At the same time, as the past two to three years have shown, it was possible to crush the "Czechoslovakian experiment"; but not one problem which gave rise to the crisis has been solved. Today, the country is in a deeper economic, political and moral crisis than it was before 1968, and it is only a question of time and favorable international circumstances before a new explosion will come. The great problem is that the foreign occupation has fostered nationalism and, because of the discrediting of the Communist Party, the clash with the bureaucratic-stalinist system may take on a violent character, with all the dangers that can bring.

Despite certain differences, the same problems and contradictions exist in other Eastern European socialist countries (with the exception of Yugoslavia which broke with stalinism in 1948, but is threatened with other internal contradictions and dangers of external intervention, and Rumania, where Ceaucescu has united the country around his independent policy in defence of national sovereignty, but with other compromises in internal policy). Thus, similar crises exist in these countries and their parties are either striving to find new solutions or strengthening oppression. The problem is that the present Soviet leadership refuses these countries the necessary political elbow-room for their own solutions or experiments and threatens to crush all genuine efforts by military intervention. But the recent uprising of Polish workers in December 1970 has shown that even in a country with a Soviet military presence political demonstrations by workers supported by other sections of the population can result in considerable concessions from the leadership. And this process will continue according to the pressure exerted by the working class — in Poland and in other socialist countries as well, not excluding the USSR.

When speaking of this opposition in the socialist countries, I would like to stress that its aim is not to overthrow the socialist system, but on the contrary, to liquidate its bureaucratic deformation and to give to it its real human face, corresponding to the original socialist ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and many other revolutionaries.