THE GREENGROCER AND HIS TV

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The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring

Paulina Bren

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For my mother, Halina, and my daughter, Zsofi

That's right. That's right. That's what matters. It's the tube.

Richard Nixon speaking to his television set as President Carter addressed the nation from the Oval Office (from an interview with David Frost in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine,* February 12, 2006)

I know: it's nothing new. Every power has tried to protect itself against its critics. And each time it has proved futile because life's truths sooner or later rise to the surface. . . . But the pity is in the years that are lost, the works that are written for the drawer. . . . The years race ahead and in the meantime aesthetic values disappear. . . . It is because the decision of what will be on view is made by people who, without having the qualifications for it, decide whether to publish that book or this one; moreover, they run amok in books already written, crossing out the names of the living, making them as good as dead. And all of this only so that they can hold on to their power. I know that these things are not written about in the press, but do not imagine that people are not informed down to the very last detail about each of your decisions, about the living standards of the elite, about their private lives. . . . And you, my dear comrade, share a part in the grand lies: lies about this being the best democracy, lies about this being the "rule of the workers," lies about you having a genuine love for our state.

From an anonymous letter sent to Czechoslovak Television's Prague headquarters on March 7, 1977

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Introduction

Walk through the city of Prague and you will encounter the elegant nineteenth-century street Pařížská ulice, one of the main arteries leading out from the Old Town Square; follow it to its end (passing the old Jewish cemetery and synagogue on your left) until you come to the Vltava River. Across the river is a steep hill with a large park that overlooks the city. This was the official marching ground for May Day Communist Party parades from 1948 to 1989, and it was on May Day in 1955 that an enormous statue of Stalin was unveiled right there. Measuring over one hundred feet, the granite monument dominated Prague's skyline. It was not only Stalin standing there, although he was front and center, with his right arm thrust into his long military coat, Napoleon-style. Behind him—enormous and yet dwarfed by Stalin's overwhelming proportions—stood Soviet citizens on one side and representative Czechoslovak citizens on the other. The latter included an industrial worker in a rubberized apron, a female agricultural worker with a sickle, a member of the intelligentsia with a raincoat tossed casually over his arm, and a watchful soldier making up the rear guard.

Humor being perhaps the only constant throughout the period of postwar communism, it was not long before this group statue of Stalin and comrades was transformed into a running joke on the streets of Prague. There was the one about how Stalin had barged to the front of the line at the butcher's; another had Stalin reaching for his wallet to pay back the Czechs and Slovaks for this exorbitantly expensive piece of socialist realist art. But perhaps the biggest joke was that merely a year later, in 1956, Nikita Khrushchev began to chip away at Stalin's personal mythology with his so-called secret speech at the Twentieth

Party Congress in Moscow. Stalin went from hero to villain. Even so, Prague's statue remained defiantly untouched, in large part because there were still too many Stalinist skeletons lurking in the closets of the Czechoslovak Communist Party leadership.

To give but one gruesome example: following the execution in 1952 of top party officials (most of them Jews), falsely accused of treason in Czechoslovakia's notorious Stalinist show trial, their confiscated property was sold off at bargain prices to their former colleagues and friends among the party elite. The avarice was such that the wife of the country's future leader, Antonín Novotný, bought up the china service and bedding belonging to the family of the executed foreign minister, Vladimír Clementis. She was familiar with the china, if not the bedding, from her many social visits to the Clementises' home.[1] It is not altogether surprising, then, that because the party leadership had such intimate ties to the atrocities perpetrated under Stalinism, it would be another six years before Prague's statue was toppled. It was finally done on Moscow's orders and with 1,600 pounds of explosives. Although the blasting operation was supposedly top secret, it is nevertheless said that schoolchildren were brought to the site by their teachers so they could learn firsthand about both history and political whimsy. Rumor has it that enterprising citizens hauled away parts of Stalin as personal souvenirs—that his ear reclines somewhere as an amusingly shaped backyard swimming pool. But either way, over the next two and a half decades, the vast plinth remained empty.

One night in 1987, two years before the end of communism, I accompanied friends, avid cavers, on an expedition into the sprawling bomb shelters that secretly lay beneath Stalin. Unable to travel abroad, my friends had made a hobby of traveling underground. After the 1989 Velvet Revolution, those cavernous multilevel rooms were discovered and turned into Prague's first rock club. Up above, an enormous ticking metronome was placed on Stalin's empty plinth, somewhat poetically, or at least rhythmically, marking the passage of history. Later, in a ghastly piece of short-lived publicity, the American pop icon Michael Jackson had a giant replica of himself erected upon the same spot where Stalin had once stood.

The Greengrocer and His TV is about Stalin's empty plinth. It is about the period of late communism that sits uncomfortably between the destruction of the Stalin statue in 1962 and the erection of the metronome and Michael Jackson after 1989.[2] The story of the Stalin monument in Prague—its creation, its destruction, and the pedestal that lay empty for twenty years—serves as an appropriate metaphor for late communism but also for what we do (and do not) know about the 1970s and 1980s in the Eastern Bloc.

That the post-1968 Czechoslovak Communist Party kept the plinth empty, that it was never able to find a replacement for Stalin, speaks to the ideological vacuum left behind by the 1968 Prague Spring and the Soviet-led invasion that brought it to an end. Once the dust had settled over the Prague Spring and its hopes for a Czechoslovak-style state socialism, the parade of new Communist Party leaders looked much like a television rerun. These were the men (yes, men) who had ruled over the country during the days of Stalin, but this time around they championed a different version of communism, which they called "normalization" (*normalizace*).

But what did that mean? The party itself did not know. It knew what normalization was not: it was not the Prague Spring; it was not "socialism with a human face"; it was not reform communism; it was not the rule of writers turned political celebrities, such as Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, Ivan Klíma, and Ludvík Vaculík. The purge that followed 1968 helped make all that clear. But defining normalization, or what Havel would later call "post-totalitarianism," took much longer. It was a long and often bungled process, but in the end normalization shaped a generation and defined a political culture that in many ways remains in place. Moreover, it was a political culture shared by citizens of the Eastern Bloc during these last two decades of communism when political idealism had taken such a pounding that the experience of everyday life was referred to officially as "real socialism," to differentiate it from the hopes of the past and fantasies of the future.

What then was "normal" in normalization? That nothing, and yet everything, was normal was hinted at by ordinary citizens' own adoption of the term *normalizace.* They used it, at first with irony and later less so, to describe the society in which they now found themselves living and working. The normality of normalization is central to this book because the people, no less than the regime, yearned to normalize their lives after the tumult of 1968. The 1970s and 1980s were about the coming together of normalizing desires from all sides of the political spectrum.

But Stalin's empty plinth also speaks to the glaring absence of scholarship on late communism. It is astonishing that twenty years after the end of communism in Eastern Europe, almost all the literature remains preoccupied with Stalinism, with an occasional venture into the territory of the Khrushchev era. Historians write about postwar communism in Europe as if it had ended in the 1960s. This has contributed to a continued lack of serious differentiation between early and late communism, thereby unwittingly feeding into a discredited cold war view that insisted on the "totality" of the communist experience. To argue that this scholarly dearth exists because the fall of communism is still too recent is no longer reasonable. Certainly, no one who has taught an undergraduate college

class recently would think to make that argument since today's student was not alive when the Berlin wall fell. The reasons, then, are more complicated.

As the term "normalization" implies, the 1970s and 1980s were intended to be without events, stagnant. As historians, how do we begin to write a history of nothingness when we are trained to look for defining moments, to uncover change, transition, transformation? The literature on the 1968 Prague Spring is extensive and rich; it was an event, after all, and an exciting one at that, with jazz and literature and high political stakes. And the work on the 1989 revolutions is growing, too, with its political dissidents, mass demonstrations, manifestos, and street theater at historians' disposal. In contrast, nothingness is daunting or, worse still, boring.

It is partly for this reason that the first wave of scholarship on late communism published in the 1970s focused almost exclusively on dissent and human rights. Here, after all, were signs of change, of people responding to the repressiveness of real socialism and its representatives. In the case of Czechoslovakia, that meant the principal sign of this change was the dissident organization Charter 77, with playwright Václav Havel at its helm, about which H. Gordon Skilling wrote impressively and in great detail.[3] A few years earlier, Vladimir Kusin, from Radio Free Europe in Munich, had published the first and, to date, only other book on normalization, but here, too, after documenting the post-1968 purge and government policies that followed, Kusin spent a substantial part of his book on the newly emerged Charter 77 organization.[4] Of course, Kusin and Skilling, like others at the time, were significantly limited by the sources at their disposal, and just as important, by assumptions about what the available sources, in particular the official media, could reveal. The conclusion, indirectly or not, was made that if the official sources were unreliable, then the unofficial sources—such as underground literature and dissidents' political tracts—were the reliable ones, the authentic windows into everyday struggles during normalization.

In the 1980s, the focus on dissent was extended to include civil society, understood as pockets of independent activity that existed outside or parallel to official structures and that could potentially be the breeding ground for a mass-based opposition to communism. In a chapter titled "A Glorious Resurrection: The Rise of Civil Society," Vladimir Tismaneanu wrote, "The main battlefield in the 1970s and 1980s was the restoration of hope for social change.…In all the East Central European countries…social movements and groups emerged to challenge the powers-that-be and to announce their intention to create networks of informal grassroots initiatives."[5] Similarly, Timothy Garton Ash, writing in the 1980s, remarked that "one could write the history of East Central Europe over the last decade as the story of struggles for civil society."[6] This emphasis on civil society by scholars working in the West further intersected with ideas being

generated by East European dissident writers, such as György Konrád and Václav Benda, whose theories of antipolitics and a "parallel polis," respectively, sought to identify viable and independent political spaces in which ordinary persons could hone their skills as democratic-thinking citizens. But civil society soon became a catchword that caught everything. As Garton Ash himself admitted, civil society had come to mean anything "from glee clubs to Charter 77."[7]

And if civil society was so pervasive, did that not make everyone a dissident? As we now well know, this was not the case. If anything, as revelations about collaboration continue to emerge, it seems that even the dissidents were not always dissidents. Certainly, by the late 1980s, particularly among the younger generation, there was a growing willingness to challenge the state, as Padraic Kenney demonstrates in his work on grassroots political opposition in the mid-1980s in East Central Europe.[8] Poland and the Poles, however, were notoriously willing to rise up, and even when periodically silenced, Jan Kubik argues, they used the limited public space available to them to signal their unified defiance.[9] Collective and visible protest began to take place in Prague in the late 1980s, but perhaps more descriptive for the case of Czechoslovakia was the offhand remark by Václav Havel's second wife (a mediocre normalization-era actress) that not until after she had met Havel in the 1990s had she ever heard of Charter 77—which goes to show that ordinary people (even the well-connected ones) often did not know, or did not care to know, about "the rise of civil society."

With the fall of communism in 1989, the expectation was that the archives, once opened, would reveal all. They did not. The prolific yet circumscribed scholarly output of Prague's Institute of Contemporary History testifies to this. The institute, founded after 1989 to explore the country's postwar communist history, has published a vast array of document collections about 1945 to 1968. But the histories of post-1968 have been less sure-footed. Among the best works so far have been Milan Otáhal's reassessments of Charter 77 and Miroslav Vaněk's oral history projects. In other words, the basis of this new research is not new archival documents. My own initial research experiences testified to this, too. When I began the archival work for this project in the late 1990s, materials on the 1970s and 1980s were closed off to most researchers because the events were still recent. But scholars at the institute had been given access to materials of the Communist Party's Central Committee, and, arguing my case based on their access, I, too, was allowed in. I was sure that it would be merely a matter of reading these top secret files before I could begin work on my book about normalization. Nothing of the sort. Normalization's leadership was made up of communism's survivors, the very men who had managed to avoid or overcome the treason trials, purges, arrests, reforms, and counterreforms of the past twenty years; if they had learned anything by the 1970s, it was that they should leave nothing in

writing. Theirs was a world of doublespeak, of endless speeches with nothing but words piled on like verbal car wrecks.

It is worth recalling that the match that lit the spark of revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 was a speech made by the brand new party leader, Miloš Jakeš. A clandestine recording of this speech made its rounds, with tape cassette copies rapidly reproduced and passed from one person to another. The recording demonstrated to the public in embarrassing detail the extent of Jakeš's and, by definition, the party's inability to lead. Jakeš's ruminations on the problems of supply and demand included, for example, the following: "But we know whether this product will or will not be on the market…we know it, we're not so stupid as that…and now the question is whether we're capable of putting even more onto the market…and if we're not, then we're not, and then we know that we'll be getting ourselves in a bit of a jam as far as that market goes, and that people will start cursing us out."[10] Not words to inspire confidence. But Jakeš's speech also gives a taste of what the archives hold.

Discovering that the archives do not automatically yield the postwar story has pushed scholars—as it did me—to step back and reconsider how to find and interpret communism's artifacts and residues. This is most evident in the work of a new generation of historians on the Soviet Union who, taking their cue from, among others, Sheila Fitzpatrick's and Stephen Kotkin's work on Soviet everyday life, have found ways to rethink the early communist experience in terms of culture as politics.[11] But even here the focus remains on the Stalinist era, about which the newly opened archives are far more vocal because the issues at stake demanded that one take sides. This brings us back to the original question: how to write about the later period of communism, about stagnation, and about the nothingness of the 1970s and 1980s. Even as historians continue to skirt the issue, some anthropologists, sociologists, and gender scholars have had to confront late communism in writing about postcommunism, with a few—most notably Alexei Yurchak—focusing specifically on late communism. Trained differently than historians, comfortable with alternate tools, anthropologists and sociologists have been less hesitant to look in all the wrong places, so to speak.

I demonstrate here that it is also right for historians to look in all the wrong places. After confronting the limitations of the Central Committee archives, I began to ask everyone I could about normalization, then a still undigested past that had ended ten years earlier. People were hard put to answer but almost inevitably began to talk about some television serials they had all watched during normalization, written by one writer, Jaroslav Dietl. This brought me to the Czech Television Archives, which opened up for me an entirely new view of the 1970s and 1980s. I have never had any intention of writing a history of socialist state television; what I found there was far more valuable. It was a way of

seeing—literally and figuratively—Czechoslovakia's normalization and Eastern Europe's real socialism.

What follows is a history of late communism that uses television as a prism through which to view the 1970s and 1980s. The archival documents I use include television serials, correspondence between the head of state television and the Central Committee, viewers' letters to Prague's television headquarters, but also newspaper articles, radio programs, debates and disagreements among dissidents printed in the underground press, and, yes, even the Central Committee archives. It is no one single source but the juxtaposition of these various texts, visual and written, that begins to unravel what was so normal about normalization—the nothingness of late communism.

The figure that stands at the center of this book is the greengrocer. Over the years, the greengrocer—Václav Havel's greengrocer specifically—has come to represent late communism. It is the greengrocer who, if anybody, took over Stalin's empty plinth. In his seminal essay "The Power of the Powerless," Havel tells the story of a Czech greengrocer—a stand-in for the ordinary citizen—who receives a political banner (reading "Workers of the World Unite!") along with the day's shipment of carrots and potatoes. Without thinking about it twice, probably without so much as reading the banner, our greengrocer displays it in his shop window as asked. In so doing, argues Havel, he announces his compliance. More significantly still, he consents to the rituals of everyday life under communism and thus "enters the game, he becomes one of its players, he makes it possible for the game to continue being played, for it basically to continue, simply to exist."[12] Havel's greengrocer epitomizes the ordinary citizen who acted out of fear without ever fully realizing it. Havel called on him to stop and to begin to "live in truth."

In the following chapters, I show how Havel's paradigm of truth and its presumed opposite, inauthenticity and falsehood, fails to hold up. During normalization, the lines of difference were blurred, decision making became more complex, and ethical ambiguity proved to be the burden not only of the greengrocer but also of the antiregime dissident and the party apparatchik. *The Greengrocer and His TV* reconfigures what we know, or think we know, about late communism. Ordinary citizens did not, as has been argued so often, lead lives bifurcated by clear-cut public and private realms: a compliant public mask at work and a liberated self at home. Instead, the prevalent political atmosphere more closely resembled what the scholar Lauren Berlant has described as endemic to the United States as well in the 1980s: a government-sponsored casting out of public life in favor of "simultaneously lived private worlds."[13] This is significantly different from so-called inner emigration, from insisting that while citizens were compliant (or at least appeared to be compliant) within the politicized public

sphere, they found solace in the depoliticized space of their homes, their private spheres. It also suggests that there were some significant similarities between East and West after 1968.

The Greengrocer and His TV speaks against our existing historiography of binaries. The emphasis on dissent and civil society, further filtered through the still dominant scholarly interest in Stalinism, has meant that the 1970s and 1980s are most persistently conceptualized in terms of official culture versus unofficial culture, of the first (state-planned) economy versus the second (black market) economy, of the party elite versus the dissident elite, and of the politicized public sphere versus the depoliticized private sphere. The image evoked is of two neatly dug trenches on either side of a field: in one trench sit those persons belonging to official party-state structures, while in the other, perhaps in less regimented recline, sit those who have declared themselves in open opposition. And in the no-man's-land between the two trenches is the so-called gray zone.[14] In the following pages, the gray zone expands and reaches into both trenches.

Although this book is not a history of socialist television, its history and impact need to be remarked upon. After 1968, the Communist Party embarked on an intimate yet tendentious love affair with television, and soap opera-like television serials about contemporary everyday life became a primary means of communicating with the public. Of particular significance were the serials written by Jaroslav Dietl, whom one participant in a dissident debate about Dietl described as having been more central to shaping post-1968 communism than both First Party Secretary Gustáv Husák and the Central Committee combined.[15] That television would have to play a vital role in politics seemed certain by 1972, by which time 80 percent of Czechoslovak families already owned a television set.[16] During the Prague Spring, the television screen had proved its political potency when it spread word of reform communism from elite enclaves to the streets. The Czechoslovak Communist Party leadership, the men of normalization, consequently became obsessed with television: with what it had done to them during the Prague Spring, with what they would do to it in the postinvasion purge, and with what it could ultimately do for them during normalization.

It is important to remember that Czechoslovakia's socialist citizens in the 1970s and 1980s were significantly different from television viewers today. They watched without remote controls, channel surfing, or anything vaguely resembling viewer choice. The complete lack of the latter ensured that Dietl's well-written dramatic serials were watched by an overwhelming majority of the country, incorporating all imaginable demographic groups. They were a transfixed audience of citizen viewers, unburdened by commercial interruptions or the delayed pleasures of video recording. But the socialist citizen viewer, despite the lack of choices, was

undoubtedly "making, remaking and unmaking meaning" in what he or she saw on the television screen.[17] In this sense, television offered an acceptable stage for negotiating the world of late communist normalization and for working out one's relationship with the state. The gifted Czech literary historian Vladimír Macura wrote that the "propagandistic language" of the Czechoslovak Communist Party "can still be considered to be a foreign, unaccepted code—a code with which 'they' speak. But 'the world of socialism' as a semiotic construct can no longer be understood as something comfortingly 'other' (outside). It is ours, we were its creators."[18] *The Greengrocer and His TV* is the story of that creation and its creators.

Normalization is recent history, with raw scars, and the ongoing struggle over its memory and forgetting (to borrow the phrase from writer Milan Kundera) can be traced alongside Jaroslav Dietl's television serials and their postcommunist rebroadcast. When I began my research at the Czech Television Archives, only the scripts were at my disposal. The head of the archives, however, was kind enough to arrange for me to see some episodes of the television serials, many of which were still on film reel. It was just me, a darkened office, an equipment technician, and the whirl and heat of the antiquated projector. A year later, a private independent Slovak television station began to rebroadcast a normalization-era television serial, *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman* (discussed in chapter 3), as part of its late-night program schedule. People watched, its audience grew, and soon bootleg copies of the Slovak rebroadcasts were on the market in the Czech Republic.

Czech Television, the successor to socialist state television and therefore the owner of all normalization-era broadcasting, began to discuss showing *Major Zeman* in the Czech Republic as well. That ignited a nationwide debate: some claimed that these serials were nothing more than communist kitsch, while others considered them insidious propaganda that needed to be kept under lock and key. The debate over the television serials was the first (and in many ways last) public discussion about the recent past. What happened next was that *Major Zeman* was shown on Czech television, with historians' panels slotted in at the end of each episode to explain to audiences what in the serial had been historical truth and what propaganda. Then gradually, all the other serials, the ones considered less overtly "political," were simply shown one by one, without the historians, as just one more offering on that day's television schedule. Normalization had been successfully normalized.

Now we come full circle. The serials I discuss here, particularly those by Jaroslav Dietl, are no longer a part of Czechoslovakia's difficult history, to be viewed critically. They have become a part of national culture with which everyone can and

should identify. They are being systematically transferred to cheap DVD format and sold at newspaper kiosks and supermarkets for no more than the price of a cup of coffee. They are there for everyone—yet again. *Major Zeman*—minus the historians—has already been issued in this mass-produced, inexpensive format. When I recently returned to Czech Television to choose photographs for this book, I was competing for images from the serial *The Woman behind the Counter* (discussed in chapters 7 and 8) with two men designing the DVD cover for its imminent release. I did not live in Czechoslovakia during normalization, but having "lived" with normalization for the last ten years, I confess that I felt a surge of kinship when I heard the ring tones on their cell phones: it was the television serial's upbeat theme song, hinting of happy days to come.

1

"A CRIMINAL COMEDY BUT OF A REVIVALIST SPIRIT"

The Beginning and the End of the Prague Spring

A day after St. Nicolas Day, when the streets were overrun by men posing as St. Nick in bishops' hats, accompanied by red-horned devils, the Ideological Commission met in Prague. It was December 7, 1964, and the commission, appointed by the Communist Party's Central Committee, was charged with keeping the lid shut on Pandora's box of postwar revelations about Stalinism.

As in the rest of the Eastern Bloc, Nikita Khrushchev's disclosures about Stalin's crimes had forced the Czechoslovak government to open up its prison doors and send home those political prisoners now known to have been falsely accused. But that had been in 1956. For a decade afterward, the Czechoslovak Communist Party had managed, rather effectively, to stave off the larger consequences of the de-Stalinization that swept through the region. While Stalinism's victims were being routinely rehabilitated elsewhere, their innocence declared retroactively, Prague remained mute. The Czechoslovak Communist Party rebuffed any attempts at public remembrance and especially the calls for accountability and reform that inevitably accompanied them. At this time the only confessions of guilt, let alone remorse, that the party was willing to make were made securely behind closed doors.

The 1952 Slánský trial stood at the epicenter of the party's postwar fabrications. It had been one of the most defining show trials of the Stalinist era, replete with memorized scripts co-written by Soviet advisers flown in especially for that purpose and a live radio broadcast of defendants' confessions and judges' pronouncements. Fourteen Communist Party leaders and bureaucrats were charged with treason; eleven of them were executed and three imprisoned for life. Of the

fourteen accused, eleven were Jewish. Such a statistic suggested that attitudes ripe under Nazi occupation had had currency in communist postwar Czechoslovakia as well, much in the same way that Stalinism and post-Stalinism continued to intertwine. There were no clear demarcation lines yet regardless of who might wish to draw them.

Heda Margolius Kovály, wife of one of those executed in the trials, was among the few "civilians" privy to these initial, closed-door confessions by the Communist Party. In February 1963, the party issued a document that "only carefully selected Party officials were permitted to see" but that Kovály had heard "almost…verbatim by the following day." In it, the party finally "conceded that all the people who had been convicted at the trials were innocent, that their confessions had been extorted by illegal means, and that during the interrogations a range of brutal and inhuman procedures had been used."[1] For Kovály, a concentration camp survivor, as her husband had been as well, this was all too familiar. Two months later, she was summoned before the Central Committee, where this same document was read out loud to her. She asked whether it would now be made public, to which the party apparatchiks replied, "Out of the question! The Party has decided to handle the whole affair internally. Nothing will be made public."[2] When asked to return with a list of losses that had resulted from the arrest and execution of her husband so that she and her son might be compensated (although on terms favorable to the State Treasury), she drew up a list that included not property but life: "Loss of Father. Loss of Husband. Loss of Honor. Loss of Health.…Loss of Faith in the Party and in Justice."[3] In June of 1963, the party permitted a small notice to be published in the country's newspapers. It announced that the men executed in the Slánský trial had been rehabilitated. Any more than that still remained off-limits.[4]

A Young Lady for His Excellency, Comrades!

It was against this backdrop that the Central Committee's Ideological Commission now met. One of the items on the agenda for this December meeting seemed to be of a more frivolous nature: a theater play written by a popular television writer, Jaroslav Dietl. Titled *A Young Lady for His Excellency, Comrades! A Criminal Comedy but of a Revivalist Spirit,* it was a light-hearted romp about a financially strapped spa town. After some brief discussion, the commission members unanimously agreed that the play was not to be performed "under any circumstances" because of its "erroneous political orientation."[5] That it had an "erroneous political orientation" was clear to all of them.

Writer Jaroslav Dietl at his desk, 10 December 1982 (Czechoslovak Press Agency; photographed by Karel Vlček)

To those uninitiated in the subtle balancing act between consenting to de-Stalinization and fending off potential antiparty revolt, the play might have seemed innocuous, belonging merely to the genre of absurdist theater popular at the time. At first glance, it is a play about an acting troupe that, in need of cash, decides to put on some light entertainment because—as they agree—vaudeville sells and everyone is fed up with serious thoughts. The play the actors improvise is set in a fictional spa town that, like them, is bankrupt. When superficial efforts to spruce up its facades fail, the local authorities agree that to survive they must inject capital into the town. They will do this by negotiating a multimillion contract for "our country's industry" with His Excellency, who, it is implied, rules over a wealthy Arab state. What follows next is a farce that clearly mimics the growing communist crisis in the early 1960s.

His Excellency's arrival in the spa town is introduced through an official press conference for which the young communist press officer is instructed to follow normal procedure and answer the reporters' questions by reading unrelated responses from a piece of paper. He successfully does so. But such typically staged public relations begin to run aground as His Excellency makes demands that stretch beyond the parameters of these well-rehearsed gestures and countergestures. First His Excellency requests "a young lady." Flabbergasted, the town