

LIKE AN EVER-FLOWING STREAM THE UPRISING OF HOPE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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This prophetic word happened to be chosen as the November 29, 1989, lesson in the devotional book of the Unity of Brethren (Moravian Church): "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24)." As I read it with my wife at the breakfast table, I was struck by the relevant power of its message. Did it not comprehend and prophetically interpret our impression of the then-developing stormy changes in Eastern Europe? This passage is concerned with the judgement of inhuman social structure, about pressing forward for greater justice and freedom.

The people of Central and Eastern Europe have waited decades-long for such changes. And not merely waited: Again and again they tried to bring about such reforms. Yet again and again those reforms foundered. Only after the Soviet Union under Gorbachev set out on the way to reform and rejected intervention in the internal affairs of her neighbors did the possibility open up for the Eastern European countries to break away. Like a relay race they passed to one another the impetus to effective renewal: The Poles with their "solidarity;" the Hungarians with their radical thrust toward transformation of the political and economic systems; the citizens of East Germany with their multitudinous "referendum of the feet" but also their unignorable cry, "We are the people."

In the following article I would like to report from the country of my origin--from Czechoslovakia. Long, all-too-long, it seemed as if the dramatically unfolding movements in Eastern Europe would bypass Czechoslovakia. The "Dead Sea" of the "normalized land" seemed unmoved. The atmosphere was marked by an almost total lethargy, broken only by courageous human rights groups like Charter 77.

For many Czechs and Slovaks within the country and within exile, lethargy was grievous, even painful. One sought reasons for it in, of all places, that country which could boast more than any other in Eastern Europe a respectable democratic tradition. How often did we ask (with hindsight, one must say, with little faith) "What has become of this manipulated people under the totalitarian system of lies? And what of those young people born and reared in that atmosphere?"

After 21 years we received the completely unexpected, liberating answer. I am thinking of the student demonstration on November 17, 1989. It was the 50th anniversary of the cruel repression of the Czech students by the Nazis. All Czech universities were closed,

many faculty members executed or taken away to concentration camps. The students wanted to commemorate these events. They received a permit for their demonstration. Nevertheless, after they sought to proceed to the city center, they were brutally attacked. The blood of students flowed once again in the streets of Prague. But that event mobilized the public. Not only young students, but also a wide cross-section of the young people in Prague and the people of the Czech and Slovak cities joined the protest and reform movement in growing numbers.

The unbelievable series of day-long mass demonstrations followed in which hundreds of thousands took part. They were carried out completely without violence, led by the "Citizen's Forum," a newly formed, loose band of human rights groups and democratically engaged citizens. Not a single political opponent in Prague was mistreated. Not a single window pane was shattered. Yet exactly this non-violent energy proved itself so strong--through the power of its words and its willingness to sacrifice--that under its pressure the entire political system was step-by-step transformed. The two-hour general strike, proposed by the Citizen's Forum and aided by the unflagging engagement of the students, was moment of breakthrough. It brought to capitulation the previous almost omnipotent regime. The movement was a practical outworking of "direct democracy" in the best European tradition, and at the same time testimony to the possibilities of non-violent strategies of democratic renewal.

Without a doubt, an enthusiastic euphoria would be out of place, much less a delirious felling of triumph in the West. After the holiday of political breakthrough will come the sobering, above all economically difficult, everyday life. Setbacks are still possible. Yet what has already been achieved gives one hope--and reason to reflect--also in the West. As Christoph Neidhart aptly formulated in a recent article in the *Weltwoche* (No. 51, 1989, p.1):

If these young people, by many decried as lost, a generation of opportunists addicted to consumption, suddenly sue for truthfulness; if they see in the ecological calamity a problem of morality and no longer merely a technical problem that with technical means can and must be solved...; if these young people preach love and non-violence,...and all at once become flag-carrying patriots, then this Prague Autumn, this (until now) non-violent revolution of the Central European History, has a meaning which points far beyond the change of systems in the CSSR and the breakdown of the Soviet social model.

There are many aspects of the renewal in Eastern Europe, which in this sense are worth noting. I would like to single out three:

AN EXPERIENCE OF DEMOCRATIC HAPPINESS

Almost all reports from Czechoslovakia in the last months have spoken of happiness. Again and again I have experienced this quite personally through countless letters and telephone conversations from quite different persons. They spoke of the happiness given to them by the democratic breakthrough. The entire atmosphere in public and in everyday relationships has perceptively changed. A never experienced feeling of belongingness

flowed outward and expressed itself as a (earlier not exactly typical) friendliness in interpersonal relationships. At the same time grew the readiness, spontaneously and powerfully, to consider the plight of other lands, such as Romania or the Third World. That readiness was seen not merely as a duty but as a natural expression of the solidarity of the liberated.

I am speaking of democratization, and therefore political happiness. Certainly, a person's happiness is multi-layered and can never be reduced to only one dimension. It can be experienced in personal life, in everyday interpersonal relationships. It can be given to us as we take part in cultural life and its values. It has inalienable possibilities in the struggle for the meaning of life "under the viewpoint of eternity." In the political arena, therefore, human happiness is never completely consumed. The people of Eastern Europe have experienced this too in spite of everything in times of oppression. We can live with meaning and happiness even in situations in which a co-creative role in the political life is largely denied us.

Yet, the experience of the Autumn of 1989 in Eastern Europe is clear: When the political arena is opened up to us as citizens, when an effective engagement for the humanizing of social relationships is made possible, and when individual and corporate use is made from these possibilities, it means an enormous enrichment of human life. A political song becomes a happy song. Certainly, in the everyday political life--and not only in the East--it often sounds completely different: "A political song! Foey! A loathsome song!" (Goethe). This sentence has the weight of a much frustrating experience behind it. Many in the open society of the West are ready to write off political engagement as a meaningless enterprise. Yet in my mind such an attitude of political apathy is to be resisted. Political apathy is above all there, where one voluntarily yields to it, a sickness which preys on the human substance. The experience of the East European Autumn of 1989 signals another possibility which should not be forgotten: The dream of political happiness need not remain empty. That possibility should, also by us in the West, be held before the eyes, and where possible, striven after.

To be more precise, what occurred in Eastern and Central Europe was not a matter of just any political experience, but that of democracy. It is surprising how the by us worn-out term "democracy" took on a new polish in Eastern Europe. In 1969, in the time of the Prague Spring, two terms stood equally side-by-side: One struggled for a "democratic socialism." Now the catchword "socialism" has receded in to the background, while "democracy" unequivocally rules the field in all Eastern European countries as the objective of all effort.

Some of us would like to regret the retirement of the catchword "Socialism." In European political and social history it indeed has an honored place and stands also for accents which even now have a validity. However, the total misuse of the word in the program and everyday life of "Realized Socialism" was so terrible that before long the use of the term and its ideals were also compromised. That is completely understandable and also to be respected by us in the West. However as we stand amidst the ruins of the Marxist-Leninist system, it should not be forgotten that a humanitarian democracy contains, and

must contain, its social components. Therefore, the "social ideal" (to use the phrase of Thomas G. Masaryk, the again today so current founder of Czech democracy) is due its relevance for the democratic development of the new Eastern and Western Europe.

THE "FREE SPACE" OF THE CHURCH.

I have not yet spoken of the role of the church in the dramatic events in Central and Eastern Europe. It was considerable. Without a doubt, under the conditions of "Real Socialism" the churches in Eastern Europe were hard-pressed but never broken. In the middle of these painful losses they obtained a new chance, a new credibility. And they have effectively employed this new credibility in decisive hours. I am not thinking primarily of Poland. There the Roman Catholic Church has always possessed an exceptional institutional power and has often let the Communist state feel it. I am thinking primarily of the churches in countries which had no such comparable power at their disposal. Also and perhaps especially these churches, though outwardly weakened, have stood by their responsibility and proved their worth.

In this regard the churches in East Germany above all deserve our recognition. Without their presence the reform movement in that country would be scarcely imaginable. They placed the her sanctuaries at the disposal of the Citizen's Initiative. The cry for freedom and justice often began in the worship service before it broke into the streets. And with it the spirit of the churches also pushed out into the streets. The churches, not exclusively but primarily, are to be thanked for the spirit of non-violence and readiness for reconciliation. The "political worship services" which today so stir the ecumenical world maintain their vitality in Eastern Europe.

By the way, when we speak of the "free space of the Church," we are thinking not only of her exceptional moments of engagement, but also of her everyday life. Even in the long years during which the Church was almost completely excluded from any direct roll in society, her elemental life as a worshipping community opened a "free space" whose importance cannot be overestimated. In the middle of the monolithically-ruled society, these afflicted "church islands" depicted another, in the best sense of the word "alternative" life and provided an essential contribution to the dismantling of totalitarian structures.

From this background of credibility the Church emerged in the critical hours of the outbreak in precisely those Countries in which she was especially beset and weakened. Two examples from Czechoslovakia: On exactly the day of the violently-repressed student demonstration, the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren was holding her synod in Prague. They were interrupted in the middle of the proceedings by theological students of the Comenius Faculty, who, still marked by their beatings from the police, reported on what had happened. The synod did not hesitate, but sent a formal protest to the address of the government. The synodal senior, Josef Hromádka, led the corresponding negotiations. And astoundingly, he was asked to work in the "Government of National Understanding" for a temporary period as thee cabinet minister responsible for Questions of Culture and Church.

The other example is the role of the Catholic Church. It is by far the strongest church in Czechoslovakia, and was effected most by the government's church policy. Yet it too achieved in the course of time a spiritual and social respect in that otherwise largely secularized country. The Archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Franzisek Tomasek, over 90 years old but still wide-awake, placed himself unmistakably on the side of the reformers. And the priest persecuted by the state, Vaclav Maly, proved himself to be an impressive and circumspect moderator of the popular rallies. An especially memorable scene: Maly concluded one of the largest rallies, with hundreds of thousands of participants, with a unison recital of the Lord's Prayer as a sign of reconciliation.

We should not forget the Romanians. Was it not the courageous protest of the Reformed pastor Laszli Tãk, and finally his congregation's attempt to protect him from the seizure planned by the police, even at the risk of their own lives, which inaugurated the last, unfortunately at first so tragic stage in the process of renewal in Eastern Europe? And when in Romania the church bells rang again after over forty years, was that not a wordless sign that the Church in Eastern Europe, without pretension, in quiet service and suffering, shared and expressed the yearning for humanitarian social relationships?

I regard to be ecumenically important this Eastern European witness of the helpful "free space" of the Church, also and especially for us in the West. How often we encounter in the midst of our affluent society doubts about the continuing importance of the Church. The alarming number of those leaving the Church is only the tip of the iceberg. In reality there is much weakness and lack of credibility in our churches. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to think about these experiences in Eastern Europe in order not to lose our already strained patience with the church. Where fundamental questions break out--and they break out sooner or later in every society, though not always so dramatically--there the Church remains what it is even in the midst of all its weakness: the free space of life.

THE HOPE OF THE TRUTH, THE TRUTH OF HOPE

Finally, I come to what is for me an essential internal aspect of the transformation in Eastern Europe, and in this regard am thinking especially of Czechoslovakia. This reform movement in Eastern Europe had without a doubt its economic side, the blunders of the bureaucratic planned economic system. Yet, when I think concretely on the triggering moment of the outbreak in Prague (and also in East Germany), I cannot overlook that it was not primarily economic needs which brought the young and also the old people out into the street. It was the hope for a life without interdiction and humiliation, the yearning to walk upright, in short, the will for truth.

One of the most oppressive phenomena of life under the conditions of "Real Socialism" was that, coupled to the repressive monopoly of power by the one decisive party, was an intolerant monopoly of truth: Marxism-Leninism as "science of all sciences and art of all arts" (as is written on the walls of the university). In that way the valuable components of Marxism were corrupted and built into a perverted system which manipulates truth. The

official ideology lost all its credibility and was regarded by thinking people, above all the youth, as a system of lies. The skepticism grew especially in the epoch of the "Normalization," the years after the shattering of Czechoslovakia's attempt to establish "socialism with a human face." One example: The invasion of the armies, which brought with it so much suffering, was officially designated "brotherly assistance." And out of such perversion was made the criterion which divided millions of citizens into "loyal" and "disloyal"--with onerous consequences for career and public life.

Again this reacted the students of Prague on November 17, 1989. The banners they carried spoke a clear message. One read: "Live no more lies." Jan Patočka, a philosopher of European rank and one of the founders of Charter 77 coined that phrase, tried to live it out, and paid for it with his life. Another banner carried the old Hussite slogan: "The truth is victorious!" Those words were after 1918 set in the national coat of arms, according to the wish of T.G. Masaryk, founder of the Czechoslovakian state.

One can realistically such words only as words of hope. Under the conditions of manipulated truth--in East and West--they appear as a pious illusion. Yet, one can learn from the legacy of those witnesses to the truth, which at critical junctures impress the Czech intellectual history from Hus to Masaryk to Vaclav Havel: Hope in truth is no illusion. To be sure, its points of reference are not actual power relationships, rather "the truth of the Lord" (as in the Hussite slogan), therefore the ultimately only essential, victorious truth of God. And there are times--spiritual great moments--when we may experience it in the midst of human confusion. What matters most is to orient one's self to it.

If there is a person who steadfastly represents that perception in the middle of chicanery and distress, and therefore especially authentically embodies the deepest motivation of the Czech renewal movement, that person is Václav Havel. For decades persecuted and since the beginning of 1989 in prison because of his efforts for human rights, he was at the end of the year elected President of the Republic. That was surprising, yet in a deep sense "logical." On the presidential standard stands these words: "Truth is victorious!" They did not first become valid at the hour of his triumph. They were already valid, as words of hope, as he sat in prison. One of the works he wrote there bore the title, *An Attempt to Live by the Truth- The Power of the Powerless*. Written in prison--an astounding witness to the hope of truth. But now, visible in and over the castle in Prague, a yet more astounding witness of the truth of hope.

Translated from German by David Ahearn