

LOOKING EAST

of value will vanish with it. Book prices, held artificially low by subsidies, will rocket, and reading as a cultural activity will decline under the flood of videos, popular newspapers, magazines, comics and consumer goods of all kinds. The voices of the Lutheran pastors who led the revolution last November—with their Green anti-consumerist idyll, their “third way” between commu-

nism and capitalism—have been drowned by the clamor for material wealth. Similarly, in the West, the unification question, in addition to giving political conservatism a tremendous boost, has driven all other topics from the public agenda. Publishers hardly dare bring out nonfiction on any other issue at the moment, and the wider social debate has been silenced temporarily.

On both sides there is fear of the unknown, distaste for the acquisitive attitude—akin to the greed of the old prospectors—adopted by

some Westerners, and resigned sadness that a flimsy political ideal has turned into a major marketing opportunity for the soft-porn business queen Beate Uhse. Among concerned and sensitive publishers, the sense of excitement at being at the center of the world stage, at having history palpable before them, is tempered by worry over the pace of change and its cultural effects. To console themselves, they quote Brecht: *Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral* (“First you must eat—morality comes later”). □

Ferment in Czechoslovakia

Their sudden emergence into a free market economy is giving local publishers the bends

BY MARTA MESTROVIC

The sudden liberation of political and intellectual culture caused by Czechoslovakia's “Velvet Revolution” has thrown the country's publishing industry into a state of ferment. New publishing houses are springing up like mushrooms and existing ones are trying to satisfy pent-up demand with incredibly large printings (by U.S. standards) of serious books—in the 80,000–100,000-copy range, and even higher.

At the same time, the industry is facing such unfamiliar problems as labor disputes, limited printing capacity, potential paper shortages, the nonconvertibility of Czech currency, the restructuring of the economy, and the growing pains associated with changing from a state-run, monopolistic economy into one of free market participants.

These were some of the issues discussed by Czech publishers who attended a conference on Czech literature and culture held in late March at New York University. *PW* was there, too, and we interviewed, among others, Milan Uhde, editor-in-chief of a new publishing cooperative called Atlantis; Jiri Pelan and Vladimir Justl, respectively editor-in-chief and editor of the publishing house Odeon, one of Czechoslovakia's biggest and best-known; and Zdena Salivarova Skvorecky, who with her husband (the noted émigré novelist Josef Skvorecky) started the publishing house Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto. The Skvor-

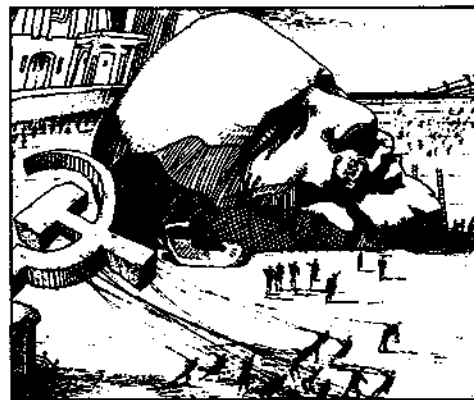
eckys are credited with doing more than anyone else to keep Czech literature alive by publishing new Czech works after the crackdowns in 1968.

Before the November Revolution, Odeon's Jiri Pelan was an editor of literary criticism and aesthetics and a translator of Italian and French works. In the wake of the revolution, Odeon's whole management and most of its editorial staff “retired,” and the erstwhile translator rose to editor-in-chief.

In one sense, though, Odeon was not as affected by the dramatic events of 1989 as were other publishing houses, because it was a specialist in foreign translations and other politically noncontroversial fields. After the revolution, “there wasn't any great need to drop titles from our list,” says Vladimir Justl, Pelan's chief assistant, “because Odeon doesn't specialize in contemporary Czech literature. We have every intention of resuming the publication of writers whom we published in the late 1960s but had to stop publishing after 1968.”

Although Odeon regularly publishes 150 titles per year, it would like to publish more, but it faces a number of technical problems: shortages of paper, lack of printing and binding shops, and in the case of translations, dearth of foreign currency funds to pay foreign authors.

One of the principal difficulties Pelan sees facing Odeon in the near future is that production capacity may limit both the number of titles that can be printed and the length of



press runs. Lack of coordination between printers and publishers could exacerbate this problem. Under the previous regime, publishing houses and printing facilities were totally separate. The publishing industry was controlled by the Ministry of Culture while printing fell under an entirely different jurisdiction, that of the Ministry of Light Industry. “In the past it was the duty of the printing establishment to cover with print a certain number of pages. If there was a shortage, the publishing houses couldn't influence what titles would be postponed, but now of course it's a changing situation. It all depends on how many printing presses will be built.” Pelan is pessimistic about the possibility of opening new facilities. “To create high-quality printing establishments able to print fine arts publications would cost about one billion crowns, besides the fact that printing shops are in financial straits.”

One solution to the manifold problems in dealing with the independent printers might be for the publishers to acquire presses. Uhde, however, noted that he was dissuaded from building his own printing facilities by the cost and current delays in construction. Once the free market eliminates some of the inef-

iciencies in the system, he does hope to build his own press.

Peter Bisek, a Glen Cove, N.Y., printer who emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1965, recently visited a number of major printing establishments in Prague. His observations of printing practices there tally with the negative accounts of the publishers. He says his small typesetting business on Long Island would be one of the most advanced in Czechoslovakia. He noted that from prepress to binding and shipping, printing operations there "look like they did when I left in 1965. By our standards, the printing presses are overstaffed, but by Eastern Europe's they probably are not."

Lucie Hola, editor-in-chief of *Typografie*, an influential Prague printing trade magazine, estimates that the number of publishing imprints has jumped to 250 from about 44 since 1989. Twenty-five printing presses remain under the auspices of the Ministry of Light Industry. But the number of independent presses (currently about 20) is growing rapidly, she says, and the small, new, private printing establishments are much better equipped than the larger, old ones—which use obsolete technology and machinery that in some cases date back to 1927. It's expected that the Light Industry ministry will drop out of the picture and that some of the plants now under its supervision will break up into smaller units, backed by private investors—a process already begun.

What all this means in terms of production capacity is not entirely clear, because until now these plants have been using only a single shift. Adding a second and third shift, she indicates, would provide sufficient production to meet demand; the real problem is probably paper supply. A necessary overhaul of Czechoslovakia's largest paper facility this year is expected to reduce "drastically" the volume of domestic paper production, "but they cannot tell by how much," she says. The more agile new printers are finding supplies from abroad, she adds.

As for distribution, Odeon's Pelan and Atlantis's Uhde concede that Kniha, the state-owned agency, used to handle it competently. A second agency, called Dilia (Divadelni a Literarni Agentura), was responsible for deciding what got published and who did the publishing. Dilia still exists but does not have its previous power, as many smaller publishing houses are now dealing di-

rectly with authors or translators.

Odeon began by specializing in translated works, musicology and fine art. It currently focuses on literary theory, literary criticism and aesthetics. Of the 150 titles the 180-person house will publish in 1990, 60% will be translations, 20% fine art publications, slightly more than 15% Czech literature and the small remainder literary theory. The current list of titles includes Rushdie's *Shame*, the first release of Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Rabbit Is Rich* by Updike, which will be in a press run of 75,000. The Rushdie print run will be 70,000. Odeon will also be publishing Philip Roth's *The Anatomy Lesson*. Pelan mentioned that William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, reissued last year, was a big success. He also mentioned an extremely important just-released book, *A Woman's Guide to Her Own Destiny (Průvodce inteligentní zeny po vlastním osudu)* by Pavel Tigríd, an émigré since 1948 and the editor and publisher of the most important émigré publication *Svedectvi (Witness)* a cultural and literary quarterly of very high quality, published in Paris where he lives.

With regard to foreign authors, Pelan acknowledged that the difficulty of obtaining foreign currency has limited the titles that can be

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published, as foreign publishing houses have had to be paid in foreign currency. "The Czech crown is not acceptable or convertible, so we will have to continue to pay in foreign currency." He pointed to long-standing good relations with such American authors as Philip Roth, who went to Prague in March 1990 to discuss plans for publishing his books, and Allen Ginsberg, who will also be going to Prague. Updike, too, personally negotiated the publication of his work in Czechoslovakia, Pelan said.

Odeon's new competitor, Atlantis, has achieved some real coups in attracting top Czech émigré authors. Josef Skvorecky, Milan Kundera

and Ivan Klima have all agreed to be published under the Atlantis imprint. As was the case with Pelan, Atlantis chief editor Uhde's position was quite different a year ago. A writer, playwright and journalist who had spent time in prison, Uhde founded Atlantis in the spring of 1989 as a cooperative with other activists from Charter 77, the human rights group led by then dissident and now president Vaclav Havel. A month later, 25 Czech and Slovak writers who were forbidden to publish joined the project. When Havel received the Freedom Prize from Germany and the Olof Palme prize from Sweden, he announced at a press conference that he was donating the approximately 100,000 deutsche marks in prize money to Atlantis. The cooperative quickly found printing facilities to handle its needs. In November 1989 the government gave it official permission to publish.

The new house began by reissuing works that had been published by émigré publishing houses, such as the Skvoreckys' nonprofit Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto. Works that had a minuscule press run of 1000 copies with the Skvoreckys will be prepared in editions of 250,000, and the mistakes that inevitably cropped up in samizdat versions will be corrected. Uhde, who hopes to return to the high standard of Czech publishing before 1948, is hiring people from the Institute of Czech Language to correct copy. He discourages author rewrites, on the ground that the books are so well known in their present versions as to constitute final form. His editorial plan now involves publishing in equal numbers books that have already come out abroad and books that first appeared in samizdat.

Atlantis's list of books for 1990 includes Ludvik Vaculik's *Czech Book of Dreams*, and Havel's *Letters to Olga* in a projected 150,000-200,000 press run. Klima's newest book, *My Golden Crafts*, and Jan Trefulka's *A Madman in Love* will have press runs of 100,000 each. Uhde made an agreement with Josef Skvorecky at the NYU conference to publish *The Engineer of Human Souls* and *The Miracle Game* as well as the writer's current work-in-progress, each of which will have press runs of 200,000. Uhde's biggest achievement is that Atlantis is to be the sole publisher of Kundera's books in Czechoslovakia.

Uhde says Kundera, a personal friend, chose Atlantis because it is not tainted by association with the previous regime. The Czech market

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is so important to Kundera, Uhde adds, that the author has insisted on supervising production. The first book will be *The Joke*, for which Kundera has written a new prologue, described as an extremely personal, emotional address to the Czech people. Such well-known émigré writers as Kundera and Skvorecky have agreed to be paid in Czech crowns which "have no value whatsoever [abroad]. They don't want to be paid in foreign currency; it's a special favor and they are glad to be published there."

Speaking about her husband, Zdena Skvorecky said, "He is willing to be paid in crowns because he knows how little currency these publishing houses have." She noted, "I talked to Mr. Uhde and he said the first books may come out in the fall but shortages of paper and printing time in plants is causing quite a lot of difficulty."

The sudden freedom in the publishing arena has caused a certain amount of anarchy. It could easily happen, Pelan predicts, that by next year the same book will be issued by five publishing houses. Josef Vachal's *The Bloody Novel* (*Krvavý Roman*) is going to be issued by three publishers.

This could lead to a shakeout later on. "I am pessimistic about the suc-

cess of small individuals [in publishing]," comments Zdena Skvorecky. "On the other hand, a collective like Atlantis, a cooperative composed of highly professional writers, also might run into difficulties on the practical side. It's not just a question of a good editorial plan. It has to build a steady economic base. Odeon is still essentially a state enterprise. It is still functioning economically the way it did for 40 years. It has a lot of employees, a lot of inefficiency, good salaries. It will have to cut the number of employees."

But, temporarily leaving aside questions about how they are to be produced, what kinds of books does the Czech public want to read? Uhde says, "The Czech people are extremely hungry for the books that were forbidden at home and were published abroad. They were informed of these books by foreign radio stations, such as Radio Free Europe, and they heard extremely positive reviews. I would call these books 'legends.' Everybody has heard about these books, everybody is dying to read them."

Before even starting production, he adds, "We have enormous numbers of orders. We don't even have time to process them yet. These are from readers who are afraid that they won't be able to get a copy when our books reach the bookstores because everything will have sold out. I have packs of letters from readers saying things like 'I'm or-

dering five copies of anything you will publish this year and next year. I'm sending 5000 crowns, just tell me how much more I should send.'"

Justl of Odeon also notes the public appetite for current literature. He reports that some writers, such as Pavel Tigrid, have imported their own books in small quantities and are selling them in Czech bookstores at very high prices. However, the works of the best-known émigré writers have not yet appeared.

The outlook for publishers in Czechoslovakia is fundamentally optimistic because that country is bookish to a degree that would hardly seem credible here. Commenting on this phenomenon at the NYU conference, Karel Pecka, a dissident novelist and essayist who spent 10 years in jail for writing an essay that criticized Stalin, said, "When you compare the number of copies printed per capita in Czechoslovakia with that in the U.S., the difference is overwhelming. This is especially the case when you consider that the literature in question is highly artistic—it is not swashbuckling adventure, science fiction or mysteries." In Czechoslovakia, he said, "books were never primarily for entertainment; they always had a deeper meaning and a greater importance." With its long history of foreign domination, he said, Czechoslovakia has always looked to literature to affirm its national aspirations and its culture. □