

CZECHOSLOVAKIA '88

"I hereby declare this symposium opened". That was all Vaclav Havel could say to us before he was arrested and rather brutally carried away by the Czechoslovak police.

This seminar prepared by Charta 77 and four other independent organizations in the CSSR was intended to commemorate the historical events 1918 - 38 - 48 - 68. The authorities had been informed in detail already in September -- which resulted in home searches and intimidation.

Since a seminar like this is in accordance with the letter and spirit of the Helsinki Final Act, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights decided to send an international delegation to participate in it. We informed the CSSR authorities and even requested a meeting with the CSSR Ambassador to explain the importance of this symposium and what the IHF participation meant. In the IHF delegation were, amongst others, Max van der Stoep, former Dutch Foreign Minister, Member of Council of State and Chairman of the Dutch Helsinki Committee, Lord Erik Avebury, Chairman of the British Helsinki Committee and Gerald Nagler, Secretary-General of the International Helsinki Federation. Some of the members of our delegation were denied visas: Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, publisher of "Die Zeit", Ove Nathan, Professor and Dean of Copenhagen University and others. Some were given visas but warned and intimidated. On arrival in Prague, our delegation found our hosts arrested and ourselves under "police protection."

After Vaclav Havel had been arrested, we - the foreign delegates - were given an envelope by a woman, who obviously was the chief of the policeforce responsible to "deal" with us. The paper stated in four languages:

Advertisement ("Achtung")

"I am warning you that the action called Symposium CZECHOSLOVAKIA 88 is illegal and its performance would be contrary to the interests of Czechoslovak working people and consequently illegal. In this connection your efforts to take part in this action would be considered as a manifestation of hostility to Czechoslovakia and in virtue of this we should have to draw relevant consequences against your person."

This warning was not signed!? Who is "I" -- the police, the state? However, insisting on the full legality of our action, we of course pursued. We tried to continue in private flats with those who were not arrested, but the police stopped even this. The seminar instead of being, as planned, an academic meeting turned into a symbolic meeting.

The IHF delegation conducted a modest commemorative ceremony and laid flowers on the grave of Jan Patočka -- while being surrounded by secret police. The delegation presented a protest to the Central Committee addressed to Mr. Jakes and went to the Police Headquarters to request clarification as to why our hosts had been arrested, what charges had been brought against them, why they were detained more than 48 hours, which is contrary to CSSR law, and if they had access to legal assistance. None of the requests and questions were answered. We also visited the wives of many of the men under arrest; they themselves were often under house arrest. Our moral support was most appreciated.

In short, the human rights situation in the CSSR is appalling. Meanwhile, since many persons living in the West who would have liked to participate in Prague could not obtain CSSR visas, the IHF organized a parallel seminar "CSSR 1988" in Vienna, moderated by the IHF Chairman Karl von Schwarzenberg. Participants were, amongst others, Jiri Pelikan, Zdenek Mlynar, Pavel Kohout, Pavel Tigrid, and Frantisek Janouch, all well known prominent human rights activists. The speeches which were planned to be held in Prague had, ironically enough to be read by others in Vienna.

The seminar in Prague was opened by Vaclav Havel, seconds before policemen arrested him. Our CSSR hosts as well as we consider the seminar as still on-going. The IHF will in every possible way continue to assist our CSSR friends to give them the possibility of intellectual and academic impulses. We consider this to be totally in agreement with the Helsinki Accords.

The IHF and the delegation which was in Prague has already protested against the treatment of our hosts and other human rights violations in the CSSR. We also strongly protest against statements like the enclosed press release from the CSSR Embassy in Bonn.

On Friday November 11, 1988, the foundation of the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee was announced. Was it symptomatic that on that day the chairman of this committee, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiri Hajek, and most of the other signatories such as Vaclav Havel were in police detention? That the members of other Helsinki Human Rights Committees, such as Max van der Stoep, Lord Erik Avelbury and Gerald Nagler were in Prague, but hindered from meeting members of the new Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee?

This new independent Czechoslovak committee consisting of internationally respected persons will hopefully be allowed to work without intimidation, house searches, arrests and discrimination. This would improve the very damaged image in respect to human rights of Czechoslovakia.

Gerald Nagler
Secretary General

Vienna, 30 November 1988