

# Czechoslovak Prisoner Samizdat in 1948-1989

Petra Čáslavová

◇ eSamizdat 2010-2011 (VIII), pp. 247-259 ◇

“We are like olives: only when we are crushed do we yield what is best in us”.

(Bohumil Hrabal)<sup>1</sup>

ONE of the branches of Czechoslovak samizdat, or illegal self-publishing, in 1945-1989, was prisoner samizdat. This specific publishing activity, the genesis of which is related to the extreme conditions of totalitarian communist prisons and work camps, has not yet been examined in depth in the Czech context. As obtaining sources and original materials is difficult because of their limited circulation and numbers, but also because of a lack of interest of literary scholars, the knowledge of this type of samizdat is very limited. In my paper, I discuss a phenomenon that is almost unknown to both laymen and academics, but is gradually being uncovered: prisoner samizdat in the years 1948-1989.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

In 1948, an era started in Czechoslovakia, called by today's historians the period of socialist dictatorship. Power in the state was taken over by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which started running the country based on the Soviet model (ideologically motivated purges in all areas of life, the introduction of censorship and so on), including political show trials. These trials had several purposes: instilling an atmosphere of fear in society, getting rid of actual as well as presumed enemies of the regime, and consolidating its power as well as ensuring there were enough labourers to mine uranium ore for the Soviet Union. Very soon,

the prison population of the totalitarian regime gained a significantly different character than in democratic prisons. In the early 50s, political prisoners started outnumbering criminals in Czechoslovak prisons (and included representatives of almost all layers of the society: writers, doctors, priests, scouts, nationalists, war heroes, pilots, craftsmen, farmers, workers and so on). In Czechoslovakia at that time, there were in total more than four hundred prison facilities and labour camps, originally POW camps built after the Second World War. In 1948, these were turned into forced labour camps, and in 1951 into correctional labour camps. And it is precisely in the period from the late 40s to the mid-50s (when the individual camps started to be closed down) and the early 60s (when the last camps were abandoned, with a mass amnesty declared in 1960 and 1962), or at the time in which the number of political prisoners grew rapidly, that we find the most examples of prisoner samizdat. The conditions in labour camps varied greatly between individual facilities and in different years, but they still provided more options for the creation and dissemination of samizdat (concentration of more political prisoners, creation of prisoner subcultures, work in groups, some contact with civilians and so on) than the environment of a typical prison. Even there, however, prisoner samizdat took hold: in shared cells, or during group labour.

There are also records of prisoner samizdat dating to the era known as normalisation, but these are much rarer. In the 70s and 80s, the communist regime turned to methods of psychic terror and blackmail (confinement in interrogation cells, eavesdropping, home

---

<sup>1</sup> B. Hrabal, *Příliš hlučná samota*, Praha 2005, p. 18.

searches, surveillance, forced exile and so on). The enemies of the regime were still persecuted, and some spent many years in prison on repeated shorter sentences. In the normalisation era, however, political prisoners were only a minority in the prison population, and no networks or subcultures could be formed. Prisoner literature was still being written to some extent, but usually did not circulate as prisoner samizdat – often there was no one to share it with.

#### TERMINOLOGICAL COMPLICATIONS

Because this field of literature has not been researched extensively, there are first some terminological ambiguities to resolve. Scholars usually only speak of a “prison literature”. Considering the variability of literary activities this header can be applied to, I consider this term too simplistic and perhaps even misleading, as it is not clear if it should be understood as referring to a location (i.e. literature created in prisons), theme (literature about prisons), author (written by a prisoner) or something else entirely. As the topic and content of my paper so far suggest, I consider it important to make a distinction between “prison literature” and two other similar terms: prisoner samizdat and literature with prisons as its subject matter. There are qualitative differences between these terms that cannot be expressed by “prison literature”. I suggest using “prison literature” only for original works that draw from an authentic experience of a prisoner that was aesthetically transformed into literature either directly in a prison or labour camp (hence also “labour camp literature”) or after release. As will be shown further, there are certain space and literary genre links that can be traced here, caused by outside influences – directly in prisons, poetry is usually created, and occasionally drama; after release, prose dominates (novels, novellas, short stories, memoirs and so on). A somewhat similarly-sounding term “literature with

prisons as subject matter” is applied to works of literature that feature prison experience as one of their themes, but the authors of which never were imprisoned. “Prisoner samizdat” could then be defined as a literary (as well as visual) work of art that is disseminated in a specifically published form directly in a prison environment. According to Jiří Gruntorád, in the broadest sense prisoner samizdat could be also applied to works that are “distributed” in the extreme environment of prisons and labour camps not physically, but from memory.

From the above, it follows that prisoner literature is not automatically prisoner samizdat, and that prisoner samizdat does not include only prisoner literature, which, however, appears to dominate. The term “prisoner samizdat” seems to be the most fitting description for the wide scope of publishing activities (including original and non-original fiction, songwriting, prayerbooks, religious texts, scholarly lectures, essays, translations, prisoner magazines and perhaps also other materials) recorded in Czechoslovak labour camps and prisons particularly between 1948-1960, and in diminished numbers also in later years.

#### THE CONTEXTS, CONTENTS AND DEFINITIONS OF SAMIZDAT

The beginnings of prisoner samizdat in Czechoslovakia can be traced back to World War Two. The first examples of prisoner samizdat were created in Protectorate and Nazi prisons, the Theresienstadt ghetto and even in concentration camps (although almost exclusively in those that were not built for extermination). Proof of similar prisoner samizdat activities can of course also be found in the cultural history of other European countries with Nazi-installed regimes.

From the very beginnings, the history of prisoner samizdat was thus closely linked to the history of modern<sup>2</sup> Czechoslovak samizdat; as

<sup>2</sup> I mention “modern” samizdat, as some researchers believe that “samizdat is not a recent invention, as such works have

J. Gruntorád says, “the roots of samizdat in Czechoslovakia can be seen in the illegal magazines and leaflet newspapers of the Nazi occupation”<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, in the history of literary samizdat, illegal leaflet and magazine publishing activities remain, like prisoner samizdat, largely unnoticed by scholarly research, even though these sources are numerous and have at the very least a documentary value, as some historians have already noted: “The total number of illegal printed material recorded by the police forces from 15 March 1939 until the war started remains impressive to this day: Overall, there were three hundred and sixty various types of leaflets and twenty-eight illegal magazines confiscated, with one hundred and twenty-five published issues altogether”<sup>4</sup>.

After the war, illegal publishing activities soon started redeveloping as a reaction to the new oppression. “Similar characteristics can be seen several years later, in the illegal literature written against the communist regime. About twenty such magazines are known, which have been published until 1956 despite heavy repressions”<sup>5</sup>. J. Gruntorád also adds that leaflets were an unusual type of samizdat activity encountered throughout the entire period of communist rule. Unfortunately, such materials are also waiting for further analysis<sup>6</sup>.

Literary historians usually agree that the “official” birth of Czechoslovak samizdat can be

dated to the early 1950s. “The illegal printing of the Protectorate era aside, the creation of Czechoslovak samizdat dates to the fifties, even though with its negligible impact, very limited circulation and high degree of secrecy it certainly cannot be characterised as a ‘second circulation’”<sup>7</sup>. As examples, J. Posset mentions the samizdat magazines of the time, the Bítov Edition and the individual works by Hrabal, Kolář or Bondy. A similar summary of the beginnings of samizdat is provided by J. Holý, also mentioning the less known samizdats of the Second World War:

In WW2 and the fifties, the tradition was revived; as examples, one could mention the *Noc* monthly revue, distributed after the Munich Treaty by young authors (J. Orten and his friends), the poem cycle titled *Z kasemat spánku* [From the Casemates of Sleep] by J. Heisler and Toyen (1941), the *Rozhovory 36* and *Dlask* magazines, the Bítov Edition, self-published surrealist anthologies or the *Půlnoc* edition from 1949-1953 (I. Vodsed'álek, H. Krejcarová, E. Bondy and others)<sup>8</sup>.

Both quoted studies are from the 1990s and partially reflect the still used concept of the history of samizdat and its “real” beginnings in Czechoslovakia. I believe that this generally established approach must be changed somewhat. Considering the results of my research so far, I propose to extend the history of Czechoslovak samizdat of the given period also with prisoner samizdat.

For the sake of completeness, the early history of Czechoslovak samizdat could also include the exile “camp” samizdat, i.e. samizdat from refugee camps abroad, which also remains largely unnoticed by researchers for the same reason as prisoner samizdat (i.e. scarce available sources), even though there is conclusive evidence of its existence. Sylva Šimsová for example remembers the Válka camp near Nürnberg: “Some people owned clippings or hand-written copies of their favourite poems and quotes. These fragments of literature were often copied, even though paper was scarce and hard to come by. To the people, however,

---

existed in Czech literature almost from the very beginning. In the 19th century, the Brixen satires of Karel Havlíček Borovský could be considered samizdat of sorts”, J. Holý, “O českém literárním samizdatu”, *Literární archiv*, 1991, 25, p. 25. Another example could be the secret printing presses of the Unity of the Brethren in the 16th century.

<sup>3</sup> J. Gruntorád, “Samizdatová literatura v Československu sedmdesátých a osmdesátých let”, *Alternativní kultura*, Praha 2001, p. 495.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kokoška, “Ilegální letáky a řetězové dopisy z prvních měsíců nacistické okupace”, *Soudobé dějiny*, 2004, 1-2, pp. 258-259.

<sup>5</sup> J. Gruntorád, “Samizdatová literatura”, op. cit., p. 495.

<sup>6</sup> On leaflets recorded from both periods, see: *Přehled dochovaného ilegálního tisku v českých zemích z období od 30. 9. 1938 do 14. 3. 1939*, III/1, Praha 1968; *Přehled dochovaného ilegálního tisku v českých zemích z období od 15. 3. 1938 do 31. 8. 1939*, III/2, Praha 1969; *Protistátní letáky a jiné formy odporu v roce 1948: Dokumenty*, 9 and 11, Praha 1994.

<sup>7</sup> J. Posset, *Česká samizdatová periodika*, Brno 1991, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> J. Holý, “O českém literárním samizdatu”, op. cit., p. 25.

they brought solace”<sup>9</sup>. In one of his books, A. Kratochvíl reprinted the cover of a samizdat edition of *Zahrada mariánská* [The Garden of Saint Mary] by Julius Zeyer, created in 1950 in the Ludwigsburg camp<sup>10</sup>.

Tracing the history of the phenomenon of Czechoslovak samizdat is in this respect hampered by a certain negligence and scant research of its origin in the 50s (which may be understandable considering that the later and much more varied development of the 70s and 80s is obviously more attractive for scholars). V. Prečan in *Svět českého a slovenského samizdatu* [The World of Czech and Slovak Samizdat] discusses the prehistory of samizdat in a single sentence: “Samizdat editions in Czechoslovakia had their humble beginnings in the fifties and sixties”<sup>11</sup>. The Polish scholar B. Bakula, when creating a list of the development stages of samizdat in Czechoslovakia, begins with 1956, and characterises the period of 1956-1967 as leaflet samizdat. All preceding development is deliberately ignored<sup>12</sup>. And J. Damborský goes so far as to openly state: “The beginnings of samizdat date to the first months of the era known as normalisation in the 70s, after the liberal period of the Prague Spring was over”<sup>13</sup>. Such an approach, however, could deprive us of valuable knowledge, as most surviving examples of prisoner samizdat actually come from the middle of the last century. For this reason, I appreciate the detailed and thought-out chronology of the history of Czechoslovak samizdat in 7 stages, as proposed by M. Machovec with regard to the historical and political development of the country. He

divides the early development of Czechoslovak samizdat into three periods: the “presamizdat” era of 1939-1945, the “protosamizdat” years of 1948-1956 and the gradual decay of the protosamizdat in 1956-1967<sup>14</sup>.

Prisoner samizdat of course has its specifics, but it does correspond to the broadest definition of samizdat as “[...] independent literature and uncensored information of all kinds, self-published (hence the original Russian word ‘samizdat’) in a ‘second’, parallel, unofficial ‘circulation’”<sup>15</sup>. There are, however, some characteristics of prisoner samizdat that differentiate it from the general concept of samizdat production seen in the 70s and 80s.

While the core activities of samizdat after 1968 were copying and disseminating texts and information, and with it creating a functional circulation and facilitating communication, for the authors of prisoner samizdat, the primary goal was the enjoyment of the creative process itself as effective psychological defence in an extreme situation. Its authors did not strive for a second circulation, which of course does not mean it was not created. Because of the lack of information, however, it is difficult to describe its workings and scope in detail. From the statements of witnesses and participants, we learn that literature was successfully circulated from memory (prisoners were often moved between cells or prison facilities; after their release, they could further spread these works among civilians) – this primarily applies to individual poems the prisoners heard in their cells or when manually working together. As human memory is imperfect, however, mistakes were sometimes made, resulting in the creation of several slightly different versions of the same prisoner samizdat. Some works of art, however, were deeply imprinted on the memory of prisoners, particularly if they held great personal emo-

<sup>9</sup> S. Šimsová, “Četba v uprchlických táborech v Německu 1948-1950”, *Biblio*, 2010, 11-12, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> A. Kratochvíl, ...za ostnatými dráty a minovými poli..., Mnichov-Plzeň 1992, p. 195.

<sup>11</sup> V. Prečan, “Svět českého a slovenského samizdatu”, *Samizdat*, Brémy 2002, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> B. Bakula, “Polská a česká nezávislá kultura a literatura v 70.-80. letech 20. století. Úvod k srovnávací sondě”, *Česká a polská samizdatová literatura*, Opava 2004, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> J. Damborský, “Cenzura, prohibita, samizdat, drugi obieg”, *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> M. Machovec, “The types and Functions of Samizdat Publications in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989”, *Poetics Today*, 2009, 1, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> V. Prečan, “Svět”, *op. cit.*, p. 11.



tional significance to them. One former prisoner was able to recite from memory a poem written for him by Josef Palivec as a birthday present even after several decades.

Various former prisoners also confirm the dissemination of written prisoner samizdat: “First poems were created already in the Jáchymov camps; in Leopoldov, they were only committed to memory, but later, thanks to (usually unknown) friends, I was able to write down my poems on all kinds of paper, most often toilet paper. Many of them, if not captured and destroyed by the wardens, circulated among the prisoners”<sup>16</sup>. In exceptional cases, prisoner samizdat crossed the borders of the prison, and even the borders of the country. A famous example is V. Renč’s long poem titled *Popelka nazaretská*; according to him, “hundreds and hundreds of prisoners knew it by heart, either in full or just parts of it, and it circulated in many copies (with all kinds of various mistakes) long before I returned home”<sup>17</sup>. Another adventurous story relates to the prisoner samizdat of Jaroslav Seifert’s *Píseň o Viktorce* [The Song of Viktorka] (a copy can be seen in the Museum of the Third Resistance; the original is reportedly in a private collection in the United States), created in 1956 in the Rovnost camp by Jan Prantl and skilfully illustrated by Zdeněk Dvořáček. According to a witness, this samizdat was smuggled outside the camp and found its way to Seifert himself who authorised it, signed it, and sent back to the authors, who did actually receive it. I have not been able to confirm the veracity of this story yet, but it is true that Seifert’s alleged signature on the cover is identical with other signatures of his. Excerpts from the *Přádénko z drátů* [A Skein of Wire] prisoner samizdat also made it into exile several years after it was created, by unknown means. “The editors of Hlas exilu received a valuable

gift through illegal (sic!) means – the poems of political prisoners of a communist concentration camp in Jáchymov”<sup>18</sup>. In several issues of Hlas exilu, émigrés could read these poems long before the readers in Czechoslovakia (or rather the Czech Republic, as they were published only in 2007 in the Aluze magazine, thanks to M. Jareš). When the samizdat was officially published in 2010, one of the authors told me that even they themselves had no idea something like this had happened. And there is also the 1980s case of the *Labutí písně* [Swan Songs] of I.M. Jirous, smuggled out of prison as a rolled-up wad of paper during a court session by means of a brief kiss between D. Němcová and J. Gruntorád. *Labutí písně* immediately started to disseminate nation-wide (without the author’s consent) in samizdat.

In general, the circulation of prisoner samizdat was usually complicated by the fact that there was only one copy in existence. Even though it was confined to the space between the prison or camp walls, it held enormous importance for the subculture of political prisoners, as the memories of one of them confirm: “Remembering the poems of Alois Hlavatý, Jiří Hejda, Božena Jišová, Vladimír Jareš, Zdeněk Vacek, Ludvík Smotek, Jiří Herzinger, Josef Krček (and many others) [...] takes me back to the strange spiritual paradise we created behind the bars that helped us survive. This poetry is very specific, and the rigid norms of aesthetes will hardly be able to understand it. But in their entirety, they paint a portrait of the times, a document as well as a symbol of the eternal strength of the human soul”<sup>19</sup>.

The previous excerpt takes us to another important differentiating feature of prisoner samizdat – authorship. The samizdat of the 70s and 80s was primarily a refuge of more or less professional writers, journalists and scholars, while prisoner samizdat was to large ex-

<sup>16</sup> B. Robeš, “Skrytá tvář české poezie: poezie za mříží”, *Zpravodaj Konfederace politických vězňů České republiky*, 2008, 2, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> According to J. Med, “Skladba zapsaná do paměti”, *Popelka nazaretská*, Brno 1991, p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> According to M. Jareš, “Přádénko z drátů”, *Aluze*, 2007, 2, p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> B. Robeš, “Skrytá tvář”, op. cit., p. 40.

tent a domain of laymen, as illustrated by the quite unknown names of poets mentioned in the previous quote. Particularly for some naïve poets, their poetry as well as that of their colleagues remained important throughout their lives, which relates to the role of imprisonment in the lives of naïve poets: “For prisoners from the cultural or political sphere, imprisonment is only an episode in their life stories, but for others, it is everything”<sup>20</sup>. Even though when it comes to the creation and dissemination of prisoner samizdat, “amateurs” were among the most active participants (sometimes nameless, for security reasons, or hidden behind noms de plume), they have remained largely unnoticed by literary and other historians.

Living conditions in prisons and camps made it difficult for the prisoners to form publishing editions or develop structured samizdat publishing activities typical in the 70s and 80s. However, the activities of the group of imprisoned scouts who managed to establish a publishing library named Rovnost (after the camp they were imprisoned in), with 12 tiny handwritten books created in total<sup>21</sup>, or the activities of one group of priests and imprisoned women as well as several proper and well-made books indicate that these two phenomena may actually have something in common. With their technical parameters, these activities truly conform to the definition of samizdat. This can be confirmed by the memories of former prisoner Karel Pecka, who says: “In the Nikolaj camp in 1953 and 1954, I first encountered something that much later became known as samizdat. Very thin collections of poetry were copied by hand; the most original example I saw was written in tiny letters in a book of cigarette papers”<sup>22</sup>.

Among other things, Pecka is right in saying

the term “samizdat” was not used at that time. In the Czech general consciousness, this word is linked with the unofficial publishing activities starting in the 1970s and the twenty-year era known as the normalisation of socialist society. For similar activities of previous periods, the term samizdat was used only retroactively, which some scholars disagree with. To give an example, in his literary history titled *Česká literatura od počátků k dnešku* [Czech Literature from Its Beginnings Until Present Day] J. Holý calls the selected period of the early 1950s “literature in catacombs”:

The only bastion of free creativity in the fifties apart from exile was not public and state-sponsored literature, but its unofficial cousin. Sometimes, the term “samizdat” is used here; that, however, would be better reserved for the period after 1970 when samizdat formed as a specific communication circle with established publishing editions, a distribution network, magazines and links to other activities [...] as well as a connection to the exile culture. None of these existed in the 50s, and would be in fact quite impossible to achieve in the Stalinist era. In extreme conditions for which the modern label of “literature in catacombs” applies literally, for example Zahradníček’s *Dům Strach* [The House Named Fear] or Renč’s prison poems were created, spreading among their fellow inmates orally. There were also other unofficial (unpublished) literary texts created by isolated individuals (Durych’s prose, Holan’s poetry) or circulated in very small groups<sup>23</sup>.

This opinion is shared by G. Zand who focuses on the unofficial literature of the early 50s. She disagrees with Chalupecký’s use of the word “samizdat” in the context of the 50s (as the texts of that time did not achieve a secondary circulation); instead, she suggests several other possible terms taken from other theoreticians: wild samizdat, pioneering samizdat, unpublished editions, typewritten editions, working albums, internal publications. She herself, however, does not select any of those (the appropriate chapter is titled “Unofficial Editions”)<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, I believe there is no reason to protest against the use of the term “samizdat” for the period of the late 1940s

<sup>20</sup> F. Mayer, “Vězení jako minulost, odboj jako paměť”, *Soudobé dějiny*, 2002, 1, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> K. Volková, “O Přadénku z drátů”, *Přadénko z drátů*, Praha 2010.

<sup>22</sup> K. Pecka, “Literatura ve vězení”, *Literatura, vězení, exil*, Praha 1997, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> J. Holý, “Literatura v katakombách”, *Česká literatura od počátků k dnešku*, Praha 2002, p. 743.

<sup>24</sup> G. Zandová, *Totální realismus a trapná poezie: Česká neoficiální literatura 1948-1953*, Brno 2002, pp. 44-46.

and early 1950s, even though I expect this position may be subject to criticism. My stance however is based on a concept of samizdat preferred by M. Pilař in his discussion of the example of underground culture. His dilemma was how to write about authors of the Půlnoc edition, or rather if they could be considered part of the underground:

When I write about the “first wave of underground culture in the 50s”, I am being somewhat anachronistic, as the word “underground” started to be systematically used only two decades later. Despite that, I choose this term, with which I am trying to indicate that it is a single phenomenon which has been continuously present in the Czech literary context from the late 40s to this day<sup>25</sup>.

Even M. Machovec in his updated discussion of samizdat considers it a phenomenon that is non-static and developing throughout the entire period of totalitarianism, i.e. 1948-1989<sup>26</sup>. For these reasons, instead of various alternative terminology (often inexact for our purposes) such as literature in catacombs, independent literature and so on, I use the term samizdat in my paper. And if we also agree that “in general, everything created in totalitarian regimes without the approval of censors and distributed in some manner could be considered samizdat”<sup>27</sup>, there are no doubts whether it is appropriate to apply this term to the publishing activities in communist prisons and camps.

I consider the preceding discussions on the contexts and definitions of samizdat important in connection with the so far neglected prisoner samizdat, as they contribute to the general discussion on the character of samizdat, its contents and boundaries.

#### HOW TO TRACK DOWN PRISONER SAMIZDAT (OR NOT)

The main reason why prisoner samizdat is one of the least explored chapters of the history of samizdat is obvious: a limited number of known sources. M. Jareš says that “to this

day, most of the prisoner poetry of the second half of the 20th century remains unknown. The lack of interest of literary historians is certainly to some extent caused by the inaccessibility of the individual texts”<sup>28</sup>. To this I add that a part of original prisoner samizdat also still remains hidden. If we are to research prisoner samizdat, we should at this moment first of all try to collect as much of this valuable material as possible. In the current situation, when we are trying to systematically uncover these historical documents several decades after their creation, when many direct witnesses and potential authors or owners of these artefacts are no longer alive, and when we are not sure what exactly we are looking for (as there are no records of titles or the names of authors), this is truly a daunting task. At this point, one could doubt whether all these activities are actually meaningful: is it worth investing time in the search of fragments of prisoner samizdat when we know so little about it? From my experience so far, I can answer with a resounding yes. I base this answer on the stories of recently found and never published prisoner samizdats, treasured as family or private heritage.

In exceptional cases, original prisoner samizdat can be encountered in an officially printed form, such as in the example of *Přadénko z drátů* published last year, a poem anthology of a group of imprisoned scouts reprinted by the Libri prohibiti library. There are also published and edited versions of some of the prisoner samizdats of leading authors, which are relatively accessible. Some works of amateur authors were later published in smaller (regional) publishing houses, in bibliophile editions or self-published in a small number of copies usually intended for one’s family, meaning their readership is also rather limited. For the remaining works, however, there is no such option.

The first method that could be used to track down the rest is contacting appropriate institu-

<sup>25</sup> M. Pilař, *Underground: Kapitoly o českém literárním undergroundu*, Brno 2002, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> M. Machovec, “The types”, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> J. Gruntorád, “Samizdatová literatura”, op. cit., p. 494.

<sup>28</sup> M. Jareš, “Přadénko z drátů”, op. cit., pp. 124-125.

tions: libraries (Libri prohibiti), museums (The Museum of the Third Resistance in Příbram, the National Museum), archives (National Archive, Museum of Czech Literature), organisations (The Confederation of Political Prisoners of the Czech Republic) and others. Unfortunately, the treasures sought there are often lying somewhere in the depository or in display cases and are difficult to access for a researcher.

Research of prisoner files, which should to this day contain some of the materials captured by wardens, including prisoner samizdat, is also difficult. These files are stored in prison archives which are located directly in the individual prisons and can be accessed only by holders of a special permit that is almost impossible to obtain; for researchers, these archives are likely to provide only very incomplete information.

The remaining “samples” of prisoner samizdat can be found in private collections in the homes of the people involved in the process, not only in the Czech Republic, but also abroad (in the case of émigrés), where they are either treasured or just lying forgotten in a drawer, because the owners did not know whom to contact and to whom to give them. Knowledge of these “treasures”, often smuggled outside through very complicated ways (involving fellow prisoners, civilians working in camps as well as wardens!) or kept hidden until the return home, is difficult to come by, as they are usually only known to the community or a very close group of people. In the early 1990s, the magazine for former political prisoners (*Zpravodaj politických vězňů Věrní zůstali*) published a call for prisoner poetry which was very successful. The result was a 16-page issue of the magazine which included reproductions of some examples of prisoner samizdat, unfortunately printed in low quality and in black and white, and as such barely readable. Unfortunately, records of all that was sent to the editors at that time and how have been lost. A similar call published recently had only minimal re-

sults. It is several decades too late, and uncovers further problems. The owners often in good faith retype the texts on a typewriter or a computer. This way, however, true prisoner samizdat often loses its additional value of a unique (aesthetic) artefact (one of the sent works for example included this post-scriptum: “Retyped from the original by the author on...”).

And I do not dare guess what may have happened to many of these unique documents after the death of their owners and many years of disinterest. Recently, I personally met with surviving family members who were unable to tell me where a beautifully made, almost textbook example of a prisoner samizdat of their relative disappeared to several months after his death (the owner had shown me the book once before, but was afraid to lend it to me); this case is probably not unique. As prisoner samizdats usually only existed in a single copy and their disappearance means losing them forever, this is a harrowing experience.

All that remains are written or oral accounts of copies that are destroyed (for example by the wardens) or lost, and some of the creative works that were spread only from memory. These as well as all other mentions, and not only physical examples, are useful for research, as they tell us more about the character of these activities, their scope and so on. For this reason, other branches of research may help as well – such as oral history, which in structured interviews captures the stories of individuals and through them the events and history as seen from “below”. This method “enhances our knowledge of a certain historical event (period) by the experience, activities and opinions of the interviewed person”<sup>29</sup>.

The typical problems of searching for prisoner samizdats can be illustrated by this note attached to one example: “Smuggled out of Vojna camp in 1956 – Author unknown – [...] – Found only now in an old suitcase (1996) By ac-

<sup>29</sup> M. Vaněk, *Orální historie ve výzkumu soudobých dějin*, Praha 2004, p. 53.



cident! Smuggled out by a civilian”<sup>30</sup>. Similarly a literary researcher is also most likely to find an example of prisoner samizdat at an unexpected location and quite by accident – which has in fact happened to me several times. For this reason, any attempts to compile a full bibliography of prisoner samizdat are doomed to fail.

#### THE TYPES OF PRISONER SAMIZDAT

As the scope of my paper is limited, I cannot go into the details of the contents of individual works of prisoner samizdat, so I will attempt to at least generalise its basic types.

Prisoner samizdat mainly focused on fiction, both original and unoriginal. Unoriginal texts were selected for their connotations or the hidden meanings the other prisoners could uncover and that could provide encouragement in difficult moments. The selection was also very limited by what the creators remembered from their free lives, as they had no other source than their own memory (with the exception of books individually smuggled into the camps or found in the stock of prison libraries, which sometimes included forgotten volumes that were supposed to be destroyed). Logically, this meant poetry or song lyrics were usually chosen, as they are easiest to remember. In addition to the already mentioned prisoner samizdat *Píseň o Viktorce* by Jaroslav Seifert, there also circulated an anthology of the poetry of Otokar Březina compiled by F. Höfer (bookseller, archivist and later chairman of the O. Březina Society): “In prison, a Dominican monk named Braitto procured a pencil for me, and I wrote those poems of Březina’s I knew by heart on a piece of toilet paper: [...] It circulated over the entire prison back then”<sup>31</sup>.

Most prisoner samizdat literature, however, was original, and again typically poetry. Its authors came from many backgrounds, as partic-

ularly in the 1950s, the prison population was very varied. Authors of original poetry were then not only writers already well-renowned or those who became famous later, either primarily writing poetry or prose (J. Zahradníček, V. Renč, J. Kostohryz, J. Knap, J. Suchý, Z. Kalista, Z. Rotrekl, Z. Bár, K. Pecka, J. Stránský, P. Janský, P. Kopta, in the 80s I.M. Jirous, J. Šavřda and others), but also amateurs. One group of these amateurs were people with an artistic education or coming from the humanities, often well-known in their respective fields (such as economist J. Hejda, or sociologist R. Battěk in the 80s); the others were “common” prisoners (in a non-derogatory sense), or laymen.

Imprisoned poets, both experienced and débutantes, kept working despite the circumstances (while other authors fell silent when faced with prison life). Usually, however, it was not they who initiated the circulation of their poetry. Some did not do so because they considered their prison poems just a path they were forced to take, violently affected by the prison experience, and not in line with the rest of their oeuvre, others were simply too introverted. Their fellow prisoners, however, often asked them for their new as well as old poems, as can be illustrated by this memory of L. Jehlička who shared a cell with J. Zahradníček:

On Saturday afternoon, the wardens locked us up in the cell, and because they’ve heard somewhere that Zahradníček was a poet (!), they forced him to climb on the table and recite. The short and stooping Zahradníček recited his own work from memory for about 2-3 hours. His poems were difficult and heavy, but every time he wanted to stop, everyone was shouting: “More, more!” They were enthralled by the poetry, which some of them may have heard for the first time in their lives, captivated and breathless, forgetting their environment and the circumstances they were in which, I swear to God, were not happy indeed<sup>32</sup>.

Similar situations built up the potential for the spreading of a work of art as a prisoner samizdat. Other literary authors tried to take into account the very specific prisoner audience, for whom poetry received a completely

<sup>30</sup> Praha, Národní archiv ČR [NAČR], the KPV fund, carton 104 – poems.

<sup>31</sup> Ferdinand Höfer according to M. Doležal, *Prosil jsem a přiletěla moucha*, Kostelní Vydří 2004, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> According to J. Hanuš, “Duchovní tvář Jana Zahradníčka”, *Mezi nás prostřena noc...: dopisy z vězení ženě Marii*. Brno 2008, p. 325.

new meaning. Václav Renč, whom I have already mentioned, wrote many prison poems that his former fellow prisoners still fondly remember:

He wanted his poems to bring the same peace of mind sincere belief does. [...] His work circulated among the prisoners, many learned them by heart, and they brought solace to those who suffered but wanted to remain unbroken. [...] I will never forget also the other poems he was writing in Leopoldov. Surely, they are less comforting than the hopeful lines he wrote in Popelka. But they contain the strength that helped him and many of us survive...<sup>33</sup>

In this context, it is quite understandable that many priests started writing poetry in prison (among others Jindřich Jenáček, Jan Jiří Vícha, Josef Veselý, Anastáz Opasek, Felix M. Davídek, Jan Dokulil, František Daniel Merth) with similar goals as poet V. Renč.

In prisoner samizdat, particularly written, original works by “common” political prisoners were very widespread. To show the surprising strength of this movement, let us quote the memoirs of political prisoner Božena Kuklová-Jíšová whose poems circulated among female prisoners:

Another method we used to escape the hopelessness of prison life was writing. In particular composing poems, as they could be memorised and could never be taken from us. There were so many songs and rhymes around, as if we had returned several generations back to the times when people could express their desires and sorrows only in the medium of a folk song. [...] It is no exaggeration to say that almost every other prisoner tried to write<sup>34</sup>.

Looking back, this phenomenon does not seem very surprising. Creative poetry in extreme prison conditions was quite popular also in the Protectorate era, when masses of innocent people were thrown together into the abnormal environment of Nazi prisons, ghettos and concentration camps. And there, as M. Trávníček notes, “a phenomenon yet unknown appeared. The self-empowering act of poetry was attempted by many of those who only came into contact with literature sparingly, or for whom poetry was not the main fo-

cus of their work”<sup>35</sup>. The crucial importance of poetry for people in extreme situations is also confirmed in the Soviet Gulags:

Many prisoners wrote or recited poetry, repeating their poems and the poems of others over and over again to themselves and later also to their fellow inmates. [...] Shalamov wrote that in all that “deception, evil and decay”, poetry saved him from total numbness. [...] Solzhenicyn “wrote” poetry in the camps by composing verse in his head and then repeating it using a pile of broken matches [...]<sup>36</sup>.

In Czechoslovak communist prisons and camps after 1948, this phenomenon worked similarly, as shown by the surviving poems and the memories of witnesses:

Original poetry was created here, which provided great encouragement to the prisoners many of whom were not interested in poetry at all before their imprisonment. This prison poetry broadened their spiritual space and gave them strength for their further life behind bars and for revolt. [...] Poems were written not only by well-known poets, but also by people who only wrote a single one or just a handful; these original creations, however, provided great solace and guided them through the night of death to the spring of life<sup>37</sup>.

Their poetry was very traditional, usually without any attempts at modernity. Perfect stanzas and an aesthetic value were not their primary interest. These authors primarily wanted to document the fate of prisoners and the living conditions in prisons and camps. These texts, in which the motives of home, family, friendship, love, childhood, faith and nature dominated, were also intended for consolation. As I consider the memories of surviving witnesses a key source, let me also quote an honest assessment of one of the amateurs who tried to capture the main characteristics of her work as well as the work of many other “naïve” prison poets:

I do not know anything about poem composition, the rhythm of rhymes and the other very basic rules. My vocabulary is not up to the task, either. I wrote simply, with clumsy rhymes or in free verse, as my inherited common sense and feelings dictated, right on the paper, without any changes or embellishments. For this reason, I often repeat myself, and sometimes struggle with logic, all of which I

<sup>33</sup> B. Rejman, *Vzpomínky byvlšího člověka č. 2090 Bohuslava Rejmana*, Vysoké Mýto 2006, pp. 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> B. Kuklová-Jíšová, *Krásná němá paní*, Praha 2002, pp. 89-90.

<sup>35</sup> M. Trávníček, “Vězeň v české poezii: od K.H. Máchy k I.M. Jirousovi”, *Literatura určená k likvidaci I*, Praha 2004, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> A. Applebaum, *Gulag*, Praha-Plzeň 2004, pp. 337-338.

<sup>37</sup> B. Robeš, “Skrytá tvář”, op. cit., p. 40.

can see quite plainly when I look at my work today, after so many years. If there can be naïve painters, there can also be naïve poets. So I ask for compassion and tolerance for a layman<sup>38</sup>.

Some amateur authors of prisoner samizdat never wrote or published anything else after their release from prison. An ample summary of this was provided by E. Büllow, one of the authors of the prisoner samizdat titled *Přádénka z drátů*:

When we were writing, it was in an atmosphere that is hard to describe. The truth of the matter is, every one of us has a certain treasury of words of his mother tongue, and sometimes, we come up with a few rhymes; when the times get hard and press on us, well, poetry flows out on its own. It seems that after that, the pressure just wasn't big enough, and we never created anything else, no masterpieces of any kind. It just stopped working<sup>39</sup>.

Others, to this day, keep writing poetry in which they try to come to terms with their remote past (mostly their life in prison) or their current old age, and some even continue in their samizdat activities, publishing their poems or just having them bound for themselves and their families and friends.

The popularity of poetry also had its pragmatic reasons. Many imprisoned people tried to find a new way to stretch their creative muscles – in a situation where they did not have access to a pencil or paper, let alone a book to read. Inventing any activity for the troubled mind that would keep a prisoner sane was particularly important in the extreme prison conditions. Succumbing to the situation could be and sometimes was disastrous (insanity, suicide). To prevent their minds from rusting, some prisoners kept repeating prayers or trying to remember long-forgotten knowledge; others found a release in poetry, particularly practical as it required no instruments. Choosing poetry as one of the possible mental activities was therefore also partially pragmatic. Karel Pecka said quite openly that “out of necessity, poetry

was written”<sup>40</sup>. Jiří Hejda explains the reason he had turned to poetry in detail:

Being alone all day. Without newspapers, a single book, a pencil or paper [...]. Nothing to do. No music to be heard, or even the sound of speech. [...] What am I supposed to do? What to think about? In this dreaded monotony, when minutes crawl by more slowly than I had ever imagined, being used to almost feverish levels of activity a single day sometimes wasn't enough for, in this terrible monotony I started composing poetry<sup>41</sup>.

But the desire to write always only appeared after prisoners overcame the worst stage of suffering and when their fears for bare survival had passed. As poet Zdeněk Rotrekl put it: “Look: When you're hanging by your rib on a hook, you think of God, your mother, your family, but not poems”<sup>42</sup>.

There is less evidence of other types of prisoner samizdat than original poetry. A specific kind worth mentioning were prison lectures and scientific studies, the products of “underground universities” established in some prisons. Lectures given by the famous professor of archaeology and art historian Růžena Vacková were smuggled out of Opava prison in spring 1965 by her fellow inmate Dagmar Skálová. The lectures of philosopher Pavel Křivský and philologist Bohumil Ryba were walled up in a Leopoldov cell in 1955 by prisoner Adolf Bečvář, who also took them out after 40 long years.

O. Mádr describes a samizdat “magazine” that circulated in more than one copy among imprisoned priests:

[In the priest section of the Mírov prison] I put something together on tiny sheets of paper that could be hidden in a palm or, in case of trouble, swallowed and eaten. I started this, but soon handed it over to someone else, the Father [Jindřich Jenáček], I believe; but for four years, a Sunday magazine like this was issued every single week. It was small, you could hide it in your hand, and we copied it by hand. We had our own scriptorium workshop of sorts, organised by Father Vlach, in which we created about 9 copies of each issue, and we had ways to distribute them. There never were any problems; it worked quite well<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> K. Pecka, “Literatura”, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> J. Hejda, *Žil jsem zbytečně: román mého života*, Praha 1991, pp. 307-308.

<sup>42</sup> Zdeněk Rotrekl according to L. Vrkočová, *Svědectví: osudy politických vězňů 1947-1976*, Praha 2007, p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> M.E. Holečková, *Cesty českého katolického samizdatu 80. let*, Praha 2009, p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> A. Třísková-Pokorná, “Pár slov na vysvětlenou”, NAČR, KPV fund, carton 104 – poems.

<sup>39</sup> E. Büllow's speech at the ceremonial launch of *Přádénko z drátů* in the Libri prohibiti library on 20 December 2010.



For future research, the types of prisoner samizdat need further clarification, supported by a thorough search for proven sources and other witness statements, as well as some terminology corrections. It remains an open question, for example, if letters written in secret in prisons and camps (and different from officially allowed but censored correspondence) and smuggled in secret to families behind the wires and bars or prisoner diaries can also be considered prisoner samizdat.

#### THE FACES OF PRISONER SAMIZDAT

An attractive aspect of the research of prisoner samizdat is the description of its many faces. Even at a first glance, it is clear how carefully and often ingeniously the publishing tasks were tackled by the creators, despite the lack of available options.

Ownership of paper or any writing instruments was forbidden in the prisons and labour camps of the 50s. Breaching this rule was punished by solitary confinement. The rule of thumb used in the prisons of that time dictated that the punishment was one day of solitary confinement for every found word<sup>44</sup>. This impossibility to write anything down together with fear of the severe penalty meant that a certain part of prisoner samizdat was disseminated orally, from memory. Naturally these conditions also influenced the form of original prisoner literature – the authors for example tended to choose poetic forms that are easier to remember.

Where writing was possible, cigarette papers were often used instead of regular paper, as they were freely accessible and according to former political prisoners could withstand rougher treatment than toilet paper (also sometimes employed). Writing on cigarette papers, usually done with a pencil that was smuggled in or traded for something, required a great deal of patience, almost becoming a concen-

trated spiritual exercise. In prisoner samizdat, the individual cigarette papers were then usually sown together by a thread or a fine string and had firm covers added. The results of this labour were miniature books which to this day remain very impressive pieces of work. “Fascinated, I look at the tiny bundle of cigarette papers in Father Jenáček’s hand. Each of these fragile papers is covered in minute letters. On both sides! Only upon closer inspection do I see the transverse lines crossing the rows: the individual rhymes”<sup>45</sup>. In the Museum of the Third Resistance, an original poem collection of General Antonín Husník titled *Motýlí křídla* [Butterfly Wings] is stored, written on cigarette papers. It is 6.5 centimetres wide and 3.5 centimetres high. A great advantage of this format was that such books were easily hidden from wardens.

Others had the form of either neatly or just very rapidly written texts in a notebook obtained somewhere (K. Pecka’s Jáchymov poem collection titled *Rozšlapaná slova* [Words Trodden On] from 1954, F. Kryštof’s poems, the *Věvec sonetů* [A Sonnet Cycle] cycle of J. Vopařil and A. Procházka and so on) which were not intended primarily for distribution, but written down as a safeguard for a loss of memory in which they had been stored for days, months or years.

In some periods, a lucky combination of conditions in labour camps made it possible to work on the books with more care, even though still in secret. Samizdats created this way were collective works – the author or authors of the texts were helped by other inmates who for example illustrated them. Resulting artefacts had characteristics quite similar to those of “real” published books. One of the examples is one of the versions of the already mentioned *Přaděnko z drátů*, extraordinary already with its dimensions of 34.3 by 23.5 cm.

It should be mentioned that in addition to literary prisoner samizdat, there were also ex-

<sup>44</sup> J. Novák, “Komentář, ediční poznámka a vysvětlivky”, *Vrstvení achátu*, Svitavy-Řím 2000, pp. 525-533 (citation p. 529).

<sup>45</sup> H. Havlíčková, *Dědictví: Kapitoly z dějin komunistické perzekuce v Československu 1948-1989*, Olomouc 2008, p. 109.



amples of visual art being created in prisons (which, incidentally, is another neglected part of samizdat history). I deliberately mention the visual arts samizdat, as it often carried an unofficial and hidden message about the conditions of the prisoners. Similarly as in the 70s and 80s when “the carrier of a samizdat message could also be a postcard, a sticker, a poster, a badge, a printed plastic bag or a part of clothing, or even a painted Easter egg”<sup>46</sup>. From the available examples, we can see that as in literature, there are universal themes in the fine art of prisoner samizdat. Typical subject matter of these works, often created in secret, are portraits of fellow prisoners (and there are many surviving portraits of imprisoned famous persons), images of the prison and camp environment, everyday life in prison, satirical sketches and illustrations of other, usually literary works (see below). As with literary prisoner samizdat, the artists were often untrained amateurs. Some drawings (like some poems of literary samizdat) can be characterised by a certain naïveté; others are however very well executed. In any case, the prisoners themselves still consider them artefacts worth treasuring (one of the former prisoners, for example, has his prison portrait hanging on the wall of his living room). Both types of samizdat are also linked by the complicated conditions of their creation (shown in the lack of materials: most prisoner works of art are drawings in pencil, in rare cases also coloured).

In many cases, both main branches of prisoner samizdat, literary and visual, crossed paths, resulting in literary works that were “published” in prison with original illustrations. Many of them became unique artefacts. A very special example are the three editions of

*Přádénko z drátů*, all published in prisoner samizdat; the two surviving copies (one in a larger format mentioned above, the other a miniature book)<sup>47</sup> are both very thoroughly designed. One other example of many is the intricate cover of an anthology made by women of the Minkovice prison near Liberec, decorated with cut glass beads.

In the richness of prisoner samizdat, I have also found proof of bibliophile editions. Of course it remains an open question whether all of prisoner samizdat could not be considered bibliophile editions of a specific kind, as only a single copy was usually made. In this particular case, however, an author selected his favourite poem from a samizdat collection published in prison, and his fellow inmate copied it to another separate sheet of paper and graphically embellished it, creating a proper bibliophile edition of the poem.

The many examples that unfortunately cannot be shown here are proof that the many faces of prisoner samizdat are among the most persuasive arguments as to why their study is worthwhile.

Researching prisoner samizdat means entering a similar territory that long ago used to be marked on maps with the words “here be dragons”. The exploration of its “geography” has been only fragmentary so far, but provides conclusive proof of its existence, which should be acknowledged not only by literary history. This brief introduction of the many types and faces of prisoner samizdat must then inevitably force us, literary historians, to re-evaluate our concept of the history of samizdat in Czechoslovakia, and take a new look on the term “samizdat” itself.

<sup>46</sup> J. Gruntorád, “Samizdatová literatura”, op.cit., p. 494.

<sup>47</sup> K. Volková, “O Přádénku z drátů”, op. cit.