Prague Spring 1990: The alliance of dissidents and Jews

Jirka Danicek.

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

PRAGUE—Jirka Danicek, a tall man with wavy blond hair and trimmed greying beard, has the charisma of someone who keeps important secrets. He moves and speaks with deliberate steadiness; he seems to have decided that, if he can not change the world, he can at least control his own thoughts and movements, and free himself from external manipulation.

Danicek, a poet, founded Prague's illegal Jewish publishing house. The press was called *Alef*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and symbolic of the struggle of young Czech Jews to relearn a forgotten religious heritage. But the word "alef" also has a specific Prague connotation. The 17th century rabbi, the Maharal, is said to have given life to the Golem by writing the Hebrew word *emet*, truth, on his forehead. When the Maharal decided to destroy the Golem, he simply erased the first letter of the word "emet"—an alef—leaving the Hebrew word *met*, which means dead. Alef, then, was the letter of truth, the separation between life and death.

Nowhere in the Soviet bloc had an underground Jewish press of such quality existed as Alef. Alef didn't distribute typewritten manuscripts, the usual samizdat format, but published actual books—about 20 titles in all. I had seen some of them in the home of Leo and Hanna Pavlat (see part one of this series, July 20): large volumes of surprisingly good quality, with simple white soft covers and black lettering. Unlike Jewish samizdat in the Soviet Union, Alef didn't publish Leon Uris, but Buber and Rosenzweig. Its audience included not only young Jews—who in Prague numbered perhaps several dozen—but also non-Jewish intellectuals.

I asked Danicek who had funded his press, but he said only, "Sources abroad." Suddenly, we were back in communist Prague, where one didn't ask unnecessary questions. I prodded Danicek for more details: his caution seemed to me an anachronism. Reluctantly he said that a Swedish organization supporting the Czech human rights movement had sent money. Also, some money had come from "someone in a Jewish organization." And he would not say any more.

Danicek is a convert to Judaism. At the age of 14, he read his first Jewish book, by Sholom Aleichem; he felt that he belonged among Sholom Aleichem's characters. Like himself, they seemed to be in the world but not of it.

Danicek began to read any book about Jews he could find. He was fascinated by how Jews had preserved their identity through exile, their ability to define themselves as an individualist people. "For most people," Danicek said to me, "it is nothing 'to be.' It's simply life. But I felt that 'to be' was something to aspire to, not to take for granted. The Jews had learned to think for themselves, to feel their selfhood. That is what I wanted."

One Shabbat, Danicek's friend Leo Pavlat took him to the Altneu synagogue. "As soon as I saw the men praying, I decided to become a Jew," Danicek said. "I couldn't have said then what I felt. But now I know: I felt the presence of God. I knew that those people were protected by holiness." In 1976, at age 26 and three years after he had first come to the synagogue, Danicek became a Jew.

I asked Danicek if he had ever felt lonely or sad to be part of such a tiny community. He said, "This was the only Jewish community that I knew. This was my Jewish people."

At the same time that Danicek was becoming a Jew he was also becoming a dissident. For Danicek, Judaism and political dissidence were part of the same process of defining himself as an individual. "I didn't want to become a dissident," he said. "But if you had some ethical ideas and you weren't afraid to say them out loud, you were a dissident."

One night Danicek, then a student, was sitting in a restaurant with some university friends. They began to sing a satirical anti-government song. Someone in the restaurant went to the police. Danicek and his friends were arrested; Danicek was sentenced to eight months in prison. When he was released, he was denied readmission to the university.

Czech society was now closed to him; he had nowhere to go but to the dissident periphery. Danicek was among the first signers of "Charter '77," the human rights petition initiated by now-president Vaclav Havel and around which the Czech dissident movement formed. Like all those who signed Charter '77, Danicek was permitted to work only as a laborer. For 13 years he inspected the purity of water sources; for much of that time he lived alone in a trailer in the forest. The Communists tried to degrade the dissidents by turning intellectuals into window washers and furnace stokers. It was a uniquely Communist punishment: proletarian vindictiveness. By punishing the dissidents in that way, the Communist leaders revealed what they really thought of physical labor: demeaning work, to be used as a weapon against their enemies.

But now the outcasts have become an elite. When we met, Danicek had just been appointed by the Jewish community to edit its magazine. The revolution had changed everything; one of the students with whom Danicek had sat in prison for singing in the restaurant is now the mayor of Prague. But while the conditions of Danicek's external life have suddenly reversed, from underground publisher to community editor, I was certain that Danicek himself hasn't changed. The revolution didn't free Danicek; he had already freed himself.

Enshrined typewriters

Danicek invited me to a reunion of Charter '77. It would be the first meeting of the dissidents since the November revolution, the first time they would be gathering not in the secrecy of small groups but as a triumphal movement.

Each of the 2,000 people who had signed the Charter '77 statement had been sent an invitation. Danicek said he didn't know if he could get me in on his invitation, but he would try. He suggested that on the morning of the reunion we meet a block away from where it was to be held, so that we could find each other more easily, away from the crowds. It was a logical arrangement, but I wondered whether setting up decoy places of rendezvous came to Danicek by habit.

The reunion was held on a Sunday morning in an old hotel in central Prague. No one checked for tickets, and I followed Danicek through the packed crowd, which filled the entryway and up the winding staircase. People hugged each other and called out the casual Czech greeting, "Ahoy!," taken from English sailors' slang. Almost everyone seemed to be smoking, and some who were not waved v-shaped fingers in the air, looking to borrow a cigarette.

They resembled a random crowd rather than a movement. There was an old gentleman in a goatee and an elegant woman wearing pearls, and young men in T-shirts and headbands with thin straight hair far down their backs. Danicek, wearing a white trench coat and smoking a cigarette with deep intent, smiled at old friends and then moved quickly on, avoiding the great embrace.

In one room off the hall was a samizdat exhibit. The glass cases held a manual typewriter, thin paper on which protest letters had been written, even an underground jazz magazine. It seemed here that the struggle for good must always end this way, with grand reunions and enshrined typewriters. In one glass case was a Czech translation of Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* that had been published by Danicek's press, Alef. I said to Danicek, "You are part of Czech history." He smiled and blushed.

Danicek introduced me to a young man with long black hair and tufts of black beard that resembled barbed wire, who wore an Israeli flag pin on his lapel. He gave me his card, a Juicy Fruit Gum wrapper on the back of which was stamped his name, Daniel Kummerman. He said, "If you have any gum wrappers, save them for me. I collect them."

When told that I was a journalist working for American Jewish newspapers, Daniel Kummerman offered me his plan: "We must get the American Jews to organize a charter flight for young Czech Jews to visit Israel. Under the Communists we weren't allowed to travel; now we don't have the money to travel. It is an impossible situation. The American Jews will pay, of course."

Until the revolution, Kummerman was the window washer in the Jewish community building. Now he was about to become editor of a new Czech magazine on foreign affairs. He said, "People in the Jewish community will think of me as a window cleaner for the rest of my life. They will think it is my hobby."

Kummerman briefly told me his story. His father had survived the Holocaust by emigrating to Eretz Yisrael and then returned to Czechoslovakia after the war. "He was an assimilated, rich, soft Central European Jew who couldn't stand the Middle East heat. My mother was a quarter or an eighth Jewish, and the Nazis didn't take quarter or eighth Jews to Auschwitz."

Kummerman grew up in a small town near Prague. He was baptized, and for some time considered himself a Catholic. "I knew I was Jewish, but it didn't mean very much. But I was always a Zionist. I learned Zionism from my father. He divided the news of the world into what was good for Israel and what was bad for Israel."

One day at university, a non-Jewish friend took Kummerman for lunch at the Jewish community's kosher dining room. Until then Kummerman hadn't even realized that a Jewish community existed in Prague.

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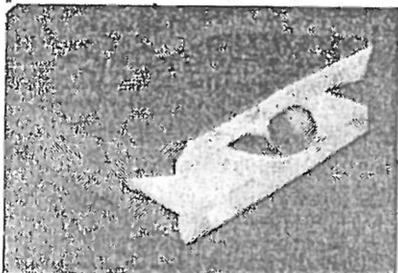

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The Mishpacha Choir, with Vladimir Merta on guitar.

Prague

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"If you were a student, you'd get lunch at the community very cheap, so I started to come regularly. I attended some lectures and started going to the synagogue. Once you get interested in Judaism it draws you in more and more."

Like Danicek, Kummerman became a dissident just as he was becoming a Jew. And as a Jew, he found Charter '77 a very hospitable place. He said: "The government used 'Zionism' as a dirty word, to attack Jews and also non-Jews it didn't like. So naturally Zionism was considered a friendly idea in Charter."

No one at the reunion seemed to take notice of Kummerman's Israeli flag pin. It belonged here, among these people of goodwill, just as Alef's books belonged in the exhibit on Czech samizdat. Nowhere else in Eastern Europe had I seen such an easy integration of Jewish culture into a dissident movement as here in Prague. Those Jews who had been involved in dissident activities elsewhere in Eastern Europe—like Solidarity leaders Adam Michnik and Bronislaw Geremek—were almost always assimilated, while members of the Jewish community kept far from confrontation with authorities. Only here had a group of young religious Jews felt sufficiently at home to join their country's political and cultural struggles.

Their loyalty had been reciprocated by the Czech intelligentsia. Danicek told me that just before the revolution, Charter '77 had issued a four-page policy statement on Jewish issues. That statement condemned the government's anti-Zionism as a new form of anti-Semitism, and demanded that Czech Jewish history and culture be taught in the schools. And it denounced the government for deliberately concealing the fact that of the 360,000 Czech citizens killed by the Nazis, more than 200,000 were Jews.

The crowd in the hotel lobby moved to a large adjacent room, which seemed to be a theater. A curtain hung suspended over a stage, round balconies lined the walls and extravagant statues of idealized women lept from the mouldings. A theater was the most logical place for a reunion of Czech dissidents. The Czech revolution has been led by artists, and now the Czechs are the only nation to be governed by artists. Czechoslovakia values its artists the way Poland values its priests, and for the same reason: each group has been its country's protector of truth. If the notion of art as redemptive still has value anywhere, it is here in Prague.

On a single row of folding chairs spread across the stage sit the former leaders of Charter '77. Havel sits toward the end of the row, staring at his clasped hands.

Havel is introduced first. The standing ovation lasts minutes. It is not applause but an embrace. People smile at Havel, as though he were looking directly at them. But Havel isn't looking at anyone. He glances toward the ceiling, strokes his mustache. Then he raises his fingers into a "v" and tries to smile. But no, that is a pose for the crowds in the square, not among friends. He abruptly lowers his hand and stands helplessly before the microphone, waiting for the applause to end.

When everyone is seated, Havel asks them to stand again. They stand. Havel requests a minute of silence, for the years between 1977 and 1989, the years of lonely struggle. People fall silent, hands at their sides. Thank you, Havel says. And then he is gone.

Mishpacha

Later that afternoon, after many speeches and ideological arguments and bows from embarrassed heroes retrieved from the audience, I left the Charter reunion and went to a rehearsal of Prague's Jewish choir. The choir, called Mishpacha, Hebrew for family, had been banned under the Communists from performing outside of living rooms; one priest who had invited Mishpacha to his church was thrown out of his pulpit.

It seemed ludicrous that a choir—and especially one whose repertoire includes Israeli kindergarten songs like "Zum gali gali"—should have been considered subversive. Partly it was because of the general Communist policy against Jewish renewal. But Mishpacha was especially de-

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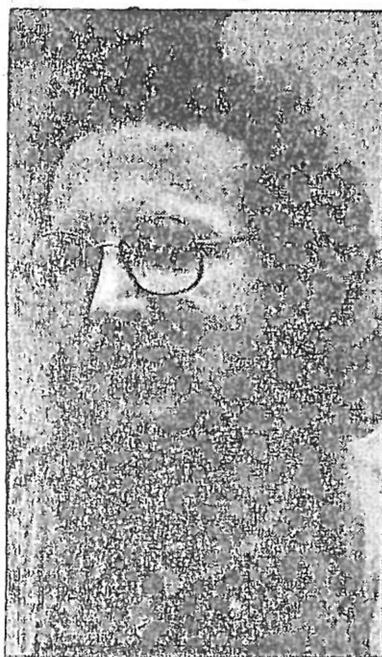
JINDRA SVATEK

Daniel Kummerman.

tested because its members included Charter '77 dissidents, like Hanna Pavlat's mother. Mishpacha had in fact begun with Hanna's family—her husband, daughter, aunt and uncle. Then the circle widened to include half-Jews, quarter-Jews, non-Jews, Jews who had become Christians, Christians who had become Jews.

On this Sunday afternoon, about two dozen people gathered in a room in the Jewish community building, which since the revolution had opened its doors to Mishpacha. The singers included a man—Hanna's uncle—in his 80s, and a young girl—Hanna's daughter—age eight. "Sanctify us with Your commandments," the choir sang, "and give us a place in your Torah." The voices were remarkably harmonious; none seemed to compete for prominence.

They were rehearsing for their debut trip abroad—to Israel, as part of President Havel's entourage. It was fitting that a Czech premier, and Havel in particular, would be the first East European leader to visit Israel, the first to make that gesture of friendship to the Jews. And it was fitting, too, that Mishpacha, which embodies Prague's East European miracle of interfaith intimacy, would be invited to join him.

The choir was accompanied on the guitar by a lean man with close-cropped blond hair who chewed gum as he picked out the sad notes of hasidic songs. He was Vladimir Merta, the country's most popular folk singer, and a non-Jew. During the revolution, it was Merta who had led the giant demonstrations in song.

After the rehearsal, I asked Merta if we could meet to talk about his relationship to Jewish music. Merta suggested that I accompany him back to the Charter reunion, where he was scheduled to perform that evening.

When we returned to the reunion, the auditorium had been transformed into a cabaret. Czechoslovakia's banned singers stood in red spotlights and sang political anthems. People sat at small tables on the balconies drinking beer. A bar did big business; there were no free drinks for the heroes of the underground.

Merta and I sat on the steps leading down from one of the balconies. He spoke slowly, ironically, as he told me about his conflicts with the government; at times he had to pause to sign

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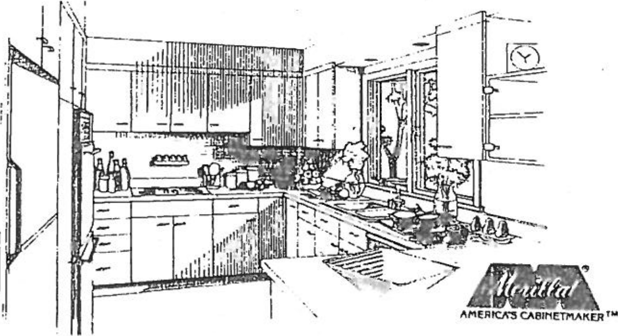

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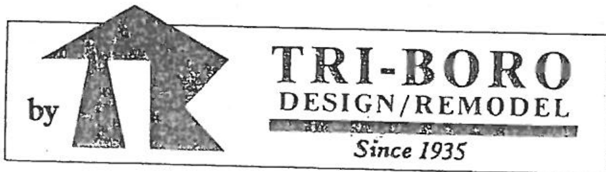

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Prague

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autographs. He said: "I was on the blacklist for five years; my album sat in the studio for 13 years. Once, after being banned again, I wrote a letter to the authorities: 'Each time you ban me I get more and more fans. So just keep it up; it's great for my career.'

"I wasn't part of the dissident movement; I didn't believe in demonstrations. I hate crowds. I was in the streets in 1968 [when the Soviets invaded], and I saw how it is done: the guy with the biggest mouth, probably a provocateur, shouts a slogan and everyone follows him. It's degrading when you can get so easily manipulated. I didn't think change could come with demonstrations.

"But during the revolution I realized I was wrong. In a certain situation only crowds can force quick change, not individuals like me with my songs. It was a humbling experience: the slogans of the crowds were more lyrical and humorous than my own songs. I didn't know what I could offer those people. Usually when you perform you try to share with the audience what is happening inside you. But at the demonstrations I found myself trying to express the spirit of the crowds, which I felt was very close to the spirit of hasidic music."

Merta joined Mishpacha through his wife, Lucia, daughter of a Jewish Communist. The hasidic melodies Merta learned in Mishpacha were instantly familiar to him: they sounded like the songs of Bob Dylan, whom Merta had once emulated in his own music. "Dylan's songs are between A major and A minor. Very Jewish. All those years I had been playing Jewish music without realizing it."

Perhaps what moved Merta most about the hasidic songs are the prayers that form their lyrics. "They were not like any prayers I had ever heard. There was none of the usual bargaining: please help me to be healthy and have luck. The small hasidic singer doesn't ask anything for himself. There is no individuality of the author in the lyrics. The songs are something like a love letter to God. It's cutting your heart open and showing God what's inside."

Merta's love for Jewish music had in fact begun many years before he joined Mishpacha. When he was 16, he found a recording by a cantor in an antique shop; it was a eulogy for the victims of Treblinka. Merta was so moved by the music that he went to the Israeli Embassy in Prague and asked for information on Jewish music.

"I feel a great emotional connection between Czechs and Jews," he said to me. "What the Czech people suffered can't of course be compared to the Jews. But we also took on some small burden of suffering in history.

"Jews were chosen by God to go through the worst—and then to see how the survivors would live and what they would teach the world. There is a kindness in Jews that comes from their religion and their history. Look at the films of the Czech Jewish director, Milos Forman. He's not a religious Jew but in his films there is

JINDRA SVATEK

Vaclav Maly.

'Religion has a chance to put forward values that Communists destroyed.'

a sympathy—a Jewish sympathy—for human mistakes. Even after the Holocaust, Jews are still giving out love to the world."

Merta laughed and said, "Actually, I am one-sixteenth Jewish. But we Czech Jews are rather provincial. We only know how to sing."

MC to the revolution

You must meet Maly, Leo Pavlat said to me. Vaclav Maly, a priest, had been the Catholic Church's most active dissident. Maly had been thrown out of his pulpit by the government, and had worked for 10 years as a furnace stoker and a toilet cleaner. He had been beaten, imprisoned and interrogated almost 300 times. "Even among dissidents, the persecution of Maly was something special," Pavlat said. "The police hated him because of his religious faith. They knew they could never break him, and it made them crazy."

Maly had been one of the main organizers of the revolution MC-ing the demonstrations; he had also led the crowds in prayer. At 39, he was likely the most revered religious figure in the country. Many considered him the spiritual if not formal head of Czech Catholicism. Maly was also known as a friend of the Jews; after the revolution he had organized Prague's first public interfaith meeting and had invited Mishpacha to perform.

Maly had no phone, so Danicek, who was a friend of Maly's, went to his apartment and arranged a meeting for me. One afternoon I visited Maly in his church. On a bulletin board in the hallway was this handwritten sign: "Jesus comes from a Jewish environment. In the Jewish community where Jesus lived, they prayed and sang Psalms and celebrated Jewish holidays. The most famous of these holidays was Passover. Jesus kept all these Jewish rituals." The intent of this message was clear: to teach Christians an appreciation for Jewish life.

Nothing I had been told about Maly prepared me for the man I met. I didn't notice if he is short or tall, handsome or plain; I was drawn only to his eyes. They are fearless, but also tender. Maly looks at you and you feel at once exposed and comforted. He conveys the total commitment, and the surrender, of a martyr. Yet there was nothing grim about him; he laughed often and with pleasure.

Maly told me that he had recently written an article about the connection between the Hebrew words "shalom," peace, and "shalem," wholeness. "People don't understand the meaning of peace," he said. "Peace is not something you can demonstrate for, or negotiate. Sorry: it doesn't depend on political ideology. It is a quality of being. To make peace you must already be at peace, you must be whole within yourself."

I asked Maly what qualities he thinks are necessary to spiritually transform Czechoslovakia, to place the miracle of the revolution at the center of a new Czech consciousness.

He said: "Religion now has an enormous chance to change society. To put forward values that the Communists destroyed, like trust, and faith, and sacrifice for the common good.

"But the influence of religion will depend on its inner strength, on the quality of its faith. It is very difficult to talk about faith in God. People think that faith means belief in fixed

truths. But faith is a personal decision to rely on God, to base one's actions on the reality of God's presence. The Jews in Egypt walking with God through the desert: that is the meaning of faith.

"We have to shift our entire religious approach, from teaching dogma to feeling God in our lives. That is how Jews and Christians will understand each other. Until now we have talked about politics and theology, but we haven't had a real dialogue. We should be talking about how to walk before God in the desert.

"The mistake that Christians made was to divide too much between the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament was seen only as a prelude to the New. We have to approach the Old Testament as a value in itself, and most of all to return to the prophetic tradition, to the direct experience of hearing the word of God. That is the religious tradition that Jews and Christians both value. Christians should understand the Jewish life of Jesus. Jesus didn't fall from heaven. Sorry: he came from the Jewish prophetic tradition."

There was a knock on Maly's door, and a middle-aged man entered. "Excuse me, Father," he said. "But I was passing by and realized that this is your church. I just want to tell you that we love you, Father. Thank you for everything you did for us."

Maly said, "It was my duty."

The man left and Maly continued, as though nothing unusual had just happened. He said: "After 40 years of suppression, there is the temptation in the Church to return to triumphalism. One must block it; it would be very dangerous. We should introduce biblical tradition not as an ideology but an offering. Religion should be based on hands bound before God, on humility, on prayer.

"Christians and Jews in East European societies now have a chance to make God real again in our lives. We speak of God as an object. But God is among us and in us. We have to forget this primitive teaching of God as an old grandfather. God is real; God is alive. Sometimes I feel God so near to me that He is more real than myself."

I asked Maly about his life as a dissident. "I sat in prison for seven months—a very, very short time," he said, almost apologetic. Then he added, laughing, "But they detained me for every communist holiday."

And how did you become a furnace stoker?

"When they would not let me serve as a priest I wanted to become a nurse. But the police were afraid that I would influence the patients. So then I wanted to be a window cleaner. But they didn't want me to meet other dissidents who were also cleaning windows. So I became a furnace stoker." Maly laughed, without a trace of bitterness, as though he had just told the punchline of a joke.

I wanted to ask Maly what had inspired his faith during his years as an enforced laborer. But then I realized he had already told me. For Maly, the great example of faith is the Jews leaving Egypt and being led by the Pillar of Fire. I imagined Maly stoking his furnace, with great patience and attention to detail, accepting his life without thought of the future, as though walking through the desert with the presence of God. □

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