

What I Did on November 17 and a Few Additional Thoughts

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I remember those days shortly before November 17 as the days of strange onerous inertia—after the fall of the Berlin Wall it was clear that also in Czechoslovakia things had to start moving. But we couldn't imagine what the trigger might be. The then regime seemed to be “stable”, but it was the kind of stability of a regime that did not want any change and would spend all its energy on its own preservation.

The following experience of the fall of the oppressive regime was stunning, joyful, pure, historical. I am very glad I could witness it at least as a common “pawn”. Standing in the squares we didn't think about what was going to come after the feast and we couldn't picture it. Shortly before those events I started to work at the Institute of Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Immediately, together with my colleagues we started to put together first authentic surveys and independent opinion polls. It was the time of double disenchantment – civic and professional.

I was thirty-something, shortly after a long maternity leave, and when I went to the square, somebody had to watch the kids. As concerns the timing of November – we were that luckier generation, although until then I had always thought we were the lost one (this feeling of “generational self-pity” maybe notoriously repeats itself) – we never experienced the euphoria of the '60s, we grew up in the times of normalization, which was that period of our lives when we were supposed to get a good education, travel and try to find ourselves somewhere on a trip between Nepal, Paris and Oxford; we studied ideologically biased disciplines and tried to “find ourselves” between the Film Club and wine cellars around the old town of Bratislava. However, the change came still in time for us to have the strength and energy to catch up.

Let me present you with two personal memories. Nowadays, when being a dissident has dropped in its value and when it seems that Slovakia is filled with former fighters against totalitarianism or at least with those who call themselves “people from the grey zone” I wish to recall the names of two people from our generation who really loved freedom and did a lot for it, but when it finally arrived they were no longer alive: Igor Kalný (1957-1987) and Tomáš Petřivý (1955 - 1986). The former was an exceptionally talented artist who wasn't loyal enough to be allowed to study; the latter signed Charta 77 and due to that he had to leave a prestigious filmmaking school. Two out of many lives who were fatally affected by the regime. Maybe not as brutally in the 1950s, but also in the eighties it was still able to ruin people's lives...

My second memory is linked to November 19 1989 – I was with my friend and kids at a trip on a hill in Bratislava overlooking Austria. We liked to go there, the kids would look for fossils and we would think out adventures for them...that Sunday evening we already knew what was going on. We were standing above the barbed-wire borderline looking towards Austria into the November fog. We really couldn't see anything: either the wires or that borderline and we were projecting the pictures of our future on this white screen...The next day everything was in motion. A few week from then my friend Eva, who had been several times applied for a travel permission and the police had request had several times been rejected her request, put her four-year-old son into an unreliable Romania-made Olcit car and headed out into the fog. And she didn't stop until she reached Paris – the city of her dreams.

I was carefully following various reflections that have this year flooded the days of this anniversary. There has been a lot of ballast and a lot of something that I can't call by any other name but "Bolshevik puke". Somebody said: just like at family celebrations everything bad often resurfaces that would otherwise remained hidden under everyday habits, these days many things about us and our society have surfaced. I personally was captivated by Šimečka's thoughts about knowing oneself: only in freedom will we find out who we are. And this holds true both for individuals and society. Oppression was a familiar excuse, oppression has no mirror. And what we have found out about Slovakia may not fill us with pride; we do not want to identify with it and (once again) wear the badge reading "I did not vote for him".

Translated by **Eva Riečanská**

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