

# ARE CANADIANS POLITICALLY NAÏVE?

*Some Observations by a New Canadian  
from the Old World*

*Josef Skvorecky*

**Y**OU WON'T LIKE THIS ESSAY, but let it be a comfort to you that the question in my title is stupid. If you do not subscribe to collectivistic hypotheses — as I most vehemently don't — you will know why. What, after all, is the *only* thing that Canadians have in common? Not even the language; just their citizenship. Apparently there are some naïve Canadians; some are downright silly. Others are sophisticated, knowledgeable, talented. A truistic observation that can be made about any nation.

The question should read: Are Many Canadians Politically Naïve? As much as I hate to hurt people's feelings, I am afraid I must answer Yes. Unfortunately, many are.

As long as such men and women are not members of the academic or mass media communities, their naïveté is pardonable. In this country, we don't have mandatory indoctrination sessions for everybody, and the majority of our citizens are preoccupied with the good old Yankee business of pursuing happiness. The cab driver who has never had a totalitarian experience cannot be blamed for not reading scholarly treatises on history and politics. Inexcusability begins with people in the mass media and in university lecture rooms. In this day and age, it is not just *naïve* to express publicly uninformed opinions and judgments, it is *criminally* naïve.

To be accurate: Canadian political naïveté, as I see it, has nothing to do with the way Canadians view our domestic political issues; in that respect they are admittedly and understandably much shrewder than citizens who came to this country late in life. Neither has it anything to do with the way they view nazism (though they rarely distinguish it from fascism). Nazism was blatantly evil, anti-humanistic, racist, supremacist. It would have been dangerous to the world — and therefore to Canada — had it won the war. Fortunately, the nazis lost and, in my opinion, they present no danger at all to the world at large; they can only

endanger individuals. The nazi ideology never could have any appeal except to Germans, the nation of supermen (and certainly not to *all* Germans), to some individuals in nations that deemed themselves racially first-class, and to cranks in other nations: to the Sir Oswald Mosleys, or to the Emanuel Moravcs of Bohemia. Today, the influence of the nazi ideology is limited *only* to cranks. But what about the estimated 2,000 ex-nazis living in our midst? Do they not present a danger? — How can they? For the past 38 years they have kept not just a low profile, but utter silence. None of them has ever tried to stand up and defend their past and their ideology publicly. They know better than we do about the crimes they had committed before this country gave them — unwittingly — shelter. Now, after Roiko, they must be shaking with fear.

Unlike the nazi ideology which had charm only for members of the *Herrenvölker* and for deviants, the communist ideology sounds sweet. It is antiracist, uses humanistic clichés, talks a lot about peace (while conducting little surreptitious military interventions, wars, and proxy-wars in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Afghanistan, Angola, Abyssinia, etc.), about international solidarity, even brotherhood, even love. *Vis-à-vis* things Soviet, the political naïveté of quite a few Canadians is brought to oppressingly fragrant bloom. Let me discuss a concrete and recent example of this blooming at its Stachanovite best.

In the spring of 1983 a *World Assembly for Peace and Life Against Nuclear War* was held in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The Brobdingnagian length of the name semantically betrays the inspiration behind the gathering: where else but in Soviet Russia does one find dailies with titles like *For The Lasting Peace, For A People's Democracy!* But one cannot ask Canadian delegates to do extensive homework in semantics first, and only then head for Prague. So they went without having done their homework. Once there, they were wined and dined, guided through the countryside on Potiemkinian excursions, and allowed to witness a peace rally of — according to their estimate — a quarter-million people. They also met some Soviet V.I.P.'s. Back home, some wrote about the events in Canadian papers. One such writer was Ms. Lesley Hughes from Winnipeg.

I have read three reports from her pen. One, headlined "A Prague spring without tanks," appeared in *The Winnipeg Sun* on June 22, 1983, and tells about how, on arriving in Prague, she suffered "a shock when [she] discovered the sophistication of life in Communist Czechoslovakia." Her second shock came when she realized the "similarities to Western life. First there were teen-agers. All in denim . . . a few given over to punk-rocking . . . defying the system just like the ones at home." In another article (July 6), "Why we don't have peace," Ms. Hughes recounts some personal chats with Valentina Tereshkova, the world's first woman cosmonaut, and with "a high-placed Russian." This gentleman even entrusted her with a few state secrets, namely that the American delegates to the

Geneva Peace Talks had “been told [by their government] to offer only impossible suggestions for disarmament.” Ms. Hughes opines that “we have been seduced out of our ability to see beyond appearances to reality” and expresses a wish “*to see for ourselves*” [Ms. Hughes’ italics]. Finally, she gives advice to Western leaders: they should act “to prevent [war] first, and worry about the communist threat to our way of life when life itself is secure.”

Her other article (July 4) is a meditation on the untruths of anti-communist assertions, entitled “Repression? It’s certainly well hidden.” Here the Winnipeg author tells her readers about “phone calls from New York . . . where newspapers have reported riots, suppression and arrests” in Prague, and about some “bad press” from the Western radio according to which the Peace Assembly would grant “freedom of expression to communists only.” She also confesses that, on her way to Prague, she was anxious not to “be seen as today’s Neville Chamberlain, shouting Peace in Our Time!” but was eventually reassured that this would not be the case when she spoke to “Czechs she met on the street, in obscure shops, in bars,” and they all “said they attended [the Peace Rally] gladly, and not just for the tourist money but for hope.” There was some more dining, vodka drinking, and dancing, a “full day group tour [through] factories, schools, day care centres and a collective farm,” and the exhilarating (and certainly hectic) days culminated with the Peace Rally on Prague’s Old Town Square, packed to capacity. “Do you really think,” asks Ms. Hughes, “the communists could have driven the citizens from their homes to line the streets 10 deep, forced them to weep and take our pictures, shake our hands?”

Finally, the Winnipeg reporter concludes: No, we Canadian delegates were no “Lenin’s fools” to support the conference. (Lenin’s term was “idiots.”)

**A** DEPRESSION DESCENDS ON ME: can I hope to get space in *Canadian Literature* necessary to analyze in detail this Gargantuan collection of misconceptions? Hardly. I cannot ask the editor to reject other contributors whose themes are more relevant to the issue of literature. A depression, indeed, descends on me. How many people read *Canadian Literature* anyway? Possibly fewer than those who read *The Winnipeg Sun*. *Habent sua fata libelli*, and the fate of articles — and books — like this one is that they are rarely perused by those for whom they have been written, but mostly only by those who do not need their arguments because they know them by heart.

But perhaps one should not give up, even though *das Spiel ist ganz und gar verloren* because, hopefully, *dennoch wird es weitergehen*. If I cannot go into all the details necessary for the clarification of the myopic vision of our Alice in the Czech Wonderland let me at least try to be systematic.

Ms. Hughes' first article displays a fallacy of the naïve Canadian psyché which I would describe as:

### 1. *The Canadian Insensitivity*

It strikes me as odd that none of the Canadian delegates found it odd to travel to a *peace* conference held in a country which only fifteen years ago fell prey to a *military* ambush of gigantic proportions (about seven times as many soldiers plus hardware took part in it as is the personnel of the entire Canadian army). During that military adventure about 100 civilians died, and ever since the country has lived under virtual Soviet military occupation. The main of several Soviet military bases is only 20 miles east of Prague, at Mladá, a mere hour's drive for armoured vehicles. Missile sites (naturally, with atomic warheads) loom behind many a Czech village, though the delegates saw none near the collective farm where they spent a few minutes, probably snacking and wining. It could not have been more than a few minutes since, in the course of one single day, they visited "factories, schools, day care centres and a collective farm." Ms. Hughes saw Bohemia — as the Czech saying goes — from an express train.

But if I find all this odd what am I to think about the sensitivity of the woman who titled her article "A Prague spring without tanks"? Apparently, the word she chose was just a word to her, with no reality behind it. A useful gimmick to coin a catchy phrase for her headline. For the millions of Czechs, however — including the 70,000 who now live in Canada — Ms. Hughes' chosen word has a more material meaning. For there are thousands of their loved ones in Czechoslovakia who lost their jobs, their professional careers, their social status, their personal liberty, and even their life as a direct result of the action of the metaphoric tanks. But Ms. Hughes did not meet any of those. She was a friendly visitor; friendly, that is, to the government.

### 2. *The Canadian Ignorance*

Here part of the blame should probably be placed on the shoulders of our ethnocultural institutions which financially support folk dancing, pork feasts, and other extinct forms of European village life. In the minds of some people, the jumping of the sexy girl-Ph.D.'s in short-skirted "national costumes," so often seen in Toronto at the Caravan Festival and on other occasions, creates and enhances the image of a universal ethnic East European as a simple-minded, semi-literate hillbilly. This was apparently Ms. Hughes' idea of the typical Czech. She seems never to have heard of sophisticated Czech literature and film; names

like Capek or Kundera tell her nothing; neither do words like Martinu or Mucha or, for that matter, the Bren gun, the Skoda AA cannon, the *Panzerjäger* — but that, perhaps, because she loves peace. When, instead of simpletons in mud huts, she found English-speaking denim-clad youths, who very probably know much more about Mick Jagger than herself (and possibly more about Faulkner), she was shocked.

She also met the “punk-rockers, defying the system *just like* the ones at home” [italics mine].

### 3. *The Canadian Inability to See the Importance of Quantity in Quality*

I love — that is, I hate — the phrase “just like.” When Václav Havel, the playwright, was arrested for the first time for having smuggled the manuscript memoirs of an ancient Socialist minister to our Czech publishing house in Toronto, I met a Canadian colleague, and when I told her about this, she uttered: “Just like Daniel Ellsberg.”

Well, yes. Both Havel and Ellsberg committed, in a way, the same crime: they leaked documents their governments wished to keep secret. There were some differences, though: the difference between the private memoirs of an octogenarian former politician, and military documents labelled Top Secret; the difference between sending the manuscript abroad with no demands of remuneration, and selling them for a handsome price to the rich American papers. Then also the difference between Ellsberg’s later fortunes: acquittal, a lecture circuit; and those of Havel: four years in jail and now round-the-clock police surveillance.

Even more illuminating of this Canadian fallacy was another encounter I had with another youngish lady, this time over the frame-up of the socialist leader Milada Horáková which resulted in her execution; she was the only Czech woman ever executed by the Czechs for political “crimes.” “Just like Angela Davis!” my interlocutor commented on the frame-up trial. Now, *that* made me mad, and I lost self-control. “Oh really? But that trial was in California, wasn’t it?” I cried. “I thought the Yanks put Angela in a gas chamber!” The lady has avoided me ever since.

Similarly with the Czech punks. Yes, they do defy the government. But instead of permitting them to hold monster-concerts in big halls and stadiums, the government — only about a month after Ms. Hughes’ departure from Prague — clamped down on the punk-folk, disbanded about thirty punk-rock and New Wave bands, took away the licences of their musicians, fired the entire editorial board of the only pop-music monthly *Melodie*, and apparently is about to dissolve the Jazz Section of the Musicians’ Union, the chief spokesman for the punks. Not “just like” at all. Just “a little like.”

#### 4. *The Canadian Neglect of Pertinent Literature*

Ms. Hughes was taken through all the stages of subtle brainwashing described in detail (with many examples) in Paul Hollander's *Political Pilgrims*, one of several books Canadians intent on travelling behind the Curtain should read. With all due respect to her, Ms. Hughes is a provincial Canadian journalist who dines with "high-placed Russians" and with the female stars of the universe only occasionally. In Prague, however, she received a V.I.P. treatment. The high-placed KGB man even gave her a piece of interesting information and she, overawed by the friendly kindness of such greats, believed his information just as strongly as she disbelieves the information offered to Canadians not only by us, biased exiles, but also by scholarly books and acclaimed novels, readily available in Canada. Some were even written by Canadians, such as the books on Czechoslovakia by the eminent Professor H. Gordon Skilling of the University of Toronto. Disregarding such works of scholarship, Ms. Hughes expressed a wish to "see for herself," not through the eyes of propaganda. After seventy years of totalitarian trickery, however, the primitive methods of Count Potiemkin have been vastly improved. Travelling to a totalitarian country in order to "see for yourself," without having done substantial homework first, guarantees the very opposite of what Ms. Hughes wanted to achieve by "being there." It guarantees that you will be unable "to see beyond appearances to reality."

#### 5. *The Canadian Inability to Realize that the Totalitarians ARE Different From Us*

"Prevent war first, and worry about the communist threat afterwards!" A nice-sounding slogan. It reminds me of a graffito I found on the wall of Sidney Smith Hall under a Communist Party election poster: "Vote Now, Pay Later!" The trouble here is that it is impossible to separate peace from freedom. By freedom, naturally, I mean not national independence but the individual liberty of the citizen. In the sense of national independence, one of the "freest" nations was certainly that of Germany under Hitler. However, the state of individual freedom in Herr Hitler's *Reich* was non-existent, and is best characterized by just one word: Auschwitz.

There does exist a genuine, government non-sponsored peace movement in Czechoslovakia. But its delegates were not admitted to the dining-and-wining parties, nor were they permitted to speak. This movement stresses the indivisibility of the question of peace and the question of freedom. To simplify this matter for our Alices: the civil freedoms and human rights that exist in our Western society guarantee that people like Ms. Hughes can, quite effectively I'm afraid, fight for disarmament — in our part of the world. The lack of such rights, such freedoms,

in totalitarian countries of whatever political stripe can lend effective support to Ms. Hughes' fight for disarmament — in our part of the world. If the Ms. Hugheses have their way — and there is a chance they might — there will be disarmament — *in our part of the world*. The long word for this is “unilateral.”

Now, the experience of both remote and recent history teaches us that the autocrat, the tyrant, the dictator, the totalitarian ruler understands, unfortunately, but one international language: that of material strength. He is unmoved by the presumably human feelings that move Ms. Hughes. After all, the men who lead a state which has killed between 30 and 70 million of its own citizens can hardly be soft-hearted. But they do understand the language of military strength. The Nazis in World War II, for instance, never used poisonous gas, yet a gas-mask box was attached to the belt of every German soldier from the first day of the war to the last. For the Allies, too, had gas, and would have used it, had the Germans started gas warfare. It was solely this knowledge which prevented Hitler from resorting to the diabolic invention of his predecessors in World War I. But if the Allies had not been in possession of the chemical weapon would it be reasonable to assume that Hitler, from humanitarian considerations, would have refrained from yperiting the Yanks, the Tommies, the Bolshies, all of them?

A more recent example from the same category of killing: the North Vietnamese certainly had access to Russian-made gas during the war in Vietnam — but they used it only after the Americans had departed, against the primitive tribesmen in the mountains, who do not even possess bazookas.

This is the reason why people of my experience, both personal and bookish, think it important that Western atomic defences be not weakened, or even abandoned altogether. We do not want to die in an atomic war, just as Ms. Hughes doesn't. However, we have reason, supported by logic and history, to fear that if the West should disarm atomically, we would have not peace but war. Non-atomic perhaps; but if the conventional forces of NATO put up stiff resistance, we probably would live to experience even the atomic variety. Limited, perhaps, but atomic nevertheless. Did you read Sacharov's report on the party and the guests in that remote top-secret Siberian place where they celebrated the successful completion of the Soviet bomb? Sacharov, the father of that weapon, proposed a toast: “That this terrible bomb may never be used!” To which one of the jolly-looking, rotund Soviet generals responded: “Thank you, comrade Sacharov, for delivering this baby. As to how it should be used, please, leave that to us!”

It is, unfortunately, impossible to secure peace first, and worry about communism later. You cannot separate the two endeavours. It would be nice if you could, but you can not.

No, I have no ready-made advice to give to those who want to preserve peace. I only know — because history has taught me this lesson — how peace can go to

pieces. Pacifism, the naïve or cowardly efforts to extricate ourselves from our common North American destiny in a world of powerful totalitarianism, is a guaranteed road to war.

## 6. *The Ahistoricity of Canadian Observations*

How often, in our Canadian newspapers, have you come across sentences like: "Mr. Jaruzelski, the leader of the military junta which grabbed power in Poland a year ago, said . . ." or "Mr. Arafat, the leader of the anti-Israeli guerrillas, declared . . ." etc.? Apparently it is presumed that Canadians have either a pathologically short memory, or a lamentable lack of knowledge of the affairs of the world.

Ms. Hughes asks her rhetorical question about the communists' ability to drive their citizens to the streets in support of *pax Sovietica*. Yes, such a thing would be impossible in this country. But Ms. Hughes does not seem to know that people now living in Czechoslovakia have a past very much different from the past of people now living in Canada. The Czechs are the veterans of six years of Nazi occupation with its fear-enforced mass gatherings (in the same Prague square) protesting the "perfidious assassination of *Herr stellvertretende Reichsprotektor, General der SS Reinhard Heydrich*"; they have lived through Stalinism with its 300-500 political executions (including the above-mentioned Milada Horáková), with about 100,000 political prisoners mining uranium ore for the production of Soviet A-bombs; with hundreds of thousands of intellectuals, lawyers, clerks, small businessmen, farmers, teachers, and scholars sent to the mines, to the "black (working) battalions," to the factories and state farms for "re-education"; with widespread screening, police surveillance, harassment, "voluntary" mandatory weekend brigades, etc. These people are the fathers and mothers of children who would have very little chance of being admitted to higher schooling, not to speak of university, if their parents refused to "fight for peace." In short: Ms. Hughes seems to be unaware of the very concrete, non-metaphorical bloodiness of the communist system in the first years after its coming to power, and of its unabated repressiveness ever since. After the unleashing of their holo-caustic actions, these regimes do not have to drive people to rallies with whips. The fear of their power and of their readiness to crack down on you, Jaruzelski-like, suffices. You are slowly manoeuvred into a frame of mind where you no longer give a damn about anything. You say to yourself: So what? We rallied against the criminal British paras who killed our good socialist friend *Obergruppenführer* Heydrich. We rallied to demand death-sentences for the defendants in the Slánsky trial, and later were told that the hanged comrades had been innocent — so what? We rallied against the lies of the imperialist Kennedy about the



presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, and a few days later we rallied in support of the peace-gesture of Nikita Khrushchev when he removed the non-existent missiles from that island. We rallied in support of the good communist Dubček, and we rallied when the Soviets invaded to depose him; only a couple of years later we rallied in support of the Brotherly Soviet Help and against the bad communist Dubček. So what? Why not rally for peace? It's just another Kremlin trick, and you'd better be present.

Two more things Ms. Hughes does not seem to know: mostly, these mass demonstrations are held during working hours, with no loss of salary. In this sense, the participants are paid for participation. If the rally falls on a holiday, the above-mentioned powers of persuasion still function. And, usually, one has to have one's name marked off on lists checked by foremen and other bosses in the side streets where the voluntary demonstrators gather. Then one marches down Paris Street, in the direction of Old Town Square — a huge river of humans. Through the side streets, rivulets of people, their banners and flags rolled up, flow in an opposite direction. They are headed for the many pubs in Old Town Prague, to celebrate a sunny day spent on an enjoyable walk and crowned by a convivial beer-drinking party in the colourful medieval rooms where, a thousand years ago (who knows?), the Good King Wenceslas himself might have dined and beered with sexy bathing-house attendants.

Had Ms. Hughes known all this, would she be so surprised that people, with whom she obviously did not speak in Czech, and possibly through an interpreter, expressed such orthodox views in the presence of an apparently fellow-travelling foreigner?<sup>1</sup>

### *7. The Canadian Habit to Judge Others by Ourselves*

Reading in U.S. newspapers about protests and arrests in Prague, Ms. Hughes expected to witness something on the scale of U.S. riots, but she failed to notice anything of that sort. Once again, she did not take into account the well-developed fear which is the best guardian of civil obedience, a fear stemming, in this case, also from the claustrophobic situation of a small nation living under a police regime. There is simply no way of escape. An American draft-dodger easily slips across the border to friendly Canada, sometimes even in his car. The criminal rents a hotel room under an assumed name, and puts on a false moustache. Even when caught by the police, a youngster who has just smashed a window at the American Embassy will have no problem continuing his studies at university.

No such possibilities exist in Czechoslovakia. To slip across the Iron Curtain is rather difficult — and if Ms. Hughes thinks that the Curtain is just a metaphor

invented by the old reactionary Winston Churchill, she should have travelled to Prague by car and, while still in Germany, taken a walk along the border. As for hotels, you cannot rent a room without showing your identity card to the desk clerk who has to present the list of guests to the police on demand. A false beard will not help you. And if you are a student and smash a window in the Soviet Embassy, well. . . .

That's why Ms. Hughes did not observe any huge crowds of protesters, battalions of police, and dozens of patrol wagons overloaded with beaten-up humans. But there *was* a protest march in downtown Prague, reported not only in Western media but also acknowledged (privately) by the Reverend John Morgan who was also dining and wining in Prague at that time. Only about 300 people marched, mostly very young, and they were handled with ease by the police. What the future has in store for them, I don't know. The totalitarian press never informs its readership about such matters.

And then there was the meeting, much written about in West German and British papers, of the representatives of Charter 77, the Czech Peace and Human Rights movement, with the delegates from the German Green and Social Democratic parties. It took place on the White Hill, on the outskirts of Prague, where 300 years ago the Czechs lost their freedom to the authoritarian rule of the Austrian Hapsburgs. The historical hill, on this later occasion, was surrounded by police, the participants were rounded up, cameras were taken out of the hands of Western peace delegates, and films were torn out of the cameras and exposed to the shining sun. But Ms. Hughes has neither seen this, nor read about it. Canadian papers did not cover the event very much; Czech papers did not cover it at all. Ms. Hughes does not read German and probably ignores the British conservative press.

In the end, as predicted by the Americans, freedom of expression was indeed granted "to communists only" — certainly in the final document of the Conference. Does this document protest against the two main atomic arsenals in the world with equal vehemence? Does it protest against one of the two at all? Or does it just rave against the warmongering Yankees, those inefficient trigger-happy militarists who, for at least a decade, had a monopoly on atomic weapons and yet, somehow, failed to launch a war on the then non-atomic and therefore defenceless Soviet Russia?

Ms. Hughes, presumably, voted for that document. I am afraid she fits Lenin's description rather well; the one she mentions in one of her articles.

**O**H MY! I WANTED TO WRITE about this beautiful land; about its golden skyscrapers silhouetted against the skies of the Indian Summer;

about the joy of its libraries; about the sweet charm of freedom I and my wife and all my good old countrymen found here, under the protective umbrella of the Yanks. But damn politics got me like the blues, and the naïveté of so many of my fellow Canadians does not help me out. I am far from being the stuff that Sisyphus was made of, and yet, again and again, I push this boulder up the steep slope of incomprehension.

How silly of me!

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In December 1983, the Czechoslovak News Agency CTK, in a press release, informed the world that “hundreds of thousands of demonstrators welcomed the decision of the Supreme Soviet and of the Czechoslovak government to place Soviet missiles with atomic warheads on Czechoslovak territory.” Apparently, these were the same crowds that only six months ago demonstrated for peace. Now they rejoiced over the fact that their country had been made a target for American atomic missiles. What a strange people, the Czechs!

