

### Miloslav (Milan) Petrussek (1936–2012)<sup>1</sup>

The world of Czech social science is a rather small community concentrated in several academic and research institutions in a country of ten million people. Today's quality institutions in Prague and Brno are the results of the complex process of the post-1989 (re)construction of various disciplines (including sociology, political science, anthropology, philosophy and economics), following their almost total destruction during communist rule. While in Poland, for example, a distinct tradition of critical social thought developed despite official restrictions prior to 1989, Czechoslovak social science was subject to all-encompassing censorship that concerned not only indigenous production, but also the prohibition on translations of Western theoretical texts. Leading Czech and Slovak scholars who dared to express critical and independent views were quickly removed from academic and research positions. As a result, the struggle for the (re)construction of the Czech and Slovak social sciences that began in 1989 was a difficult and somewhat solitary task wrought with many predicaments that characterised academic and scholarly work in this small post-traumatic professional community. Once the borders opened, some (including me) decided to temporarily or permanently emigrate to countries with larger and better established professional milieus. The task of shaping the local tradition was taken up by a few exceptional personalities who dedicated their professional lives to the building of institutions that allowed for the Czech social sciences to grow.

The professional wisdom, patience and resoluteness involved in this process is personified by the work Miloslav (Milan) Petrussek and Alena Miltová—an exceptional couple to whom many Czech social scientists owe their careers and some of us much more than that. These sociologists chose to play different, yet complementary roles in the post-1989 reconstruction of Czech sociology and social sciences more generally. In 1990, Milan was already an established sociolo-



Photo courtesy of A. Miltová

Miloslav Petrussek

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gist, albeit with twenty years as a dissident, during which he had been removed from an official position in academia. Between 1970 and 1989, this leading Czech scholar worked as an assistant librarian in the university library, secretly publishing a samizdat journal *Sociological Horizons* and contributing to other Czech samizdat publications with his own texts and translations. After 1989, he threw himself fully into both a scholarly and administrative academic career. He played the leading role in the building of the School of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague, where he served for two terms as the dean. Throughout this intensive administrative period (including a term in the position of a university vice-provost), Milan published and earned the highest academic degrees. In addition to important sociological monographs, he edited the *Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Sociology* and wrote textbooks that continue to be used as classics in the country. Milan was also one of the closest advisers to President Václav Havel and later he co-founded Václav Havel's library. Perhaps of all his different roles and careers, however, the most important to him was teaching. Milan Petrussek was a professor par excellence—a professor who treated teaching with passion and had a sense of mission for cultivating future generations of Czech sociologists.

In 1991 Alena Miltová, who held a PhD in sociology, decided to leave her research career at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and establish a private publishing house that specialised in the social sciences—publishing both translations and original work. With a hard-to-describe modesty, she has operated this enormous undertaking from a small one-room office, rented from the Academy of Sciences in the centre of Prague. In 20 years, she has published over 250 titles, including classic works by such authors as Georg Simmel, Marcel Mauss, Maurice Halbwachs, Thorstein Veblen, Erving Goffman, Clifford Geertz, etc. It is Alena, through her publishing house SLON, who played a key role in filling in the great gap in Czech language literature after 1989—the legacy of communist censorship.

Even though they might not put this as their greatest achievement, one needs to see both Alena and Milan as highly successful institution builders in the very complicated milieu of post-socialist Czech social sciences. They both created the necessary institutional infrastructure for generations of Czech scholars to come.

While the writing of this piece is motivated by Milan's sudden death on 19 August 2012, I cannot write about him without thinking about Alena—they were inseparable in life and in my mind. I loved getting postcards from the many different places that they visited on their European sojourns. Neither of them drove a car. They used public transportation to go to distant places, sometimes at the invitation of their friends or former students, who owed their international careers to their support. In 2010, they visited me in Wrocław. We spent a wonderful four days filled with discussions about social sciences, literature, and academia. I remember asking Milan for advice on my upcoming career deci-

sions—he unquestionably supported my return from a high-profile public job to full-time academic career. Their visit was planned to coincide with the New School's Graduate Faculty's Democracy and Diversity Institute run by Elzbieta Matynia, who was at the time beginning to work on a book of correspondence between Adam Michnik and Václav Havel. Milan helped her to locate sources. It was a memorable visit, because in the 1990s, Milan and Alena were key members of the Graduate Faculty's Democracy Seminars, and in Wrocław they met up with GF faculty that helped create that exceptional transatlantic community of public and academic intellectuals, leaders of dissent in their homelands.

I suspect that Alena's and Milan's travels always had an intellectual sub-text—even going for a two-week health visit to a spa involved packing and transporting manuscripts, dissertations, and reviews. I remember getting up at six in the morning, woken up by our baby son, when they were visiting us in Wrocław, finding Milan hard at work over books from our library, taking neat handwritten notes in his paper notebook with a pencil.

I feel it was a gift that I was able to see them the last time together this past summer. They were very happy spending their vacation in the picturesque corner of northeast Bohemia near my family house. The place—Babiččino údolí (Grandmother's Valley)—is tied to the history of Czech literature and is a favourite domestic family destination. Grandmother's Valley takes its name from a book by the 19th-century Czech feminist writer Božena Němcová, who wrote a Czech children's classic in which she describes her childhood spent there under the care of her grandmother. Milan, Alena, and I had lunch in the restaurant of the small hotel where they were staying, not far from a historic museum created in the houses and locations described in the book. As usual, we talked about the social sciences and Milan was keenly interested in developments in Polish academia. He mentioned his latest book project, but he spent most of the time talking about his students, about teaching and the new evaluation standards in the Czech research community. He was concerned with what he perceived was the lowering standard of academic quality, and the waning of enthusiasm both among students and professors.

But Milan's eyes brightened as he shared news of his new project—a sociology discussion group composed of his former and current doctoral students. They gathered regularly in Milan and Alena's small Prague apartment and spent evenings discussing sociology. The meetings were structured and began with a three-hour seminar, followed by less structured discussions over wine. It seems poignant that this great professor of Czech sociology, who did not give up his passion for sociology and took to samizdat when he was fired from academia by the communists, would decide to renew his currently disenchanted students' passion for sociology in the private space of his home. It is hard not to notice the resemblance between his home-based meetings with students and the flying seminars that he was a part of in the private spaces of communist Central Europe.

With Milan Petrusek's sudden death, Czech sociology has lost one of its most important architects. However, I feel strongly that I should end this remembrance on a hopeful note: his intellectual legacy will be continued by his students, to whom he was devoted until his unexpected death on 19 August.

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### **The Janáček of Czech Sociology: Miloslav Petrusek**

At the peak of this year's summer heat, Czech sociology lost one of the most talented authors, teachers, and public protagonists in all its history. Miloslav Petrusek, professor of sociology at Charles University in Prague, and for many years member of the editorial board of *Sociologický časopis*, died suddenly on 19 August at the age of 75. With Petrusek and Jiří Musil, another prominent Czech sociologist, who passed away this past summer sociology in the Czech Republic lost its most distinguished figures, who made an extraordinary contribution to the sense of continuity and to the dignity of the discipline in the difficult period of the second half of the 20th century. In the last decades of their life, Petrusek and Musil powerfully promoted a sense of unity in the compartmentalised discipline, eradicated a formative influence on the youngest generations of future sociologists, and cultivated an awareness of the close interrelation between sociology and other social sciences and humanities.

When in 1989 the Iron Curtain was lifted and the world opened up for Petrusek as well as for millions of other citizens of Central and Eastern Europe, he was in his mid-fifties. Like his lifetime inspiration and intellectual hero, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who became the president of Czechoslovakia in 1918 at an even older age, Petrusek proved to be ready for the immense task that was put in front of him: to become the main protagonist in the reconstruction of sociology from the ravages caused by communism. There can be no doubt about it: in an academic community decimated by forty years of ideological control which, unlike in most neighbouring countries, did not slacken significantly even in its last two decades, he made a deeply consequential decision to dedicate all his available energy—which became proverbial—to the renewal of independent, free and critical social sciences, and of sociology and its institutions in particular. At least in Prague, if not in the whole country, Petrusek epitomised the rebirth of Czech sociology after 1989. An ousted academic without advanced academic titles and able to continue his work only in the semi-official 'grey zone', Petrusek—unlike