

multiculturalism from becoming just a complacent cliché, we must work to grant everyone access to the material and cultural conditions that will enable the many voices of contemporary Canada, to speak — and be heard — for themselves. That is the purpose of this collection.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Raymond August, 'Babeling Beaver Hunts for Home Fire: The Place of Ethnic Literature in Canada Culture', *Canadian Forum*, August 1974, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>'Placing Truth or Fiction', in *Displaced Persons*, eds Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Mandelstrup, Denmark: Dangeroo Press, 1988), p. 156.

<sup>3</sup>Marwan Hassan, *The Confusion of Stones: Two Novellas* (Dunvegan, Ont.: Cormorant Books, 1989), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup>*Toronto Star, Saturday Magazine*, 11 February 1989, p. M13.

<sup>5</sup>In Jars Balan, "'A Word in a Foreign Language': Ukrainian Influences in George Ryga's Work," in Jars Balan, ed., *Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1982), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup>In 'Ethnicity and Identity: The Question of One's Literary Passport', panel discussion in Balan, ed., *Identifications*, p. 80. Canadian actress and playwright Linda Griffiths claims that Campbell's awareness of history forced her to rethink her own relation to power and oppression in terms of her Scots heritage. See the many discussions on this topic in *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* (Toronto: Coach House, 1989).

<sup>7</sup>In Jane A. Shapiro, ed., *Voices: From the Eastern Arctic* (Yellowknife: Outcrop Press, 1987), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>*Toronto Star, Saturday Magazine*, 7 January 1989, p. M24.

<sup>9</sup>'Regionalism and the Canadian Archipelago' in *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada*, ed. L.D. McCann (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall, 1982), pp. 459-84. My thanks to Germaine Warkentin for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>10</sup>'After 300 Years Our Neurosis Is Relevant', in William Kilbourn, ed., *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup>'The Peaceable Kingdom Still', special issue, 'In Search of Canada', *Daedalus*, 117, 4 (Fall 1988), p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>'So Great a Heritage Is Ours': Immigration and the Survival of the Canadian Polity', in *Daedalus*, 117, 4 (Fall 1988), p. 66.

JOSEF SKVORECKY b. 1924

FROM

*The Engineer of Human Souls*

The skies they were ashen and sober;  
The leaves they were crispèd and sere —  
The leaves they were withering and sere;  
It was night in the lonesome October. . . .

EDGAR ALLAN POE, 'Ulalume'

The whole range of thought and feeling, yet all in organic  
relation to a ridiculous little waltz tune.

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Outside the window, which is high, narrow and gothic, the cold Canadian wind blends two whitenesses: snowflakes sifting down from lowering clouds and snowdust lifted and whirled by the wind from the land stretching southwards to Lake Ontario. The snow swirls through a white wasteland broken only by a few bare, blackened trees.

Edenvale College stands in a wilderness. In a few years the nearby town of Mississauga is expected to swell and envelop the campus with more variety and colour, but for the time being the college stands in a wilderness, two and a half miles from the nearest housing development. The houses there are no longer all alike: people have learned something since George F. Babbitt's time. Perhaps it was literature that taught them. Now there are at least four different kinds of bungalow spaced at irregular intervals so that the housing development looks like a Swiss village in one of those highly stylized paintings. It is pretty to look at.

But I see it only in my mind's eye, as I look out on the white, cold, windy Canadian landscape. Often, as my thoughts flow, I conjure up again the many wonderful things I have seen in this country of cities with no past. Like the Toronto skyline with its black and white skyscrapers, some plated with golden mirrors, thrusting their peaks into the haze, glowing like burnished chessboards against the eve-

ning twilight above the flat Ontario landscape, and beyond them a sun as large as Jupiter and as red as an aniline ruby sinking into the green dusk. God knows why it's so green, but it is. The Toronto skyline is more beautiful to me than the familiar silhouette of Prague Castle. There is beauty everywhere on earth, but there is greater beauty in those places where one feels that sense of ease which comes from no longer having to put off one's dreams until some improbable future—a future inexorably shrinking away; where the fear which has pervaded one's life suddenly vanishes because there is nothing to be afraid of. Gone are the fears I shared with my fellows, for although the Party exists here, it has no power as yet. And my personal fears are gone too, for no professional literary critics in Canada will confine me in arbitrary scales of greatness. My novels, published here in Czech by Mrs Santner's shoestrapping operation, are widely read by my fellow Czechs but hardly ever reviewed, because there is no one to review them. There are those two or three grateful laymen who lavish praises on them in the émigré press, their flatteries sandwiched between harvest home announcements and ads for Bohemian tripe soup; they are literate, but they do not understand literature. Then there is Professor Koupelna in Saskatchewan. Every once in a while Passer's mail-order firm in Chicago sends him one of my books as a free gift along with his order of homemade jelly and Prague ham. The book arouses a savage and instinctive outrage in the good professor which he mistakes for the spirit of criticism and he fires off a broadside to the journal of the Czechoslovak Society for Arts and Sciences in America. Fortunately, his attack is launched from such a pinnacle of erudition that most Society members find it repellent. And his erudition has so many gaps in it that even those who are not repelled remain unconvinced.

I feel wonderful. I feel utterly and dangerously wonderful in this wilderness land.

Sharon McCaffrey, the Irish girl from Burnham Lake Settlement, with the stunning red hair and the sweet, creamy complexion, is rattling off an oral paper behind me on *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* by Edgar Allan Poe. She is in a hurry to get it over with, while I'm hoping she will spin it out to save me from having to talk too long myself. I know the book she has copied her material from, and at least it's not Coles Notes. As a matter of fact, it's a rather worthy book by Professor Quinn, and she has reproduced his argument faithfully, omitting nothing. Right now, although I didn't ask her to

(but it is in Quinn), she is comparing *Pym* to *Moby Dick*. 'The introductory sentences are practically the same: "My name is Arthur Gordon Pym" and "Call me Ishmael". Both talk about the town of Nantucket. Some of the characters in both novels concern themselves with hidden meanings: Pym and Peters try to decipher the hieroglyphics carved into the rocks on the island of Ts . . .'—she stumbles over the word with its Slavonic cluster of consonants—'. . . Tsalal. The crew of the *Pequod* puzzle over the golden doubloon Ahab has nailed to the mast. Pym and Augustus, at the beginning of the story, almost perish on the sea. Ishmael visits a whalers' chapel and studies the memorial plaque bearing the names of sailors lost at sea. . . .'

I peer into the white vortexes outside the window and, in the warmth of the room, I know how inhumanly icy they are. The howling wind is barely audible inside and I can hear again in my mind the sounds of the Russian poetry I once read to my students. Poe, I'm afraid, bores them. The horror films on television are far more horrifying. So I try to enliven him as best I can, which was one reason I recited the Russian version to them. The other reason was that I had again succumbed to my foolish but probably irrepressible desire to explain the inexplicable. And I had succumbed because Irene Svensson, with her graceful and supercilious face, had stood up to declare 'The Raven' a worthless, sentimental piece of tripe. It was an act of revenge, for she had noticed how my voice broke (I can't help it, I'm sentimental) whenever I read the lines:

Tell this his soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,  
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore . . .

and she thought it would be a clever way to get back at me in front of the others for having tortured her, last term, in the privacy of my office, where I had donned my professional mask and browbeaten her like a drill sergeant. But I hadn't reported her plagiarism to the Dean. I cannot bring myself to be genuinely nasty to anyone called Irene. It is one of my ancient inhibitions. Irene Svensson therefore produced a new paper and she thought, this time, she had put one over on me. But luck was against her. Having first underestimated my scholarship, she now failed to reckon with Murphy's Law. She bought a ready-written essay from a shady operation calling itself Term Papers Inc. Two years before, they had sold the same paper to a pretty Chinese student from Trinidad by the name of Priscilla Wong Sim, who had turned to Term Papers Inc. at my indirect suggestion—

to pass her with a clear conscience I had to have at least one essay from her in which every second word was not misspelled and there were no such oriental mysteries as 'This novel is a novel. It is a great work, for it is written in the form of a book.'

Irene ended up in my office again. This time she confessed in tears and it was a delight to see that proud, sophisticated face with its smug mouth dissolve gently into the face of an uncertain little girl from Oshawa, Ontario. But where, I wondered, was her feminine instinct? Didn't this Swedish girl smelling of deodorant and lavender realize that I could never ever have brought myself to report her to the Dean?

It was not, of course, her lack of instinct; it was her inability to understand my kind of experience. She had no way of knowing, even if her name had not been Irene, that life had long since immunized me against the temptation to inform on anyone, regardless of what authority demanded it. My reluctance is as impregnable as the Iron Curtain. I lived too long in a country where even the most pristine truth, once reported to the authorities, becomes a lie.

I commanded Irene Svensson to write her essay in my presence. She took her Parker Silver Ballpoint and one of those lined notepads students use and for the next two hours she fabricated a paper on 'The Function of Colour in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*'. She was perspiring so heavily I could detect the faint aroma of a girls' gymnasium through the lavender, and as she gnawed on the end of her Parker the indelible ink stained her mouth. For the next two weeks she came to lectures with lips like the dead Ligeia's.

And so, in the face of her revenge, I had succumbed to the preposterous desire to square the circle, to demonstrate that something written well, as Hemingway once said, can have many meanings: I brought Yesenin-Volpin's Russian adaptation of 'The Raven' along to one of my lectures on Poe.

The swirling white whirlwind outside the window is now creating a hissing filigree of sound on the glass, and I can hear the sound of Poe in Russian:

*Kak-to noch'yu v chas terrora,  
Ya chital vpervye Mora. . .*

The hard Russian *r*'s rolled through the drowsy lecture room. It was winter then too, with a gale blowing outside, a week before the Christmas holidays. 'Cheap, mechanical inner rhymes,' Irene had

said, her mouth curling into a shorthand of disdain. 'The contemporary critics didn't call him a jingle man for nothing.' Clearly she had prepared for her revenge. 'In reality his monotonous poetry is only a weak, watered-down version of English romantic poetry and has scarcely anything at all to contribute to modern sen . . .' — she hesitated — ' . . . sensibility.' She had destroyed the effect. No one in the class appeared to have noticed but she knew I had and she flushed with anger.

*I v somneni i v pechali  
ya sbeptal: 'To drug edvali,  
Vsekb družey davno uslali. . .*

Tears rose to my eyes. I wanted to strike back at Irene but I could not. I had to stop reading for a moment until my Pavlovian reaction to poetry, conditioned by my own experiences — national and international, fascist and communist — had subsided. Irene had the advantage because, as far as she was concerned, my hesitation was further evidence of my ridiculous sentimentality. My eyes slipped over the Cyrillic script:

*O Prorok, ne prosto ptitsa!  
Est'li nyne zagranitsa,  
Gde svodobny ob iskusstve  
ne opasen razgovor?  
Esli est', to dobegu li  
ya v tot kray, ne vstretiv puli?  
V Niderlandakh li, v Peru li  
ya reshil by staryy spor —  
Romantizma s realizmom  
do sikh por ne konchen spor!  
Karknul Voron: Nevermore!*

Sharon chirrups on. Soon she'll be over and done with it. 'There has never existed a writer who concentrated more on utterly personal experience. He was the first and greatest artist of abnormal psychology. He displayed a tendency to immerse himself in problems, the solution to which assumed an almost brilliant perspicacity without demanding any actual experience of life whatsoever.' She has switched her unacknowledged sources and is now parroting Krutch. I look into the flurrying snow and a well-fed raven (or simply a black

bird) stalks circumspectly through a corridor of white vortexes, and the phantom ship of Captain Guy looms up out of the white fog.

*'Nikagda!' – skazala ptitsa. . . .  
Za moryami zagranitsa. . . .  
Tut vlomilis'dva soldata,  
sonnyy dvornik i mayor. . . .*

Irene sat down, pleased with her ambiguous victory – the mechanical internal rhymes of a drunken jingle man – and I angrily fought back the tears. Her revenge for my exposing her twice and humiliating her thrice (her lips were still a shade of aquamarine) was achieved.

*Pered nimi ya ne sbarknul,  
odnomu v litso lish' kbarknul,  
No zato kak prosto garknul  
chernyy voron: Nevermore!  
I vazhu, vazhu ya tachku,  
Poutoryaya: Nevermore . . .  
Ne podnyat'sya . . . Nevermore!*

I had to pretend to blow my nose, long and hard. The disrespectful eyes of the young of this young and innocent country looked at me with curiosity. I read them my own English translation of the Russian.

Once at night in time of terror  
I first was reading Thomas More. . . .

Racked with doubt and sorrow  
Whispered: 'It could hardly be a friend  
All my friends have been imprisoned. . . .

O Prophet, plainly no mere bird  
Is there no foreign country  
Where to argue freely about art  
Portends no peril sore?  
Shall I ever reach that region  
If such be, and not be shot?  
In Peru or Netherlands  
I'd settle that old contentious score  
Of the realist and romantic  
Still disputing as before  
Croaked the raven: 'Nevermore!' . . . .

'Never, never!' quoth the bird. . . .  
That foreign land's beyond the sea. . . .  
Whereupon in burst two soldiers  
A drowsy porter and a major. . . .

I did not click my heels before them  
merely spat into a face,  
But the Raven, sombre Raven  
simply croaked out: 'Nevermore!  
Now I push a wheelbarrow  
keep repeating, 'Nevermore . . .'  
There's no rising. . . . Nevermore.

The translation murdered everything, the rumbling Russian r's, Poe's 'O', the saddest of all vowels, far, far sadder in Russian than in the language of the Stratford genius, that court lickspittle, but I could still hear the Russian verses rumbling in my ears, interpreting E.A.P. with immeasurably greater understanding than the literary critics possess, despite a long century and a great ocean between them, displaying a knowledge of life that Poe, through some secret twist of fate and despite what Krutch said, did have – a knowledge that Joseph Wood Krutch does not possess.

*Ya boyus'drugoy puchiny  
v tsarstve, gryaznom s davnikh por. . . .  
Karknul Voron: Nevermore!*

For I have feared since time of yore  
Yet another such abyss  
in realms corrupted heretofore. . . .  
Croaked the Raven: 'Nevermore!'

'If Pym's pilgrimage is not interpreted as a voyage of Mind, then it is nothing more than one of the many quite ordinary accounts of sea adventures.' And Sharon stops as though someone had cut her off. I turn around. She stares at me with her green Irish eyes, somewhat sheepish, not on my account but because she is ashamed for having put on such a display of intellectuality in front of her classmates. Premature cynicism is not a characteristic of young Canadians. She has finished reciting her plagiarized paper, and there is only one unpleasantness left to endure: my questions – assuming, of course, that I'm curious about anything.

I look around. Ted Higgins, who plays tight end for the Varsity Blues, is crouched down behind Davidson's edition of Poe, eating his lunch. Irene Svensson (and this too is a part of her revenge, this ostentatious lack of interest) is provocatively painting her nails with something that looks like stovepipe silvering. Vicky Heatherington, who plays trombone in the school jazz band, is flirting with a shaggy fellow called William Wilson Bellissimmo, his hair as bristly as his Americanized triple-double-consonanted surname. They are struggling over something in Vicky's right hand and Bellissimmo has his arm round her shoulders. Her trombone-enlarged breasts swell under a T-shirt sporting the garish picture of a man. Once, when I asked her who it was, she told me it was a self-portrait of Van Cock. Behind these dallying lovers the sad eyes of Veronika Prst peer at me and through me. She is a moody girl from the Vinohrady district of Prague. On her way back from a tour of Cuba she defected to Canada, and in her first week in class she fought bitterly with Larry Hakim, who had once gone to Cuba to help with the sugar-cane harvest.

'Do you really believe that?' I ask Sharon. 'I mean, that *Pym* is either a pilgrimage of the soul or else just an ordinary thriller?'

Sharon stiffens. She can't admit she has no opinion of her own, so she responds with an obstinate 'yes', and my unfettered thoughts carry me back to the wooden cabin on the wooden schooner of Captain Guy, to a distant time of primal terror, a time when each night before falling asleep I sailed with Jules Verne over a blue-black sea, through a cleft in the giant glaciers, the alabaster gateway of the southern passage, towards a lukewarm sun glowing low over the horizon, while before the ship stretched a tranquil, gently rippled sea, and in the distance, land, and immensely far away, wild purple mountains. Why and how they came to be purple I did not yet know. Arctic swallows swooped through the air, I saw Poe in a hovel in Baltimore scratching away with a goose-feather pen in a cold winter room, just like me in that bed, in that wooden cabin, held captive by the impenetrable curtain hung around the protectorate of Böhmen und Mähren, completely cut off from all avenues to the beautiful Antarctic, Poe a captive of poverty, dreaming on paper of the Wilkes expedition that had left Jeremiah Reynolds behind and sighing Reynolds' name on his deathbed—why? Because he might have lived Reynolds' life? In the beautiful and ghastly freedom of the purple mountains of madness? But Reynolds' life was not his: Poe's life

ebbed away in a grim prison of poverty, in the airless stench of a New England hovel. A pilgrimage of the soul? A pilgrimage *in* the soul. A magnificent boyhood adventure. Only the rich, the successful, the important, the powerful ever cease to be boys and girls.

Those tears. Perhaps they were a disgrace—Anglo-Saxons are, it is popularly believed, unsentimental. Anglo-Saxons with names like Bellissimmo, Hakim, Svensson. But now Irene is silent. Perhaps she at least had appreciated the exotic, guttural rumbling of *Kak-to noch'yu v chas terrora, ya chital v pervye Mora*. Her grey, northern eyes observed me unprotestingly, thoughtfully. To my surprise, for I had given her a C minus in the freshman course, she enrolled this year in my sophomore course, which was partly intended to reiterate in depth (that, at least, was the theory) the same material covered in the freshman course. Poe, therefore, is on the course again, and this year Irene's papers are excellent. Perhaps she has hired a teaching assistant to help her, or perhaps she has actually begun to study. Generally she keeps silent, observing me. . . . *Kak-to noch'yu v chas terrora*. . . . Once at night in time of terror. . . . We have always been surrounded by terror and by the beauty that is an inseparable part of it.

*Translated by Paul Wilson*



JOSEF SKVORECKY was born in 1924 in the town of Nachod in northern Czechoslovakia. He was already a very successful novelist and translator when he and his wife Zdena Salivarova immigrated to Canada in January 1969 in the wake of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. After brief stays at Cornell University and the University of California (Berkeley), Skvorecky accepted a position in the English department of the University of Toronto. Since 1972 he and his wife have run 68 Publishers, considered by many to be the most important Czech publishing house anywhere, since they published authors once banned in Czechoslovakia. Among his publications in English are *The Cowards* (trans. Jeanne Nemcova; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); *The Bass Saxophone* (trans. Kaca Polackova; Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1980); *Miss Silver's Past* (trans. Peter Kussi; London: Picador, 1980); *The Swell Season* (trans. Paul Wilson; Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1982); *The Engineer of Human Souls* (trans. Paul Wilson; Toronto: Lester and Orpen Den-

nys, 1984); *Dvorak in Love* (trans. Paul Wilson; Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1986).

SAM SOLECKI is a professor of English literature at the University of Toronto. A former editor of *The Canadian Forum*, he has written extensively on English, Canadian, and Czech literatures. He has edited *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje* (1985), and Josef Skvorecky's *Talkin' Moscow Blues: Essays about Literature, Politics, Movies and Jazz* (1988). His *Prague Blues: The Fiction of Josef Skvorecky* is forthcoming.

*I spent nearly the first ten years of my life living in a camp for Polish refugees in the English midlands, and one of the most magical of English words for all of us was 'America'. Looking back I realize that for many of us the word came from the same group as 'Oz' or 'the promised land'. Canada, on the other hand, was only mentioned if someone had relatives there or as an adjunct of the United States. Did you know much about Canada when living in Czechoslovakia?*

I had a vague and probably unrealistic image based on some youthful reading of James Oliver Curwood, who I believe to be a Canadian though some say he's an American. He wrote boys' novels about mounties and trappers and Indians and Indian girls—so my image of Canada included mounties and deep woods and grizzly bears and a few other romantic details. Also as a boy I loved to read Ernest Thomson Seton. So I had an image of a pretty wild country and knew nothing about Canadian cities, for example. On the other hand, I knew something of the famous American cities like New York and Chicago because I had seen them or heard about them in American films. Canada was hazy and my picture of it was pretty romantic.

*All emigration involves anxiety, but leaving Czechoslovakia in January 1969 must have been particularly anxious for you since you were a writer. You were forty-four and had achieved a substantial reputation as a novelist, a script writer, an editor, even a cabaret writer. But this was all in Czech, a language you once described as 'that unknown, useless and difficult language of the Western Slavs'. Suddenly you were in a country where the demand for Czech writing and writers was minimal.*

I had no idea what I would be doing. If I had known Russian I could have hoped for a job at a university in a department of Slavic studies. But actually I felt quite good because I knew things would have been even worse had I stayed in Prague. I also knew that if I had stayed I would have had three choices: I could recant and say that I had been wrong and that I would mend my ways; I could go back into the underground of which I had been a member in the early fifties, but then I had been a young man and had been willing to write for the desk-drawer; or I could stop writing and do something completely different. In comparison to these, anything was better.

*Like Milosz and Kundera, you tend to think of most North Americans as relatively naïve about foreign affairs or, more precisely those foreign affairs related in some way to the Soviet Union. My impression is that one of the consequences of your essentially 'conservative' stance on foreign affairs is that many critics fail to look beyond this to attitudes and views on other issues. After two decades you must be tired of this whole topic.*

You're right, but it's important, very important. One of the inevitable consequences of being an emigrant or exile is that one remains tied to the old country and concerned with the fate of that country. And, since in my case and in Czechoslovakia's case, that fate is tied up with totalitarianism and communism, and communism has a world importance, then it's inevitable that my interest, what you call my politics, should be primarily concerned with foreign affairs.

*One of the results of this seems to be that you have little interest in domestic Canadian or American politics.*

You could say I'm interested but not as interested as I am in the other politics which are so obviously more important or urgent. Don't forget that for my generation, at least since Hitler, politics, real politics, always involved danger. You could die for saying or writing something. You could also be in danger simply because of what or who you were. From that extreme perspective, Canada and the United States and most of Western Europe don't have politics; life in these societies is free of politics. On the other hand, Czechoslovakia is still political in the old sense, and I'm still a Czech. So *glasnost* and *perestroika* and their effect on Czechoslovakia are more important to me than the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties. This

is probably true for most immigrants who come to Canada as adults. Those who come as children will grow up to be a hundred per cent Canadians and they will be more concerned about whether to vote for the Liberals or the Conservatives than whether Jakes is the head of the Czechoslovak government. Their politics will be mainly national politics. I came too late to be like that. It all depends on the age when you emigrate.

*I first saw Canada as a child from a ship, the ss Captain Cook, sailing up the St Lawrence, so that the first cities I saw were Quebec City and Montreal. I still remember being disappointed by Ontario's towns and cities because they seemed so much less interesting than Quebec's. It was as if Quebec had a history and Ontario didn't. Only in school and even then only gradually did I start to see Ontario as 'historical' in its own way, though I must admit it still doesn't excite my imagination in the way that Quebec's history does.*

You could say that I lived in history for the first forty-five years of my life, so that I take castles and châteaux and medieval and baroque churches for granted. Prague is, after all, as full of history as any city. But to me the general conditions of life, the general intellectual conditions of life, are much more important. Beautiful medieval churches are interesting, but they don't compensate for the fact that intellectual and cultural life are lived under conditions that, from one point of view, are also medieval. You know, whenever I go to Europe now, and I only go on business or to give readings, I always look forward to coming home, coming to Toronto. This is home and I feel more at ease here than I do in Germany or anywhere else in Europe. The only exception to this is England which I like very much, perhaps because of the language or because I always remember it as very green, very beautiful. The language is very important because Czech and English are now my main languages. Like many Czechs I used to speak German very well, but I haven't really spoken it since the war, which is almost half a century ago. I read it well, but when speaking I feel rusty.

I want to return to what we were just saying about Canada and history. When I came here, Canada struck me as so much younger than the United States. You can see this when you compare the Czech communities in the two countries. The Canadian one is really

quite recent; most of the people came either before the Second World War or immediately after in 1948. Then there was the final group that came, as I did, after 1968. But the American Czechs—and I wrote about this in *Dvorak in Love* and it is also a topic in the novel I am now writing about Czechs in the American Civil War—the American Czech community is much older. Many Czechs settled in America after the revolutions of 1848, and there was continuing immigration after that. There are now many fourth- and fifth-generation Czechs in America. Toronto has about 14,000 Czechs and about 8,000 of them came as a result of 1968. One of the results of this is that the Canadian Czech community tends to be more intensely interested in what is happening in Czechoslovakia because they have come from there much more recently. Most American Czechs, on the other hand, have little direct knowledge of the old country. Still, I want to say that I admire the American Czechs very much because of their perseverance. Without any multicultural grants and official encouragement they remained Czechs. I was at a conference in Texas a few years ago where there were about ten mixed choirs all singing Czech songs, even though many of the singers obviously didn't understand the language. It was very impressive. There were people there in the old national costumes which they made themselves, but the ornaments on the costumes were Bohemian and Texan. And all this was done without any kind of official governmental support or encouragement.

*In your account there doesn't seem to be much difference between the American 'melting pot' and the Canadian 'mosaic'.*

I don't think there is, except that the Canadian government certainly talks about ethnic groups and multiculturalism more than the Americans do.

*I've always thought much of this is just political, a jockeying among parties for influence and votes with various groups. In fact, my own response to official multiculturalism is that it is ultimately divisive, in that it creates nearly countless small interest groups which see the country primarily if not exclusively from their own limited ethnic perspective.*

I wonder if one of the results of all this is that many Canadians think that European immigrants are sort of old-fashioned, simple people

who do cute dances in outlandish costumes and sing in funny languages. I think that, if an ethnic culture is going to survive beyond the second or third generation, it will do so whether or not it is officially supported. But usually immigrants become assimilated. I think that's inevitable whether in Canada or the United States. It's ironic, by the way, that most of the folk dances and songs that the ethnic dance groups do at officially sponsored events are no longer done in the hills of Bohemia or Poland or wherever. The teenagers there dance to rock and roll, and those dances haven't really been performed spontaneously for years.

*Do you think of your writing as directed at a Czech readership?*

Not really. I just assume that, if what you write is any good, then it will always find some readers—Czech, English, French, whoever. After all, there isn't such a great difference between the readers in one country and another. If what I write is not entirely bad, then the work will find its own readers, no matter in what country or in what language. I should point out, though, that some of my stories and parts of *The Engineer of Human Souls* and *Dvorak in Love* are probably incomprehensible for readers in Czechoslovakia because they are written in a Czech heavily influenced by North American English. Other than that, I believe that people are essentially the same everywhere, and if a writer manages to write well about some aspect of life, people will read him.

*Would it be valid to call the Czechoslovakia of your youth multicultural? Prague, after all, was a German, a Czech, and a Jewish city, and Czechoslovakia had many national or ethnic or linguistic minorities within it during the First Republic.*

The society was certainly multicultural, but not in the way that Canada or America are multicultural. There was certainly a lively German culture in the country, but the Germans lived only in the Sudeten and in Prague. Similarly the Hungarians lived in the south-east in Slovakia, while the Ukrainians lived in the Carpathians. The various groups were fairly separate. So as a result there was a greater homogeneity in the country's culture than the term 'multiculturalism' suggests. We didn't have the mixture that a city like Toronto has. My own home town of Nachod, for example, was a Czech town and only had about seven German families in it. That's out of a population of

about 14,000 people. By the way, the fact that the town was almost completely Czech prevented it from being annexed after the Munich Agreement in 1938.

*Do you ever worry about your own Czech language? You left Czechoslovakia over twenty years ago and have lived since then in an English-speaking world. The language must have changed over that period of time.*

Oh yes. There are always new terms, slang words, idioms and so on. But the core of the language seems to me to have remained the same, and when I write I write in it and from it. But, you know, when I speak Czech, I have noticed that I use American or Canadian Czech. I think of it as a dialect of the mother tongue. And it is over a century old. Rosie's letters in *Dvorak in Love*, for example, which are written in that dialect, are based on a series of letters published in the 1890s in a Chicago Czech humorous weekly. They are supposedly written by a servant named Rosie. The folks back home write back that they can't understand her. She responds by telling them that they should learn English. But this situation, in which the immigrant's first language is influenced by English, is common to all immigrants and you can find it in every ethnic community. Henry Mencken writes about this in his appendix to *The American Language* where he shows how European languages become corrupted by American English. My own attitude to this is fairly liberal. I see it as an interesting linguistic phenomenon with great humorous potential which, as you know, I try to make use of in my fiction, although it is very difficult to translate into English. It needs a reader who knows both languages and can see and hear the humour that comes out of the meeting of the two.

*Since coming to Canada you have written essays and articles in English for The Canadian Forum, The New Republic, and The New York Review of Books, but you have never written any fiction in English. Why not?*

Well, fiction involves playing with language in a way that non-fiction doesn't. I use slang, various idioms, make jokes, and play with dialects. I find that difficult enough to do in the language I have spoken all my life, the one I feel at home in. I don't think I could do it in English—there I'm just a visitor who arrived late. It would certainly