**What was the “underground university”?**

It was also sometimes known as the Patočka University after the great philosopher and spokesman of Charter 77 who, after being forced to retire from Charles University, continued teaching his students in secret at his home in Břevnov. But, unlike the “Flying University” in Poland, it did not have an organisational structure, mainly because the Czechoslovak Communist secret police were less tolerant than those in Poland, and tried to stamp out the seminars by raids, threats, and physical and psychological violence.

In Czechoslovakia the lectures were usually described more modestly as home seminars, and they functioned independently of each other. The most famous were the open seminars led by Julius Tomin and Ladislav Hejdánek; there was also the Kampademie at the Palouš home, the Central Europe seminar run by Rudolf Kučera, and those of Ivan Havel, Daniel Kroupa and Petr Rezek. The publication of Charter 77 was of great moral support with its clarification that the Communist-run country was acting illegally in suppressing academic freedom.

The Oxford philosophers who eventually formed the Jan Hus Educational Foundation responded to a letter from the philosopher Julius Tomin, sending their first visiting lecturer, Kathleen Wilkes, at Easter 1979. (A French initiative was launched shortly afterwards, followed by the USA, Canada and Germany. There was also a strong and independent Dutch presence.)The Foundation was soon involved in supporting the unofficial culture in the form of visiting experts, courses, books, stipends and grants for samizdat. By the mid-1980s however the foundation was looking for more consistent ways to prepare students for life in an eventual democracy. One way was to enable them to study courses that would lead to an international qualification, and the first step was taken with the preparation of Milan Balabán’s Judaic Studies students for the Cambridge Diploma in Religious Studies.

Meanwhile, in Brno, a new approach to the home seminar was conceived by Jiří Müller, Roger Scruton and Petr Oslzlý. This was intended for people unknown to the secret police, working in normal jobs, but with the strength of character that would enable them to benefit from the best teaching in philosophy, theology, political and social science and modern history. There were related programmes in ecology and modern literature, and in art and music – the latter also providing practical support for the Jazz Section.

The aim was to expand the teaching and activities more widely across the country (and to Slovakia; Bratislava was already reached) and to prepare people for the coming free society. Freedom arrived more quickly than expected; but several hundred students ~~at least~~ (and in the “underground university” as a whole probably several thousand) had acquired knowledge and contacts that would be put to use in the new democratic society.

Further reading:

Markéta Bendová, Johana Borovanská, Daniela Vejvodová (eds)¸ *Filosofie v podzemí – Filosofie v zázemí:Podoby filosofie v dobe normalizace a po sametové revoluce*, Prague 2013, Nomáda

Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers*, London 1999, Claridge Press

Barbara Dayová, *Sametoví filozofové*, trans. Broňa Müllerová, Brno 1999, Doplněk

Jessica Douglas-Home, *Once Upon Another Time*, Norwich 2000, Michael Russell Publishers

Petr Oslzly (ed), *Podzemní univerzita; vznik a organizace brněnských bytových přednášek a seminářů*, Brno 1993, PROGLAS: [Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury](https://www.kosmas.cz/nakladatelstvi/331/centrum-pro-studium-demokracie-a-kultury/)

Roger Scruton, *Notes from Underground*, New York 2014, Beaufort Books

Roger Scruton, *Zápisky z podzemí*, trans. Zuzana Uhdeová, Brno 2015, [Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury](https://www.kosmas.cz/nakladatelstvi/331/centrum-pro-studium-demokracie-a-kultury/), [Moravské zemské muzeum](https://www.kosmas.cz/nakladatelstvi/5102/moravske-zemske-muzeum/)