

English edition

# Jan Patočka



The Czech Academy  
of Sciences

**F** Institute of Philosophy  
Filosofický ústav AVČR

Science 69  
around  
us  
Personalities

This published, curtailed and modified text of a larger study is a preliminary output from the ongoing research activity of the Jan Patočka Archive and from its biographical, archival, bibliographic and comparative research within the AV21 Strategy. In addition to the primary source which consists of the texts contained in Patočka's *Collected Works* published by OIKOYMENH, care of the main editors Ivan Chvatík and Pavel Kouba, this research also draws its factual content from the valuable information provided by Patočka's daughters, Mrs. Františka Sokolová and Mrs. Jana Patočková, as well as his son, Mr. Jan Patočka jnr.

Further, there are reflections, factual information, broader interpretations or just glosses used in this text which over the last fifty years have been collected either in written form or as oral history from my friends, teachers and colleagues. Due to lack of space only exceptionally were these directly quoted. They all share in their silent authorship of this text and my thanks: Ivan Chvatík, Filip Karfík, Pavel Kouba, Miroslav Petříček, Petr Rezek, as well as Erika Abrams, Michal Ajvaz, Johann P. Arnason, Renaud Barbaras, Marie Bayerová, Miloslav Bednář, Václav Bělohradský, Petr Blažek, Ivan Blecha, Frank Boldt, Jiří Brabec, Christiane Brenner, Jakub Čapek, Václav Černý, Henri Declève, Peter Demetz, Ivan Dubský, Jan Frei, Tomáš Halík, Ludger Hagedorn, Miloš Havelka, Ladislav Hejdlánek, Tomáš Hermann, Josef Hiršal, Vojtěch Hladký, Miloslava Holubová, Svatopluk Karásek, Erazim Kohák, Jaroslav Kohout, Jiří Kolář, Božena Komárková, Daniel Kroupa, Dana Léw, Bedřich Loewenstein, Valérie Löwit, Tereza Matějčková, Zdeněk Mathauser, Alexander Matoušek, Jiří Michálek, Alena Mišková, Jiří Musil, Květoslava Neradová, Zdeněk Neubauer, Jiří Němec, Anastáz Opasek, Karel Palek, Martin Palouš, Radim Palouš, Jiří Pechar, Jitka Pelikánová, Josef Petrůň, Zdeněk Pinc, Petr Pithart, Jindřich Pokorný, Jiří Polívka, Aleš Prázný, Vilém Prečan, Rio Preisner, Giovanni Reale, Jan Rous, Eva Řehová-Jůzová, Jana Seifertová, Věra Schifferová, Milan Sobotka, Jan Sokol, Stanislav Sousedík, Alexandr Stich, Eva Stuchlíková, Jiřina Šiklová, Ilja Šrubař, Ladislava Švandová, Jindřich Toman, Ivo Tretera, Dušan Třeštík, Zdeněk Urbánek, Ludvík Vaculík, Zdeněk Vašíček, Jan Vladislav, Ivan Vyskočil, Daniel Vojtěch, Petr Vopěnka, Paul Wilson, Josef Zumr, Josef Zvěřina...

I would like to express my greatest thanks to them all.

Jan Vít

In the dark year of 1939, after the constitution of the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, a slim volume was published in Prague containing the essay, “*Česká vzdělanost v Evropě*” (Czech Culture in Europe) by the philosopher Jan Patočka. By “Czech culture,” the author – aware of the European dimension of his reflection – meant the nation’s sum of its culture in its broader sense, the effect and spiritual legacy of its personalities; literally, the “universal relevance of the spirit”. At a time when history had reached a crossroads, the thirty-two-year-old Patočka wrote that “*the spiritual resources of these great personalities are necessary*” if the spirit of the nation is to avoid moral collapse. “*They, however, cannot be acquired; they are the gift of grace. The means we have at our disposal for a spiritual struggle are of the intellectual and moral kind...*”

In 1977, Jan Patočka, at that time spokesman of the civic initiative Charter 77, died after exhausting interrogations by the Communist secret police. The world-famous linguist Roman Jakobson, whom Patočka had known before the war when Jakobson used to live in Czechoslovakia, wrote in his obituary: “There have been three Czech philosophers of international importance and exceptional moral strength and purity: Jan Ámos Komenský (Comenius), Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and Jan Patočka.” Moral integrity combined with a holistic view of the world obtained through critical understanding stands here above mere expertise in philosophy. While still a student, Patočka wrote that the philosophical life consists of nothing more than “*a calm clarity about life as a whole, an awareness that acting as a philosopher is a necessity for me, that it is the only possible way of my existence in the world*”.

It would be a mistake to think of Jan Patočka in the light of the circumstances of his death as a martyr: “the way of his existence in the world” reached its fulfilment, maybe its affirmation, precisely in this last moment. Patočka lived and worked not only amidst of the breakneck intellectual currents of the twentieth century, in living touch with great names from Husserl to Heidegger (just to remain in the sphere of phenomenological philosophy). At the same time he lived his life in the rapids and whirlpools of the historical events of the “short century”, in the shadow of two deadly dictatorships, Nazism and Communism. He lived through, and above all reflected through, these historical events in their pan-European (one could even say global) compass.

Patočka understood the phenomenological philosophy to which he devoted himself, “*not in any way just as the teaching of Husserl*”. Phenomenology is, as a way of thinking and as philosophical questioning about how the world appears to us, “*always contained in philosophy*”. A unified philosophical view flows like a submerged river beneath Patočka’s phenomenological work, just as it flows beneath his individual works devoted to the history of philosophy, especially Greek philosophy, but also that of Comenius and Masaryk, the Czech history in their “*national programme*”, and the history of the spiritual formation of Europe.

Patočka’s “thinking on history” is crowned by the *Kacířské eseje* (Heretical Essays), his key work of the mid-1970s – those grey years which themselves encouraged the philosopher to express everything he had previously said in urgent appeals. Immediately afterwards these thoughts resounded in the words Patočka used to arm Charter 77 ideologically. Patočka spoke here in a fundamental relationship to his home community, on Socrates’ example not hesitating to enter into conflict with its shameful state – here one can speak literally of Patočka’s “political Socratism”.



Jan Patočka with his father

Jan Patočka attracts us both by the uneven course of his collected philosophical works and by his life as a breath-taking story, fundamentally linked with the spirit of the time. However “philosophically” detached Patočka’s work seems at first sight, in the *“invisible effort of the philosopher”* it remains fully engaged with regard to its surroundings and its time. As long as we do not dismiss Patočka’s thought as old-fashioned moralising or, on the contrary, indulge in obligatory adoration, reproducing it in meaningless slogans such as “truth” and “freedom,” then the philosopher begins to speak to us surprisingly topically and urgently.

In all of this, Patočka’s story is full of profoundly human features, including his acknowledged hesitation and uncertainty. It is not an arid story, but one enlivened by the philosopher’s particular temperament – with a sense for the play of the world and endowed with quiet humour and irony, with that “philosopher’s laughter”. In this too Patočka is heir to Socrates. He is still present for us today, and not as a stone bust deposited in a museum.

## The philosopher’s youth

The story opens in 1907, when Jan Patočka was born in Turnov as one of the four sons of a secondary school teacher. His father, Josef Patočka, had been educated as a classical philologist. In his youth he had taken part in an archaeological expedition with Heinrich Schliemann’s young colleague Wilhelm Dörpfeld. He shared his love for the Greek world and its culture with his son Jan, teaching him Ancient Greek from his early youth.

Patočka’s mother Františka, a sensitive woman with a feeling for the arts, was from a peasant family. Ambitious in her youth, she registered for courses at the School for Singing and Opera in Prague with money she had earned herself, and with this training was engaged as a singer with a theatre company in Pilsen. She was cast in soprano roles such as Ännchen in *Der Freischütz* and Micaela in *Carmen*. Unlike her husband, an *“incorrigible atheist”* (as their son later remembered), Jan Patočka’s mother was a Christian in the spirit of simple country devotion; that is, immersed in work, in *“the prayer of the hands”*. She considered Jenda (as she called Jan familiarly) the most gifted of all her sons, and lovingly tolerated his impracticality and loftiness regarding the banality of the everyday.

“As usual, Jenda tripped on a level floor and bumped his nose,” she writes to her husband; at another time, that Jenda, at the age of six, “carries a notebook around with him all day and makes notes like a scholar”. Jan’s brother František, three years older, describes Jan as a boy and a young man as being “utterly stubborn... He was always writing something for himself. For that purpose he stole paper from his father, and got through stacks of it, writing all over everything. He was always beaten for it – of the four boys, he got the most beatings.”

By this time the Patočka family was living in Prague, in a quarter called Královské Vinohrady, where Jan studied at secondary school. His father’s “*immeasurable influence, an authority virtually irrevocable into adulthood*”; the home library containing the philosophy editions from the Laichter publishing house and naturally President Masaryk’s writing, which enjoyed his father’s special respect; as well as a feeling for the performing arts and for aesthetics cultivated from youth, and a great gift for languages – all these led the eighteen-year-old Patočka to the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University. Although studying philology, in which he specialised in Romance and Slavonic Studies, he inclined towards philosophy from the first semesters. When philosophy began to completely outweigh philology in Patočka’s university studies, his father did not immediately take this kindly – whatever sort of proper living could one make from philosophy? Loyal to his practical bent, Patočka senior kept a vigilant distance away from metaphysics.

“Dear father, don’t be angry with me about all this,” the student Patočka had to explain, bargaining and making promises uphill and down dale, including mastery of the course in French historical grammar, for: “*what sort of coward would I be if I missed out because of my philosophical foibles and used them as an excuse for my intellectual inability and weakness of will...*” Nevertheless, it caused his father more than one wrinkle, as he wrote to his wife about Jan’s holidays: “Worries! If I don’t have enough of them with Jenda who is untameable and reckless. Please keep an eye on him and make sure that when he goes walking in the woods he doesn’t take his philosophy books.”

In fact, Jan was a very diligent student of the Greek *paideia* to which he had been led by his father from his youth and in which *filosofia* figured not only as love of wisdom but also as a chosen way of life. As an obdurate atheist, his father was prepared to tolerate his son’s deep interest in philosophy only as long as this philosophy showed no signs of religiousness. However, his father did not have to worry, as Jan Patočka’s *religio* would be based on “faith in philosophy”. Even as a student he found philosophy to be the “*spiritual centre of life, standing somewhere among the spheres of the arts, sciences and religion,*” a universe which “*underpins human life spiritually and which gives and problematizes for it every given content*”.

## The intellectual landscape of the time

After World War I and into the 1920s, Czechoslovak philosophy was still marked by positivism. In practice this was largely promoted under the name “scientific philosophy,” in

imitation of all the other scientific fields in which the coolly objectivist positivist spirit generally prevailed; Patočka additionally referred to it as “*the priesthood of science*”.

Masaryk’s Realism already contained positivist principles. Nevertheless, Masaryk managed to translate science-based positivism into a “practical philosophy,” face to face with the current problems of contemporary society. Czechoslovakia was unique in being the only country where “*a thinker founded the state*” with the aim of “*negotiating a space for responsible political behaviour*”. In this sense Masaryk’s state represented a “challenge” – not only for the society of that time. At a personal level of citizenship, “*everyone who is co-invited and co-challenged by Masaryk’s act can implement their co-involvement only through their risky co-responsibility*” in overcoming the security and apathy of everyday life.

Charles University was not the only academic centre in Prague at that time. The Prague German University (which, after the division of the Charles-Ferdinand University into its German and Czech parts in 1882, had an independent existence) exercised considerable influence. At the very least, the Prague German University studies in philosophy offered continuity with Bernard Bolzano and with the philosophy Franz Brentano had developed with his followers at this university at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the philosopher of language Anton Marty, and with the founders of holistically shaped psychology, Christian von Ehrenfels and Carl Stumpf. All these together – Patočka recalled – created one of the genealogical lines of phenomenological philosophy. Up until the end of the 1930s, many of the professors and pupils of the Prague German University shared in the common activity of the Czech-German Prague Philosophy Circle – already with Patočka’s involvement.

Not only the German University but Russian and Ukrainian educational and research institutions as well, operated in Prague from the 1920s. These were set up by émigrés who, after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, were welcomed in Czechoslovakia thanks to the “Masaryk aid operation”. Patočka refers in his dissertation to the works of Nikolay Lossky and other leading figures of this exile; of prime importance however, was Patočka’s later close relationship with members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, in the first place Roman Jakobson, and subsequently his professional contacts with Dmytro Chyzhevsky.

Jan Patočka was, he recalled, “*very disappointed*” during his first term as a student at Charles University by the lectures of František Krejčí, the leading figure of Czechoslovak positivism. Patočka’s first systematic philosophy tutor J. B. Kozák was well oriented in contemporary philosophy in general terms, but acquainted his pupils only informatively with its latest breakthroughs. The figure of Emanuel Rádl stood above all the other philosophy teachers, a philosopher who was “*irritating and provoking*” in an unsettling way. Rádl understood philosophy (and science too in the derived sense) as inherently linked with ethics, and was always prepared for public engagement. With Rádl before his eyes, Patočka the philosopher developed a permanent awareness of social issues.

## Paris, Berlin, Freiburg – from Husserl to Heidegger

Generally, “*Czech conditions for study were uncomfortable for the generation setting out at the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s.*” The twenty-two-year-old Patočka had

the good fortune to spend the school year 1928/1929 on a scholarship from the French government at the Sorbonne.

In Paris, Patočka's fate became tied to Husserl's phenomenology. One late February afternoon he stayed sitting in the hall after a lecture had finished early, because the next lecturer was to be Professor Husserl. "*Most students had left the hall but I remained with quaking heart – since I had, for a long time, seen Husserl as my kind of philosopher.*" He thus became directly involved in the famous lectures later known as the "*Méditations cartésiennes*," summing up Husserl's previous phenomenological systematics in a "new intuition, which at the beginning of our age brought philosophising young people to a new way of philosophy".

Patočka returned from Paris knowing that positivism can be superseded, "*that philosophy renews its claim to be a scientia generalis from its own roots, not in any way as a servant or debtor to the special sciences*". He began to look out over the domestic backyard and report on what he observed. In 1928 he began to write regular reviews for the journal *Česká mysl* (Czech Mind), the most important philosophy review of that time, and later he published articles in it too. He had been contributing already while on his scholarship year in Paris with knowledgeable reviews on what was being produced in French philosophy, and adding notes systematically providing information about thinking in Czech and international philosophy.

As a student of philosophy, Jan Patočka soon responded to all this with his creed – philosophy as a personal calling. In 1929, his first major text to be published in *Česká mysl*, was the essay *Theologie a filosofie* (Theology and Philosophy). In this, the twenty-two-year-old author ("*I am not yet a philosopher, but I want to be one*") looks on philosophy as "*searching and finding the eternal and the unchanging even in the most fleeting and the most volatile*". In this sense the "*truth*" at which the philosopher arrives, "*is merely found by him*"; whereas the God reveals truth to the theologian, the philosopher "*is unable to substantiate his truth otherwise than by using it,*" walking on ground "*he must never let himself be commanded, even if by God Himself*".

The fascination with Husserl's phenomenology never left Patočka. In 1931 he defended his doctoral dissertation *Pojem evidence a jeho význam pro noetiku* (The concept of evidence and its meaning for noetics), which was targeted towards "*the concept of evidence in Husserl,*" towards noetics created by the phenomenological method. It was through Patočka's work on his doctoral thesis that the Czech environment for the first time came to know the foundation stones of phenomenological philosophy.

Graduating in June 1932, in the autumn Patočka left for Germany on a scholarship from the Humboldt Foundation. This was the critical moment of history when the Weimar Republic came to an end and Hitler seized power. The winter semester in Berlin offered attractive lectures by Nicolai Hartmann on Aristotle, by Jacob Klein on Plato and Greek mathematics, and lectures by the leading classical philologist Werner Jaeger devoted to the Ancient Greek *paideia*, the educational pedagogy that not only formed Greek men but also opened the path to the humanistic culture of Europe.

"*It was in Berlin that I became politicised,*" Patočka recalled, as a direct witness to the Reichstag fire, the activation of the Gestapo and the growing terror in the streets. A witness to that "*sorcerer's caldron which brewed the beginning of the end of Europe*" and at the same time "*the clash of two Germanies*". For German scholarship still survived,

“under the sun of Goethe,” in the ideals of Kant and Herder, recognisable to the last moments in the universities at Marburg, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Göttingen, or Freiburg.

Patočka registered for the summer semester of his German scholarship in Freiburg, at the Faculty of Philosophy led by Martin Heidegger. It was when the fame of Heidegger’s work *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time), criticising the whole previous tradition of philosophy, had not yet quietened down.

But first of all in Freiburg, outside the university walls, Patočka was welcomed by his fellow countryman, the Moravian Prostějov native Edmund Husserl, at that time almost seventy-five years old. At the university Husserl was already *emeritus*, but he wanted to dedicate himself to Patočka privately, especially “*if he comes unspoiled by philosophical training and without intellectual blinkers over his eyes*” – as Patočka remembered Husserl’s first welcome to afternoon tea. As in ancient Athens, Husserl philosophised with Patočka peripatetically on long daily walks, just as he did with his academic assistant Eugen Fink, only two years older than Patočka. It was Fink who on Husserl’s request extended Patočka’s knowledge of the basic problems of phenomenology. And although Husserl was not happy about it, Fink also took Patočka to the lectures by the “disloyal” Martin Heidegger; disloyal not only in his ever more noticeable inclination away from Husserl’s phenomenological starting point, but also in his political attitude. The summer semester 1933 began in Freiburg on 25 April, four days after Heidegger took over the post of rector. In his inauguration speech the new Rector launched into “the grandeur and glory of this new beginning”– four months after Hitler’s seizure of power and shortly before books began to be burned on the outskirts of German university cities. To the end of July, Patočka formally studied under



Jan Patočka  
with Edmund Husserl  
and Eugen Fink



Rector Heidegger, who by that time was already wearing the NSDAP badge on his lapel. Patočka was not dazzled by Heidegger's political involvement; however, he gained a lasting impression of the particular philosophical depths of Heidegger's ideas.

Patočka's path through phenomenological philosophy started here – “between Husserl and Heidegger”.

## Back in Prague

On his return to Prague, Patočka felt isolated in his fascination with phenomenology. He was soon brought out of this feeling. Professor Emil Utitz, a Prague native, philosopher and aesthetician, was forced out of his long-term engagement as a professor in Halle by the ascendant regime in Germany and returned to the Prague German University. His ambition was to make Prague a major centre of contemporary European philosophy – of its kind a supranational “republic of scholars”. He initiated the founding of the Czech-German Prague Philosophy Circle (*Cercle philosophique de Prague pour les recherches sur l'entendement humain*), similar to the parallel operation of the Prague Linguistic Circle.

An initial incentive for the Prague Philosophy Circle was provided by the 8th International Philosophy Congress organised in Prague in September 1934 under the chairmanship of Emanuel Rádl. The intention of the Congress was also to focus on the current crisis of democracy and the failure of political and economic liberalism, and on the defence of basic European values and the responsibility of scholars in this regard. A phenomenological discourse was also implemented at the congress in a broad, sometimes even shattering, debate. It was supported not only by several speakers, but also by Husserl's greetings addressed to the congress. The honour of reading his letter to the Congress fell to Jan Patočka. Husserl emphasised that it was necessary to overcome the spiritual marasmus of the time intellectually – with hope in the international calling of phenomenology.

Before this task was grasped by the Prague Philosophy Circle in the coming years, Patočka had an opportunity to talk about it again directly with Husserl. He was invited to spend the Christmas holiday of 1934 in Freiburg. Fink was there too, and they set out again with Husserl on philosophical walks in the surrounding countryside. The main theme of their conversations was naturally phenomenology. Husserl promised to come to Prague as soon as he could, so that he could speak personally and urgently about the tasks of phenomenological philosophy in regard with the European spiritual crisis.

Before that took place, the activity of the Prague Philosophy Circle had got fully under way. Jan Patočka wrote about its very broad programme in *Česká mysl* at the time, that “it is the cultivating of philosophy in the spirit of the domestic tradition, represented by the names of Comenius, Bolzano and Masaryk, that it is a belief in the universal theoretical and practical mission of philosophy”. Patočka was at the time secretary to the Czech chairman of the Prague Philosophy Circle, J. B. Kozák (Emil Utitz held the position of German chairman).

The dual, Czech-German, composition of the Circle was a last manifestation of the cosmopolitan spirit of what was then still Czech-German-Jewish Prague. At the end of 1934 nationalistic storms had broken out at the universities, caused by a ministerial

decree ordering the German University to hand over the university insignia to the Czech University. The way in which the Circle programmatically straddled the Czech and German Universities was, of its kind, a cultural gesture.

During Patočka's Christmas in Freiburg, Husserl reminisced about his youth and hence about Masaryk. He recalled how close he came to Masaryk, his "first educator" in 1876-1877, during the time they spent as students together at Leipzig University. It was at that time Masaryk who recommended the eighteen-year-old Husserl, until then immersed in mathematics, to study philosophy with Franz Brentano. Masaryk had already done so himself in Vienna, and Viennese studies later significantly contributed to Husserl's path to phenomenological paradigms. On Christmas Eve, Husserl gave Patočka a present. It was especially valuable, as it related to both the two former Leipzig friends: a simple wooden reading desk that Masaryk had given to Husserl in Leipzig more than fifty years ago. "I thus became the inheritor of a great tradition," Patočka recalled years later.

An essential personality of the Circle was Ludwig Landgrebe, whom Husserl had reminded Patočka about as being his former assistant. Due to the atmosphere of Hitler's expanding power, he withdrew to Prague, where he habilitated at the German University. At this time he was a valuable partner for Patočka in weekly conversations on themes from Husserl. They went for walks in the streets of Prague, where, given the number of refugees fleeing from Hitler, intellectual German could sometimes be heard more frequently than Czech.

On the Czech side, J. B. Kozák brought his students from the Czech University into the Circle and its debate; one could even catch sight here of one of the fathers of Czech structuralism, Jan Mukařovský. Other representatives of the Prague Linguistic Circle also attended; the two circles were interconnected in the intellectual context of their research.

The Prague Circle's lectures were held largely in the Café Louvre, where the Prague adherents of Brentano used to gather at the turn of the 20th century. The climax of the first year was a visit of Edmund Husserl, as he had promised Patočka the preceding Christmas. In November 1935 Husserl, at that time seventy-six years old, delivered two lectures, one at the German University in Prague and one at the Czech. They became events to which people travelled from neighbouring Central European countries "to hear Husserl".

The Prague lectures, plus lectures given in Vienna, became the basis of Husserl's famous *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology). The main theme of Husserl's lectures consisted of a diagnosis of the crisis of European science seen as the roots of the contemporary crisis of European humanity, with unspoken concerns about the dark demons unleashed in Germany. Husserl claims the cause of the crisis to be the fact that the contemporary sciences have isolated themselves from human experience, and so he turns to the pre-theoretical, pre-scientific world – that is to the *natural world of our life*. It is the natural world, *Lebenswelt*, i.e., "permanent living in the certainty of the world" – surrounded by a horizon of known and unquestionably sure things, things accepted by man in primordial records, on whose ground of life they can bring themselves out of their hiddenness and make us aware of them.

Shortly afterwards Patočka followed on from Husserl's *Lebenswelt* in his first book, *Přirozený svět jako filosofický problém* (The natural world as a philosophical problem) published in 1936. The very first sentence of this habilitation work by Patočka reads: "*The problem of philosophy is the world as a whole.*" Man is a finite being but relates infinitely to the whole of the world – "*he is part of the world but also has the world, knows about the world*". We do not turn to the natural world of human existence "*in mere theoretical curiosity*" but because "*we seek life in its original quality, the meaning of things and the meaning of one's own self,*" trying to reach "*an overall understanding of being,*" searching for "*things making sense in the entirety*".

## Twilight... Night...

Right from the start, Emil Utitz not only provided the Prague Philosophy Circle with a research programme in phenomenology, but also included in it the classification of virtually illegible manuscripts of Edmund Husserl's previously unpublished work, thus effectively rescuing them. Ludwig Landgrebe took over the difficult work of the collective processing of Husserl's manuscripts, many of which were in shorthand, after he had had them transported piece by piece from Freiburg to Prague.

Members of the Circle tentatively gave papers on this at the 9th International Conference of Philosophy in Paris in April 1937, when for the first (and the last) time they appeared together before an international audience of experts. On his return journey from Paris, Patočka stopped to see Husserl in Freiburg. Except for the news of the birth of his first daughter (christened Františka after Patočka's mother) the news from Prague was gloomy. Masaryk had died, Rádl had collapsed physically. Patočka wanted at least to encourage Husserl with news about the continuing transcription of his manuscripts. He caught Husserl in a deep depression. The Nuremberg race laws had already come into effect, with fateful outcomes for German Jews, Husserl felt like an internal émigré in Germany. "*He saw clearly and without illusions the European schizophrenia, he saw a dark future for Czechoslovakia and dampened my optimism, which he approved only as a moral position, not as an estimate of the situation.*" On Patočka's last day with him, Husserl fell while taking a bath, which resulted in a serious injury. It developed into a protracted inflammation of the pleura, to which Husserl eventually – in pain and full of forebodings about the European spirit to which he had devoted his life's work – succumbed in April 1938.

Meanwhile the definitive manuscript of Husserl's *Erfahrung und Urteil* (Experience and Judgment) had been edited and revised by Landgrebe in Prague and, with the care of the Prague Philosophy Circle, published in book form. Unfortunately, after the German occupation of Prague and the immediate expiration of the Circle, the book was confiscated and destroyed.

On the first day of the German occupation of Prague in March 1939, Ludwig Landgrebe was instantly stripped of his senior lectureship at the German University. Its leadership had already been taken over by National Socialist radicals who had gradually purged it in the Aryan spirit. Landgrebe set out in a roundabout way for Leuven – to the freshly established Husserl Archive, to continue transcribing the Husserl manuscripts and with Eugen Fink prepare them for publication. This they did until May 1940, when Hitler attacked Belgium. Emile Utitz was similarly forbid-

den to continue as professor at the Prague German University. In 1942 he found himself in the ghetto town of Terezín, but unlike other Jewish professors of the German University he survived by a miracle; thanks to the spiritual support he was drawing from books as an administrator of the local library in Terezín.

The fate of Husserl's other manuscripts, patiently worked on to the last moment in Prague, was especially fortunate. At the end of 1938, after the Munich Agreement and the cancellation of mobilisation (for which Patočka had applied, but been rejected for health reasons), the atmosphere was on edge. Just at that time, a twenty-seven-year-old stranger appeared in Prague, "for whom no cigarette was strong enough and no risk sufficiently terrifying". Although in layman's dress, he identified himself as a Franciscan monk - Father Herman Leo van Breda from Catholic University in Leuven in Belgium. He was familiar with Husserl's phenomenology and was clearly concerned about the whole literary legacy of the philosopher, including the part in Prague. His aim was to create a Husserl Archive in Leuven. What followed was van Breda's adventurous smuggling, at great risk to himself, of all the surviving Husserl manuscripts, tens of thousands of pages from Germany and Czechoslovakia, soon to be occupied. It is one of the most gripping stories in the history of philosophy.

Jan Patočka lectured at the Faculty of Philosophy until the closure of the Czech universities after 17 November 1939. He then taught at a grammar school, and with difficulty tried to earn a living for his family, which had grown by another daughter, Jana. At the end of the war he was put to forced labour, building the Vinohrady railway tunnel, and survived the Anglo-American air-strikes of February 1945 that caught Vinohrady in particular. During one such air-strike his wife Helena had to hurry to hospital by tram for the birth of their third child, their son Jan. Among all this Patočka continued to write.



Jan Patočka as class teacher at Hellichova grammar school in 1942

The booklet *Česká vzdělanost v Evropě* (Czech culture in Europe) was in readers' hands immediately in 1939. It was published in the series *Svazky úvah a studií* (Volumes of studies and papers), edited by František Kovárna and coming out as a consolation in the midst of the marasmus of the Second Republic. Patočka here interprets the tradition of Czech humanism in the context of European culture with its Classical, Christian and Enlightenment traditions, supplemented from Czech sources (with reference to Masaryk) "by the inherent momentum of the idea of humanity".

Patočka emphasised "the idea of culture in its topicality" in one of his first essays in the cultural and political review *Kritický měsíčník* (Criticism Monthly), published from 1938 by Václav Černý, Patočka's friend and fellow student from university studies. The young men (Černý and Patočka were joined by a third associate, František Kovárna, publisher of the *Svazky*) were barely thirty years old, and in their cooperation, the "topicality" of the idea of culture covered common concerns about maintaining a intellectual life on the home front. Culture then does not mean "solely blessed enrichment" – as Patočka wrote on another occasion in *Kritický měsíčník* – "but rather pain and struggle" (also with one's self) for "just awoken freedom" which would "reveal that which seems is only seeming, and only by accepting danger it would acquire full security, enabling a man to live his life from his own roots, from his own ground".

The ascent of reason stands in opposition to the irrationality of contemporary demons – reason as the vital essence of Europe. For, as Patočka wrote behind the backs of the Protectorate censors in the journal *Život* (Life) in 1941, "there is no culture anywhere outside Europe that is so established around the naturalness of reason," and on the other hand, there is "no movement that did not have inscribed on its banner: 'idea, understanding, reason...' that led to anything other than new forms of primitivism".

Patočka refers to reason in what should ideally be its Humanist nature with an appeal to the spiritual tradition of German culture, about which contemporary official propaganda obdurately remained silent. Having already described the Enlightenment as one of the axes of European culture, Patočka recalls the "philosophy of humanity" of the classic German philosopher, J. G. Herder. The year when Reinhard Heydrich declared martial law with repressions against the home resistance, the year when the first railway transport reached Terezín, with still unimagined horrors as its final aim – 1941 – was the year when Patočka translated an essential selection from Herder's writings under the title *The Development of Humanity*. A year later – the year when Heydrich unleashed his terror, when regular transports set out for Terezín (taking Emil Utitz among others), when the machinery and bureaucracy of the Holocaust got under way – Patočka, in second booklet for Kovárna's *Svazky*, appealed to "Double Reason and Nature in the German Enlightenment" without fearing to write that German thinking "in National Socialism's world view merged the irrationalism of objectives with the rigid rationalism of means".

The theme of Patočka's third wartime booklet, *Symbol země u K. H. Máchy* ("The Earth as a symbol" in the romantic Czech poet K. H. Máchy), concerns the antithesis, not only of nature and history, but also of time and eternity. The essential, consciously mythical figure in the compass that "Máchy senses to be the axis of human life," is the "Mother Earth" that gave us birth, whose essence "is the same as the essence of time: the eternally living emergence and decline" which "feels in mankind, feels and thinks through us and in us".

## On the road to February 1948: the Idea threatened by ideology

In June 1945, in a hurried attempt to catch up with the lost years of the war, teaching was immediately reintroduced at the Czech universities. Jan Patočka at once joined in the restoration of philosophy studies at Charles University. For the “first academic year” (which had to be squeezed into one summer), Patočka announced the course *Surveying the History of Philosophy*. The audience was largely composed of older students, who, following the forced closure of the universities in 1939, had been denied the opportunity to study for the duration of the war. This audience, in general still academically uninitiated, had to be introduced to philosophy at its roots, the philosophy of the Greeks, where philosophy had not only acquired its name but also its mission – to facilitate “*the inner transformation of man from his own intellectual striving for the truth*”.

Patočka’s course in the history of philosophy thus became a focal point for many students (years later they would look back on these lectures as an experience equivalent to being initiated into a mystery). The staging was perfect, especially in the evening. When there was a power outage, they would continue by candlelight; Patočka’s enlarged shadow was multiplied on the walls so that the philosopher’s thoughtful toing and froing was magically illuminated and magnified, the inimitable hand gestures he used to entice and draw ideas out of the air. Patočka spoke spontaneously, for that moment and that moment only, making the audience witnesses to his thought processes – *living philosophy*.

In his first two-semester course Patočka introduced his pupils to the earliest Greek philosophy, pre-Socratic philosophy. The following academic year 1946/1947 he elucidated the figure of Socrates as far as “*the awareness that through the idea itself one can in the deepest way influence one’s relationship to the world and to oneself; one can transform it in a consciously responsible relationship*”.

Patočka as a teacher here fulfilled the social role that today we call the “public intellectual”. The wide range of Czechoslovak journals, able to publish freely in the short interim from 1945–1947, enabled Patočka to engage himself fully in contemporary debates. His articles appeared not only in *Kritický měsíčník*, but also in the Protestant oriented *Křesťanská revue* and in *Naše doba* founded by Masaryk, one of the earliest journals of opinion. We can read in most of the essays Patočka’s effort to orient both the reader and himself in the intellectually and, of course, ideologically stormy time, and his effort to set aside the ephemeral and seize the essence.

Patočka wrote a prescient reflection of that time in his essay *Ideologie a život v ideji* (Ideology and life in the Idea) for the January 1946 in *Kritický měsíčník*. The idea as such “*must be embodied*,” meaning that “*in life this embodiment concerns our most essential inner being*,” the personal struggle of each of us, however much our “*life in the idea*” may be harassed by ideologies of very varied collectivism, which look on a person “*from outside, as on one thing among other things*”.

In ideologies lurks the danger of totalitarian dictatorship for which “a man is merely a small item in the overall account, controllable from without and within. If you look after his economic security, validate his self-confidence en masse, organise his thought through propaganda, his free time and entertainment through the appropriate measures, he will belong completely to you, and even think he is free and that all this is actually the realisation of man”.

Against ideologies, Patočka sets the “*idea of man*,” and even after the war the orienting figure for him was in this sense Masaryk. He writes in *Naše doba* that if so far a simplified understanding of Masaryk’s legacy adapted to daily use still sufficed as “an *annunciation of safe optimism, civilizational and moral progression*,” the Masarykian tradition of Humanism now poses a broader “*question for the essence of man*” – along the metaphysical extension of life over mere existence satisfying basic needs.

The posthumous publication of Emanuel Rádl’s *Útěcha z filosofie* (Consolation by philosophy), written in pencil while he was bedridden during the war, symptomatically took place in the atmosphere of that time. Through its metaphysical-theological disposition, through its moral appeal (though judged superficially as an “old man’s moralising”) the *Consolation* claimed that man was subordinate to the idea of a moral order as a supra-historical vault over “*supposedly scientific*” modern sciences, over their “*constructed facts*,” just as over the arrogance of self-confident ideologies. Patočka wrote several journal articles engaging in the debate, in an effort to stand behind the philosopher whom he had valued above all others. In his “defences” Patočka interprets the *Consolation* in the tradition of humanism, not only Czech and Masarykian, but also European. According to Rádl, this humanism was imprinted into Europe as the Greek inheritance whose indivisible component was created by the Platonic metaphysical idea. Patočka explains that “*it is about the metaphysical reality of the last ‘truth’ which clarifies everything by making sense in its entirety, and through this clarifies life and everything life contains and by which life is surrounded*” while, from our everyday life, this last truth “*points outside itself, above itself;*” to that “*which is not of ‘this’ world of mere facts and mere objectivity... , it points to the eternal.*” Patočka concurs that it is part of the elementary question about “*the entire aim of life, the question about what determines the life of man,*” after which “*he plods searching through the world and realises his calling*”. Patočka will rethink this “plodding” path of man in his private manuscript entitled *Věčnost a dějinnost* (Eternity and historicity).

It was no accident that at this time Patočka expounded Socrates to his students in his course on the history of philosophy. He saw Socrates in his way as the first philosopher of existence, as a “*discoverer of human history*,” with an emphasis on the self-formation found in each man’s own being. Such a moral contest is a purely personal matter, a life path on which each goes his own way – not in any way led by the morality of an “internationally” aggregated “human race,” as the bugles of the coming dictatorship of the proletariat trumpeted.

In the winter semester of the academic year 1947/1948 Patočka continued his course on the history of philosophy with Plato and Platonism. The Platonic lectures lasted the whole of 1948 – a year of radical social transformations. However, Platonic *metanoia*, reaching not the gloating crowds but the moral life of the individual, did not know how, and did not even want, to meet such changes.

*"Our situation is bad," Patočka wrote among his reflections on philosophical reading in his private notes in January and February 1948, when politics ceased to be "the same as ethics". In the general confusion of thoughts and emotions, it is difficult "to learn about our current era; we cannot believe all the evil that happens in it, but then again we cannot, even for a moment, not believe it ... As if Nazism would reveal itself over and over again in corrected editions... lowness and smallness are to be compulsory subjects of love, in the equation: 'rough and primitive' = 'good'..."*

In the last week of February 1948, despite the closed windows of the lecture rooms of the Faculty of Philosophy, the roar of the crowd could be heard from Old Town Square not far distant. From the balcony of the Kinský Palace, the Communist leader Klement Gottwald called excitedly for "watchfulness and readiness" since "the reactionaries will strive to overthrow the People's Democratic Order so they can terrorise our ordinary people undisturbed". When on 25 February Gottwald informed the baying mob of the final "victory of the working people" over the reactionaries, five thousand university students (many of Patočka's students among them) set out for the Castle that evening to protest against the Communist *coup d'état* that had already effectively taken place. On the way the students were beaten up by members of the police force and the *Lidové milice* (the so-called "People's", i.e., Workers' Militia), and were not received by President Beneš; he was only able to listen to their cries through an open window.

From 26 February a Communist "action committee" took all matters to do with the faculty into its own hands; the Communist purges began. On 4 March, Dean J. B. Kozák spoke with eyes fixed on the ground at a meeting of the professorial corps about the "encouragement of the Socialist tendency in our nation," even about the "termination of the activity of some professors, lecturers and assistant lectures and the exclusion of some students from study". Kozák did not mention any names. It was rumoured however, that those to be sacked included the previous dean Josef Král, as well as Václav Černý, František Kovárna, Jan Patočka, those assiduously identified by one of the daily papers *Mladá fronta* as "collaborationists, active agents and enemies of the Republic".

Patočka was not the first in line; he kept a strict guard on his own philosophical ivory tower; however much the everyday matters of politics pounded on its door below. He himself honestly admitted that he was somewhat confused and – far from making hasty judgements – incapable of immediate decision-making. He placed ideas above all ideologies; he tried to look for Masarykian humanity ideals in a still unforced concept of Socialism, not yet stripped of the respect for freedom. He valued the social and economic side of Socialism as a new chance for Humanism after the failure of pre-war Liberalism, even though soon – face to face with rising Stalinist brutality – such a projection showed itself to be abstract and Utopian.

Supposedly closed into his philosophising, Patočka appeared harmless. He even found an intercessor at the faculty among the moderate ("dialectical") Marxists. Perhaps, if he had been just a little more accommodating, he could have gone on lecturing. Nevertheless, his refusal, after some hesitation, to join the Communist Party was not a great help to him. Very soon, the lectures by the "idealistically inclined" assistant professor Patočka were no longer recommended. Patočka was still allowed to start lecturing on Aristotle, though, as it turned out, not to finish. The next academic year 1950/1951 he was released. *"I would rather scream than be stifled,"* confessed



otherwise moderate Patočka in one of his letters of that time, “*but after analysing the situation I saw it would be hopeless*”.

## A lame pilgrim on the road...

The lecture Jan Patočka delivered in 1950 to the Brothers Čapek Society in memory of the writer and artist Josef Čapek was, so to speak, a metaphor. Man goes his own plodding, stumbling road through history “*in the context of the questions of being, time, person,*” says Patočka. He takes that road, accepting the finiteness of his life movement, in encountering himself as a soul which is aware of the world as a whole and its being in it.

Allegedly, after February 1948, it was arranged for Jan Patočka to escape over the border. However, for him to run away from everything would be unthinkable. In any case, Socrates had also been offered an escape from prison and he too refused to leave Athens. Nor could he leave his loyal students: one of them, Eva Stuchlíková, invited those she could trust in her flat – the age of home seminars had begun.

Patočka remained, and chose Masaryk’s way of tending to “*small duties*”. From 1950 he shut himself into scholarly seclusion, one that actually bore the initials TGM; the Institute of T. G. Masaryk, founded in 1932 as the first “Presidential Library” in Europe, had so far not been abolished. Patočka was taken on here in the position of internal researcher with the task of organising the Institute’s archive. At that time, in the same year as the trial of Milada Horáková (who spoke out for Masaryk’s legacy before her execution), it seemed as though the Institute was a forgotten enclave in a surrounding intellectual wasteland during the extreme Stalinist sovietisation. Over the following four years Patočka put together a set of documents, and in independent studies (naturally unpublishable in his lifetime) dealt with Masaryk’s struggle against the anti-Semitism unleashed around 1900 in the Hilsner Case. Such research was completely out of conjecture in the early 1950s; the “spirit of the time” denied any sort of connection with Masaryk. Moreover, the Communist regime at that time was not embarrassed to show anti-Semitic malice: in the shadow of the gallows, in the political trials, the prosecutors frequently alleged criminal Zionist conspiracy.

Since the opportunities for publicising and publishing Masarykian scholarship were strictly limited in those years of rigid Stalinism, Patočka threw himself into his “domestic work” on other private manuscripts. The international situation at that time was reflected especially in the study “*Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt*” (Supercivilisation and its inner conflict), reflection on the crisis of Europe against the background of its civilizational transformations in the universal scientific and technological “*supercivilization*”. European modernity provided the basic impulses for this transformation; however, after two world wars and the collapse of colonial empires, it remained exposed to the conflict between two new global empires – on the one hand the American version of liberal democracy and the mission of “moderate” capitalist economy, and on the other, Socialism in its sub-version Communism, with its radical ideology of world revolution and its accompanying totalitarian practices. An Iron Curtain had been lowered in Europe; in the ongoing Cold War, in the rupture between West and East, the question was what could still be saved of the values of the European world, from its traditions and culture – or, as Patočka wrote in a private letter: “*keeping clean the source from which flows all the blood that nurtures the world*”.

## Thaw...

The hope of a thaw gleamed in March 1953, with the deaths of Stalin and Gottwald, but the icy grip of Stalinist totalitarianism still held strong. That same year the Masaryk Institute was taken over by the state in the context of the ideological “struggle against the legacy of Masarykianism”. A year later it was abolished and the greater part of its archive and most valuable part of its library transferred to the Institute of the History of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Another part was moved to the central library of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (ČSAV), while the remainder of the archive was put through the shredder. Patočka (“the Pilgrim”) again found himself “on the road,” but he took “Masaryk” with him in his imaginary travel bag as a topic to which he would return, in both research and criticism.

For the next (four-year) period Jan Patočka became a specialist employee of leading Comeniologist institutions: the Institute of Research in Education, and later the Cabinet of Sciences of Education at the ČSAV. After Masaryk, Comenius was the second personality from Czech intellectual history to whom Patočka devoted his lifelong attention.

Patočka the philosopher is a *paidagogos* in the Greek, Platonic sense – more of a *tutor* than a “teacher”. This was what attracted Patočka to Comenius – as a tutor guiding a person on their road “to themselves”. This is the only way the Pilgrim can be led out of the labyrinth in which he wanders, “fleeing from himself..., from his own finiteness”. The way out of the labyrinth, into the openness of the world as a whole – Patočka deduces – is to Comenius’s “universal reform” by means of education. Comenius’s life’s work *Všeobecná porada o nápravě věcí lidských* (General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human), unfinished and forgotten (its copy discovered by Dmytro Chyzhevsky as late as 1935), attracted Patočka as though Comenius had written this pansophia for him. Conscious of the modern crisis, Patočka had the ability to bridge three centuries and feel the tragedy of Comenius’s effort to lead European humanity out of the crisis of religious wars and public sacrifices with the help of comprehensive reforms of the knowledge of the time.

On 1 January 1958 – during the gradual “thaw” of the frozen totalitarian crust, several times interrupted, at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s – Patočka was, in the academic structures, appointed an employee of the editorial department of the Philosophy Institute of the ČSAV, with responsibility for the editorial preparation of philosophy publications and their translations. In the course of this, he continued to devote himself in depth to Comenius, and linked him into his reflections on the history of philosophy. In the broader European context, he researched the whole family tree of Czech thought, into which he also inserted František Palacký. Above all, however, he focused on Bernard Bolzano. At an academic conference on the history of Czech philosophy in Liblice in April 1958, Patočka gave a paper on Bolzano – in an indication of Bolzano’s importance as a “predecessor” of phenomenology, in the Bolzano–Husserl connection. Subsequently, he was not confined to editorial work; the publishing house of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was able to publish Patočka’s long prepared translation of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Phenomenology of Spirit) using his original translation of Hegel’s terminology and with a comprehensive commentary.

From the end of the 1950s political and social conditions relaxed so much that Patočka was allowed to make “work-related visits” abroad. As a Czech philosopher equally well respected “in the capitalist West” he represented a valuable export article, maybe not in the material sense, but as evidence of the cultural openness and broader views of the Communist regime as it revitalised itself. Guest lectures at German universities enabled Patočka to renew contacts made before the war, and before the Iron Curtain fell, above all with Fink and Landgrebe. Thanks also to these impulses, he returned to work more consistently on his own phenomenological systematics, and in his subsequent research tried to introduce a phenomenological ground plan.

He returned to the field of the history of philosophy, above all the “worldwide” philosophy, that is, the cosmically reasoning Greek philosophy. He was fully engaged in Aristotle’s concept of movement – especially if it could be applied not only to the processes of world events but also to the natural world of human existence in it. This idea permeates his book *Aristoteles, jeho předchůdci a dědicové* (Aristotle, his predecessors and heirs) of 1964, with the subtitle “Studies in the history of philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel,” one of the few major works to be published in book form in Czechoslovakia during Patočka’s lifetime. *Aristoteles* brought its author official recognition in the academic community and he received a “second habilitation” – that is, the “big doctorate” (Dr. Sc.) – and his appointment as a professor began to be considered.

In the Institute of Philosophy too, Patočka was no longer a mere “employee of the editorial department”. In the 1960s the bigoted Marxism that had reigned until recently went through revisions and moved “from anathema to dialogue” with what had up to that time been perceived as hostile world views, phenomenology included. Patočka was extremely open to this dialogue that was mostly led in the Institute seminars. He was generous to Karel Kosík – whose *Dialektika konkrétního* (Dialectics of the Concrete) he subjected to a dialectical but in the final synthesis appreciative criticism – and to Milan Sobotka – with whom he dialectically read Hegel’s *Phänomenologie* – and most open towards Ivan Dubský... to those “existentialist cadres,” as the poet Egon Bondy, a long-term informer for the secret police, divulged when reporting on Patočka’s seminars. Apparently Patočka spread “explicitly bourgeois and religious interpretations,” in which – complained Bondy – “the term Marxism doesn’t occur once!”

After Patočka had given lectures at West European universities (in Aachen, Bonn, Cologne, Freiburg, Leuven, Mainz...) all that remained was to invite the philosopher to Charles University too. This happened almost fifteen years after his last lecture in the Faculty of Philosophy in October 1964 and from this date Patočka’s external Thursday lectures began – they were optional, and characteristically at noon, during the lunch break. Within the year Patočka wrote them down under the title *Úvod do studia Husserlovy fenomenologie* (Introduction to the study of Husserl’s phenomenology). It was Czechoslovakia’s first encounter with phenomenological philosophy for a long time.

One of the signs of the relaxation of the regime in the 1960s was the enrichment of cultural life. With the rapidly distancing canons of Socialist Realism, society was awash with a wealth of literature, with the straight talking of the small form theatres, with New Wave Cinema, and with a new spirit wafting from exhibition halls and emanating from paintings originating there and then in artists’ studios. Patočka talked to Medek over his Surrealist paintings, held discussions with the sculptor Koblasa in Reduta jazz club, reflected on poems by Hrubín and Holan along with stories by

Hrabal and Vyskočil, whose work he watched in dramatic form on his frequent visits to theatres and stages such as *Reduta* and *Na zábradlí*.

In the 1960s new cultural journals became an independent medium. *Tvář* (Face), perhaps the most daring journal of that time, discovered Patočka for itself in 1965 publishing his paper “K prehistorii vědy o pohybu: svět, země, nebe a pohyb lidského života” (The prehistory of the science of movement: world, earth, heaven and the movement of human life). It was in this treatise that Patočka developed his theory of life movement – movement which is the unique “medium of encountering things in the world”. The experience is realised primarily by our “physicality,” through which – as Patočka and Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenologist of physicality, both considered – we also fathom the whole of the world to which the body (not the psycho-physical organism, but the “physical subject”) relates as to one of its parts.

Patočka’s life theme, the concept of the natural world, thus became further elaborated. Meanwhile, Patočka’s first book *The Natural World*, published in 1936, was virtually unavailable, the copies in the university library being kept under lock and key. Faced with this situation, Patočka’s students and fans requested its republication ever more emphatically. The author hesitated, since his reflections on the concept of the natural world had by then undergone great transformations. In the end he yielded, on condition that for the new edition he would supply a comprehensive preface that would be a kind of opponent to the original text. Patočka worked on the preface through the whole “year of hope” 1968. In the hope of its promised second edition in 1969, Patočka gave his preface the title: *The Author’s Meditations on “The Natural World” Thirty Years Later*.

Unlike many others, in 1968 Patočka was not to be found among the rhetoricians on the platform. He “made politics” in his own way. When, after almost twenty years, he inaugurated his return to Charles University, he introduced his first lecture to a packed *aula maxima* at the Faculty of Philosophy with the mildly sarcastic words: “I think we were discussing Aristotle last time we met, weren’t we...”

Patočka turned to the students as to the vanguard of intelligentsia which is, as a matter of principle, anchored “in the universality of reason,” impressing on European civilisation “a rational and rationalising will” and at the same time the moral sense. The “young intelligentsia” especially, could hand on to society “their eminently active and animating power”. As long as the student body did not remain merely a noisily demonstrating, emotionally and militantly operating mass, enjoying “negation as the only room for their freedom,” it could become not only the natural opposition to the bureaucratic establishment, but also an effective force “confronting the malignant tendency” that threatens European civilisation. The humanities-based and, as Patočka believed, also technology-based intelligentsia is predetermined for that process by a permanent “sense for questioning”, as well as by an intensified intellectual “means of criticism and criticality”. What also makes them so is their continual casting of doubt on a comfortably simplified “relationship to truth,” as is facilitated by “the original presence of being in the insight of our mind, that is, of the last meaning and purpose that shapes the world as a whole”.

Conscious of his inclusion in academic structures, Patočka at the same time made his voice heard in debates about the previous organisation of academic life. He was among the signatories of a protest resolution requesting the fundamental reform of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. In June 1968 the weekly *Literární listy* published Patočka's reflection "on the principle of scientific conscience" which is to be always essentially aware of "the historical crossroads of our life". It was placed alongside the famous manifesto *Dva tisíce slov* (Two Thousand Words) created to activate the general public in support of the current movement in the society. Two months later the Soviet tanks came to suppress it.

Focusing on the role science has in the spiritual life of the nation comes into what were then Patočka's reflections on discovering the "meaning of today" through the "meaning of our history". Whether we are concerned with the "idea of the National Theatre" or the "false theory of the nation" in relation to Slovakia, or the "dilemma in our national programme" (the concept of the awakening nation identifying itself linguistically, that is, ethnically, as opposed to the politically defined "civic nation," as Bernard Bolzano, the "Bohemus" of Italian and German origins and after him Emanuel Rádl, thought it over). Patočka held to Bolzano's thesis, according to which the meaning of national existence "does not lie in naturally given conditions but rather in moral feats which make the nation really participate at the world history". Patočka designates Palacký's concept of "natural democratism" as one of the constructs that emerged from the need of a moral ideal in renewing national society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He proposes to start from the fact of the discontinuity of Czech history – from the caesura starting from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century which was followed by, in place of traditional and hierarchical social structures, a new Czech society built from below, from its lower spokes. In the course of this, the idea "of elementary democratism of the Czech and in part also of the Slovak nation" was offered as especially "flattering and seductive". In the context of the contemporary discussion about the nature of domestic Socialism, Patočka's ambiguous statement, in its way fatalistic, that "the idea of equality taken to its full equalisation" is "comprehensible and close" to us at home, and that from this aspect "our embodying into the Socialist camp is an understandable outcome of that" also stems from here.

Patočka lectured on the theme of "the philosophy of Czech history" in the Club of the Socialist Academy on 23 April 1969 – a date fatal in its timing. On 1 April 1969 the presidium of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (ÚV KSČ) had considered the political situation in the country seven months after the "fraternal assistance" of the armies of the Warsaw Pact in August the preceding year: "Following the anti-Soviet riots provoked in our streets by counterrevolutionary forces after the victory of the Czechoslovak hockey players over the Soviet representatives at the world championships, the situation is still very serious, for it shows that we have not got rid of the sources of tension relying on the operation of anti-Socialist and anti-Soviet forces..." On 17 April the ÚV KSČ called for the "consolidation" to be speeded up. The subsequent "implementation guidelines" slid with the whole of Czechoslovak society towards "normalisation".

In the spirit of Patočka's periodisation, a new historical discontinuity in our land opened; in this twenty-year caesura the country would officially experience its next – as Patočka called it – "small history".

## The frost returns...

The screws were tightened gradually. For the time being, Patočka and his lectures on phenomenology did not seem to be the most urgent “crisis phenomenon” clamouring for attention; the regime hesitated over what phenomenology actually was and whether it was in some way dangerous. So Patočka (at the last moment appointed professor) could still lecture at the Faculty of Philosophy and in the academic year 1969/1970 could open a lecture series on *Phenomenology*, which for new, still increasing numbers of students represented again a new “introduction to phenomenological philosophy”.

Patočka lectured as though on an island on which a few survivors had been cast up. A desert began to extend around him. The larger part of the consignment (11,000 copies) of the booklet *O smysl dneška* (The meaning of today), containing Patočka’s most recent articles, was destroyed. It was not the only book to end up being pulped. Publishing plans were cancelled, books began to be removed from libraries. The second, postponed publication of *The Natural World* with Patočka’s essential revisional preface eventually came out in 1970. The book was “banned and not banned”; the authorities did not approve it for wider planned distribution, but it could be obtained for 20 crowns in the bookshop of its publishing house, providing you had written confirmation from some official research institution that the book would be used “for study purposes only”.

As the space narrowed, Patočka grasped every opportunity to speak, to express himself, to interpret... “Hrst úvah nad Pambiblií J. A. Komenského” (Reflections on Comenius’s Pambiblia) came out in one of the last numbers of the literary critical review *Orientace*. Before an avalanche of bans overwhelmed the theatre *Za branou* and its innovative productions by Otomar Krejča, there was at least still time for Patočka to write for the audience in the programmes for Chekhov’s *Ivanov* (1970) and Sophocles’ *Oedipus–Antigone* (1971). In *Hudební rozhledy* (Music Views) he dealt with Beethoven’s music and the “German spirituality” connected with it.

Much of what Patočka expressed was through the most traditional method: letters. In his “letters to a friend” (Hildegard Ballauff) he tried to expound (for the German reader) his concept of Czech history, its inner discontinuity, historical “surges” and falls, dilemmas and painful moments. Part of it is the age-old “hobnobbing and wrangling” of Czech and German elements which over the years created a specific cultural amalgam. Patočka’s German translation of Jaroslav Durych’s prose work *Boží duha* (God’s Rainbow), with the theme of improbable love quelling the demons of the post-war “final reckoning” with the Germans, intended only for their four eyes (“Für Dich, Hildegard”) later became part of the intimate correspondence with Hildegard Ballauff. The translation and Patočka’s accompanying study were likewise dedicated to Hildegard.

In 1970, in one of the last articles by Patočka allowed to appear publicly in the *Křesťanská revue*, he tried to examine “the spiritual foundations of life in our time”. Looking beyond the misery at home, Europe found itself in a “post-European” era. This new, “essentially material world”, this “super-civilisation” with its “merely general intentions”, among which its “colossal quality” stands out, triumphing scientific technology,

this “power of all powers”, “mass democracy”, holistic “mass quality of social and political life”, all this in sum means the demise of old Europe. The (brave) new world that opens up here seems to be an “epoch of optimism, but scarcely an epoch of happiness”. The life of the individual is thrown into tense borderline situations – while in the unalterable situation “that we are placed in the world we are in and must endure our existence. Only he who finds his very own centre; in the words of Josef Čapek: the man with a soul” can face up to it. Man as an “existence which being universal, having a relationship with the universe, constantly comes closer to everything”. His place “within the world” means to be “at the same time in a relationship to the world as a whole”. The theme of spiritual life in a post-European age became the foundation of Patočka’s *Heretical Essays*.

Patočka’s lectures for the academic year 1971/1972 were on Plato, reflecting on his dialogue *The Republic* and his *Letter VII*. It was symptomatically the last lecture series that Professor Jan Patočka would be allowed to hold in the Faculty of Philosophy of the Charles University. He had become *persona non grata*. Respected abroad, at home he was exposed to every kind of obstruction.

In 1972 Professor Patočka was forced to retire, the third time he had been expelled from the university. He ceased to have anything in common with the official academic sphere. He was invited by the preparatory committee of the 15th World Congress of Philosophy to Varna in Bulgaria in September 1973 but was not included in the official Czechoslovak delegation. He decided therefore to go to Varna on his own account. At the Congress he read his paper about dangers of technicization in science according to Edmund Husserl and the essence of technology as a danger according to Martin Heidegger – to the unfeigned dismay of the academician Radovan Richta, head of the Czechoslovak delegation, at that time director of the Institute of Philosophy of the ČSAV and the prophet of “civilisation at the crossroads,” derived from the “scientific and technological revolution” as the culminating phase of Socialism. In Varna, Richta’s delegation was unable to do more than interrupt Patočka from the auditorium with noisy clapping and stamping. Patočka was unable to complete the reading of his speech. On his return his passport was confiscated and the secret police from that time made him an object of their permanent interest.

With Patočka unable to remain in the university department or to publish officially, the home seminars of the 1970s were all the more important. They took place not just in various apartments, but also in artists’ studios and backstage in the theatre, as for example Patočka’s conversations with the creative team of the theatre *Za branou*, and even in medical surroundings, if we could thus call the venues for the seminars on the phenomenology of physicality organised by the psychologists Jiří Němec and Petr Rezek.

From autumn 1973 Ivan Chvatík, Jiří Polívka, Jiří Michálek, Jaromír Kučera, and Miroslav Petříček who met at Patočka’s home seminars decided deliberately to record everything on tape. Following on from Patočka’s last university lectures, seminars devoted to Plato, i.e., the theme of “spiritual life in our time,” were organised regularly at various homes. It was about discovering through the personality of Plato (and indivisibly Socrates) the historical meaning of European civilisation in the moment of its crisis. The whole series was transcribed from the tapes and edited for typewritten “samizdat” publication and later received the title *Platón a Evropa* (Plato and Europe). The lectures with the accompanying discussions and subsequent seminars – truly

Jan Patočka at  
a home seminar  
(photo by Jan  
Endrýs)



“spiritual exercise” in the style of Greek philosophy education, in its way salvation in a twilight time – took place under the imaginary aegis of the Platonic *epimeleia tés psychés*, “care of the soul”. Patočka understood the care in which the soul (in representative terms such as “subject,” “spirit” or “subjectivity”) turns to itself, to be the most particular idea of the intellectual history of Europe, consisting of an effort to live a life based on rational insight and from there to glimpsing the truth.

## The Heretical Philosopher

Patočka’s *Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin* (Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History) were published in samizdat in 1975. It was Patočka’s culminating work, *inter alia* because it is where all the philosopher’s previous thinking about history is accumulated. It is also where Patočka’s phenomenological thinking is summarised; *making manifest* the phenomenon of history and at the same time – in a closing synthesis of Patočka’s two teachers, Husserl and Heidegger – inserting into it human existence in understanding specific life in society, in the world, in history.

Man is, in his finiteness, endowed with an infinity of freedom in which endless possibilities and their creative grasping in marginal situations open up to him – through which he becomes a being in history. The guarantee of this dynamism is a continual shaking “of the meaning of the previously given”, a shaking of guaranteed life certainties. The space of historicity opens with this shock only, with this intrusion of questionability.

According to Patočka, the Greek *polis* became the place where questionability broke into human life; history began in the contest between free citizens for its political direction. Questionability, which was then inextricably attached to human existence, was to be mitigated by grandiose attempts to constitute a metaphysical system later leading to the victorious control of the European space by Christianity. Once rational natural science is born in its womb, it will show, nevertheless, that the relative meaning of hu-



man existence cannot be derived from science or from any other externally given instance of absolute meaning. The shock with which history began is here again. However, “man cannot live without meaning, without the holistic and absolute meaning, he cannot live in the certainty of meaninglessness”. Patočka thus proposes to “acquire meaning as a path”. Man as finite and free “is to live in the atmosphere of questionability”. He has the ability to exist meaningfully even while “questioning the meaning and searching for it” at the same time. That is why the figure of Plato’s Socrates is so vital in the *Heretical Essays*, a man who taught his fellow citizens that in a choice between “having truth and searching for truth is necessary to opt for the latter”. To survive in this “attitude of having no anchor” and act responsibly means to live historically, “to realise meaning that is absolute but nevertheless accessible to humanity, because of its questionability” – in the freedom inclined towards acquiring the meaning. This as a whole is nothing other than “the movement of the self-caring soul”. Over less than two years Patočka found himself in the company of those few who – as he forecast in the *Heretical Essays* – in the spirit of their care of the soul, began to “care for the community”.

In 1976, with Jaroslav Seifert, Václav Černý, Václav Havel and other personalities, Patočka signed the protest addressed to President Husák against the trial of members of the underground music groups, The Plastic People of the Universe and DG 307, and the Protestant priest Svatopluk Karásek. Jan Patočka, an admirer of the “spirituality of Beethoven’s music,” accepted the “underground” musical manifestations. He did not himself like the music of these youngsters, but uncompromisingly defended their freedom to express themselves in it without regard to the regime’s consent or prohibition. The biblical words of one of Karásek’s songs appealed very much to Patočka: “Say No to the Devil!”

With the announcement of Charter 77 in January 1977, Patočka took on the role of its spokesman. He understood the basic intention of this civic initiative as being the idea of the universality of human and civil rights that had to be defended to the ultimate limits. He wrote on this “militantly”, in typewritten fliers distributing reflections about what Charter 77 meant. They helped to counter the propaganda war which the regime unleashed against the “losers and self-invited intruders”, as the signatories of the Charter 77 pamphlets were called in the daily *Rudé právo* published by the ÚV KSČ.

From the first days of the Charter, Patočka was involved with amazing energy, going round signatories with an agenda, organising, persuading and encouraging – in enormous physical and psychological stress, suffering at that time from a heavy attack of acute bronchitis. Meanwhile, he was carted off by secret police investigators to ever more frequent interrogations in Ruzyně prison, sometimes for the whole day, other times lasting far into the night. Václav Havel recalled how with great dignity Patočka delivered a lecture on the immortal soul, even here, in the “waiting room for interrogations”.

The regime was especially irritated when, at the beginning of March, Patočka had an opportunity to explain the Charter to the Dutch Foreign Minister Max van der Stoel, in Czechoslovakia on an official visit. This brought the Charter a wider recognition abroad.

Patočka was by that time at the end of his tether. After a whole day “outing” with his interrogators, the doctor diagnosed extreme heart failure, and called an ambulance. Patočka did not stop working even in hospital; he received guests and formulated announcements



Jan Patočka,  
spokesman for Charter 77, with  
Dutch Minister Max van der Stoel  
(photo by Vincent Mentzel)

about the meaning of the Charter, since “there are things for which it is worth suffering. And the things for which we eventually suffer are those that are worth living for.”

On Sunday 13 March 1977, Radio Free Europe broadcast the news that Jan Patočka had died in hospital in the seventieth year of his age. Immediately the same day Chvatík, Petříček, Polívka and Michálek, the most loyal students of the home seminar, went to his apartment and removed all the philosopher’s written work, so it would not fall into the hands of the secret police – including the manuscript in German lying in a significant place on his desk, bearing the title “Europa und Nach-Europa” (Europe and Post-Europe), which maybe Patočka had intended to continue working on after his return from hospital.

After the announcement of Patočka’s death, a burial was hurriedly arranged by the secret police on the morning of 16 March, so as few people as possible would know about it. That day, no flowers were obtainable anywhere in the whole of Břevnov where the funeral took place. The wreath that the poet Jaroslav Seifert had ordered for his friend from a florist mysteriously disappeared at the last minute. Trams stopped running to Břevnov shortly before the funeral, so mourners had to hurry to the cemetery on foot. Many of those whom the secret police had not managed to intern in time had their ID checked by the police even at the cemetery walls. The funeral service took place hurriedly in the cemetery chapel, which was too small to hold more than the close family; the adjoining Monastery Church of St. Markéta was out of bounds. A police helicopter hovered low over the cemetery, drowning out the priest’s words that hastily accompanied Jan Patočka to his eternal rest. In case perhaps one of the grieving visitors who had succeeded in reaching the graveside had wanted to catch at least a fragment of a prayer, motorcycles of the sports club Red Star revved up in the neighbouring speedway stadium. Members of the secret police were scattered among the graves and mourners or, equipped with state-of-the-art video technology, compiled their lists from a distance or from behind the cemetery wall.

Under a feeble March sun the coffin was lowered into the grave. Jan Patočka, a spiritual man and a man of history, set out on his “second life”.

After Patočka's death, the Charter 77 community took his legacy as its affirmatory seal and moral argument. Whether they understood the legacy in whole or only in part, it was over the years safeguarded like an amulet, until in 1989 Czechoslovakia crossed the threshold of radical change. Meanwhile, in the outside world, the international response to Patočka's Socratism also led to a more focused reading of his work. Patočka's reflections on the history of philosophy were recalled even in the drafting of the constitution of Europe, as it became united again. They affirm its spiritual principles; they define its identity as an original cultural space, founded on critical reason and freedom. They remain vital today, in our questing hesitation, to the extent that Europe remains Europe in the original meaning.

If future generations "between past and future" understand Jan Patočka and the way of his philosophical life, it will be proof of the fact that a community of those who think and search for meaning still exists; that the soul does not cease to care for itself and thus accepts responsibility towards history. An appropriate place in our memory will also be found for Jan Patočka. For, as he suggested, "true philosophers are those who know how to transform our life, how to give us something about what we had previously no idea, because what seems superfluous and fantastic to us, is the very truth itself..."

Forty years ago, when Jan Patočka was spokesperson for Charter 77, on the day he died the loyal students of his university lectures and unofficial home seminars removed the philosopher's writings from his apartment to ensure they would not fall irrevocably into the hands of the secret police. That day the Jan Patočka Archive symbolically came into existence. In subsequent years, the secret legacy was gradually transcribed, the frequently almost illegible author's sketches deciphered, classified, organised into sets and gradually published in samizdat, in twenty-seven thematic volumes. The whole archival corpus, concentrated into the years 1977–1989, with accompanying editorial and academic activities, became the basis of today's Jan Patočka Archive, deposited in the Institute of Philosophy of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences on 1 January 1990 and operating up until the present day.

#### COMING UP IN THE SCIENCE AROUND US SERIES:

Tomáš Černušák: **Všední život papežských nunciů u rudolfinského dvora**

Štefan Pilát: **Gorazd**

Miroslav Dočkal: **Cesta k jádru věci**

#### ALREADY PUBLISHED:

Jaroslav Pánek: **Institute of History, CAS (English edition)**

Ondřej Beránek: **Oriental Institute (English edition)**

Kateřina Piorecká and Pavel Janáček: **Czech literary studies and the Institute of Czech Literature, CAS (English edition)**

Science around us | Personalities  
*Jan Patočka | Jan Vít*

Published by the Center of Administration and Operation CAS, v. v. i. Layout: Jakub Krč; Type: WOW, spol. s r. o. Editor in charge: Petra Královcová. First edition, 2017. Edition number 12265. Print WOW, spol. s r. o., Washingtonova 1567/25, 110 00 Praha 1.

ISSN 2464-6245

Registered by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic under Reg. No. E 22344

Other volumes available at:

[www.vedakolemnas.cz](http://www.vedakolemnas.cz) | [www.academiaknihy.cz](http://www.academiaknihy.cz) | [www.eknihy.academia.cz](http://www.eknihy.academia.cz)