

SAMUEL ABRAHÁM
GRACIOUS ANALYST OF THINGS CZECH AND SLOVAK

Written K&K, 1996

The Canadian political scientist H. Gordon Skilling (1912) is an extraordinary individual who has studied the fate of Czechs and Slovaks since the 1930s. He is one of few Western scholars who does not rely on secondary sources but visited Czechoslovakia as often as he was allowed and able. What is even worthier is that he analyzed the perennial Slovak question. During the Normalization period (1969-1989) he met with dissidents in Prague, Brno and Bratislava and was "honoured" to be expelled by the Secret Police following one of his visits to (the dissidents) Milan Šimečka and Miroslav Kufyř in Bratislava. In the 1970s he helped found the Jan Hus Educational Foundation (along with another Canadian, Charles Taylor, Englishman Timothy Garton-Ash and others) that was in contact with dissidents, supplying them with books and various information, (through various diplomatic and "less" diplomatic channels,) and helped them to survive the oppressive Normalization period.

Skilling was also involved in "smuggling" dissident literature from Czechoslovakia some of which was published by Zdena Salivarovna and Jozef Škvorecký at their *68 Publishers* based in Toronto. Skilling's roots do not lie in Czechoslovakia so what explains his lifelong interest in this country? He first visited Czechoslovakia in 1937 as a young Canadian Rhodes scholar studying Czech history at the recommendation of R.W. Seton-Watson – a Scot who had followed the fortunes of Slavs, and especially Slovaks, in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy since the turn of the century. Skilling's interest was surely influenced during this two-year stay in the Czech Republic; which occurred at a time when Czechoslovakia was at a crossroads. For he lived through the last years of the First Republic, (founded in 1918,) which had become, as Skilling writes: "an island of democracy" in the midst of dictatorships in Eastern Europe and where reigned until 1935 the 'philosopher-king', Tomáš G. Masaryk" (*Listy z Prahy, 68 Publishers*, 1988). Since that visit he has followed the fortunes of the republic where the ideals on which Masaryk founded Czechoslovakia were shattered; first by the Nazis and then by the Communists. He was also fascinated by the philosophical works and political career of Masaryk. His latest book *Against the Current* follows Masaryk's life and work before World War I. Until the 1960s he focused his work as a political scientist on the theory of Communism. Yet, he had never lost interest in his "cherished country" and had remained in contact with Czechs and Slovaks both outside and inside Czechoslovakia. The year 1968 pulled him back to this region and starting then he began to focus his studies on the reform process during the 1968 Prague Spring and the Normalization period, 1969-1989. His *opus magnum* *Interrupted Revolution* remains the seminal study of the 1968-1969 period in Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately despite being translated into many languages (including Polish), it has not yet been published in either Czech or Slovak. In *Interrupted Revolution* Skilling succeeded in depicting accurately the different development and historical conditions in the Czech Lands and Slovakia, and the ensuing disparate reception and development of the 1968 reforms in each. Despite the break-up of Czechoslovakia, and despite the three decades since 1968, this book remains important for Czechs and Slovaks to read. This is true because of the general ignorance and stereotypical views of this period among Czechs and Slovaks, but mainly because it would help to clarify the current developments in both the Czech and Slovak republics. The problems, that Slovak society lived through in the period 1969-89, are similar and remain unresolved today.

During the Normalization period Skilling wrote a great number of studies dealing mainly with political culture and dissident activities in Czechoslovakia. Until the mid-eighties, he did not stop believing that the ideals he encountered in the 1930s remained imbedded inside Czechs and Slovaks. He believed that once the Iron Curtain fell, the spirit of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939) would return. It is only in his essays from the late eighties, when reforms were long under way in Gorbachev's Soviet Union, Poland and Hungary, that one detects in Skilling's writings doubt and

disillusion. If Slovaks and Czechs continued to tolerate the draconian regime of Gustav Husák– if the nations which Skilling trusted, and placed so much hope, failed to take their destiny into their own hands, at such an opportune time– then Skilling ceased to believe that the democratic predilection and political culture of the First Republic would reemerge.

Like many dissidents, Skilling was concerned about the civic passivity and obedience of the vast majority of Czechs and Slovaks. It was clear to him that the activities of a tiny group of dissidents was simply not sufficient to oust the Communist regime. For the future of Czechs and Slovaks the role of the dissidents as the flicker of hope and the conscience of the people was ill-fated. It provided an excuse for the compliant population to remain passive while at the same time dissidents were the bad conscience of those who were afraid to speak out. The dissidents fervently refused this role; they did not fight for the downfall of the Communist regime. Instead, as they stressed, they strove to live a meaningful existence in the midst of the dreadfulness of the Normalization period. Havel's proclaimed "life in truth" was an expression of individual resistance to the corrupt regime, a way to survive. In no way was it a political program. At most, it could serve as an appeal to the rest to act and think in a similar way. The dissidents followed Masaryk's command – "small work" and responsibility for one's own acts.

I had numerous conversations on this and other topics with Professor Skilling, and his dear wife Sally, before November 1989, at either his house or in his office at the University of Toronto; were he is Professor Emeritus.

The fall of the Communist regime in November 1989 took Skilling by surprise as it did many other Western analysts or, for that matter all of us, including the dissidents. He was immensely happy and infused with a feeling of self-vindication when he saw the cheerful and nonviolent masses during the "velvet" revolution. Yet, more than others, Skilling was aware that the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia was more due to the external pressure than a consequence of internal dynamics. Certainly he was delighted with the unfolding of the "velvet revolution" but he harboured no illusion as to its causes. He followed events prior to November 1989 too closely to be startled by the unexpected and smooth fall of the Communist regime. Nor was he very surprised by the speed with which the Czech and Slovak nations rebuffed the dissidents-turned politicians, or that the new generation of ambitious politicians rebuked these "dissident politicians" for their inexperience, mistakes, softness while in politics. The new wave of leaders that appeared suddenly and separated themselves from the silent majority did not need to be reminded by the "dissident politicians" about their earlier passivity past or even their sudden transformation from communists to democrats, and in the case of Slovakia, to nationalists.

Skilling regretted the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993 and was not surprised that the majority of Slovaks and Czechs supported the preservation of the federation. Again, more than others, he understood that the main legacy of Communism is absence of historical memory and the phenomena of a silent and passive majority. His book on Masaryk speaks about the life of an individual who was not only responsible for the creation of the Czechoslovakia in 1918 but, above all, was an authority who was willing to stand "against the current" anywhere and anytime where human rights were breached, and where evil tried to overpower and outshout human dignity. It is not a book about an individual at the peak of his fame but at a time when a true civic and humane position could have cost Masaryk his position, personal security, and perhaps even his life. Against the Current is an historical analysis but, as is true of all brilliant works of a similar nature, it is very relevant in any country and at any period in which human rights are under attack or democracy is under threat.

Post scriptum. In addition to being a brilliant scholar and a marvellous human being, Gordon Skilling has a great sense of humour. That is not surprising for any brilliant individual lacking a sense of humour is a "contradiction in adjecto". Perhaps the best stunt he concocted was in 1988 when, with the help of his dissident "connection", he organized a celebration of his fiftieth wedding anniversary at Prague City Hall – the City Hall where he and Sally were married in 1937. With great glee on his face he showed me the photographs showing a typical communist ceremony official conferring them with a plaque, and standing in the background is a group of about thirty prominent dissidents, all unusually well-dressed. Of course, that comrade official had no idea who the Skillings were or who was present at the ceremony.