

SPARKS OF FREEDOM

British Support for Brno Dissent
in the 1980s



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Annotated catalogue for the eponymous exhibition,
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Introduction

Close cooperation between Oxford philosophers and representatives of Prague dissent began in January 1979. Soon after, a charitable organisation known as the Jan Hus Educational Foundation (JHEF or *the Foundation*) was established to provide systematic support. Cooperation with the JHEF in Brno commenced in 1981, and the first home seminar was held in December 1984. This collaboration continued discreetly, and therefore without interruption, until the end of 1989. In the following year, the Czechoslovak Jan Hus Educational Foundation was established in Brno. It continues its activities to this day under its Czech name, Vzdělávací nadace Jana Husa (VNJH).

The exhibition *Sparks of Freedom: British Support for Brno Dissent in the 1980s*, held in the Marble Halls (Mramorové sály) of the Moravian Museum from 15 October 2025 to 19 April 2026, along with the accompanying eponymous catalogue, focuses on events in Brno during the second half of the 1980s. While this may seem a short time, both in terms of historical perspective and individual human experience, closer examination reveals the opposite. In the context of a totalitarian regime, five years of clandestine cooperation, secrecy and sustained international collaboration constituted an exceptionally long and intense period. A single misstep could have led to exposure of the entire operation, and intervention by state authorities had the potential to disrupt any plans overnight. In terms of everyday life, five years might seem to pass in the blink of an eye, but the exhibition and this catalogue aim to demonstrate how profoundly meaningful and transformative this period was for those involved, as well as those in their immediate circles.

In her book *The Velvet Philosophers*, Barbara Day introduces the narrative of British–Czechoslovak cooperation as the story of ‘a group of men and women on both sides of the Iron Curtain for whom philosophy was a matter of life and death’. This passion for learning, so rarely encountered by British academics in their own students, was precisely what inspired many from the democratic world to engage in this risky endeavour. The question of life and death, of genuine desire, was the driving force on both sides. In Brno, however, the effort extended beyond philosophy. It represented a revitalising source of education and culture in the broadest sense.

This true story unfolded in the 1980s. Although the worst brutality of the communist regime had subsided, people still lived under constant pressure and constraints. Even in this later period, the totalitarian regime still strove to maintain firm control over the lives of individuals. Whenever something escaped that control, and therefore posed a potential threat to the regime, it sought to suppress it and restore order. This included a wide range of punishments: from subtle threats, spiteful acts, traps, betrayals and underhand tactics in everyday life, to arrest, detention and imprisonment. The regime was remarkably inventive when it came to forms of punishment. Crude interference in people's lives, and even the mere fear of it, fractured relationships and left scars, not just on bodies but deep within minds and souls.

Home seminars (and the parallel world that formed around them) were an attempt to escape this straitjacket of control and lack of freedom. Liberation could come through a bold severing of ties, or by the quiet but deliberate and persistent unravelling of them. In Brno, it was the latter. The loosening of this grip brought the chance to breathe freely, along with flashes of joy, fulfilment and meaning. Achieving this required great patience and determination from the key participants; a stubborn resolve to live a free life without accepting imposed boundaries.

In the case of Jiří Müller, this resolve was accompanied by a strong sense of principle and strategic thinking. Petr Oslzlý, with his creative spirit, succeeded in expanding British support into areas beyond the home seminars. Miroslav Pospíšil connected Britons and Brno citizens through his interpreting skills. All three were united by their extraordinary diligence. It is also important to emphasise that all three men found support and understanding in their wives; Bronislava Müllerová, Eva Oslzlá and Yvona Pospíšilová. These women provided a stable family foundation and a sense of close support, which was essential to the smooth continuation of the activities. It was thanks to this harmonious collaboration and mutual trust that their joint efforts could endure.

The individual chapters of this catalogue follow a chronological structure, at least in part. However, much of the activity took place simultaneously across multiple cultural spheres. For this reason, the chapters are also organised thematically according to areas of focus. First, readers are introduced to the beginnings of British–Czechoslovak, and later specifically Brno-based, cooperation, especially regarding samizdat activities. The following chapters explore home cinemas, visual art, music and the environment. The catalogue also covers the activities of VNJH after 1989. At its core is the section devoted to home seminars with British guests, held in the home of Eva and Petr Oslzlý. The book concludes with a photographic appendix and biographical portraits of key figures associated with the Jan Hus Educational Foundation (JHEF).

The exhibition and catalogue draw on the rich resources of the JHEF and other collections held by the Moravian Museum's Department of the History of Antitotalitarian Culture (ODKAZ). They are also based on consultations with and personal collections of individuals associated with the JHEF, in particular Barbara Day, Jiří Müller, Petr Oslzlý, and Miroslav Pospíšil. We would like to express our sincere thanks to them for their advice, comments, insightful criticism and much-needed clarification and support, both professional and personal.

The Beginnings of Cooperation

Petra Pichlová

The Phenomenon of Home Seminars in Czechoslovakia

The emergence of home seminars in Czechoslovakia was closely linked to the rise of the totalitarian regime and its restrictions on independent-minded intellectuals.¹ Some of the first home seminars began as early as the 1950s, when university lecturers deemed politically undesirable were dismissed. These individuals typically took up manual labour but continued to educate themselves in their original fields and sought to share their knowledge with others. This trend intensified during the period of Normalisation in the 1970s, when political screening and further purges took place at universities. During this time, home seminars became the only space where knowledge could be freely exchanged and open discussion could occur. The seminars were seen as gatherings of people eager for knowledge and free intellectual debate.

A turning point came with the events surrounding Charter 77. From 1977 onwards, the number and frequency of home seminars increased, and efforts emerged to establish a more structured form of alternative education, including a programme that would to some extent be a substitute for formal academic study for those who had been denied it. As a result, many of the home seminars began to take place at regular intervals. (GRAEVENITZ 2009, 27)

One of these seminars was run by Julius Tomin, a signatory of the first wave of Charter 77. He initially lectured on ancient philosophy, with a particular focus on

¹ Numerous home seminars took place in Czechoslovakia, in various forms and at different locations. Their focus also varied, ranging from literary discussions and lectures in philosophy and the natural sciences to the activities of the hidden underground church. Educational circles also included prison lectures delivered by incarcerated university professors, such as the theoretician and art historian Růžena Vacková. A thorough classification and mapping of home seminars would merit a scholarly publication of its own.

FROM : JAN HUS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION PHONE NO. : 01716092703

Dec. 17 1996 05:54

The University of Oxford, Great Britain
Harvard University, USA
Free University, West Berlin
Heidelberg University, Federal Republic of Germany

From: Julius Tomin
Keramická 7
Prague 7, Czechoslovakia
Prague, 20. May 1978

We wish to establish scientific contacts

Dear Colleagues,

I should like to inform you about what we are doing and ask you to cooperate with us in our work.

I, my friends and my students all live in Czechoslovakia. It is now about a year since we decided no longer to accede to the illegal way in which the representatives of State power in this country arrogate to themselves the right to decide who may be allowed to study and what they should be studying, who may give lectures and what subjects they should lecture on. We therefore resolved to get together for the purpose of studying philosophy. As I have for the past 14 years devoted myself to the study of ancient philosophy, it is this subject we chose for our meetings. As was to be expected, it wasn't long before officials of the Interior Ministry began to take an interest in our work. They displayed their interest in their own, characteristic fashion, subjecting us to many hours of interrogation and exerting pressure on us with a view to getting us to abandon our studies. Our need for this kind of joint effort was, however, stronger and we stuck it out. Nor are we isolated in our struggle to gain the right to study - the Charter 77 movement, which is striving to establish fundamental human rights in our country, has given us backing, and we have the support of public opinion abroad. As a result, our course in philosophy has now been running for a whole year. To the credit of the Ministry of the Interior let it be said that they have hitherto not put any further obstacles in our way, at least not directly: they are content to carry out persecution of individuals by sacking them from their jobs, preventing young people from studying at secondary schools and universities, and so on. At times, though, they still threaten us: "We'll destroy you - you and your Plato!" Since we started inviting our friends abroad to come and join our sessions, I haven't received any foreign mail. That is why I have resorted to this Open Letter to your four universities. I have been deprived of all means by which to try and establish scientific contacts in the normal way.

We cannot accept a state of affairs where the authorities decide to whom we may write and from whom receive letters, who may come and visit us, who may talk to us, who may share his knowledge and his experience with us. Most of us have for many years now been studying English and German, our spiritual world is partly formed by the literature of your countries. How can we permit all live contact with contemporary cultural and scientific life in Great Britain, the USA, and West Germany to remain permanently cut off? We cannot even travel to the German Democratic Republic, as our passports have been confiscated. We cannot buy English or German newspapers and journals, and all printed matter sent to us by friends is prevented from reaching us. However, our country needs foreign currency (the living standards of the representatives and executors of State power cannot these days be maintained without Western goods) and so foreigners are welcome. You thus have an opportunity to come to Czechoslovakia and to visit us.

What subjects are we interested in? We wish to understand the world we live in, so we cannot ignore the natural sciences. Has science become a mere instrument for the technical exploitation of nature, or has it retained its capacity to give us an understanding of the universe? We shall welcome natural scientists who will try to bring closer to us the world of the natural sciences as part of the human struggle for understanding... We wish to understand the society we live in - we shall welcome economists and sociologists... We wish to understand Man - we shall welcome psychologists, philosophers, theologians... We wish to understand the development of mankind - we shall welcome anthropologists, historians, futurologists, ecologists... There is no discipline, no subject we can possibly exclude out of hand. There is only one condition - you need to have the desire to come and see us, to share with us the fruits of your own study and research. As I receive no mail from abroad and as my telephone may any day be taken away from me, we cannot count on the normal means of communication. Perhaps you will therefore allow me to suggest a solution which I consider the most convenient: we meet to study philosophy in my flat every Wednesday at 6 p.m., from September to June. You will be most welcome whenever you choose to join us. Ideally, we should like to set aside an agreed day for your lectures, for instance the first Wednesday in the month between October and June.

Dear friends, we shall be very happy if you accept our invitation and decide to cooperate with us. Please come and visit us.

Copy of the letter sent by Julius Tomin on 20 May 1978 to four foreign universities. The English versions were sent to Oxford and Harvard, and the German versions to Heidelberg and Berlin. Of the four universities, only Oxford responded. Jan Hus Educational Foundation Collection



Photo from a clandestine meeting between Julius Tomin and his students. Barbara Day Collection

British Home Seminars in the Household of Eva and Petr Oslzlý

Marta Mrázová

Jiří Müller knew that since his activities were unacceptable to the regime, he could not himself host foreign lecturers. He therefore decided to approach his long-time friend Petr Oslzlý, then dramaturge at the Brno-based Divadlo na provázku (Theatre on a String). Oslzlý's work at the theatre and his broader cultural engagement could provide the seminars with 'perfect cover.' (DAY 1999, 133) Oslzlý had many international contacts connected to his theatrical work, so it did not seem suspicious when foreign visitors appeared at his home. Müller deliberately selected the harmonious household of Eva and Petr Oslzlý, '... because only a good marriage could endure the requirements I had.'¹⁸ He followed the same logic when choosing the household of Jana and Milan Jelínek for French lecturers and that of Marie and Jaroslav Blažke for German speakers. It must also be emphasised that the strong bond between Bronislava and Jiří Müller formed the core of the flawless organisation behind these events.

Müller approached Petr Oslzlý saying he wanted to discuss a 'serious proposal' with him and his wife Eva. (OSLZLÝ 1993, 13) During the ensuing visit, he explained how the proposed seminar should be organised and made them explicitly aware of the risks it would entail. Petr Oslzlý recalls: 'Given our values, mine and my wife's, Jiří assumed we would offer our flat for the project, fully take on the organisation, make it our own, and be prepared to risk a confrontation with the StB, which naturally loomed over the whole affair and, if it came to pass, would undoubtedly endanger our entire family.' (OSLZLÝ, JEŘÁBKOVÁ 2020, 176) The Oslzlýs agreed without hesitation. They had several personal reasons. They had studied at university during the relatively free climate of the 1960s and were thus a 'lost generation' for the totalitarian regime, having 'absorbed too much of the freedom of 1968 and not enough Marxism.' (ibid., 14) As a result, they were unable to teach at universities and participate in shaping the education of young people. Petr Oslzlý

¹⁸ E-mail from Jiří Müller to Petra Pichlová, 27 March 2019.

NOTES FOR VISITORS TO PRAGUE AND BRNO

1) Accommodation

Unless you are staying with a private individual, it is advisable to book a hotel in advance. One way to do this is through a travel agent in this country. The usual arrangement is that one pays in advance (in western currency) for the room and for half pension, receiving in return a set of vouchers. The food vouchers are for fixed sums in Czech currency, and they can be used towards payment of bills in any of the Interhotel restaurants in Czechoslovakia - so that you are not restricted to eating in your own hotel. One may also be given vouchers to cover the cost of a hotel bus, run by Čedok (the Czech travel agency), from the airport to the hotel and back again. If one has paid for half pension in advance, one is under no legal obligation to change money into Czechoslovak crowns. The cheapest hotel that can be booked from this country is the Zlatá Husa in Wenceslas Square; it is not grand but is perfectly adequate.

A booking can also be made by sending a post card to the hotel of your choice in advance. It is also possible to go without a booking and find one's own hotel, though there is a risk that this may not be easy to do. (The production of a 20 Kč note at a hotel desk has been known to cause a room to become suddenly available.) If one travels in either of these fashions one is legally obliged to change a certain amount of money - about £10 for each day of the visit - at the official rate (and one cannot change it back into Western currency). This must be done at the airport or on the border crossing point before passport control.

If you are staying privately, i.e. not in a hotel, the same point about money applies. It is also essential to register with the police. (If you are staying in a hotel, the hotel will do the registration for you.)

2) Money

Money can be changed legally at the airport or at any bank; the queues are usually shortest at the airport. It can also be changed legally at some hotels. Money that is changed legally can be changed back into Western currency if it is over and above the amount one is obliged to change by law; the appropriate receipts are needed. Money that is changed illegally cannot be changed back. No significant amount of Czechoslovak money - which in practice means no amount over about 50 Kčs - may be taken out of the country. Even at the official rate of exchange Czechoslovakia is not expensive. (Money can be changed illegally at a better rate, most often with taxi drivers and night porters. It can never be considered a safe practice.)

3) Security

a) Border crossings

Passport and visa are examined on entry and travellers' cheques, foreign currency and valuable including cameras are sometimes registered. A simple registration ticket for these if issued should be retained and any conversion to foreign currency or travellers' cheques entered upon it. If you are carrying a lot of money prepare a story about preferring it to travellers' cheques or needing it for some later part of your trip. (If the cash is for stipend distribution, then avoid declaring it if possible.) Usually visitors are not searched, although in recent months some visitors have had their books confiscated. It is best to prepare some story about why you have so many books with you. Perhaps you are in the midst of a research trip or you were given them at your last port of call. It is also best to pencil your name in some, and perhaps to insert marker slips with notes suggesting you are reading them. Visitors to Brno will normally catch the bus leaving Vienna shortly after 5.00 p.m. It takes about 45 minutes to reach the city centre by bus from the airport and then about 5 minutes walk to the bus station.

The Jan Hus Educational Foundation and Brno Samizdat

Petra Pichlová

Jiří Müller's feel for conspiracy was fully ignited after his release from a five-year prison sentence in December 1976.⁴¹ It was at that time that he began to devote himself intensively to samizdat activities. He saw this as a meaningful pursuit: one that could awaken people from inertia and, more importantly, build bridges between the world of dissent and a broader readership. This effort to create connections proved successful for Müller (and, very soon after, also for Bronislava Koutná, who he married in 1979). Not only did the production of their publishing operation, originally intended as a re-edition of Ludvík Vaculík's *Petlice* series, expand, but the number of subscribers outside dissident circles grew, even including individuals within official structures. According to Jiří Müller's recollections, this included judges from the Municipal Court in Brno: 'There was a group of four judges; two women and two men. And one of the women even worked as an editor on some literature. We all shared the same interest. I was interested in ensuring that I didn't put them at risk, so that they could continue working as judges. One of them later became President of the Constitutional Court.' (URBÁŠEK 2005, 598)

Such expansion could only occur thanks to strict adherence to the rules of secrecy and efforts to keep activities as hidden as possible: 'The Müllers followed strict conspiratorial rules: dozens of people collaborated with them, regularly or occasionally, knowingly or unknowingly, but they were never informed about each other.' (PŘIBÁŇ 2018, 515) This secrecy, de-

⁴¹ Jiří Müller was arrested in November 1971 and a year later sentenced to five and a half years in prison for subversion of the republic (he had organised the production and distribution of leaflets ahead of the elections to representative bodies). He was released in December 1976. (PŘIBÁŇ 2018, 514) Immediately after his release, he signed Charter 77 and brought the text of the declaration to Brno, where – together with Jaroslav Šabata – he began recruiting the first signatories.



Jiří Müller shortly after his return from prison at the end of 1976. Jiří Müller Collection



In 1979, Jiří Müller married Bronislava Koutná. All subsequent unofficial activities were joint efforts. Pictured with their parents at a cottage in 1979. From left: Bronislava Koutná, Jiří Müller, Františka Müllerová, Vilém Müller and Anna Koutná Tesařová. Jiří Müller Collection

Home Cinemas

Romana Dominika Hrbatová

Cinema, like other forms of art, was subject to censorship in Czechoslovakia during the first half of the 1980s. Some of the films were not released for general distribution at all, let alone being shown in private Czechoslovak households. This cultural sphere became one of the areas of interest for Bronislava and Jiří Müller (PICHLOVÁ 2020, 333–334). At that time, there were only limited options on the domestic market for acquiring video-cassettes and VCRs for personal use. While such technology was widely available and commonly used abroad, ordinary citizens in Czechoslovakia enjoyed no such privilege. The first Tesla-brand VCRs⁷⁶ began to appear on the domestic market in around 1983–1984, usually available through Tuzex hard-currency shops. Another option was to receive a device as a gift or to import one from abroad.⁷⁷ This offered an opportunity to harness Western technological advancement in the service of greater freedom at home. The Müllers had been considering this option for a very long time: ‘The idea of importing a VCR was not some passing whim. Jiří and Bronislava Müller had worked it out in detail, including other aspects that home cinemas could offer’ (ibid., 333). They presented their proposal, along with the idea of establishing so-called *home cinema* screenings⁷⁸, during a visit from Paul Flather in July 1984: ‘*Most Klub* (meaning bridge club): this is the video club project, described by JM as building bridges out of the current ghetto, where dissidents and others find themselves, to the rest of the population (hence the name)’.⁷⁹ One

⁷⁶ These were devices assembled from kits imported by the Dutch company Philips, which had a licensing agreement with the Bratislava-based Tesla plant. (DĚP 1987, 256)

⁷⁷ In his letter, Jiří Müller proposed to Roger Scruton that a VCR be brought legally into Czechoslovakia from abroad, for example as a wedding gift. Letter from Jiří Müller to Roger Scruton, dated 22 August 1984. Held in the JHEF fund, ODKAZ sub-collection, Moravian Museum.

⁷⁸ Petr Oslzlý recalls the existence of home cinemas: ‘Our British friends brought over books that were unavailable here, and kept asking whether there was anything else we might need. So Jiří Müller and I came up with the idea that we could run an underground home cinema, screening banned films. I received foreign currency from Britain so I could buy a colour television and VCR in Tuzex – owning a VCR was still quite rare in our circles at the time.’ (OSLZLÝ, JERÁBKOVÁ 2020, 183)

⁷⁹ Report from Paul Flather’s trip, 6–16 July 1984. Held in the JHEF fund, ODKAZ subcollection, Moravian Museum.



Photo taken during filming of a documentary about places connected with Gustav Mahler's childhood in Kaliště and the surrounding area. From left: Markéta Oslzlá, Petr Oslzlý, David Matthews, Mrs. Kratochvílová and Miroslav Pospíšil. August 1989. Miroslav Pospíšil Collection

The Underground University and the Visual Arts

Romana Dominika Hrbatová

The 1980s in Czechoslovakia were a difficult and unacceptable time for many young artists who refused to submit their creative freedom to 'Normalisation ideals' and the restrictions and directives of censorship. Many of them thus became classified as 'unauthorised' artists,¹⁰¹ losing the possibility of making a living through their art and having to seek other means of livelihood.¹⁰² This situation gradually manifested itself in all areas, particularly in education. At the same time, suitable specialist literature for study was also unavailable. Access to sources dealing with contemporary visual art in Czechoslovakia and abroad was complicated, and above all, financially demanding.¹⁰³

No work of art can exist solely for its own sake. There is an interaction between the artist and the viewer, and, of course, among artists themselves. The possibility of discussion, of inspiration, as well as a free art market; all of this influences the existence of a free creative environment. Just as a writer finds it difficult to write only for the drawer, a visual artist needs to exhibit their work. Artists therefore naturally sought ways to exhibit together, in 'small informal galleries' (flats, cottages or gardens).

As part of his concept of the underground university as a 'Faculty of Arts', one of the organisers, Petr Oslzlý, himself a graduate in both theatre studies and art history, also considered it desirable to provide lectures on art. In May 1985, thanks to the international touring of Divadlo na provázku (Theatre on a String), he travelled to the United Kingdom. The theatre presented its English-language version of Bertolt Brecht's *The Wedding* at the 19th International Brighton Festival (OSLZLÝ et al. 1999). It was in Brighton that he first met Jessica Douglas-Home (née Jessica Gwynne). Together they arranged a secret meeting with Roger Scruton at the Caledonian Club in London, near Hyde Park. Petr Oslzlý later commented on this decision: 'My visit to London was, of course, not the result of a game of chance encounters, momentary ideas or decisions. It had been prepared in advance.

¹⁰¹ At the time, artistic merit was not the decisive factor. What mattered were political views, or whether one had joined the Socialist Youth Union or the Communist Party.

¹⁰² Otherwise, they risked being charged with *parasitism*.

¹⁰³ 'A book on art ordered from a Western publisher could cost as much as half a month's salary.' (DAY 1999, 169)



Backstage at the 19th International Brighton Festival, May 1985: Divadlo na provázku presents the English version of Bertolt Brecht's *The Wedding*. From left: Jiří Pecha, Bolek Polívka, ?, Miroslav Donutil, Iva Bittová, ?. CED Archive, ref. DHNP-AF-III-016. Photo by Pavel Zatloukal



The Theatre on String performed their *Commedia dell'arte* and a drama workshop in Bristol within the Days of Czechoslovak Culture held on the JHEF's initiative. Theatre historian Barbara Day was the key figure behind the organisation of the event. The Centre for Experimental Theatre Archive, ref. DHNP-AF-III-016. Photo Pavel Zatloukal

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