



Contemporaries about the “Velvet Revolutions”

Interview with
Jiří Šitler

Jiří Šitler is a Czech historian and diplomat who has worked in European universities and archives; in the team of the first president of Czechoslovakia – and the Czech Republic – Vaclav Havel. Later he represented the interests of the Czech Republic in the rank of the Ambassador to Southeast Asia, Romania and Sweden as well as in the negotiations on compensation for the Czech victims of the Nazi regime under WW II. He is the author of the numerous essays, articles and books on the political history of Czechia, Czech – German relations, history of the Second World War, as well as on the history of Southeast Asia.

Dear Mr. Šitler!

Visegrad Europe: *You are living a very interesting life where you have had the possibility to immerse yourself in various types of Humanitarian work: Firstly being a historian working for the Academy of sciences and lecturing at numerous universities worldwide; then as a press-secretary and foreign policy advisor to the first Czech President Vaclav Havel and afterwards as a diplomat, ambassador fulfilling numerous special tasks inevitably connected to history and presenting your country both in Asia and Europe... Could you name some moments from these three stages that you could relay as your greatest accomplishments when discussing amongst your friends and closest colleagues?*

Jiří Šitler: As a historian, but also as a member of the presidential staff, I worked from the shadows. My greatest achievements were if I could discover a new history source, or if my advice was accepted. My time as an independent actor came only after I became a senior diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was the chief negotiator of compensation for Czech Nazi victims with Germany and Austria, and I am immensely proud about the result. 80 000 of our citizens were finally compensated, after I dedicated several years of my career to this issue. This is my biggest life achievement so far. By the way, this was probably the only occasion when I had the opportunity to cooperate intensively with Russian partners. Czechs, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians and Jewish organizations worked together to make sure that victims in Central and Eastern Europe get some compensation. I am also quite proud of the role I played, together with my good friend Petr Vágner, in establishing the International Visegrád Fund. Sadly, Petr Vágner died recently. His death is a great loss to all of us — he was not only a great promoter of the Visegrád cooperation, but also an expert in Russian history, and the history of the countries of the former Soviet Union in general. But back to my career: There is also a lot of stories to tell from my time spent in Asia — from Burma, or with the Czech-speaking king of Cambodia.

VE. *Do you find your education in history was a good choice for fulfilling these tasks? In which situations did it help you more than other acquired skills? And how do you estimate the value of such knowledge for the work of diplomats from the height of your experience?*

J.Š. Before 1989, I never considered to work for the government or to perform any public duties whatsoever. The goals of the communist regime were not mine, and I was not ready to become a member of the party and to serve them. I thought I would live in a niche, as a low-level academic studying distant past (which was less ideologized than recent history). Even

after 1989, when I was considering new options, public service wasn't one of them originally. I wanted to complete my education abroad, and to travel. I thought about leaving the Academy to found a travel agency. However, I joined the Office of the President in March 1993, and I realized that knowledge of history, and also fluency in languages I had to master as a historian were great assets.

VE. Our journal has dedicated several issues to the topic of The Velvet Revolution. It seems you are the just person to ask about your recollections from the top of the events, as well as about your experience from the work close to Vaclav Havel. First of all, the question about the origins. To your mind, this time (after the experience of 1968) which factor plaid the triggering role: inner, or changes that began internationally, also in the USSR (Gorbachev factor), in the neighboring countries?

J.Š. I think that without international change, there would be no change in Czechoslovakia. The Gorbachov factor was very important. The regime in Czechoslovakia was rotten, the leadership incompetent, but when it could still rely on the Soviet Union, it was going strong. However, it was very important that there were people around Václav Havel, Charter 77 and other groups, who were able to give face and structure to popular discontent, and to seize power when the regime imploded.

VE. From here it appears that the steps undertaken in Prague were more cautious in comparison to Hungary and Poland. Was it the factor of 1968, and to what extent?

J.Š. We have to differentiate between the situation before and after 1989. Before 1989, the changes were more cautious or rather lacking. And it was definitely caused by the 1968 factor. After 1968, all reformist elements were purged from the communist party and from all leading positions, and the civil society was crushed. There were some "grey zones" in academia and economy where few pockets of independent thought survived. However, comparing to Poland or Hungary with strong reformist wings within their communist parties, and with strong independent non-communist forces in the society (like the catholic church in Poland etc.), it was nothing. It came to a paradox: when reformist Hungary and Poland apologized for their role in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Czechoslovak communist regime refused the statements and complained that the apology (not the invasion!) was an interference in our internal relations. The Warsaw Pact invasion was their source of legitimacy; without that, they were nothing. After 1989, the pace of changes was suddenly faster than in Poland and Hungary: the lack of reformists in the administration meant that there was a stronger need to replace them by newcomers. The Office of the President was composed entirely from new staff, and there were

some quite radical changes in our diplomatic corps and MFA personnel, as well as in other government institutions. Restitution and privatization laws and other economic reforms were adopted rather quickly. There was more continuity in Poland and Hungary.

VE. To what an extent was Czechoslovakia prepared to use the thus widely open window of opportunity? I mean was the “revolutionary wind” something sudden for Czechoslovak opposition or?

J.Š. Dissidents around Charter 77 and other independent groups did not expect such a rapid change, they expected a protracted negotiated transition. Like in Hungary and Poland, but slower than in those countries because of the dissidents’ relative weakness and the lack of reformist wing in the party. However, the mood among general population changed fast also in Czechoslovakia. Since 1988, there were mass demonstrations against the regime, many of them spontaneous and only partially organized by the opposition. The government suppressed them violently, especially during the so-called Palach week in January 1989. People were becoming less fearful and less pessimistic, especially the young generation, which didn’t experience the 1968 invasion. And everybody could see changes all around, including the fall of the Berlin Wall. Still, the opposition didn’t expect that the demonstration on 17 November 1989 would become the trigger for a regime change. They were aiming for a big demonstration on 10 December, the International Day of Human Rights.

VE. With the events on the Vaclav square... Could you share with us how your day began? What had impressed you most? Were there any doubts, any awareness of events on the air?

J.Š. First of all, the demonstration at Albertov in the afternoon of the 17th of November, which was officially celebrated as International Students’ Day in communist Czechoslovakia, was permitted, for whatever reason. It was supposed to be a commemorative event to honour Czech students killed or sent to concentration camps by Nazis in 1939, and it was co-organized by the Socialist Youth Union and independent student organizations. I participated in a previous demonstration on the 28th of October which was violently suppressed. We were not sure what would the security forces do on the 17th of November, given the fact that the event was permitted. But the air was full of expectations. It was Friday. I went with a bunch of friends from the university, and the participation was huge. The representative of the Socialist Youth was booed. I remember I was particularly impressed by one of the speakers, Josef Šárka, a veteran of the events of 1939 and a concentration camp survivor. He said that their generation of students was not afraid of Nazis, and the current generation of students shouldn’t be afraid of communists. He challenged us with the slogan “Tvrdě do tvrdého!” which means something like “Meet the

toughness with toughness!”. We marched to Vyšehrad, an ancient castle in Prague, and from there to Národní street, through which we wanted to enter the Wenceslas Square. More and more people were joining, exiting their houses or workplaces. The crowd was shouting “Češi pojďte s námi!” (“All Czechs, come and join us!”), and I remember that there was a group of Roma doing construction work on a street we passed through. One of them shouted. “Can Gypsies join, too?” (A Cikáni můžou taky?) and the crowd responded “Gypsies too” (A Cikáni taky!), and they joined. It was exhilarating, I felt free for the first time in my life, and it felt like the breakthrough. The situation suddenly changed at the Národní street. Security forces separated about 2000 demonstrators from the rest, I was among them. After a standoff, there were suddenly armoured vehicles everywhere, barking dogs, police in riot gear. They pushed the 2000 people together so that we couldn’t breathe, people were crawling under cars, crying, shouting. Then they created a single way out of the encircled area, if you didn’t want to suffocate, you had to take it — and get severely beaten in the process. It also happened to me. The crowd was probably too big to be dispersed, and they wanted to set an intimidating example on this smaller group. We regrouped at a friend’s house, and we agreed that people won’t take it anymore: also the older generation won’t sit at home when their children get beaten. Already on Saturday, the opposition around Václav Havel was able to form the Civic Forum, to create a network all around the country (with universities and theatres forming the organizational backbone and meeting places) and to formulate first demands. I travelled to visit my parents on Saturday, but I was back in Prague on Monday to organize a local cell of the Civic Forum at my workplace, which was the Central Archives of the Academy of Sciences at that time.

VE. And virtually saying — the “second day” of the revolution... Were there any disappointments, surprises from inside or internationally?

J.Š. Well, I can’t say I was really disappointed. After the weekend, I started to produce leaflets and posters with the slogan “Tvrdě do tvrdého”, but the motto of the day was non-violence (that’s why the events became known as Velvet Revolution) and I was a bit disappointed that there was no use of them. But I didn’t expect that everything would become rosy suddenly. I just wanted freedom, and that’s what I got. After 1989, my fate was up to me, and not in the hands of communist party brass and bureaucrats.

VE. You began your work at the office of the President in 1993? What were your primary tasks and impressions from the first meetings with Václav Havel?

J.Š. I joined the presidential office after I returned back from my stay at a university in Germany. I badly needed the stay abroad for my personal devel-

opment and self-confidence. I was asked to join the president's team because, at that time, there was still a lack of personnel which had some language skills and experience from abroad but was not compromised by the communist regime. Also, it was immediately after the split of Czechoslovakia, and when Václav Havel was re-elected, this time as the Czech president, new staff was needed to re-fill vacant positions. I was actually hesitating but then I thought I would try for a couple of months. I remained public servant ever since. I started to work in the press department, and the spokesman forgot to introduce me. So, when I began to appear around the president with journalists, he thought I was a new security guard. My physique is nothing like a security guard though. However, we were a small team, and I got to know president very well, and I gained his trust. I am proud that he valued my advice and expertise, especially on relations to Germany, on human rights related issues, and on his speeches and public appearances. I switched to the foreign policy department after some time. President Havel was an international celebrity back then, and there was a certain glamour in working with him. On personal level, it was easy, he valued advice of others, had a great sense of humour. On the other side, he was very disciplined, when it came to the exercise of his presidential duties, and pedantic, when it came to paperwork; his desk was always very neatly organized. Far from the Bohemian image people usually have of him.

VE. The parting from Slovakia. How did Vaclav Havel accept it, what were his forecasts for the separation? Was it already during your period of work for him? If yes – what were his emotions?

J.Š. I didn't work for him during the period of separation. He was definitely against the separation, but he saw that he couldn't stop it, and that's why he resigned as a federal president. When I joined his team, the separation was already a fact. Václav Havel knew though that relations with Slovakia would always remain very close, and it was important to him to cultivate relations with president Kováč.

VE. The Visegrad group has marked this year its 30th anniversary. Trying to find the roots I have found various interpretations of the events. Vaclav Havel or Jozsef Antall: who was the first to voice over the idea? Please, share with us how do you see the process being the foreign policy adviser to Vaclav Havel soon after it happened.

J.Š. I don't know who was the actual author of the idea. Maybe it was something that just arose because there was an objective need for such a cooperation. After the liberation from the confines of Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, we needed a regional structure to show that we were ready to work together, which was a prerequisite of our integration in Western European structures.

VE. How do you evaluate those three decades? To what extent does the V4 nowadays correspond to the ideals of 1991–1993?

J.Š. The V4 underwent several transformations over the time. At the beginning, there was the common goal of integration into European and Transatlantic structures. Later, when we noticed that our civil societies were losing contact with each other because of the focus on the above-mentioned integration, we created the International Visegrád Fund to promote academic and people-to-people exchanges among us. I think this is an aspect that is still very important, and can serve as an example to other regions, like the former Soviet Union, or Western Balkans. We can live together in peace in the region, respecting each other. For Czechia, being anchored in the West and promoting people-to-people exchanges between our countries, that's the true and living legacy of the founders of the group. Of course, the group can also serve as a lobbying group if we identify joint interests when dealing with our partners, but not on the cost of its true legacy.

VE. My two final questions to you are as to historian and diplomat. Where in your opinion is the point where our “new interpretations of history” (some of which were simply forbidden under socialism and come to the forefront in Central Europe currently with the establishment of a new ideology) would not clash to an extent from which there – virtually speaking – will be no way out?

J.Š. I think that at least with our neighbours, we are actually closer to understanding each other's views on history than ever before, including in the communist era. We have joint committees of historians with Germany, Poland, and Austria (among others), and although they are government-funded, they are strictly independent. They studied problematic parts of our common history. Journalists use their books because they know they are not tainted by ideology. The last great achievement is a joint Czech-Austrian history textbook. The precondition is that we do not use history as a weapon and that politicians do not try to impose their national perspective on the others. I would be happy if we could achieve something like that with Russia one day.

VE. What a lesson should we inherit from this “wall of history” not to turn it into a new Berlin wall? Is history purely the job of the archivists, or a base for national schoolbooks? Or should we simply let it be the inner affair of the states and escape any interference in this process. What does your experience in humanitarian diplomacy suggest?

J.Š. Politicians should learn from history, but they should not teach history. They should be sure that hatred towards others doesn't have place in national textbooks.

VE. Thank you very much for the interview. And finally: what would you like to wish to Czechia, to Russia and to our relations?

J.Š. We need prosperity, peace, freedom, and mutual curiosity. And mutual respect, including respect for national sovereignty.

Prague, April 2021

Современники о «Бархатных революциях» Интервью «Вишеградской Европы» с Йиржи Шитлером

Йиржи Шитлер — чешский историк и дипломат за плечами которого работа в европейских университетах и архивах; в команде первого президента Чехословакии — а затем Чехии — Вацлава Гавела; представительство интересов Чехии в ранге Посла в Юго-Восточной Азии, в Румынии и в Швеции; в переговорах о компенсации чешским жертвам нацистского режима... Он автор эссе и многочисленных статей о чешской политической истории, книг об истории Второй мировой войны, а также истории Юго-Восточной Азии. В интервью, которое, он любезно согласился дать нашему журналу, он увлекательно рассказывает о своих достижениях в области истории и дипломатии, а также делится впечатлениями о бархатной революции в Чехии свидетелем и участником которой он стал, а также о годах работы в команде президента Вацлава Гавела. Революция изменила его планы касательно профессии, когда его знания иностранных языков и истории оказались востребованными строителями молодой чешской демократии. Пригодился и организационный революционный опыт. Й.Шитлер рассказывает, как создавал ячейку Гражданского форума у себя на работе, в Центральном архиве Академии наук и о событиях до и после знаковых дней ноября 1989 года, когда чехи решили идти в своей борьбе до конца.

Реформы в Чехословакии были не только более «бархатными», они были одновременно и более спонтанными нежели в отчасти готовившимися к ним соседних Венгрии и Польше. Потому в первые дни после революции потребовалось кардинальное замещение экспертного и административно-управленческого аппарата не только в правительстве, но и в самих министерствах. Так Йиржи Шитлер оказался в команде президента. Ему повезло в том смысле, что президент Гавел высоко ценил экспертное мнение, а в общении обладал уникальным чувством юмора. Как он считает это было лучшим стартом для работы будущего дипломата.

Отвечая на наши вопросы о Вишеградской группе и об отношениях с Россией, Йиржи Шитлер отметил связующую роль, которую играет вишеградское объединение в своем регионе одновременно повышая престиж входящих в него стран. Говоря об отношениях с Россией, мы не могли обойти стороной идущий сейчас процесс возвращения к очищенной от нагромождений коммунистической идеологии истории. «Политики должны учиться на историческом опыте, но они не должны учить истории. Они должны лишь следить за тем, чтобы ненависть к другим и друг к другу не находила места в учебниках.» Отвечая на вопрос что бы он пожелал нашим взаимоотношениям, Й.Шитлер ответил: «Нам нужно процветание, мир, свобода и взаимное любопытство. Также нам необходимо взаимное уважение, включая уважение национального суверенитета друг-друга.»