

## Prisoners of their Generation

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I would like to begin this article on a personal note since Albín Bagin (1939 – 1982) was, with Ivan Kadlečík, my closest friend for more than a quarter of a century. On one occasion, in April 1968, he wrote to me (his letters were veritable micro-reviews): “I have just seen the third issue of *Mladá tvorba*<sup>1</sup> and realized that we had an agreeable meeting on the pages of this magazine. Although our pieces are very different, I feel a kind of spiritual connection between us.” I felt something that Ivan Kadlečík recently described when writing about the three of us: “We had no need to seek one another out because [...] we found one another a long time ago, when we met at university in the 1950s.” And he adds: “At that time we were already writing to each other in the summer vacations.”

We might say that Ivan took up the epistolary genre programmatically, for he says: “when people stop writing to each other, as happens so often today, history slows down and soon it will cease to exist.” (From this point of view, even I am ceasing to exist, even though I try at least to call Ivan regularly, because it is quite impossible to force him to text me.) Albín, who was also a keen letter writer, has an important place in my memory, which I have revisited for this occasion, and re-read his letters. I regret that unfortunately not all of them are at my disposal. Be that as it may, letters served as an important medium of communication in the late 1950s and early 1960s, however old-fashioned that might seem today. That is why we were so interested in the editions of the collected letters or memoirs of Ľ. Štúr, J. Hollý, P. J. Šafárik, M. Hamuljak, A. Sládkovič, S. H. Vajanský, P. O. Hviezdoslav, which were so widely published the 1950s and 1960s.

When we began our studies at the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in that historic year of 1956 – though we did not, of course, realise its historical importance at the time – we did feel something unusual was in the offing. Milan Rúfus published his collection of poetry *When We Mature*, Dominik Tatarka’s novel *Demon of Consent* appeared in *Kultúrny život*<sup>2</sup>, the magazine *Mladá tvorba* was established, and we were reading the rather opportunistic *Slovenské pohľady*,<sup>3</sup> whose editor-in-chief in those chaotic times was Alexander Matuška. We greatly admired his collection, mostly from his younger years, entitled *For and Against*, which also appeared that year and inspired us with an openness and polemical character more typical of pre-war Czechoslovak writing. The 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956 denounced the personality cult of Stalin and opened the eyes of some communists in Czechoslovakia. In October, when our lectures began, we could hear the sound of cannon in the castle, echoing from behind the Hungarian border, but our response to the Hungarian Revolution in October of that year was rather confused. First-year students of Hungarian

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<sup>1</sup> *Mladá tvorba* (Young Authors’ Magazine), published from 1956 to 1970 (Translator’s note).

<sup>2</sup> *Kultúrny život* (Cultural Life), a weekly focusing on literature and current affairs, published from 1946 to 1968 (Translator’s note).

<sup>3</sup> *Slovenské pohľady* (Slovak Perspectives), the oldest literary magazine published in Slovakia, established 1881 (Translator’s note).

language and literature (i.e. Hungarians) began to have doubts that gradually got under our skin as well. Škvorecký's novel *The Cowards* appeared, the magazine *Revue svetovej literatúry*<sup>4</sup> was established, we read Czech papers such as *Host do domu*, *Květen*, *Světová literatura* and *Plamen*,<sup>5</sup> but also the magazine *Film a doba*<sup>6</sup>, as well as many others. For Albín, Ivan and I, who were at the time living in the middle of this authentic Czechoslovak literary context, all this would prove to have a lifelong influence, on each of us for different reasons.

Seen from the outside, all three of us came to the capital from the “countryside”. We were in high school during the dreadful years when the school system was modelled on Stalinist ideology (our schooling lasted 11 years, though in the Soviet Union it was even shorter, only 10 years<sup>7</sup>), and all the good practices of the former system of traditional *lycées* were denounced and survived only thanks to teachers who were immune to ideological directives and regulations. Looking back, though, one might admit that even disadvantages can sometimes be inspiring! In any case we seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds sensed that change was afoot, though not in the halls of the university. Albín was not even seventeen (even though he was the best-read of us all), I was seventeen and a half and Ivan was the oldest: he was eighteen and a half – soon we started to call him “boss”.

So we were not even twenty, the age when, according to Albín's hero Saint-Beuve, we would become forever prisoners of our own generation, for that was when we choose our friends and enemies. “To be together at twenty means to be together forever,” says this great French critic, and he is probably right. In our case, he certainly was.

Even though we had left the provinces, we brought our values with us, and these did not allow us to enter the world of the crude and oversimplified climate of the early 1950s. For example, our lectures on literary theory were based on Timofeyev's legendary manual (*Slovník literárnovedných termínov/A Dictionary of Literary Terms* by L. Timofeyev and N. Vengrov), adapted for Slovak purposes by Rudo Brtáň and by our professor Mikuláš Bakoš, a founding father of Slovak structuralism who had three years earlier penned the 300-page study *Stalin and Art*. Thanks to the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union we were not obliged to read it. Timofeyev's *Theory of Literature* and its adapted version called *A Dictionary of Literary Theory* were still on our “syllabus”. Although we did study the traditional elements of poetics there was also a lot of superfluous material about literature for masses and the Party, about symbolism as a reactionary movement in bourgeois literature, and of course the assertion that surrealism was decadent. We really had to study those books and manuals and were required to learn these definitions by heart, but at the oral exams our professors were not so strict: there was a kind of gentlemen's agreement between students and teachers.

<sup>4</sup> *Revue svetovej literatúry* (Review of World Literature), a monthly devoted to translations and reviews of new and important literature published abroad (Translator's note).

<sup>5</sup> *Host do domu* (A Guest in the House), *Květen* (May), *Světová literatura* (World Literature), *Plamen* (The Flame): Czech literary magazines and newspapers (Translator's note).

<sup>6</sup> *Film a doba* (Film and the Age) (Translator's note).

<sup>7</sup> Students graduated from the eleven-year high school system at 17; in the Soviet Union they graduated at 16 (Translator's note).

I mention all this just to point out that even for our generation, and not only for those that came before us (those of critics like Noge and Petřík), the study of the history of literature and indeed of the humanities in general was not so easy in the time of socialism's heyday. The late 1950s were not as liberal as the late 1960s. Luckily there were, even during those hard times, good teachers who were not so rigidly ideologically oriented. Moreover, what mattered to us was our own reading and the contacts we made at university. When we went to visit Milo Urban, who was only in his fifties but seemed to us an old man, in his country exile a few kilometres outside Bratislava, we did not know very much about the so-called First Slovak Republic<sup>8</sup> (even though that was the time of our childhood), and we only vaguely recalled the newspaper *Gardista*<sup>9</sup>, which our parents had not read; but thanks to Andrej Mráz's essays we knew quite a lot about his novellas and novels, although we could not finish his 1957 novel *The Switched Off Lights*. Our visit to someone who managed to be both the former editor-in-chief of a pro-fascist paper as well as an excellent writer was arranged by his son Cyro, an engineering student who happened to be a friend of Ivan's from high school. On the other hand we were not allowed to meet the communist journalist and avant-garde poet Laco Novomeský, who was "hidden" by the regime in Prague in the Památník národního písemnictví/The Museum of Czech Literature after his release from prison. Such were the contradictions of the late 1950s that formed us, and may have deformed us, too.

Our professors initiated us into the realm of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature with all of the limitations given by the period we were living in. We felt it more acutely when talking about 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, but the lectures and courses were not our only resource, since we still had at our disposal works of our teachers that had appeared before 1948. Early every Monday morning I queued up with Albin (Ivan was too lazy to get up so early) in front of the used bookstore in Sedlárska Street, waiting for the latest arrivals, among which we could expect to find books banned by several regimes. For example, Bakoš's selection from the Russian formalists was for a long time the best manual of literary theory available. If we had not had this authentic experience of Shklovsky, Tynjanov, Jakobson, Eichenbaum and the other Russian formalists in Bakoš's translations, we might have believed what the 1956 *Dictionary of Literary Terms* said about them: nothing good, even though Bakoš managed to slip in the phrase that "some of the works of formalism (and structuralism), based on the close reading of certain literary works, resulted in relevant information about poetic language, writers' styles, Slovak verse, etc." I must admit though that I did not learn much from Bakoš's own course, which he gave in our graduation year in the early 1960s. I was asked to talk for around two hours about "a current debate on socialist realism in the magazine *Nová mysl*."<sup>10</sup> We managed to accept some of Bakoš's ideas in his *Literature and Superstructure* (1960), and four years later, during our postgraduate work, when he published *Problems of Literary Theory Today and Yesterday*, we were convinced that a genetic perspective could be combined

<sup>8</sup> The First Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945) was a semi-independent Axis-client state of Nazi Germany.

<sup>9</sup> *Gardista*, a pro-fascist newspaper published during World War II. Milo Urban was its editor-in-chief from 1940.

<sup>10</sup> *Nová mysl* (New Mind), the official journal of the Communist Party (Translator's note).

with a structural one enriched in the 1960s by studies of comparative literature: that it is possible to combine diachronic and synchronic principles in a historical poetics.

In this respect Mikuláš Bakoš, apart from his deviations of the early 1950s, was an inspiration to us all, and to Albín in particular. Even if it was not immediately obvious, Albín was able to complement Bakoš's almost scientific focus on the literary and its immanence with Matuška's more intuitive essayistic style and Mráz's and Pišút's interest in literary history and the functionality of literature. Moreover Albín Bagin later, in 1978, appreciated Pišút's interpretations of the authors and problems of romanticism from a historical perspective, pronouncing these "reader-friendly and informative", adding that the former quality "is no longer common in Slovak literary theory, and the combination of these two qualities even less so." Albín Bagin himself successfully blended these two attributes in all his work. As he said to Vladimír Petrík, he thought it was important to try to bring literary theory back "to those willing to think about the problems of man, society and its development."

Even at university Albín Bagin inclined toward a synthetic theory of literature, which he applied to both literary history and criticism. He had always been the kind of critic who was well versed in Slovak literature of the last century and a half and the key writings of foreign authors. His collected papers, essays and critical reviews run to six volumes (one co-authored with Ján Števček), while his contribution to the 1984 *History of Slovak Literature* remains a source of inspiration to this day. As well being a prolific writer, he was an assistant professor. This aspect of his life deserves to be dealt with in some depth, but not in a literary journal. It is a sad chapter and not just as far as his own person is concerned. Albín Bagin avoided confrontations, did not favour irony, and in his criticism he did not negate or exclude, instead advocating understanding; his criticism was subtle in its sympathies and above all he was a critic supportive of new talent. For in his view a critic "cannot be born of denial, however effective that might be, but only out of the formulation of a positive social and literary model." This attitude was already evident in his debut work *The Spaces of the Text* (1971), in which he considered the work of the younger generation of writers, for example the poets of concretism such as Buzássy, Peteraj, Lenčo, Kužel and Hruz. Later he remained true to his convictions, which was reflected in his selection of writers and texts and in his meticulous efforts to understand art, to speak its language, and to explain it. Bagin, who resembled one of his mentors, Saint-Beuve, in so many ways, preferred explication to judgement. That is why his work, which was built around knowledge of historical context and an awareness of tradition, embraced many generations and schools but above all creativity itself which, he said, in the end "helps us break out of the mundaneness of the everyday" and "completes and forms us into a whole and retrieves everything that we lose in our daily life, everything that we would otherwise be lacking". That is why his book *Three Masters*, on Flaubert, Chekhov and Thomas Mann, of whom we talked for hours in our youth and who helped him to develop his "own perspective on reality and the world of literature", is a sort of a testament.

Albín spent the summer of that historic year 1968 in Košice and, following his recovery from a life-threatening illness, battled alongside Ivan Kadlečík against provincial

Party officials and local literary “elite” to save the magazine *Krok* -- without success, despite the changes brought by the Prague Spring. He taught at the Faculty of Arts in Prešov and turned down work as an editor or a scholar at a number of institutions, for he enjoyed teaching and had an extraordinary talent for that vocation. The reason for his moving back to Košice was not only his illness but also, as he wrote in the summer of 1968, that he considered literature and its analysis to be his forte: “I intend to remain faithful to poetry, even in times of democratisation, because although the process of democratisation may be important, after it passes we might realise that literature has been forgotten.” This was not a sign of resignation; Albín was active in readings organised by Matica Slovenská, and from the autumn of 1968 by Ivan Kadlečík as well. Within the limits set by his personality and health, Albín believed in literature just as much as did Ivan Kadlečík. In the early 1970s he secured a post at the Faculty of Arts in Bratislava, and it seemed that as far as his professional life and standard of living were concerned, his situation would improve. His devotion and commitment to literature, exercised without any pretense to social or professional recognition, are a shining example even today, several decades after his death. I hope that the seminar (at which this piece was first presented) will partially repay our debt to the memory of Albín Bagin.

I apologize for the personal tone of the piece, but I feel I may be permitted a little nostalgia due to my age and my friendship with Albín Bagin. Also, it now almost a quarter century since I wrote a piece on his work when I edited some of his still-unpublished texts as a collection entitled *In Search of Values*. I think that today, in this age of values in turmoil, Albín’s attitudes and opinions might serve us as a reliable compass, for we are living in times dominated by consumerism and kitsch accompanied by nationalistic extremes in politics.

*Postscript:* On the pages of the magazine *Romboid*, Ivan Kadlečík has recently answered his own rhetorical question: “... what would be the role of Albín Bagin, writer and critic, in today’s defeatist chaos and literary and social disorientation...bearing in mind his personality and principles in these unprincipled times? For me he is associated with words like peacefulness, forbearance, modesty and a kind of stubborn honesty. Our society is short of people who know what they want and know what they stand for.” I fully concur with Ivan – and not just because we are friends “imprisoned by our generation”.

*Translated by Aňa Ostrihoňová*