

Notes and Comments

VOICES OF FREEDOM IN EASTERN EUROPE

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In this special section three Latter-day Saints who have been personally involved in witnessing the various recent developments within Communism in Eastern Europe tell of their experiences and feelings. First, there is a personal interview with a noted Communist by Melvin Mabey, Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University; then, Kent Robson, who now teaches philosophy at Utah State University, reports on his recent year at the University of Warsaw on a Stanford graduate exchange fellowship; finally, Ralph Thomson, a professor of Government at Boston University, now Resident Director of its Overseas Graduate Program in Heidelberg, tells of his visits to Czechoslovakia before and after the Russian invasion of 1968.

AN HOUR WITH MILOVAN DJILAS — HEROIC YUGOSLAV INTELLECTUAL

Melvin P. Mabey

By the time he was twenty-five, Milovan Djilas had already served three years in prison for communist activities. His keen mind, energetic spirit, and Partisan valor endeared him to Josip Broz Tito, and before he reached the age of forty, he had acceded to the vice-presidency of Yugoslavia. When his country broke with Russia and the Communist bloc in 1948, Djilas, Tito's heir apparent, led the anti-Stalinist fray. Simultaneously, however, he was becoming disillusioned with the Communist system as he witnessed Party leaders driving the same fine cars, living in luxurious villas, and pursuing many of the identical ostentatious patterns of the "decadent bourgeoisie" the Communists were replacing. The curtailment of freedoms and the enforcement of strict party discipline became increasingly oppressive to him as he compared them with the liberties viewed during his travels in the West.

When Djilas, with true Montenegrin courage, spoke out against these restrictions and appealed for democratization of the Communist Party in Yugoslavia, even his close friend Tito would not tolerate such violation of discipline. In 1954, Djilas was relieved of his government positions and Communist Party functions. His continued insistence upon democratization of the Yugoslav Communist organization and even the suggestion that another socialist party be established in his country met with immediate rebuff by his former comrades in the Communist hierarchy. He was given a suspended prison sentence and put on probation for three years. In December 1956, following the Hungarian uprising, he was jailed for criticizing Yugoslav foreign policy. Nevertheless, he continued to speak out against tyranny and oppression in books such as *The New Class* and *Conversations with Stalin*.¹ Nine of the following ten years were spent in prison.

Since January 1967, Milovan Djilas has lived in quiet seclusion in a modest Belgrade apartment. His days are devoted to reestablishing a family relationship with his wife and their fifteen-year-old son, and concentrating on nonpolitical writing. One of the conditions of his release from prison was that he refrain from public activity for five years.

A short time after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia last August, I contacted Mr. Djilas and asked if he could visit with a university professor from America. Although his association with westerners had been extremely limited, he cordially invited me to come to his flat.

Inside the entrance to the apartment house, a long row of mailboxes lined the left wall. Whether intentionally or accidentally, the name of the former Vice-President of Yugoslavia could not be seen. Without waiting for further verification of the correctness of the address, and according to instructions given me by phone, I started my ascent to the third floor. I knew that under given circumstances, citizens of a Communist country might experience great difficulties following visits with foreigners, and a sense of uneasiness flashed through me as I was caught on the stone stairs in the gaze of a middle-aged resident of the building.

I was greeted at the door by Milovan Djilas himself. He stood erect, handsomely attired in a brown sport shirt and slacks. Imprisonment had greyed his hair, but his eyes sparkled and his grip was firm as he extended his hand and warmly welcomed me inside. We entered his study just off the entrance hall—commodious, but unpretentious. A large desk dominated the book-lined room.

We sat facing each other in oversized, comfortable armchairs. A small table separated us, as he asked if he could serve me Turkish or American coffee. After I declined, he suggested that at least I might like some mineral

¹*The New Class* explains the development of a country under communism into a slave state with a ruling class which holds the masses "in abject material and intellectual poverty." *The New York Times* described it as "a crushing indictment of Communist rule. . . . One of the most compelling and perhaps the most important sociological document of our time." *Conversations with Stalin*, published in 1962, relates ideas and reactions expressed by Stalin to Djilas in the post-war era. The Yugoslav government, obviously yielding to Soviet pressure, charged Djilas with having revealed state secrets.

water. He left, and I surveyed the room where thoughts had been transformed into meaningful expressions, where dismay and disillusionment inscribed on paper had committed their author to physical isolation from the world. Momentarily my mind compared these pleasant surroundings with the stark reality of the prison confines and the cell shared with a murderer and a thief. There Djilas' writing had turned from polemics to the novel, and the scarcity of paper had often forced him to record his thoughts on the available toilet tissue. "Strict but correct," was how he had described his last internment, but during those four and a half years he had found peace with himself and freedom from resentment.

In a moment, Mr. Djilas returned and shortly afterward his wife quietly entered and placed a glass of sparkling mineral water on the table before me. My thanks were silently acknowledged.

As I explained the reason for my visit, Mr. Djilas picked up a pad of paper from his desk and made notes. He wrote as he asked, "Will you be publishing it? Where? When? How long will it be? Is the journal anti-communist? Now, what would you like to know?" With his interview ended, mine began.

We discussed freedom—individual and collective. Years before, Djilas had been deprived of his freedom because of his concern over the path which the Communist Party was taking. In an interview with a *New York Times* correspondent in 1954, he had said, "I am giving this interview to encourage free discussion as an act of loyalty. I am taking a risk, but one cannot go on without some risk. . . . It will mean a lot for our country to have a citizen say what he thinks. . . . [The Communist Party] must permit freedom of discussion. Now I see this is impossible. Another political formation should be constructed. This could only be democratic and Socialist."

Today, fifteen years later, he still speaks of the need for free discussion. Djilas viewed Czechoslovakia under its liberalization program as being the one communist country in which this was possible. In fact, he had anticipated that it would probably become the first communist country with a really free society. This hope for the future had momentarily been quashed by the Soviet invasion, and he did not consider that this would be the last use of Russian might. He expected increased pressure upon Rumania and the possibility that Russian troops would be used there as well. In like manner, he expressed concern for his own land, but asserted the Yugoslavs would fight unitedly to counter any attack from the Soviet Union. Said Djilas, "The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia was not the result of an internal communist struggle, but the oppression of one people and state by another. Communism was of secondary importance compared with imperialism." He then added, "The tragedy of Czechoslovakia is, however, that all international juridical authority has been lost." And as an aside, "The United Nations did nothing!"

Continuing his thoughts on the changing world of communism, he said, "There will be differences and contradictions for a long period in most communist countries. Russia will probably always have some. It is a reactionary

country, although it also must undergo changes." He voiced the conviction that communism was moving toward freedom, but, pausing, added, "It may not be realized without a war." Djilas then optimistically asserted that the greatest hope for peace in this world of conflict between ideologies and imperialistic interests was the compromise revisionist and reformist movements.² "They will help delay or avoid a war," he proclaimed.

Freedom is still uppermost in Mr. Djilas' mind. His concern prompted me to ask, "Will your speaking with me jeopardize your future?" Without answering directly, he responded. "No one seeks to spend his life in prison, but I must say what I think even if it means prison for me." He was not taunting the hangman's noose by irrational and flaunting remarks. His record in defense of principle has been well established.

Our discussion had centered on "freedom," which Webster defines as "a very general term, . . . [implying] at one extreme total absence of restraint and at the other, an unawareness of being hampered in any way." Djilas stated that it is "the concrete form of human and social existence." Its purpose, as he defined it, seemed to reflect an awareness of an eternal verity. "Freedom is meant to enlarge the existence of the nature of man."

Djilas, an avowed atheist, turned to religion. He charged that the Marxist view of the origin of religion was superficial and inexact, i.e., that it resulted from social conditions and prejudices. He saw religion as a by-product of man's need to have something to die for. Because of this, it would live as long as human beings existed. Religion and human destiny are immutably connected. Man is a creative being, unlike the animals that inhabit the earth.

For a moment we spoke of Mormonism. His early preoccupation with Marxist philosophy and his later concern with the development of democratic socialism had left him little time for examining religious precepts. He had not heard of the Mormon Church, but knew of the mountains in which its members had found refuge.

The last war had brought Milovan Djilas to Belgrade. Yet his heart remained in his native Montenegro in Yugoslavia's mountainous south. "That is the place to live—in the mountains," he said. "One can breathe freely and think clearly." From these mountains, Djilas had fought as a Partisan to rid his country of Nazi control. He hoped it would not be necessary to repeat the struggle against possible Soviet aggression.

As I retraced my steps down the three flights, my thoughts turned to the words of Tennyson as he described the early fight of the Montenegrins against the Turks:

They kept their faith, their freedom, and their height,
Chaste, frugal, savage, armed by day and night.

Milovan Djilas is a true Montenegrin, as, undeterred by the limitations of his homeland, he continues his pursuit of free expression.

²Although Djilas is not satisfied with the political development of his native land, he views its accomplishments as a compromise which has partaken of both worlds — communist and capitalist. Yugoslav communism has been attacked as being both revisionist and reformist.