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Making History: Czech Voices of Dissent and the Revolution of 1989 (Review)

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MAKING HISTORY: CZECH VOICES OF DISSENT AND THE REVOLUTION OF 1989. By Michael Long. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005. 189 pp. Hardbound, \$70.00; Softbound, \$29.95.

Making History explores the lives and political views of eleven Czechs who were prominent dissidents during the last two decades of the Cold War. The author and interviewer of the dissidents, Michael Long, is an American and a Professor of Slavic and Eastern European Studies at Baylor University. Some of the interviews were conducted in Czech, others in English; most of them took place in Prague, the remainder in Berlin. Worth noting is Professor Long's observation in the book's introduction that in the Czech Republic oral history is neither well known nor understood but that the interviewees were enthusiastic about participating in the project and pleased that a foreigner was interested in this important phase of their history.

The eleven individuals interviewed—journalists, scientists, historians, philosophers and novelists—comprise an outstanding and inspiring group of individuals, both men and women, who quite modestly and matter-of-factly recounted their harrowing experiences in actively resisting the Communist government that ruled Czechoslovakia from 1948 until 1989. Their resistance was indeed heroic: they were made to suffer for their efforts to bring an end to a political system that attempted to control every dimension of life. Their suffering included harassment, arrest, imprisonment, loss of professional employment, and social alienation. Scientists and university teachers found that the career path for dissenters fortunate enough not to go to prison was to work stoking furnaces, cleaning toilets and other menial jobs. Others spent years in prison: One of the interviewees, Peter Uhl, spent a total of nine years in prison from two separate arrests

between 1969 and 1984. His wife was also imprisoned. Particularly significant in respect to the character and capabilities of these dissenters is the fact that after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, many of them went on to play important political roles in helping their society to make the transition from Communism to a democratic society.

The period that Professor Long focuses on primarily in the interviews is the time that began with the “Prague Spring” in 1968 and ended with the collapse of Soviet rule in the central and eastern European satellite states in 1989. In order to help the reader appreciate and understand his historically-oriented conversations with the dissidents, the first chapter of the book is a short but quite helpful twenty-year history of the activities of the political opposition that culminated in fall of communism in Czechoslovakia.

In the 1970s and 1980s a multifaceted underground movement emerged that featured, most prominently, the “Plastic People of the Universe,” a counter-culture, avant-garde rock and jazz music movement that scorned the cultural status quo that was ruthlessly protected by the regime. The prosecution by the regime of members of the Plastic People led to the establishment by Czech dissidents of Charter 77, headed by the future President, Vaclav Hável. Charter 77 turned out to be a landmark initiative to defend human rights, particularly freedom of expression. These Czech dissidents were also heavily involved in the formation and activities of VON, a Czech acronym for the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted formed in 1978 to assist individuals facing prosecution for trumped up and phony crimes. Also, these dissidents helped to organize and run the Flying University, an underground university that gave the talented and educated people shut out of the educational system because of their political views an opportunity to participate in the life of the mind.

Each interview was structured around three primary questions: a biographical question, a request for each interviewee to characterize his or her experiences that led to the Velvet Revolution in 1989, and a question that drew from the interviewees' reflections on their perceptions of the successes and failures of that revolution. These questions serve very effectively to build personal narratives that capture the unique contributions made by each of these individuals to the birth of democracy in Central Europe.

These compelling and fascinating interviews provide a very personal and intimate sense of what life was like for a person of high principle and conscience who had to confront an impersonal and monolithic system of power and repression. The author has done a good job of preserving the unique voice of each of his interlocutors. The reader will find no single or uniform political or philosophical perspective among the interviewees other than a desire to be rid of an oppressive system and to be able express their opinions freely and enjoy the basic rights of a pluralistic, democratic society. The interviews also reveal the toll that a life of dissidence takes on the family from the result of forced underemployment, harassment and imprisonment.

The final chapter of the book compares some of the reflections of the interviewees about the progress of the ten years of post-Communist Czech society with the perceptions of the broader public in the Czech Republic. Long uses polling and survey data to determine Czech perceptions of the success of the Czech Republic's transition to democracy, its economic well-being, its experience of xenophobia and its level of support for NATO and the EU. Curiously, the data showed the general public to be more optimistic and positive, generally speaking, than the eleven interviewees.

Making History is indeed a worthwhile and well crafted use of oral history to document an extremely important period of history where, from this reviewer's knowledge, little has been done previously in this genre. The book has endnotes that provide documentary support and also a brief bibliography of which approximately fifty percent is in Czech.

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