

Death in Prague of Petr Uhl (1941-2021)

Friday 3 December 2021, by [KRIVINE Hubert](#), [SAMARY Catherine](#) (Date first published: 2 December 2021).

It was with sadness that we learned of the death of Petr Uhl at the age of 80 on 1 December 2021, after a long illness. Like the Polish Marxist activists Kuron and Modzelewski in the mid-1960s, Petr Uhl in Czechoslovakia embodied for us in the heart of the Prague Spring in 1968 the living expression of a radical critique of single-party rule in the name of the socialist ideals he stood for.



Copyright: Solidarity demonstration with Petr Uhl (centre) and others

As a French speaker, it was in Paris that Petr discovered the ideas of the Fourth International during several trips and meetings where he had made contact with Alain Krivine. He had met him in Moscow at the International Youth Festival in 1957, where Alain Krivine was a delegate of the Communist Youth of France. In Paris, Petr Uhl discovered the activities of the “Krivinian” left in the Union of Communist Students, and then those of the Fourth International. He shared with it deep anti-imperialist and internationalist convictions and in particular the hope of new uprisings in the countries of Eastern Europe aimed at reducing the gap between their bureaucratic reality and socialist goals.

His attachment to “socialism from below” is further witnessed to by the text he wrote during the Gorbachev era in 1988, reproduced below as a tribute. In it, he criticizes what he calls “reforms from above” - comparing those of Dubcek in 1968 to those of the USSR in 1988 while defending a “democracy from below”. In 1980 his book, published by La Brèche, expressed his point of view on “socialism imprisoned”. He defended this also through clandestine cross-border activist links, notably between oppositionists from Poland, such as Jacek Kuron and Czechoslovakia, and in the dissemination of censored literature - especially that of our current.

He was a political prisoner under the old regime, spending nearly ten years of his life in prison in often harsh conditions, the last time (in the context of 1968) for “Trotskyist conspiracy”. Petr did not hide his sympathies, but he was not a member of the Fourth International - which our representative at his trial in October 1979 testified to. [1] He was in fact accused of having dared to bring together a few dozen young people in the context of the emergence of the “movements from below” that he evoked, stimulated by the “Prague Spring,” and then of being active with others in Charter 77 and other associations for the defence of rights.² Without himself being a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, he was close to the father of Anna Šabatová (his wife), Jaroslav Šabata - one of the leaders of the self-management wing of the CP: this current supported, against both the conservative (Novotny) wing of the regime and the technocratic reformers, the development of

workers' councils in the workplaces that unfolded during the Soviet intervention, until 1969.

Petr was thus, again, in prison. And it was there that he rubbed shoulders for several years with the writer Vaclav Havel who became his friend. It was with the latter (and many other intellectuals) that he formed Charter 77 in 1977, then the VONS (Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted). Petr was not (unlike many other members, such as Havel) an anti-communist "dissident". On the contrary, he considered the democratic struggles for a socialism worthy of the name to be essential. He therefore engaged in the establishment of organizations and fronts for the respect of rights bringing together people from various ideological horizons that the struggles "against" (repression or censorship) brought together but without a real common program "for" defining another society.

A completely different context opened up in 1989, when, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 ended the rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and brought Vaclav Havel to power. Petr then decided to participate, for a time, in the emerging political pluralism by becoming a deputy for the Civic Forum - renouncing, from this point of view, a fight for socialism. But he retained - until the end of his life - an attachment to internationalism and a resolute opposition to NATO, perceiving the construction of the European Union as a positive counterweight to the United States. Dissatisfied with political party life (while growing closer to the Greens), he focused on two facets of his activities: that as journalist (at *Právo*), and that as human rights defender.

He was particularly active on behalf of the Roma, publicly declaring his refusal of Czech citizenship when the regime, after the division of the federation which he deplored, built a wall to prevent the Roma from Slovakia from entering the newly independent country. But he also held several official positions in the defence of rights: from 1991 to 2001, he was an expert at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and from 1998 to 2001, Human Rights Commissioner of the Czech Government, chairing the Governmental Council for Nationalities, the Human Rights Council and the Inter-Ministerial Commission for Roma Community Affairs.

In many ways, his wife and children shared this commitment to universal rights: Anna Šabatová was, like him, a member of Charter 77 and even took on the function of spokesperson. She became mediator of the republic from 2014 to 2020. And Petr was particularly proud of the achievement of his daughter, Saša Uhlová, who "infiltrated" the workplaces of her country to write an article revealing inhuman working conditions in a report that was widely publicised (even in *Le Monde* on 8 December 2017) in an article entitled "Sasa Uhlova, the voice of the forgotten of the Czech economic miracle" [2]. Petr Uhl was, to the end of his life, a courageous defender of all the "forgotten". So in this respect he remained fully our comrade.

Our heartfelt and supportive thoughts are with his wife and children.

Catherine Samary and Hubert Krivine on behalf of the Fourth International

2 December 2021

P.S.

• Fourth International. Friday 3 December 2021:

Footnotes

[1] In homage to his struggle, we are putting online this text by Petr Uhl “Réformer d’en haut ou démocratiser d’en bas ?” (Reforming from above or democratizing from below), published in the 1988 issue of the journal *L’Homme et la Société*, in No 88-89 “Staline est mort hier. L’émergence du social en URSS” (pp. 161-175), l’Harmattan :

https://www.persee.fr/doc/homso_0018-4306_1988_num_88_2_2348?pageId=T1_162

[2] https://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2017/12/08/sasa-uhlova-porte-voix-des-oublies-du-miracle-economique-tcheque_5226774_4497186.html