

## **«The Human Face» Director's comment**

The end of the 1960's in the history of Europe was marked by an attempt of the Czechs and the Slovaks to breathe a new life into the socialist ideas of their country. By then, there had already been a few revolts against the Stalinist mechanism of state in other countries: first in East Germany, then in Hungary, then in Poland. And every time those revolts were violently put down by the Soviet troops. However, what happened in Czechoslovakia wasn't a rebellion, but a peaceful reform movement that was widely supported by the people of the republic. In 1968, the Czechs and the Slovaks had an incredible surge of public consciousness, which led to a harsh pushback from Moscow and, ultimately, a political, moral, and humanistic catastrophe.

Even now, as many documents of that era are declassified, it is difficult to say who the heroes or the anti-heroes of this historic process were. What's worth mentioning is that the young generation knows very little of the high hopes that inspired the people of Czechoslovakia in the early months of 1968.

It all began when Aleksander Dubcek, the newly appointed Head of the KSČ, abolished censorship! This was the first signal announcing that a person could now speak and write WITHOUT FEAR, BREATHE FREELY, AND NOT HIDE ONE'S THOUGHTS! To the Stalinist model of State this was an unheard-of act of impudence, undermining the foundation of the regime sustained by FEAR. The retraction of censorship shook the society to its core; the people woke up from a long sleep and suddenly felt hopeful for a new form of the state, now seemingly within reach. Nobody was aiming to bring down the socialist regime, people just wanted to be themselves and inject their society with some humanistic traits, inspired by European philosophy that pervaded the Central Europe since the times of the Holy Roman Empire. The Communist Party with Dubcek at its head instantly acquired sincere support of the people, which had never happened in any other country of the Soviet Block. This genuine mass enthusiasm alarmed, and later drove to panic, first the Kremlin, and then the rest of the states in Eastern Europe. The Stalinists found the motto of the new ideology, which soon spread to the other countries of the continent, particularly insulting: "Socialism with a human face". It made it look like the Soviet model lacked such a face (a fact of truth that had been continuously effaced).

The history of the Prague spring can be interpreted from various perspectives, but what interests me is a more intimate look at the high human tragedy of the Czechoslovakian events.

Dubcek was brought up in a typically soviet ambiance. When he returned to Czechoslovakia, he witnessed the same dazed society he saw in the USSR. Later on, while working as a Party official, he fully realized that in Czechoslovakia, just like in USSR, every party executive is always fearful and suspicious of all his actions being controlled, all his conversations listened to and recorded.

The story of Dubcek is a story of a man who crossed the line and dared to DEFY FEAR. He stopped fearing the wiretapping, the agents, the occasional barking from Moscow, the repression... He decided to act as a free man. This discrepancy between his behavior and the psychology of his counterparts brought about its own share of fear and suspicion. His peers in Prague and partners from the USSR deemed his actions dysfunctional and delusional. A "proper" Soviet leader, a member of the Party, could not act like this. However, there was a peculiar circumstance: Dubcek's policy had aroused

some incredible enthusiasm among the Czech and Slovak students and workers. The people supported his initiative: Dubcek's endeavors gave the students and the workers hope that such a conventionally conservative political force as the Communist Party is capable of adjusting its function and championing a move towards free society.

Aleksandr Dubcek was certain that he was answering the call of his heart, like a real communist. It is this certainty that brought about the tragedy of Dubcek and the "Prague spring" as a whole. One could even liken Dubcek to a hero of an ancient tragedy: the protagonist's actions inevitably lead to his doom, yet he blindly keeps working towards his goals; aware of the risks, the hero just cannot act otherwise. The same goes for Dubcek: until the very end, he would either fail to see the dangers he had been warned about, or would consciously keep his mind off them.

Yet, doom was inevitable: tanks invaded the country, hopes shattered. Dubcek couldn't see sense in this suppression until his last days, but he found his life's purpose and was certain of his righteousness. That is where his greatness lies: he got to keep his face, the Human Face.

**Andrei Konchalovsky**