

Josef Skvorecky: rich experience and

Interview by Elaine Ostry

"I wish I had been younger when I came to this country," says Josef Skvorecky. "But that doesn't mean we don't feel at home. We do...because this country has given both me and my wife that essential value in life, and that is freedom."

He smiles.

Writer Skvorecky emigrated to Canada in 1969, shortly after the Russians invaded his native Czechoslovakia. He claims that freedom is essential to creativity. "I wrote more books in Canada than in Czechoslovakia, because there is no censorship here." In his homeland, "censorship is absolute," and Skvorecky is only too familiar with this problem.

When Skvorecky was twenty-four years old, he wrote *The Cowards*. This novel was banned by the government, and Skvorecky was fired from his position as an editor of the magazine *World Literature*.

Censorship, Skvorecky states, "means that writers who want to have their books published have to avoid the central issues of life and the central issues of life in Czechoslovakia at the moment are police rule and widespread corruption. You must not mention the police, except in an approving way — in other words, you have to lie."

"There are, of course, many talented writers who if the country were free, would probably produce interesting books. But because there is this absolute censorship, they have to avoid the interesting issues. So they write about side issues...usually love stories which do not have any links to real life."

"Czech literature today," Skvorecky says, "is simply destroyed by censorship. It exists mainly in exile, by people who are free and can fully develop their talents, because they couldn't do it at home."

Skvorecky is one of these Czech writers living in exile. He has found it easy to adjust to the Canadian lifestyle. "I got used to it overnight," he says. "My first night in Canada was probably the happiest of my life, because I felt that I could go to sleep and be sure nothing would happen in the night — that there would be no knock at the door."

"The presence of secret police informing and spying on you," Skvorecky notes, "is something unknown to Canadians. In Czechoslovakia, if you are a public figure, or a writer, and you're displeased by the government, you are being followed by the secret police."

Skvorecky did, however, suffer from the "exile's dream" when he came to Canada. "Everybody suffers from it, especially in the first years. You dream almost every night that you are back in the old country and you can't get out...it's a nightmare."

For Skvorecky, greater freedom of speech has resulted in greater productivity. His novels include *The Sweet Season*, *The Engineer of Human Souls*, and *Dvork in Love*. He was the winner of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1980, and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1982. He won the Governor General's Award for *The Engineer of Human Souls*. Skvorecky has taught English at the University of Toronto since 1971, but writes in Czech.

"I do write non-fiction in English," Skvorecky says. "For that, you don't have to be absolutely at home. But if you want to write fiction, that means a national language...for that, you really have to be at home."

Most of Skvorecky's books are set in

Czechoslovakia. "I would never dare," says he, "to enter the minds of real Canadians, of someone who was born here. I can only observe (Canadians) from the outside. People live by associations, usually formed when they are young, and these associations are simply different from mine, because I spent most of my life in a very different country."

The problems of Czechoslovakian writers, Skvorecky notes, are different from those of Canadian writers. According to Skvorecky, the most serious problem for Canadian writers is competition from the States. This is because Canada and the US share the same language, and the US has a larger and more profitable market.

Then there is the issue of Canadian identity. "For the Czech," Skvorecky comments, "it's quite easy, because Czechs speak Czech, and there's no other nation that speaks this same language. But Canadian identity, I think, can only be determined in terms of historical development, not in language — and literature is an art that works with language." Canadian writers face "a cluster of problems that have nothing to do with politics" and therefore do not face the hardships of Czechoslovakian writers. "I think what the Canadian writers should strive for — and they do strive for — is simply excellence." This pursuit is not prevented by politics as it is in Czechoslovakia.

"If you are a first-class writer," says Skvorecky, "and if you picture this country and life in this country, there's no reason why you should not be world famous, and why you shouldn't contribute to the culture of this country, because you are not restricted by any form of censorship — unless you specialize in pornography."

Skvorecky is doing his part in encouraging Czech literature. His wife runs a Czech-language publishing house, 68 Publishers, where he does most of the editing.

Skvorecky has been writing for over thirty years. He has found that his style has changed during that time. "It's a natural development," he says. "As you go through life, you acquire more and more experience, and this style becomes more complex."

"When I wrote *The Cowards*, I was twenty-four years old, and I was very much influenced by Hemingway," Skvorecky comments. "I think the ideal situation is if you have a good literary model, and the material is your own."

"If you don't have any interesting experience about which to write, and you are just influenced by a style, it gets you nowhere; you become an imitator."

"But if you have a rich experience...and you find someone who will influence you stylistically," says Skvorecky, "then the merger is what makes for good writing."

Certainly Skvorecky has a wealth of rich experiences from which to draw ideas. Most of his novels deal with politics in some way, and this interest reflects his background. He was fifteen years old when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia.

"Prior to that," Skvorecky says, "Czechoslovakia had a system that was very similar to Canadian democracy." After six years of fascism, communism in various forms from socialism to a Sweden to Stalinism) dominated Czechoslovakia.

"People of my generation have really experienced personally all existing political systems," Skvorecky states.

"For a writer," Skvorecky comments, "difficult times are always good. If he can survive, and if he can find another place to live in time to be able to

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