

**Heiliger Text**

**Die identitätsbildende Funktion  
klassischer Texte innerhalb einer  
Gemeinschaft**

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## The Making of the Czech Ecumenical Bible Translation (1961-1979)

### *Shaping a new ecumenical community in times of communist oppression*

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#### *Introduction*

In the evening of Thursday 13 December 1979 an ecumenical meeting took place in a church of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church in Prague Vinohrady. The event of the year for churches and the ecumenical life in the country was organized by the Ecumenical Council of Churches of the Czech Socialist Republic to present a complete new bible translation. The event was also attended by a number of foreign guests from international organisations as well as from churches from Germany and Switzerland. Earlier that day a symposium had been held in a nearby building of the Church of the Brethren where two representatives of the translators' groups had spoken about the significance of the main non-Catholic bible translation so far, the Kralice translation of the Czech Brethren from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Also some of the principles and expectations concerning the new bible translation were discussed. The primary goal of that meeting, though, had been to decorate the translators, who had been working for 18 years on a entirely new ecumenical translation, to be used by both catholics, orthodox and protestants in the country.

Some ten years later Karel Skalický, a Roman Catholic theologian, living in exile in Rome, where he published a theological journal on the situation of the churches in communist Czechoslovakia, said: "If Czech christian were able to realize such a scholarly demanding and linguistically high standing work in such unfavourable circumstances, truly there is no need to despair. They showed not only that they are worthy successors to the Kralice translators, but also of our first Slavonic apostles."<sup>1</sup> To Skalický the translation was not just another edition of the bible in the Czech language, but a testimony of the churches under communism to their society about the enduring value, beauty and depth of the Word of God. He even did not hesitate to compare the translators to Cyril and Methodius, who brought Christianity to Bohemia and translated the Bible in Slavonic, a kind of common root of all Slav languages.

What brought Skalický to this high praise? What is the significance of the Czech Ecumenical Bible Translation of 1979 (first print) at the background of the time? To give an answer to these questions we have first to remind

<sup>1</sup> Jestliže čeští křesťané dokázali v tak nepříznivých podmínkách uskutečnit vědecky tak náročné a jazykově tak vytříbené dílo, věru netřeba malomyslnět. Dokázali nejenom, že jsou důstojnými pokračovateli Kralických, ale i našich prvních věrozvěstů. K. Skalický, Postavení církví a věřících v Československu osmdesátých let. In: *Studie* č. 126, p. 445. [My translation]

ourselves in short the developments in communist Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1980.<sup>2</sup> In 1948 the communist party had installed the dictatorship of the working class in the country, which had far-reaching consequences for those, who it saw as a potential adversary. Without doubt, the churches belonged to this group, though in different grades of risk. In 1949 the regime issued a set of laws on religious communities, which basically brought the end to the freedom of religion. Churches became fully dependent on the state for their income, all pastors were to be paid by the state, a special secretariat for church affairs was established to keep control over the churches and their activities. The regime saw the Roman Catholic Church as its most dangerous competitor as it was the largest church in the country with the top of the organization outside the country, in the Vatican. In the early fifties all monasteries were abolished and most of the monks and nuns were placed in a kind of house arrest. Most of the bishops were arrested as well or put under surveillance. In show trials priests and some bishops were accused of state undermining activities and sent to labour camps or executed.

The new regime had much less reason to fear the much smaller non-catholic churches. They were not able to mobilize large numbers of people. Moreover, leading representatives of the two main non-catholic churches – the Czechoslovak Church and the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren – had clearly indicated their more or less positive approach to the new regime. The first church had issued a declaration welcoming the communist regime as a step that would bring the country closer to the Kingdom of God. The second did not take a similar step, but its influential leader Josef L. Hromádka stressed on every opportunity that evangelical christians should accept the communist rule, since the democratic system had proven not to be functional in preventing from the Second World War. To many protestants communism was in a way sympathetic because of its declared sympathy for and dependence on the Hussite reformation of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The 1950s were not favourable to official ecumenical relations in Czechoslovakia. The regime needed to prolong the situation of 'divide et impera.' The only places where to some extent ecumenism flourished were the forced labour camps and special divisions in the army, because there believers from different sides, often pastors, met and learned to understand each other. This situation changed in the 1960 due to a cautious liberalization of the communist system and due to the Second Vatican Council. Prague based

<sup>2</sup> See for more on this Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation, Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism*, Oxford 2004; Andrzej Grajewski, *Kompleks Judasza, Kościół zraniony*, Poznań 1999; Karel Kaplan, *Stát a církev v Československu v letech 1948-1953*, Brno 1993; Pavel Otter, *Církevní politika 1949*, Heršpice 1992; Jiří Hanuš, Jan Stříbrný (ed.), *Stát a církev v roce 1950*, Brno 2000; item, *Katolická církev a totalitarismus v Českých zemích*, Brno 2001; Alexandr Budka, Jan Stříbrný (eds.), *Církevní procesy padesátých let*, Kostelní Vydří 2002; Jaroslav Cuhra, *Církevní politika KSČ a státu v letech 1969-1972*, Praha 1999; Lubomír Balcar e.a. (eds.), *Církev v proměnách času, 1918-1968*, Praha 1969; Miroslav Brož (ed.), *Církev v proměnách času, 1969-1999*, Praha 2002; Martin Vaňáč, *Ekumenismus v České republice, Příspěvek ke studiu ekumenických vztahů v České republice na pozadí vztahu státu k církvím v letech 1918-2000*, Praha (not published) 2001.

catholic and protestant intellectuals were meeting regularly at seminars held in the evangelical seminary. On lower levels in the churches people of both sides organized meetings and held the first regular ecumenical prayers. The idea of dialog to ease tensions had its impact also on ecumenical relations.

The events of the Prague Spring and the invasion of the Warschau-pact troops in August 1968 had also its consequences for ecumenical relations. The dialog was halted from the side of the regime, which again aimed to isolate the churches from society as much as possible. Nevertheless, the idea of ecumenism continued to have its attraction on certain circles, partly because of the experiences of the preceding years, partly because now the regime was much less able to divide the churches as it had lost much of its credibility.

From 1977 the situation in the CSSR got a further shape. In January of that year Charta 77 was published, a document based on the human rights agreements of the Helsinki accords of 1975. Charta was to become the democratic opposition in the totalitarian Husák era. A number of believers from both the RCC and the ECCB signed the document. All churches issued official declarations taking distance from Charta or even condemning its signatories for betraying the values of the society. Especially the ECCB saw a huge polarization between the church leadership and the Chartists in the church. Nevertheless, christians within Charta experienced a profound ecumenism in their common struggle for human rights in Czechoslovakia.

The ecumenical bible translation got its shape in the decade of liberalization and the first decade of the so-called normalization. The years 1968 and 1977 are landmarks of these decades, as do names like Alexander Dubček and Gustáv Husák. How was the process of the translation effected by these events?

### *Beginning and institution<sup>3</sup>*

Already in the early 1950s the first proposals for an updated bible translation were put forward. In the summer of 1952 Miloš Bič, professor of Old Testament at the Comenius Faculty, wrote a letter to the central office of the ECCB with a proposal to prepare a critical edition of the Kralice translation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In a second letter he estimated the number of collaborators on this project in the range of 100.<sup>4</sup> Prof. J.B. Souček, the New Testament scholar at the Comenius Faculty, thought rather of a revision of the text of the Kralice translation. He published some texts which he had reworked himself. Soon it turned out that just a revision would not be enough, but that a entirely new translation had to be made in order to meet the needs of people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> The following sections are based on material from the archives of the two translation groups. Both archives are rather limited, but offer a lot of interesting information. The archive of the group translating the Old Testament is best organised and in the custody of the Czech Bible Society. The New Testament translation group was less precise in ordering their archival material, which is with the Centre for Biblical Studies of the Czech Academy of Science and the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University.

<sup>4</sup> Bič on 25.7. and 10.9.1952 to the Synodical Council of the ECCB, Archive Old Testament Commission (AOTC).

The first steps for a new translation of the Old Testament were set late 1960 or in the beginning of 1961.<sup>5</sup> The first meeting of a group of 6 persons took place on the 1 February 1961 in the office of Bič at his faculty. Two months later they met again and started to work on Genesis, the first bible book to be translated.

Soon also the New Testament scholars were to take action. J.B. Souček according to some was more cautious than his colleague Bič and was not sure whether it was the right time to start with this project.<sup>6</sup> The general feeling among protestant biblical scholars was that on the one hand the Kralice translation was problematical because of its archaic language, but on the other hand their hesitation to go beyond this translation was large as well. Their efforts would only be justified if they would at least meet the standards as the Kralice. Would they be able to produce such a translation?

Both groups<sup>7</sup> started their work in a structured manner from the academic year 1961 on. Both consisted only of members of the ECCB. At the beginning there was not much certainty as to when the translation would be finished, since that was dependent on many factors. Especially the reactions from the state authorities were unpredictable, as a final completion of the work would require their consent to print and publish the new translation. Would they allow a new, modern translation to be published when their aim was to keep the churches in a small ghetto? In a report to the Synodical Council of 14 June 1962 J.B. Souček wrote:

“We are aware that the work is not going fast, but we are convinced that it would be on the cost of the matter, if we would force ourselves to a higher tempo beyond our realistic ability. [...] Therefore, we ask the Synodical Council for patience and further friendly support for our work.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the first problems both working groups<sup>9</sup> had to solve was the financial issue. As both formally started on their own initiative, members who had to travel a longer distance, had to pay travel costs. In August 1961 both groups were officially installed by the Synodical Council under the auspices of the

<sup>5</sup> According to Z. Soušek Bič and he discussed the idea for the first time seriously during a visit of Bič to Libice nad Cidlinou most probably at the end of 1962. Interview with Zdeněk Soušek, 13 March 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Z. Soušek; interview with Pokorný, 30 March 2006.

<sup>7</sup> In the Old Testament group participated Miloš Bič (chair), Zdeněk Soušek (secretary), Blahoslav Pípal, Miroslav Heryán, Josef Sládek, Jiří Ruml and Rostislav Nechuta. The New Testament group started with Josef Bohumil Souček (chair), Milan Hájek (secretary), Jan Heller, Amedeo Molnár, Štěpán Milan Pavlinec, Petr Pokorný and Jaroslav Stolař.

<sup>8</sup> Souček in a letter to the Synodical Council of 14. June, Archive New Testament Group (ANTG).

<sup>9</sup> Both working groups are addressed in the correspondence with the Synodical Council or other authorities as commissions. The Old Testament group adopted this designation, the New Testament group preferred the name ‘translation group,’ though in documents dated after the death of J.B. Souček the word ‘commission’ occurs regularly. Letters in AOTC.

Study Commission,<sup>10</sup> but without a budget. The Old Testament group first received support from two church districts,<sup>11</sup> but from the end of the year the Synodical Council regularly send money to the chairmen of both groups.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the synod of the ECCB meeting in May 1963 adopted two resolutions concerning the translation group. The discussion on them showed again both enthusiasm for the project as well as doubts whether the translation could exceed the Kralice version.<sup>13</sup> The first resolution approves of the work in progress and stresses that the translation should be understandable for today's Czech citizens. In the second the synod required the Synodical Council to enable distribution of preliminary results of the working groups to all congregations.<sup>14</sup>

With this the institutional framework of the translation work got a relatively solid shape. Another step was to agree on arrangements and principles between the two working groups. Here a difference in approach appeared between the two. The Old Testament group stressed the necessity of a concordant translation, whereas in the New Testament group the requirement of accessibility for the wider public was shared broadly. For the New Testament group the principle of dynamic equivalency was the better alternative to too strict a translation. This difference would play an important role throughout the process of the translation work and is obvious from the final result as well.<sup>15</sup>

In a joint meeting on 5 February 1963 both groups discussed what they saw as the main problems. As the central problem they identified the freedom of a translation in relation to the original. The New Testaments translators stressed, that the tradition of a more dynamic translation can already be found in the New Testament, where we find rather free translations of texts from the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. From there the question derives which spelling of names from the Old Testament in the New Testament to use. Here the Old Testament group seemed to have a certain advantage over the New Testament group, most probably because of previous work on a biblical concordance and dictionary. At the meeting they presented a Hebrew-Czech dictionary that would be the starting point for tackling these problems. For some from the Old Testament group especially names were a sensitive issue as

<sup>10</sup> Letter of Synodical Council 23 August 1961. The head (jednatel) of the so-called Stálý odbor studijní SRČCE was Jaromír Sklenář, who was later to play an important role. AOTC.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of 19 September 1961 of Seniorate (church district) Polička and of 20 September of Seniorate Horácko. AOTC.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of Synodical Council to Souček of 31 October 1961, to Bič of 3 January 1962. AOTC.

<sup>13</sup> Interesting here is that one of the members of the Old Testament commission, Jiří Ruml, during the discussion underlined, that the project on the side of the Old Testament is not more than a "free revision" not meant for liturgical use. "In the present theological situation we are not able to produce a new translation." ANTG.

<sup>14</sup> AOTC and ANTG.

<sup>15</sup> Jan Heller, *Podvečerní děkování, Vzpomínky, texty a rozhovory*, Praha 2005, p. 82 ff; interview with Petr Pokorný, interview with Milan Balabán, 18 April 2006.

for some Old Testament scholars in Prague they reveal the nature of the person or the matter at stake.<sup>16</sup>

The meeting did not result in clear conclusions, but at its next meeting the Old Testament group agreed on a set of rules on transcribing *nomina propria* from Hebrew to Czech. From now on the group used a dictionary of all names and other central notions in the Old Testament that would be translated in a concordant way.<sup>17</sup>

In the relative freedom of 1968, attempts were made to re-establish the Bible Society in Czechoslovakia, which had been abolished by the communist regime. The state authorities did not allow an independent organization, but agreed on a department for these aims with the Ecumenical Council of Churches of the Czech Socialist Republic. Foreign partners, especially the United Bible Societies (UBS), assisted in this process. The result of the foundation of the so-called Bible Work of the Ecumenical Council of Churches was the existence of a formal line of communication between the UBS and both translation working groups. UBS offered seminars in Switzerland and Poland on translation work and brought also guidelines for this work. At the time UBS underlined the need of an accessible translation based on the principle of dynamic equivalency, which was rather the line of the Czech New Testament group. The consequence of the entrance of UBS in the Czech translation discussion was that the more liberal approach of the New Testament group had to be accepted to a higher degree by the Old Testament group.<sup>18</sup>

At large it seems that the Old Testament group had a much stronger centralized leadership and way of working than the New Testament group. Partly this was due to the differences in character between Miloš Bič and Josef B. Souček. Bič's ambitions with the translation work were also much higher than Souček's. For Bič a new translation was very much the culmination of his career as a Old Testament scholar.<sup>19</sup>

The difference in ambition had several outcomes. In the years of the translation work the Old Testament group also prepared a commentary to each book of the Old Testament, which were published from 1974 onwards. Every translator had not only to propose his or her translation of a given text, but also to write a text for the commentary about it.<sup>20</sup> Alongside the new translation a complete commentary on the Old Testament was born as well. Also Bič seems to have been much more invasive in the process of a proposed text (translation or commentary) than his counterpart in the New Testament group. Milan Balabán indicated that the published texts, all edited by Bič, saw

<sup>16</sup> Minutes from the meeting in AOTC.

<sup>17</sup> Dictionaries in AOTC.

<sup>18</sup> See the documents on UBS and the establishment of the Bible Work in AOTC. There also the guiding principles of UBS in a Czech translation are preserved.

<sup>19</sup> See also Bič's Memoires "How we translated the Old Testament" in *Informační Bulletin České Biblické Společnosti*, 1995/2 to 2000/2.

<sup>20</sup> In his Memoires Bič presents the commentary basically as a by-product of the translation. Item, 1995/2 p. 12-14.

often major changes without the knowledge of the original author. According to him this provoked certain tensions in the commission.<sup>21</sup> Bič himself denied interference and stressed the collective character of the work.

Another aspect in the different style of working was certainly the amount of work the Old Testament group had to manage compared to the New Testament group as the size of the Old Testament text is much bigger than that of the New Testament. Due to this in 1964 the Old Testament group split into a group in Bohemia and one in Moravia. Of both groups Bič was the chairman and Soušek the secretary. The practical way of working of all groups was similar. One person prepared a translation, which was carbon-copied and sent to all members in the New Testament group or to some members in the Old Testament groups. Approximately once a month the groups met to discuss the proposed translation and agree on a final formulation.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of continuity the New Testament group had to suffer great losses, which affected the work of the group in one way or another. In 1972 J.B. Souček died and his place as chairman was taken over by J. Mánek. Also Mánek died while the process was still underway, in 1977, when finally Petr Pokorný became chairman. These events might have stressed the equality among the group members, whereas in the Old Testament group – which did not experience such losses – the hierarchy of authority was clear from the beginning to the end.

#### *Ecumenical outreach*

In the cause of the first years of the translation work some new members were added to the groups, in the first phase rather members of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless soon also members of other churches started to participate, firstly of some non-catholic churches like the Church of the Brethren and the Czechoslovak Hussite Church.<sup>24</sup> Others were to follow in the next years.

The most significant extension of the groups started from 1966 onwards. In that year the first Roman Catholic, Jan Sokol, started to visit the group, soon to be accompanied by Václav Žilinský. Sokol – not a biblical scholar – had gained some experience with translating and reworking of biblical texts for children. His father-in-law, the philosopher Jan Patočka, was acquainted to Josef Souček, who invited Sokol to participate in the translation project. Later they received an official consent of bishop Tomášek of Prague for it.<sup>25</sup> In 1969 the first Roman Catholics joined also the Old Testament group.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Milan Balabán.

<sup>22</sup> Some of the working sheets are preserved in the ANTG. In the AOTG only several versions of the translation of Ps. 23 survived.

<sup>23</sup> In the Old Testament group Pavel Smetana (1962), Milan Balabán (1963).

<sup>24</sup> In the Old Testament group Josef Michal (1962), pastor of the Church of the Brethren, and Václav Žák (1962), pastor of the Methodist Church; in the New Testament group Jindřich Mánek (1961), New Testament scholar at the Hussite Theological Faculty.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Jan Sokol, 20 April 2006.

Here the problem to find suitable members from the catholic side might have been that there were hardly any roman catholic Old Testament scholars at the time. From 1968 onwards the catholic participation got a higher profile, i.e. the higher clergy, a clear sign of the interest of a part of the church leadership.<sup>27</sup>

The significance of this extension with Roman Catholic members is hardly to be exaggerated. For the first time in centuries, after a long history of first Roman Catholic oppression of protestants and later vast Roman Catholic dominance in the country, both sides sat together and cooperated in the translation of a common text. As we have seen, in the 1960s ecumenical meetings were taking place regularly due to the relative liberalization of society and the changes of Vatican II. These meetings were rather an exchange of opinions, but in the two translation groups the two sides were working together on a common project that in the given circumstances had a fair chance to be completed and presented to the Czech public. This point of credibility in Czech society was an important part of Sokol's motivation to participate.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the real challenge was the significance of the new translation to the liturgical life of the Czech Roman Catholic Church. In the same years that both commissions were working on their translation, two competitive projects were launched. The first, a translation of the New Testament was completed in 1969 in Rome and was not a collective work, but done by the Czech priest Ondřej Petřů. The second was more complicated for the ecumenical teams. Its author was Václav Bogner, a professor of biblical languages at the Roman Catholic Theological Faculty, who had resigned in the 1950s when the faculty was forced to move out of Prague to Litoměřice. He was preparing a liturgical translation for use in the lectionary. The Old Testament group was the first to establish contact with Bogner, who visited the group once in May 1969. Most probably the communication was related to his translation of the Psalms, which he presented in September that year. He invited the Old Testament group to review his translation.

A few weeks later in an article in the Roman Catholic weekly *Katolické noviny* (23.11.1969) Bogner denied cooperating with the ecumenical translations groups. This evoked some irritation in the Old Testament group, which urged Bogner to explain his views.<sup>29</sup> Most probably this did not happen.

Relations got more complicated when Bogner started to publish his first examples of the gospel readings in *Katolické noviny* in 1973. In an accompanying note he wrote about his method, collaborators and sources. Here he referred also to the new translation of the gospels by the ecumenical New Testament group, which he had received most probably already in 1969 from Jerolím Adámek, one of the Roman Catholic members of the group –

<sup>26</sup> The first was Jaroslav Janoušek, who had met Bič in a Nazi concentration camp (interview with Miloš Bič by Martin Vaňáč in Vaňáč, o.c., p.106 ff.).

<sup>27</sup> In 1968 Jarolím Adámek joined. He died in 1969 and was replaced – only in 1976 – by Antonín Liška, who after 1989 was appointed bishop.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jan Sokol.

<sup>29</sup> AOTC.



with the agreement of the group. In his short note Bogner stated that the new translation has "an archaic diction" and therefore for his liturgical translation "had to be re-worked" in such a way, that it "almost lost its original form." In the next weeks the catholic weekly published some texts, which are largely dependent on the ecumenical translation, but do not refer to it as a source. For the New Testament group two issues were at stake. In the first place it is the question whether the Roman Catholic leadership was serious about its participation in the translation work. And secondly the copyrights of the ecumenical translation were seriously violated.

The irritation on the side of the New Testament group concerning Bogner reached a high level. On 19 June 1973 the chairman, J. Mánek, sent a letter of protest to bishop Tomášek, which was co-signed by the secretary and president of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Socialist Republic. The formulation is both diplomatic and slightly ironic:

The Ecumenical Translation Group welcomes the fact that its translation of the gospels obtained the Imprimatur and is used also in the Roman Catholic Church, of which some representatives were cooperating on it. The group would be glad to give its consent to the use of its translation of the New Testament and its well-considered corrections, if it would be requested. The starting point can only be mutual discussion and clarification of the position of the catholic members of the translation group (+ Dr. J. Adámek and V. Žilinský), who worked and are working under the authority of their bishops.

The answer of bishop Tomášek came after some consultations between the two sides in the beginning of 1974. The minutes of one of these meetings indicate that members of the New Testament group were seriously disappointed in the behaviour of Václav Bogner. The main problem they identified was the lack of communication between the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the New Testament group, which before was covered by Adámek. Representatives of Archbishop František Tomášek tried to take away the impression that the aim of Bogner or the hierarchy was to harm the efforts of the ecumenical New Testament group. Some members of the group put the affair in a political context. Bogner's work was endangered by serious interference in the liturgical commission of the bishops' conference. This could have been an attempt from the side of Pacem in Terris priests – supportive to the regime – to weaken the position of the hierarchy and its ecumenical efforts.

Both sides agreed that the liturgical lectionary was using the ecumenical translation to a large extent without previous consultations with the New Testament group. This position was confirmed in a letter of bishop Tomášek of 5 March 1974. The New Testament group was not entirely satisfied as it saw a lack of understanding at Tomášek's side for the rightful "bitterness" among the group. Nevertheless, the group gave its additional agreement to the use of its texts for the Roman Catholic lectionary.<sup>30</sup> Two years later Tomášek

<sup>30</sup> Minutes of the meetings and letters in ANTG.

appointed a successor to Adámek, his main representative in the New Testament group.<sup>31</sup>

The affair with Václav Bogner's liturgical translation showed how sensitive the question of genuine ecumenical relations and cooperation was at the time. On the one hand the Roman Catholic Church delegated directly or indirectly some of its experts to both ecumenical translation groups, at the same time it went its own way in matters of the liturgical use of the bible. The unprecedented willingness on both sides to cooperate in translating the Holy Scriptures, a sacred text to both, had its limitations. Certainly this was due to conservative forces in the Roman Catholic Church at the time, but it might have been an instrument in the hand of those in circles of the oppression apparatus to at least hinder ecumenical cooperation that would bring both sides together instead of separating them. Nevertheless, the mere fact that the new translation was ecumenical was a far more significant and powerful signal to both the churches and Czech society than some hesitations on the Roman Catholic side.

#### *The political context*

In the period when the two groups were working on the translation two important events happened in Czechoslovakia on the political level. In 1968, the developments known as the Prague Spring, lead first to a liberalization of the communist system, which was especially to be felt in the press. Censorship practically ceased to function, which resulted in a wave of democratic pluralism in the media. Serious thought was given to proposals of democratization of the economy and the political system. Nevertheless, the experiment ended in an occupation by troops of the communist allies under the leadership of the Soviet Union. What followed was the period of the so-called normalization of the 1970s and 1980s. The regime did not try any longer to convince the population about the truth of communism, but aimed at preventing people from political involvement other than ritual approval of the system. The means to implement this were of rather a administrative nature. People (or their relatives) could loose their perspective on a career if they expressed themselves in a "disloyal" way about the regime.<sup>32</sup>

The second major development started in 1977, when the manifesto Charta 77 was published and a structure of democratic opposition based on human rights appeared on the scene. Charta 77 was a reaction to the Helsinki accords between the two sides of the Cold War conflict and introduced human rights as a formal framework to limit the confrontation between East and West. Between 1977 and 1989 Charta 77 published regularly reports about violations of human rights by the regime in Czechoslovakia. Till 1989 Charta was joined by more than 1800 people. Many of them were subjected to oppression, trials

<sup>31</sup> Correspondence on this in ANTG.

<sup>32</sup> See Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its aftermath, Czechoslovak politics 1968-1970*, Cambridge 1997; Jiřina Šiklová, *The "Gray Zone" and The Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia*, in: *Social Research*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (1990), p. 347-363.

and imprisonment. Also a significant number of protestant and catholic pastors and lay persons joined the movement.<sup>33</sup>

Both events left their traces on the work of the translation groups of the Ecumenical Bible Translation. The developments of the Prague Spring were apparently discussed during the meetings of the working groups. A tangible result of these discussions was an open letter to minister Vladimír Kadlec of education, signed by five members of the Old Testament group.<sup>34</sup> The letter, dated 28 May 1968, is a reaction to an interview with Kadlec in the communist party paper *Rudé Právo* of 22 May, in which he gave an evasive answer to the question whether teachers, who had to leave their jobs because of their religious orientation, now could return to their positions. The tone of the letter is rather sharp and polemic. It accused the minister of old-fashioned, more or less stalinist views on religion and its role in public life.

You are of the opinion that pupils could learn about them [religion and christianity] "best in historical disciplines." Do you think that teachers who for twenty years were lead to distort the history of christianity and to vulgarize fundamental christian values, will have enough moral weight in the eyes of the children? Will they be able to sincerely and unbiased convey basic information about christianity? You are afraid that believing teachers will influence the pupils with "unscientific statements". Do you think that atheism in itself is a sufficient guarantee of scientific knowledge? We are convinced that the contradiction of faith and science is artificially constructed. Faith and science do not exclude each other if they do not exceed the boundaries of their competence.

The letter expresses a clear conviction that now the time has come to rehabilitate faith and religion in the eyes of the people. State authorities have to enable and facilitate this process, is the message, not to stop it.

It is rather likely that the Old Testament group did not receive an answer from the minister. Most probably after August 1968 the letter was to be forgotten. In general the period of the Prague Spring was rather favourable to the translation groups. Several translations of bible books could be published: Genesis, the 12 prophets, Josua-Judges-Ruth, and Ezdra-Nehemia-Esther. The last translation was published in 1970, but already approved of by the state authorities in 1968. The crisis came after the end of the Prague Spring. After 1968 the Central Church Publishing House – a state institution – refused to accept further manuscripts for publication.

In a rather desperate letter of 7 November 1972 Miloš Bič of the Old Testament Commission complained to the Synodical Council about the perspectives of his project. He expressed his concerns that he might not be able to finish the work, as his health is rather weak. If he would pass away as Souček

<sup>33</sup> For Charta 77 see Vilém Prečan (ed.), *Charta 77 1977-1989, Od morální k demokratické revoluce, Dokumentace*, Scheinfeld-Praha-Bratislava 1990; Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers*, London 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Milan Balabán, Miroslav Heryán, Vladimír Kubáč, Josef Sládek and Zdeněk Souček. The sixth signatory, Marie Čejková, pastor of the ECCB in Poděbrady, was not a member of the Old Testament commission. AOTC.

did earlier that year, the translation would be endangered. In the New Testament group there was already a crisis due to Souček's death. Moreover, since 1969 the authorities refused to prepare further publications. Four years are lost, the church leadership is not fulfilling the resolution of the synod to enable the publishing of the finished translations. Instead the church is just using the limited options for printing – the church was entitled to print four publications each year – for useless things. It is not possible to complete the translation till the celebration of the Czech Confession and most likely even the anniversary of the Kralice translation can not be celebrated by a complete edition of the new translation.<sup>35</sup>

The reason for the refusal of the state authorities was most certainly the new political line of the regime after the Prague Spring to isolate the churches as much as possible. Therefore publications had to be stopped or at least halted for some time. It took till 1975 when the state authorities agreed again to a publication of further books from the Old Testament. In between in 1973 the authorities had also given their consent to publish the four gospels, but that was already planned for 1972, when it was stopped. These tactics of the regime caused great frustration on the side of J.B. Souček, whose health was rather poor. Petr Pokorný indicated that Souček's disappointment with the delay of the publication of the new translation of the gospels was so strong, that it had a negative effect on his already poor health. On 9 September 1972 Souček died.<sup>36</sup>

In 1977 two members of the translation working groups signed the manifesto Charter 77. On the side of the Old Testament commission it was Milan Balabán, from the New Testament group Jan Sokol. In general the state policy had the strategy to isolate those, who signed the document. Often they lost their jobs and opportunities to participate in developments of public relevance. Also several pastors in the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, who joined Charter 77, lost their state licence to their profession and had to find other sources of income, often as window cleaners or heaters in hotels.

The state tactics in case of the translations groups was diverse. Jan Sokol did not experience any attempts from the side of the authorities to exclude him from the working group. He could even be officially mentioned as a member of the group. In case of Milan Balabán things went very different. He was soon to loose his position as a pastor and had to leave the Old Testament commission as well.

Here we have to take into account that the official reason to abolish Balabán's membership was rather private or moral. On 6 September 1977 two members of the Old Testament group, Blahoslav Pípal and Anna Kárová, were forced to give up their participation in the translation of the Old Testament due to a relationship between them and Pípal's subsequent divorce from his wife. The Synodical Council saw this as a serious offence against moral behaviour in the church and suspended Pípal as pastor and suspended his

<sup>35</sup> Miloš Bič to the Synodical Council, 7 November 1972. The letter is preserved in both the AOTC and ANTG.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Petr Pokorný.

membership of the Old Testament commission. In the same time also Balabán was divorcing from his wife. The Synodical Council took this as an argument to take the same step against him and suspended his membership of the commission as well.

Balabán's case concerning the translation commission was not political at first sight, but in the framework of the proceedings against him from the side of the church leadership and the state authorities due to his political conviction, the cancellation of his membership of the commission got necessarily a high political profile. In the given circumstances it was not possible to see this one measure entirely independent from the others taken against him. The Synodical Council must have understood the significance of this step in the political context.<sup>37</sup> Another development most certainly had a great influence on this development. On 1 July 1977 the authorities forced Miloš Bič to resign from his post as professor of Old Testament at the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology, where he had been teaching since the end of the Second World War. For Bič, who formally retired, as well as others at the faculty, in the church or in the translation commission, this must have been a sign that the project was at danger in a time that the work was almost done. In order to avoid further provocations and risks for a successful completion it might have been the easiest way to dismiss Milan Balabán from the commission.

The affair got its final touch in 1979 during the preparations of the edition of the new translation. In it a list of translators of both commissions was to be included. Two names were missing: from the New Testament group Štěpán Pavlinec<sup>38</sup> (who went into exile in 1968) and on the side of the Old Testament group Milan Balabán. The latter, when he heard about this, wrote a letter protesting against this decision to the secretary of the Old Testament commission, Zdeněk Soušek. Balabán accused the leadership of the group of sacrificing one of its former members in order to ensure the publication of the translation. In his answer Soušek denied responsibility for the step, stating that it was a measure from the state authorities against which he and Bič had protested themselves. The first edition after all did not include a list of members of both commissions, but the second of 1984 did. Both names were missing.

The affairs of both Pípal and Balabán were obviously a threat to the hopes and ambitions of Bič to finish and publish the ecumenical translation. The fact that he was forced to retire from his position as professor was the most serious warning that things got complicated. In the case of Balabán with its clearly political context he very probably and perhaps rightfully might have been of the opinion that with Balabán in his commission the state authorities would never give their consent to finish and publish the translation and commentaries. All this happened moreover when things were going in the right

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with Jan Sokol, Milan Balabán and Zdeněk Soušek. Some documents concerning the Pípal and Balabán case are in the AOTC.

<sup>38</sup> According to Pokorný he had agreed on not being mentioned. Interview with Petr Pokorný.

direction. By 1977 much of the translation work was done. Bič had not much to win by keeping Balabán in his group.<sup>39</sup> He could rather loose.

Bič had established quite good relations with the state authorities directly involved in the Central Church Publishing House, which was nothing more than the state institution for censorship on church publications. After 1968 the head of the censorship on the churches, Ladislav Prokůpek, had been replaced by Karel Knobloch, very much a hardliner who in the course of his career causes a lot of difficulties to the churches. Nevertheless, since 1974 Knobloch had agreed several times on the printing of the separate translated bible books and on the publishing of commentaries. According to Bič he did this much on his own risk as the higher state authorities were opposed to granting churches more space than they have.<sup>40</sup> Bič also managed to receive certain privileges in the negotiations with the printing companies. He was allowed to perform corrections of the draft prints in the companies themselves, something that was not allowed, since it excluded interference of the censor in the process.

#### *Publication and reactions*

The first results of the work of the translation groups was with some regularity published in church weeklies or magazines. Especially the publication of some more sensitive biblical texts provoked sometimes strong reactions. When in October 1969 the new version of the Ten Commandments appeared, many found it too modern, too civil, and not sacred enough. Comparisons were drawn with the Kralice translation, which could not to be beaten.<sup>41</sup>

In 1973 the four gospels were printed. The translation of Mt. 16,18 caused much criticism. The New Testament group had printed "you are Peter, you are the rock on which I shall build my church." Most of the letters concerning this issue were sent in 1978, not only from within the ECCB, but also from other churches not participating in the process of translation. They rejected the proposed translation of Mt. 16,18 because its character was too much Roman Catholic and too favourable to the pope. One added that this translation was certainly not what the ancestors of the Bohemian Reformation had fought for. In the final edition of 1979 the commission changed the formulation in a more acceptable "you are Peter, and on this rock."<sup>42</sup>

In November 1976 the Ecumenical Council of Churches started negotiations with the state authorities on the question of the celebration of the Kralice translation in 1979. It proposed that the Czechoslovak state would apply for international recognition of the Kralice translation as a part of the world heritage protected by UNESCO. The authorities refused this idea, but accepted another proposal, i.e. that on the anniversary of 1979 the new

<sup>39</sup> Also Zdeněk Soušek indicated Bič's concerns as reasons for the decisions. Interview with Zdeněk Soušek.

<sup>40</sup> Bič in his Memoires in Informační Bulletin České biblické společnosti, 1996/2, p. 5-7.

<sup>41</sup> AOTC.

<sup>42</sup> ANTG.



ecumenical translation would be published. This meant that the work on the translation had to be finished in 1977 and submitted to the authorities and the printing company. Both groups were immediately informed.<sup>43</sup> On 2 August 1977 the manuscript of both Old Testament and New Testament was indeed submitted to the authorities. After long months of corrections the ecumenical translation was printed in Český Těšín on paper that was imported from western partners, in a number of 120.000 copies. The first 500 went to state institutions and libraries, the rest to the churches. It was not available in normal bookshops.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusions

It is remarkable that the ecumenical translation started as a rather small project of some interested scholars from within the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, but gradually grew into a project shared by Christians from other denominations. The political and ecclesiastical processes of change of the 1960s had an important influence on the final significance of the translation. As such it became a testimony of Christian faith in Czechoslovakia under communism. In the relations and negotiations with the state authorities the working groups as well as the Ecumenical Council of Churches managed to protect the translation project. The regime might have aimed to use the project as proof for the outside world that Czechoslovakia cares about freedom of religion. Nevertheless the significance of the translation for Czech culture and society does nullify the state manipulation.

The price for this success was paid most and for all by Milan Balabán, who in a political context had to give up his work in the Old Testament commission and was not mentioned in the list of translators in the 1984 edition. It remains a question whether fear that the communist regime would not allow him to finish the translation brought caused the head of the commission Miloš Bič to take this step. The case of Jan Sokol in the New Testament group shows that things could go different as well. The unpredictability of the communist regime might have contributed to Balabán's case to a high extent.

<sup>43</sup> AOTC.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Zdeněk Soušek.

## Die Bergpredigt und die "bessere Gerechtigkeit" bei den Böhmisches Brüdern

(Die Auseinandersetzung um die biblische Interpretation und die ethische Konsequenzen.)

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Die Böhmisches Brüder haben seit Beginn ihrer Existenz das Prinzip "sola scriptura" von den Hussiten übernommen. Die erste Generation der Brüder hatte dieses Prinzip als wörtliche Interpretation verstanden, was zu einer legalistischen Einstellung führte. Die Brüder stellten bald fest, dass die ethischen Konsequenzen dieser Position sie auf sehr engen Raum einschränkten.

Die Auseinandersetzung über die Schriftauslegung spielte sich um das Jahr 1500 herum ab und konzentrierte sich vor allem auf die Frage der Eidablegung. Die Frage, was die angemessene Interpretation der Bibel sei, zeigte sich dabei in interessanter Weise. Die radikaleren Brüder hatten recht, was den Wortlaut betrifft (Matt. 5,34 sagt klar "überhaupt nicht schwören"), sachlich aber war ihre legalistische Interpretation biblisch falsch. Die Gegner haben biblisch-theologisch angemessen argumentiert, sie haben dabei aber einen nicht korrekten Wortlaut verteidigt.

Das Ergebnis des jahrelangen Konflikts war zweierlei. Einerseits brachte er eine neue Stellung zur Bibelinterpretation – man sollte die Bibel nicht buchstäblich interpretieren, sondern nach dem Geist des Textes fragen. Auf der anderen Seite führte er zu der Entscheidung, dass die Schriften der ersten Generation der Brüder nicht mehr als normativ, sondern nur als eine Stimme in der Diskussion gelten sollten.

Die erste Generation der Böhmisches Brüder stellt in ihrem theologischen Programm die Heilige Schrift als die einzige Quelle ihrer Lehre und auch ihres sittlichen Lebens vor. Die Theorie und die Praxis der Brüder sollten ausschließlich nach dem Zeugnis der Bibel geregelt werden:

Was die Propheten vorher prophezeit hatten, das haben die Apostel den Menschen verkündigt und wir annehmen und glauben, was sie schreiben; wenn sie schreiben, was wir glauben sollen, das glauben wir, und was wir tun sollen, das tun wir...<sup>1</sup>

Die Interpretation der Schrift heißt für die ersten Brüder, sich an den wörtlichen Sinn zu halten, wobei beide Teile der Schrift klar hierarchisiert sind – das Neue Testament hat die entscheidende Autorität. Was im Alten Testament nicht dem Neuen entspricht, das kann nicht gültig sein:

<sup>1</sup> Šestý list k Mistru Rokycanovi [Der sechste Brief an Magister Rokycana], AUF I, 20a.