

[研究ノート]

Zdena Tomin: A Brief Introduction to Her Life and Work

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After the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, Czech society experienced dramatic changes. One consequence was the division of the Czech cultural and literary scene in the 1970s into two coexisting, parallel tracks: one official, the other unofficial. The relative freedom that Czech intellectual circles had enjoyed through the 1960s was gone. The official socialist scene could be characterized as conformist, materialistic, flooded with objects, food, and sex.¹ Approved writers published their books through state publishing houses; their works were strictly reviewed and censored, and freedom of expression was quite limited. Meanwhile, on the unofficial side, the banned writers or those who were starting to write and didn't want to prostitute themselves to the official review process published in exile or by samizdat (the illegal reproduction of literary works, usually on typewriters, that were then passed from reader to reader).² In the "in-between zone," a few writers teetered on the edge of the official and unofficial literary scenes, such as Bohumil Hrabal, whose works were banned for some years after 1968,³ and Ladislav Fuks.

Leaving Czechoslovakia seemed to be the only viable option for many people during this period of normalization. Some authors who had been active in the opposition dissident movement were forced to leave for the opposite side of the Iron Curtain. Josef Škvorecký and his wife Zdena Salivarová emigrated to Canada (1969), Milan Kundera to France (1975), and Jiří Gruša to Germany (1981). Also among those compelled to leave their homeland was Zdena Tomin, who found her new home in the United Kingdom in 1980.

Tomin's literary works have not received much attention in either the Czech Republic or Great Britain. They have been left in the past, virtually unnoticed, even though at the time she was unquestionably one of the most active Czech citizens and opposition political figures.⁴ Her works merit a place not only among those of prominent Czech samizdat or exile writers—representing a rather different perspective and style of literature from her male colleagues such as the highly acclaimed Milan Kundera and Josef Škvorecký—but also among British writers of the 1980s. Tomin contributed to both Czech and British literature with her firm, autobiographical woman's voice (described as "magical feminism") and unique poetic style. In this paper, I will briefly introduce the life and literary works of Zdena Tomin.

An Insider's Perspective: Early Life and Work in Czechoslovakia

Born in 1941, Zdena Tomin was the youngest child in a poor Prague family. Growing up in the stormy period of postwar changes, she admired Generalissimo Stalin as a young teenager, lost her ideals later in the 1950s, and became involved with the Czech surrealist group around that time. She published some of her early surrealist poetry in the magazines *Repertoire of a Small Scene* (*Repertoár malé scény*) and *Analogon*.⁵ She studied acting at the Theater Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts, and philosophy and sociology at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. In 1962, she married a young Marxist philosopher, Julius Tomin, who in the 1970s would host one of the so-called underground home universities, “Jan Patočka University,” in their Prague flat.

Zdena Tomin graduated from Charles University in 1968, writing her thesis on the philosophical meaning of human existence, *Absurd Life* (*Nesmýslný život*); it was published in *Notebooks* (*Sešity*) the following year, leading to an intense debate with the influential Czech philosopher Milan Machovec. In that same year, she started working as an interpreter (from and to German and Russian) and continued writing even though she had no hope of becoming published through official means, since she had been placed on the black list of banned writers. As normalization proceeded, Zdena played an active role in the opposition movement, alongside her husband. In 1977, both of them signed Charter 77, thus clearly proclaiming their political views, with the result that they and their two sons became victims of persistent state oppression.

Until her exile, Zdena Tomin lived in the “dissident ghetto,” surrounded by friends and opposition colleagues. “[Everything that] was going on affected me, and I think most of my friends, very positively,” she recalled later, “because, even though it was a small group—and it was a ghetto and it was surrounded by guards and secret policemen—it was a besieged ghetto. You developed very intense friendships with people you would not have been friends with normally. And the solidarity in that ghetto was something which I think we all look back on with deep nostalgia.”⁶

But the pressure of dissident life was becoming enormous and the tiring distress and anxiety due to living on the edge of society had to be put into words. Tomin wrote and published two literary works that reflect the situation of Czech dissident society in the 1970s: *Total Deployment: A Diary of a Working Woman* (*Totální nasazení: deník pracující ženy*) and *Theater Piece?* (*Divadelní kus?*).

Total Deployment, published in 1977,⁷ is a literary diary of seven days in June and presents a stirring personal testimony of a working woman, mother, and wife who is sent abroad (probably to East Germany) as an interpreter while her beloved but a bit complex

and radical husband is protesting against the political situation with a hunger strike. Slight bitterness leaks through the lines, since the author sees her position as complicated, undervalued, demanding, and unfair in comparison to that of her heroic, self-confident husband. “I was fed up with you, my love. That manly beauty of yours, while my body ages. Those convictions of yours, while I do not know where I belong. Those historical grasps of yours! And I still do not know where to go. A soul of a woman! ... I feel fear. ... If the worst comes to the worst, I will go mad for a while. Take care of the kids!”⁸ She has to manage her life as the wife of an exposed dissident and fulfill the female role of supporting the heroes. Tomin’s descriptions of everyday reality (she works as a temporary interpreter in some prison, feeling incarcerated there too) mingles with surrealist, dreamlike moments during which the narrator gradually succeeds in reaching nearly the same point of elevated mind as her hunger-striking husband, thus in the end achieving a moderate settlement with him and also with her female self.

With *Total Deployment*, Tomin contributed to the literary genre of choice among the persecuted writers—a diary. As Jonathan Bolton mentions,⁹ diaries, collections of letters, memoirs, and essays written from a first-person narrative perspective were widely favored by unofficial authors during the period of “normalized” culture, as outlets for their need to express their plight publicly.¹⁰ But *Total Deployment* is more than a personal account; it can also be understood as a depiction of the situation of Czech women dissidents. Doubly burdened with work and household responsibilities, they were viewed with suspicion by most of their society, as if they were endangering their families and especially the future of their own children.

A year later, in 1978, Tomin’s play *Theater Piece?*¹¹ was published, also in a samizdat edition. With this play, she contributed significantly to the dissident drama of the 1970s,¹² vividly representing the conflict between collaboration with the power represented by the secret police and man’s moral responsibility. *Theater Piece?* is an experimental play set somewhere in twentieth-century Europe, depicting her own experience with persecution by the State Secret Police (StB) through a strong female main character named Marie-Anna, whose dissident husband, Jakub, has been imprisoned for a long time. Marie-Anna is a brisk, temperamental woman in her thirties, facing the stereotypes of everyday “normalized” life as represented by secret policemen, military brutality, and prisons. The story is unveiled through dramatic dialogs between Marie-Anna and secret police officers, with periodic injection of prosaic comments by a female narrator who explains the plot, giving further details and describing Marie-Anna’s emotions and thoughts. StB officers pressure Marie-Anna to collaborate, to divorce her husband, and to start living a “normal” life, yet she resists and keeps her own integrity firm. The play presents what we might call a happy ending: Marie-

Anna's husband is released from prison and the couple is reunited after many difficulties. Since Tomin's works were banned for life, this piece was never staged.

During the hard times after the publication of Charter 77, Zdena Tomin was a fierce human rights advocate, serving as the spokesperson for Charter 77 from June 5, 1979 to January 1, 1980 and as an active member of the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS). On May 7, 1979, she was brutally attacked in the doorway of the building where she lived with her family, most probably by an StB agent. As Barbara Day recounts,¹³ "Passers-by rescued her, but not before she had been severely beaten. An ambulance was called and she was hospitalized with a concussion. The following day she issued a statement connecting the attack with her constant surveillance by the secret police." Several other "preventive detentions" and police raids followed, and in August 1980, Zdena and her family were forced to leave Czechoslovakia for the United Kingdom, where Julius was offered a teaching position at Oxford University. Nine months later, they received a notice that their Czechoslovak citizenship had been revoked. Labeled as enemies of the state, they were now people of uncertain nationality. The family disintegrated soon after its arrival in England as Zdena and Julius took different paths.

An Outsider's Perspective: Later Life and Work in Great Britain

After her "voluntarily forced" emigration to Great Britain, Tomin went through difficult times. She explained in an interview for a historical journal, *Memory and History (Paměť a dějiny)*,¹⁴ "I was very active but it was not an easy time. Really miserable, I did not have anywhere to live and so on. Better times came only when I got a position at the BBC World Service." She remained active in the political and public sphere. Always a vigorous and committed woman, Tomin cooperated with Amnesty International, gave speeches at various conferences, took part in public debates, and coauthored three documentaries about Charter 77 and political prisoners; she also became an anti-nuclear and peace advocate, participating in European Nuclear Disarmament¹⁵ and other organizations. Tomin has lived in London, her adopted home, ever since, but with her emigration she lost an important part of her life. The anxiety of living under constant scrutiny was replaced by the anxiety of emptiness, since leaving Czechoslovakia meant that she could not pursue her political objectives as previously. During these difficult days, she began writing prose in English, leaving the Czech language behind and returning to it only as a BBC editor. Within a few years, she would transform all those anxieties into her first English novel, *Stalin's Shoe*.

In 1982, Tomin was invited to write a screenplay for a television drama, which she entitled *Enemies of the State*. The story takes place in Prague between 1977 and 1980, and it

depicts the real-life struggles of the Tomin family. In 1984, BBC television featured her life story in a documentary, *Nationality Uncertain*, for which she also wrote the script. Like her previous film, this documentary also dealt with life in socialist Czechoslovakia, the dissidents' political struggle, and the difficulties of their everyday life, all illustrated by the author's moving personal story and compared to the contemporary situation of Bangladeshi immigrants in London.¹⁶ The official Czechoslovak media did not remain silent, continuing to attack Tomin even four years after her emigration. In response to *Nationality Uncertain*, the Czech weekly *Průboj* published a repulsive article called "Truth, Lies and Illusions, or the Story of One Emigrant."¹⁷

After two documentaries that captured and reflected her political persecution in Czechoslovakia and after her personally difficult early years of exile, Tomin turned to more subjective genres. She published two confessional novels, both written in English, both dealing with the reshaping of the identity of a woman whose past had been lost and whose future was yet to be found. The first one, *Stalin's Shoe* (1986), covers the Czechoslovak years up to 1968 and her later life in Britain; the second, *The Coast of Bohemia* (1987), recalls her dissident experience of the late 1970s.

In *Stalin's Shoe*, Tomin tried to come to terms with her own emigration for the first time, thematizing "*ennui de l'exil*" and the tortuous journey of a woman deprived of both her citizenship and her identity. The novel, written in eloquent, alluring English, can be understood as a story of crucial loss and a quest to secure one's future by regaining the past. The main character is a middle-aged emigrant woman from Czechoslovakia, Linda Strizlik, who, after unsuccessful psychotherapy treatments, withdraws from chaotic London (where she has lived, separated from her English husband, in a flat with two other "again single" women), to her friends' cottage in rural Wales in order to write a book and get over her "ghosts." Surrounded by nature, Linda returns to her Czech past, writing emotional letters to a fantasized lover about her lost sense of magic and the grievously heavy world surrounding her. She writes the stories of her disappeared family: her foolish father, unloving mother, suicidal brother, and victimized sister. The narrative of loss and of enormous longing for love unveils its net as the reader comes to know Linda better and slowly begins to understand her compelling and complex story, as an unwanted girl coming to terms with her solitary and naive Stalinist childhood. "Linda was twelve when Joseph Stalin died. She heard the news in town, where she was being X-rayed ... traveling home on the open platform of tramway line number eight she cried her heart out. The clouds were white and swift on the winter sky and Linda's tear-flooded eyes transformed them into gigantic doves carrying Stalin's soul to Heaven and beyond. ... Life was never the same after Joseph Stalin died."¹⁸

In the Welsh cottage, Linda suddenly discovers her passionate erotic self with an unsettled Canadian named John, but their brief encounter does not end well. A strong whirlwind hits Wales, and Linda is knocked unconscious and seriously injured. She is reborn by virtue of nature:

The entire southern sky was now full of shooting tongues. It was quite beautiful to look at, quite like the *aurora australis* Linda had never seen, and never would see. “Fiddlesticks,” whispered Linda, “there is no limit to the things I shall see now that I am on my own, free at last. The ghosts are gone!” she shouted, and never mind that her voice fell flat on the ground. “I am in love with myself!”¹⁹

The wilderness, the storm, and the short, painful relationship with John release her ability to love again, giving her permission to let go. The cottage burns to the ground and Linda’s past is buried there with her writing, but from the ashes rises a reborn woman, ready to accept both her past and her future. After spending some time in a local hospital, Linda returns to London, where she finds a hopeful present and future.

Tomin’s second English-language novel, *The Coast of Bohemia: A Winter’s Tale*,²⁰ was reviewed as beautifully written, praised for its sensitivity, sensuality, perfect style, and fluency. *The Coast of Bohemia* is based on her own experience of the late 1970s Czech dissident movement. The story takes place in an unnamed city in Eastern Europe, presumably Prague, in winter. No further details about the place and time are given. The narrator, Funny, is a 33-year-old translator and dissident, a driving force behind the “Citizen’s Committee,” and a strong, independent woman. In contrast, her friend Norma, “adopted” by Funny, is an intellectually disabled, damaged, girlish woman, lost in the big city and the modern world. Funny cares for Norma like a loving mother, trying to protect her from the “bad” real world, including the secret police and persecution she must face every day. Nonetheless, Norma does not seem to be from this world; she reads from the clouds, resembling a doll from some other world. The novel in its entirety can be seen as portraying a metaphorical world in which people are constantly being watched and the cold climate freezes life to death. The narrator is followed and interrogated by a young secret police agent, Anton. Driven by her fears, she loses control over her situation, becoming marked as a traitor and mocked by her fellow dissidents. After Norma drowns in a frozen lake, Funny, having no more friends, seizes the opportunity to leave the country. Only exile can give her deprived being the comfort that she has sought for so long. She whispers down her chest, “Shush, things will sort themselves out. This is England, remember. Good old London, none of your foreign wilderness. Where, pray, is Bohemia?”²¹

With her two novels, Tomin achieved literary respect in a country where the only widely known Czech authors were Milan Kundera and possibly Bohumil Hrabal. Readers and reviewers praised her for opening up a new world to them—a world of female emigrants and agonizing ambivalence. “And if the novel does not have quite the cutting edge of other emigrant tales, still there’s an appealing freshness and buoyancy,” said one review.²² Tomin assimilated firmly into British society, building deep personal friendships with other contemporary female English writers, such as the influential Fay Weldon²³ and Shelagh Delaney.²⁴

As for the main tool of a writer—language—it is not easy to trace specifically the main phases in the development of Tomin’s style or form. Nonetheless, her enormous linguistic talent is apparent, along with her ability to express the pure essence in each of her narrations. Powerfully emotional, her writing portrays the dungeons of a female soul, including aspects that are not easily understood and accepted by some readers. Logic and rationality clash with dreams and irrationality. Tomin’s identity as a Czech writer was deeply rooted in her experience of oppression in everyday life, whereas her English identity shifted more toward the private spheres of life and the acceptance of a new reality in exile.

After the Velvet Revolution, and After All

Now, almost three decades years after the revolutionary year of 1989, debates continue over the role of Václav Havel and the third resistance movement²⁵ in Czech society. It thus seems important to clearly interpret the role of the dissident movement in the development of the postmodern Czech psyche. Moral dilemmas have not been solved, and the “gray zone” is deeply rooted within the system. Zdena Tomin commented on the situation:

People started turning against the dissidents, and I think dissidents were quite amazed and reacted with panic, started to be ashamed of having been dissidents, styling themselves as the “new-age people,” able “today people,” [saying,] “Let’s not go back, let’s not dwell on what we did and how we were persecuted.” But, the thing is, they were not persecuted enough. There was not enough torture, there was not enough blood. And when they suddenly seemed to be at the power—however shortly—people thought: “Wait a minute, these people we now say, ‘Aha!’—you did not do enough. We were the morally sound. We were the fighters for freedom.” And they punished the dissidents, for not being saints enough, and not being unsaintly enough.²⁶

Zdena Tomin retained her permanent resident status in Great Britain even after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. She has not returned to the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, neither

has she published any works of prose since 1988.²⁷ It seems that there is no easy way for those who were uprooted or forcibly dislocated, and who then managed to reshape their own identity while losing their nationality, language, and citizenship, to return later to their former homes. Zdena Tomin lives in London and remains nearly unknown to Czech readers (her English novels have never been translated) and nearly forgotten in the British literary scene. She is still unfairly overshadowed by her male fellow writers such as the French Milan Kundera, Canadian Josef Škvorecký, or Austrian Pavel Kohout. Compared to them, she has lived and continues to live a simple life, never having gained comparable fame or support. Nonetheless, she is probably the only Czech woman author to have earned very good reviews and won the hearts of readers in Great Britain with novels written in English. Tomin stands astride Czech and English literature, having contributed to both. With her Czech texts, she enables us to understand more fully the life of a persecuted activist under the Communist regime at the end of the 1970s; with her English novels, she presents a unique view of émigré life in Britain in the 1980s and a distant look back at the Czechoslovak socialist past.

Notes

- ¹ Here I would like to mention a widely popular author Vladimír Páral, who skillfully “erased” the socialist gloomy reality from his books, so when reading his novels from the '70s readers can get a feeling that the society they were living in was no different than societies in other countries.
- ² For example Edition Padlock (Edice Petlice), founded in 1972 - led by Ludvík Vaculík and named as an axiom to the official Edition Key (Edice Klíč) of Československý spisovatel; Edition Expedition (Edice Expedice), Edition Bin (Edice Popelnice) or Prague Imagination (Pražská imaginace).
- ³ However, after an “apology” published in literary magazine *Tvorba* in 1975, some of his novels were printed in official publishing, although censored and mutilated.
- ⁴ It seems important to mention that also philosophical works and essays of her former husband Julius Tomin, a significant figure of Czech dissident movement, are overlooked nowadays and have not been published since the samizdat publication in the '70s. He disappeared from Czech scene with his forced emigration, but even before that he was considered to be too radical, and uncompromising - he frequently wrote open letters to Czechoslovak government or president Gustav Husák and went on hunger strikes frequently. In 2014 Czech TV broadcasted a short documentary about J. Tomin *Aristotle from Bartolomějská (Aristoteles z Bartolomějské)*.
- ⁵ poems of Zdena Tomin published in *Analogon 4 - Proměny erotismu*, 1991.
- ⁶ “Dissidents of Central and Eastern Europe,” *New Europe* BBC radio program, May 1997.
- ⁷ Zdena Tominová, *Totální nasazení* (Prague: Edice Petlice, 1977).

- ⁸ Tominová, *Totální nasazení*, 4.
- ⁹ Jonathan Bolton, *Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁰ Maybe the most important “public diary” was Ludvík Vaculík’s *Český snář*, where he presented the readers with a fictionalized picture of life in the dissident ghetto, which was published in his samizdat Edice Petlice in 1980 and provoked a strong discussion amongst its readers. Vaculík proclaimed that the best is to write openly and publish everything, from notes on gardening or love life to comments on the political situation.
- ¹¹ Zdena Tominová, *Divadelní kus?* (Praha: Edice Petlice, 1978).
- ¹² Key authors were Václav Havel, Ivan Klíma, Pavel Landovský and Pavel Kohout.
- ¹³ Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers* (London: A&C Black, 1999), 20.
- ¹⁴ Zdena Tomin, “S duší neudělá násilí nic,” interview by Adam Hradilek. *Paměť a dějiny*, 2011/02, 101-107.
- ¹⁵ A British peace movement group, led by a historian E. P. Thompson, active from 1980 till 1991.
- ¹⁶ Both TV films were received very well by British, and later American, audience, as it helped them to understand the situation in socialist countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain.
- ¹⁷ “Pravda, lež a iluze aneb Příběh jedné emigrantky”, weekly *Průboj*, 14 -15 April, 1984, 10.
- ¹⁸ Zdena Tomin, *Stalin’s Shoe* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 52, 53.
- ¹⁹ Tomin, *Stalin’s Shoe*, 135.
- ²⁰ The title of this book refers to Shakespeare’s play *The Winter’s Tale*, in which the author gave the Kingdom of Bohemia not only the seacoast but also a desert.
- ²¹ Zdena Tomin, *The Coast of Bohemia. A Winter’s Tale* (London: Dent and Sons, 1988), 201.
- ²² *Kirkus review*, January 1, 1986.
- ²³ Fay Weldon (1931), novelist (f.e. *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*), essayist, playwright; a feminist classic
- ²⁴ Shelagh Delaney (1938-2011), dramatist (*A Taste of Honey*), screenwriter; associated with feminist writing
- ²⁵ Certificates of participation in the Third Resistance were awarded already to 1072 people. Amongst the first ones was Zdeňka Tominová.
- ²⁶ “Dissidents of Central and Eastern Europe,” *New Europe* BBC radio program, May 1997.
- ²⁷ Only an excerpt of her first novel appeared in an anthology of Contemporary Czech Women *Allskin and Other Tales* published in 1998, edited by Alexandra Buchler.

ズデナ・トミン——人と作品

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本稿は、チェコスロバキア生まれの女性亡命作家ズデナ・トミンの遍歴とその文学作品を簡単に紹介したものである。トミンは1960年代から執筆活動を開始し、当時のチェコスロバキアの政治運動にも積極的に参加したが、1968年以後は共産主義政権によって弾圧され、亡命を余儀なくされた。亡命に先立ってトミンはチェコ語で日記体小説『全的挺身』(Totální nasazení)と戯曲『演劇的作品か』(Divadelní kus?)を書いてサミズダート(地下出版)で出版したが、亡命後はやむを得ず執筆言語を英語に変更、長編小説『スターリンの靴』(Stalin's Shoe)と『ボヘミア海岸』(The Coast of Bohemia)を発表し、同時代のイギリス文壇で高い評価を得た。現在これらの作品はほとんど埋没され、再版されることもなければ、文学研究において顧みられることもない。しかし、チェコスロバキアの政治運動と亡命してからの不安な生活を女性の観点から表現したトミンの作品は、M・クンデラやJ・シュクヴォレツキーなど男性の亡命作家の作品と比べると、異色を放つものであり、注目に値するものである。