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CZECHOSLOVAKIA

5 April 1966

CHANGES IN LITERARNI NOVINY

Martin Vaculik (read Vatsulik), Czechoslovak CP Presidium candidate and leading regional CP secretary of southern Moravia (Brno), criticized at the district Party conference in Jihlava on 20 March 1966 the cultural weekly Literarni Noviny for printing articles by "irresponsible" writers and journalists. He announced that the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union had drawn proper consequences from this unsavory state of affairs and had effected a change in the "system of direction" as well as a personnel reshuffle in the editorial board of the above journal.

The nature and extent of the announced changes were disclosed in Literarni Noviny (No.13, 26 March 1966) which just became available. The reform in the journal's management consists in the fact that, from now on, the journal will be directed not by the editor-in-chief, but by the editorial board. At the same time, the title "editor-in-chief" has been altered to "responsible editor" who will be subordinated to the board. This means a downgrading of a function which, up to now, has been decisive in the paper, for the new responsible editor becomes a mere executive.

Actual managerial duties have been entrusted to a triumvirate which, true to Vaculik's statement, consists of active writers (in contrast to theorists, critics etc.). Chairman of this new ruling body is Bohuslav Brezovsky who will be assisted by Milan Kundera and Jan Otcenasek. Of them, only Brezovsky is a newcomer, whereas Kundera and Otcenasek were already members of the old editorial board. Milan Jungmann, former editor-in-chief, has remained on the staff as responsible editor. For all practical purposes, he will be subordinated to the above triumvirate. According to the brief release in Literarni Noviny, the editorial board has been charged with preparing a study of editorial policy and submitting to the Writers' Union suggestions for pertinent reforms, in particular as regards publishing of political materials. Further personnel changes and an expansion of the editorial board are to follow in the near future.

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The new chairman of the directorate, Bohuslav Brezovsky (read Brzezovsky), born 1912, is an orthodox Communist novelist. He is best known by his two novels, "People in May" and "The Iron Ceiling," which deal respectively with the May 1945 Prague uprising and the February 1948 Communist coup d'état. Regarding his former position as editor-in-chief of Kveten (May), the youth magazine

- 2 -

administratively suppressed in 1959 for its revisionist tendencies, it should be recalled that he directed this journal between 1955 and 1957, before the journal became subject to Party criticism.

Milan Kundera is a quite different proposition. Born in 1929, he belongs to the younger generation and is known for his liberal attitude. He is noted especially for his play "Owners of Keys" in which he came out strongly in support of civic courage and blasted petty-bourgeois cowardice and conformism. Also, Kundera is the only one of the above top team who is not a Party member.

Finally, Jan Otcenasek (read Otchenashek), born 1924, is a Communist author and intellectual of some standing. Formerly a politically orthodox author -- his best known novel from that period is "Citizen Brych" published in 1955 -- he has shown a more enlightened and liberal attitude ever since the first thaw in 1956. At that time, he was elected first secretary of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, a post he left during the cultural freeze in 1959 under the pretext of "creative leave." His noteworthy novel from that period is "Romeo, Juliet and Darkness" (1958), describing a love affair between a Prague student and a Jewish girl during the Nazi occupation (a successful film was produced on the basis of this novel subsequently). Ideologically, Otcenasek stands somewhere between Brezovsky and Kundera.

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These changes in Literarni Noviny cannot be considered as other than a retrograde step forced on the Writers' Union by the Central Committee's ideological department, headed by Novotny's close associate, Pavel Auersperg. As disclosed earlier this year, this department now has the last word in approving the composition of editorial boards.

But, on the other hand, the Party does not seem to have won a victory as complete as it would have liked. It is particularly the appointment of Kundera to the top body of Literarni Noviny which indicates that the Writers' Union did manage to force the Party to a sort of compromise. As the 13th Party congress approaches, the regime is evidently anxious to tighten its rein over the whole cultural front. But, at the same time, it is anxious to avoid taking too drastic a step which would provoke too much open tension in this sector. The changes in Literarni Noviny would seem to be evidence of both these desires.

What the Party is trying to do is to depoliticize Literarni Noviny in as tactful a way as it can. It remains to be seen whether, by the measures it has taken, it will succeed.

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