

Georg Aeberhard • St.Urbangasse 21/23 • CH- 4500 Solothurn
+41(0)78 9091921
georg.aeberhard@gmail.com

A Chance to Meet Men and Women of Honor

by Georg Aeberhard

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A Chance to Meet Men and Women of Honor

Hi Anne
are you in Soleure these days by any chance? Literaturtage...
If it should be the case, I would like to have a cup of coffee
with you (or tea, or glass of wine.)
So long
Jiri

Hi Jiri,
I shall be there around 15.30, there should be a book-tent,
where my German publisher, Ricco Bilger, has a stand, look for
me there around that time. I hope you are free.
See you!
Anne

This e-mail exchange took place in May 2014, on the occasion of the
"Literature Days" in Solothurn, the town I happen to live now. I was looking
forward to meet Anne, and tell her about my project to put down my life's
coincidences; we had quite a few coincidences occur among the two of us,
mainly related to our existence as foreigners in Switzerland and - associated
with her book "Prague au doights de feu".

I've met Anne Cuneo¹ at the pub "Hirschen" where the Zürich jazz
society "Bazillusclub" moved to in 1984. We picked up a conversation from
table to table while waiting for Marion Brown's show to start. We talked
easily, in English, and soon after I introduced myself as a Czech emigrant,
Anne mentioned her adventure in my birthplace Prague experiencing there
the invasion by the Warsaw pact troops in August 1968. We had lot of stories
to tell "because we come from countries covered with scars and somehow
didn't wholly integrated in this country where everybody is busy finding
make-ups so that one doesn't see scars." That's how Anne once described our
affinity in a postcard, and she continued: ""But you, I noticed, carry around
the same type of tales as I. It always feels good to meet oasis when you are in
the sand hills..." We had similar tastes and interests - jazz, books, theater and
films -, and we started to see each other on different occasions rather
frequently.

When it came to the "Fall of Berlin Wall" later on, on October 9th, 1989, and the "Velvet Revolution" began in Prague on November 17th, we discussed these things feverishly for months, the more since Anne left for Prague once again to cover the progress of the overturn while I was already there - by a coincidence: I was invited to the documentary film festival in Leipzig and on my way back I drove to Prague where I arrived on November 17th in the evening. The first night I spent at the wireless, watching the magic eye tube trying to get a clean reception from the jammed transmitters like Radio Free Europe, BBC or Voice of America which I tried to tune in at my mother's place. The next day I myself was in the streets. I was able to stay in Prague for about a week, a week filled with the common anxiety that the party will have the workers' militia to disperse the protesters, and later on days and nights filled by growing satisfaction as the party's might began to fall apart, getting the news about it confirmed gradually even directly from the Czech radio and television. I met old schoolmates and friends in the overcrowded streets of Prague I've not seen or talked to for more than twenty years (I met two by coincidence, two upon a date). Well, I wasn't active there, in the crowd. I didn't shout or whistle or rang the keys. I was watching the people, I listened to the various balcony speeches. I felt great joy for them (us) but at the same time I asked myself if the twenty years of "normalization" really were necessary in the context of the country. It was completely wasted period of time, of no use for anyone either in the West nor East.

Back in Zürich, I urged Anne to write a novel about her days in the occupied Prague in August 1968, and about her subsequent escape to Vienna. Her story goes like this: Anne is in Prague with her husband, and while going to pick up some records on the right side of the river Vltava, she gets blocked there by the invading troops. Those are morning hours of August 22. In the course of these unexpected events, Anne stays in Prague for about a week. Now, she falls in love with the record vendor who gives her a shelter, and as a courageous daughter of an Italian partisan, she participates bravely in the resistance against the occupation forces, while phoning reports to the Swiss Radio in Geneva. Finally, she gets through to Vienna where she meets her husband by chance(!), a fortnight later just passing by on a street.

The successful progress of the "Velvet Revolution" in 1989 finally made Anne Cuneo to put her story down, yet spanning its hyperbole to the very November days in 1989. She has written the novel in French and was published in 1990 under the accurate title "Prague aux doigts de feu"² (In German its title is "Štěpán"³, 2011). On the frontispiece Anne Cuneo makes the following acknowledgement:

L'AUTEUR TIENT A EXPRIMER SA RECONNAISSANCE A JIRI HAVRDA, TIZIANA MONA, IRENA PETRINOVA. SANS LEUR AIDE, CE LIVRE NE SERAIT PA CE QU'IL EST.

Thanks to this acknowledgement the "Ambassador of Switzerland Mr. and Mrs. Jean-Francois Kammer request the pleasure of my company" at the "Dîner" in honor of Anne Cuneo while she was in Prague upon an invitation by the Institut francais de Prague to read from the very book we are talking about. The Embassy people knew about my presence in the Czech republic at that time since I was running an art gallery exhibiting Swiss artists also.

This "Dîner" became one of the affairs which are well set and cared for, meaning to do good yet - in my/its case - turning into an absurd miss. The ambassador Jean-Francois Kammer invited the following exponents of the Prague Spring '68 and of the Charter '77 to the "Dîner" :

Ludvík Vaculík⁴, the author of the "Two Thousand words". Published in the "Literární noviny" and being signed like a petition by people all over the country; this call for freedom became the actual manifesto for the Prague Spring 68. Ludvík Vaculík was not imprisoned but his works were banned for twenty years, until '89,

Ivan Klíma⁵, a writer and playwright, world famous next to Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal,

Jiří Stránský⁶, political prisoner (7 years in the uranium mines, in 1974 sentenced for 3,5 years again) and writer, president of the Czech PEN club,

Dana Němcová⁷, psychology diploma Charles University, dissident (6 months in prison)

Prof. PhDr. Milan Tvrdlík, CSc., German studies, Charles University

Jiří Pehe⁸, the director of New York University, Prague (returned emigrant from the USA)

Svatopluk Karásek⁹, parson and senator (returned emigrant from Switzerland)

Jaroslav Vejvoda¹⁰, writer (returned emigrant to Switzerland)

Alexander Tomský¹¹, publisher and translator (returned emigrant from England)

(One might say, missing were only Václav Havel, ex-president, world famous playwright and dissident (total of 8 years in prison served) and Pavel Kohout, writer (expelled emigrant to Austria)

Now, in 2005 we were well past the year 1989, the Czech Republic was on its own, the dissidents practically obsolete, even Václav Havel faced a lot of mean animosity. There is the "normalization" generation running the country, it's a tough survival fight going on, money reigns, corruption is getting worse and worse. At these times, to remember or to evoke the Invasion '68 as well as the Velvet Revolution '89 is not welcome anymore; it is outdated, its values are an obstacle in the fight for the fast buck.

So, here we are, zombies of the time gone. It might be that I am the only one who feels honored, honored to meet men and women to whom I looked up to, the first three for sure, being myself a generation younger. The whole reception evening became a bitter lesson of passing time, of lost illusions and well-meant non-communication. Not only because of the mix of languages in use at the table (French, Czech, English, German), and in the couloir afterwards, but also because of the merciless perspective set by the contemporary development – individually as well as a civilization as such. Apart from the fact that unfortunately, except for me, no one has read Anne Cuneo's book "Prague au doigts de feu"...

The Czechs and Moravians around the table took the chance to talk with each other about their everyday political, social and private matters, frustrations and "malheurs", and in the end Ludvík Vaculík intoned a Moravian wine folk song. Anne Cuneo had an exchange with the Ambassador and with the publisher sitting next to her (no, the book wasn't published in Czech so far) while I talked with my old friend Jaroslav Vejvoda - an old friend from the very beginning of our lives as refugees in Bern. Vejvoda's actual name is Marek, he had chosen his artistic name Vejvoda

because of a pub in Prague where he was a regular: "U Vejvodů". And so was I, before August '68, though we didn't know each other at that time.

Oh, by the way, the served menu was exquisite, the wines excellent:

The Dîner du 15 mars 2005

Saumon mariné

Supreme de canard aux champignon,
Haricots et carottes glacées

Poire Williams a la glace vanille et sauce nougat

Saint-Saphorin Roche Ronde 2003

Pinot Noir de Sierre 2003

Champagne Charles Heidsieck brut

As in regard to "honor": Anne Cuneo was awarded the title "Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la République française" in 2008, and in 2013 she was named "Commandeur de l'ordre National du Mérite".

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- ¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Cuneo
 - ² <http://www.campiche.ch/pages/oeuvres/prague.html>
 - ³ <http://www.bilgerverlag.ch/index.php/Buecher/Anne-Cuneo-Stepan>
 - ⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludv%C3%ADk_Vacul%C3%ADk
 - ⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Kl%C3%ADma
 - ⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiř%C3%AD_Stránský
 - ⁷ <http://www.gariwo.net/pagina.php?id=7664>
 - ⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiř%C3%AD_Pehe
 - ⁹ http://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svatopluk_Karásek
 - ¹⁰ [http://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaroslav_Vejvoda_\(spisovatel\)](http://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaroslav_Vejvoda_(spisovatel))
 - ¹¹ http://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Tomský