

# Out of the desert

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In December 1981, in response to the growth of the vast opposition movement named Solidarity, Poland's Communist leader General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law. The military government sealed the borders, imposed curfews and disconnected the telephone lines. Solidarity's leaders were arrested; thousands of opposition activists were interned. One evening during the long months that followed, a young graduate student in Polish philology set out to hear a lecture at St Hyacinth's Church in Warsaw. "Imagine," Jacek Leociak said to me, "martial law, not long before the curfew, in a Dominican church on Freta Street, Krzysztof Michalski - very handsome then - is lecturing about Heidegger."

Michalski was a Catholic whose philosophical passions were Heidegger and Nietzsche. He was a close friend of the philosopherpriest Józef Tischner, chaplain of Polish Solidarity, and of Karol Wojtyła, who became Pope John Paul II. Earlier Michalski had been a student of Leszek Kolakowski. That was in the 1960s, when Warsaw University's philosophy department had been among the best in Europe. Michalski had lived in ,oliborz, a neighbourhood a few miles north of the university still permeated by the legacy of the pre-war Polish Socialist Party. At the university Michalski had friends from his own neighbourhood, and also other friends, like Adam Michnik, Barbara Toruńczyk, and Irena Grudzińska, who were the children of Communists and lived in the centre of Warsaw, in large apartments where they would throw parties when their parents were away.

Then in March 1968, it all changed. Communist censors prematurely shut down performances of Adam Mickiewicz's nationally minded Romantic drama *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve). Students protested against the closing of the play. In response, the Polish United Workers' Party (Poland's Communist party) blamed the student protests on "Zionist conspirators", using the demonstrations against censorship as a pretext to unleash an anti-Semitic campaign. Communists propagated fantastical accusations of a Nazi-Zionist conspiracy against Poland.

Many of Michalski's friends went to prison. Michalski did not. He was not at the centre of the student protests, he was only a sympathizer - because he was absorbed in philosophy, because, he believed, he was not as courageous as his friends. When they did get out of prison, many of those friends, together with Kolakowski and others among their professors, left Poland. Altogether, after March 1968, some 13,000 Polish citizens, most but by no means all "of Jewish origin", gave up their Polish passports in exchange for exit visas. Forty years later, it still felt to Michalski as if it had been just yesterday: the emigration of his friends. The closing of the philosophy department. The end of everything.

A catastrophe for his generation, he described it, and for all of Polish intellectual life. "Afterwards," he said in an interview, "we lived its consequences, on ruins."

It was not easy, in these circumstances, to write a dissertation about Heidegger. The Communist state, as was pointed out to Michalski, regarded Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) as directed against the workers' movement. Moreover, after March 1968, there was no longer anyone left with whom to study. And so in 1973, Kolakowski's friend Irena Krońska sent Michalski in turn to another friend, the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. In 1933, as a young man, Patočka had studied in

Freiburg with Edmund Husserl, Heidegger's teacher and the founder of the phenomenological tradition, and with Heidegger himself. Patočka was personally close to Husserl, and very loyal: after the Nazis came to power and Husserl, as a Jew, was stripped of his German citizenship and no longer permitted to lecture in Germany, Patočka and his colleagues invited him to Prague. The lectures Husserl gave there in 1935 became his last great work, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*. Philosophically, though, Patočka was closer to Heidegger.

In June 1972, Patočka gave his final lecture as professor at Prague's Charles University: the grace period following the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring was over. Patočka's students brought him a bouquet of flowers to commemorate his forced retirement.

Afterwards, one of those students, Ivan Chvatík, would go to visit him in his apartment to talk about philosophy. Soon Chvatík asked if he could bring along his friends, fellow students, and in this way, somewhat spontaneously, a private seminar came into being.

Once a week Patočka and his students would meet in his apartment to read Heidegger's *Being and Time*, translating aloud from German into Czech. There was nothing shallow, nothing superficial, Chvatík later recalled. Every word of Heidegger was explained, clarified and commented on by Patočka; sometimes they would devote the entire evening to just a few lines. Patočka believed, as he wrote to Michalski in 1974, that Heidegger's philosophy had a "special meaning ... for our East European countries". In Heidegger, Michalski found a thinker for whom reality had an incurably and primordially historical character. Michalski was involved with the Polish Catholic journal *Znak* (which was banned in Czechoslovakia) and he asked Patočka if he would write something about history. Patočka welcomed the suggestion: ideas he first articulated in private, underground lectures for his friends and students in Prague, became a series of six "heretical essays about the philosophy of history". In Czechoslovakia, these essays were circulated illegally, in samizdat, in 1975. In Poland Michalski managed to publish in *Znak* his translation of only one of them - "Does History Have a Meaning?" In this third "heretical essay", Patočka insists that meaning - absolute meaning, meaning embracing totality - is a condition for human life. In its absence we descend into nihilism. Yet "history" as such, Patočka believed, begins precisely with the "shaking of accepted meaning". This shaking is good - good in the painful way that Heidegger suggested angst, our confrontation with nothingness, is good. As a result of such a confrontation we return to a problematized world, a world in which we have lost our naive certainty of meaningfulness and are forced to seek meaningfulness anew. For Patočka, what mattered was the seeking itself. Accepting responsibility meant posing the question of meaning for ourselves.

In Communist Eastern Europe, "responsibility" was a special term. The moment when Michalski met Patočka was the aftermath of 1968, when the Czechoslovak experiment of "socialism with a human face" had been brought to a violent end by Soviet tanks. Paradoxically, the arrival of the Red Army in Prague meant the end of Marxism. The new hard-line government brought "normalization": a return to dogmatism, to censorship and oppression, yet now with minimal terror. Normalization-era socialism was no longer so bloody. Nonetheless, Patočka's student, the philosopher Ladislav Hejdanek, believed that "morally it was much worse". If Warsaw after 1968 had felt like an intellectual desert - so many of the best minds were gone - Prague after 1968 had felt like a moral desert: the true believers in Communism were gone, replaced by opportunists and cynics. In some way Michalski and Patočka found themselves in similar positions in their respective deserts, having kept a certain distance during revolutionary moments, having not been to prison when so many of their friends had, and feeling the weight of this.

On January 1, 1977, Patočka, at Václav Havel's request, assumed the role of one of three original spokespeople for the human rights initiative Charter 77. This was a petition lamenting that human rights in Czechoslovakia existed on paper alone. The Charter said nothing critical of Marxism; it demanded only that the Czechoslovak government respect the Helsinki Accords. Charter 77 was spawned by a small group of dissidents, yet it brought together Christians and Marxists, former Communists and former victims of Communists, those who had survived Nazism and those who had survived Stalinism, who now shared - despite having perhaps been on opposite sides in the past - what Patočka in his last "heretical essay" named "the solidarity of the shaken". Patočka's decision to represent Charter 77 meant that the police came for him, as he must have known they would. By then he was sixty-nine years old and in weak health; the interrogations at the hands of the secret police were brutal and draining. Patočka did not survive them.

Patočka's death was a defining moment for Michalski. Shortly afterwards, he went to the Federal Republic of Germany on a scholarship.

There he met Klaus Nellen, a West German student of philosophy. Michalski was not charismatic in the typical sense. His social skills were peculiar, and he had much of the brooding philosopher about him. Wandering about in silence, unable to cook a meal for himself, he seemed an unlikely animateur.

Yet he possessed that peculiar ability to persuade people to do things: in this case, he persuaded Nellen to go into Communist Czechoslovakia and smuggle out Patočka's papers. Nellen brought the first papers across the border; later Chvatík managed to smuggle further papers by giving them to sympathetic foreign diplomats.

Soon Patočka's archive became the centrepiece of a very special place: the Institute for the Human Sciences in Vienna. Here Michalski, together with his young colleagues Nellen and Cornelia Klinger, created a meeting point for intellectuals on both sides of the Iron Curtain, a space for exchange between academia and a broader public, and an intellectual community devoted to overcoming the divide between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. Pope John Paul II was a patron of the institute and participant in its forums, as were Hans Georg Gadamer, Leszek Kolakowski, Józef Tischner, Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur. The Institute for Human Sciences founded a journal, *Transit*; to this day it draws scholars from dozens of countries, hosts conferences, organizes summer schools, and sponsors public debates in Vienna, Warsaw and elsewhere. In the thirty years since its founding, the institute has cultivated hundreds of younger scholars. Topics have ranged from the public role of religion and conditions of European solidarity to feminism and climate change, sources of social inequality and immigration policy, nascent capitalism in Eastern Europe, and the nature of truth.

Michalski was the rare intellectual with a talent for organization. Yet he remained devoted to philosophy. Among Patočka's remarkable accomplishments had been a translation of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* into Czech. Patočka, though, was not a Hegelian. On the contrary, he remained so passionate about Heidegger's philosophy because, he believed, it was Heidegger who provided an antidote to what Miłosz called "the Hegelian bite". This was the intuitive conviction Patočka and Michalski shared, which had brought them together: Heidegger's philosophy as a means of extricating oneself from all totalizing schemata of history which reduced the individual to a distant observer, gazing on history as if upon an already determinate or to-be-made-determinate object.

Michalski's childhood had coincided with Stalinism in Poland; his adolescence with attempts to purify the Communist system of its Stalinist deviation without abandoning Marxism. At the core of Marxism remained Hegel's claim that "the truth is the whole". "Does the understanding of something suppose finding a unity in that which one wants to understand? Is it only then - when we are able in each fragment to see a part of some whole - that we can discover some meaning in the multifariousness of the experienced world?" These questions, Michalski said in an interview, had kept him awake at night since his first years of university.

They were at the heart of his book on Heidegger, published in 1978, and at the heart of his book on Nietzsche, published some thirty years later. Could there be meaning - the kind of meaning that imbues life with value - without wholeness? Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was the philosophical cornerstone of Michalski's early university years. From Kant, Michalski came to Heidegger through Husserl's phenomenology. For Kant the gap between the phenomenal and noumenal realm remained unbridgeable. Kant's *Ding-an-sich* - the "thing-in-itself," the unknowable reality as it is in itself - was a concept Michalski found empty; it had no content. Against this emptiness he was drawn to Husserl, who called for a return to experience, to the validation of our experience in the world as the "single definitive ground of knowledge". "To be conscious of what is being played out in our experience", Michalski wrote in *Logic and Time: An Essay on Husserl's Theory of Meaning*, "... that is the task of philosophical reflection."

For Husserl, Michalski emphasized, the relationship between subject and object precedes its parts. In the beginning there is the relationship. There is no unbridgeable gap between consciousness and the world. Human beings are connected to the world in such a way that they cannot be separated from it. It was Heidegger, though, who deepened this connection, who radicalized it.

Like Hegel, Heidegger was a profoundly historical thinker for whom meaning was only possible in time. Yet in Heidegger's

philosophy, Michalski explained, we do not look at history from the outside, as already finished, as already whole or to be completed in some determinate way, but rather from the inside. We are "always already" thrown into the world, into history, always already bound up in it, open to the unknown that is life. There is no place apart from the world to stand at a distance and contemplate it. We are in the world, Heidegger argued, not in the way that a bird is in a cage or a cookie is in a jar, not in such a way that we could in principle be detached.

Heidegger became for Michalski the thinker who provided a point of departure for answering the answers that kept him awake at night: yes, there can be meaning without totality, without an Archimedean point outside of history and outside of oneself.

"Life and history," Michalski wrote, "do not go on independently of our participation, like a carousel you can ride or jump off of at will." For Michalski the imperative was to resign from the illusory conviction that there is some point of view from outside time on which we can look at our "now" *sub specie aeternitatis* and in this way relativize it. No, the time in which we are living possesses its own finality. We are the co-creators of meaning in this time. And so all meanings are fragile, temporary, open to change - but for all that no less deep and binding and real. These meanings are the only ones we have and the ones we must use.

So meaning is possible, but not above and outside ourselves. Everything around us is not found by us, but rather is, in a certain measure, our creation. Because we are co-creators we are therefore responsible. Heidegger, for Michalski, was the philosopher of freedom - of freedom as responsibility. It is understandable that we long to cast off responsibility by displacing it onto some firm foundation. We long for the world as a garden, orderly and secure. But that world, that garden, is illusory. Lurking in every moment is the possibility of the end, of the closing of the world as it was - and of a new beginning, a new world.

In an essay of 1974 that Michalski translated for *Znak*, Patočka described how for Heidegger, responsibility is not a relationship to something that is, to some kind of being, but rather an ontological trait of *Dasein* - that is, of our own being. ("Patočka used to say," Václav Havel wrote in "The Power of the Powerless", "that the most interesting thing about responsibility is that we carry it with us everywhere.") This flowed from Heidegger's philosophical project, described by Patočka as "the first radical-to-the-depths attempt to build philosophy on the ground of finitude". This was a fundamental idea that Michalski, too, absorbed from Heidegger: that the condition of possibility for freedom, responsibility and meaning is human finitude - that is, death. Death is always hanging over us, defining our being, for being-in-the-world means being-towards-death. *Angst* for Heidegger is an anxiety that, unlike fear, has no tangible object. *Angst* is rather our feeling of notbeing-at-home-in-the-world in the face of the nothingness we move towards; it is our confrontation with death. In our daily behaviour we flee from that confrontation. In moments of *angst* our true condition is disclosed to us. In Michalski's reading of Heidegger, human finitude - death as a possibility "not to be outstripped" - is not negative, but is rather the condition of any meaning at all. This finitude is not a prison of the soul, but rather that which reveals the authentic meaning of human existence as freedom.

This was not merely an academic matter. There is some unusual quality in Michalski's writing - not only a clarity and lucidity, but also an intimacy, something irreducibly personal. In the 1970s, many of Michalski's friends were involved in the creation of *Solidarity*. Living in Poland then, Michalski felt as if Heidegger were speaking directly to him, Krzysztof Michalski, like the eyes in certain portraits, which seem to be gazing at the viewer wherever he or she might be. "Heidegger was for me," Michalski wrote, "the philosopher who was able to disclose the weight of each step of my life or of yours."

Michalski read Nietzsche similarly, as conceiving of history as "yet another name for the world in which we live: the world of becoming, the world of constant change and irreducible diversity. Attempts at discovering a goal, a totality, a 'truth' beyond it, attempts at discovering the 'transcendent meaning' of the world in which we live, or else at understanding in reference to some 'external' system of reference - all these end ... in utter failure". For Nietzsche, the attempt to impose some kind of rational whole was life-negating.

It was, in essence, nihilism. How can nihilism be overcome? Ultimately, through the confrontation with death, the most radical discontinuity. Death discloses instability, the suspension of meaning. "Death is not a 'something,'" Michalski wrote in *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*, "it is not an object that we need to incorporate into a

greater whole. The integration of life and death disturbs the identity of the former; it shows us that there is no 'whole' to be made of it."

Death is the possibility of something unknown par excellence. And so one's life is open to something irremediably new at every moment. The true meaning of death - what the confrontation with death, if one does not flee from it, means for life - is the opening of our eyes to our freedom, and our responsibility. Each of our lives is an answer to the challenge of coping with our approaching death.

The Flame of Eternity, translated by Benjamin Paloff, was published in English in 2012. It was, unexpectedly, Krzysztof Michalski's last book.