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THE HARD LIFE OF A FEMINIST IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

I have been reading *WRITING A WOMAN'S LIFE* by Carolyn G. Heilbrun.

My constant reading of feminist literature really shifts my view of the situation of women here in Czechoslovakia.

For example, when I read about women's efforts to be treated as quite normal coworkers in the workplace, I thought to myself: "Haha, what a funny problem! Of course women can do all kinds of work as well as men, and nobody denies that!" - But then a young guy at one of my literary workshops told me: "Female scientists are always ugly and unattractive." Well, before I was educated in feminism, I just wouldn't pay any attention to his words; but now I notice his sentence really well.

Or another example: we have a sort of apa among our SF fans - a file into which every participant writes his thoughts, opinions etc.; I wrote there a short letter (essay) about feminism - what it actually is, as nobody knows the real meaning of the notion, and everybody thinks that feminism is just a very radical and quasi-Communist form of movement.

Some of the participants reacted adequately to my essay, but two of them obviously didn't read my contribution at all. Instead they reacted very fiercely along the lines: "Shit, these stupid Communist women want complete equality and deny all gender differences and spend all their time yelling at meetings".

One of these people was a woman, our secretary at *IKARIE* magazine, otherwise quite a nice person - but one of those who are nauseated by Communist propaganda and thus by anything that sounds leftish, and who refuse to accept any new ideas in this field. What is really bad is that they don't just say "feminism doesn't interest me" but they condemn the whole thing very aggressively.

The second "anti-feminist" was a guy who even wrote that "it would be very bad if men were forced to cook - the real man doesn't cook". At the other hand, although he has such prejudices, he is the most enthusiastic and involved new father - at the last party in my house he spoke so much about his new baby that I was completely bored with him! So what would you think about him?

People can't see (or at least try to see) their own prejudices: they are more emotional than rational, they are not able to listen to other people's opinions, they can't discuss things in a logical way, and this is at least partially the impact of the Communist regime, which forced people not to think at all.

From 6. to 8.6.91 there was held a feminist conference in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, ; I couldn't go there but it induced me to write an essay about the possible aims of feminism here in Czechoslovakia. It's relatively long (about 4000 words) so I can't include it in this issue but I can send it to anybody who is interested.

My main "discovery" (which was discovered rather by my Canadian friend Laura) is the *CULT OF MOTHERHOOD*.

All Czechoslovak women (and men too) were trapped by this cult in the seventies and eighties. It was very typical for very young people (under 20) to become parents. I didn't know any

woman who would choose not to have children at all, or postponed her first baby until after she was 30. Motherhood was considered very fulfilling, but women of course had their jobs or careers as well.

Our women don't need any consciousness-raising groups, or other "we-women" activities. But our men desperately need some images, some *MODELS OF THE NEW MAN!* They don't have idea that something like this can exist, that creating a home, dealing with babies, cooking etc. is not a closed world for them.

Personally I am also product of our times and *I hate the idea of joining some women's group.*

Why?

1) It is very Communist-like. It reminds me of the Communist Union of Women, which was utterly dreadful.

2) Because of the "*we are not a minority!*" complex. We don't need this type of separation from men at all; we want to deal with topics like the family, better human relations, human rights etc., but we don't want to exclude men from these activities!

We had a guest from Norway and he told us that in Norway the allocation of quotas to scholar's jobs went so far that if they have to choose between a man with better education and capability, and a woman with lower abilities, they have to choose the woman! I think it's extremely unfair for the men, and I can't understand why people decided for this, as it will cause a deterioration in the academic standard of the schools! It's somewhat too much, I feel.

Sometimes I am quite desperate about my abilities to deal with feminist topics at all. I feel that I am not competent for it!

Yes, I am a woman, but my whole education was very atypical.

My parents are scientists, and they are very much alike. My mother is far more dry and rational than my father, who is far more emotional. My mother likes intellectual work, and speaks about cooking and household chores as "these stupid idiotic duties that must be done". My father does all the cleaning, gardening and still other chores so that he spends perhaps more time around the household than my mother.

They didn't stress to me that I was a girl. My mother usually wears gray-brown plain clothes, no decorations, no cosmetics or perfumes, and shows no "womanly" behavior at all. So it was a bad model for my teens, when I was not able to behave adequately, in the "girlish" way that was expected from me.

The result was that I never had any doubts that the purpose of my life was some sort of interesting, creative work and that I was able to play the role of a worker, but I suffered constantly from my inability to fulfil the female role. I felt myself to be a human being without any gender, and when I wanted to be socially succesful, I had to think hard about how to behave. What clothes? What sentences to invent for this and that occasion? I know that *everybody* has such problems at this age, but I want to stress that my identity was perhaps really genderless.

So perhaps that's why I can't understand why some women should feel *different*, non-capable for certain work, and so on.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA TODAY

This is part of a letter that I wrote to Charlotte Proctor after reading a comment about the situation in Czechoslovakia by a Czech fan in Charlotte's fanzine ANVIL; this comment was such a pessimistic whimpering, showing clearly the Communist opinions of its author, that I could't keep silent!

I am very glad that the price of energy has been increased - finally, after much hesitation! Cheap energy was the reason why people, factories, transportation companies, agricultural cooperatives, simply everybody, was terribly wasteful. And our disastrous environmental situation is caused by exactly this: nobody could be bothered to introduce more efficient technologies as energy was so cheap. I am glad - really glad, as a sincere Green - that petrol is so expensive. Yes, I hate our government for raising the prices of train tickets and public transport; in many respects our government is losing the opportunity to build a new model of environment friendly, non-consumptionist society, and is rushing shortsightedly into a completely unregulated market economy: they think a market economy will heal everything. It is of course a primitive view, but the Communist view is yet more primitive.

The Communists say that people shouldn't suffer from the economic reforms (that there shouldn't be any unemployment etc.) but can't offer any alternative ideas how to do it. To postpone the economic reforms or slow them down would be disastrous. We must carry them out as quickly as possible, including the complete privatization of industry and services - but this makes the Communists angry.

Some people really voted for the Communists in our elections but the majority of Czechs elected the Civic Forum, which is rightish and has the market economy in its program. People who vote for the Communists yearn simply for the living standards and the social security that we used to have before the revolution; but they don't see that our source of cheap Soviet oil has finished, and the enormous Soviet market that went with it, and that we can't by any means restore the old times.

Personally, I am still extremely happy with the changes, with the possibility of free travel, with the free exchange of information, with the possibility of realizing one's ideas without bureaucratic obstacles. Some people are pessimistic, but that's because their psyche is still manipulated and deformed by the Communist regime and they can't realize and are not able to use all the options and the whole freedom that they have now.

A VERY CONFUSED EUROCON

9. - 12.5.91 I attended EUROCON held in Krakow, Poland. It was probably the worst organized con that I have ever visited.

There were a few interesting GoHs but there were no panels or discussions with them on the program. I spoke to Poul Anderson at a room party, and of course I asked him about his views on feminism, as I had read about his argument with Joanna Russ. He was very nice and polite and explained to me that his opinions were formed in the thirties and forties and that he can't change them so easily, and that Joanna Russ is too radical and can't tolerate any opinions a bit different from hers.

The Krakow organizers were not recognizable - or visible - at all, and so some fans from Warszawa and Katowice tried to help the participants. But there were no program notes at all on Saturday and Sunday (only on Friday), and the Green room was locked, but it would not have been of any use anyway, as nobody knew what the program was supposed to be. Some English fans (such as Martin from Reading - I forget his surname) spent whole days walking around the different places where the program should have been (two cinemas, two clubrooms, one hotel), only to find out that really nothing was happening anywhere. We saw a new film called *Witches* which is quite cute, especially for children, but one movie performance wasn't worth a journey of 800 km to Krakow, waiting several hours at the border, and living in an uncomfortable hostel (8 people crowded into one room, so that I couldn't sleep much, because some of them kept snoring terribly)!

Anyway, Krakow is a beautiful old town so I finally stopped trying to find the programme and went sightseeing instead which was quite agreeable.

There was a party on Saturday evening where the prizes of the European SF association should have been awarded. But the organizers found out that somebody had locked the prizes (diplomas and plaques) in a closet, so they only read out the names and didn't in fact award anything. Which was very typical.

The most interesting episode for me was visiting Stanislaw Lem who lives in Krakow. He will be seventy this autumn and is not keen to visit cons and meetings; rather, he hides himself away from fans. But a colleague of mine, Pavel Weigel, has founded a *Society of the Friends of S.Lem* in Prague. He brought Lem some photographs, badges of the society, books and magazines to sign etc., so he was allowed to visit Lem at his house, and invited me to accompany him.

Lem has a beautiful luxurious house with a lot of antiquities, an elegant wife and a fat dog. He didn't understand either my English nor my mixture of Polish and Czech, and he scarcely understood Pavel, as his hearing is bad, so I only listened to their (somewhat monotonous) conversation. My impression was that Lem hasn't got any bright new ideas; he himself says that he has stopped writing. It's a bit sad but probably each personality has a period in which it flourishes, and then it fades as time changes.

