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ROBERT GÁL: PARADOXES

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Dear Peter and friends:

People call Fedor Gál the first Slovak immigrant in the Czech Republic. It's not a joke.

Gál once was the head of the most popular and powerful political movement in Slovakia. Called Public Against Violence, it was the Slovak sister of the Czech Republic's Civic Forum. Civic Forum, I'm sure you still recall, was a small group of individuals -- students, actors and dissidents -- that somehow organized a revolution in the fall of 1989. Public Against Violence was the brainchild of a group of friends from Bratislava -- writers, religious dissidents, environmental activists -- that formed at about the same time as Civic Forum. The bulk of the population joined them, and together, they brought down Communism. They were heroes.

The subsequent fall from grace of both Gál and Public Against Violence could be called the beginning of the end of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. It certainly was the end of post-Velvet Revolution unity in Slovakia. And it showed once again what people are capable of in the name of nationalism.

In June 1990, during the first post-revolution parliamentary elections, both movements won handily -- Civic Forum took about half of the votes in its republic, and Public Against Violence a healthy third in Slovakia. Many of the movement's members became government ministers.

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But the mandate soon began slipping away. Nationalists such as Vladimír Mečiar (now the Slovak prime minister and the man leading Slovakia to independence) left the movement and turned on their former colleagues. An increasingly discontented populace began listening more and more to the voices that shouted on the streets of Bratislava that Public Against Violence was a new Politburo; that it was "Pragocentric" (favoring the Czech capital); that Slovaks in the federal Parliament were traitors.

Fedor Gál became the main target of the nationalistic opposition. He was head of the presidium of Public Against Violence. Conveniently, he also was a Jew. Demonstrations in Bratislava began to feature anti-semitic slogans. Leaflets with caricatures of Gál, his Semitic features exaggerated, were passed out. There were anti-semitic letters to Gál's home and office. There were crank calls, insults yelled at him on the street. The Gál family became the target of harassment and vandalism.

Most of it stopped when Gál got out of elected politics in mid-1991. But life was never the same for the Gál family. Last summer, the 47-year-old sociologist left his native Bratislava and moved to Prague.

Public Against Violence, like Civic Forum, fell apart. Civic Democratic Union, the pro-federation party of former Public Against Violence leaders, failed to get enough votes (at least 5 percent of the total) in the June 1992 elections to get into the Slovak parliament.

LOVE AND HATE

Just about everybody in this country knows the name Fedor Gál. The reaction it prompts depends on who you're talking to, and where. In Prague, Gál has become sort of a cult figure. I've seen people stop him on the street just to pat him on the back, shake his hand or ask for his autograph. At his lectures, women hand him flowers. In Bratislava, he avoids walking down the street. Even today, when the movement he symbolized no longer exists, Fedor Gál is still hated in his hometown.

He's aware of the craziness of the contrasts.

"The less people like me in Slovakia, the nicer atmosphere there is for me in Bohemia," he told me. "It's not that people in Slovakia are better or worse. It's the tension between the two lands. There's the feeling that I'm some kind of war hero, so they let me know that. I think I've become even a bit of a mythical figure. But ... I'm not nearly as important as they think .. I'm a sort of symbol of a certain period. For some I'm a symbol of November [1989], for some I'm a symbol of a certain conflict and possible endangering of them, with my emigration and so on."

He says it doesn't feel good to be stared at in Prague, "but it's more pleasant when they shake your hand than when they give you

dirty looks and insult you."

He says he doesn't want to exaggerate the situation in Bratislava and emphasizes that he's not afraid there. But he says it's difficult to get "negative feedback" all the time. Especially difficult if you are not one to let things roll off your back.

"For me, it's enough that someone says something vulgar to me once. If he says it at 8 in the morning, it's still in me at 8 at night."

But Fedor Gál, who gives interviews and writes about himself quite a bit, wasn't the subject of the research I have been doing for the past several months. I talked to him mostly about his 24-year-old son, Robert.

I got to know Robert over a period of several months last spring. Over coffee, wine or beer, we talked about life and Life, what happened to his family, and what to make of it. What it was like to hear your father being called a "dirty Jew." What it was like to know your father's life could be in danger. What it was like to have your republic turn on you. To be fair, Robert would say the whole republic didn't turn on his family. But I think he'd then admit that sometimes it felt that way.

His father describes him as shy, especially in situations where he's not sure of himself. He says he's sometimes difficult, but a "good kid." Fedor Gál says his son has a hard time establishing relationships with people and doesn't have much of a social life. He says Robert is alone so much he probably spends too much time thinking about his problems.

SPIRITUAL MASOCHISM

I'd describe Robert as sensitive but not to the point of weakness. He was a bit nervous at times, but to me he was polite, friendly and willing to talk at length about difficult subjects. He was quick to laugh, at himself or at life. His conversations often were peppered with references to philosophers such as Plato or Hegel. (He has a certain fondness for Marx, but he doesn't want that taken the wrong way. He sees Marx's philosophy a call to action, a challenge to "change the world.")

Robert sometimes thinks of life situations as philosophical problems. He says he likes to stand outside of society, so he can observe it better. But he isn't always removed. A bit of questioning reveals pain, anger and passion beneath the surface, and his normally soft voice rises.

He calls himself an idealist, which can lead to "spiritual masochism," he says with a smile.

Idealism also can lead to at least a degree of disillusionment, but I got the feeling both he and his father are fighting that. They say they believe ultimately things will come out all right

in Slovakia. Neither plans to go back, however.

Despite his mild demeanor, Robert is not afraid to stick his neck out. In fact, in April 1990 Robert was one of the young founders of Echo, the first Slovak newspaper to tackle the sensitive issue of politicians with questionable pasts and take on nationalists who twisted the truth and manipulated the public. (The best journalists in this country praise Echo for its courage and investigative work.) Many people didn't like what Echo said. Other Slovak media -- partial to the nationalists -- attacked the publication. Distributors made sure sales were sluggish, Robert reports. Outgunned, it was out of business in a year.

Although Robert is one of his father's biggest fans, he is not blindly noncritical. Nor does he feel he is in his father's shadow. He is going his own way, studying philosophy at Charles University in Prague. He expects to graduate this fall. To earn extra money, he works as a night guard sometimes in a building on Wenceslas Square in Prague. Like his social scientist father, he writes. But Robert's writings usually have a philosophical bent. They have appeared in several publications.

Looking back, Robert can pretty much explain what happened to Fedor Gal in Bratislava. He can even offer reasons why it happened. But that doesn't make the pain or the anger go away.

Robert says the problems of Public Against Violence -- Verejnost Proti Nasiliu or VPN in Slovak -- began when it became "dirty from the dirt" it began uncovering, such as information about corrupt managers of various companies, leftovers from Communism. That mafia fought back, saying VPN/Gal were lying.

Communists often transformed themselves into nationalists. They began talking of inequality between the two republics, and about wanting sovereignty for the Slovak Republic. They found a receptive audience in a public that never had a country of their own (unless you count the fascist Slovak state during World War II). They accused VPN of being a mouthpiece for Prague and the federal government [which means working against Slovak interests].

INTELLECTUAL VS. POLITICIAN

Robert says some VPN leaders were surprised at the wave of nationalistic fervor. "Some were very taken aback by this. For example, my father. As a politician and as a person. ... He didn't comprehend what it was those people wanted. That was apparently because he never in his life considered himself -- simply, it wasn't important to him what a person is a Slovak or a Czech or whatever. Then for example (Václav) Havel, our president, and lots of former dissidents and lots of very intelligent people were very disappointed with the evil that accumulated in those people. ..."



This is related to the general problem of the intellectual being in politics, Robert says. Havel, like Robert's father, has wrestled with this issue. Havel so far says intellectuals should have a place in political life. Fedor Gál isn't so sure. It didn't serve him too well.

Robert says sometimes it's a case of the intellectual not being able to wake up and smell the coffee, as it were.

"The intellectual maybe has a tendency to idealize reality a bit, or at least arrange it into some kind of system to make it logical," he muses. "So it would lead to something good."

But Robert knows that even people who like his father don't buy such explanations for why he and VPN ultimately failed.

THE SWEATER PROBLEM

Both he and Fedor Gál place a great deal of blame on Fedor's wardrobe. They say people didn't like the fact that he wore jeans and sweaters long after other Velvet Revolutionaries had moved on to suits and ties. They say the way Fedor Gál looked and

sounded -- too intellectual, too harsh -- made him unpopular, scared people off.

"All of VPN underestimated these things," said Robert. "They cared about deep thoughts, principles and truth, and not some idiotic things like neckties."

But Fedor Gál does come up with other reasons besides his sweaters. Inability to anticipate problems such as the tidal wave of nationalism, for one. Inability to choose priorities. Inability to "sell" VPN. In general, inability to become good politicians.

"It took us an extremely long time before we realized that it's not enough to do something, that it's necessary to sell it too," Fedor Gál told me. "We put together a language law*, a proposed constitution, a proposed agreement between the Czech and Slovak republics, a government program. But we didn't manage to sell anything, to properly explain anything. We were learning from our mistakes. And there were a lot of them. And now we're paying for it."

[*Refers to a law declaring Slovak the official language in the Slovak Republic but making allowances for use of other languages in minority communities. This is a more moderate law than the one sought by the nationalists, who wanted no exceptions.]

Fedor Gál says the VPN era was like being "on top of a volcano," with history in fast forward and no time to reflect.

"I think they did all that was possible," his son says in VPN's defense. "It was mortals who knew what being overworked is, what fatigue is. They worked for 20 hours a day and slept four hours, for a year and a half. But of course, they were in a sort of bubble at VPN." They associated mainly with one another. There was no time to sit in a pub and chat with the public. No time to carefully examine people coming into its ranks.

Fedor Gál says Slovak society also is part of the equation. People who were not politically mature looked for an easy way out. They were impatient; they felt they were worse off, so they swept out the people in power.

HOMELESS

Robert has a younger brother, who was working in Finland the last I heard. Their mother, a writer of children's books, still was in Bratislava the last time Robert and I talked (in June) but planned to relocate to Prague soon.

Robert says he doesn't miss his hometown. He says he's always felt more like a "cosmopolitan" than a Slovak.

"I don't have one," he says when I mention the concept of home. "Slovakia became alienated from me, or I became alienated from

it. I couldn't live in Slovakia with the feeling that I'm living at home. ... I think my father feels it even more intensively. They in fact chased him out of Slovakia, like in those old stories from the Middle Ages. So it's like that." He grows silent for a minute. But then he says he's not "settled" anyway. "Maybe my whole life I've been defending myself against being tied down." He's single, for example, in a country where many young men his age already have families. "It doesn't even occur to me to think about getting married or something. For example, I keep wondering about what it would be if I suddenly lived somewhere completely different, on the other side of the world."

I ask him if everything were fine politically, whether he could live in Bratislava again.

"For people of my orientation, my view on the world, living in Bratislava isn't very good. In Bratislava [the capital of Slovakia] were created focal points of very radical nationalism. Specifically in Bratislava. A Bratislava resident had during the past two years the opportunity to see radical nationalists in action in small meetings in the middle of the city. Nationalistic newspapers are more or less circulated in such a way that the vast majority of them are circulated in Bratislava.

"People of liberal orientation momentarily don't feel good in Bratislava. That's a general feeling. I have the advantage that I don't have to stay there. But most of those people don't have an apartment in Prague. They have to stay there. ... A lot of personal friendships, personal relationships, were cut off after the revolution. For the reason that one was a 'bigger Slovak.' One felt he was a bigger Slovak than another. They stopped saying hello to those people, they stopped being friends."

He says national identity is a real problem, a real issue in Slovakia. "Politicians didn't make it up. But the politicians very often brought it to extremes."

'A SICK MAN'

Robert says Slovak media preach hatred of the Czechs and the federal government, and defend Mečiar, a "professional manipulator of facts" educated in the Soviet Union. Robert says "lots and lots and lots" of people fall under the media's spell, and believe Mečiar is telling the truth when he says he's Slovakia's only guarantee of democracy.

Fedor Gál doesn't mince words today when discussing the former VPN leader. In "Nadoraz," a long interview with him done in July by Jana Klusáková and published as a paperback book (small publishing houses can get books out quickly these days), Gál says he considers Mečiar "a sick man" and a "Communist in body and soul."

He says despite the fact that Mečiar is a chronic, power-hungry liar who changes his mind so often that Gál wonders whether he

has any long-term memory, he remains popular. Fedor Gál says that's because he has qualities including "clear speech, quick thinking, unbelievable endurance, and the image of a person who resembles any average citizen."

Fedor Gál says Mečiar's historical role stems from the fact that he has managed to make separatists out of the Slovaks. "He is a genuine expert at Lenin's method of how to change the minority into the majority."

But Fedor Gál says he's convinced that if Mečiar's anti-federation tactic proved politically unprofitable, he would readily change it.

Robert notes that in addition to the nationalist issue, the ground may have been more fertile for a Mečiar in Slovakia because dissent wasn't strong there under Communism. He calls it a "silent agreement" of sorts with the government. There wasn't as much cracking down by authorities as in the Czech Republic. In general, the former agrarian society was doing relatively well, thanks to the fact that the defense industry was located there and was fed by hefty government contracts. Gustav Husák, the president installed after the end of the Prague Spring, was a Slovak, as were many of the most powerful political and party leaders over the years.

But the end of Communist rule brought unemployment. The percentage of jobless people in Slovakia is higher today than in the Czech Republic (although at least one federal minister has said Slovaks have a looser definition of unemployment so the numbers are skewed). Slovaks see themselves as the losers in the process of radical economic reform. They agree when Mečiar says Slovaks need a slower pace of change, and solutions specific for their nation. They feel Czechs have been deciding things for them, without them.

Add to these factors the sense of national pride pushed by politicians like Mečiar. Slovak television features programs about Slovak heroes from the past. Spots about Slovak traditions and folklore are shown on the news.

FERTILE GROUND

Slovaks were ruled by Hungarians for one thousand years. They always had to fight for their identity, always felt they had enemies who wanted to harm them, Robert says. There are many ways to explain this yearning for identity. The important thing is -- as Robert says -- that it's real. It may be contributing to the incredible fact that many Slovaks today look back fondly on the World War II Slovak State, which sent the bulk of its Slovak population to concentration camps, even paying the Germans to take the Jews away.

Slovak politicians tend to get upset when charges of anti-semitism are made against their people. They either say anti-

semitism isn't worse in Slovakia than anywhere else, or that there isn't any. But several factors show that anti-semitism is very real in Slovakia, and that it manifests itself more strongly there than, say, in the Czech Republic: Vandalized cemeteries. Memorial plaques put up to honor Slovak State President and war criminal Jozef Tiso. Reports by international monitoring organizations. Public opinion polls showing many Slovaks wouldn't want Jews as neighbors. And the Fedor Gál incident.

During an international conference on anti-semitism I attended in Prague, Gál's name was used to symbolize contemporary anti-semitism in Slovakia. A speaker from Israel noted that the important thing about what happened to Fedor Gál is that the ground was "fertile" for it to happen.

What happened went beyond anti-semitism as such. It went beyond dirty politics. It was a sinister combination of the two.

NO MORE VELVET

Robert says the trouble began at the end of 1990, when VPN's federation-friendly politics came under attack. His father would say the first big blow to VPN was in June 1990, when Ján Budaj, one of the stars of the revolution and a popular VPN official, was found to have ties to the secret police. He had to give up his candidacy to Parliament and leave VPN's leadership. Part of VPN disagreed with Budaj's ouster, and the movement began to splinter. Then there was Mečiar, an unknown glass-factory lawyer who after joining VPN quickly became Slovakia's interior minister and then its prime minister. Fedor Gál says Mečiar began ignoring VPN and running his own show. He installed former secret police officials in the Interior Ministry, and he helped himself to secret information that he threatened to use against his foes. He was removed from his post in April 1991. Many people didn't like that either and joined forces with hero/martyr Mečiar when he founded his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia.

The fight was on. Opposition politicians whipped up anti-Gál sentiment. Radical separatists attacked him and other federation backers, verbally and sometimes physically. Thousands of hate letters began pouring into VPN headquarters. Gál's secretaries tried to keep them away from him. The Gál family received obscene, threatening phone calls. Their mailbox was kicked out so often they family put it upstairs, near their apartment door.

"And of course all the mass media spit on the name Gál," Robert recalls. "It was like saying to everyone, 'Fedor Gál, be careful about him, he's the bad one, he wants bad things to come to you,' etc., etc. It was a psychological event. Neighbors stopped saying hello to us. ... A lot of people, even intelligent ones, fell for it." Now it's known who was behind this hate campaign under the guise of nationalism, Robert says: former secret police operators; people who didn't get enough power after the Velvet Revolution; and people with complexes and problems with their identity.

For someone looking in from the outside, this situation may be difficult to comprehend. But even people living here were confused. They were many rumors, and little proof of anything. The media didn't do their job (as I define it, anyway). An atmosphere of fear was growing. And VPN was a political novice, a lightweight, while in many cases the opposing forces were seasoned pros.

Robert says he wasn't afraid his father would be physically harmed during that time, because as chairman of the VPN presidium, he had two bodyguards. "So from that standpoint I wasn't afraid. But of course there were moments when we were afraid. And it was the most when he left politics, when he wasn't chairman anymore [but still active in VPN] he automatically lost the bodyguards. And suddenly he didn't have a car so he couldn't even set out into the street."

Robert and his mother began urging his father to give up politics. "The last weeks and months, when the hatred was so direct, so clear, we would say to him every day, "Please leave it, forget about it, it's not worth it, you're ruining your health. Of course. Every day we said that to him."

`SHE CRIED A LOT`

The thing that bothered Fedor Gál most was that not even his 80-year-old mother was spared the anonymous calls and letters, Robert says. "And that his mother was afraid to go outside, to leave the house. She's an 80-year-old woman. She always did her own shopping, went to buy the newspaper by herself. Many of my grandmother's neighbors don't say hello to her, in her building. She took it very hard. She's an old woman and suffered a great deal already in her life. She was in a concentration camp and in effect was alone her whole life, to raise her children, she didn't have a husband. When her husband died she didn't remarry. She was alone with the children. Her whole life she had problems like whether they'd even have enough to heat. She had no property, nothing. ... And her brother had problems in the '50s, as a Communist he sat in prison. ... She lived through a lot, and then after all that during her twilight years something like this happens. ... She cried a lot."

Robert says he read some of the hate mail that made its way into the Gál home. "Some return to my mind visually, the view of the postcard comes back." Sometimes, when Robert picked up the phone, the caller would spit out a few epithets about the "dirty Jew" and quickly hang up.

Caricatures depicting Fedor Gál with a hooked nose, long beard and bulging eyes upset Robert, but his father dismissed them as unimportant. He was too busy to worry about such things. But when the attacks intensified, even Fedor Gál couldn't ignore them anymore. "Then something snapped in him, I think," Robert says. "He began to realize that something is abnormal here. That he slaves away for two years, day and night for these people, for

these people who now reward him this way.

"It's a strange paradox. And of course there were more of those paradoxes. Those Communists, for example, those big shots who truly destroyed a lot of human lives and ruined our lives for 40 years, those merrily walked around free; [former Communist President] Gustav Husák until the last day of his life had personal bodyguards, they drove him around in a 613 [a big Tatra sedan used by government officials] and no one did anything bad to them for the evil they caused. No one took away their property, no one tried them for their crimes as was done with fascist crimes.

"But those are my reflections. It's my reflection on the theme of how many paradoxes there were," he says, then remembers another point. "And no one called them names. One more paradox -- the fact that no one called them names. Suddenly, they found their victims in VPN. And suddenly, the Communists, those real criminals, didn't bother them at all."

It's clear Robert just doesn't ponder all this as one of life's "paradoxes." It hurts. How does he make peace with it?

"It's a problem," he says with a laugh. "It's really a problem, which I of course will have to work out by myself. No one will do it for me. But I think that even time works beneficially, that a person forgets. At the same time it's clear to me what happened. That it wasn't the entire Slovak nation."

More next time.

All the best,



Dagmar

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