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Remarks at the Ellis Sandoz Panel: the Eric Voegelin Society
Annual Meeting, 2024

Martin Palouš

I

MY REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST. THE VOEGELINIAN REVOLUTION OF ELLIS
SANDOZ IN OUR PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSIONS DURING THE 1970S AND 1980S

First, the original context of my encounters with Ellis and his Voegelinian world¹: the regular meetings of Kampademia (just a small group of friends, our *Geistkreis*, in Voegelin's terminology²). What brought us together in this setting? What was on our agenda? What do we want to achieve? We were trying—as with many other related and personally interconnected initiatives of this kind—to respond *philosophically* to the greatest burden of our lives: to the late (advanced) form of totalitarian government that ruled in the 1970s and 1980 in Czechoslovakia.³

What was a distinct feature of our “philosophizing”? Measured by the standards used in the environment of Western academic institutions, it was not more than a private activity of a bunch of lovers of knowledge—individuals who were united by their shared desire to know (certainly not all of us had diploma in philosophy), kicked out from universities and dwelling underground. For me personally, participation in it was a kind of *consolatio philosophiae*—a form of philosophical activity invented and named by Boethius more than 1500 years ago now and adopted for our current uses.⁴

¹ The whole story of my relationship to philosophy as it evolved in my life in dissent is described in two letters, written in 2009 and 2010 for my parents and my brother on the occasion of their birthdays. They can be found in my philosophical autobiography *Traces in the Sand* (Palouš M. Stopy v písku. Pokus o filosofickou autobiografii (Kodudek Praha, 2022)). Their English translation is attached.

² T.R. Korder (pseudonym R. Palouš), *Voegelin & Patočka: výběr záznamů průběhu bytového filosofického semináře paralelní kultury v Československu* (Purley: Athenaeum-Rozmluvy, 1988); Hledání aktuálního pojetí dějin [*In search of a modern concept of history*]. *Záznam bytového filosofického semináře* (Prague, 1984).

³ This is Václav Havel's analysis of this phenomenon; see, e.g., *The Power of the Powerless*, trans. John Keane, ed. Paul Wilson (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1985).

⁴ See Zdeněk Neubauer, *Consolatio philosophiae hodierna: k šestnácti dopisům Václava Havla* (Praha: Knihovna Václava Havla, 2010).

THE PLACE OF JAN PATOČKA AND OF HIS IDEAS IN OUR CONVERSATIONS

There is no doubt that within all miniscule philosophical platforms existing in Czechoslovakia in these times, including our **Kampademia**, Jan Patočka was recognized as a great authority, our principal philosophical teacher, or even I can say The Philosopher. We all, even those who didn't agree with our "Master's Voice" in everything and all the time, were in the position of his disciples, junior partners in philosophical dialogue to which he was inviting us in his lectures and writings.

In 1970, i.e., in the last phase of his philosophical life, Patočka set himself a bold task: to formulate a philosophy of history departing from and reflecting on our own current situation: a philosophy of history not just as an academic discipline practiced at universities in their various departments but as a personal response to the current spiritual and political crisis—as a kind of Socratic call directed not only to professional academic philosophers, but talking to all Czechoslovakian citizens. It would be a philosophy of history that would invite each one of them "to be engaged," to use the formulation of Eric Voegelin, "in an act of resistance against the personal and social disorder of (his/her) age."⁵ This would be an act of resistance in Czechoslovakia in the time of Husak's "normalization" and in the midst of profound spiritual crisis of European mankind in the 20th century.

As a devoted pupil of his great teacher, Patočka proceeded in his search in three fundamental steps:

- a. Starting from Edmund Husserl's *Philosophie als Strenge Wissenschaft* that was formulated in his early logical writings and accepting the basic principles of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as his own philosophical point of departure.⁶
- b. Being aware of the fundamental insufficiency of Husserl's transcendentalism to reach into the deep elementary structures of the human "natural world" and to analyze "the movements of human existence" in it, he turned to Heidegger's *Dasein Analyze*.

⁵ Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12: Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 265.

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Veit, 1901), *Die Idee der Phänomenologie: Fünf Vorlesungen*, ed. Walter Biemel (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950); or *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologische Philosophie* (Halle a.d.S: Max Niemeyer, 1913).

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- c. Finally, Patočka's philosophy of history in the *Heretical Essays* incorporated Hannah Arendt's analysis of the three different forms of human active life: labor, work and action.⁷ He contraposed the *bios philosophikos* and *bios politikos*: on the one side the life of the solitary observer of human matters, walking, in the words of ancient poem of Parmenides, "far from the beaten paths of humans,"⁸ and on the other side the human life lived among other human beings, or turning attention to the fundamental conflict between the uniqueness of each human being and the elementary fact of human plurality in the world.

One more thing, however, must be added here, and maybe it is the most important aspect of Patočka's philosophical method. At least for three generations of his Czech students, Patočka was not perceived just as a phenomenologist from Husserl's school of thought but was recognized as the most qualified teacher and interpreter of classical Greek philosophy—from presocratic thinkers to Plato and Aristotle and their schools.

And it was his search for a philosophy of history that inspired him to balance "positive platonism"—the interpretation of classical Greek philosophy the origins of which can be traced back to the Platonic Academy—with a "negative platonism"—seeing Plato not as the author of a philosophical doctrine that must be recognized as the fundamental basis of Western rational scientific thought but as a disciple of Socrates. Instead of keeping his focus on the realm of immovable eternal ideas dwelling somewhere beyond the habitat of mortal humans, Patočka set himself on the Socratic path of philosophizing.⁹

And here, at the very end of his life story, is when Patočka proved that he was essentially a Socratic philosopher. When asked by Václav Havel in the fall of 1976, he accepted the role of one of the first three spokespersons of Charter 77. He left his philosophical study, his desk full of papers and his library full of great books, and entered the public space

⁷ Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd (Chicago: Open Court, 1996); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁸ Parmenides, in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Hermann Diels 2 vols. (2nd, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1906), B1, 2–3, 27.

⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculanarum disputationum: libri quinque*, ed. C.F. Muller (Leipzig: Freitag, 1904), 5.4.10–11: "*Socrates autem primus philosophiam devocavit e caelo, et in urbibus conlocavit et in domus etiam introduxit et coegit de vita et moribus rebusque bonis et malis quaerere* (Socrates was the first who "called philosophy down from heaven, and placed in the cities, and introduced it even in homes, and drove it to inquire about life and customs, and things good and evil").

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inhabited by “dissidents”—and died after he suffered brain attack exhausted by police prolonged interrogations.

VOEGELIN AND SANDOZ IN KAMPADEMIA

Like most of the participants in the Czechoslovak underground philosophical movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the members of Kampademia following Patočka’s death were unable, as “registered enemies of state,” to travel abroad. The activities of this small *Geistkreis*, however, were certainly not isolated from the outside world. Thanks to the initiative of Oxford University and the Jan Hus Foundation (with one branch office based in London and the other one in Paris), we could participate in all sorts of projects from Patočka’s “flying university” and thus welcome in our seminars a number of great contemporary thinkers, who contributed in their own way to the grand dialogue of mankind taking place in the free world behind the Iron Curtain. Here are some of the names of those who visited us in these troubled times, gave lectures, and participated in our discussions: Jacques Derrida, Daniel Dennett, André Glucksmann, Jürgen Habermas, David Levy (who was familiar with the work of Voegelin and belonged to the circle of Voegelinians), Jean Francois Lyotard, Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, Paul Ricoeur, Roger Scruton, Jean Pierre Vernant, Charles Taylor, and Ernst Tugendhat. Through the clandestine “parallel” communication channels, we also received books that enlarged our horizons and kept us in the loop of ongoing global philosophical conversations. One of us, for instance, got his hands on Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics*, and another one received *The Voegelinian Revolution* by Ellis Sandoz. I was fortunate to get first four volumes of Voegelin’s *Order and History*.

Voegelin’s strong rejection of Husserl’s transcendentalism and his approach to the philosophical problem of the relationship between order and history problematized the fundamental thesis of Patočka’s *Heretical Essays*. The idea that human history began with emergence of the Greek polis and the philosophy in it immediately attracted our attention. In 1983 and 1984 we spent the whole semester discussing Voegelin’s ideas and his criticism of current philosophical schools of thought, including Husserlian phenomenology. The relation between Patočka’s philosophy of history articulated in *Heretical Essays* and Voegelin’s version of it—with his theory of consciousness grounding a “new science of politics”—became particularly strong and from time to time a very hot topic in our endless

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conversations. A transcript of those dialogues and the conclusions we arrived at were later published in London, but unfortunately only in Czech; so far, they are unavailable to English readers.¹⁰

The Jan Hus Foundation sent us more than professors and books. In the mid-1980s it introduced an educational project whose aim was to enroll young dissidents in selected fields of study in Western European universities—a clear sign that times had started to change. I decided to use that program for the completion of my own philosophical education. I contacted professor Thondt, the director of the Higher Institute of Philosophy (L’Institut Supérieur de la Philosophie) at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, the seat of Husserl’s archives, and I sent him a proposal for a dissertation on “Phenomenology and History.” My plan was—departing from our conversations in Kampademia—to write a substantive study about the relationships, entanglements and controversies between the positions of Patočka, Arendt and Voegelin. To my surprise and great joy, I soon received a reply that my proposal was accepted and that I could come to Leuven and start working on it at my earliest convenience. On top of that, this reply came less than year before the 1989 Velvet Revolution opened the world beyond the enclosed borders behind the Iron Curtain, so seemingly nothing could have prevented me from throwing myself into it.

But paradoxically, the things started to change for me in the new world after the collapse of communism. Instead of going to work on my dissertation in Leuven, I found a new role in the political realm of transition from totalitarianism to democracy and never finished what I promised to do in in my proposal. Was it a mistake, an omission or even betrayal of my philosophical teacher Jan Patočka? I will try to answer this quite painful personal question in the second part of this text, which highlights the role that Ellis Sandoz played in my future philosophical life from 1990 until his death in 2023. As my teacher in the field of political thought, he himself was a staunch Voegelinian and American patriot, but at the same time he was a tolerant partner in our non-ideological and always illuminating philosophical conversations that took place in the middle of fundamental historical change. Regardless, whether we liked it or not, we found ourselves together in a new world that started to emerge after the abrupt end of the short 20th century. But I must stress again and again: Ellis became

¹⁰ See T.R. Korder, *Patočka & Voegelin*.

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a friend of mine in this situation, exactly in the spirit and tradition of *philosophia peri ta anthropina* of Aristotle, articulated and coined in his ethical writings.

II

The role of Voegelinian ideas in the moment of our transition from totalitarianism to democracy: my first personal encounter with Ellis Sandoz and the communications with him and other Voegelinians in the new world

The closed world in which I lived with all my friends before the revolutionary changes of the miraculous year 1989 was gone. Suddenly, I had a brand-new passport in my hands that enabled me to travel abroad. Looking back now, I must say that I traveled a lot, indeed, and with great joy and pleasure, in the first post-revolutionary years—after long decades spent in Czechoslovakia as if in a big cage. On January 2, 1990 I accompanied newly elected President Havel on his official visit to two German states. Two weeks later we flew with Ivan Havel, the president's brother, to the United States as two representatives of Civic Forum, our revolutionary political body. We spent two weeks in New York and Washington meeting many people, some of them our old friends from the times of dissent, but also making new and important contacts and laying out our political goals and intentions. Shortly we returned to Prague, but I travelled across the Atlantic Ocean once again, this time as the head of the advanced team preparing the first official trip of President Havel to the United States. I participated as a member of his delegation in February. I could go on and on reporting my travel adventures in these joyful times, but I will mention here only two of them that took place in 1990. The first was a two-week trip to Leuven in the spring, in the hopes that I would be able to start my studies there in the beginning of the next year. I was a member of Czechoslovak Parliament at that time, and two weeks was the maximum length of time I was allowed to be absent from its sessions. The second was a trip to San Francisco in the first week of September to attend a panel at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association on the current Central European political situations. While I presented the Czechoslovak case there, I also learned that that Eric Voegelin Society had its annual meeting there as well. So, I went to the meeting room where it took place and saw Ellis Sandoz, the founding president of EVS, and other Voegelinians for the first time face to face.

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I tried to explain to them why I was there, and I was welcomed heartily and immediately. Without hesitation I was invited to join the club.

So, the history of my membership in EVS began. I think that with one exception I participated in all its annual meetings between 1990 and 2023, and here I am again, my thirty-fourth appearance (if I am counting well). The EVS membership means a lot to me, and I would like to thank all of you for your kind behavior toward me, your inspiring thought, and most of all for your friendship. And without any doubt it is Ellis Sandoz who must be remembered today and thanked first, because he was not just the founding president of EVS, but for long decades its spiritual father and guardian of its soul.

I will treat the Voegelinian school of thought—still well and alive today in the internet magazine *Voegelin View*—in the third part of this paper. But first I will turn to another area of Ellis Sandoz's scholarship, the tremendous work he did as one of the leading experts in political theory and religion of the American Founding. He possessed deep knowledge of the dilemmas and challenges accompanying the American Revolution and the first decades of the constitutional history of the United States. He kindly offered us—Czech underground philosophers trying to get a basic orientation in their new situation—a possible point of departure for our own mature political thought.

In the 1990s it was a great honor for me to cooperate with Ellis in a number of conferences in Prague and Olomouc that focused on contemporary Czech constitutional problem, namely, the restoration of liberty based on laws in our post totalitarian society. We brought to our discussions American and British ideas that opened up fundamental debates that had substantively contributed to the constitution of Western mind. I especially remember an event in 1992 that I organized in Štířín Castle (the facility operated by the Czech Foreign Ministry) where all members of Kampademia were present. There Ellis Sandoz met for the first time president Václav Havel, who participated in one of the panels and got into a very deep and illuminating conversation with Ellis.

When preparing for this panel discussion I opened my private “archive,” the paper boxes stored on the bottom shelves of my library, and discovered in them a host of materials and personal notes from these conferences. Most of them, thanks to Ellis, were financially supported by Liberty Fund, which enabled us to bring many important participants, both American and European, to our conversations. Here I see now one of my current tasks, a

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mission still to be accomplished: to sort these papers out properly and turn them into a special, still unwritten chapter in the history of our transition from communism. The main hero of this story is Ellis Sandoz and his genuinely philosophical deeds. One of my most cherished memories from my encounter with Ellis, who acted not only as my great teacher, but also as a great gate-opener for me, is from February 2013, only a couple of months before his retirement. He invited me to Louisiana State University to give a series of lectures to his students about our Czech Revolution, its significance and the philosophical questions generated by it. As far as I can tell, this lecture, entitled *Resisting Tyranny and Making the Velvet Revolution*, was quite a success. In Ellis's students I discovered a very nice, educated, and open-minded audience, young people ready to learn and ask good questions. And I can proudly report that I received from this occasion a great recognition: I became the first recipient of "the Order of Merit" of the Eric Voegelin Society since its establishment in 1985.

III

THE FUTURE OF VOEGELINIAN LEGACY. QUESTIONS I RAISED IN MY PAPER WRITTEN FOR ELLIS SANDOZ MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS AGO

Because my presentation is already too long, I will be very brief here. The whole argument made in my three points can be found in my chapter in *Philosophy, Literature and Politics*, a collected volume of essays honoring Ellis Sandoz on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, edited by Charles R. Embry and Barry Cooper and published in 2005.¹¹

Its first point was the "immortalization" of a philosopher. For years I observed a similar process in the camp of Voegelinians and Patočkians: the publication of their collected works, volume after volume. For years I participated both in a number of conferences about Patočka and regularly attended the annual meetings of Eric Voegelin Society. For years, however, I couldn't escape a troubling question: isn't it true, as the history of the relationship between Plato and Aristotle—his most important disciple—demonstrates, that only *in the moment when the Master's teaching is overcome, when he is—to use a figure of speech—struck from the heavens to the earth, does the philosopher gain his place in the dialogue engaged in by*

¹¹ Martin Palouš, "Common Sense and the Rule of Law: Returning Voegelin to Central Europe," in *Philosophy, Literature, and Politics: Essays Honoring Ellis Sandoz*, eds. C.R. Embry and B. Cooper (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 258–84, was written in 2004, during my tenure as the Czech Ambassador to the United States.

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great, “immortal” thinkers across the borders of civilizations and centuries? And in that sense, are we doing enough for our great teachers in this regard? I think that whether we like it or not, this question is still undecided and thus relevant. I wrote:

Where will the Voegelinian debate and research be, let us say, thirty years from now? Can we imagine that? Will Voegelin be still recognized as a great, truly “revolutionary” philosopher of the period at the great turn of history as his immediate disciples believe? Or, will this image be whittled by the passage of time, and Voegelin “only” remembered as one of those educated Central Europeans, born at a tragic time, uprooted from their domestic environment, living their lives on the periphery of the big world, leaving behind only faded photographs, collected volumes of their works, and gradually disappearing traces of their personal struggles, which were heroic and that is why respectable, but did not make a real difference from the point of view of the universal history of the spirit?¹²

The second point was Voegelin’s escape from Central Europe. In his *Autobiographical Reflections* (edited by Ellis Sandoz) Voegelin vividly describes his first encounter with America, thanks to a Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fellowship. His exposure to American “common sense” made him, according to his own words “unfit for further existence in Central Europe” after he returned to Vienna with its current social and political atmosphere. Wasn’t this precisely what Ellis Sandoz tried to teach us after the collapse of communism, motivated by his tireless efforts to finally bring common sense there? Wasn’t the return of common sense to Central Europe, the spirit that Eric Voegelin missed there in the 1930s, what he wanted to bring back to life, to resurrect through our cooperation?

The third and final point is Voegelin’s course of jurisprudence taught at LSU from 1954 to 1957. Isn’t this sphere of law, of legal theory and philosophy, an extremely important and even central battlefield for Voegelin’s ideas? And were they not brought to us by Sandoz Ellis, Voegelin’s great disciple and an associate in the struggle for the defense of European civilization against the spiritual diseases that plagued the twentieth century and brought communism and Nazism to our part of the world?

So Ellis, once more: I can’t thank you enough for your friendship, for everything you have done for us. The very fact that the other participants on this panel who organized to honor you are much younger than me proves clearly that your basic message is still alive and

¹² Palouš, “Common Sense and the Rule of Law,” 260.

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well. It is here with us. I was most likely wrong when raising the above-quoted skeptical question about Eric Voegelin's—and, I can add, also *your*—process of immortalization.