

# The “Old” Samizdat Is Dead, Long Live the “New” Samizdat! The Liberated Samizdat Club in the Post-Communist Czechoslovak Book Market\*

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## Abstract

LOUČOVÁ, Petra: The “Old” Samizdat Is Dead, Long Live the “New” Samizdat! The Liberated Samizdat Club in the Post-Communist Czechoslovak Book Market.

In the final issue of the clandestine *Lidové noviny* from December 1989, Václav Havel bid farewell to the newspaper’s samizdat era in his “Goodbye samizdat” editorial: “Goodbye samizdat Lidové noviny, goodbye conspiracies, goodbye interrogations! Hello printer, hello new readers, hello freedom!” A few months later the press began to report about an extraordinary project by the Liberated Samizdat Club and its promise to literally “return to samizdat” by self-publishing the first editions of previously unpublished books. All the participants were to work for free, and the size of the print run was to be determined by previous subscriptions. This “new” samizdat, as a revolt against the principles of market economics in the era of liberalisation and transformation, is at once a specific chapter in the post-Communist history of the Czechoslovak book market and a contribution to the history of samizdat and its continuities and discontinuities.

**Keywords:** samizdat, Velvet Revolution, book market, post-Communism, Liberated Samizdat Club (Klub osvobozeného samizdatu); František Kautman

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Supposing it is at all possible to define, the phenomenon of samizdat can be described as “*all independent literature that, for whatever reason, came to be in contradiction to the mandatory cultural policies of a totalitarian state and was thus disseminated privately by citizens despite threats of repression.*”<sup>1</sup> Although there is evidence of samizdat efforts as early as during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, samizdat did not truly flourish in Czechoslovakia until after the Communist coup in February 1948, especially during the so-called normalisation period in the 1970s and 1980s, when this parallel circulation offered a viable alternative to scores of authors who were excluded from official literary communication. The appearance of such a circulation was a typical consequence of the presence of authoritarian literary censorship.<sup>2</sup> Probably the greatest

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1 PŘIBÁŇ, Michal. I. K terminologii samizdatu. In PŘIBÁŇ, Michal et al.: *Český literární samizdat 1949–1989: Edice, časopisy, sborníky*. Praha : Academia – Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2018, p. 16. All quotes in this article have been translated from Czech.

2 ŠÁMAL, Petr. Část sedmá: 1949–1989: V zájmu pracujícího lidu: Literární cenzura v době centrálního plánování a paralelních oběhů. In WÖGERBAUER, Michael et al. (eds.). *V obecném zájmu: Cenzura a sociální*

popularity was achieved by literary samizdat in the form of a plethora of more or less organised imprints, workshops, magazines, or almanacs,<sup>3</sup> but non-literary samizdat was also highly diverse and widespread (in the fields of music, art, theatre, religion, spirituality, politics, philosophy, economics, ecology, etc.); of course, themes and genres intermingled. Samizdat output also often shared a specific generational, subcultural, or group affiliation (surrealism, underground, punk, Czech tramping, Scouting, sci-fi, programming, etc., but also students of secondary schools or universities).

Insufficient technological support meant that Czechoslovak samizdat was never developed to the extent of the Polish *drugi obieg*, which featured print runs of thousands of copies and a high reach throughout the population. Czechoslovak samizdat was mostly characterised by limited numbers of typewritten copies (one typescript usually amounted to twelve copies) with a greater emphasis on the aesthetic and overall visual appearance of the product compared to its Polish counterpart.<sup>4</sup> Improved equipment and financial backing from the West led a number of major samizdat publishers to endeavour to refine – or professionalise, even legalise – their printing and publishing ventures (in both the quality and quantity of “prints”) in the late 1980s. Over the course of 1989 and in response to the new Housing, Consumer, and Producer Cooperatives Act (94/1988 Sb.), Brno dissident circles and later the writing team of the samizdat magazine *Obsah* (Contents) began to establish the publishing cooperative Atlantis, which obtained its publisher’s licence as early as 30 November 1989. The extensive documentation for this audacious plan includes correspondence by Václav Havel: *“Independent literature, both at home and in exile, is disseminated in quite copious amounts in Czechoslovakia today both through samizdat, which long ago stopped relying solely on typewriters but has limited options nonetheless, and through the importation of what is published in exile. What these two paths have in common is that they are – how to put it? – simply somewhat wild: being either borderline legal or in some way or other open to persecution or at least complications. The time is ripe for another step to be made. The way I – and most of the people around me – feel it, this next step would be the founding of an independent yet fully legal (i.e., ‘registered’) independent [sic] publishing cooperative in Czechoslovakia. It is the task of us who live here to secure such a publishing cooperative,”* Václav Havel informed his friends beyond the borders of the country about the publishing venture he intended to back financially, among other ways, in June 1989.<sup>5</sup>

*regulace literatury v moderní české kultuře 1749–2014: Svazek II/1938–2014.* Praha : Academia – Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2015, p. 1124.

3 An overview of Czech literary samizdat in the encyclopaedic form was created by a group of authors – see PŘIBÁŇ, Michal et al. *Český literární samizdat 1949–1989: Edice, časopisy, sborníky.* Praha : Academia – Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2018. For more on the topic of Czechoslovak samizdat, see the following sets of thematic studies: GLANC, Tomáš (ed.). *Samizdat Past & Present.* Praha : Institute of Czech Literature – Karolinum Press, 2018; MACHOVEC, Martin. *Writing Underground: Reflections on Samizdat Literature in Totalitarian Czechoslovakia.* Praha : Karolinum Press, 2019.

4 KANDZIORA, Jerzy. Druhý oběh a bibliografie mimocenzurních tisků: Polská zkušenost. In *Česká literatura*, 2016, Vol. 64, No. 6, pp. 918–928; on the differences and similarities of samizdat in the former Soviet bloc, see OLASZEK, Jan. *Drugi obieg wydawniczy w PRL i samizdat w innych państwach bloku sowieckiego: podobieństwa, różnice, wzajemne wpływy.* In GASZTOLD-SEŃ, Przemysław – JARSKA, Natalia – OLASZEK, Jan (eds.). *Drugi obieg w PRL na tle samizdatu w państwach bloku sowieckiego po 1956 roku.* Warszawa : Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2016, pp. 15–57.

5 HAVEL, Václav. *Nakladatelství Atlantis a “režie” Frankfurtu.* P16/1 Václav Havel Güntheru Christianse-  
novi, Klausu Junckerovi, Jiřímu Grušovi, Pavlu Kohoutovi, Vilému Prečanovi. Praha, 22. června 1989.

Besides Atlantis, the first private publishing companies to launch in the post-November 1989 era was the erstwhile typewritten Česká expedice (Czech Distribution; from 1978) of Jaromír Hořec, whose registration was approved by the Ministry of Culture on 5 December 1989.<sup>6</sup> The year 1989 does not offer a clear-cut delineation, as some samizdat organisations continued to produce scheduled titles in the early 1990s. Others, such as Pražská imaginace (Prague Imagination), Sefer (formerly Alef), etc., decided to maintain continuity with their previous work (with varying degrees of success). The same was true for samizdat magazines – some have lasted until today: *Host*, *Prostor*, *Revolver Revue*, *Střední Evropa*, *Možnost* (online); others lasted a number of years: *Akord*, *Box*, *Hantá press*, *Kritický sborník*, *Lázeňský host*, *Teologické texty*, or *Vokno* and *Voknoviny*, among others; and some just briefly: *Kvašňák* or *Sklepník*. The publishers of *Lidové noviny* (The People’s News) strove to “officialise” the monthly in the conditions of state-sanctioned socialism, and they also received preliminary approval for publication on 5 December 1989. It has functioned as a national daily newspaper since April 1990. Some samizdat magazines continued to exist as alternative media or as periodicals closely related to specific subcultures. Examples include the punk fanzines *Sračka*, *Šot*, *Mašurkovské podzemné*, etc.<sup>7</sup> In October 1990 Jiří Gruntorád oversaw the launch of a private library of “forbidden books”, *Libri prohibiti*.<sup>8</sup>

It seemed at first that the post-1989 era provided an excellent opportunity to publish and disseminate the samizdat (and exile) works of previously silenced authors to readers. Samizdat as a method of self-publication would no longer be needed and could be permanently abandoned, since the fall of the socialist dictatorship meant that literature was no longer endangered by censorship, and its creators or publishers did not have to fear repression or persecution. However, this premise was not confirmed: just as quickly as the illusions about the functioning of a free book market were lost, it soon became clear that this was not the end of samizdat either. Besides the aforementioned magazine enterprises, which fundamentally diverged from the mainstream media, and numerous post-samizdat occasional prints – practically collector’s editions of sorts<sup>9</sup> – a unique case in this context is the initiative later known as Klub osvobozeného samizdatu (the Liberated Samizdat Club), whose representatives chose an unusual approach considering their advanced age: to establish a completely new entity, whose publishing principles would not conform to the market conditions of the time, but which

In HAVEL, Václav – PREČAN, Vilém. *Korespondence (1983–1989)*. Eds. Vojtěch Čelko and Vilém Prečan. Praha : Československé dokumentační středisko, o.p.s., 2011, p. 746.

6 It is often claimed that the first private publishing house was Paseka. Although it was informally established on 9 December 1989 at a congress of the Anti-Alcohol Society of Doctor Řimsa, official approval was not provided to Ladislav Horáček until March 1990.

7 For more on these transformations, see JANÁČEK, Pavel. Část osmá: 1989–2014: V zájmu jednotlivce: Literární cenzura v období neoliberalismu a postmoderny. In WÖGERBAUER, Michael et al. (eds.): *V obecném zájmu: Cenzura a sociální regulace literatury v moderní české kultuře 1749–2014: Svazek II/1938–2014*. Praha : Academia – Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2015, pp. 1380–1385; PŘIBÁŇ, Michal. II. K dějinám českého literárního samizdatu. In PŘIBÁŇ, Michal et al. *Český literární samizdat 1949–1989: Edice, časopisy, sborníky*. Praha : Academia – Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2018, pp. 42–43.

8 For more on this, see <https://www.libpro.cz/en/establishment-of-library/>.

9 For more on this, see MACHOVEC, Martin. The Types and Functions of Samizdat Publications in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1989. In MACHOVEC, Martin. *Writing Underground: Reflections on Samizdat Literature in Totalitarian Czechoslovakia*. Praha : Karolinum Press, 2019, p. 154.

would instead adopt and apply the ideas and experience gleaned from samizdat during the period of oppression. Therefore, whereas the question of integrating the three previous strands or communicational channels of Czech literature (official, exile, samizdat)<sup>10</sup> was being hotly debated on one hand, on the other, some former samizdat participants again endeavoured to develop new, independent operations with the aim of standing up to the lucrateness of the book industry and helping Czech books survive.

The present article builds on a study of archival documents and contemporary journalism to map the story of the Liberated Samizdat Club and to reconstruct and assess the success (or lack thereof) of its samizdat rhetoric and practice in the post-Communist Czech culture of the first half of the 1990s.

### A non-profit publisher

Literary history has paid little to no attention to the Liberated Samizdat Club to date. Besides helping to complete our understanding of the history of Czechoslovak samizdat and to shed light on its continuities and discontinuities, the club's concept also takes us back to the time of the "revolution" and subsequent transformation of the Czech book market. The customary presentation of the post-1989 book scene is replete with rich imagery of crises linked to the demise of "Czech books". The impacts of the Velvet Revolution and the developments that followed in the book market were experienced as a literal "horror".<sup>11</sup> In retrospect, the first half of 1990 can be termed a liberalisation phase, which was characterised by the repayment of debts, that is, the frantic publication of mostly exile and samizdat texts and many other previously prohibited or unacceptable titles in bookshops, with a sharp rise in the number of publishing companies. This period quickly outgrew its means, and in the second half of the year the book market moved into a transformation phase, which lasted roughly until the end of 1991. This phase was characterised by privatisation, market over-saturation, and the accumulation of unsellable books, especially newly published titles of previously prohibited literature, caused by the unrealistically large print runs with hundreds of thousands of copies and erroneous estimations of the short-lived interest of readers, while the market was also inundated with so-called "paraliterature".<sup>12</sup>

In these rather chaotic times, the literary historian and theoretician, author, Charter 77 signatory, and samizdat participant František Kautman – previously also editor-in-chief of *Československý spisovatel* (The Czechoslovak Writer) from 1949–1952 – turned to his friend, the poet, translator, and erstwhile publisher of the samizdat imprint Kvart, Jan Vladislav in France in August 1990 with a specific proposal:

10 For an assessment of the period, see the compendium *Česká nezávislá literatura po pěti letech v referátech*. Praha : Primus, 1995.

11 ŠMEJKALOVÁ, Jiřina. *K teorii a praxi knižní kultury*. Brno : Host, 2000, p. 137.

12 For more on this, see JANÁČEK 2015, pp. 1432–1433; ŠIMEČEK, Zdeněk – TRÁVNÍČEK, Jiří. *Knihy kupovati...: Dějiny knižního trhu v českých zemích*. Praha : Academia, 2015, pp. 386–390; ŠMEJKALOVÁ 2000, pp. 138–141; ŠMEJKALOVÁ, Jiřina. *Cold War Books in the "Other" Europe and What Came After*. Leiden : Brill, 2011, pp. 285–293.

*“What do you say we found a non-profit publishing house ‘Samizdat’ (I would not even eschew the Russian name), which would employ a single paid worker [...]. The rest of the team would be volunteers – mainly the editorial staff, which I would like to have you chair; I would acquire a few younger people (not too many, but hard-working and committed to the notion), who would assess incoming manuscripts globally, the way it was done in samizdat; that is, the manuscripts would be unedited, unamended, etc.; there would just be the essential decision ‘do – don’t do’; the author would then process the manuscript himself, and its production (using cheap and quick equipment, computers – diskettes etc.) and distribution would be organised by the said employee (who would also proofread it). There would be no royalties (like in samizdat), but if some publishing firm were to show interest in another edition, no one would prevent the author from making that offer. The distribution base would be the ‘Samizdat Readers’ Club’, whose members would generally subscribe to individual books based on a pre-announced publishing schedule.”<sup>13</sup>*

The idea was to self-publish previously unpublished books in first editions. All the participants were to work for free; the size of each print run was to be determined by previous subscriptions, and the enterprise was to be unprofitable. Jan Vladislav agreed, and Kautman soon started approaching potential members of the editorial board of the planned organisation. Their reactions varied. Some considered it a good and plausible plan;<sup>14</sup> others were unsure of the need for a new samizdat.<sup>15</sup> For example, Klement Lukeš angrily replied: *“My first reaction was quite unsavoury: ‘Bollocks! There are so many publishing firms, houses, and similar as yet unnamed activities being launched at the moment, and you come at me with samizdat?’”*<sup>16</sup> Conversely, the poet Zdeněk Rotrekl wrote enthusiastically to Kautman that he himself, as an author of exclusively samizdat and exile publications, welcomed the notion wholeheartedly.<sup>17</sup>

The editorial board was made up of Jan Vladislav (chairman), František Kautman, Iva Kotrlá, Klement Lukeš, Karel Pecka, Vilém Prečan, Sylvie Richterová, and Zdeněk Rotrekl, and its members met for the first time on 18 October 1990. All of them had participated in samizdat before 1989: *“activists of the erstwhile samizdat”* or *“old samizdat workers”*, as František Kautman called them. The initial concept also counted on maintaining ties with Prečan’s Czechoslovak Documentary Centre of Independent Literature in Scheinfeld, to which it would provide samizdat materials that the latter did not yet have in its collection, and conversely, the centre would help distribute the club’s books abroad. Kautman also wondered if it might be possible for the centre to find some benefactor.<sup>18</sup> Vilém Prečan later suggested specific forms of cooperation, namely that they could bilaterally provide each

13 Literary Archives of the Czech Museum of Literature (LA CML), fond Klub osvobozeného samizdatu (Liberated Samizdat Club collection; LSC), box 2, letter from František Kautman to Jan Vladislav, 3 August 1990.

14 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Ludvík Vaculík to František Kautman, 22 September 1990.

15 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Jan Trefulka to František Kautman, 27 September 1990.

16 LUKEŠ, Klement. *Náš host Klement Lukeš, člen ediční rady včerejšího samizdatu – i dnešního* (prepared by D. Hajná). In *Zápisník*, 1991, Vol. 35, No. 11, p. 2.

17 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Zdeněk Rotrekl to František Kautman, 24 October 1990.

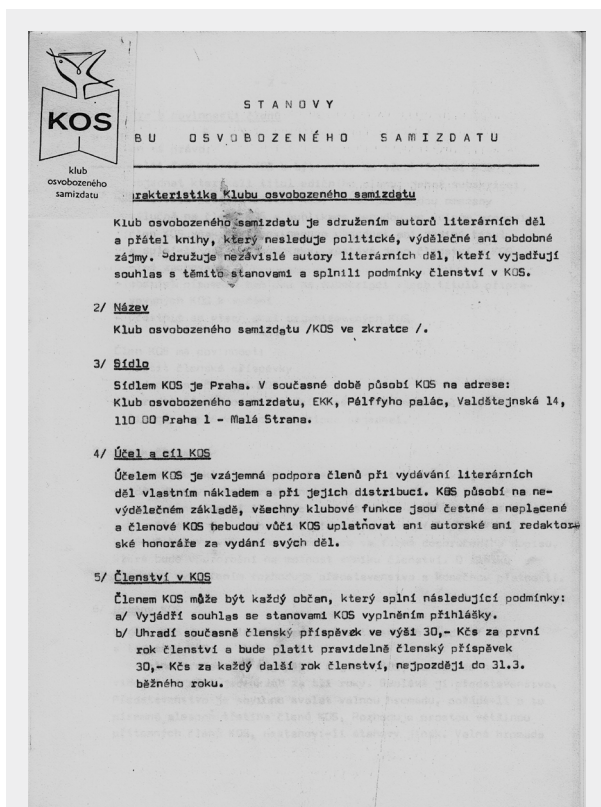
18 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from František Kautman to Jan Vladislav, 3 August 1990.

other with their publications and subscription base and that the centre would also help print some of the materials<sup>19</sup> – but without any actual results.

The newly developing project was first given the working title of Samizdat (along with the parallel Samizdat Readers' Club). Contemporary correspondence shows that the exact form of the name was debated in autumn 1990, the hot issue being whether it was suitable to use a Russianism in these liberated conditions. For example, that was precisely why "samizdat" was not accepted as a term in Poland even before 1989. One of the future authors and representatives of the Liberated Samizdat Club (LSC), Jan Kameníček, gave František Kautman the following advice: "*Ad vocem of the imprint's title: I see no reason why not to call it Samizdat. It is a word with a great tradition – after all, khozraschyot, perestroika, or vodka are also terms known throughout the world. And seeing that I reckon we are still living in Communism to a certain extent, I do not know why we should suddenly choose terms for a new era if that has not yet fully arrived.*"<sup>20</sup> The editorial board finally agreed on the definitive names of both

the samizdat imprint and the subscribers' club: Osvobozený samizdat (Liberated Samizdat) and the Liberated Samizdat Club.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, Kautman formulated the key document, *Výzva* (Appeal), which summarised the premises and message of Liberated Samizdat. Both the text and the idea itself immediately enjoyed the widespread attention of the press.<sup>22</sup> The full text of the "Appeal" is included as an appendix to this article, and so it will suffice to quote its concluding imperative here to illustrate its tone of urgency: "*And so we call on all creators and readers of good Czech books: help us overcome the difficult situation of the current book market by supporting this self-sustaining initiative.*"<sup>23</sup> The founding meeting of the Liberated Samizdat



**Figure 1.** Statutes of the Liberated Samizdat Club. (Source: Literary Archives of the Czech Museum of Literature, Liberated Samizdat Club collection)

19 LA CML, LSC, box 1, Zápis z ediční rady samizdatové edice (Minutes from the editorial board of the samizdat imprint), 30 October 1990. Efforts to cooperate with the Institute of Czech and World Literature and the Institute of Contemporary History (both of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) were similarly unsuccessful.

20 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Jan Kameníček to František Kautman, 20 September 1990.

21 LA CML, LSC, box 1, Zápis z ediční rady samizdatové edice (Minutes from the editorial board of the samizdat imprint), 30 October 1990.

22 Besides Czech newspapers and magazines, mentions of the new club also appeared in foreign periodicals (*Der Standard*) and the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe or the BBC, among others. Several thousand printed flyers were distributed to advertise the club.

23 LA CML, LSC, box 1, *Výzva* (Appeal).

Club took place in Prague on 9 November 1991, where the organisation’s statutes were approved and its managing board was appointed.

## The “Old” and the “new” samizdat

It is remarkable that just shortly after the events of November 1989, both Kautman’s interpretation and the contemporary press quickly associated pre-revolutionary samizdat with epithets like “classic”, “old”, or “yesterday’s”, whereas Kautman’s proposed samizdat was “new”, “liberated”, or “samizdat in a new role”. In this sense, the club enjoyed an almost fervid reception, as it was an act that directly responded to the unfavourable economic conditions in the book market, in which the organisers reckoned that certain books had no chance of finding a publisher.<sup>24</sup> The fact that this conduct defied contemporary expectations is inadvertently evidenced by journalistic descriptions such as “*an extraordinary initiative*” or “*an utterly peculiar cultural institution*”.<sup>25</sup> However, the public was in no quandary about the benefits of the LSC, and so its activities were further characterised as “noble” or “praiseworthy”; one writer even suggested that it was “*a heroism almost comparable to the time when the illegal distribution of samizdats was punishable by prison*”.<sup>26</sup> The first general meeting of the club in November 1991 is notable for a newspaper report that compared the members of the editorial board to the Christian apostles: “*In either case, they never gave up. They have that in common. As well as their permanently defiant nature: when others are silent (or blather), they get down to important work. With or without danger, but always for free. Samizdat skirmishers who have come out of their holes and refused to crawl in again and quietly whine about how our culture will be ruined without subsidies. Thirteen apostolic lunatics with a profound sense of reality. I know that is a contradiction. But it is not.*”<sup>27</sup>

**Spiel mit dem Reiz des Verbotenen**

Ein neuer „alter“ Anlauf, die Verflüchtigung der Leselust in der Tschechoslowakei zu stoppen

Prag – Angesichts des spektakulär rückläufigen Buchabsatzes in der Tschechoslowakei, deren Bewohner vor noch nicht allzulanger Zeit zu den eifrigsten Lesern der Welt gehörten, ist ein altes Etikett zu neuen Ehren gekommen: In Anlehnung an die als *Samizdat* firmierende seinerzeitige oppositionelle Untergrundkultur gründeten Exponenten der ehemaligen *Charta 77* und Exilliteraten dieser Tage den *Klub des freien Samizdat*.

Die u. a. vom Historiker Vilém Prečan und dem Kafka-Experten František Kaufman in Prag ins Leben gerufene Initiative will vor allem verlegerisch tätig werden und dabei an die Rezepte aus den Tagen des Kampfes gegen das totalitäre Regime anknüpfen: Die Preise der Bücher beschränken sich auf die reinen Produktionskosten. Bei einem Minimum an Aufwand für Produktion und Vertrieb wird außerdem eine maximal bewegliche Reaktion auf das Leserinteresse angestrebt.

„Wenn schon nichts anderes, so erfüllen wir mindestens eine informative und propagatorische Rolle für das Buch. Niemand von uns wird bezahlt, auch die Autoren nicht. Unsere Zielsetzung ist, die bestehende Lücke nicht nur mit origineller Literatur, sondern auch mit neuen und unbekannteren wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten auszufüllen. Unser Spektrum soll von Filmdrehbüchern über Publizistik, Essays, Literaturwissenschaft bis zu Dramen und Poesie reichen“, so Klement Lukeš, Mitgründer des Verlages *Freies Samizdat*.

Die ersten fünf Titel gelten der Lebensbilanz Jan Vladislavs („Buch der Poesie“), den Lebenserinnerungen des Arztes Bedřich Placák („Partisanen ohne Legende“), dem Tagebuch eines Patienten aus der psychiatrischen Anstalt („Entstehung eines Romans in Sonatenform“) von Jan Kameníček, dem Lyrik-Band „Das Meer beugt sich im Regen“ von Pando Kolevski und einer Novelle aus der bewegten Nachkriegszeit von Mojmir Klánský: „Albatros“.

Mit einer vom *Europäischen Kulturklub* in Prag zur Verfügung gestellten modernen Druckerei will der neue Verlag bald als Novum in der CSFR auch Taschenbücher auf den Markt bringen.

Marta Marková-Kotyková

**Figure 2.** Information about the founding of the Liberated Samizdat Club also reached the international press – an article from the Austrian daily *Der Standard* from 2–3 February 1991. (Source: Literary Archives of the Czech Museum of Literature, Liberated Samizdat Club collection)

24 For more on the growing sense of so-called economic censorship, see JANÁČEK 2015, pp. 1435–1436.

25 GRYM, Pavel. Osvožený samizdat. In *Tvar*, 1990, Vol. 1, No. 39, p. 3.

26 GOSMAN, Svatoslav. Osvožený samizdat. In *Labyrint*, 1991, Vol. 1, No. 8, p. 2.

27 FILIPOVÁ, Miroslava. Pod korouhví bláznů. In *Práce*, Vol. 47, No. 274, 23 November 1991, supplement No. 47, p. 4.

The aforementioned František Kautman was especially active in promoting the new organisation in the media. His participation in pre-1989 samizdat endeavours gave him credibility, and he was also the bearer and disseminator of the ethos of samizdat revival that was then taken up by others. The LSC regarded itself as the direct successor to the samizdat tradition of the “normalisation” period: *“It seemed that old samizdat – the self-sustained copying of manuscripts of forbidden authors on typewriters and their dissemination to at least a small circle of readers – had died after November 1989. But something else soon appeared instead...”*<sup>28</sup> In fact, the final months of 1990 gave rise to other projects born of the dissatisfaction with cultural developments and the general post-revolutionary disillusionment in this area (the Parliament of Independent Culture, the Pant Club for literature and art, the alternative culture centre Artforum, which also ran a bookshop specialising in the sale of short-run publications and non-commercial literature, and many others).

Kautman and his colleagues had actually merely refreshed samizdat as a certain type of independent production and distribution process, which was devoid of the threat of persecution. However, at the same time their efforts still included an element of disavowal, though in this case it was unfettered resistance to market mechanisms, which could result in mere economic failure instead of state oppression. Kautman himself noted somewhat paradoxically: *“I realised at the time that the idea of samizdat could be implemented much better in a state of freedom than under totalitarian conditions. Without State Security pressure, using modern computer technology. This new samizdat is linked to the samizdat of the past in that the authors receive no fees, the reviewers also work for free, so the earnings from the book merely cover the production costs.”*<sup>29</sup> He simply claimed that *“samizdat can still play a useful part”* if its old virtues are revived at a new and higher technical level.<sup>30</sup> There could be much discussion about the use of the term samizdat in a free society, but that is not in the scope of this article. Let it just be said that some literary historians refuse this usage because they consider samizdat to be meaningful *“only under specific socio-political conditions, in which the publication and dissemination of documents is restricted and usually also ‘penalisable’ or punishable by law.”*<sup>31</sup>

The Liberated Samizdat Club appears rather to have been a certain form of institutionalised samizdat. For example, although Kautman repeatedly emphasised that the LSC was an “author-reader subscription society” and that their ambition was not to participate in market economics,<sup>32</sup> he and other members of the editorial board also published in standard publishing houses at the time. Purely samizdat methods and do-it-yourself (DIY) procedures of publication in the early

28 KAUTMAN, František. Samizdat žije... In *Nové knihy*, 1991, No. 48, p. 1.

29 KAUTMAN, František. Samizdat v nové úloze (prepared by M. Fronková). In *Lidová demokracie*, Vol. 48, No. 57, 7 March 1992, p. 4.

30 KAUTMAN 1991, Samizdat žije..., p. 1.

31 MACHOVEC, Martin. Obecně přijímaná definice samizdatu neexistuje. In *Česká literatura*, 2016, Vol. 64, No. 6, p. 943.

32 KAUTMAN, František. Zpíval KOS kosici fistulí... (prepared by M. Nyklová). In *Svobodné slovo*, Vol. 48, No. 9, 11 January 1992, supplement Slovo na sobotu, p. 3.



1990s were generally used only by subcultures and various (anarchist, feminist, ecological, religious, etc.) movements. The DIY strategies used in these environments are an expression of efforts to achieve cultural and social autonomy, while fanzine production represents an alternative means of communication in opposition to mass media and the mainstream environment, creating a sense of affinity within the given community.<sup>33</sup> The “boom” of diversely focused magazines/zines (*10:15 Fakezine, A-kontra, Filtré, Konserva/Na hudbu, Plivník, Rock 88, Spark, Scene Report, ROK, UNI*, and others) is typical for the early 1990s.<sup>34</sup>

Either way, the LSC was highly successful at evoking its legitimacy as a post-revolutionary continuation of samizdat.<sup>35</sup> This was most notably manifested in František Kautman’s text “Návrat k samizdatu” (“Return to samizdat”), published in *Listy* (Pages), in which he gave an exposition of the history of Czechoslovak samizdat before 1989, outlined the effects of market economics on the book market, and presented the new samizdat programme offered by the LSC, concluding his text with a message about the invincibility of Czech books and the experience and ethics of samizdat, which could help maintain book culture in post-Communist countries and beyond.<sup>36</sup> The article – and other media depictions and reactions to the club – aptly capture a characteristic feature of the early 1990s: “*One of the defining principles of the representation of the book transformation was the mechanical conversion of the material and economic aspects of text production (from decaying bookbindings to indebted distributors) to the ideological level in the sense of ‘the fall of national culture’. In other words, technical production issues of the book market were placed in direct relation to questions of ethics and nationality.*”<sup>37</sup>

As time passed, the need to unambiguously define the LSC’s essence caused the original references to “old” samizdat to weaken, although this was still maintained in the name of the club, and it came to refer to itself more as an “author-reader society/citizens’ association”, “voluntary free-time organisation of readers and authors”, “non-professional voluntary organisation”, or “voluntary non-profit organisation”. However, Kautman himself continued to publicly defend samizdat and its qualities both in the past and in the present.<sup>38</sup>

33 For more on this, see DANIEL, Ondřej et al. *Kultura svépomocí: Ekonomické a politické rozměry v českém subkulturním prostředí pozdního státního socialismu a postsocialismu*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, 2016; HROCH, Miloš. *Křičím: “To jsem já.”: Příběhy českého fanzinu od 80. let po současnost*. Praha : PageFive, 2017; MICHELA, Miroslav – LOMÍČEK, Jan. *Fanziny: Subkulturní symbol*. In Milan HLAVÁČKA – Jakub RAŠKA et al. *Symboly doby: Historické eseje*. Praha : Historický ústav, 2019, pp. 159–169.

34 Other fanzines can be found, for example, in the Czech and Slovak Archives of Subcultures (ziny.info) or in the archives of BigMag, <http://bigmag.cz/?lang=cs>.

35 In a meeting in November 1991, the managing board decided, among others, that one copy of each LSC publication was to be sent to the Libri prohibiti library of Jiří Gruntorád. LA CML, LSC, box 5, *Záznam ze schůze představenstva Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu* (Minutes from the meeting of the managing board of the LSC), 9 November 1991.

36 KAUTMAN, František. *Návrat k samizdatu*. In *Listy*, 1991, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 89–92.

37 ŠMEJKALOVÁ 2000, p. 162.

38 See KAUTMAN, František. *Odkaz samizdatu*. In *KOS: Bulletin Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu*, 1994, Nos. 2–3, pp. 1–3; KAUTMAN, František. *Je exilová a samizdatová literatura úspěšná?* In *Česká nezávislá literatura po pěti letech v referátech*. Praha : Primus, 1995, pp. 20–25.

## Friends of Czech books

The numerous newspaper and magazine articles reporting about the LSC led to large numbers of people applying to join it from all over Czechoslovakia and from various generations – ranging from university students to pensioners. The “Appeal” written by the editorial board was highly suggestive both in its description of the book market crisis and in its solicitation of the broader readership (see Appendix). Some readers responded ardently to this call to action, as exemplified by one of the letters that the club received: *“If it really is so tragic and if it helps Czech books, you can count on our family.”*<sup>39</sup> A number of readers shared this worried outlook on the future and quality of “our” books, and so they expressed their gratitude that the club had taken up *“such a thankless task in this day and age”*.<sup>40</sup> They looked with sympathy at the *“attempt to get good book products to the readers despite the tough conditions for books”* and regarded this as an invaluable service. One reader joyfully welcomed the fact that *“I will receive delightful book morsels through your efforts”*.<sup>41</sup> It seems that the club managed to respond well to contemporary moods and concerns about the situation in the book market, both on the side of publishers and booksellers<sup>42</sup> and among readers themselves. Future members then expressed the hope that, conversely, the club’s books would be interesting and *“mainly also for a manageable price”*(!), and they thanked them for *“this service to us lovers of good books, who do not need books that are finely dressed, but ones that tell something, and that is what counts.”*<sup>43</sup> We can assume that, especially for regional applicants, their future membership in the club was seen as a guarantee of access to something “better” and “exalted”. Combined with the offer of exclusivity,<sup>44</sup> this must have undoubtedly appealed especially to older readers.

From the beginning, the LSC counted on acquiring members from among the old samizdat subscribers,<sup>45</sup> and this intention was also reflected in the aforementioned “Appeal” (see Appendix). Some readers still had very clear memories of samizdat, and many of the letters sent to the club evince echoes of the reception of samizdat before 1989. These include the brief allusions of former regular recipients of samizdat: Mr Jan H. wrote to the club as a *“long-standing samizdat reader”*,<sup>46</sup> Mr Stanislav K. welcomed the idea of a club as he had previously only borrowed the books for one or two feverish nights, and so he would be grateful for the option to buy an interesting book.<sup>47</sup> Mr Martin S. confessed to having very much enjoyed reading samizdat literature, noted that he would like to continue doing so, and wished the club much success and as large a response from readers *“as back then”*.<sup>48</sup> Applications were also sent in by recent samizdat participants,

39 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Helena B., undated.

40 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Jindra T., 4 March 1991.

41 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Zdeněk T., undated.

42 Some regional booksellers also offered to help promote the club’s activities.

43 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Jiří Š., 27 March 1991.

44 The club’s advertising materials used this strategy intentionally: *“Would you be interested in one of these books? They cannot be bought or ordered at bookshops, but you can get them if you become a member of the Liberated Samizdat Club (LSC for short).”* LA CML, LSC, box 1, advertising flyer.

45 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from F. Kautman to J. Vladislav, 3 August 1990.

46 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Jan H., 12 February 1991.

47 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Stanislav K., 18 February 1991.

48 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Martin S., 23 February 1991.

including regional figures – Pavel Fraité from Hořice (the magazine *Sklepník*), Erwin Kukuczka (the imprint *Louč*), Vladimír Liberda from Ostrava, Petr Náhlík from Pilsen, Petr Pavlovský (the magazine *Acta incognitorum*), Mojmír Trávníček from Nový Hrozenkov, Julius Augustin Varga from Šumperk, and others. Membership was requested by well-known former dissidents, such as Rudolf Battěk, Ivan M. Havel, Olga Havlová, Eva Kantůrková, Radim Palouš, Vilém Prečan, Jan Ruml, experts on Czech studies from both at home (Miroslav Červenka, Milan Jankovič, Lubomír Machala, etc.) and abroad (Ivo Bock from Bremen), and even some institutions (the Museum of Czech Literature, the Josef Škvorecký Society, the library of the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, etc.).

**PŘIHLÁŠKA**  
Přihlašuji se za člena KLUBU OSVOBOZENÉHO SAMIZDATU

Objednávám závazně tituly:	Předpokládané ceny titulů:	počet
Vladislav: Kniha poesie	cca 75,-	5
Placák: Partyzáni bez legend	58,-	5
Kameníček: Vznik románu v sonátové formě	55,-	5
Kolevski: Moře schoulené v dešti	25,-	5
Klánský: Albatros	38,-	5

Jméno: Olga Havlová

Adresa: Nábř. Rašínova 2000, Praha 2 - Nové město

a zavazuji se platit klubový příspěvek 30,- Kčs ročně. (Složenkou zašleme po obdržení přihlášky.)

Knihy ~~vyzvednu osobně~~ – zašlete na dobírku. Konečná cena knih bude oznámena dodatečně a bude určena podle počtu odběratelů.

**Figure 3.** Membership application and pre-order by Olga Havlová, a former samizdat participant and the husband of then Czechoslovak President Václav Havel. (Source: Literary Archives of the Czech Museum of Literature, Liberated Samizdat Club collection)

Thanks to its declared strategy of samizdat revival, the membership base of the LSC in the early 1990s did in fact “absorb” some of the core figures of pre-1989 samizdat. By November 1991, 274 members had been accepted; in April 1992, there were 365 members; in 1994, 410 members were listed; and finally, as of 1 March 1995, memberships amounted to 315 entries.<sup>49</sup>

## Samizdat utopia

The idea of a supportive community of friends of new Czech books soon began to collapse, however. LSC volumes were published<sup>50</sup> in paperback and, bar some exceptions, with a unified graphic style, which was created together with the club’s logo by the artist Klára Rasochová *pro bono*, in the LSC spirit, and which was deemed tasteful<sup>51</sup> but, honestly, not especially attractive. The print runs were planned to consist of 200 to 400 copies (although initial estimates gave a range

<sup>49</sup> In each year, there were always some members who did not pay their membership fee, which begs the question as to how actively they then subscribed to the pre-order of books.

<sup>50</sup> The actual publication of books was initially arranged in cooperation with the European Culture Club, later primarily with the publisher Pavel Primus and his eponymous publishing company.

<sup>51</sup> Potential readers were enticed with the literal promise of a “modestly produced, yet charming collector’s edition”. LA CML, LSC, box 1, advertising flyer.

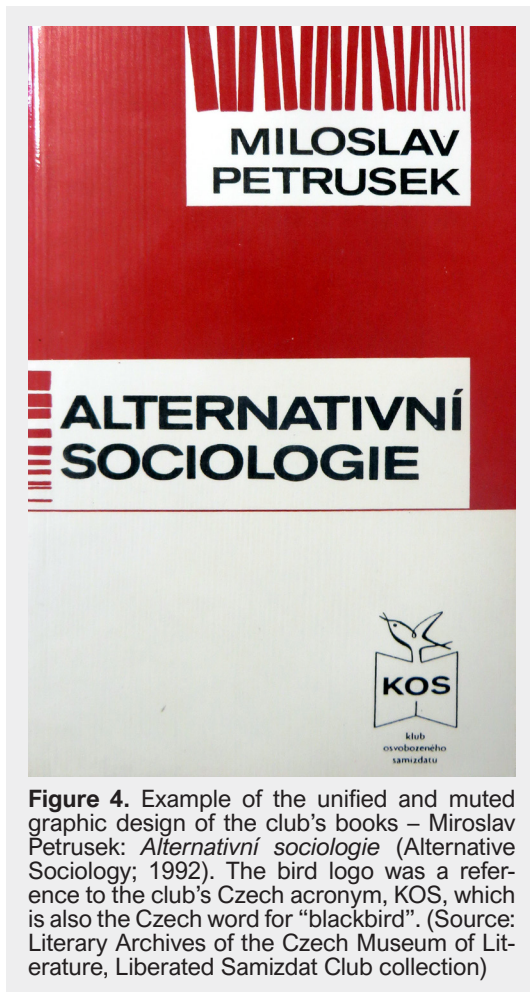
of 600 to 2,000 copies), but the actual numbers were determined by the subscribers. Their professed interest then also designated the order in which the individual titles would be published. People initially ordered publications in apparent euphoria, with the main goal of supporting the club's existence. This was no doubt aided by the project's publicity, which was copious in 1990–1991 but then gradually abated, causing the LSC to struggle to promote its operations and its books. Another problem was that the club's publishing scope was so broad that members were often interested in just a single title and not the whole catalogue; there was no need to own a complete series, despite the publications' unified visuals. The given method of financing the "self-sustaining unremunerated publishing house" via membership fees – which were initially set to CSK 20, then CSK 30, but then rose to CSK 50 per year in 1992 – and the payment of production costs from book sales proved to be insufficient. This was something of a paradox because, economically, the club endeavoured to make its publications as cheap and accessible as possible, especially seeing that no one was going to profit from them.<sup>52</sup> Members were thus repeatedly called on to promote the LSC principles among their acquaintances and help acquire new members, as larger print runs would help reduce the cost of each copy. The subscription system can theoretically be seen as building on the approach of publishing ventures such as the erstwhile Evropský literární klub (European Literary Club) or Družstevní práce (Cooperative Works) or the later Čtenářský klub (Readers' Club; administered by the State Publisher of Fine Literature, Music, and Art, later the State Publisher of Fine Literature and Art, finally Odeon). Book clubs had become popular especially after World War II, and practically ever larger publishing house maintained its own club or participated in one. Club publications generally featured solid editing, high-quality typography and art, affordable prices, and large print runs. These attributes, easily appreciated by customers of the large official publishing houses of the past, were largely missing in the LSC series. However, if one was to look for some similarity with pre-1989 alternative culture, it could be likened to the book subscription of Jazzová sekce (Jazz Section), with all the difficulties inherent to this kind of interest-based production and distribution of books for members (longer waits, higher prices, etc.).<sup>53</sup>

Sky-rocketing prices in the printing industry and rising postage costs led the LSC to approach myriad institutions with requests for grants as early as late 1992, as it did not want to burden its members by increasing membership fees, instead wishing to enable them to pre-order books for more reasonable prices. All the same, the club found itself in a crisis in 1993,<sup>54</sup> one which had long been anticipated, as evidenced by one recollection of the author Jan Kameníček: *"Only there arose problems that*

52 See LUKEŠ 1991, p. 3; KAUTMAN, František – SOBOTKOVÁ, Alena. Jedeme dál! Samizdatové nakladatelství bude pokračovat ve své práci i v nových podmínkách (prepared by M. Kolomacká). In *Práce*, Vol. 47, No. 46, 23 February 1991, supplement No. 8, p. 5.

53 The subscription format was used to a much lesser degree by some larger samizdat imprints as well, and by some samizdat magazines (e.g., *Spektrum*); in those cases, the publishers could be more certain of covering their considerable production costs.

54 It is worth noting that, from 1992, the book market had to contend with the peculiar privatisation of Knižní velkoobchod (the Book Wholesaler) and with the liquidation of the state enterprise Kniha (Book) and its stock.



**Figure 4.** Example of the unified and muted graphic design of the club's books – Miroslav Petrušek: *Alternativní sociologie* (Alternative Sociology; 1992). The bird logo was a reference to the club's Czech acronym, KOS, which is also the Czech word for “blackbird”. (Source: Literary Archives of the Czech Museum of Literature, Liberated Samizdat Club collection)

*we had not accounted for. We could not have imagined that it was the end of idealism and that the ‘ruthless hand of the market’, as it was often called, was beginning to take effect. Paper costs were rising steeply each half year. The printer refused to cooperate altruistically. And the distribution, which was conceived as a subscription for members and was sent COD, was no longer affordable.”<sup>55</sup>*

The club's operations were resurrected in 1994 with several successful subsidy applications (the Ministry of Culture, the Czech Literary Fund), which allowed the LSC, among others, to organise literary events for newly published titles, which secured them at least a certain degree of advertising, and to begin publishing its *Bulletin Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu* (Liberated Samizdat Club Bulletin). In its first issue from 1994, Kautman again defended the purpose of the club, but added: *“Perhaps our initial plans were too generous, especially with regard to the number and speed of books to be published. Practice has shown that we must be more modest.”<sup>56</sup>*

Even so, the LSC was unable to effectively respond to the changing conditions of the book market in the first half of the 1990s, which included the overall transformation of the lifestyle of the Czech population and the redefining of free-time activities after 1989, decreasing purchasing power, and shifting reading behaviour. It was becoming increasingly difficult to reach prospective readers. The strategy of *“the reader will always find the book”* had to be abandoned in favour of *“the book must get to the reader”*.<sup>57</sup> This went in hand with the collapse of the 1990s image of a persistent readers' community, which – while limited in numbers – used to buy books, bought books, would buy books *“even if there was nothing to eat”*, and would continue to show their love for Czech books by permanently subscribing to them.<sup>58</sup> Members were repeatedly warned that their pre-orders were binding, and the publishing process was also delayed by members' hesitations – it was thus necessary to order books as quickly as possible. Members were also supposed to pay their membership fees on time. However, it seems that members soon began to question what sense there was in

55 KAMENÍČEK, Jan. O počátcích Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu. In BUBENÍKOVÁ, Miluša – HŘÍBKOVÁ, Radka (eds.). *Na trnitých cestách života a tvorby: Sborník příspěvků ze symposia pořádaného u příležitosti životního jubilea Františka Kautmana*. Praha : Národní knihovna ČR – Slovanská knihovna, 2015, p. 144.

56 KAUTMAN, František. Vážení členové. In *KOS: Bulletin Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu*, 1994, No. 1, p. 1.

57 ŠIMEČEK – TRÁVNÍČEK 2015, pp. 391–392; see also HALADA, Jan. *Člověk a kniha: Úvod do nakladatelské specializace*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, 1993, p. 63; ŠMEJKALOVÁ 2000, p. 155.

58 See KAUTMAN, František: *Nakladatelé, autoři, knižní trh a čtenáři*. In *Labyrint*, 1991, Vol. 1, No. 7, p. 2.

paying membership fees to await the mercurial arrival of a modest catalogue that might not contain anything of interest to them. Other offers appeared to be much more attractive, notwithstanding that readers were becoming ever more accustomed to sales and special discounts, as with other types of goods. Various classic novels could be bought on sale at the time, mainly from the clearance of stock of disbanded publishing firms, for prices in the single digits of Czech crowns, whereas the final costs of LSC books were often higher than estimated in the subscription catalogue and reached as high as CZK 100.

The club's situation was aptly summarised by one regular member, Evžen Sláma from Brno, who ruminated in one of the bulletins from late 1994 that the LSC had mainly come to be preferred by authors, who saw in it the chance to get their manuscripts published, rather than the people who would then actually buy those books: *"Especially now, when a vast miscellany of books is being published, their price continues to rise, and those interested in good books are not known for having funds to spare. Especially in cases when the author might be of fine quality but little or no renown, there will probably not be many people willing to purchase his book for a relatively high price."*<sup>59</sup> He recommended that the club should stop focusing on beginning or unknown authors and that it would be good if the LSC strove to publish at least one book that would *"be remarkable and cause a sensation"*, which could then attract the much-desired attention.<sup>60</sup>

All the same, the membership base of the club continued to deteriorate alongside persistent issues with the existing system of pre-orders. Collaborative ties with the publishing house Primus were relinquished with the comment that *"the path of co-production with commercial publishers is unfeasible for the LSC"*.<sup>61</sup> The club continued to be plagued by rising production costs and the price of paper. In spring 1995 the organisation's general meeting debated whether to call an end to the project. Members voted to keep the operation running, but with a changed approach. The subscribers were to send the money ahead of time, so that the pre-ordered books would not be refused; it was also necessary to ensure there would be shorter waiting times between the making of the subscription offer and the publishing of the book – with a maximum period of three months. It was also deemed essential to grow the membership and activist base so that the brunt of the work would not be borne by just a few individuals, and a new managing board was appointed. Nonetheless, in the second half of the year, financial difficulties and a lack of public interest caused the Liberated Samizdat Club to close down for good.

The literary historian and journalist Vladimír Novotný commented on the event in an article titled *"Literární úbyť"* (Literary losses), in which he juxtaposed the dissolution of *"the samizdat grandstand of the Czech underground"*, the magazine

59 SLÁMA, Evžen: Vážení Kosové. In *KOS: Bulletin Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu*, 1994, Nos. 2–3, p. 4.

60 SLÁMA 1994, p. 4.

61 LA CML, LSC, box 1, letter from František Kautman to František Hrdlička, 21 March 1995.

*Vokno* (Window),<sup>62</sup> which – somewhat curiously, considering the non-conformist and non-commercial nature of modern underground – was paid for by state funds in the post-1989 period, with the ceased operation of the club, which was started without state subsidies and intended to publish books in line with samizdat tradition: *“Times change, there is no money, and mainly, surprisingly (or inevitably?) interest has been lost in those circles which the Liberated Samizdat Club appealed to primarily. Maybe it really is outdated: non-commercial prose and poetry is now published by prestigious publishers (Atlantis, Paseka, TORST, Argo, etc.), which have now jointly established the Literary Club.”*<sup>63</sup> It was no longer possible to rely on enthusiasm and DIY methods in 1995. The transition period, in which the LSC wished to fill a gap in the book market, had passed.<sup>64</sup>

## A failed experiment

During discussions about the composition of the club’s editorial board in autumn 1990, the prosaist and theoretician of exile literature Sylvie Richterová declared that *“the publishing plan should be highly representative, the point is not to publish some kind of ‘leftovers’, but good things. After all, that is the samizdat tradition.”*<sup>65</sup> The initial intentions of František Kautman as the founder of the club were also quite ambitious. The DIY venture was to provide opportunities to authors who could not break into the book market and to “serious”<sup>66</sup> works of literature. However, the authors were expected to show solidarity: *“It is certainly not easy to convince authors, especially those who have not received any remuneration for their books for twenty years, to again offer their books to readers for free. But they have a choice: they can either accommodate themselves to the market or to the demanding reader and the laws of their own self-realisation. (As has always been the case in the history of literature, in our country certainly since the days of the national revival.)”*<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, the club also counted on the threat of its newly established independent publishing operation to be inundated by all kinds of scribblers. In a private letter to Jan Vladislav, František Kautman anticipated the situation: *“The unpleasant thing is that we will probably get flooded by a large amount of less valuable or utterly valueless manuscripts, which we will have to reject and thus generate ill will – but there is no getting round that.”*<sup>68</sup> The express formulation of the “Appeal” shows that they attempted to avoid this problem at least partially and in advance. With no success, of course. Numerous people hoped to publish

62 A year earlier, another alternative samizdat magazine, the Hořice-based *Sklepník* (Cellarite), terminated its operation. The first two post-1989 issues were printed in runs of 2,000 copies, but the publishers only sold half of them, resulting in a net loss. The print-run later stabilised at 150 copies. The magazine was not dissolved for financial reasons, but due to a lack of contributors and readers. Likewise in the case of *Vokno*, its demise was not caused by financial problems but by a dearth of editorial staff.

63 NOVOTNÝ, Vladimír. Literární úbytě. In *Práce*, Vol. 51, No. 178, 2 August 1995, p. 13.

64 A kind of swan song of the LSC was the compendium *Návrat Egona Hostovského* (The Return of Egon Hostovský; 1996), compiled from the proceedings of the international scientific symposium on the life and works of Egon Hostovský (Hronov, 21–23 May 1993).

65 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Sylvie Richterová to František Kautman, 14 November 1990.

66 This was no doubt partly in defiance to the contemporary boom of popular literature.

67 KAUTMAN 1991, *Návrat k samizdatu*, p. 91.

68 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from František Kautman to Jan Vladislav, 11 September 1990.

their writings and so sent the club their “humble first work”. Already in April 1991 the club’s secretary Alena Sobotková reported the situation to Jan Vladislav thus: “*There is a large offer of manuscripts as well, but a lot of slush.*”<sup>69</sup> In an interview in early 1992, Kautman admitted they were bombarded with manuscripts, especially poetry, where the assessment had to be all the more strict to ensure that the LSC maintained a stable, balanced catalogue.<sup>70</sup> Reviewers’ reports were thus given considerable weight, and this was seen as one of the differences between old and new samizdat, namely, that in the pre-1989 period it was not possible to maintain a corps of reviewers and to convene meetings and editorial boards; there was no opportunity to rely on second opinions, all of which was permissible in the new era.<sup>71</sup> Some people reckoned that the review process and the quality of the editorial board members would allow for a certain “rehabilitation” of old samizdat, as far as professionalism was concerned.<sup>72</sup> However, this was not completely true (cf. the “admiralty” editorial board of the samizdat Edice Expedice or the mode of operation for the Brno imprint Prameny). In fact, the club actually retained some of the shortcomings of old samizdat – for example, when they gave up on doing any editing work on the texts.

The constant struggles to secure print runs, as the low quantities were of little interest to printers, caused books to be released with numerous delays – for example, the manuscript of the prison poems of the Slovak doctor Vojtech Belák, *Zápočet z ponížení* (A Course in Humiliation), was received by the LSC in February 1991 and approved for publication in May of that year, but it was not published until mid-1994. The club dubbed this case a “*lengthily protracted odyssey*”.<sup>73</sup> Regular operations also evinced a considerable lack of flexibility, which was caused, among other reasons, by the unexpectedly demanding administrative responsibilities, further complicated by the initial lack of equipment (computers), and especially by the club’s insufficient workforce and the overburdening of all participants – namely the reviewers and proofreaders and those copied the texts on to diskettes – who worked completely for free in accordance with club principles, with the sole exception of the secretary. The authors of submitted manuscripts were frequently asked for lenience with regard to the assessment stage, as the editorial board was flooded with manuscripts to such an extent that it was only able to function with the greatest of efforts.<sup>74</sup> These delays then caused some of the authors to request their manuscript to be returned so they could offer it to a different publisher. Another significant feature can be observed here – just as members of the LSC were recruited from among the supporters of pre-1989 samizdat, the club was also approached with publication requests by the less known samizdat authors of the Communist period. The club gained their sympathies and concurred with their convictions, yet often turned down their submissions. Vladimír Liberda, a former samizdat publisher and normalisation-era political prisoner from Ostrava, wrote to the LSC in August 1993 with palpable frustration: “*Dear friends, some two years ago I submitted to you a typescript of my prison memoirs from*

69 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Alena Sobotková to Jan Vladislav, 17 April 1991.

70 KAUTMAN 1992, Zpíval KOS kosici fistulí..., p. 3.

71 LUKEŠ 1991, p. 4.

72 GOSMAN, Svatoslav, quoted in FILIPOVÁ 1991, p. 4.

73 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from František Kautman to Vojtech Belák, 10 May 1994.

74 LA CML, LSC, box 1, Vážení přátelé... (Dear Friends...).



*the years 1982–84, titled ‘Příběh orwellovských let’ [A Story from the Orwellian Years], which was ‘published’ in my Ostrava samizdat, in Edice Petlice and Česká expedice. I just received a larger sum of money from the Min. of Justice as compensation for that and my previous incarceration in Bory. I therefore ask you to please inform me how much it would cost for you publish this title at my own expense with a run of one thousand copies.’*<sup>75</sup> In response, the club merely returned the manuscript and suggested that he should contact a publisher in his neighbourhood or attempt to self-publish the work, as the LSC required the necessary number of subscribers to apply, which was out of the question in the near future.<sup>76</sup>

Many authors were rejected for various reasons – some almost immediately, others on the basis of negative reviews. Some positively reviewed manuscripts were merely kept in reserve, while others were entered into the subscription programme but ended up not being published all the same, probably due to insufficient interest from subscribers. The number of cancelled titles in the catalogue offer could be interpreted in several ways. The offered works featured a diversity of genres but lacked attractiveness compared to the competition in the book market. The unfocused scope of the LSC’s publishing programme, ranging from fiction to scholarly works, may have caused anxiety among the readers, who simply could not know what to expect next and whether it was worth the membership. In the case of “samizdat classics”, there was a certain chance to succeed and gain support from erudite readers and from participants in “old” samizdat. However, the club’s selection of less known authors yielded far worse results. Last but not least, it appears that the LSC’s production appealed only to a limited group of readers and certainly not to the youngest generation. The older generation of reviewers were not always favourably inclined towards the poetics of beginning authors. The publishing schedule was thus largely filled by “tried and tested” authors – be it veterans of “old samizdat” with direct links to the LSC,<sup>77</sup> or works known from clandestine pre-1989 editions, or both. Although the club proclaimed its openness to young authors and debutants, this was only partly implemented in practice, as in this sense the people within the LSC had a more retrospective tendency (generationally, poetically, ideologically).

An overall view shows that from October 1990 to March 1995, members of the managing board reviewed a total of 126 manuscripts, of which nine were published and another 16 were approved and recommended for publication. The remaining 101 manuscripts were returned to their authors.<sup>78</sup> Over the course of 1991–1996, only eleven books were actually published.<sup>79</sup>

75 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter from Vladimír Liberda to the LSC, 15 August 1993.

76 LA CML, LSC, box 2, letter to Vladimír Liberda, unsigned, 4 October 1993.

77 The LSC understandably featured a “mesh” of personal ties and a system of friendships and motives that may have been decisive in the selection and approval of works.

78 LA CML, LSC, box 1, Zpráva o činnosti Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu (KOS) v době od ustavující valné hromady z r. 1991 do 20. března 1995 (Report on the operations of the Liberated Samizdat Club [LSC] in the period from the founding meeting in 1991 to 20 March 1995).

79 Jan Vladislav: *Kniha poezie* (1991, 350 copies); Jan Kameníček: *Vznik románu v sonátové formě* (1992, 260 copies); Bedřich Placák: *Partyzáni bez legend: Život a boje partyzánské brigády na západním Slovensku* (1992, 260 copies); Miroslav Petrušek: *Alternativní sociologie: Úvahy o smyslu sociologie v nealternativní společnosti* (1992, 320 copies); Zdeněk Rotrekl: *Němé holubice dále* (1994, 250 copies); Vojtech Belák:

## Conclusion

The bold idea of “liberated samizdat” was conceived at a time which the organisers themselves characterised as “*an economic situation temporarily adverse to the muses*”,<sup>80</sup> although this was a relatively natural adaptation to free market conditions in the publishing industry after decades of regulated existence. “*However, what is most unsustainable is not the old order as such, but precisely the idea of the very existence of immutable orders*”,<sup>81</sup> Jiřina Šmejkalová wrote in connection to the period; and LSC representatives surely realised that. Even so, they – as many others – saw the consequences of publishing freedom after 1989 as catastrophic. This led to the concept of the Liberated Samizdat Club – a self-defence response to the “laws of the market” as a result of failed expectations of the outcome of the “book revolution”.

The club wanted to maintain continuity, and it founded its premises and argumentation firmly on the social function and heritage of Czech books. Its evocation of the tradition of voluntary service to Czech books and the recent history of typewritten culture, heroism, sacrifice, altruism, and related ethical aspects basically represented the one extreme of the contemporary conflict of “*enthusiasm and liberalism, that is, of an almost revivalist-Krameriesque determination and the cold rationality of economic principles*”.<sup>82</sup> This dramatic interpretation, the call to “*save good books through self-sustaining action*”,<sup>83</sup> resonated in certain parts of society, and the founding of the club was regarded as a praiseworthy endeavour that was “*no doubt highly meritorious, it is a certain type of self-help in a difficult economic situation*”.<sup>84</sup>

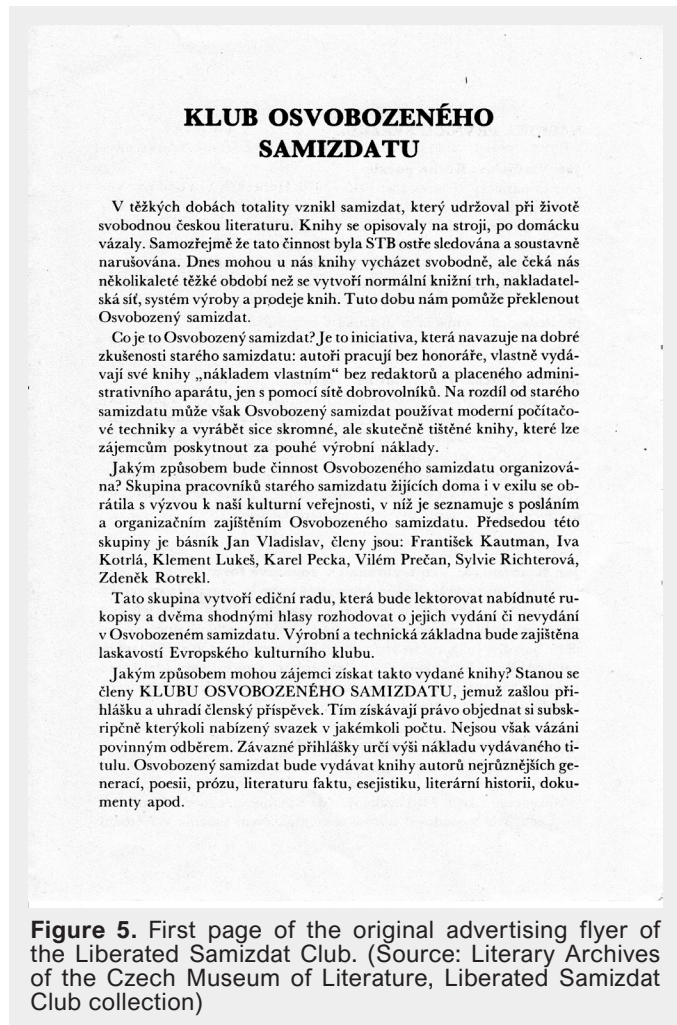


Figure 5. First page of the original advertising flyer of the Liberated Samizdat Club. (Source: Literary Archives of the Czech Museum of Literature, Liberated Samizdat Club collection)

Zápočet z poníženia: *Básne* (1994, 250 copies); Erik Kolár: *Vila Humboldt: Kronika zašlé generace* (1994, 300 copies), Šimona Löwensteinová: *Filosof a moralista Emanuel Rádl 1873–1942* (1994); Zdena Bratršová – František Hrdlička: *Cesta k močálu a jiné prózy* (1994), Marek Hofman: *Hra na divergenci* (1995); František Kautman (ed.): *Návrat Egona Hostovského* (compendium; 1996).

80 KAUTMAN – SOBOTKOVÁ 1991, p. 5.

81 ŠMEJKALOVÁ 2000, p. 150.

82 ŠIMEČEK – TRÁVNÍČEK 2015, p. 443.

83 KAUTMAN 1991, Návrat k samizdatu, p. 91.

84 NYKLOVÁ, Milena. Staňte se členy KOS! In *Lidová demokracie*, Vol. 47, No. 268, 16 November 1991, p. 4.

Activists of the club were members of the samizdat “elite” before 1989, and by self-publishing based on volunteering and good intentions free of political or commercial aspirations they wanted to conduct a new resistance after 1989. They worked on the assumption that there was a certain number of authors who were unable to publish due to the situation in the book market, and the LSC was basically meant to be the institutionalised mediator between these authors and the “deprived” readers. References to “old” samizdat mainly hoped to activate the attribute of solidarity – both by the authors, who would provide their works for free, and by the readers, who would support the production of the works even at a higher cost (while enabling the whole project with their annual membership fee). Solidarity and a shared enthusiasm were to motivate people to participate in the running of this “parallel” literary institution without any remuneration. The brunt of this burden was then borne by women in the club, who volunteered as secretaries and proofreaders but also included an artist and a graphic designer.

The LSC’s first step – to raise the alarm, to warn and subsequently recreate the “parallel polis”, a platform of people who shared a similar “world view” and were willing to support the alternative symbolically, financially, as readers, and as authors – was actually successful. The club was undoubtedly aided in this by the social capital accumulated by its representatives under the Communist regime, which bolstered the project’s overall credibility. But the actual implementation of the altruistic samizdat vision was hampered by numerous problems (high prices, lack of flexibility, limited aesthetic appeal, and partly also lacklustre content). It gradually became apparent that this was an ideal that was insupportable in the given circumstances and the chosen form. The community of samizdat “conspirators” did not receive what they had expected from the club; the post-revolutionary fighting ethos abated, and with it came a loss of interest by the literary community, whose needs were saturated elsewhere in the market.

The first half of the 1990s is a period in which *“books, and their price, [...] became a scene in which aspects of cultural traditions and stereotypes intersected with aspects of politics and psychology”*.<sup>85</sup> The closing down of the Liberated Samizdat Club was not just the failure of one gesture of author-reader defiance towards the market in the era of liberalisation and transformation. It also symbolises the destruction of one myth and the sober awakening of one generation from its pre-revolutionary ideas of the prestigious role of literature, literary works, and authors, which was to be rewritten in the post-Communist societies of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>86</sup>

*Translation: Adam Prentis*

<sup>85</sup> ŠMEJKALOVÁ 2000, p. 155.

<sup>86</sup> See WACHTEL, Andrew Baruch. *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*. Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

## Appendix

### Appeal of the Liberated Samizdat Club<sup>87</sup>

#### Appeal

We call on you, our literary public, authors, readers, and distributors of books with the following appeal:

The situation in our book market is dire. The old structures of book publishing and distribution are dying; the new are arising but slowly and painfully. The situation in the printing industry is catastrophic. The monopoly of the printers allows them to push up prices. Small printers are almost non-existent, and private publishers, dependent on large printing houses, are in a precarious position, and many of them are fighting for survival. The old system of wholesale book distribution has collapsed. Its warehouses and bookshop stores are overfilled both with actual pulp fiction and with literature that is not without quality but which is currently almost unsellable. It very rarely happens now that a book would be completely sold out upon publication. The rising costs of goods and services are decreasing the purchasing power of readers of books.

It will take some time for a normally functioning book market to be established in our country which would also enable the publishing of long-lasting, short-run editions that generally constitute the majority of new high-quality book productions.

We believe that it is pointless to bombard our central authorities and other administrative institutions with memorandums demanding remedial action. There is no choice but for culture to help overcome this difficult period, caused by the developments of the past forty years, under its own power.

We see the founding of a samizdat publishing venture, which would draw on all of the benefits of the experience of classic samizdat: minimal production and distribution costs and maximally flexible reactivity to readers' interests, to be one of the possible paths. This opportunity has been brought to us in technical cooperation with the European Literary Club, a transnational non-governmental organisation for the collaboration of European artists and friends of European culture, which was established last year in Prague. The ELC is willing to give "Liberated Samizdat" access to its short-run printing press, which is the main prerequisite for executing the plan to publish original books of value, which cannot be mass produced in the current situation, and there is thus the danger that they might have to wait a very long time to get to readers. Modern, short-run printing methods allow for the flexible production of a book in a very short time in runs of just a few hundred copies in a decent paperback format, and for its delivery to the reader for the production costs. This is, of course, possible only if any kind of profit is forgone by both the publisher and the distributor and also by the author himself, who would receive no royalties for such a publication (though he would retain full copyright for any eventual later edition). In fact, this is precisely how samizdat functioned in the previous years.

The literary treatment of a book published in this way would be the sole responsibility of the author, and not the publisher's editors. The editorial board would merely decide on merit, after reading the manuscript, whether to recommend it for publication.

Therefore, we turn to all authors who have good quality manuscripts of prose, poetry, drama, film scripts, literary studies, criticism, history, philosophical essays, or commentary, etc., as-yet unpublished or published solely in old samizdat, to offer them to us. We also appeal to successful samizdat and exile authors: may they offer their manuscripts with the same altruism as they did in the past, to allow them to reach readers as soon as possible. We welcome young, still unpublished authors and their more mature works. However, we do not wish to be an imprint for beginning authors, which might help discover new talents under the patronage of "older" writers. That is not our task.

We turn to the readers' community, to the subscribers and readers of old samizdat, and to all lovers of demanding literature, who did not hesitate to wait long hours in queues for a good book, and who spent considerable funds to procure badly legible samizdat copies:

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<sup>87</sup> Source: LA CML, LSC, box 1, *Výzva* (Appeal), also *MY* No. 9/1990 and *Studentské listy* No. 4/1991. Translation: Adam Prentis.

You have the opportunity to acquire, at the shortest notice, the books you anticipate, while at the same time helping our book culture overcome hard times. We call on you to become members of the “Liberated Samizdat Club”; this membership entitles you to order samizdat literature, whose publishing programme will be provided to you in advance so that you may commit to the purchase of titles that you are interested in (this interest will also determine the print run). The requested books will be sent cash-on-delivery to those interested immediately upon publication.

We repeat that this is a self-sustaining cultural enterprise, in which all participants work for free. The price of the published books will be set exclusively according to the actual production costs. Even so, these will not be low: but readers of good books here have traditionally brought financial sacrifices to Czech books – in times of danger, in the crisis years of the First Republic, during the war, under the totalitarian regime of the past forty years. They will no doubt be ready to bring such a sacrifice now as well.

And so we call on all creators and readers of good Czech books: help us overcome the difficult situation of the current book market by supporting this self-sustaining initiative.

The editorial board of the “Liberated Samizdat Club”:

Jan Vladislav, chairman

František Kautman, Iva Kotrlá, Klement Lukeš, Karel Pecka, Vilém Prečan, Sylvie Richterová, Zdeněk Rotrekl

Prague, 16 October 1990

\* \* \*

## Výzva Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu

### Výzva

Obracíme se k naší literární veřejnosti, spisovatelům i čtenářům a distributorům knih s následující výzvou:

Situace na našem knižním trhu je vážná. Staré struktury vydávání i distribuce knih odumírají, nové se rodí pomalu a těžce. Katastrofální je situace v polygrafickém průmyslu. Monopolní postavení umožňuje tiskárnám cenový nátlak. Malé tiskárny téměř neexistují a soukromí nakladatelé, odkázání na velké tiskárny, mají pozici velmi obtížnou a mnozí z nich bojují za pouhé přežití. Zhroutil se starý systém knižního velkoobchodu. Jeho sklady stejně jako sklady knihkupectví jsou přeplněny vedle skutečného braku ne špatnou, ale v dané situaci těžko prodejnou literaturou. Dnes už jen zcela výjimečně je některá kniha po vydání okamžitě rozebrána. Se stoupajícími cenami zboží a služeb klesá také kupní síla čtenářů knih.

Potrvá nějaký čas, než u nás vznikne normálně fungující knižní trh, který umožní vydávat i dlouhodobě prodejnou a malotirážní literaturu, z níž se obvykle skládá většina nové hodnotné knižní produkce.

Domníváme se, že je zbytečné bombardovat ústřední orgány a jiné správní instituce memorandy, žádajícími, aby zjednaly nápravy. Nezbyvá, než aby kultura i tuto těžkou dobu, zaviněnou vývojem uplynulých čtyřiceti let, svými vlastními silami pomáhala překonat.

Jednu z cest k tomu vidíme v založení samizdatového nakladatelství, které by využilo všech výhod zkušenosti klasického samizdatu: minimální náklady na výrobu a distribuci a maximálně pružné reagování na čtenářské zájmy. Taková možnost se nám naskytla v technické spolupráci s Evropským literárním klubem, nadnárodní nevládní organizací pro spolupráci evropských umělců a přátel evropské kultury, která vznikla loňského roku v Praze. EKK je ochoten dát „Osvobozenému samizdatu“ k dispozici svou polygrafickou malotirážní základnu, což je hlavní předpoklad realizace plánu vydávání původních hodnotných knih, které v nynější situaci nesnesou masový náklad, a proto je nebezpečí, že by musely čekat velmi dlouho, než by se dostaly ke čtenáři. Moderní malotirážní tiskárenské metody umožňují operativně, ve velmi krátké době vyrobit knihu v nákladu několika set výtisků, v paperbackové, slušné úpravě, a dát ji do rukou čtenáře za výrobní náklady. Samozřejmě, že je to možné jen za předpokladu rezignování na jakýkoli zisk jak ze strany vydavatele, tak ze strany distributora a ovšem i autora, který by nedostal za toto vydání honorář, (pro eventuelní další vydání by si však zachoval všechna autorská práva). Ostatně právě tak tomu bylo v samizdatu minulých let.

Za literární podobu takto vydané knihy by odpovídal výlučně autor, nikoli redakce nakladatelství. Redakční rada by po přečtení rukopisů jen meritorně rozhodovala, zda rukopis doporučuje či nedoporučuje k vydání.

Obracíme se tedy na autory, kteří mají kvalitní rukopisy prózy, poezie, dramatu, filmových scénářů, literární vědy, kritiky a historie, filozofické esejistiky či publicistiky apod., dosud nepublikované nebo publikované jen v starém samizdatu, aby nám je nabídli. Apelujeme i na úspěšné samizdatové a exilové autory: ať nabídnou své rukopisy právě tak nezištně, jako to dělali v minulosti s tím, aby se dostali ke čtenáři co nejdříve. Víťáme mladé, dosud nepublikující autory a jejich zralejší díla. Nechceme však být edicí začínajících autorů, která by pod patronací „starších“ spisovatelů pomáhala objevovat nové talenty. To není naším úkolem.

Obracíme se na čtenářskou obec, na odběratele a čtenáře starého samizdatu i na všechny milovníky náročné literatury, kteří neváhali stát dlouhé hodiny ve frontách na dobrý knižní titul, a vynakládali značné finanční prostředky na zakoupení špatně čitelných kopií samizdatu:

Máte příležitost získat co nejdříve vámi očekávané knihy a na druhé straně pomůžete naší knižní kultuře překonat těžké údobí. Vyzýváme vás, abyste se stali členy „Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu“, toto členství vás opravňuje k odběru samizdatové literatury, jejíž vydavatelský program vám bude předem nabídnut s tím, abyste se přihlásili k závaznému odběru titulů, které vás budou zajímat (podle tohoto zájmu bude stanoven i náklad). Vyžádané knihy budou ihned po vydání zasílány zájemcům na dobírku.

Upozorňujeme znovu, že jde o svépomocný kulturní podnik, na němž všichni zúčastnění pracují bezplatně. Ceny vydaných knih budou určeny výhradně reálnými výrobními náklady. I tak nebudou nízké: ale čtenář dobré knihy u nás tradičně přinášel české knize finanční oběti – v dobách obrození, v letech krize za první republiky, za války, za totalitního režimu uplynulých čtyřiceti let. Jistě je bude připraven přinášet i nyní.

Vyzýváme tedy všechny tvůrce i čtenáře dobrých českých knih: pomozte podporou této svépomocné akce překonat těžkou situaci současného knižního trhu.

Ediční rada „Klubu osvobozeného samizdatu“:

Jan Vladislav, předseda

František Kautman, Iva Kotrlá, Klement Lukeš, Karel Pecka, Vilém Prečan, Sylvie Richterová, Zdeněk Rotrekl

V Praze, dne 16. října 1990

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