

Watching Everyone?

I will begin by saying that I am not against a handful of top state officials having their communist-era pasts scrutinized, so that any skeletons in their closets should not influence their decision-making. Nor am I against publicizing the most drastic cases of denunciations made to the regime, although this issue seems considerably more complex both morally and practically. Experience to date shows that drastic cases of collaboration with the secret police occurred very rarely and telling the truth about typical ones does not seem to be liberating for everyone. Meanwhile, society is aware it is just being thrown bits and scraps, that manipulated information gets leaked from the archives to the media, and this undermines the moral implications of such revelations.

*Here, however, I want to address the recent effort to enact a law requiring academics in Poland to file vetting declarations. Among all the press commentaries on the topic, I could find not a single convincing argument justifying why researchers should have to declare whether they collaborated with the regime, especially as lists of secret collaborators were meant to be compiled and published anyway. This was not even a Polish version of the Russian proverb *доверяй, но проверяй* (trust, but verify): the pointlessness of vetting declarations is demonstrated by the fact that they have not actually played a role in bringing any of the known drastic cases of denunciation to light.*

This debate in Poland has involved plenty of tub-thumping, epithets about prima donnas and rabble-rousers, allegations of anarchy and people putting themselves above the law – tricks too familiar from communist-era propaganda to be worth discussing. All of it only evidenced a lack of real arguments. Assertions that well-known figures refusing to file such declarations would be shielding guilty individuals were pure demagoguery, since those who refused would be the first to have their pasts scrutinized. The appearance of tub-thumpers is not surprising. In one of his poems Ernest Bryll wrote: “This is the hour of the crafty. Someone washes his face / of blood and slips over to join the predators.” Precisely.

The Polish president said he could not understand the opposition to the idea, since it was no different from declaring one has a clear criminal record. I am unsure whether the president really could not sense the difference, or was pretending. Declaring a clear past conviction record is something required, for instance, when seeking certain posts; opting not to do so does not entail losing something, only being excluded from gaining something. Secondly, if I have

a criminal record it means I broke the law, and was ruled guilty by a court after I could present a defense. This is the heart of the matter: here, I would lose my job as a physicist for refusing to file a vetting declaration, i.e. I would be punished without being guilty. And this lack of guilt is twofold. Even if someone did collaborate with the communist secret police or intelligence services, the latter were never ruled to have been criminal organizations, and thus collaborating with them was not breaking the law. Such collaboration has simply been deemed immoral (by whom? when?) but in a democracy the law does not punish immorality.

This recent tangible threat of losing my job for not filing a vetting declaration reminded me of early 1976, when I signed a

protest against one of the provisions in the draft of a new constitution. I knew I could be thrown out of the Academy, but was reckoning that nothing lasted forever in Poland and that new problems of the regime would force it to forget its old ones. Ultimately I was not thrown out of my job, only prohibited from traveling abroad. Another recollection is from when the regime tried to recruit me in 1986, a scene I described in a poem “Scoundrels,” which concluded as follows: “let’s keep in touch / he said / in case you’re approached / by scoundrels / let us know / always easier that way / it’s a poor country / we just can’t watch / everyone.”

This sense of regret that the regime could not keep an eye on everyone seemed amusing to me back then, although the conversation itself was far from funny. Now it looked as if they wanted to watch everyone again.

Once again I had to calculate my possible losses. I am no legalist, and even have trouble with the Decalogue in the point prohibiting coveting other’s wives. But if the Constitutional Tribunal had not overruled the law, my refusing to file a vetting statement would have got me thrown out of my job “by law.” I have worked for the Polish Academy of Sciences since 1961 and it would not be pleasant to be fired now “by law.” But if that did occur, not even a set of quintuplets would be able to ban me from publishing my work abroad or online. There would still be the issue of having no salary. A difficult problem. I promise not to forget who got us into all this and who got us out of it. ■



For refusing to file a vetting statement, I would have been thrown out of the Academy – being punished without being guilty

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