

Slovakia

Tereza Reichelova interviewed **Egon Gál**

Interview date: September 2019

Reichelova: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Gál: I was born in central Slovakia, Partizánska Ľupča, that's where we lived; I was born in a maternity hospital in Mikuláš. But we lived in Partizánska Ľupča. I was born in 1940, in August. I was born to Jewish parents and when I was three years old, they baptised me as a Protestant because my parents thought it would save us. And when I was four in 1944, there were massive deportations in Slovakia, and they deported me and my mother to Terezín. My brother was born there.

Reichelova: Right there in Terezín?

Gál: Yes, right there in Terezín. Then, after the war, we went back to Ľupča; it is a small village and we were quite a rich family. I don't know where exactly they deported my father. Me, my mother and brother returned from Terezín to Ľupča but my father didn't return, he died during a death march. Mother was waiting for him, but she didn't live to see him anymore. In 1948 when – we were landowners, rich – and in 1948 they collectivised all the property, so we moved to Bratislava. So, since 1948 we have been living in Bratislava.

Reichelova: You were seven at that time.

Gál: Eight. I was born in 1940.

Reichelova: How strongly do you feel like you come from a village? To what extent does your landowning [...]

Gál: Very little. You know, after all, I almost didn't go to Ľupča. We didn't have anyone there, we left quite involuntarily, and I didn't like looking back on the past; I didn't go to Ľupča. So, when I went to visit Ľupča at some point after 1990 and some people, older people who were my peers, addressed me, I didn't recognise anyone. But I go there now. Me and my brother have had the Jewish cemetery repaired. There are five or six graves; six Jewish families lived in Ľupča. We've had the cemetery done and we've also had a memorial to my father made, so I go there now. And my relationship to Ľupča... now I even made friends with some people from the village, but I don't feel my relationship to Ľupča is defined by these people or the village itself – it is the surroundings. The surroundings are beautiful, almost kitsch. So, I like going there.

Reichelova: How big was it? You said there were six Jewish families.

Gál: Six Jewish families and I don't know how many more people. It had something around 5,000 inhabitants. It was a small town. Before the war, its name was Německá Ľupča [German Ľupča] and after the war, it was Partizánska Ľupča [Partisan Ľupča].

Reichelova: When did you start to become aware of your Jewish identity? Do you remember that as a child? Was it a big topic, or not?

Gál: No, it wasn't a topic for me as we were the only Jewish family in Ľupča after we came back from Terezín. Others didn't return. Only us and a grandmother with her daughter Deniska, with whom we were in Terezín. I used to sleep in one bed with Deniska in Terezín. But I didn't remember, she told me.

Reichelova: And in Terezín [...]

Gál: I don't remember Terezín, only very little. I think even Deniska didn't remember much either, as a three or four-year-old child doesn't remember much. But she was there with her granny who talked about everything [that had happened]. She even talked about what we ate for breakfast. But our mother didn't talk about it at all. For her, it was a terrible trauma as she lost her husband. They had been together for five years at that time. So basically, we were the only Jewish family there. Somehow, I simply didn't experience any identity issue. And when we came to Bratislava, I was the only Jew in our class until I was in Year 8. So, I engaged in the collective very much and I wasn't really aware of my Jewishness. Then I went to Chemical Engineering Technical School, and there were two of us in the class, but I didn't know about it. I found out about the other girl, that was Jewish, too, at our class reunion after 20 years. Because at that time people started to talk more about identity and so on. Then I went to university, a part-time programme. I passed my final exams at the Chemical Engineering Technical School, I did my military service, and after national service, in 1962, I went to study chemistry part-time. And in our class at university, there were no Jews either. Or I don't know, there might have been.

We will skip some periods of my life now, and I'll tell you how I was confronted with the issue of my identity. It was when I was fifty. In 1989, when PAV [Public Against Violence] was established, I worked in a research centre for cables. A PAV unit was established too, and I was part of it. With PAV, we had a board next to the elevator where we posted info about what was happening in our free time and in the city. And it was at the beginning of the year 1990, when the research centre didn't have money and it had to dismiss some people. They dismissed twenty workers and one of them was a person whom I knew very well. I was helping him with his PhD, we were quite compatible, but he was very argumentative and the biggest conflicts he had were with his bosses. So, he was among the first people who were fired. I went to work one day, I think it was in February 1990, and there was a poster with an inscription "These Jews are responsible for my dismissal". There were six or seven names but none of them was a Jew. So, I came to him and I say "Colleague, none of these people is a Jew! I am a Jew but out of the people, whose names are written there, nobody is a Jew!" We

quarrelled, this one's brother-in-law is a Jew, and the other one's too. Soon, I gave up and went away. The following day I went past the poster and the word 'Jews' was crossed out and replaced by the word 'Zionists'. That was the first time I realised that this identity means something. And, also in connection with my brother because he was the boss, or one of the leaders, of PAV. At that point, I became aware of problems connected to identity. But not until then. It was definitely there latently, as a consciousness of, probably not anti-Semitism, but difference of Jews. But I think it is as Slavoj Žižek wrote "An anti-Semite believes in the Jew; but it is only a virtual Jew because in reality they don't know any Jews."

Reichelova: A lot of Czech Jews who survived the concentration camps recall that in the 1950s anti-Semitism was even stronger. Due to the fact that they came back from concentration and extermination camps, they were deemed criminals. At that time, there was no coming to terms with the Holocaust, even in the West this started to take place only during the seventies and eighties. In the fifties everyone was struggling to survive the aftermath of the war and many people, survivors, told me that when they came back, they encountered even more hatred than when they were being expelled.

Gál: Oh yes, that was after the war. But they were not deemed criminals. The reason was that people – neighbours – dispossessed Jews of their property. And when these Jews returned, they demanded this property back and people were angry that they returned because of that. My mother didn't demand anything. She talked about that very little, but once she told me that she went to our neighbours' place and they had our carpet on the floor and our cutlery on the table. She pretended not to see it. But many people were angry that those people came back.

Reichelova: To what extent did your mother raise you in Jewish traditions?

Gál: She didn't bring us up in Jewish traditions, she brought us up in consciousness of being Jewish. For instance, we used to be quite reckless when we were young. We smoked, drank and our mum used to say that a Jew wouldn't do anything like that. So, I knew I wasn't a proper Jew. But bringing us up, no, she didn't do that. We didn't know any [Jewish] holidays, we didn't stick to any traditions, we were a secular family. My mother is from a family of Eastern Jews, I saw some photographs. I never knew any of my grandparents, but in an archive, I saw a photograph of her parents - a typical Eastern Jew, a black hat, a black jacket, a beautiful chin... with his wife. My mum said that at home they followed customs, they kept Sabbath, they ate kosher. My father was from an assimilated family. Grandfather was a director of a bank in a small town and they had huge properties; my father studied economics at St. Gallen. So, from my father's side I know he had a bar mitzvah, that is what I know.

But I think that my parents observed some customs. When they lived in L'upča, there was a prayer room, where the six [Jewish] families that lived there used to meet. But I don't remember that. Nor do I remember observing any customs or praying at home.

And in Bratislava nothing at all. There, we didn't even keep the Sabbath, nothing whatsoever.

Reichelova: How was moving to Bratislava? Your mother with two little children.

Gál: It was dramatic. We couldn't take a lot of things. We lived in a nice one-storey house in Ľupča so we took some things. For instance, in my study I still have a writing table and a nice bookcase from the beginning of the 20th century. Carved furniture. It is not of any style, it is, I would say, burghers' style from the beginning of the 20th century. I have that in my room, and a big lamp, too. I have lived all of my life in tower blocks, so I drag it from one tower block to another, it's a real chore. And our move from Ľupča to Bratislava was hard going, too. Moreover, we didn't have a flat. When we came to Bratislava, we stayed – my mum and two children – at a friend's from Terezín, in lodgings. We had only one room and we lived in that room so I don't know where our furniture was because it would definitely not fit in there. It must have been stored somewhere.

And then in 1950, my uncle became a military attaché at the embassy in Belgrade. They went to Belgrade and we moved into their flat. It was a very decent flat. And when in the fifties, the anti-state conspiracy centre appeared, the trials, my uncle was involved, too. He was in prison for 6 months. Clementis was a minister in Slovakia at that time and it was Clementis who sent my uncle to Belgrade. So, they summoned him, he was in jail for half a year. They released him but we were in his flat. He and his two children ended up at a friend's, in one room in lodgings for two or three years. Here you are.

Reichelova: And that was your uncle.

Gál: My father's brother.

Reichelova: You were still very small, but did it influence you politically?

Gál: No, not at all. Well, our mother was trying to filter these [political influences]. I found out somewhere else, at home we didn't talk about politics. I knew that my uncle was in prison, but we didn't talk about the background at home. I got to know afterwards.

Reichelova: Did you talk about the communists' rise to power?

Gál: It wasn't a topic. The rise of communists to power affected us as they took our property. But still, we went through that without analysing it. I was eight and my brother was 5 years younger, i.e. 3 years old, so it wasn't possible to analyse it in any way and our mother didn't want to traumatise us. I imagine it to be like that now. Indeed, what happened to our uncle or what happened to us, we didn't understand it politically, we took it personally somehow. We took it as a hand of fate. The invisible hand of fate.

Reichelova: I see. What was primary education like in Bratislava when you went to school in the fifties?

Gál: I started to go to a Catholic school, Notre Dame, where nuns used to teach. The first year, in 1948, nuns were there. But the next year they disappeared, and comrade teachers took their place. I arrived in Year 3 and that year we prayed and then the next year we sang songs at the beginning of the lesson. But it's interesting that we, children, didn't take it very dramatically. You know children... The only thing was that when entering the classroom, we were supposed to say, "Hail labour!" and we somehow didn't feel like that, so we always waited for some other classmates to arrive and did it together. But you know, my memories of that are not strong. I really don't remember that we would think about things in a political context. Maybe some families talked about it, but we didn't. My mother had different problems. To feed us and to dress us. It wasn't easy with only one salary. She was a milliner originally and then a scrapyard accountant; and she was a single mother. It really wasn't easy to raise the two of us all alone.

Reichelova: Was your passion for chemistry and natural sciences already developed in school?

Gál: No! In primary school, nothing has been set in stone. But some friendships formed there. I am a person who – I don't know why, it is possibly caused by the fact that I used to be excluded as a Jew, nothing dramatic, but anyway, I was different – so I'm a person who has a strong need for friendship. I lived among friends and we lived our everyday lives and I didn't think about the future at all. Our mother had only one irrational desire – she wanted us to be educated. I have no idea how she imagined that would happen because at the same time it was necessary that we get a job so that we could make our own living. A very nice man used to live in our building who was a professor at a chemical engineering technical school, so I decided to study chemistry. I applied for chemistry and I passed the entrance exams. I finished the technical school and I went to do military service. After military service, I decided to study – at that time, the possibility of part-time studies already existed. Originally, I wanted to study physics but I worked in a chemical lab and my employer told me that to get the [professional] benefits and free time for studying, I had to study chemistry because I was in a chemical lab. So, I studied chemistry. It wasn't particularly what I wanted. But in the end, I made my living with it until I was 50 because I got gradually interested. I did my own research and chemistry started to attract me. I wasn't originally really dead set on that.

Reichelova: Tell me something about your convoluted course towards philosophy. Now you teach philosophy and ethics at a private university.

Gál: You know, it was really a coincidence in the seventies and eighties when things were sort of relaxed. Even when I worked in research, I studied privately and read philosophical books. And then, me and a group of friends started to meet regularly at

a friend's place, we read and lectured there. We read various philosophical texts by the greats, Kant, Husserl, I don't know. And we held lectures, we took turns at what each of us led on. My topic was the cultural history of the sciences. I was fascinated by that. You know, when science was emerging, at the beginning, there was also Paracelsian science, Newtonian science – and that was fascinating for me. This epoch of the end of the Renaissance and beginning of the Modern Era. Newton was an alchemist, Kepler was an astrologist, at that time, the disciplines were not separated into 'science' and 'pseudo-science'. I was fascinated by this period and I gave lectures about it at our private meetings. These meetings were attended by a great mix of people. There were people like me, technicians, natural scientists, there were students of pedagogy, some from the Maths Faculty, there were religious people and atheists, there were drivers too. Quite colourful.

Reichelova: How many people used to attend?

Gál: There were a lot of people but not everybody always came, so it was eight or ten people maximum per session. Sometimes even less, it really varied. We used to meet quite often so it varied. But some people from the Maths-Physics Faculty attended our meetings and when they shut down the department of Marxism-Leninism in 1989, new philosophy departments were emerging. Those friends from the Maths-Physics Faculty proposed that I apply for the position of the head of department of philosophy. So, I applied; there were 4 candidates and I got the job. That was fascinating, I had never studied at university, I had studied part-time at the technical college. In June I had no idea that I was going to be a philosopher and in October I was the head of the department of philosophy at a university. That was a revolutionary story, indeed. I wasn't the creator of the revolution, but it was very peculiar. And I didn't have any free time!

Speaking of that, I started in the mid-eighties. Me and my friends, also chemists, electricians, friends from various fields of study, we published an anthology on the philosophy of mind. I edited it and my friends translated it from English. Mostly, these were American authors because there, philosophy of mind was a quickly developing discipline. And I was lucky to pick authors who are very important nowadays. Indeed, it was Nagel, Searle, Dennett, Rorty. That's how I met Rorty, in fact. It was a good anthology which I used as a textbook when I started at university. You know, nobody read that except for my students. We published it in 1000 copies which we left in the publisher's store, so he was selling it after three years for 3 Czech crowns. But the book is really good even today.

Reichelova: Possibly nobody knew about philosophy of mind.

Gál: You're right, nobody was interested in that. Actually, I held the first seminar on philosophy of mind in Slovakia. I was lucky to be at the Maths-Physics Faculty where people who were getting acquainted with artificial intelligence were studying. So, these students were interested. And students from other departments joined the class too,

so yes, people were quite interested at the faculty. I am still on first-name terms with my first students, I meet with them and we are friends. But the beginning was quite dramatic for me. When I became the head of the department, I gave a lecture. I didn't have a computer, so I wrote 20 pages by hand. There were a hundred people in the lecture hall. When I saw that I thought I was going to faint. Moreover, at the first desk, there was a colleague who taught history of physics and he also applied for the job as the head of the department, but they chose me. He sat in the first row and he fell asleep after 10 minutes. I was lecturing for an hour, looking at this sleeping man. Yes, they were my beginnings.

Reichelova: Was it possible to get hold of philosophical classics? And to what extent?

Gál: You mean literature?

Reichelova: Yes. Some books were obviously prohibited, and they were confined to samizdat. But the classics?

Gál: No, the classics were not prohibited. In Bratislava, there used to be quite a strong department of history and the classics were not prohibited here. Everything was published before the war in the first place, and moreover, they used to publish an edition in Slovakia called *Philosophical Questions*. It was published by Pravda (Truth) publishing house. They published not only the classics, they also had a series called Contemporary Bourgeois Philosophy where people like Wittgenstein, Foucault, Max Weber were published. They published very interesting things and the only catch was that there had to be an appropriate foreword, a necessary tax. But history of philosophy was quite strong here and there were good teachers, and literature available too. For instance, Husserl was published, *Philosophical Investigations* was published in Czech in the sixties. We used to read that because there was a young man who was Ricoeur's PhD student and he knew a lot.

Reichelova: These group meetings of informal education and 'samizdat' circulation were a well-established phenomenon in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. How much did these informal groups know each other? Did you know Patočka at that time?

Gál: No, no, no. Our group was led by Peter Sýkora, who was a biology student of Zdeněk Neubauer. I do not know how exactly, because Zdeněk Neubauer didn't teach before 1989, but he considered himself to be his pupil and he was visiting Ivan Havel and he went to the private university and lectures in Prague. He organised our group in Bratislava. There were also others, there was a strong generation of Catholic intellectuals who had their own self-education – a private school of sorts, a club. We knew each other and from time to time someone frequented both clubs. There was a secret church in Slovakia, and they were working hard to publish samizdat. But you know, some people were involved in more the one group.

Reichelova: In your group, did you see yourself as subversive?

Gál: No! Not at all. The meetings were open, anyone who wanted to could come, sometimes I didn't even know all the people there. When they got political, it was to an extent to which people get political everywhere. In short, there were no dissidents emerging.

Reichelova: Because in Czechia, there were many.

Gál: In Czechia they politicised a lot, it was a bit different. It was a seedbed of dissidents. There were similar groups in Bratislava, too, but I wasn't involved. Šimečka, Kusý, young Šimečka and Ján Budaj, these were people, dissidents, who politicised and who did – not really philosophy – theoretical musings about the world. They were politically oriented. But I wasn't in contact with them. It all started to intersect and connect in the mid-eighties. There were three groups, I would say, politically oriented alternative clubs. Those were dissidents, the secret church and environmentalists.

Reichelova: Environmentalists were eco-activists?

Gál: Yes, their concern was ecology. These ecologists published a samizdat at some point in the mid-eighties which was called *Bratislava nahlas* (Bratislava Aloud), where they described all the problems with pollution and the ecological problems of Bratislava. Out of the majority of them, the centre VPN emerged. But I wasn't in that group. My brother was in the group that worked on *Bratislava nahlas* but we were really. I did my research; I did philosophy and I was completely consumed by that. Until 1990 I was working in chemical research. So basically, I lived two lives. I made my living by chemistry, but I devoted all my free time to philosophy. And I didn't have the energy for anything else.

Reichelova: What was chemistry like in the second half of the twentieth century? Was it different from today?

Gál: I think the school was decent. There were several good teachers, it was a casual socialist school. Our department was called The Research Centre of Cables and Insulators and we basically led research for all the cable factories in Czechoslovakia from Pilsen to eastern Slovakia. In Czechoslovakia, there were five cable factories and we conducted research for them. The research was of quite a high quality, some of my colleagues were published abroad. But during the 'normalisation' period – and when I became a full researcher, that was during 'normalisation' – inefficient work in research was typical. We didn't have the devices, accessible technology, chemicals, we didn't have anything, and we carried out our research as best we could. We made our measurement apparatuses ourselves.

Reichelova: Was there any contact with Western Europe in regard to research, or only with the Soviet Union?

Gál: Only with the Soviet Union. There was a similar centre to ours in Moscow. I've never been there but our Soviet colleagues came to visit us several times. Regarding the West, in the eighties it was already possible to travel out of the country, but the first time I attended a foreign conference was in February 1990 in London. That was traumatising too because I didn't speak English very well.

Reichelova: And your ideas about the West? Was the contact with reality a blow for you?

Gál: I was in London in 1971 for the first time on a dollar pledge. You know, you requested a hundred dollars from the bank; I requested three times and the third time I got the hundred, so I went to London. I got to know the city a bit and I brought back a suitcase full of books. I stayed there for a month. It was possible to live on a hundred dollars for a month then. I stayed in a Salvation Army hostel where accommodation plus breakfast cost me a pound a day. Then I didn't get out of the country until that conference in London [in 1990]. And when I got back from the conference, I became a philosopher.

Reichelova: Were you at the conference as a chemist?

Gál: At the conference I was there as a chemist, yes.

Reichelova: A goodbye conference?

Gál: [laughs] The first and the last conference in my life, yes!

Reichelova: Did you experience the year 1968 in the context of 'normalisation'? As an event that changed everyone's lives?

Gál: My life was not changed that much by '68. For instance, in 1968 everyone in our department with a university education had to approve of the arrival of the armies, but I was only a lab technician then, I didn't have to. I've wondered several times about what I would have done and I'm not sure. So, 1968 was like an earthquake for me. The sixties were years of hope. At that time, I even had dreams about switching to philosophy and completing it smoothly. I wasn't thirty yet, so the dream was to finish my studies and make my living by what I had a passion for. But not only that, the sixties were the decade of thinking about the future. We started to have a feeling of freedom for the first time in our lives. 1968 ended it. But I can't say that simply ended our lives, it was just an inert time. If I'm supposed to tell you what changed in my life, I couldn't. I don't know. It was a continuous flogging a dead horse. But we will talk a bit more about freedom. My life changed in this way: I stopped hoping, I accepted that this is how the world we live in was going to look like and I started to – or rather all of us – have started to live, so to say, to privatise social capital. We created groups of alternative life where we self-actualised. Some of my friends made art, they organised exhibitions, one of my colleagues in the cable research centre was a theoretician of photography, an amateur. However, all of us were amateurs. A small group of amateur

photographers formed around him, and they used to meet once a week in a photo tribune where they used to bring their works; he assessed these works and people were debating. That was one of the groups I was a member of. The second one was philosophy. And then we did a lot of sports. In short, we lived an alternative life, we used to go to cottages where we philosophised. We didn't fight against the regime, but we led our lives in such a way as to minimise the impact of the political situation on ourselves.

Reichelova: That sounds like an anarchist conception of spreading freedom within the limits of the oppressive system! Did you feel oppressed by the regime at that time? Or did you have a concept of personal freedom that was enacted in fellowship?

Gál: I didn't think about freedom. Maybe, I'm fabricating when I think about it now and I project some things into my past. Accepting Berlin's concept of positive and negative freedom, negative freedom was non-existent. Freedom of speech, freedom of religious expression, there weren't any negative freedoms like these, one simply couldn't. But our freedom to realise I don't even know what, to lead a meaningful life, was there. Moreover, people of my generation were starting families, children were born, it was necessary to feed them, we were worried about many things, we didn't have a flat – we were worried by everyday existence and we were overloaded with these matters of survival and questions of personal freedom didn't even cross our minds.

Reichelova: Did you ever consider leaving the country for the West or the Czech Republic?

Gál: When I was in the West in 1971, I was thinking of staying there. But I had a younger brother and a mother who was alone. That was the reason. And the second reason was that I lived more in books than in reality. And the only language I could read properly was Slovak. And the only way of life I could live was the socialist way, where you weren't stained at the workplace. So, there were more reasons. But I don't remember how exactly I made my decision.

Reichelova: When did you get married and have children?

Gál: I was 38, that means I got married in 1978.

Reichelova: Did children somehow change your way of perceiving the world, future, time?

Gál: When they were little, I earned very little. We didn't earn much in research, so my first priority was to support my family. My wife worked in the same centre as I did. I didn't have any idea; I didn't even think of what I would propose to them. The only vision I had in mind was that I wanted them to study so that the world was open for them, so that they could do what they wanted to.

Reichelova: You are saying that until the revolution at the end of the eighties you were an apolitical person and then, suddenly, in the nineties everyone was to an extent pressed to have an opinion.

Gál: You know, in my case the transition was sort of like when we used to meet in these groups, it wasn't possible to say people were completely apolitical. That's one thing. The second thing is that I wasn't politically active, I didn't take part in any political activities, I wasn't a dissident. But I wasn't pro-regime either, I wasn't a member of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth, not a communist.

Reichelova: Or a Young Pioneer?

Gál: [laughs] I was a Young Pioneer, I was! But I lived completely besides these things and the first time I started to think about a political context was after the Charter 77 case when I read Havel. Maybe it wasn't the first time, but I don't remember that because politics in my life wasn't such an important topic. The first time I was thinking it through was when I was reading *The Power of the Powerless*. Then I realised two things. First of all, I felt a bit ashamed because I felt it concerns me too. I walk past and ignore the slogans and all the socialist context. But the second thing was that I felt offended reading it. Because I didn't live in untruth. You know, we really lived – and I had the feeling at that time, too – a meaningful life. Yes, I ignored the slogans, but we were educating ourselves, we worked. I can't imagine what Czechoslovakia after 1989 would look like if everyone lived as Havel wanted. All these physicians, engineers, teachers, doing research or working at the university, doing anything meaningful requires a whole person, after all! And doing, what dissidents were doing, also requires the whole person. Rebelling when a person has little children and a job, they don't have to be ashamed of – I had, and I still have, an ambivalent feeling about this dissident opinion of us as Pithart says “organised people”. But we were not organised. I don't want to defend this way of life, but I don't think that my life took place in a timeless gap and that it was bereft of any meaning.

Reichelova: How do you perceive the whole Czechoslovak discourse around memories of communism?

Gál: I think it is an ex-post construction of human personal narrative. What is memory? It is a narrative that my present self relates about my past. And there is a need for self-respect. That's why we adjust our stories so much. That's what I do in reality. I lived outside the political context, my real life took place outside politics, but I always had politics in mind in a sense, at least after Charter. I didn't have the feeling, you know, I was an introvert at that time, and I didn't feel the urge to be involved in public affairs, it was against my nature.

Reichelova: You mentioned your brother was an active member in the ecological movement?

Gál: My brother was an active member, yes.

Reichelova: And he didn't try to mobilise you too, so that you?

Gál: No, he didn't mobilise me at all. First, we didn't talk about that much, he was a sort of secretive person, he thought I don't even know about it. In any case, we didn't talk about it. He got involved because his friends were members. I had different friends and a different kind of society. Moreover, there was one more serious divide. The majority of people who were involved actively before 1989 were humanities people, artists, these were people whose task was to think about society. Sociologists were much more familiar with the world than chemists. My brother worked in a sociological department in Prague. He cooperated with *Sportpropag* where Zeman and Klaus worked. I prepared two studies for them. These were completely off-topic, they were some theories of complexity and complex systems. So, I was less oriented and less involved – indeed, I lived in a different world.

Reichelova: How did you experience the year 1989?

Gál: I experienced 1989 as any regular citizen did, at least until the moment I became the head of the department. We had a PAV organisation there, I was the head of the local PAV at the department, our task was to transform it. First, there was no money from the state, but it was necessary to transform it. It was fashionable to replace the management because the management consisted of communists mostly. I took part in that. Moreover, I had a serious dilemma. We nominated a person to become the director, he was a good manager, it was a good idea, and it was my idea – and in one single week – he offered me the position of the deputy for research. At the same time, I went to the competition at the Maths-Physics Faculty. I had a dilemma. I asked the director to wait for a week to see how I did in the competition. And I won the competition, so I decided – my wife had approved of that, you know, she had to – the university life, it was such nonsense in a certain sense. I started as the head of the department, but I had the salary of an assistant. In the other job, I would have the salary of a deputy. But this was such an incredible revolution in my life, it changed me a lot.

You know, for instance Rorty – I translated some of his writings during the eighties and it was also published in samizdat, but I would never dream of meeting him in person. In 1992 or 1993, me and my friend got to know that Rorty was in Vienna for a month, there is the Institute for Human Sciences, or, *Institut für die Wissenschaft vom Menschen*. That was an institute where Western and Eastern intellectuals used to meet even before 1989. And in 1993 they invited Rorty for a month. So, me and my two friends set off to meet Rorty. He had a lecture and we asked him to go to Bratislava to give a lecture. He said yes, no problem. So, the next week I went to Vienna in a haywire Škoda car to pick him up and I brought him to Bratislava where he gave a lecture in a theatre. Non-philosophers were amazed, philosophers outraged, a standard situation. When it all ended, he got a medal from the mayor of Bratislava and

then we went and sat down with him during the evening; I was staying with him in a hotel and when we went to bed, we stopped to have a beer. He talked about himself, I talked about myself in horrible English and he asked me for my phone number and address, so I gave them to him, like at a Young Pioneer camp. A year later, we're sitting at the dinner table and my wife says "You have an Englishman on the phone" – it was Rorty. He said that he has a grant and whether I want to join him for a semester. So obviously, I went for a semester. That semester completely changed my life and I started to take an interest in politics as Rorty was a very politically and intellectually engaged person, which influenced me a lot. I did cognitive science, which Rorty scorned. So, I studied that almost illegally when I was there. My stay has influenced me quite radically. I was more than fifty but a lot in my thinking has changed.

Reichelova: Hearing this story about Rorty in Bratislava, 1989 was a time when the Western borders opened and four years later the Czech Republic and Slovakia were torn apart. Borders were moving and opening. How did you see it?

Gál: This beginning of the 1990s was a dream for us. We thought we had become a part of the West. But the West we imagined was different from the West we became a part of.

Reichelova: In what sense?

Gál: I don't know. It wasn't easy. There was identity politics on the one hand and on the other hand, huge inequalities, neoliberalism and loads of things, which we hadn't seen before but mechanically copied from the West. When I was in America in 1995, Rorty told me that they were quite disappointed about these Eastern intellectuals because they were expecting to learn from us something about the world, they didn't know anything about, something we achieved. But they realised they'll not learn anything from us and that we are copying them in every imaginable manner. We simply didn't expect that. We got drunk on freedom. But the social life – inequalities, emergence of nationalism. What depressed me the most was that suddenly you could see homeless people in the streets, suddenly all those poor regions emerged around Slovakia. That is one thing. The other thing is nationalism. Ethnically defined parties were established, religiously defined parties were established, I was shocked. And I was worried.

Reichelova: Have those worries been allayed or not?

Gál: Yes, they have. But you know, at first it awakened my childhood experience where I was 'the other', I didn't belong. I was at home, and yet I wasn't. You probably don't know the experience of living in a diaspora. You feel the difference no matter if you can express it explicitly or not. And suddenly the National Party was established and when the Christian movement was formed and its head was the son of a prominent representative of the Slovak state, I got worried. I mean, the existential worries were dissolved, but it is still there as a huge problem. The issues of religion – I was an

undisputed atheist, but after 1990, I won't tell anyone I'm an atheist. I say that I am religiously unmusical. I am aware of the meaning, I am aware of the strength of religion, but it doesn't make me a religious person. Therefore, I'm trying to penetrate this topic as a philosopher. These were my contradictions.

Reichelova: That remark of Rorty's about them expecting something new from Eastern intellectuals sounds like Habermas' critique of the '89 revolution which states that the revolution didn't bring any big new idea – unlike other revolutions – and therefore, it is a false revolution. Nothing new emerged with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Do you feel like it's true? That the Eastern Bloc didn't bring anything new, that it only copied the West.

Gál: No, that's not completely true. To some extent, we did copy the West, neoliberalism is functioning in our countries as well, here oligarchs influence politics too, and we copied that to some extent. But what we didn't realise then was that the notion that by changing the constitution, institutions and laws, human mentality changes as well, was an illusion. I don't think that Habermas was fully right, no. The East does bring something, and Central Europe does bring something, but the voice is still weak.

Reichelova: What do you think the voice says? Or what is this voice of Central Europe?

Gál: I'd rather not say explicitly. For example, Havel had something to say, Pithart had something to say, but they don't think so in the West. There are Hungarian philosophers and Polish philosophers who, indeed, have something to say and they are translated, they come up with new ideas. Expecting that Slovakia or the East suddenly comes up with an idea of capitalism with a human face is naïve. First, we have to experience problems of real capitalism to be able to reflect them. We lived in one emptied world without movement, without time, without everything, so our thinking and the dissident writing was a kind of social therapy. It was for us and it was addressed to us. We couldn't come up with new conceptions of the world, we couldn't come up with ideas about a capitalist socialist state because we didn't know what it was. We dreamed about freedom which we knew what was. And the majority of our dreams were illusions. You know, freedom is not what we thought it was. But ok, today we know that it is easy to change the regime, it is easy to switch to philosophy from chemistry, but it is difficult to philosophically reflect on a situation I suddenly happened to be in. It is difficult to come up with an idea that would feel new and interesting to people who have lived in that regime for 40 years already.

Reichelova: In the nineties in the Czech Republic, the main motive was to get into the European Union. I suppose it was the same in Slovakia, right?

Gál: It was the same in Slovakia. But we had bad luck, Meciar was elected the PM and an order call Meciarism was established. They did politics in a rough, poaching

way and our chances to join the EU were diminished. Europe didn't really care about Slovakia. But then came Dzurinda and integration proceeded very fast. Now we have the Euro, you don't. I think that in Slovakia pro-European public opinion is very strong. Of course, there is an extremely strong nationalist party who have around 15 percent, but sociologists argue that that is a normal invariable, that there are always 15 percent of people who are extremists of sorts in every society.

Reichelova: One of my teachers, Pavel Barša, argues that paradoxically, the East finally levelled with the West because these xenophobic parties are in the East the same is in the West. It is easy to compare Kotlebovci and Marine Le Pen.

Gál: Yes, certainly. But I think that extremist parties in some western countries are more likely to get to power. You know, here, these extremists are in opposition. The ruling power is corrupted to the highest degree, but the pro-European trend prevails in the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia.

Reichelova: Are you afraid of another violent conflict in Europe to come?

Gál: You know, it is still an open question in Europe. Disintegration or integration? Nationalists and xenophobes prevail, or the integration of pro-European politics prevails? A year or two ago, I would have said the danger is enormous. But it seems like it's weakening. Look at Brexit, what problems are connected with it, look at elections in Slovakia, Čaputová is the president, in Italia, in the Netherlands, in Belgium these extreme nationalists are getting weaker, I hope.

Reichelova: And if you look at the bigger picture, since your childhood until now, do you have the feeling that Europe is substantially more multicultural? Czechoslovakia was quite homogeneous for quite a long time. There were Czechs, Slovaks, Rusyns, a small number of Romani, after the war and the expulsion of Germans and Hungarians, Czechoslovakia was quite homogeneous, wasn't it?

Gál: It wasn't, not that much. There were many Hungarians and many Romani people in Slovakia. There aren't many Jews, but I think the conflicts of identities and multiple cultures latently existed here even before 1989, and they started to be explicit after '89. I think multiculturalism is a challenge that will exist for a long time, rationally. It is not possible to deal with emotionally, it is a normal, factual, rational problem we will not avoid. Your generation will not avoid it and Slovakia is multicultural. Before, minorities here were invisible. Now, they are visible. The defiance against migration is a sort of fear of people misused by politicians, but this will have to stop. It is impossible to build such a high fence that would be impossible to break through. I think that migration and ecology are two problems waiting to be addressed and they are theoretically assessed by few people. These will be the key problems of the upcoming years and if we don't deal with them, we'll be trouble.

When I look at my life, I think that despite all these totalitarian regimes and unfreedoms that I've gone through, it was getting better and better. I mean my personal life; I don't want to generalise. But as a child, I was deported, they took our property, but in the end, I managed to finish my studies and in the end, I had the opportunity to develop personally and finally I became a philosopher, I realised my dream which I feared to even articulate before. I am trying to side-line my personal life when thinking about society. Life in this society was not the best, but it was a success story after all. Even the bad 'normalisation' was better than a crude totalitarian regime. And today, despite all the corruption and mafia, life is better and more open than before.

How will the world of the future look? If you look at the world of the past and the technologies that didn't exist, considering Europe overall – regardless of one's relation to or opinion on the past – the last 200 years in Europe is a success story. All measurable aspects and quantities are ameliorating, people live longer, they are healthier, more educated, there is less violence, we are richer, more literate and despite all this we live with a feeling of permanent crisis, that's peculiar. There is an endeavour to understand, that is what the feeling of permanent crisis is all about. Look at contemporary Europe, there are growing inequalities, on the one hand. The movement of global progress that started with Enlightenment and science and Modern rationality does not bring profit to all people. There are people, there are regions whose life is not getting better, it is actually worsening in many regions. The second thing is human nature. Human nature is tribalistic. Despite the fact that we fly to space, despite the fact that we have artificial intelligence, despite all that, our mind hasn't changed in the last several hundred thousand years. Take human history, the first tribes, the communities where morality originated used to have around 150 members, in these communities, morality was emerging. We internalised this morality in our brains and our emotions. And human history as such is a history of enlarging this circle. First, there were 150 people, then it was couple of thousand, then several hundreds of thousands, several millions. The question after the cause of enlarging this circle is a key question, I think. The first factor is religion. Religious narratives. Why are Enlightenment science, humanity, rationality, human rights, why are they unable to be so effective as religion? Because they didn't create any narrative, they didn't create any heroes with whom one could identify, they didn't create symbols and they don't elicit emotions. The core around which human morality is built, is emotions. And the biggest community that appeals to emotions, so far, is the nation. Every community bigger than that is a matter of rationality, not a matter of solidarity and values that are built on morality. The question is whether we will create a narrative for Europe with which we could be able to identify. I almost think we won't, you know. I don't know, I might be wrong. But if we don't come up with it in next 50 years, rationality must prevail. The feeling that there are many Europes around the world, that there are problems that must be solved without regard to state borders – ecological problems, social networks, that capital doesn't respect borders, this feeling must prevail. On the other hand, there is nationalism and various centrifugal forces, so the only way how to manage the situation is – I don't know, it's such a dumb term – critical thinking, an

attempt to get self-reflection into the public discussion. I don't suppose that everyone will start to meditate and reflect and be self-critical, no, I don't think that. But at least the people who create public opinion should consider it their duty. And that's not happening. Look at our newspapers, the newspapers got adjusted to the conflicts. This is harmful!

Reichelova: As you were speaking about a need for a narrative for Europe – do you have the feeling there should emerge?

Gál: European identity, yes, and European solidarity, too.

Reichelova: And don't you think it is getting deeper? Would you say that your children and your grandchildren feel much more strongly as Europeans than your generation does?

Gál: A stronger feeling of European identity, no, I don't think so. But their feeling of local identity is weaker. My grandchildren are little but neither of my children think about it, they live in a broader context. On the one hand, there are things connected to morality, sympathy is a key factor, and it is difficult to imagine a universal sympathy with European humanity, is pretty difficult. You know, at least for me, it is more natural to imagine sympathising with members of one's nation or religion than to imagine, but you see that, the problem with the Grecian debts is the problem of solidarity.

Reichelova: I see. And do you think the Soviet Union managed to create this? Did the Soviet Union come up with a narrative strong enough to surpass the national level?

Gál: Yes, it did, but only for a short time. The Soviet Union came up with that kind of narrative, but it wasn't stable enough, there was something missing or it was dissipating. You know, our parents were fascinated by the narrative. The generation of my parents, all of them were Marxists or communists. Juraj Špicer was a Jewish intellectual, one of the leading intellectuals, who was born in 1919. At time of the war, he was around 20 years old and he said that when his parents packed a knapsack for him to run away somewhere abroad, when they started to arrest people, and when they caught him – because they did catch him – he had Marx and Freud in the knapsack apart from the apples and bacon that his parents packed for him. My mum's brother was a convinced Marxist. My uncle was a communist. That whole generation was convinced. The narrative wasn't a narrative. It was a promise of freedom and equality. You didn't need a narrative, you didn't need Jesus, you didn't need stories, you needed a vision of the future. A vision of the future where people are equal and free.

Reichelova: But we are speaking of equality in a broader sense, aren't we? Those people believed in equality with Tajikistan and the Mongols, not only that Slovaks will be equal among themselves. How strong was international solidarity?

Gál: I don't know to what extent this internationalism worked. It was more about social equality, you know, people didn't consider the global context that much. I don't know if anyone in Slovakia thought about Mongols. In Slovakia, they thought about poverty and about the fact that a group of people is oppressed by another group of people. I think that neither us during the communist era, nor the older generation, was actually thinking about the fact that somewhere in Africa, South America and Asia are people who live in much worse conditions than we do. Those are questions that opened now because the world opened for us. I don't think our thoughts reached that far.

Reichelova: Considering the question of whether it is necessary to have a European people in order to create a European identity, or it is desirable to interconnect Europe institutionally in order for a European people to emerge, we should take into account the Soviet Union that just came, delineated borders and thus created a new person.

Gál: Yes, the Soviet Union, that's possible. It brought a vision of freedom and well-being to the poorest parts of the region, but I think it didn't last. The religious narrative lasted for 2000 years. The national narrative lasted for 150 years and the Soviet one for 40 years. It means that the first contact with reality destabilised the narrative while the nationalist narrative crashed with reality many times and it wasn't destroyed by that. Which means that narrative is not enough, something more is needed, something people have in common: language, faith; this is one of the questions connected to the Roman Empire, the Soviet Union, the Habsburg monarchy. Why has the Habsburg monarchy fallen apart? In the 20th century, they called it the prison of nations. It was no prison. You know, unlike the Soviet Union. The USSR became a prison of nations very quickly.

Reichelova: Last year a book that focuses on the Habsburg monarchy from the perspective of a 'school of nations' that enabled nations to grow up and develop was published.

Gál: And to live together.

Reichelova: Consider how the communist regime was trying to suppress all nationalist tendencies, which was probably quite tangible in the sixties in Slovakia, and consider the fact that nationalism leads to fascism etc etc. Since the nineties, nationalism has grown quite quickly, and the Left and leftist rhetoric found itself in a deep crisis. The second one mentions solidarity or equality, someone uses the argument 'ad gulagum' and throws the whole thing out of the window. Would you say that the Left became completely disqualified due to the Soviet project?

Gál: I think the Left is the Left. There is the socialist Left and there is leftist liberalism. I think socialism is disqualified because what our past has shown is that it is impossible to govern society centrally. Not only because of freedom, but because it doesn't work, it's not effective. But the liberal left, a regulated market [can be]. Yes, it is a bit rude in this [liberal] society but I see that as a solution in the future as there are many people

who ended up losers in the process of globalisation, emancipation, liberalisation, poverty and disadvantages can't be a hereditary sin. And the children of those who lost, are losers only because of where they were born. The only solution is public finance. Education, healthcare, insurance. Other areas of social life that the state should care about and which we should be able to regulate through taxes. So, I think that if this is leftist thinking, then it is the only thing that can help. Because if it is not present, those problems will grow and these inequalities will grow and these Okamuras and Kotlebovcis will grow, too.

Reichelova: Speaking of 'Europe in the next 50 years,' do you feel like these big structural changes will actually happen and that they will happen without violence?

Gál: Considering history, these changes have happened. Big empires were not stable and also impossible to govern from one centre. In the past all big empires originated through violence. But I think that new technologies might help here. First of all, it has its drawbacks as well as its advantages, all this fake news and Cambridge Analytics and all these ways of influencing through the internet – it is a negative thing as well as a positive one. There is the potential to cause disagreement but there is also the potential to unite people. I am a cautious optimist. I think that integration is non-violent thanks to new technologies more intelligent than our brains; it is possible to coordinate more complex systems as artificial intelligence has already done. So, I believe that the trend of peacefully uniting will continue, and I also believe that humanism will finally prevail and that we'll achieve a broadening of our circle. Yes, democracy without conflict is impossible, democracy without conflict is unthinkable. But it is possible to make conflicts more cultivated. It means that not every conflict has to end up as an armed conflict, it is possible to deal with it in other ways.

Reichelova: Carl Schmitt would give you a good dressing-down!

Gál: Yes, he would. He has never been my role model. I believe that the circle will broaden. As Rorty said, the history of the world is a series of miracles. I don't see the reason why these miracles shouldn't continue. I don't see any reason for this to stop with our generation.