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From Samizdat to Substack: Lessons from Czech Resistance to Censorship for Today's Brazil

An interview with Czech journalist Cecílie Jílková on the abuse of power, the importance of free speech, and the risks of digital censorship.



DAVID AGAPE
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Cecílie Jílková

In June 2025, during the second Westminster Free Speech Forum in London, organized by Michael Shellenberger, I had the opportunity to meet Czech writer and journalist Cecílie Jílková again. Her story spans two distinct eras in the struggle for freedom: her family's resistance to the communist dictatorship of former Czechoslovakia and, today, her own work against the advance of digital censorship in Europe.

The daughter of dissidents, Cecílie grew up under the Soviet-dominated regime, in a home where thinking freely was both dangerous and non-negotiable. Her father, Ludvík Vaculík (1926–2015), a writer and journalist, was under constant surveillance by the StB, the regime's secret police. Her mother, Lenka Procházková, was persecuted for supporting Prague's dissidents, among them fellow members of the Charter 77 movement. From an early age, Cecílie learned that freedom of conscience could come at a high price, but that it was worth more than the silence imposed by fear.

Communism took hold of the country in 1948, when the Communist Party seized power with the backing of the Soviet Union. In the years that followed, the state became a machine of control and repression. Some 250,000 people were imprisoned for political reasons; thousands died in forced labor camps or were executed. Censorship was total. The economy was nationalized, religious faith was persecuted, and fear spread silently into every corner, from classrooms to dinner tables. In 1968, the reform attempt known as the Prague Spring was brutally crushed by Soviet tanks. Hope would return only in 1989 with the Velvet Revolution, a peaceful movement that ended the regime and turned Czechoslovakia into a symbol of democratic transition in Eastern Europe.

Today it is Cecílie's turn to defend freedom, now in the face of new threats. What used to be done with wiretaps and dossiers is done today with invisible filters, digital surveillance, the criminalization of speech, and algorithms disguised as the fight against disinformation.

The author of *Father God and Mother Love* (*Otec Bůh a matka Láska*), in which she recounts a childhood under surveillance, inherited trauma, and the marks authoritarianism leaves on the most intimate relationships, Cecílie now publishes on Substack, where she reflects on the impact of digitalization and warns against the growing normalization of state control over the internet and public opinion. Last week she published an interview with me focused on Brazilian society's crisis of trust in the traditional press and on the new mechanisms of institutional censorship.

Now the roles are reversed: in this conversation, it is Cecílie who shares her view of Czech history and of today's challenges to freedom of expression. It is a dialogue of particular interest to Brazil, where control of public debate is advancing under similar justifications. Listening to someone who has already faced, and survived, a regime of silence can help us understand what is at stake now, and how we can win.



Cecílie with her parents, Ludvík Vaculík and Lenka Procházková.

What was it like growing up under the surveillance of the communist regime?

You have to realize that when you are born into extreme conditions, they automatically become your normal. So for me it was completely normal that our apartment was bugged around the clock, that our phone was tapped, and that a car with StB agents was parked in the street outside our building. My parents taught us not to talk out loud about certain things at home and not to trust people. Anyone could be an StB collaborator, and plenty of people really were. The teachers at the kindergarten I went to, for example. Before I understood this, I took their interest in our family for sincere affection, and I often enjoyed chatting with them about what was new at home, who had come to visit, and so on.

When I grew up, I learned to distrust the centralized system, the media, and politicians in general, but at the same time not to get stressed by that distrust. So even a childhood in the dissident world can be fun. People adapt very easily.

What was it like living with dissident parents, and how did it influence you?

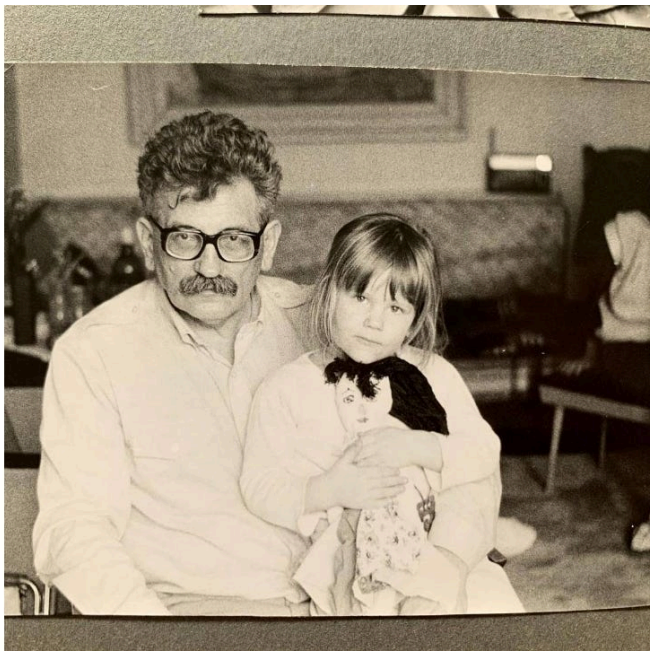
Both my parents were dissidents, and my father was twenty-five years older than my mother. My father became a dissident only in his mature years, whereas my mother had been on the list of enemies of the state since the age of eighteen, because her father, the famous writer Jan Procházka, was an enemy of the state, and the regime hounded him to death with its persecution. Procházka's daughter thus in effect inherited the status of an "anti-system person" from her father without having done anything against the regime herself.



Documentary about the death of Jan Procházka (in English). youtube.com/watch?v=6fBz6a4Rcw4

How did it influence me? Positively, I think. Neither of my parents was particularly afraid of the regime. Even though they were regularly taken in for interrogation, even though they were not allowed to work in their professions (both had university degrees, and my father had been a respected author and journalist), even though we were not allowed to travel abroad, and even though the threat that my father above all could be arrested and imprisoned at any moment was always present, we still, as a family, made fun of the regime pretty much every day.

It taught me not to respect official authorities, but to go by other criteria. Respect is due to people who are morally firm, brave, brilliant; in short, to real role models. Respect is not due to bureaucrats and opportunists who, even if only through their silent, passive consent, help or serve totalitarian despotism.

Cecílie with her parents, Ludvík Vaculík and Lenka Procházková.

What role did cultural resistance play in your family's fight against censorship?

Samizdat (the underground publishing of texts of every genre) was my father's main activity. After he became a banned writer, he founded a samizdat publishing house. That meant taking in texts from other banned authors, editing them, collecting money to have them copied and bound, and then distributing them within the dissident community. Quite often the texts made their way out of that community to ordinary readers, too, and circulated among them as "under-the-counter goods." Reading these samizdat books and magazines encouraged and motivated the wider public. It was a kind of "water of life" in that dull sea of propaganda.

Most important of all, though, the texts reached other countries through a network of friends, often including various diplomats, and were officially published there. For the authors this meant, first, money to live on (because the communist regime could not justify to the outside world confiscating royalties paid in hard currency) and, second, it protected these authors, among them the playwright Václav Havel, the future president, from bestial treatment by the StB. While the StB had no problem ambushing and savagely beating the dissident Zdena Tominová, for political reasons it could not afford to hit my father, a well-known writer published abroad, during an interrogation. That taught me that the regime always behaves worst toward those who are unknown.

Secret dissident meetings were very important too, because they motivated the dissidents to persevere in their efforts, not to lose their moral firmness, not to sink into skepticism. At these meetings they not only confirmed one another's positions but also refined them and exchanged

inspiration. The dissidents naturally also served each other as expert feedback. Among them were brilliant professors and philosophers; in short, the intellectual and moral elite of the nation. The quality of some of the works created in the underground was very high.

How can Brazil learn from your family's resistance to protect freedom of expression today?

Words are like water: they can never be stopped completely. You can dam a river, but the dam will overflow. So censorship is, in a sense, always dysfunctional, and even counterproductive. Whatever we censor, we strengthen, because we give it the stamp of rare under-the-counter goods and so create a black market in ideas.

Censored authors often achieve greatness precisely because they were banned. It strengthens their character, and that improves the quality of their work. Meanwhile, pro-regime opportunists are pampered and subsidized by the regime, their work degenerates, and so it often fails to achieve timeless quality. Censored content becomes highly competitive not only because of its higher quality but also because it is rarer for the audience. In this respect it pays to respond to censorship with resistance in the form of your own underground production. Think of it as a long-term investment. It is a good way to use your inner desire to express yourself openly. It is not wasted time; quite the opposite.

Another positive side of fighting for free speech is transcendence. Every person looks for a higher meaning in life. Going through life without a higher meaning leads to decadence, addictions of every kind, psychopathologies, and self-destruction.

A higher meaning that surpasses even our ego and lets it fade into the background can fill us with happiness even in objectively unfavorable external conditions. Even prisoners in concentration camps had a better chance of survival if they found a higher meaning in surviving. That meaning could be, for example, loving someone with a pure love and holding on inwardly to that ideal in the worst moments.

But another great purpose in life, and a motivation to fight, can be creative work. Transforming something negative, like life without freedom, into something radiant, like a brilliant article, a novel, a feuilleton, a painting, a song, or a social media post, is not only excellent therapy, it is also a gift to the community. And whoever gives to others is, at the same time, inwardly rewarded with a good feeling. Their life gains a higher meaning. So one could say that fighting censorship is an entirely natural reaction of a person seeking a higher meaning in life.

What is the biggest threat to freedom of expression in the Czech Republic today?

The European Commission, without question. Just as Brazil is living under the dictate of authorities nobody elected, the Czech Republic, as a member state of the European Union, is living under the dictate of commissioners nobody elected and whom lobbyists have corrupted. All the censorship regulations originate in the European Commission. The greatest dangers are the European laws DSA, eIDAS, and Chat Control 2.0.

- The DSA can legalize all censorship, because it officially authorizes platforms to censor;
- eIDAS legalizes technological tools (digital identities) for breaking anonymity online;
- And Chat Control can legalize the elimination of privacy, because it advocates breaking the encryption of all digital communications.

The vast majority of Europeans still do not realize the potential of these laws. And these laws come from the commissioners of the European Commission.

How is a country that overcame censorship and repression under communism now starting to lean toward authoritarianism again?

Quite naturally. The whole world keeps going through phases of freedom and unfreedom, phases of peace and war. In Europe we have lived through German and Soviet occupation, through Nazi and communist frenzy, and now comes an attempt at mass control by means of technology.

It is an entirely natural process, because power has its own immutable laws of development and behavior, no matter who exercises it. This is not my own idea; my father figured it out (and for the speech in which he defined these laws in 1967 he was expelled from the Communist Party and spent twenty years in the underground).

Let me briefly explain these laws of power:

According to my father, the development and behavior of all human power are governed by inner laws that neither the person in power nor the class in power can change, because they are simply the laws of human behavior in a particular situation: being in power.

1. **Reproduction.**

   Every power simply wants to go on existing. It tries to preserve itself forever. (But it never succeeds, because it always, inevitably, gradually degenerates, so relax.)

2. **Homogenization.**

   This means that every power automatically keeps ridding itself of everything dissimilar, so that each of its parts, or "cells," ends up the same as the center of power itself. The same form, the same rules, the same system, so that a single simple principle of control will do everywhere. That is why it now seems to us that all the official media say the same things and that many countries are introducing similar regulation of speech. That is one of many symptoms of the homogenization of power.

3. **Independence.**

   Power gradually grows stronger until it reaches a state in which it no longer needs anyone's support but leans on itself: the center on the periphery and vice versa. The individual components of power can rely on each other one hundred percent, and they must, because they form a circle.

4. **Dynastization.**

   What does that mean? It is, for example, a situation in which, during some crisis, power convenes a legislative assembly and has its independent position written into constitutional law. Whatever it does from then on, it does in accordance with the constitution. And since for ten, twenty, thirty years nobody ever puts this point on the agenda again, and nobody else can put it on the agenda under the constitution, and nobody can convene another legislative assembly under the constitution either, a dynasty is founded by constitutional means.

   It is a historically new type of dynasty, because it preserves one important democratic principle: anyone who wants to can join it. So the dynasty cannot die out, neither in the male line nor in the female line. This is what now threatens Europe, and I believe it is already happening in Brazil.

5. **Working with people.**

   Power always gives preference to people whose character resembles its own. But because such people are in short supply, power must also use other people, whom it adjusts to its needs. Naturally suited to serving power are people who crave power, people who are obedient by nature, people with a bad conscience, and people whose desire for well-being, advantage, and profit sets itself no moral conditions. People who are afraid and people with many children can be adjusted to serve power. So can, for instance, people who were humiliated in the past and trustingly accept an offer of new pride, and then, of course, people who are stupid by nature.

   For a certain time, under certain circumstances, and for certain tasks, various moral absolutists and selfless but poorly informed enthusiasts can also be used temporarily, as my father was at first, when he once joined the Communist Party with naive ideals.

If, in this description of the laws of power, you see an analogy with what you are going through in Brazil, it could, paradoxically, reassure you, because every dynasty degenerates over time, and so the totalitarianism in Brazil will collapse over time too. Partly on its own, through its inability to survive, and partly thanks to intervention from outside.

What impact are the EU's digital regulations having on freedom of expression in the Czech Republic?

So far it isn't that bad. Czech Facebook is, of course, still very heavily censored through shadowbans and occasional blocking, but we are definitely not yet at the stage of police raids over social media posts. Since the pandemic, though, there has still been an atmosphere of cancel culture, and opportunists and fake opinion leaders still publicly bully the opposing side online. That leads conformists to follow the official narratives and the silent majority to censor itself.

For us, it is therefore absolutely essential to prevent the planned breaking of encryption and to preserve anonymity online. We have to stop it, because it would harm not only European citizens but all users of social networks. If we succeed, it will prevent even greater conformism and even stronger self-censorship. So let's keep our fingers crossed.

Implementation of the DSA censorship legislation is still stalling in the Czech Republic, apparently purely because of bureaucratic incompetence, but even so, that fact gives me a feeling of "pride in my country," haha.

What risks does the Czech Republic face if censorship increases, and how can Brazil avoid them?

That is actually an excellent and deep question! It makes you think about the worst that can happen when power gradually becomes so dynastic that it is allowed to rule at full strength for whole decades. Because that is the real consequence of censorship.

In the case of the Czech Republic, economic collapse could theoretically threaten us over a longer time horizon (the whole Western world, after all, faces the fall of the dollar and a currency reform). Then, even more hypothetically, the replacement of the original population as a result of open borders and migration, and finally the extinction of traditional Central European culture under the influence of stronger cultures. And war threatens all of us constantly.

War is a business, crisis is an opportunity for power to dynastize further, and killing people in war is population control.

But as we have said, power naturally keeps homogenizing and dynastizing, yet at the same time it degenerates and in the end always collapses. These processes happen on their own and are inevitable. The only question is how long it will take before power collapses, and who will seize the opportunity right away.

All of us can influence these processes and events by creating a so-called parallel polis, which is dissent, or simply a natural market response to an opportunity. Our own platforms, our own media, our own education, our own market. And we have been doing that successfully for a long time!

Decentralization is also very important. If something has no center, it cannot be abused by power. One social network with one owner and one data center is very fragile. One media outlet with one owner and one newsroom can be censored very easily. One AI with one owner and one "opinion" can lose all its positive benefits. The natural basis of viability is therefore competition and decentralization.

Build your own platforms, your own media, your own publishing houses, your own schools, your own technological tools, your own communities, and your own markets. In my book *Father God and Mother Love* I wrote a motivating passage that might be a fitting way to close our interview:

> *Although we may have felt—let's say for at least three generations—that everything is taking a turn for the worse, all the generations before us also felt that everything would keep worsening "till the end of time." It is an endless Shepard tone, creating the illusion of perpetual decline, even though it never gets any lower. That's why the worst has still not come: while something continues to worsen without end, something good has long since been quietly improving alongside it, as every worsening inspires some form of improvement to develop.*
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> *Improvement usually happens outside the center of power and is labeled as "anti-system"—in reality, the highest form of system lies precisely in this "decentralization." A spontaneous order flows irresistibly through the individual cells of central power.*



Cecílie Jílková is a Czech writer and journalist and the daughter of dissidents. She has worked in the traditional press and as a screenwriter for crime series, has published books on natural food, and today writes on Substack about digitalization and freedom of expression. Her autobiographical novel Father God and Mother Love tells of a childhood under surveillance, the dilemmas of a post-communist adolescence, and the effects of repression on family relationships.