

# **VISEGRAD FELLOWSHIP AT THE OPEN SOCIETY ARCHIVES FINAL REPORT**

SUBMITTED BY PIOTR WCIŚLIK IN SEPTEMBER 2015

Unlike many research reports, but similar to Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's descriptions of laboratory life,<sup>1</sup> in this account I would like to dwell on what discovery in historical scholarship has of an adventure, with its unexpected encounters and its many cul de sacs. Hence the following narrative is not linear and there is less continuity than it could be expected between the first part – describing the background of my research and its principal problematics – and the latter part on research findings. Still, the Visegrad fellowship at the OSA was for me most productive when it comes to issues that I was not actually planning to investigate during my stay.

## **Research Background**

My PhD research concerns the phenomenon of samizdat or independent publishing under Communism, mostly focused on the Polish scenario, supplemented by a comparative edge. Samizdat studies are an established and consistently growing field of scholarship. Although I come from a history of political thought background and my previous contributions to the field consist in studying what underground press activists thought they were doing politically – in terms of practicing democracy and engaging in political economy of cultural goods – recently – and this research visit contributed a great deal to this turn – my interests have shifted in the direction that can be called materialist intellectual history, which aims to connect thoughts and things in a reflective way. It starts from a conviction which today is becoming ever more patent, that freedom – and freedom of expression in particular – does not

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills: Sage 1979).

only depends on laws and institutions, but also is very much a result of how we engage with technologies and media. This means a materialist approach which is nonetheless not determinist – on the contrary it shows how practical creativity is indispensable part of autonomy and that creativity does not always mean choosing the technologically advanced options. It also aims at understanding how we connect with things intellectually and endow them with political meanings.

### **Research Questions and connected OSA resources**

Knowing the archives quite well, I had more research questions than a two-month visit could accommodate and hence my strategy consisted in dividing my time between collecting the broadest possible spectrum of sources and studying only some of them in depth. First involved the long *durée* of underground publishing in Poland – as long as the history of censorship. Here I was after something I define – following Reinhart Koselleck – as the space of experience of the underground publishing movement of the 1970s, e.g. what potentially or in fact a person involved in the business of independent press could know about his or her predecessors and whether his or her activities can be understood as a part of some bigger historical trend. In this case the RFE/RL research library was of tremendous help.

In addition to the *longue durée*, I was interested in the immediate prehistory of underground publishing in Poland - the period between the emergence of the Soviet samizdat in the late 1960s and the Polish samizdat boom of the late 1970s. Here my aim was to show that underground publishing did not come from an urge for intellectual freedom alone, but that it was deeply embedded in practices of unlicensed circulation of knowledge, including transnational knowledge transfers. I assumed that this magma of practices will be most likely evidenced in the Information Items – field reports collected by the collaborators of the RFE Polish Unit Research and Analysis Department even after the program as such was terminated in the early 1970s.

Moreover, I suspected that RFE was not only evidencing the birth of samizdat in Poland, but was in fact its maiden, both in terms of facilitating the knowledge transfer from the Soviet Union and giving it a proper resonance. More generally, my next line of research deals with the dynamics of political spokespersonship involved in the interaction between the “second circulation” press and the radios. Here - in addition to the Information Items – I was counting on finding more about this dynamics from the collection of internal memos.

Finally, my aim as Visegrad fellow at the OSA was to understand the post-history of independent media – how underground publishing movement as well as the radios were integrating themselves into the 1989 realities. In particular, the post-history of the independent media constitute a distinct perspective on the temporality of the transition, which looks considerably less revolutionary (but more real!) if we consider that RFE ended in mission in 1994 and if we give voice to those independent publishers which were reluctant to emerge from the underground. Relevant to this topic were especially the Subject Files, including the hitherto unprocessed collection of subject files of the Open Media Research Institute.

### **Finding the unexpected**

In retrospect, the division of labor between collecting sources and their in-depth study resulted to be uneven. When it comes to the *longue duree* prehistory and the post-history of underground publishing in Poland, I barely ventured beyond the collection stage. My research time was mostly consumed by studying the two other topics mentioned above, that share the same source base – the Information Items. Or – indeed that would be more precise to say – I was consumed by studying first of all the Items as such. Their unique quality is that they trigger serendipity. When historian goes through a collection of subject files, he or she can only learn about a particular subject matter, corresponding to the name on the folder. In contrast, the Information Items are arranged chronologically and therein by number of the

report. In order to find the needed bit of information, you need to dig through memos and observations considerably off topic and unless you are very disciplined – not in my case – distraction becomes inevitable. Distraction sometimes means stopping to read a joke – RFE reporters were particularly keen on registering jokes “good ones, bad ones, as they go,” (in case of Maciej Morawiecki reporting from Paris, this is how the compilations started and in fact most of them are not funny). At other times, it means realizing your curiosity to investigate a phenomenon you were not interested in in the first place, but once mentioned in the report, it presents itself as entirely relevant.

The Items release serendipity not only because of the miscellaneous character of the corpus, but also due to the level of knowledge they represent, which is the mezzo level of the lived reality. The observation they usually contain, are neither something you can otherwise learn in official news, nor the type of insider knowledge that was the domain of high profile defectors such as Józef Światło. They are superficial, but not trivial, just like the jokes, which are so abundantly documented not because each of them presents a prime quality resource for the RFE analysts, but because in their bulk they point to trends and evolving attitudes of the society.

Incidentally, this makes them really difficult to use in an academic dissertation, especially when it comes to these late editions of the Information Items which I was investigating. These are not evaluated in the same way as the “old” ones were. The old ones had a basic virtue in their own right in that made historian’s job for her – each piece was corroborated against other sources in search for evidence of its reliability. With the late information items what you get instead is grading, very rarely an item gets the grade A standing for a piece of information which is both reliable and relevant enough to be further circulated within the radio for the use of the broadcast department. But then again, this is a small price to be paid for the serendipity

– you just need to do your job, which in my case was to consult the relevant Subject Files and other collections in OSA custody.

### **Serendipity in practice: the case of black market and leaking**

To illustrate how serendipity works in practice, let me start with the seemingly trivial example. One day I came across a note about “samizdat porn.”<sup>2</sup> By samizdat porn the author meant smuggling of pornographic literature and movies mainly from Denmark, their domestic reproduction and circulation. Allegedly this was a lucrative business involving activities of sportsmen – with privileged passports – custom officers and technicians employed in official reprography institutions. Even though porn itself has a marginal relevance for my study, what was interesting was first the year of its publication. 1972 was before underground publishing took off in Poland. This pointed to the fact that “samizdat” had become a familiar word to describe certain activities even before the activities which it actually connoted appeared on stage. I took it as an invitation to consider samizdat as something broader than underground publishing – all types of practices related to unlicensed circulation of knowledge and cultural goods.

A complementary incitement for my curiosity was precisely the type of activities that the note described. Smuggling and black market distribution was for the underground press movement not quite something they believed they were engaged in.<sup>3</sup> For a very simple reason. If you are facing the prospect of ending up behind bars, you want to make sure that you go to prison as a political prisoner and not as an ordinary criminal. And despite the fact that the second circulation was dependent on the black market in many ways – paper and ink to start with – their intentions were clearly non-profit. However, from the point of view of the consumer of

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<sup>2</sup> Item R176, 13.03.1972 in HU OSA 300-50-11, Container 13.

<sup>3</sup> See Piotr Wciślik, “Movement, Enterprise, Network: The Political Economy of Polish Underground Press” in *Samizdat. Between Practices and Representations*, ed. Valentina Parisi (Budapest: Central European University and Institute for Advanced Studies, 2015), 73-86.

unlicensed cultural goods this looked quite differently. While for the activist, breaking the barrier of fear involved in independent publishing was a courageous act of “living in truth,” in case of the readers – many of whom would not quite follow up with other types of freedom-oriented actions – this was rather a matter of socialization into a society and a culture in which some goods are acquired in a murky way. In case of books, the black market was conditioned by a number of factors – not only censorship but also shortage of paper and backwardness of printing industry. Whether it was because a book was “withdrawn from circulation”, had a limited circulation due to lack of paper, or constituted a rarity from the prewar times, it seems that it was quite an ordinary thing to approach certain dealers for books which were not on display.

Another path of unlicensed consumption were the leaks from the official but restricted publications. If we consider the activity of leaking a practice constitutive for the independent media of the period (the Black Book of Censorship<sup>4</sup> is a case in point) then actually we should contemplate understanding samizdat as something that happens in the official realm. This was the case of foreign agencies press releases as well as, incidentally, transcripts of the RFE broadcasts.<sup>5</sup> Part of the wires and the broadcasts was distributed only among a few designated newspapers and relevant state agencies, while the most confidential material was reserved only for the highest echelons of the party state. In this context, it is worth mentioning that OSA holds a precious collection of Hungarian “numbered books” (each number corresponding to a name of a restricted list of recipients) including *nota bene* a curiously large amount of non-communist Left publications. Now, an interested citizen of People’s Poland (or at least its major cities), before she is handled her first underground volume or journal, she is already habituated to reading about what is not in official news from those leaked

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<sup>4</sup> *Black Book of Polish Censorship*, ed. and trans. Jane Leftwich Curry (New York: Random House, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Item N130, 12.03.1973, HU OSA 300-50-11, container 11; /73 and item S179, 01.08.1974, HU OSA 300-50-11 container 21.

publications. Bringing other ways of unlicensed circulation of culture into the picture and also understanding well the difference of perspective of samizdat producers and consumers might redefine to some extent the contours of the field.

### **Media phantasies of emancipation**

To answer why things turned out way they did it is always useful to draw alternative stories in which they do not. We are so accustomed to understand underground press as the medium eponymous with the opposition under late socialism, that it becomes quite refreshing to investigate its immediate prehistory, the time before anyone saw it coming. To the extent that we take breaking the state monopoly of information as the constitutive aim of samizdat, it is quite telling that we often forget to ask the obvious question - why it was needed at all? After all – especially as travels as telephone calls got less controlled and rationed – the radios were still the major source of uncensored news. For much of its existence, samizdat would reach greater audience only once being rebroadcasted from Munich. The information items from the early 1970s in their bulk suggest that interested citizens were investing their hopes on abolishing the information monopolies not in the do-it-yourself duplicators, but in the “telecommunication sputniks” (as satellites were then called).<sup>6</sup> It was widely believed that the sputniks were impossible to jam and hence with their arrival communism would lose against media globalization.

However, the sputnik was a distant, Cold War materialization of these technofantasies, a cold and distant symbol reminding that emancipation was a matter of world powers and big historical canvas. You could argue samizdat was in line with a different set of hopes in which citizens could play their own part. “I write it myself, I edit it myself, I censor it myself, I publish it myself, I distribute it myself, I sit in jail for it myself.” – as Vladimir Bukowski

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Item R709, 29.04.1975, HU OSA 300-50-11, container 16.

defined the inalienable DIY character of the phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> The more it seems important to note that media other than paper media were attractive precisely because of their hoped “social media” character. One case in point was the Citizen Band Radios and the walkie talkies. Rumor had it, that Polish youngsters was fascinated by cheap Japanese walkie-talkies, that boys from Sweden would give to Polish girls at the cost in order to be able to court them across the Baltics.<sup>8</sup> This being just a rumor, is nevertheless revealing for the hunger for unmediated interpersonal communication. The other case in point are the pirate radios, which also become an object of fascination first and later on, they materialize in the form of the Solidarity Radio in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Recounting the parallel lives of samizdat press and the underground radio might be very revealing about understanding social media under communism, in spite of – or precisely because of – the fact that the later have not developed its full capacities before communism collapsed.

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I am greatly indebted to my colleagues at OSA for accepting me in the archives in the new role of researcher, allowing me to roam freely through even the unprocessed fonds. And I am ever thankful to professor Istvan Rev for advice on which of the many new findings are worth pursuing in the near future.

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Komaromi, *About Samizdat*, <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/about-samizdat> (accessed August 9, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> R1347, 11.03.1977, HU OSA 300-50-11, container 17.

<sup>9</sup> See HU OSA 300-50-01, containers 1479-1482; HU OSA 300-55-10, container 25; HU OSA 300-55-14, container 8.