

...BRIDGES... Number 4, 2006: "A Study Beyond our Comfort Zone" by Beverly Schmidt

prepared on behalf of the ECCB's American Working Group and the PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network

Joyce's preface: Initially, I imagined that BRIDGES would become a "conversational" forum. Although I was looking forward to describing events in the Czech Republic in a timely way, I was also eager to receive questions, comments, announcements, and articles about Czech connections from interested Presbyterians in the United States. It has taken a while for this notion to "catch on." However, in recent weeks, Beverly Schmidt has begun to fulfill that hope by sending an announcement regarding the ECCB's up-coming international youth conference to BRIDGES' recipients and by preparing this article that I am pleased to share with you.

A long-standing group of women, primarily from Covenant Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio, undertook the challenge of working with Božena Komárková's *Human Rights and the Rise of the Secular Age* during the fall of 2005. We were used to reading "cutting edge" biblical and theological literature, as well as books by feminist theologians who help us understand and live our journey as faithful Christian women in a post-Christian, post-enlightenment era. Our group has reached a level of trust and intimacy that enables us to speak our thoughts, no matter how radical, within the safety of a group of sisters committed to love and friendship. It was a good thing we were at such a level, for Komárková inspired some fierce reflections on the political order of our nation at this time.

Dr. Komárková (1903-1997) was a profound intellectual who endured Nazi imprisonment and curtailed vocational prospects during the communist era. From the time she completed her dissertation on human rights through the fall of the communist regime, she wrote on sociology, philosophy, history, and theology. We were fortunate to have two women join the group who had postgraduate backgrounds in literature and language. Katie Kinnison, now a church educator, and Kathy Burkman, retired Ohio State University professor of English and theatre, and a playwright in her retirement, supported our readings with references to Czech novels and plays that gave us a broader sense of the unique Czech character.

We began with a discussion of the role of the intelligentsia. The clergy, who once had been advisors to the kings, lost the coercive spiritual power that they wielded for many centuries as society became democratized. University education became available to many, rather than just a privileged few. Knowledge assumed a different character. It was no longer wisdom, but a system of judgments about external facts. Moral and intellectual spheres became separated, and the intelligentsia were no longer sure of their role in forming and nurturing moral responsibility. Our group, many of whom have backgrounds as educators and parents, discussed with concern the

role of parents, teachers, and clergy in preparing today's young people for a worthy and fulfilling life.

Moving on, we tackled an essay entitled "Are Christian Institutions Possible?" With a deep breath, we admitted that even a lifetime spent in devoted loyalty to the church does not answer the questions that are so urgent today. The Bible is ambiguous – and often contradictory – in its statements about social life. Is there another reality beyond this world which may provide us with a system accessible to human beings? Are doctrines and dogmas historically conditioned, and therefore less than perfect guides for us now? Komárková tells us that institutions which call themselves Christian are justified by Christianity, rather than created by it. Christianity is salt and leaven, so change and transformation can happen within institutions. Freedom is not of this world, but we can live freely through faith. The early church before Constantine showed how this is possible. So we women smiled at one another, knowing that our work is still before us, with the living God to guide us.

With our dictionaries, highlighters, pens and pencils handy, we let "The Two Kinds of Law" inform our understandings of "Human Rights and Christianity." There is the type of law that is needed by technology, where the unchanging effects of the laws of nature can be predicted with absolute certainty. Marxism made this kind of law the yardstick against which human behavior could be measured. The communist era did not abolish the legal system; human nature finally could not be totally compressed into a technical form. Justice through judgment still had to be administered. However, the second kind of law goes beyond justice. Discord can be overcome only by love. In love, law and freedom meet. Our group could quote some familiar sayings from Jesus and the Bible to shore up that theological premise. Finally, we were in familiar territory. A personal relationship between God and the human being, defined by the grace of God and the experience of faith, influence not only church order, but may also transform the processes of political life.

Joyce's invitation: This summary of conclusions reached by the discussion group at Covenant Church may give you a taste of the interesting conversations and diverse interpretations that Komárková's intricate analyses invite. Thus, even if you do not have plans to travel to the Czech Republic or to host a Czech visitor at your church, your congregation may enjoy a "Czech encounter" by undertaking a study of a Czech thinker and discovering points at which that person's insights may deepen your own understandings of contemporary issues.