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Josef Skvorecky on the Nazis' Control-Freak Hatred of Jazz

By J.J. Gould

For one, there are all those "hysterical rhythmic reverses characteristic of the barbarian races and conducive to dark instincts alien to the German people" ...



Just over two weeks after the death of Vaclav Havel, another Czech literary figure who played a key role in his country's Communist-era dissident

movement, [Josef Skvorecky](#), died of cancer Tuesday. He was 87. Once upon a time, Skvorecky had been a vital force behind the intellectual and spiritual current that culminated in 1968's pro-democratic Prague Spring. After the Soviets put an end to it all, Skvorecky and his wife Zdena Salivarova took

refuge in Canada, where they founded the dissident publishing house [68 Publishers](#) and lived ever since. As Matt Welch [explains](#):

It was 68 Publishers, founded in 1971, that proved to be a lifeline to both Czechoslovak literature and dissidence, publishing samizdat works from the likes of Havel and Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal that would often be re-smuggled back into the country.

Some people left Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Soviet invasion (just as many escaped Hungary after 1956), and -- quite understandably -- turned their backs on the mangled countries they left behind. Škvorecký was not one of them. He was committed to helping his native land, helping his native language, and perpetuating the free flow of ideas under arduous circumstances.

Skvorecky left no shortage of legacies to remember him by, but one of the more notable themes in his nonfiction writing is an emphasis on, as Welch puts it, "the oftentime minute similarities between applied fascism and communism." And some of Skvorecky's more notable variations on that theme are in his recollections and insights on the common totalitarian hatred of, among all things, jazz. Here he is writing in the introduction to his novella *The Bass Saxophone*:

In the days when everything in life was fresh -- because we were sixteen, seventeen -- I used to blow tenor sax. Very poorly. Our band was called Red Music which in fact was a misnomer, since the name had no political connotations: there was a band in Prague that called itself Blue Music and we, living in the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, had no idea that in jazz blue is not a colour, so we called ours Red. But if the name itself had no political connotations, our sweet, wild music did; for jazz was a sharp thorn in the sides of the power-hungry men, from Hitler to Brezhnev, who successfully ruled in my native land.

Anyone who finds this proposition fascinating won't, I promise, be disappointed to read the rest of this book, or for that matter all of *Talkin' Moscow Blues: Essays About Literature, Politics, Movies, and Jazz*. But maybe the single most remarkable example of 20th-century totalitarian invective against jazz that Skvorecky ever relayed was here in the intro to *The Bass Saxophone*, where he recalls -- faithfully, he assures us ("they had engraved themselves deeply on my mind") -- a set of regulations, issued by a Gauleiter -- the leader of a regional branch of the National Socialist Party -- as binding on all local dance orchestras during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Get this:

1. Pieces in foxtrot rhythm (so-called swing) are not to exceed 20% of the repertoires of light orchestras and dance bands;

2. in this so-called jazz type repertoire, preference is to be given to compositions in a major key and to lyrics expressing joy in life rather than Jewishly gloomy lyrics;
3. As to tempo, preference is also to be given to brisk compositions over slow ones so-called blues); however, the pace must not exceed a certain degree of allegro, commensurate with the Aryan sense of discipline and moderation. On no account will Negroid excesses in tempo (so-called hot jazz) or in solo performances (so-called breaks) be tolerated;
4. so-called jazz compositions may contain at most 10% syncopation; the remainder must consist of a natural legato movement devoid of the hysterical rhythmic reverses characteristic of the barbarian races and conducive to dark instincts alien to the German people (so-called riffs);
5. strictly prohibited is the use of instruments alien to the German spirit (so-called cowbells, flexatone, brushes, etc.) as well as all mutes which turn the noble sound of wind and brass instruments into a Jewish-Freemasonic wowl (so-called wa-wa, hat, etc.);
6. also prohibited are so-called drum breaks longer than half a bar in four-quarter beat (except in stylized military marches);
7. the double bass must be played solely with the bow in so-called jazz compositions;
8. plucking of the strings is prohibited, since it is damaging to the instrument and detrimental to Aryan musicality; if a so-called pizzicato effect is absolutely desirable for the character of the composition, strict care must be taken lest the string be allowed to patter on the sordine, which is henceforth forbidden;
9. musicians are likewise forbidden to make vocal improvisations (so-called scat);
10. all light orchestras and dance bands are advised to restrict the use of saxophones of all keys and to substitute for them the violin-cello, the viola or possibly a suitable folk instrument.

Being a Nazi, this public servant obviously didn't miss an opportunity to couch as many of these regulations as he could in racist or anti-Semitic terms. Such, after all, are the Nazi equivalent of soothing conventional wisdom. But that's just it: If you're a Nazi, and you can pass something you don't like off as a "Negroid excess," or a manifestation of "Jewish Fremason-ry," it helps you with the kind of Nazi cred you need insulate yourself from having to justify what's wrong with the music as music. More than that, it helps you hide your fear of the deeper resonance the music has with people as people. In an interview given in Prague in 1968, relayed in *Talkin' Moscow Blues*, Skvorecky noted that "jazz is, above all, a kind of fraternity." That's not an entirely obvious thought if you come from the same part of the world jazz itself does.

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<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/01/josef-skvorecky-on-the-nazis-control-freak-hatred-of-jazz/250837/>

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