CHAPTER NINE

THE PAPER REVOLUTIONARIES

Along with the gradual disintegration of the dominant position of the centrally controlled publishers in the market, a boom in private, independent publishing was reported in most countries in the region, and Czech publishers were no exception to this trend. Who, though, was behind the book turnover of the late 1980s and early 1990s and how do these individuals characterise the ‘transitional’ period? To at least partly answer this question, it is necessary to take the discussion back to the issue raised above about representation and to the data and information available on these processes. One cannot but envy Robert Darnton’s attic, filled with the archives of the Société de la typographique de Neuchâtel, where he found “first-hand accounts of life in the book trade from all of its sectors and all of the cities in France”, dating back two hundreds years earlier. Indeed, it is impossible not to appreciate his doubts about the representative nature of the ‘contents of one single attic’ and its capacity to fully reconstruct ‘the whole world’ of his object of study, i.e. the forbidden books in pre-revolutionary France. But for anyone dealing with the cultural dynamics of post-socialist Central Europe, even an attic of resources that could help explain the world of books in ‘revolutionary Bohemia’ twenty years ago would certainly be appreciated, as the resources for creating a fairly credible picture of the ‘transitional’ book world are rather limited.

Much of the following account is based on the information gathered from nineteen in-depth interviews conducted in the late 1990s. They were not intended to and could not even provide a fully representative picture of the entire publishing scene in the country, but the main

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2 Two of my research assistants and I conducted 21 (recorded and transcribed) interviews, 19 of them with professionals involved in publishing, one with a former bookseller, and one with a representative of The Union of Czech Booksellers and Publishers. Interviews were conducted in the period between May 1999 and March 2001 in Prague and Brno. I also held numerous informal (i.e. unrecorded) discussions mainly with Prague publishers, booksellers, printers and journalists involved in the coverage of the book production in the period of 1995–2006.
purpose was to record some authentic reflections of people actually involved in the day-to-day operations of the book business in the 1990s. Their attitudes and experiences may not be typical for the book scene as a whole, but they certainly do to some extent reflect its specific socio-cultural context. The principal criterion for the selection of interviewees was their position in the local book world – they were among the most productive, stable (i.e. in business for over five years), and respected publishers, who were involved in independent publishing since its very beginnings. The majority of private publishing houses were established during the early period of 1989–1991, the youngest of the houses started in 1994. The smallest of our interviewees produced up to five titles a year, the yearly production of the biggest ones was in the range of 100 to 1000 titles.

These characteristics put further limits on the representative nature of their testimonies. A snowball sampling method was used; we knew some publishers personally, we also knew people who knew some publishers; and some of the interviewed publishers simply suggested others who might be willing to talk to us. Given the workload of the majority of these individuals, their availability also had to be considered, as did the very practical concern of location – the majority of our respondents were thus based in Prague. The interviewers asked a range of basic questions pertaining to the personal characteristics of the publisher, such as age, education, professional experience before 1989, and motivations; information about the company, including the process of its establishment, office locations, editorial profile, key authors, financial backup, promotion, and so on. Finally, we asked about the type of publications released, print runs, production time, paper and printing, copyediting and preparation of the manuscript, the availability of market information, and the tools of promotion used in their publishing practice. One of the most problematic issues was that of confidentiality. The majority of our interviewees were public figures; interviews with them and their own writings on a variety of book-related matters had already been published in the local print media on several occasions, and they had also taken part in televised discussions. Some of them were only willing to provide us with relevant information on the condition that their names would not be revealed. Thus, the anonymity of all interviewees was respected, for given the rather limited size of the local cultural community, and the nature of the market, where even just a first name and a general identifying feature, like “a small publisher specialising in esoteric literature based in South Bohemia”,