

My Banned Book

by *Charles Laurence*

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Charles Laurence's book on his mother's affair with a famous Czech spy was about to be published when European privacy laws stopped publication in the U.S. Whatever happened to American free speech?



Free speech has long been a prized American export and at home, we are often told, a value worth fighting for. This makes it all the more ironic that, in a quiet and sneaky sort of way, our free speech is being quietly gagged by European privacy laws that a lot of people might initially applaud.

It makes it even more ironic that the medium that brings these laws to American shores is the same which has us condemning Chinese totalitarians for their latest victim: the Internet.

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I have been on a learning curve on these Euro laws for the last few weeks since my book, *The Social Agent: A True Intrigue of Sex, Spies and Heartbreak Behind the Iron Curtain*, got stopped by a lawyer just as it was about to leave the warehouse for the bookstores.

At the heart of the matter is the balance between rights to free expression on one hand, and rights to privacy on the other. Lawyers in Britain, home to "libel tourism," believe the issues have lost their balance.

In France, two magazines have paid fines for their coverage of Roman Polanski's latest legal troubles. One was punished for publishing pictures of his children—essentially illegal in all circumstances since the French enacted new privacy laws under the European Convention on Human Rights. The other was fined for publishing a picture of a man who has evaded judgment for child rape, standing behind a window in his Swiss refuge, staring back at photographers. The first initially seems laudable, protecting children. The second seems outrageous, protecting a convicted child rapist.



My book starts with childhood memories of Prague in the late 1950s, when I was a boy, the Cold War was at its height and my father, a British diplomat, was posted there. Unhappiness descended on the family when my mother, then a glamorous figure on the international circuit, had an affair with a man named Jiri Mucha.



The Social Agent: A True Intrigue of Sex, Spies and Heartbreak Behind the Iron Curtain. By Charles Laurence. 256 pages. Ivan Dee. \$26.

Mucha, the son of the iconic Art Nouveau poster artist Alphonse Mucha, was a man with a lot of secrets to keep. They are to do with spying for the Soviets and their Czech surrogates during the Cold War, with sex, and with betrayal. Mucha, a writer who lived in a medieval palace in Prague's Castle Square, was notorious as an international socialite and philanderer, but no one was ever quite sure of the spying.

A good deal of this remarkable life is revealed in *The Social Agent*, which was to be in bookshops on March 5, published by Ivan R. Dee, an imprint of Rowman and Littlefield.

It is not surprising that there are those who would like to keep these secrets a little longer. Jiri Mucha was the "social agent" of the title, a

job description I discovered along with closets full of dark detail in the files of the Czech secret police, the StB, and a very remote legal threat has come from his widow, Geraldine. She is 92, Scottish in origin, and continues to live in the Prague palace.

Alphonse Mucha, whose posters for Job cigarette rolling papers and Sarah Bernhardt's theatrical roles made him enormously rich, is a one-man tourist industry in post-communist Prague. His grandson has set up a Mucha Foundation, and there is a museum, a brasserie, and souvenir outlets selling countless prints and knickknacks.

Lawyers for Rowman and Littlefield have caved to Geraldine Mucha's threats because of the Internet-borne quirk of contemporary publishing. I sold the North American rights to the book for publication in the United States, where legal advice assured us that *The Social Agent* fell firmly within a writer's right to tell his own story.

But the laws are weighted against the writer in the European Union with its beefed-up privacy laws. The Mucha threat has to do with "privacy" rather than "defamation," but the key point for Rowman and Littlefield is that since these days an American book can be ordered anywhere in the world with a click of the mouse, the publisher can be taken to court anywhere too, under local rules. Porous borders which might liberate Chinese can gag Americans.

Rowman and Littlefield conferred with lawyers on the far side of the Atlantic and, unbelievably, laid down their arms without even asking for the identity of Geraldine's lawyers. For all but the blockbusters, it simply costs too much to lock legal horns in Europe.

Oddly, the hardback edition of *The Social Agent* remains available now for immediate delivery via the Internet. The technology of the worldwide market seems to have made it as tricky to withdraw a book as publish it.

The *facts* of the story are not in contention.

Among my memories of Prague from 1957 to 1960 were rumors that Mucha may have been a spy. He *was*. His code name, I now know, was ANTY.

Here's a 1950 secret police report of a "social agent" soiree at his palace: "A pornographic film was screened and foreign diplomats had sex with a prominent Czech actress and other women who were present." The report goes on with lurid detail, detailing among things, both the sexual activity and spy-catching plans of a U.S. military attaché.

Soon after this, Mucha was used by the Czech spymaster Kamil Pixa to entrap an American journalist, William Oatis, The Associated Press bureau chief in Prague and an intelligence agent from World War II. Mucha took him to dinner and handed him details of military officers who had been "purged." Oatis was then snatched away, subjected to a show trial, and jailed. The case triggered a Cold War crisis, with Eisenhower protesting directly to Stalin, and Congress imposing the first of the Iron Curtain economic sanctions.

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But in 1956, two years earlier, Mucha had notched up a far greater score. He crossed the Iron Curtain in the guise of a journalist, reporting the Cannes Film Festival, to rekindle an affair with a celebrated ballet dancer, Pauline Grant, who had abandoned her lover for him during WW2. That lover was Sir Anthony Eden, then Churchill's wartime Foreign Secretary, and by now Britain's prime minister. Grant was a confidante of many of Britain's most senior figures. As a "social agent," Mucha could not have done better, nor been more dangerous.

Mucha died in 1991. I visited Geraldine twice in Prague, in 2007 and 2008, and describe those visits in *The Social Agent*. It is that which is behind the Euro-style legal problem. Geraldine threatens action for "fraud and defamation" on the grounds that I had obtained "information under false pretenses." She recalls my visits, but her memory fails on the topic of researching old stories with a view to writing a memoir. That's her way of trying to keep the family secrets.

It is ironic, at the least, that the very world of terror, deceit, and moral corrosion from which America delivered Europe is now regaining the power to muzzle those who would reveal its secrets.

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