

# **“Calling Radio Free Europe: the Czechoslovak Service’s answering machine”**

## **Final Report: Open Society Archives Visegrad Scholarship**

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### **Research Aims**

During my two-month stay at OSA, my research project on Radio Free Europe’s listeners in Czechoslovakia has pursued two different yet related questions: how to research the audible past in archives and how does sound mediate social practice? The latter question, which was the analytical focus of my research, interrogates how sonic features (voice, jamming, signal strength and music) of broadcasted material provided a space and place for people to craft emotions (beliefs of comfort and hope), exercise cognitive structures (engagement, distraction), configure the body (knob-tuning), situate place (urban-rural), develop know-how (tuning, tinkering) and provide material for goal attainment (clear reception). By using transcripts of telephone messages on RFE’s answering machine, it is possible to see grounded information about daily life in Czechoslovakia in the mid 1980s and how listening to RFE broadcasts affected ‘the everyday’.

In this sense the aim of my research was not to ask whether RFE’s broadcasts were objective or not, but rather to explore how listeners *used* RFE broadcasts. How was RFE’s claim of objectivity appropriated by listeners for emotional maintenance, such as hope? How did broadcasts create rules, patterns and traditions within families and homes? What social practices emerged from the listening space or interaction with the radio set? The research thus intended to focus on the communicative-experiential domain of radio listening.

By focusing on how listeners used sound, it was possible to consider the question of what those sounds, when coupled with their uses, could make possible. Sound devices (e.g., radios, transmitters, antennae and cassette tapes) and their use allowed me to think more generally about sound and music’s role as a psycho-social resource for collective agency. Radio-listening practices, as described in the telephone transcripts, helped to show how sound is able to become a flexible medium in which all of the subtle shades of person’s lifeworld can be displayed (e.g., from fear, to hope, to curiosity, to sharing, to family).

In addition to conducting this research aim at OSA, I have also proposed a virtual exhibition considering Radio Free Europe's listeners in Czechoslovakia. Such an exhibition is concerned on one hand with presenting the story of these telephone calls from listeners; on the other hand, it is an opportunity to engage visually with dimensions of the data—how to present the moods of callers, how to show fear or anxiety in a caller's voice, how to display a caller's sense of excitement? In short, what might the timbre of a voice tell us about the past? By investigating recorded sound along with data visualization tools, the exhibition hopes to achieve an alternative view into daily life in 1980s' Czechoslovakia.

### **Resources Used**

During the Visegrad Scholarship period, I collected data from the series "Telephone Calls to the Czechoslovak Desk" (HU OSA 300-30-29). This three-container series comprises extraordinarily rich personal accounts and testimonies, which provided the basis and body of my analysis. These accounts are telephone messages left on the Czechoslovak RFE service's answering machine between 1985-1989. Thus the research looked to a dedicated set of listeners, RFE's "core audience", who were active participants using the call-in format of the Czechoslovak Broadcast service of Radio Free Europe. Installed in the early 1980s as a practical extension of receiving letters from listeners, RFE's answering machine enabled listeners to leave a maximum two-minute message per phone call.

Such transcribed messages, in Czech and Slovak (with some transcriptions in English) provided a real-time glimpse into quotidian life and thoughts of RFE listeners. In particular, I focused on messages that discussed jamming, signal strength, tuning in, tinkering with radio antennae, taping radio broadcasts, requesting music; these were then analyzed considering the RFE's symbolic goals (e.g., hope, freedom), technical coordination (e.g., frequency bands, transmitter strength), and material listening conditions (e.g., bedrooms, *chata*, workplace).

To support the research in the data set of "Telephone Calls", material from RFE's "Eastern European Audience and Opinion Reports" (HU OSA 300-6-2) was valuable. For example, these reports helped to understand jamming conditions' effects on modes of listening. In one such poll, RFE reported that thirty-four percent listened to RFE despite jamming, twenty-six percent were prevented from listening to RFE by jamming, and forty percent were non-listeners for reasons other than jamming of RFE. Statistics as such shed light on the nuances of moments of listening—sustained listening attention or prevented attempts at listening.

Similarly, RFE Background Reports (HU OSA 300-8-3) were also useful for my research. Particularly advantageous in this regard were the digitized Background

Reports, which allowed me to search keywords and emergent themes in my research. For example, reading information in the answering machine transcripts concerning Havel being awarded the Erasmus Prize in 1986 and then contextualizing the call within the Background Reports.

Unfortunately, the answering machine tapes were not available for my research during this period. After contacting Hoover Archives as well as the National Museum in Prague, it was revealed that most of the tapes were erased; thus only the transcripts survive. This presents difficulties in how to analyze the pitch, frequency, and intensity of answering machine messages if one were to pursue sonic analysis for researching moods and emotions in the past. Therefore alternative tagging and coding of the transcribed messages will be used for the ongoing data visualization. Additionally, the three containers in HU OSA 300-30-29 have been scanned and will be available in OCR for easier searching of key themes in the data visualization.

During my two month stay at OSA, I was fortunate to be able to have many discussions on the how to approach such data visualization with Gabriella Ivacs (and who also put me in contact with the Hoover Archives and the National Museum in Prague) as well as with Csaba Szilágyi, who helped with outlining the virtual exhibition. Also, both Csaba Szilágyi and István Rév suggested other sound-related material (e.g., amateur radio listener QSL cards, VOA jazz broadcasts) in OSA that will be the basis for future research.