

For the more radical factions, on the other hand, the feeling of constant threat from the side of repression was a cementing factor, and the spreading movement managed to effectively unite those threatened by eviction. In the mid-seventies, London began seeing squatter conferences. Official supportive initiatives were established that searched for suitable houses for squatting and helped those who were imprisoned for squatting.

The legislative amendments (from criminal to civil code) differed from state to state and changed according to acquired experience with squatting. Some states criminalized the movement, while elsewhere amendments went against property owners who weren't using buildings. For example, in the Netherlands and England, squatting did not fall under the criminal code, being only a misdemeanor. The property owner needed a court ruling to have his property emptied. On the contrary, in Denmark the police could act immediately. In Berlin, squatters were often prosecuted for disturbing domestic cohabitants (via complaints by the owners), but the courts gave lenient punishments.

In addressing these problems, politicians had to decide between protecting a basic value of the social order – private property – and tolerance for a phenomenon resulting from the collapse of the social housing policy. Squatters themselves say that in the course of thirty years, more than 250,000 squatters were living in London alone. Holland – where in 1980 6,000 houses and apartments were occupied – now tolerates squatting. Evacuating a squat is not possible until the town hall proves that the building is slated for demolition, or that the town will begin construction on the area.

#### CHRISTIANIE

A symbolic legend of the squatting movement was the occupation of vacated barracks in Copenhagen in 1971. The Danish army had abandoned an extensive complex of buildings that the city didn't know what to do with. The growing movement of alternative youth immediately occupied the complex Christianie, and opened it to all who were interested. Houses, halls and warehouses began to be filled with a quaint mixture of people longing for egalitarianism and for a communal life. Although several police raids occurred, the inhabitants of Christianie tirelessly returned, and after negotiations in 1973, they

gained official recognition as a place of social experiment. In Christianie there quickly appeared a number of restaurants, coffeehouses, workshops and stores, as well as a kindergarten. The inhabitants, who in the 1990s numbered about a thousand, organized on the basis of resistance to centralization – power and responsibility were taken up at the lowest possible level. Organs and working groups spontaneously arose, according to the needs of the community, and were accessible to every inhabitant. Decisions weren't the result of majority voting, but were agreed upon by a consensus of all participants. Most of the money-making activities were organized collectively (apart from the market with hashish), earnings and fees flowed into common funds, and money was divided monthly by economic councils.

The organization of Christianie, however, also caused a series of problems – mainly due to inflexibility and low effectiveness. The commune itself tolerated the use and sale of soft drugs, despite their illegality in Denmark, and was not able to get rid of heroin dealers and criminals. Despite this, while many squatter communities throughout Europe unsuccessfully dealt with internal problems – the inability to reach consensus, not carrying out duties, disturbing other's privacy, never-ending wild drinking and disorder – to this day Christianie functions with the same ideals it had thirty years ago.

#### WHAT A LONG STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN

The beginning of the 1980s saw the culmination of the radical European wave of squatting in abandoned houses and apartments. A unique climate for squatters and also the anarchist movement was seen in West Berlin, where young men often took refuge in order to avoid army duty. A variegated alternative movement involving anarchists, Trotskyites, Maoists, punks, ecologists, feminist activists, radical lesbians and counter-cultural artists found a rather strong position in the city.

Radical groups gradually occupied all of the deteriorating quarter. But court notices and police raids resulted in furious violence in the streets, and West Berlin was shaken by unrest. In the following years the movement weakened, both from the influence of successful repression, and due to internal disputes. The abyss between those squatters who decided to negotiate with city hall for lower rent and militant radicals who refused to communicate with institutions widened perceptibly.

Most squats occupied in western Europe in the last thirty years have ended with police evacuations. Some, however, succeeded in reaching the temporary tolerance of the municipal authorities, while others agreed to negotiations with authorities for advantageous agreements, thus legalizing their stay in the original fortifications of resistance.

FILIP ČERNÝ (1975) EDITOR FOR DOMESTIC NEWS AT CZECH TV

## A PRIVATE WAR

### Interview with the Dutch historian Evelien Gans about her experience with squatting and on coming to grips with her Jewish heritage.

Holland has the reputation of being the promised land for all squatters. The daughter of Jewish parents, Evelien Gans (1951) is herself a former squatter. Though her work deals with modern Dutch Jewish history, with latent anti-Semitism, and with Jewish narcissism, her personal history includes chapters connected mainly to squatting.

In the 1970s, Amsterdam was going through difficult social and housing unrest. Squatting in apartments of the lowest category was not only a left-wing romanticism, but even the socially weak were grateful for what they could get. The protests concerning the senseless neglect of abandoned buildings culminated in a massive demonstration on April 30, 1980, when Queen Beatrix was crowned. Instead of being a day of national pride, Amsterdam became a battlefield. Evelien Gans was there.

#### How does someone become a squatter?

In 1975, I lived in an Amsterdam quarter where metro construction was planned, which called for the demolition of residential buildings. My street was not directly under threat, but friends asked me whether I would be willing to spend the night in one of the threatened buildings. One night became three. Downstairs everything was barricaded – when I went to the university in the morning I had to go across the roofs. But we couldn't prevent them from clearing us out. A group of police arrived with truncheons and helmets and arrested us. I spent the night in prison. This made me radical, and sent me on a path of regular squatting. I moved into a quarter around East Park where we occupied apartments. We were called "activists of the quarter."

#### Was the situation with housing really so miserable?

A lot of apartments were empty and falling apart. We therefore functioned a bit like unofficial urbanists: we dealt with the planning of the quarter's outlook, with the poor quality of new construction, with the construction of a large thoroughfare near our street that would tear down many old houses, including some of the last ones from the old Jewish quarter. We also took care of one

coffeehouse where people from all the quarter could meet. We took ourselves incredibly seriously. "Revolutions will start in East Park," I declared.

#### Did you squatters have problems with the "regular" inhabitants?

In the beginning we got along very well. We met in the coffeehouse and had common birthday celebrations. With the growing radicalization of the movement and the eventual appearance of squatters' indulgence with alcohol, the full-time residents lost their patience. By that time,

It was of course a struggle for ideals and so on, but in its own way, it was also my private war

further cohabitation wasn't possible. But when someone looks at the relations at that time, it can't be forgotten that for a long time Amsterdam's population stood behind the squatters. This changed the day Queen Beatrix was crowned, when a gigantic demonstration occurred. The event changed the general mood of public opinion.

#### How did the character of the squatters' movement change after this event?

For some time we continued to keep a culture of rebellion. We had our own printing press, coffeehouses, quarters and acquaintances. There was a truly complete culture – political and social. I worked in an illegal radio (Vrije Keyser).

I said goodbye to the movement while squatting in another house called Lucky Luijk. In occupying the house, I realized that we used the same means as the underworld, and that was too much for me. Anyway, most of the squatters from that time have settled own with families and jobs.

#### What did you do after this dream finished?

In 1982 we published a book about the demonstrations. After some time had gone by, I realized that I was looking for something that I could write about, think



about and analyze, and this brought me together with someone who helped me understand how important my Jewish faith was to me. I needed to make sure that I had a right to claim this identity, even though I did not experience war first hand. For a certain time, I felt divided. In 1984 I started crying at a workshop that was part of a sort of socialist conference in Bergen: "But I don't want to give up my left-wing ego because of my Jewish identity."

Luckily, it did occur to me that this wasn't necessary. I cast myself into modern Jewish history, and after the defense of my dissertation I stayed at the university. The academic world accepted me, even with my squatter past. That's a big Dutch advantage – local universities are truly not conservative.

**What was the fate of your family in the war?**

My mother was half-Jewish, so she was not put on the transport. My father was hiding and my **uncle** was

deported; he didn't return. I am actually a typical member of the post-war Jewish generation. Only later did I realize that squatting for me was a way of putting up with trauma, maybe even a sort of intentional looking for risks and dangers. As if I was unconsciously trying to experience a weakened form of oppression, injustice, and persecution that marked my family. It was of course a struggle for ideals and so on, but in its own way, it was also my private war.

*Interview conducted by Anna Hájková*

**Further References:**

- Corr, Anders, *No Trespassing!*, South End Press, London, 1999.
- Jackson F., *Squatting in West Berlin*, Hooligan Press, London, 1984.
- Internet:  
www.squat.net  
www.squat.freemove.co.uk



**The Society of Friends of the U.S.A. (SPUSA) is a non-profit organization, with an Education Center that has offered a full-range of English courses since 1990. SPUSA also organizes various public events, including its annual Writing Contest, listed among the Czech Ministry of Education's recommended school activities**

The topic for the ninth annual SPUSA Education Center Writing Contest is "The Stranger." As always, various interpretations of the given theme are welcome – submissions may be in the form of an essay, short story, film script, etc. Entries will be judged on originality and quality of thought, rather than on grammatical perfection. Entries must be in typed English and relate to the topic "The Stranger" – 300 words for elementary school (up to 15 years old), 500 for secondary school (16 to 18), and 600 for university-level students (19 to 26). Entries will not be returned and must include: the contestant's name, date of birth, address, telephone number and school. We also ask you to tell us where you heard about the Writing Contest.

*Entries must be sent to SPUSA Education Center, Rytířská 10, Praha 1, 110 00, and postmarked no later than March 15, 2002.  
Tel.: 02/2421 0813. E-mail: spusa@mbox.vol.cz*

Finalists will be invited to the Education Center in April for a second round of writing. Five winners in each category will be chosen by an independent panel of judges, headed by Mr. Jiří Stránský, President of the Czech PEN Club, who will announce the winners on **June 7, 2001, at a reception in the Radio Free Europe building in Prague.**

The winning pieces will be posted in late May on the center's web-site

**Prizes include (2) month-long English courses in Great Britain, (2) places in the Prague Summer Program in Creative Writing at Charles University, and a year subscription to *The New Presence* magazine**