A MAN WITHOUT FEAR

Stanislav Devátý (*1952)

They say he knew no fear. He was practically the only dissident brave enough to go on the run in the late 1980s, fleeing from arrest into neighbouring Poland. “It wasn’t certain when I’d return. Naturally we expected that it would come out. When we went to Poland I said when we were saying goodbye at the border that we’d come back in two months. And that’s how it worked out, almost to the day,” says Devátý, recalling his dramatic flight from conviction, which took place on 17 September 1989.

But that was just the closing act of his resistance to the totalitarian regime. Stanislav Devátý, who was from Zlín, had many years of persecution, arrests and hunger strikes behind him. He had also been a signatory and spokesperson of Charter 77. He was repeatedly placed in custody. He was also a member of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted. “When I think back, perhaps the worst thing was when I began a method of passive resistance. At that time I wrote a protest letter to President Gustáv Husák. Secret police officers were monitoring me and expected that I would go to a restaurant in Zlín, that I’d drink. But I didn’t drink. It was some time in 1983. A birthday party was taking place in the restaurant and they came for me. They arrived around midnight. It was a better restaurant – even foreigners used to go there. They came for me. They wanted me to go with them. But I lay on the ground! So they pulled me out by all four limbs, by my arms, by the hair. Then they beat me and I fainted for the first time. That was probably the worst. It was tough. Employing that method the first time just wasn’t easy. But after that I didn’t care any more,” says Devátý of his style of resistance to totalitarian violence.

It was after the revolution when Stanislav Devátý returned from Poland to Czechoslovakia. He became a member of parliament before later serving as director of the Security Information Service (BIS) and after that becoming a lawyer.

Stanislav Devátý was born in 1952 in Zlín. He attended a vocational school focused on electrical engineering and worked as a technician at various companies. But even as a boy he had taken notice of what was going on. In August 1968 in particular he was deeply affected by the Soviet occupation. “I was then on a hop-picking brigade by the German border and the whole thing drove right past us. Various petitions were signed against the occupation, too. It was then that a decision was born within me that led me to the other side. Imagine: They’re forever telling you how wonderful it is, how we have friends, and

then all of a sudden those best friends are in your garden with tanks. Perhaps that's the very reason I didn't want to resign myself to the occupation," he says. Devátý was then 16. He got a further shock a year later when on the first anniversary of the occupation he witnessed the suppression of demonstrations. All resistance was collapsing and people were succumbing to defeat. From then on, people would do their best to live according to what the circumstances allowed.

Stanislav Devátý too tried to live independently of the totalitarian regime, which exerted total control. Like some other young people, he did his best to be independent. If possible. "We had long hair and went to rock concerts," he says. But he also attempted to do things that could expedite the end of the regime.

He went through a number of jobs and for a while worked at the collective farm JZD Slušovice, an unusual enterprise that managed to function at least to some degree in Czechoslovakia's collapsing economy. It created the illusion of being exceptional.

In the meantime Devátý had become a Charter 77 signatory, set up a Friends of the USA Club in Zlín and circulated independent information. He became a member of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted. All the while he attracted the interest of the secret police, who devoted constant attention to him.

And Devátý took them on with passive resistance. When they came to arrest him he lay on the ground, grabbed a table leg or chair, shouted and attracted attention. He was unafraid to implement passive resistance. He later explained that Gandhi's approach in India had appealed to him, though he also took advantage of his burly figure. He weighed 113 kilogrammes and it wasn't easy to drag him out of a room and even harder to load him into a car and take him off to the station. And Devátý discovered that his approach attracted interest, which the StB were very keen to avoid. Naturally, the great majority of people were at that time not brave enough to confront the secret police in any way, so logically Devátý was forced to attract attention. People's attention was piqued by the commotion. They were shocked. Repression did of course continue during normalisation, although secretly – and Devátý upset that rule. He was aware that the regime in those days could not be as harsh as it had been. If he had behaved like that in the 1950s nobody would have treated him with kid gloves.

In 1988 Devátý became a Charter spokesperson. That involved working on Charter documents, recording police harassment and writing position papers. As soon as he took on that function he was thrown out of JZD Agrokombinát Slušovice. He worked there as an electrical engineer in the computers department. In those days it was common for the secret police to order the sacking of inconvenient persons and few had the courage to

defend themselves. Stanislav Devátý immediately sued JZD Slušovice over his dismissal. And won.

In January 1989 people in Czechoslovakia commemorated the anniversary of the self-immolation of Jan Palach. Naturally the totalitarian regime did all it could to prevent this. Všetaty in the Mělník area, where Palach was from and where he was buried, was tightly patrolled and the cemetery was literally surrounded by StB officers. But Devátý succeeded in getting through the cordon and placed a crown of thorns on Palach's tomb.

Nevertheless at the start of 1989 he ended up in custody. He responded with a hunger strike and for a period his health deteriorated sharply. Then things got even worse. In August 1989 he was sentenced to 20 months in prison for sedition. But he never showed up for his appeal hearing. On 17 September 1989 he went on the run and crossed the border into Poland.

He had a backpack and was accompanied to the frontier by friends from Zlín. "We walked for several kilometres, uphill. But on the Polish side it wasn't that far to the road. There Polish friends were waiting for us. But we hadn't chosen a good time. In those days the Poles guarded the border and the border police wanted to stop our car. But our friends simply sped off and let me out a bit further on. It was a chase like out of a gangster movie. After two days I finally got to Wroclaw."

However, he didn't know how long he would have to remain in Poland. He sensed that the regime would fall but he didn't know when. Things were changing in Czechoslovakia, but slowly. "After about a month I started getting nervous. At that time I had no idea that 17 November was coming. We knew something was planned for 10 December, which was Human Rights Day," says Devátý.

But the regime fell in November. It collapsed quickly and Czechoslovakia was free. Just to be certain, Devátý didn't return to his homeland until December. By then it was clear the changes were irreversible. Democracy had won. Devátý became a parliamentary deputy and later director of the intelligence agency the Security Information Service. He subsequently became a lawyer.

He feels strongly that nothing he did prior to November 1989 was unnecessary. "It certainly wasn't needless bravado. The opposite. It was 100 percent necessary. Today it may seem to us that our contemporary society has major problems. But that can't be compared to what was before. The opportunities there are today just didn't exist then.

You can travel wherever you like and do what you want. So I think that a few kicks were worth it…”

After the revolution Stanislav Devátý became a deputy in the Parliament of Nations of the Federal Assembly for Civic Forum and later for the Civic Democratic Party. From 1993 to 1997 he was director of the Security Intelligence Service.

Text by Luděk Navara