

IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO BE HIDDEN AWAY IN SOME CHURCH

Svatopluk Karásek (*1942)

In an old interview for the magazine Reflex (18. 12. 2000), the Evangelical cleric and musician responded to a question relating to the issues of faith, preaching and political stance: "I always say that politics is essentially an aspect of faith, that we are responsible for the era in which we live. I also signed Charter. The very mild-mannered German theologian Dietrich Bonhöffer in the end got involved in the attack on Hitler and died in a concentration camp. He said he'd been dismayed by the fact that over 60 percent of Christians in Germany had voted for Hitler, even though those terrible anti-Jewish laws were already in place. After all, it's not enough to be hidden away in some church, to say the Lord's Prayer and to let on that I don't have anything to do with what's happening around me. I'm for Christians feeling responsibility and being engaged. On the other hand, the pulpit can be used extemporaneously in various ways. I experienced that in Switzerland, where many of my friends in the clergy were left-oriented. I sat there as a listener and suffered like an animal when they ventilated their leftist ideas. That's something to be discussed at a table, where I can argue back. But when I'm sitting below, there's nothing to but ball my hand into a fist. (...). I'm committed to politics. I regard it as very important. But I don't want to abuse the pulpit for politicking." This quotation is a good summation of Karásek's outlook and an apt introduction to a short portrait of him.

Svatopluk Karásek was born in Prague on 18 October 1942 as the third son of Petr and Doubravka Karásek. His father was a clerk and was briefly imprisoned after the Communist takeover of February 1948: "Dad was great, a straight guy. (...) I perhaps inherited from him a certain strength of personality. Only chickens give up. I tried to live by that and he was my model. But he wasn't a Christian, until the end of his life. Mother maintained the faith in the family. She had us children baptised and also organised it for me to have catechism lessons at school. I attended with just two or three other boys from the entire school."

In 1956 Karásek enrolled in a gardening-focused secondary school in Děčín, though he was expelled, taken back and expelled again for insolence. "I had my first conflict on just the second day. When the instructor said that today only an idiot could believe in God, I spoke up. 'My mother believes in God and she's no idiot.' (...). The class burst out laughing, the instructor turned red and dragged me out the door saying he'd sort me out." In 1958 he switched to a wine growing school in Mělník, where he got to know Vratislav Brabenec,

saxophonist, poet and later member of underground band The Plastic People of the Universe. "This is how I tell it: the first day I enter the school and see an interesting guy who's also going there. He was in the fourth year and I was in third, following the switch from Děčín. We got talking and I suddenly tell him that all I've got in my bag is the Bible. He opened his bag and he had a Bible too. We thought this was a great coincidence and didn't go to school but to the U Šrachtů pub, where we started talking about it and getting to know each other." A friendship of many years was born. As a young man Karásek was sporty (he swam and played basketball and volleyball competitively), was into music, wrote song lyrics and read Beat poetry. He and Brabenec formed a band and began stage acting. Through the latter the pair even reached a nationwide competition, though they were disqualified over their school assessments, which stated they had a bad influence on the young generation.

Svatopluk Karásek graduated from secondary school in 1961. He applied to the Comenius Evangelical Theology Faculty in Prague but was rejected. To avoid military service (compulsory in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic), he found a place at the mines in Kladno, where he had to sign a 10-year contract. With the help of Evangelical theologian J. L. Hromádky he got out of the contract in 1964 and applied again to study theology, this time successfully. A year later Brabenec started at the same faculty. In his third year Karásek interrupted his studies and entered military service, where he was constantly in trouble. For instance, during the Six-Day War he handed his weapon in to his commanding officer during an emergency drill to show that, contrary to Communist policy and therefore the army's strategy, he was on the side of Israel. After a psychiatric evaluation the army concluded that Karásek was of no use to them.

He returned to university, graduating in May 1968. He got married and took up his first parish position in Hvozdnice near Prague. "The community there was, let's say, devastated, as they hadn't had a clergyman for eight years. In 1968 the regime abolished church secretaries, so they told me to go try out my new methods, that there was nothing I could spoil there because there were only a couple of parishioners. In a year I succeeded in putting the village back on its feet and filling the church." In the meantime, of course, Czechoslovakia had been occupied by the "friendly" armies of the Warsaw Pact. Normalisation brought a return of strict state supervision and with it church secretaries (state representatives who carried out that supervision): "The Synod council received an order that the systemised place in Hvozdnice had been abolished eight years previously and that there ought not to be any clergyman there. We objected that it had happened due to low attendance and that it was now sizable. But in vain. (...). I refused to leave. What pastor would abandon his flock as soon as a wolf appears? But it soon bit. They took away my state permit. I tried it again at Nové Město pod Smrkem. There a church secretary

from Liberec approached me, wanting me to see to it that fewer young people would attend. What could I tell him? The exact opposite was my aim.”

After losing his state permit to perform religious services, as was the official term, Svatopluk Karásek had to find a new job. In 1972 he got work as a castle warden at Houska Castle, where he and his wife Stáňa and children spent many years. He wrote songs and performed for friends and acquaintances as circumstances allowed. For him playing was a form of preaching. He gradually became a natural part of the nascent underground. In September 1974 he appeared at the unofficial Festival of Second Culture in Postupice and at the end of the year recorded the Plastics' Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned LP at an improvised studio at Houska. Karásek also continued to meet with Evangelical clerics within the New Orientation group, with Miloš Rejchrt, Alfréd Kocáb and Jan Šimsa coming to visit him.

In 1975 Karásek played at the Second Festival of the Second Culture in Bojanovice. Afterward the Communists clamped down on the underground and Karásek and the others were arrested. “Though the police ‘mapped’ us, it appeared more likely they wouldn’t take any action. Then out of the blue they picked up 16 or 17 people. Within one day we were all at Ruzyně. I couldn’t believe it. When they took me I said: ‘This is some mistake. I’m singing songs here. It’s already 1976, so it’s not possible they’d lock us up for that.’ In the next cell was Vráťa Brabenec and he just played the saxophone and never said a word. So I said to myself, there’s no way they can lock somebody up for that!”

The Prague District Court convicted four of those arrested: poet and musician Ivan Martin Jirous, poet and musician Pavel Zajíček, Svatopluk Karásek and Vratislav Brabenec. The highest punishment, 18 months in prison, went to Jirous. Karásek received an eight-month term for “disorderly conduct”. The justification for the prosecution of his crime was marked by typical StB language: “The defendant Karásek (...) sang songs from his repertoire. (...) The songs’ lyrics contained vulgar expressions and the defendant Karásek performed the songs in an indecent manner, which he put down to stage fright. (...) The lyrics contained coarse vulgarities with an anti-socialist and anti-societal effect, for the most part extolling nihilism, decadence and clericalism.”

Even before the trial many in Czechoslovakia, frequently with contrary views and positions, expressed solidarity with the imprisoned and persecuted artists, coming together in defence of freedom of expression and also managing to draw attention to the case abroad. The same year this community became the basis for the establishment of Charter 77, probably the best known opposition initiative in Czechoslovakia. Karásek signed Charter immediately after returning from prison. He was not allowed to return to Houska Castle and lived with his family in Prague, where he cleaned windows. A period of

constant secret police surveillance and harassment followed: “We lived all the time in a kind of state of emergency: home searches, detentions, interrogations and so on. One morning I was picked up by uniformed police – not State Security officers. There’s a post office in Košíře and they put me in handcuffs and chained me to the heating by the entrance to the post office. So from morning people were going to the post office, they greeted me and asked what I was doing. But I didn’t know. Then at around 4 in the afternoon a policeman came and let me go. Apparently they were tasked with detaining me so I couldn’t meet with some Austrian minister who was on a visit and had planned to meet Chartists. That’s just an illustration of the terror they used on us.” Karásek was asked to become a Charter 77 spokesperson (there were three every year). He first accepted but then in view of his family, in particular his seriously ill wife, he declined.

The police pressure intensified and at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s the State Security launched what was called Operation Clearance, aimed at hounding dissidents out of the country. The Karáseks were among its victims. They went into exile in 1980, first living in Austria and then Switzerland. They lived near Zurich and Karásek ministered in Bonstetten and Höngg. He also spoke at exile gatherings, took part in human rights events and preached at Radio Free Europe and Přemysl Pitter’s Czech community in Zurich. He did not return home until after the fall of the Communist regime, with the move becoming permanent in 1997.

Following his return he ministered at the Church of the Holy Saviour in Prague’s Old Town, played concerts, released records (his LP *Did You Say No to the Devil?* came out as early as 1990) and became in the good sense a well-known figure in Czech public life. The book “*Sváťa Karásek – Your Wine is Excellent*” came out in 1998. The following year a book of interviews conducted with him by the Evangelical clerics Štěpán Hájek and Michal Plzák came out under the title “*There’s a Throne in Heaven*” and in 2000 a collection of 50 of Karásek’s sermons was published as “*God’s Trumpet*”. He also became involved in practical politics. In 2001 he was a member of the Czech Television Council and the following year was elected to the Chamber of Deputies as an independent candidate of the centrist Freedom Union-Democratic Union party, which he later joined. He also served as government human rights commissioner. At the end of the 2000s he quit politics and cut back on public activities for health reasons. However, he by no means sits at home all the time. “I often come to the church, to the Church of the Holy Saviour... It’s my old place and I sit on a pew among the people. I’m now on the other side...”

Text by Adam Drda