

WE CAME TO HATE THE REGIME

Rudolf Mrázek (*1934)

Rudolf Mrázek lived for scouting. When the Communist banned the scouts and incorporated them into the official Czechoslovak Union of Youth he and his friends carried on meeting. They discussed the political situation and the things going on around them: arrests, the closure of the border, the purges of students at schools.

But then their Union of Youth “colleagues” took over their club’s equipment. “They broke down the door, burst into the clubhouse and stole everything they could. Just like that... We also had tents, which they had sown into waterproof raincoats,” Mrázek says. They lost everything: volleyball nets and camping equipment, including tents and canoes.

By that time Mrázek was a leader and in charge of younger boys. They asked where all the things had gone. The Communists stole them, he told them. What’s more, there was nobody to appeal to. “I came to hate the regime all the more,” says Mrázek.

They agreed to continue scouting. Illicitly. By themselves. The secret meetings were to be outside the village or at Mrázek’s house. “My mother was really tolerant, even though she wasn’t enthusiastic about it. But I had no father, there was nobody to impose order, so a kind of centre where everybody met formed at our place,” Mrázek recalls today. So they began producing leaflets. On a mimeograph. Instead of a signature the leaflets bore the acronym SODAN, for Skautská organizace demokracie a nezávislosti (Scouting Organisation for Democracy and Independence). They began distributing the leaflets in bulk. In Křenovice near Brno and the surrounding area, where the majority of them lived, including Mrázek. “The mimeograph I got from my uncle wasn’t enough for us. We made leaflets into the night, what’s more 50 or so an hour, which wasn’t that many. Ladá Stávek from Slavkov and Tomáš Holešovský found out that they had a better mimeograph at the district National Committee, kept in a room that it was easy to get into. We stole it. Luckily it was a large mimeograph.”

Rudolf Mrázek was born on 11 May 1934 in Břeclav. He came from a patriotic family. His father was a Sokol who worked as a railways inspector and was active in the anti-Nazi resistance as a member of the National Revolutionary Army. He died during an air raid on Brno. Two of his uncles fought as aviators in the UK and one died over the Bay of Biscay. The second survived the war and became commander of Brno’s Slatina military airfield following his return to Czechoslovakia. After graduating from grammar school Rudolf

Mrázek started university. However, at this time he had already found his greatest outlet in the scouts. When the scouts were banned his group continued, independently. Mrázek was 15 when the Communists took over and began wiping the scouting movement out. This he couldn't come to terms with. "Apart from school, scouting was our main daily enjoyment. There we learned friendship, generosity, kindness, love of homeland, to defend it – all of this part of scouting. And they banned it because they didn't need love of homeland, they needed love of the Soviet Union," Mrázek says.

Moreover, Mrázek enjoyed sport and company in general. As well as the Junák scouts, he attended Sokol, where two of his aunts were leaders. The core of his group of friends comprised Mrázek himself, Mojmír Babušík and Oldřich Klobas. Also Vlastimil Žampach, a schoolmate who also enrolled at university alongside Mrázek. Others joined them, including Jan Koňorza, a relative of Babušík's who was a former policeman. Alongside trips the ex-scouts began planning another activity: resistance. Thanks to contacts from the scouts they hooked up with other resisters. Their number swelled to dozens, though for safety reasons they weren't to know about each other.

"We were aware of what was going on around us, such as farmers being set higher quotas," Mrázek says. In those days village party organisations were largely focused on establishing unified agricultural cooperatives, or collective farms. Including by violence. In spring 1950 a cooperative preparatory committee started up in Křenovice, established by a decision of the local Communist Party. The results were dismal. By the end of the year the cooperative had 110 members but only one heifer and two horses.

While some coops barely survived, farmers who were doing well were harassed. Many ended up in jail, their farms were confiscated and entire families were moved to the border areas. In Křenovice this wasn't necessary. Increasing compulsory quotas for the state was sufficient pressure to join the cooperative.

The resistance group first wrote threatening letters to Communist functionaries. This produced no effect, even though they threatened them with violence and called on them to give up their weapons. They then wrote on the wall of a building in Křenovice that the feared local national committee secretary was a traitor to the nation. Security was then stepped up, though it still remained scant.

As well as the letters, the group's members launched a leafleting campaign. For the most part they printed them in the apartment of one member, Karel Ochman. Naturally his parents had no idea what was going on. The leaflets were always tied to an anniversary:

the foundation of the republic on 28 October; Masaryk's birthday on 7 March; or the anniversary of Edvard Beneš's death on 3 September.

But then they resolved to try something more. To help the farmers and sabotage the work of the cooperative, setting its haystacks on fire. Mrázek and Mojmír Babušík were best suited to this task.

Mrázek recalls his cooperation with Babušík: "They had an arsenal of weapons at home, so as much gunpowder as we needed was at hand. We stuffed it into stockings or bags, to which we added string that was used for blinds, very soft – when it was lit and blown out, it smouldered beautifully. We knew that 15 centimetres of that string would smoulder for an hour. That then caught the gunpowder wonderfully and there was an explosion where we'd tossed it – and then a fire. We called it the ignitor."

After successfully burning down a number of hayricks they began planning further operations. One idea was to derail a train, though just a freight one so as not to cause injuries. However, by then the secret police were already onto them. In October the arrests began. They came for Rudolf Mrázek, who was studying at the science faculty, in a lecture theatre.

He was taken to an interrogation centre at the corner of Příční and Bratislavská streets in Brno. "During the interrogation I had to sit on a bench and then a supervisor, who was in a bad mood, ordered me to kneel. He said, You bastard, I won't learn a thing from you. He then grabbed my hair and banged me against an armrest. To this day I've got little scars by my eyes... the way I was swerving about, I was covered in blood."

In the end Rudolf Mrázek got 16 years. He was released in 1963 at the age of 29, having served 10 years, three months and 19 days. Among those he met in prison was future Communist president Gustáv Husák, who was then out of favour. "I shared a cell with him for around a year and a half. He was out for himself. He didn't have a real friend, only sycophants. They then transferred him to Mírov. He claimed he and Slánský were political prisoners. But we weren't. He still felt he was a Communist. He was convinced. But he didn't squeal. He used to walk in the courtyard with a former head of investigation at the StB regional directorate, who ended up in prison after the trials. I said to him, He put you in prison and you talk to him? He said, You never know who you'll need. He was obsessed with power. He behaved haughtily."

Text by Luděk Navara