

## ***THE MERRY GHETTO***

**Dana Němcová (1934)**

With her husband Jiří Němec, psychologist Dana Němcová was one of the most significant opponents of Czechoslovakia's Communist regime in the so-called normalisation period (1969–1989). Today she says of that era: “The most tragic thing was that, unlike in the 1950s, when at least some people believed in communism as mankind's good fortune, we were living in a period when people just adapted to pressure, fear and an instinct for self-preservation (...). The 1950s were destructive. It was simply a massacre, when the elite of the nation were wiped out. In the 1970s a less conformist person could expect a wee year in prison. (...). However, it was a period of enormous demoralisation.”

Dana Němcová was born Dana Valtrová on 14 January 1934 in Most, north Bohemia. She graduated from grammar school in Chomutov and began teaching at an elementary school in Jirkov. In 1953 she went to Prague to study psychology at Charles University's Faculty of Arts. At university she got to know her classmate Jiří Němec (1932–2001), a future psychologist, philosopher and Catholic intellectual. The pair got married in July 1955 and went on to have seven children. With her husband Dana began visiting priests and lay Catholics fortunate enough not to have been imprisoned. They also visited Poland, which was culturally freer.

For the Němecs the relatively easing of the situation in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s did not represent an “awakening from Communist illusions”. Rather it was a chance to develop what they had been doing previously, to take advantage of the slight openness. Jiří Němec was allowed, albeit with restrictions, to work publicly. In 1963 he was one of the initiators of an ecumenical seminar in Jirchář. He was an editor at the magazine *Tvář* (the only non-Marxist arts review in then Czechoslovakia) and in 1968 contributed to the creation of Work of Conciliar Renewal (an association pushing for the introduction of the ideas of the Second Vatican Council into the everyday life of the Catholic Church and making Christianity more accessible). In addition he worked as a psychologist, lectured, translated and oversaw book series.

Following the Soviet occupation in August 1968 the Němecs left for Austria. They weighed up remaining in exile but in the end decided to return. The post-occupation Communist regime was based on widespread persecution and, among other things, turned Czechoslovakia into a cultural wasteland. The couple were gradually surrounded by friends who placed honesty and decency in public, intellectual and artistic life ahead of convention

and career. For them a key relationship was with the Jirous married couple (Ivan Martin Jirous, nicknamed Magor, or Madman, was an art historian, poet and artistic leader of the rock band The Plastic People of the Universe). Dana Němcová insists that the cornerstone of the community that gradually developed was camaraderie based on shared values. “We wanted to be with somebody... in the same boat... and we came into contact with the musical underground. They were long-haired young musicians who had given up on a professional career... Strangely, age difference was irrelevant. In those days people came together on the basis of point of view more than age.”

The Němecs’ apartment on Prague’s Ječná St. soon became one of the few places in Prague where people met, expressed themselves and behaved as if in a normal democratic society. It served as a kind of centre of the Prague underground as well as a “contact point” for people from the country, who acquired information there on friends, concerts and, later, goings on in the dissent.

The regime, which at a deep level could not abide free creation or “free association”, turned the underground into a political opposition. The persecution of members of The Plastic People of the Universe and other people from the underground intensified, reaching a pinnacle with arrests and manipulated trials that took place in 1976. At that time the Němecs – with other friends – organised support for the arrested: “(...) it succeeded in boosting our awareness of the fact that it wasn’t just the trial of some musicians. (...) It was discrimination against everything that didn’t bow down to the regime, which didn’t serve it or pander to it.” She also says: “It’s true that it represented a certain mobilisation of a certain circle of people, of mobilisation of self-defence on the cultural front, and it was in fact a step toward Charter 77.”

During the trial of the underground bonds were cemented among those who grasped that freedom is indivisible – that defending the rights and freedoms of individuals means defending the rights and freedoms of society as a whole. The Němecs played a key role in the fact that people of completely divergent lifestyles and outlooks understood the need to surmount the natural “social barrier” and to defend long-hairs whose music didn’t say much to them or was indeed a deafening racket to their ears. Except for the experiences of the Němecs and several others in the first six or seven years of normalisation the Czech anti-communist opposition would surely have looked different.

January 1977 saw the publication of the Charter 77 declaration demanding adherence to human rights (the Charter later became Czechoslovakia’s most influential opposition movement). As initiators, the Němecs were among the first to sign Charter 77 (both also collected signatures) and the consequences for them were immediate. Due to her support of underground Dana Němcová had already lost her job. Barred from making a living as a

psychologist she worked as a cleaner and caretaker. Following the publication of the Charter Jiří Němec was also kicked out of his job. From 1977 he worked as a night watchman. The whole family were subject to State Security harassment, interrogations, arrests and home searches. However, Dana hardly ever refers to her persecution, preferring to talk about who she gained from a non-normalised life in normalisation society. “We created a world within a world. It was like what was written on one Plastic People record – The Merry Ghetto. We enjoyed lots of good times that compensated for the pressure and kept us going when it came to resisting and insisting on this independent alternative.”

A year after Charter 77, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted was established to document cases of injustice and send reports about it abroad. Dana Němcová was one of its founders, inspired in part by solidarity with less well-known, non-Prague dissidents. In 1979 she and others were arrested on the grounds (as stated in a Prague StB Directorate of Investigations record dated 30. 5. 1979) that: “Accused Dana NĚMCOVÁ is in contact with numerous persons with decidedly hostile relations toward socialist society and the system of government in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. In the first half of 1978 a number of persons in Prague and elsewhere, among them also Dana NĚMCOVÁ, decided they would attack the state organs of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, in particular the security, prosecutor’s office and courts over their activities in such a manner as to give the Czechoslovak and foreign public the impression that these organs are carrying out their activities illegally. In order to slander the aforementioned organs they illegally established the so-called ‘Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted’.” (Security Services Archive, special investigative file, archival no. ZV-485 MV).

In October 1979 Dana Němcová was sentenced to two years in prison, suspended for five years, for sedition. She had spent the previous six months in custody. In 1979 she was imprisoned for several months (again in connection with the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted) with Jiří Němec. This left their children without parents and the older siblings looked after those who were still minors. In 1983 Jiří Němec left for exile in Vienna – and Dana remained alone with the children. “The start of the 1980s was tough, firstly because there was huge pressure to move away and some of our friends (...) did actually leave the country. This made me desolate. Then there were more verdicts (...) so heaviness was palpable at the start of the 1980s. But it was interesting that other, perhaps less well-known circles, which Charter essentially provided an umbrella for, were formed, supplemented one another and hooked up. It could be said that despite the pressure the activities intensified.”

A more detailed account of Dana Němcová’s life in the anti-communist opposition, respectively in the non-conformist community of the 1970s and 1980s, would exceed the

framework and meaning of this text. She was arrested as late as January 1989 when, as a Charter 77 spokesperson at the time, she and other opposition figures went to lay flowers at the statue of St. Wenceslas on the time of the 20th anniversary of the self-immolation of Jan Palach. When the regime collapsed she travelled around the countryside explaining the events to people. In 1990–1992 she was briefly a Federal Assembly deputy. After leaving politics she set up the Advice Centre for Refugees, in which she was until recently still active, and she is still the chairwoman of the board of management of Olga Havlová's Committee of Good Will. In 1990 she received the Pax Christi international peace award. Seven years later she was awarded the Woman of Europe title, the following year the Presidential Medal of Merit, in 2000 Austria's Central European prize, in the 2013 Babylon magazine's Ferdinand Dobrotivý Award, the Memory of Nations award, etc.

*Text by Adam Drda*