

THERE WAS NO SUNSHINE IN LEOPOLDOV. EVEN THE WINDOWS WERE COVERED IN WIRE SCREENS

Bohumil Robeš (*1930)

Bohumil Robeš, who was convicted for membership of the SODAN resistance group active around Bučovice and Slavkov near Brno, doesn't regard his arrest or initial imprisonment as his worst experiences. While old friends to this day describe the shock that came with being deprived of freedom, for Robeš the period that followed was worst: when he was in jail in Leopold.

In this he differed a little from the other members of SODAN who were arrested. Even in prison he would not be broken. As a political prisoner he refused to work and therefore received ever harsher punishments. In the end he spent 13 and a half years in jail. He says the feared Slovak prison Leopoldov was the worst.

“There was no sunshine in Leopoldov. Even the windows were covered in these kinds of wire screens. The harassment was the worst thing there. Honestly. The bullying and harassment. I'd even call it terror. Because it was just in my time there that the revolution took place in Hungary. Leopoldov is in southern Slovakia, so near the Hungarian border, and they made everything stricter. They thought up every possible kind of harassment for me. They really put some thought into it. They were primitive. I told them they'd answer for their crimes against political prisoners. So they set on me and tied me to a stake, with my feet backwards and my hands tied constantly for 10 hours. They then untied me at 10 in the evening and gave me an aspirin. I went to my cell... I couldn't even wash.”

But the worst thing was that conditions in Leopoldov caused him to become seriously ill. “A warden came and unleashed a hosepipe on me directly from a hydrant. Through a hatch. He sprayed me so long the water was everywhere. I was in solitary. And then he left me like that. I think that gave me pneumonia. That was a method of harassment at Leopoldov.”

Bohumil Robeš was finally released in 1967.

Bohumil Robeš was born on 1 August in 1930 in Holubice, near Slavkov in the Brno area. He lost his father at the age of 13. From a white-collar family, he studied at a French grammar school and planned to go to the Faculty of Theatre at Prague's Academy of Performing Arts. At the same time he was involved with a number of amateur theatre

companies, among them the student theatre at Brno's French grammar school. He was also interested in literature and signed up to the scouts and the Orel Christian sports organisation. However, a poor assessment led to him being rejected by the Faculty of Theatre. One factor was that he had been brought up in a Christian spirit at home.

With the support of friends, he got an engagement as a puppeteer at Brno's Radost theatre. At that time he also became involved in the activities of the SODAN (from Skautská organizace demokracie a nezávislosti, Scouting Organisation of Democracy and Independence) resistance group. They signed leaflets with the acronym SODAN.

The group was made up of young people from the Slavkov and Bučovice areas and was chiefly focused on writing, printing, duplicating and distributing leaflets, though they were later also involved in sabotage. In the end they planned to derail a train, though only a freight one so as not to harm anybody. Some group members attempted to fight back against the collectivisation of villages and forced creation of collective farms by setting hayricks alight.

The dominant figures in the group were Rudolf Mrázek and Mojmír Babušík. However, the group had no connections to abroad and were soon betrayed by informers.

Robeš first ended up at Brno's Cejl jail. In Brno he was sentenced to five years in prison, though he was saved from mining uranium underground by a physical disability. "I was lucky that I didn't have to go down the mines. I had just one kidney, so that's what they decided." However, he did end up at the feared Leopoldov prison. There, as a political prisoner, he refused the compulsory work, leading to frequent and lengthy stays in solitary confinement. Even in prison he stood up openly to injustice, leading to his sentence being extended twice. The first time by five years, the second by six.

Leopoldov was fateful for him. Though he also spent time at Jáchymov and the Vojna labour camp, he was in Leopoldov for 10 long years. With one interval – when he was treated for pneumonia at the Bory prison in Plzeň.

Bohumil Robeš passed through investigative custody and jail without ever using bad language. "In my youth I'd said I wouldn't speak coarsely. As a little boy I was coming from somewhere, probably somewhere on the street, and used inappropriate language... Mum looked at me and said: You never heard that from me. And then her tears started to flow. Mum had brought me up herself from when I was 13, because father had died. I have to

say the whole time in jail, even when it was a really grim situation, nobody heard a rude word out of me!”

While in prison he attempted to write poetry, but only where the regimen made it possible. And always in secret, as it was banned. What’s more he could only write poems with the help of fellow inmates, who gave him paper. “I only felt good when I had written a poem,” he said later. One fellow prisoner helped get the poems out, smuggling them out of jail. Unfortunately many of his poems were destroyed by wardens and have been lost irretrievably.

This is an excerpt from Bohumil Robeš’s poem Darkness. He wrote it in Leopoldov on 24 May 1964:

The Depths of Rats

What depths we have entered
Through Dante into a hell of terrors
To the heart of a rat, rebellious horror
Fiery depths, huge dog
Eyes bulge in fear
So as to rip away our faith in the forces
So as to slash off the wings of our uprising
When a man has dreamt of the deity
Somebody keeps breaking our wings
Somebody tempts us to vice
And to betrayal, we’ve got to collapse
Eternal pain to the torso

Robeš returned from prison in 1967. He was barred from working in the arts so found jobs in construction and a wide variety of professions.

Text by Luděk Navara