

I WANTED TO LIVE AMONG DECENT PEOPLE AND MAKE AN HONEST LIVING

Jiří Runkas (*1955)

Though the idea of flying across the Iron Curtain was daring, it appealed to Jiří Runkas from Moravské Budějovice. He was aware that the Slovak road cyclist Robert Hutýra had succeeded in doing so and had indeed been inspired by another balloon escape from the then East Germany to the West.

Runkas had completely had his fill of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. He no longer wanted to serve it and had been considering defection for some time. "You couldn't feel good here. There just wasn't any freedom and I had different ambitions. I wanted to live among decent people and make an honest living, to get paid for it and buy fine things. Simply to live like a human being. And that wasn't possible in the then Communist Czechoslovakia," he says. He knew how things looked on the other side of the Iron Curtain and was well-informed, as a listener of foreign radio stations. "I regularly listened to Voice of America. I made a red mark on the radio with a marker. Naturally when later the secret police did a search of my home they noticed that mark," he says.

At the start of 1987 he completed and tested out the balloon. In a remote valley of the Želetavka river, so the inflated balloon wouldn't be seen from anywhere in the area. It worked, with the trial proving a great success. He would do one more and then fly. That was the plan. Instead he ended up in prison.

Jiří Runkas was born on 21 September 1955 in Dačice, but spent his whole life in Moravské Budějovice. He wasn't willing to reconcile himself to the Communist regime and saw leaving for abroad as his only alternative. The trained mechanic was into ship modelling and had made it onto the national team. However, the Communist regime wouldn't allow him to go abroad, to the West that is. He tried everything. For 11 years he applied for a currency allocation necessary to travel to the West.

Runkas then tried to buy an excursion to Switzerland. It cost him lots of money but again there was a problem: He didn't receive an exit permit. "So I went to the police and asked why they'd rejected my trip. They replied that they wouldn't tell me."

Naturally he had in the interim lost the money he paid for the excursion. Jiří Runkas had had his fill of life in Communist Czechoslovakia. He had noticed a report in 1983 about the

professional cyclist Robert Hutyra flying across the Iron Curtain on a homemade balloon. With his entire family and racing bike. A lot was said and written about his successful defection to the West and Runkas was also aware of it from foreign radio stations. But where could the precise technical information essential to constructing a balloon be found?

Everything was top secret. There were no manuals, no guides and no literature. Just because of a fear of defections to the West.

Runkas's first discovery was that there was literally no information to be had in Czechoslovakia. "At the Technical Library in Brno there was information on, for instance, helicopters. But nothing at all on balloons. They had deliberately removed it all," he says. He tried to do it on his own. After all, he was an experienced modeller. He produced a model balloon over 1.5 metres in height. "It was so that I'd know how to sew it," he explains. He later burned the model, of course. The problem was the very purchasing of the materials required. Wouldn't he be suspicious? What if somebody noticed and began asking questions? Or informed on him directly?

"I bought a lot of materials in Brno, at Řempe, there were queues everywhere. I was thinking that if the shop assistant measured the material for me it would take a long time and everybody would be wondering what I had it for. So I said: Give me the entire roll! And that was it," he says.

But that wasn't the end of his problems. It wasn't easy sewing the individual pieces together either. "The material had to be sewn together by an overlock seam, like with jeans. There was three and a half metres of seams! I had to find a parachute because of the parachute string," he says.

Another problem was the ordinary basket that hung under the balloon. It was produced for him by a basket maker, but Runkas needed a larger one. And he couldn't say why. So he said it was for his cottage, for laundry. The basket maker was surprised it was so deep... He explained that he had long arms.

In the end, after numerous difficulties, it was constructed and tested. And then betrayed. The secret police arrested him in 1987 on the basis of an anonymous tip-off. They then conducted a search of his cottage, finding part of the balloon. To this day he doesn't know who informed on him at that time. He was returning from an aircraft modelling competition in Poland to find them waiting for him right on the Polish border. He was taken away to Brno. He knew he was in major trouble. His attorney told him it looked like an eight and a half year term. His wife also went through hell. She was in custody for 48

hours. An acquaintance of his that they suspected of knowing about it but not reporting it also ended up in custody. "They told me wife they'd lock us all up and put the children in a home. That was the worst thing," Runkas says.

In the end he was actually lucky. After two months in custody he was conditionally released. It was near the end of the 1980s and the regime was slowly starting to change. And crumble. However, the secret police didn't just confiscate his balloon but also the foreign currency he had prepared for the journey.

Following the collapse of the regime the balloon was returned to him. It was a symbolic moment. He inflated it and took a flight. But it was no longer necessary to do so in secret.

Today Jiří Runkas still lives in Moravské Budějovice, where he makes a living producing and repairing acoustic guitars.

Text by Luděk Navara