

EITHER YOU WRITE FOR US OR YOU WON'T WRITE AT ALL

Karol Sidon (*1942)

When the Charter 77 Declaration was published in the Western media in January 1977, one of the signatories, future rabbi Karol Sidon, was working as a newsagent. He was already an established writer, dramatist and scriptwriter but was barred from such work for political reasons. The Communist regime reacted to the Charter with massive counter measures that included the persecution of dissidents and a propaganda campaign denouncing the Chartists in newspapers and magazines. Karel Sidon remembers it thus: "A few days after the Charter, an article about the writer Ludvík Vaculík appeared in the magazine *Ahoj na sobotu* that showed him in an unflattering light. It was clearly the work of the State Security. I took a small pair of scissors and clipped that piece about Vaculík out of individual copies and decided that I'd only sell the magazine with the pages cut out and then just to those I knew by sight. I had a hunch they'd test me. After a while a young guy came along and I thought: 'You're definitely StB, I can tell.' So I concealed the magazine from him, saying we didn't have it. More people arrived and then a young lady, quite nice, came along so I sold it to her. And in the instant I handed it to her, I said to myself: 'Man, now you've made a mistake!' She tore it out of my hands and ran with it to a man standing a bit further away. She was waving the magazine above her head. I knew things were bad." With the help of an acquaintance from a printers Sidon quickly got rid of the partly excised magazines. A few minutes later he was arrested. "They locked me up for two days and started working on me. For the first time I saw a high-ranking StB man, who proposed that I move to Israel." For several years such police pressure became an everyday part of his life.

Chief rabbi Karol Sidon (Hebrew name: Efraim ben Alexander) was born on 9 August 1942 in Prague into a mixed marriage. His Jewish father Alexander Sidon came from Trnava. He was a chemist and spoke Hungarian as well as German and Slovak and had fought in WWI. His mother, Jana Honzíková, was from a poor Czech family in Prague's Nusle. In 1944 the Gestapo arrested Alexander Sidon. Not because of his Jewish origins, however: "They picked him up for a misdemeanour. I know that he'd placed a classified ad saying he wanted to sell a Leica camera. A German soldier came and bought it. That's what maybe led to the arrest, because Jews were barred from such transactions. I also know a different version from a relative, though, suggesting that father was a resistance member. However,

I don't know anything more specific about that." Alexander Sidon did not survive the Nazis, meeting his death at the Terezín Small Fortress.

For the most part Jewish children of mixed marriages were not placed on the transports. However, toward the end of the war things deteriorated and Karol, aged two, faced the threat of being sent to a concentration camp. His mother therefore sent him to relatives in the countryside. "I remember that in the beginning, before it became clear things wouldn't be that awful, I had something in the cellar. I had to be in the cellar during the day... but these are very vague memories... I found a photo at my sister's from a time shortly afterwards. In the photo I'm wearing a Russian uniform, because Uncle Cyril was a tailor and sewed it for me. I was photographed in the Russian uniform saluting, with a little rifle on my back. It's a wonderful photo."

Following liberation the Sidons returned to Prague. In light of their experiences with Nazi and Czech anti-Semitism many families in those days didn't discuss Jewishness. But Mrs. Sidonová kept nothing secret from Karol: "Mother was in poor health, mentally. She had depression. Her sister Anna said she ought to find a man. And mum said: 'No, no, when the first fellow comes along and says, Here I am, Mrs. Sidonová, I'll marry him.' And my later, second dad returned home in 1946, rang the bell and said: 'Here I am, Mrs. Sidonová,' so she married him... He was no intellectual. He was simple. He'd been quite a tearaway in his youth. But he managed to keep the family together and earn money whatever the circumstances..." Under the Nazis Josef Gross had been imprisoned in Terezín, escaping twice. He was sent to Poland but again repeatedly managed to escape. When the front drew near he reached the Russians. "But he wasn't tattooed and they didn't believe him. Some Jewish commissioner, who understandably had slightly different ideas of Jewishness, questioned him. Stepfather wasn't circumcised and he didn't know how to pray... To be on the safe side they sent him to Russia, to some camp, where the majority were Germans. He had to escape from there after the war, reaching Prague after a roundabout journey... He was a great storyteller and distinguishing the truth from the fabrications is pretty hard." For Karol, his relationship to his father (real and step) was of key importance and it became the subject of his writings. "I didn't know which father to choose. I didn't want to disappoint the real one, who I hadn't known. Therefore I ran away from home many times."

Karol Sidon came of age in the worst period of the Czechoslovak totalitarian regime. Alongside omnipresent persecution, propaganda and fear, the 1950s were also marked by Communist anti-Semitism. Sidon was well aware of Nazism and the Jewish fate, but he was under no illusions regarding the system in which he was forced to live. Despite considering going into the visual arts in his youth, he opted for literature. After his school leaving exam in 1959 he studied dramaturgy and screenwriting at Prague's FAMU film

school (1960–1964). He worked at Czechoslovak Radio briefly, then as a dramaturge at Jiří Trnka's studio at Krátký film and in 1968–1969 was an editor at *Literární listy* and *Listy*.

For Sidon the Soviet occupation in August 1969 was a fundamental turning point in many respects. "When the tanks arrived, I was aware that history wasn't going as we'd wished. That many of my Communist and, in those days, frequently almost non-Communist older friends from the *Literární listy* editorial team believed that the world was essentially on a steady path to improvement. I had already sometimes said and wrote that the Lamentations of Jeremiah suddenly entered my mind in Czech: 'How empty is the city...' and so on. Basically, I had an epiphany that confirmed my sense that what was nice about life could disappear in a flash." The experience of occupation led him to faith and in the following years he learned Hebrew and was a regular at the Jewish Community and at the synagogue. However, "it took another 10 years until I felt ready to be considered pious. Don't forget, I was a child of my age. When I came home and said I wanted to convert father declared: 'Karlík, don't be silly. Everybody's abandoning it'."

The occupation and subsequent normalisation in Czechoslovakia (the de facto revival of the totalitarian regime) also meant the gradual loss of work for Sidon: "Something changed in the moment the Czechoslovak political delegation returned from Moscow, where they'd signed the Russian ultimatum. Until then demonstrations were constantly being held. Some other people and I held a demonstration against the Moscow 'agreement'. Around 50 of us walked through Prague from start to finish. Nobody else joined us. And when we wrote a declaration against these deals, the printers refused to print them for us. So there was a more or less unified opposition for seven days, until the delegation arrived, and after those seven days people became exhausted. That was how normalisation de facto began. (...) It first became clear at the Radio, where one editor, who had cooperated with me normally and had been wonderful, said: 'That's that, the end, don't come back.'"

By 1970 Karol Sidon had brought out two prose works, *Sen o mém otci* (A Dream of My Father) (1968) and *Sen o mně* (A Dream About Me) (1970), while as scriptwriter he had collaborated with director Juraj Jakubisko on the films *Deserters and Pilgrims* (1968), *Birds, Orphans and Fools* (1969) and *See You in Hell, My Friends!* (1970). He also worked for Czechoslovak Television, for which he adapted Russian classics. The normalisation Communist regime expected officially active writers to collaborate with and support it. Sidon's refusal to do so brought complications. "I was able to work for theatre and television at the start of the 1970s. Others could no longer do so and I felt absolutely terrible (...). Sometime in 1971 the political staff evidently decided that they had me on the hook like a fish and that it was time to reel me in. Negotiations at the television, to which I had been invited, because a play I was working on still hadn't been approved,

followed. And the head of drama programming, I think his name was Dvořák, told me straight up: “I don’t wish to play Mephisto, but if you don’t write for us, you won’t write at all.’ So I said ‘I won’t, goodbye’ and that was the end of it. For me it was, in a way, liberation. Problem solved. I could work in samizdat and I was free.”

In 1972–1973 Sidon worked as a salesman at a postal service news kiosk, in 1973–1975 he was an assistant labourer for water utility Vodní zdroje and from 1975 was again employed as a newsagent. After signing Charter 77 (and the event outlined at the start of this text) he lost that job and became a stoker. He never stopped writing as a dissident and published in samizdat, including works such as the novel-essay *Evangelium podle Josef Flavia* (The Gospel According to Josef Flavia)(Petlice, 1974) and the novel *Boží osten* (The Divine Thorn) (Petlice, 1975).

In view of his dissident activities and work with the Jewish Community, the State Security persecuted and investigated Sidon in a “binary” manner: “I had two StB men, one because of the Charter and the second over my Jewishness, because the Communist regime was unabashedly anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic. (...). You never knew how things would go with the StB and they took advantage of that. (...) After one arrest, in the night, which was just dumb, they drove me out of Prague and threw me out somewhere in the forest. I didn’t know where I was, so it was quite difficult to find inhabited places. I came to, I think, Čáslav. It was dark, as it was everywhere after 11. There were just two fellows on a bench so I sat by them. At that time they had picked us up at the court in Pankrác; Havel was on trial. And one of those two fellows sitting there was also named Václav Havel. They took me to a hostel (...) and in the morning I got to Prague, probably by hitching.”

The constant StB harassment gradually led Sidon to seriously consider leaving for the West. But, he says, he wished to make use of his departure for the free world to do something worthwhile for his home. Thanks to the then chairman of the Council of Jewish Communities in Czechoslovakia, Desider Galský, he had the opportunity to study on a grant at a university in Heidelberg. In 1983 he applied for an emigration passport and left for Germany with his family (his second wife and son; another son was born in Germany; two daughters from his first marriage remained with their mother in Prague). He graduated in Jewish studies from Heidelberg’s Hochschule für jüdische Studien and in 1990–1992 completed his studies at a rabbinical seminary at the Harry Fischel Institute in Jerusalem. He returned to the Czech Republic as the Prague and provincial chief rabbi and achieved a great deal in reviving the Prague Jewish Community and building a Jewish school. As a rabbi Karol Sidon focuses on specialised work (translating, for instance, the

Five Books of Moses) while he also continues to write prose, publishing his most recent books under the pseudonym Chaim Cigan.

Text by Adam Drda