

I DETESTED THE REGIME ...

Jana Soukupová (*1958)

When the revolution got underway in November 1989, crowds of people naturally began gathering on Brno's Náměstí Svoboda (Freedom Square). There was no internet and the media was slow in coming to life. Every word delivered to the eager public was important. Jana Soukupová moderated when speakers addressed the square, quickly jotting down the names of those due to appear on a scrap of paper. In those days everything took place in unimaginable chaos, which left no time for planning the order of speeches. "Jan Šabata and I arrived together at Náměstí Svoboda, where sound equipment had been set up, directly from talks with the mayor, Josef Pernica. I immediately seized the microphone. I moderated the whole gathering," says Soukupová. Jan Šabata was the son of dissident Jaroslav Šabata, who was then in custody.

By that time Jana Soukupová had her own experience of the attentions of the StB, who had searched her apartment and summoned her for questioning. However, it was just that attention on the part of the Communist secret police that led Jana Soukupová to stand up once and for all against the regime. That said, she had already felt what she herself dubbed "detestation" of the totalitarian regime for some time.

"The search of my home definitively swung me to the other side. So in the last two years before the revolution I made my flat available for so-called 'šabatas' at which the leading Brno dissident Jaroslav Šabata met in our large living room with opposition sympathisers, with whom he planned political action," says Soukupová. She had long been assured of the attentions of the secret police. And when the revolution came she immediately became swept up in the events. However, she did not aspire to any position. Rather she grasped the significance of a free press and worked to revive Moravské noviny as an independent newspaper.

Jana Soukupová was born in 1958 in Brno and attended grammar school and then a teaching academy. She taught at a kindergarten and otherwise earned money as best she could, becoming a cleaner and putting up posters.

From her youth her outlook was certain. One of her grandfathers was an admirer of Masaryk's and wrote in her scrapbook: "Don't be afraid. Don't steal. That's what the president liberator of our nation implored. If he were speaking of the Junák scouts he'd

say, Don't lie. It's the same thing... Dear Janulka, I believe you will see the day when people don't need to either be afraid or steal. Granddad."

Though rather an unusual thing to write in a girl's scrapbook, Soukupová remembered it well. Probably because her second grandfather held similar views; the Communists had nationalised his company, so his outlook was also clear.

In the 1960s, however, the Communist regime began slowly changing for the better. The Prague Spring was then ended by the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. But Jana Soukupová didn't experience the tanks rolling in for herself. She was at that time in Syria, where her father, accompanied by his family, was working as a foreign expert. "Many of dad's colleagues from Syria emigrated with their families. But my mother was very close to her family, country and language," Soukupová says.

So they returned in 1969. Jana Soukupová even managed to join the scouts for a short while, before the Communists banned them completely.

After her school leaving exams she taught at a kindergarten. But she also became a mother and made the best life she could in the normalisation period. She took part in many (semi-)banned events and wrote for the newspaper Brno Večerník. Later, once she had left the kindergarten, she stuck up posters, delivered lunches and worked as a cleaner. In 1985 she asked Dušan Skála to write a report on a festival in Lanžhot for the underground periodical Host.

"When I think about the reason I got mixed up with the dissidents the word detestation comes to mind. The pressure of normalisation was for me, first and foremost, disgusting. The design of its instruments of propaganda was gross and the faces of the vast majority of the governing elite betrayed heinous personal preferences that I just wanted to get away from – to the other side," she later wrote.

In the second half of the 1980s she allowed Petr Cibulka, a dissident and collector of musical recordings, to keep his archive of recordings and samizdat at her place. When the Communist regime sent Cibulka to prison in 1987 for alleged financial crime Jana Soukupová was subject to a home search. "The StB shoved me in a car at the kindergarten and hauled me off to be interrogated. Then for 12 hours they turned over the whole of my huge flat. They took away a whole truck full of boxes! Mainly from Cibulka's nooks." The StB even recorded the whole operation on video, a first for Brno.

Immediately after the November revolution she went looking for the recording but it turned out to have been shredded. Like many other valuable materials that the adherents

of the old order managed to destroy in the archives of the Ministry of the Interior in Brno's Kanice, today home to the Security Services Archive.

However, the dramatic search made it completely clear to Soukupová where she wished to belong. Brno dissidents gathered at her apartment, which she paid for in StB interrogations. However, in June 1989 they allowed her, surprisingly, to travel to the West, to France. On the other side of the Iron Curtain she managed to record an interview with Radio Free Europe journalist Lída Rakušanová about Petr Cibulka, who was then in custody and facing a long sentence. She brought back a plastic bag filled with several editions of the quarterly Svědectví, which were of great interest behind the Iron Curtain, in Czechoslovakia. However, customs officers and the secret police were also interested in such banned literature. Luckily, she handed the bag containing Svědectví to her daughter and it escaped attention at the border.

But then events started moving at great speed. It was clear the regime wouldn't last long. In November 1989 Jana Soukupová was one of the first demonstrators on Náměstí Svoboda. The second day they brought her off to the police station in the Židenice district, attempting to intimidate her. But on the third day she was back on the square and moderated a large demonstration against the regime. Communism was clearly ending. For Jana Soukupová this meant a new beginning. There was an obvious need for a free press so she and Jiří Voráč put their energies into making Moravské noviny an independent newspaper. The first issue came out in December 1989. And Jana Soukupová stuck with journalism, subsequently working for various titles. In 2010 she drew on her own memories for a book entitled Nepoddajní aneb Nešlo to jinak; Příběhy jihomoravských disidentů v 70. a 80. letech 20. století (The Intractable, or There Was No Alternative: Stories of South Moravian Dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s). She also wrote Štatl za Husáka (Brno Under Husák) about the normalisation years in south Moravia.

Text by Luděk Navara