

“DEFECTIVE” MUSICIAN AND WRITER FROM KARLÍN **Vlastimil Třešňák (*1950)**

In 1982 Vlastimil Třešňák moved involuntarily from Communist Czechoslovakia to Sweden. He did not wish to leave his home, to go into exile. Later he recalled: “They drove me out with harsh interrogations. The waste of time, exhaustion, fear, hopelessness. (...) They arrested and beat me whenever they wished and could. It was their job description. Comrade Kafka and another StB officer I didn’t know carried it out, pissed drunk. When comrade Kafka beat me in 1981 and I collapsed Kafka ran through another office to the corridor for a doctor. In the neighbouring office they were actually interrogating my good friend Pavel Brunnhofer. Banned music and unofficial exhibitions took place in his apartment and P.B. and I were agreed that we’d never emigrate, we’d never leave. And now he sees me from the office next door lying on the ground, clearly not pretending, and when I came to he said to me: Get out of here!” (quotation from Ondřej Bezr’s book *That’s Nice, Is It Not? An Interview with Vlastimil Třešňák*, Galén, Prague, 2007).

The writer, musician and visual artist Vlastimil Třešňák was born on 26 April 1950 and was brought up in Prague’s Karlín by his paternal grandparents. He was greatly influenced by the poor and frequently adventure-filled world of the working class district, whose residents lived on the periphery not just of the city but socially. It became one of the main motifs of his work. After completing elementary school he held various casual jobs and soon began playing the guitar and harmonica as well as singing his own songs. In 1968 he began appearing as a “freelance” folk singer (his first public performance was on Prague’s Charles Bridge). Four years later he joined Šafrán, a loose association of folk singers whose members included the likes of Jaroslav Hutka, Zuzana Michnová, Vladimír Merta, Petr Lutka, Dáša Andrtová-Voňková, Vladimír Veit, Jan Burian, Jiří Dědeček, Zuzana Homolová and from 1973 the promoter Jan Pallas.

The association wasn’t registered, had no internal hierarchy and balanced on the edge of regime tolerance. Šafrán was occasionally written about in music magazines and its musicians could play live if they had their sets approved. However, they very rarely appeared on television or radio and the few records they had released had been strictly censored. All copies of an already pressed joint Šafrán LP were destroyed in 1977, very likely as Pallas, Hutka and Třešňák had signed Charter 77. The State Security had already

taken an interest in the association, respectively certain members. It was impossible to overlook their popularity with young people or their disregard for official “culture policy”.

From August 1976 the StB began systematically monitoring some Šafrán members and put pressure on concert organisers (houses of culture, university clubs, etc.) to limit their opportunities for public performance: “In view of the overall social danger of the group of songwriters in question, steps have been taken to work on them. J. Hutka – Operation Singer Zpěvák, V. Třešňák – Operation Rychta, J. Nos - Operation Troubadour, P. Lutka – Operation Hudebník, V. Merta – Operation Šafrán.” (From the StB file on Vladimír Merta). From 1977 the musicians began appearing individually. Vlastimil Třešňák, who was most in contact with people from the dissent and underground was, like Hutka, placed in the category “noteworthy criminally defective person”: “Třešňák actively develops right-wing focused activities along with other right-wing oriented persons, such as Jaroslav Hutka, Václav Havel, Marta Kubišová, Pavel Landovský and others.”

In the 1970s Třešňák made a living as a warehouseman, a night watchman and a props handler at Barrandov, though his favourite job was at an antiquarian bookshop on Dlážděná St. “I came to Dlážděná in 1977, after Charter, because I needed work for the stamp, so I wouldn’t be a ‘parasite’. I started as a cleaner. It was a lovely team, a lovely place to work. I held many, many jobs, but this was the only one where I stayed many hours after my shift. (...) When it became clear I wasn’t a dumb cleaner but also one of them, my engagement at the antiquarian bookshop expanded. They asked if I’d like to sell my prints there. Though I never thought I’d be able to monetise them, they were quickly snapped up. Until the StB’s intervention it was a kind of sideline,” he recalled in *Revolver* no. 33/1997.

The heroes of Třešňák’s lyrics are frequently outsiders, existing on the edge of society, whether forced to or through having no alternative. His prose is often compared to that of Bohumil Hrabal, among others. However, it must be emphasised that Třešňák isn’t interested in representation or barren pen portraits, or even the attractive aestheticisation of poverty or failure. Few writers have, for instance, created such a raw and powerful picture of the arid despair of normalisation Czechoslovakia as Třešňák in his 1970s prose. Prime examples include the story stories *One Day That Shook Me* (1978), *Romulus and Remus: An Energetic Response to an Energetic Question* (1979) and *The Vatican* (1980). Needless to add, prior to November 1989 Třešňák published exclusively in samizdat and later via exile magazines and publishers.

In 1978 the actor Vlasta Chramostová invited Třešňák to perform at her apartment theatre. In 1976 she put on a staged collage of Seifert’s *All the Beauties of the World*, followed in 1977 by *Apellplatz II*, inspired by a Jerzy Andrzejewski short story and quoting

works by Karol Sidon, Berthold Brecht, Pavel Kohout, Ludvík Vaculík, Edmond Rostand and others. The pinnacle was a performance in 1978 of Play Macbeth. Appearing in the adaptation of the Shakespeare play were its author Pavel Kohout, Vlasta Chramostová, Tereza Kohoutová (Boučková) and Vlastimil Třešňák, who also wrote the music and sang. It was well received and repeat performances ones were monitored by the StB. Following a police raid on Ivan Havel's apartment it was no longer performed. The cameraman Stanislav Milota succeeded in filming a performance which was secretly sent to the West and shown by Austria's ORF TV station. Another of Třešňák's noteworthy activities was to set up the Hrobka volunteer people's library with Olga Stankovičá, Olga Havlová and Jarmila Bělíková. Over 500 volumes of "people's literature" of all kinds were gathered and borrowed from the Stankovičs' apartment, while several issues of the New Pulp magazine with the latest new additions were published and carnivalesque evenings and tableaux organised.

Growing police persecution of Vlastimil Třešňák climaxed with a brutal interrogation in July 1981. Many years later (in 1998) a court ruled that the accused StB officer "Dr. Josef Kafka is guilty of on 13. 7. 1981 in a period from 21:30 until 17. 7. 1981 at 2:30 at Prague 1, Bartolomějská no. 7 in an office of the National Security Corps as a supervisor of the regional directorate of the NSC Prague and the Central Bohemian Region StB during an interrogation of the arrested Vlastimil Třešňák, along with an as yet unidentified man, beating him with the palms on the face and hitting him on the head several times with a celluloid ruler and on 14. 7. 1981 from 13:30 to 14:20 and during this same occasion himself putting out lighted matches on the back of Vlastimil Třešňák's hands and at the same time taking part in his illegal detention, which lasted from 21:30 on 13 .7. 1981 until 16.7.1981 at 3:00." The StB officer (by that time an entrepreneur) Josef Kafka received a suspended sentence and "the sanction of being barred from activity in the armed forces, armed corps, in the regular police and in the security services for a period of four years." In effect he received no punishment under a scandalous verdict.

Vlastimil Třešňák became a victim of the police operation Clearance which employed exceptional pressure in a bid to force selected people to leave the country. As mentioned above, in 1982 he emigrated to Switzerland. He later lived in Germany. In Sweden, and thanks to Jan Pallas, his first album Zeměměřič was released. It had been recorded on tape in 1978 and smuggled across the border. (He has to date released seven albums, with one of the most noteworthy 1995's Koláž, on which he again hooked up with the Korman Romany family, musicians with whom he had played in his youth in Karlín).

Třešňák continued to write in exile, with his prose – such as the novel The Most Important Things About Mr. Moritz (1989) and the short story Oedipus on the Corner (1986) – naturally reflecting themes linked to the émigré experience and his new life. Following the

fall of the Iron Curtain he returned home (making the move permanent in 1995). He has published several novels, such as *The Key is Under the Mat* (1995), played live with various groups and exhibited his pictures; his art has been published in the monographs *Adam und Söhne* and *49 + jedna / 49 + one*. Today he rarely appears in public, is interview shy and focuses on his art and writing. He retains Swedish citizenship: “In the early 1990s I received from the then Czechoslovak interior minister an offer to get my Czechoslovak citizenship back – if I filled in five questionnaires, paid several hundred crowns for a duty stamp and supplied three photographs. I blithely said that I wouldn’t; when his predecessor comrade Obzina stripped me of my Czech citizenship, let his successor bring it to me at the pub *U zlatého tygra*. I waited in the pub, and waited and waited... So I don’t have Czech citizenship. It’s actually all the same what passport you have in your pocket. I just happen to have a Swedish one.”

Text by Adam Drda