

MY PARENTS HADN'T A CLUE. I WENT TO SCHOOL AS NORMAL

Vlasta Černá (*1953)

It was the night of September 5–6, 1950. Vlasta Černá was sitting crouched in a bush by the river Morava on Czechoslovakia's southern border with Austria. Above her flares lit up. Gunfire could be heard. *"When I saw that they'd caught Felix Davídek and Josef Pluháček and were placing them in handcuffs, I was lost. I didn't know where I was or where I could escape to. So I lay down behind the bush. In the morning they started shooting at me. It was a miracle nothing happened me. They arrested me."* Vlasta Černá was then not quite 18. Her dream of a free life beyond the Iron Curtain had just evaporated.

Vlasta Černá was born on 19 January 1933. She lived with her parents and two siblings in Horní Štěpánov in Moravia. Her father Arnošt Přikryl had a small carpentry workshop while her mother looked after the household and a small farm. During WWII Vlasta attended the municipal school. *"We had to have German. In fourth class some SS man or soldier taught us and when we didn't know a word they'd beat us across the fingers with a cane. I got it too as I didn't know how to say the candle."* However the teacher Vilhelm, a great patriot, was brave enough to have the children practice the national anthem through open windows. *"To this day I remember people on the street stopping under the school windows."* At the end of the war her father joined the partisans in the local forests. Shortly before liberation he was forced to leave home for a few weeks, though in the end the family survived the war, fortunately.

Following liberation Vlasta hoped to attend grammar school in Jevíčko and as she needed Latin for the entrance exams she started going for extra lessons with the local chaplain Felix Davídek. Meeting Davídek shaped the rest of her life. Felix Maria Davídek, later a secretly ordained bishop in the underground church in Czechoslovakia, had decided after the Communist coup of February 1948 to set up the illegal church school Atheneum to prepare young people for theology studies.

The Přikryls were hit directly by the arrival of communism, with the Communists nationalising the father's workshop in 1950. Vlasta herself experienced the banning of Orel and Sokol. When the Communists replaced a crucifix with portraits of Stalin and Gottwald at the community centre, now occupied by the Communist Youth, she and several friends decided they wouldn't take any more. *"We secretly hung the crucifix back*

up and stamped on the portraits. It led to a big investigation but luckily nobody found out anything."

In 1950 Davídek decided to expand his covert religious teaching by setting up a Catholic university. This did not escape the attention of the Communist secret police and in April 1950 he was arrested. The same day he managed to escape from a police station in Boskovice via a window and fled into the forests. News of his escape soon reached Vlasta and without hesitation she helped to hide him. *"I was a go-between in contact between Davídek and his family. When he needed something, I brought things to his hideout. He was hiding in the buildings of some accommodating people. Then two weeks later he changed places for safety reasons. He disguised himself in women's clothes and in the evening we brought him to a new dwelling. We kept him hidden until September 1950."*

Davídek was aware that the situation was untenable in the longer term and decided to escape to the West, to Austria. Vlasta decided to go too. *"My parents hadn't a clue. I went to school as normal. They didn't know for a long time later that I'd been locked up. I had a schoolbag with books, one ring and nothing else."* The three-member group were meant to be guided across the border by a reliable people smuggler. In reality, however, he was a provocateur and lured them into an ambush on the banks of the river Dyje. When the flares went off Vlasta jumped into a nearby bush in the confusion.

Following their arrests, the StB brought all three to a notorious interrogation centre in Uherské Hradiště, where prisoners were often brutally interrogated, including by torture using electric currents. The secret police also arrested 10 other people from Davídek's circle.

Fortunately Vlasta, being a minor, didn't face torture. But they did lock her up in solitary confinement in an underground cell for three months. *"For the entire duration of the investigation I wasn't able to wash or change my clothes. I felt like an animal. It was humiliating. To kill the time, I sang in my soul all the songs I knew. I prayed... Otherwise I'd have gone insane."* Vlasta had to write a fake postcard from Austria so her parents would think she was safely over the border.

For some time she found herself in a cell with a planted informer. Later she was put back in solitary. After seven months, sometime before Easter 1951, she became very ill with jaundice and was released home early. *"The others from our group were still being investigated and I was already home. So on top of everything people in the area suspected I was an informer."* She found a job working a sewing machine in Boskovice,

though not for long as she soon contracted jaundice again. She wasn't allowed to do school leaving exams so in autumn she enrolled at a secondary school specialised in health care.

However, in November 1951 she was rearrested. The trial of the Zvon (Bell) group surrounding Felix Maria Davídek was approaching. In March Vlasta was sentenced as a minor to one year in prison. Davídek got 24 years and the other members of the group received terms of between one and 18 years. Fortunately Vlasta had already served most of that time in investigative custody and soon got out.

On her release she completed the healthcare course and later also completed school leaving exams by correspondence. She got married and had three daughters. In the latter half of the 1960s she studied psychology at the Faculty of Arts in Brno and later worked at a psychiatric clinic in the city. She lived to see the fall of communism in 1989. However, her life was marked by terrible trials; her husband and one of her daughters died, while she herself survived cancer. She worked till she was 78. Today she lives in Brno. *"Young people should respect what they have more and shouldn't trust the Communists."*

Text by Jan Horník