

I ALWAYS HOPED AND BELIEVED THE REGIME WOULD FALL

Pavel Bratinka (*1946)

Pavel Bratinka was born in Bratislava on 14 March 1946 to a Slovak father and a Czech mother. In 1950, following his parents' divorce, he and his mother moved to Prague, while his brother Petr remained with their father in Slovakia. His mother was a manual worker at Tatra Smíchov. From a very young age Bratinka took an interest in politics, influenced by his anti-Communist mother and grandmother. However, his convinced Communist father, with whom he lived for a year before he moved in with his grandmother in 1961, proved a negative influence. Bratinka was also interested in astronomy and enjoyed mathematics and physics. He attended lectures at the Prague astronomical observatory, where he later worked as a guide.

In 1964, after secondary school he enrolled at the Faculty of Nuclear and Technical Physics at the Czech Technical University in Prague, where he focused on solid state physics. The Communist ideology impinged only slightly on his studies. *“Admittedly I joined the Socialist Youth Union, but that soon fell apart. It was the atmosphere of the laid-back 1960s. In those days I was optimistic that progress would follow a better course.”* In the second half of the 1960s there was virtually no censorship of foreign language publications. Bratinka regularly visited the library at the US Embassy, where newspapers, magazines and books could be accessed: *“Until 1968 they even brought magazines to my home every week: Newsweek, Time, Life and The International Herald Tribune – I had huge amounts of them.”*

In July 1968 he travelled to the Netherlands to write a thesis at the Technische Hogeschool in Delft, so he did not experience the invasion at home. He made a living in the Netherlands as a welder. He returned to Prague legally in November 1969, when the borders had been closed. Remaining in exile did not appeal. He joined the Institute of Nuclear Physics at the Academy of Sciences as a candidate of sciences. However, membership of the Socialist Youth Union was a condition for obtaining that title. Pavel Bratinka refused and was drummed out of the Academy of Sciences in 1974. He briefly worked as a worker at the printers of Rudé právo. After being fired he found a position as a clerk at the Institute for Technical Development of Information, where he remained for seven years.

In the 1970s he began taking part in apartment seminars at which religion, philosophy and politics were discussed. When Charter 77 was created dissident friends asked him to refrain from signing so as not to be in the sights of the StB; at that time he played an important role in the publication and distribution of samizdat. Nevertheless, the secret police kept a file on him from 1977 to 1988 that ran to over 900 pages. As he discovered later, there was a secret police informer in his office at the institute to whom he used to give Charter materials to read. The secret police snitch also lived opposite his apartment.

In the summer of 1981 the StB came to the conclusion that his job was too easy. *“Within an hour they threw me out for the possession and duplication of materials targeted against the leading role of the party and the work of the National Security Corps.”* When Pavel Bratinka discovered that the order had been signed by a cadre officer at the enterprise and not a superior he decided to contest his dismissal in court. He won the case and at least received the wages he had lost before being officially dismissed again by so-called “agreement”. He became a night cleaner in the Metro. *“That was the best-paid job. There were very interesting people there. Virtually nobody was a real cleaner. The further you fell, the higher your earnings.”* However, the night shifts wore Bratinka out so after a year he found a job as a stoker at Metrostav. *“I was a stoker for seven years, until the fall of communism.”*

Working in a boiler room left plenty of free time for dissident activities. He kept duplicating and distributing Infochy, Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted materials, and translated foreign texts and books, such as Friedrich von Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*. When the Communist regime brought the publishing work of Edice Expedice to an end he took care of the completion and distribution of texts within the Edice Svíce series for two years. These included, for instance, the memoirs of de Gaulle and Prokop Drtina.

From the 1980s he distributed financial donations from the West for translators of samizdat texts and books. *“We bought typewriters with it and handed out money for lawyers to the families of those who were locked up. It amounted to around 150,000 crowns a year.”* Thanks to his good command of English he was also responsible for the dissent’s contact with foreign diplomats, in particular from the UK and US.

Throughout the normalisation period he was summonsed for questioning from time to time. *“You were scared, but it was never overwhelming. The laws were elastic – they could lock you up any time. I refused to testify.”* Bratinka was lucky and was always released after a few hours. One time, however, in October 1988, he spent four days in custody. He never experienced brutality during questioning. He finally signed Charter 77

in 1988, though he had been among the Chartists' inner circle since the start. *"By then it was essentially a symbolic signature."*

Many meetings and debates in that circle in the days of normalisation naturally gave rise to friendships and acquaintances that Bratinka brought into politics. *"When the regime fell, we already had a clear understanding of market economics, capitalism and the division of power within the state. Nobody spoke about socialism with a human face."* In December 1989 he cofounded the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA) at his apartment, becoming its first chairman, a position he held until 1992. When the foreign section of the Civic Forum was created, Bratinka became its deputy chairman in January 1990. Within the framework of the Civic Forum he stood for the Federal Assembly for the ODA. In 1990 he became an MP and served as deputy chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the federal parliament for two years.

From 1992 until 1996 he served as deputy foreign minister of the Czech Republic. In 1996 he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies on the ODA ticket and two years later became minister of portfolio in the Czech government. In February 1998 he left the ODA and co-founded the consultancy company Eurooffice Praha – Brusel, which he continues to run. He is married and has four children.

Text by Jan Horník