

WE CHIPPED IN TO GET A BUILDING WHERE WE'D DO AS WE WISHED

Jaroslav Chnápko (*1956)

“The State Security first came for me shortly after I’d signed Charter 77. They arrived early in the morning. That was probably the intention, that they’d pull you out of bed half-asleep and disoriented. By the way, the Gestapo used similar methods. I was dazed but my father told me to calm down. He said they’d wait – and made me breakfast. His behaviour helped me a lot. I ate and only then did we open the door to them,” remembers Jaroslav Chnápko, nicknamed Šíma, a one-time dissident and noteworthy underground figure. *“When they put questions to me in the interrogation room I tried not to answer. It was important not to say a word to StB men. Their method was to ask you about total banalities and if you answered, because it struck you as immaterial, they’d use any kind of triviality against somebody else. They let on they knew everything and every detail could help lead the person being questioned to believe them, crack and testify.”*

Jaroslav Chnápko was born in 1956 in the industrial city of Most in northwest Bohemia. It had a harsh atmosphere typical of all the areas of Czechoslovakia from which the German population was driven out after the Nazi occupation. The Germans were replaced by settlers from the interior with no relationship to their new environment. Jaroslav grew up with an older sister, Zdena, while his parents, Josef and Hermína, worked at a factory named Czech-Slovak Friendship Chemical Works (previously the Stalin Works). They were workers but not Communist Party members. After elementary school Jaroslav became an apprentice locksmith at a vocational school run by the factory. *“It was an enormous factory to which workers were ferried by bus. I remember the gas emissions. Sirens would sound and the buses would carry away half-poisoned people feeling unwell. Once I was walking along with a friend and sparrows above us just dropped down dead.”*

Neither the authorities nor the senior functionaries at the plant took workers’ safety very seriously. Jaroslav’s mother died in the chemicals works in 1979 while trying to save the life of a co-worker. *“Mother was working at a petrol cistern, where she died. I don’t know the exact circumstances, but she always had to record the values on paper. When her shift ended, her colleague went to note them down. She didn’t come back for a long time and mum, who had already got changed, went to look for her. She found her mildly poisoned by petrol fumes. She wanted to pull her away but then both of them got*

poisoned. The grim reaper was never far away there. Once there was an explosion because a student working there was wearing a nylon or silicon bra that made a spark of static – and around 20 people died.”

Jaroslav Chnápko's conflict with the Communist system grew out of everyday experience. At 13 he bought a crock of a motorcycle, which he rode over slag heaps with friends. He was picked up by uniformed National Security Corps officers. *“Five policemen battered me all night and tried to beat where I'd stolen the motorbike out of me. I defended myself. Father went to complain, but nothing came of it. On the street I used to run into the guy who'd beaten me the most. Every time it made me feel sick.”*

When he was a bit older he and his friends started listening to rock music, aping their Western idols' jeans and long hair. With the beginning of normalisation (roughly the two decades following the Soviet invasion of August 1968) the Communist regime was reinforced practically and ideologically and barred free music or any other form of creativity. For instance, *“jeans were regarded as ‘capitalist trousers’ that did not belong at a socialist vocational school. I first wore them because I was into rock, but after a while they became an attitude to life and a protest. I went to a concert and a policeman was standing in front of the pub; he might check my ID, or he might hit me because of my hair or clothes. It was absurd. The state apparatus itself turned us into enemies. You couldn't live your own way. The fact you were impotent, that you had no right to justice, that you wouldn't be heard, was constantly reaffirmed.”*

In the first half of the 1970s “inadaptable long-hairs” who wanted to life freely and, if possible, outside official structures, gave rise to an underground that was an informal and persecuted opposition movement. In 1975 Chnápko began compulsory two-year basic military service, which meant the loss of freedom, further systematic bullying and irritating ideology. He and other apprentices from working class families in Most were conscripted to a regiment in Pacov. Later he was sent to Přešlavice in central Moravia. He had frequent disciplinary problems and was placed in solitary as punishment. Military service reinforced the conviction that he did not wish to be an obedient citizen of the CSSR, mutely doing the high-ups' bidding. A wave of persecution of the underground in 1976 culminated with widespread arrests and two show trials. On 1 January 1977 the Charter 77 Declaration was published in the Western media, following which the Communists launched an intensive campaign against the signatories. Chnápko, who worked in a chemicals plant after military service and later in apartment maintenance, signed Charter 77 as an ordinary labourer. He did not yet know Prague dissidents and friends had given him the text, which he regarded as a worthwhile call to the state to at least adhere to its own laws.

The State Security monitored the Charter group and soon brought in most of them for questioning, pressuring them to reveal from whom they had received the text. They also came for Chnápko but then lost interest in him. The Communists gradually prohibited official concerts by numerous independent groups. There was increased harassment of young people who attempted to live more freely, in private at least. In 1978 a group of friends that included Chnápko (and the likes of Karel Havelka and František Stárek – see their portraits) decided to buy a house where they could live and put on events. *“It was possible to buy houses relatively cheaply in the villages. So we decided that we’d chip in and get a building where we’d do as we wished and where the police wouldn’t come chasing after us.”* They bought a homestead in the village of Nová Víska, which they did up (originally it had just two inhabitable rooms) and began organising parties and concerts. Young people began gathering there, especially at weekends. They could sleep over for a few crowns towards utilities and food. *“I’d recommend life in such a ‘commune’ to everybody as a ‘guide’ to learning tolerance. We got on well, worked all day and then drank and danced. There was music every evening. Guitars were played and music was played on cassette recorders. We turned the barn into a concert hall where bands performed and we put on festivals. The Plastic People of the Universe played there and it hosted the first punk festival in the country. It didn’t last long, but those were wonderful years.”*

Naturally both the secret and uniformed police began watching this spot where hippies from far and wide gathered and Nová Víska was frequently surrounded. The regular police checked people’s ID and confiscated their car registration papers while reinforcements from other districts were also used to monitor the building. Searches of the house, which was the birthplace of the underground magazine Vokno, occurred frequently. *“Víska was exceptional in that samizdat was created there secretly but on a large scale. There were maybe 100 people there, though in one room sealed with mattresses; printing took place on a mimeograph without visitors knowing. You turned a handle on that machine and with every turn one page was created. It was loads of work. But the police never found anything.”* Chnápko met his future wife Silvestra (see her portrait) at Nová Víska. Along with editor-in-chief František Stárek, the pair distributed the magazine Vokno around the country via trusted acquaintances.

In 1980 the State Security had the authorities issue a decision to expropriate the Nová Víska building on the grounds it was required for defence purposes. The owners at least got their money back and began searching for a different building. However, this was at the time the StB launched Operation Clearance, under which it pressured dissidents to move to the West, often employing brutality. Many of Chnápko’s friends went into exile as the systematic StB pressure had become unbearable. However, Jaroslav, Silva and

their daughter had no wish to leave and purchased an old mill in Osvračín, West Bohemia.

Though they also had jobs they began small-scale farming, obtaining horses and other animals and carrying out repairs. Friends visited Osvračín at weekends and concerts took place in the granary. However, they remained in the Communists' sights. *"They harassed us systematically. For instance, we had a couple of horses and we drove them with a buggy – and the police gave us curious fines, for speeding or the vehicle not having lights. Or I was turning out of the gate and got a fine for 'blocking the traffic'."* In a country where the average income was around 2,000 crowns the frequent trumped-up fines hit the family budget hard. *"For instance, we didn't have money for food for a week. We lived from the little we had at home and looked forward to the weekend, when friends would arrive and bring something."* After the fall of communism Chnápko discovered in the archives that the StB regarded the family's situation as dire and expected they would soon achieve their goal of forcing them to move to a "capitalist foreign country". Emigration had been offered to Chnápko during numerous interrogations but he refused.

In the end the StB, in cahoots with other agencies and organisations, set about expropriating the mill. A court upheld a collective farm's application to take over their garden and other land and there were simultaneous efforts to confiscate their house. In October 1989 the Chnápkos were given two months to move out. *"We were the last co-operativised homestead in the country on the basis of 1950s legislation, meaning without compensation. Only a small dwelling part was to remain to us."* The couple were at their wit's end. They gave some of their belongings away and remained in the half-empty house, preparing to take the step they had long refused – emigration to the West.

This period of despair ended unexpectedly with November 1989 and the fall of communism. At that time Jaroslav was in Prague, which he visited to sell the ceramics produced by him and his wife in Osvračín. In the end they didn't lose their house but remained there – and their lifelong endeavours paid off. The pair are now retired but still produce ceramics at the mill and run a gallery named after the legendary samizdat magazine Vokno.

Text by Adam Drda