

I THOUGHT PEOPLE WOULD PROTEST – NOBODY DID A THING

Silvestra Chnápková (*1954)

Silvestra, or Silva, Chnápková (nee Lupertová) was born in České Budějovice in April 1954. After a few years her father, a chemicals specialist, was assigned to the Stalin Works in Litvínov and the family moved to an inhospitable town in the impoverished Sudetenland shaped by the huge chemical plant. *“Thick fogs stank of whatever they had just released from the factory, people on the tram stank of phenol, the river Bělá changed colour and during periods of smog in the autumn you couldn’t see a step in front of you. The fog was so thick people groped in the dark and walked from memory. Even on the way to school we held hands so we wouldn’t get lost.”*

The majority of Litvínov’s population prior to the war were Germans (they called it Leutmannsdorf). After liberation they were driven out of Czechoslovakia and Litvínov turned into an industrial zone. *“At 16 I was doing seasonal work at the factory. It was like The Begum’s Fortune by Jules Verne. Thirty-five thousand people worked there, liquids were dripping everywhere, plumes of smoke, everything shook and rumbled. The factory was on several hectares and, as it was left by the Germans and the plans were lost, in some places nobody knew what was flowing and how. It was dingy and rusty.”*

Silvestra’s father Stanislav Lupert didn’t build a career at the Stalin Works (renamed the Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Chemical Works in 1962) as he didn’t join the Communist Party. Sometimes the family had to get by without him as he had suffered from tuberculosis in his youth and was frequently at sanatoriums. Her mother Terezie worked as a clerk in Most. Silvestra, then 14, was at her grandmother’s place in the village of Slavošovice na Třeboňsku when the Warsaw Pact invasion occurred. On her return to Litvínov she was taken aback by the response of locals. *“I’ve never experienced anything worse in my life. But it was even more dismal when I came back at the end of the summer wearing a tricolour pin around my neck. I thought something would happen, that people would protest and defend themselves. Nobody did a thing. As if they weren’t in an occupied country, as if they’d reconciled themselves. My older sister Jana was at university in Prague at the time and brought home loads of materials, so we had lots of information. I myself never reconciled to it and later at grammar school clashed with the teachers on account of my comments. It really hit me how the authorities behaved. In ninth grade we had a tough, strict Russian teacher and she was the best of the lot. She spoke to us openly and later had to leave the school. They started appointing verified*

cadres as professors at the grammar school, which I'd entered in 1969. The students' union was abolished and instead some classmates joined the Socialist Youth Union. That hurt quite a bit. There are just some things you can't do because they're shameless."

At 16 Silvestra and her boyfriend set off on a long trip around Bohemia. It was, she says, part escape from home, part ramble, motivated by despair at the situation in Czechoslovakia and the desire for freedom and adventure. A nationwide missing persons alert was declared for the pair and as punishment they were moved from Litvínov to a grammar school in Most. She did not receive a recommendation to university and after school worked at Prague's na Bulovce hospital, at a mountain chalet in the Krkonoše and from 1978 at a computing centre in Most.

By then she was looking after a young daughter, Jana, and at weekends travelled to a homestead in Nová Víska near Chomutov, which she had bought with a group of friends from the underground and which young people – who like her were searching for a place they could feel free – used to visit. They shared her attitudes, hobbies and worldview. She had already known some of them, such as František Stárek (nicknamed Čuñas), Miroslav Skalický (Skalák), Miroslav Hrabaň (Alpín) and her future husband Jaroslav Chnápko (Šíma), and knew they were “her people”: *“Víska meant lots of jolly friends who liked listening to music and dancing and wrote interesting texts. It was an open community. Whoever came there and had a similar outlook immediately felt at home. They were forever inventing games and organising concerts and festivals and there used to be two or three hundred people there at weekends. The police played cat and mouse with us, but I took it as a bit of an adventure. You were happy when you somehow tricked them. They hardly ever beat us. Most times they left after a search with a grated carrot.”*

Silva signed Charter 77 at Nová Víska but at this point the State Security were uninterested in her. She worked during the week and spent her weekends with her daughter among the Nová Víska community, where she was involved in the production and distribution of the samizdat magazine Vokno. In 1980 the Communist authorities expropriated the homestead (see the portraits of František Stárek and others in this collection) and the residents tried to find a new house where they could live together. They almost succeeded. They found the Vodolenka farm near Domažlice, which was so big even families with children could have lived there full-time. However, when Silvestra went to a notary to sign the contract she learned that the State Security had scared the owner off from selling. Friends disappeared. The StB managed to drive many Charter 77 signatories out of the country under Operation Clearance, including most of the Nová Víska people, such as Miroslav Skalický and Karel Havelka (Kocour). In 1981 František Stárek was imprisoned for the production and distribution of Vokno.

It was in connection with the magazine that the secret police began to focus intently on Silva. It was at a time when she and her husband Jaroslav (Šíma) had managed to buy a former mill at Osvračín, near Domažlice, through her mother. However, they were still living in Most. *“They carried out a major search of our home and I was interrogated for 12 hours. My daughter Jana had to be picked up by her grandmother and I had no idea what was happening with her. They brought Šíma for interrogation to Litoměřice and because I knew he’d get nothing from the StB I sent him food via the SNB [uniformed police – author’s note] and they ate it. During the search they confiscated lyrics by Frank Zappa, some samizdat, photos, nothing extraordinary. I knew from the Víška guys that I shouldn’t talk to the police and I stuck to that.”*

The mill in Osvračín had been abandoned for five years. It was full of mice and bugs and had broken windows. The Chnápkos used whatever was at hand for heating as they had no right to buy coal. They gradually brought water to the house and fixed the electrics. Having previously lived in environmentally devastated northern Bohemia they enjoyed the countryside and sunshine. Silva worked as a wages clerk at a seed cleaning plant and Šíma as a labourer at a collective farm. They wanted their house to function like Nová Víška, as a meeting place open to like-minded people. They organised their first concert, got a small garden and animals and suddenly the work began making sense. *“Initially I was enthusiastic. We’d gone from the fog and stench of the north to nice countryside. We’d got Žofka, a guard goat who walked about with us like a dog. We had two kids a year and six litres of milk a day. The co-op lot didn’t even have that much from cows, so we enjoyed it. I was surprised they didn’t do much breeding or cultivating in the village, apart from a few rabbits and hens. We’d come completely inexperienced from the city and didn’t even know how to hold a rake or plant potatoes and suddenly we had a goat and a cow and later pigs, geese and hens, a bull and a horse, quite the zoo. Village children from the nursery school would come to see the animals.”*

Silva was very surprised by the fear that ruled the local populace. She was used to the tough conditions of north Bohemia, where the regime was kinder toward miners, for instance; it needed them and treated them relatively generously. But, in her recollections, people in Domažlice were often afraid to speak up over minor matters. On top of that, the traditional countryside had been turned upside down by collectivisation. Furthermore, Osvračín was in the borderlands by West Germany, where everybody was carefully monitored. From the start it was hard living alongside the locals. The Chnápkos struck them as suspicious and strange due to their uncommon energy in cultivating land and breeding animals. What’s more, at the weekend they were visited by lots of people of unusual appearance. Osvračín wasn’t ready for “long-hairs and punks”. The police’s interest also played a role. The Chnápkos were the only Charter 77 signatories in Domažlice and both the public and secret police kept a special eye on them.

Official harassment took various forms. For instance, a policeman from the nearby Holýšov Miroslav Borník (a future post-1989 police president and Ministry of the Interior inspectorate member), who lived in Osvračín itself, played an active role in organising police harassment of the young couple (Jaroslav Chnápko also describes this in his profile). Despite her successes in talent contests, their daughter Jana was not accepted at any secondary school. After a complaint to the Ministry of Education she was assigned to a special school for apprentices; only after further complicated interventions was she allowed to attend a vocational school.

The state and local authorities and the cooperative did their utmost to ruin the Chnápkos' lives. They destroyed their crops, imposed absurd fines, e.g., for cleaning their own driveway (the couple have been trying in vain to fix it up for 35 years) and they were barred from hooking up to the municipal sewage system for a long time. Renting them land was barred so, having nothing to feed them with, they were forced to sell their cattle. *"When we sold the cattle we had the idea that we would make ceramics. They discovered that we could again make a living so began to confiscate buildings. It kept intensifying and with every court case we knew it would be even worse... They lost files; the prosecutor, who had been active in the 1950s, treated us the same as farmers back then. The final verdict came a month before November 1989 – we were to clear out every building within two months without compensation. It was decided that everything except the dwelling part would be transferred to the ownership of the local Unified Agricultural Cooperative."*

The Chnápkos began considering going into exile. They had resisted such a step for years and the StB had systematically "recommended" their relocation to the West. In the end they stayed and their mill was saved by the fall of the Communist regime in late 1989. *"After the revolution all kinds of people started to greet us. I founded the Civic Forum in Osvračín and people asked me if I'd be the mayor. I think some were afraid that we'd want to get them back for what they'd done to us. But naturally nobody apologised to us. With a few exceptions, the locals kept their distance."* Silvestra and Jaroslav Chnápko continue to live in Osvračín. They make ceramics, organise cultural events and own the Vokno Gallery.

Text by Adam Drda and Monika Stehlíková