

## **FINDING ONE'S OWN TRIBE**

**Vladimír "Lábus" Drápal (\*1964)**

*"The police were constantly hassling me. Constantly. They came to my work. When there was something happening they picked me up at 5 in the morning and I sat in the cop shop till 8 in the evening. Often they didn't want anything, I just sat about and they brought me some police almanacs to read. Naturally it was unpleasant. [...] It sometimes happened that I left an interrogation, ran down the steps and after 50 metres other StB men came after me and arrested me. I said: 'I'm just leaving an interrogation!' To which they replied: 'And did you say anything?' 'No, I didn't.' – 'So maybe you'll tell us something.' And I was inside for another four hours."*

Vladimír Drápal, nicknamed Lábus, was born on 27 March 1964 in Louny in northwest Bohemia. His mother was a teacher and his father a career soldier and later Communist functionary (chairman of the local national committee). Vladimír attended language school (he learned English) in Louny, read beatnik literature and listened to rock music. In seventh grade he saw the TV show Attack on Culture (1977), propaganda intended to denigrate the underground and longhaired independent musicians. However, in Lábus's case it had completely the opposite effect. *"That programme had a major impact on me. I was blown away to discover that such people existed, that the 'tribe' to which I belonged really existed."* Not long afterwards a friend lent him a roughly recorded tape of the band Umělá hmota. *"In those days I was listening to Deep Purple, Kiss and so on. Then suddenly I heard this music that pinned me to the floor. It was a raw and authentic statement. I'd never heard anything like that before and it totally fascinated me."*

Vladimír Drápal leaned toward the underground and the persecuted independent arts scene for the same reason many other adolescents and sensitive young people did: in the grey world of normalisation, official hypocrisy and spinelessness, they were seeking something in which they could believe. He had long hair, which in the Communist Czechoslovakia of the 1970s wasn't a fashion but an expression of a free attitude. His outlook brought him into long-term conflict with his parents, who had imagined their son maturing into a "decent citizen" and building a career. He had no siblings to lean on as his brother Tomáš is 12 years younger.

Lábus didn't want to enter grammar school, which demanded too much conformity of students, and, as he liked animals, applied to the Central Agricultural School in Žatec. In the search for kindred spirits he used to take the bus to Prague and walk the streets

watching out for anybody with a similar look, which might signal mutual interests. At secondary school he got to know musicians Jiří Zelenka and Pavel Škarýd (both were members of the band *É Ucho* Accord Debil Band, later *Orchestr Bissext*) and Borek Holeček, who put on alternative bands at the Žatec jazz club. He hung out with Louny's hippies and became friends with the town's Zdeněk Buk, a Charter 77 signatory. He gradually got his hands on samizdat and tapes of unacceptable groups and travelled all over Bohemia to meet people from "his tribe". *"I'm not going to claim there was a private or semi-official concert with five bands every weekend. But there was at least a gathering in some pub where at least one musician would perform. Travelling the country was also magical in that in those days hippies really comprised a kind of brotherhood. You arrived somewhere and met your first long-hair and he told you where people hung out. If you didn't have any money he'd help you, give you a bite to eat. Sometimes you could be on a visit for several days without a crown in your pocket and there was nothing weird about it."*

Lábus put a lot of energy into avoiding military service and acquired a so-called blue book, which meant exemption from conscription. Compulsory military service in occupied Czechoslovakia resembled a "superior jail": two years filled with bullying and ideological aggravation. He visited the recruitment centre every year and to at least get a postponement would simulate mental illness, leading to a brief period at a psychiatric clinic in Most. He made a living as an agronomist and when he was later allowed to do alternative civilian service as a worker at a power station Počerady for some time.

Lábus recalls many important meetings, for instance with Milan "Svědék" Padevět and his band Hally Belly. A key moment in his life was a chance encounter with František "Čuñas" Stárek, publisher of the samizdat underground magazine *Vokno* (also profiled in this collection).

*"I was on the tram in Prague and standing opposite me was a guy with a *Vokno* badge on his sweater. So I approached him and said I was having trouble finding the magazine, asking if I could buy a copy from him. He replied that on Saturday at such and such a time I should come to the boiler room of St. Thomas's in the Lesser Quarter. It was Čuñas. He kindly welcomed me into the 'hard-core' underground and I later distributed *Vokno* and *Voknoviny* throughout northern Bohemia."*

As soon as he left the boiler room Drápal had his ID checked by the Public Security. He was later summoned for questioning by the State Security in Louny. In the second half of the 1980s he was highly active in the opposition and on the alternative culture scene. He regularly attended opposition events and concerts and visited Prague so as to maintain contact with the capital's underground and dissent. He joined the Movement for Civic

Freedom. Naturally the State Security had him in their sights, which would have been the case simply because he was part of the so-called defective milieu (in the period StB jargon) and underground bands and musicians (Svědék, Orchester Bissext, Křik, J. S. V. and Nucený výsek) played at his wedding. However, Drápal didn't conceal his anti-regime attitude. Long before he had declared that he would not join the Socialist Youth Union on principle. In 1988 the StB registered him as a hostile individual and he was systematically summoned for questioning and had his liberty curtailed.

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Vladimír Drápal says the StB harassment made his life hell, but otherwise he was content. He did things he regarded as meaningful and didn't take part in pseudo elections or attend official regime events at work. Also he was fortunate in never being convicted or imprisoned long-term. He didn't have major problems at work, though he discovered ex post that he had been under surveillance there: *"I was an agronomist and in the same enterprise there was a guy who was a mechanic. He always said: 'Hey, they're after you, I'll lend you my car so they don't catch you. Where are you off to?' And I said: 'Sure, you're great!' I regarded this person as an ally. But later I discovered that they'd caught him drink driving one time and that they'd told him he'd either lose his license, which would have cost him his job, or inform on me. He gave in and reported on me to the police every week maybe. I had no idea. He was a drummer, a rocker, always cursing the Communists. We got on well..."*

What's more, Vladimír Drápal had the disadvantage of living in small town. There were virtually no dissidents in Louny so the State Security devoted increased attention to him. There was evidently even a kind of state security committee almost exclusively focused on him and his activities. *"At first I was a kind of avid lawyer for myself. I tried to explain to the StB that nothing was going on – I just had long hair and listened to my kind of music. In time I understood this was pointless so just kept silent. But sometimes you could be provoked and to this day there are things I reproach myself for. Of course I never gave*

*up any information deliberately. But they were good psychologists – they knew how to provoke you and dogged silence was the only effective defence.”*

Lábus also had it tough toward the end of the Communist regime. Like many who were there, he rejects the myth that it was possible to live without fear and more or less freely under the decaying Communist regime in the second half of the 1980s. “On the actual 17 or 18 November I was at an interrogation the whole day. The cops *histrionically examined and loaded pistols in front of me constantly. They shouted at me, asking if I wanted there to be misery and hunger here like in Poland and such like. They were frightened by what was happening and were at a total loss, which made them all the more aggressive and dangerous.*”

When in November 1989 the Communist regime began to fall Vladimír Drápal was politically active and cofounded the Louny Civic Forum, on whose ticket he later served for four years on the local council. Subsequently he travelled, was in business, worked at the Municipal Arts Centre and ran a bookshop and rock club. In 2001 he set up the label Guerilla Records, which releases, distributes and promotes non-commercial music and literature. In 2002 he won a tender process to become director of the Vrchlické divadlo theatre in Louny. He later became director of the Louny Town Gallery, which he set up, and in 2014 began working at the Zastávka House of Culture. In recent years he has been deeply dissatisfied with the political situation in the Czech Republic and the rise of undemocratic tendencies. In June 2018 he stepped down as theatre director and from his other posts, saying “*I cannot be a loyal state employee if the head of state [President Miloš Zeman – author's note] and the prime minister [Andrej Babiš] embody all that I despise.*”

*Text by Adam Drda*