

“UNPAID VOLUNTEER OF THE REVOLUTION”

Fedor Gál (*1945)

The sociologist, politician, essayist and documentarian Fedor Gál was born in the Terezín ghetto. His father Vojtěch came from a Jewish family that ran a farm in the village of Nemecká Ľupča (after the war Partizánska Ľupča) in Slovakia's Liptov. In 1939 the Nazis had broken up Czechoslovakia and created a formally independent Slovak state, a satellite of Hitler's Germany where anti-Semitic measures were applied. In autumn 1944 Vojtěch Gál, as an officer of the Czechoslovak Army, fought in the Slovak National Uprising. After it had been quelled he attempted to take his family – his pregnant wife Barbora and four-year-old son Egon – to safety. As Jews they all faced deportation and murder.

The Gáls were arrested and interned at a concentration camp in Sered', where they were split up: Vojtěch was deported to Sachsenhausen and on 19 December 1944 Barbora and little Egon were placed on a transport bound for Auschwitz-Birkenau. *“Our transport from a camp in Sered' was headed for Auschwitz but as it was already the end of the war and the gas chambers and crematoriums had stopped working they turned us around and we reached Terezín,”* Fedor Gál, who was born in the ghetto on 20 March 1945, said in an interview for the Memory of the Nation archive. He never knew his father. An SS officer gunned him down on a death march from Sachsenhausen to Schwerin at the end of the war.

Following the liberation of Terezín, Barbora and the children returned to their farm in Partizánska Ľupča. They found an empty house. People from the village had stolen all of their property. With the help of her sister she tried to run the farm. In the first few months after the war she still hoped her husband had survived. She kept battling and lived for her children. Shortly after the Communist coup of February 1948 the family farm was expropriated and Barbora Gálová no longer had any reason to remain in the village, where people stared at her, both due to guilty consciences and as a “class enemy”. She and the children moved to Bratislava, where she worked at a scrap company until her retirement. She died in 1994. She hardly ever spoke about the Holocaust and her sons were unfamiliar with much of their pasts.

Fedor Gál attended elementary school in Bratislava and later entered a chemistry vocational school in Zlín (then Gottwaldov) in Moravia. After graduating he worked in several professions in the chemicals industry, including at the Juraj Dimitrov Chemical

Works in Bratislava, where he was during the Soviet-led invasion of August 1968. *“In front of Comenius University in Bratislava, on Šafárikovo námestie, I saw a tank open fire on people. I saw the first dead bodies I’d ever seen. To this day I remember their names: Captain Holík and Danko Košanová. During those days I felt we were united and fearless. That lasted just a short while. Just like a memorial plaque to Danko Košanová on the university building. Then most people folded and kept their heads down for long decades. Nevertheless, the ‘60s gave us the aroma and taste of freedom and 21 August 1968 also showed its value. My generation lived off those feelings until November 1989.”*

Fedor Gál soon had children and needed to support them so held down a job while completing further studies in economics and chemical industry management at the Faculty of Chemical Technology at the Slovak University of Technology. He graduated in 1972. However he was increasingly interested in the humanities and in 1977 began a PhD in sociology. *“For that time I chose a rather strange specialisation: prognostics. It was a discipline without departments or professors and minimal ideological, meaning Marxist-Leninist, deformation,”* he recalled in an interview for the project *Inventura devadesátek*. *“I was a professional prognostician at various institutions. But I was never on any project longer than five years, because under communism prognostics teams were frequently dissolved, whether due to the prognoses they arrived at or because of the people working on the prognostics team. In the end I went freelance in 1987.”*

In the 1980s Gál got to know a circle of Czech prognosticians who had been recruited from various fields and who included the future Czech politicians and presidents Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman. He travelled regularly to Prague, lived in Slovakia and moved in the so-called grey zone, working officially as an expert but taking part in independent activities in parallel. He comments in the quoted interview: *“I was one of the people behind Bratislava/nahlas, which was a manifesto produced by environmental activists who placed quality of life in the political context and naturally drew the attentions of the secret police. I signed some petitions, we published samizdat and from time to time the State Security called us in for questioning. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t regard any of this as dissident activity. I regard it more as part of the Slovak grey zone. I get referred to as a well-known Slovak dissident... but I didn’t have the sense I was risking my liberty.”*

In November 1989 Fedor Gál was a key figure in the anti-Communist revolution. Civic Forum was established in the Czech lands as a platform for pro-democratic forces and in Bratislava Gál and some friends founded Public Against Violence. In diaries from 1990 (*Několik dnů* (Several Days), Academia, Prague, 2012) he described his role in the turning points of the time thus: *“For me the revolution began on the evening of 18 November 1989. We were sitting at the home of Soňa Szomolányi, a sociologist from Bratislava University, at one of many private debates then taking place in Bratislava [...]. The talk was about culture and science and we also discussed politics. We were debating about*

the time for action and tried to more precisely characterise the situation in society but also the nature of events that one has no choice but to get involved in. We broke up in the night and only later did I learn that many such meetings had taken place that day.”

The next day his friend Miloš Žiak called Gál and told him that the student Martin Šmíd had died during a demonstration in Prague as a result of police brutality (it later transpired that this false report had been deliberately circulated). Žiak told him to come that afternoon to the Municipal Gallery on Dostojevského rad. *“Around 500 of us turned up, mostly artists, writers, researchers, activists from Bratislava’s ‘Green’ movement and people from the Bratislava dissent. A civic movement was established whose name, Public Against Violence, was born immediately afterwards during a discussion at Ján Langoš’s apartment [...]. We (Peter Zajac, Jano Budaj, Valér Mikula, Martin Bútor, Peter Tatár, Andrej Zimmermann and I) wrote its first document in the hectic atmosphere of the erupting revolution. The theatres went on strike and instead of performances played host to discussions with the public. The student movement had already been formed [...]. A communications channel between Bratislava and Prague was established. The first gatherings on squares were planned [...]. The movement’s first programme was drafted and a vision of a new social system for the republic began taking shape. In those days the faces of people who would soon sit in government and in parliament started appearing for the first time, so that they could declare to the world, through concrete actions, that a revolution in this little Central European country had triumphed without violence.”*

In 1990–1991 Gál served as chairman of the Coordination Centre and later of the National Council of Public Against Violence. In 1990 the movement won the first free parliamentary elections in Slovakia since the Communist coup of 1948. Gál felt he had his “finger on the pulse of the age”, had a lot to offer democracy building and was seen as an authority. However, he soon withdrew from politics. Among the reasons was a conflict he had with the then interior minister and future prime minister of Slovakia Vladimír Mečiar (he had entered politics via Public Against Violence; he later set up the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, with which he won elections in 1992). *“We were long-term unpaid volunteers of the revolution. Despite this, we were taken as the new bigwigs and negative sentiment on the part of the public wasn’t long in appearing. We became a lightning rod for all the problems linked to the changes, which were frequently thorny and new. And Mečiar won the next elections [...]. This raised him up and buried us. [...] After a year of working with him we understood what he was all about. In a year he turned for us from unknown person into somebody that manipulated people and abused sensitive information. That took the Slovak electorate 10 years. In the meantime Slovakia was isolated. It had no chance of getting into the EU or NATO and had the reputation of a black hole in Central Europe.”*

In 1992 Fedor Gál earned an economics doctorate. After the split of Czechoslovakia he moved to Prague and taught at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University. The same year he founded the company CET 21 with Péter Hunčík, Josef Alan and Vlastimil Venclík. It later won a tender process and acquired a television broadcasting licence, leading to the creation of the first Czech commercial station, NOVA, which remains on air. The winning project was meant to be a sophisticated and educational channel. However, the utterly commercial NOVA, which had US investors, never fulfilled that brief. Like the other owners, Fedor Gál sold his share. He and his son Róbert founded the publishing company G plus G, which mainly publishes books focused on minority issues and the Holocaust.

Since 2009 Fedor Gál has also been a documentary maker. He has been involved in four long films and 12 short documentary essays. He has also created three online applications, including the multimedia application Long Short Journey, which shows his search for his father's story, and Slovakia 1989-1990, which revisits the fall of communism in text and video. Another of his projects, Natálka, traces the story of a Romany girl who suffered severe burns in an arson attack in Vítkov in 2009. He has also published several books and writes articles in the Slovak press.

In the 2016 book *Cez ploty (Through Fences)* Gál enters a discussion with Matej, a young Slovak neo-Nazi: *"My lifelong credo is that if we are to survive a complicated time and a complicated world relatively healthily, dialogue among various people is imperative. I even believe that such dialogue needs to be across barricades and fences. And the more varied the people ideologically, religiously, politically and socially, the more important the dialogue, if it can be held. There are situations where dialogue simply isn't possible. But that's another subject..."*

Text by Adam Drda