

IF YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING, YOU CAN'T GIVE ANYTHING AWAY

Vladimír Hradec (*1931)

“The Communist president Klement Gottwald personally signed death warrants for innocent people. In the period when the Mašín brothers et al. threw themselves into the resistance, thousands of innocent people had already ended up in jail... The Communists were violent criminals – and violent criminals don’t understand anything other than violence. Either you’re a collaborator and you suck up to them – or you take a stand and do something against them,” says the pensioner and musician Vladimír Hradec, who was once a member of the resistance group surrounding the Mašín brothers and later a political prisoner.

He was born on 30 May 1931 in Poděbrady, where he grew up with his older brother Jiří. Their father, a former legionnaire, taught at an agricultural school, while their mother was a housewife. During the Nazi occupation Vladimír Hradec began grammar school. He was interested in technology and music and took up the violin and piano. When the Red Army reached Poděbrady in May 1945 he saw weapons for the first time. *“We all welcomed those Soviet soldiers effusively. So did I, of course. They had a HQ in the town and when my friends and I went there we saw that they had thrown German machine guns beneath a vehicle.”* The boys grabbed the guns and inconspicuously made off with them via a nearby wall. *“Then we were armed and we were really delighted that we were soldiers too. Then we went shooting outside the town, until the ammunition ran out... It was a kind of boyish passion. What’s more, I was really into technical things. I had plans, instructions and sketches off by heart. I knew how different guns were taken apart and assembled...”*

Following the liberation of Czechoslovakia Hradec was a scout and musician. He learned guitar and saxophone and joined a band. He became interested in politics around the 1946 elections, which were not fully free and were won by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Afterwards his schoolmates split into Communists and the rest. *“It was clear society was beginning to divide. The fact that somebody was the son of a farmer, somebody else the son of a capitalist, was already being highlighted... For now it didn’t have the same consequences as after February – nobody was thrown out of school...”* Hradec also recalls the 1945–1946 period, when he watched disapprovingly as members of the Poděbrady Communist Party left to “revive the borderlands” following the expulsion of the Germans, with most returning soon afterwards. *“They left with suitcases*

and came back with trucks. So it was obvious they hadn't gone for patriotic reasons. Afterward they were incredibly big Communists."

When the Communist takeover of February 1948 occurred Hradec had no illusions about Communist politics and was unsurprised when the party broke its pre-coup promises one after the other. *"I don't know what day of the coup it was, but we were going to school in the morning and ran into militia men who had clearly been prepared in advance. They had rifles and were coordinated. It was obvious to us that they must have been primed. In school the 'hardcore' division of students began... and then the arrests, nationalisation of property. One witnessed all manner of persecution."*

Vladimír Hradec regarded the way Gottwald's totalitarian state apparatus treated people as utterly abhorrent. Like thousands of others, he believed Communist Party rule wouldn't last long and that democracy would be revived. He shared this outlook with friends from his childhood and adolescence. These included the brothers Ctirad (1930–2011) and (1932) Mašín, sons of the legendary anti-Nazis resister and army officer Josef Mašín, who the Nazis executed in 1942. They also included Hradec's neighbour Zbyněk Janata (1932–1955). When nothing had changed in the country by 1951 and, quite the contrary, the terror had intensified, the Mašín brothers, inspired by their father, launched resistance activities. They were assisted by their uncle Ctibor Novák (1902–1955) and their friends Milan Paumer (1931–2010), Janata, Václav Švéda (1921–1955) – and Vladimír Hradec.

The group carried out a number of resistance operations. In September 1951 its members raided two police stations in order to acquire the weapons they lacked. While doing so they killed two police officers. In August 1952 Josef Mašín and Václav Švéda held up a vehicle that was carrying wages in a bid to raise funds. During that operation an armed wages clerk was killed in a fight. They planned other moves, but for various reasons did not carry them out, including the fact that Ctirad Mašín was briefly imprisoned for political reasons. They also felt they wouldn't achieve much against the Communist apparatus alone. They were in a tough situation. The uprising they had anticipated never arrived. What's more, they were very young, around 20.

Hradec did not take part in the above-referenced operations. His field was weapons and supplying his friends and he is sometimes described as the group's "armourer". When Ctirad Mašín sought his help in the early 1950s Hradec hid machine guns, pistols and other items at his home and on the family property. He was later involved in the theft of explosives (these were to be used in an attack on a train carrying uranium mined by Czechoslovak political prisoners to the USSR) and helped produce fuses (Ctirad Mašín used these in 1953 when the group set a number of hayricks on fire in a bid to impede

forced collectivisation). Hradec was unfamiliar with the details of the resistance operations. Ctirad had apparently told him: *“If you don’t know anything, you can’t give anything away – that was my father’s rule – so don’t ask about anything.’ So I took that on board and didn’t ask about anything.”*

In October 1953 the Mašín brothers decided to escape to the West and fight communism in the ranks of the US Army. They were convinced an international conflict between the Soviet Bloc and the US was imminent. Five members of the group set off to cross the Iron Curtain. Following a dramatic escape and struggle with East German soldiers and police, who hugely outnumbered them, Ctirad Mašín, Josef Mašín and Milan Paumer reached the American sector in Berlin and really did join the US Army. Zbyňěk Janata and Václav Švéda had been arrested trying to escape. Vladimír Hradec, then a chemistry student at university in Prague, did not take part. *“I just helped them to prepare some things. And the only thing they told me was that they would go through East Germany... Ctirad, Josef and Milan Paumer were trained. I couldn’t have handled such a tough journey. Janata and Švéda weren’t trained – and things ended badly for them too.”*

Hradec learned of the arrest of Švéda and Janata from a foreign radio broadcast. He had a hunch the State Security would soon come for him and suspected he had been under surveillance for a long time. The Communist secret police picked him up at a tram stop at Prague’s Letná on 25 November 1953. His brother and parents were taken into custody at the same time. Hradec wasn’t tortured physically but was prevented from sleeping. *“After an interrogation, they always pushed me into a cell. Somebody was sitting behind the cell door tasked with making sure I didn’t fall asleep. I had to keep walking. Any pause in walking throughout the day would mean loud kicks on the door and the order ‘Walk!’... After a week or two it was a case of ‘sleep while you walk’.”* The exhausted and disoriented prisoner was less able to resist the investigators, who wanted “names, names, names”.

However, Hradec says, the importance of Ctirad Mašín’s above-mentioned rule was borne out: He knew nothing about the actual activities and plans of the group, so couldn’t give anything away. At the end of the investigation, the “script” of a court testimony was placed before him to be learned by rote. An experienced fellow inmate warned him not to change a word of it. At the end of January 1955 Hradec was convicted in the show trial of the group “Ctibor Novák et al.” of treason, military espionage and the theft of national property. He was sentenced to 22 years in prison. *“Court? It was a theatrical production. Two people actually did make pointless comments that weren’t on the programme and I think it caused them quite a bit of harm.”* Hradec’s parents got 18 years and his brother 16 years, simply for not reporting on him. A number of death sentences were issued and Novák, Švéda and Janata were executed on 2 May 1955.

The Communists imprisoned Vladimír Hradec for several years at Pankrác in Prague, Leopoldov, the Nikolaj and Rovnost uranium labour camps and at Bory in Pilsen. His parents were released under a 1960 amnesty. That same year his father set out to visit Vladimír but died of heart failure on the way. His brother Jiří got out of jail in 1962 and Vladimír himself was released two years later. He left prison a trained miner and had learned other professions, as well as being an unqualified chemist. However, he couldn't find employment as nobody would hire a political prisoner with such a record. A one-time fellow inmate was at that time a technician at the enterprise Spolana Neratovice and offered Hradec some advice. *"He told me: 'Don't be afraid of the prosecutor and apply for certification that you can work in the chemical industry.'* So I visited the prosecutor and actually received papers stating that the prosecutor had no objections to my being employed in a working profession in the chemical industry." He then got a job at Spolana, where his colleagues initially regarded the one-time member of the Mašín's group as a "curiosity". *"The technicians came to have a look at me, one after the other."* Until the end of communism Vladimír Hradec remained an "unreliable" citizen from the state's perspective. He kept his own company and after years in jail did his best not to draw attention to himself. He didn't meet his friends the Mašín's and Milan Paumer again until after 1989. To this day he has no doubts about the activities of the resistance group and regards frequent references to them as "ordinary murderers" as absurd. In his view, the Communists were the real murders. Today he is retired and plays the organ in a church.

Text by Adam Drda