

I EXPERIENCED THE OCCUPATION WHEN I WAS DOING MILITARY SERVICE – IT INFLUENCED ME

Tomáš Hradílek (*1945)

On May Day 1987 Tomáš Hradílek and his good friend Rudolf Bereza decided on an unusual course of action. While thousands throughout Czechoslovakia were taking part in compulsory marches and carrying banners praising the Communist government and friendship with the Soviet Union, the pair unfurled a rather different banner in Olomouc. It read: “Charter 77 urges civic courage”. It took half an hour before the secret police chased after them. That was a relatively long time for the StB, who had everything under careful control. Both were arrested and faced investigative custody. In the end they were fortunate and got away with a fine. *“A short while previously Václav Havel had put forward an interesting thesis that sometimes a small snowball was enough to start an avalanche... That an impulse was enough and things were then set in train. So we said we’d help those snowballs along and do something to reach out to people,”* says Hradílek of the background to that banner.

In November 1989 Tomáš Hradílek was a founder of the Civic Forum in Olomouc and made it into the Federal Assembly that same year. He briefly served as interior minister. But it all started with the Soviet invasion in August 1968, which influenced his entire life. *“The toughest moment of my life was when the troops arrived in 1968. That majorly influenced my future activities.”*

Tomáš Hradílek was born in Lipník nad Bečvou in 1945. He completed his studies in agriculture in Brno and was doing his military service as a graduate when the troops of socialist states, led by the Soviets, invaded Czechoslovakia. *“I was serving under the supervisor and, even before the news of the occupation spread, the head of the detachment was summoned. He got through to the Ministry of Defence and received an order to see to conditions for the landing of planes. We were also in charge of airport security. Then the invasion began... I was watching a truck carrying Russian soldiers. They saw a black flag hanging from a building and opened fire. On that building. That was an intense experience.”*

At this time he had become a Communist Party member. *“I don’t regret it at all. I was on the party’s reform wing. And I stood up strongly against August ’68 within the party.”* However, when normalisation began Hradílek applied to cancel his membership. The Communists beat him to it, though, and threw him out.

Normalisation went on and on. In 1976 he and his wife had had their fill of the situation. Everything was tightly controlled, including turnout in elections. *“In 1976 we said, Enough is enough, we won’t accept this charade of an election. We decided not to go to the polls. We were the only ones to do so in our building and far and wide. They came to our place with a ballot box. We sent them packing and that sparked attention throughout the town. So when the Charter came along it was logical that we got involved. That was the start of everything.”*

Hradílek heard about Charter 77 on the radio, from a Voice of America broadcast. He decided to sign it and travelled to Prague with a list of signatories. He first tried to visit Professor Jiří Hájek but found out he was under guard so headed for František Kriegel’s place, where he signed the Charter. He then sent an article about it to his local newspaper Nové Přerovsko, but naturally they didn’t publish it.

His wife backed him in everything he did. *“We were worried about the children. That’s why my wife didn’t sign the Charter. Otherwise they could have taken them from us and put them in a children’s home.”*

In the end, however, the secret police – unlike in the case of other opponents of the regime – didn’t use their children to threaten them. Hradílek lost his job at a collective farm and found a manual job working a saw. He remained there for 13 years. The StB bugged his apartment. When the 10th anniversary of the existence of the Charter grew close he began working on something concrete, co-drafting the document *A word to fellow citizens*. He filed a lawsuit for treason against Vasil Biřak. In those days he acted in collaboration with Rudolf Bereza and the pair wrote an open letter appealing to Gustáv Husák to abdicate. *“I contributed more to that document. It was Ruda’s idea to go out on May Day with the banner. He wanted to welcome glasnost.”* Glasnost was the free speech referred to as part of the perestroika advanced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. However, Hradílek thought text stating that Charter 77 required civic courage was more fitting. And the banner bearing those words was a genuine attention-grabber on May Day. It is preserved in a photograph that has become part of modern history. But the letter to Husák helped in a different way, he says. Hradílek believes the regime didn’t want the letter to be discussed and this allowed him and his friend to avoid trial and jail. In any case, pressure eased somewhat at that time and only two years remained until the fall of communism.

“I never regretted anything. Not even joining the Communist Party. It was a time when I didn’t have bloodied fingers. It’s a kind of natural characteristic of mine that I’m not indifferent to what’s happening around me.”

This attitude led to Hradílek's taking another public stand in 2018, when he went on hunger strike over Miloš Zeman's fresh candidature for the Czech presidency. However, he cut it short after appeals from his family. *"In the case of Miloš Zeman I believe that a wise saying applies: the fish stinks from the head. So I regarded it as better that Zeman not be president for a second term. But ending the hunger strike was at the urging of my children. And all of my grandchildren. Acquaintances too, but my family was decisive."*

Text by Luděk Navara