

IT WASN'T POSSIBLE TO RETREAT ANY FURTHER

Miroslav Jirounek (*1955)

“If I can be grateful to communism, it’s for the fact it didn’t proffer an illusion of sincerity, for forcing me to the very bottom, to the sources. I asked what the meaning of our existence was at a time when Czech society had been gripped by the monster of normalisation: soulless, sterile, mendacious and built on lies. It was only later that I learned about the judicial murders, the theft of family and church property and the destruction of cultural historical landmarks and entire social classes. However, the repulsiveness of totalitarianism was direct, immediate, intrusive and unacceptable, without damaging the very essence of humanity. It wasn’t possible to retreat any further,” the violinist, conductor and one-time dissident Miroslav Jirounek wrote to the creators of the Faces of Resistance project.

Miroslav Jirounek was born on 3 August 1955 in Kladno, though he grew up in Mladá Boleslav. His father was Bohumil Jirounek, who came from Lomnice nad Popelkou and graduated from Charles University in history and French. His mother Marie Jirounková was born in Blatnice pod Sv. Antonínkem; her resistance fighter father was killed in Buchenwald, her mother died of tuberculosis and she was looked after by the Baťa works school.

As a boy, Miroslav Jirounek learned to play guitar at a public arts school. He was greatly impacted by the political and cultural liberalisation of the late 1960s, in large part because his father, the director of a district library, was a reform Communist during the Prague Spring and co-organised public lectures and discussions in a spirit of freedom almost unimaginable only a few years earlier. Guests included the principal conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, Karel Ančerl, the poet František Hrubín (following his key address at the 1967 congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Writers) and Bohumil Hrabal. When Czechoslovakia was occupied by Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 liberalisation was snuffed out within a year. This was followed by so-called normalisation, meaning the renewal of a tough totalitarian regime and purges. Like thousands of others, Jirounek Sr. was thrown out of his job and the party, whose ranks were filled by new collaborationist cadres.

There was a permanent Soviet base in Mladá Boleslav and the pupils at Edvard Beneš Elementary School watched out the windows as neglected, tired occupying soldiers carried out drills. Their “Asian features” became lodged in Miroslav Jirounek’s mind.

Teachers abandoned previous pro-reform positions and society was gripped by fear and tension. A politically reliable deputy head teacher was installed in the school. *“He roared at me during a civics class because I criticised the mendacity of the incoming leadership. It was hard to get accepted to a secondary school,”* says Jirounek.

He passed exams for the Mladá Boleslav grammar school but for a long time received no notification of acceptance. Secondary students were already being assessed as to whether they had “politically appropriate” backgrounds – and it seemed school management was hesitating in Jirounek’s case. Nevertheless he was accepted at the end of the holidays and enrolled in September 1970. As at other institutions, a new cadre, František Nerad, had been made school director. Jirounek describes him as a “Communist road sweeper”. *“I don’t know if he was directly tied to the State Security. In any case, he behaved like a fanatically dedicated servant of the incoming regime. He persecuted classmates who had long hair, pulling on it and dragging them around. He tore crosses from the necks of religious students. I stood up for one of these boys and told the principal he had no right to behave that way, as freedom of religion was guaranteed by the Constitution.”*

This wasn’t the only such clash. Nerad managed to create even worse conditions at the grammar school than were common in the morass of normalisation. *“In the neighbouring final-year class was my friend, the extraordinarily talented mathematician and physicist Vladimír Meier, who regularly placed well in the main rounds of Olympiads. The director barred his class teacher from recommending him to study at university. The teacher took it badly and hung himself from the handle of the window in his chemistry lab.”* Following the tragic death of student Josef Fiala, which was not linked to school life but still left everybody shaken, the head teacher forced all of the students to attend the funeral in Socialist Union of Youth outfits. Jirounek, the only person at school who was not a member, defied the director, refusing to accept the shoehorning of politics into his friend’s private funeral. The entire school attended and Jirounek played Handel’s violin sonata.

In autumn 1973 he got his military service call-up papers, by coincidence two weeks after the armies of Syria and Egypt attacked Israel (the Yom Kippur War). Recruits received political instruction and Jirounek says he refused to recognise Israel as the aggressor, earning a reputation as a provocateur. His “case” was considered at a meeting of the teaching council, supervised by a regional inspector. The educators voted to expel the problem student. *“The director first informed me that I had been transferred to a grammar school in Mnichovo Hradiště. I attended for two weeks and then that director told me that I couldn’t study there either. When I came home there was a letter in our*

box saying I had been expelled from all secondary schools in Czechoslovakia. The toughest punishment possible.”

In 1973, Jirounek also came first in his category in solo violin and chamber playing with string quartet in the main round of a public art schools competition. After being kicked out of school he made a living in a manual job and succeeded in doing his school leaving exams at the Wilhelm Pieck grammar school in Prague. In 1975 he passed the entrance exams to study conducting at the Prague Conservatory. He had been there around six months when a denunciation arrived at the school via a Communist Party regional committee, setting off a new process of expulsion. There was no concrete reason, as Jirounek’s grades were excellent. In the end, however, his expulsion was based on his “hostile social attitude to the socialist system of society” and his previous “expulsion from all of the secondary schools in the republic.”

In 1975, European states, including Czechoslovakia, committed to uphold human rights at a conference in Helsinki. Miroslav Jirounek therefore appealed to the UN Commission for Human Rights in Geneva, receiving a great deal of help in preparing documentation from Pavel Brázda, the late visual artist, who was also persecuted by the Communists, while philosopher Ladislav Hejránek analysed the case in his Letters to Friends. In the end the Communist state relented and Jirounek was allowed to study conducting, while still working, between 1981 and 1986. He was a stoker and one morning in June 1986 left his boiler room only to conduct Beethoven’s Egmont at the Dvořák Hall that evening.

From the mid-1970s or so the hitherto disjointed anti-totalitarian opposition in Czechoslovakia began stepping up its activities. In autumn 1976 Miroslav Jirounek signed a petition for the release of imprisoned musicians and other underground figures. In January 1977 he put his signature to the Charter 77 Declaration, later signing other Charter and Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted documents. He also became a signatory of the Position of Churches and Religious Persons, a letter from 31 members of the Evangelical Church to the Federal Assembly. *“The people whose spiritual wisdom I leant on at that time were all from Evangelical circles: Ladislav Hejránek, Alfred Kocáb, Milan Balabán, Jakub Trojan.”*

When Charter 77 was published Jirounek was working as a cleaner at the Divadlo na Vinohradech theatre in Prague, where he also experienced a mass anti-dissident campaign. The Communist Party drafted the so-called anti-Charter, which was represented by popular artists who gathered at a showy event at the National Theatre to sign a proclamation backing the Communist regime. *“As far as I know, the only person who didn’t join the campaign was Ilja Racek, who had played Julius Fučík on film in the 1950s. Nothing happened to him – he just disappeared from television. Watching the*

great Czech actors who descended to the gutter with their signed sheets, like at an execution ground, was sad. Humiliation, shame, misery. The most hard-nosed of them even managed a smile.”

Jirounek’s opposition activities were monitored by the StB, who started a file entitled Musician on him in 1980 and described him as a citizen “hostile toward our state and societal order”. He recalls an absurd situation in which a former elementary school classmate sat across the table from him during an interrogation. *“He tapped the table with the rubber end of a pencil and asked: ‘So what can you tell us, Mr. Jirounek?’ And I said to him: ‘What the hell are you on about, Vlád’a?’ Vlád’a turned red and left the room. Textbook-style, he was replaced by a bruiser. He grabbed my notebook – that infuriated him most – bore his teeth and roared that he would smack my head off the radiator. I told him to have a go and, surprise, he didn’t do it.”*

For the most part, Miroslav Jirounek’s involuntary visits to the offices of the political police didn’t last long, as he displayed no willingness to communicate, never mind cooperate. In 1981, for instance, he was interrogated because of his presence at an apartment seminar held by philosopher Ladislav Hejránek at which the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (in whose luggage the StB placed drugs) gave a lecture. Jirounek recalls that the interview with the StB man lasted only 20 minutes, because he knew that as the interrogated person he was only bound to speak about specific crimes. His single response was: *“I am unaware of any circumstances relating to the crime of the smuggling of illegal materials by the French citizen Derrida.”* In one of his documents the StB recorded that they had by “operative means” succeeded in preventing Jirounek from studying at university, specifically the Academy of Performing Arts. The StB closed their file on him in 1988 on the grounds that he was not involved in hostile activities.

Not long after the publication of Charter 77 Miroslav Jirounek married Michaela Mikšovská and, starting in 1978, they had five children. Jirounek’s wife had been thrown out of the Academic Grammar School on Prague’s Štěpánská St. for attending the funeral of philosopher Jan Patočka, and they lived modestly. *“It was very tough for my wife, but all of our children graduated from university and are today very successful, perhaps also because their path wasn’t easy. A large family sticks together and our reward is the greatest.”*

Starting in the mid-1980s Jirounek worked on many films as a conductor and music director, including director Jiří Barta’s animated *The Pied Piper* (1985), the Laterna Magica theatre’s stage oratorio *Odysseus* (1987), Juraj Herz’s *Galoshes of Fortune* (1986) and Věra Chytilová’s *My Praguers Understand Me* (1991). He also recorded music for the Czech exhibition at the World’s Fair in Vancouver in 1987. On 19 November 1989, he co-

founded the Civic Forum at Prague's Činoherní klub theatre. In 1991–1992 he was principal conductor of the Prague Chamber Opera. At present he is a businessman and is involved with the Czech Christian Academy, Sokol and the Society of Friends of Art in Mladá Boleslav.

The idea of communism is once again popular among many contemporary intellectuals. But Jirounek is not among them. *“Communism is on principle bankrupt, in the true meaning of the word. It is based on a false claim of rights that aren't actually rights at all and, by contrast, on the suppression of actual basic human rights included in Lafayette's declaration. It is based on human hatred, violence, property theft, prison and executions. It doesn't have a decent ethical foundation and is therefore condemned to cultural, economic and political bankruptcy.”*

Text by Adam Drda