

A “WITNESS” AGAINST VÁCLAV HAVEL

David Kabzan (*1969)

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The musician David Kabzan was born on 9 November 1969 in Krnov. He grew up with two siblings in the mining and steel-making city of Ostrava, the so-called “steel heart of the republic”, which the Communists regarded as a bastion of support. From a young age he realised he was living in a strange, hostile system. Part of his family was in exile and his parents faced various political difficulties. His mother tended not to take part in officially compulsory pseudo elections and when she did go she carried out her “civic duty” in an idiosyncratic manner, Kabzan says. One time she apparently entered the polling station on all fours carrying her voting slip in her teeth. Kabzan attended a large elementary school in an estate of tower blocks and didn’t much fit into the pupils’ “socialist collective”. He stood out in terms of background, behaviour and appearance (for instance he received clothes that were unusual for Czechoslovakia from relatives in the West). His parents split up and his mother married a man of interest to the State Security. *“His name was Jarda Kremla. They harassed him and drove him to suicide,”* David Kabzan recalls. *“So I soon knew that what went on in the adult world was no fun. And it was clear to me who the enemy was.”*

When he was 14 he entered a vocational school, where his field was breeding exotic animals. He stayed at dormitories in Čakovice. There, alongside apprentices, in what he calls the absurd spirit of the age, lived StB officers, who had a special relationship with the principal. He soon got to know people from the “second generation” of the Prague underground, began going to pubs and concerts and again had it harder than his peers. *“The StB men had their eyes on me. They said something about me wasn’t right. They hassled me and spied on me at the dormitories and at school. After three quarters of a year it was no longer bearable, so I moved into a flat where around 30 of us lived.”* He kept to himself at school. In any case, classmates and teachers gave him a wide berth. It was known that he – in then police parlance – moved in the “world of defective youth”.

He gradually got to know older dissidents. He recalls being at the apartment of Václav and Olga Havel, where unofficial philosophy lectures took place, for the first time at 16. He also attended the apartment seminars of the professor Milan Machovec.

The secret police maintained their interest in Kabzan. *“The hardest thing was that I was in Prague without my parents. I had no network. Most of my friends came from dissident families. They returned from interrogations to their natural habitat and had support at home. I was alone and the StB let me know it too. They said I should be aware nobody knew where I was and that they could do as they liked with me.”* They even brought him in for questioning from the vocational school, summoning him over the tannoy system. He was even questioned in the “holy week” before his leaving exams. *“I passed my leaving exams because the teachers knew what I’d been through and were quite lenient toward me.”* He later distributed samizdat publications and delivered flyers and in the latter half of the 1980s took part in public anti-Communist protests, after which he was regularly questioned. *“After some demonstration on Wenceslas Square I was assigned an StB man, who was then ‘responsible’ for me until the revolution.”*

The interrogations hardly varied. Each time David Kabzan had to describe where he went, whom he was in contact with and who gave him the samizdat. At that time he was unaware that the StB man “responsible” for him was named Petr Beran and that his “buddy” was Kamil Líbal. Beran sometimes slapped Kabzan. He sometimes kicked the chair from beneath him during interrogations and sometimes banged his head off a metal locker.

In January 1989 a series of brutally quelled demonstrations, referred to as Palach Week, took place in Prague (student Jan Palach had immolated himself in January 1969, voluntarily taking his life in protest at the fact the Czechoslovak public and some politicians had ever more visibly abandoned their resistance to the Soviet occupation and what followed). Kabzan, then a worker at the National Gallery, took part in a demonstration on 17 January and was “questioned” by Beran for several hours. *“During my final interrogation in January 1989 State Security officer Petr Beran beat me for four hours. He first banged his truncheon against a metal locker and then beat me in the neck and the head. I was sitting on a chair and beside it there was a plank bed. When I couldn’t take any more I rolled over onto it. I got a fair few more blows of the truncheon on the bed. He beat me for a long time. Then the StB men went for lunch and assigned a guard to me. They came back and carried on. They wanted me to sign some statement. For years I had held out from signing anything for them, so they beat me all the more.”*

The StB officers wanted Kabzan to testify against (writer and dissident) Petr Placák and also to give a statement saying he had been provoked to take part in the demonstration

by Václav Havel. As he later discovered, his “testimony” was to serve in a planned show trial of Havel due for February of that year. The investigators in the end forced the beaten Kabzan to sit at a desk. *“I remember that above the desk hung a poster of Stalin and that Beran had pinned decorations he’d received in the corners. [...] When I said I wouldn’t sign, Beran took his truncheon and pressed the handle into the nape of my neck. He began beating me harder and harder on the spine. I felt like I couldn’t feel my body any more. So I signed that statement.”*

After the interrogation, which took place at StB HQ on Bartolomějská St., they brought Kabzan via a passageway to a building on Konviktská St. that housed uniformed Public Security police. From there he was to be released. On the way he came to and informed the police officers present that StB men had forced him to sign the interrogation report. He filed an official complaint with the prosecutor’s office. On 25 January 1989 the dissident Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted issued a Communiqué (no. 895) on his case. It states that during the course of an interrogation on 17/1/1989 the police wrote *“things in the official report that David Kabzan did not say”*, that he had raised objections and they had then *“started beating him up”* and he had *“sustained around 20 blows with a truncheon to his back, nape and hands.”* They had then *“continued... doing the report, in which they themselves were the sole authors of the written text.”*

David Kabzan was then living at a hostel with his mother, who had followed him to Prague. Soon after filing the complaint he was looking out the window when three Vohlas, typical police cars, pulled up outside. In fear of arrest, he fled and hid with friends in the countryside. The police brought in his relatives and friends for questioning. He later learned that the StB had intended to charge him with running over somebody near Svitavy. This despite the fact he couldn’t drive, didn’t own a car and didn’t have a license. *“At that time I met Petr Placák, who told me that it was an StB method – they tried to get people by making stuff up. But it was no joke. They could have locked me up in custody as a suspect and then it would have taken ages before it was proven that I hadn’t done anything.”*

Nevertheless, David Kabzan returned to Prague in autumn 1989. He was friends with young people from the independent student movement, which had been set up in opposition to the Socialist Youth Union, the official mass youth organisation. With them he took part in a permitted march on 17 November 1989 in honour of student Jan Opletal, murdered during an anti-Nazi demonstration on that date in 1939. Kabzan recalls that his friends, using a megaphone, urged participants, organised by the Socialist Youth Union, to head toward the centre of Prague. The procession took that direction and turned into a peaceful anti-regime protest against which the police intervened on

Národní St., beating up many students. That was the day the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia began to collapse.

Today David Kabzan is a member of the rock band Rány těla (Body Blows), works at the Prague farm Toulcův dvůr and helps handicapped children. "His" StB men Petr Beran and Kamil Líbal were convicted of "abuse of office" and received suspended sentences. That took 17 years. However, it is still one of the few cases in which the Czech courts have found such people guilty.

Text by Adam Drda