

I TOOK IT ALL ON MYSELF TO PROTECT THE OTHERS

Anna Koutná-Tesařová (*1933)

It was early spring 1973. Anna Koutná, a political prisoner of the Husák Communist regime, was in jail in Opava. At home she had two daughters and a husband, who had himself received a shorter sentence in the same show trial. In March, Anna learned that her husband was dead – his body had been found in the Brno Reservoir. The circumstances in which former army officer Karel Koutný died remain murky. However, it is certain that his death was most peculiar. “On 4 January Karel left for work and never came back. Soon afterwards his briefcase was found on the bank of the Brno Reservoir. A while later they found him, drowned. He was a good swimmer. The post mortem report said that his feet and hands were bound in his own handkerchiefs...”

Anna Koutná-Tesařová (nee Boháčová) was born in Železné hory on 24 March 1933, out of wedlock and in impoverished conditions. She had four older siblings. Her mother, a widow from WWI, was alone with the children. At the age of nine Anna was orphaned, living with her older sister Lída before being placed in a children’s home. Before the war she was brought home by a woman intent on adopting her. However, no bond developed between them. *“She disposed of me in the countryside with my sister, in the zone around Sedlčany and Neveklov, where there used to be an SS shooting range. It was a huge area that people had been forced to leave and were now going back to.”*

After completing elementary school in 1947 Anna worked in a small factory in Chiran, where she soldered syringes. She lived with an aunt. *“I wanted to become independent, not to be a scrounger. My brother came back from military service and got a job with the financial guards. I was around 22 and wanted to do an apprenticeship. But I didn’t want to be dependent on or beholden to anybody.”* When the Communist putsch of February 1948 took place she was in Chiran, a young girl inclined toward the ideas of Communism. She joined the Communist Youth Union and later the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and sang in the youth union choir. *“I had no information or education. I genuinely believed in the Communist ideals... They noticed at the cadre section that they had an active youth union member and sent me on a course for writing clerks. I readily agreed. The course was far away in the Valašsko district, in the village of Zdechov... We had Czech, typewriting, shorthand and, of course, Marxism. We were training to be secretaries. They banked on us being reliable reinforcements.”*

Following Anna's graduation she worked until around the mid-1950s training apprentices at arms manufacturer Zbrojovka in Vsetín and in Zlín. It was there – perhaps at a youth union dance – that she met her first husband, Karel Koutný, a fresh graduate of the Antonín Zápotocký Military Academy (he had already graduated from a vocational school and the Brno faculty of the Czech Technical University and passed out as an officer). She married him on New Year's Eve 1955 and they moved to Brno. There they had their first daughter Marcela, with a second, Broňa, born three years later. In the early 1960s Anna Koutná did a part-time course at a secondary level school of librarianship with a focus on journalism. She was interested in literature, theatre and the visual arts. Around this time her Communist dogmatism began to crumble and she looked at public affairs more critically.

Before their second daughter was born Karel Koutný left for the USSR, where he was to teach for five years as an army specialist. However, illness forced him to come home after a few months. Anna was employed as a clerk, including at the culture and education department at a Regional Committee of the Communist Party. A few years later her husband again left for the Soviet Union where, as a dependable comrade, he taught a course in the Republic of Buryatia for several months. He was bound by strict military secrecy but most likely worked on an anti-aircraft base.

In the 1960s the Koutnýs gradually leant toward reform communism. They retained trust in the USSR and were convinced the communist system could be improved, given a "human face" in the parlance of the day. That all changed with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. *"The invasion hit us hard. All our illusions took a hard fall. (...) That intervention was a crime..."* Anna Koutná remained in the Communist Party until 1969. When, like all Communists, she had to undergo screening in the early days of normalisation, she expressed her disagreement with the occupation. She was expelled from the party and kicked out of her job. *"A year later my husband came to the same end during screenings in the army. (...) By then he was a lieutenant colonel. He was working on his candidature of sciences and had submitted his paper, but they didn't accept it. They didn't allow him to defend it and he had to leave for political reasons. He was looking for a job for ages before they took him on as a specialised maintenance man at Brno City Office Machines."*

The Koutnýs family friends included other expelled Brno Communists: Jaroslav Šabata, Mirka Černá and her husband Alfréd Černý. At the very beginning of the 1970s the latter asked Anna if she would copy short texts: uncensored reports. She agreed and was soon also making copies for another acquaintance, Šabata's colleague Vlasta Tesařová. Her husband also got involved in circulating uncensored information, archiving and hiding copied materials. In December 1971 the Brno State Security began making arrests (over a

so-called leafleting operation in which citizens were informed that they didn't need to take part in pseudo elections and vote for the National Front's prescribed candidate list). Many who ended up in the cells had nothing to do with the flyers but had, for instance, copied and distributed samizdat materials viewed as subversive by the regime.

On 17 December 1971, Karel Koutný was arrested following a denunciation and the State Security searched the family's home. *"The texts that had been copied were essentially innocent. The StB acted hysterically. They didn't find much during the search and took what they could find – my husband's old notes, old newspapers. It didn't merit locking up. But on 20 December they came for me too,"* says Anna, who then spent eight months in custody. Their daughters, 13 and 16, stayed with their grandmother. *"I refused to confess. I didn't want to speak. But they got to me through the children. They said, 'It's up to you. If you don't admit it you'll be here longer, the children will be without parents...' I testified. I confessed. Dozens of women did copying. Whatever they laid before me I took on myself, to protect the others..."* In August 1972, the Koutnýs were convicted in a series of trials alongside several others (Vlastimila Tesařová, Anna Šabatová, Květa Marková, Zdeněk Vašíček, etc.). Anna got two years and Karel one for aiding in the criminal offence of subversion.

Karel Koutný was released before his wife. He first survived a strange motor accident before disappearing at the start of 1973. Anna looks back: *"From letters it seemed that my husband was stable. He was in a far better state than when we were in court. He was in prison with Jaroslav Šabata and seemed optimistic. He wrote about all the things we'd do. It made me happy. 17 December came and they released him. The next day or the day after he went to Zlín, where he had left a car with relatives. On this way back he was going through an underpass when suddenly he was blinded by a powerful spotlight and crashed. He ended up in hospital, where he spent Christmas Eve. He then wrote saying he couldn't explain the whole thing – and the tone of his letter was odd... the optimism had returned. On New Year's Eve he was at home. He was looking for a job and was due to start at the arms plant as a worker. Then on 4 January he set off for work and never came back..."*

To this day Karel Koutný's death hasn't been cleared up. As mentioned, his body was found in the Brno Reservoir. If he had opted to commit suicide, it's hard to explain how he could have bound his own hands and feet. Even doctors expressed doubts at the time – and Anna remains convinced that her husband suffered a violent death. *"When I spoke about it with friends we came to the conclusion that somebody probably murdered him. He was the bearer of state secrets. He had information from the Soviet Union relating to anti-aircraft defence and it's quite possible that when he was in jail they started worrying*

that he might give something away... The case was looked into twice after 1989 but it didn't lead anywhere. What's more, all the materials had been lost."

In 1973 Anna Koutná returned from prison to her daughters. She was only allowed to do unskilled, physically demanding work in a warehouse. In 1976 the well-known Czech historian and political prisoner Jan Tesař (see portrait dedicated to him) emerged from jail in a poor physical state. Friends, including Anna, visited him in hospital. The two grew close. The following year the Charter 77 Declaration was published and Anna signed it. She says that though she had been in prison and feared interrogations, searches and arrest, she still "signed everything". In 1978, she, Jan Tesař and other dissidents founded the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, an important opposition organisation that mapped the cases of politically persecuted Czechoslovak citizens, relayed them to the world and attempted to secure assistance for victims and their families. Anna Koutná-Tesařová also copied samizdat publications and was involved in many other dissident activities. Like Jan Tesař, she was harassed by the State Security. In May 1979, Jan Tesař was again arrested and later (in April 1980) accepted an offer to leave the country. He lived first in Germany and later France. *"There were years of pressure on us to emigrate. I didn't want to but he said he'd be better off there than in jail. He left for Germany..."* In the end Anna Koutná-Tesařová also decided to leave Czechoslovakia. *"My daughters had their own lives. Broňa was already a mother. I felt lonely and wanted out."* She and Jan Tesař married in France. Today they both live in the Czech Republic.

Text by Adam Drda