

UNCOMPROMISING

Marie Rút Křížková (*1936)

“From 1976 I was a forest worker, because being politically inconvenient I couldn’t find other employment... I immediately declared allegiance to Charter 77 on 13 January 1977, not only with a signature but also with a letter in which I responded critically to the well-known propaganda piece Losers and Usurpers, which had been published a day earlier in Rudé právo. I sent the letter to President Husák, the media, my employer, various institutions and to the schools where I had previously worked. During an interrogation the StB showed me that they’d automatically forwarded it from those schools to the State Security... It was sad.”

The literary historian and teacher Marie Rút Křížková was born Marie Šopejstalová on 15 June 1936 in Miličín, Central Bohemia. Her father was a cobbler and was forced to repair the boots of SS officers during the Nazi occupation. He deliberately put sharp studs into them that would after some time dig into the SS men’s feet and make walking highly unpleasant. It came out and in 1940 he was punished for sabotage by being sent to work in Germany. At that time the Šopejstals had three children (in the end the number was five): Marie, Eva and the newborn Václav. When their mother got sick the Protectorate authorities took the children from her and placed them in a home in Prague, from where they were sent to two families. The girls ended up with a collaborationist farmer who mistreated them. The mother located them by chance and a year later got them back. She also succeeded in bringing the boy home. In September 1942 Marie started attending school in Miličín.

In the dying days of the war the father escaped from the Reich. After the liberation of Czechoslovakia the Šopejstals moved to Rumburk, where he briefly served as a national administrator at a firm producing medical footwear. However, the family’s situation took a sharp turn for the worse following the Communist coup of February 1948, when Václav Šopejstal lost his job. During the subsequent clampdown on the self-employed, his cobbler’s workshop was nationalised and he was later forced to work in the Jáchymov mines. The pair feigned divorce as “negative class origins” (in their case “petty bourgeoisie”) represented a handicap to children, who were for instance barred from studying, in the Communist country. Thanks to her parents’ farsightedness Marie was accepted into a teaching-focused grammar school in Liberec in 1951. She recalls that “mother and father remarried in the early 1960s. Only then did I learn that the divorce had been a sham.”

In Liberec Marie met her future husband Josef Křížek. After graduating (1955) she became a first grade teacher (first in Rumburk and later in Zvánovice). In 1956 she married and had two daughters, Dagmar (1958) and Svatava (1961). *“Interestingly, as a teacher I was able to work with young children as I liked. I was fortunate in my principal and nobody pressured me ideologically,”* she says. *“Admittedly, I didn’t have a particularly strong anti-regime attitude and I certainly didn’t behave like a resistance member, but I wasn’t in either the Communist Party or the Union of Youth and I refused to leave the church on principle.”*

While still a student Marie Rút Křížková was introduced to the work of the major Czech poet Jiří Orten (1919–1941); she came across a book of his in a second-hand bookshop and in many respects that encounter determined the rest of her life. She systematically studied Orten’s oeuvre, got to know his family and later studied by correspondence at Charles University’s Faculty of Arts (she graduated in the fields of Czech language and pedagogy, specialisation literary history, in 1968). *“As a student I [...] wrote my dissertation about Orten. The title was Prose in the Context of Orten’s Work. I also persuaded Severočeské nakladatelství to publish his prose. Three volumes came out in 1966–1968.”*

In 1963 the Křížeks divorced and Marie lived alone with her daughters. She was deeply shaken by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which occurred while she was teaching at a specialised vocational school in Liberec. *“They shot dead my former apprentice, 19-year-old Zdeněk Dragoun, on the scaffolding at the Town Hall. I wrote a declaration against the military invasion that was read out first on Liberec and then nationwide radio. It was called Party of Moderate Progress Within the Bounds of the Law – I refuse to live in the bounds of a law imposed on us by tanks.”* This intense and publicly declared anti-occupation attitude, which she adhered to in the following years, was held against her by the normalisation-era Communists – with such a “record” she could not work with children or youth. *“I was still teaching in 1969 [...], but they moved me from one vocational school to the next and at the start of normalisation just kicked me out. Nothing drastic. Basically my contract expired and they didn’t renew it. I stopped teaching for many years.”* From 1970 she got by as best she could. Her ex-husband and friends helped her out and she did jobs such as planting trees or sorting post at night.

At the turn of the 1970s Marie Křížková became involved with Jiří Orten’s brother Ota Ornest (the brothers’ original name was Ohrenstein). In 1971 she was accepted into the Prague Jewish Community and adopted the name Rút. A year later her relationship with Ota produced a daughter Ester, who she brought up alone. At that time (starting in 1968) she was working on the book *Je mojí vlastí hradba ghatt?* (Are the Ramparts of Ghettos My Homeland?), an anthology of poetry, prose and drawings by Jewish boys interned in

the Terezín ghetto under the Nazis. It was published in 1978 in samizdat as official publication was forbidden. Marie Rút Křížková bore the renewal of the totalitarian regime, repression, persecution, omnipresent ideology and base propaganda with difficulty but defiantly. Her intransigence and unwillingness to work with the collaborationist post-occupation state apparatus escalated further when State Security officers tried to get her to inform on members of the Jewish community.

In January 1977 the Charter 77 Declaration appeared in the Western media, calling on the Czechoslovak state to at least adhere to its own laws. The Communist regime responded with a mass propaganda campaign, known as the Anti-Charter, maligning the signatories. Typically, it was not officially possible to read the text of the declaration. The campaign was launched by an article in the Communist Party newspaper Rudé Právo entitled Losers and Usurpers. *“When I read that article I said to myself that we had a new 1950s,”* says Marie Rút Křížková, who reacted in her own way to the campaign intended to turn as many people as possible away from the Chartists. *“I immediately declared allegiance to Charter 77 on 13 January 1977, not only with a signature but also with a letter in which I responded [...] to the piece Losers and Usurpers [...]. I sent the letter to President Husák, the media, my employer, various institutions and to the schools where I had previously worked. During an interrogation the StB showed me that they’d automatically forwarded it from those schools to the State Security... It was sad.”*

After signing Charter 77 Marie Rút Křížková was repeatedly questioned by the State Security and as she was involved in distributing and hiding opposition materials her home was searched numerous times. The secret police didn’t let up on her and also complicated her children’s lives, even threatening to take away her youngest daughter. She discussed this in an interview for the project Women in the Dissent. *“In the mornings I get these strange premonitions and sometimes ideas. One morning I woke up and knew they wanted to do something to Ester. I didn’t hang about and woke her up, took her to the first bus and called my former mother-in-law – Křížek and I were no longer married – saying I’d send little Ester to her and that she was to keep her there till I called. And imagine, that very day they really came to the kindergarten. They had a permit to take her away.”*

From February 1983 to January 1984 Marie Rút Křížková was a Charter 77 spokesperson (three were selected every year). She faced ever increasing pressure. Being forced to do manual work had taken its toll on her health and she had to undergo surgery. In 1986 she decided to attempt to get back into teaching. She applied, concealing the fact she was a Charter 77 signatory, and became a Czech and history teacher in the Prague district of Hloubětín, which was virtually unthinkable for a dissident in Communist Czechoslovakia. *“Nothing happened for around two months. Then a little policeman*

came to our house for a check and asked whether I was working. When he learned I was teaching he whistled loudly, turned and left. I later discovered that after the visit the StB had made great efforts to have the school throw me out but failed to achieve this. There was a great principal, Zdena Pacáková, who was in the Communist Party but was an excellent woman. She told the StB that she needed me, that I was a good teacher and that she wouldn't let me go. Either they didn't dare order her to throw me out or they thought it wasn't worth it. In any case, she defended me right up to 1989."

While normalisation was still in place Marie Rút Křížková returned to the Christian faith. She worked with the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted and in 1988 signed the manifesto of the Movement for Civil Freedom. Following the fall of communism she founded the Christian Democratic Party with dissident Václav Benda but soon realised politics wasn't for her. In 1991 she received a doctorate as a literary historian. She is the co-founder of the Society of Christians and Jews and a member of the Czech Christian Academy and the Community of Writers. She has edited the works of Jiří Orten and published a number of books. She lives in Prague.

Text by Adam Drda