THE ŘEPČICE FREE ZONE

Viktor Parkán (*1946)

"They expropriated our house and moved us out in 1983, shortly after we had the children baptised. They were christened by Zdeněk Bárta, an Evangelical pastor and dissident who didn't have a state license. Václav Havel was the godfather of our youngest son. For the state security this was evidently a spur to deal with us quickly. The baptism was in June and by July officials and policemen had arrived with an order. We were forced to leave with their assistance. The very next day workers arrived and began to demolish the house. They took what they liked – and then levelled it. All that remained was a barn, which they moved to an outdoor museum, and a dance hall; it was a lovely First Republic structure which somebody later bought and today uses as a cottage," says Charter 77 signatory Viktor Parkán.

The Parkáns had bought a large house in the village of Řepčice, near Litoměřice, taking a half share with their friends the Kubíčeks, a married couple. Also living with them were the songwriter Charlie Soukup and his wife, and every weekend they were joined by people from the opposition and other free-thinking friends. The State Security therefore decided to destroy the nest of "hostile influences". The official grounds for expropriating and destroying the building were that it was an obstacle to the construction of a new turning place for buses. Naturally, no such facility was ever built. There were numerous cases of the StB deciding to demolish somebody's home – and they all offer a good demonstration of how the Communist regime worked.

Viktor Parkán was born on 17 May 1946, though he grew up partly in Teplice and Liberec, where the family moved because of his father's job – he worked in restaurants his whole life. Viktor returned to Prague in fourth grade. He later attended a comprehensive secondary school (a period replacement for grammar schools), graduating in 1964. He applied to the Faculty of Construction at the Czech Technical University and, though successful in the exams, wasn't accepted; he failed to obtain a recommendation to study after a conflict with a teacher. For a few months he did casual land surveying work before joining Prague's Divadlo na Vinohradech theatre as a stage hand. He remained there for 12 years. Viktor Parkán has fond memories of his childhood in Prague's Karlín and adolescence in the relatively free culture of the 1960s. Things took a turn for the worse in 1966, when he entered two-year compulsory military service. *"It was dreadful. Constant bullying and on top of that political education from officers who expounded the need to destroy the West militarily and said the only trouble was explaining that to*

working people. When I got out I said that if I had to do it again I'd rather chop my hand off."

Viktor Parkán was doing conscription during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. The Czechoslovak People's Army showed at the time that it served many functions, but defending the country wasn't one of them. *"Some officers stood up against it, or at least refused to give the occupying forces any help. The occupation really hit me hard. I didn't want to go into exile, but I never reconciled myself to the situation and to the regime that later took shape."*

Normalisation purges began soon after the occupation. People quickly adapted to the revived totalitarian system and changes also came in at the theatre where Parkán worked. *"I experienced the theatre prior to August 1968 and then for many years after the occupation – it was an absolute disaster. People 'turned their coats', either out of fear or from brazen calculation. They utterly changed their outlooks and joined the collaborationist Communist Party. It was frustrating."*

Around this time the musician Charlie Soukup, an important figure in the Czechoslovak underground, joined the stagehands. Parkán headed the rigging system and the two worked together and became close. Soukup introduced him to the Evangelical pastor Svatopluk Karásek and brought him to the apartment of the Němec family on Ječná St., which was a key centre of unofficial culture and intellectual life. *"As soon as you got to know those people there was no way back. They were principled, inspirational. It was basically clear. I don't what more I could say."* Conditions at the theatre became unbearable for Parkán and he quit in 1976. *"One guy, who came from a terribly persecuted family, whose factory had been seized by the Communists back in the '50s, suddenly did a complete u-turn. He joined the party, became our boss and started behaving like a bastard. I just couldn't stay."*

In 1975, Parkán got his hands on a copy of a letter that the playwright Václav Havel had addressed to the then president and supreme representative of the Communist Party Gustáv Husák, analysing the situation in the country. *"For me it was an essential text. It influenced me greatly. Amid the grey of normalisation, Havel formulated what things had come to in our country in a comprehensible manner. He captured the great con, the lies of the then regime and the deep societal crisis."* Soon afterwards Viktor and his future wife Petra decided to move to the country. The reason was practical: It was difficult to find an apartment in Prague and their friends the Kubíčeks had a child but couldn't find a home. So they bought a former pub for day-trippers in Řepčice.

This followed the publication (in January 1977) of Charter 77, which Petra had immediately signed, "earning" her the interest of the secret police: *"When we moved to Řepčice a car suddenly appeared at the house and two plain-clothes men got out. I was on the first floor at the time and suddenly I see out the window that they're shoving my wife into the car and driving off. Nobody had introduced themselves or said a thing to anybody."* Parkán set off for Litoměřice to try find out where they'd taken his wife, eventually locating the police station. *"Petra was just leaving. With her was an StB man and he said to me 'What are you doing here? We'd bring her back to you.' No word of apology. They behaved completely callously."*

This was just the beginning of their "Řepčice problems". Viktor soon signed Charter 77, and Charlie Soukup and his wife moved into the house. The musician J.J. Neduha set up a rehearsal space for the band Extempore in the ballroom, and friends, most from the dissent, began to visit. The house became a cultural sanctuary for students and many young people from northern Bohemia. "*We had loads of acquaintances in Prague who had much to impart to those young people. Father Josef Zvěřina* (Catholic priest, dissident, 1950s political prisoner – author's note), *Dana Němcová* (see her portrait in this series)*, Václav Malý* (Catholic priest, dissident, now a bishop) *and many others used to visit us. Informal discussions on all kinds of subjects occurred at our place every weekend."*

The State Security began to monitor the building virtually right away, as well as spreading slander about the owners in the village and making their life difficult in every way possible. *"For instance, we got a piglet and when we did a pig-killing the StB heard about it – I was hardly able to get a butcher to come. Though he did make it, the only one of the guests who reached us was Václav Malý, for whom a bus driver had pulled over where there wasn't a stop; he ran in our gateway and the policemen were out of luck. They checked the ID of all the others and detained or sent them back."* When Charlie Soukup was released from jail, where he had been locked up after a fabricated trial, the political police discovered that a party was going to take place in Řepčice. They came out with a story that unexploded munitions from World War II had been found behind the house. After that they set off crackers to ruin people's visits as much as possible. *"It was a kind of theatre – I said to myself that they must've had a dramaturge."*

The Parkáns had a daughter (1979) and two sons (1981, 1982) in Řepčice. Viktor worked as a waiter for a while before doing labouring jobs. At the end of the 1970s the State Security launched a plan of destruction. They got the authorities to inform the owners that the house needed to be expropriated and demolished to make way for a bus turning point. The couple had an independent expert opinion drawn up that confirmed the plan was nonsensical and slanted, as only two, barely used, paths led to the spot. They hired a

lawyer and fought the regime for several years. Naturally, they couldn't win. All authorities in Czechoslovakia were centrally controlled and when the StB made political moves individual rights fell by the wayside. The building, which had represented a kind of island of normality, was expropriated in 1981 and the family were expelled (as referred to in the introduction) in 1983. The Parkáns and Kubíčeks received the estimated worth in compensation from the state.

The authorities offered Viktor Parkán's then sizable family a replacement apartment in Litoměřice, he recalls. They refused, moving in with relatives in Prague. Following the 1989 revolution, Parkán looked through his secret police file. *"I read that listening devices had been installed in the replacement apartment, which they dismantled when it transpired we wouldn't move in."*

Viktor and family lived in Prague for three years, before moving to the small village of Planá near Mariánské Lázně, where he got work in a uranium mine. *"It was a small shaft, for just a few people, almost a family environment. As Chartists it was pretty hard for us to get work. It was always just for a while, before the StB put pressure on the organisation in question. They took me on at the mine, no problem. They had few people – almost nobody wanted the job."*

Viktor Parkán's life changed utterly following the fall of communism. He and his family moved to Slaný, in order to be near Prague. *"During the revolution I started doing distribution for Information Service. It was a kind of revolutionary bulletin that grew out of the samizdat magazine Sport and later turned into the weekly Respekt."* He later joined the Ministry of the Interior, where he was in charge of migration and asylum policy. When he looks back he says that – despite the frequent interrogations, harassment and house searches – he doesn't regret a thing. *"I got to know lots of excellent people I wouldn't have met otherwise. I didn't go into exile and remained free on the inside."* He is sickened by today's authoritarian tendencies and politics, under which people compromised by the Communist regime have been rehabilitated, attributing this partly to a short democratic tradition. *"Czech democracy has lasted just a brief time in modern history. There was no freedom here from the end of the First Republic to 1989. As yet we haven't been able to handle that democratic deficit."*

Text by Adam Drda