

A CZECH CHILD

Petr Placák (*1964)

The writer, journalist and historian Petr Placák was a member of the youngest generation of the anti-Communist opposition, participating in and co-organising anti-regime demonstrations in Prague in the late 1980s. In 2007 he published the “novel essay” *Fízl (Cop)*, in which he writes: *“I was born four years before the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia, in fact just at the right time to manage, in August 1968, to store in my memory images of Russian tanks and the desperation and despair of adults. The August occupation of the country in 1968 is my earliest coherent memory. The funeral of Jan Palach and the whole subsequent normalisation period followed on from it smoothly. Even from pre-school age we were aware of where we were living – in a country occupied by the Ruskies and ruled by collaborators, domestic Communists. For us, Husák was the supreme local demon, while at the same time we knew that above him was the lord of all hell himself, Lucifer Brezhnev, whose blackened soul broke through to the surface and disfigured his appearance. One of my scariest childhood experiences was a television broadcast from the airport when the two monsters, Husák and Brezhnev, hugged and kissed one another on the lips – they were literally attached to one another like huge mating leeches whose mouths were at once organs of excretion and reproduction.”*

If the Soviet secretary general Leonid Brezhnev was the lord of hell and the head of the Czechoslovak Communists Gustáv Husák was a “local demon”, what then was an StB man or cop? *“A versatile instrument used to break people’s fragile character, their dignity, independence, freedom and personal autonomy. A devil’s assistant who attacks people using pressure, temptation, threats, seduction and payment.”*

Petr Placák was born in Prague on 8 January 1964. His father Bedřich Placák, a doctor who had led partisan units in Slovakia during WWII, was thrown out of his hospital in 1969 for publicly stating during the August celebrations of the Slovak National Uprising that no nation should ever reconcile itself to occupation. Bedřich Placák was a signatory of Charter 77, which Petr and his brother Pavel also signed. The Placáks were therefore a family who were blatantly hostile to the totalitarian state. It blatantly persecuted them in turn.

Petr Placák completed elementary school in 1979. His marks were poor. What’s more, he was told to not even bother applying to study for class background reasons. So he

became an apprentice: *“The paradox is that to this day I don’t even know what I trained in. It was in the field of mechanics and involved some numerical code... For the most part I painted boxes and such like... Later I had to start working at the factory where I’d trained. After a few months I managed to leave with the help of a psychiatrist.”*

While still an apprentice, in 1982, Petr Placák had a major run-in with the Communist police. He lent a classmate his father’s wartime pistol (deactivated, in line with the law). His friend took it out in a pub and somebody informed. The State Security capitalised on this to harass the entire family and Placák was interrogated a number of times. This reinforced his resistance to the Communist system and his contempt for those who represented the regime at any level.

When he escaped from the factory with the psychiatrist’s help he completed an evening certificate at an engineering focused secondary school, from then on (until the fall of communism) making a living from casual manual work. He worked at a National Gallery depository, as a night watchman, as a casual forestry worker in Northern Bohemia and as a Metro cleaner. In 1985, Petr Placák was accepted into the engineering faculty of the Czech Technical University: *“I applied there so as to have six months free and I was only in the school around three times. I thought that I would postpone it for another six months. I had a story ready about having trouble at home and needing to repeat the year. But it didn’t work out because the StB found out what was going on... In the end I was a cleaner at the Družba department store, but despite being evaluated as the best cleaner they threw me out after Palach Week in 1989... In Czechoslovakia in the 1980s it was compulsory to have a job, so you could be unemployed for only two months. At the same time, the StB gave orders that opponents of the regime be thrown out of their jobs. It was one of many types of harassment: If you didn’t have a permanent job, you were persecuted for being a parasite. If you found work, the StB and the cadre officials stripped you of it and then persecuted you for not having it...”*

From 1982 to 1986 Placák played clarinet in the band The Plastic People of the Universe. From the mid 1980s he also published in samizdat, producing a novel called Medorek (1985) and a poetry collection, Obrovský zasněžený hřbitov (Huge Snow-Covered Cemetery) (1987, pseudonym Petr Zmrzlík). In May 1988 he was one of the founders of the Czech Children initiative and wrote its royalist Manifesto, a provocative, romantic text calling for the renewal of the monarchy. It states among other things: *“Monarchy isn’t the rule of the minority to the detriment of the majority or the rule of the majority to the detriment of the minority. Monarchy isn’t the rule of several thousand money-grubbers, usurpers, spongers and parasites of the country and the nation. Monarchy is sacred... Monarchic rule will be of the kind chosen by the people. If they choose Communist, it will be Communist. However, we are convinced that a government needn’t*

have, nay shouldn't have, any political programme. It's either good or bad... We propose the transfer of political parties to the field of arts and entertainment or among charitable associations, etc."

The State Security was confused by the Manifesto (which had been signed by, among others, writer Jáchym Topol, poet and critic Andrej Stankovič and poet and art historian Ivan Martin Jirous): *"We produced something that was utterly incomprehensible for a Bolshevik. The StB naturally went to town on it and had the Manifesto published in Rudé právo. Just to give people a picture of what we were like. So suddenly among the announcements of milking labour crews and Socialist workers, there was us, the Czech Children, declaring that the Czech kingdom persisted, preparing for the arrival of a Czech king, which was our highest aim, and so on. It was a rather infantile text, but in the context it was almost ingenious. And of course it had the opposite effect: after all that insane Rudé právo gibberish, the Manifesto had a liberating impact on many people."*

However, the Czech Children's programme was also rejected completely by the opposition. Indeed, the ex-Communist wing of Charter 77 even regarded it as debasement of the dissent by the "radical youth". *"We wanted to contrast ourselves in some way from just those older opposition types from Charter. It bothered us that they were addressing Husák and the state leadership. That they wanted to discuss human rights with a regime founded on the denial of all human and civil rights. With our proclamation we weren't addressing the regime but our friends and the general public."*

Petr Placák says that from 1987 he lived *"from one anti-Communist demonstration to the next."* It was clear to him that the undemocratic regime could collapse if it faced persistent public pressure. In June 1988, he and some friends organised a leafleting campaign against the demolition of old Žižkov. Two months later the "monarchist-anarchist" Czech Children (along with the Independent Peace Association) called on Czechoslovaks to take part in a demonstration on the 20th anniversary of 21 August 1968, i.e., the start of the Soviet occupation. This was followed by protests on the anniversary of the foundation of the state (28 October 1988) and the first ever permitted demonstration on Human Rights Day (10 December 1988). Prior to demonstrations, the Communist police usually attempted to arrest as many "subversive" elements as possible. Ahead of such events it was common that members of independent initiatives hid with friends for a few days or ended up in 48-hour custody. The demonstrations were regularly broken up by the police, with various degrees of brutality. Placák recalls this time: *"Partly it was a bit of an adventure, like in The Red Arrows, and partly there was a fantastic atmosphere at demonstrations. All of a sudden people were closer. Every unfamiliar person in the city felt the same thing – everybody against those Communist*

bastards. In the Metro, everywhere. It was an atmosphere that can't be experienced in different situations."

In January 1989, Petr Placák and other dissidents attempted to honour the memory of Jan Palach (a student who on 16 January 1969 set himself on fire in protest at the occupation and above all increasing apathy in society) and place flowers at the statue of St. Wenceslas. *"They arrested me before I could even reach the monument on Wenceslas Square. When myself and others were waiting at the cop shop in Benediktská St., I wrote on a piece of paper that we'd gather again the next day. The reason was a ribbon which I'd hidden in the lining of my coat and which had 'Jan Palach Czech Children' written on it. It seemed a pity that we couldn't lay it at the monument to St. Wenceslas. The fact that a demonstration was called for the following day sparked a chain of demonstrations..."* They released Placák that evening and arrested him again the following day. He remained in custody for two weeks and later received a suspended sentence. Today he is convinced that the demonstrations on Wenceslas Square were a turning point in Czech society's path to freedom, in part because it influenced or even changed the views of those who had hitherto feared to express civic discontent. *"It was a breakthrough event, above all in terms of demonstrators' resolve. And also in that it was actually registered by the whole of society. There had never been so much discussion among people about demonstrations as then. Even the Bolsheviks wrote about it in the newspapers. Prosecutors and National Committees gave quotes... Suddenly scientists from institutes and artists started to get in touch. Cardinal Tomášek wrote a wonderful letter as early as on 21 January. Students began to revolt. The Several Sentences petition, which was signed by tens of thousands of people, was drafted."*

After 1989 Petr Placák graduated in history from Charles University, worked as an editor and commentator at various Czech newspapers and magazines and was a researcher at the Office for the Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (1993–1994). He has published quite a lot of prose, including the short story collection *Cestou za dobrodružstvím* (On the Path to Adventure) and the above cited *Fízl* (2007). He has also produced academic works, such as *Gottwaldovo Československo jako fašistický stát* (Gottwald's Czechoslovakia as a Fascist State) (2015). Since the mid-1990s Placák has run the arts and society magazine *Babylon*, while he has worked at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes since 2013. A lot of public attention was received by a court case he initiated against a number of State Security officers who had kidnapped and beat him up in 1989; almost 25 years later the courts found them guilty.

On the question of the significance of the dissent in the 1970s and 1980s, Petr Placák says: *"The most important thing was its role in particular instances of assistance to people persecuted by the regime, just as it was important in informing the free world of*

the fates of political prisoners and their families... The dissent maintained independent thought and art in a Communist dictatorship and preserved contact with pre-Communist and non-Communist society as well as with the Czech exile community. And above all it played a major role in the transition from totalitarianism to democracy. Even though everything that possibly could have been screwed up was, the idea that there would be no opposition structures, and that the Communist authorities would negotiate with some kind of reform StB people, is genuinely scary..."

Text by Adam Drda