

WE COULDN'T JUST KNOCK IT ON THE HEAD

Jan Princ (*1948)

For Jan Princ, who signed Charter 77 and faced secret police pressure, the worst period was when close friends of his began leaving for abroad. During normalisation, the Communist regime reinforced its position, systematically harassing its opponents and hounding them out of the country. At that time it seemed the regime would last forever and that the Iron Curtain would always divide Europe. *“When my friends went into exile that was the hardest thing for me. Despair. I really thought I’d never see them again. I believed that,”* he says. *“It was different from when they went to jail. In that case it was clear they’d be back.”*

Princ and his wife Květoslava created shelters of a sort at various locations in the Czech countryside. These old houses were a gathering place for free-thinking people keen to be left alone by the omnipotent totalitarian regime. There too the secret police always tracked them down and made their lives difficult. But they didn’t give up. *“We met friends there and more and more new people kept coming. We couldn’t just knock it on the head,”* Princ says. StB pressure led him and his wife to move three times. He took all sorts of jobs, including in a glue factory and at a gas works.

Jan Princ was born in 1948. He attended Prague’s University of Chemistry and Technology, but he didn’t graduate. Like other students, he took part in protests and strikes against the Soviet invasion of August 1968. It was a turbulent period and the protests also left their mark on his future wife Květoslava, who was younger but studied at the same university. She remained there for some time as an assistant, but Jan left. In the meantime, they had fallen in with Prague’s artistic and dissident communities. Intellectuals gathered at the apartment of the married Němecs at that time. The pair followed underground bands, in particular the Plastic People of the Universe. The group were a phenomenon at that time, though the secret police already had them in their sights. *“I first started encountering the police at Plastics’ concerts,”* says Princ.

In 1974 the Princs, by that time married, had a son. However, they didn’t have a proper place to live. The wife of the well-known poet Ivan Martin Jirous gave them a helping hand. Her husband, known by the nickname Magor (Madman), was at that time in prison, so they were free to live at their apartment.

Around this time dissidents were debating how to get away from the omnipotent secret police. The regime didn't just persecute its enemies but also those who wished to extricate themselves from their influence, live independently and do their own thing. The first plans to quit the capital and move to the countryside were hatched. The Princs decided to purchase a house in the country. In the years to come they would live at three such spots, regularly having to move as the Communists bore down on them. The first building was in Rychnov, near Verneřice in Northern Bohemia.

Before this time Princ had been extremely keen to avoid military service, which then lasted two years and was linked to bullying and humiliation. *"I was a so-called draft dodger in those days. I received call-up papers four times. One time I talked my way out of it. Then I simulated appendicitis [...]. In the end I got a diagnosis for psychiatric care. When I returned to normal life we discussed setting up an unofficial community centre in the countryside. We knew loads of people. That was the original idea."*

The Princs bought the house in Rychnov in 1976. Initially the secret police didn't pay them any attention and they lived there contentedly. However, that was to only last a year. Princ signed Charter 77 and the couple became involved in the key initiative, which criticised the political and state authorities for failing to adhere to human and civil rights. The StB began to persecute and prosecute Charter signatories in a big way.

On top of this, a New Year's Eve party was held at the Princs' place in Rychnov that was attended by many people monitored by the secret police, such as Václav Havel and actor Pavel Landovský. What's more, a broad community of friends and acquaintances had grown up around the house. This all drew attention to the Princs. The police first monitored the building and later even carried out a raid during a social event. Princ had a hunch this would happen and asked the guests to keep quiet. The police accused them of breaching rules on late-night noise but themselves set off petards. They then forced everybody outside and checked their ID. The police then drove a number of people to forests in the area, where they let them out. Others, including Princ, were placed in custody. Parked cars had their tyres slashed and mirrors smashed.

However, this was just the beginning. The authorities decided to demolish the house, expropriating it on the pretext of constructing a place for buses to turn. *"To this day it hasn't been built,"* says Princ. *"We just wanted to live in our own way and within the framework of the laws of the time. We actually did things that were a service to the state. We trained people who had got out of prison and were trying to find work. Today we'd get a grant for such a community centre."* Their original aim was not to take a stand against the Communist regime. *"We wanted to be together and have friends who visited us. That's it. I wanted to keep sheep [...]. At the beginning there was no political*

motivation behind our activities. They were the ones who actually gave us that motivation.”

Jan Princ's life was also complicated by the fact it was hard for him to find work as a dissident and Charter signatory. *“I have professional skills and I'm used to working,”* he says. In the end he passed through lots of jobs. Alongside the above-mentioned gas works and glue factory, he also had a stint on a drilling rig. And naturally he worked on the renovation and maintenance of the buildings that the secret police hounded him out of, one by one.

After leaving Rychnov they didn't throw in the towel but created similar independent communities in Robeč and Mastířovice. It was difficult, because the secret police were keen to prevent the repeat establishment of such communities. After the expropriation of the Rychnov house, the Princs decided not to find another building under their own names. They rented a parochial house in Robeč with Salesian priest František Hochman. However, they were forced out, a process that recurred in Mastířovice. They then decided to try somewhere else entirely and leave northern Bohemia. They had been persecuted and harassed and underwent endless wrangling over the building in which they lived. Princ himself spent three months behind bars. *“People abroad stood up for me. It was quite a strong campaign, fortunately for me. A court gave me a term corresponding to the time I'd been in custody.”* But the worst thing was always being on guard, wherever they lived. They raised three children while on the move, either setting up one place in the country or departing for the next one.

In 1986 the Princs moved to Moravia. The situation had changed. The regime no longer exerted such pressure and rural houses as a place of shelter for friends lost their significance. *“By then you could meet anywhere, so we found this building. It belonged to two retired men, who sold it to us,”* says Princ. That was their last move. To Věrovany near Olomouc, where they live to this day.

“People are still the same. Today you sense a certain disgruntlement in society. But when I look back, it was similar in our day; we were disgruntled and we were in the minority at that time,” says Jan Princ. *“But whoever wanted true information found it. And it's the same today – some information is true, and whoever wants it can find it.”*

Text by Luděk Navara