

THE ETERNAL OPTIMIST

Štefan Ružovič (*1934)

They had to wait for rain. They flung the iron bar and suddenly it was dark. A section of the electric fence had shorted. They had around 15 minutes to make it through the closely guarded zone, where the wire was electrified under a system known as Electrical State Border Protection. From time to time a deer or hare would get stuck in it and fried. They were separated from freedom by the swollen Morava River, though there were spots where it was safe to cross. He knew the area well. After all, he'd grown up there. So he wasn't as alarmed as the others when several shots rang out around them in the dark.

When his native Devínska Nová Ves became part of the border zone, Štefan Ružovič began guiding people to freedom. In the end it cost him his own. The Communist regime sent the incorrigible class enemy to jail three times. But still he says he's an idealist.

"If you lose your freedom, you lose everything," he says, 70 years after the Communist takeover of February 1948. A 1950s political prisoner, sometime people smuggler and founder of the anti-state group Sova, Ružovič now lives in a small apartment in a Pilsen high-rise estate. Conditions at the Valdice prison, where he polished glass without protective gear, seriously damaged his eyesight and he later went blind. He can now only move with difficulty.

Despite this, he recently set off on a long journey. Blind and in a wheelchair, one of the last 1950s political prisoners undertook a trip of approximately 1,200 kilometres, all the way to the small Czech town of Rtyň v Podkrkonoší, with Czech and Slovak filmmakers.

Ružovič is one of the few who remember there was a small labour camp there for political prisoners, named, like the mine, Dark Mine. Not even locals are aware today of the existence of a camp where prisoners extracted radioactive coal in inhumane conditions and people died almost every day. He pulls up his sleeve to reveal a tattoo that today reminds him of the camp. The words Dark Mine and a mine lamp. A light in deep dark mines.

When they arrested him he was 18 and a half. However, his family had come into sharp conflict with the regime shortly after the Communists violently seized total control in Czechoslovakia. Just a couple of months after "Victorious February" two men knocked on

their door. Young Štefan was helping his father chop wood. *“They said they were from the Communist Party’s agitation committee and had come to convince father to join it.”*

“Even under the Slovak state I didn’t join any party – and I won’t do so under yours,” said his father, driving the aghast comrades out of their yard without discussion. The entire family were later tainted by a cadre report stating that the father had chased members of the Communist Party’s agitation committee away with a hatchet.

Ružovič’s first disappointment was not getting into the school he wanted. Even then he observed with discomfort how the world he had known was being transformed. For him his native Devínska Nová Ves meant freedom. However, following the Communists’ ascent the village became a closely watched border zone, soon marked by border guards, the barking of Alsatians and barbed wire. More and more unfamiliar faces also arrived. These were people persecuted by the regime who, perhaps yearning for the freedom they had experienced during Czechoslovakia’s First Republic, saw fleeing as their only option.

Ružovič was young and, he emphasises, an eternal idealist. He began to help. He didn’t know their names or stories, only that many of those people’s lives were on the line in Communist Czechoslovakia.

One time a truck driver asked him, as a local who knew the village thoroughly, for help. He wanted to know where the river was shallowest but had his own plans and didn’t heed advice. The man managed to break through barriers in his vehicle, crossing the Morava at a shallow point and reaching Austria. However, a certain Florian Camby was in command at the border and regarded defending it as a literal battle. The driver unfortunately got stuck in the mud and, despite being on the Austrian side, he was shot dead. The border guards then dragged him back to Czechoslovakia on a motor boat.

In 1949 he and some friends from school – Ferdinand Mislovič, Ján Beleš, Ľudovít Pešadík and Peter Jeck – founded an anti-state group. *“The group was named Sova (Owl), because we only worked at night,”* he says. They first built bunkers, bases for people persecuted by the regime whom they subsequently guided across the border. They later printed flyers and carried out small-scale sabotage against the Communists.

Around this time they were contacted by Eman Vlasič. A former airman who had escaped the incoming regime to Austria, he was in contact with refugees and wished to fight the new totalitarian regime.

When the group learned that the Communists were about to move tens of kulak families out of Devínska Nová Ves, they waited in the dark for the mayor, a committed Communist, with pistols. They stole the documents he had in a brief case, telling him he wouldn't see the morning if he reported it to the police. They got away with it. However, they didn't know the State Security was already onto them.

It wasn't long before the State Security uncovered their action, arresting Ružovič at the Devínska Nová Ves railway station as he returned from school. The village was surrounded by militia men. He still remembers that it was on St. Nicholas Day, 6 December 1952.

The group's members were tried separately. Peter Jeck, the youngest, was conditionally released. Ludvík Pešadík and Ferdinand Mislovič, then soldiers on basic service, were tried by a court martial in Trenčín. The first got two years, the second five. Ján Beleš, whose confession led to the arrest of the others, received two years. The state court handed the steepest sentence to young Štefan Ružovič in June 1953.

"I've known Pankrác, Leopoldov, Ilava, all the best spots," says the political prisoner today in a hoarse voice. However, he spent the greatest part of his prison pilgrimage in the now almost forgotten labour camp of Rtně v Podkrkonoší, known as the Dark Mine.

Conditions at the camp weren't a lot better than at the Jáchymov uranium mines. The political prisoners were held in an old German camp that also housed prisoners, guards and Germans, punished after WWII. The Czechoslovak patriots were highly put out that among them were murderers from Lidice. Paradoxically, the wardens treated the war-related prisoners better than the Communist regime's political prisoners.

They worked in a coal mine without any preparation whatever, one reason people were seriously injured and died almost every day. Quotas were high and shifts lasted 12 hours. During their free time the political prisoners were harassed by chief Bydžovský and political commissar Spousta, who treated them worse than criminals. Ružovič, the youngest person there, was often given correction, prison within a prison. He bore this in good spirit. However, what he couldn't take, and what really hurt, was when his family travelled across the entire country to see him.

They travelled for two days and in winter waded through metre-deep snow to get to the camp to give their son a small parcel. The whole visit lasted less than five minutes. *"This isn't allowed, this neither,"* said the authoritarian chief, who wouldn't even let him receive an apple. He often felt his parents were taking the whole thing worse than him.

Ružovič was released in 1955. However, the insubordinate class enemy wasn't free for long; within a few months they had arrested him again. *"In a pub, where I was celebrating on St. Stephen's Day with my fiancé and cousin, I allegedly uttered a sentence, in Czech no less: Long live the Czechoslovak working class and its misery,"* he says, shaking his head over the absurd reason he found himself back behind bars.

Again he was back in the same labour camp. But there was no way he was going to give up. He had earlier befriended Egon Kinasch there, an adventurer who had got 25 years for working for both sides – the Austrian and Czechoslovak intelligence services. The two decided to escape together.

The ideal moment to escape came during an unguarded moment when they were leaving the mine where they worked. However, they weren't free for long and were recaptured by wardens with machine guns

Following a tough investigation, Ružovič was transferred to one of the harshest prisons, Vadlice near Jičín. At the old Carthusian monastery he immediately received a reputation as an escapee. With it came a prison uniform with a blue band and a target on the back and a ban on working outside the prison building. There he plucked feathers as well as working on glass production, without protective gear. He suffered permanent damage to his sight and later, as a free man, gradually went blind.

When he was released on 28 October 1958, continuing his studies was out of the question. Nobody would hire him either.

In the end he managed, with the help of good people, to find a place. He ended up doing the toughest of jobs, in a brick factory and a quarry, his whole life. In 1979 the regime locked up the defiant class enemy again, for eight months. But he remained true to his reputation as a tough lag and always spoke his mind.

The former class enemy remained living in Devínska Nová Ves, which was a border area filled with collaborating defendants and auxiliary border guards, as well as Public Security. He remained in the sights of the State Security until 1989.

He welcomed the Velvet Revolution with hope. However, that was dashed when he found out ex-Communists were still running things at the enterprise where he worked. When at the factory he saw erstwhile committed party men on a list of candidates for posts on the new, democratic management he was characteristically candid. *"The same Communist bastards are there again,"* he said, earning himself the sack shortly after the revolution.

For several years he worked as a security guard. However, three months before retirement age he found himself jobless. Shortly afterwards he completely lost his sight as a result of the tough conditions in jail. Gradually his legs also went, while he has also had severe spinal problems.

Today, how does he view what happened? And has what he dreamt of when he fought for freedom way back then come to pass? *“You know, I’m an idealist at heart. What’s most wonderful, what’s best, is confined to our dreams. But we’ve got to live somehow. Democracy develops, it grows like a flower. What we’ve got here is a long way from genuine democracy.”*

Text by Soňa Gyarfašová