

## **SKALÁK'S "UNDERGROUND BLUES"**

**Miroslav Skalický (\*1952)**

*"Skalický is a blues man in the pure sense of the word; it is as if the cheerfulness and playfulness of his songs – transmitting ease despite the harshest problems of an underground world confronted by the world of a consumer society manipulated by the police and bureaucracy – shines light on the gloomy atmosphere of his themes and has transformed them in hope-filled vocals that comment on the world of establishment baseness with merry irony, bereft of bitterness or excessive rhetoric,"* Ivan Martin Jirous, the poet, art historian and artistic leader of The Plastic People of the Universe wrote in 1977. He was reflecting on the Third Music Festival of the Second Culture in the CSSR (as his text was also titled), which had taken place at the country home of the dissident and later Czech president Václav Havel. At that time Miroslav Skalický, who had performed at the festival with a hastily assembled group, had spent a year in jail and was bound for exile.

The poet and musician Miroslav Skalický, nicknamed Skalák by friends, was born in Prague on 31 August 1952. In the 1970s he was one of the chief "organisers" of the Czech underground, though the word is rather incongruous in the context of that free-thinking, informal movement. Even in childhood he had no illusions about the Communist regime. His parents were not important people in the 1950s. They were working class and close friends had ended up in jail and labour camps for political reasons. In 1958 the family moved to Pilsen, where after elementary school Skalák became an apprentice carpenter at the Škoda works. As a young adult his major passion was rock'n'roll. He collected records and even as an apprentice got in trouble for having long hair. What's more, he had a wicked sense of humour and loved to provoke, especially those in authority. For instance, he and a friend reported at a police station that they had found 10 hellers (less than the price of a bread roll), insisting that the police write up a report and that they receive, in line with the law, ten percent of the amount handed in as a reward.

When Skalický had completed military service (reduced in his case as he had entered the Military Buildings enterprise as a worker) he moved to Chomutov in Northern Bohemia. For some time he had been socialising with friends who were of a similar stripe, working class long-hairs offered zero perspective by the regime that followed the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. They scorned the collaborationist, mendacious regime and were barred from travelling or studying freely. Instead, they were forced to do boring

and soul-destroying jobs (work was compulsory in Czechoslovakia until 1989). They tried to at least have fun on their own terms, to listen to music of their choosing, to be together and to be left alone by others. In the industrial cities of Northern Bohemia there were many such people and the North Bohemian underground, which took shape spontaneously, was of considerable import. The Communists played a major role in its inception. They banned free rock music and allowed only ideologically correct, artificial and pitiful official culture and harassed all those who rejected it and defied the specific totalitarian bourgeoisie. This led to many young people becoming united in their natural antipathy to the police state.

In the early phase of normalisation Miroslav Skalický ran “discos” and put on events with friends at private homes, which led to the National Security Corps clamping down on them with increasing frequency. Life got tough. Many long-hairs were barred from entering certain towns. Skalický was banned from Žatec and in the first half of the 1970s was frequently arrested. In a 2013 interview for idnes.cz he said: *“For the most part this was after gigs and events (...). In those days I lived in Chomutov. We had the group The Hever & Vazelína Band and with them we chiefly provoked the establishment at Revolutionary Trade Union meetings and such like. In 1971, for instance, it didn’t take much. We had the girls sew us Bermuda shorts in the colours of the American flag. They were made from various materials and had stars sprayed on them. They caught me and expelled me from Chomutov for promoting fascism and defaming the flag. Today when I tell this to young people they laugh and hardly believe it.”*

Skalický started putting The Hever & Vazelína Band together in 1973. The group, whose line-up was in constant flux, appeared at various events (not just secret ones but also in public) and the musicians didn’t just “play” instruments but also tin cans, barrels and all kinds of random items. Their set mainly comprised well-known songs to which Skalický had put his own parody lyrics and a number of them became genuinely famous (Cheap Synthetic Riff-Raff, Black Epauettes, etc.). In his 2012 book *Tváře undergroundu* (Contours of the Underground) Skalický recalls: *“We weren’t much able to play. We were more out to provoke, because we couldn’t reconcile ourselves to what we saw around us. People took humming along with it as normal. But I couldn’t reconcile myself to what they were doing, how they looked, how they lived, how they acted in work, the views they had, the fear of expressing oneself. What annoyed me most was that the high-ups tried to make me behave like them...”*

In 1975 Skalický became friends with Ivan Martin Jirous and with him and others attempted to organise a festival of unofficial bands. This didn’t work out. However, that same year Skalický and his friends Karel “Kocour” Havelka and František “Čuňas” Stárek (whose portraits also feature in this series) organised an Evening of Poetry and Music in

Přeštice near Pilsen. The programme included film screenings, a reading from his Zpráva o třetím českém hudebním obrození (Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival) by Jirous and musical performances from singer-songwriters Svatopluk Karásek and Charlie Soukup. During the evening the police arrested Skalický and Havelka but after being questioned the pair were released and the event proceeded as planned. In February 1976 Skalický's Hever & Vazelína Band played at the Second Festival of the Second Culture in Bojanovice. The police didn't take action there either, evidently as they were preparing a major clampdown: In spring 1976 the State Security arrested dozens of people, including Miroslav Skalický.

This was followed by stage-managed trials of the underground, one in Prague and the second (in July 1976) in Pilsen. Skalický, Havelka and Stárek were convicted over organising the Přeštice event, receiving 18 months. An appeals court halved their sentences. The trials were intended as a warning and a clear signal that the Communist regime wasn't going to tolerate unofficial culture. However, this was not a total success because the underground was defended by opposition intellectuals (key roles were played here by philosopher Jiří Němec and playwright Václav Havel), who informed the West about the trials and organised a campaign in support of those charged. It was the very protection of free speech and creativity that united individual strands of the Czechoslovak opposition at this time, laying the groundwork for the establishment of what became the best-known opposition initiative: Charter 77. Miroslav Skalický signed the Charter declaration soon after returning from prison; he had served his sentence working in the Zbůch mine near Pilsen.

When he was released from jail Skalák teamed up with Havelka, Stárek and other friends to buy a large house at Nová Víska near Chomutov. For many months, it became an example of a functioning independent underground community. Hundreds attended regular concerts and lectures there, again under the watchful eye of the State Security and regular police. The underground magazine Vokno, to whose first two issues Skalický contributed, was also established at the farmstead. In the end the state expropriated the house at the same time that the StB launched an operation named Clearance, focused on using extremely brutal pressure to force dissidents to leave the country.

In 1980 Miroslav Skalický decided to go into exile. In the above-cited interview for idnes.cz, he says: *"I didn't want to go away. When they took Nová Víska from us, I agreed with another 10 people to buy another building near Domažlice, where there would be more of us and we could continue in a free culture."* However, this attempt was thwarted by the State Security and Skalický was repeatedly interrogated and arrested. *"What's more, I had just had a child at that time. From a young age, when she was six months, I had her with me during interrogations. In Kadaň they threatened she could be run over by*

*a car or that our house would go on fire. Which in some cases happened. After a Plastics concert they set the building where they'd played alight. In Rychnov they blew a house up after a concert. (...) So I said to myself that it wasn't worth it here."*

Skalický moved to Vienna, where he made a living as a worker and craftsman. He soon also got involved in all manner of activities supporting the Czechoslovak opposition. In exile he had to overcome initial distrust from "respectable" émigrés toward hippies, which he managed to do. Considerable support was shown to him by Pavel Tigrid, the journalist and publisher of the exile review Svědectví, and the future Czech minister of foreign affairs Karel Schwarzenberg. Skalický organised the smuggling of exile magazines into his homeland, travelled around the coast of Yugoslavia in the summer handing out the magazines Svědectví and Listy to Czechoslovak vacationers and took part in protests against human rights violations in Czechoslovakia. When the Communist president Gustav Husák visited Austria, he and Karel Havelka stuck hundreds of stylised arrest warrants bearing Husák's portrait along the route from the airport to central Vienna.

Following the fall of the Communist regime he began visiting Bohemia and bought an old mill at Meziříčko, near Želetava in Vysočina. He spent two decades doing it up and for several years it has hosted musical events and festivals. To this day people uninterested in mainstream culture gather at Skalák's place. Since the beginning he has provided space not only to friends from the underground but also emerging artists, including "techno heads"; he argues that even though he himself doesn't like techno and uses earplugs during such performances he remembers well how hard it was for alternative music to find a venue in his youth. This openness has led to distaste or even antipathy on the part of some living near the mill. He faces threats, unsubstantiated denunciations to the police and administrative obstacles. He takes it quite stoically – and views the worsening political situation with similar equanimity (idnes.cz, 2 January 2017): *"Things are getting tough. Rights and freedoms are being restricted. It's slow and inconspicuous, but it's happening, even though I always say that as a nation we're living in the best of times and we're doing better than we ever have. I know from my circle of acquaintances that they're considering their options and thinking about moving to the West or to more civilised countries. They're thinking about their children. They have a sense of foreboding. I laugh at that, but they're pessimists. They're most upset about the Czech Republic leaning toward Russia."*

*Text by Adam Drda*