

AN “ATTACK” ON GOTTWALD

Ondřej Stavinoha (*1955)

On Great October Socialist Revolution Square in the Central Bohemian town of Příbram there once stood a statue of Klement Gottwald, chief architect of the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, creator of the totalitarian system and “first working-class president”. Before midnight on 23 August 1978 the statue was approached by Ondřej Stavinoha, who placed an explosive on it. *“The bronze Gottwald measured two metres sixty. (...) I placed it between its legs. Connected to it was a 12-second timer detonator. I set it off with a battery. And I ran...”*

Stavinoha’s “attack” was politically motivated. Czechoslovakia had been occupied by the Soviet army for a decade and Gottwald symbolised terror, repression and subordination to Moscow. What’s remarkable is that this striking protest wasn’t carried out by an “agent of imperialism” or “reactionary element” – which propaganda had spread a fear of in the population – but a man of the people, a miner, a representative of the most elevated profession.

Ondřej Stavinoha was born on 14 June 1955 into a working class family in Znojmo. He became an apprentice (agricultural mechanic) in Rýmařov. After school he was a tractor driver for a while before entering compulsory military service. From there he went into the Příbram uranium mines. He worked on the shaft, though being used to hard work it didn’t bother him. When the 10th anniversary of the occupation of Czechoslovakia was approaching (it had started on 21 August 1968), Ondřej began to feel the need to express his discontent with the political situation. It sickened him that the occupying army was celebrated, while the confidence of the Communists and the ever-present National Security Corps and militia men also angered him. What’s more, he was dating a girl whose stepfather was in the National Security Corps: *“He was forever proclaiming: ‘Nothing will happen during the anniversary this year, no protests – we’ve got everything under control!’ It got on my nerves. At the same time, the National Security Corps were carrying out manoeuvres in Příbram. They went around the pubs. They pushed us about. If somebody had for instance an American flag on their jacket they’d cut the whole sleeve off. Everyday harassment. So I said to myself: ‘I’ll show them!’”*

But under a repressive regime, how could one express opposition to the regime and make it clear that not everybody had given in to humiliation? Ondřej discussed it with a friend from the mine, František Polák. They first considered a silent protest, for instance

by walking through the town in funeral clothes on the day of the anniversary. However, they scotched that idea as nobody would have noticed. So then Stavinoha decided to protest in a highly visible way. He would blow sky high a symbol of the Bolshevik regime, a bronze statue of Klement Gottwald. Decades later Ondřej recalled: *"We took around a kilo of explosive material for breaking rocks from the shaft, which we got away with easily. The explosives were doled out, but we never used them all up. After detonations some were always left over..."* He hid the explosives in a bed at his rooming house and agreed with Polák to go to Příbram's square and blow up the statue. They were concerned they hadn't enough explosive material and shared their plan with another miner from the rooming house, Jaroslav Týsl, and he secured more.

The operation didn't go to plan because a police patrol prevented Polák and Stavinoha from reaching the square on 21 August. But Ondřej wasn't ready to give in and set off for the square again at midnight on 23 August. He placed the explosive on the statue and fled. *"I got as far as the fountain. The detonation was such that it propelled me forward somewhat. When the boom occurred I turned and saw Gottwald falling to the ground. At the same time glass and windows shattered and I thought to myself: I've gone too far! (...) As I later discovered, the explosion ruptured the crotch of the statue and, if I remember right, ripped off Gottwald's right leg. In the end I paid for all the damages, including the repair of Gottwald."*

Soon after the explosion, regular police and State Security officers arrived at the square in Příbram and began preparing extraordinary measures. In the morning the district directorate of the National Security Corps launched a criminal investigation into general endangerment, while a whole floor at the police station was occupied by Prague StB officers. When the investigation kicked off Ondřej Stavinoha and František Polák were asleep at their boarding house. The next morning they left for their shift as usual: *"By then the police operation was in full swing. The radio announced repeatedly that anybody who had seen anything suspicious was to report to the National Security Corps... It made me pretty anxious. Polák and I even considered whether we shouldn't flee over the border, but we didn't know how."* Neither of them had told anybody about the explosion, though they were itching to when they heard the miners at work discuss the attack. They remained at liberty for seven days and the police evidently wouldn't have had anything to go on if Jaroslav Týsl hadn't voluntarily reported to a police station. As he possessed an unlicensed rifle he became afraid and, aware that he didn't have a direct connection to the explosion, began to testify.

The police came for the "attackers" at the mine during the night. *"At two in the morning around five men in plain clothes appeared at the gallery. 'Which one is Stavinoha? You're coming with us.' (...) They let me wash and then took me to Příbram."* Ondřej knew why

they'd come for him, but he had no idea how they'd got on his tail. He was sitting in an underground cell when an investigator came for him. *"A man in plain clothes came along. He was nice and said: 'Let's go Ondřej, do you know why you're here?' I replied that I hadn't a clue. He said there was no point in denying it. (...) He said: 'You know what, I'll let you think it over.' And he left. The next one came. He was a bad guy: 'Stavinoha, are you going to speak or not?! Who did you blow it up with?!' And it all kicked off: hands behind the chair back, cuffs, slaps. 'I'll get it out of you!' I kept asking what he was on about. I held out as best I could. I asked myself how they could possibly know. Nobody saw us and we hadn't spoken to anyone. But after half an hour of shouting and slaps the nice one came again. (...) And he gave me Týsl's testimony to read."*

Denial was futile. The statement Ondřej read contained details only his friends could know. So he confessed to the investigators, signed his statement and was taken to Ruzyně prison in Prague, where he was placed on remand. He recalls being in one of a number of National Security Corps cars, which wailed all the way *"as if they were carrying a mass murderer."* His trial ran from 22 to 26 January 1979. *"We first went to the Regional Court in Prague (...). I got nine years and was ordered to pay all damages, which amounted to around 140,000 for the statue alone... Nine years was a lot. Admittedly they'd told me in custody I could've got even worse. But somehow I didn't expect it. It didn't sink in... The court was packed. They read out that the National Committee in Příbram had demanded an exemplary punishment. But then my boss from the shaft asked to speak and pleaded for a reduced sentence, saying the gang would vouch for me. (...) I appealed against the verdict on the spot and about a month later the matter went before the Supreme Court. They didn't reduce my sentence, but they did decide that Franta Polák would pay part of the damages... So to sum up, I got nine years, Polák got seven and Jaroslav Týsl got a year."*

Soon after the trial Ondřej was placed in Valdice prison. He had no idea what awaited him and recalls being overcome by despair on arrival. Fortunately several other political prisoners were already aware of him. They made sure he was placed in their cells and introduced him to life behind bars. The first person to look after him was Josef Römer, convicted for alleged espionage. *"When I arrived at the cells in Valdice, where 30 or 35 fellows lived, they gave me basic 'training': watch out for this and that, don't start anything with that guy."* In Valdice Ondřej Stavinoha later worked "on the glass", pressing beads and marbles by machine. *"One time a gruff guy appeared at my machine and said: 'You're going to do my work!' (...) I made marbles and beads from sticks of glass that were one metre long. They were heated up in an oven and the glass flowed from the end of the stick. So I grabbed a baking hot stick and said: 'Beat it or I'll stick this in your belly.' He came around one or two more times but when he saw it wasn't going to work he left me alone. But you always had to be kind of resolute and on your guard."*

There were only a few political prisoners in Valdice, with most of the inmates convicted on criminal charges. Ondřej Stavinoha was nicknamed Gottwald. He worked hard as he couldn't handle inactivity. *"Jail is so monotonous. One day is like the next and it's infinitely long. I worked 12 hours a day (...) so I didn't have much time for depressing thoughts."* Ondřej was constantly under the eye of a guard who monitored him, though that supervision eased after two and a half years. After five years he began to exercise regularly and, out of necessity, covertly. After around a month Stavinoha was in the exercise yard when he met his friend and "co-attacker" František Polák. When Polák was released after a few years Ondřej told him to visit Jaroslav Týsl, who had turned them in, and "knock his block off": *"At that time I didn't know that Týsl had died from gas poisoning. I don't know why or how it happened, but when Franta got there he was dead."*

In time Ondřej Stavinoha became skilled at the job. *"Fifty-seven percent of my earnings went toward prison costs and settling damages, meaning toward the cost of repairing the destroyed Gottwald... I paid it off in five or six years."* Ondřej served out his full sentence and recalls the support he received from his sister and mother, who was shaken by his conviction. A year prior to the end of his sentence she wrote a letter petitioning the president, Gustáv Husák, for a pardon. He turned it down. When Ondřej walked out of the gates of Valdice it was already the latter half of the 1980s. Not long after he was released the statue of Klement Gottwald that he had once blown up disappeared for good. *"I had to find work, because having a job was compulsory then. So I pulled myself together and went to the mines. (...) I started on the uranium, on the same shaft, in the same gang."*

1989 was a joyous year for Ondřej, who only regretted the revolution hadn't come sooner. He campaigned to have his sentence annulled. Rehabilitation took years, but he got there in the end. In the new era of freedom he experienced an unpleasant and curious situation linked to the attack on the bronze Gottwald – the police investigated him after a bomb went off on Prague's Old Town Square, seriously injuring a German tourist and leaving dozens of others hurt. In conclusion we naively asked Ondřej Stavinoha whether his experience of Communist prison had given him anything and how he looked back on it today. He went quiet, then said: *"What could be positive about jail? It's a waste of time, a waste of everything. It went on forever. In prison, when the days dragged on, one after the other, I often asked myself: Was it worth it? But what are you doing to do? It happened and can't be changed. It's in the past now."*

Text by Adam Drda