

# **TO THE LIMIT AND CRAZY, AS IF LIFE ITSELF WAS AT STAKE**

**Miroslav Vodrážka (\*1954)**

In March 1977 the young author of the Manifesto of Emotionalism (Manifesto of Emotionalism), Miroslav Vodrážka, climbed the statue of St. Wenceslas on Prague's main square. *"I wrote two-metre, huge inscriptions – 'E', for emotionalism, and 'God is here' – on the plinth in enamel paint,"* he recalled many years later in an interview for Revolver Revue (103/2016, the source of all quotations in this piece). *"There was some old Bolshevik standing by the monument who tried to drive me away with a stick. But I was quite high and I said to him several times and emphatically: 'Go home, granddad!' Then I climbed down and on my way dumped the paint and the brush in a bin and carried on normally as far as the Arco café on Hybernská St. (...) There, a load of cars pulled up and StB and National Security Corps men jumped out to arrest me."*

Vodrážka's performance, which would be regarded as a misdemeanour in any democratic country, led to his being criminally prosecuted and undergoing a life-threatening stay of several months in the closed ward of a psychiatric clinic. The case aptly illustrates the nature of the normalisation Communist regime. A group of uniformed and secret police officers took action against a 22-year-old for deviating from humdrum respectability. He had long hair and an unusually long coat and expressed himself publicly and freely, what's more initially incomprehensibly, in – to use the period jargon – a "religiously tinged" fashion.

The musician, philosopher, journalist and "radical feminist" Miroslav Vodrážka was born in Prague on 13 September 1954, a few minutes after his twin sister Viola. Their father worked in a library and in the 1950s gave away or sold to acquaintances for a pittance books that had been removed from collections and earmarked for liquidation for political reasons. Somebody informed on him and he was convicted and sentenced to decades of wage deductions. This left the family on the verge of poverty. *"I was shaped by lack and exclusion... Recently I received from a friend from elementary school at Vyšehrad photographs from a Pioneer scarf ceremony, which was then a compulsory ritual, but my sister and I aren't in the picture. Why? Because father said we so poor that we didn't have enough for a Pioneer shirt. So he never declared his political outlook but fixed it so we were always outsiders. But I didn't mind. I don't recall taking it badly."*

Another formative experience for Vodrážka was the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, which began in August 1968, shortly before he turned 14. *“On the night of 20 and 21 August, when the Russians invaded, I spontaneously joined the resistance. (...) The experience of occupation was important for me in the long term: it gave rise to a generational sense of absolute antipathy toward the Soviet Union, to communism and the Communist ideology.”*

Around the same time he completed elementary school his parents split up and his father forgot to submit his application for further studies. This oversight led to a free year when he occasionally took casual work, played basketball and above all read systematically. He subsequently did an apprenticeship (air conditioning technology) but his main interest by then was the arts. He began to write and play guitar and later made sporadic appearances in pubs with an “emotional trio”. *“The concept of our performances was that the playing always had to be extremely intense, to the limit and crazy, as if life itself was at stake. (...) We played music based on an artistic Manifesto of Emotionalism that I had written some time in 1971. The music could be characterised as absolute improvisation – the only guideline was emotion.”*

Vodrážka was a member of the Czech underground. He rejected the totalitarian system that had begun to emerge in Czechoslovakia after the occupation and which had been preceded by a brief political liberalisation. He had no time for official art, collaboration, compromise and omnipresent lying. He lived on the margins among friends who shared his outlook. *“Our group adored deviational, radical revolt and sometimes even somewhat crazy feats. We loved whatever was far out. We were influenced by literature and writers such as Le Clézio, Camus, Beckett and others. (...). Our view was that somebody who does something abnormal, uncommon and deranged sets himself apart from the system. Naturally this also included appearance. (...). In my conception, the underground was defined by artistic-political radicalism. (...) In my view, the underground encompassed those who were creative and at the same time independent and anti-regime to the max – this meant that because you didn’t want to get locked up for parasitism (having a job was compulsory in the CSSR – editor’s note), and had to eat, you went to work. But that was where one’s voluntary relationship with the regime ended.”*

For Vodrážka and his pals long hair wasn’t just a fashionable signifier of membership of a subculture; it was an element of resistance to the establishment, which regarded the wearer as a so-called juvenile defective (the StB’s term), and a social signal: *“When I first started working at Sentinel (the State Technical Literature Publishers – editor’s note) in 1974, where I was working in the duplication centre, my boss took a look at me and said: You’re against, right?”*

Miroslav Vodrážka wrote the slogans on the St. Wenceslas monument referred to in the introduction shortly after the launch of Charter 77. A massive anti-dissident campaign had just ended and the StB officers evidently didn't hide their enthusiasm when they found in the pockets of the "delinquent" a type-written document, the Manifesto of Emotionalism. They assumed it was a bald political declaration and were disappointed. Regardless, Vodrážka was dragged from one interrogation centre to the other, where the political police conducted amateur "theological discussions" with him over the slogan "God is here". The StB had monitored him previously, establishing a file on him, codenamed Marabu, in 1976. The interrogations ended with a charge of disorderly conduct and transfer to the Bohnice psychiatric hospital: *"A totally screwed-up situation ensued, because they employed insulin treatment on me. Today that 'scientific' method is banned, but they strap you to a bed and, via injections, you get ever increasing doses of insulin in your body (...). That causes hypoglycemic coma accompanied by hallucinations, thrashing about, cramps, etc. (...) The treatment lasted several weeks. Sometimes it even ended in death, unfortunately. I say that it was an expression of the Frankenstein's marriage of political power and medical science. When they did experiments on me I quickly realised that it was an absolute disaster, because if they'd sent me to prison I'd at least know when I'd get out. But with court-ordered medical treatment you might never get out."*

After a couple of months Vodrážka managed to get out of Bohnice mental hospital. He remained under supervision, however, and had to wait until 1981 for court notice that he was no longer under protective oversight. Nevertheless, his bad experience didn't cause him to accept the regime's restrictions. At work he began covertly duplicating opposition samizdat materials and obtained chemicals for the printing of the underground magazine Vokno. The apartment of Miroslav and Iva Vodrážka on Celetná St. in central Prague became a venue for unofficial gatherings, concerts and lectures. It became *"a kind of underground laboratory in which in the course of time various music groups rehearsed (...) Iva put on theatre there. Anybody who needed to could sleep over at the flat (...). But in my view the most important thing was the apartment seminars that I began in 1980 with a series of lectures on religion by the philosopher Maxmilián Duren. (...) A circle of young people around the philosopher Julius Tomin also attended his lectures. Egon Bondy heard about them and asked me whether he couldn't move the seminar he ran with the philosopher Milan Machovec to our flat, because the owner of the flat where he was began worrying there would be problems with the StB."* A free philosophy seminar became established at the Vodrážkas; alongside Czech philosophers, professors from abroad, in particular from Belgium and the Netherlands, came to deliver talks over several years.

In 1981 the StB launched a nationwide clampdown on the publishers and writers of the underground magazine Vokno. Vodrážka was placed in custody and was fired by the publishing house. From then until the start of the 1990s he made a living as a boiler room stoker. He came up with a plan to save the magazine and also played a role in numerous other opposition activities. These included founding the Committee for the Defence of František Stárek, the imprisoned editor of Vokno, with friends. In the late 1980s clandestine meetings of Charter 77 spokespersons took place at the Vodrážkas' apartment and the secret police registered Vodrážka as a "Chartist", despite the fact he had not put his signature to the best-known Czechoslovak opposition initiative: *"What was proclaimed in the basic declaration struck me as unacceptable, but above all impossible, specifically that the signatories were not seeking political or social change; that, as Jan Patočka wrote (...), the Charter stood fully on legal grounds and its signatories considered themselves loyal citizens of the state, not seeking any political change regarding the constitution or legislation. When I stole chemicals to produce the underground magazine Vokno I simply wasn't standing fully on legal grounds and I didn't feel any loyalty to the law."*

Miroslav Vodrážka is one of the many who emerged from the dissent and succeeded in maintaining their liberty and independent critical thinking in the democratic system. He had deviated in his views and position in the past and continues to do so today. After the fall of communism he didn't take up an official or political position but worked as an editor at the now legal Vokno (until 1992) and published in numerous other magazines and newspapers. Vodrážka has long been focused on feminist issues, was a member of the Gender Studies Foundation in Prague in the years 1991–1997 and has written many articles and lectures on gender. His published books include the essays *Chaokracie* (Chaocracy) (1997) and *Esej o politickém harémismu* (Essay on Political Haremism); *Kritická zpráva o stavu feminismu v Čechách* (A Critical Report on the State of Feminism in the Czech Republic) (1999); a collection of essays from 1990–2007 on the underground, chaos, feminism and transgender issues entitled *deCivilizace* (deCivilisation) (2007); and *Filosofie tělesnosti dějin* (The Philosophy of the Physicality of History) (2014). In addition he has released a number of CDs, most recently a "musical documentary" of the 1980s named *Underground Temple Story* (2015). He performs alternative music with, among others, the soprano Helena Zaoralová, and Laurie Amat, a US vocalist. At present he works at the department of digitalisation of archival documents at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes; he is also chairman of the Institute's Independent Union organisation.

*Text by Adam Drda*