

LIBRI PROHIBITI

Jiří Gruntorád (*1952)

In 1989, Jiří Gruntorád, publisher of the Popelnice (Dustbin) samizdat series, was imprisoned in Minkovice in north Bohemia because of books. Minkovice was one of the worst jails in normalisation Czechoslovakia. “It was never possible to get all the work done and it was always cold, too... In October it started to snow and in May it was still snowing. They harnessed the prisoners to a snow plough... It’s hard to describe... The first time I entered the workshop of the Preciosa national enterprise I thought I was in hell. In the clouds of steam I saw figures running about incredibly, dressed in some kind of rags of overalls. And in a while just like them I too was running about,” he remembered over 20 years later.

Today the director of the library Libri Prohibiti, Jiří Gruntorád was born in Prague on 21 September 1952. He finished elementary school and was apprenticed to be a carpenter (in his words this was an “exalted term for a forestry worker”), until it was discovered during an examination at a military service recruitment centre that he had a spinal problem. He was barred from heavy forestry work and became a tour guide in Prague. Like many of his generation, Gruntorád was also shaped by his experience of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. His desperation soon grew into opposition to the collaborationist Communist regime, he says. However, the greatest influence on his life was books. He devoted himself to them in opposition, was imprisoned because of them and today pours all his energies into them. “In that weird Communist ‘timelessness’ books always brought me joy. Incidentally, in those days it was one of the modes of existence. People escaped to their cottage – or into literature.”

The same year that the Charter 77 declaration was published Gruntorád was listening to Western radio stations. He was aware from Radio Free Europe that the seeds of an opposition existed and that there were dozens of banned writers living in the country, though he didn’t know any dissidents personally. That changed a year later, in 1978, just by chance. “At that time I was working as a bricklayer at the Prague OPBJ (District Housing Management Enterprise) and was repairing the brickwork torn out by plumbers and electricians. And one day they made a hole in the apartment of then leading dissidents – Václav and Kamila Benda. Alongside thousands of books there were carbon copies of Charter documents all over the place. They were impossible not to see.” His interest was piqued – and he became friendly with the Bendas. He then started putting out samizdat

publications himself. His first samizdat comprised 14 copies of Jaroslav Seifert's collection *Morový sloup* (The Plague Monument), which he typed out.

There is a widespread belief that mainly political texts came out in samizdat (the term for unofficially published and uncensored books or texts in multiple copies, for the most part typewritten and later duplicated by Xerox or mimeograph). However, the reality was different. "Compared to Poland and Hungary, Czechoslovakia was ideologically a far more tightly controlled country, so what was routinely published there couldn't come out here. For instance, in Poland there was no need for religious samizdat... while there was very widespread historical samizdat, about Katyn and the Warsaw Uprising. By contrast, the volume of literary samizdat was a Czech speciality. We don't find so many purely literary books in any other country. Not even in the Soviet Union was the number of banned writers as high as here... Even lyrical collections couldn't be published in our country... And Czech samizdat has another specificity: in terms of design and craft it's the nicest by some distance."

There were a number of samizdat series in Czechoslovakia, with two of the most important *Expedice* (Dispatch) and *Petlice* (Padlock). For fun Gruntorád gave his series the similar sounding name of *Popelnice*. However, his publishing activities were wholly serious. By 1989 around 130 titles had come out in the *Popelnice* series (including prose works by Bohumil Hrabal, Ludvík Vaculík, Václav Havel, Jaroslav Hutka and Vlastimil Třešňák). Each involved a great deal of work, carried out in secret alongside his regular job. Books had to be copied on a photocopier or by a trustworthy transcriber. Then the copied sheets had to be put together, an equally trustworthy binder had to be located and finally the title needed to be distributed. All of this with the risk that the police would turn up and confiscate the entire "run". The State Security became aware of Jiří Gruntorád quite quickly, but instead of going after him "via the book" they did so "by the pistol". "The first contact with the StB was surprising. There was no intimidation – they locked me up for three months right away. They convicted me of unauthorised possession of a gun, which never existed." All indications are that the totalitarian police were hoping to force Gruntorád to keep his distance from the dissent. However, his reaction to the pressure was to sign Charter 77 on his release from prison.

As he didn't give in and kept producing samizdat despite the warning, he soon ended up behind bars again. He was arrested in December 1980 and in June 1981 was sentenced to four years with two years of preventative supervision. In his grounds for conviction, judge Jan Rojt stated that Gruntorád had, among other things, made 10 copies of the poems of Bohuslav Reynek. He continued: "Nevertheless, even an unobjectionable text can be regarded as hostile propaganda against our socialist social order, as for that matter was shown in 1968. In the collection *Pieta* (Reverence), in the opening poem in particular, the

landscape and its atmosphere are described very gloomily. The same goes for the collection *Setba samot* (Sowing Solitudes), where one can point to the poems *Žalář* (Jailer), *Krysa v parku* (The rat in the park) and others.”

The relatively hard-line sentence was intended in 1981 (at a time when the Solidarity trade union movement was reaching a peak in Poland and Czechoslovakia’s Communists feared the unrest spreading to their country) to intimidate the opposition. Gruntorád was evidently also the victim of an StB strategy known as “trimming the fringes” under which they started to focus on “foot soldiers” – those whose work was practical rather than ideological or theoretical.

In 1981 the samizdat publisher was brought to the above-mentioned Minkovice. The prison no longer exists but the local company Precosia is still running – and this author visited it with Jiří Gruntorád in 2007. The firm’s buildings stood on the grounds of the former labour camp, an old wall fitted with barbed wire was still there, booths for armed wardens still stood and a platform where new prisoners were received was still recognisable. Gruntorád is an even-tempered person but the place had a visibly powerful effect on him. He worked there polishing glass for chandeliers and glass decorations. Left-handed, he was forced to use a machine for right-handers which made him slow, not that anybody cared why: “The quota was tough – if we didn’t fill it, there were sanctions – usually special punishment, meaning solitary confinement. Once I got solitary over Christmas. It wasn’t possible to close the window and in the morning I woke up covered in snow. Instead of a toilet there was a hole in the ground. In the summer it froze over and in the summer rats crawled out of it. We slept on a block of concrete on which a board was laid at night. There were no mattresses.” As in other prisons, the majority at Minkovice in the normalisation period were criminal prisoners. So on top of the tough work, systematic bullying by wardens, hunger, repeated solitary and health problems there was another hardship: loneliness.

After a number of complaints, Gruntorád was transferred from Minkovice to Valdice prison. Though he was still assigned to a relatively tough “correctional-educational” group, the move saved his life. In Valdice he met Ivan Martin Jirous, nicknamed Magor (Madman), an art historian and poet who was also the artistic leader of the underground band The Plastic People of the Universe. Naturally, a book story is involved, with Gruntorád managing to get Jirous’s well-known poetry collection *Magorovy Labutí písně* (Magor’s Swan Songs) out of the prison. “There was a strict ban on all kinds of ‘artistic activity’ at the prison. All that was allowed was correspondence, thanks to which we have Havel’s Letters to Olga and Jirous’s collection *Magor dětem* (Magor for Children), containing poems Ivan wrote for his daughter. But the censors wouldn’t permit his Swan Songs. I smuggled them out with the help of Dana Němcová, who came to a court in Liberec that I

had to appear before and got a kiss on the cheek in the corridor. As I did it, I slid into her mouth a secret note that I had under my tongue. The guards had searched everything else several times. I got the whole manuscript out of Valdice in December 1984. The book came out even before Jirous returned.”

Jiří Gruntorád left prison on 17 December 1984. He was under so-called preventative supervision, meaning he had to have a set place of residence and to report regularly to the police. In 1989 he was doing what he had done previously: making a living as a labourer and publishing books in samizdat. The Popelnice series had kept operating while he was in prison, overseen by friends, including the copyist Táňa Dohnalová. Following the fall of communism he set up Libri prohibiti, a unique library of samizdat and émigré publications (i.e., of banned books). On 28 October 2002 President Václav Havel bestowed on him the Medal of Merit, first degree, while he also received a Magnesia Litera award for establishing and running the library. It is a sad testament to post-1989 developments that in 2015 President Miloš Zeman presented the same Medal of Merit to the owner of Preciosa, Ludvík Karl, a man who prior to 1989 occupied a leading position in the enterprise making use of prison labour.

Text by Adam Drda