

I WANTED TO TAKE A FIRM STAND AGAINST THE REGIME

Jiří Pořízka (*1940)

Jiří Pořízka came into conflict with the totalitarian Communist regime twice. The first time was when he was still young and ended up in prison for disseminating religious belief; he was sentenced to a year and a half in 1962 for alleged subversion. The second time was when in August 1968 he and his wife fled the Soviet occupiers into exile and left behind their little daughter Pavlína, whom the Communist regime refused to let join them in their new home in Sweden. He began fighting the totalitarian regime, this time over the right to live with his daughter... "I wanted to take a firm stand against the regime," he says. He and his wife decided to go on hunger strike to win the right to have their daughter join them in Sweden. It was a minor declaration of war. The start of the hunger strike was intended to demonstrate to the Swedish public just what kind of regime ruled in Prague. On 25 May 1971 a Communist Party congress began in Prague. It was an important event at which the Communists planned to reflect on how they had dealt with the so-called normalisation that followed the Soviet occupation. The Pořízkas launched their hunger strike on the same day. "I had planned linking the hunger strike to the Communist Party congress as a gift 'to them'. I no longer had any alternative," explains Pořízka. To increase their visibility he and his wife moved to the centre of Stockholm. There they stayed for several days in a bid to capture the attention of the city's inhabitants. They also launched a leafleting campaign. Ten thousand leaflets drew the Swedish public's attention to the fact they hadn't seen their little daughter in three years. "I felt the complete support of the public. In a few days 80,000 had signed a petition supporting our demand. Naturally, I also received a negative letter, though that was probably 'organised' by the Czechoslovak Embassy," he says.

Jiří Pořízka comes from a very old family. His predecessors were named Pořízka and Pařízek and were from Jestřebí near Velká Bíteš. There are references to the family in provincial records from as early as 1358. One of his most noteworthy predecessors was Jan Pařízek of Jestřebí (1601–1668), who became the master of the free university of Padua. Jiří Pořízka possessed numerous family heirlooms, including a gold ring from the mid-17th century. He never took it off. But before long he was to lose it in a whirlwind of dramatic events.

When Jiří Pořízka was born his family adhered not only to tradition but to the Catholic faith. His father Alois Ferdinand brought his two children up in a strict Catholic spirit. From

the age of seven Jiří attended a Catholic scout group. This was in 1947, when that wasn't an issue. But that quickly changed following the Communist takeover in 1948. "Following the abolition of the scouts we continued meeting and as young boys went to summer camps. We had an excellent leader, who was 15 years older and a very religious man," says Pořízka. The leader was named Lubomír Studený and he was a member of the St. Wenceslas scout company. Pořízku was greatly drawn to scouting and became more deeply involved. "In any case, inspired by the romantic impulses of my family's history, I regarded it as positive thing. In the illegal scout troop we circulated leaflets and the Catholic faith. My father reinforced my interest," Pořízka says.

His father was the administrator of a textile factory in Prostějov. Only until February 1948, of course. Then he had to make do with the position of cutter at the Jiří Wolker clothing factory.

His son his began two-year military service in 1959. On his return he began spending time with another scouting enthusiast. It wasn't a good move. The enthusiast turned out to be an informer and Pořízka was arrested. He was charged with disseminating a hostile religious ideology and of circulating leaflets. He was of course attempting to take on the governing Communist ideology. However, from the Communist prosecutor's perspective he was guilty of subversion.

Three of them went to jail. He, the leader Studený and a friend of Pořízka's. The sentences were calibrated. Studený got four years, Pořízka two and a half. The verdict was delivered on 30 October 1962. The Supreme Court later commuted his sentence to a year and a half and in the end he was released on 25 July 1963. On condition. For a four-year period. These were of course absurd and disproportionate punishments. However, a decade earlier they would have been far tougher. He was very fortunate that the case of the three scouts came to court in the early 1960s, when the atmosphere in the country began to change and Communist repression eased. This also benefitted the young convicts.

Nevertheless, the conviction impacted Pořízka's life in a different way. He retained a bad reputation for many years. "You're an enemy of the people," he was told on his return by the Communist director of the enterprise where he worked. "He addressed me in the informal form," says Pořízka. And he wanted to dismiss him. In the end Pořízka was allowed to stay, but he could only do manual work. Until 1968, when they apologised to him and allowed him to return to his former office.

It was a time of hope and opportunity. People believed in Alexander Dubček, perhaps because they just wanted to believe in somebody. Things really did change. Pořízka and his beautiful wife Anna (nee Pořízková; by coincidence she actually had the same surname

as her future husband) believed their lives would get better. In particular they hoped this would be true for their three-year-old daughter Pavlína. Censorship disappeared, the borders were opened and the Pořízkas planned to use freshly-acquired passports to visit Austria. To finally see what was beyond the Iron Curtain.

But things began changing fast. On 21 August the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops began. The hammer came down particularly hard in Prostějov. Three unarmed civilians in the town were shot dead by Soviet soldiers. The Pořízkas considered what to do next. Above all, Jiří Pořízka had his experience of the previous years. He sensed that if he stayed he would again be a second-class citizen. He and his wife agreed to escape to the West. There was just one issue: whether to take little Pavlína?

They weighed the pros and cons. They were leaving on a motorcycle and couldn't take any food, sleeping materials or clothes. If Pavlína stayed she'd be with her grandfather and grandmother, whose place she was used to and where she spent most of her time. And if they did manage to flee they would get her out too, once the situation calmed down. They decided to leave Pavlína in Prostějov.

It was a fateful decision. "Our view was that the civilised way to resolve such situations was to allow the child to follow their parents later," says Pořízka. That would have held true if the Communist Czechoslovakia were a civilised country. There they were mistaken. When they were leaving by motorcycle they almost ran into a Soviet tank. However, they made it to Austria. After the longest night of their lives they registered as refugees with the Austrian authorities. It was morning and crowds of other unfortunates who had decided to leave their homeland had also crossed the border. The occupation and subsequent exodus provoked a major wave of solidarity with Czechoslovakia. Even in distant Sweden there were protests against the Soviet policy of artillery guns and tanks. Actually, Sweden wasn't that far away. Its relative proximity and good reputation led the Pořízkas to decide to turn to the Swedish Mission, a refugee organisation that would help them get asylum.

"We didn't want to go Germany, or to South Africa, where they'd invited us. For many people in Czechoslovakia Germany was a revanchist state. South Africa was too far away and our aim was to have our daughter join us," says Pořízka. In a year they were in Sweden. In November 1969 they were assigned a student flat in Lund in the south of the country. "Sweden wasn't lambasted in Czechoslovakia. It was almost a socialist country. That's why we chose Sweden," says Pořízka. In the meantime their property was seized in Czechoslovakia and they were sentenced in absentia for leaving the country without authorisation, Jiří to 30 months and Anna to 18. But that was irrelevant to them in Sweden. They were content. Pořízka studied at a local university and his wife worked as a nurse.

They had a wonderful future ahead of them. If only their daughter wasn't behind the Iron Curtain.

For now, Pavlína was being brought up by her maternal grandparents. However, all efforts to get her to Sweden came to nought. The parents' main contact with their daughter was by telephone. Twice they asked the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior to allow her to leave. In vain. They wrote to the Czechoslovak president, the Red Cross and the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

All that was left to them was to alert the public to the case. So they launched a hunger strike and petition drive to coincide with the start of the Communist congress. They attracted attention throughout Sweden, with even some Swedish MPs coming out in their support. However, Czechoslovakia didn't alter its ridiculously tough position. It was a punishment for parents who were proud and resilient. Other exiles got their children out of Czechoslovakia. Jiří Pořízka then accepted an offer from two Swedish pilots, who attempted to get Pavlína across the Iron Curtain. Unsuccessfully. A second attempt, when Pavlína's mother flew with them under a false name, also failed. All three were caught and joined Pavlína as hostages of the totalitarian regime. Pořízka considered his next move. He planned an escape using a special car with hidden compartments for people-smuggling, but that also fell through. In the effort he lost the valuable ring, a family heirloom that was to serve as a distinguishing mark. However, when it came to the Swedish public, Communist Czechoslovakia lost. Sweden's prime minister, Olof Palme, invited Pořízka to a private meeting. "He was sympathetic toward the case," says Pořízka.

Something of a new Cold War broke out between Sweden and Communist Czechoslovakia. Relations between them ground to a complete halt. The police first arrested and later expelled the 29-year-old Swedish journalist Karl Thomas Walden, who wrote about the case. Later, when an ice hockey international between Sweden and Czechoslovakia was planned for Prague, the Czechoslovak authorities refused to grant visas to a number of Swedish journalists. They were from the media outlets that had devoted most attention to Pavlína's case. In the end the match was called off.

The Helsinki Conference on Security in Europe took place in June 1973. There the Swedish minister of foreign affairs met his Czechoslovak counterpart, Bohuslav Chřoupek. The

Požítkas were discussed. On 12 March 1974 Anna was granted permission to travel. She had had a son, Jáchym, behind the Iron Curtain and Pavlína was now nine.

Jiří Pořízka, who had successfully fought to get his loved ones out of Czechoslovakia, returned to his homeland for good after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The mother and children did not.

Text by Luděk Navara