

## ***THE WORST THING WAS WHEN MOTHER DIED IN PRISON***

**Zdena Mašínová (\*1933)**

Zdena Mašínová regards the imprisonment of her mother and her death in a Communist jail as the toughest time of her life. Relatives of Zdena Mašínová's played an active role in the second and third resistances. Her father, General Josef Mašín, had been executed by the Nazis in 1942 after being condemned to death by a military court. Her brothers were more fortunate. They became fully involved in the anti-Communist resistance and – in dramatic circumstances – ultimately managed to break through to West Berlin, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in August 1953. The Communist regime couldn't touch them there so wreaked revenge on their relatives at home. On their sister Zdena, and others. *“What was the hardest moment for me? The fate of our mother, who died in a Communist jail in appalling circumstances in 1956. After arresting her they left her without medical care. They had arrested her in 1953. We discovered that they left her lying on a concrete floor in a terrible state... That was the worst time.”*

Zdena Mašínová Sr. died in a prison camp on 12 June 1956. The regime also persecuted Zdena Mašínová Jr. herself. But things went better for her and she lived to see the fall of communism. Thanks to a physical disability – she was born with a handicapped leg – from the beginning she was unable to take part in the resistance with her brothers and they did not let her in on their plans.

Zdena Mašínová was born in Prague in 1933. Her father was General Major Josef Mašín, a legionnaire and brave soldier. He joined the resistance and was active in Obrana národa (Defence of the Nation) in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi occupation. In addition, he, Josef Balabán and Václav Morávek comprised the legendary Tři králové (Three Kings) group, which was focused on intelligence work and relayed important information to the government in exile in London. Zdena Mašínová also experienced Nazi raids of their home when her father was on the run. The Nazis caught and imprisoned him in 1941. His wife was also put in jail. Zdena Mašínová Jr. and her brothers were threatened with being sent to the Reich for re-education. Being disabled, Zdena could even have ended up in the gas chambers, though in the end the children were allowed to remain with their grandmother. However, their father was imprisoned as an enemy of the Reich. *“I regard it as essential, and consider it huge fortune, that I was born into such a family. I say that despite everything that happened later on. It was just because he had*

*a family that he entered the resistance. It struck me as a given and necessity that he did so," says Mašínová.*

The father's influence was felt throughout the family. His example made a deep impression on his two sons, Ctirad and Josef, who decided to join the anti-Communist resistance after the Communist coup of February 1948. In the meantime, Zdena struggled with her disability before enrolling at a grammar school and later at medical school. She lived in Olomouc while her brothers remained in Bohemia. As for what they were organising against the totalitarian regime, she didn't know precisely. *"I had a hunch. From the beginning, from the end of the war, we had plenty of information about Russia. I knew something from mum, who had returned from Terezín, and a Russian POW was hiding at our place. An officer. He said he couldn't return to Russia... Then later my brothers died something at our place. Everything was based on hints alone. I first learned something more in a telephone call from mum. She told me she was worried for them. That was in autumn 1953, when my brothers fled to Berlin. I followed Radio Free Europe and learned about their escape from it."*

However, following the Mašín brothers' successful breakout the Communists turned their sights on the rest of the family. *"The National Security Corps came for Zdena Mašínová at a hospital, where they arrested her. They took her to the prison hospital at Pankrác and shortly afterwards announced she was healthy and could stand trial. However, they had made such headway in a mass public trial that she couldn't be added to the list of the accused. She spent a year on the concrete floor of a prison cell, in insufficient clothing, without a mattress or cover that would protect her from the biting cold. They convicted her separately. And again in the gallery, filled with shouting representatives of the belligerent proletariat, sat her young daughter Zdeňka ..."* That is how Barbara Masin, daughter of Josef Mašín Jr., describes the regime's treatment of Zdena Mašínová Sr. in her book *Odkaz; Pravdivý příběh bratří Mašínů (Legacy: The True Story of the Mašín Brothers)*.

Zdena Mašínová Jr.'s uncle Ctibor Novák had worked with the group and also received the death penalty. Zdena Mašínová Sr. died of cancer in jail. Imprisonment was familiar to her from the war years. She was the first woman to graduate from the Faculty of Geodesics at the Czechoslovak Technical University in Prague. Her ashes were placed in an unmarked grave. Shortly after her sons' escape her younger daughter, Zdena Mašínová Jr., was also picked up. *"They arrested me in October 1953. I was imprisoned in Olomouc and at Ruzyně in Prague. But I don't like to speak about it."*

While Zdena Mašínová Jr. was behind bars relatively briefly the secret police monitored her until the 1960s. She worked at the State Institute for the Control of Medicines and

later at various laboratories. In 1969 she met her brother Josef in Copenhagen, Denmark. But she didn't avail of the chance to emigrate.

*"I've never regretted anything, never ever. My state of health was such that I couldn't cooperate with my brothers and I experienced everything as I experienced it..."*

Zdena Mašíňová received the Václav Benda Prize in 2015. Since the return of the family farm at Lošany near Kolín, following a dramatic and protracted court battle, she has been trying to have a memorial and a museum dedicated to her courageous father and family built there. She would like to offer part to the Scouts.

*Text by Luděk Navara*