

“FREEDOM WILL COME”, THEY WROTE ON FLYERS

Jan Roman (*1929)

“The Czech nation!” These were the opening words of one of the flyers written and copied by Jan Roman, a young man from Brno. In the fateful year of 1948 he was 19. He felt he had to become involved in the struggle for democracy. He and some friends formed a group, considering the most effective ways of standing up to the nascent totalitarian regime. Flyers struck them as a worthwhile approach. They wrote, for instance: *“The Czech nation! Maintain your fortitude, don’t believe government propaganda (...). Consider what we have lost by rejecting American assistance (...) consider what kind of economic disaster is hurtling toward us, consider the obscene murder of dear Jan Masaryk, the attack on Drtina and the gangster-style ultimatum placed on President Beneš to sign the resignations.”*

This call came, of course, in reaction to the dramatic events that followed the Communist coup of February 1948, when Jan Masaryk was discovered dead in the courtyard of the Černín Palace and the democratic politician Prokop Drtina was found seriously injured on the ground beneath a window of his apartment. There was more in the flyer, including a key call on voters to protest at the repression by dropping blank slips into the ballot boxes during elections: *“Genuine democracy requires controls in the form of several free parties. Czech nation: Come to your senses and act: vote against the unified candidate’s list, vote against CPC dictatorship! VOTE WITH BLANK SLIPS!!! Freedom will come again, truth will prevail! Read and pass on...”*

The group was varied, comprising both students and workers. However, Jan Roman had no idea it also included an informer. In January 1949, Roman was arrested and condemned to 12 years in prison. He succeeded in breaking out of jail but was caught and sentenced again. In the end he spent a total of six years in prison or on the run. For him the worst period was when he was on the run and was in constant hiding. *“It was perpetual fear,”* he says.

Jan Roman was born in Carpathian Ruthenia, which was then part of Czechoslovakia and is today Ukrainian territory. Following the fall of Czechoslovakia his family were forced to leave, resettling in Brno. Jan Roman worked as a clerk while concurrently doing secondary school studies via distance learning. The three post-war years of relative freedom left their mark on him. A member of the National Socialist Youth, he read a lot and followed politics, attended meetings and was deeply impacted by the February 1948

coup. He became involved in a number of initiatives. To him, calling for a boycott of elections rigged by the Communists was logical: *“To this day I ask myself how older people found communism appealing,”* he says.

He and his friends got stuck into the struggle for democracy, principally via the production and circulation of flyers. At that time the Communists weren't yet in total control of everything, making it possible for some time to make public appeals unobserved. *“The flyers were copied and distributed in the period before the elections on 30 May 1948, probably from April 1948 to the end of May or the start of June 1948. The group's final flyer, no. 5 and with it the content-wise identical flyers no. 13 and 3 were distributed around a week before the elections. In the case of one flyer, no. 10, entitled ‘Truth prevails’ and with six pages of content, it was not established that this group produced it...”* read the subsequent court verdict. The court devoted a lot of attention to the group's leafleting activities. After all, it was important for the regime to silence all resistance. And the secret police had succeeded in recruiting an informer among the resisters. Perhaps this was not so difficult. *“Our meetings were conducted in the spirit of naive youth, which wasn't bothered by the awareness we were doing something unlawful. Our models in attacking the Communists' dictatorial methods were our MPs, who not long previously had gone in for what we were now doing. Convicting us as a dangerous illegal group was made easier for the court by the existence of an informer – a provocateur in our ranks,”* says Roman. That provocateur evidently induced the group into conducting various actions, such as attacking a National Security Corps station with the purpose of acquiring weapons or transmitters. He also ensured that the secret police had an overview of what individual members were up to. Which explains why they arrested Jan Roman prior to his school leaving exams in January 1948. He was lying in bed at home. Fortunately for him, he was one of the last they came for. By then they knew almost everything already, meaning he avoided brutal interrogations and torture. His trial took place in Brno under the feared judge Karel Trudák. He subsequently went down in history as the chair of the court panel that condemned Milada Horáková, a former MP with the National Socialist Party, which Roman had also previously allied himself with.

The trial concluded with the handing down of sentences under the dreaded article 231, the law on protecting the people's democratic republic. Most political prisoners were sentenced under this law. Roman got 12 years. However, he wasn't keen on spending his best years in jail and decided to escape. An opportunity arose when he was sent to work outside the prison, loading beet onto wagons. Roman took advantage of the situation. When the guards weren't looking he climbed over a pile of beet and disappeared from view. Freedom! He kept moving all night, reaching Hradec Králové and then Pardubice, where he had family. *“The anxiety when I escaped. Imagine that two guards with*

automatics are guarding you. There were six of us prisoners and we always filled a wagon and then stabilised the wheels. I saw that the wardens were leaving with some prisoners so I pretended I was stabilising the wheels. I waited for one of the guards to turn around. By coincidence that didn't happen, so I climbed over the pile and headed for Hradec." He got some clothes, money and glasses at his relatives' place in Pardubice and set off for Brno. There he hid out in a chalet by the reservoir and looked for somebody who could lead him over the border. But everybody was afraid and time was running out. He had to keep going. He had chosen the worst possible time to escape. The Slánský trial was taking place and the country was gripped by fear. In the end Roman sought help from a priest he knew from jail. However, the cleric interpreted the situation as provocation by the secret police and the escapee ended up in handcuffs. "The worst thing was my capture. Two StB men caught me. They arrested me in front of the train station. They came after me and asked my name. In those days, people saw spies everywhere. Evidently I too had been suspicious to the priest. The moments when they caught me were the worst."

While he was being taken to Brno by train he made his final escape attempt, through a toilet window. This also ended in failure so he wound up behind bars again. Fortunately the investigators got the case mixed up, believing he was in for robbing chalets. *"I was afraid that I wouldn't persuade them that I really hadn't stolen the clothes. If they learned that I'd got them off acquaintances or family, they would've been punished. They'd accuse them of supporting me as a political prisoner. So it was encouraging when I learned more crimes had been attributed to me..."*

His actual past was uncovered later and he was immediately sent to the Rovnost camp in Jáchymov. He remained there until his release in 1955. He encountered difficulties later too as he didn't hide his outlook or take part in elections. However, they had no way of blackmailing him. He wasn't seeking to study and made a living as a printer. In fact he had learned the printer's trade in jail so got something out of it. He had no regrets. *"Actually, I did regret not being more careful, that's for sure."*

Text by Luděk Navara