

Jan Dobrovský

Journalist for Communist-era *samizdat* publications and the *Lidové Noviny* newspaper

Czech Republic

My name is Jan Dobrovský. I was lucky to be born into my father's family. He [Luboš Dobrovský] was a journalist at what was then Czechoslovak Radio during the Prague Spring. It was a time of revolutionary opposition to censorship at the foreign desk led by Milan Weiner. The foreign desk was exceptional because it worked for the people. This helped define my destiny. When I eventually grew up I realised that we were already living in a 'normalised' world, and that there were things going on that we were facing as a family unit. So I naturally found myself on the side of the resistance against the communist dictatorship, and I was motivated to work to oppose the dogma of Soviet imperialism that was in place.

When I was a bit older, my future colleagues asked me to work with them. I first wrote some literary articles and such for various underground *samizdat* periodicals, or for publications put out by émigrés in various parts of the world, which were then sent back to Czechoslovakia. It was about three years before the revolution when Jiří Ruml came up with the project to revive the old *Lidové Noviny* newspaper, which had ceased publication. The idea was to create a newspaper that wouldn't only be for the ghetto – in other words, not only for the closed society of dissidents, where most *samizdat* publications ended up. It would be a newspaper read mainly by the so-called grey zone, which comprised people located somewhere between dissidents, on the one hand, and people who had no idea about dissent, on the other. This group was mostly intellectuals, people who worked in various scientific institutions, etc. This way dissidents would have a communication overlap which would also allow them to reach the 'ordinary population' that lived under a conformist socialist regime. My friend Vlada Mlynář and I accepted an offer to work on the project, first as technical support and later as journalists and members of the editorial staff. We were in fact members of the editorial staff from the start, but we didn't think we would be trusted to work as journalists as well. So we started to contribute interviews, articles and so on. We published the newspaper and then, in a kind of conspiracy, we distributed it with Jan Ruml, who was our 'conspiracy teacher'. That's how I actually got into journalism.

I don't remember much about specific cases of journalists who were spied on. It was quite a long time ago, and while we were a group of people who knew about each other, at the same time we were working in secret. We were, if I speak about my own experience, closely watched by the State Security Service

[StB], since they knew we were publishing a newspaper that could reach beyond the dissident ghetto and become a dangerous game for them. By then [Soviet leader] Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* and *glasnost* had begun, so the public demand for new information, due to the new openness coming from the Soviet Union, was huge and people no longer feared picking up a copy of a *samizdat* publication and reading it.

We knew the StB would want to know everything about us and we were under constant surveillance. They were constantly picking us up somewhere and putting us in pre-trial detention cells for 24 or 48 hours and calling us in for interrogations. They would also tap our phone lines, eavesdrop and come into our homes when we weren't there and leave in a way so we knew they'd been there. So we were always living in a state of tension. I was put in an even more difficult situation when they tried to put my father, who was working as a window washer at the time, in jail for a crime that wasn't political. The crime was 'theft of socialist property', which he allegedly committed by taking receipts for more windows than he actually washed and receiving excess wages for work he didn't do. During what was a long and complicated trial which involved six separate hearings, it turned out that he had washed more windows than what he was paid for. So the opposite of the alleged crime was true. They nonetheless ended up convicting him, since they reclassified the crime of theft as the crime of 'harming the planned economy of the republic'. And because they liked the idea that they could start prosecuting dissidents for economic crimes, I was assigned work assembling racks and shelves in stores.

The story of my father, and eventually that of our entire family, began when he joined the foreign desk of Czechoslovak Radio. The editorial office there was quite exceptional in terms of who worked in it. They were very erudite and well qualified, which later showed in their work as dissidents, and later after the revolution when many of them became prominent politicians. Part of the Czechoslovak Radio editorial staff eventually became the editorial staff of *Lidové Noviny*, but much happened in the meantime. At the foreign desk my father was a specialist in things he understood well. He understood Poland very well, as he did Russia, but he was also well informed on the subject of Asia. He reported from China, from where he was expelled because they didn't want him to report truthfully. He then became a permanent correspondent in Moscow, and we went there and lived as a family. It was a very interesting experience for me because I was there in 1967 as a seven-year-old boy. But the power of that experience and the information I took in was so great that it left me with many emotional memories. Then came 1968, which we spent in Moscow. [After the Soviet invasion] we were first sort of deported, or rather put under house arrest. Then the whole family was finally deported, so we

returned to Czechoslovakia. My dad left the radio station, which was already under the influence of Russian propaganda. He was a member of the [Communist] Party at that time, because everyone working at the radio station was a member of the Party. His name was then either struck from the Party membership ledger, or he was kicked out. I'm not sure which it was, but they're procedurally a bit different.

In any case, my father was very happy. He found himself on the editorial staff of the literary publication *Literární Noviny*. It continued to be published for a while, but it was eventually banned. He then became the editor of *Plamen*, another literary magazine. It continued to be published for about six months before the regime banned it as well. At that point it was clear that [journalists who had worked freely] were all blacklisted and that they would never again be able to make a living doing work of an intellectual nature. So he found himself in the position of storekeeper at the Museum of National Literature, where he couldn't do much harm to the regime. His wage was miserable but he had relative freedom there and was able to meet his friends when he was distributing pens, paper, tape and other materials from the supply room. It was obviously a big change for him.

Then the year 1977 and [dissident declaration] Charter 77 arrived. My father was one of the first signatories. And at that moment, from his exile in the supply room at the Museum of National Literature, a resistance movement arose, because the regime was unable to deal with the Charter and they began to fight against it as a group that threatened [the Communist Party]. That's how the regime created the resistance group. They started to see it as a danger which it had to mobilise against. So they mobilised actors, athletes and ordinary people, and imposed their propaganda on them which claimed that the Chartists were the enemies of peace and socialism. As a result of this, my entire family found themselves among those targeted for marginalisation and being pushed into a corner by the regime.

Who was spying on you? Do you know?

I knew these people, the ones who were following me, or who were in charge of my case. We used to call them our "personal officers." After the revolution a film crew from Channel Four in the UK came to see me about a documentary programme they were making about the regime change. They saw me as an ideal subject to tell the story of how things changed and what the State Security Service was all about. So I took on that role and got in touch with some of my former "personal officers" to see if they would be in the film. I knew them in a different role than the one they were playing earlier as StB

agents. I got to know these people and their roles at the time they were following me because they would sometimes end up having to spend time with me while I was working. For example, at one point I was working as a boiler operator at Motol Hospital at the ward for elderly patients and patients with long-term illnesses. We worked in 48-hour shifts. Our task was to oversee the individual heating units to keep them in continuous operation, so we would sleep there in between scheduled inspections. One time the StB came to arrest me, I can't remember for what. They came to my work area but my supervisor forbade them to take me away before the end of my work shift.

He said there was no replacement for me and the hospital would have no heat if they took me away. So he wanted me to stay there for 48 hours with my "personal officer." I ended up spending two days with him, as if we were on a camping trip together sleeping in the same tent. He waited patiently until my shift ended before taking me away and putting me in jail. I think I was able to get to know him better during the time we spent together than others were able to get to know officers they met only during interrogations. We spoke openly and frankly about a wide range of topics. We obviously weren't close, but the experience we had said something about the man. So I contacted him and they filmed him. He explained why he did the work he did. He said that a psychologist or psychiatrist would probably be interested in what sort of a personality type he was, since he enjoyed peering into other people's lives and manipulating them. He didn't know why he was like that, since he was a trained biologist. But his work filled him with joy, because it gave him the impression that he was determining other people's fate.

And those people were never punished in any way after the collapse of communism?

I don't think so. There wasn't much of a way to do it. If they committed crimes that were clearly against the laws which were then in force, or crimes against humanity, it would be difficult to punish them merely because we had suddenly introduced democracy and a different principle of law. This is a difficult issue, since at the time they acted in good faith, in the strict sense of the law, but not in the realm of ethics or morality. To punish someone for behaving immorally is a very complicated thing. Personally, I didn't feel any need to take revenge. I felt anger toward these people, and I would have discussed with them why they were doing it in the first place. But it never occurred to me to feel joy that they might suffer from fear the way I did. The ones who I think should have suffered were those whose behaviour was criminal, those who created the system of manipulation, those who obeyed Russian advisors, and those who

consciously engaged in activities aimed at limiting people's human rights. Most of them were tools of the regime, unless they were high-ranking commanders. I don't want to absolve them of their moral guilt for what they did. I don't want that, but I don't think it's something that's legally punishable. It's a matter of understanding, of awareness, and condemnation that this way of approaching life and people is immoral and repulsive.

On the one hand, I'm glad I lived in that time, even though it was awful. I'm also glad that I was able to overcome the fear I felt deep inside. I was afraid, and I wasn't alone. Almost everyone around me was afraid. But I think our approach was the right one, since we managed to conquer our fear. Because we had a sense of overcoming it. Because we sensed and knew that even if it cost us our freedom, it was worth it.

You know, you get used to some of these things after a long time, after years. Some things you just can't explain and it's best not to think about them, since doing so gets you nowhere. The fear you overcome is sometimes exhausting, since it actually immobilises you. I don't know. It's hard for me to talk about it because even today I still don't have a clear sense of what motivated us. The friends around me motivated me. People who were philosophers, teachers, university lecturers who couldn't teach anywhere other than in underground gatherings in people's flats, former journalists, historians, people who had their own professions who had accomplished something in life but who made a living as stokers and manual labourers, and weren't deterred by it. These people didn't think about whether or not they would lose their physical freedom. They thought about whether or not they would lose their mental freedom. It filled me with joy to be able to talk with these people. I saw them as heroes.

Interview by Jonathan Terra, 2023

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