

Will I be on T.V? [1978]

Whose disgrace?

The following account was written by the philosopher Ladislav Hejdíánek, who became one of the three spokesmen for Charter 77 after the death of his one-time teacher, Professor Jan Patočka, in March last year. It describes a form of harassment that is widespread in Czechoslovakia today – the temporary detainment of people the regime considers dangerous whenever a sensitive public event such as a political trial is to take place.

Still playing the game of apparent legality, however shoddily, the police disguise such detainment as 'interrogation' ³. According to the Law Concerning the National Security Corps (i.e. SNB, the uniformed police), you may be held for questioning in three circumstances: to 'explain' a felony, to provide evidence as a witness, or as a direct suspect. The law stipulates that for the first two kinds of interrogation, you must be summoned in writing and told what felony is involved - in other words, who is suspected and of what. Article 15 mentioned by Hejdíánek concerns the first type of interrogation.

Ladislav Hejdíánek's account is dated 7 January 1978. A month later the leading Czech playwright Pavel Kohout wrote a letter to the Czechoslovak Prime Minister, Lubomír Štrougal, complaining about the behaviour of the police on the evening of 28 January, when they prevented a large number of dissidents from attending the annual Railwaymen's Ball in Prague. The playwright Václav Havel, actor Pavel Landovsky, and musician Jaroslav Kukal were arrested, and Kohout himself knocked unconscious by a policeman who hit him from behind as he was leaving the premises. We print the full text of his letter to Dr Štrougal.

Will I be on T.V?

Ladislav Hejdíánek

It began as usual. At one p.m. on Friday – the day the Supreme Court decision on Aleš Macháček and Vladimír Laštuvka¹ was to be handed down – the STB came to pick me up at work. 'Well, off we go again, Mr Hejdíánek. Of course you know the routine by now.'

I asked the gentlemen to show me a written summons, but they didn't have one. They said an oral summons was enough and then rattled off a formal command for me to appear, etc., according to Article 19 of the Law concerning the National Security Corps. I asked what it was about and they said I'd find out soon enough. In other words, it was an irregular summons. I had always appeared before in response to written summonses. Why, I asked, had they resorted to these extraordinary and unlawful procedures? Moreover, I pointed out that I worked until three-thirty, and since they had never once recompensed me for the loss of pay this incurred, though I had always requested it, I told them I wouldn't leave before three-thirty. I also wanted to telephone home, but they wouldn't allow it.

When it was clear that they weren't to be put off, I told them they could repeat the procedure they had gone through with Mr Tomín,² if that was what they wanted. And so they grabbed me, pulled me along the corridor and down the stairs, dragged me across the courtyard on my back, and started shoving me rather roughly into the waiting car.

It was here that I made my first mistake. I had been determined not to utter a word, for what had impressed me most about Tomín's comportment was his silence. I wanted to see whether I was up to

¹ Aleš Macháček, an agricultural engineer, and Vladimír Laštuvka, a nuclear physicist, were sentenced to three and a half years in prison on 26-28 September 1977 on charges of 'subversion' for possessing and distributing 'illegal literature', including Charter 77. On 6 January this year, the Czechoslovak Supreme Court confirmed the sentence on Macháček, but reduced Laštuvka's by a year.

² Julius Tomín, a philosopher and signatory of Charter 77, who was the first of the Chartists passively to resist illegal arrest.

it too. But to my shame I held out for only about two minutes. Then I pointed out to the puffing officers that I'd lost a shoe. They declared that they couldn't care less, then pushed me into the car. I was crestfallen - it was a question of human freedom and dignity and here I was worrying about my shoe. I resolved not to speak another word.

The journey passed without incident. The officers were breathing heavily and the clearly more important one merely muttered darkly that if I so much as budged I'd catch it. Hands on your knees and not a move. I made no response.

In Bartolomějská Street, they ordered me out. Again I did not respond. They cursed and threatened and then, slightly more roughly this time, hauled me out of the car, deliberately bumping my head against the door. Still cursing, they dragged me along the pavement, not by my arms but by my sleeves, up the steps and into the tiled building on my back. For the first time it was genuinely painful. They propped me against the porter's cabin, but the porter clearly didn't approve. You brought it in here,' he said, 'so you can clear it out of here too. The top brass will be coming by in a moment.

So they dragged me off behind a partition and one of them went to phone the comrades from his department for help. A while later two more of them arrived and all four cursed me (son-of-abitch', 'cow' and other epithets from the animal kingdom, and so this is the spokesman, the national hero' and such like). They dragged me into the lift, kicking me collectively as they went. (I have to admit that on the whole they were gentle kicks, with the exception of one blow to the spine, which was more painful. Perhaps they were just warming up.) On the second floor they pulled me out of the lift and along the corridor into a room, where they left me lying on the floor. One of them tramped on my shoeless foot for good measure, then reconsidered, turned my foot over with his boot, and stamped on the arch (but again, not particularly hard) with the words, 'Doesn't want to get up, does he? Naturally, I remained lying down. Then they went away to cool down, one staying behind with me.

An hour or so later they began to lose patience and so at someone's suggestion, they opened the window to try and speed things up. This provided me with an opportunity (in this mutual experiment) to ascertain that one's legs tremble from the cold for only about a quarter of an hour, then the body arranges things, even if the foot is shoeless. The frigid atmosphere was occasionally broken by interjections like: 'Still don't want to talk, Mr Hejdánek?' I said nothing. After a while they opened the door as well, and a draft playfully teased my hair. My legs began trembling again, but this time I knew it was only a matter of time before the wise body took care of it sua sponte. There is nothing like bodily resources for avoiding every act of violence; they are capable of handling almost anything.

Or so I thought. About five o'clock my leg was seized by a cramp, my back began to hurt unbearably and my stomach was writhing with pain (recently I've again been troubled by stomach ulcers, so that I have to eat at least a little at frequent intervals); to top it all I had to - if you'll excuse mèn- go to the toilet. There is nothing like the bodily processes. Naturally I couldn't just get up without a word and walk out: who knows, they might have started shooting. And so I had to speak.

I was given permission and an escort. I got to my feet stiffly and hobbled out with great difficulty. (Incidentally, just try walking, even without being in a state of incipient hibernation, with one shoe missing.)

When I returned, I alternated between pacing about, standing behind a chair with my arms on the back of it and, until they forbade me to do so, ' sitting on the table, relieving my weight with both arms. One rather polite young man (who came in later and greeted me politely as I was lying there, so that I regretted not responding and apologised to him later) told me that I could lie on the table as before if I wasn't able to sit. I welcomed this suggestion and laid down. Later someone else came in

and said that he was going to sit at the table and didn't want to have to stare at my head so might I-if I wished-lie down on the floor again?

I did so. And then it was now about seven in the evening - he finally closed the window, leaving only the ventilator open. About half an hour later the door opened and in came a man who was the only one to introduce himself to me - he called himself Uhlíř - accompanied by another man with a video camera. Uhlíř announced that he was going to put a few questions to me and required an explanation according to Article 15 of the Law concerning the National Security Corps, and would I stand up. I did, but remained leaning against the back of the chair while he instructed me about the contents of Article 15 and asked two questions about what I knew of two leaflets he put before me. It was the first time I had ever seen them, so I said I knew nothing, that I had not read them. I was instructed again about my duty to tell them everything I might eventually find out about the leaflets. All this was filmed. The interrogator then asked me why I had refused to go with the security officers voluntarily so that they had to carry me. I replied that I had already given my reasons at the time, and I repeated them and made a correction - I wasn't carried but rather dragged, on my back, through the courtyard, through the streets, up and down stairs and corridors, and was kicked in the process. The next question: why did I cause so much trouble when Charter 77 professes respect for the law? I replied that it was constantly necessary to resort to new forms of protest against ceaseless abuses of the law. And finally, I was asked what people would think when they saw what had just been filmed. I retorted that I was being filmed without my consent, which was just one more abuse of the law, and that viewers would certainly draw their own conclusions. Finally, I pointed out that I had only one shoe and had no intention of leaving the place in the freezing cold in my stockinged feet. They left, and I again remained alone with one of them. I lay down on the floor.

About an hour and a half later I was finally led down the stairs (I could walk only with great difficulty), put into an ancient car and taken home. The jerking vehicle brought hellish pains to my back. But what's a backache when human freedom and dignity are at stake? And now it seems they intend to show me on television as part of a new defamation campaign - in my work-clothes with the buttons torn off, with dishevelled hair, tired and battered. Will the disgrace be mine?

(Transl. Paul Wilson)