

Pavel Vošický – the political prisoner who helped shape Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign

01-05-2015 02:01 | [Ian Willoughby](#)

When many of his friends were starting university, Pavel Vošický was getting a different sort of education, hearing the stories of political prisoners of various stripes in some of the most notorious jails in communist Czechoslovakia. Barely out of his teens, Vošický had been found guilty of sedition while on military service. This followed visits he had begun making to Prague’s British Embassy some years earlier.



[Pavel Vošický, photo: Ian Willoughby](#)

Almost a decade after his release the fine arts graduate and part-time singer left for the US, where among other things he worked on TV ads for Jimmy Carter’s successful 1976 presidential campaign.

Now once again living in his native Prague, Vošický lectures and has occasional shows of his art parodying the Socialist Realist images that incensed him in his youth.

Pavel Vošický, who is today in his mid 70s, was born just weeks after the Nazis created the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. He has vivid memories of the end of WWII in 1945 – and his bitter disappointment at Prague being liberated not by the US but the USSR.

“In the last days of April, we heard on the radio – not on Czech radio but on illegal radio, because everybody had a set at home – that the Americans were in West Bohemia.

“Then on May 6 some of the guys came and said, The Americans are in Plzeň. Then we started speculating about how long it would take them to get to Prague. They’d have to be in Beroun in one hour, in Prague in two hours.

“To describe that feeling, of waiting for the Americans, I have to go back to the movie Casablanca.

“Remember the beginning, the animation: The poor people, victims of German occupations, are going down to Marseilles, Oran, and eventually they end up in Casablanca.

“Those unlucky ones who didn’t have political protection or finances or gold or whatever, they wait, wait, and wait.



[Liberation of Prague by Red Army, photo: Karel Hájek, CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

“Just before that, to symbolise that this is Vichy France, they play the Marseillaise, but it goes like this [sings version ending on bum note]. Total disharmony. Beautiful propaganda work.

“And I could compare our wait and wait and wait... We were waiting, the rest of May 6, the whole day. On May 7, the whole day. On May 8. Just to learn that the Russians are in Prague.”

Vošický’s antipathy to the Soviets persisted. And it was to cost him dear when, after graduating from a secondary school focused on jewellery making, he was called up for military service in a Czechoslovakia that was now part of the Eastern Bloc. He had not been in uniform long when he was arrested by the StB secret police. The year was 1959.

“The case was that I was on an indoctrination course in Litomeřice, north of Prague. And I was so depressed by the agitprop.

“They were teaching us how to do propaganda among soldiers who were participating in the PVSK [common room].

“And I come back – actually I was serving in Marienbad [Mariánské Lázně] – and get off the train from Litomeřice and in front of the main railroad station I saw signs, proclaiming our friendship with the Soviet Union, that we have to fulfil the Five-Year Plan, and blah, blah, blah.

“I said to myself, Jesus Christ, how could I pacify my mind?

“And since I had been going for many years, twice a year, to the British Embassy... I have to explain why. Between 1953 and 1958 I was attending art school – the middle level.

“If you had a life subscription to Geographic magazine, you could also get one for a jewellery magazine, about the latest trends.



[Pavel Vošický in 1959, photo: archive of Pavel Vošický](#)

“And my professor said, You speak English, try [to get the magazine from] the British Embassy. We had tried the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but got no reply.

“And there was a lady, her name was Miss Scott. She said, We don’t have it, but we could order it from London. I’ll give you some other magazines, about numismatics and airplanes – Flight magazine.

“I came back a couple of months later and she had all copies of the jewellery magazine.

“I never had any problem [going to the embassy]. Nobody paid any attention to me, because I was between 15 and 18...

“And I was standing in front of that train station and I said, My God, how can I display my dissatisfaction with all this madness here? How about going to the British Embassy, to see Miss Scott?

“I went there. She was surprised but she was cool [laughs]. She gave me those magazines.

“I was apprehended by the secret police and they asked for my ID and the paper which allowed me to go to Litomeřice, etc. And then they let me go.

“Months went by and nothing happened, so I forgot all about it. Then all of a sudden I got an order go to go Plzeň.

“Immediately after that I was apprehended by ‘organs of the military counter-intelligence’. And probably after thorough research they figured out that I wasn’t a spy or anything. I was just going there – before that visit in military uniform.

“I was branded a class enemy, because of such a demonstration of non-loyalty to progress our friendship to the Soviet Union and the Communist Party and so on.



[Pavel Vošický in Cafe Nisa in 1961, photo: archive of Pavel Vošický](#)

“They arrested me and gave me a one and a half year sentence. It was the end of the 1950s, 1959, and in the jail there were old prisoners who had been there since the late ‘40s and early ‘50s.

“I met incredible people. Officers from the Royal Air Force. Officers from the Russian front, which was more intriguing to my mind... And they were talking and talking, in the evenings.”

Did they shape your political outlook?

“Absolutely. I learned things. Every evening somebody else was talking. People who were collaborators with the Germans. Some Germans who didn’t go in 1955, when Khrushchev-Bulganin struck that treaty with Adenauer, allowing remnants of POWs to go to Germany.

“One old German collaborator told me, Once you get out of here, try any means to [whispers] get the hell out of Czechoslovakia, because this country is blah, blah, blah.

“I said, Why, I love my country? He said, I’ll tell you why: 1955. His prison number was three digits long, but mine had six – it was in the thousands. So he knew more than I did.

“In 1955, a memo came from the prison authorities asking prisoners which said, Do you identify as Czech? Are you a Czech citizen? Or do you identify as German?

“Czechs (and even some Germans) speculated that being Czech would get them out sooner. They declared I am Czech, I pledge allegiance, whatever [laughs].

“But because of that, they [including some Germans who has speculated incorrectly] remained there in jail for another 5 years while those who declared that they are Germans outright went back home before the end of 1955, when an amnesty took place. And so they went [laughs].”

After doing time at the Pankrác, Ruzyně and Bory prisons, Pavel Vošický was sent into the PTP, or Auxiliary Technical Battalions. They were a supposed army unit though the “soldiers” were regarded as politically unreliable, barred from holding weapons and used as free labour.

Despite his background, however, Vošický was later allowed to attend third-level education. He also became a part-time singer as part of the Apollo theatre group, from which several of his colleagues went on to be pop stars in 1960s Czechoslovakia.

“When I was released from the PTP I was in the city of Liberec, and I learned from something called Music USA, a programme, who was the most known American on this planet – a guy named Willis Conover and his programme Music USA, transmitted from Tangiers [on Voice of America].



[Apollo, Pavel Vošický top center, photo: archive of Pavel Vošický](#)

“We were glued to that programme. I wrote the lyrics, phonetically... I don’t know what it was, but it sounded English to me at least.

“I started singing with the local orchestra in the Café Nisa in Liberec.

“Somebody told me – because I was painting still, in private – to try to go the Academy. I said, Are you crazy? I was in jail, I could never make it.

“He said, Try it. And he gave me a recommendation to work in a House of Culture, in the art department.

“I was there two months, in Jablonec nad Nisou, before the StB realised there was a politically unreliable person, so they kicked me out.

“But the director, who was an old communist fighter in Spain who had fought against Franco, already knew what was going on in this world. He wrote me a recommendation letter before the StB could prevent it.

“Based on that recommendation letter, I went to UMPRUM [Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design]. And I was lucky, because Dr. Adolf Hoffmeister, who was director of Czech broadcasting during the war, under the [US] Office of War Information, he said, I like it.

“But, I said, I was arrested. He said, Oh, I was arrested too, in France. I was in prison. Never mind that you were in prison.

“They didn’t accept me, though. That was ’62. Because there was some catch, if you behaved for three years [after release], it was a trial period.

“You could not vote and we had to sign that we would never talk about the conditions in prison when we were released.

“And it happened that I was eventually admitted, against the system. They said, How could...? But he [Hoffmeister] was such a big shot, to make a long story short, that they didn’t dare [contradict his will].

“So I became a student in communist Czechoslovakia at a prestigious school.

“And because I was singing... I was one evening in the Viola café, on Národní třída, and I was singing with Rudolf Rokl and Karel Svoboda, they were playing piano, and there was some meeting of people from Státní divadelní studio [State Theatre Studio, umbrella group for small theatres].



[Karel Hála, Pavel Vošický, Pavel Sedláček, Pavlína Filipovská, Miky Volek, photo: archive of Pavel Vošický](#)

“There was [Karel] Gott, Laďa [Ladislav] Štáidl, Jirka [Jiří] Štáidl, [Josef] Laufer [laughs], you know his story later [he was accused of being an StB informant]. It was a who’s who. Eva Pilarová.

“I told Rokl, Start a twelve [bar blues]. I started singing and got a good reception and a couple of days later I was admitted to the newly born theatre Apollo. Eva Pilarová, [Petr] Hapka, Laďa Štáidl, [Jaromír] Klempíř and Rudolf Rokl were there.

“I couldn’t stop my manifestations of displeasure with the regime. I was a bad guy all the way [laughs]. But I had the auspices of Professor Hoffmeister, who always saved me at the last moment. So I made it.

“I was at Apollo for two or three years and then they kicked me out, to put it mildly, because they realised what I was. Members of that group of musicians and singers – Gott was at that time in Vegas – were interrogated and they told me, There’s a big problem.

“Unfortunately for the StB and fortunately for me – and I don’t know if fortunately or unfortunately for the fate of Czechoslovakia – came Dubček. And they had different problems. They put it [his case] aside because they had more to deal with.”

The promotion of Alexander Dubček to first secretary of the Communist Party led to the relatively liberal Prague Spring period, which came to a crashing end when the Soviet occupation began in August 1968.

Like thousands upon thousands of others, Pavel Vošický left Czechoslovakia at that time. He moved to the US, living at different periods in Philadelphia and Washington and working as an art director.

This is how the one-time political prisoner, who had studied TV and film animation, came to work on Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign in 1976, including art directing the candidate's TV ads.

"I worked for a company that was asked in 1972 to make a political campaign for Jimmy Carter in the state of Georgia. He was running for the post of governor.

"It was Gerry Rafshoon who was in charge of the advertisements, graphics and things like that. But we were doing the TV commercials.

"He was satisfied and when Carter decided to be president... you know, even Mickey Mouse might make it at that time against Ford.

"Not that I have anything against Ford. He was good. But he couldn't chew gum and play piano at the same time.



[Jimmy Carter, photo: Public Domain](#)

"So we won, again."

So you helped Jimmy Carter become president.

"I played a small role. Gerry Rafshoon, my boss, later became White House communications director... but actually I don't have any of my work or graphics because I gave the whole package to Czechoslovak Television, and they lost it.

"But now I'm flying to New York – I'll try to retrieve it... from a friend of mine, who had a copy of the package of the work on videotape because he was an editor, and an assistant director. I was the art director and I hope I will return with some of the campaign graphics.

“It [his work] was ‘trumpeted’ here but I don’t think it could make some kind of Godlike influence on a campaign [laughs], if you know what I mean?”

When you were in the States I believe you were influenced by the great Czech illustrator and children’s book author Miroslav Šašek.

“Absolutely. And he was known. The same way that Willis Conover was a global name, because of Music USA, for the Czech community Šašek was probably the best known Czech outside of Czechoslovakia.

“He illustrated books on Paris, Melbourne, Montreal, you name it, New York [in the series This is...].

“All those people who as children read those books and looked at those pictures are now in the corridors of power. They remember him.”

Is it the case that he in some way inspired your work? You’ve done work which is a kind of parody of Socialist Realist art.

“Absolutely. Using Socialist Realism as a weapon, or a vehicle.

“I did those pictures with the intention first of all to get it out of me. I did like 30 pictures. It was just a manifestation for myself and a couple of my friends.”



[Caricature by Pavel Vošický](#)

I was reading that some of your works were bought by some well-known Czechs living in the States, including Miloš Forman.

“Yes, he bought something like 10 pictures. He had them on the wall in his New York apartment. Little caricatures.

“Because he bought my pictures, others were buying them. But those pictures were more on the level of art, if you will, than ideology.”

I was also reading that when you left here at the end of the 1960s your then partner stayed here or couldn't get out. And you had a daughter who grew up here who you couldn't see. Could you tell us about that, please?

"Yes. I saw her for the first time in 1976. A friend of mine in Washington and I were sitting in a café in Georgetown and we said, Where could we get visas to Czechoslovakia? I had American citizenship by then.

"It's dark under the lamp. So we flew to Moscow and I went to the Czechoslovak Embassy. No questions asked, they gave me a visa.

"Where else would they give me a visa? In Copenhagen? I don't know. In Rio de Janeiro? Definitely not in Washington. But in Moscow – no questions asked.

"I said I was going to Brno, to some industrial fair or something. I'm not sure about that, but I got the visa.

"Via exotic places, like Brest-Litovsk and Warsaw, all of a sudden the train stopped in front of a sign that said Petrovice. Virtually the middle of nowhere, nothing ever happened there, but I was at home.

"I smelled that. They were using such bad coal and it created an unbearable odour. But I was at home. You got the same smell at the airport 10 years ago.

"And the beer, which was in funny paper cups with the sign RAJ, Restaurace a jídelny [state agency Restaurants and Canteens]. I was at home after six years."

But how was it not seeing your daughter and then finally getting to meet her for the first time?

"I walked on the street and I saw her mother, going with her to the kindergarten. And then she comes up to me and it was [chuckles]..."

But was it tough?

"Frankly, it wasn't. It was like, What shall we do tomorrow? No, it wasn't any anti-climactic feeling. It was just, OK, we've fulfilled our mission."

But I mean was it tough not being able to see your child regularly?



[Caricature by Pavel Vošický](#)

“Of course. But I spoke on the phone with her. She called me: Daddy, I want a dog. So I bought her a husky. A beautiful husky. I had to buy a cage and a ticket, anti-rabies injections and all these things.”

You sent her a dog from the States?

“I sent the dog via Copenhagen with Pan American Airways. He arrived and the customs people didn’t have the idea to give him water. So inhuman, you know.

“It was there at the airport, at Ruzyně, for four, five days. Because she needed a required paper, with a stamp from the Ministry of Agriculture, that the dog is allowed to... [laughs]. My God.

“At that moment all these ideal situations where we sat in a restaurant remembering the good old times in Prague... that all was erased at the moment when she saw that the dog almost died in transit because of the lack of water.”

In the early to mid-1990s Pavel Vošický began wrapping up his work in the US and gradually moved back to his native Prague. Here he has lectured on history and the use of art in propaganda – and is now perhaps best-known for his own art. He has shown his pictures in the Czech capital, as well as in New York, Vienna and Nuremberg.

But like many former émigrés, Vošický has reservations to say the least about developments in his home country since the Velvet Revolution.

“It was something that happens once in a while, once a century, maybe once a millennium. It was a miracle that it happened.

“But not in the way that we were expecting. Not that we expected the Communists to go on February 26, 1948. That’s nonsense.

“But we were expecting an immediate, how would you put it, goodbye to it all, to those 42 years of Bolshevik propaganda.

“And we came to the conclusion the revolution was done partially by those who made the Communist takeover in 1948. So it wasn’t our vision of the end of communism and the beginning of democracy.”

So have you been disappointed by developments in the last two decades plus here?



[Pavel Vošický with his daughter Lenka in 1976, photo: archive of Pavel Vošický](#)

“Of course. When you see faces that you used to see in the Czech papers or on Czech television late in the 1960s, and mainly hear the voices of those people, and all of a sudden they are democrats and in favour of free elections and so on. You know, somehow you couldn’t trust them.

“I have no monopoly on saying something like that. I have no right to say it.

“But after meeting many Czech-Americans in this town – including those who were compensated for the loss of their wealth after the Communist takeover – resignation, sir. The name of it is resignation.”

Source: Czech Radio 7, Radio Prague

URL: <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/special/pavel-vosicky-the-political-prisoner-who-helped-shape-jimmy-carters-presidential-campaign>