

I love Žižkov. I don't mean modern Žižkov, with its sumptuous buildings and reconstructed tenements, where Prague socialites now live at a price tag that most people cannot even imagine. I mean the Žižkov of the 1990s, the neighbourhood around the Obzor cinema, where you could tell at a glance who belonged where. From modern Seifertova Street down: very frequently Roma; approximately as far as Bořivojova Street, a mix of artists, alcoholics, slackers and settled Roma; from Kubelíkova Street up, gadjos only. Of course this wasn't hundred per cent the case, but it worked as a rule of thumb. The exception was Víta Nejedlého Street, where sometimes some real scum lived in completely derelict houses.

When we were growing up, we lived with our parents on the corner of Bořivojova Street and Ježkova Street, in a beautiful tenement building with huge flats. I don't know how my mother managed to do this, but the then district enterprise of housing management (OBPH) assigned my parents a three-bedroom flat with a floorplan that seems like a palace to us today. And we, the Bangas, lived in that palace. Mum, dad and four children. Three brothers and one older sister.

In 1985, though, the palace definitely did not look like the sort of palace we picture today. We had a tin bathtub

instead of a bathroom because the flat had no hot water, and our dad said that there was no space for a bathroom anyway. I think it would have been possible but you'd have to be technically inclined to make it work. Our dad was definitely not technically inclined. The toilet wasn't in the flat but outside on the corridor, and we shared it with our alcoholic neighbour, whose name I think was Ričl and who lived opposite us. So it was only in the morning, when the neighbour was asleep, that we could go to the toilet in peace. At any other time, we risked getting intoxicated on the miasma of cheap alcohol that contaminated the toilet and the space around it.

Every day, we carried the low-quality coal briquettes on sale back then to the fourth floor in coal scuttles. There was no lift. The briquettes kept our home warm and provided water for washing in. Nobody was interested in the fact that my twin and I were only three years old, while my older brother was six. The rule was "if you want to be warm, carry coal". And mum didn't exactly treat us with kid gloves. We went for coal morning, noon and night, on Saturday and on Sunday. If you wanted to go outside the building to see any friends awaiting you there, tough luck. You had to carry coal.

Even a trip to the cellar could be categorised as "terrifying" – the cellar was infested with rats the size of cats, so we went for coal in pairs at the very least, and more often than not as a foursome. The absence of a lightbulb was as problematic as the presence of rats – it was always be-

ing removed by a neighbour, who probably needed it more than we did. So whenever we went there, it was dark.

On the other hand, we learned not to be so scared of the dark when we were still small. We got used to the presence of vermin and we were not overweight, because running to the fourth floor carrying coal was better than any gym. That's also why we later excelled at sport, that is, my older brother and me. He was a superb forward in football, and he was even signed by local team Viktorie Žižkov, although that was as far as he got because mum couldn't afford to support his sporting career. To this day, I still remember how the trainers praised him because nobody could take the ball from him. That's how good a forward he was.

And, finally, we had one "advantage" that I would never have guessed would have come in handy later in life. We were used to a prison environment from a very young age. We went to nursery school on the corner of Prokop Square and Prokopova Street; today it's the site of Metropolitan University Prague. As a nursery school, it really did resemble a slammer, because there were bars on the outside and a barred door inside. An honest to goodness dungeon.

I can barely remember changing in the cloakroom and my fond farewells with mum, who ran from the nursery school to work. I remember the bars. And my fellow pupils Viktor, Roman and Robert, who were my friends in nursery school. Only, if the barred door resembled a

slammer, which of course I couldn't know back then, the nursery routine was even closer to a prison setting. Morning rollcall, headcount, breakfast. A walk to Vítkov, then a mandatory nap. If you didn't sleep, you were given a bollocking. If you didn't eat, you were given a bollocking. And if you didn't – God forbid – listen and obey, you were a candidate for real prison. Meaning, specifically, Viktor, Roman, Robert and me. Paradoxically, of the four of us, I'm the only one who has never been in prison as an adult.

I hated the nursery school routine. I didn't want a nap, I wanted to read. The irony. I could already read and write at nursery school, and napping kept me away from reading so many interesting things, such as the instructions for using Bistol, a floor wax, or the obituaries in the newspapers – my favourite. I really did read them all the time. So I was practically permanently on the naughty chair, and it's absolutely no surprise that I had to listen over and over again to lectures about how I should follow my twin's example – he obeyed everyone. I was a rebel from birth. And so was our older brother.

My favourite part of nursery school was going home. We had a piano at home and, even more importantly, a record player. To be honest, it was only a mechanism housed in a polystyrene case with a bunch of cables and a match keeping them in place in the amplifier. I have to laugh when I look at modern, super high-tech gadgets on which you can play any music on any device over Wi-Fi. We had socialist “high-tech”. However, the stuff we played more

than made up for the lack of technology. While my classmates were listening to children's singer Dagmar Patrasová singing about an earthworm, and the more gifted to Michal David, we were listening to Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, or anything by the Beatles.

My dad was to blame. He was an unsuccessful musician who had lived his entire life in the shadow of his brother, a musical genius. As far as I can remember, all Bangas were musicians. Grandpa was a multi-instrumentalist, dad played a passable guitar, Uncle Miro was a genius on the guitar, Uncle Igor was a bassist, Uncle Jonko a drummer and Uncle Béla, known simply as Ujo, was a professional listener. He may not have been able to play anything properly, but he was a major league drinker. No surprise, then, that the Bangas were always jamming. And frequently also drinking. But, to be clear, drinking went on everywhere back then. It was a sign of the times and of the social environment across Žižkov. And anyway, what else was there to do on Friday evenings? You couldn't watch an American film on TV, we went to the cinema to see *Winnetou* and vodka cost seventy crowns. You grafted all week in the Sport factory, where pretty much the entire Banga family worked, then you had a bevvy on Friday with music. And you played, sang, danced for hours and hours and then nursed whoever drank too much.

When dad couldn't play, he distributed LPs of banned music to his mates. He usually did this by sending me or one of my brothers with the records. Nearly every gadjo

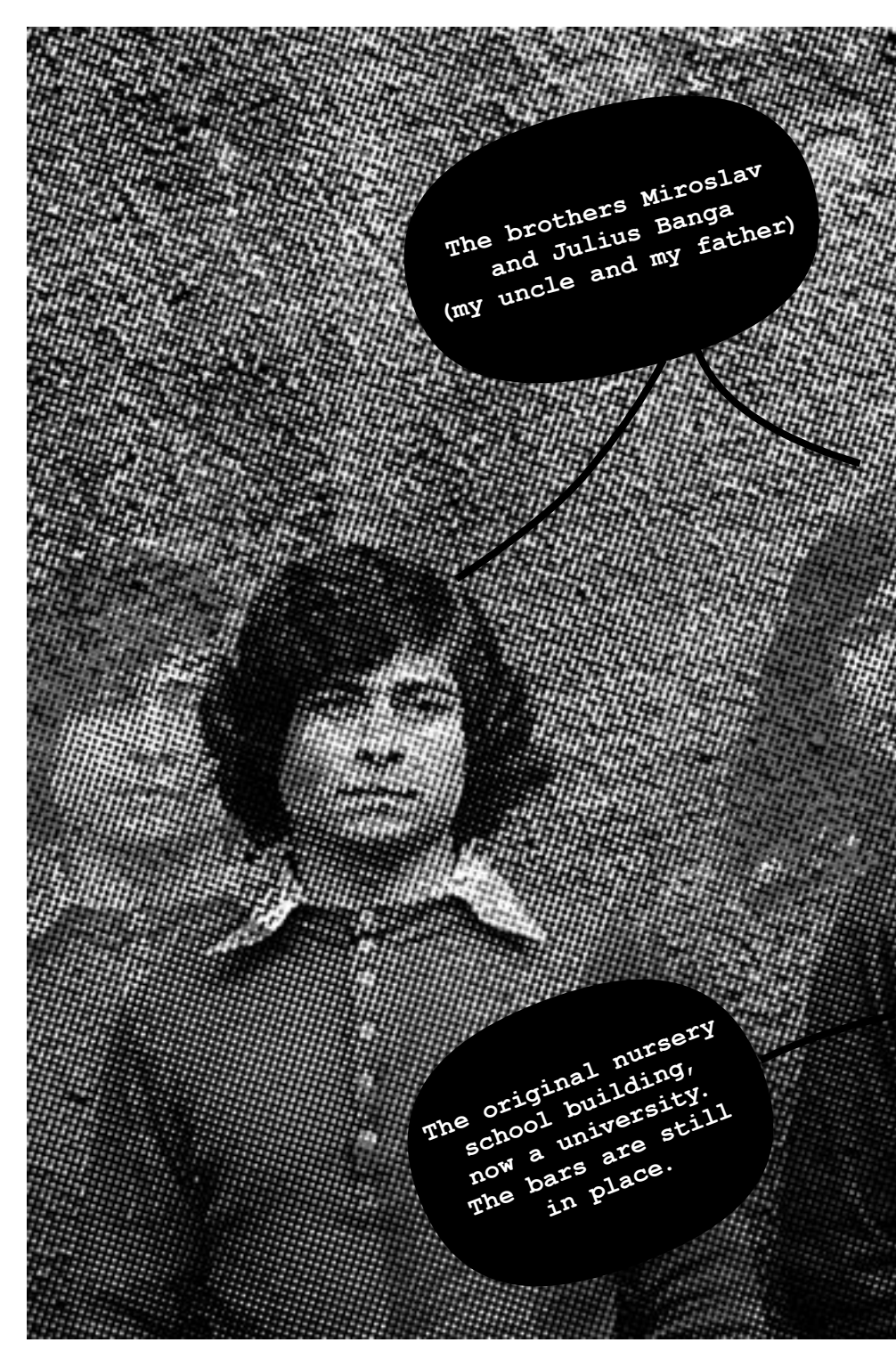
intellectual from far and wide also regularly climbed the stairs to our fourth-floor flat with no lift. All the banned directors, actors and musicians had nothing better to do with their lives than get wasted and listen to gypsies playing the Beatles. The more dynamic and sober among them also figured out ways to use their contacts to get one of the Banga family onto Czechoslovak Television. Director Radek Dubanský was ultimately successful here, so the first Banga appeared on ČST, on the programme *Televizní klub mladých* [Young People's Television Club], where Uncle Miro demonstrated his skill on the guitar. Seeing a Roma on TV didn't happen just like that. Not that it's substantially different today but then a ploy was required to get anyone at all on television, let alone an unknown Banga from Žižkov. That was only for the Gondolán brothers! I think that the Žižkov Roma celebrated for several weeks. Why not, Startky cigarettes cost four crowns, beer 1.70 crowns and Stolichnaya vodka flowed liberally.

However, visits from intellectuals and enemies of the regime had some downsides. At home, my brothers and I were always listening to invective against Bolsheviks. Although we didn't have the first clue who or what a Bolshevik was, dammit! The knowledge that "Bolsheviks are fucking swine" was so ingrained in us that we took it as an absolute matter of course. And so we once stole some eggs from mum and went to throw them at the statue of Antonín Zápotocký, the former Czechoslovak president, whom our oldest brother wisely declared to be the biggest

swine of all. We younger ones believed him unreservedly. We threw the eggs and shouted “you fucking Bolshevik!” exactly as we’d heard at home. We didn’t even notice the yellow Zhiguli police car with white doors and the inscription VB, for Veřejná bezpečnost, or Public Security. And we weren’t lying blatantly, we were telling the truth. We’d heard these expressions at home, from dad. It was the first time in my life that the police took me home. It was 1987 and I was five. The future jailbird had his first black mark. At least, that’s what they told me.

Back then, Roma had a different social position than they do today. The Bolsheviks simply thought of them as workers, and workers could do anything. No matter that most Roma did unskilled work and a synonym for Roma was navvy. Also, no matter that most Roma worked for two reasons: they had somewhere to work and they also needed to work. Otherwise they'd end up inside. For that matter, lots of Žižkov folk were intimately familiar with the prison in Vlnařice. Freeloading was a serious offence! So both our parents worked and needed someone to watch us when we weren't at nursery.

Most often, we went to the Siváks', a Roma family who lived on the corner of Krásava Street and Bořivojova Street. Father Sivák listened to rock, so my father thoroughly approved of us visiting them. Mum wanted to send us to old Mrs Bogdanová, who also lived on Krásava Street, but two houses further up. She was a Jewish widow, the first genuine intellectual I ever met. Educated, kind, devout and white. The complete opposite of everything we'd known before. She didn't have any booze at home. She probably didn't even smoke. She did have the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) at home. It was Mrs Bogdanová who was, I think, the first person to leave a mark on me and my twin. She showed us that it was possible to lead a different lifestyle from the one we lived. In faith, in humility.



The brothers Miroslav
and Julius Banga
(my uncle and my father)

The original nursery
school building,
now a university.
The bars are still
in place.



The house at
the corner of
Bořivojova Street
and Ježkova Street,
where we grew up.



Not that I would have enjoyed this in any way, but I definitely learned much more from her than from my nursery teachers. In fact, the only problem was that, fairly soon, I had to choose between going to Mrs Bogdanová's, or to the Siváks'. That is, to the gadjos, or to Roma. Mrs Bogdanová was definitely not a gadji because she was Jewish but back then I genuinely didn't understand that.

What a terrible dilemma. Was it better to be with Roma, who looked like me, lived like me, talked like me and were pretty much the same in every way, or with a white woman who told me about God but also talked so nicely and was so kind? It was no use. Whenever I could choose, I always chose Helena and Martina Siváková, typical gypsy women. It was always fun with them. What's more, Eva Cínová, who had a beautiful singing voice, lived right next door and was another girl in the gang.

As a child, I hated things that I now love as an adult. Order. Tidiness. Back then, I wanted to run around outside with the girls or go to the Viktoria Žižkov training ground, where children could go without being punished. Nobody ever chased us away. I also had my first kiss behind the sheet-metal covering of Žižkov stadium, and smoked my first cigarette, which me and my older brother had pinched from mum. At the age of five. I remember exactly two things perfectly: the brand was Femina and mum tanned our hides when we got home because we stank of cigarettes, as if we'd come from the pub.

Our feeling of wellbeing was to come to an abrupt end as soon as we went to primary school on Vlkova Street. My older brother already knew it well, so he told us spine-chilling stories about small children being eaten alive there and described the whole school to us twins as if it were hell itself. And I believed him, so I was afraid of school. But at the same time, I wanted the school bag I'd seen in the shop windows in Koněvova Street,¹ where there was an enormous shoe shop. A red leather satchel, with reflectors. The synonym for schoolboy. And plim-solls!

They didn't like me much in school either. And this wasn't because I didn't have either a satchel or those plim-solls. What grandpa had started, Mrs Bogdanová had finished. I could read, write and count. I had nothing to do in school. So I was disruptive, permanently. I was bored and not even President Gustáv Husák, whose portrait hung above the teacher's desk, could stop me.

The other children – by which I mean the Czech children, and my twin, who sat on the same bench as me – were quiet as mice. They listened to the teacher and never breathed a word. Either because they respected authority or because they were actually learning something. Jirka Oláh and me were at the other end of this spectrum entirely. Yes, he was Roma too. He couldn't actually read yet but when we didn't have red shorts for PE, he was able to pinch them so quickly that nobody even noticed that we

1 Translator's note: Koněvova was renamed Hartigova on 1 October 2023.

were lending each other the same pair while the other was on the toilet.

In music, I saw some chance of excelling and joining the “right” side of our socialist class. So in music lessons, I performed a piano version of *A Hard Day’s Night* by the Beatles and later sang a passage from *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the fake English I’d picked up by listening. Only the outcome was completely different to the one I had expected. Suddenly, I wasn’t allowed in the school band.

So I lost further social contact with a group of children who really did not understand my habits, and the truth is that I didn’t understand theirs either. I’d never seen anyone have so much food for their mid-morning snack but not share it. I watched as my classmates took bread rolls, neatly wrapped in a napkin, out of their schoolbags, and threw away what they didn’t eat. Jirka and I never threw anything away. But we also didn’t have bread rolls with salami in a paper napkin. Mostly we had bread and butter, and sometimes an apple. We always divided everything up between us. Whenever there was an apple, we – Jirka, my brother, and me – ate one third each. That’s what real Roma do.

3.

Surviving school with Jirka was over as quickly as it started. My parents had the brilliant idea of exchanging apartments. That's something that's almost unheard of today but it was completely normal under socialism. So we exchanged a palace in Žižkov for the flat of horror on Pavlov Square. It might have had warm water and even its own toilet, but it was swarming with woodlice and it was so cold that I spent the first few days pressed against the gas heater. We didn't have heaters in the old flat, where there was a stove. Then again, you should try roasting *buřty* sausages on gas heaters! When dad was looking after us, we ate nothing but *buřty*. But the worst thing about the exchange was that the new flat wasn't big enough for our piano. So we left our greatest treasure behind in the old flat. And as I recall, I would a thousand times rather have had the piano in the old flat than the bathroom at Pavlov Square.

The flat was dirty, smelly and full of mould. Not to mention that the flat of horror's original residents, and the new tenants of our palace in Žižkov, were Vlach Roma who looked as if they'd jumped straight out of the 1975 Soviet film *Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven*. They had the lot: hair dyed ginger and copper medallions on their headscarves and skirts. Heaps of skirts. I guess there's no point in mentioning that several dozen of them lived in a