

The Price of Patriotism

By Pat Butcher

This piece has been produced as an accompaniment to the screening of Andrea Sedláčková's [Fair Play](#) on 2 November as part of the [Made in Prague Festival](#).

It says much for a political system that prefers to suppress dissent rather than use it as a creative force, that the two greatest athletes in Czechoslovak history, the runner Emil Zátopek and the gymnast Věra Časlávká should be punished and, effectively, exiled for their liberal/democratic views.

Winners of eleven golds and sixteen Olympic medals between them, Časlávká and Zátopek made no secret, either of their support for the Prague Spring, and the liberalising movement of Alexander Dubček; or their public opposition to the Soviet/Russian invasion, which ended that liberalisation, in August 1968.

Both athletes were entertainers as well as great athletes; performing what would be called nowadays an invaluable example of 'soft power', advertising the worth of Czechoslovakia across the globe. Zátopek, born in Moravia in a family of seven children, had a habit of cajoling his opponents during races, and employing an awkward, head-rolling running style that similarly endeared him to crowds across the world (he was so successful that he was permitted to travel widely – with a 'minder' of course). Spectators everywhere would chant Zát-o-pek, Zát-o-pek, Zát-o-pek, as he tortured himself and his opponents around the tracks. Časlávká, a Bohemian from Prague, was equally ebullient, performing with a radiant smile, and theatrical flourishes which charmed spectators, equally, across the globe.

By 1968, Zátopek had long since retired from athletics, and as a Colonel in the Czechoslovak Army could easily have kept quiet and enjoyed his exalted position as the most famous Czechoslovak internationally, as a folk hero at home, and as a member of the *nomenklatura* (effectively the Communist Party 'insiders').

But Zátopek was a real folk-hero, a man of the people. He was out on the streets every day, rallying the crowds, addressing the multitudes in Wenceslas Square, being photographed admonishing the Warsaw Pact soldiers, and giving them a history lesson. The Mexico Olympics were due the following month; and Zátopek instructed the perplexed invaders (who had been told to expect olive branches) that in Ancient Greece, there was something known as an 'Olympic Truce,' when battles were suspended for a period before and throughout the Olympic Games.

Časlávká was still competing; having won three gold medals in the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, she went on to win four in Mexico. There was much drama about these latter golds, because her major opposition came from Soviet gymnasts. When she only won silver in one team contest, losing to the Soviets, she refused to acknowledge the winners' anthem during the medal ceremony, bowing her head and looking away; a slight which enraged the Soviet authorities.

The pair's support for Dubček, their signing of the 2000-word manifesto (the intellectuals' call for liberalisation), and their continuing opposition to the Soviet invasion and the introduction of the period of 'normalisation' resulted in a new status – non-persons. Zátopek was dismissed from the Army, and exiled from Prague – 'I was told I was free to find work wherever I liked, as long as it was manual labour, and not in Prague,' he once told me, two years prior to his death, in November 2000.

Similarly, Časlávká's career was ended on her return from Mexico. The authorities forbade publication of her autobiography. Despite being the most experienced gymnast in Czechoslovak history, she was refused permission to coach for five years, and then only clandestinely. Finally, ten years later, she was allowed to go and coach in Mexico, but only apparently, after the Mexican government had threatened to suspend oil exports.

Zátopek's partial rehabilitation had a similar background. In 1971, he had publicly recanted, to the dismay of fans and supporters, but had only been permitted to return to Prague, to a lowly job in the national sports archives, after the organisers of the Munich Olympics in 1972 had insisted on the world's most famous long-distance runner attending the Games.

Both Zátopek and Časlávká could have emigrated; indeed Zátopek and his wife, Dana Zátopková, herself an Olympic gold medallist were allowed to go to the Mexico Olympics after the invasion (many believe the regime hoped they would defect). But like Časlávká, they chose to return to their home country; and suffer the consequences.

To a Westerner like myself, observing this sorry farrago from a safe distance, the most disgraceful factor in these sad histories still seems to be, what an enormous waste of talent! ■