

*The Screeching
Seagulls Are
Flying
Around Me*

Dagmar Simkova

May 23, 1929 – February 24, 1995



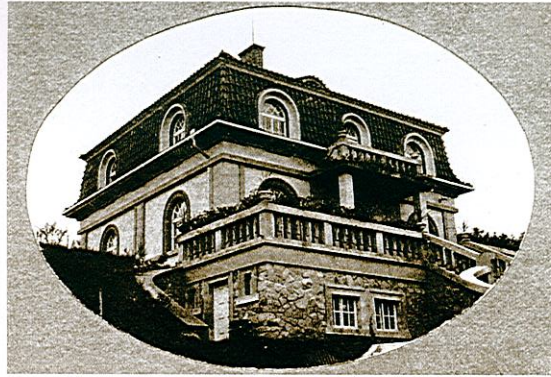
A picture created by Dagmar Simkova in Australia.

During their rule in the former Czechoslovakia, the communists executed 248 people because of political reasons, 205,486 were imprisoned and 282 were killed during their attempt to cross the Iron Curtain into the free world. These numbers are both sad

and grim, and behind each number is a story of an individual person. One of these stories we have portrayed in our exhibition.

The story of a woman, whose life was ruined by the communists because of her “upper-class origin”, her desire to run away into the free world and her decision to help friends with the same ambition. She wasted all her youth in communist prisons. The State Security arrested her when she was 23 years old and she left prison at the age of 37 with all of her possessions having been confiscated. In September 1968 she left the country and started a new life in Australia. There she received two university degrees, organized several exhibitions of her paintings and wrote a small book called “We Were There Too”, which, today, remains one of the strongest testimonies about the dreadful situation in the Czechoslovakian communist prisons.

In Australia, her new homeland, Dagmar Simkova loved long walks along the seashore. Her book finishes with these words: “The screeching seagulls are flying around me. I am so free, I can walk barefoot. And the waves wash away traces of my steps long before a print could be left.” The smell of salt can be sensed from these words, the words of warm sand and eternal freedom of the ocean. They were written by a woman, who experienced such an uplifting feeling of freedom shared only by those who were forced to go through the same ordeal as her. Her story should not disappear as the footsteps in the sand. The exhibition you are about to visit reminds you of it.



Villa Marta. Home of Dagmar Simkova.

Home and Childhood

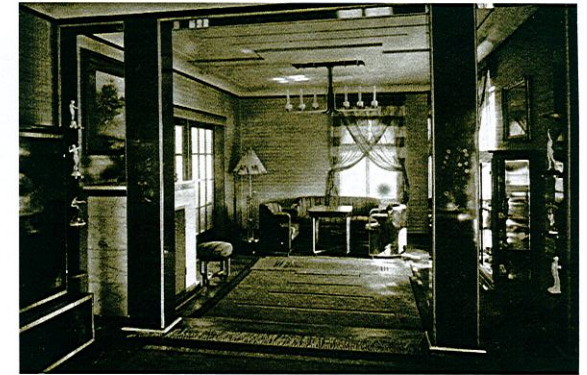


A twelve-year-old Dagmar.

Dagmar Simkova was born on the 23rd of May, 1929 in Prague but she spent most of her childhood years in the South Bohemian town of Pisek. Her father, a banker Jaroslav Simek, built there a family villa at the end of the twenties. He chose an extraordinarily beautiful place at the



Grammar School photograph. Dagmar Simkova in the first row, fourth from the left.



Original interior of Villa Marta.

very end of town surrounded by trees and meadows. He situated the house into a steep slope which could only be accessed by the stone steps decorated by the plump little angels.

According to the traditions at that time, the house was given the name Marta, out of respect for a woman. The name Marta was crescentically inscribed above the main entrance to the villa. In the surrounding garden, he also built a greenhouse for orchids and the stud farm. He shared the love of horses together with his older daughter Marta. The Simek family befriended Karel Havelka-Czechoslovakian jockey legend. He rode their horses in Chuchle (Prague’s horse race track).

While the older daughter Marta spent most of her time on horseback, Dagmar, eight years her junior fell for dancing and tapdancing. Her closest childhood friend Blazena Seifertova, her schoolmate and the daughter of the larger Pisek stud farm director, also remembers how they would carry their tap shoes. Together they tap-danced wherever they could. One more thing Dagmar loved was swimming, sunbathing and hanging-out with friends on the Otava river right below their stately home. She could spend hours and hours there.

After the communists confiscated the villa in 1954 all of the furniture got stolen and it slowly began to fall into a ruin.

Currently the new owner is trying to repair it into its original beauty.



Communist authorities confiscated the villa from the Simek family and left it to be devastated.

The End of Nylon Age

Banker Simek, Dagmar's father died tragically in Pisek at the end of the Second World War. Doctors recommended Dagmar to change her environment. Her mother sent her to study in nearby Steken baroque castle.

There, there was the Institute of Modern Languages organised by the Catholic Order of English Virgins. There she spent almost two years studying languages, art and etiquette. In 1948 she decided to take up History of Art and English at the Philosophical Faculty at Charles University in Prague.

Life of the whole family changed after the communist coup in 1948. Dagmar's sister, Marta managed to escape communist Czechoslovakia in 1950 and settled in Australia. Dagmar with her mother were forced to share their villa with other tenants who were moved here by the communist authorities. Dagmar, the daughter of the banker and also with her bourgeois background could not continue in her studies. At first Dagmar was a worker at the textile factory in Pisek, then she worked as a technical drawer in Textilia (state owned company) and finally, after getting the certificate she got a job as a nurse in hospital.

She still continued attending dance nights at the Bila ruze café in Pisek. The music, however was becoming hard to listen to. Jazz and Latino-American rhythms were banned because they were too Western orientated.

She hated the new totalitarian regime, she herself painted and distributed anti-communist



Castle in Steken.



Dagmar Simkova right before she got arrested.

leaflets around Pisek. Dagmar also painted and reproduced several posters ridiculing Gottwald and Zapotocky (both were presidents of Czechoslovakia and communist party leaders). However, much worse was the fact, that she hid two of her friends who were former students sent to do their military service. They deserted the Army and wanted to go to the West. The fact that she also wanted to escape made her situation even worse. She was only 23 when the State security arrested her in their villa. She was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Her mother knew about her daughter's activities and was soon sentenced as well to 11 years, with their whole property confiscated.

Under Arrest And in Prison



In her book *"We Were There Too"*, Dagmar Simkova tells about her life and lives of other women after they had been arrested. She describes the cruelty of inquisitors, their methods, humiliation, and their need to blackmail and make prisoners confess and sign faked statements.

On the 12th of February, 1954, Dagmar Simkova was sentenced to 8 years in prison by the Regional Court in Ceske Budejovice. However, the prosecutor protested. Her sentence seemed too short to him. He was outraged by the unbroken behaviour of the young girl. In the end, on the 1st of July, 1954, the Supreme Court of Czechoslovakia sentenced her to 15 years in prison. Her mother, Marta Simkova, was sentenced as well to 11 years in prison. All of their property was confiscated.

Dagmar was held in several prisons. She was even in the infamous solitary confinement cell, a dark, mouldy room with only bare concrete floor. Prisoners were locked there naked with only a minimum amount of food. From Pardubice prison she was sent to Zeliezovce in Slovakia. It was one of the harshest prisons at that time. She managed to escape from this hell on the 5th of August, 1955. She ran and fell in a field, where she rolled in scented thyme flowers. It was an intoxicating feeling of freedom. But it lasted a few hours. Workers in the fields found her the following day sleeping buried in a haystack. She was led through the village, people made the sign of the cross. The prison authorities proclaimed her as a dangerous murderer. Her sentence was extended by another three years.

We Were There Too

Mutual solidarity and gentility helped the prisoners to survive years of imprisonment and meeting the undoable work norms. The worst thing, however, was the dull cruelty of illiterate matrons. "According to them we are swines, bitches, beasts and smelly heaps of manure.

We oppose them with mutual tenderness and attention and courtesy. We use diminutives to address them. We behave according to 'Code of Conduct rules'. We are noblewomen. We watch carefully our every move, intonation, and expression. It is constant self-control, which helps us to keep our dignity. We call it 'silk-rustling'," Dagmar Simkova wrote in her book.

The former university professor of classical archeology Ruzena Vackova had a great influence on young women who longed for education, but were obstructed by the communists. She gave them lectures on fine art, literature, and history of theatre.

"We keep forgetting about life around us. We devour every word. We try to remember, and understand like the best students at universities."

Dagmar Simkova describes the precious moments in her book. She, together with Dagmar Skalova wrote the lectures down.

Dagmar Skalova wore a special tightening belt on her back after a spine injury caused by the interrogators. She was allowed to keep it on even during the swoops, when all the women had to strip themselves naked. She kept the exercise book with the lectures under this belt. It was secretly transferred out of prison in 1965. Dagmar Skalova dedicated it to the Archive of Charles University after 1989. Historian Zdenek Poustka prepared it for the publishing.



Book *"We Were There Too"*.

After the Release From Prison



Dagmar Simkova did not leave the prison until the 28th of April, 1966, when she returned to Pisek. She lived together with her mother and her dog Lumpik, whom she took in, in a poor one-room flat with a bath tub which was very welcomed by both women after the years spent behind bars.

"I work in a soft drinks company under similar conditions to that of Ivan Denisovich described in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich', but I don't mind that much. You just get used to it. I have found the way out of this. I am supposed to do an English state exam," she wrote in one of her letters. She led a very modest life, and her salary was restricted, until the Ministry of Interior cut the expenditures for her court trial. She passed her English state exam.

Dagmar Simkova helped to found K 231 (Club of Political Prisoners) in Pisek in 1968. When the Soviet tanks rolled in later in August, she didn't wait a minute and left the country together with her mother. First to Austria, where they waited for their documents to be completed. They lived in a refugee camp waiting for permission to leave, which grew longer and longer. In the meantime, Dagmar did some odd jobs. For instance, she worked as a cleaner for the Salvation Army.

After fourteen years in prison and two years in Czechoslovakia she finally got to the West for the first time. "Vienna is a beautiful and amiable city. I walk a lot. I find things easier than in Prague now. The shop windows make me crazy, one never knows where to look first," she writes with fascination in one of her letters to her relatives in Czechoslovakia.

Australian Exile

Dagmar Simkova finally arrived in Australia with her mother in November 1968. They immediately set out to the outback to meet Marta. Her husband was a builder, specialist in engineering hydro-electric dams and he was currently working away on a project in Western Australia. His whole family accompanied him.

“There was a woman and two boys waiting for us at the airport in Kununurra. Immediately, I recognized members of my family in them. There were no other people there waiting anyway. The countryside here can definitely be called romantic because it is not only green but it also has red rocks, blue hills, beautiful palm trees, and colourful wild flowers. Besides millions of parrots, budgies, kangaroos, and crocodiles you can also spot lots of other different kinds of animals absolutely unknown to us,” wrote Dagmar in one of her letters from Australia.

After several month she left with her mother by boat to Perth. They rented a small house in Perth and fell in love with the picturesque and clean town with a beautiful climate. Dagmar started to work in an oriental restaurant, and also enrolled into a course for models and stuntmen. “I learnt to turn somersaults from the height of 30 meters without breaking my neck, I learnt to fall off horseback. I was driven over by a car plus other tricks from judo and karate. We had a lot of fun practising and I became young again. It is a very nice feeling and it was definitely worth it just for that matter. I also got to know various interesting people. We were beginning to start a new, careless life again,” she confides in one of her letters.

Unfortunately, Dagmar’s mother got ill and she died in the spring of 1970. It was a terrible blow for Dagmar. “The loss of parents is always a dreadful thing. In a foreign country it is like a haunting nightmare. A haunting loss of your past, and loneliness; because in a foreign country without old friends who knew you so well, one seems to be like an alien from another planet.”

Dagmar started to work as a nurse in a private hospital. She took care of elderly and mentally ill

people. She studied at two universities. She got her degree from the History of Art and Social Work. She learnt to create enamel paintings, she took part in 50 exhibitions. She took part in clubs of compatriots activities. She spent a long time working as a therapist in the penitentiary. Her former co-workers remember the respect she had in dealing with the prisoners who otherwise refused to obey authorities.

After 1989 she would come back to her native land several times, she was rehabilitated. She found their villa in a very bad state.

She suffered from cancer and fought it bravely until the end. She died on 24th of February, 1995 and her ashes as she wished were spread out in one of the parks in Perth.



Dagmar Simkova in Perth.

Written by Pavlina Formankova.
English translation by David Zaloudek.
Photos by National Archive, Patrick Murphy, Jan Hubner, Julie Hruskova, Edita Rerichova, Marek Anel, Vera Witznleiterova and Jan Bubak.
Graphic design by Stanislava and Pavel Vodicka.
Printed by Merkantilie.

Published by Ministry of Foreign Affairs
of the Czech Republic, 2010.

