

Jiri Franek As Czechoslovak Railways Worker



This photograph was taken after the year 1970, when I was working for Czechoslovak Railways, after being fired from my post as university professor.

After we returned from Germany, they very quickly threw me out of the Faculty, threw me out of the Party, but that I had already been thrown out of.

In the critique they wrote: 'Associate professor Franek comes from a rich jewish family from Prague.'

In those days that was the worst thing you could be. I worked in the Lidove Publishers, in fact as the assistant chief editor, but because I had been thrown out of the Party, someone had to vouch for me.

One acquaintance of mine did vouch for me, the literary critic Vladimir Dostal, but when he died the director of the publishing house immediately threw me out, and I ended up working for the railway.

I have to say that I very quickly got used to working for the railway. One of my colleagues found me the job, she had remained at the faculty and then later became a faculty dean in Olomouc; her best friend worked at the train station.

She told me that they were always looking for people there, so I went and introduced myself. First I had to go for schooling and then they took me on, because they had personnel shortages.

During Communism there were always personnel shortages, because each job was done by ten people instead of one, so of course there were never enough workers.

So I got in and got schooled to be a signalman. I worked at the railway station in Sedlec.

Signalman, that means that I got to work in a so-called switch tower, those are the little houses that stood right beside the tracks, there was a signalman in it, who had to watch the signals, and it had a telephone so that I could let them know if a train hadn't by chance remained stopped or if a wagon hadn't by accident become disconnected.

I worked outside of the train station and sometimes it was in the middle of nowhere. My job was to watch and see if the train was whole and on the right track.

Besides this, right in Sedlec there was a rail spur, that was always stressful for me. There was a fish cannery in Sedlec, so trains with refrigerated rail cars would arrive, and I had to let them off the main line into the cannery, according to very strict rules.

During this I would always be shaking, but not even once did I screw up. I'm proud of that.

Working for the railway had the advantage that you worked a morning shift, then the next day the afternoon shift, and then had a day off. So I had lots of days off, I would go to the library and also to the swimming pool.

Once I was running to catch a streetcar on my way to the swimming pool, and I slipped and fell and broke my little finger, so I wasn't able to work.

The doctor gave me a note that I can't manually move switches with my hands, so they put me on disability, which could last up to a year. We had very little money.

From disability I went into early retirement, where I got half of my pension, but didn't have to do anything any more, and then they gave me my full pension.