

Pavla Fáberová

The Life Story of the Founder

I was born on 1st January 1968 in Prague in an academic family. My grandfather Eduard Knobloch, M.Sc., D.Sc., was a typical scientist. He loved researching and exploring new things and didn't worry too much about how much it earns. In the 1950s, he discovered a way to simplify the production of insulin, but he didn't get any money or rewards because inventions were considered a part of his job responsibilities. If he discovered the same thing a few miles further west, we, his grandchildren, still would have lived off the fruits of his career.

My father, Pavel Knobloch, M.Sc., Ph.D, always had a passion for sports and sports events. He was an excellent soft-

ball player and later, an important representative and organizer at the club level, the national level as well as the European level. At the weekends, my dad was usually busy with softball matches, socializing with friends, so my brother and I often spend the time alone with my mom or one of our grandmothers.

My mother, Jarmila Knoblochová, M.D., born Bartůňková, dedicated her life to other people. She worked as a doctor all her life, and she had a huge number of friends. She remembered not only their birthdays and name days, but also the birthdays of her friends' partners, children and grandchildren. She would give presents to them all. I have always admired her for this ability, but my memory was never as good as hers. Sometimes, I'm having a hard time remembering all my kids' birthdays, and don't even get me started on their name days. I don't try to remember other people's birthdays at all. I hate shopping, and buying presents is always exhausting for me. When my mother died, the number of Christmas presents decreased dramatically in our home, so I decided to work on myself a little bit in order to keep Christmas memorable, but it's still not my strong suit.

I only have one sibling. My brother, Jan Knobloch, M.Sc., is more than four years younger than me, and our relationship as chil-

dren was not particularly close - I didn't want to play with Legos with him, and he didn't want to do his share of household chores. However, our relationship improved as we grew older, and today, my brother's company supports my nonprofit organization, Close Neighbour.

When I was in college, I was so frustrated with my surroundings as well as with myself, that it was no longer bearable. I desperately needed to find a direction and meaning in my life. I got involved in the independent student movement and we organized a petition addressed to the Czech Secretary of Education for a more diverse teaching of ideologies at universities. At the time, all we were taught at schools was Marxism-Leninism - communist ideology in its various forms: the international labour movement, political economy, scientific communism, etc. We tried to fight for diversification of the ideologies that are being taught - either all of them should be taught, or none of them should. The second major effort of our movement





was the 17th November march in 1989, remembering the 50th anniversary of the funeral of Jan Opletal. The event was quite successful...

The months around the Velvet Revolution were, quite understandably, very intense. On the one hand, I felt happy and proud to finally be outside of something I believed in, something I could identify with. It was a beautiful feeling. I formed a strike committee at my university, I repeatedly stood up to the rector of my college, I represented the university on the national strike committee. But I was also disgusted by the way the various meetings were run - there were always people who obviously loved listening to themselves and just kept talking for hours... As a result, something that could have been

summed up in two sentences took four hours. Various fights broke out over various bigger or smaller seats, and the former ideology leaders began to shamelessly secure their future positions in politics or other areas.

There are a lot of theories about the Velvet Revolution - what really happened, who pulled the strings, etc. I think everyone experienced their own personal revolution. I was very naive, I didn't understand some things that were happening around me, such as Hungary opening its borders, Germans flocking to the West German embassy in Prague... Yet even before the revolution, I was already secretly copying banned texts from my father's computer about the conditions in the 1950s. I certainly wasn't manipulated by anyone. That applies to the time during the revolution

or at any other time, although there have been people who have tried to manipulate me.

After the revolution, the Red Cross organized a project where about 50 Romanian and Roma children from an orphanage came to Strakonice, Czech Republic, and stayed for a month. They hired a couple of students to take care of the children during that time. My friend Majda and I were among them. It was my first encounter with Roma children and a great experience I could later build on. I was in charge of five children and I took care of them all day long. Food was delivered for us, so we didn't have to cook. At that time, I did not believe it was possible to take care of five children all day long, while having to do shopping and cooking too. When I was preparing for this project, I was

learning Romanian phrases like: "Sleep tight, my little girl", "I love you", "Thank you", etc. When the children arrived, I soon realized I rather need to learn phrases like: "Don't touch it", "Calm down!", "Take turns". I set ground rules that I insisted on: "No jumping out of windows", "No throwing stones at each other", "Being careful not to get hit by a car" and "Take turns" for activities they all liked. During that time, I learned a lot about raising children, and I lost a lot of my ideals. I really loved the kids, but sometimes, I would lose my nerve, or feel completely helpless. And it was the first time I prayed from the bottom of my heart. I remember I sat in the middle of the frozen field, crying and calling to God: "God, if you are up there, please help these kids, because I can't do it all alone." I still remember some of the names: Gíca Pruju, Dana Lupu, Natálie, Rozálka...



The search for values and for the purpose of my own life led me towards the spiritual topics. At first, I was reading various occult books about afterlife, zodiac signs and ghosts. My spiritual journey was a long process. I was exploring Buddhism for a while, then various Christian churches – the Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, The Seventh-day Adventist Church – it was a mess for me back then. My first experience with Christianity was through my grandmother, Libuše, who loved to organize everyone around her. At Christmas, my grandfather and I went to church to see the Nativity scene. My grandmother scolded me more



than once for being so unruly and disobedient, and she said it was because I didn't believe in God. So, I asked how I could do it to believe in God. I wanted to read the Bible, which my grandmother didn't have, but she taught me a prayer: "Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ..." I prayed that for a while at bedtime as a child, but it didn't improve my relationship with God and neither with my grandmother. In the vacuum following the revolution, I did not quite know where to start searching for the ultimate truth and meaning.

But then something happened while I was in nature, and it was such a powerful experience with God that I will never forget it. I can walk away from God, I can make mistakes – which is what I do – but I cannot say that there is no God and believe it I simply know there is a God. But despite knowing this, I had a difficult time in Christian churches. Maybe it's because I'm not particularly easy to get along with. I will occasionally influence a church community here and there a little, sometimes I leave one church for another, I am rarely kicked out. Overall, I'm always trying to fit in somewhere, because all my life I've needed people around me to show me a mirror, give me feedback. I live too fast sometimes.

In the autumn of 1991, for the first time, I honestly admitted to myself that I want to live with God, that I was ashamed of the mistakes I had made, that I believed that God sent His only Son Jesus Christ to Earth and that He died for my sins, that I wanted Jesus to guide me in my life because He is the King and the Lord. In Christianity, this is called conversion, the moment when I truly embraced God. This happened in Pilsen.

In 1992, I began working with Roma children and brought them to church where I was a member at that time. I could not understand why others weren't as enthusiastic about their presence as I was. Once I took a couple of them (about 15 children) to the wedding of an important member of the church. The children secretly brought a kitten with them and the scared kitten meowed at completely inappropriate moments. If looks could kill, I wouldn't have survived till the end of the ceremony. Eventually, the church asked me not to bring any more Roma children to church. I broke down in tears and went back to Prague where my parents lived.

In 1994, I got married after a short period of dating, and gave birth to five children in six years and four months. My first husband and me moved to a different place every two years, so only two of my children were born in the same city. We lived in Prague, Vlašim, two places in Šluknov, two places in Humpolec, and then in Metánov. During the time we were together, we also completed a month-long course for missionaries in Havířov, spent a month in Russia as missionaries at a summer camp, and spent five months in Ukraine. Everywhere we lived, I was drawn to Roma children. Everywhere we went, we had a few friends in the Romani community, I organized activities for their children and tried to help in whatever way I could.

In 2006, my children and me left my husband and after long and exhausting series of trials, we got divorced. Leaving the father of my five children was one of the hardest decisions of my life. One thing that helped me back then was a documentary about women who experienced domestic abuse. "One thing

you can be sure of: it will get worse." The documentary featured physically abused women, and I envied some of them because they had bruises or something to show as evidence. I didn't. I was abused emotionally and had nothing to show as evidence.

My parents told me that they could see that we weren't getting along well, and that they will understand if I leave him. At some point, I swallowed all my pride, called them and asked them if we could stay with them for a while. They said yes. We were living with my parents for three months until I found a suitable flat in Pilsen. I wanted to get back in touch with my Roma children and their meowing kittens.

It came naturally that I started working with the whole families, soon. My own





predicaments and challenges helped me refrain from judging other people too fast. A lot of mothers of the Roma children I work with are my friends and I love them dearly. I can relate to stories in which everything in life doesn't work out the way we expect... Do you have a bunch of kids with a partner who has been unhelpful and useless, and you don't know what to do about it? I can feel you. Don't give up, let's talk about it! After I left my husband, I wasn't able to read the Bible for about a year. I explained it to God and He understood it. I knew it was just a matter of time before I recovered, and today, the Bible is an important part of my life again.

I lived with my kids alone for six years. It wasn't exactly easy. My ex-husband was



constantly suing us, dragging us through courts. The lawsuits were always an extremely depressing experience. It felt unreal and absolutely crazy. It wasn't until my youngest daughter turned 18 that he stopped being able to sue us. So, he switched to another strategy how to make our lives miserable. He approaches our friends, the churches we attend, doctors, employers, the Roma children we work with, and tells everyone his side of the story in which he is the hero and martyr and we are the bad guys.

I home-schooled my children until 5th grade. Only my youngest daughter went to school one year sooner than others because she didn't want to be alone at home without her siblings. Homeschooling was very practical,

because when we moved to another place, the kids did not have to change schools. Homeschooling was awesome. We got up whenever we wanted, we never had to learn after noon. When there was enough snow, we went skiing. When it was hot, we went swimming. Most of the time, the kids didn't even notice that I was teaching them something, we talked a lot about everything.

When we were working with Roma children, we taught them in a similar way. We often comment on life around us, pointing out connections and defining the major crossroads in life that require careful decisions - choosing the life partner, school, job, dealing with addictions and other temptations. As a good mother, I consider my children to be the best in the world and I am very proud of them all. The fact that they continue to be involved with Roma children in our organization, Close Neighbour, even after they grew up, feels undeserved and awesome! They all survived my parenting and education - that is another reason why I am proud of them! The oldest, Pavla, has already completed her university education, Johana is a teacher, Ester is a dentist, and Koli and Marie are working on

their university degree. My own children are my biggest project in life. If there's one thing I could wish for, it is for my children to be happy.

My second husband, Aleš, is a hero. He married a woman with five children of her own, and a bunch of Roma children and families she interacts with all the time. It wasn't always easy. Funnily enough, Aleš also has five children from his first marriage, but they're all boys. I have four daughters and one son, so our families were like two different cultures. Aleš, like me, was taking care of his children as well as other children, he was a leader of a Pathfinder Club (an organization similar to Scouts) for boys from mostly Christian backgrounds - again, a little different culture than the kids in our organization. Aleš entered our life, our organization and brought a lot of great things with him. For example, he builds us a Scout-type camp every year - with tents, teepees, and a field kitchen. Until then, we always rented a building as an accommodation. Aleš also improved the graphic design of our presentation and encouraged us to be more organized.

But not everything is always great. One weekend, he came to support me at an event with Romani teenagers in Prague. The kids were very unruly and as we were preparing to go back, they kept arguing about who would sit in the third row



of seats in the car. One of the girls decided to secure her place by jumping into the trunk of the car (we have a van), running over all the luggage and crawling into the back seat she wanted, not caring about the fact there was already a boy sitting in it. The boy had recently undergone leg surgery and still had screws in his legs. Aleš got angry, so he pulled her out of the car again and told her: "Is this how you get in the car?" Another girl saw this and started being rude to Aleš. Aleš is a tough man, he served in the army, he's a carpenter, but even he heard some of the swear words for the first time. She cursed his mother, until Aleš finally had enough and decided to, well, discipline them. It was an intense scene and the ladies got all offended. But unfortunately, this wasn't the end of the story. Half a year later, Aleš went to our



Children's club to repair the floor for us, free of charge. In the meantime, I went to greet the women who were sitting on the benches. When I looked back in my husband's direction, there were five men hitting Aleš with their fists. I immediately ran to them, jumped right in the middle and started shouting. Surprisingly, they stopped. We kept shouting at each other for a while, until they eventually walked away. A police car arrived shortly after – they saw the incident on the camera. The police wanted to write a report about the attackers. I knew that at least two of them were on probation, because they had recently been released for good behaviour in the middle of their prison sentences. I knew their wives and children. I knew how hard it was for them when their fathers were in prison. I was very grateful to the police for



arriving so quickly, which definitely helped calm things down. I was very grateful that Aleš did not file the report. His nose was bleeding and his ribs were bruised. He had to sleep on his back for about a month.

At that moment, I was seriously considering walking away from it all I told Aleš that if he wants, I will quit my work at Close

Neighbour. But Aleš is not a lady, and he knows me well. "What else would you be doing? It wouldn't be you anymore." He concluded. Time has healed the wounds, and now when I meet those ladies and their dads, we are on friendly terms. We've enjoyed a lot of good things together too - all's well that ends well.



The goal is clear.
The path is arduous but beautiful. And we will keep going...