

2. The Communist Period (1951–1978)

Introduction

In Tchechoslovakia, on the night of 3-4 May 1950, the State Police attacked our house at Banská Bystrica. The superior of the house, Fr. Augustín Mikula, was not at home. The police took away the residents of our apostolic school: Fr. Štefan Krištín, Fr. Rudolf Puchovsky, Fr. Rudolf Lorenc, the seminarists and the novices, among whom was Jan Havlik. The priests were brought off to the large Salesian house of Hronsky Benadik, with other religious (Capuchins, Franciscans, etc.). A few days later Fr. Puchovsky and Fr. Krištín escaped. Fr. Puchovsky remained in hiding for eight years as well as two of our confreres, Frs. Hutyra and Orieseck. The young people were transported to Kostolna to construct a dam, called “the Youth Dam,” at the River Vah. A few months later the young internal seminarists were able to return home. The diocesan, religious and Vincentian seminarists were obliged to do “military service” for three and a half years!! Fr. Štefan Krištín, helped by some laity and Daughters of Charity found an adequate house at Nitra where, from September 1950, six of our young men began their studies in a clandestine seminary. Frs. Puchovsky and Orieseck helped in their formation. On 29 October 1951, the State Police arrested Fr. Krištín and the six seminarists, among whom was Jan Havlik. For fifteen months they underwent interrogations torture and hunger. And on 5 February 1953, their trial resulted in the following sentences: Fr. Štefan Krištín condemned to life imprisonment (changed subsequently to 20 years in prison; he did in fact 13 years of forced labour in the mines); the seminarist Jan Havlik condemned to 10 years in prison (in fact he actually did 11!). In the course of the trial our confreres and our students were sentenced to a total of 129 years in prison! (Milan Šášik, CM)

In Yugoslavia the Communist Party took power at the end of the Second World War during which it had organised the resistance with the very definite intention of seizing power and bringing about the Communist Revolution. For this reason during the German occupation (1941–1945), it had already secretly “liquidated” hundreds of non-Communist compatriots while accusing them of collaborating with the occupying Nazis. So, during this foreign occupation, a veritable civil war had raged between the partisans and the adversaries of the Communist Revolution. The Catholic Church as a rule ranged itself on the side of those against Communism, which earned it a particularly severe persecution when the Communists took power. Furthermore, it is clear today that the Communist regime was seeking the separation of the country’s Catholic Church from the Universal Catholic Church, and the creation of a schismatic or “patriotic” Catholic Church.

The Daughters of Charity were no exception. At the end of the Second World War their province was very vibrant if one reflects that out of a population of a million and a half inhabitants in Slovenia there were 1140 Daughters on 31 December 1945. They were working either in their seven educational or health-care establishments or else in 15 public hospitals. The persecution began immediately

after the war, but it was at its worst in the years 1947–1949. The revolutionary forces seized, one after the other, the sisters' foundations, putting some of the sisters into prison, confiscating their properties and driving them from their houses or from public institutions. Through an irony of history the severest blow was struck on 8 March 1948 which was celebrated by the Communists as Women's Day. On that day, in all the hospitals where they were still working, the sisters were summoned together and told that they had to leave the place that very day. Thus on one single day 249 sisters found themselves on the street. The provincial house was too small to shelter them and many returned to their families. The regime had urged them to leave their Company, abandon their religious habit and break off all relations with their superiors. On these conditions they were offered the possibility of resuming their work again within two weeks. With the exception of one sister who had collaborated with the Communists and had already left the Company no sister accepted this offer.

The expulsion of the sisters from their houses and other institutions was generally accompanied by interrogations and temporary imprisonment. But there were also actual trials before tribunals where the sisters were condemned to penal sentences varying from a few months to a few years. In all, 42 sisters passed through prisons or forced labour camps. In 1948 one sister died in prison.

Bit by bit the province got itself reorganised by sending sisters to Serbia and Macedonia where there was a shortage of qualified nursing personnel; that is why they were welcomed with open arms. But in reality this was a veritable haemorrhage since they had left their Catholic region to go into non-Catholic regions where their presence produced no fruit by way of vocations. On the other hand their presence amongst the Orthodox played a very important role with regard to ecumenism. (Anton Stres, CM)

a) Martyrs of the Congregation of the Mission

1. Jan Havlik, CM, Seminarist of the Slovakian Province, born at Dubovce on 12 February 1928 and died on 27 December 1965 on the road to Skalika.

Jan Havlik completed his secondary studies in 1949 in our apostolic school at Banská Bystrica. On 29 October 1951 he was arrested with five other seminarists of the Congregation of the Mission in the clandestine seminary of Nitra. He was interrogated and tortured by the terrible State Police for 15 months, suffering from both hunger and cold. After a trial which lasted from 3–5 February he was condemned to ten years imprisonment. He was condemned for strictly religious reasons: studying theology in a clandestine seminary. It is clear that the ill-treatment and torture which he endured in prison must have contributed to break down his personality. The prolongation of his prison sentence by one year, without any further trial, is proof that he remained faithful to his vocation and accepted no compromise. In prison he gave heroic witness to his faith. He passed the last period of his incarceration in Val-

Dice. In prison he was once again interrogated, ill-treated and left cold and without food. He always behaved with faith and courage. He was released on 28 October 1962 after 11 years of prison.

Suffering from heart disease and other health problems he died at the age of 37 on the road to Skalica on 27 December 1965 while on his way to visit his brother. He is buried in the cemetery of his native village, Dubovce near Vlekovce.

His life was saintly. He was pious, gifted as a singer and as a speaker. He liked to pray to the Virgin Mary and was fervent in prayer.

2. Fr. Jan Hutyra, CM of the Province of Slovakia, born at Jablonov, 1 February 1912 and died at Brno 27 February 1978.

Shortly before the end of the 2nd World War, Fr. Hutyra attempted to save the lives of 20 people from Ladce, taken hostage and condemned to death by the Germans. This was as a reprisal for an attack. He went in person to speak to the German officers, offering his life and that of 19 Daughters of Charity who volunteered with him, to replace the 20 innocent hostages. The officers refused the offer and hanged 19 of the hostages, allowing one to go free.

In 1947, Fr. Hutyra took part in the General Assembly of the Congregation as well as the Canonisation of St. Catherine Laboure. En route he was followed and spied upon by the Secret Police. On his return to Bratislava, he was arrested, imprisoned and tortured. As a result, he had to be treated in hospital at Turciansk, where he remained until the end of May 1950.

However, in that same year he was again arrested by the Police, together with other confreres and found guilty of disseminating forbidden literature. He was imprisoned in Locentor Camp in Bac, and later in Bodolíneč and subsequently in Beluska Slatory. Having escaped, he went into hiding until the year 1958. He continued with success while on the run, looking after his confreres and Daughters of Charity, consoling and counseling and guiding his flock, while also distributing religious literature, while under cover. He acted very prudently, contacting only certain confreres and members of the Daughters of Charity. The Police, however, got on his trail and arrested him in 1958. Interrogated by them, he was harshly tortured and locked up, first in Valdice and then in Bory. Eventually, he was condemned to ten years in prison, during which he was forced to work for a long period as a glasscutter, activity which was very difficult for his poor health.

In 1965, by virtue of an intervention by Pope Paul VI, Fr. Hutyra was granted a pardon with other prisoners, but he did not receive permission to resume his priestly work. He was forced to work as a layman in the hospital in Prague. However, he continued, in secret, to be involved with the Vincentian Family and worked for the formation of members of the Community and for vocations.

Everyone who came in contact with him was in agreement about his extraordinary qualities, his ability to surmount difficulties, his pastoral wisdom,

apostolic faith, honesty and diplomacy. He was harassed by Secret Police all through his life. His shocking interrogation by the police, harmed his health and from it he never recovered. Again and again, he was beaten to the point where he would lose consciousness. Witnesses testified that during one of these interrogations, he had long needles driven under his nails, all of which tortures caused him severe illness.

He died aged 66 on 27 February 1978 at Brno, where he was buried.

b) Martyrs of the Company of the Daughters of Charity

1. Sr. Valerija BOJC, DC of the Province of Slovenia, born 4 December 1904 and died 5 April 1951.

In 1947, the Communists, who were at that time the absolute masters of Yugoslavia, entered upon a grave religious persecution. In Slovenia alone, between 1947 and 1949, about 100 Priests were imprisoned, as well as a huge number of lay people and nuns, 40 of whom were Daughters of Charity of that province. They were accused of various crimes, but the principal reason was their adherence to the Catholic Church.

On 1 September 1948, at Dedinge-Belgrade in Serbia, Sr. Bjoc was arrested by the Secret Police (Ozna), then kept in prison until her death. Very enfeebled by her harsh treatment and starvation, in particular during her four months detention in the harshest prison cell ("Le Cachot," which means the dungeon), she became seriously ill, but was not accorded the necessary care. Finally, in danger of death, she was transferred to the prison hospital, where she died on 5 April 1951.

2. Sr. Florina Barbara BÖNIGHOVÁ, DC of the Province of Czechoslovakia, born 21 December 1894 at Weigaithen (Slovakia) and died 31 March 1956 in prison at Prague Pankrac.

After the First World War, sister was appointed superior of the Daughters in the hospital of Kremnica. At that time, she was only in the eighth year of her vocation, which shows the extraordinary qualities she must have had. Later, she was to become superior of the hospital of Ruzenberok. In 1934, she became provincial treasurer at Ladce. From 1940 to 1948, she was superior of the hospital at Levocca and later that of Nitra, where she was arrested. At that time, the Communist regime held sway. Some young sisters were in residence at the hospital during their Seminary period. Fr. Štefan Krištín, CM, was in charge of their formation, but secretly, of course. Sr. Florina, as superior, helped in every way in the work of formation. Soon, the Secret Police became aware of the secret formation performed by the Vincentian Fathers. The young sisters and the chaplain were arrested, and

soon afterwards, on 1 November 1951, so was Sr. Florina herself. She had to endure interrogation at Nitra. Shortly afterwards she had to be transferred to the prison hospital, suffering from pleurisy and diabetes. Though she was under strict guard, some sisters succeeded in contacting her and found her serene and resigned to God's Will. After a week in hospital, she was returned to the prison for further interrogations, the details of which we have been unable to discover; but judging by the usual methods at the time, they were severe, and we know that subjects were often tortured.

The judicial process entitled "The case of Krištín and his companions" then took place. Permitted to speak, Sr. Florina expressed herself briefly as follows: "I revere the Holy Father and I am determined to remain faithful to my vocation and to the Church, even at the cost of my life. It is true that I helped those in need, which was my Christian duty."

She was condemned to 15 years in prison on a charge of high treason. After a short spell in Pardubice, she was transferred to Pankrac on 31 March 1956. How she was treated there is unknown to us. After her death, she was buried in a common grave in Praha-Dablice.