

# Commemorative event about persecution in Czechoslovakia

Bratislava, Slovakia, November 13, 2023

50 years ago, dozens of our early members in Czechoslovakia were arrested. To commemorate the unfolding drama unknown to the wider public, UPF Slovakia organized an event for members and friends. Despite bad weather the hall in our Peace Embassy was filled to its maximum capacity. Among the audience was the former prime minister Ján Čarnogurský, a renowned human rights advocate during communism. Some of the early members we had not seen for a long time also attended.

The introductory message was given by UPF president Miloš Klas. Then the historian **Lubomír Morbacher** from the Slovak Nation's Memory Institute (UPN) outlined the persecution of believers during the 1970-ies until 1989. After the end of the Prague Spring, churches and committed believers were put under incredible pressure. Communist agents infiltrated many dissident groups. Dr. Morbacher praised the courage of our first members and condemned their mistreatment by state authorities and lamented about the lacking acknowledgement until today.

However,

Between 1971 and 1972 the movement was thriving, with pioneers being sent to numerous towns. Everything seemed to be going well - until September 1973. The communist regime had not known about our young movement until priests in pulpits warned their congregants and some parents wrote to the secret police to intervene! Then, a drama of historic dimension took its course: Secret policemen raided apartments throughout the nation. Within a few weeks, nearly 30 members were imprisoned and 200 people were interrogated; nearly 40 members were prosecuted. In 1974 the courts sentenced some 25 members to imprisonment; they served a total of 50 years in several prisons. A power point presentation portrayed individual members telling how and where they had been arrested.

The second speaker **Štefan Detvai**, former President of the Slovak Bar Association, served as defender of our members. In 1973 he was an advocate with few years of experience but huge enthusiasm. He was an acquaintance of Anton Uhnák, one of the members, before the troubles started. Dr. Detvai explained in detail how he was surprised to find no evidence for any crime whatsoever and was shocked that such pure minded, excellent students were treated like criminals. His sincere effort to prove the innocence of our members almost landed him in jail himself! The today renowned lawyer revealed fascinating facts which kept the audience captive. He remarked several times, that for years he himself was traumatized by the verdict. He realized that the persecution was politically motivated and sheer injustice.

Afterwards a panel discussion with some of the persecuted members took place: the first church leader Betka Danišková, Dorota Šimeková, Miloš Klas, Anton Uhnák and his wife Maria, Juraj Lajda and his wife Erika, and Štefan Jakubáč explained how they felt when they were arrested, what worried them most during the interrogations, the reaction of their family and friends, and how they view today their imprisonment and its impact on their further life.

The participants had the chance to buy the book „The Faith which Broke the Iron Curtain” written by Julian Gray. Gifts and letters of thanks were given to the persecuted. Tasty food was served and picture taking completed the evening. Dr. Morbacher said that he felt honored having been part of the commemoration. Though he attends often similar events, ours has been outstanding.

Report: *Barbara Grabner, UPF Slovakia*