

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Tribute To Marie Živná, Victim Of Despotic Czechoslovak Communists

Knut Holdhus
April 20, 2024



Alžbeta (Betka) Danišková in 1972

First member to join underground movement in East Europe writes tribute to victim of communist regime and first martyr

Part 3 of a series commemorating Marie Živná. See [part 1](#), [part 2](#)



Marie Živná, the first [Unification Church](#) martyr in East Europe. Here, the official high school graduation photo of her at the age of 18

How I remember Marie Živná

A tribute to Marie Živná, the first [Unification Church](#) martyr in East Europe, written 16th June 2011 by Alžbeta (Betka) Danišková, the first member to join in the former Czechoslovakia in 1969.

In October 1968 Emilie Steberl came to what was then called Czechoslovakia. She was sent from Austria to establish a group of followers of the [Unification Principles](#). Thanks to her patience and endurance, I accepted the teachings on 25th January 1969.

After she had left Czechoslovakia in August 1970, Emilie Steberl appointed me to lead our movement.

We worked underground illegally, but our work was successful as we managed to send missionaries to other countries and to 25 cities and towns in Czechoslovakia.

Due to many reports, the secret police started to watch us, and since 1971 we had to work very carefully.

Printed materials had to be destroyed immediately. I would visit missionaries in the different cities. But on 25th December 1972, at the end of a long journey, I had a serious car accident. My backbone was broken, and the spinal cord damaged. Since then, I was immobile, in a wheelchair. The closest members of the movement decided Marie Živná would be my assistant. The person who had introduced her to our movement, Michal Glonda, called her "[God](#)'s child".

Marie started living with me at an undisclosed address - an apartment in Mojmirova street in Bratislava.

Only a close circle of members would visit us. She helped me with physiotherapy, prepared food and took care of hygiene. She also maintained contacts with others. But the owners of the apartment, probably on request from the police, asked us to leave the flat. So we decided to live with other "sisters" in Agatova street. We continued our work until September 1973 when we were arrested, interrogated and imprisoned.



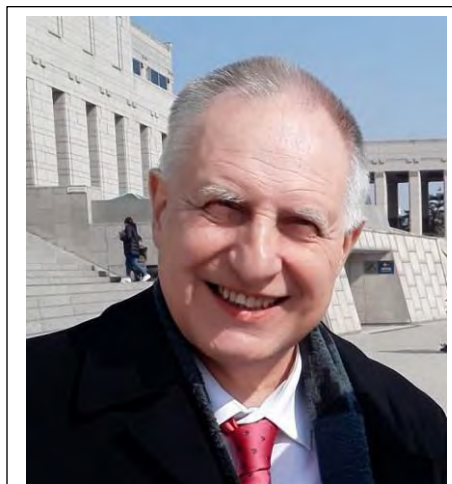
A monument erected in 2019 by the Czech market town of [Svojanov](#) to honour Marie Živná, who died under mysterious circumstances while in a communist prison in Bratislava. The text says, "Marie Živná - victim of the despotic communist regime"

While in pre-trial custody we were interrogated separately, and interrogations could last many hours. In order to meet Maria Živná, I asked for a "confrontation" with her. Marie knew very well that it was just a pretext. "Confrontation" under supervision of many policemen was very untypical.

Marie embraced me and asked me if I was not cold, and if I had warm clothes. As a big surprise to the investigators, we were laughing of joy. Then the "confrontation" quickly came to an end.

I would meet Marie several times in the corridors of the prison. We always had to stand facing the wall. During the last meeting she turned her head to me and smiled. She did not mind being scolded by the policeman.

When my lawyer told me that Marie had died, it affected me so much that I could not stop crying. My prison towels were completely wet. I knew for sure from her replies during the investigations I was acquainted with [those accused had the right to look through all the documents produced after the interrogation and investigation had been completed], that what she said did not contain any doubts about the teachings of the [Unification Principles](#). Her crystal pure, clear and direct answers were a proof of her clear mind.



Dr. Juraj Lajda, Photo (2024)

Up until today I could not think about her peacefully because even the years did not take away the pain I felt when I was told she had passed away.

Dr. Juraj Lajda, another early member of the [Unification Church](#) in the former Czechoslovakia, adds (also in June 2011),

"In 1973 the persecution of the [Unification Church](#) members started. The communist secret police started to observe us and in September 1973 the first members were arrested. Within several weeks almost 30 members were put into prison. Marie was one of the last ones who were arrested. Even though she was very close to Betka, the leader of the movement, and knew many things, she worked very silently and seemed to be invisible so that the secret police could not find her easily. Marie pretended not to know anything. During the interrogations by the police, she gave very little information and said nothing of importance.

Marie was arrested in late autumn 1973. Together with other members she was waiting for the trial in Bratislava prison. The trial began 2nd July 1974 and lasted until 19th July 1974.

On Easter Thursday 11th April 1974 Marie died under suspicious circumstances in prison. The prison police sent a telegram to her parents that their daughter was dead. They were shocked and immediately travelled to Bratislava to visit the prison. The police gave them the iron coffin with the dead body; the coffin was sealed, and nobody was allowed to open it. The parents did not obey the instructions from the officials and opened the coffin. What they saw was terrible. There was their 24-year old daughter with grey hair.

Her funeral was a big event in her home village. Marie had a very good reputation and people could not believe that she had lost her life by accident. About 1,000 persons gathered at her funeral and expressed doubts about her death, accusing the communist regime of killing innocent people. Marie became a symbol of resistance against communism. At the funeral numerous secret agents were present."

Part 3 of a series commemorating Marie Živná. See [part 1](#), [part 2](#)

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Will Japan Soon Be On

Marie Živná, the first martyr in a communist state, honoured on 50th anniversary of her death in a prison cell



The place Marie Živná died in a detention cell 11th April 1974 – the Palace of Justice in Bratislava, Slovakia. Photo: Laurenc Klas

Part 1 of a series commemorating Marie Živná. See [part 2](#), [part 3](#)

No one knows exactly how Marie Živná (1949-1974) died 11th April 1974, but all agree that it was under mysterious circumstances while being held in detention by the communist authorities in Bratislava.

She had been arrested by the secret police of Czechoslovakia in the Autumn of 1973 along with 18 others as part of a crackdown on religious groups.

Altogether 200 persons connected to the thriving [Unification Church](#) were interrogated. Many of them had joined the new religious movement that had come to the country with an underground missionary, Emilie Steberl, from neighbouring Austria in October 1968. This was 12 years before underground missionaries were sent to other East European nations as part of a legendary project behind the Iron Curtain that came to be called "Mission Butterfly".



Emilie Steberl (1932-1981), the first underground missionary for the [Unification Church](#) to communist countries behind the Iron Curtain. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

All those arrested survived the ill treatment behind the prison walls, except Marie Živná. 50 years after her untimely death, a program to honour her was held 13th April 2024 in her small hometown of Svojanov, 60 km north of the large Czech city of Brno. Another commemorative meeting was held in Bratislava, Slovakia on 7th April.


Novinky, the most visited Czech online newspaper, reported on the event in Svojanov and wrote about Marie,

Novinky.cz "The political and social relaxation of the late 1960s was

followed by normalization. In the atmosphere of tightening screws, Marie found hope in a faith. In 1972, she became one of the first Czechoslovak members of the [Unification Church](#). The newly formed movement, standing outside official structures, immediately provoked a reaction from the regime.

A group of believers was arrested in Bratislava, and a trial ensued, in which 18 young people were sentenced to unconditional imprisonment for subverting the republic. The nineteenth, Marie Živná, did not survive to see the end of the trial. But what exactly happened behind the walls of the detention cell in the Bratislava Palace of Justice on April 11, 1974, is unknown." (Novinky 15th April 2024, translated from Czech. [Original article](#))

Barbara Grabner, a journalist in Bratislava, tells [News and Insights](#)

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Marie Živná, the first martyr in the East Bloc, here in Summer of 1973, months before she got arrested.

Photo: FFWPU

"In



A photo of Marie Živná (1949-1974) at the age of 18, displayed at the commemorative meeting in Svojanov on 13th April 2024. The picture had been taken for her high school graduation. Photo: FFWPU

September 1973 the persecution started; Marie was arrested end of autumn 1973. Like other members she waited in the prison for the trial to take place in Bratislava. The police released Marie for a while because they thought that she would lead them to other suspects. During that period, Margita Vrábelová, the mother of an imprisoned member of the **Unification Church**, met Marie for the last time,

'I met her at the main station. I was walking upstairs, and she was walking downstairs. We stopped and she asked me for small change for a bus ticket. I wanted to give her more money, but she said that she didn't want to carry any extra money. So, I gave her the amount she asked for. I think that she asked for the change from me just to have a reason to stop and talk to me and tell me a little bit about her situation.'

Ladislav Šimek too met Marie,

'When I crossed the main square, Marie was walking toward me from the opposite direction. I knew it would be better not to talk to her because of the secret police observing us. We greeted each other just with our eyes in very careful manner. It was the last time that I saw Marie alive.'

Novinky writes,



The official declaration where **Father Moon** declares Marie Živná martyr on 1st May 1994. Photo: FFWPU

"However, Jiří P. Kříž [a friend of Marie from her student days in Brno] does not believe that she committed suicide, as the official version claimed.

'It was not technically possible. And it contradicts her state of mind. She managed to contact another inmate, so we know she was joyful. What those StB [State Security, the secret police] agents did to her then exceeded the imagination of any of us,' Kříž added, according to his findings, there are no written documents in the archives about what happened."



From the grave of the Živná family in Svojanov, Czech Republic. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Friends of Marie tried to find out how she had died. They found that Marie's parents had been shocked upon seeing their daughter's body in the coffin. Her hair had turned grey while in prison. How could the hair of a 24-year old suddenly lose its colour? The parents must have suspected that Marie had been seriously mistreated, maybe even tortured while imprisoned.

In his autobiography *As a Peace-loving Global Citizen*, [Sun Myung Moon](#), the founder of the [Unification Church](#), mentions how Marie Živná

"lost her life while in prison at the young age of twenty-four. She was the first martyr who died while conducting missionary work in a communist country." (p164)

[Father Moon](#) describes his reaction when he heard the news of her death,

"I could not speak. I fell into a sorrow that seemed to have no end, as if I had been thrown into deep water." (p164)

As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen



Front cover of *Father Moon's autobiography*.

One of the first members of the [Unification Church](#) in Czechoslovakia was Milos Klas. He joined in 1970 and was also arrested, interrogated and imprisoned. He recalls,

"I used to witness [evangelize] mainly to those students and young people who attended some church. I didn't witness to my colleagues even though some of them knew about my 'forbidden' activities. My own particular lifestyle and the way in which I treated people left a positive impact on them. So, in difficult circumstances my colleagues would always help me, even if it meant a risk for them.

One day in October of 1973, the secret police visited my workplace. They wanted to arrest me but because I wasn't present, they told my boss that he should order me to be there on the following day at a certain time when they would come again. My boss managed to warn me that the secret police were going to come for me and suggested that I should take all precautions necessary.

It gave me just enough time to hide our literature in a heap of coal in my landlady's cellar and to deeply bury the rest in the forest, with the help of a young member. My boss was excellent. He even cared for me some years later when I was released from prison. He re-employed me even though the management protested strongly. [...] Altogether I spent twelve months in prison. The authorities released me four months early because, without my knowledge, my mother had written a petition for clemency to President Husak, who had granted it." (Mission Butterfly – Pioneers Behind the Iron Curtain, 2006, p30-31)



Milos Klas in the early seventies. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Featured image above: A photo of Marie Živná (1949-1974), the first martyr in the communist world, displayed by Mária Uhnáková, who was also imprisoned, at the commemorative meeting in Svojanov on 13th April 2024. Photo: FFWPU

"First Martyr in Communist World Commemorated" – text by Knut Holdhus, collected from reports from Czech Republic and Slovakia. Posted 17th April 2024 at 5:06 pm. Updated 18th April at 9:34 am.

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Serious

Part 2 of a series commemorating Marie Živná. See [part 1](#), [part 3](#)

by Dr. Juraj Lajda, publisher.

On 13th April 2024, we commemorated the 50th anniversary of the passing of Marie Živná, a [Unification Church](#) martyr in the former Czechoslovakia.



Dr. Juraj Lajda, Photo (2024): Personal

To mark the occasion, the Czech chapter of the [Family Federation](#), together with the municipal authorities of the Czech village of Svojanov, where Marie was born, organised a memorial meeting in the Town Hall. Distinguished guests and village residents participated.

The large Czech online newspaper Novinky.cz reports,

Novinky.cz "From an early age, Marie Živná was shaped by the environment in which she grew up. Her father was a castellan in a medieval castle, where she watched him paint pictures on winter evenings. It was her love of history and art that led her to study art history at the Faculty of Philosophy in Brno. She was just about to graduate, and she had also written her diploma thesis, in which she researched a set of Gothic churches in the Svojanov region. In the end, however, everything turned out differently." (Novinky 15th April 2024, translated from Czech. [Original article](#))

In 1972 Marie met members of the [Unification Church](#) at the university in Brno and soon joined this new and fast growing movement. It didn't take long before it attracted the attention of the secret services. They realised the movement from South Korea was opposed to communism.

The first member was arrested on 11th September 1973, and one week after that, many believers in Bratislava and other cities were taken into custody. A trial took place months later where 18 young men and women were found guilty of "subverting the republic". They received unconditional prison sentences of up to five years. 19 would have been sentenced, but one of them, Marie Živná, died in her prison cell before the trial took place.

The mayor of Svojanov emphasized in his opening speech that during the time of communism, people could not freely practice their religion.



Theatre critic Jiří P. Kříž. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Theatre critic **Jiří P. Kříž**, who met Marie during joint activities at the Society of Philosophy Listeners, said:

"Marie Živná's heroism is not a showy standing on the barricades. She was a pure girl from Svojanov who managed to resist and until the end not give in. To this day, nobody knows anything about this."

The next speaker was **Milena Blatná**, BEng, the president of the *Confederation of Political Prisoners* in the Czech Republic. She described the atmosphere of the 1950s and 1970s under the communist regime. Marie lost her life for her ideals, and no one causing this tragedy was punished, Mrs. Blatná said.



Milena Blatná, BEng, the president of the *Confederation of*

Dr. Juraj Lajda, the moderator of the event who himself spent 3 years and 2



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years, the prison spent 3 years and 4 months in communist prison, recalled:

"In 1990, I visited Marie's parents in Svojanov, together with Dr. Andrew Wilson, an American professor. The father of Marie showed us a telegram that had come from Bratislava. It said, 'Your daughter has died; come and get her things immediately.'"

Consideration of Political Prisoners in the Czech Republic. Photo: FFWPU

Lajda declared with emotion that Marie must not be forgotten. "She is a role model; she represents noble values and a noble character," he added. Then he gave a short presentation describing the history of the Unification Movement.



Alžbeta Danišková. Photo: Erna Mae Leskovjansky

Afterwards, a short video was shown in which **Alžbeta Danišková**, leader of the **Unification Church** at that time and the main person in the trial, spoke about Marie Živná. Alžbeta was given a four years and four months prison sentence by the totalitarian regime.

Another speaker was **Anton Uhnák**, BEng, who served three



Mária Uhnáková. Photo: FFWPU

years and eight months behind bars. He recalled that in 1968 there was the *Prague Spring* movement, but Soviet tanks soon interrupted the reform



Anton Uhnák. Photo: FFWPU

process. At that time, **Reverend Moon** founded *International Federation for Victory over Communism*.

"We need young people who are willing to sacrifice their lives for **God**. We need to find the logic of love," Uhnak concluded.



Dorota Šimeková. Photo: FFWPU

Dorota Šimeková, the next speaker, was jailed by the communist rulers for three years and eight months. She pointed out that true freedom means freedom of the soul, and added that Marie ought to have been crowned for her humility.

Mária Uhnáková was held prisoner for three years and two months. For her, Marie Živná had a deep heart. When Mária prayed for hours and thought of

Marie Živná, images of flowers always came to her.

"Marie left this world with a radiance emanating from her, like the 'princess of Svojanov'", Mária Uhnakova said.

With a touching deep inner feeling, she recited a poem she herself wrote, dedicated to Marie Živná.

Marcela Gregůrkova, MD, a medical doctor who joined the **Family Federation** after the fall of communism in 1990, said that many young people at that time searched for the meaning of life and for **God**. After the fall of communism, it was possible to speak about **God** freely. But this was not possible for those who lived before that time. Marie Živná lost her life because of her faith.

Finally, **Suzana Strkulová**, the current president of the **Family Federation** in the Czech Republic, said that she had not experienced hardline communism. Everybody has the ideal to have a good family, to have children and to be happy. Marie Živná was never allowed to have that, and that made her sacrifice all the greater.

sacrifice all the greater.

In the next part of the program, others in the audience had the chance to speak. Many expressed that they had known Marie since childhood and described her as the best person they had met. One woman recalled going to school with her. She remembered Marie as a great girl.

Novinky.cz included the words of František Beneš, a friend of Marie from her university days, who helped Marie photographing churches for her thesis,

Novinky.cz “When that terrible telegram arrived, I was at the factory. It was a shock throughout the village. It spread like wildfire: ‘Maruška died in prison.’

One person commented on it saying: ‘Well, what did she want? Society gave her an education, and she joined anti-state groups.’

My blood started boiling. I shouted at him: ‘Do you approve of this?’

Shortly after, my supervisor called me, ‘Hey Franto, watch your mouth. I’ve got a report against you for insulting the party.’ That’s how it was back then.”

Afterwards, the participants went to the local cemetery where Marie is buried. Here they laid wreaths, sang, and prayed.

The memorial meeting was attended by over 90 people, mostly local residents who for many years had not been able to talk about this case.

Those who attended the meeting expressed their appreciation, because it allowed them to learn more about the circumstances of Marie Živná's life and death. Guests also came from Slovakia and Austria.

Marie Živná's brother attended the meeting with his wife and daughter.

On 15th April, the largest Internet newspaper Novinky.cz covered the event. Their article was penned by a regional journalist who attended the commemorative meeting.

“18 Survived Years in Communist Prison, 1 Did Not” – text: Dr. Juraj Lajda, 16th April 2024



From the grave of the Živna family. Photo: FFWPU

Part 2 of a series

commemorating Marie Živná. See [part 1](#), [part 3](#)

Featured image above: Marie Živná in the communist prison Autumn 1973. Photos taken by prison authorities. From the archive of [FFWPU Slovakia](#).

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