

The Wind that Shook the Iron Curtain: Witnessing in Communist Czechoslovakia

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Emilie Steberl accompanied by Paul Werner (left) about to cross alone into Czechoslovakia from Austria; others worried about her, but she was determined to go ahead with her mission.

*A book, tentatively titled, *The Wind that Shook the Iron Curtain*, aims to tell the story of the arrest and incarceration of the early members of the movement in Czechoslovakia in their own words with a minimum of added narrative for historical context. The book is enhanced by letters from the first missionary and by the written court judgment from the Bratislava district court where, in 1974, eighteen members were sentenced to prison terms. Overall, including others sentenced in trials in different cities, twenty-five members received prison sentences.*

A Note On Czechoslovakia: Czechoslovakia came into being as a country at the end of the First World War after the Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated, formed from the so-called Czech Lands, Bohemia and Moravia, in the West and Slovakia (formerly part of Hungary) in the East. The Czech and Slovak republics, with their similar languages and culture, then existed side by side under one sovereignty as Czechoslovakia until the early 1990s. They officially completed their amicable separation into the Czech Republic and Slovakia through the Velvet Revolution on January 1, 1993.

A grave personal risk

Fifty years ago on October 30, Emilie Steberl, a young woman from Austria who had joined the movement in Vienna two years earlier, stepped over the border into communist Czechoslovakia. She was the first person in our movement, since True Father himself went to North Korea in 1946, to go to the communist world with the purpose of bringing the Divine Principle. Though of Germanic descent, Emi was originally born in Czechoslovakia. Her family had been forcibly evacuated to the West after the Second World War.



Emi Steberl (at the back) on a visit to Western Europe in 1969 with True Parents.

Communism was at that time a global power, still moving from strength to strength, seemingly

unstoppable. The aftermath of World War II had seen the Sovietization of most Eastern European nations, and communism as a political force was gaining influence in large swaths of the world. In Czechoslovakia itself, valiant attempts by reformist first secretary Alexander Dubček to soften the grip of communism on his nation had already met with resistance in August of the same year, with several hundred thousand Soviet-led Warsaw- Pact troops entering the country to quell a rebellion against Soviet domination (one that wasn't actually happening).

Undeterred by the civil unrest, Emi began her life as a student of the Slovak language and quietly began witnessing to fellow students. Within a few years a dozen people had joined, so when Emi could no longer extend her visa, the native members stepped forward to take on the mission in their own country. By 1973, they had pioneer outposts in some twenty-four cities, and close to a hundred members -- one of the largest national Unificationist groups in Europe, even in the world, at that time.



Early members visiting Svojanov Castle, where Marie Živná (in the hooded coat) grew up. She died in prison, aged twenty-four. Her father was the castle's caretaker. Ahead of her, (in back, in a white jacket) is Juraj Lajda, who spent thirty-eight months in prison. In front of him is Ján Gl'onda, who describes his brother Michal's arrest in this article.

Pursued and captured

Their bold witnessing work had not gone unnoticed by the communist authorities, who worked over months and years to gather intelligence on our members' efforts. In the late summer of 1973, they arrested the main leaders and all active members, and jailed most of them. Then began long months of questioning by the secret police, after which judges handed down prison sentences of one year to more than four years during trials held in various cities. It was during the interrogation period that one young member, Marie Živná, died in her cell. Although her death has never been adequately explained, Father named her a martyr and mentions her in his autobiography.

Our brothers and sisters, and the early missionaries, have given their first-hand testimony about how they worked together to build the movement in Czechoslovakia, about how the young movement collided with the communist authorities, and about how they dealt with life in prison and afterward. Although it is a tale of caution for missionaries and members working in unwelcoming environments in the present time, it is also a story that evokes the spirit of the early days of our movement. The following is a brief extract from the combined testimonies of the members from the chapter in the book entitled "Arrests":

MICHAL GEONDA: At the beginning of September Laco finished his military duty. Since he had received a secret warning, he went to warn other members that were in danger. Laco fulfilled his mission; he warned the brothers and sisters about the impending danger. Meanwhile Jozef Vojtek buried and burned all written materials at the barracks. On September 10, Jozef was already back in civilian clothes when he was stopped by the general of his division, who said, "I cannot let you go right now. There are some things we don't understand." Lieutenant-Colonel Jan Kříž imposed a disciplinary punishment upon him of twenty-one days in solitary confinement under the severest of conditions. They dragged him to the military prison in Ostrava, where they put him into solitary confinement. The car that took him to prison did not have door handles on the inside. A guard with a loaded machine gun sat next to him.

In the military prison, another guard with a loaded machine gun accompanied him, even when he

went to the bathroom. Every day until September 18, a military counter-espionage officer interrogated him. It was clear that they knew everything. After eight days, they moved Jozef to prison in Olomouc, where he was charged. After Jozef's detention, the secret police began a wave of roundups and caught almost half of the most active members of the Unification Church in Czechoslovakia in their web.

JURAJ LAJDA: I had been made regional leader in western Slovakia. I had been in this position for about a month. During the summer of 1973, we were aware that something was going on and we were hiding materials. I asked my cousin, "I have a suitcase; could I leave it with you?" His family did not know anything.

Aside from our brothers in the military, the first to be arrested was Jan Gľonda. This was September 13. Then, one week later Betka Daniřkova and Dorota řebestova (today, řimekova) were arrested. On the 24th the leader of the Prague center was arrested, and I was arrested October 8. Marie řivna was arrested later.



Early Czechoslovakian members sharing a meal before all the troubles began.

MICHAL GŁONDA: My brother Jan was arrested in Ostrava as he boarded a tram to go to work. They ransacked his apartment, including the attic and the coal-cellar, where they even turned the coal upside down. When he was asked to point out his partitioned-off room in the apartment, he pointed at the one of his neighbor who had recently passed away. However, a zealous neighbor who was observing the scene cried out, "Jano, don't lie! This one is yours!" There, they found everything. That is how many important materials ended up in hands of national security, and how they could also learn about our principles.

ANTON UHNÁK: We received the news of Jano's arrest. Betka quickly gathered the missionaries and city leaders from around the country. She said, "Now we are facing a time of persecution; maybe we will go to prison. Something will happen."

Yet we did not worry about going to prison or persecution. In our hearts, we had absolutely decided to build a better life. We therefore could not think that we were doing something dangerous. No! We wanted to save our nation through our philosophy. Absolutely no one among us was worried about the danger.

We had prepared some Divine Principle texts. When the persecution began we felt we had to hide the books. I therefore left Bratislava for another city, taking with me the books and papers. But the police were already following me. For one week, I saw them observing my every step. I could not pass off the materials therefore. They watched me and the other brothers and sisters constantly.

MICHAL: I dreamed that two strangers were dragging Betka and Dorota out. The next morning, this happened exactly as I had dreamed it. They were arrested at number 5 Agatova Street.

JURAJ LAJDA: I was in the city of Trnava. It was October 8, a Monday. They were already after me -- when I left my house I could see people following me. There were two or three of them. They had walkie-talkies, talking to each other. At the time I was going to the municipal office to legalize my temporary address. At the municipal office, at around 1:00 pm, they arrested me. They waited until I had received the seal to legalize my new address. Then as I came out, they showed me their identity cards and said, "We are the police. Please come with us. We need some explanations." And then I knew, Okay. The time has come. They were with the civil police, not the secret police. They were quite okay. They put me into a nice car, and brought me to Bratislava, to the jail. They put me in a cell. I was alone. I remember that first night. It was the most difficult and terrible night. I was in a cell that was cold and dark. But I felt that the darkness was not only physical, but also spiritual. I felt it was not just physically cold, but spiritually cold. I felt lonely, completely alone, like Jesus on the cross when God left him. I had to summon up all my faith and my internal power just to survive that night. The next morning the sun was shining into the cell. They gave me papers to sign that explained that I was being held and why. I asked them "How long will I be here and what is going on?" The policeman said, "We don't know; maybe three to five months." I was shocked. "Three to five months!... Why?"

They said, "Don't think that you will be going home tomorrow." It was so shocking at first to be incarcerated. Gradually I had to get used to the idea that I must stay in prison. We were still naive. We were not aware of the seriousness of what was happening.

Book editor's note

Czechoslovakia is not the only country where members of our church suffered state-level persecution, imprisonment or worse. Not infrequently early missionaries under communist regimes and other authoritarian states experienced arrests and expulsion or incarceration, and in rare cases even torture or death.

The testimonies of the early missionaries and of the other early members -- who formed the root of the movement in their nations -- constitute a record and a source of wisdom to be kept for all time, from which those in future generations can draw inspiration and wisdom.

It is hoped that many more of our elder brothers and sisters will step forward to pass on the deep heart they have grown through service to God and humankind in the mission field.



From left: Juraj Lajda, who did archival research on those imprisoned and whose wife Erika Lajdová contributed her testimony of that fraught period; Researcher Julian Gray who undertook to record the overall history of that period, and Anton Uhnák, an erstwhile national leader of Czechoslovakia, who served three years and eight months in prison