

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: New Video - State Persecution in Communist Czechoslovakia

Knut Holdhus
March 11, 2025



Some of the members who were imprisoned in Czechoslovakia during crackdown by Communist authorities in 1973-1974. In the middle, are the prison photos of Marie Živná, who died while in prison

New video documentary "The Struggle for Truth and Justice" about the state persecution of the "Principle People" in Czechoslovakia in the early 1970s



Barbara Grabner May 31, 2024

Link to the English version of [The Struggle for Truth and Justice](#)

by Barbara Grabner, historian and journalist, author of the books "Mission Butterfly" and "Children of Cain"

Fifty years ago, a [new faith group](#) was massively persecuted by the communist authorities. In July 1974, started the politically motivated court case against the so-called "Principle People". That name was used by the regime since the [Unification Church](#) was not registered officially in the communist state. The final verdict by the Supreme Court was announced on 10th October 1974. Out of the 38 members who were put on trial in several court cases, 28 were sentenced to prison for alleged "subversion of the state". They served a total of more than 50 years in several prisons in Czechoslovakia.

The drama which unfolded at that time is worthy to be recorded for history. Thus, I decided to produce a documentary. Inexperienced with filming, my husband Miloš Klas and I consulted professional film makers from the Nation's Memory Institute. Several meetings with experts took place, but they hesitated to take on the task. After some weeks, it became evident that there was no budget and staff available from their side.

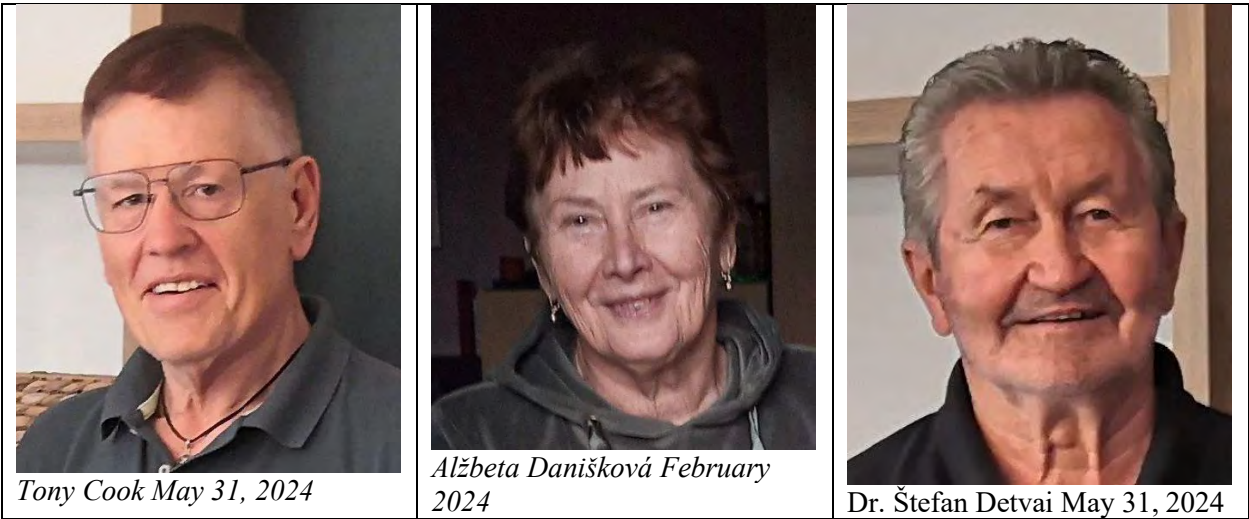
But we did not give up. Since we wished to hold events to commemorate the persecution and trial, we decided to produce a documentary ourselves. With no practical experience, that was a big challenge! We searched desperately for alternatives.

Assistance came from Vienna-based Tony Cook. He had the necessary equipment, technical know-how and experience.

How to write a script - when you have never done so - was another challenge. First, I watched similar documentaries and took notes about details. Tony assisted me all the way.

Luckily a sponsor was found, and the costs were covered by the Slovak branch of the [Family Federation](#).

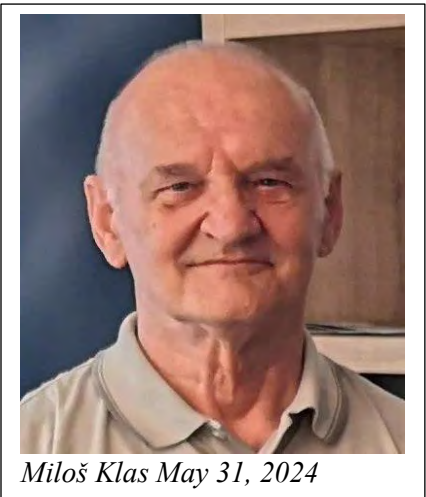
From spring until autumn, the production was realized step-by-step. Unexpectedly, only few of the persecuted members were ready to give an interview.



The first leader of the [Unification Church](#) in Czechoslovakia, Alžbeta Danišková, was however happy to receive the camera team in her home. Bound to a wheelchair it was a double challenge for her to recount events, especially since her best friend and member of the group [Marie Živná](#) died in pre-trial detention during the interrogations.

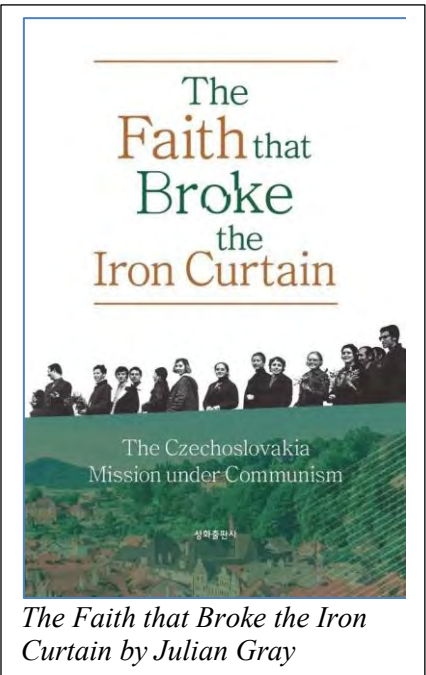
Fortunately, the most courageous defense lawyer at the time, Dr. Štefan Detvai, and also Dr. Lubomír Morbacher, a historian from the Nation's Memory Institute (UPN) granted detailed interviews. Thus, several lengthy interviews were filmed, historic pictures and documents were collected and archived, ready for future projects. This job was done largely by Miloš Klas, who also had been imprisoned.

Tony Cook recalls,



"A special experience for me was to see the photographs of the convicted members - such young and hopeful faces. Putting them on the screen moved me deeply."

Another challenge for the production team was to find the best locations and backgrounds. The house where the very person lived who had brought the young movement and its message from the free world - Austrian Emilie Steberl - still exists. It became part of the documentary. Historic is also the chestnut tree in the Horský Park, Bratislava. There, secret meetings took place, usually in the dark of night or early in the morning in order to avoid police observation. Unfortunately, one of the first meeting places - a house in a garden owned by the second church leader Margita Vrábelová - had been demolished a few years ago.



At the end of September 2024, hastily a trailer about the persecution and trial of the "Principle People" was produced for the [vernissage of the exhibition](#) at the Bratislava Peace Embassy on 2nd October. Though rather short, the large audience was impressed.

Their response inspired us to realize the documentary film within two weeks. On 10th October the documentary was first time shown to the public on occasion of the [50th anniversary](#) of the final verdict. In early December, after some improvements, it was shown to a gathering of experts in the Nation's Memory Institute.

Since Slovakia is a rather small nation, it was decided to produce an English version. Thus, it was made available on YouTube for members and friends around the globe. But the interviewed persons were kept speaking in their native language Slovak.

Documentary The Struggle for Truth and Justice, length 30 minutes. Script: Barbara Grabner. Camera: Anthony Cook. Technical assistant: Miloš Klas, produced in Bratislava, 2024.

Link to the English version of [The Struggle for Truth and Justice](#)

The book "The Faith that Broke the Iron Curtain" written by Julian Gray provides detailed insight into the case.

Text: Barbara Grabner, slightly edited

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Tribute To Victim Of Despotic Communist Regime

• April 20, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



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](#),
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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.



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

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](#)".



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**". Photo: [FFWPU](#)

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.

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



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were laughing or 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.

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."



Dr. Juraj Lajda, Photo (2024): Personal

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

Featured image above: Alžbeta (Betka) Danišková in 1972. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

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