

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Marie Živná, Unificationist Martyr

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A photo of Marie Živná (1949-1974) displayed at the commemorative meeting in Svojanov on 13th April 2024

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

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 17 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, Emilia Steberl, from neighbouring Austria in October 1968 as part of a legendary project behind the Iron Curtain that came to be called "Mission Butterfly".

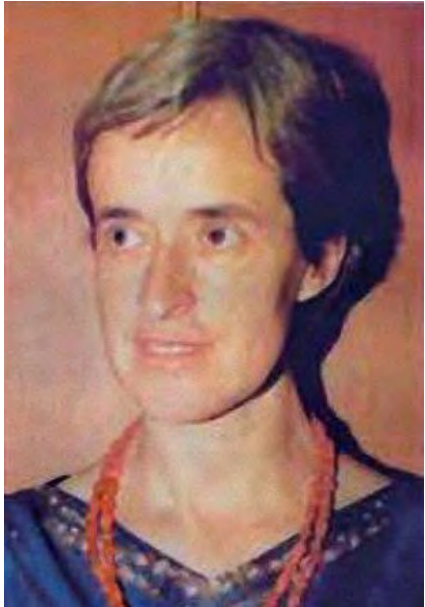
All those arrested survived the ill treatment behind the prison walls, except Marie Živná. 50 years after her untimely death, a program to honour her was held 13th April 2024 in her small hometown of Svojanov, 60 km north of the large Czech city of Brno. Another commemorative meeting was held in Bratislava,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



Emilia Steberl (-1981), the first underground missionary for the [Unification Church](#) to communist countries behind the Iron Curtain

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](#),



A photo of Marie Živná (1949-1974), the first martyr in the communist world, displayed at the commemorative event in Svojanov on 13th April 2024

"In 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

"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."

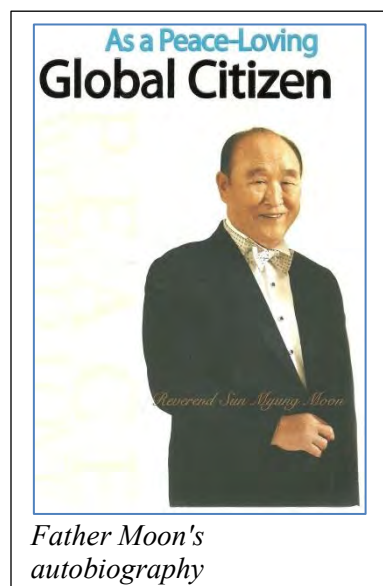


The grave of the Živná family in Svojanov, Czech Republic

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 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)



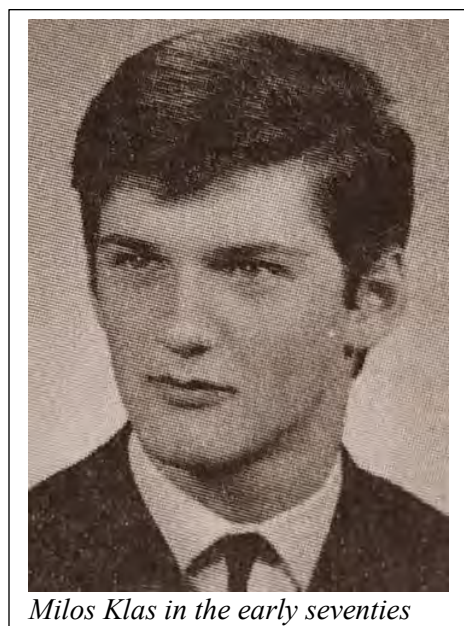
[Father Moon](#) describes his reaction when he heard the news of her death,

"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)

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.



Milos Klas in the early seventies

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)

"First Martyr in Communist World Commemorated" - text: Knut Holdhus, collected from reports from Czech Republic and Slovakia

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Sent to Death Camp to Die

To get rid of Sun Myung Moon the North Korean authorities sentenced him to five years in a death camp

Before he was transferred to a concentration camp 20th May 1948, [Sun Myung Moon](#) was held in a cell in Pyongyang. There he met Weon-dok Kim, a major in the North Korean army, convicted by the communists of spying for South Korea. He had several strong spiritual experiences and dreams where, among other things, his father asked him to prepare to meet an extremely important person from South Korea. In the dream, this person was surrounded by a brilliant light.

When the 28-year-old [Moon](#) was shown into the cell, and the two got to know each other, Weon-dok Kim realized that he had now met the right person. From then on, he became [Sun Myung Moon](#)'s disciple.

The two were transferred to a concentration camp outside Heungnam (Hungnam), an industrial city on the east coast. There were about 1500 prisoners there. The cells were designed for 20, but 40 were crammed in.

The conditions in the camp, known as a death camp, were terrible. Every single day there were prisoners who died. The communist regime always made sure to replace those with new ones.

Many were political prisoners, dissenters whom the authorities wanted to get rid of. Instead of executing them, they sent them there to die a slow death. Most died of hunger and exhaustion after a few months.



Part of North Korea with capital Pyongyang in the West and industrial city of Heungnam (Hungnam) on the East coast. Photo: 下一次登录 / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped



From a storage building in Heungnam with huge piles of hardened ammonium sulfate. Picture taken in the 1930s when the large factory was run by a Japanese company – Nippon Nitrogen Fertilizer Co., Tokyo. Photo: Nippon

The camp was three kilometers from one of the world's largest fertilizer factories, Korea's nitrogen fertilizer factory. In the storage buildings lay huge piles of hardened ammonium sulfate. The prisoners' task was to crack loose pieces, which they then processed until they were small enough to be put in 40 kg bags, which they carried to the scale for weighing and finally carried them up on freight cars.

The inmates were divided into teams of ten. Each team had to produce 1300 bags a day. In practice, they had to manage three bags per minute. If they did not manage their daily task, they did not get food in the evening.

[Moon](#) quickly realized that he had been sent to the camp to die. It was impossible to survive there for five years.

He



Nitrogen Fertilizer Co. [Public domain](#) image

understood that if [God](#) was to continue to use him, he must first win the spiritual battle against the forces of evil, which in such a death camp seemed to have a solid grip on him. The weapons [Sun Myung Moon](#) used were prayer, love, and a disciplined life. No matter what he would have to go through, he decided to always regard those who kept him locked up, as [God's](#) children and forgive them their abuses.



[Sun Myung Moon](#) praying in Heungnam while fellow prisoners were sleeping. Illustration: [FFWPU](#)

Even under such inhumane conditions, where the inmates had to perform hard physical work while being given the poorest food, [Moon](#) had to constantly put the spiritual at the center. It was extremely difficult under those horrible circumstances.

Occasionally, a prisoner would die in the canteen while the inmates were eating together. Fellow prisoners would then rush over to the dead person and pick food out of his mouth. They were so terribly hungry. They behaved like animals and could hardly think of anything else than food.

[Sun Myung Moon](#) had to pass this test of extreme hunger. For two weeks he gave away half of the little food he was served, to others. He set himself the goal of longing as much for [God's](#) love as his fellow prisoners longed for food.

[Sun Myung Moon](#) explained his way of thinking,

"I knew that the secret to overcoming evil was to let it attack me first. I could then overcome it later."

[Father Moon](#) described his amazing attitude when he prayed at that time,

"I never prayed from weakness; I never complained; I was never angry at my situation; I never even asked His help, but was always busy comforting Him and telling Him not to worry about me. The Father knows me so well. He already knew my suffering. How could I tell Him about my suffering and cause His heart to grieve still more. I could only tell Him that I would never be defeated by my suffering." (New Hope – Twelve Talks by Reverend [Sun Myung Moon](#), 1973)

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"Sent to Death Camp to Die" – text written by Knut Holdhus based on historical materials.



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