

Book Reviews

Flight from the Depths of Jáchymov Concentration Camp, by Anton Srholec, translated by Sister Rita Carberry. Prešov: Michal Vaško, Ružová St 22, 1996. 200 pp.

One might have hoped, after the collapse of communism, for more testimonies like this, by the doyen of the Slovak Catholic underground. The publisher and Irish translator are to be congratulated for their endeavour, even if the format and punctuation occasionally leave something to be desired. Maria Horvathová's evocative woodcuts add a further dimension.

Srholec, reared in a deeply believing traditional small farmer's family, joined the Salesians but was sentenced to 12 years for trying to escape the communist regime to study in Italy. He spent nine years in the uranium mines and a further nine in heavy manual work. He had the advantage of being allowed to go to Italy during the Prague Spring, where he came into contact with the developments of the Second Vatican Council before his return and ordination. 'The state licence hangs like the Sword of Damocles above the head of every priest', he wrote. In 1985 his state licence was revoked and he was sent back to secular work.

This book, written in 1990 in memory of his ardent young fellow-novice Jan Havlík, confines itself to Jáchymov. There are parallels with Dostoyevsky's *House of the Dead*, but this is no literary masterpiece. It is, rather, hammered out of the practicalities of survival – physical, moral and religious – in a death camp, by a member of a Christian cell seeking to witness to others, but painfully learning their limitations.

Srholec graphically describes the subterfuges he and his fellow-Christians employed to maintain a minimum of privacy and space for prayer life, study, reflection and community fellowship. Some, like the makeshift tea boiler, rigged up on carbon rods on exposed wire in a tunnel, are amusing. 'Your group is your lifeboat. On it we are peacefully carried, we share, there is time for work and jokes', he explains. He describes many of their discussions. Physically as well as spiritually tough, in his advice to his disciple Jan he stressed the need to keep oneself fit, to work effectively while conserving energy, to aim for survival and prepare for freedom. He discouraged open evangelism which he found to be counterproductive.

You will be saddened by the indifference and mockery of your fellow prisoners to the problems and values which are most important to you. They welcome your service and are glad you are someone they can rely on but you mustn't speak very much to them about Jesus Christ. The majority of them don't like it ... they have no theological background and you don't offer answers to questions that are not asked. ... Jesus didn't have a catechism or theology books in his hand. He simply lived with people, listened to them and if they needed anything helped them. ... Here is an ideal mission station, the like of which you haven't even dreamed about.

... It is necessary to make acquaintance with people, to strengthen them and lift them up. They are like small children. They must be taught to live rationally and humbly so that they don't allow their hearts to be steam-rolled.

His own ministry had no limits. When he and a friend were sent to Nitra prison for interrogation about their involvement in a clandestine magazine he was told: 'You have a finger in everything that's going on here.' 'I only do my duty', he replied. 'Who do you meet in the camp?' 'Everybody, even you guards. I exclude nobody.'

The book records numerous anecdotes from fellow prisoners, some horrifying, some amusing, like the story of the victory of the 'Vatican' volleyball team in the youth summer camp, after which the students marched out *en masse* to the local church for Mass, chanting 'Our standard is the Cross'. Priests were set to sort and pack uranium ore, which kept them warm – 'death by mercy killing'. 'It is a pity we believers are so bound by our tradition', reflects Srholec, emphasising how necessary it would be for church and believers to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and social conditions.

From the depths of the uranium mines Srholec has brought into the daylight 'the radiation of True Light' through his deep and simple faith. Since 1989 his radical outlook and prophetic voice have put him at odds with his hierarchy and he has concentrated on running a hostel for homeless men and pastoral work with those he feels the church has marginalised. He is vice-chairman of the Slovak Helsinki Monitoring Committee and deeply concerned with the nation's political development. Pondering in what kind of nation the Slovaks are, he writes:

A mixture of criminals and martyrs, people both primitive and genial, self-sacrificing and selfish; but we don't know how to govern. For too long we have lived in subjection. As soon as someone gets power he forgets his brother. ... For too long we have eaten our bread from foreign hands and have had to sing foreign songs.

Srholec has written other books; perhaps he could write one to tell us about the survival of faith in the Slovak underground outside the mines.

JANICE BROUN

Laveur de Vitres et Archevêque: Biographie de Mgr Miloslav Vlk, by Alain Boudre. Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1994. 208 pp.

Biographies of leading figures in the church's resistance to communism have been disappointingly thin on the ground, so this well-written study of the illegitimate peasant boy from south Bohemia who rose to become a bishop, succeeded Cardinal Tomášek as archbishop of Prague, and in 1993 became president of the European Bishops' Conference, is very welcome. As I discovered from interviewing several participants in the Czechoslovak underground, including clandestine monks, each individual has a different story to tell. Since western Christians who establish links with Czechs gravitate inevitably to Prague and neglect the rural scene, this book provides a salutary reminder of the problems of provincial life. Apart from his ten years 'in the wilderness' cleaning city windows, most of Vlk's life and ministry was

passed in Bohemia.

Although Boudre gives adroit introductions to each chapter to provide the essential overall religious context, he misses too much out. He hardly mentions the participation of leading Catholic activists in Charter 77 or VONS, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted, or the arrest and imprisonment of dozens of priests, secret religious and laypeople involved in the underground from the late 1970s onward. Moreover, his tone is at times too reverential, as in a tribute to Tomášek which does not allow for his mediocrity and timidity until he was spurred on by the rebuke of leading theologian Josef Zvěřina and the encouragement of the new pope, John Paul II.

In the appendix (which includes addresses by Vlk) Jiří Kratochvíl's succinct assessment of the ambiguous role of the Catholic Church in a deeply secularised society in the past, and the problems it experienced in redefining its role in the wake of the euphoria at the time of the Revolution and papal visit, is particularly valuable and provides the key to this book.

Despite his irregular birth, his mother's eventual marriage gave Vlk the stability of a strict upbringing. He worked all hours as a cowherd and farm labourer, in a conservative church setting. To quote Vlk himself:

... faith was traditional, irrevocably imprinted by the long years under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the unhealthy union between church and state. The life and the structures of the church were marked more by the mentality and mores of civil society than by the word of God and the spirit of the Gospel. ... We relied on ourselves and our own capacities. So communism found us at a loss, completely unprepared for confrontation.
(p. 27)

In minor seminary in České Budějovice his scholastic and particularly linguistic ability – including Esperanto – became clear. Always ready to make a stand to try to ensure the fulfilment of his vocation as a priest and to wring every advantage for the church, he memorised all his interrogations so as to warn his many contacts and disciples in the unofficial church circles in which he moved. Profiting from his permitted study as an archivist and his comprehensive knowledge of canon and civil law, he meticulously filed a record of every receipt, document and letter to outwit the state authorities, who regarded him as sly and insidious.

His teaching that the church was not a building to be repaired but 'living stones' – too challenging for most Czech Catholics of the time – led to his eventually losing his licence; he was partially 'rehabilitated' by the Office for Religious Affairs after a heart attack and allowed to function in two remote villages just before the events of 1989. Boudre fails to mention that a high proportion of rural priests succumbed to alcoholism or broke their vows of celibacy: the environment in most villages was apparently so depressing that, according to one leading Czech activist in 1990, it was virtually impossible for a priest to survive without psychological damage; he believed that groups of parishes should henceforth be run by small religious communities. Vlk had found his in an encounter with Focolarini in East Germany; through study of the Gospel they brought him hope, inspiration and dependency on Christ so that he in his turn created new Focolare groups as he was moved around among parishes, and during his barren years in Prague. Many times he was thrown back onto his last resource, 'Christ crucified and abandoned'. In one parish he was sacked on, of all days, All Souls, before he could celebrate Mass. It says much for his ministry, his friendships and care for individuals that in each parish he established

vibrant communities.

It should be added that many Czech Catholics were not happy about the choice of Vlk as archbishop; they believe that more suitable candidates were overlooked and that his theology was insecure. He is criticised now for being out of the country too much in his new post and for being far less accessible than was Tomášek. There is no doubt however as to the integrity of his view on the Christian's role in society today.

JANICE BROUN

Albanie: Ils ont voulu tuer Dieu: La persécution contre l'Église catholique (1944–1991), by Didier Rance. Paris: Aide à l'Église en Détresse, 1996. 472 pp.

This addition to the 'Martyrs et Témoins de l'Est' series is particularly welcome because of the relative shortage of literature on this most tragic land. It was originally conceived back in 1981 when Rance built up a collection of photographs of priests and churches. He makes use of documents in Albanian, English, Italian and German, some of them unpublished, and in particular of Mgr Zef Simoni's *Martirizimi i Kishës Katolike Shqiptare*. Access to state archives was impossible. He had to rely on the memories of ageing witnesses, who while precise on facts often lost touch with time and dates during years in prison and labour camps. This is, essentially, a harrowing martyrology, and is not a book which can be read at one sitting. It provides a follow-up to the late Gjon Sinishta's *The Fulfilled Promise*, providing further information on many whose fate was unknown, including the 30 surviving priests, some of whom were able to resume their ministry after 1989. It was the appalling brutality of the primitive prison and labour camp system (still going strong in the late 1980s) and its prodigal waste of 300 of the pick of the nation, scholastically and culturally as well as morally and spiritually, which has contributed to Albania's present collapse. The majority of Catholic priests in precommunist Albania had to go abroad to pursue further theological studies. What was so impressive was how many of these showed their commitment to the recording and preservation of their nation's unique culture and folklore. Their calibre is indicated by the fact that not one denied his faith – a record no other communist state, I believe, could equal. Figures like the Jesuit Pjetër Meshkalla, who between imprisonments celebrated Mass and provided spiritual direction in his house, and died in captivity only a year before the demonstrations for freedom of religion, should be considered for beatification. Meshkalla publicly prophesied to his captors the collapse of communism and the return of young people to rebuild the churches. There are a few glimpses of how the church survived clandestinely; it would be interesting to learn more from the nuns, most of whom were thrown out of their convents in 1946 and escaped the direst persecution. Because they were able to move around when almost all the clergy were in prison they carried out a vital home and family ministry, more effective than that which occurred within the Orthodox community; only 11 Orthodox priests came forward to minister in 1991.

Rance provides a summary of persecution of other faiths, with moving references to believers of different faiths helping one another: a Muslim who cared for a priest who had gone mad; Muslim fellow students who prayed for Sister Lucia Mhilli to pass her medical exams. He emphasises how feeble was the resistance of the mainstream Sunni Muslims; the main target of persecution were the Bektashis and

Dervish orders.

In this inspiring book, Rance is (as usual in this series) not uncritical of the attitudes of some of the figures he meets. Though their isolation was unique in Europe, there is still the need for a more academic overall survey of persecution in what was the world's first atheist state, but in the present circumstances the research necessary for that could be held back for years.

JANICE BROWN

De l'oppression à la liberté: l'Église en Hongrie 1945–1992, by Paul G. Bozsoky and László Lukács, edited by Jean-Dominique Durand and Régis Ladous. Paris: Beauchesne, 1993, 381 pp.

In his introduction Lukács admits that the authors are not yet distanced enough from the events they are describing to produce a rigorously scientific evaluation and that they are forced to limit themselves to chronicling the history of the churches under communism. He admits the Hungarian churches' past record of compromise with the civil authorities, and the abuses of powers these were consequently able to perpetrate:

Within the church and in its name ... there has been abuse of the power at its disposal. Despite that, during the course of its long history, it has always been able to hold up a mirror for the powers to see themselves in, and likewise one for the individual conscience; it has been able to point out the difference between good and evil, faithfulness and betrayal, light and darkness. (Introduction, p. ii)

The book is written from the standpoint of the churches, specifically the Roman Catholic Church. Other religious bodies, including Protestant Churches, are dealt with rather summarily and with reference to British, not local, sources. The authors distinguish between the church as an institution, linked to and subject to the socio-political evolution of its time, and as a community of believers, fallible, yet also heroic in its witness. Yet there is no attempt to analyse the justifiable grounds for hostility towards the church, especially among workers and peasants, which the communists, initially, were able to exploit so effectively.

The authors are able to highlight methods of resistance to domination by a government which, imposed from outside, had no pretensions to legitimacy in Hungarian eyes. For instance, in order to counter draconian censorship of the press and in particular of pastoral letters, bishops preached at length. Believers paid far more attention to what they said than to what they wrote.

One valuable feature of this book is Bozsoky's step-by-step analysis, with precise documentation, of the processes by which the government tightened its stranglehold on the church, in particular, by isolating its bishops from the faithful and the religious, so that many Catholics came to believe that the bishops had betrayed the latter. Another is Bozsoky's placing of the persecution of religion in Hungary in its European and Cominform-policy contexts. The supplement (pp. 330–72) contains 'chronologies', invaluable time-charts of antireligious legislation and persecution, including the key trials from 1945 to 1954, not only in Hungary but in other Soviet satellites. For Hungary the time-chart goes up to 1991.

Part I, Book 1, covers the period 1945–85. Here Bozsoky has taken advantage of some previously unexamined documents to reassess some accepted assumptions which show the episcopate in the 1950s and early 1960s in a more favourable light. He throws considerable doubt, for instance, on whether the remnant of the episcopate actually signed the communiqué of 3 July 1951 which condemned ecclesiastical persons who ‘employed violent or illegal methods’ and pledged to take disciplinary measures ‘according to canon law against every ecclesiastical person who is culpable of transgressing the laws of the people’s democracy’. He believes the bishops would have refused point blank to sign it and suspects that it, and several other directives, were phrased by Miklós Beresztóczy, the vicar-general of Esztergom, a priest broken by imprisonment into becoming an active government collaborator (pp. 83–84). He also points out, in defence of the episcopate, that in many cases they were confronted with the choice of either suspending a priest or agreeing to his arrest. The officials of the State Office for Church Affairs knew the clergy inside out – their characters, qualities, defects, problems – and could effectively block any appointment which did not suit them. Bozsoky deliberately omits any consideration of the events of the 1956 revolution, the church’s role during it, and Mindszenty’s trial, these having been adequately covered elsewhere.

Perhaps few readers are aware of the extent of the episcopate’s isolation. Until the Second Vatican Council, not a single bishop during the communist period had been allowed to attend episcopal conferences, even in Poland or Czechoslovakia; nor was a single foreign bishop allowed to visit them. Having been prevented from reading the voluminous pre-council documents sent to them, the bishops were despatched to the council with five dollars each for their expenses. When Pope Paul VI asked one of the archbishops during their *ad limina* visit to Rome in 1977 how many children were receiving catechetical instruction in the schools of his see city, he had no idea. The pope knew only too well: none.

There is revealing information on basis communities. Many of them together with their idealistic neophytes foundered due to a complete lack of sound guidance and unavailability of basic theology, for although some religious literature was printed, no adult catechism was allowed and ‘psychological torpor’ prevailed.

Bozsoky’s assessment of Cardinal László Lékai is positive: a devout, well-educated man who did bring about some positive if low-key improvements in church life but who was only too aware of how tightly his hands were tied.

In Part I, Book 2, covering the years 1986–92, László Lukács provides a brief but trenchant summary. He sees the 1960s as the decisive decade for the decline of Christianity in Hungary. A mark of the paralysis of the hierarchy is that it was not until the eve of the collapse of communism that a bishop – József Szendi of Veszprém – summoned up the courage to break the protocol and spell out to the government exactly what were the church’s most grievous afflictions and urgent needs. Lukács emphasises how marginal was the Catholic Church to the developments of 1988: ‘it received the gift of political freedom, merely profiting from the liberties achieved by society as a whole’. His chapter ‘L’Église dans la démocratie naissante’ is particularly perceptive. Formerly the church had to defend itself against attacks from atheists; now it faces attacks from all sides and has no idea how to respond to them. Previously it was anchored in a safe port, in a narrow space; now it finds itself on a vast ocean, exposed to all the winds and waves. Neither in its theological work nor in its pastoral engagement is the church prepared to engage with the new situation in Hungary. It needs time to adjust, to work out its means of dialogue both within and with the outside, non-believing world. The church’s future rests in

the hands of a small minority of people deeply committed both in their spiritual life and in their service to the community and the underprivileged.

Several moving biographies, in the second part of the book, provide further valuable evidence of efforts to break the stranglehold of state supervision. István Tabódy strove to ensure that expelled seminarians should be ordained and eventually provided validly ordained priests where there was a need: he was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment. His biography shows how the State Office for Church Affairs and the secret police exacted promises from the bishops, almost without exception, and thus prevented an effective clandestine church forming. Perhaps this was providential, Tabódy now admits, for such a development would have led to schism. The Franciscan Mgr István Zadravec, who ordained 200 priests, was a notable exception. Agnes Timár provides a moving vignette of arrests of members of a young order whose serenity and trust in God under persecution was inspired by the witness of women martyrs in the early church. György Bulányi recalls tersely his years in prison; it would have been good to learn more about his work with basis communities.

More specific information on which regions became religiously moribund would have been welcome. So would the reason why lay graduates of the promising academy of theology established in Budapest in 1978 had to agree not to apply for employment in the church and why, more specifically, in an institution weighed down by an ageing clergy so little use has been made subsequently of their talents and commitment.

JANICE BROWN

God Moves in a Mysterious Way: the Hungarian Protestant Foreign Mission Movement (1756–1951), by Anna Maria Kool. Zoetermeer, Holland: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1993. 1024 pp.

Although the Protestants of Hungary were about as numerous as those of Denmark, Norway and Finland ... they did not display the vigour in fresh movements and in sharing in the spread of Christian faith that was seen in other countries.

This book, originally a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Utrecht, tries to respond to the above observation by the theologian of mission Kenneth Latourette. Kool basically agrees with this statement, but considers that the issue needs to be examined in the light of Hungary's specific historical and geopolitical situation. In 900 pages, the author enquires into the beginnings, development and end of the Hungarian Protestant foreign mission movement. Its roots can be found in the pietistic movement of Zinzendorf and the Herrnhut Community, whose influence reached the Hungarians through students returning to their country after studying abroad. The story continues with the establishment of mission organisations, both Reformed and Lutheran, their development and their subsequent suppression by the communists in the 1950s.

The first mission initiatives were taken in the middle of the nineteenth century under the influence of German Pietism, by ethnic German Lutherans. As a result of this initiative Samuel Böhm, Hungary's first missionary, was sent to Africa by the Basel Mission in 1857. Foreign mission activity began in earnest in Hungary only

after a new resurgence of evangelical spirituality at the turn of the century. The theological liberalism of the nineteenth century had sapped the vitality of the Hungarian Protestant Churches. Under the influence of Anglo-Saxon Puritanism and German Pietism a number of renewal or revival groups were established. Among these the 'Bethánia' Association, founded in 1903, was the most important and had the greatest impact. These groups put personal renewal on the churches' agenda and sowed the seeds of mission in the hearts and minds of the people. The catalyst for this movement was the launch of the Scottish Mission in Hungary among the Jews. The Bethánia movement eventually became a considerable factor in the renewal of the Reformed Church and, although the official church always regarded it with suspicion, it established its own foreign mission organisation. A similar development occurred in the Lutheran Church.

In its present form, Kool's work is unlikely to reach the general reading public, but anyone with an interest in the history of the Christian Church in Central and Eastern Europe will find it a valuable source-book. As far as the Hungarian Protestant churches are concerned, there is much to learn from this detailed, in-depth study. On the fringe of the Balkans the question of nationalism was and still is a burning issue. Escaping the influence of nationalism has also been difficult for the churches. It is very necessary to question western methods of spreading the Gospel and to work out a mission strategy tailored to each particular situation. According to one Hungarian religious newspaper foreign mission 'has depended upon the major foreign powers and has been undertaken in the framework of their ministry and using their methods'. The interwar years were a period when the resurgence of Hungarian nationalism exerted a strong influence on the Protestant churches and their mission activities. They were not immune to the temptation into which the major powers had fallen – namely, that of making mission a tool for spreading Hungarian culture and by this means strengthening the 'Hungarianness' of the Hungarian communities abroad. Spiritual decline has always been characterised by an overemphasis on national and cultural aspects of the church. In the light of some failures of Hungarian foreign mission the churches must reexamine their attitude to this issue today, when nationalist and cultural slogans have reappeared in some church circles. Was the tendency towards nationalism responsible for the suppression of 'Bethánia', itself a movement of foreign origin? The issue is complex and rarely discussed in works of Hungarian theology or church historiography, while today church officials of the Királyhágómellék Church District, which includes the Reformed churches on the geographical territory of Romania (since 1920), manifest open hostility towards the spirit of Bethánia still alive in the Reformed Church.

Kool's study points up the importance of renewal movements for the life of the Hungarian Protestant churches. It is to be hoped that the Hungarian edition of this book will help to encourage necessary reflection on these urgent issues. The political changes which occurred in the late 1980s did not automatically change the people but they have created, even for the less courageous, an opportunity for repentance and renewal and for theologians an opportunity to articulate more openly a proper ecclesiology and theology of mission.