

YOU COULD BUY TRANSLATIONS OF PATOČKA IN THE PUB

Prof. ThDr. Milan Balabán (*1929)

Milan Balabán was born on 3 September 1929 into the family of Evangelical cleric Antonín Balabán in the village of Boratín in what is today Ukrainian territory. In 1938 the family moved to Myslibořice, where the father worked as an educator at a social care institute. Milan Balabán had four siblings and their mother, Anna, was a devout Protestant: "I knew the Bible perfectly at the age of six. Father told us Bible stories at bedtime every evening. Mother knew the Bible even better than father." Naturally Milan grew up in the Christian faith.

When Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi forces the whole family were on holiday at Nové Město na Moravě: "I remember everybody stood by the radio and cried." After the war Balabán witnessed cruelty during the expulsion of the Germans. In Uherské Hradiště he saw young men of 20 drowning an elderly Germany woman in the fountain on the square. "What I saw of the expulsions was similar in Hodonín. Local Germans had to board trucks within an hour. They were only allowed to take one piece of luggage on the journey. But I don't want to compare it to the suffering of the Czechs during the occupation."

He attended grammar school in Zábřeh, taking an interest in literature and the visual arts as well as attempting to write poems. His parents rejected communism from a Christian perspective and Balabán's basic political orientation was shaped at home. After grammar school he decided to study theology at the Comenius Protestant Evangelical Faculty in Prague. He was particularly influenced by the works of Slavomil Daněk. He enrolled in 1948. "At that time they accepted me without a hitch. But my siblings had major problems getting in anywhere. My sister, for instance, wasn't accepted to study theology because to the hypothetical question 'How would you organise the birthday of J. V. Stalin in your group?' she replied that she wouldn't celebrate it at all."

Balabán completed his studies under dean and professor Josef Hromádka in 1952. He briefly served as a vicar in Havířov before having to enter military service for two years in 1953. In view of his political profile, he spent his military service in the Auxiliary Technical Battalions, where soldiers didn't have access to weapons. "We were assigned to various construction work, in some cases to work in mines." After his discharge Balabán received a position at a rectory in Strmilov. "Under pressure from the Communist regime, the leadership of the church itself attempted to shove inconvenient parsons to the margins somewhere. I got a place nobody else wanted. I was a vicar there for several years. I

repaired the church myself.” He later worked at Semtěš near Čáslav and in the end at Radotín in Prague.

Milan Balabán was actively involved in the association Nová orientace (New Orientation), which was founded at the end of the 1950s. “I think it was the most significant group of its kind prior to Charter 77. Clerics and lay people regularly met at apartments and rectories, where they discussed banned subjects. It was actually the dawn of apartment seminars.” The Communists regarded Nová orientace, which in time took on an ecumenical character, as a dangerous church organisation.

Balabán regularly took part in philosophy seminars helmed by Jiří Němec and Ladislav Hejdánek in Jirchář. “We later also received support from abroad. The churches in Germany and the Netherlands, whose representatives brought us books and occasionally a small monetary contribution, in particular came through. Once even the philosopher Jacques Derrida came from France, but they took him straight from the airport to Ruzyně.” The State Security constantly monitored the seminars.

Balabán also became actively involved in lecturing when he headed a seminar entitled “Hebrew thought”. At that time all texts were duplicated on typewriters. “It was a major achievement when we acquired paper that was also carbon paper. It was possible to make 15 copies, although the last three were useless.” In the years 1968 to 1985 Balabán was a member of a group of translators working on an ecumenical translation of the Bible. In 1969 he had the chance to spend three months doing postgraduate studies at Chateau de Bossey in Switzerland.

After losing his state permit to minister in 1974 he was forced to make a living doing various blue and white collar jobs. “The best job was with the Prague sewer system. Admittedly we were underground, but you could at least make some money. The work was relatively dangerous. You couldn’t slip – otherwise the sewer would carry you all the way to the Vltava. A couple of workers died that way. You also lost your sense of smell in the sewers. Mine came back two years after I changed jobs.”

Milan Balabán was one of the first to sign Charter 77 at the end of 1976. Professor Trojan brought the Charter text to him. “Some refused, saying it was absurd to begin with to call on a totalitarian regime to adhere to its own laws. My view was that we couldn’t rule out a positive reaction from a certain group of people.” Balabán was arrested more than 20

times but he was always released the next day once the reports had been written, meaning he avoided conviction and imprisonment.

In the normalisation era there were many dissident pubs where inaccessible literature could be acquired. “You had to know at what time exactly to go. And there you could buy a translation of Patočka, for instance, and next week maybe Buber in some other pub.”

Following the fall of communism in 1989 Balabán was able to officially return to this occupation and in 1990 received a doctorate in theology. In 1995 he was appointed theology professor at the Evangelical Faculty in Prague, where he headed the Religious Studies department. His academic work centres on Religious Studies, Bible Studies (the Old Testament in particular) and Theology. He continues to write poetry and has been an editor at various magazines. He also edits publications for the Oikúmené publishing house.

Text by Jan Horník