

A PRIEST WITHOUT STATE PERMISSION

Father František Lízna (*1941)

In the spring of 1961 the young worker František Lízna went to visit a girl he was interested in. She was the daughter of a kulak, a farmer dubbed on the Soviet model a village rich man and designated for “liquidation”. When Lízna entered he found the girl crying. The police had arrested her father that day. The young man, incensed, spent some time with the family before heading home. On his way he noticed a red flag on the National Committee building. He removed it from its staff and for some time walked around the village with it before, in protest, ripping it up and throwing the shreds on some bushes. Somebody informed on him and the next day a policeman arrived. A month later (on 29 May 1961) František Lízna stood trial, receiving a seven-month sentence for disrespecting a symbol of Soviet communism. He was immediately taken to Ostrov nad Ohří, to “his” first jail.

František Lízna was born on 11 July 1941 in Jevíčko. Shortly after the Communist coup of February 1948 his father (a Catholic and ex-army officer) was sent to a forced labour camp for political reasons. The StB carried out a search of the Lízna's home and the authorities then moved the family. Thanks to a shortage of students, František was allowed – despite a poor cadre assessment – to attend an 11-year grammar school and in 1959 passed his school leaving exams. He was the only student not to wear a Communist Youth shirt.

Barred from continuing his studies, Lízna found work as a labourer in a printing factory and press shop. On his release from his aforementioned first jail, he found a job at an armaments factory. However, he was thrown out for crossing the border into East Germany without permission. He later made a living as a stagehand and in 1962 was forced to enter military service in an army unit in Slovakia's Michalovce. His personal documents stated that he was a “religious fanatic” (meaning practising Catholic) and “particularly dangerous politically” (anti-Communist). During his military service František Lízna only got to hold weapons a couple of times and he was eventually barred completely from doing so after refusing to march in formation carrying a Communist pledge. From then on he fulfilled a special military task: looking after pigs and herding sheep.

In 1964 Lízna got a job at a freight station in Uherské Hradiště, loading heavy sacks onto wagons that departed daily to the West, to Austria. As he says, his only wish was to “escape from the trap in which I lived. I said to myself at the time that I had a fascinating chance

to get away. I hid inside a wagon but after a day and half a night they dragged me off at Břeclav. I probably fell asleep and snored. I got a year in prison, quite little.”

During his second prison term Lízna decided to become a priest. However, following his release in 1965 he learned that this was impossible: official church structures were long controlled by collaborators and broken priests. So he went to see the episcopal vicar of Olomouc and informed him he wished to study theology. “He found out I’d been inside and said to me: ‘Son, on you go, get married and start a good Catholic family.’ I was adamant, so the vicar called the state commissioner or the church secretary or whatever the function was called to discuss my case with him. Of course the commissioner was an StB man. He started coming out with some nonsense to me and I told him I wasn’t interested, that he should tell me straight whether there was any way that I could study. So he told me completely openly that there was a way, if I signed on to cooperate with the secret police.”

Lízna rejected the proposal and remained a worker. It wasn’t until 1968 that a secretly ordained priest, the Jesuit Jan Rybář, found him work as an orderly working with the sick at the Vincentinum in Velehrad. The same year he was accepted as a novice in the Society of Jesus. Following the Soviet occupation he travelled to England and Austria’s Innsbruck to study for several months with other brothers in the order. He then graduated from a seminary in Litoměřice.

“Through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and St. Ignatius, may you become a warrior for Christ, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.” With these words František Lízna blessed the StB officers who, on duty, visited his first mass in 1974. Every priest was required to have so-called state consent, a mechanism by which the Communist authorities kept them under control; if priests rebelled against official requirements, the consent was removed and they could no longer minister officially. Lízna never received such a permit and never sought to – he was unwilling to bow down to the regime. He didn’t work as a priest but as a warehouse man at an Olomouc hospital. In 1977 he signed Charter 77 (though the Church hierarchy was cool on the opposition initiative) and was in contact with Fr. Jaroslav Zvěřina, Fr. Otto Mádr and the nun Anna Magdalena Schwarzová, with people who had spent long spells in prison in the 1950s. He became active in the anti-Communist opposition, among other activities publishing samizdat literature, for which he was arrested and imprisoned in Olomouc for four months.

Around 1980 he moved to Prague for work, immediately attracting the attentions of the local StB. During one questioning he received a warning and an offer: If he voluntarily left Prague, broke off contact with young Christians and ceased all activities linked to Charter 77 he would be left alone; otherwise, he faced prison again. Lízna refused to give in and a

few months later was arrested for giving the samizdat magazine Informace o církvi (Church Information) to two foreign priests to take to the West (the StB arrested them and they gave Lízna away). He was sentenced twice, getting 20 months in prison in the trial of a samizdat group on 28 September 1981 and another seven months in January 1982 for harming state interests abroad. Following his return from Pilsen's Bory prison Jesuit provincial superior Pavlík placed him in Borotín, where he looked after mentally and physically handicapped boys. He regarded this work as another important experience. He also resolved shortly before leaving prison that he would conduct a thanksgiving pilgrimage around the country. He never ceased doing pilgrimages and went on many solitary journeys around Europe after the fall of communism.

In 1988 the Stb arrested František Lízna again while he was distributing "provocative leaflets" in Brno on the anniversary of 28 October 1918. The court handed him a two-month prison term for "disturbing the peace". To this day Fr. Lízna emphasises that a priest without a state permit could under communism fully carry out his vocation and not make unnecessary compromises, as it is possible in good faith to serve mass anywhere. He served as a priest throughout the 1970s and 1980s, doing baptisms and hearing confessions in hospitals, homes and prisons. Following his final imprisonment the StB also barred him from Borotín and he joined an institution for the physically handicapped at Černá Hora in the Blansko area.

After the fall of communism František Lízna worked as a prison chaplain at Mírov. Today he is a parish priest in Vyšehorky in Mohelnice – and his parochial house is open to those in need. In 2001 the president bestowed the Order of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and among other honours he received the 2012 Celestýn Opitz Prize for exemplary care of the sick and needy.

Text by Adam Drda