

PRISONER WITH A BATON

Levko Dohovič (*1936)

A wonderful conductor of Ukrainian origin, he has worked with the Ukrainian National Choir in Prague and the Carpathian Mountains Ukrainian National Choir. His teachers were Stepan Chornenky, a soloist with the Lviv opera, and Leonid Ishchenko, principal conductor of the opera orchestra in Odessa. Both taught Levko Dohovič in Stalin's Gulag, where he conducted his first concert in March 1955.

In his youth Levko Dohovič survived imprisonment in 13 jails, some of which were within the Arctic Circle. Music helped him through the toughest periods of his life. He had been brought to it by old traditions. He was born on 29 September 1936 in Uzhhorod in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which belonged to Czechoslovakia during the First Republic. His father was a Greek Catholic priest and his mother a teacher.

His carefree childhood came to an end when the NKVD became active in Uzhhorod in 1944 and his father was forced to escape the Soviets for Czechoslovakia. The rest of the family remained in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which later fell to the Soviet Union. This impacted the family. His mother, who was looking after four children, wasn't allowed to teach. People tried to help them out.

Dohovič's older sister also later fled to Czechoslovakia. The youngster considered following her, though emigration soon became far more difficult. He also stayed to support his mother. For a while he even forgot his dream of attending music school.

As Ukrainians they had major trouble accepting the fact that Russian was introduced as the compulsory language in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Criticism was rife. Dohovič and his friends made flyers reading "Death to Stalin" and "Death to communism", which they distributed in secret around Uzhhorod.

"I got mixed up in the student protest movement in 1949–1950. Collectivisation, Orthodoxisation, liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church, imprisonment, exterminations – they just killed people who didn't join kolkhozes. All of this sparked resistance in us," he says. In February 1950 he was imprisoned. The fact that he was 14 was no obstacle to the Communist regime.

It was hardest for his mother, who following his imprisonment remained alone with his sisters. His father, who had fled the NKVD to Czechoslovakia, was imprisoned there as a Greek Catholic priest in 1950 and ended up in jail in Ilava.

The 14-year-old Dohovič had no idea what awaited him or how long the Communists would investigate him in the Uzhhorod prison. During one interrogation the investigator hit him so hard in the face it left his front teeth crooked. *“It was the only time they punched me. Otherwise the worst thing was they wouldn’t let us sleep. Going through that at 14 was really tough.”*

He recalls the investigators asking him the same questions again and again. *“For instance, where had I hidden the letters from the Vatican that the pope had sent me. I asked if they genuinely believed the pope would write to a 14-year-old boy.”* He also remembers the response. *“We don’t need to believe it – we know you got them.”* They claimed he had received instructions on how to combat communism.

They employed a Beria-style approach to investigating: give us the man and we will charge him. Among all of this misfortune, 14-year-old Dohovič also had some luck. In prison he met people, political prisoners, who helped him. For instance, the Greek Catholic priest Ivan Mina, who informed him of his rights as a young political prisoner. He also told him that investigators had to treat him less harshly than adult prisoners.

“I’m grateful to him that I survived the initial days. He had been inside for four years after getting a 10-year term in 1946. He appealed, saying he’d been wrongly sentenced. This was upheld and he moved in with his sister. In 1950 they imprisoned him again and gave him 20 years,” says Dohovič of the first person to help him out in jail. The priest also warned him to never under any circumstances agree to collaborate, *“because if your fellow prisoners don’t destroy you then you will destroy them.”* These words, but perhaps even more a natural obduracy, helped make the young prisoner exceptionally recalcitrant. *“I did my best to stay strong and that may have helped me to survive.”*

Following two months of interrogations a court sentenced the 14-year-old to 10 years, launching Dohovič’s journey through Stalin’s prisons and Gulag camps. *“So it began. Uzhhorod, Lviv, Kiev, Kharkov, then the same route back. Because some paper always had to come directly from Moscow regarding where minors were to be placed. In Kharkov, where they had taken me to a camp for minors, the chief warden said he didn’t want me.”* In the end they sent him to a peninsula in the White Sea.

There Dohovič encountered criminal prisoners for the first time. *“It was tough there, because there were only 14 politicals out of around 360 people. Your life was on the line.”*

At the labour camp he first worked a saw in the forest and later got into the library. Even at the camp there was a school for underage prisoners. At this time he was helped by two Estonians and a Russian.

The two Estonian prisoners escaped. Dohovič also began to think about freedom. *“The idea of escaping had been alive in me from day one of my imprisonment. It was with me the whole time. I kept thinking about the Count of Monte Cristo.”* He decided to dig a tunnel underneath the wooden library building. He began it in 1951 and escaped on 2 July 1952. He was hoping to reach Finland. But they caught him in the end.

Following his escape they interrogated and investigated him afresh and in the end moved him to another camp. It was there he had a fateful encounter – and got to fulfil his old dream of devoting himself to music.

“While I was still at Molotovsk I had learned the basics of music from the Lviv opera soloist Stepan Chornenky, who had also appeared at the famous La Scala in the interwar period. In Lviv there was a choir, Kotka, a famous male choir. One time they sent them to Moscow. And the conductor of Kotka took on Stepan Chornenky as a soloist, saying he’d help them. Imagine, after the second concert in Moscow the whole choir was jailed – including the conductor. This was in 1940 and I ran into him in 1953.”

To this day he has kept the notebook in which he jotted down notation. He also got a clarinet from his fellow inmates. The political prisoners had a brass orchestra.

On 2 March 1953 unofficial reports of Stalin’s death began to circulate. *“He had died earlier but it was only then that it reached our concentration camp,”* says Dohovič. Four days later the camp’s commanders confirmed that the news was true. He shakes his head as recalls a Russian fellow prisoner who broke down in response. *“He wept hysterically over Stalin having died. And he was on a 25-year sentence.”*

The camp’s bosses wanted them to pay their respects to Stalin. Dohovič refused, a decision with consequences. *“When Stalin died all the minors were amnestied. But they sent me to Vorkuta, to an even stricter camp.”*

In Siberia, inside the Arctic Circle, it was frequently minus 30 and the wind was terrible. In December 1950 it was 55 below zero, he recalls. Working was impossible. *“It was best in a mineshaft – it was warm there. I was number 2A424.”* Indeed he titled his autobiography *Kronika politického vězně 2A424* (The Chronicle of Political Prisoner 2A424). Today he regards it as a miracle that he survived. It often happened that he woke in the morning beside the cold corpses of fellow inmates who hadn’t withstood the

draconian conditions. Believing he was dead, his mother had a memorial mass served for him.

“In Vorkuta I was allowed to write one letter every six months. When I wrote a letter to my mother somebody attached to the KGB asked me to sign up to collaborate. I said I’d never done so and never would. He took the letter and tore it to shreds.”

Soon afterwards he was placed in a different prison, where letters were forbidden. However, political prisoners protested against the inhumane conditions in Siberia in 1953. Protests erupted simultaneously in Norilsk and Vorkuta. The camp administrators called in the army. According to official statistics, 483 prisoners died during protests in Vorkuta in July and August 1953, among them cleric Ivan Čejtíš. Over 700 were injured, including Levko Dohovič.

In 1954 an order came from Moscow that prisoners in the camps should get more free time. This was aimed at preventing chains of strikes. At that time Dohovič was in a camp by Lake Baikal. He recalls this period fondly as it was the first time he held a conductor’s baton. His second teacher was an ex-chief conductor of the opera orchestra in Odessa, Leonid Ishchenko, who was serving 25 years. In March 1955 Dohovič performed his first concert in the Gulag with a choir of fellow prisoners.

When Khrushchev came to power prisoners were gradually released. Dohovič was let go on condition that three people in Uzhhorod sign a guarantee he wouldn’t take any action against communism. On his return he devoted himself to music, which helped him in trying moments. After a series of experiences he managed to get to Czechoslovakia after 13 years. The former Greek Catholic cleric was working on the railways and Levko Dohovič trained as a dental lab assistant. He found work in Ústí nad Labem and began conducting choirs.

He later moved to Prešov, where he met his wife Helena. He worked with the Poddukelský choir and founded another, Vesna. He turned his focus to working with young people and introduced his son, a future conductor at the State Theatre in Košice, to music.

During normalisation he remained a thorn in the authorities’ side and was banned for 15 years in 1971. He wasn’t even allowed to work as a stoker and ended up in construction. From 1979 he gradually returned to music. Today he works with the Carpathian Mountains Ukrainian National Choir.

“Music has given me strength throughout my life. It’s my elixir,” he says.

Text by Soňa Gyarfašová