

**IF IT WASN'T FOR JAIL I WOULD NEVER HAVE MET SO
MANY EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE**
Jaroslav Vrbenský (*1932)

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Jaroslav Vrbenský was born in Prague on 4 February 1932. His parents, Jaroslav and Helena, were Roman Catholics and he naturally grew up in a Christian environment. His father introduced him to music and started him playing the piano at a tender age. Under the Nazis Jaroslav attended general school and entered gymnasium in 1943. After the war he joined the Junák scouts. *“The priest and teacher František Soukup, who had co-founded troop no. 298, introduced me to the scouts.”* Jaroslav Vrbenský regularly served as an altar boy during Soukup's services and also played the organ at the Church of the Most Sacred Heart of Our Lord in Prague's Vinohrady. He co-founded a choir that was then taken over by his father and later developed into the renowned Vyšehrad Choir.

In the early 1950s, after the Communist takeover, Vrbenský was in contact with Fr. František Mikulášek from St. Ignatius Church. From him he learned how to work with young people in organising apartment seminars along the model of the Flemish Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (JOC) movement. When the Communists began arresting church leaders, Vrbenský resolved to continue meeting with and educating young people. *“My starting point was that the StB didn't know our names. For a while we could stand in for arrested priests and organise individual groups.”* At meetings they discussed religious matters and the foundations of theology. Vrbenský visited parishes in towns such as Beroun, Rakovník, Starý Plzenec and Jindřichův Hradec.

Following his graduation from grammar school he applied in 1951 to study music theory at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. Though he had been accepted, he was transferred involuntarily to the Faculty of Pedagogy, where he was assigned to teaching music and Russian. Still wishing to dedicate himself to music, he applied to the Conservatory in 1952.

However, he didn't manage to begin attending that September. He had been arrested the previous month after attempting to help priests Antonín Bradna and Karel Pilík, who were hiding from persecution, to escape across the border. Vrbenský attempted to find help from former partisans but instead encountered StB provocateurs, who set a trap for

the wanted priests. The StB arranged with Vrbenský for the clerics to come to a meeting in a Brno park, where the details of their cross-border escape were to be discussed.

Vrbenský himself travelled to Brno with Karel Pilík. When Pilík failed to return from the meeting, he returned to Prague without him. However, he was still unaware it was a trap. A few days later, when he was at an arts festival in Paseky, the StB came for him too. *“They asked what bed I had slept on and then chopped up the straw mat. When I wanted to leave a watch I’d received for my school leaving with an acquaintance they prohibited me, saying it could be used to build a transmitter.”* Vrbenský was brought to Brno’s Příční St. police station, where he discovered the priests were already being held.

The investigation lasted almost a year. Vrbenský was interned for longest in Ostrava, where he spent several months in solitary confinement. The investigators mainly employed psychological pressure. He escaped the torture common in the early 1950s, though he did receive the occasional blow. Vrbenský was charged with illegal association and treason for organising Christian youth apartment seminars and assisting in cross-border escapes. During the trial *“Antonín Bradna et al.”* he was sentenced on 25 June 1950 to 12 years. He was 20.

From Ilava prison he was transferred in September to Leopoldov, where a particularly cruel period of starvation had just ended. *“The prisoners even pulled up the grass in the yard to have something to eat.”* Vrbenský was assigned to a workshop producing binders. He contracted pleurisy. *“I lay in a fever for around six weeks. My father could come for 10-minute visits at that time. They placed me outside the cage door on a stretcher. At least I could hold my father’s hand.”*

In February 1954 Vrbenský was transferred to the Bytíz labour camp in the Příbram area. He was assigned work as a construction worker and built apartment blocks in Příbram. Two years later he was moved to the Vojna camp, where he spent the following six years. Vrbenský did not fall under a 1960 amnesty in which the majority of political prisoners were released. He was transferred to Valdice and, finally, in February 1962, to Mírov prison. He was released at Christmas that year.

“My imprisonment affected my mother’s psychological state and health most severely. But my time in jail also had its upsides. I would never have met so many exceptional people.” In prison Vrbenský encountered the elite of the nation, from the officers of Western armies to priests and poets. He was interned alongside such names as General Karel Janoušek, priests Antonín Mandl, František Šilhan, Adolf Kajpr, Josef Zvěřina and Silvestr M. Brait, and Pavol Gojdič, a bishop in the Greek Roman Catholic Church. After

eight years of back-breaking work he brought home 2,000 crowns. He had been fortunate to work in jobs where quotas could be filled. Others returned with debts.

He was briefly employed as a stoker before finding a job as a maintenance man at Orbis. From 1967 he worked in production at Odeon. Following the liberalisation of the Prague Spring and the ascent to power of Gustáv Husák, and just before the restrictions of normalisation, Vrbenský had a stroke of fortune: in April 1969 he became an editor at the Vyšehrad publishing house, where he focused on philosophical and religious works. Censorship returned and it was difficult to secure publication for some titles. In the 1970s and 1980s he was involved with the dissent. He attended an ecumenical seminar in Jirchářice, where he got to know Czech philosophers and theologians who helped him select and prepare books for Vyšehrad's publication schedule. He remained at the company after 1989 and helped save it in 1993, when it became independent. He remains an external editor at the Vyšehrad publishing house to this day. Jaroslav Vrbenský was fully rehabilitated after the Velvet Revolution.

Text by Jan Horník