

IT'S HARD TO GET USED TO THEM TAKING AWAY YOUR DIGNITY...

Františka Muziková (*1933)

She has experienced interrogations, solitary confinement, numerous prison cells and all sorts of harassment. But for Františka Muziková from Nitra the worst thing was... the lice. *"Yes, it's the lice I most remember. They were the worst thing, in my view,"* she says. She ended up in prison after coming into conflict with the Communist regime. She was brought up in a Christian spirit and retained her faith despite the totalitarian authorities. Despite a state that was officially atheist and put down expressions of religiosity.

"The lice – that was terrible. They brought us from Slovakia to Pankrác in Prague and deloused us, so I walked around the prison courtyard at Pankrác with a turban on my head. You know, today it may seem like a detail in the overall context. But even there in prison I really hadn't ceased to care. You get used to prison, but it's hard to get used to them taking away your dignity," she says. *"So those lice were probably the worst thing of all."* When the Communists seized power in February 1948 she was 15. In spite of some difficulties she graduated from a social and health care focused secondary school in Nitra in 1953. She later worked as a nurse in charge of hospital equipment and in her free time took part in all kinds of clubs, prayer meetings, religious gatherings and meditation sessions. She also acquired and passed on Catholic literature. In January 1959, she was arrested on suspicion of sedition. She got a two-year jail term and was released after 18 months.

Františka Muziková was born and grew up in the village of Kľačany in Western Slovakia. Her Christian parents brought her up to be hardworking, upright and religious. However, prior to her school leaving exams it became clear that the regime was thoroughly monitoring everybody. She needed a positive assessment to be able to pass her exams, but failed to receive one. Her parents were castigated for their childrearing style and for being kulaks, which was untrue. But even if they had been, nobody could persecute her because of the family she was born into. Could they?

Despite the negative assessment, Františka Muziková did graduate. She also found a job at a hospital in Nitra, where she worked as a nurse handling equipment in an operating theatre. After work she would meet friends and colleagues for meditation, prayers and lectures. *"We even gathered in the hospital, at work. We also went for religious seminars in the mountains. It was wonderful, in tents, a kind of adventure. We took holiday time*

for it. Naturally we kept it all secret. We copied books on typewriters and gave out flyers, but only among ourselves, among people we knew,” she says today. They also discussed their opposition to what was happening around them. Such as the fact people were going en masse on a May Day parade. *“We discussed the situation and agreed it wouldn’t be right for us to go on the parade too,”* she says. She made sure she had a hospital shift that day. By taking part in the parade, people were acquiescing to the regime. At least publicly. In reality they may have thought the opposite. But Muziková was unwilling to submit to the regime and live a lie. At the time she was considering entering an order. She had no idea that others would decide her fate – and had already made their decision.

They came for her on 5 January 1959. They were wearing leather coats. *“They said I should go with them. But I replied that I couldn’t just walk out of work, that my superiors would have to decide on it. But it was already decided. Of course the head doctor couldn’t do anything – it wasn’t up to him,”* she says. She left with them. Her arrest was a bolt from the blue. Her family didn’t expect or know about it either. But at the same time, Františka Muziková was lucky. She wasn’t imprisoned until the late 1950s, when the worst waves of repression had passed.

But even still she had three weeks in solitary ahead of her. Followed by investigative custody. One of the worst places she recalls was the jail in Nitra. *“We didn’t have beds there, just pallets. When they put us in with the prostitutes, the Gypsies, I got lice... then they moved me to Pankrác in Prague.”* There she faced a medical examination and humiliating delousing... In court she was accused of *“... becoming the head of an illegal group at the Regional Institute of National Health in Nitra, attending and organising illegal meetings of that group, whose members received instruction in a spirit hostile to our system...”*

As a political prisoner she naturally experienced harassment. For instance, she was placed in a cell with prostitutes, deliberately of course. But she always succeeded in finding fellow prisoners also persecuted because of their faith. They even sang religious songs when they were together. But she also experienced having informers in her cell. One of them made her life complicated, so in the end she was sent to the prison in Želiezovce in Southern Slovakia.

Františka Muziková was first sentenced to two years in jail, later commuted to 18 months. She was released in 1960, on 9 May, during an amnesty, two months before her sentence ended. Naturally she continued to experience difficulties. Like every political prisoner released in Communist Czechoslovakia.

In later years she looked back on imprisonment and persecution with humour and perspective. *“We were such big criminals we had to stand trial in Prague,”* she says. *“Otherwise I’d never have got to see Prague.”*

Following her release she was monitored. She was initially ordered to work at an agricultural cooperative but fortunately got out of it. In the end she even returned to her profession, working at a tuberculosis institute and later at a hospital in Nitra. She got married in 1970. Outside work she took an interest in church history. When communism collapsed she became active in the Confederation of Political Prisoners. *“Many people say that it was better under communism, but nobody will hear that from me. The worst thing about a Communist regime is that you can’t decide for yourself.”* Františka Muziková doesn’t regret a thing and would do it all over again.

Text by Luděk Navara