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The Salesian Viliam Vagač (1887–1970) and His Struggle Against the Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia

INTRODUCTION

The persecutions of Salesians by the Communist regime in Slovakia and Czechoslovakia are an important and relatively well documented topic. Don Ernest Macák SDB[1] wrote his "*Zápisky spoza mreží*"[2] during the internment of Slovak monks in Podolínec from 1950 onwards. He is also the author of other related works such as *Dva roky v katakombách* (2000), *Bláznom pre Krista* (2004), *Utečenci pre Krista* (2006), and *Prenasledovaní pre Krista* (2008).[3]

One of the first studies on the persecution of religious orders published after the fall of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia is the book "*Nebudete ich môcť rozvrátiť*",[4] subtitled "On the fate of the Catholic Church in Slovakia from 1943 to 1989" written by František Mikloško. Chapters on the persecution of the Salesians are also naturally part of the two-volume work "*Zločiny komunizmu na Slovensku I–II*".[5]

1 SDB – Saleziáni don Bosca (Salesians of don Bosco). See: www.saleziani.sk (Accessed July 21, 2025)
2 Macák 1996, 80.
3 All the books mentioned were published by the Don Bosco publishing house in Bratislava.
4 Mikloško 1991, 283.
5 Mikloško–Smolík–Smolíková 2001, 576, 744.

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Using the archives of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic, the historian and archivist Ján Milan Dubovský wrote a fascinating book on the suppression of male monastic orders in Slovakia entitled "Operation Monasteries. The Communist regime in Slovakia in the struggle against male monastic orders from 1949 to 1952",[6] in which he describes the harsh conditions of imprisonment and forced labour of imprisoned Salesians and other clerics in Communist labour camps.

In his study entitled "Trials of Slovak Salesians in the 1950s" [7] published in the Nation's Memory Institute's quarterly, "Nation's Memory", Juraj Kováč dealt with the topic of show trials of Salesians.

Michal Titus Radošinský is the author of the book "*Don Titus Zeman – the 'Vatican spy?'*"[8] on the activities of the Salesian Titus Zeman together with Don E. Macák and Alfonz Paulen, a priest from Šenkvice who was also a Salesian, and others organised the escapes of young Salesians abroad; he was arrested by the State Security (hereafter "ŠtB"), suffered cruel interrogations and was sentenced to 25 years of imprisonment. The Salesian Don Anton Srholec is the author of the very interesting book "*Svetlo z hlbín jáchymovských lágrov*",[9] which describes the harsh forced labour of imprisoned clerics in uranium mines and camps, known as "mukl" from the Czech abbreviation for "a man destined for liquidation".

The nun Kamila Novosedlíková, FMA[10] published the book "*Dejiny Inštitútu dcér Márie Pomocnice na Slovensku,*[11] which partly describes the work of the male branch of the Salesian order.

The author of this study recounted the life and fate of Viliam Vagač SDB in the book "*Salezián, misionár, väzeň Viliam Vagač*",[12] which was published on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Don Bosco.

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6 Dubovský 1998, 295. The author of this publication also dealt with the topic of female orders. See: Dubovský 2001, 338.

7 Kováč 2012, 33–57.

8 Radošinský 2005, 184.

9 Srholec 1991, 160.

10 FMA – Daughters of Mary Help. The female branch of the Salesian Congregation founded by Don Bosco. See: www.salezianky.sk (Accessed July 21, 2025)

11 Novosedlíková 2005, 248.

12 Dubovský 2015, 120. Don Viliam Vagač sometimes wrote his name in the Hungarian transcription as Vagacs.

THE YOUTH, STUDIES, AND MISSIONARY SERVICE OF V. VAGAČ

As one of the earliest Slovak Salesians, Viliam Vagač (1887–1970) combines almost all the basic problems and issues in the life of this order.

He came from a well-known family of *bryndza* cheese-makers from Stará Turá[13] which traded with places as far away as Vienna. From 1899 to 1901, the young Vagač attended two classes of the town school in Šamorín (Somorja in Hungarian), where he learnt Hungarian. Later, in Vienna, he was an apprentice trader and learnt German, but he did not continue the family tradition. On the verge of adulthood, he decided to become a monk, a missionary, and a priest. He was one of the first young people from Slovakia to study from 1905 at the Hungarian Salesian institute in Italy.

During these years, the Salesian Karol Zafferi was promoting Salesian work in Germany and in Austria-Hungary. In Slovakia, the Association of Salesian Colleagues grew successfully; for example, Viliam Vagač's brother-in-law Rajmund Molec worked for them. As a result, in 1913 the heads of the SDB in Turin decided that the time had come to found an independent institute for the young people of Hungary within its territory. The site they chose was the former monastery of the Pauline Fathers in the little town of Péliföldszentkereszt near Esztergom. Here, the young Vagač added teaching to his studies and also taught there. However, because of political problems between Austria-Hungary and Italy during the First World War, Slovak clerics were unable to complete their studies of theology in Italy, and had to finish studying in the Polish town of Oświęcim, including Vagač. On 17 June 1919, Viliam Vagač was ordained as a priest.[14]

Since the Salesians still had no institute in the newly established Czechoslovak Republic, the young priest Vagač left for his alma mater in what was by then Hungary, in Péliföldszentkereszt, where he worked as a chaplain for over a year, from 22 June 1919 to 30 July 1920. There were

13 Truhlíková 2011, 55. See also: Archív SDB Bratislava, personal collection of V. Vagač. Memories from V. Vagač's own biography from 1961.

14 Pašteka a kol. 2000, 1436. Don Vagač describes these events in his own hand-written biography from 1961, stored in the Archives of SDB Bratislava, personal collection Viliam Vagač.

Slovak villages in the vicinity with filial churches where Don Vagač gave sermons in Slovak. During Béla Kun's Communist putsch in Hungary, the Slovak Salesians took refuge in an institute in Slovenia, where Don Vagač was their catechist. After Kun's putsch was put down, they returned once more to the area of Esztergom.

As early as 1918, the young Vagač was thinking about developing Slovak Salesian life by having Slovak pupils and students leave the Hungarian environment to go to Poland, where he himself had completed his studies. In 1919, after the war, the Rector Major of the SDB Don Rinaldi gave his approval to the settlement of Slovak Salesians in Oświęcim. So after one year working in the institute near Esztergom, the young priest Vagač left to work in the Salesian institute in Oświęcim. This decision was also influenced by the fact that in 1920 the former Austro-Hungarian Salesian inspectorate was split into two parts: Austria-Germany-Hungary and Poland-Yugoslavia. So, in August 1920, the definitive decision was made to move the Slovak aspirants from Hungary to Poland.

Their transfer during these post-war years was not simple, but it had a humorous subtext. Since waiting for passports in Hungary was apparently supposed to take two months, and lectures in Poland were due to start in September, V. Vagač set off with some friends on his own initiative for Poland via Czechoslovakia. At first, a soldier helped him with his 90-kilogramme suitcase from Esztergom to Štúrovo (Párkány in Hungarian) across the bombarded Mária Valéria Bridge, where a rickety wooden gangway had replaced the destroyed part of the bridge on the Slovak side.

Viliam Vagač, SDB was thus active in Austria-Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary and later, after the First World War, as a priest in the Slovak Salesian Institute in Italy. He visited Slovakia and worked on the influx of new aspirants, and after the First World War worked on establishing the first Salesian institute in Czechoslovakia and in Slovakia.

Don Vagač as a priest at the Slovak Salesian Institute in Perosa Argentina near Turin. Source: Archives SBD Bratislava

Salesian students in Perosa Argentina. Don Vagač is in the second row from the bottom, fourth from the left. Source: Archives SBD Bratislava

The result of these efforts was that the first such institute, called Marianum, was established in Šaštín, mainly thanks to Don Vagač. Don Vagač was named as a priest in Šaštín[15], but he also played an important role in building up the institute, in enhancing the Šaštín basilica, for example by installing new bells, in improving the pilgrimage movement, and above all in the impressive growth in the number of new students of the Salesian institute and young SDB monks.

For a short time, Don Vagač also worked in Svätý Beňadik[16] where he was responsible for the development of the institute and the novitiate, and for improving the basilica of Svätý Beňadik and the affiliate churches of Orovnica and Kozárovce. The editorial board of the Don Bosco journal was set up here in Svätý Beňadik and Don Vagač managed the agenda of the Salesians' missions here, too.

In the autumn of 1932, Don Vagač left on a mission to Brazil, where he worked and served for fifteen years in the demanding missionary conditions of the rainforests and indigenous tribes. In the spring of 1947, at the age of 60 and in weakened health, he returned to Slovakia and began to work in the Salesian institute in Hody near Galanta. In 1950, at the time when the threat of the dissolution of the orders was looming, he was sent as a priest to the state hospital in Bratislava.[17]

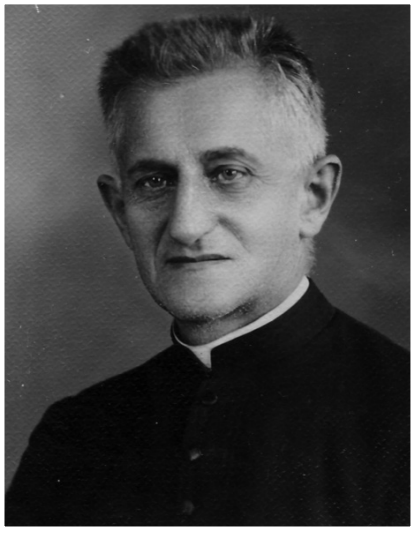
15 ŠA v Bratislave, collection Regional People's Committee Bratislava (hereafter f. KNV Bratislava), Religious department 1949–1960, personal file of priest V. Vagač.

16 Present-day Hronský Beňadik (Hungarian: Garamszentbenedek).

17 This wealth of Don Vagač's experience as a monk, priest and missionary is described in the monthly magazine Don Bosco, founded by Don Vagač, volumes I – VII from 1930 to 1936 and its successor Saleziánske zvesti, volumes I – XI from 1937 to 1947. The magazine is available, for example, in the University Library in Bratislava.

Salesian Institute and Basilica of the Virgin Mary of the Seven Sorrows in Šaštín, 1920s. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

Leadership of the Salesian Institute in Šaštín. Don Vagač at the top in the centre. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.



Viliam Vagač before his return from missionary work, Sao Paulo, Brazil 1947. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava

SLOVAK SALESIANS AND DON VAGAČ AFTER THE COMMUNIST PUTSCH OF 1948

The anti-church policy of the Communists in Czechoslovakia hit the Slovak Salesians shortly after February 1948. At the end of the 1948/49 school year, the new authorities closed down and nationalised the Salesian institutes and oratories in Michalovce, Žilina and Komárno, and the institute and minor seminary of the Salesians in Trnava.[18] The same fate was supposed to befall the main Salesian institute in Šaštín, where the Communists wanted to concentrate the Salesians from the four confiscated institutes. The regime simply planned to send the eighty Šaštín students home, and a decree had already been drawn up by the Education Committee. However, the Salesians, headed by the Provincial Jozef Bokor SDB, managed to avert it on this occasion.

At a meeting organised by the State Religious Affairs Administration of the Education Committee on the future of the work of religious orders in August 1949, the Salesians were encouraged to begin to cooperate with the Czechoslovak Youth Association, which was the sole association entrusted by the regime to educate young people. The then Inspector of the Salesians, Don Vagač's confrere Don Jozef Bokor, having asked why the Salesians had been removed from their institutes, received the answer that it was the work of the State Security.[19]

The Salesians were supposed to devote themselves to their spiritual work in their parishes after the loss of the first institutes. The monasteries in Bratislava, Šaštín, Nitra and Svätý Beňadik were to be left for this spiritual work. Agents of the regime were to be installed in the Salesian monasteries belonging to pilgrimage churches (Šaštín and Svätý Beňadik). However, this plan by the Communists was not put into practice, because a much fiercer repression against the religious orders began to dominate in early 1950.

18 Dubovský 1998, 9.

19 The meeting was led by the then head of the cult section of the Ministry of Education, Science and Art, the priest and doctor of theology Jozef Straka, a member of the Communist Party of Slovakia.

In the meantime, in 1949 almost forty houses of religious orders were closed down, four of which were Salesian.[20] The regime launched a campaign against "the most dangerous" orders which had a primarily pedagogical influence on young people in society, which included the Salesians. The Church Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia stated in early 1950, referring to the Salesians, that "they are the most dangerous due to their relatively progressive activity among young people."[21] In 1950, there were over 290 Salesians in education and religious training in Slovakia, educating over 430 students.[22] In March 1950, the Communists nationalised the Salesian institute in Hody, as well as the Salesian novitiate in Svätý Beňadik, the Salesian teaching school in Šaštín and the Salesian institute of theology in Sv. Kríž nad Hronom. Agents of the regime were installed in the institutes. Their presence in the monasteries came to an end on 1 April 1950. However, they remained in the Šaštín monastery until 13 April and prepared information preceding Operation K – the suppression of male monasteries in Czechoslovakia. The committee's leader, the head of the Slovak Office for Church Matters, Gustáv Husák supervised the whole operation.[23]

The Communists planned to transfer another 214 Salesian monks to the Šaštín monastery to join the ranks of the 79 local Salesians. These 293 people were supposed to live in a space where, according to the information gathered by the Education and Culture Committee in March 1950, a maximum of 200 people could be accommodated. Seventeen "reactionary" Salesians were supposed to be placed in the so-called disciplinary monastery in Pezinok, including the Provincial of the Salesians, Jozef Bokor. The Šaštín Salesians found out about the intended action beforehand and so had time to hide away valuables, typewriters and money which was due to be confiscated by the Communists. The Provincial Don Jozef Bokor, and later apparently Don Viliam Vagač, too, knew where they had been hidden.

The organisers of the suppression of the monasteries discovered, however, that the monastery in Šaštín was not very suited to the purpose

20 Dubovský 1998, 15.

21 Bulínová–Janišová–Kaplan 1994, 334, 389.

22 Dubovský 1998, 42. The data from this period varies. See: Mikloško 1991, 211. The author mentions 252 Salesians in 1950.

23 Pešek 2003, 141.

of isolating the Salesians. It was a pilgrimage site attracting thousands of believers, mainly in May and September; it lay near the border with Austria and the population of the town and its surroundings was rather hostile to the regime. As a result, they planned and carried out the transfer of 256 Salesians to the internment monastery in Podolínec, on the night of 24 to 25 April 1950. In ŠtB jargon, it was known as Operation K1.

Don Vagač was 63 years old at the time, and so three years after returning from his missions, he worked from January 1950 on the authority of Provincial Don Bokor and with the approval of Lazík, the bishop of Trnava, as a spiritual father or curate in Bratislava's State Hospital, where he had a private flat. He was the priest for the nuns from the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross (hereafter "Sisters of the Holy Cross"), including for Sister Zdenka Schelingová SCSC[24] and for the patients and staff of this hospital.[25]

Don Viliam Vagač as a priest at the State Hospital in Bratislava with altar boys, 1951. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

24 Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross (SCSC). See: www.sestrysvkriza.sk (Accessed July 21, 2025)

25 Archív SDB Bratislava, personal collection of Viliam Vagač, SDB, document "Continuity of my employment as a priest, no. 1."

AFTER OPERATION K – THE SUPPRESSION OF MALE MONASTERIES IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Based on what the head of the religious affairs section of the Ministry of Education, the priest Jozef Straka, had said in 1949 about the state also attacking religious orders, the Salesians had prepared themselves from November 1949 for carrying out their activities in "difficult times". Subsequently, several Salesians were placed in parishes around Bratislava with the approval of the bishop of Trnava, Ambróz Lazík. There, they were supposed to continue in the "Salesian" education of mainly young people and were to be more active than diocesan priests, since the latter had come under enormous pressure from the regime after the passing of anti-religious laws in the autumn of 1949.

The Salesians in parishes were supposed to focus on teaching religion in schools, on improving their sermons or influencing parents to prevent them placing their children in state boarding schools, where they would be subjected to atheist education. They were supposed to exercise an influence on believers and prevent them from engaging in political activities organised by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (hereafter "KSČ"), since the decree of excommunication was in force for members of the KSČ. Last but not least, they were supposed to support Salesian aspirants for the priesthood studying in secret.[26]

However, after April 1950 and Operation K or the "barbarian night", huge resources – mainly financial – were needed for all this mostly secret work of the Salesians, as well as many courageous people who helped the priests and monks in hiding and escaping across the border. As the oldest, Don Viliam Vagač was entrusted with managing the secret finances of the Salesians. Although he performed his role bravely and wisely, the Communist ŠtB also began to follow him after April 1950.

In May 1950, Don Vagač met Don Valábek in his flat in the state hospital, where the latter had a medical examination, and informed him that he was going to write a letter to Rector Major Don Ricaldone in Turin to appoint

26 Archív ÚPN Bratislava f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB, Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Record of the statement of V. Vagač dated 10 January 1956.

Valábek as the representative of Don Bokor, who was interned. A reply came from Turin in the form of a conspiratorial letter written in Latin stating that the Provincial's representative should indeed be Don Valábek. However, the latter did not take up this post, since he was interned in Podolínec. Instead, Don Vagač[27] took it up with Don Bokor's approval, and later destroyed the correspondence with Don Bokor. Don Vagač only showed the letter with the mandate from Don Bokor to his confreres Ján Chrenko and Ernest Macák.[28]

In other words, since Don Vagač was not interned after Operation K, he was secretly invested in May 1950 by the inspector Don Bokor with the function of representative of the Provincial for those Salesians who were not interned in the concentration monastery after Operation K.[29] Don František Valábek was interned in Podolínec and so could only perform the duties of representative of Don Bokor there for the local Salesians. Under Valábek's leadership, the Salesians interned in Podolínec, with the two exceptions, decided not to take up posts in parishes left by interned "reactionary" priests in order to avoid thus supporting this violent removal of priests from their positions.

Don Jozef Bokor was dealt with by the State Security in an operation with the codename "Inspector"[30] and interned in the monastery in Želiv. Don Bokor's parents informed Don Vagač of this in May 1950. Don Vagač wrote him coded letters and consulted with him about his decisions. Towards the end of 1950, he wrote to him about the internment of Salesian sisters and about the situation of the young Salesians in the internment monastery in Podolínec.

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27 Archív ÚPN Bratislava f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB collection, Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Record of the statement of V. Vagač dated 10 January 1956, Case "Inšpektor", doc no. 1.

28 According to the memories of Ernest Macák, some instructions were given only orally. He remembers Don Viliam Vagač as a very gifted and capable priest and monk who did not, however, "know his way around in the jumble" of growing pressure after 1948. In an interview with the author, 64 years later, he was not able to remember an authorisation from Don Bokor. See also: Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, BA-V-1356, Operation "Inšpektor".

29 De iure Don Vagač recognised the representation of Don Bokor by Don Valábek, given by the Rector Major of SDB. Don Valábek, for example, gave secret faculties to the new priests whom Don Vagač had recommended for ordination.

30 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Case "Inšpektor", doc. no. 2–5.

Don Vagač actively held meetings in his flat with the scattered young Salesians and gave them guidance, for example for working with young people, to stand aside from worldly life or to prepare faithfully for their life as priests. For this purpose, he used the hidden money that had not been seized from the Salesians during the suppression of the monasteries in April and May 1950, or funds that came from the "Salesian" parishes for mass intentions. He also used this money to buy food and other goods for the interned Salesians which were then smuggled into the concentration monasteries. Viliam Vagač stated that he did not respect the official closure of the monasteries and the ban on the activities of the orders.

From his position, Don Vagač tried to manage the remnants of the Salesian order, to manage the property that had not been seized and also to help ordain priests from among the ranks of the young Salesians. Following the instructions from Don Bokor, he also managed the Salesian men and women who were not interned. For example, in July 1950, he was able to visit the community of Salesian nuns in Nitra just before Operation R – the suppression of female convents.

Similarly, in the middle of January 1951, Don Vagač wrote to two Salesian confreres who had been moved to parishes before the suppression of the monasteries, informing them that he was representing Don Bokor and giving them instructions not to allow themselves to be transferred as priests, but to demand the approval of the superiors in the order before doing anything.[31] Don Vagač informed other Salesians of this task entrusted to him and took an interest in their activities, for example smuggling people across the borders, which was organised at that time by Don Titus Zeman, Don Ernest Macák and others.

Don Vagač had a very responsible and enthusiastic approach to organising the secret ordination of priests, because there was the risk of the creation of a so-called national church, controlled by the regime and cut off from the Vatican.

Don Vagač received the names of clerics who were aspirants for the priesthood from Don Valábek in Podolínec, since Valábek was naturally well-informed as before his internment he had worked as the director of

31 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, letter by don Vagač dated 14 January 1951.

the Salesian school of theology in Svätý Kríž nad Hronom. In Podolínec, he could also summon the chapter to approve it. Salesian clerics who had served their military service and completed their secret studies also asked to be ordained in this way. The Salesian theologian František Buzek organised the correspondence between Vagač and Valábek in October 1950.

Don Vagač secretly informed Don Bokor about the secret investitures, as well as about the escapes of Salesians abroad or repression against arrested confreres. The method of their coded communication is documented by a message from Don Vagač to Don Sandtner in Podolínec informing him of the successful transfer of one of Zeman's groups of Salesian clerics to Turin as follows: "The working group stopped at the grandfather's grave", referring to Don Bosco. However, Don Vagač did not approve these escapes; he was afraid – and rightly so – of the great suffering if the fleeing Salesians were caught. On the other hand, Titus Zeman tried to hide his relations with Don Vagač from the ŠtB, probably to protect him.[32]

In the suffocating atmosphere of arrest, Don Vagač wrote a letter in Latin in January 1951 to the bishop of Rožňava, Róbert Pobožný, in which he gave him the names of Salesian aspirants for ordination, namely Miroslav Kysela, Ján Beňo and Ján Mikes, who sent for Kysel[33], as well as later for František Szabadoš. However, following the order of home internment for bishop Pobožný, secret investitures became more complicated, and so Don Vagač managed to contact the secret bishop Hnilica, via the Jesuit Jozef Marko, who was being treated in the state hospital, in order to continue the ordination of Salesian clerics.[34] And so the first clerics were secretly ordained by bishop Hnilica in Don Vagač's flat, each one separately to avoid them knowing of each other and thus preventing them from betraying each other in the event of any forced interrogation.

The newly ordained priests were given the order that during the whole period of the emergency, they would not be allowed to celebrate holy mass in public. Don Vagač informed Don Bokor, interned in Želiv and Don

32 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Record of statement of Titus Zeman dated 5 January 1956.

33 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, letter by V. Vagač entitled Literae Dimissoriales dated 5 January 1951.

34 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Record of statement of Matej Marko dated 25 January 1956.

Valábek, at that time interned in Osek in Bohemia, of these ordinations using conspiratorial formulae such as "everyone is OK". In this way, the Salesian clerics Jozef Štamec, Ján Mikes, Anton Radošovský, Stanislav Sloboda, Miroslav Kysela were ordained in Don Vagač's flat by the secret bishop Hnilica.[35]

Anton Radošovský confirmed his ordination dated 6 May 1951 even during later interrogations by the ŠtB during the arrests of Salesians in the mid-1950s. He said that on the instructions of the secret bishop Hnilica and Don Vagač, he was supposed to conceal his ordination until the Salesian problem was resolved. Since the ŠtB obtained this information during the existence of the hard Communist regime, it is clear that the ŠtB used pressure or force during interrogations, and not only on him.

In the summer of 1951, the Salesians František Valábek, Ján Hlubík and Ľudovít Žilka were transported to the disciplinary monastery in Želiv, where they were then paradoxically able to inform Don Bokor, who was interned there, of the situation among the Salesians.

In the words of Don Vagač, the significance of the secret ordinations at the beginning of the repressive 1950s was that they represented a resistance against the regime's plans to create a schismatic, "national" church. The secret new priests were supposed to perform pastoral duties in "difficult times" and were supposed to influence young people to maintain the true hierarchy and priests. The Salesian clerics who were preparing themselves for secret ordination, were to have the support of the priests in parishes and were to retain their monastic status even outside the seized monasteries. Don Vagač believed that an agreement would be found with the regime. However, he was soon to be convinced of the opposite.

35 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Record of statement of V. Vagač dated 25 January 1956; Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Record of statement of Titus Zeman dated 5 January 1956.

DON VAGAČ AND HIS CLOSE ASSOCIATES IN THE GRIP OF THE STATE SECURITY

The life of Don Vagač, then a priest in the state hospital in Bratislava, changed radically on 29 February 1952, when the feared Communist ŠtB arrested him together with the sister of the Order of the Holy Cross Zdenka Schelingová and other sisters also serving in the hospital.[36]

A few days later, on 5 March 1952, the ŠtB issued an arrest warrant for Sister Kazimíra, also serving in this hospital, in which she was accused of organising together with Zdenka Schelingová, Sister Kristína Ševčíková, Mária Sandtnerová and Viliam Vagač the escape of priests – part of the detained group of the Salesian Titus Zeman – from the court of justice in Bratislava.[37] The latter were being dealt with by members of the ŠtB as part of Operation "KAPLÁN" [Chaplain].

Don Vagač knew about the nuns' intentions to help these priests, whether he discovered it as their priest or they asked him outright for help. It appears that he did not hesitate and joined the plan to rescue the priests, at the cost of risking retaliation from the regime. In this case, however, the ŠtB was "cannier".

The ŠtB linked this case to the almost successful escape of the priest Štefan Koštial, who was able to escape from the hospital just a few days earlier with the help of the aforementioned nuns, only to be arrested later by the ŠtB. Anna Mária Tomečková testified in this case, stating in her interrogation in early April 1952 that they had arrested the priest V. Vagač at the house of the Sandtner family, to which the above-mentioned Mária Sandtnerová belonged.[38] The ŠtB followed Vagač; it was literally at his heels and arrested him on 29 February in an operation coordinated with the arrest of the sisters in the state hospital, including Sister Zdenka, who has been beatified.

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36 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-1356, Record of statement of V. Vagač dated 25 January 1956. See: Kováč 2012, 33–57.

37 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-223, Proposal for the arrest of Kazimíra Leštianska.

38 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-223, Section record no. 3 with accused Anna Mária Tomečková dated 2 April 1952.

Don Vagač knew that the priest Š. Koštial had escaped, was in hiding and was supposed to hand over to him some belongings and messages which would make his hiding and escape easier. Before his escape, he visited him in early January and they spoke together about the detained Salesians from Zeman's group who were to be tried on 20 February 1952, that is nine days before the arrest of Don Vagač and Sister Zdenka. A few days earlier, Don Vagač had wanted to visit Koštial, who was ill, but Sister Kazimíra did not allow him to, worrying that it might arouse suspicion in the ŠtB, which was guarding Koštial. After part of Zeman's group was detained, Don František Reves (Revesz) remained free, whom Koštial wanted to contact via Don Vagač, and expected a visit from him. Koštial planned for Don Reves to help him escape abroad after his escape from the state hospital, since he had experience with the escape of Salesians in the recent past.[39] Following Don Vagač's arrest, Štefan Koštial no longer tried to meet Reves, but he was arrested shortly thereafter anyway.

During his interrogation by members of the ŠtB on 5 April 1952, Štefan Koštial testified that nursing nuns and the priest V. Vagač had helped him escape. Don Vagač had time to send Koštial, who was still in hiding then, the Pope's Christmas message from 1950, which he himself typed out on a typewriter. This, too, shows that Don Vagač was worried about Š. Koštial as a fellow priest and outlaw in the eyes of the Communist ŠtB.[40]

After his arrest, Don Vagač, who was already 65 at the time, spent two and a half months in pre-trial detention by the ŠtB, who obtained information from him concerning the activities of the Salesians, particularly after the suppression of the religious orders. He was transferred to the court of justice in Bratislava; he was not allowed to receive parcels except for laundry. On 30 May 1952, he was allowed to write a letter to his sister Irena Molecová in Trenčín in which he wrote that he was healthy. Since his nephew Karol Vagač had been arrested at the time, Don Vagač expressed sympathy for his fate.

In early June, he was interrogated by Dr Winter at the well-known State Prosecutor's Office which investigated fabricated crimes pursuant to Act

39 Lagová 2006, 240, 242.

40 Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-223. Notes on the statement of Štefan Koštial dated 5 April 1952.

no. 231/1948 on the protection of the popular democratic republic. Don Vagač testified that the minutes of his interrogation by the ŠtB were correct. This may show that the ŠtB broke him, pressured him or used force, or that Don Vagač wanted to speak openly, but carefully to the investigators.[41]

Don Vagač testified that he had given various Salesians who were at liberty money to survive and had also financially supported priests who were hiding from the ŠtB. He also mentioned that Don Bokor, then already detained in the concentration monastery in Želiv, had entrusted him with the responsibility of representing him in urgent matters. Salesian clerics who wanted to be ordained as priests then turned to Don Vagač. At first, Don Vagač talked about the ordinations with the bishop of Trnava, Ambróz Lazík, but when the affair did not progress, he turned via someone else to bishop Pobožný who then ordained three clerics. When bishop Pobožný was then sentenced to house arrest, the secret bishop Hnilica performed the ordination of five clerics in secret in Don Vagač's flat. The latter then instructed them not to let it be known until they were regular priests in any diocese. During the secret ordinations, Don Vagač used liturgical objects from the hospital chapel.

He also testified about the secret bishop Hnilica, who secretly fled to Austria after the ŠtB started to look for him. The possibility of ordaining secret priests was then interrupted. Don Vagač also testified about the amount of money that was in his possession following the suppression of the religious orders, a sum totalling over 1.5 million crowns. He bought necessities for the scattered confreres, for those concentrated together and those in hiding. During his interrogation on the Salesian money, Don Vagač did not conceal the fact that large amounts could be found in his possession, which the Salesians had thus tried to save from confiscation.

As he testified, he was also informed of the escapes organised by Don Zeman. He stated that he had dissuaded the clerics from this, but he had also met with them and Zeman in his flat. He admitted that he had also met František Buzek and František Reves who had given him news of the escapes.

41 ŠA v Bratislave, f. State Prosecutor's office, arch. no. 2 SPt III 41/52. Records of the questioning of V. Vagač dated 2 June and 3 June 1952 and the Administration for the State Prosecutor's Office Prague dated 2 June 1952.

Don Vagač also testified about meetings with his nephew, the judge Karol Vagač, whom he informed of certain affairs of the illegal order and of the secret ordinations in his flat. As he stated, Karol Vagač dissuaded him from risky moves, such as escapes abroad.

The interrogators tried to obtain as much information as possible about the escape of the above-mentioned priest Štefan Koštial from the State Hospital in Bratislava where Don Vagač also served, to which Don Vagač testified that he did not know of it in advance. The prosecutor's office was also interested in whether Štefan Koštial could have been a secret bishop following the internment of bishop Vojtaššák. Don Vagač denied this. However, he did admit that he was involved in the escape of six priests, for which he gave the nun who helped them the sum of 7,000 Kčs (crowns) so that they might have funds to live on when they were free.

INTERROGATIONS AT THE PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE AND TRIAL

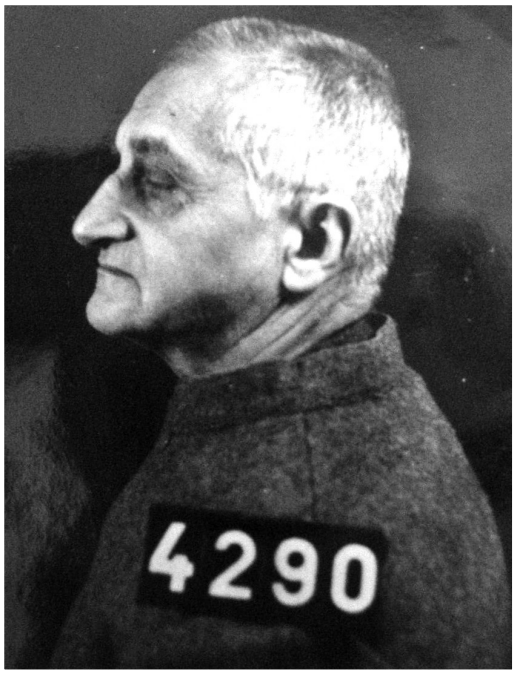
Based on the questioning of Viliam Vagač, Karol Vagač and other detained Salesians, the state prosecutor's office in Bratislava prepared in late August 1952 a report for the state prosecutor's office in Prague on the criminal acts of seven accused, of whom two were Salesians, one a priest, three state officials and one a nun[42]. The report contained information on their activities following the suppression of the male religious orders, particularly in relation to keeping and using unconfiscated Salesian money.

The Bratislava state prosecutor's office specifically accused Don Vagač of co-organising the escapes of Salesians and other priests abroad and of supporting them financially. Further, he was accused of establishing a "secret spiritual administration", namely the ordination of clerics by bishops Pobožný and Hnilica and helping a second, named person to escape from Czechoslovakia. They also accused him of helping escape and

42 ŠA v Bratislave, f. State Prosecutor's Office, arch. no. 2 SPt III 41/52, Crime report against V. Vagač and co dated 28 August 1952.

financing priests who were being treated in the state hospital under the supervision of members of the ŠtB, so Don Vagač knew of them; he was also accused of helping priest Koštial flee from the same hospital. Above all, the regime wanted to pin on Don Vagač the accusation that he had received unconfiscated Salesian money to the sum of around five million Kčs which he used to finance various "anti-state actions by reactionary priests".

The prosecutor Winter added to the report in August 1952 the proposal that bishop R. Pobožný should also stand trial, but this was rejected by the Communist party authorities. The regime needed to retain the false pretence of dialogue with the Catholic church by having a single bishop living in relative freedom. However, the other accused following the investigations of the ŠtB were supposed to face prosecution. The state prosecutor's office submitted the definitive version of the accusation to the state court in Bratislava at the end of September 1952.[43]



Salesian Viliam Vagač as a prisoner (1950s). Source: Archives ZVJS Leopoldov.

43 ŠA v Bratislave, f. State Prosecutor's Office, arch. no. 2 SPt III 41/52, Accusation by the State Prosecutor's Office Bratislava to the State Court Bratislava against V. Vagač and co. dated 25 September 1952.

The file was in effect a fair copy of the previous, invented account by the State Prosecutor's office compiled by using violence against those being interrogated, and intended for the then feared State Court. The text began with words which did not bode well: "The state prosecutor accuses...", followed by the list of the seven accused: Viliam Vagač, the Salesian Ján Chrenko, Don Vagač's nephew judge Karol Vagač, the priest Anton Mihálik, the savings bank official Rafael Peltzner,[44] the religious sister of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross Katarína Bartalová and the official Filip Spišák.

The accusation recited in detail all the facts from the investigation which the Communist justice system considered to be criminal and treasonous, whereas in a free country they would be judged as normal expressions of religious life and its safeguarding.

The text of the accusation was almost obsequiously subordinated to the atmosphere of fear, hatred and persecution of the Church as well as to Communist propaganda and manipulation. It began with phrases which in a fair system of justice would sound absurd, but in its totalitarian version played a fateful role for the accused: "[...] in the struggle between the Vatican – the faithful servant of Anglo-American candidates for world domination – against the USSR and people's democracies, monasteries played an important role, among others [...] serving as refuges for various anti-state elements such as the spy centres of the Vatican and ... the assets of the orders were used to fund criminals sent to Czechoslovakia by the Vatican [...]"[45] The arguments of the totalitarian justice system had their own internal logic. Since the monasteries and religious orders were thus acting against their own mission, they should be closed down, their property seized and "used for their original purpose – for purely clerical objectives." This should be clear to the proletariat, party members and traditional Slovak Catholics!

44 Rafael Peltzner, head of the Savings Bank in Šaštín was close to the Salesians. For example, he donated 10,000 crowns for the repair of the Šaštín basilica.

45 ŠA v Bratislave, f. State Prosecutor's Office, arch. no. 2 SPt III 41/52. Accusation by the State Prosecutor's Office Bratislava to the State Court Bratislava against V. Vagač and co. dated 25 September 1952.

The accusation painted Don Vagač in a similar light. As an agent of the Vatican, a priest without state approval, secretly entrusted with the role of Provincial of the Salesians in Slovakia who was supposed to use hidden money to finance "anti-state operations aimed to implement a detested capitalist regime". They accused him of hiding five million crowns and a large amount of gold, and using them with other Salesians to fund the hidden life of the order. The propagandist language of the accusation describes Don Vagač's modest flat in the state hospital as a "centre of Vatican illegality and agents". The accusation also deals with support for the escapes of Salesians under the leadership of Don Zeman; Don Vagač was supposed to have played one of the key roles in supporting the escapes, although, as he testified himself, he dissuaded them from such risky operations. In this he was partially right, since the third group of fleeing priests was detained by the border guards and several of its members, and Zeman himself, were to be subjected to the terrible suffering of Communist interrogations, prisons and camps in the Jáchymov region. The accusation did not pass over Don Vagač's account of the secret ordinations of priests by bishop Hnilica in his flat either, which the accusation describes as "organising secret spiritual administration as part of the Vatican's terrorist network", as well as his role in the escape of priests from the state hospital in which he served.

It is interesting to note that despite Don Vagač being in contact with the sister of the Holy Cross Zdenka Schelingová and talking to her about the escapes, the text of the accusation does not state this. With hindsight, it is clear that the violent methods of the ŠtB's investigators bore fruit, as the accusation contained much information which was intended to remain truly secret as part of the work of the underground church. So according to the Communist accusation based on the feared Act no. 231/48, Don Vagač had committed the crime of treason.

According to the judgement of the Bratislava state court of 17 October 1952 against Viliam Vagač and his six accomplices, the crimes stated in the accusation by the state prosecutor's office were "confirmed". The verdict repeated the accusation which had in fact already been fabricated by the ŠtB investigators. The judgement was thus the inevitable outcome of the Communist machinations of justice, followed by the inferno of Communist arrests, camps and executions.

VERDICT: EIGHTEEN YEARS OF PRISON

The court confirmed the "crimes" of the accused, and sentenced Viliam Vagač to eighteen years of imprisonment, the surrender of all his property to the state and the loss of his citizens' rights for a period of ten years. The others were sentenced to two to fourteen years, in total the whole "subversive" group was given a sentence of fifty-seven years in prison. Golden and silver liturgical objects and other jewellery were seized. The months which the accused had spent in the tough pre-trial detention of the ŠtB counted as part of their punishment.[46]

The justification for the verdict sounds hypocritical and propagandist considering the fact that the Communist regime had gradually been destroying church structures for over four years. The convicts were not apparently punished because they were priests or monks, but because they had "abused their religious function" and "set themselves on the side of the enemies of the working people". This type of vocabulary might have been attractive to the manipulated general populace. This suppression was an attempt by the regime to retain a monopoly in people's minds, whether by subterfuge or force.

The Communist justice system based its invented accusation on other facts to which other accused persons testified under pressure, in particular the Salesian priests Ján Chrenko and Anton Mihálik and the nun Katarína Bartalová. Taking advantage of their well-informed situation, the prosecution emphasised the role of the clerics in "associating with each other with the aim of overturning the people's democratic foundation of the republic".

The Salesian priest Chrenko was said to have participated in the hiding of unconfiscated Salesian money and used it to help organise escapes abroad. Although, as the judgment states, he confessed to his "crimes" during the so-called administrative process which was in fact an inhumane interrogation by the ŠtB, during the trial he had the courage to deny his confession and declared that he did not know that the money and valuables

46 ŠA v Bratislave, State Court Bratislava, arch. no. 3Ts III 85/52, Judgment against V. Vagač and co. dated 17 October 1952.

were to be used for "anti-state activity", but he assumed that they would be returned to the Salesians once their monasteries were also returned.

Similarly, the Salesian priest Mihálik, as the administrator in Šaštín monastery, was said to have access to 2.3 million Kčs (crowns) and gold items which were to be used "following the intentions of the Vatican for anti-state objectives". Specifically, when he was already interned in the concentration monastery/ prison in Osek, Bohemia, he was supposed to have delivered to Don Vagač via Filip Spišák a sketch of the places in the Šaštín basilica where the Salesian gold and silver liturgical objects were hidden. He was also supposed to have informed of the hiding of Salesian money by Rafael Peltzner in Šaštín.

Finally, Sister Bartalová as a sextoness of the chapel in the state hospital where Don Vagač served, was said to have performed "anti-state activity" by helping priests secretly celebrate mass in the flat of Don Vagač. Further, in the event of the arrest of Don Vagač, she was supposed to handle the secret Salesian money, savings book and valuable objects. Despite the fact that during her interrogation by the ŠtB, she testified in favour of her accusation, in court she denied knowing about the secret ordination of priests and that the money was supposed to be used for "anti-state activity".

It is possible to say that the change in statements in court compared to the "confessions" under pressure from the ŠtB in all the accused points to the ŠtB having constructed its narrative of accusation by the use of physical and mental violence even on women, laypeople and clerics.

The judgement states that when considering the sentence for Don Vagač, his old age (65) was taken into consideration, but weighed against him were the facts that "he had a wider political view" and "enticed others to a socially dangerous" crime.

The text of the judgement includes a statement that Don Vagač took part in organising the escape of priests from the regional court prison, for which he offered 7,000 Kčs (crowns) as a bribe to the gaolers. This was the case which Sister Zdenka Schelingová bravely took part in, since she was working at the same time as Don Vagač in the State Hospital in Bratislava as a nurse. Don Vagač was also her spiritual father, so it is quite clear that he must have known about the Sisters' attempts to help the above-mentioned priests and helped them knowingly. He knew he was taking a risk, as was proven by his later arrest by the ŠtB and subsequent torture over several years. It is important to emphasise that the arrests of Sister Zdenka and

Don Viliam Vagač took place on the same day, 29 February 1952. This is the proof of their joint courage and sacrifice for the persecuted priests and the Church.[47]

The condemned Don Vagač, his nephew the judge Karol Vagač, the Salesian Ján Chrenko and Filip Spišák appealed against the verdict at the Supreme Court in Prague. In mid-January 1953, the court set a date for proceedings as 18 February 1953 in the Justice Court in Pankrác. The defenders of the condemned had been the Bratislava barristers Ežo Sabinský, Vojtech Rampášek and Henrich Lax. Since this was a case of so-called compulsory defence, the court appointed three advocates *ex officio* from Prague, namely Josef Rychetský, Otakar Mázl and Antonín Pech.

On the same day, that is 18 February 1953, the senate of the Supreme Court led by J. Křepel rejected the appeal. Don Vagač appealed only against the length of the sentence, since, as he argued, it was excessively long considering the mitigating circumstances. He mentioned his old age, the years spent in missionary service when he could not follow political developments in Czechoslovakia and – as the verdict stated – his "long ingrained obedience to the Vatican". However, the Supreme Court evaluated Don Vagač's secret activities as gravely "socially dangerous", using religion "for the criminal intentions of western imperialists". One interesting argument by the court was that the condemned Don Vagač was supposed to have "damaged the material provision of the Church" by misusing the offerings of believers to "destroy the social order of believers".[48] The Communist justice system always managed to find a stick to beat the "dog" by applying its ideological convictions of the damage of religion and service of the Church to believers and the socially weak. This was part of the systematic hypocrisy of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia which on the one hand proclaimed so-called religious freedom and saw it as the unbounded loyalty of the church structures to the totalitarian system, and on the other ruthlessly isolated and eliminated individuals, orders and institutions which upheld the true sense of religious freedom and the mission of the church in history.

47 For more on the arrest and interrogation of Sister Zdenka Schelingová, see Archív ÚPN Bratislava, f. KS ZNB – S ŠtB Bratislava, investigation files, BA-V-59.

48 ŠA v Bratislave, Regional Court in Bratislava, arch. no. 3 Ts III 85/52 - 288, Judgment against V. Vagač and co. dated 18 February 1953.

Karol Vagač, who was also found guilty, mentioned in his appeal in December 1952 that he had hidden the money from his uncle Viliam because he had explained that it would be needed for the young Salesians who would use it to buy necessities after the suppression of the monasteries. He added that he did not know about Don Vagač's secret mission after the closure of the monasteries and the internment of their Inspector Bokor. Similarly, he also talked about helping the escapes of priests and monks, which were not financed by the money he was hiding. He wrote that as a lawyer he had explained to Viliam that escaping from the republic was seen as a serious crime; he dissuaded him from helping in this affair, as Don Vagač also testified later.

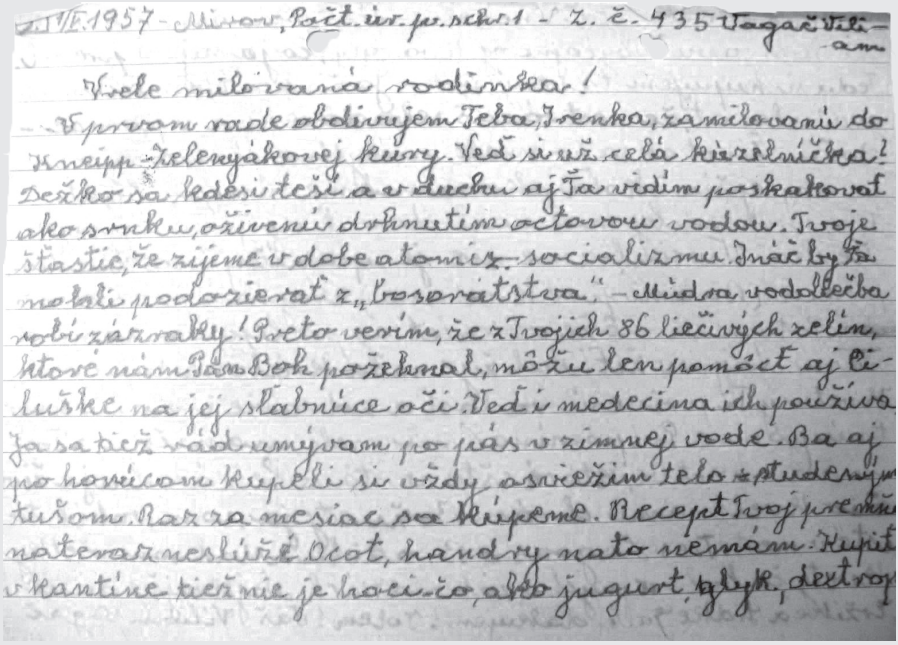
Karol Vagač focused the attention of the supreme court on his activity as a prosecutor before 1945, when, according to him, he had helped members of the illegal Communist resistance and had played a part in their escapes from prison. He also pointed to the fact that following the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising, he had to flee and his flat had been ransacked by the Gestapo since he had taken part in the anti-fascist resistance. He finished his appeal by writing that he was a democratically-minded person who expressed his positive attitude to the establishment after 1945 by joining the Association of Friends of the USSR, among other acts.[49]

However, Karol Vagač later withdrew his appeal via his barrister. He then served his sentence in the so-called Correction and Labour camp in the north Bohemian town of Rtyně in the Podkrkonoší region. This involved hard labour in a mine. Following an amnesty from the President of Czechoslovakia on 4 May 1953, two years and two months were deducted from his sentence. At the beginning of 1955, he asked for the rest of his sentence to be revoked, which the commission of the Regional Court in Hradec Králové accepted on 11 March 1955. He was released with a conditional sentence of five years, which matched the rest of his eight-year conviction.

49 As the state prosecutor, Karol Vagač was a member of the illegal anti-fascist resistance group Flóra founded in March 1943 to re-establish the Czechoslovak Republic. Its members included, for example, the well-known partisan commander Ľudovít Kukorelli and others.

DON VILIAM VAGAČ IN A COMMUNIST PRISON

After the sentence of the state court was pronounced, the almost 66-year Salesian Viliam Vagač was transferred to the Communist prison in Mírov, known as the Closed Institute of Corrective Institutions, Mírov. In February 1952, following the confirmation of the sentence by the Supreme Court, he was sent to the prison in Ilava, from where he was transferred back to Mírov in early June.[50]



Manuscript of part of a letter from the prisoner Don Vagač to his family from Mírov Prison, 1957.
Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

50 Archív ZVJS Leopoldov, Personal files of the condemned, file of V. Vagač, card Records of changes.

According to his letter of admission money to the amount of almost 10,500 crowns and a silver Omega watch on a chain were taken away from Don Vagač on his arrival in the prison.

In the prison questionnaire, Don Vagač described his character in his own writing as follows: hard-working, sensitive, modest. He wrote: "I have always loved the truth, I worked in social workshops among the poor youth and Indians. Work and prayer were my own programme." His knowledge of foreign languages predestined him for an academic life; in the prison questionnaire he mentioned knowledge of the following languages in addition to Slovak: Hungarian, German, Italian, Latin and Portuguese. As his hobbies, he mentioned horse-riding and football, his experience and customs from his time at the oratory or from his missionary work in the rainforests of Brazil. In the part about his work, he wrote: "I worked as a catechist for the Salesian youth. I feel guilty about breaking the laws of the current regime. I regret my action and I want to correct it through useful work. The motives for my crime were religious." He described his feelings as follows: "I am suffering from the loss of freedom, my health is continuing to deteriorate and I cannot devote myself to my profession. I want to devote myself to educating young people and writing about my experiences from my missions in Brazil and the life of Indians." He filled in the part entitled "motives" as follows: "motives – religious and monastic, I wanted to help my monastic confreres. I do not believe I will live until the end of my sentence – I am 66 years old and am sentenced to 18 years."[51]

Since he had been arrested outside his home and immediately transferred into pre-trial detention in the court of justice in Bratislava, he had been unable to take any personal belongings from his flat. For this reason, he asked the Regional Court in Bratislava in a hand-written letter to release his seized belongings, in particular his manuscripts, books and laundry and to send them to his sister.

At that time, Don Vagač had already been suffering for ten years from chronic bronchial catarrh, asthma and tuberculosis. He had serious heart problems and nervous diseases. He weighed 60kg for a height of 168 cm.

51 Archív ZVJS Leopoldov, Personal files of condemned, file of V. Vagač, Prison questionnaire of V. Vagač.

The beginning of the de-Stalinisation reforms in the Soviet Union following the memorable "Khrushchev" 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union created momentum for certain political changes to dogmatic Communist Czechoslovakia. The new leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia acknowledged the existence of repression in the system of justice in the first half of the 1950s, and several prisoners were amnestied, and a few of the ŠtB's most brutal investigators and prison guards were suspended. However, the amnesty of 1955 did not apply to the prisoner V. Vagač. In his prison evaluation of December 1955, Don Vagač is additionally characterised as a "clear enemy of the people's democratic establishment" who "subscribes to an idealistic ideology and uses it to influence co-prisoners while also combating Marxist opinions."[52] This was enough to refuse him a pardon.

Similarly, in August 1956 Don Vagač's incarcerators wrote of him that he was "a nationalist, a supporter of the Vatican who turns his back on Czech priests and only meets Slovak priests".[53] Anyone who knew Vagač particularly during his younger years spent in Hungary, Poland and Italy, and later in Brazil knows that nationalistic animosity was impossible for him.

In September 1956, after over four and a half years in prison, Don Vagač resolved to ask for his trial to be reviewed and wrote a hand-written letter to the general prosecutor in Prague.[54]

In his letter, Don Vagač complained about the conditions during his interrogation in 1952, when his allocated barrister visited him only once, for 10 minutes, and that in the presence of the "screw"; the state prosecutor was not present at the hearing, the arrest warrant was apparently issued one month after his arrest and the accusation record was not delivered to him but only just about read out in court; the questioning in the court was just a matter of form, since he did not answer the questions due to an apparent lack of time. And finally, after his appeal against the sentence,

52 Archív ZVJS Leopoldov, Personal files of condemned, file of V. Vagač, evaluation of prisoner V. Vagač.

53 Archív ZVJS Leopoldov, Personal files of condemned, file of V. Vagač, evaluations of prisoner V. Vagač.

54 ŠA v Bratislave, State court in Bratislava, arch. no. 3Ts III 85/52, Request by V. Vagač to revise the trial (manuscript).

he was unable to take part in the audience before the Supreme Court in Prague, which confirmed the sentence of the state court anyway. Don Vagač only attacked the (in)activity of the prosecutor who in his closing speech, in the spirit of ideological propaganda, described the elderly missionary, monk and priest Don Vagač as "the greatest exploiter".

He also dared to write that false documents had been used, and that violence and threats had been used against him by the ŠtB investigators to make him sign the fabricated accusation. He specifically argued in the case of the charges against him that he had not been *de iure* the Provincial of the Salesians in the place of the interned Don Bokor, because in his opinion this went against church regulations, but that the other Salesians had turned to him as the oldest member of the order. He also argued that he did not know of the existence of directives which banned the activity of the orders, which he said "was confirmed in an article in the *Mladá fronta* newspaper where the actions taken against the orders were said to have violated the so-called Socialist rule of law". As for the matter of abetting escapes from Czechoslovakia, he repeated his view that he had dissuaded them from escaping, because the punishments for doing so were severe. On the use of the unconfiscated money for the escape of the imprisoned Salesians in Zeman's group he wrote that he had been driven by fear that his confreres might end up in Siberia, but changed his mind the next day, but by then they had already been arrested.

Don Vagač also explained the affair of the ordination of Salesian clerics thus, that at the time the bishop of Trnava, A. Lazík, could not ordain new priests, although "his" Salesian clerics were properly declared for ordination, and so bishops Pobožný and Hnilica ordained them instead, but Don Vagač bound them not to perform services as priests until they were properly taken into a diocese.

In this letter to the prosecutor general, he also wrote that his statement from 1955, when he was interrogated by the ŠtB in Bratislava, was extorted from him by the Communist investigators through violence ("terror"). Subsequently, contrary to the real facts, he was supposed to have admitted that he had instructed the secret new priests to remain faithful to the Pope after the creation of the so-called national church, a breakaway from the Vatican, and they had done so. He also mentions in this letter the intimidation and mental and physical pressure from the ŠtB investigators in

his interrogation from 1956 in Banská Bystrica, during which he experienced as a 69-year-old "nervous fits", as he wrote.

It is clear that during his early years in prison, Don Vagač was able to study certain laws and regulations valid at the time, because at the end of the letter he explains that although the so-called Socialist order of law had been grossly breached in his case, he should not have been sentenced to more than six years of prison for the strange-sounding "delicts" mentioned, such as helping people to leave the republic, obstructing the supervision of the churches, or hostile acts against the republic, quoting the relevant articles and laws.

Don Vagač also turned to the regional prosecutor's office in Bratislava to re-examine once again the sentence of the state court in Bratislava from 1952 concerning the unlawfulness of the investigators against him in 1956.

At that time, an evaluation of Don Vagač had been drawn up in the Corrective and Work Camp of Mírov in November 1956. It mentions that since 1954 he had been ill and unable to work (he was 67 years old), but he acted like an "engrained enemy of the regime who has a damaging ideological effect on others in a reactionary spirit", focused on indecisive priests and said critical things against the regime.

However, in December 1956, the regional prosecutor's office in Bratislava expressed itself on Don Vagač's sentence, saying that the condemned had had the opportunity to prove their innocence in court, and from the proceedings their criminal activity could apparently be "objectively judged". The prosecutor argued that the testimonies of those accused testified against Don Vagač, which could be confirmed by the prosecutor's questioning of witnesses in June 1956. The prosecutor stated that Viliam Vagač had provided no new facts in his plea that could lead to a revision of the original sentence. But he did say that it would be possible to consider a pardon due to the old age, illness and inability to work of the sentenced person. However, the regional prosecutor did not recommend reducing the sentence and stated that by helping people escape across the border, the "crime of treason" had been committed.[55]

55 ŠA v Bratislave, Administration of the Regional Prosecutor's Office in Bratislava for GP – examination of the crime of V. Vagač dated 5 December 1956.

ATTEMPTS TO FREE DON VAGAČ

At that time, Don Vagač's sister Irena Molecová, née Vagačová, was also writing a pardon request for her brother, one which the president of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic Antonín Zápotocký was able to grant. The archbishop of Trnava, Ambróz Lazík, wrote a letter in a similar spirit. The regional court recommended granting this pardon. Based on the words of the general prosecutor, who in this case had Don Vagač's letter from September 1956 "on his table", the pardon for 69-year-old Viliam Vagač was rejected in a decree from the Supreme Court in Prague on 1 November 1956. In its decree, the court stated that "Don Vagač's crime is still highly dangerous for society and he has not started on the path to reform and improvement". The prosecutor was supposed to judge his poor state of health, but did not take it into account, and so Don Vagač remained in prison.[56]

His sister Irena, however, did not lose courage and continued to try to get her brother out of prison. In December 1957, following the presidential amnesty of 1 December 1957, she sent to the regional court in Bratislava via the regional prosecutor's office a request for a pardon to be granted to Don Vagač who at the time was still imprisoned in Mírov, since his own request had been rejected. His sister Irena explained that the 70-year-old elderly Don Vagač really was no longer "socially dangerous", but on the contrary needed health care which she promised to provide him.[57] However, neither her no Don Vagač received a positive response. The Ministry of Justice justified its decision by stating that in Don Vagač's case, it concerned a "grave crime against the foundations of the republic" for which the 18-year sentence was appropriate. Furthermore, it stated that after five years of prison the condemned – de facto a 70-year old elderly man – had been unable to prove that he was worthy of being pardoned and that he should

56 ŠA v Bratislave, Regional Court in Bratislava, arch. no. 2 Nt 94/56, Decree of the Supreme Court in Prague dated 1 November 1956.

57 ŠA v Bratislave, Regional Prosecutor's Office in Bratislava, letter from Irena Molecová to the Regional Prosecutor's Office in Bratislava dated 14 December 1957.

serve at least half his sentence. Therefore, it was up to the condemned man to show "signs of reform, including in a political sense".

Two prison evaluations from June and December 1957 clearly confirm this: "The sentenced Vagač considers himself innocent, does not regret his actions and states that his religious activity was an obligation for him. He has not shown interest in being reformed and has a negative effect on the prisoners. He interacts with prisoners with reactionary ideas and uses his missionary skills among them."[58] Despite the tragedy of the whole situation, from a certain point of view this was a very good testimonial to Don Vagač as a priest and monk. However, despite his hope for release being crushed, Don Vagač did not lose courage or his love for his family. In May 1957 he wrote a letter in which he mentioned, among other things, that he washes up to his waist in cold water, and he urges trust in God's help. However, the letter did not leave the prison; it was confiscated by the bodies of the regime.

The cynicism and stubbornness of the regime towards the old priest thus appeared in all its brutality. Instead of expressing compassion for an ill person, he was transferred in April 1958 to the dreaded prison of Leopoldov. They did not treat him with kid gloves there and so for example in 1959, at the age of 72, he was given a disciplinary punishment in prison in Leopoldov of "1 month without privileges" for calling the prison guard a "screw". His redemption from the Communist gaols of Mírov, Leopoldov and Ilava came one year later. On 31 March 1960, the regional committee in Nitra decided to apply the presidential amnesty to V. Vagač. He was to leave prison after eight years with his saved earnings of 358,- Kčs (crowns).

Half a century later, Don Ernest Macák described Don Vagač after his release as someone "caught in a trap". He did not mix much with people, he was out of his depth and the persecution in prison destroyed his health. Nevertheless, the "legend" of Slovak Salesians, Don Ernest Macák, calls Don Viliam Vagač a man who succeeded in "making a legend out of poverty".[59]

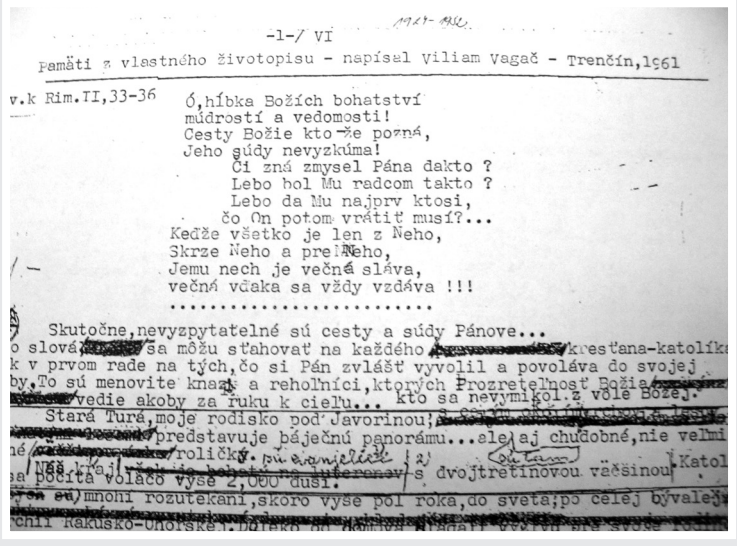
58 Archív ZVJS Leopoldov, Personal files of the condemned, file of V. Vagač, evaluations of the condemned V. Vagač.

59 Discussion between the author and Ernest Macák, born 7 January 1920 in Vištuk, from 21 May 2014.

FROM HIS AMNESTY IN 1960 TO HIS WORK IN OSADNÉ

"Suffering is a mystery,
our nature struggles against it,
but it is probably the most effective silent means
of spreading God's glory here on earth."
Don Jozef Bokor in a letter to Don V. Vagač dated 5 April 1966.

Based on the decree of the Regional Court in Bratislava of 30 May 1960 pursuant to the presidential amnesty of 9 May 1960, Don Vagač was released on parole for ten years after eight years in Communist prisons. They "forgave" over nine years and nine months of his original eighteen-year sentence, which was supposed to end in 1970, and also pardoned his "ten-year" loss of civil rights. This was conditional for 10 years, provided he did not commit a deliberate crime.[60]



-1-/ VI

Pamäti z vlastného životopisu - napísal Viliam Vagač - Trenčín, 1961

v.k Rim.II,33-36 Ó,hĺbka Božích bohatství
múdrostí a vedomosti!
Cesty Božie kto že pozná,
Jeho súdy nevyzkúma!
Či zná zmysel Pána dakto ?
Lebo bol Mu radcom takto ?
Lebo da Mu najprv ktosi,
čo On potom vrátiť musí?...
Kedže všetko je len z Neho,
Skrze Neho a pre Neho,
Jemu nech je večná sláva,
večná vďaka sa vždy vzdáva !!!
.....

Skutočne, nevyzpytatelné sú cesty a súdy Pánove...
o slová sa môžu sťahovať na každého kresťana-katolíka
k v prvom rade na tých, čo si Pán zvlášť vyvolil a povoláva do svojej
by. To sú menovite kňazi a reholníci, ktorých Prozreteľnosť Božia
vedie akoby za ruku k cieľu... kto sa nevymikol z vôle Božej.
Stará Turá, moje rodisko pod Javorinou
predstavuje báječnú panorámu...ale aj chúdobné, nie veľmi
roličky
Katol
s dvojtretinovou väčšinou
mnohí rozutekaní, skoro vyše pol roka, do sveta; po celej bývalej

First half-page of Don Vagač's own biography on his return from Communist imprisonment, 1961. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

60 ŠA v Bratislave, Regional Court in Bratislava, arch. no. 3 Ts III 85/52. Decree on the decision of the president of the republic on an amnesty dated 30 May 1960.

He went through the Bratislava court of justice, the Communist gaols in Mírov, Ilava and Leopoldov. He came out of prison as a 73-year-old shattered and sick old man. It did not break him, but he did long for rest. He addressed the Central Charity in Slovakia (hereafter "ÚChS") and asked to be placed in the retirement home for priests in Pezinok, offering his services as a translator from Hungarian, Latin, German, Italian and Portuguese, but to no avail. The apostolic administration in Trnava issued him a confirmation of his service as a priest from 1924 to 1932, and from 1947 to 1952, but the state or regime did not want to provide him with the necessary care or proper old-age pension.

The family of his sister Irena Molecová in Trenčín therefore took him in. Don Vagač had no income and his effects from the time before his imprisonment had been sold off or destroyed. Therefore, he requested in a letter dated 9 July 1960 the return of his belongings from the house search in 1952 with a value of 250,000 Kčs (crowns). The reply from the Regional Court was the statement that these items had served "to perform anti-state activity" and so had been confiscated without prejudice to any claim. In the end, the local people's committee in Bratislava did pay him 800 Kčs (crowns) for the items that had been sold but did not fall into the category of confiscation.

Don Vagač also informed Bishop Ambróz Lazík of his difficult situation, and the latter sent him financial help to the amount of 500 Kčs (crowns) and promised to send this every month. Similarly, the bishop of Nitra, E. Nécsey, helped Don Vagač in December 1960 with the sum of 700 Kčs (crowns).[61]

On 30 May 1960, the bishop of Nitra, Nécsey, granted him the authorisation to celebrate holy mass outside a church, known as *privilegium altaris portatilis*. However, the cynical Communist regime wanted to have under its control even a person of Don Vagač's status, or to humiliate him even more, and so in June 1960 he had to apply for what was known as state approval to provide a spiritual service, although he could not celebrate public masses. But it was only in March 1961 that Don Vagač obtained this state approval for celebrating holy mass without access to the public in

61 Archív SDB Bratislava, personal collection of Viliam Vagač, SDB, letters from bishop E. Nécsey and bishop A. Lazík to V. Vagač, 1.

the parish church in Trenčín. In his sister's house in Trenčín, Don Vagač typed out his biography, including the period up until his departure as a missionary.[62]

In the meantime, he reapplied for the possibility of entering the retirement home for priests in Pezinok, but according to the leadership of the Central Slovak Charity, it was only for elderly priests, not for monks. This was a fallacious argument, because by then Don Vagač had been working as a priest for almost 33 years. The 74-year-old Don Vagač longed for peace and privacy in a suitable home for priests after years of toil and suffering, but the regime of the then Czechoslovak Republic did not provide him with it. In September 1961, the vicar-general of Trnava offered him a place in the charity house in Báč, but Don Vagač did not accept it, owing to conditions that were not acceptable for his health.

At this time, the Central Slovak Charity planned to take in three priests in social institutions where religious sisters worked, to provide them with a spiritual service. One of them was the Institute for Mentally Handicapped Children in Osadné, Humenné district, which lies 2 km from the Polish border. The sisters of the Holy Cross worked with the children there. In September 1961, Don Vagač applied for this post.

It was not until 21 June 1962, ten months later, that the Eastern Slovak Regional People's Committee (hereafter "KNV") accepted Don Vagač's request to serve as a cleric for the sisters in this care home in Osadné. Don Vagač wrote about this and his plans on 5 July 1962 to the Mother Superior of these twelve nuns, who had been waiting for their cleric for almost one year. In the same month, the Košice capitular vicar Štefan Onderko renewed Vagač's jurisdiction to work in this institute in Osadné for the Sisters of the Holy Cross and appointed him as their proper confessor.[63] Don Vagač was 75 years old at this time.

62 Archív SDB Bratislava, Memories from my own biography, written by Viliam Vagač, Trenčín 1961.

63 Archív SDB Bratislava, personal collection of Viliam Vagač SDB, letter from Š. Onderko to V. Vagač dated 6 July 1962, box 1.

Don Viliam Vagač (second from the right) with friends at the institute of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in Osadné. Don Jozef Bokor in the middle, 1965. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

CONCLUSION

In 1964, the 40th anniversary of the arrival of the Salesians in Slovakia was celebrated. Owing to his state of health, Don Vagač was not present at the celebrations in Šaštín, but his faithful friend Ladislav Stano provided him with an account of the festivities.

In his worsened state of health, at the age of 78, he received the decision by the Regional Court in Bratislava in June 1965 to pardon him the rest of his original ten-year period under parole, that is the remaining five years, based on another amnesty by another Czechoslovak Communist president, Antonín Novotný of 9 May 1965.[64] By this time, he could no longer stand during services, only sit; he gave his sermons to the sisters in whispers.

64 ŠA v Bratislave, Regional Court in Bratislava, arch. no. 3 Ts III 85/52, Decree of Regional Court Bratislava dated 11 June 1965.

The turning point in his desire for rest in a retirement home for priests came in April 1966, when Don Vagač met the president of the KNV Bratislava and it emerged that he had officiated at the latter's marriage forty years earlier in Šaštín. So the high-ranking Communist functionary promised the old priest, missionary and prisoner of the Communist regime a place in the retirement home for priests in Pezinok. A few weeks later, he fulfilled his promise. In broken health, Don Vagač arrived in early June 1966 to rest in the retirement home for priests in Pezinok.[65]

Don Viliam Vagač at the end of his life in the Charity House in Pezinok. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

65 Archív SDB Bratislava, personal collection of V. Vagač, letter from the general director of the Central Slovak Charity to V. Vagač dated 31 May 1966.

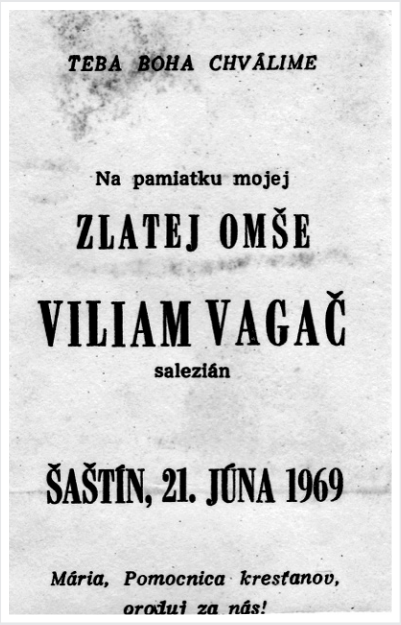
As part of the political liberalisation after January 1968, the Slovak Human Rights Organisation was established in Czechoslovakia (hereafter "SONOL'P"). It was mostly composed of political prisoners. Don Vagač did not remain on the sidelines and at the age of 81 he joined this organisation and asked for his rehabilitation, but the efforts not only of the SONOL'P were stymied by the invasion and the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Communist countries' armies from 21 August 1968.

In June 1969, Don Viliam Vagač celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination. In his beloved Šaštín, he celebrated his golden jubilee mass on 21 June 1969. He could no longer stand, but he spoke through the microphone to the many faithful around him. He smiled his characteristic gentle smile. One year later, on 2 July 1970, Viliam Vagač died in Pezinok at the age of 82. He is buried in his beloved Šaštín.

EPILOGUE

The Hungarian and Slovak Salesian Viliam Vagač lived the dramatic life of a man, monk, missionary, prisoner of faith and conscience and priest; he had a firm faith, the perspective of a scholar and modern apostle: a true follower of Christ and Don Bosco. Even though at times he was not understood by his superiors, Don Vagač had his vision which he turned into true Salesian work, spreading faith and salvation-bringing love to the souls entrusted to his care, in particular to young boys. In parishes, oratories, missions, hospitals, schools and in prison. To believers, indigenous peoples, the sick, children with disabilities, nuns, Salesian clerics, boys and fellow prisoners of Communist Czechoslovakia.

Golden mass of V. Vagač – his speech. Šaštín, 21 June 1969. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.



Commemorative picture from the golden mass of V. Vagač. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

Funeral of Viliam Vagač, Šaštín, 1970. Source: Archives SDB Bratislava.

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