

'Agape' triumphs from the depths of Slovakia's concentration camps

by Marianna Wertz

Light from the Depths of Jachymov Concentration Camps

by Anton Srholec

Published by Michal Vasko, Ruzova St. 22, Presov, Slovak Republic, 1996

198 pages, \$2

The subject of this book is something all freedom-loving people should know about. It is especially important for adherents of the international political movement headed by Lyndon LaRouche, whose leaders continue to suffer wrongful imprisonment, political harassment, and the danger of death today, for standing up for their beliefs; and who nevertheless continue to fight for the good.

EIR first learned of this book at a forum of former political prisoners, in May 1996 in Slovakia, where author Father Anton Srholec spoke about his 98-month imprisonment in Slovakia's Jachymov concentration camps and lethal uranium mines, under Soviet occupation of the country. Also speaking at the event were Dr. Jozef Miklosko, president of the Friedrich Schiller Foundation for Protection of Life, Culture, Education, and Human Rights in Slovakia; and (by video in Slovak translation) Lyndon LaRouche, himself a former political prisoner and then candidate for the Democratic nomination for U.S. President. LaRouche told the attendees that their common task today is to convince the governments of the world "to enter into a cooperation to bring the world out of its present economic misery."

Light from the Depths is an account of Father Srholec's experience, and, more importantly, of how he survived his trip to hell. It is living proof of the power of *agapē*,—what Plato calls "passion for justice," and St. Paul calls "charity" or "love"—to sustain the human spirit.

Imprisoned for beliefs

In a history that most of the world has forgotten, tens of thousands of religious and political opponents of the Soviet Union's occupation of Czechoslovakia spent many years in forced labor in the concentration camps and uranium mines

in Slovakia's mountains, from 1950 to 1960. Anton Srholec, born in 1929 in the small farm community of Skalica, was seeking to escape to Italy to train for the priesthood, when he was caught at the border, tried, and sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment in 1951.

Srholec writes, in a short history of Slovakia which introduces the book, that he hopes to show how the deep roots of the Catholic faith in Slovakia sustained the people of that small country "in the heart of Europe," despite first Nazi, then Soviet occupation. He describes how prisoners in inhuman conditions fought for survival, while they slaved to provide ore which the Soviet Union could turn into atomic weapons. But these "tragic and dramatic situations," he says, were "brightened by memories of lovely sincere human relationships, of friendship increased by faith in God and by hope drawn from God's word."

This faith, or *agapē*, Srholec shows, has a most ironic power. When he was first imprisoned, and before being shipped off to Jachymov, Srholec spent a hundred days in solitary confinement, with intermittent interrogation/torture sessions. Here, Srholec says, he first experienced the flooding of his heart with peace and happiness, the result of prayer, which sustained him in the following eight years: "The regime which fought in such a furious way against prayer, has created a center of the most intensive spiritual renewal" in their own concentration camps, he writes.

But, he cautions, as bitter experience and the suicide of friends during imprisonment underscored, "If one has no repertoire of spiritual thoughts, life in prison is long and sad."

Souls united through suffering

Srholec's experience will ring true to anyone who has experienced unjust imprisonment, including the dozens of associates of LaRouche who have been or still are unjustly imprisoned in the United States. It is an experience, as he puts it, of "souls united through suffering," who learn that only by helping each other can any one of them survive.

He stresses the need to overcome bitterness and rage, even when one is treated worse than an animal by prison guards. "We had gone through the test where forgiveness must be radical—either you have your sufferings, humiliations and the offenses against you buried deep in your heart

FIGURE 1

Prisons, concentration camps, and workcamps in Czechoslovakia in 1952



Anton Srholec

so that you never remember them, or you continually bear the burden of injustice which will make you bitter and this bitterness will increase like the snow on the mountains before Christmas.”

At the same time, the book is replete with accounts of the humor shared by the inmates, which played so important a role in sustaining them. “In the midst of our daily slavery, prison humor glowed like a dying ember. It consisted in sneering at the guards and the regime and in banter about ourselves and our misery. Somewhere deep in the soul a spring of great strength and value flows. Ours was an affinity of souls joined by disaster, suffering, love and hope. This perception gave meaning and sacredness to the most difficult experiences.”

He notes that a person “gets used to living under the glare of searchlights and the sights of machine guns and in danger in the mine without being conscious of it. It is not the main thing.

“What is the main thing then? Is it perhaps the consciousness which comes from very old Hebrew-Christian wisdom, that painful and difficult times have their own meaning, or perhaps it is being part of the only process of the march of mankind, including me, to deeper understanding and greater love? Or is it the hope that everything will come to a good end?”

Toward a more just world

After recounting the endless days of chipping away at an ore which can kill a person simply by exposure, Srholec concludes that his “greatest wish is that this slave labor is of benefit to mankind and that it becomes for us a source of joy and pride, because a miracle can take place in the end and all of this will become a contribution to the building of a more just world. . . . May we not lose hope, because without it, we would be only slaves.”

Indeed, Srholec today is contributing to a more just world, by the publication of this book and his other works. He was released from prison during the May 1960 general amnesty, and returned to a freedom which, he says, is “never as nice as we dream about.” His still-occupied homeland allowed him to work as a priest, but in 1974, state authorities transferred him to an obscure parish, because of his popularity. In 1985, his license to practice as a priest was revoked. Since the Velvet Revolution in 1989, in which he participated, he has been involved in various cultural, humanitarian, and social activities, at home and abroad. In 1992, he founded a shelter for homeless men.

His work in tandem with Dr. Miklosko and the Schiller Institute also clearly reflects his continuing commitment to put his beliefs into practice, whatever may be the ultimate cost.