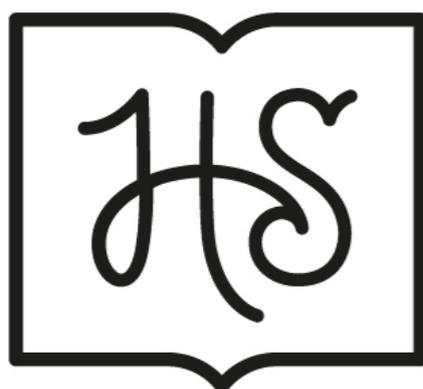


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A System Outside the System: Czech Salesians and their Clandestine Summer Camps in the 1970s and 1980s¹

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ABSTRACT

A System Outside the System: Czech Salesians and Their Clandestine Summer Camps in the 1970s and 1980s

This paper describes the underground youth work of the members and lay supporters of the religious order of Salesians of Don Bosco in the Communist-governed Czech Republic. The focus is on the clandestine summer camps (nicknamed “the cabins”) and the education and training of the camp leaders and counsellors. Unlike typical dissent activities, the camps created “parallel” space for school age children and adolescents. Another distinctive feature of the Salesian system of youth work and education was the quantitative size, broad regional and social scope and complex training system for the leaders of the camps.

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Introduction

Repeatedly in modern history, underground teaching and learning have emerged when formal schooling has begun to be controlled by the totalitarian regimes or some groups of citizens have been denied access to any education at all. Well-known examples include clandestine educational activities in Jewish ghettos during World War II (Křížková 1995, Kasperová 2014) or lectures by imprisoned scholars in labour camps in the Communist-controlled Central and Eastern Europe (Solzhenitsyn 1974, Bursík 2006). More recently, a shadow school system was established in Kosovo province controlled by the Serbian nationalist government.

From the perspective of the mainstream formal school system and its reflection in educational science, clandestine teaching may seem a marginal phenomenon. We believe, however, that the study of education under atypical conditions might be useful not only to historians, but also to other social sciences as “the typical or average case is often not the richest in information. Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied” (Flyvbjerg 2011, p. 307). That is why we want to give information about one less known instance of underground educational activity in Czechoslovakia in the time of Communist rule.

At the moment, only a very limited amount of research exists on mechanisms and effects of the official educational system in Communist Czechoslovakia (1948–1989) (Mareš 2010, Zounek & Šimáně 2014, 2015). The phenomenon of clandestine education in this period remains almost unknown to educational research despite the fact that some scholarship exists within the general history (Dayová 1999, Doellinger 2002). This paper will describe some aspects of the underground youth work of the members and lay supporters of the Czech province of the religious order of Salesians of Don Bosco (we will refer to them as *Czech Salesians* or *Salesians* for the remainder of this article). The focus will be on the summer camps (nicknamed “the cabins” or *chaloupky* in Czech) and their supporting infrastructure in the Czech (western) part of the former Czechoslovakia. We confine ourselves to this territory as Slovakia has always been a different church province with a distinct history and unique culture. Specifically, the Salesians in Bohemia and Moravia formed one organisational unit (order province, called an *inspection* in the period we are describing) and the Slovaks established another. For both practical and security reasons Czechoslovakia’s two Salesian provinces/inspection ran their projects independently. (Similar rules were also observed by the male and female branches of the Czech Salesians so that only a few people involved knew details about the activities of the other branch. That is why our paper covers the male/boys part of the movement.)

For the study of some aspects of totalitarian regimes, traditional written sources do not exist or have problematic value (reports produced by secret State police, Communist press coverage of dissent activities). The outline of different forms of underground education has to be sketched mostly from the memoirs and recollections of participants. This article draws

largely on both authors' personal recollections of clandestine educational activities.² Using the researchers' autobiographical memories as a (principal) source for their own historical study is a rather problematic approach. However, recent shifts in social sciences methodology legitimized the subjective and individual experiences (Aurell, 2006). We try to avoid the pitfalls of our approach by focusing on factual description and avoiding interpretation. Moreover, we have tried to triangulate our memories with the available literature. Vracovský (2002) gathered together recollections of different people who attended the cabins and Křížková (1996) described the broader context of Salesian activities in underground. Some other participants or coordinators of other Salesian activities – as pre-school children groups or girls camps – were interviewed by Dvořák (2007). All these accounts are, however, available only to Czech readers.

Underground education under the totalitarian regime in Communist Czechoslovakia

As in other Central and East European countries under Communist rule in the second half of the 20th century, the Czechoslovak Communist government attempted to control all the activities of the Christian churches. The Roman Catholic Church, as the largest Christian community in Czechoslovakia, was the primary target of persecution.³ In particular, all male religious orders were banned in 1950, all male monasteries were seized by the state and turned into prisons, barracks or warehouses, and many members of the order communities were imprisoned.⁴ Despite that, several orders continued their underground activities (e.g. Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, Premonstratensians, etc.).

The activities of the official clergy (recognised and licensed by the state) were limited mainly to liturgy (confined to the interior of the churches) and some opportunity to teach Religious Education in schools (up to 7th grade). All other Church attempts “to influence the young people” were regarded as hostile activities qualifying their organisers as enemies of the state (Gabrielová 2011, p. 47) so the official clergy could not take part in any youth work beyond liturgy. Even the attendance of official Religious Education lessons at school might harm a child's career prospects. Activities of lay members of the Church were not permitted. That is why youth work occupied a unique role among the activities of the underground Church. Immediately after the Czechoslovak Communists took power in 1948 and imposed their control upon the churches and upon higher education, the Catholic priest Felix Davídek also attempted to establish an underground university with regular day classes for some twenty students (Fiala & Hanuš 1994). Soon, Davídek was arrested and sentenced to many years in prison. The scope of the independent activities became very limited in the first two decades of Communist rule.

²In the 1980s the first author was serving as a leader of several camps and later as a deputy to the then chief coordinator of Salesian summer camps for boys and gained considerable insight into the youth work system. The second author was a “rank and file” participant in the late 1980s.

³For the purpose of this paper, “the Church” refers to the Roman Catholic Church in the Czech (Socialist) Republic.

⁴The prisons, paradoxically, became places of some independent teaching (Bursík 2006).

The Prague Spring in the late 1960s brought hopes for a more liberal regime in Czechoslovakia. The August 1968 invasion by Warsaw Pact troops led by the Soviet Union ended the glimmers of hope. The following two decades are dubbed “normalization”. In official Communist Party jargon, normalization meant the removal of almost all democratic reforms. Hundreds of thousands sympathisers of reforms were expelled from the Communist Party. In particular, many teachers and scholars lost their jobs and had to work in blue-collar occupations. While the Communist government did not revert to mass terror, strong control of both formal education and Church activities were reinstalled. Once again, many children and young people were denied access to higher education due to their parents’ political opinion or religious belief.

As a reaction to the renewed ideological control of higher education and Communist Party cadre policy, during the 1970s and the 1980s a broad network of more or less regular independent university courses emerged. They took place in private flats during evenings and weekends.⁵ Obviously, there were good reasons for the participants to keep their educational activities hidden.⁶ The lectures were given by former professors⁷ and other scientists who had been forced to leave their jobs after the Communist coup in 1948 or after the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 as well as by priests, preachers or monks without the state license required for religious ministry. Gradually, the alumni of the clandestine courses took on teaching responsibilities. Finally, some daring visitors from western universities joined the faculties of these underground colleges. Their students were adults denied from access to higher education for political reasons (members of so-called bourgeois families, dissenters...); people seeking information not included in official curricula (non-Marxist philosophy and social science, religious education, humanities), and people looking for an alternative community and/or lifestyle.

It is less known that clandestine educational activities were also organised for adolescents and children and in some cases even by them. In this paper, our aim is to describe the youth work system established by the Czech Salesians and their lay supporters. This system was of remarkable size and level of complexity. Its goals were not confined to catechism and included broader educational vision.

The cabins

As the normalization period started, many Church activities were suppressed once again. The religious orders, however, formed tightly-knit groups with a strong system of internal

⁵This system was used several times in Poland and was known as a Flying or Floating University (Uniwersytet Latający).

⁶The philosophical lectures organised in the flats of Julius Tomin and Ivan Dejmal were a notable exception as their convenors struggled to maintain their public status despite persecution. In the late 1980s, there was even the possibility to award degrees in religious studies, and literary theory through co-operation with Cambridge University (Dayová, 1999).

⁷The Communist secret police (StB) used the official label “former people”, in Czech *bývalí lidé*, code BL (Gabrielová 2011).

discipline, and they were able to build their own system of education for their prospective members (Corley 1993, p. 188). So the underground orders survived the Stalinist terror of the 1950s and some of them later even thrived during normalization. Salesians were probably the most successful among them – at least from a quantitative point of view – as in 1989 they emerged from underground with more than 200 members and many lay helpers. The underground summer camps played an important role in recruiting new members and supporters, but were not limited to this goal. The camps' system will be described in the following paragraphs.

Despite some obvious successes by the (persecuted) Christian churches that we have mentioned above, the Czech lands became one of the least religious countries in the world in the 20th century (Nešporová – Nešpor 2009). The cabins network tried to answer what was perceived as a problem of the Christian minority living in secularised society under a totalitarian government. While in major cities such as Prague or Brno and in some regions of Moravia and eastern Bohemia some non-formal networks of lay Christians always existed, Christian families in the western parts of the country were dispersed and quite isolated. Children from Christian families often had no friends, classmates or other peers sharing their faith in their schools and neighbourhoods. Catholic parents and local parish priests were able to provide some religious education to younger children at home or during official Church activities (e.g. First Communion preparation classes). The official Catholic Church was not permitted to organise any official activities for teenagers or young lay adults, however. Many parents were aware that peer culture and the broader social environment played a key role in identity development in adolescence.

The Salesians started the “cabin” camps as unofficial two-week-long summer camps for small groups of boys (10-20 members, in most cases no more than 12) usually held in private country houses (“the cabins”) during summer holidays. Most of the campers were aged between ten and sixteen. Starting with one such camp in 1974, the network grew to more than 80 camps in the last year of Communist rule (Figure 1). The main part of this movement was coordinated by Father Karel Herbst (dubbed “Kája”, i.e. Charlie) from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s and by Father Pavel Kadlečík (“Reverend”) in the late 1980s. While Herbst studied in a state-recognised seminary and joined the unofficial Salesian community after he became a priest, Kadlečík was officially an employee of the Prague public transport system who both studied for priesthood and was ordained underground (Vracovský 2002, Kriegler 2015).

The cabin camps built on some previous experiences of pre-war and underground Salesian educational activities. Before 1950, the Czech Salesians' work focused on pastoral care of young people, both general education and professional training of boys from lower social classes, and leisure activities for poor children. From the 1950s, despite the official ban of the Salesian order and imprisonment of many members, the Salesians continued in their attempts to fulfil their mission under the new conditions, albeit in a very limited scope (Křížková 1995). During the period of the Prague Spring in 1968-1969, the reformist Communist rulers did not revoke the ban on male religious orders. Despite that, some Salesian activities were

resumed, among them a limited number of summer camps. After “normalization” started in 1969, one unofficial camp continued to be held every summer by Fr. Jaroslav Lank, mainly in an unused parish house in České Petrovice, a small mountain village close to the Polish border in eastern Bohemia (Vracovský 2002).

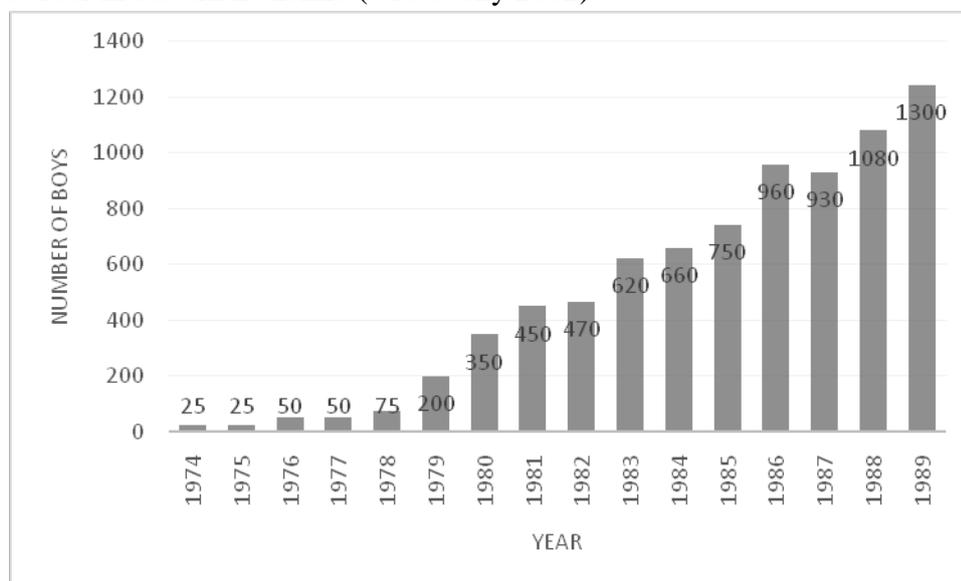


Fig. 1 Estimated number of boys taking part in summer cabins 1974–1989 (Vracovský 2002)

In 1974, the young priest Karel Herbst (“Kája”), who was about to become a secret member of the Salesians organized his first summer camp for boys inspired by the previous Salesian tradition. Several months later, his state license required for any public religious activity was withheld by the state authorities. Herbst could not continue his parish ministry and had to get a job as window cleaner in Prague. This proved to be a turning point in his life and for the Czech Salesians youth work. Over the next four years, Herbst organized and personally led one to three camps during every summer holiday. (Herbst 2005, Peroutková 2008)

The cabin camps were held in privately owned country houses.⁸ Relatively isolated cottages in woody and hilly regions of the country were preferred to accommodate the noisy groups of boys (Fig. 2). The facilities were of varying quality, some of them providing only very modest conditions. The camps had to appear as though they were private family vacations of relatives and their friends.⁹ That is why the typical summer camp accommodation in tents was not used. Old farm houses or similar buildings better prevented the outside observer from

⁸Secondary dwellings (cabins, cottages) in the country were extremely popular and quite widespread in Czechoslovakia during the normalization period. Cottages were perceived as refuges from state-controlled everyday life. Many cabin summer camps were held in such secondary dwellings. Some of the camps, however, were held in the primary dwellings of Christian families that shared their homes with campers for two weeks. As the number of camps grew, some cottages were purchased by sympathisers to serve as more or less dedicated bases for youth work. Usually, there was no technical staff at the facility during the camps so the counsellors were responsible also for cleaning, maintenance and related logistics.

⁹Some summer camps organized by other Catholic underground groups did not follow this pattern and used various cover stories to obtain the official approval of the local authorities.

monitoring the size of the group or its daily activities. Very often the attic of the cottage was turned into a large bedroom where all the campers slept.

Indeed, it took several years before the Communist police started to interfere with some of the camps (Vracovský 2002). Meanwhile, the fame of the camps quickly spread within informal networks of Catholic families. More and more parents wanted to send their children to the cabin camps. So in the late 1970s, a change of pattern was necessary. Herbst could not lead all the camps personally. He had to appoint other camp leaders and counsellors, mainly from among past participants. For several years, it was possible for Herbst to spend a few days at each of the camps. His job of window cleaner with no fixed working hours provided some flexibility for him to leave Prague for the necessary time.¹⁰ As the number of camps grew, Herbst could only spend a few hours at each camp. In the eighties, another young Salesian brother Fr. Pavel Kadlečík – dubbed Reverend – started to shadow all Herbst's activities related to the cabins network, serving as a driver, secretary and deputy to Herbst. Like Herbst, Kadlečík gradually became not only the manager of the camps, but also a mentor and role model for many of the campers and counsellors. From the autumn of 1986, Kadlečík took over the whole responsibility for cabin ministry. (Kriegler 2015)

The camps officially did not exist, so the organisers did not have to conform to any legal rules or regulations (regarding health, safety etc.). Each camp usually had one leader and one to three counsellors/facilitators (generally called the assistants). Auxiliary personnel (most often one or two cooks who would be mothers of campers, or relatives or friends of counsellors) sometimes supported the leader. Sometimes camps of older boys were held at privately owned or Church buildings in need of reconstruction and the campers joined in with the construction and maintenance work. (In the Communist economy of “planned scarcity” it was common practice for private houses to be built and repaired using the do-it-yourself method.)

Considering the obstacles and risks of illegal youth work in the Communist regime, the actual (explicit) content of the religious instruction at the cabin camps may seem very modest. Indeed, the Salesians are well-known for their simple spirituality and kindness rather than for their theological or academic virtuosity. The daily schedule of the camps included one lesson of religious education known as “the little theme” (or *témátka* in Czech) covering some topics of catechism or church history. The instruction took less than one hour. The quality of the lessons varied as the instruction was held by the leader or one of the counsellors, often upper secondary school students or young workers. The lesson was usually based on handwritten notes from the Christmas convention (see below). In the late eighties, some material for lessons was provided as “samizdat” (booklets self-published to evade an official ban). From 1988, a youth samizdat magazine *Čtení do krosny* (Readings from the Backpack) was published by the Salesians for the camp counsellors as well.

In addition, there were different prayers during the day, but (as more and more camps were led by lay leaders) usually not daily holy mass. The schedule always allowed for fun, games, hikes and sports. In their memories, the participants and counsellors often refer to the

¹⁰In principle, every healthy adult citizen had to be employed by a state owned firm or a cooperative and contribute to the building of socialism. This was another way in which the whole population was controlled.

attractive mix of adventure, fun, friendship and challenging conditions at the camps (Vracovský, 2002) spiced by the risk and protest against the totalitarian regime (forbidden fruit).

In 1977, Dana Ovečková and Dagmar Turková organised the first clandestine cabin camp for girls (with the help of Fr. Karel Herbst). From the early 1980s, Dagmar (“Dáša”) Větrovská and Fr. Petr Baran created youth groups for counsellors/staff of girl’s camps. Vracovský (2002) estimated that approximately three hundred girls took part in girl’s camps every year in the late eighties.

Figure 2 a, b. The campers, staff and the site of a cabin summer camp held in Iser Mountains (Jizerské hory) in 1986 (Photo authors).



The training of the camp leaders and counsellors

Unlike the typical youth programmes organised by Christian communities in free countries, there were no priests at most camps so lay leaders and counsellors (often young adults in their early 20s or even older adolescents themselves) were responsible for the daily running of the camps. This was quite extraordinary challenge and opportunity for personal growth in a country where any spontaneous initiative was suspicious and possibly dangerous to the state-planned and top-down controlled society.

The reliance on the young lay leaders demanded a system of training and guidance for the camp leaders and counsellors (assistants). Gradually, the summer cabin camps became the culminating activity of a more complex system of youth work and training. A relatively stable pattern evolved in the 1980s. Every year in autumn, a series of one-day hiking trips was organised on Saturdays and Sundays in almost all regions of the country.¹¹ The date of the next regional trip and meeting point were announced to the campers during the summer camp. All campers and counsellors were invited to take part in the trip held in their home region. Herbst (and later Kadlečík) convened and took part in all these trips. During the trips Herbst wanted to debrief every boy – he informally interviewed the camper or counsellor about his summer camp experience and learned about his interest in the following year's camp. Similarly, the leaders were interviewed about possible counsellors for future camps.

In late autumn and early spring, courses for the regional counsellors took place (usually as weekend retreats in some of the cabins). At the courses, all camp leaders and counsellors were provided with some religious education, as well as instruction in practical issues in camp leadership. The weekend courses were led by Herbst, Kadlečík or another member of the Salesian order. The programme often included some maintenance work on the buildings used for the camps, too.

In addition, a Christmas convention of leaders and counsellors was held in Prague. It was organised during the Christmas break and was attended by approximately 150 youngsters from all over the Czech Republic. The participants at the convention were divided into around five classes that met in private homes. A faculty of five or six lecturers was organised, consisting of underground priests and lay sympathisers. Over three days, each of the lecturers gradually visited all five classes in different parts of Prague and held a half-day lecture or workshop. One of the main goals was to transmit the syllabus of lessons for the summer camps. So some lectures given during the Christmas course comprised an outline of the lessons to be delivered at the camps with necessary background information and teaching tips. Other lectures covered different issues of camp organization, including some advice in the event that they were interrogated by the secret police. Some lessons were of a more general

¹¹There were minor exceptions. When the Salesians succeeded in establishing a local community in the southern Bohemian regional capital, České Budějovice, the local branch was able to organise camps independently. A similar situation evolved in the north Moravian industrial centre, Ostrava, that was quite distant from Prague. Still, Herbst tried to mix children from different regions and backgrounds in individual camps – e.g. boys from Prague or from other major industrial cities with their peers from the country.

nature and aimed at the counsellors' personal and intellectual growth.¹² Once during a convention, all the participants met on a hiking trip.

The spring round of regional trips was similar to the autumn trips. The new counsellors were introduced to the campers and the necessary information about the summer camps was passed on to their parents. Around Easter time, Herbst or Kadlečík travelled around the country and visited the new campers' families, checked the newly acquired buildings, fixed the schedules with the owners of the cabins etc.

At the end of the 1980s, the number of cabin camps grew so high and the education and training of the counsellors was so intensive that centralised organisation was no longer viable.¹³ So shortly before the fall of Communism, the organisation of the cabin camps was decentralised and divided into three areas – Bohemia (led by Pavel Kadlečík), North Moravia (Pavel Kuchař) and South Moravia (Josef Kopecký Jr.). On November 17th 1989, Czechoslovak students organised an independent protest march in Prague, the first of its kind since the Prague Spring. While the Salesians themselves usually did not take part in openly political opposition activities, several camp counsellors joined this march that started the Velvet Revolution. Within several weeks after the march the situation in the country had dramatically changed. In December 1989, the regular Christmas convention of the counsellors was held publicly for the first time at the campus of the Czech Technical University in Prague.¹⁴ The Salesians and their educational activities were no longer underground.

Discussion and conclusion

The independent clandestine activities, as well as the activities of “broader” civil society (e.g. official church activities), are considered to be an important factor in the transition from the Communist regime to a democratic society in Czechoslovakia (Skovajsa 2008). The Salesian youth work formed a relatively unique part of the independent underground activities or “parallel society” (Benda 1990). It also supported the religious segment of “broader” civil

¹²There was another opportunity for more rigorous study for the leaders and counsellors. The Salesians organised two systems of systematic clandestine study of philosophy or theology (Dvořák, 2007, Srovnalová, 2003). The “small theological study” took the form of very intensive week-long summer courses for adults and older youths also held in the cabin country houses. Alternatively, it might be organised as a series of evening lectures in private flats during the year. The “grand theology study” was an independent university study of philosophy and theology based on secret lectures by professors and lecturers expelled from official colleges (J. Zvěřina, F. Míša etc.). Participants were required to read assigned texts (published as samizdat) and oral examinations were held at the end of each course.

¹³We must not forget that the relatively complex management and coordination of the camps had to be done without phone calls and with only very limited use of letters sent by official post. Phone and post communication was monitored. Moreover, (private) phone lines were scarce in some areas of Czechoslovakia. Personal communication was used as much as possible.

¹⁴One lecture was given by the then vice-premier of the new, non-Communist government František Reichel.

society (in Skovajsa's terms) as it explicitly supported the activities of campers and counsellors within the official church whenever it was possible.¹⁵

During the normalization period, a colourful and heterogeneous network of different groups and individuals formed a parallel society (Fiala – Hanuš 1997). One distinctive feature of the Salesian educational activities was its broad regional and social scope. Underground educational or intellectual activities usually spread unevenly. They tend to be concentrated in major cities, e.g. seats of universities (Duraczyński, 1973). Salesian camps formed a wide network covering the whole country and were available to almost all Catholic youth. Simultaneously, they covered different social strata of society, including working class and rural families. Unlike typical dissent activities, the camps created space for the independent activity of school-age children and adolescents. High school and university students were a key source of leaders and counsellors because of their physical and intellectual capacity, and also they had a relatively large amount of free time during the summer holidays.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the underground activities for children were organised in a very different context than ghetto education or other previous cases of clandestine education. Obviously, parents of the campers either did not perceive the risks involved as being too high, or found the benefits of the camps more important than the possible negative consequences for their children. While for the vast majority of children participating attendance of the camps did not lead to any direct confrontation with the official powers, some risk of persecution was involved, and the organisers, most notably Karel Herbst, were under increased surveillance and pressure from the secret police.

The Communist school system was quite inclusive at the level of basic education (e.g. primary and lower secondary), no one was excluded from having access to schooling.¹⁶ The underground youth work in Communist Czechoslovakia complemented the formal schooling that provided relatively good education in some subjects (mathematics, science) but was very biased in other areas (social studies, humanities). Critics might object, however, that people participating in Christian youth camps were offered just another form of ideology.¹⁷ The witnesses believe that experience of agency, mutual trust and understanding in clandestine groups might be more important than the contents of the lessons given to the campers and supported the genuine personal growth of the participants (Kriegler 2015).

It seems that when the usual “normal” institutions became dysfunctional or completely disappeared, the strong charismatic personalities of teachers or youth leaders played a key role (Shner, 2015). In the case of the cabins, it was Karel Herbst, then Pavel Kadlečík and others. Within the broader system of Catholic independent education, Felix Davídek, František Fráňa or Josef Zvěřina and many others could be mentioned. In the case of Salesian activities, the charismatic personalities acted within the wider institutional framework of

¹⁵Salesians were not the sole organisers of (Christian) youth work. František (Tišek) Fráňa, a member of the “Silent Church”, and his followers ran the Radost Summer Camp formally organised as the summer holiday retreat of a co-operative from Brno.

¹⁶In this paper, we do not discuss the effects of the broad network of “special” schools that might result in some form of exclusion or discrimination of the Roma minority by today standards.

¹⁷Under adverse conditions it might be easier to pass on yet another ideology.

religion and under some supervision of their superiors. This institutional affiliation helped to avoid the dangers of cult/sectarian development that could be found in some other underground and/or religious movements. The network did not depend on just one person, responsibilities were shared, people could be replaced and quantitative and qualitative growth was possible.

As we noted above, the research on both official and underground education in Communist Czechoslovakia is only rudimentary, despite the fact that the Communist period is of key importance to the history and identity of the Czech people (Zounek – Šimáně 2014). Many aspects of the history of the second half of the 20th century are still to be studied. This paper is only a minor contribution to this task.

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