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Reunited—but Reconciled?: Christians in the Former East Germany

Editor's note: 2020 marks 30 years since the reunification of Germany. Jubilant scenes at the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 usually illustrate that peaceful revolution, which precipitated the dissolution of the Communist G.D.R. (German Democratic Republic) in October 1990. Yet the key role played by East German Christians in these events—heralding the swift collapse of the entire Communist bloc—is often overlooked.

Largely for propaganda purposes, the G.D.R. authorities allowed churches exceptional latitude for grassroots community organization. Ironically, this gave rise to the many opposition initiatives—including prayer meetings and church rallies—that preceded the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was a dark side to this policy of lenience, however: East German churches were also surveilled to an exceptional degree by the G.D.R.'s Ministry for State Security, commonly known as the Stasi.

*According to Berlin's Stasi Museum, by 1989 the Ministry had more than 90,000 staff and a further 200,000 unofficial collaborators [German: Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter] among the general populace of some 17 million—a far greater reach than that of the K.G.B. in the Soviet Union. The Ministry's Department XX/4 focused exclusively on infiltrating and undermining churches, particularly the majority Lutheran Church (see Elisabeth Braw, *God's Spies: The Stasi's Cold War Espionage Campaign inside the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).*

Thirty years on—and despite massive Western investment and efforts towards institutional integration—levels of life satisfaction and optimism remain significantly lower in the former G.D.R. than in former West Germany (see John Gramlich, "How the



Dresden's *Frauenkirche* (Church of Our Lady), destroyed in 1945 and rebuilt 1994-2005. The banner reads: "Blessed are the peacemakers. Matthew 5:9." (G. FAGAN)

attitudes of West and East Germans compare 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall," Pew Research Center, 18 October 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/18/how-the-attitudes-of-west-and-east-germans-compare-30-years-after-fall-of-berlin-wall/). Among concerning trends, a new and increasingly far-right political party, Alternative for Germany [German: Alternative für Deutschland], received roughly 20 percent of the vote in former East German regions in recent national and European elections—approximately double its support in former West Germany.

Despite massive parallel efforts to preserve and process Stasi records, the less visible legacy of spiritual damage wrought by the legitimized deception they document—including within churches and families—is still keenly felt. When it comes to former Stasi spies, justice has rarely been served, according to one Stasi Museum guide: "They disappeared into the land like rain."

In this and the next issue, the East-West Church Report offers personal reflections on these matters from Christians in the former G.D.R.

Being "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves": An Interview with Pastor Michael Kanig

Before his first sip of strong morning coffee in his airy Dresden kitchen, Pastor Michael Kanig always reads the daily "watchword" (German: Losung). This Saxony tradition originates in the 1720s with renowned Protestant revivalist Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf. It consists of two brief Old and New Testament verses, the latter either confirming or refining the first. (When the editor of the East-West Church Report met Pastor Kanig, for example, these were Hosea 12:6, "So you, by the help of your God, return; Observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually," and James 1:21, "Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." See www.losungen.de/die-losungen/).

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Pastor Kanig Interview *(continued from page 1)*

A fourth-generation Lutheran pastor, Kanig was born in 1938 in Eitzdorf, a village between Dresden and Leipzig in Saxony. For the major part of his life, this region belonged to the Communist G.D.R. (German Democratic Republic). Now retired, Pastor Kanig led the Zion Church in central Dresden from 1964 until 2001. While able to worship, his congregation of approximately 2,000 was under constant pressure to conform to government dictates, as Pastor Kanig described to the Report in late October 2019. The original conversation took place in German.



Pastor Michael Kanig with his wife, Margarete, at home in Dresden (G. FAGAN)

Given your family background, did you always think that you would become a pastor?

No. When I took my *Abitur* [school-leaving exams] in 1956, I had to decide whether I would become a teacher of ancient languages—I studied Latin and Greek—or whether I should study theology. I reasoned that it was important for there to be pastors in the G.D.R., whereas Latin and Greek were not so important. That was why I studied theology.

Having Latin and Greek was a great advantage, though. There were a handful of high schools in the G.D.R. that taught Latin and Greek. Ours in Dresden was the Holy Cross School [German: *Kreuzschule*], which had one of two significant boys' choirs in the G.D.R. In a choir each person also has to sing in such a way that his voice does not stand out. There must be unity, so each chorister has to listen to the others and adapt to them. That lesson remained with me for the rest of my life.

This was not long after the Stalinist period. Did you experience anti-religious hostility from the state?

The situation was always tricky. The state doctrine was of course dialectical materialism, including atheism. However, the G.D.R. was in a particular situation, in that we had the Federal Republic of Germany [i.e. West Germany] next door. The G.D.R. also wanted to play a certain role on the international level. That meant that everything that happened in the G.D.R. had this aspect: How did West

Germany, or the United Nations, view it? There were times when the G.D.R. said, “Our allegiance is to the Soviet Union, our big brother, and nothing else interests us.” Those were bad times for the church. But from around the mid-1960s, the G.D.R. tried to participate in the international arena, which meant that the authorities had to demonstrate some democracy and human rights. They could not be as severe as in the Soviet Union—for instance, there were five theological faculties in our state universities: Berlin, Greifswald, Halle, Jena, and Leipzig. I studied theology in Leipzig, at the Karl Marx University! (Laughs.)

Naturally, these state faculties were closely watched. We were not timid, but we knew there was no point in appearing so provocative that we would end up in prison. There were people who did that, but we held back. It all began in school. We listened to what we were told, while what we thought was something quite different.

We did listen to programs broadcast from West Germany. We knew what was happening over there. Sometimes, we knew more than West Germans—for example, about literature, which was very important to us. Back then, we devoured [Max] Frisch, [Friedrich] Dürrenmatt—and Heinrich Böll, obviously—while people in the West read crime novels, perhaps. (Grins.) Whenever anyone came over from the West, they generally expressed surprise at how informed we were, and at how we tried to strengthen one another with what we were really thinking. The G.D.R. authorities knew all this, but foreign policy was also important to them. They were dependent upon Western loans and wanted to sell G.D.R. goods—some, like cameras, were quite sought after. This state of tension provided a corridor in which the church could operate—more than in neighboring Czechoslovakia, for example, where the situation was really bad.

So on the one hand, the G.D.R. was more hardline ideologically, but on the other hand, it was like a Western-facing display window for the whole Communist bloc.

How did this dual policy affect your Zion Church here in Dresden?

The old Zion Church was burned out in the Allied bombing raid of 1945. There was nothing there but ruins

Pastor Michael Kanig's study, Dresden (G. FAGAN)



after the War. Then, in 1956, a barrack-style building was built nearby, and we were able to hold services there. That lasted until 1979, when the regional church office asked if we would consider having a church built by the Swedes! Of course, we did not say no. This again happened for foreign policy reasons: Swedish Lutherans had made an offer to come and build a wooden church here in Saxony. It was consecrated in 1982.



Swedish-built Zion Church in Dresden, consecrated in 1982 (G. FAGAN)

So you were able to maintain contact with Western Christians?

Yes. Many East German congregations also had contacts with West German congregations. We were lucky in that the pastor of our partner church, St. Martin's in Braunschweig, originally came from Leipzig and was interested in maintaining contact. He visited us, as did the deacon and choir of St. Martin's. Of course, this all had to be one-sided [most East Germans not being permitted to travel to the West], but they stubbornly kept at it.

Were the legal restrictions otherwise similar to those in other Communist states?

Yes. The state was divided into regions that were further subdivided, and every local administration had one consultant for church affairs. The local level was responsible for ensuring compliance with the law. They were particularly focused on a couple of points. The first was the congregational bulletin, our bi-monthly four-page church newsletter. We always had to get it approved in advance. The second was a display case on the street outside our church.

This was always a game of cat and mouse, sometimes ridiculous. Once, for instance, my old choir classmates and I organized a concert—we had formed a men's choir, and we sang Biedermeier-era music from the 1830s. Our graphic artist designed an advertisement for the display case illustrated with a joyful Pentecost ox [German: *Pfingstochse*, a Pentecost tradition in German-speaking rural areas in which cattle are paraded out to pasture for the first time in the spring; the leading "Pentecost ox" is adorned with flowers and ribbons]. The local state official responsible for monitoring us stood outside, issuing threats. I was summoned for interrogation: "You can't do that! That is not a church event!" (Laughs.) "Why not?" I asked. "The church can be cheerful too, sometimes!" We did it, of course.



Zion Church in Dresden, interior (G. FAGAN)

Then in the 1980s we had an artistically gifted choirmaster who was a bit of a rebel—a young guy fresh out of church music school. He also made a poster for the display case, with the slogan: "The Way is the Goal." For Christians, this was obviously a reference to "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" [John 14:6]. But to the authorities, this was an affront to their slogan, "Our Goal is Communism." "We have a goal

before us set by the Party. We are moving towards it, and everyone must follow." If someone now says that *the Way* is the goal, the next step is to develop something off their path, and that was not allowed. I guessed what would happen, but I said, "Let's display the poster and see what happens." Sure enough, I was summoned for interrogation a few days later. "What is this? What are you doing?" (Laughs.)

Could there be serious consequences in these situations?

I must say, I was lucky on many occasions. We had a mayor who was rather moderate—an economist who understood very well how unsustainable things were in the G.D.R. He had words with his people who were responsible for state security. Also, every district was supposed to have one official who liaised between church personnel and the state. For some reason, they did not appoint one for our district. So in Dresden we had a relatively reasonable relationship with the authorities. In nearby Leipzig and Chemnitz—then named Karl-Marx-Stadt—things were much more difficult.

Was there ever a time here when the authorities tried to close down churches?

It never went so far. But young people were fought over always. For us Lutherans, confirmation was essentially the moment when a young person said whether they chose the path of faith. That was exactly when the state intervened and said, "Everyone is to make a commitment to the Socialist state when they are 14 years old"—with the *Jugendweihe* [German:

youth consecration]. At first, there were disputes. [Editor's note: Notably, German Chancellor Angela Merkel—daughter of an East German Lutheran pastor—refused to attend the Communist *Jugendweihe* ceremony and opted only for confirmation. See Elisabeth Braw, *God's Spies: The Stasi's Cold War Espionage Campaign inside the Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019, 50]. But

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Pastor Kanig Interview *(continued from page 3)*

then the church resolved not to victimize the children. We agreed that the *Jugendweihe* would be at 14, but also that young people would be able to maintain their contact with the church—perhaps intensify it—for one more year, so that confirmation would take place at 15. In practice, this meant that our workload giving confirmation lessons became a little lighter, as our youth work was spread out over a third year. I was glad even, because at 14, young people sometimes do not really know what they are doing, but their development has advanced somewhat by the time they are 15.

When the authorities understood that their attempts to influence young people were ineffective, however, they tried something new [in the late 1970s.] They introduced pre-military training [German: *vormilitärische Ausbildung*] into the senior high school grades. The reaction of many parents and young people was: “In 1946 you said, ‘No more war!’ and ‘No weapons!’ But now you are doing this?” Many refused to participate, and there were disputes once again—some pupils were expelled. The response from the church was rather skillful. Outside the United Nations’ building, there is a Soviet statue called, “Let Us Beat Our Swords into Plowshares” [echoing Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:4]. Some church members made cloth patches with this image and slogan on them, and young people loved to wear these. There were very fierce disputes over that, to the point that headteachers were summoned by the education authorities. But then church leaders weighed in. We warned the governmental Commission for Church Affairs that we would make such a fuss that they would have their ears boxed in the international arena. The school expulsions were then reversed.

So Protestants in East Germany held a particularly pacifist stance?

Yes. After 1945, Germany’s Lutherans were at first in a single church, the E.K.D. [German: *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*]. But after 1961 [when the Berlin Wall was built] this became unrealistic, so the G.D.R. received its own association made up of the churches in its different regions: Saxony, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Brandenburg. They were more strident on an ethical proposition that was not really adopted in the West: “According to God’s will, there should be no war.” [German: *Krieg soll es um Gottes Willen nicht sein.*] Of course, one might ask how peace-loving we really were! But the idea was that we were supposed to be peace-loving in our internal politics—

and we did not understand why our young people were being trained to use firearms.

That was quite different from the stance of the Communist authorities.

Yes. And that meant that the church was, if not popular, then trusted. Many young people, students, and academics—it was mostly educated people—knew that on church premises they could speak openly with one another. And because of that, church premises—and especially the groups that gathered there—were taken particularly seriously by the Stasi secret police. These groups developed social theories and demands, which became ever more concrete during the 1980s.

For example, south of Leipzig we had brown coal fields and chemical plants—hideous polluters. One notorious coal factory was called Espenhain. An appeal started called “A Mark for Espenhain.” The idea was to raise funds for environmental protection measures, and so people each paid a single Mark [less than \$1] into a particular bank account—within a couple of weeks this had crashed the G.D.R.’s banking system! Such things occurred through church circles.

In his novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek brilliantly described this mindset of saying, “Yes, Sir, right away!”—of taking the authorities by their word to a degree that they did not want. Doing this showed us that there were far more of us than we initially thought. Groups began to network with one another in cities like Dresden and Magdeburg. There was a conciliar process whereby social issues like militarization, indoctrination, and press freedom were discussed in people’s free time. This spread wider and began to make an impact.

We followed truly democratic rules in these small circles. For a short time after 1989, people from these church groups moved effortlessly into politics. [Reinhard] Höppner, the first Minister President of Saxony-Anhalt, came from our student community, for example. [Wolfgang] Thierse, later president of the Bundestag [German national parliament], was a member of the Catholic student community in Berlin.

Did the young people who met under the church umbrella view Christianity as something positive simply because it was not part of the state, or were they really influenced by Christian principles?

That spectrum was very broad. Of course, there were people who said, “We are going to the church’s premises, but what the church itself has to say does not concern us.” But my experience was that when you talked to young people, and when young people talked to each other, the New



“Swords into Plowshares.
Micah 4:3” logo
(Source: www.friedensdekade.de)

Testament—especially the Beatitudes—was continually present. They were fighting without success, and then they encountered these formulae: “Love your enemies,” “Do good to those who hate you.” What they said may have sounded different: “If we mutually destroy one another, no one wins. It is much more



Downtown Dresden (G. FAGAN)

sustainable if we regard other people as human beings like us, and ask, ‘Why do you think that way?’ and, ‘What do you actually want when you dictate to us how we should think?’”

There were some quite radical church movements in the G.D.R. that were popular with young people, such as the Church from Below [German: *Die Kirche von Unten*.]

Yes. The background is that, if a free opinion is not tolerated by a state, then it continues underground, festers, and breaks out somewhere—usually in the wrong place. But when you can speak freely with one another and also express your thoughts through writing or music, then they are debated and questioned. So that was the idea—that people should be able to speak freely with one another in church and feel that they are being taken seriously.

What happened was that young adults and teenagers became increasingly shaped by one objective during the 1980s: “We must put a stop to the sclerotic state of the G.D.R.; we must take it by its word and uphold its socially-minded slogans. Whenever they stop us from doing that, we must stand up and say, ‘We cannot go on like this!’” There were some more radical people who said, “We must resist atheism and make our pacifist beliefs known publicly.” That often ended up going off on a different track.

Particularly in Berlin, the Church from Below was a shake-up to the church institutions, because they constantly feared that the state authorities would say, “That is not allowed, we are closing you down!” Both church leaders and junior pastors continually had to ensure that the Church from Below remained a church activity. So they said, “The church is there for everyone, but not for everything.”

Some church leaders and pastors were later found to have been informers for the Stasi secret police. Do you think the church has since done enough to deal with Stasi collaboration by church personnel?

I think the church provided a list of all its pastors to the Gauck Authority very early in the 1990s. [Colloquially named after its first director and former pastor, Joachim Gauck, this is the Federal Commission for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former G.D.R.] That body checked to see

whether any pastors were burdened by involvement with state security. I think there were only a few in Saxony, and they were suspended as a result. I know of one in Dresden, [Hans-Richard] Mosemann (d. 2017). These cases could often be tragic—Pastor Mosemann’s congregation was in the Blasewitz neighborhood

of Dresden, near the River Elbe. One day his teenage son was playing with friends by the river, in shallow water, and he found a gun. I do not know if he told his father about it, but in any case his father was accused of not declaring this gun to the authorities. This was against the law on firearms, and he could have been imprisoned for it. He was told that he would not be charged if he collaborated [with the Stasi]. Mosemann was a good pastor, but on that point he caved. I do not know to what extent he reported on his colleagues.

Were you aware of being monitored by the Stasi?

I discovered only later that the janitor who took care of our church building in the 1980s was an informant. He was a Seventh-day Adventist and had been a construction soldier [German: *Bausoldat*, unarmed G.D.R. military serviceman]. He told the Stasi what was going on in our church—for example, the Swedes also gave us a Brother typewriter with a special kind of colored ribbon. After these ribbons were used, this janitor took them out of the waste paper basket and gave them to the Stasi! But I already suspected something of this sort, so I only wrote innocuous things on that typewriter. At some point prior to 1989 this janitor was so far from the role I had asked him to fulfill that he quit. I told him that he had to work in an orderly manner if he expected to receive payment. When the Stasi files were opened after 1989, they said that he “left this important post upon his own initiative.” I do not know if there were any other informants—I looked at the Stasi files very early on, when not everything was accessible.

I think that janitor did inform on members of our congregation, but either the state authorities were lenient—this being Dresden—or they saw us as relatively unimportant. No one was ever arrested. One of our confirmation candidates wore a “Swords Into Plowshares” patch and was nearly expelled from his high school, but he was able to join his class again on appeal. Once again, I can say that I was lucky.

So that is what it was like. You had to be cautious, and consider both what you were saying, and how you were saying it—all while not betraying the commission with which you were entrusted. You had to be “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” [Matt. 10:16]. ♦

“And he went on his way rejoicing”:

An Interview with Professor Dr. Volker and Mechthild Hofmann



**Professor Dr. Volker and Mechthild Hofmann
at home in Halle (G. FAGAN)**

Professor Dr. Hofmann, in your autobiography you note that your brother moved to West Germany in 1958, when people were still free to leave East Germany. Why did you decide to stay?

Volker: In my Christian student community in Leipzig I came to the realization that I should stay where I was put. Where God has placed us is where our assignment is. Who would change this miserable G.D.R., if not those who were able due to their disposition, education, and courage? That was one of the most difficult aspects of the G.D.R. Three million people left—the best ones, who knew they could find work in the West. It was a miracle that the peaceful revolution of 1989 succeeded despite the fact that those people were missing. [The departure of three million able people] was the fundamental reason why nothing changed here after 1990—or only very slowly.

Was your Christian student community seen as opposing the Communist state?

Volker: Yes. Living as a church community was essentially the only possibility of living in opposition to the state. You had a certain degree of protection—it was not so easy for the authorities to remove a pastor, for example. Although that did happen—back in 1957, our student pastor, Siegfried Schmutzler, was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for leading Bible study in Böhlen, a workers’ settlement near Leipzig. He urged people to live as Christians—not to put up with everything and not to lie, but to live in truth. Anchored in the church, you could do many things for which you would otherwise lack the courage—the Christian community offered solidarity outside your immediate family.

Were you both naturally drawn to faith as children?

Mechthild: We were shaped by our father’s job as pastor. Faith was our daily life. To those in the ordinary world,

A retired pediatric surgeon, Professor Dr. Volker Hofmann spent most of his career at a Catholic hospital in the city of Halle, then in the Communist G.D.R. (German Democratic Republic). Born in Dresden just weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War, he was fortunate to be taken outside the city on the eve of the devastating Allied bombing raid of 13th February 1945. As a teenager, he was drawn to the city’s Reconciliation Lutheran Church, where he met and married the pastor’s daughter Mechthild—sister of Michael Kanig, who would also become a pastor (see pp. 1-5 in this issue).

In 2018 Professor Dr. Hofmann published a fascinating autobiography, whose title is taken from Acts 8:39, “And he went on his way rejoicing” (Volker Hofmann, Er aber zog seine Straße fröhlich, Magdeburg: Janos Stekovic, 2018). The editor of the East-West Church Report met the Hofmanns in Halle in late October 2019. The original conversation took place in German.

pastors’ children always seemed isolated, but we felt protected. We were completely at home in the *Kurrende* [German: Protestant children’s choir]. When we were five years old, we began to learn the texts of all the hymns. Music shaped us to an incredible degree—Bach, Handel, Schütz... we learned it all.

Once you are a teenager, you wish to leave this confined space. But the socialist world appeared narrow in a different way. In high school we had a practical component—the so-called “workdays in production” [German: *Unterrichtstag in der sozialistischen Produktion*]. One day a week we would go into a manufacturing plant—often it was very stupid work that did not inspire us. Our world was more interesting, and I did not need anything very different.

Were you marginalized at school?

Mechthild: Often, because I never joined the F.D.J. [German: *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, the G.D.R.’s socialist youth organization]. We had lessons in atheism, and Christian pupils were asked questions like, “Where is your God?” When you are 14, you cannot answer that. I was only permitted to take the *Abitur* [school-leaving exams] thanks to one teacher who greatly supported me. He spoke very forcefully—he said that if I were not permitted, he would resign.

Volker: In dictatorships, people are coerced using their children’s education prospects.

Professor Dr. Hofmann, like your brother-in-law Pastor Michael Kanig, you attended Dresden’s Holy Cross School (German: *Kreuzschule*), with its famous choir?

Volker: Yes, a very old school. Its pupils mainly came from Christian families, naturally, because they sang Christian music. It was an island in a red sea. The G.D.R. even promoted it as an advertisement, in the same way as sports.

But my path to church in my youth was very different. My father left the Catholic Church. My mother remained, but she had no contact with it. Sunday mornings were always a bad time at home—my mother would sweep the rooms and scold because everything was dirty. Where could I go? On Sunday mornings, only church. I sat at the back and dozed. At confirmation it became more interesting—our Lutheran church youth group was the only point of convergence for young people who did not want to join the F.D.J. At university in Leipzig I took on further responsibility in my student congregation. It was a path that led ever further. Living in a Christian way seemed like the only thing that made sense. What the Communists said about the working class, justice, and so on did not apply to us. We had something quite different—the Sermon on the Mount, a completely new way of defeating hatred, ending wars.

The state supported militarization?

Volker: Yes, from the mid-1950s. Immediately after the [Second World] War, we children were strictly forbidden even to carry toy tanks in our satchels. But then weapons were brought into schools and military service was introduced. Everything was turned on its head.

In your book, you refer to the May 1968 demolition of St. Paul's University Church in Leipzig as another point when opposition between the Christian community and the Communist regime crystallized.

[A short video of the demolition may be viewed at <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2tnc81>.]

Volker: Due to an official visit by Walter Ulbricht [then leader of the G.D.R.], the authorities decided that Leipzig should be remodeled as a socialist city. St. Paul's Church would have to go from Karl Marx Square. St. Paul's was a 13th-century Gothic church, Mendelssohn was married there [in 1837], and it survived the War practically unscathed. The city council approved its demolition almost unanimously. The only dissenting vote came from a member who was a Lutheran pastor. However, after 1989 it emerged that he had been working for the Stasi, and that this had just been a provocation to encourage others to speak out and so flush out any opposition.

Mechthild: We went to watch the demolition. There was a huge crowd of people there. Right to the last moment before the explosion, no one could believe it. Afterwards, the bells of the churches all around rang out in protest.

Volker: That event changed many people's minds. Up until that point, many people remained neutral. But together with the events of the same year in Czechoslovakia [the crushing of the Prague Spring in August 1968], this meant that a significant—if not large—portion of the population became politically engaged. Step by step, protest behavior began. The Helsinki Accords of 1975 brought demands

for human rights, and then came the expatriations of [East German protest singer] Wolf Biermann in 1976 and [East German writer] Reiner Kunze in 1977. The mood of protest grew ever stronger. The authorities kept thinking that if they allowed a valve to open, pressure would be released, and they could carry on as before. Yet by the end in 1989, three million had left but the kettle was still at boiling point.

During this period you worked as a pediatric surgeon at St. Barbara's Hospital here in Halle. It was a Catholic children's hospital—was that something very unusual in the G.D.R.?

Volker: Church hospitals did not exist in any other socialist country—only in the G.D.R. There were 17 Catholic hospitals and some Protestant ones as well—they all existed before the War. Around 50 to 60 Catholic nuns worked in ours, but their number grew ever fewer as the older sisters died, and no novices joined.

Was religious activity restricted there?

Volker: We had complete freedom inside the hospital. Communists' children dutifully prayed along! They had no clue what prayer was. They just liked it, and the nuns were kind—they were always there for the children.

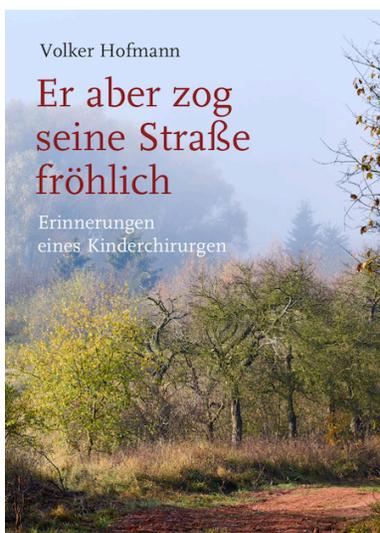
From 1977 onwards, you were permitted to travel abroad, including to Western Europe and the U.S. How did that come about?

Volker: There were three reasons. My impertinence—I received an invitation to travel, and I wanted to accept it. If I were denied permission, I would have to tell the host the reason. The authorities did not want that—they did not want to be depicted negatively abroad. The second reason was that we had developed a method of ultrasound diagnosis for children, and I was an advertisement for this. The third reason was that I worked at a church hospital, so they did not care so much whether I returned. But I did come back—I always came back.

Did you have to pass on information to the East German authorities after your trips about the Westerners you had met?

Volker: Yes. I always had to give two reports—one political and one technical. In the technical report I could describe quite honestly where I had lectured, what logistical problems I had experienced, and so on. In the political report I wrote, for example, "In America they very much wish to get to know more colleagues in the G.D.R." On the contrary, they wanted the opposite—not to have contacts. I was essentially saying how things should be. At the time, there were two or three pediatric surgeons in America who were way ahead of us in their operating methods, and we needed them to come to the G.D.R. so that we would have those possibilities too.

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Hofmanns Interview *(continued from page 7)*

There is an important point here. When you force a dictatorship into dialogue—as on human rights with the Helsinki Accords—the dictatorship always loses. We were always the stronger ones in dialogue. Ultimately, that is why the whole edifice collapsed in 1989. Through the Helsinki Accords, demands for freedom of movement arose. It all came to a head in the 1980s. To start with, there were very few *Ausreiser* [“ones who leave,” i.e., people who demanded the right to leave the G.D.R.] They were badly treated—fired from their jobs or imprisoned. But that changed as their numbers grew—they could not imprison everybody. After waiting for around two years, it actually became possible to leave for the West.

But you still did not try to leave?

Völker: No, we were the *Hierbleiber* [“ones who remain”]. When friends who were leaving came to say goodbye, they said, “How long will you wait? Think of the children!” So the question did arise, but it was not possible, partly due to our older relatives here. There was also a certain defiance involved—the reflection that, if we go too, then we will be giving up this whole part of Germany to the Communists. Then they will get what they want—for everyone in opposition to leave and for them to have free rein here. We did not want that.

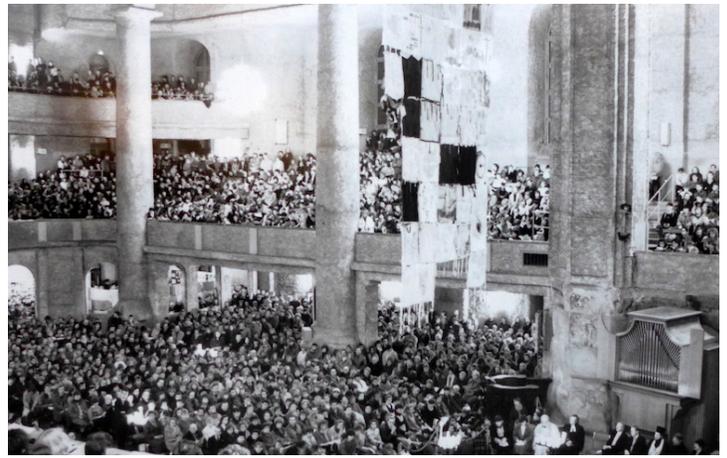
By this time the protest movement in the church was becoming influential.

Mechthild: Being active in our congregation, I experienced this from the early 1980s. Churches across the whole G.D.R. observed the so-called *Friedensdekade* [“ten days for peace”] in early November. What happened here in Halle was this: From all over town, people processed peacefully to the main church on Market Square. We were not allowed to carry placards, but people streamed from all directions, praying and singing. People called out, “Peace! Be peaceful!” The police were watching, but they never did anything.

The peaceful revolution of 1989 began with the Church. The *Friedensdekade* was a forerunner of it. This is frequently discussed now—did the Church really start it? Definitely. There is no doubt about it. The Church initiated people into the use of genuinely peaceful means to try to alter their circumstances. There were of course people who were not Christians who joined us—but the Church organized it.

Professor Dr. Hofmann, in the 1980s you yourself became active in a protest group called Christian Medics Taking Social Responsibility [German: *Christliche Mediziner in sozialer Verantwortung*].

Völker: That meant being opposed to the dictatorship in a specific way. We were against the introduction of military training for schoolchildren after 8th grade, including summer camps where they had to do shooting practice and perform military exercises. There was also instruction in how to defend against a nuclear attack—absurdities like lying in a corner. As medics, we maintained that the only defense was to disarm.



Peace forum in the Church of the Holy Cross [*Kreuzkirche*], Dresden, on 13 February 1982, the anniversary of the bombing of Dresden in World War II. Participants subsequently marched silently to the ruin of the bombed Church of Our Lady [*Frauenkirche*], where they lit candles in remembrance. (Source: STASI MUSEUM)

That meant disarmament not only in the West, but also in the East. And that was a trigger for the regime: disarmament in the East! For them, such a demand could only come from class enemies and traitors—people who should be watched.

And the Stasi did surveil you.

Völker: Yes, it began after my trip to America in 1987. While I was there, I contacted the I.P.P.N.W. [International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War], an international group founded by Americans and Russians. You could be an individual member everywhere except the G.D.R., where the members were a group of 40 Party comrades. Our group [Christian Medics Taking Social Responsibility] was opposed to them, and we wanted to become members. So while I was in Chicago I went to meet with the I.P.P.N.W. treasurer. I explained to him that we were not allowed to join, and suggested that they expel the official G.D.R. group—he had no idea about our situation. My appeal worked—the G.D.R. Politburo was forced to accept individual membership, and we were able to join about a year later.

But I don’t know what I was thinking—I was stupid. The Soviets sat at the top level of this organization. A Russian based in Chicago found out about my meeting and informed Moscow. From there, a directive went to the Stasi, who began 24-hour surveillance of me. My Stasi file begins with: “He is making unauthorized contact with the U.S. section of I.P.P.N.W.” For the regime, this was the worst thing a person could do—be politically active behind their backs in America. They began to surveil me in early 1988, and it became ever more intense. They conducted house searches, including here.

Where we are sitting now?

Völker: Yes. They wanted to know precisely what we were doing and with whom we were in contact. On one occasion, we noticed that every item in my desk had been moved—but with precision, so that we could still find everything. I went to take out some concert tickets, and they were not there. They were in a completely different



**Former Stasi headquarters, now Stasi Museum, Berlin
(G. FAGAN)**

compartment. So they had swapped the contents of the compartments in my desk without paying attention to what was in them, and everything was no longer in the right order. They entered our house very skillfully, using a skeleton key.

Mechthild: Later on, after 1989, we saw that they had a plan of our house, showing the entrances and where everything was situated. We were also watched by our neighbors on this street. At the time, we knew about the section representative [German: *Abschnittsbevollmächtigter*], who was responsible for this particular area.

Volker: They were like the block wardens [*Blockwärtter*] that the Nazis had. He would ask me things like, “Are you going on another big trip?” He was not in the loop about whether my travel had been approved.

Mechthild: Then there was our immediate neighbor—we did not know about that at the time. Later on we asked her, and she said yes, they did ask her to do it, but that she only said good things about us. I did not expect it of the Catholic hospital, however. That totally dumbfounded me. We had limitless trust in that hospital—in the doctors, in the nuns.

Volker: There were three people there who informed on us. We had no idea at the time.

What happened when you found out? How did these people respond?

Volker: None of them admitted it—none of them came to us of their own accord. That would have been the best solution. To say, “Listen here, I’m sorry, I was pressurized, I was blackmailed,” or something like that. But none of them actually did that. They all said they had nothing to do with it. So naturally, I made copies of the Stasi reports about me and asked them to read them through. “Look, here’s your report. It says here, ‘Audio tape report from 28th March, 1988.’” I read it out to them. Their response was, “Then it must have been like that.”

Mechthild: Not one of them admitted it, even when it was simply placed in front of them. We could not understand how someone could act like this.

Were these people previously friendly towards you?

Volker: Very friendly, to the point that we trusted them completely. For example, I always told the hospital’s

administrative director everything. He always knew exactly which schools I was going to visit, and it turned out that he prevented those visits. It did surprise me at the time—that when I arrived, the director of the school would say, “Unfortunately, we have to cancel today.” I did wonder how that could happen at such short notice. Later, I read all about it in my Stasi file. One teacher who let my visit go ahead despite everything was reprimanded by the Party.

If someone was previously very friendly towards you, but suddenly acts strangely on seeing these reports, that is an indirect admittance of guilt, in a way.

Volker: The thing is, none of them expected someone to come along later and say, “Listen here!” I headed a department at our medical association which organized hearings for medics burdened by this—who had gone against their professional honor by snitching on colleagues. Only one wrote to me afterwards to say that he was grateful for this hearing, that he was now relieved of a burden. (Sighs.) They all believed that this would never become known. Before people intervened, a great deal was burned back in 1989, so everyone believed—about themselves: “It’s gone, thank God!” The Stasi officers with whom they liaised all said, “Don’t worry, everything has been destroyed.” That is why there was this strange reaction.

You were in the unusual position of being granted access to your Stasi file in March 1992, somewhat earlier than the general public in Halle. Why did that happen, and how did it affect the impact of what you discovered?

Volker: Halle’s Martin Luther University was evaluated under the local law *On the Renewal of the Universities* [German: *Hochschulerneuerungsgesetz*, adopted in Saxony-Anhalt Region in July 1991 with the aim of purging Stasi collaborators from university staff]. But who would conduct this evaluation? It had to be people who themselves had been evaluated. I went through this process as a member of a round table that was to evaluate the medical faculty.

The archivist who gave me my file told me not to be shocked. I read it and requested the real names behind the aliases. My first reaction was, “Our administrative director—this cannot be true!” He was also the Catholic parish chairman, so in a very trusted position. No one knew, and the craziest thing about it was that his brother-in-law was the senior head of our hospital and so was his superior. He did not know either, and their wives did not know anything. They were all very close. “What do I do now?” I thought.

I went along to the clinic because I knew that this Dr. Willms, the senior head, would be in his office until at least 8 p.m. He was a little brusque with me because he wanted to finish his work. “I have something to report to you,” I said. It grew darker and darker, and we lit a candle. I told him everything. He could not grasp it—his whole world suddenly collapsed, that of his family as well as the hospital.

First we agreed to say nothing about it. In the meantime, his brother-in-law [i.e. the collaborator] had

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Hofmanns Interview *(continued from page 9)*

become sick—he had developed a brain tumor. That is a curious thing in itself; so many people fell seriously ill during that period. Then we discussed at length—would we confront him, or not? We decided not to do it, because he was in the final phase of his illness.

We did not tell his wife either until after he had died. It was even more terrible for her. She could not take it in—she said to me, “How can you spread such things? My husband never did that! What you are doing is terrible!” But then she said, “Please come over to our house so we can talk about this.” I agreed, naturally, and I made sure to take copies of the transcripts of her husband’s taped reports to the Stasi. She sat with her daughters and said, “Now tell us again, how can this be the case? My husband only ever said good things about you. How can you spread such bad things about him?” I then read the taped reports to her. I left without saying anything. What else could I say?

Collaboration was her husband’s second life. And why did he do it? He was caught drunk driving and was told he would either lose his license—and so his job—or he could work with the Stasi. “Don’t worry, we will just visit you every two weeks, and you will tell us about what is going on at the clinic.” So that is what he did.

And the Stasi collaborators’ identities were later revealed publicly?

Völker: That only happened here in Halle, in no other city. All informants’ aliases and real names were published in the local newspaper [the local edition of *Bild*, during July and August 1992]. Every day they



(Left) February 1988 document from Stasi file on Professor Dr. Hofmann (Source: V. HOFMANN) and (right) Stasi key copying kit (Source: STASI MUSEUM)

covered a different letter of the alphabet. *Neues Forum* [New Forum, an East German pro-democracy movement founded in September 1989] had made everything secure. In late 1989 there were fires everywhere—attempts to destroy government records. In Halle, *Neues Forum* blocked the Stasi offices—no one was allowed in or out, whereas in many other places much was destroyed or otherwise not processed. Here, every name was found and sorted—most crucially, the records containing people’s real names, not just their aliases.

Do you think the full transparency that took place here in Halle was preferable, and did it have significant consequences?

Völker: Definitely. For example, there was one collaborator who even used my name as an alias. He remained the medical director of a large local hospital right up until the names were published. The very next morning, he was fired. There was a clean up, and that should have happened in other cities. Relationships became clear. People who had nothing to do with the Stasi were no longer suspected, while people whom you might have considered your best friends were debunked. It certainly helped. ♦

“It was truly marvelous what God did here”:

An Interview with Rev. Dr. Pavel Černý

Rev. Dr. Pavel Černý is the retired head of the Church of the Brethren [Czech: Církev Bratrská], a Prague-based Protestant denomination whose mixed origins include a U.S. Congregationalist mission sent to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1860s and a local Presbyterian spiritual revival during the same period. The term “Brethren” in the church’s title—used by several Protestant denominations in the Czech Republic—indicates that it is also deeply influenced by the distinct tradition of the Czech Reformation, of which Rev. Dr. Černý is a scholar (see his article on pp. 13-15).

Supporting a large Christian bookstore, Rev. Dr. Černý’s 300-strong downtown Prague congregation attracts numerous intellectuals due to the proximity of Charles University and other Czech national institutions. It is also the oldest community in the Church of the Brethren: Founded in 1880, it has remained on its present site since 1907. Since 1989, the community’s daughter congregations in the Czech capital have grown from four to thirteen, and several more are in an early stage of development.

The editor of the East-West Church Report met with Rev. Dr. Černý at the church premises in downtown Prague in November 2019. The original conversation took place in English.

Your experience as a pastor here encompasses the later Communist period in then Czechoslovakia. What were conditions like for Czech Protestants back then?

Inside the church, we were relatively free. The situation varied from country to country in the Communist bloc. In East Germany, for example, the churches were able to conduct social work. In Czechoslovakia, the Communists stopped all our social work—only worship inside religious buildings was allowed. We also had to be constantly vigilant, as there were some people coming to church in order to spy on us, sometimes bringing a tape recorder in their bags. When I used the telephone I

could sometimes hear strange noises, because I was being surveilled.

It proved a great advantage to me that my father had been persecuted, as I had some training in how to deal with this. My father was a pharmacist who started a factory producing different medicines. Being a factory chief was an important position, and in 1958 the Communists told him he had to stop all his activities in the church—he was a lay preacher—and join the



Rev. Dr. Pavel Černý at his church (G. FAGAN)

Communist Party in order to continue running his factory. When he refused, he was fired immediately. For some time he was unable to find work. Also when I was a boy, our pastor and four of our church elders were sent to prison simply for working with young people. [See the *East-West Church Report*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2018), 2.]

I became a pastor in 1974. I was aware of [local human rights] initiatives like Charter 77, and I knew some pastors from the mainline Presbyterian Church who had signed that, but I was not sure whether this was the best way of proceeding. I had a professor of church history who taught me that our vision, our eschatology, should be long-term. If you signed Charter 77, you would immediately lose your license to preach and be assigned other work, such as responsibility for the boilers in several buildings. A boilerman's wages were two or three times higher than a pastor's wages, but you were not allowed to preach, whereas I was running a church and wanted to carry on helping people there.

Were you ever interrogated by the secret police?

Yes. Uniformed police typically delivered the request, but after that there were only secret police, without uniforms. I was interrogated for the first time in 1971, while I was studying theology at the state-run theology faculty in Prague—that was the only place where you could study theology. I was the leader of a student organization, and of course we students were opposed to the official Communist propaganda. One evening, around 250 of us gathered in the student dormitory—it was the anniversary of the death of Jan Palach, who had set himself on fire on Wenceslas Square [in central Prague, in protest against the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968]. We invited a famous music group, Spiritual Kvintet. There was also one student there who was very good at composing protest songs. He started to sing about Palach, and the group began to sing songs like, “We Shall Overcome.” It was reported immediately. The director of the seminary was expelled, as were the students directly involved in inviting the musicians.

Later on, I was also interrogated about church activities, and the relationships between different pastors. It is interesting to read the government files of that time on our church today. They say that this church must be watched very well, because on the surface it looks quite peaceful, but inside

it is very dangerously indoctrinating young people. They knew that we had quite big youth groups in many congregations, and some Communists were getting nervous about it.

Was theology the only study path available to you, given your background?

I originally started a degree in biology, also at Charles University. I simply love nature, and I longed to study biology from a young age. I had to wait a year to do so because

my father had been persecuted—I was not allowed to go to university immediately after school. During that year I worked in a laboratory and received a positive recommendation. I was accepted for study starting in the fall of 1968. Then the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia took place and it was awful—there were other students besides Jan Palach who committed suicide, and many students fled abroad. It was a very bad time. My studies began, and I started to ask myself: Is it right to study biology in this situation? There were many students who wanted to study biology, but I had heard that there were not enough pastors in the church. So I prayed to try and find out God's will for my life. That is how I transferred to the theology faculty.

How did the collapse of the Communist regime in the Velvet Revolution of 1989 seem to you at the time?

When Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union and the liberalizing policy of *perestroika* began [1985 onward], we had a clue that something could happen. But being born in this country, I have to confess that I did not expect that we could be released without some kind of fight: a war. It was truly marvelous what God did here, because our revolution was truly a “velvet” revolution, without one shop window being broken. There was a tremendous sense of national unity at the time.

Did your church participate? Wenceslas Square, where major demonstrations took place, is a 20-minute walk from here.

Of course. When it began on the evening of 17 November [1989]—when student demonstrators were beaten by the police—we were holding a youth conference in this church. We immediately sent a letter to the prime minister in the name of our conference, protesting about the beating of those students. It was a conference for all the Church of the Brethren congregations, and there were around a thousand young people squeezed into this building. Many of them participated in the demonstrations quite spontaneously. The involvement of Václav Malý [now auxiliary Catholic bishop of Prague] in Charter 77 is well known. [See the *East-West Church Report*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2020), 5]. But there were also Protestant pastors who participated and became quite well known. The churches had a great reputation at that time. I

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am afraid that we lost that reputation—but the expectations of society were very high.

What happened, do you think?

Many people in our country came to realize that the churches were islands of freedom under the totalitarian regime. Everything—schools, businesses, and factories—was run by the Communists, but there was still discussion within the churches, and they were like small islands of freedom in each town or village. People also appreciated that many in the church had suffered—not just interrogated, but put in prison for years. From one perspective it was easier at that time, because the situation was almost black and white, and it was possible to identify a clear enemy. On the whole, the churches were in opposition to the regime. Very sadly, however, there were also church people who collaborated with it.

What happened since then is complex, and I would not like to oversimplify it. But one problem occurs when the church almost wants to be part of society—to be so open, so accepting of the ethics of secular society, that the church diminishes and disappears into secular culture. I believe we have to be the light and the salt of the world. We must be more open—in the Communist period we had to have very closed relationships in order to support one another, and sometimes we developed quite closed communities as a result. There was no other way to operate. But when the churches opened up and tried to penetrate society after the Velvet Revolution, the bridge they built to connect with society was unfortunately used by society the other way as well, to undermine the unity and ethics of the church. The statistics for Czech churches show this to be a great problem—only a handful of communities are now experiencing growth or planting new congregations.

Do you think a particular approach is required when ministering to Czech society?

I would say so. I think our people are very sensitive toward being manipulated or pushed. This is partly because of our heritage of Counter-reformation, and also the periods of Nazism followed by Communism. All of these were trying to indoctrinate and manipulate people, so they are very sensitive about being led in a particular direction. They like to discover the Gospel in their own way, so we have to be very careful not to manipulate or push in our worship, but to let people go to Christ by themselves.

As you know, the Czech Republic is something of a laboratory of secularism, as we are one of the most secularized countries in Europe. The percentage of believers is very low—compared with neighboring Poland, where statistically 87 percent are believers, we have 21 percent. But if you compare the number of criminals in each country, the results are proportionally similar. So where are those Christians in Poland? Our atheism is actually not as atheistic as it seems. If you speak to people on a personal level, you



Cirkev Bratrská Christian bookstore, Prague (G. FAGAN)

will often discover that they are not atheists at all. They have room for transcendence. Our first president after the Velvet Revolution, Václav Havel, was like that. He often said that there must be something there, even that there is something watching us, so we must behave morally. Many people have this concept of an impersonal god.

Not long ago, I met up with my former classmates from elementary and high school at a school reunion. They all knew that I was a pastor, and it became a little like a pastoral counselling session. (Smiles.) One by one they were coming up to me and opening up about their lives. On a personal level, then, people here are very open.

Is this open, personal approach reflected in your activities at this church?

Yes. There is a growing need for pastoral care, for example—these days there are many marital and other family problems, and people come here for counselling. We have a special department for family life, with several professional psychologists. In the Theological Seminary we try to integrate theology and psychology and to train more workers for pastoral counselling.

We also have a club called *Samari*, meaning Samaria—this name points to the fact that we are sometimes somewhere between the sacred and the secular world, just as Samaria was between Judea and Galilee. Here we organize public programs that are not always religious, such as music and poetry, or talks with speakers from different walks of life, such as economists or writers. For example, one of our pastors—a theology professor and expert on C.S. Lewis—will soon give a talk on Ernest Thompson Seton, who was one of the pioneers of the Scouting movement. For some people, it is a huge struggle just to step inside a church, so this club is something in between. This approach is in fact the same missiological strategy of the Apostle Paul to become “like a Jew to the Jews, like one under the law to those under the law, so as to win those under the law... for the weak to become weak, to win the weak.” [1 Cor. 9:20-22]

It seems to me that today we need more of an emphasis on religious experience and the practical living out of our faith. The God of the Bible is not a system of teaching, but a relational being. ♦

The Unique Path of the Czech Reformation

PAVEL ČERNÝ

The Reformation started in Bohemia—with Moravia, a region forming the present-day Czech Republic—more than one hundred years before it began in the other countries of Europe. More typically considered the initiator of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther admitted he held the teachings of his Bohemian predecessor, Jan Hus (c. 1372-1415). “In short, we were all Hussites without knowing it,” Luther wrote in 1520. His prominent adversary, Dr. Johann Eck, likewise characterized Luther’s position of attaching more weight to his own Scriptural interpretation than to that of senior clerics as “the Bohemian virus.”

However, the “First Reformation” of Jan Hus differed markedly from the “Second Reformation” of Martin Luther. The latter was more developed theologically on dogmatic questions such as justification by faith. It was also heavily backed by the German-speaking nobility, who even saved Luther’s life by sheltering him at Wartburg Castle in Thuringia. Luther’s Reformation would adopt a strategy expressed by the Latin phrase *Cuius regio, eius religio* (literally, “Whose realm, their religion.”) This meant, for example, that if the ruler of Prussia was Protestant, all the people in Prussia had no choice but to be Protestant. The Hussite “First Reformation,” by contrast, was far more considerate of personal freedom—individuals could choose if they wished to be Protestant or Catholic. It was also more of a grassroots movement, with greater involvement by the laity, and sensitivity towards social questions.

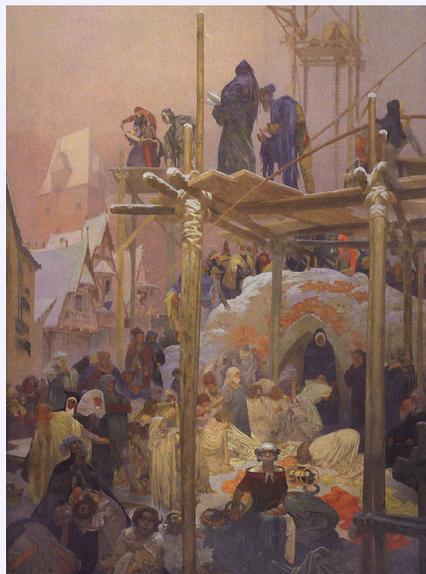
Local revival

The Bethlehem Chapel in Prague symbolizes the early beginnings of this “First Reformation.” Founded in 1391, it was designed with the express purpose of preaching in the language of the people, having no facility for sacramental ministry. Such an idea originated with a local revival movement whose spokesman was Jan Milíč of

Kroměříž (d. 1374). A Catholic priest, he was convinced of the vital necessity of preaching the Word of God in the vernacular. Alongside a refuge for former prostitutes called New Jerusalem, Milíč established a school in Prague for laymen who wished to become preachers. He also often preached for Emperor Charles IV—a devout ruler who liked to invite influential preachers to Prague, at that time the seat of the Holy Roman Empire. Matěj of Janov (d. 1393)—a pupil of Jan Milíč—further developed the movement through biblical scholarship, and it was his followers who built the Bethlehem Chapel. The Chapel was able to accommodate over 2,000 people—a significant proportion of Prague’s then total population of some 30,000.

Preaching in Czech

Around this time Czech students returning from their studies at Oxford University brought writings by the prominent radical English theologian John Wycliffe, who completed the first translation of the Bible into English in 1382. Wycliffe’s writings influenced Jan Hus—Prague archives contain Wycliffe manuscripts on which Hus has made notes in both Latin and Czech.



Jan Milíč of Kroměříž: A Brothel Converted to a Convent by Alfons Mucha, 1916 (Open Source)



Bethlehem Chapel, Prague (G. FAGAN)

From 1402 onward, Jan Hus preached in Czech at the Bethlehem Chapel, whereas Latin was the rule in other local churches. Such a development was possible because Hus was on friendly terms with the then ruler of Bohemia, King Wenceslaus IV, and his queen, Sophia, who attended Hus’s services quite often. The Bethlehem Chapel rapidly became the center of Reformation activity in Bohemia. Here, Hus worked on the second edition of the Czech Bible from 1406 through 1413.

Parts of the Bible had in fact already been translated into the local vernacular. In the 9th century the Byzantine missionaries Cyril and Methodius came to present-day Czech territory, where they translated the Gospels into the old Slavonic language and developed the Glagolitic alphabet to transcribe it. There may have been residual memory of this non-Latin usage in the 14th century, supporting the desire for reform. One Catholic monastery in Prague retained Slavonic services—sometimes in secret, as Latin was the rule under Rome.

[Editor’s note: Prague’s Emmaus Monastery was founded by Charles IV in 1347 for Benedictine monks who worshipped using the Roman Catholic Rite but in Church Slavonic. A fragment of an Old Czech wall inscription of

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the Ten Commandments in Glagolitic script survives at the monastery. Catholic priest Fr. Tomáš Petráček noted to the editor of the *East-West Church Report* in late 2019 that the Hussites “played with these Slavonic origins... they were looking for allies. They sent an envoy to Constantinople, but it did not work out.” This envoy, who was warmly received by Orthodox clerics in Constantinople shortly before Byzantium’s fall to the Ottomans in 1453, appears to have been a prominent Prague Hussite originally from England, Peter Payne. (See Robin Baker, “‘Constantine From England and the Bohemians’: Hussitism, Orthodoxy, and the End of Byzantium,” *Central Europe* 5, no. 1 (2007), 23-46.)]

Four demands

Following papal anathema and excommunication from the Catholic Church, Jan Hus was burned at the stake in 1415. Notably, however, the Hussite movement’s four principal demands in the Prague Articles of 1419 did not challenge core Catholic doctrine:

1. The Word of God shall be freely proclaimed and preached without impediment in the Kingdom of Bohemia.
2. The sacrament of the body and blood of Christ shall be freely administered to all the faithful in the two kinds—that is, in bread and wine—according to the order and teachings of Christ.
3. All worldly rule is to be rescinded from priests and the Church returned to its apostolic poverty, and so to its special mission of bearing witness to the Gospel.
4. All mortal sins—particularly those that are public—and loose living are to be prosecuted and punished, regardless of whether master or servant is guilty.

The revolutionary emphasis here was rather upon social justice and freedom for preaching the Word of God. At this time, clergy implicated in crimes were not exposed to punishment—unlike the laity—and the Hussites wanted the Church to affirm that ecclesiastical figures would also be subject to civil justice. Their movement grew quickly, especially when compared with that of Luther, who had the advantage of being able to print books and pamphlets. In Hus’s time, everything had to be written by hand.

Different streams of practice soon developed in Hussitism. In 1420 Hus’s most radical followers founded the town of Tábor in southern Bohemia, named after Mount Tabor in Galilee. There, they wished to create something akin to the Kingdom of God, with everyone giving their money and possessions for common use in a form of Christian commune. Even some nobles gave up great wealth to join them. The Taborites were radical liturgically as well as economically—their priests served in ordinary clothes rather than ornate vestments, for example.

The Taborites won many battles under the leadership of an extraordinary commander, Jan Žižka, who was never beaten despite crusades sent out by the Pope and Emperor after



Cyrillic and Glagolitic Reims Gospel, given by Charles IV to Prague’s Emmaus Monastery in the 14th century (Open Source)

1420. Following a split in the Czech Reformation, the radical Taborites were defeated at Lipany in 1434 by the moderate Utraquists and some Catholics. The Utraquists—so named due to their emphasis upon the principle of communion being offered to the laity in two kinds (Latin: *sub utraque specie*)—reached an accommodation with the Catholic Church. The legacy of the Czech Reformation then passed to the Unity of the Brethren or *Unitas Fratrum*, which was established in 1457. By 1467, this body needed new priests. After prayer and fasting they decided to consecrate their own, without the approval of Roman Catholic bishops. The first three priests were selected simply by drawing lots—to the Unity of the Brethren, their practice of sharing the communion chalice among all participants symbolized the priesthood of all believers.

Unity of the Brethren

The leading theologian in this early phase of the Unity of the Brethren’s development was Lukáš of Prague (1458-1528). Writing before Luther—with whom he later corresponded—Lukáš developed the Unity’s theological teaching and ethics. He rejected the Catholic understanding of transubstantiation, for example, while believing in the real spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He also maintained that government should not interfere in church affairs.

The Unity of the Brethren welcomed the Lutheran Reformation of the early 1500s without losing their own special character. This “Second Reformation” strongly influenced the Utraquists, so that the Czech lands were overwhelmingly Protestant by the end of that century. In 1575 the Unity of the Brethren and the Utraquists reached a consensus in the joint Bohemian Confession of Faith. Their freedom to worship was reinforced in 1609, when Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II granted religious toleration to Bohemia in his “Letter of Majesty.”

This considerable degree of religious liberty was soon disrupted, however, as the Roman Catholic Church reasserted its power. The Battle of White Mountain in 1620 saw the defeat of a badly organized Protestant army at the hands of the new

Bohemian king and Emperor, Ferdinand II. A harsh Counter-reformation followed, during which the Czech lands came under the jurisdiction of Rome and the pro-Catholic Habsburg dynasty.

Jan Amos Komenský

A key figure in the Unity of the Brethren's twilight was its last bishop, Jan Amos Komenský (also called Comenius, 1592-1670), who was expelled from his country and mostly lived in exile. A great theologian and educator, he maintained contact with the French philosopher René Descartes, and was even asked to become the first president of Harvard University. Due to the difficult situation in Europe at that point, he instead worked in Sweden, England, and the Netherlands. He is still renowned as the pioneer of child-centered education.

Komenský was convinced that we must proclaim the Gospel as much as possible. He desired this so deeply that he said that “even Jesuits”—who were then leading the Counter-reformation in the Czech lands—“will be able to co-operate for the sake of the Gospel. Let us do something together.” This was extraordinary given that the brutal Thirty Years' War was then under way in Europe. Yet Komenský's vision was clear: For the sake of the Gospel we have to cooperate, even with our enemies. Komenský was also somewhat critical of the “Second Reformation,” as he was unable to accept the fragmentation of Protestantism. His theology did not permit any period of church history to be made the standard for all time. Komenský and his predecessors called all denominations (including the Roman Catholic Church) Unities. According to their progressive ecumenical understanding of ecclesiology, the Church is a single

Body of Christ consisting of Christians of various denominations.

Habsburg subjugation of Czech Protestantism continued for over 150 years and almost destroyed the legacy of the Unity of the Brethren. In 1727, however, a spiritual revival took place on lands belonging to Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, who had given refuge to exiles fleeing Moravia and Bohemia for neighboring Saxony. Over the next twenty years, the Czech Brethren living on Count von Zinzendorf's estates were able to send out some 200 missionaries, who went as far afield as Africa, India, and the Americas. Even today, you can meet people in remote parts of Africa who say they are Moravian!

2015 anniversary

The year 2015 marked the 600th anniversary of Jan Hus's execution. This was a significant event for the whole of



Jan Hus at the stake, Jena Codex, c. 1500 (Open Source)

the Czech Republic, including secular society. We began to prepare many years earlier, and for the first time were able to commemorate our Hussite heritage together with the Catholics. In 1993 a special interconfessional symposium on Jan Hus took place in Bayreuth, Germany, followed by a delegation of church leaders and historians to Rome, for a meeting with Pope John Paul II. In 1999 a further symposium took place at which the Pope described Jan Hus as a reformer, and expressed “deep regret for the cruel death” inflicted upon him. [See “Address of the Holy Father to an International Symposium on John Hus, 17 December 1999, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1999/december/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_17121999_jan-hus.html.]

As 2000-2009 president of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic—of which the Czech Catholic Bishops' Conference is an associate member—I have found our relationship to be strong at grassroots level. During the Communist period, some of our pastors shared prison cells with Roman Catholic priests, and they were also held together in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. There, they prayed together and supported one another, and so became friends. During the 2015 commemoration of Jan Hus, we were finally able to apologize publicly for all the terrible things in our bloody history. It has helped us to heal. ♦

Pavel Černý is a retired pastor in the Church of the Brethren (Církev Bratrská). He was formerly president of the denomination and still teaches practical theology and missiology at the Evangelical Theological Seminary, Prague.

Hus and Belarus

The figure of Jan Hus continues to resonate with Protestants in Central and Eastern Europe. In Belarus, Baptist Sergiy Melyanets published his poem “Auto-da-fé”—dedicated to the memory of Jan Hus—on 7th August 2020. It concludes:

The holy one is praying: “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” *Sola Scriptura, sola fide, solus Christus*. The principles of faith. The foundations of life. The answer to the question: What is it worth sacrificing life at the stake for? Standing stock-still on the scaffold in the fiery haze.

On 10th August Sergiy Melyanets was dragged from his car, beaten, and given electric shocks by riot police suppressing pro-democracy demonstrations in the Belarusian capital, Minsk. (See “Belarus: Systematic Beatings, Torture of Protesters,” Human Rights Watch, 15 September 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>.)

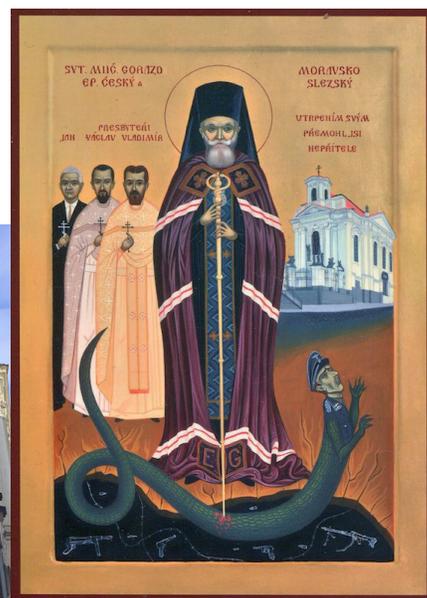
A Great Act by a Small Church

In conjunction with neighboring Slovakia, the Czech Lands have an Orthodox Church whose independence (autocephaly) has been recognized by Moscow (1951) and Constantinople (1998). Though the Church is small, it has played an outsized historical role since its revival in the early 20th century.

In 1941 Hitler placed senior Nazi Reinhard Heydrich—one of the architects of the Holocaust—in charge of German-occupied Bohemia and Moravia. Mass executions and deportations to Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in Austria immediately followed. In response, after months of training in Britain, seven Czech paratroopers were airlifted onto Czech territory on the night of 28th December. Their mission—Operation Anthropoid—was to assassinate Heydrich.

Despite some mishaps, the group succeeded in fatally wounding Heydrich in Prague on 27th May 1942. Within half an hour of the attack, all civilian traffic out of the city was halted and some 35,000 homes were searched. Believing that villagers in Lidice and Ležáky had harbored the paratroopers, Nazi police executed all males older than 15 in Lidice and all adults in Ležáky, before razing both villages.

In Prague, meanwhile, the seven paratroopers had found refuge in the crypt beneath the Orthodox Cathedral of SS. Cyril and Methodius, thanks to the parish council chair, Ján Sonnevend. His suggestion to hide the group was supported by Fr. Vladimír (Left to right, alternating with Nazi officers) Ján Sonnevend, Fr. Václav Číkl, Fr. Vladimír Petřek, and Bishop Gorazd on trial in 1942; SS. Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Cathedral, Prague (G. FAGAN); icon of St. Bishop Gorazd.



Petřek, who also took care of the men. After discovering the hiding place, however, Nazi troops stormed the church in the early hours of 18th June. All seven paratroopers died in the attack.

As the storming was taking place, Fr. Vladimír Petřek and a second priest, Václav Číkl, were arrested, in addition to Ján Sonnevend, church warden Václav Ornest, and members of their families. The following day, Czech Orthodox Bishop Gorazd (Pavlík)—who had known the paratroopers were in the crypt—wrote to the authorities offering his own life for the release of those under arrest. He received no answer, and within days was arrested himself.

A brief trial took place in Prague in early September. Bishop Gorazd, Fr. Václav Číkl, and Jan Sonnevend were executed by firing squad on 4th September. Fr. Petřek met the same fate the following day. All Orthodox churches in Bohemia and Moravia were closed down. On 24th October some 260 Czechs also suspected of aiding Operation Anthropoid were executed in Mauthausen-Gusen camp, including ten more members of the Prague Orthodox parish.

Bishop Gorazd was canonized by the restored Czech and Slovak Orthodox Church in 1987. Frs. Vladimír and Václav, Ján Sonnevend, Václav Ornest, and the other martyred parishioners were commemorated as saints for the first time on 8th February 2020.

Information taken from an exhibition at SS. Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Cathedral and Museum, Prague.

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EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

P.O.Box 76741
Washington, DC 20013
U.S.A.

Geraldine Fagan, Editor
eastwestchurchreport@gmail.com
Mark R. Elliott, Editor Emeritus
emark936@gmail.com
Matthew Lee Miller, Book Review Editor

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