
NOTE

BRIEF HISTORY OF FMA INSTITUTE IN SLOVAKIA

*Kamila Novosedlikova** in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 48(2006)161-180

The development of the FMA Institute in Slovakia has been bound very closely with the history of the Slovak Society of St. Francis de Sales. Within the prehistory of both religious families, it is evident that Don Bosco had already been known in Hungary during his lifetime. The first written information on the Turin priest was mediated to the larger public by various Catholic magazines. The first biography of Don Bosco in the Slovak language was written by Canon J. Jedlička in 1899. His enthusiasm for Don Bosco enabled the Slovaks to get to know the educator of young people not only through Church services but also through educators, to whom this learned priest was giving lectures on the preventive system. When he asked for help for the support of his work for the education of poor boys in Turin, the Slovaks responded by donating generously.

In 1905, the first group of Slovak young men set out for Turin in order to become Salesians. It was Michael Rua who received them. The young men were Alojz Hudek from Sv. Jur, Viliam Vagač from Stará Turá and Ladislav Stano from Ružomberok. These young men started their studies in a Hungarian Salesian institute for vocations in Hungary in the small town of Cavaglia. After their numbers increased, the Salesian Institute for the Slovaks was opened in 1921 in Perosa Argentina. This is where the future Slovak provincial Jozef Bokor started his study, as well as Ján Hlubík, František Sersen and others. Thanks to the extraordinary dedicated activities of the first Slovak Salesians and their cooperation with Slovak bishops, the first Salesian institute in Slovakia was opened on 8th September 1924 in Šaštín¹.

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¹ In Šaštín SDB started to run a holy shrine of Virgin Mary of Seven Sorrows, patroness of Slovakia and local parish. They also constituted a boarding school for young men in the local monastery.

The year 1922 was an important year for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The congregation commemorated its 50th anniversary of foundation. At that time the worldwide Institute had some 4000 sisters, 480 novices in 470 houses. The FMA in Europe included sisters from Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, England and Ireland. In May 1922 the SDB Rector Major Philip Rinaldi expressed his desire in front of the Mother General Catherine Daghero that the presence of the FMA be extended in the jubilee year also to Germany, Poland, Russia, China, India and Australia. In November 1922, the FMA started working in Germany, in a small town of Essen. During the same year another work was opened in Poland in the town of Rożanystok², on the eastern border with Russia. Within the framework of the beginning of the FMA Institute in Slovakia, one can trace several phases:

Prehistory	before 1922
Formation abroad	1922-1939
Coming to Slovakia and founding of first communities	1940-1950
Life in concentration camps	1950-1968
Political relief	1968-1969
Formation of secret vocations	1970-1989
Expansion of the work	1990-2000
The first Slovak province	2000-

In the context of Slovakia, Prehistory means the period before 1922. During these years the first two Slovak girls, Helena Ščepková and Jozefína Sobotová, departed for Italy in order to undergo religious formation under the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. All the available written documents prove that the entire development of FMA Institute in Slovakia was closely connected with the history of the Society of St. Francis de Sales in Slovachia.

The Slovak Salesians realized that it was necessary to take care also of the Slovak girls: "As long ago as in Perosa," writes Viliam Vagač,

"I had thought of our Salesian sisters and had visited their Mother Superior in Nizza Monferrato³. I had asked her to accept some Slovak girls for studies and for novitiate. I obtained a very generous reply and it turned out that some six members were accepted in the end. At the beginning I used to go and hear their confessions; that was before they learned any Italian"⁴.

² M. MAUL, *75 anni Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice in Austria*. Wien 2003, pp. 6-7.

³ Mother Catherina Daghero was the second General Mother Superior. She died in distinguished sainthood on 26th February 1924.

⁴ V. VAGAČ, *Curriculum vitae*. Typescript. Trenčín 1961, p. 32.

When the first two Slovak girls Helena and Jozefína came to Turin on the 27th of December 1922, Mother General Catherine Daghero received them heartily. Shortly after, the Mother Superior sent the girls to Giaveno and on the 5th of August 1923 both girls entered the novitiate in Nizza Monferrato⁵.

Sr. Helena Ščepková was a devoted sister, capable from the very beginning of supporting development of Slovak vocations in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. As a young sister, soon after her first professions in Nizza in 1925, she helped other five girls from Slovakia to enter the FMA Institute. Gradually other girls were coming and she became their caring older sister, who as an assistant to the postulants initiated the girls in the secrets of religious life. She was known to be rigid and demanding. Still, she was a great support⁶. Sr. Helena wrote to various well-to-do persons in the United States, asking them for financial support of the Slovak girls. It was to her merit that the Slovak girls were able to go to Italy; moreover she herself organized some of the expeditions.

Between 1922 and 1936 as many as ten expeditions set out for Italy from Slovakia. Expeditions included 32 sisters⁷. With the exception of two girls who had to return home for various reasons, the other girls made their religious profession and studied further at different schools. Majority took courses in being governess, tutors and teachers in elementary and secondary schools and courses in nursing. Superiors tried to encourage the sisters in enhancing their natural gifts. Many sisters worked in nurseries, oratories, in educational institutions and in orphanages. They taught musical instruments, singing and headed music ensembles. Since they commanded also other craftsmanship, they chaired courses in embroidering and painting. Many sisters had long worked as cooks, helpmates in laundry and ironing house.

Several Slovak girls started their Salesian religious formation in other parts of Europe – in Poland. Later on, due to the political situation in Europe they stopped going to Poland and the next set of members traveled again to Italy. Besides Italy, Poland, Belgium, Austria and Hungary, some Slovak sisters were also formed and made to work in France. In 1927, after leaving postulancy in Turin, Antónia Hederová from Naštice and Terézia Karlubíková from Sládečkovce were assigned to the French province. Two years later

⁵ Sr. Helena Ščepková had the opportunity to meet Mons. Ján Cagliero, the first Salesian missionary bishop in Latin America, several times. He addressed her in a Piedmont dialect and asked her in joke, whether she understood him.

⁶ E. KUBICOVÁ, *Private memoirs*. AIT.

⁷ E. MATEJKOVÁ, *History of FMA Institute in Slovakia*. Diploma work. Bratislava 1999, pp. 48-49.

Alžbeta Karlubíková and Terézia Vavrovičová from Šaštín came to the same province. After completing novitiate in Marseilles, they all worked in different houses in France as teachers, assistants in oratory or were in charge of the kitchen, wardrobe or the chapel. Superiors sent Sr. Terézia Karlubíková for two years to Africa, where she worked as an assistant in a hospital. In 1928 her co-nationals Alžbeta and Terézia Vavrovičová came to France.

In 1935, when majority of Slovak Salesian sisters fully worked in various FMA Institutes in Europe, two young sisters died. Twenty-six-year old Sr. Emília Žákovičová died on 25th January 1935 in Nizza Monferrato in Italy and twenty-seven-year old Sr. Anna Šoltýsová died on 10th August 1935 in Rozanystok in Poland⁸. Almost a year after their death two new addition, Júlia Reháková and Mária Fordinálová, registered in Poland, but shortly after they were sent to France for formation.

In the second expedition four other new members set off for Italy. Two of them were blood sisters: Dočolomanský, Margita and Ludmila from Svätý Jur and the other two were from Bošáca. One was Emília Žákovičová, who later attended college in Italy, preparing herself as a teacher. The other was Anna Mihálová. The blood sisters Dočolomanský and Sr. Mihálová became the pioneer volunteers of Slovak Salesian missionaries. All three of them worked in overseas missions.

Sr. Margita Dočolomanská (1903-1988) left for missions in Punta Arenas⁹ shortly after her first professions in 1928. She was assigned to Magellan Province in Chile, which at the time included also five Argentinean institutes in southern Patagonia. Sr. Margita came to the southernmost, cold wasteland, equipped with enthusiasm and resolution at 25 years old. She worked there as a teacher and assistant in elementary school in Santa Cruz and later in several institutes in Buenos Aires, where she died in 1988. Sr. Ludmila Dočolomanská (1905 – 1979) came to the missions in Brazil in 1931. When she was twenty-eight she started to work among the indians of Bororos tribe. She worked in many missionary hospitals of Campo Grande as a self-sacrificing nurse until her death in 1979. Sr. Anna Mihálová (1908–1981) was another ‘grape’ in a Slovak missionary ‘bunch of grapes’. She was born in 1908 in Bošáca, close to the town of Trenčín. The daughter of zealous parents, after completing secondary school, was accepted by the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. After profes-

⁸ *Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice defunte dal 1874 al 1995*. Roma 1996, pp. 500, 510.

⁹ At the beginning of 20th century Slovak realistic writer Martin Kukučín worked here as a physician among Croatian immigrants.

sion of the vows in her twenties, she left for the missions in Central America. She worked there continuously in the following countries: Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. She taught religion, languages, physical education and music. Sister Anita, as she was called, became popular among young people due to her efforts in field of gymnastics¹⁰. For many years she was a director of various colleges for girls. She was so successful in her work that even secular authorities recognized and appreciated her merits.

At the end of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties of the past century, four Slovak novices in Belgium prepared themselves for African missions. One of them, Sr. Bernardína Ifčicová (1910-2001) finally remained a missionary in Belgium. In autumn 1931 she came to Belgium to the town of Groot-Bijgaarden together with her cousin Irena Kukumbergová. Her life of following Christ became a service, which she fulfilled gamely as a cook in different houses of the Belgian province.

Sr. Irena Kukumbergová (1913–1998) after her first profession stayed in Belgium for another 14 years. At first she studied in Louvain to become a nurse together with Sr. Mária Marková, who later worked in the town of Kafubu in Africa as a nurse. After completing the course for treating tropical diseases, Sr. Irena was commissioned to Belgian Congo – present-day Zaire. In the former Elisabethville, present-day Lumumbashi, she learned the native language Kukemba. For fourteen years she had been working in a pharmacy in Kafubu; later on she was transferred to a missionary station in a virgin forest¹¹.

Sr. Mária Marková (1911-2004) was born in Chynorany to a peasant family of seven children¹². In 1911 the first Salesian missionaries started to work in Belgian Congo. The Superiors sent Sr. Mária Marková and Sr. Anna Hederová after making their first profession in 1932 to Brussels to continue their studies. At the time two cousins of a Salesian missionary Jozef Figura¹³, Sr. Kukumbergová and Sr. Ifčicová, had been already working in Brussels. After a year, the Belgian FMA provincial took Sr. Anna Hederová to visit Belgian Congo. Sr. Hederová had stayed in missions for many years. She returned to Belgium only after her health condition seriously worsened. She died in Belgium on 8th December 1978.

¹⁰ J. SVĀTOKRÍŽNY, *Slovak missionaries in the world in 20.th century*. Prešov 2002, pp. 308-309.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

¹² Chynorany rectory was in 1985-1988 the place where secret FMA novices met their novice mistress Sr. M. Černá, parish housekeeper. For three years FMA sisters, who during totality lived spread all over Slovakia, made their religious professions here.

¹³ Long-time salesian missionary in Japan.

In December 1945 Sr. Marková leaves for Africa, where she had been working for 46 years in Belgian Congo and Zambia. It was not once that she performed medical interventions, including child delivery in the forest. She used to leave the missionary station once a year only. She lived in the wild forest for seven years together with other five sisters of three different nationalities. Unfortunately, a long civil war followed which exacted a great number of victims¹⁴. At the time of disturbances Sr. Mária traveled to Belgium. After her return to Africa, she worked in Lumumbashi hospital. Political and economic conditions in Zaire deteriorated and worsened, amounting to a situation under which the missionaries had to leave the country.

1. Return of FMA to Slovakia

In 1939 the FMA Institute included 30 Slovak sisters who were spread worldwide. They had successfully fulfilled their missions. Thus there were preconditions for opening Salesian work for girls also in Slovakia. World War II had just broken out but at the same time also a new chapter of the FMA Institute in the Slovak history had started. Priest Viliam Vagač, who was helping the sisters as long ago as from Perosa, tried to find an institute in Slovakia in which the sisters could start working after their arrival from Italy.

Eighteen years have passed from the departure of the first girls from Slovakia to follow their Salesian vocation in 1922 to the founding of the first community in 1940. The first entries were born still under the Austro-Hungarian Empire; they left from Czecho-Slovak Republic and returned to the Slovak State. At the time the Slovak sisters returned to Slovakia, Salesians opened officially six institutes all over Slovakia, they had their novitiate, pedagogical academy and theological school¹⁵.

During the first Czecho-Slovak Republic, the Salesian Society was officially recognized by a Government decree No. 12838/VI of 13th February 1936. Few months later, on 21st July 1936, the Provincial Ignác Stuchlý sent a request for opening a Salesian institute in Trnava to the Ministry of Education and National Edification in Bratislava¹⁶. The institute is to be located in the

¹⁴ Africanization of Congo arrived; from 1971 the new name of Congo has been Zaire.

¹⁵ Compare Salesian News XXV, No. 9-10, 1944, p. 87.

¹⁶ Trnava is one of the most important towns in Slovakia. It was the first town on the territory of present-day Slovakia, that was conferred privileges of free royal town. Hungarian King Belo IV granted privileges to Trnava in 1238. In 1635 Cardinal Peter Pazmany founded here Trnava University. The building allotted to Salesians was the former Archbishop palace, originally a gothic palace with a closed courtyard. In 1562 it was adjusted to the seat of Esztergom Archbishop.

premises of former Trnava seminary that had been transferred to Bratislava¹⁷. Few years later the first Slovak Salesian Provincial Jozef Bokor in his letter of 3rd April 1940 Ref. No.15740 requests the Apostolic Administration (Trnava Ordinariate) to give consent to opening of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians' house in Trnava.

On 12th April 1940 Trnava Ordinariate grants its consent under Ref. No. 2874/1940:

“Upon your request of... I give permission to the sisters of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians congregation to settle in the Salesian institute in Trnava, on Ján Hollý Street No.1, and to keep the household there under the condition that subsistence of the congregation members shall be taken care of, the members are Slovak nationals and citizens, and they will not collect offerings and shall be no burden whatsoever to public charity”¹⁸.

The General Council affiliated the house in Trnava – and thus also the future work in Slovakia – to Venetian Province, Veneto-Emiliana, headed by the Provincial Madre Rosalia Dolza. In 1942 the secretary of the General Council, Madre Clelia Genghini¹⁹ announces that Trnava community was exempted from the Venetian province and put under the German-Austrian ‘visitoria’. Sr. Alba de Ambrosio took over the responsibility.

In the introduction of the chronicle, there are records on the foundation of the work:

“In 1940 A. D. during the papacy of Pope Pius XII, acting president of the Slovak State Dr. Jozef Tiso and diocesan bishop Pavol Jantusch the institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Mother Superior Luisa Vaschetti gives her consent to the founding of Mary Help of Christians house in Trnava. Provincial Bokor, SDB, merits appreciation for founding the house, since he had asked Mother Superior in Turin to provide the house with sisters who would be in charge of the kitchen and laundry in the Salesian philosophical academy in Trnava. Venerable Mother Superior satisfied his request and on the 16th of July 1940 commissioned two sisters to make necessary preparations. Sr. Jozefína Bartošová was a director in Unterwaltersdorf in Germany²⁰ and Sr. Dorotea Hudáková came from the Italian town of Alasio”. [CRONACA della casa di Trnava (Slovacchia) sotto titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice. Anno 1940/41²¹].

¹⁷ Letter No. 8775/1936, Archive of Archbishops Office in Trnava (further referred to as: AAT).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Author of the first three volumes of Cronistoria.

²⁰ In reality Sr. Bartošová worked as a director in 1937 in German Jagdberg and in 1938 in Hungarian Olad. Only shortly before her departure for Slovakia she worked in Austrian community in Unterwaltersdorf. The information I received from FMA central archive in Rome shortly before completing the work.

²¹ Chronicle is written in Italian, the language of the founder.

The superior of the house was Sr. Jozefína Bartošová. The community consisted of 9 sisters and 10 postulants²². They were responsible for kitchen, washing and ironing for the Salesians and residents.

Regular and extraordinary visits of the Provincial Bokor proved his deep interest in the life of the Slovak Salesian volunteers. He stressed as the foremost quality a spiritual life, community relationships and willingness to sacrifice oneself on behalf of salvation of souls. He recommended the sisters: "Love your neighbors and live lives of sacrifice. It is the source of happiness in our hearts"²³. When, after a lapse of time, I look at the period in which a newly born work of the FMA Institute in Slovakia developed, I realized that the situation was overwhelmingly complicated and unfavorable. There were strong pressures against the Catholic Church as well as against the existence of the young Slovak State. The world was seized by World War II and Soviet Russia switched on the flames of the communist dragon. The only favorable thing for the Salesian work's development was a constantly increasing number of poor and abandoned youth.

In 1944 fourteen sisters lived in Trnava community. That year was of great importance for the Slovak Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. On the 24th of July a new work was opened in Nitra²⁴. Sr. Štefánia Bokorová became the directress. Gradually other sisters came to Nitra.

On 10th August 1944 a grand opening of the Sunday girls oratory took place in the Salesian parish in Trnava, Kopánka. Founding the oratory was of greatest concern for the Salesian priest Ján Hlubík. For the time being sisters would come from Hollý Street on Sunday afternoons and Thursdays as well as on all feast days. Based on the request of Provincial Bokor, who took the responsibility for the Salesian sisters during the war, the Salesian sisters' house was opened on the 10th of December 1945 in Kopánka. In spite of the fact that visitors would come there regularly for the oratory, the communists, after they saw the house was frequently vacant, were about to take over the house. The Provincial designated Sr. Helena Ščepková as the directress. At the time the locality was really the most abandoned section of Trnava. A considerable part of the inhabitants lived in devastating conditions. Many families lived in scrapped railway carriages. The young did not have a place for

²² Names of the postulants are not mentioned.

²³ *Cronaca Trnava*, 1940/41, AI Innsbruck.

²⁴ Nitra is significant not only due to the fact that it is the oldest bishop seat of all dioceses in Slovakia, but that it is a real heart of Slovakia. Its labelling as St. Method's town became legendary since oldest times. The first Slovak abbacy was founded here as long ago as before the arrival of St. Cyril and St. Methodius. It was probably here, where the Bible was translated first to Slovak language.

meeting; practically they were brought up on by streets. Salesians founded here an oratory and a social house on 8th December 1941. A hall, originally planned as a theatre, started to serve as a church for the believers. Thus originated a great society; a virtuous and spiritual transformation took place for backward Kopánka to a Kopánka that was morally more mature and socially more compact. To encourage a comprehensive development of young people, the Salesians organized various activities in specialized circles by age and the interests of the boys. Salesian News from 1943 stated that over 500 women and girls participated in spiritual retreats in Kopánka. Male attendance reached over 400²⁵. In April of the same year the magazine mentions for the first time the Salesian sisters as organizers of SKM girls group²⁶ in Kopánka. There were no rooms for girls so they would meet in the building of a Catholic school. The December copy of the Salesian News describes the activities of the girls oratory as follows:

“Salesian sisters started with educational activities in Kopánka still some time before through organizing and guiding young girls, namely SKM-D. Their contemporary activities are regular and systematic already. Oratory is open on holidays and each Thursday and is visited by more than 200 girls, both younger and older. The sisters teach their oratory pupils various kinds of homework, catechism, chant, how to sew on sewing machines, rehearse theatre plays and academies, and later on plan to open a private school for piano playing and a kindergarten for the smaller girls”²⁷.

On 8th December 1945 a daily girls’ oratory was opened at Kopánka (corner Krížová and Suchá Streets). Performance of opera by don Strečanský, Madonna of Golden Hearts²⁸, was a part of the grand opening. At the occasion of the founding of the new or their very own first house, the Salesian sisters started keeping up a chronicle of the house. We learn from it that the directress and chronicler was the same person, Sr. Helena Ščepková; Sr. Terézia Karlubíková was the cook and wardrobe attendant, and Sr. Alžbeta Karlubíková was the oratory assistant. The few years the oratory was in existence, under rather modest conditions, proved that the work of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was blessed.

“The oratory is attended by tens, even hundreds of girls. They can learn there, educate themselves as well as recreate. They are taught handicrafts and religion. Three tenancies were founded in order to deepen religious life. The sisters dis-

²⁵ Salesian News XIV No. 1-2, Bratislava 1943, p. 46.

²⁶ Slovak Catholic Youth.

²⁷ Salesian News XV No. 12, Bratislava 1944, p. 96.

²⁸ Compare A. HACAJ, *Chronicle*. Archive of SDB Trnava.

tinguished themselves by work in social field. They engaged with large hearts in clothing-action for the benefit of poor children. The sisters participated in charity collection for people devastated by war. They gathered 10,000 Czechoslovak crowns. They were executing also missionary activities through prayers and acts of good works. During a missionary week they collected 5,000 crowns for Catholic missions. Their cultural activities included performances of theatre plays for the larger public. They organized cultural and recreational evening parties. They also distributed Catholic publications, even started their own library. Both the Church and civil representatives of Trnava have shown great understanding for the Salesian sisters work and kept on supporting it"²⁹.

2. Salesian Nitra

The formation of Salesian work in Nitra is almost unique example of good cooperation between church and civil authorities. Bishop Dr. Karol Kmeľko had to wait for 18 years until Salesians could come to his diocese. At first it took several years of prayers, followed by concrete steps by the Nitra public office representatives headed by the county mayor and deputy in parliament, Štefan Haššík, a devoted cooperater of the Salesians.

The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Nitra had the same conditions for successful activities among youth as the Salesians had. Ardent Nitra citizens were preparing themselves for the arrival of the FMA sisters by praying and establishing a Committee for the Settlement of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. A girls oratory gathered at the beginning some 60 girls. Their number gradually increased up to 150. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had their house in Nitra on Piaristická Street No. 22. The Oratory was attended predominantly by girls from poor families and Salesian sisters tried to cushion and support them also financially. Not once they had to feed them. Inhouse girls, who came from well-off families, contributed both by monthly funds and in kind. They lived in the institute modestly. Often it happened that residents made the rounds in surrounding villages and begged so that the sisters had something to cook. Although there was the war going on, people gave as much as they could. The Salesians and the Salesian sisters had a reputation in Nitra and the ability for improving and making better the children who visited them.

The Chronicler, Sr. Otília Havlíčková, recorded important circumstances of establishing the religious house of the FMA sisters in Nitra, which took

²⁹ Compare: *From girls oratory on Kopánka* in: Salesian News, XIX No. 2, Bratislava 1948, pp. 23-24.

place in 1944 during the papacy of Pope Pius XII and the presidency of Dr. Jozef Tiso. The FMA Mother General was Mother Linda Lucotti and the diocesan bishop was Dr. Karol Kmetko. The work started by inviting both government and church authorities who became benefactors of the institute. The house came under competence of the German-Austrian provincial Sr. Alba de Ambrosis.

Sr. Štefánia Bokorová was directress, Sr. Antónia Hederová economer, Sr. Agneša Dočolomanská members' assistant, Sr. Otlía Havlíčková residence assistant, Sr. Anna Weissová music teacher, Sr. Mária Fordinálová janitress and Sr. Katarína Fitošová cook. From Trnava to Nitra the following aspirants came: Paulína Petrisková, Mária Virágová, Anna Kabátová, Emília Kraváriková and Mária Audyová.

3. The first FMA novitiate in Slovakia

The house of 'Mary Help of Christians' in Nitra in 1948 until the opening of the novitiate had the following works: aspirantate, postulancy, girls residence, specialized courses, and feastday and daily oratory³⁰. A number of new vocations increased. A year later the novitiate had 18 novices³¹, of which 8 were in second year. Several new aspirants came from Czech republic. Thirty-nine-year-old Sr. Antónia Hederová became the first novice mistress of Slovak novices. She came from a numerous family in Naštice. She completed her religious formation in Italy and in France, where she had worked for 20 years among youth in various Salesian institutes.

The Nitra aspirants experienced the first shock of their lives from the police shortly before the opening of the novitiate. In winter 1947, Sr. Bokorová accompanied the last group of postulants to Italy³². The great benefactor from Nitra Mrs. Vilčeková³³ had asked her to take a small parcel for her brother. After sister Bokorová returned from Italy, the secret police members came to Piaristická Street No. 22 and conveyed to Sr. Bokorová a warrant of arrest.

³⁰ *Elenco generale 1948*. Roma 1948, p. 193.

³¹ 1st year: Bernardína Banská, Anna Buncíková, Jozefína Galová, Mária Kasanová, Mária Knapová, Terézia Kubáňová, Marcela Orihelová, Anna Pavlová, Mária Pazková, Elena Vojteková.

2nd year: Mária Černá, Emília Kubicová, Katarína Macková, Hedviga Morávková, Pavla Pavlová, Mária Rajtárová, Irena Škapcová, Vilma Šutková.

³² Mária Virágová, Pavlína Petrisková, Anna Kabátová, Mária Audyová, who soon returned home.

³³ Sister of former Foreign Minister of Slovak State Ferdinand Ďurčanský, who emigrated to Italy.

She was released from the Regional Court jailhouse in Bratislava on 11th February 1948. Sr. Bokorová served her time in prison for five years, with short intermissions. She was charged with construed seditious acts – such as crime of preparing machination under §2 of Law No. 50/1023 of Statutes – and found guilty of committing a crime of not reporting a crime under §165 para.1 of Criminal Code No. 86/50 of Statute. She was sentenced twice to several-years forced labor in prison. The first time she was sentenced on 6th December 1949 to serve in III category of forced labor in Ilava prison and later she was transferred to forced labor camp in Nováky. She was released on 4th October 1951. When she was sentenced to prison for the second time on 5th August 1957, general amnesty reached her, based on which she was released before her time on 7th February 1958. Nevertheless, it was necessary to pay for the release a certain amount of money³⁴.

The following months, the Salesian sisters survived a great dismay and suspense, as during the night from 13th to 14th April 1950 all the monks and nuns were kidnapped within the Action K and assembled in concentration camps. Afterwards the events happened very fast. Buses and trucks stood ready. Religious abruptly packed up, civil people helped them to carry their belongings to the trucks. “Each of us had about two pieces of luggage or less,” recalls Sr. Morávková,

“we took blankets and personal belongings. I managed to carry away the feather bed to my parents. Bed tables and beds were loaded up on trucks. Sad moments they were. We parted with our neighbors. We cried and they cried too. We did not bother to take many things, since we assumed we would be executed. During the bus journey we prayed and sang... Rosary supplied us with strength and courage; it really nerved us”³⁵.

4. Salesian sisters in Orava

The community of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Dolný Kubín³⁶ was devoted to blessed Maria Dominica Mazzarello.

³⁴ Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic, based on the decision of Regional Court in Bratislava of 5th June 1991, ref. No. 2 Rt 131/91 valid from 18th June 1991, that declared abolition of the said damnatory verdict under § 2 of Law No. 119/1990 of Statute and suspension of criminal pursue in full scope, conceded a compensation to Štefánia Bokorová in amount of 18, 912 SKK.

³⁵ H. MORÁVKOVÁ, *Private memoirs*, AIT.

³⁶ Dolný Kubín is situated in north-western Slovakia and is entrance gateway to Orava, that is the northernmost region of Slovakia. In past Orava belonged to the poorest regions of Upper Hungary.

Sr. Jozefína Bartošová was directress and the community members were Sr. Mária Fordinálová, catechist and head of oratory; Sr. Anna Weissová, music teacher; Sr. Katarína Fitošová and Sr. Terézia Karlubíková, who were in charge of kitchen and garden³⁷. The official record enumerated the following community activities: spare-time out-of-school activity, feastday oratory, catechism in the parish, special courses - music, handicrafts, theatre plays.

Local priest Viktor Trstenský endeavored to found the work of the FMA Institute in Dolný Kubín, when, in his letter of 16th April 1947 he requested the Bishop, the ordinary of Spiš Canonry for its consent to open a house of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; ref. No. of the letter is 104/1947³⁸. Although many societies, guilds and fellowships fully worked in the parish due to his untiring apostolic activity, he describes the arrival of the FMA in his book *Reminiscences* as follows:

“The arrival of the Salesian sisters to Dolný Kubín on 12th May 1947 acted as a real bomb. They came to a house that Mrs. Polláková noble-mindedly dedicated for Salesian goals. Sisters did not idle about a minute. They took care of babies, little and older pupils, adult maidens and women. They disseminated Christ’s Kingdom in their way among female believers in Dolný Kubín. Theatre plays, lectures, short films, teaching music, singsong, games etc. all these served to a magnificent goal”³⁹.

FMA sisters joined parish activities straightaway. They took charge of church arrangement, washing, and ironing the church vestments and altar cloths. Sister Weissová took the place of the organist. Daily oratory was opened for smaller children, who enjoyed coming to the sisters in great numbers. The evenings belonged to older girls, who rehearsed theatre performances with the sisters. Above all, it was necessary to collect money for the benefit of poor families that were unprecedentedly numerous in Orava. Situation in Dolný Kubín was more and more strained. Threats against priest Trstenský mounted, because he protected the Salesian sisters and did not mean to renounce his religious activities. In his letter to the local Action Committee of the National Front in Dolný Kubín he stresses that the FMA sisters “exhaust” their forces only for moral and religious salvation of the most abandoned, thus they work just in the sense of contemporary times⁴⁰. On 6th May 1948

³⁷ Sr. T. Karlubíková worked in Dolný Kubín in 1947-1948. Sr. K. Fitošová had replaced her in 1948-1949.

³⁸ Letter of priest Trstenský, V., ASB, No. 881/1947.

³⁹ V. TRSTENSKÝ, *I could not have kept silent*. Nové Mesto 1994, p. 30.

⁴⁰ V. TRSTENSKÝ, *The Word on Salesian sisters Institute*. Instead of manuscript. Lev, Ružomberok, pp. 3, 18.

Municipal Action Committee of National Front in Dolný Kubín obtained a Petition from local believers containing 700 signatures, in which they protested against the confiscation of the Salesian sisters' house.

The District Administration Committee in Dolný Kubín in its letter of 28th April 1949 prohibits, with instantaneous validity, all FMA Institute activities in Dolný Kubín. It commands to liquidate the institute within 8 days⁴¹. Bishop Vojtaššák replied to the ban with the following letter of 29th April 1949:

“If the sisters are not allowed to perform their activities for which they settled in Dolný Kubín, they will do other activities e.g. for clergy and church needs. They will not leave the place, since they have a right to exist themselves from the work of their hands...”⁴².

In autumn 1949 the situation deteriorated fast. On the 3rd of November 1949 the District National Committee informs the Salesian sisters about the confiscation of their house and orders the occupants to clear the house by the 12th of November 1949. If the order is not obeyed, the Committee threatened with distraint. The reason given for this was contempt of order that banned any FMA Institute activities⁴³. In spite of the threat, the Institute continued its activities and as Mother Superior declared on 25th October 1949, the Institute did not intend to cease from functioning. Government bodies intentionally complicated the whole affair concerning the Salesian sisters' activities in Dolný Kubín. The letter of the Salesian provincial Fr. Bokor dated 5th January 1949 addressed to bishop Vojtaššák proves the fact. We learn from it that Fr. Bokor was commissioned by the Mother General of the FMA Institute to act in official matters on behalf of the FMA Institute in Slovakia⁴⁴.

Many sources recorded the liquidation of the community. At first let us cite the statement of Viktor Trstenský in his book ‘I could not have kept silent’:

“On the 23rd of November 1949 at 11 p.m., during the night some 300 militiamen attacked Dolný Kubín. Many of them invaded the Salesian sisters' Institute through the windows, dragged the sisters out, loaded them on a truck and drove them away from Dolný Kubín. Militiamen left the sisters at the station in Belušké Slatiny and no one took care of them afterwards”⁴⁵.

⁴¹ Letter of District Administration Committee, No. 370-28/4-1949, ŠOKA, D. Kubín, No. 3961/1949.

⁴² Letter of bishop Ján Vojtaššák, ASB, No. 889/1949.

⁴³ Letter of District National Committee in D. Kubín, ŠOKA, D. Kubín, No. 3961/1949.

⁴⁴ Letter of Jozef Bokor, ASB, No. 64/1949.

⁴⁵ V. TRSTENSKÝ, *I could not have kept silent...*, p. 99.

From the written records of the interested party we learned that after militiamen broke a window and asked the sisters to leave the house pretty fast and to take the most necessary belongings only, the Superior, Sr. Bartošová, after she saw many men in uniforms, said: “Are you not ashamed? So many men against four defenseless women! And namely you, Czechs!”⁴⁶. The militiamen have not found much property in the house, since the house was furnished rather modestly. Community had suspected for a long time already that the loop was getting tighter and tighter and therefore they had tried to conceal the more valuable things, such as Mass vestments, chalices and sculptures of saints, to trustworthy people.

5. Destinies of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians during totalitarian regime

During the ten-year presence of Salesian sisters in Slovakia they opened four communities that efficiently influenced young girls. The Institute had all the conditions for further successful development and a large number of new vocations only prove the fact. The social situation had radically changed and the sisters had to face completely new challenges. The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians started working in Slovakia in mid-World War II under the rule of the Slovak State. After the war, the communists gained stronger and stronger positions. In 1945 Slovakia became a part of Czecho-Slovak Socialist Republic. All church schools and many Catholic institutions were nationalized. The cultural policy of Czechoslovak Communist Party aimed at the liquidation of the Catholic Church. The Republic was seized with concern, mistrust and uncertainty as soon as in 1947 the first Slovak FMA sister, Š. Bokorová, was detained and imprisoned in the Regional Court in Bratislava. She was released on bail of 10,000 Czechoslovak crowns. Some time later she was put in prison again, as well as Sr. Kozmonová, Sr. Hederová and Sr. Fordinálová. In autumn of 1949, the community in Dolný Kubín was buried. In spring 1950 during the savage night from 13th to 14th April, after the liquidation of male monasteries, also the Salesian sisters left their house in Trnava on Holly Street.

⁴⁶ Publication by Jozef Inovecký *Quando le spine fioriscono* was published in Italy. Unfortunately, no date of publication is marked. The whole book truly captures lives of Slovak votaries in individual concentration camps. Chapter *Questa notte di novembre* on pages 161-168 describes events that took place during the night of 23rd November 1949 in FMA community in Dolný Kubín. The author traces destinies of Salesian sisters also in the times of violent liquidation on 30th August 1950. He recounts their multiple removal all over Slovakia. (Prievoz, Beckov, Úpice, Voderady).

6. Concentration

At the end of August 1950, female religious communities were generally extinct. Then also the last two communities in Nitra and Trnava in *Kopánka* collapsed. Going back to the events shortly before the liquidation of female religious, after the mentioned negative experience and namely after the liquidation of male religious, tension among the sisters mounted. Despite that, in 1949 other 10 girls entered novitiate. Girls were resolutely persistent to continue their vocation, cost what it may (there were 18 novices altogether). First graduates from the Slovak FMA novitiate were about to make their first professions on 5th August 1950. Superiors, seeing the situation, decided that the ceremony should take place a month sooner, on 6th July 1950. Thus other 8 Slovak FMA's were added. In order to protect them against expected intervention of any executive body of power, a textile factory employed the young sisters. Sisters would come daily to work dressed in vestal robes. On 30th August 1950 at about 9 a.m. they had a phone call at the factory urging them to return home. At the factory yard there was already a bus with militiamen. All sisters had quickly to pack up and with a song "Mary, our protection" on their lips they started a journey to the unknown. Through these measure, the government brutally intervened with the vowed life of sisters, and after concentrating them from gathering in convents, subdued them to total control of state power. The sisters' position was not much more different from that of prisoners. They lost freedom of movement; they were under constant surveillance and were not allowed to do anything without prior permission of commissioners and wardens appointed by the state. They were not allowed to receive any visitors and all their mail was checked and censored. Commissioners were particular about making the sisters' life uncomfortable but only to such a limit that the sisters were able to work productively. Commissioners devoted much effort to retraining political courses that consisted in a "briefing from newspaper", lectures, projection of progressive films etc.

'Abuse of mind', this might be a proper name for gathering convents – concentration camps rather – established on short notice all over Slovakia. Ground preparation started as early as in 1944 so that in 1950 everything was ready for the frontal attack against the Roman Catholic Church. Gathering convents aimed to insulate Superiors from the vowed members, split religious unity, break down resistance in many a man, intimidate them, and same as couple of months ago, in April 1950, liquidate female religious, too. To that end there were special retraining lectures in order to discourage the sisters' minds plus hard manual work, disgracing and discrediting the vowed religious.

First stay in Bratislava. All 26 FMA - except for Sr. Karlubíková who went to visit her parents, Sr. Hudáková who was treated for tuberculosis, and Sr. Bokorová who was in prison – were transported to Bratislava, ward Prievoz, to the provincial house of the Franciscan sisters⁴⁷. Both the girls who were in formation (novices) and postulants had to return home. Sisters stayed in Prievoz for some three weeks. Several sisters were assigned to work in an oncological clinic. Four sisters of shattered health were transferred to a concentration convent in Ladce⁴⁸. Gradually, those sisters who were able to work were transported to Beckov, to a former Franciscan monastery⁴⁹. Since comrades suspected that the vowed might have unfavorable influence over factory co-workers, they mostly employed sisters in works outside of factories. And in order that the sisters would not get too much accustomed to their new surroundings, comrades methodically moved sisters from one concentration convent to another. Some of the sisters had to move as much as eleven times. Sisters stayed in Beckov till October 1951.

Since Slovak Authority for Religious Matters (SLOVUC) was unable to employ concentrated sisters productively in Slovakia, Communist Party executive body decided to employ them in Czech marches in textile factories. Labor was arduous. Toiling in a hemp factory, full of water and smudgy steam, required a lot of sacrifices. Many sisters had poor health and would not stand such toil for much longer. Therefore in their prayers they resorted to St. M. D. Mazzarello pleading for help. They prayed to her daily the novena with upraised hands. The sisters succeeded in being gradually transferred to Slovakia, to Hronský Beňadik⁵⁰. Here they helped with treating sick sisters

⁴⁷ Votaries were concentrated on Kaštieľska Street, in former Csáky manor house from the end of 19th century, built in eclectic style.

⁴⁸ Village Ladce is situated in north-western part of Ilava valley by River Váh. In 18th century a lineage of Motešický had a baroque manor house built there with widespread park and later on a small church had been built there, too. After 1925 a monastery was instituted in the former manor house. In 1942 Society of Daughters of Christian Love (Merciful sisters of St. Vincent) gained consent to establish autonomous province on the territory of Slovak State with motherhouse in Ladce. In 1950 monastery became the concentration camp for the religious sisters.

⁴⁹ Franciscan monastery. Written records come from 15th century. First friars came from prepository of Nové Mesto nad Váhom after they had retreated to Beckov castle in fear of Husite armies. In 17th century a church and monastery started to be built under the castle. Monastery embosomed many a notable priest who can be merited for religious faith recovery in surroundings as well as for maintaining Slovak culture by publishing Slovak Catholic records. They helped in parish and vicinity. In 1949, after friars were concentrated, life subsided here. In 1950 monastery became the concentration centre for religious sisters. From 1965 its function is that of Priest charity home.

⁵⁰ Original name was: Hronský Svätý Beňadik. Fortified monastery was built in 11th century. In 16th century it was fortified again and enlarged to a style of renaissance fortress.

concentrated from other congregations or they worked in garden. Some of them were officially listed as employees with very low wage. Unemployed sisters received the minimum social benefits that did not suffice even to pay for their meals. In January 1951 four sisters were transferred from Ladce to Pruské.

In Hronský Beňadik, the sisters had the opportunity to transcribe the translation of the Statutes by typewriter in order to distribute the rules among novices who stayed with their parents and intended to continue their formation. Both commissioners and militia thought to find incriminating evidence, therefore they raided the sisters' rooms in any day or any hour of the night. Then they messed up everything, causing shocking experience to the sisters. At first the Master of novices organized the work of novices and later a Salesian priest, Jozef Štáмец, replaced her until his imprisonment in 1956. Sisters did not interrupt their contact with the priest. Later on, the girls represented a core of secular VDB Institute – Don Bosco volunteers. In 1953 the Master of novices quit with the intention to flee from the country. Since she did not succeed to realize her intention, she had to pretend she had only left the Institute to lead a civilian life. Her departure initiated immediate after-effects. Nine young sisters were transported for a short time to a concentration camp in Sládečkovce⁵¹ and then to Voderady. The Unified Farmers Cooperative in Voderady urgently needed workforce. Women-prisoners had worked there before, but after the amnesty they had been released. Living conditions were unspeakable here. Lodging had no doors or windows. Military cots contained several-year damp straw and were full of insects. On the yard there was a well, a wash-tub and a steamer. Church was much too far away, therefore the sisters asked for the establishment of a chapel. Besides Jesus in the sacrament, the sisters had also a statue of the Virgin Mary that they shifted about with them from camp to camp. Older generations of Slovak FMA nourish a vivid memory of the saint.

Former fortified monastery and church are preserved and the original medieval Benedictine abbey was adapted to renaissance fortress against Turks. In 1950 monastery became the concentration camp for the priest and later for the religious sisters.

⁵¹ Village between rivers Váh and Nitra, originally known as Močenok, has a rich historical past and religious and cultural tradition. The first written record is in Zbor Writ from 1113. Parish church of St. Kliment was built in 1765. Latin name of the village is “villa Misenic” and is bound with St. Kliment, whose relics were left by St. Cyril and St. Method on the territory of magnate family of Gorazd. This is the family from which disciple St. Gorazd, worshipped in the village, comes from. In 1840 Nitra bishop Imrich Paladai had a new manor house built in the village in classicistic style. The building had been the seat of the bishop's office till 1911, then the office was transferred to Nitra. The manor house is surrounded by a large park and a garden. In 1950 a concentration camp for the diocesan priests was forcedly organized here. Later it became a concentration camp for the religious sisters.

Salesian sisters also missed their Mother Superior and suffered a lot. They could renew their first professions in secret only in the presence of a priest or an older sister. Toiling in fields was strenuous. They had to work in summer heat during harvest as well as during chilly winter days, scrubbed cucumber seeds in a river, while kneeling for several hours on stones. Since many sisters' health withered they had been transferred to a close village called Kostolná, where fieldwork was less wearisome. Sisters secretly were helping each other. When they were caught in the act, as a punishment they were relocated to other camps. (Sr. Černá to Jasov and Sr. Kubicová and Sr. Škapcová to Sládečkovce). Other sisters replaced them. Sisters had stayed in Jasov⁵² for about a month only and then they were moved to Sládečkovce.

Second stay in Beckov. Older sisters, who had returned from the Czech republic, then worked in Báč⁵³, in a charity home for priests, or they returned to their families. Sr. Weissová left for Austria, Sr. L. Dočolomanská remained with her brother in the Czech republic. The year 1955 was marked by further reshuffles. FMA from Báč, Jasov, Sládečkovce and Kostolná were assembled in Beckov. A charity home in Beckov, in which 88 religious lived, was regarded by the regime as the most comfortable one. As many as 95% of the occupancy were from the St. Vincent sisters. Communist authorities made two attempts to break the firmness and solidarity among the sisters. They removed sisters-nurses and in order to provoke friction among religious, they brought in 11 Salesian sisters, hoping a misunderstanding would arise between individual religious, and thus a warden would get a chance to reconnoiter. The Sisters worked in the fields and run the household for nothing. After toiling for three strenuous years, four FMA sisters from Voderady were transferred to Sládečkovce, where they had to face responsibility and back-breaking drudgery on a large poultry farm. In 1961 two sisters left the Institute due to health problems. During the stay in Beckov two sisters have died: Sr. Fitošová in 1958 and Sr. Macková in 1962. On the funeral day of the latter, six junior sisters made secretly their perpetual profession, while all of them passed their formation in the Nitra novitiate.

In 1962 a whole group of sisters came from Beckov to Sládečkovce. Some of them worked here on poultry farm; others were doing various ser-

⁵² Baroque monastery, church and premonstrates. Monastery of John the Baptist was founded in second half of 12th century. After abolition of premonstrate religion (emperor Josef II in 1787) Jasov archive was transferred to Budapest. In 1802 the religious returned to monastery. They renewed their activities and continued until 1950, when a concentration camp was forcedly organized here.

⁵³ Previously a Franciscan monastery. In 1950 a concentration camp for the diocesan and religious priests was forcedly organized here.

vices in the house or in the garden. From 1963, due to improving political situation, the Austrian provincial Sr. Giovanna Zacconi could visit sisters in Sládečkovce. Sisters made use of the period of political abandonment, took a course in catechism and in 1969 started to teach religion. They worked mostly at parishes in Šoporňa, Šaštín, Nová Ľubovňa and Trnava on Kopánka.

7. Period of clandestine activities: 1970–1989

The situation during this period brings to mind the seed buried deeply under ground. The FMA's experienced a lot of sufferings; nevertheless, nothing could break them; on the contrary, sisters felt purified and strengthened in their true-heartedness. After twenty years of being victimized, not a single sister walked away from the Institute. Sisters stood their ground in such a crucible. But still, the fight against the Church went on. Happiness in freedom did not last long. Religious were forbidden to teach religion. A lot of sisters have not returned to the charity house in Sládečkovce any more. They dispersed to different places inasmuch as they could not be controlled so easily. They left to work in parishes or to take care of their aging parents. They took off their habit and dressed like civilians, but they have never stopped being religious. They kept in contact with each other and they used to meet for spiritual retreats. Prayers and sacrifices of the sisters have not remained fruitless. The Lord used that to achieve yearning for religious life also in the hearts of the new socialist people. In 1967 the first vocations started to be endorsed to dedicated Salesian life.

“In 1971 a 16-year old Rozália Mrenová from Horné Orešany came to Sr. Bokorová and Černá oin Kopánka and showed her interest in religious life. Another girl, Ludmila Konkoľová from Nová Ľubovňa, did the same”⁵⁴.

In 1974 a Salesian, don Jozef Izakovič, started the novitiate for two girls. In 1976 Superiors in Rome gave the novices their permission to make religious professions. The novices professed their vows in front of Sr. Anna Lukáčová, who was at the time responsible for the Slovak FMA's. In 1981 Sr. Vilma Šutková took over the services as a delegate. Sr. Mária Černá became the novice mistress. Thanks to the courage and great sacrifices of the sisters as well as of many Salesian brothers, in the period between 1976 and 1990 forty-three young Daughters of Mary Help of Christians entered the Institute.

⁵⁴ From recountal of Sr. Rozália Mrenová, Fma.