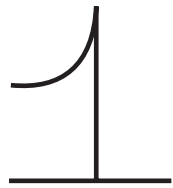




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# They Were “Heroes”. Conceptual and Narrative Analysis of the Figure of a Free Teacher in a Totalitarian Society<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** Despite the context of contemporary post-heroic indifference, our intention is to re-analyze the concept of heroism, not in the modernist (totalizing and iconic), or in the post-modernist (de-heroizing and ironic) way, but in the optics of hermeneutic re-reading of the specific teachers’ stories from the Stalinist years of the totalitarian regime. In the contribution we bring a conceptual identification of features of the ethical-characterial understanding of “hero without a halo”, by which we want to break the simplistic dichotomy

between heroic and everyday – we introduce a third concept – “a hero of everyday life”. We point out how the mythical-idealistic idea of heroism perverted to a collective ideology and how the reality of the communist totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia demanded heroes – heroes of everyday life. The aim of the research is to find the occurrence of the identifying features of the “everyday hero” in particular stories of three teachers from the times of socialist Czechoslovakia, with the help of narrative analysis.

**Keywords** totalitarian regime, communism, heroes, persecution, teachers, micro-stories

<sup>1</sup> The study originated with the support of the projects of Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic VEGA No. 1/0106/20 Freedom versus Unfreedom in Education in Slovakia in 1948– 1989 and No. 1/0056/19 Moral Reflection as a Primary Component of Character Education under Conditions of Implementation of the School Subject Ethical Education.

“Unhappy the land that has no heroes.”

Bertolt Brecht

## Introduction

To this exclamation of Andrea Sarti, uttered with a youthful pathos, teacher Galileo responds with a statement which unwittingly foreshadows post-heroic irony: “No, unhappy the land that is in need of heroes” (Brecht, p. 130). “They always laughed at the heroes,” Brecht says through a boy’s mouth a few moments later. Despite the fact that Brecht is far from postmodernism, the authors of post-modernist, post-historical and post-heroic theories of the late 20th century like to refer to this passage from the play.

The concept of post-heroism (cf. Petrušek, 2006) originated in sociological circles as an extension of the wave of post-isms characterizing time, society and culture “after the fall of great narratives” (Lyotard, 1979, Czech translation 1993). According to this concept, self-legitimizing modern interpretations of social cohesion and history needed to rely on the symbolic characters of public heroes and their cult to justify their own ideological-value reinforcement, including the implicit violence used “for the holy cause”. After the fall of ideologies and the arrival of the so-called the last man (cf. Fukuyama, 1993, Czech translation 2002) there was also a “fatigue of the heroes”, their unnecessaryness and even undesirability. Mike Featherstone (1995 In: Petrušek, 2006) in this sense distinguishes the *heroic mode* from the *everyday mode*, which are facing each other, arranged in ten oppositions (e.g. public recognition – recognition of family and friends; cult of power – peaceful compromise; risk – certainty). Contemporary man thus enjoys and satisfies his consumerist smallness and hedonic mediocrity, without being disturbed by high ideals.

In thus described context of contemporary post-heroic indifference, or even anti-heroic irritability, my contribution about heroes

and prophets may sound as anachronistic bizarreness at first sight<sup>2</sup>. On closer reading, however, I believe it will be clear that my intention is quite current: to re-analyze the concept of heroism, not in modernist optics (totalizing and iconic), or even in postmodernist optics (de-heroizing and ironic), but in hermeneutic re-reading of particular stories of teachers and in conceptual identification of signs of ethical-characterial understanding of the “hero without a halo”.

A modernist romantic-idealistic image of a hero unfolds as he represents an exceptional individual, into whom the providence of history is embodied. The romantic hero was given an extraordinary historical role to perform as an instrument of history (cf. Hegel, 2004, pp. 26–29). The modernist hero, the *Great Man*, despises democracy because it gives power to the immature, the uneducated and the weak, while the natural force triumphs in favour of the strong, the intelligent and the noble. Mentality of the servants has no understanding for the hero: “no man is a hero to his valet” (Carlyle, 1966, p. 184), repeats the well-known sentence mentioned by Hegel. The hero can also be immoral, he transcends moral duty, moral questions are a manifestation of weakness and conventionality for him. In contrast to the a-moral mythic-idealistic concept of heroism stands the ethical-characterial concept of a virtuous individual. An exceptional, virtuous individual, a person with an excellent character, is not necessarily a “public hero”, canonized or legitimized in the legends and symbols of public and political life. His excellence is the result of a cultivated respect for himself and others. The history of ethics, from Aristotle to the current authors of the so-called ethics of virtue, calls this concept of heroism “virtuous heroism”.

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2 It should be noted that the sociologist Miloslav Petrussek revised his initial enthusiasm in his assessment of post-heroism in last writings and ironically criticized the postmodern loss of sense of uniqueness and heroism. The post-heroic self-satisfaction of the hedonic man proved to be a temporary, fashionable trend that could not face the real difficulties in a society shaken by the crisis (cf. Petrussek, 2006).

I want to break the simplifying (and interpretatively comfortable) dichotomy between the heroic and the everyday by creating, or better said by renewing of the *third concept* – the “hero of everyday life”. I do not mean the tendentially heroized suffering fatalist “Million Man” (Hronský Cíger, 1969, p. 5), nor the collective man with a “dove-like nature” or a member of the “plebeian nation” (Mináč, 2014, p. 49), or even the indifferent and passive “Man Without Features” (Musil, 1930). The hero of everyday life is a moral hero with formed character traits, who, risking his own losses, actively acts in favor of a higher good (cf. Kohen, 2013). Despite the fact that his acting separates him from the homogenizing stream of the anonymous mass of “ordinary people”, his heroism does not have to be connected with the publicity or with legitimization or canonization processes generating traditional heroes (in epics, hagiographies, political and media constructions).

### Research Aims and Methods

This concept of *virtuous hero* and heroism follows the classical concept of moral character, which is winding as a civilizational formula of the “good man”, beginning with the eudaimonical ethics of the ancient Greeks and experiencing a renewal in the current ethics of virtue (D. Carr, A. MacIntyre, M. Slote, M. Nussbaum, K. Kristjánsson, T. Irwin, L. T. Zagzebski, Ch. Swanton etc.), or in contemporary humanistic psychology and pedagogy (cf. Franco et al., 2016; Zimbardo, 2014; Franco, Efthimiou, Zimbardo, 2016; Allison, Goethals, Kramer, 2017 a. o.)<sup>3</sup>; in contrast to the (also classical) mythical-romantic concept of heroism, which in the 20th century resulted in totalitarian political ideologies<sup>4</sup>.

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3 One of the surveys of heroism researches states Z. E. Franco et al. in article *Heroism Research: A Review of Theories, Methods, Challenges, and Trends* (2016).

4 The romantic-historicist „hero“ ceased to be an exceptional individual, collectivized himself, became a monologue “we” versus the reactionary “they/it”. On the contrary, the “reactionary forces” (representatives of the lower race, or the enemy class) have been placed in the position of sufferers, necessary historical victims, who have had to endure the “collective heroes” carrying out their “historical mission”. There occurred a per-version of heroism: the self-proclaimed heroes of the “great stories” (in Lyotard’s words), celebrating the necessary victory of history,

Zimbardo's ordinary, *banal heroism*, contrasts with the "banality of evil", which is most revealed in the environment of totalitarian machinery (cf. Arendt, 2016). In contrast to the "normalcy" of systematic betrayal, pretense and deception, the examples of "banal heroes" who behaved correctly and internally freely, despite the unfortunate consequences, are all the more radiant. In his book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007; in Czech translation 2014), Zimbardo lists *four attributes of heroism*: 1. It must be voluntary; 2. It must involve a risk or a potential sacrifice; 3. It must be a service to a person or people; 4. It must not include any secondary gain expected at the time of the act (cf. Zimbardo, 2014, p. 542). He considers courage (bravery and perseverance), justice (with respect to the others and the whole) and a sense of transcendence (higher moral and religious values) to be the hero's basic virtues. Resisting evil, especially structural evil in the totalitarian dehumanizing societies, "we care about heroic stories because they serve as powerful reminders that people are capable of resisting evil, of not giving in to temptations, of rising above mediocrity, and of heeding the call to action and to service when others fail to act" (Ibid., p. 537).

In my contribution, I highlight the enduring personal virtuous heroism, which is a condition for the real continuity of civilization in society, but at the same time is – embodied in specific life patterns – an inspiring model of moral education of students. The historical-educational text thus connects the current pedagogical challenges of character education and moral leadership of students with the sources of our own historical experience as a source of knowledge and inspiration.

On the other hand, the text helps to uncover parallel "small" cultural history of the 20th century which illustrates the unofficial, averted lines of development and life of teachers in a totalitarian regime. Although radical social historians of the time rejected the narration of stories as a way to legitimize and overestimate the importance of great

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forced the "footmen" to inadvertently and unintentionally become the "heroes of everyday life". Dissidents of totalitarian regimes were forced to become moral heroes, remaining true to their day.

leaders at the expense of simple men and women, they later acknowledged that a return to storytelling is necessary precisely because of historical coverage of ordinary people's lives (cf. Burke, 2011, p. 154) – people of the “periphery” play a constitutive role in the formation of the “center” of history (cf. *ibid.*, p. 71). I base my thesis on the theoretical premise that it is not possible to faithfully capture the history of education, schooling and the teaching situation in Slovakia in the time of the Stalinist political monolith without the descent to the micro-stories of socially “discarded” teachers. “Victim history” is an organic part of contemporary historiography (cf. Ginzburg, 2009), including the historiography of education, especially when it comes to examining the period in which the political system inevitably produced dissidents.

The aim of my research is to find the occurrence of the identifying features of the “everyday hero” in particular stories of teachers from the times of socialist Czechoslovakia, with the help of narrative analysis. After preliminary determination of the conditions for defining the concept of “virtuous hero” (I am inclined to the four attributes of heroism according to Ph. Zimbardo) – in contrast to the concept of “collective heroism” of the ruling class<sup>5</sup> – I set two historical-educational research questions: What signs of moral heroism are repeated

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5 Slovak or Czech term “*hrdina*” comes from the Proto-Slavic *гърдъ*, „*gurd*“, which suggests expressions as heavy, slowly moving, proud, dignified. The Latin *gurdus* (heavy) also comes from Indo-European *g<sup>h</sup>er* – (cf. Králik, 2015, p. 209). The Greek term *ἥρωες* was also reflected in the Russian *герой*, *geroj*. In our linguistic cultural context, this term acquires a sarcastic, pejorative expression – a *geroj* is someone who mechanically makes himself worthy of admiration. The ironic use of the originally Russian term *geroj* is a result of the violent overuse of this word, imported into our countries during Soviet hegemony. The term “*gerojstvo*” (heroism) is an ideological variant of normative heroism, used today with the symptom of irony. In the socialist narrative, existed also the concept of the “hero of everyday life”, but it did not refer to a character-moral individual, but to the anonymous “hero of socialist labor”, a man without autonomy, dissolved in the collective. Current sarcastic use of originally Russian word *geroj* carries the experience of resistance to cultural dictation, which sought patheticism, but forced pathos arouses fear or ridicule, certainly not admiration.



in the stories of persecuted teachers in a totalitarian state? Is there a typical heroic characteristic of teachers that the regime has ostracized?

At the beginning of the historiographical part of the study I illustrate, how the reality of the communist totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia demanded heroes – heroes of everyday life. The study contains a record of the individual destinies of three “ordinary” teachers who, in their personal and professional history, lived the mode of an ordinary hero, facing persecutions and shaping their lives in accordance with their moral conviction that did not correspond with the demands of political dictate.

The choice of three stories is practically random, they are connected only by a similar experience of heroic enduring and facing persecution. In my study, protagonists act as representatives of the persecuted teacher status, i.e. the entire social group, which was manipulated by power and in many cases pushed not only out of education, but also out of the possibility of their professional and civic employment.<sup>6</sup> In the final part, I identify selected features of ethical-characterial understanding of the hero in the stories mentioned. The attitudes of these protagonists are thus shown in a contrasting light to the publicly proclaimed and perverse “collective heroism” of the communist state.

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6 There were a large number of analogous cases of persecuted teachers in Slovakia, but they have not yet been systematically processed historically. There is no corpus of collected stories of teachers who had to face persecution during the communist regime. The only review publication on this topic is *Pohon na učiteľov: Dokumenty zločinov komunizmu na Slovensku zv. 1* [*Hunt for Teachers: Documents of the Crimes of Communism in Slovakia Vol. 1*] by Jozef Janek (1999), which contains a list of about 350 persecuted teachers with short medallions. In the book, he mentions a total of 660 teachers who were “deprived of bread” during totalitarianism (Janek, 1999, p. 163). However, it does not provide more detailed stories to the extent that the three stories in this article are listed.

### **“Free” Teachers in Unfree Conditions: Three Examples of Heroism**

After the Communist Party’s violent takeover in February 1948 and the establishment of a totalitarian dictatorship, the representatives of the state were extremely interested in the consistent control of schools and education<sup>7</sup> because in the spirit of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, education should have been the instrument of mass ideologization and discipline of the population (cf. Olejník, 2018). The regime included teachers among closely monitored social groups and considered their ideological education to be one of the most important tasks (cf. Žatkuliak, 1996, p. 77).

Personal stories of the persecuted teachers in Slovakia have not been systematically processed yet. Nation’s Memory Institute in Bratislava recently established the Research Center for the Period of Non-Freedom, which also includes the Department of Audiovisual Works (former Oral history), which manages records of people persecuted by the communist regime. There is no special category of persecuted teachers among the statements. Among the published testimonies, only two concern teachers (Ján Goč and František Maník, cf. ÚPN, Witnesses from the period of non-freedom). The publication of Jozef Janek (1999) is relatively rich in personal memories and stories of persecuted teachers. He briefly wrote and included in his study a number of these cases, based on a call he published in the newspaper *Slovenský denník, Učiteľské noviny, Katolícke noviny* (he received 350 letters). The experience of the persecuted teachers can be expressed by the synthetic statement of one of them, the writer Ondrej Chudoba: “I had to leave the teaching

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7 Especially some years (1948, 1956, 1969) became milestones, followed by waves of increased sanctions for teachers: the first wave (1948–1952) occurred immediately after the communists seized the state, the second wave (1956–1962) came after the death of J. V. Stalin and K. Gottwald and after suppression of the Hungarian uprising and the third wave (1969–1973) of persecutions followed the violent end of the so-called “Prague Spring”, the arrival of the occupying forces of the Warsaw Pact and the onset of the so-called normalization (cf. Žatkuliak, 2001, p. 655). However, the strict surveillance and persecution of educators, especially for religious and political reasons, lasted throughout the whole totalitarian period.

occupation because, almost simultaneously with my teaching qualification, I obtained the dreaded ‘class enemy’ qualification. My family and I were affected by the repression of the 1950s. However, it was not an extraordinary or atypical story. Thousands of such unhappy stories took place at that time and their trauma is still growing in the memories of those born earlier. Needless to say, I do not need to describe the details, it is enough to mention that one day I became an exile and sometimes even a homeless person, until later I was helped by my parents-in-law roof...” (Janek, 1999, p. 59).

In my contribution, I present three specific cases in which the heroes of upbringing and education appear in a struggle with the communist power of totalitarian Czechoslovakia<sup>8</sup>. If we define a “character hero” above as a banal, hidden, or everyday hero, with certain attributes of heroism (cf. Zimbardo), we could consider as heroes hundreds, thousands of teachers who, in a situation of life dilemma (to subject to violent pressure from the regime and to collaborate<sup>9</sup> versus maintain self-esteem and endure the ensuing social and economic repression) decided for personal integrity and, as a result, faced persecution. From this number – in representation, as a *pars pro toto* – I choose three microhistorical stories, on which I document the heroic features of persecuted educators. Three cases are representative in relation to a number of similar ones (cf. footnote 6). I draw the first two from the work

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8 Here we will focus mainly on the period of the 1950s, during which the “purges” were the cruelest and most massive among teachers. In the name of the “class struggle”, former officials somehow connected to the war Hlinka Slovak Folk Party’s government were being removed from schools, as well as teachers representing the post-war Democratic Party, even exponents of social democracy. The most common reason for persecution was the active affiliation of teachers to the church and to religion.

9 Many educators, as civil employees existentially dependent on state power, joined the Communist Party during 1948 (their number more than tripled), some out of conviction, but mostly out of danger, most teachers cooperated with the regime, albeit by force, relatively a small number of teachers fell into the group of those who resisted and suffered severe consequences (cf. Žatkuliak, 1996, p. 78 et seq.).

of Ivana Višňovská (2015), the third I documented in person, with the help of archival research and interviews with participants.

### Vilma Dovalová (1905–1997)

Persecutions of the 50s at the level of exemplary trials did not escape teachers either. The most pointed out of this was the trial of the controversial Moravian teacher Josef Vávra-Stařfk, which ended with the execution on 26th August 1953 (cf. Kaplan & Paleček in Višňovská, 2015, p. 178). Other political trials with educators did not have fatal conclusions but caused lifelong trauma to the victims and their relatives anyway. The purpose of the processes was, in particular, to intimidate the teacher status, to warn other teachers to put themselves fully and unreservedly at the service of the regime<sup>10</sup>. This was also the case with Vilma Dovalová. During the reconstruction of her story, Ivana Višňovská drew on interviews with relatives and friends of Dovalová and from archival documents.

Vilma, born Igažová (born on 20th December 1905 in Biskupice, near Bánovce nad Bebravou) came from a simple peasant family, after graduating from a city school in Bánovce, she graduated from the teacher's institute in Bratislava in 1925. She married Ján Doval, they had two children together. At first, she worked at the State Folk School in Šrobárová near Komárno, where her husband worked as a headmaster, from the beginning of 1938 both were transferred to the Folk School in Dolné Držkovce, where her husband again held the position of the headmaster. The locals liked the Doval family, the students remember Vilma as strict, pedantic but kind. The school inspection in 1949

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10 Teachers were under constant pressure from the political authorities, their demands for indoctrination curricular, extracurricular, political and educational activities escalated, whereas the regime abused them – as “bearers of state ideology” – for its own purposes, under the threat of various punishments. During the first wave, e.g. the number of professors and associate professors at universities in the Czechoslovak Republic decreased from 1,430 to 887, about 5% of all teachers were dismissed from education and more than 6,300 teachers of national schools were transferred to other workplaces due to sanction reasons (Kaplan in Žatkuliak, 1996, p. 80 and 87).

evaluated her as capable, qualified and trustworthy, so she easily passed the inspections in 1945, also in 1949, she even became the headmaster of the school. It can be assumed that she was ideologically satisfactory as well, although she never hid her Catholic affiliation.

The school year 1949/50 was fatal for her. Already in September, at the order of the state, the praying at the school in the Catholic spirit was forbidden and the so-called unified prayer was established, which Dovalová reluctantly accepted but complied with the instruction. In October, she warned some boys at school who had longer hair to be cut several times and she asked their parents to do so as well. When they disobeyed it, she entangled red ribbons into their hair as a sign of warning and ridicule. Parents of the pupil Štefan Veľký, who supported the Communist Party in the village, came with the accusation that she had ridiculed their son but what was worse, she allegedly wanted to ridicule the Communist Party (whose symbol was red colour). The school inspector, recently appointed and coming from their village, probably instructed the other communist parents to report the actions of teacher Dovalová as anti-state.

On November 28, 1949, she was indicted by the District Prosecutor's Office in Bánovce nad Bebravou, on January 16, 1950, she was taken into custody by the Regional Court in Nitra. She was accused of a double offense of spreading an alarm message, of a crime of sabotage, of participating in the offense of outrage against the republic, of an offense of defaming the republic, and finally of an offense of defaming the allied state. She was to commit a double offense by expressing dissatisfaction with the ban on cross prayer at school after mass in front of the church and by saying to pupils at school, "Children, we must not pray or cross pray at school, we are forbidden to do so". The outrage against the republic was to be committed by having the pupils' hair cut and tied with red paper ribbons around their heads and led them around school in derision, knowing that they were the children of local communists. According to the accusation, she was to take the ribbons from the paintings of K. Gottwald and probably also V. I. Stalin, with which the paintings were decorated. However, witnesses told the researcher Višňovská that the incident did not take place this way

and that she should have taken the ribbons from her own supplies. Husband Doval sent letters to the public prosecutor's office, as well as several requests for pardon, directly to President Gottwald but without an answer. On June 6, 1950, Dovalová was found guilty by a court verdict of all the acts attributed to her in the accusation. However, Dovalová constantly claimed that her act was not politically motivated. Vilma Dovalová was sentenced to 7 years and 8 months in prison and to a secondary sentence of loss of honorary civil rights, she was also fined CSK (Czechoslovak crowns) 40,000, in case of unenforceability another 4 months in prison and confiscation of half of her property. The conviction also contained the following reasoning: "Educational work is one of the most difficult and responsible, especially in the time of building socialism in our people's democratic state. [...] The state hands over great values to the hands of teachers in the person of school children. [...] Today, the teacher must be the first builder of a socialist society. When we ask ourselves whether the defendants performed their civic duties as teachers, we get an overwhelmingly negative answer. They did not perform their duties as required by the teacher of our pride – the unified public school. In fact, they became unworthy of the trust of the working class, which entrusted them with their treasures – the children. How they could proclaim discipline when they themselves were disrupting that discipline. [...] Let the activity of the defendants be a deterrent to how a good educator should not continue. Let this case be at the same time a lesson for teachers working in our unified schools [...]" (Višňovská, 2015, p. 197). Dovalová served her sentence in the Ilava prison. After being appealed to the Supreme Court, her sentence was reduced to two years imprisonment, a fine of CSK 10,000 and the loss of honorary civil rights to five years. She worked as a tailor in prison. She was released on January 17, 1952.

The fine and reimbursement of costs were a liquidation for the family. After her release, Dovalová did not return to Dolné Držkovce, she returned to children and her husband in Nové Zámky. She was no longer allowed to do pedagogical work, and due to her poor health, she remained a "housewife". Her husband even joined the KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia), albeit for existential reasons, so that their

daughter Hilda could have studied at university despite her mother's poor staff profile. Vilma later lived only from retirement of her husband, who died in 1960 and she privately tutored students. As a part of the rehabilitation of political prisoners after 1990, she asked for her name to be cleared but her request was rejected, despite the fact that she was legally convicted and punished for "anti-state activity". She lived in Nové Zámky and Bratislava, with her daughter, among grandchildren and great-grandchildren, she died at the age of 92.

### **Edita Mikulová (1931–2014)**

The young teacher Edita was judged and convicted together with her older colleague and headmaster Dovalová. Her conviction was also a consequence of the political order of the time, she herself became an unintended and almost "accidental" victim of the hunt for deterrent cases. Mikulová was born on May 8, 1931 in Poltár, her father was a police captain, her mother a housewife. Witnesses stated that her family was anti-communist, she was not afraid to express her opinion out loud. She graduated from folk school in Bánovce nad Bebravou, where she also attended a city school. She graduated in 1949 in Trenčín at the Vocational School for Women's Professions. From the beginning of September, she joined the folk school in Dolné Držkovce as an assistant teacher of handicrafts. She was not qualified for a full-time teacher but she also worked as a class teacher of the 2nd year. She was very handy and especially popular with female students.

Edita Mikulová was indicted at the same time as the headmaster Vilma Dovalová, she was taken into custody on March 9, 1950 and charged with the offense of outrage against the republic, the offense of defaming the republic and the offense of defaming the allied state. The reason was that at Dovalová's instruction in October 1949, in her class she cut hair, tied red ribbons to the heads and allegedly led five pupils whose parents were members of the Communist Party – and Mikulová knew about it – around school with the headmaster and to ridicule them. She was charged with the same charges as Dovalová for this act, except for spreading of an alarm message. Relatives also tried to help her, her father Štefan Mikula testified in her favor by letter to

the public prosecutor's office, he asked her to be released from custody until court time but without a response. The mother of the pupil concerned, Júlia Veľká, also testified in her favor, arguing that Mikulová was obedient to the instructions of her superior. Mikulová was found guilty by the court reasoning that her actions intended to jeopardize the important interest of the republic, publicly outraged the republic and its establishment, publicly damaged and removed the colors of the republic with the intention of showing contempt and also publicly damaged and removed the colors of the allied state to show contempt. All the alleged acts for which she was convicted were in the nature of "bad intentions". Edita did not feel guilty by these acts, certainly not from "anti-state intentions".

The main sentence of imprisonment for 1 year and 10 months and the secondary sentence in the form of loss of civil rights, as well as a fine of CSK 20,000, possibly 2 months of imprisonment and confiscation of one quarter of property, was – thanks to Vilma Dovalová's appeal to the Supreme Court – reduced to one year of imprisonment and a fine of CSK 10,000. She served her sentence in the women's prison in Ilava, where she worked in the laundry but also took part in the prison theater. She was released on April 10, 1951, a month later than it was set by the judgment because she was unable to pay the fine.

After release, Edita did not return to the teaching profession, she was not allowed to earn a teaching qualification. At first, she worked in a dressing room and later, until her retirement, as a controller in Zornica clothing factory. After her release from prison, she married Štefan Kobyda, they lived in a house in Bánovce, they had two children together and they also took care of the son of her sister, who died prematurely. After 1990, she finally experienced official rehabilitation and became a member of the Confederation of Political Prisoners of Slovakia. Edita Kobydová, nee Mikulová, died in March 2014. The self-governing region of Trenčín posthumously granted her veterans' decree for participating in the anti-communist resistance.



### Ondrej Lajcha (1919–2000)

Ondrej Lajcha is not one of those teachers who was punished by a court but political reprisals and pressures had a negative effect on his life and the life of his family. For his religious and moral convictions, he lost at one point a job, employment opportunities in education, home for the whole family (school apartment), prospects for a good education for his children and any prospects for professional development.

Ondrej Lajcha was born on September 14, 1919 in the village of Skala (today Skalka nad Váhom) in a peasant family as the last of seven children to parents Ondrej and Anna, nee Verková. After graduating from the national school in Skala in 1931, as he liked to study, he continued his studies at the state real grammar school in Trenčín, where he graduated with honors in 1939. Since he came from poor conditions, he had already earned money at the grammar school by tutoring younger pupils and also helped his family from earnings<sup>11</sup>. He was the only child in the family who graduated from high school – according to his earlier statements, he accepted the recommendation of his former teacher Alexander Trška to continue his studies, as he was gifted, although he had to support himself (his father died in 1935). He enrolled at the Faculty of Arts of the Slovak University in Bratislava, where he graduated from History and Latin with the professional qualification of a secondary school teacher in 1943. He spoke classical Latin and Greek, German, Russian and French. In the school year 1943/1944 he worked as a temporary teacher at the grammar school in Zvolen, in 1944 he was allowed to move closer to his birthplace and worked as a professor at the grammar school in Piešťany. In 1945 he acquired a teaching ability in the Russian language, later he taught mainly mathematics and, according to the memories of his daughters, also the German language. On March 3, 1946 he married Helena, nee Tršková, with whom they had three children, Anna in 1949, Margita in 1953 and Karol

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11 VIZVÁRYOVÁ, Margita, 2020. *Statement of Mgr. Margita Vizváryová, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Skalka nad Váhom), PA of the author; RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajská, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

in 1956. They lived together in a nice office apartment in Piešťany on Mudroňová street. He had good relations with colleagues, they visited each other with colleagues Pomajbo, Klepanec, husband and wife Krohovec<sup>12</sup>. After the reform of the school system in 1953 he transferred to the Eleven-Year High School in Piešťany, where he worked as a professor until September 15, 1957.

The decisive reason why his employment was terminated after 14 years as a high school professor was the fact that his eldest daughter Anna, who was already attending primary school, attended religious education. His religious and moral convictions were known in his surroundings before, his colleagues and superiors knew about that and tried to persuade him to “go to church” in the surrounding villages and not express their faith so much<sup>13</sup>. Ondrej was an inner anti-communist but for security reasons he did not show it publicly. Throughout the 1950s, he sought to “get along” with the regime by participating in non-party but regime-supported organizations, such as the Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship (Zväz československo-sovietskeho priateľstva, SČSP, in which he was even a district officer since 1950), or Revolutionary trade union movement (Revolučné odborové hnutie, ROH, the only trade union during the communist era). He went through all the political checks, during the summer holidays in 1952 he passed an examination in political literature, which was prescribed for individual study by the Commission of Education, Science and the Arts, Decree No. 666/1952-K/1 (confirmation of completion with a detailed list of literature and examinations is in the author’s private archive – PA). The extensive questionnaire, which he had to fill out as a teacher on November 2, 1953, shows that he worked 50 hours of voluntary work (the questionnaire is in the author’s PA). He did this in order to keep his job and to “close his eyes” to his superiors. Nevertheless, he felt that he was not acting in full accordance with his inner attitude, that he was going to the edge of what he could still bear in conscience.

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12 RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajská, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

13 *Ibidem*.

However, as far as his faith was concerned, he knew no compromises. He had to give a direct answer to the direct question. The turning point, the culmination was the pressure to deregister his daughter from Religion classes, which he could not do. He felt an internal contradiction to what had been forced on him for a long time. “He received an ultimatum: either he stopped going to church and deregistered me, or he had to leave school.”<sup>14</sup> Lajcha replied that he could not compromise with his own conscience in this. He had to leave school immediately.

After the beginning of the school year 1957, he remained with his family, three small children (the youngest son was 1 year old) without a job, without a roof over their head (they had to move out of the teacher’s apartment), without further prospects. The wife’s sister and her family helped them and let them live together under their roof in the two-room flat in Skala and during the winter and the following summer they helped them build a second apartment attached to a house next door from the other side, where they then spent almost their entire lives. Lajcha was employed as a worker in a nearby quarry<sup>15</sup>, working manually from September 1957 to the end of 1958. As an intellectual, he was not used to working hard manually, he was beaten, exhausted and hungry, fainted once exhausted and had to call for emergency<sup>16</sup>. He was honourable in the village as a “professor”, it was very prestigious at the time, “when people saw him working in a quarry, they looked

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14 RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajsská, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

15 Dislocating teachers to lower positions in worse conditions has become a mass tool of punishment and intimidation. An even tougher measure was the reassignment of teachers to production: e.g. only in the Prešov region in 1950 there were dismissed and reassigned to production 550 teachers (Janek, 1999, p. 55); subsequently (in 1952) there were 1152 missing teachers of national schools in Slovakia and the numbers were supplemented from the ranks of 500 retrained manual workers (Žatkuliak, 1996, p. 86).

16 RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajsská, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

at him as a rarity”<sup>17</sup>. He fed a young family, earned little<sup>18</sup> compared to the professor’s earnings in 1956 (1,993 Czechoslovak crowns per month; calculation in the author’s PA) fell below 1,000 crowns (only in April 1958 he became a “quarry master” and his salary rose to 1,200; documentation in the author’s PA), while building a new home from scratch. His wife used to put a fried cumin soup with a piece of bread in his thermos for lunch<sup>19</sup>. At the same time, he wanted to improve his qualification, so in the school year 1957/58 already, he began a two-year evening study of civil engineering at the Industrial School of Mechanical Engineering in Nové Mesto nad Váhom, where he graduated for the second time in June 1959. Subsequently, he completed a two-year distance learning course in the field of quarrying and processing of stone, clay and kaolin at the Industrial School of Civil Engineering in Bratislava. With a construction education, he created better earning opportunities and until his early retirement he worked in various positions in the company Cestné stavby (Road constructions) in Trenčín. Around 1960, members of the State Security Service (ŠTB) came and offered him cooperation, threatening to destroy his family and set fire to his house. He experienced anxiety but resisted and later it passed<sup>20</sup>. In 1968, his colleagues called him to teach at the grammar school again, he considered it very much because he loved teaching but normalization came quickly and “as if he came, so he would go”<sup>21</sup>. In the afternoon, he sometimes tutored pupils and students, taught

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17 VIZVÁRYOVÁ, Margita, 2020. *Statement of Mgr. Margita Vizváryová, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Skalka nad Váhom), PA of the author.

18 The social consequences for the lives of teachers and their families have been extremely severe. The regime’s repressive measures, in addition to prisons, job losses and downsizing, included stopping of promotion, exclusion from public life, bans on publishing and public engagement, prevention of the admission of their children to university studies but also to grammar schools, etc.

19 RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajská, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

20 RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajská, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

21 VIZVÁRYOVÁ, Margita, 2020. *Statement of Mgr. Margita Vizváryová, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Skalka nad Váhom), PA of the author.

German privately in the evenings and sometimes substituted as a teacher at a vocational school. Apparently, his experience of physical and mental strain and work exhaustion deprived him of his health and he was released to a disability pension in December 1977 due to heart attacks and other cardiological problems.

All the time, he took good care of children who managed to graduate from technical and pharmacy colleges, although daughters Margita and Anna would like to study pedagogy or humanities but as daughters of a former teacher who was “unreliable” for the regime, they would not be allowed to do so<sup>22</sup>. The children experienced hostility of the system that made them feel their revenge when they could not be educated spiritually, e.g. musically and artistically<sup>23</sup>. However, the father never sold off faith and moral conviction, he also imprinted moral and religious principles into his children, who also did not compromise in life thanks to parental upbringing. In the village, he was considered a man who retained his character despite persecution, he deserved respect. Former students maintained a warm relationship with him, visited him and called for meetings, held him in high esteem and loved him. “He was a great hero. He was faithful to his conscience, honest, good character and [...] for the truth. That was heroism at that time. [...] This was not a common thing. [...] He said several times that if it came back, he would never have done otherwise.”<sup>24</sup> He lived with his wife in the care of his children and grandchildren, he died in Trenčín on December 12, 2000.

## Conclusion

In identifying the attributes of heroism in its ethical-characterial understanding, I am inspired by Zimbardo’s four key features of heroism:

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22 Ibidem; RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajska, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

23 VIZVÁRYOVÁ, Margita, 2020. *Statement of Mgr. Margita Vizváryová, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Skalka nad Váhom), PA of the author.

24 RAJSKÁ, Anna, 2020. *Statement of Ing. Anna Rajska, daughter of Ondrej Lajcha* (14th February 2020, Trenčín), PA (private archive) of the author.

(a) it must be engaged in voluntarily; (b) it must involve a risk or potential sacrifice, such as the threat of death, an immediate threat to physical integrity, a long-term threat to health, or the potential for serious degradation of one's quality of life (social and economic status); (c) it must be conducted in service to one or more other people or the community as a whole or an ideal; (d) it must be without secondary, extrinsic gain anticipated at the time of the act (Zimbardo, 2014, p. 542), in connection with his choice of the three basic virtues of a hero: 1. bravery (courage and perseverance), 2. justice (including the defense of human rights) and 3. sense of transcendence (higher moral and religious values). Volunteering is a necessary precondition for human action to qualify as a moral act for which the actor is responsible. In Zimbardo's four-dimensional model of heroism (Ibid., pp. 554–557) there is also a distinction of the so-called active and passive heroism, with the "passive hero" becoming the one who endures violence and persecution for his actions, carried out in integrity with his moral convictions. An active hero is one who develops activities for good reasons, in which he faces unfavorable circumstances and hostile positions of people.

We can identify the above four features of heroism in all three "discarded educators". I base it on preserved records and archival documents.

(a) *Voluntariness*. Our teacher heroes have been victims of persecution and repression because of their long-term attitudes, they have not been active or "action" heroes. The voluntary nature of their actions was that they maintained their internal attitudes, despite threats and pressures to adapt. Dovalová tried to act in favor of the religious rights of children (mobilized parents). Despite her position as director, she continued to attend services, which was contrary to political expectations. The scene for which she was sentenced (weaving red ribbons in children's hair) was motivated by her pedagogical intuition, she wanted to achieve respect for school rules. Although Mikulová only obeyed her superior, her degree of voluntariness in the proceedings that led to the trial and imprisonment was lower than that of Dovalová, but she did not deny her share of the free act and did not look for an alibi strategy

to get rid of the accusation. Among our three teachers, the highest level of volunteering seems to be with Lajcha. The sacrifices and suffering of his family that followed his expulsion from the teaching services were the foreseeable consequences of his conscious decision.

*(b) Threats.* In addition to unjust imprisonment (Dovalová & Mikulová), they bore degrading social and economic consequences, such as the loss of opportunities to continue working in teaching services, social degradation to the level of manual workers (Dovalová, Mikulová & Lajcha), income reduction and often experiencing poverty and material deficiency (all three), difficult conditions for the education of children (especially Lajcha) with dignity. Through their actions, teachers faced obvious risks of persecution and political punishment, yet they acted with courage and perseverance. Dovalová and Mikulová spent years unfairly in prison. Lajcha was unjustly dependent on material poverty, he experienced anxiety in securing the family, he sacrificed his health as a result of his decision. In facing these circumstances, they all necessarily exercised their virtues of bravery and fidelity.

*(c) Serving others and an ideal.* Through their actions, the teachers served the ideal of personal inner freedom and the right of self-esteem (all three), as well as the defense of moral and religious values (Dovalová, Lajcha). In none of the cases was the victim's self-pity or a victim syndrome recorded in their further lives, although they fairly demanded rehabilitation after the change of regime (Dovalová, Mikulová). In their actions, they were focusing on the good of other persons, their loved ones (Dovalová, Lajcha) but at the same time they wanted to be faithful to the truth and a high transcendent ideal (Lajcha). Even after expulsion from the teaching services, they tutored students in the evening and maintained good long-term relations with them (Dovalová, Lajcha). They did not reject their profession, they carried it further as a personal mission. They were willing not to merge with the crowd of silent or conformist people, who formed the majority, their actions were not reduced only to dreaming or silent rumble but expressed their attitude with specific manifestation. Fidelity to internal principles was also their defense of justice and human rights and freedoms in general. These principles and religious faith (Dovalová,

Lajcha) formed a transcendent pillar for them, on which they relied during their lives.

(d) *Gratuity*. The actions of all three at the time of the act were not motivated by any profit; on the contrary, they knew or assumed that their actions faced existential risks. Their heroism was not a manifestation of just one unique act but it was the result of a long-term continuous effort, the formation of their characters and beliefs. However, their exceptional behavior did not lead to exclusivism, superior attitudes towards others, their heroism can be described as “inclusive” – involving others in friendship, solidarity and their own educational influence (e.g. in relation to their own children but also colleagues at work or former students). Even without great gestures and self-presentations, their story had an exemplary dimension, had an educational and prophetic effect on the people around them (Dovalová, Lajcha).

Characterial heroism proved to be varied and plural here, too: there is no “one” heroism, there are many different ways of realizing heroism. The micro-stories of the three selected teachers are the evidence of a large number of similar teacher destinies, which can be qualified as stories of hidden heroes<sup>25</sup>. In contrast to the totalitarian notion of the extra-moral campaign of this victorious class, the “little” virtuous heroes who illustrate the stories of our three teachers clearly come to the fore.

In answering the research questions, I identified four key features of moral heroism and traced their occurrence in the stories of selected teachers. In the synthesis of these four characteristics, it is possible to summarize the typical heroic characteristics of teachers, which the regime ostracized.

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25 This study presents only three cases in which teachers resisted and endured the repression of a totalitarian state. A more massive, book-collection of the stories of fourteen teachers who resisted the persecution of the Nazi state in Germany (1933–1945) is presented by Lutz van Dick in *Lehreropposition im NS-Staat. Biografische Berichte über den „aufrechten Gang“* (1990). The fates depicted in both publications show analogous features of teachers who “walked upright” to maintain their dignity. Van Dick’s publication can be a challenge to us for a similar treatment of the stories of persecuted teachers in Slovakia.



In terms of historical research, this probe opens a window to a parallel reality that has no strong support in official archival documents: private daily history of oppositional persons can be captured mainly on the basis of “weak” sources such as letter correspondence, memories of witnesses and testimony of direct participants. Official documents (e.g. minutes of interrogations, court decisions and judgments, administrative institutional documents, then official interpretations of events in the press and in historical texts) were prepared with bias and in the lens of the fight against the class enemy. Given that we do not have a collected and historically processed corpus of cases of persecuted teachers in Slovakia, this paper is a stimulus and a challenge to continue mapping the other side of the socialist education story, to further collect and analyze similar stories forming a systematic historical and social phenomenon.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning the current moral-educational aspect of the presented research. In reviving the interest in *character education* in contemporary education (cf. Brestovanský, 2019, 2020), the re-establishment of the topic of ethical heroism also has a specific pedagogical significance. One of the pillars of character education is also the study of following worthy good role models, whose exceptional features can be attractive in shaping young people’s own personalities. Real historical patterns from their own cultural environment have a positive educational influence. Historical narrative research on teacher-heroes, the probe of which is contained in this article, is a valuable source for this type of educational activity<sup>26</sup>.

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26 To illustrate, several examples from around the world and from Slovakia. At The Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, they systematically develop character education through heroic imagination, e.g. in the *Knightly Virtues* programme (Arthur et al., 2014). Dan Wright, Headmaster of the London Oratory School, has produced the *Hero’s Quest* – a character education course for 16–18 years old (available at: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/2851/character-education/teacher-resources/the-hero-s-quest>). There is a *Hero Construction Company* in Australia and the USA, an educational nonprofit that helps create a culture of heroism in regular schools (cfr. <https://www.heroconstruction.org/lessons>). Philip Zimbardo and co-workers founded the *Heroic*

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*Imagination Project* (<https://www.heroicimagination.org/>), aimed at developing everyday heroism; its branch also operates in the Czech Republic (<https://hipczehia.wixsite.com/hrdinavnas>) (cfr. Kohen et al., 2019). In Slovakia, inspired by the concept of character and virtues education at the University of Birmingham, a project of the Academy of Great Works (*Akadémia veľkých diel*, Kolégium Antona Neuwirtha) was created, in which hundreds of students learn “how to become a hero” (<https://www.akademiavelkychdiel.sk/>). Finally, again in Slovakia, the project Inconspicuous Heroes (*Nenápadní hrdinovia*) has been running for thirteen years, in which the task of students is to find people (or individuals) who behaved heroically at a time when power was controlled by the organs of communist totalitarianism in 1945–1989, and through study of written sources, interviews with memorials to document the story of the “inconspicuous hero” (<http://www.november89.eu/>).

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