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"FREE FROM IS NOT FREE FOR": THE EXPERIENCE OF DEPAUL SLOVENSKO'S WORK WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE IN A POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRY

Juraj Barat

INTRODUCTION

Depaul Slovensko (Slovakia), a non-profit organization, was established as a response to the unreasonable dying of homeless people on the streets of Bratislava in the winter 2005/2006 and the absence of accommodation for them. The lack of experience, absence of professional social work and the prejudices of a post-communist, 'Christian' society were the context for beginning a new form of work, without precedent in this environment. In the years following these events we gradually built up a low-threshold dormitory, shelter and day care centre and offered crucial services inspired by the concept of a complete solution to the problem of homelessness in Slovakia. The interconnection of the provision of social service with our Vincentian values is constantly dynamic in this context. It combines everyday experience with the history of charity and Depaul International family and, at the same time it creatively converts and updates them in our particular territory where it offers and tests new and actual solutions to current problems.

POLITICAL CONTEXT OF 1989

Homelessness has become a new phenomenon in post-socialist Slovakian society after the political changes in 1989. We cannot say previously there were no homeless people but they were hidden in various institutional contexts as disabled people, mentally ill or those caught in prostitution. Their visibility was associated with shame, as it seemed to deny progress towards a "bright tomorrow".

The communist party was formed by the group of favoured who stood as the absolute leading force in the society; they usurped power and tyrannized the rest. Whoever did not obey or tried to kick against the system was silenced, or they tried to liquidate him/her. During that time, the public space in Czechoslovakia

was filled with communist banners and slogans such as "With the Soviet Union forever!" However, almost no one in the socialist ruling class truly believed in this form of communism. People still repeated the slogans about "dictatorship of the proletariat" but did not seem to believe this.

In the seventies, ideological attack of the political standardization slogans went hand-in-hand with a rising consumerist lifestyle.

From the beginning of the

seventies people in Czechoslovakia had to tolerate the communist slogans on public buildings and spaces but by this time many households already had a refrigerator, a TV, a car or a cottage in the countryside.

With the inability of the socialist economy to cope, especially with growing economic competition and new technologies in the Western world, many dreamed of change: 1988 was that year of change. On 25th March the Catholic Church organized a peaceful "Candle demonstration". A communist government dispersed the peaceful crowds by the police and water cannons. On 16th November, 1989 - on the eve of International Students' Day - students from Bratislava organized a demonstration that became the beginning of the "Velvet revolution" in Czechoslovakia¹. The nation was severely traumatized by the Stalinist and

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Post-Stalinist abuse of power, and people needed to talk about it in public in order to get rid of their sadness and sense of wrong. They needed to cleanse it.

At that time we refused to believe that the market economy also had its own problems and could create traps where freedom could be lost through advertisement and the pressure to perform, and that it is very easy to become economically poor in a democratic society. Our aspirations have focused more on getting rid (free from) regime-related persecution. The Church also struggled for this freedom and at the same time it built its own structures in order to practise the faith through an underground, parallel world (Vlasák, 2017, September 14). We really were not ready for (free for) life, as we see it today. First of all, the freedom was a mix of hope and joy; later we became aware that this freedom was a leap in the dark and it started to evoke uncertainty and fear. Looking back I can see that we were not prepared for the fact that freedom from totalitarianism, with the features of limited consumption for calming the crowds, would primarily mean a huge increase of uncertainty experienced by everyone who had been shaped by a very restricted, organized environment and where the compliance with certain standards is required under the threat of severe punishment. This was akin to a prisoner syndrome: freedom after decades spent in a strictly controlled environment.

HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE HERE, WHAT NOW?

Preparatory Stage

Under the wings of Glasnost and Perestroika, political, social and economic development began to change our society. 15 years after the “Velvet revolution” there are thousands of homeless people in our country. In the winter of 2005/2006 on the streets of Bratislava, 19 people died by freezing or hypothermia, and 56 in Slovakia as a whole (this figure is official statistics, the real estimate was higher). Municipalities and regional authorities did not respond even though it was their legal duty to do so, so non-profit organizations contacted the media and urged politicians to assume their legal responsibility. These laws manifest (as they still do) the gaps of enforcement.

There seemed to be little compassion amongst the general public for homeless people, and so there was no civil power to achieve any improvement. Non-government organizations formed a coalition to change this situation and analysed who the homeless people living on the streets of Bratislava really were. We found that people dying in the winter were, and still are, mostly alcoholics and those living with mental illness. There was no place for them in any other institutional care – state or private (founded by non-government organizations or the church). We concluded that we needed to create low-threshold social services for homeless people. Since no other charity was willing to start this new type of work and there was no prior local experience of working with this social group, we started communication through Caritas Europa and CAFOD (UK) with the Depaul Trust in London. The best solution seemed to be to use the experience of local charities and the Depaul organization.

Under supervision we prepared a broader analysis of Slovakia’s social problems after 1989 and identified the main excluded groups as homeless people, drug users, those in prostitution, trafficked people and Roma. Strategically, we chose the capital of Slovakia as the location for our work and the target group of homeless people, which included all of the excluded groups. In this way, in the spring of 2006 we dared to create a new non-profit organization called Depaul Slovensko.

FIRST LOW-THRESHOLD NIGHT SHELTER

In order to get a proper place we started negotiations with the municipality of Bratislava. Officials dismissed all our proposals about possible buildings in the city as an inappropriate for this kind of social service or indicated that the city had other plans intended for those places (mainly for business activities). We intensified our efforts and focused on media and negotiations with Bratislava’s mayor. Soon after the municipal elections in November 2006 we received an invitation from the Mayor to meet and discuss our dormitory. We got three rooms in one big warehouse outside the city near the airport. We got the first beds, tables and chairs from the army. They also built one big “hygiene tent” outside the building (nobody

used it during the winter, so we dismantled it in the spring). On the evening of 20th December 2006 we could welcome the first seven homeless people in our dormitory. This number grew every day. Christmas Eve that year was very emotional for all present.

The municipality of Bratislava expected homeless people would just sit all night on the chairs (as at a railway station) and leave in the morning. Another of the city's conditions for running the service was that there should be security guards at the entrance (after 2 months we had to stop this practice as it created more stress and tension than our drunk clients themselves and the costs for two security service employees per month was more than costs for six staff members).

City officials also demanded that we arrange a bus each morning to take our clients from the dormitory to the different parts of the town (we quietly stopped this after a few weeks).

However, soon there was not enough space for those needing soup and a bed in our dormitory. Step by step we began to inhabit the other parts of warehouse until we occupied 200 beds each night. We offered one hot meal a day (usually soup), tea or coffee; we started to do social work and counselling. From the beginning we also provided small treatments.

Thanks to offering material help we also got closer to addressing the other problems faced by our people, we learned to listen to them, accept them and show them a new direction. We learned how to serve and work with people in need, even though we were not students of social work (no study in social work had been possible under socialism).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORK

Very soon we saw that the original purpose of our dormitory was not enough because each morning we had to send back onto the streets those with physical illnesses, wheelchair users or people discharged from hospitals to home care. Often there were freezing temperatures. So, after the night-shelter of St. Vincent De Paul (homeless people named it themselves) we opened a shelter named after St. Louise for ill and

homeless people. Our aim was to allow them stay indoors, especially sick and weaken people during the winter. The reaction of our clients was that "suddenly" many of them "got sick" so they could stay in the shelter.

With these experiences and our inner beliefs, we were opening to other necessary part of our mission, including addressing prejudice and forming public opinion. We were looking for support in the Church, we asked for volunteers or some collections but we usually received negative answers. Even though we were supported by some of the Lazarists (Missionary Fathers), not everyone was excited about what we were doing. Some religious groups strictly refused to support those under the influence of drugs or alcohol

or those caught in prostitution; they said it is their own decision to live on the streets and if they are not willing to change or respect advice, there is no need to offer help and support.

With other non-profit organizations we have prepared a new model of system solution.² Our model covered housing, health care and work preparation, low-threshold social services (day centres, dormitories, shelters, health care...), pastoral

services and support services for enabling access of homeless people to other institutional care, including hospices. We presented this model at conferences about homelessness as well as at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family. In the existing Social Services Act, a new section of Crisis Intervention Services has been created.

Another project arising from the needs we identified was the Dispensary of St. Elizabeth. We established it in the middle of the town, near the Presidential Palace as an ambulatory low-threshold day care and centre of personal hygiene. Dispensary provides social counselling, basic first aid medical care: changing bandages and mediation of medical treatment especially with the help of medical students acting as volunteers.

It was not originally our intention to do outreach

"We learned how to serve and work with people in need, even though we were not students of social work..."

social work because other organizations and groups in Bratislava already did it. However, in the woods on the outskirts we found people that our state did not know existed. They were not registered with the Social Insurance Agency and Health Insurance Company; their documents were from the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. So, we also started to do outreach social work of crisis intervention in this context. Practise shows that repression by the police and public doesn't solve the problem of homelessness, it merely moves it to other locations. In cooperation with the target group, social workers and the borough's staff we presented a solution to the problem of homelessness and its prevention in Karlova Ves. Involvement of our outreach workers, departments of boroughs and volunteers from local parishes has moved us to extend fieldwork into forms of community organizing.

Every year, between 1500 – 1600 people in need pass through our facilities³. Since the formation of our organization we have helped 6860 homeless people – it's the largest database of homeless people in Slovakia (it is estimated that there are 10,000 – 12,000 homeless people in Slovakia). We thought it would be great for others who work with homeless people to have this information. However, police and local politicians who showed the greatest interest, wanted to use it especially repressively, so to protect our clients we did not provide it. Nevertheless, in cases of investigation of criminal offenses by the police we are obliged to provide it.

Often people come to us with infectious diseases and they are not treated because they don't have health insurance or they have no opportunity for after-care. Our clients are being expelled from doctors' waiting rooms and, furthermore, they are often unwilling to wait there, so we were looking for a solution acceptable for homeless people as well as the public, so they won't move around the city and spread diseases to others. Our current project is an ambulance for homeless people.

TODAY'S CONTEXT AS A CHALLENGE FOR DEPAUL

Society and politics

After the fall of communism in Slovakia in 1989

people were filled with great relief and optimistic emotion. But those days are gone. "Truth and love will win over lies and hatred" – was the slogan of those times. Today we cannot hear it anymore. So where are we today?

Ordinary people educated under the communist regime are disoriented by modern capitalism. This capitalism which is presented as the best system of all possible is the capitalism that was criticized by the communists whose government we rejected in 1989. After 1990, Slovakia (like other post-socialist countries) has been under the pressure of neoliberal propaganda organized by global financial groups and institutions focused on their interests. People who longed for greater democracy and goods known from Western trade fairs and advertisements were persuaded that the concept of neoliberal reforms is the "only possible" way to better life. People here dream of changing the environment in which they live but they don't have back-up.

Living under other rulers meant that leaders from the inside were usually in the opposition or "sitting on two chairs at the same time" but they were not visionaries and have been unable to lead the country into independence. There is a feeling that after Vienna (Slovakia was a part of Austro-Hungarian Empire) and Moscow (the socialist regime after World War II) officials from Brussels (the European Union) "rule" us. Many people take for granted that we can travel freely around the world and we can democratically express our opinions. On the other hand, they realize that living standards have not improved as they expected – because their wages do not rise in line with the price of goods. With the opening up of countries of the former Eastern Bloc, world market prices also came for a range of products and services. And our people want to purchase and consume as others do in industrialized countries (Čulík, 2018, August 20).

So, we feel that an upbringing in state paternalism and the desires of neoliberal free market are combined inside of us. People standing in front of today's politics feel deserted, they don't have a convincing and united political force. This demonstrates the depth of hopelessness that engulfed a certain part of society. Even some Christians, after the collapse of the communist dictatorship, started to claim they didn't mind the State Security (ŠtB) and our

communist history because now the main enemies are liberals. Despite the fact that the spirit of communism still dominates the unreformed justice system; the communists, ŠtB agents (secret police in socialism), their children and collaborators have become the largest privatization investors and capitalists and they still participate in many state functions. They need to manage the state as a company for profit.

Regarding corruption and law enforcement, Slovakia is one of the worst countries in the world. Many of the things that caused corruption were suppressed but new causes of corruption occur almost daily – this proves that it's not just the fault of individuals but the whole political and legal system is "ill".

Slovakia is still a country where democracy is more pretended than real and where authoritarian or populist politicians are in power. Their actions, speeches and measures change according to public opinion polling. Valued preferences of the voters reflect moods and concerns and then set the political agenda. Political power is in the hands of people who have argued that they want to correct the failures of previous politicians but, in fact, they commit the same mistakes. In order to gain significant political support among the voters they no longer have to create or propose strategies to deal with many existing, often unpopular social problems. In an effort to gain influence and money they only need to do one thing – to create fear.

The European refugee crisis from 2015 and several terrorist attacks in Europe have come to populist politicians as a "gift from heaven". They immediately took the stand of "defenders" of the nation against Muslims and refugees and transferred this rhetoric to their own socially weak people. The creation of the enemy forms the core of the strategy and illustrates the images of the enemies - and their voters (because of their prejudices but also their real social, class and economic relations) perceive such enemies in the rest of society. These enemies are the weakest and most socially disadvantaged, excluded, marginalized and unpopular groups and minorities: the unemployed, disabled, Roma, immigrants, and refugees. They manipulatively blame almost entire ethnicities for being parasitic on the social system. And through legal regulations and rules allow that someone can "go to the wall" and must live in dangerous conditions

outside of the human community. The system of executions, the preference of the rights of the rich, the police repression against the poor and the poorest are the legal and structural reasons that thousands of people find themselves on the edge of existence, caught between life and death.

CHURCH IN SOCIETY

In our society there is an empty space for a critical observer who will speak as a prophet. Non-transparency, corruption, poverty, social exclusion, oligarchs and "godfathers", violation of social rights, alms-like wages, judicial systems that don't work all contributes to negative attitudes and tension in our society. In particular, young people are more and more suffering from unbearable feelings of superfluity.

About seventy five per cent of inhabitants of Slovakia are Christian, mostly Catholic. In the socialist era, the Church was a real opposition to the regime of that time. The Church was built on two levels. The first part was the official, visible church; the other part was hidden and created a completely unique model for survival in difficult conditions, preparing mechanisms and networks for the future. But it probably didn't prepare her leaders for a time of living in an 'open' society. The Church was defined by a struggle for liberation from the existing regime and not the preparation for life in a new system. This is part of the explanation that Christian Democrats in politics are still stronger in opposition than in the formation of strong governing coalitions. Their agenda is dignity of human life more in protection of unborn children than protecting the life of poor people.

There is hope that the situation will be better. The approach and example of Pope Francis in the field of support for poor and excluded people, as well as the events in Slovakia after the murder of an investigative journalist in the spring of 2018 (an event that shocked entire Slovak population and led to the biggest demonstrations since 1989), give hope for the transformation of the society and greater control of public issues, including addressing the problems of those living in poverty. Bishop Forgáč said in his public speech: "If there are leaders in our country who through their actions, friendships, contacts, their activity or their inactivity created and create such

atmosphere, or environments that allows various forms of personified or organized evil, they have indirect responsibility for what has happened here.” “... It can also be an institutionalized evil. This is the evil that is being done by groups of people, institutions” (Forgáč, 2018, March 3).

All of this is concerned with increasing levels of poverty, including homelessness, in our society. At the same time, we are fully aware that there have been also positive changes and developments in our region in the last twenty nine years but standing on the side of poor people we often feel isolated and as if we are fighting against a great machinery of the state, officials, politicians, public, and media. The time of compulsory May Day parades commanded by one party, lantern parades in tribute to the Great October Socialist Revolution, persecution of Christians and waiting in the markets for basic food and fruits or a pair of jeans is finished. Opening, freedom and new opportunities, free travelling around the world, raised standards of living, freedom of religious expression, literature and professional study have come. The framework which limited and allowed little have now expanded both for the positive and negative. There are still people with a sensitive heart, people willing to help. Our country is beautiful and sick at the same time.

CONCLUSION: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

In Depaul Slovakia we are aware of doing something that is not popular in the eyes of most of our society. Nonetheless, step-by-step, our society increasingly accepts the need for active work with homeless people and is willing to agree with the fact that repressive measures will not resolve any environmental social challenges and it will not help homeless people. Agreement about providing any services for homeless people in their vicinity is still strongly rejected. In this, they are all united, regardless of right-wing or left-wing party political stances, Christian or atheist. We

know that the gospel can't be focused only on social issues and politics but the Church cannot avoid such questions when sharing the gospel. This is a Word to today's world.

We learn that to serve means to take responsibility for our clients and for society. We realize that we are working in a high-risk environment when we have five employees per shift working with two hundred vulnerable people.⁴ We feel tension in keeping a professional attitude as the theory and methodology of social work teaches and meeting legal requirements

and quality standards balanced alongside the Gospel requirement to offer love towards our clients in service of Christian values. Managing this range of requirements in our services can prove too complex.

However, very often we are the last chance for the people we meet. We answer the questions about the life and death of our people. We go into the empty space, on an unknown path, we are on the path that has not overwhelmed us yet, and even if we

use the experience of others we learn a lot from our own experience.

Our projects are a place where people change, they see and become a human face; they open up to new beginnings, hopes and perspectives. We also find ourselves changing too. We employ people who come with a traditional Christian upbringing and know that they should help people in need. But many of them find that such good intention is often not enough. We also welcome people who like a free way of living without a home but would like to help others for humanistic reasons of extreme exclusion. There are also people who don't even know what their place in life is and they want to try to discover whether this is their "business". And they are surprised that, in fact, this becomes their vocation, and begin to study social work as their future professional orientation. People come to us: some leave, some return again later. Depaul is their place.

We learn to be authentic and faithful in the unity of our thoughts, words and deeds. All of this creates tension

"Our projects are a place where people change, they see and become a human face; they open up to new beginnings, hopes and perspectives."

and we strive to keep these dynamics in balance.
We grow, mature and help to find dignity: even for
homeless people.

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NOTES

¹ For more information on the Velvet Revolution see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velvet_Revolution

² For more details on Depaul Slovakia in Bratislava see our website: <https://sk.depaulcharity.org/depaul-slovensko/na%C5%A1e-aktivity/dokumenty-na-stiahnutie/model-soci%C3%A1lnej-pr%C3%A1ce-v-bratislave>

³ For more specific information on Depaul Slovakia data see our website: <https://sk.depaulcharity.org/depaul-slovensko/na%C5%A1e-aktivity/jeden-rok-v-depaul-v-%C4%81sloch>

⁴ Read more stories from Depaul Slovakia here: sk.depaulcharity.org/depaul-slovensko/na%C5%A1e-aktivity/pribehy

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Juraj Barat is the former director of Depaul Slovakia and currently working on project development for Depaul Slovakia.