

FRANTIŠEK DOBROTA: SLOVAKIA

Co-authors:

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General Information:

Age: 41

Gender: Male

Country of Origin/Residence: Slovakia

Offence types: Violent criminal activity, thefts and robberies

Number of convictions: Seven convictions

Experience of Punishment: Sentenced three times (imprisonment one and a half years for an attempted assault with serious injury, two years for theft, 12 years for another violent crime)

Time since last conviction: 18 years

Time since last offence: 18 years

Personal Experience

Firstly, there were family reasons, then an attempted assault with serious injury. Later in prison, I got familiar with people there who I kept seeing even after I left the prison. Together we started a new criminal path, with actions which were not related to my first crime including for example, theft and robbery. I was prosecuted seven times and sentenced three times.

My first sentence was related to an assault with serious injury. After that followed imprisonment for theft for a short period - two years. This time the number of years in prison was increased by the time remitted from the first period of imprisonment. Then came two quiet periods – six months and then a whole year without me being involved in any criminal activity. Last time I was released on 10th April 2006 at 10.21 am. They were supposed to let me go at 10.00 am but for some reason they kept me waiting longer.

As time passed I realised that not even the first crime was worth the sentence. I just wanted to avenge my mother, who had already been dead for some time. The revenge did not bring

anything, apart from that I started another chapter in my life, the worst one, when a person comes back and is outside the 'normal' circle. Only then do you realise how your previous actions have affected your subsequent life ... But I'm telling you, when I was released the first time, my intentions were not to repeat it again. It was more like foolishness. After my first prison sentence, I realized how well it all went – because they remitted half of the sentence. I kept telling myself how easily it passed – if anything happens, it's not such a big deal to get out of it, but I was not careful enough.

After my release in 2006, for sure a person can't live life how he wants or live the way he imagined. Just be honest, how many times can you solve things by getting involved in a quarrel or by involvement in conflict, but me ... I have to back off. I can't fight with people, because then I'm facing much more serious charges. I've learned how to control myself and step away from conflicts. It's a question of choice, my choice. And where there's a will, there's a way – circumstances even favour you sometimes. In my opinion, it is important to support people freshly released from prison. Nobody was interested or is interested in me. I served 15 years all together, from when I was 18 years old until I was 36. In that time, I'd only spent a year outside. Try to imagine being released after such a period of time and all you get in your hands is 70 Euro. What do you do with that? You can't rent any accommodation for it, or anything. And in my situation, when I left prison, my parents had already passed away and I was not mentioned in their will. You have absolutely no chance and it's always about the people who stand by you. Who give you a helping hand when needed? It doesn't need to be only about the material stuff, all you need is a place to lay your head or some basic things. For sure, some support and somebody behind you that's important.

Who supported you?

For me it's 50/50. My family always stood by me – they offered me the greatest support. By family, I mean my brothers who never turned away from me. And then I was lucky with employers, which are the other 50 per cent. I was hired by one man as a worker on a building site and since then I have had my job. It's been over six years now. The first six months after my last release were like this – I have a cousin in France. I was supposed to be released on Monday after twelve years, and in the weeks before that I started making plans. Twelve years is a long time so I started to imagine what was going to happen. One week before that time, I

got a letter from my cousin in France, offering me a job. No language skills were needed. So I was released on Monday, and the next Friday I was on my way to France. And then I went back to Slovakia – back to my girlfriend. My cousin is in the French Foreign Legion, so he is very strict. After a time, when I broke up with my girlfriend he did not want to hire me again – that's how he was trained in the Foreign Legion. He explained to me that this is how things are and I had my chance, but only once. It helped me a lot that he took me on as I already had two criminal convictions. And then Lipsic (the former Minister of Justice) started with the nonsense (three strikes and you're out rule). For me that means that I can't have any fight, even if it's just a small scuffle, nothing serious, not even a slap. I would be arrested and get a special trial for it. So all I can do is back off.

Where did you encounter problems?

Many people work to have a decent living. If somebody has been sentenced, it's difficult. I don't know how to put it. Nobody would employ me if I said in interview how much time I have spent in jail. Once you have done a crime, you are punished, you are imprisoned, but that's not everything, that's not the end. Your punishment lasts until the end of your life. Even if you could erase it from all those databases, people already know, and have it in their mind and will always find a way not to employ such a person. On the other hand I'm lucky. My boss knows everything about me. But again, it's unofficial employment. He does not employ people. If we go on a construction site, and everything has to match all reports, he splits the time between us, or I work for some number of hours. I am taking state benefits but it doesn't suit me at all. Even though I have worked since I was 15, the time spent in prison does not count. The law changed recently, so I have only a few years in active employment. These things do not work in this country. People are working unofficially because they have to. Even if you get 400 Euro and some food stamps, it's absolutely not enough to feed your family. So the choice is to get an unofficial job, earn some 1000 Euro – and even that is not enough and you can't live to a high standard on that.

During release - how was it?

I think that at that time there were the counsellors. We once had a talk together. But there was nothing else, no support at all. I mean, what is missing is that there should be some organisation, communities for people released from prison. Not to be pushed into

something, but more like being advised and having the information needed, when leaving jail and if something happens you may look for support here and there. They will give you a lot of advice on how to do the paperwork related to health or social insurance, that you need to go there and do this and that, but to get other information apart from this wasn't on their list.

Were they working with you in prison, preparing you for your return to normal life?

No, there was no such interest.

You mentioned Mr. Kuf (a priest running a shelter for ex-offenders) – how did you meet him? Did he help you somehow?

Well, he was visiting (the prison) as part of a project focused on our study for final exams, for example for our group. He was also giving out information and talking to us about the possibility that we could find shelter and support over at his place after being released. It was the only thing I can think of. I could have gone over there. He gave us some hope, that if we didn't have anything (to eat) or we didn't know how to go further he would be there for us. He also set some conditions. I won't forget them. You cannot drink, you have to work, and there are some limitations for example once a week you have to go to a mass. I think for a person, who wants to be grateful for this help, it's only fair to obey and be grateful for stuff like this. It's such a little thing you can give him back. I never visited him. Once I was passing by on a trip. I thought about visiting that place but in the end I did not go.

What does it mean to you not to be active in a criminal activity? Pros and Cons?

I don't know, I never thought about myself as a criminal. I was not showing off too much, and in general I feel like an honest and good person. I know that I helped more people than hurt them. But when you hurt somebody, then you are thinking who and when you going to meet. So it is also shame and conscience. And even if I had some crime money, I always preferred to get rid of it. It weighed heavily on my mind. I was not happy with it. I could not sleep and it wasn't a good feeling at all. For me it's difficult to commit crime. It's easier to live honestly. And I can tell you that I had moments thinking about revenge. I caused the pain and I paid for it, but they hurt me many times, too. Even in prison some people hurt me – and those are the moments when you think of revenge once you're out there. It's not worth

it now; it's a long time ago. The thing that affected me the most was the graduation certificate. Many people took it, also the group I was with. It was said that the reason for doing it is not to fall lower after you're released from prison and so you have at least some chance to have a decent life. So it has changed the way of my thinking. Now I even laugh when I remember those "revenge" thoughts.

What has changed in your life and in you personally?

I should say that there should be somebody who would observe how I was and how I am now. It has definitely changed me. I'm not so free minded as before. I'm intense. Even though everything works now, it's still unstable.

Did you enrol in some kind of supporting programmes?

We haven't had such things. But it would be a great thing if something like this works somewhere. Even if it helps just one person, it's worth it. No, nobody addressed me with anything like this. It's also about having such a network. Like Orange¹. They keep calling their client every month and offering new offers. Something like this should exist also for us. To know about those people and who is interested will do it. I have moments when I don't need it, but sometimes I'd like to have something like it. It's like abstinence. I think that people with influence (politicians) should realize that once a "deinstitutionalized" person goes back to normal life, they should have some basic support to handle it. I don't mean being pampered, just some basic support instruments, because, if you want somebody to avoid committing crime, you don't let him sink or swim alone. They should be more interested what's going on, what's happening to those people. If not, then everyone is surprised. There are so many people who would never commit a crime again, but they just don't have a choice. Many times it's just an act of desperation.

¹ Mobile phone network [ed comment]