

Father Jan Lang SJ caring priest

b June 20 1919 in Rajhrad, Moravia d March 21 2007 London

The priest to the Czech and Slovak community for 60 years and founder of Velehrad House, the London hostel and religious-cultural centre, is not among us any more *writes Milan Kocourek, UK reporter of Czech Radio*. He died in St Mary's Hospital Paddington some five weeks after a heart attack. His life was filled with the love of God. This was the theme of several speakers at the requiem mass in the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mayfair. It was Father Lang's home for many years. But at any time he preferred to be at Velehrad House in Ladbroke Square, which he founded with his friends in the 1960s and which will be his lasting memorial.

Jan Lang was born in a Catholic family one year after the birth of Czechoslovakia. Following his studies at the Velehrad grammar school he joined the Society of Jesus in 1938. He wanted to become a priest and continued with his studies at the archbishop's seminary in Prague and Panenské Břežany. At the end of the war the German secret police, Gestapo, arrested all its members on the suspicion of subversion and incarcerated them in the notorious Terezín fortress. There Jan almost died having contracted typhus. On his release his weight was 38 kilogrammes.

After a 'beefing-up' of several months at the Hostýnek rehabilitation centre he was sent to Heythrop College in England on a scholarship and completed his studies with ordination in 1947. Soon Afterwards Father d'Arcy, his Jesuit superior appointed him to be a priest to the Czechoslovak community in this country. His selfless pastoral and spiritual care of his countrymen started then.

In his requiem tribute, Father František Hylmar, a Czech Jesuit priest from Prague, recollected the words of Bata's company director in the UK when surveying the plans for Velehrad House's reconstruction after its acquisition. "I looked at those plans, it all looked like a terribly improvised job. But I knew that since Father Lang was in charge, everything would turn out well."

Among Father Lang's multifaceted activities was his Saturday school for the children of his countrymen. However he was not only taking care of the Czech and Slovak community in this country. For many years he presented very popular talks to the Czech audience of the BBC broadcasts from Bush House.

Father Lang was loved by everyone who had the honour of meeting him. And he reciprocated that love. He was buried alongside his Jesuit colleagues at Morden cemetery. We shall miss him.

Milan Kocourek, BCS Review 96 April/May 2007

Saturday school



Saturday school outing



Juventus youth club
dancers at Caxton Hall



photographs from late 1950s to mid 1960s provided by Maria Hughes.

Saturday school lasted until 12 years of age. Each December pupils entertained their parents with a performance in at the Czechoslovak National House in West Hampstead when Mikuláš presented them with a pair of Bat'a shoes.

When the first generation became teenagers, Father Lang created a youth club, Juventus, that met on Sundays at Velehrad. It formed a folk dance group that also performed in Leamington Spa and Trafalgar Square by the Christmas tree.