

# NORMALIZATION

Documentary tragedy by  
ROBERT KIRCHHOFF



**THE TRUTH IS SIMPLE. LIES ARE COMPLEX.**

**Premiere in Slovakia:** May 16, 2013

**Countries of Origin:** Slovak Republic, Czech Republic

**Copyright:** 2013

**Approved for audience:** 15+

**Format:** DCP, Blu-ray, DVD

**Runtime:** 100 minutes

**Original Languages:** Slovak, Czech, French, English, Ukrainian

**Subtitled:** English

**Genre:** Political, Social & Human Interest

## SYNOPSIS

Judicial manipulation, secret service games, physical and mental torture, blackmailing of witnesses, covering up the truth, massive propaganda, covered-up evidence, abuse of power, of law and justice... All this comes together in the longest unresolved case in the Czechoslovak judiciary that began on a sunny day in 1976. In the criminal records it is referred to as **CERVANOVA CASE**.

Who are those sentenced? Who are those who made the ruling in the longest and most controversial criminal case Slovakia has ever seen? Who are the actual witnesses and those labeled by police as witnesses? How come those who should be riddled with guilt and keep quiet - are speaking out, while those certain of their guilt don't want to speak out?

These and many more questions are posed by the long-awaited Slovak documentary tragedy titled **NORMALIZATION**. The film explores the shocking behind-the-scenes events of the longest running case in the history of the Czechoslovak judiciary that began in 1976, when a body of a 19-year old student of medicine, Ludmila Cervanova, was found in river in the middle of a small village in Western Slovakia. The girl was drowned alive and although there were no traces of violence found on her body, yet the police claimed she had been raped.

It was a case that was paraded in the communist mass-media at the end of which seven men were found guilty of this heinous crime. They are the same individuals who today proclaim their innocence and claim that they were caught up in the middle of a grand-scale political-judiciary conspiracy.

The film is a detective story made by well-known Slovak documentary director **ROBERT KIRCHHOFF** which has taken eight years. He ventures into the dark depths of this unresolved and highly covered-up case of kidnapping, rape and murder of a young woman, which has also important political context. The case is familiar to perhaps everyone in Slovakia.

In the film Kirchhoff delves into the strange and shocking circumstances of the case, uncovering secret files, intelligence ploys of the communist police and the political elites. He interviews witnesses who have never appeared in front of the court. He brings to the surface hard to believe facts and new findings about this case - one of the biggest traumas of Slovak justice. Last but not least, he recounts the life stories of seven men accused of the murder for whom the case has become a life-long burden and never ending nightmare.

The crime becomes a means to portray the mechanism of fear, absurdity and a strange way of directed fate - spanning the era of Normalization to this day.

### Director ROBERT KIRCHHOFF about the film

"Eight years ago I decided to document the trial with the alleged murderers of Ludmila Cervanova. I found out that this case is made up of a peculiar chain of events that have impacted the lives of several dozens of people. I was interested in all the unanswered questions - either direct or indirect. I was interested in the truth. I did not want to make a reconstruction of a criminal case. I was after the universal portrayal of "crime and punishment" with a strong political subtext. This film does not have the ambition to find the real killers or to be about proving someone's innocence. I did not want to blow the case wide open. This is for the courts to do. This never-ending and mysterious case captures the story of our country, the structure of power. It illustrates the period know as the Czechoslovak normalization. Even though long gone, its protagonists remain impervious to time and social changes."

## THE CASE

37 years ago, a student of medicine Ludmila Cervanova was murdered. She was the daughter of Colonel Cervan who took part in several secret missions in Arab countries.

In 1976 a frantic police investigation to find the killers was on. The then president of Czechoslovakia Gustav Husak became personally engaged in resolving the crime. What followed were dozens of interrogations of those detained and charged in the case. There was blackmail, manipulation, false confessions, withholding of information, all coupled with massive propaganda in the media.

After five years of investigation, the socialist judiciary system condemned a group of seven young men in 1981. They received cumulative 108 years in prison. There were three death sentences proposed, which they only narrowly escaped. Each one of the defendants served a long sentence in Czechoslovakia's highest security prisons - all without credible evidence and testimonies.

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 brought a new promise for a retrial. In 2004 the court upheld the sentences for the defendants - despite new evidence proving their innocence.

Today, there are seven middle-aged men whose lives have been destroyed. They have lost the fight with the Slovak judiciary system, yet still continue to fight for their innocence, to clear their names. They are awaiting the ruling of the European Court for Human Rights - the last instance to decide whether they will die as murderers.

They claim that they were caught up in the communist regime's political and judicial conspiracy. To prove to the public and the courts that they are the victims of a judicial conspiracy, they took a polygraph examination.

The test results: Not a single lie was detected.

Judicial crime or mistake?

Judicial manipulation, secret service games, physical and mental torture, blackmail of witnesses, hiding of the truth, massive propaganda, covered-up evidence, abuse of power, law and justice... All this comes together in the longest unresolved case of Czechoslovak justice that began on a sunny day in 1976. In criminal records it is referred to as CERVANOVA CASE.

## THEY SAID ABOUT THE CASE

### **František Čerman, sentenced**

“They arrested me with the others based on a story fabricated by the police.”

### **Milan Andrašák, sentenced**

“I have signed a confession. That’s the truth of the matter. It was my self-preservation reflex. That’s all. You want to survive; you don’t know what to do. During the pre-trial proceedings I was subjected to inhumane treatment and deprecation. They used all forms of psychological and physical violence against me. It was unbearable.”

### **Pavol Bed'aň, sentenced, closing remarks in front of the court in 2004**

„Here are the statistics: Those found guilty - 7, their combined sentence - 108 years without the possibility of parole. Proposed - 3 death sentences. 5 persons emigrated as a result of this case. 4 crown witnesses were beaten during interrogation. 21 witnesses were subjected to continual psychological pressure and blackmail. 2 female witnesses suffered miscarriage during interrogation with the investigators who knew that the women were pregnant. 1 female witness held in jail and terrorized while breastfeeding, 2 other witnesses charged with assault on an officer - their punishment for telling the truth about the case. I was 27 years old when arrested by the police thugs, charged without a shred of evidence and put in jail. And because I had not perpetrated any criminal acts against the well-being or life, I was accused. I became a hostage of my decency. I don’t owe anything to anyone. I have no apologies to make for anything I did. I am the creditor in this case, only trying to defend my dignity.”

### **Viera Zimáková, witness**

„The investigators created an atmosphere as if it was all pre-conceived. As if they just needed a person to say - yes, I was there with so and so. It was really awful where they took me. Cobwebs everywhere, mice running all over the place. There were horrible Turkish toilets... What happened next was a serious psychological moment for me - they kept me away from my child that I was breastfeeding. She was not used to anything else, only my milk. I was worried what would happen to her. They locked me up again in the retention cell. This is how my other witness account came to be...”

### **Hassan Hussein Awni, former Arab student and witness**

“He who tells the truth will not be happy. Nobody likes the truth. When you are right and walk along quietly, nobody notices you. When you act as a fox, people are afraid and avoid you.” (Arab proverb)

### **Otakar Motejl, the first Czech public rights defender, counsel of Miloš Kocúr**

“The law is an attempt for justice. When applying this law, we should strive to bring about justice. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it does not. I’d probably step down rather than to convict... If I had to convict.”

### **Luba Lesná, investigative journalist**

The murder of Ludmila Cervanova took place on July 9th, 1976. It was a great tragedy for her family and friends. Today, 35 years later it still traumatizes the Slovak society.

## THE PROJECT TEAM

**Script, directed by, produced by:** Robert Kirchhoff

**Camera:** Ján Meliš

**Editing:** Jana Vlčková, Adam Brothánek

**Sound:** Václav Flegl, Michal Gábor

**Music:** Peter Zagar

### ROBERT KIRCHHOFF



(\*born 7<sup>th</sup> May 1968)

Robert Kirchhoff is an independent film director, producer cinematographer, and scriptwriter.

Between 1995 - 2000 he studied film directing at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, where he graduated as M.A. (2000) and later as Art. Dr. (2006) in documentary film. In his professional carrier he filmed and produced many feature documentaries, many of which achieved a significant recognition at numerous festivals domestically and internationally. His filmmaking focuses on current social topics that cope with “traumatic” heritage of historical events in Central Europe in 20<sup>th</sup> century. To name the few, he provides a critical insight into current situation of minorities at the edge of society in post-communistic Slovakia (*Black Word/Calo Lav*, 1999), or explores the social and moral identity in the wake of the “capitalism” in former eastern block (*Hey you Slovaks*, 2002). In his current film *Through the Forest* (planned for completion 2013) he reveals the intertwined fates of survivors of romany holocaust and his most recent documentary deals with the juridicial crime (*Normalization*, 2013)

Most notably, the screenings and retrospective of his work include such prominent venues as Anthology of Film Archives, New York, USA (2006), Columbia University, New York (2004) or New School University New York (USA), (1999).

Since 2002 he is a founder and CEO of atelier.doc Ltd., which was established as an independent production organization focusing primarily on production of documentary films and TV movies ([www.atelierdoc.sk](http://www.atelierdoc.sk)).

Since 2003 he also participated as a producer or a co-producer on some of the most significant and awarded Slovak and Czech documentaries that gained national and international recognition. These include such titles as *Disease of the Third power* (dir. Zuzana Piussi), *Made in Ash* (dir. Iveta Grofova), *Obscurantist and his lineage* (dir. Karel Vachek). He also coproduced a documentary *Blind Love* (dir. Juraj Lehotsky), which was awarded by CICAIE award at Cannes 2008.

In addition to his filmmaking career, Robert Kirchhoff holds an academic appointment of Assistant professor at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava where he leads the course: the Directing of documentary film and Auteur documentary film. He also works as a lecturer of film courses at Summer Film School in his native Slovakia or in neighboring countries of Central Europe.

### **FILMOGRAPHY (selection)**

*Merry Christmas* (1996), *Recollection* (1997), *Loses and Return* (1998), *Black Word/Kálo lav* (1999), *Open windows* (2000), *Guest again the Grain* (2000), *You are my Sunshine* (2000), *On the Water* (2001), *Hey You Slovaks* (2002), *Flowers of the Evil* (2003), *Glamour and Misery* (2005), *Ghost in the Machine* (2010), *Normalization* (2013).

## CONTACT

[www.atelierdoc.sk](http://www.atelierdoc.sk), [www.kauzacervanova.com](http://www.kauzacervanova.com)

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### TRAILER

[vimeo.com/64048169](https://vimeo.com/64048169)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SK5k8QrQCI>

### MORE INFORMATION

[www.kauzacervanova.com](http://www.kauzacervanova.com)

[www.atelierdoc.sk](http://www.atelierdoc.sk)

<http://www.facebook.com/film.kauza.cervanova>