

ANTON: CZECH REPUBLIC

The offender, who is at this time under the supervision of a probation officer, was conditionally released from prison; he had spent two years there. The probation period of the conditional release was set by the court at five years; he was conditionally released without the imposition of any obligations or restrictions. The interview with the probation officer and the offender took place in 2012, ie, in the third year of the probation period.

Age: 29

Sex: male

Nationality: Czech

Crime for which he was last convicted: bodily harm by negligence – traffic accident; contempt of court – repeatedly driving a vehicle without a driving licence; production and distribution of narcotic and psychotropic substances and poisons

Total number of convictions: four

Experience with alternative sentences: conditional sentence, community service sentence of 220 hours (served), another community service sentence of 300 hours (commenced, but while serving it, the sentence was terminated because of a combined sentence and the offender was sentenced to imprisonment)

Last conviction: 2008 (four years ago), entered prison in 2007

Time since last crime committed: five years

In the following account, the probation officer, who is working with the offender on parole, noted the offender's opinions, experiences and stances and added her commentary and observations:

For what reason did you commit crimes in the past?

It started with a traffic accident when I was 21. It was a bit of bad luck – I was passing and hit a cyclist, who was just turning toward me. I was driving at 50 km/h, in other words, within the speed limit. However, there was a solid line, and if you're passing, you will cross it. Nothing really happened, which is why I only got a conditional discharge. I was driving home from work and wasn't under the influence of drugs.

How did you try to change your life after your first conviction?

In fact, no change occurred at that time at all. I was attending university, but at the weekends I was already taking methamphetamines. Sometimes I even helped out; when someone needed drugs I got some for them. I mainly drove people where they needed to go, a taxi driver of sorts (I got money for it). When I realised they would take away my driver's licence, I didn't know what to do. So I sort of got caught up in it all, especially in distributing drugs. I couldn't buy "it" anymore (I had no cash), so I learned to cook drugs.

Did you try to "fight" it, find a reason not to do it?

I didn't fight it. I didn't try to make money dealing drugs; rather, I cooked drugs, mainly for myself and sometimes for friends. The classic "a small amount for my own needs," and I thought there wouldn't be any problem with that, although in the end there was. I wasn't thinking about the consequences because I was certain there couldn't be a problem with such a small amount. What's more, I knew two people who were also making drugs, but a lot more than I was. Compared to them, I was small fry.

When you look back today, what was it that caused you to change?

What was important was the "sobering up", the two to three months I spent in prison. That is if you don't get in with the wrong group. I decided that I wasn't that stupid to take drugs in prison as well. There were hints that I should take something to someone, but I said no. Once I sobered up, I started reading a lot (that's classic me). I mostly read sci-fi. Somehow I realised that technology was moving forward quickly and I was doing nothing – I had quit school, and the two years before getting into prison I had been taking drugs. I realised as quickly as in the first month of entering prison that I didn't want to end up back there again. I spent a lot of time "immersed" in books. I handed out food three times a day and in the meantime I was reading. Books always helped me, since childhood. In prison, I had something to fall back on, because reading, acquiring information, was always something that fulfilled me. I could go back in time. I could escape into my own world, which helped me "survive" prison.

Was desistance your choice?

It was my choice. I realised that things turned out quite well – I was sentenced to only two years unconditionally. I knew that I could survive, but if I did it again, I would not be able to “start up” my life again. I believe that prison give me a chance to stop and think about my life. My situation at the time had only two possible outcomes: prison or an institution. Since 2006, I had in fact been expecting to end up in prison, and so there was neither the strength nor a reason to stop. It was clear that I would end up there – so it was not worth it for me to stop sooner. So repression helped me a lot (as the turning point came in prison).

Who or what supported you in your resolve to stop?

The resolve to stop, or rather to not start again ... I thought a lot about my parents. When I was in prison, they took very good care of me: they visited me regularly, were kind to me, and supported me. My father supported me a lot in my university studies (appreciated the fact that I was studying), which I started while I was in prison. I knew I couldn't do that to them again; I didn't want to disappoint them. I managed to finish my studies with honours after I was released from prison. I received my Bachelor's degree. I'm signing up for school next week, and in two years I'll be an engineer.

What helped you and what stood in your way at first when you made your decision to desist from crime?

My parents were supportive of me, and I was studying and wanted to achieve something (to make up for lost time). Nothing stood in my way: immediately after returning home from prison, I got back together with my “old” friends from childhood. I did not keep in touch with people who used drugs. I changed my group of friends. Now I'm much happier. I have given myself new goals, one of which is to become a programmer. Before entering prison, I didn't think that way. I am now much better at setting goals – this is above all work, the relationship with my parents, my studies, and I'm also in a relationship. My girlfriend and I have been living for some time together, and I'm happy. Actually, I don't want to lose it. We've planned a future: when we're going to go on our first holiday, when we are going to pay off the mortgage, when we are going to have our first child. First and foremost, my girlfriend has to finish her studies, and so do I. Now my work is giving me a lot of satisfaction; it's a job I really want to do. The difference between then and now is that then I used to take drugs. I found that I enjoyed cooking drugs – I enjoyed chemistry since grade school and I

felt fulfilled. Even the police said that I cooked very high quality meth. Now I know how to apply my abilities in a better way. I also feel better about it.

What factors influenced you (helped you to make your decision) to desist from crime?

Repression influenced me the most ... Even the positive. I feel better and look better. I don't have to be ashamed. I believe I am a different person – better. I've also filled out, because when you do meth, you don't eat ... Outside of repression, it's mainly the social factors. I don't feel like an outcast, because when I was under the influence, I was ashamed to go outside, and when I did, I only looked down. Now I don't have to be ashamed; actually, no one has to be ashamed of me, especially my girlfriend. In the past, my relationships were only shallow and frivolous without a future and from the same environment (drug users).

How do you assess your experience with desistance?

I believe that I would have gotten there (desisting from crime) one day, but I think prison was a shortcut. My experience in prison was nothing pleasant, but it was survivable. I was in two prisons: the first was nothing much, but the second was much better. The staff were better, the environment was nicer and, most importantly, I began to study. I even felt support. The worst was the limitation of my personal freedom. What motivated me was that if I behaved well and fulfilled my duties, I could go on an outing outside the prison. I was also often saying to myself that I must avoid any disciplinary punishment, or else they would not release me at "half-time" [once half the sentence was served]. From the very onset I wanted to be released at half-time. It was the most important thing to me. Everything I did was subject to this plan.

What changed in your life when you decided to desist from crime?

I made my decision when I was still in prison. After I was released, it was difficult. I had to catch up what I missed when I was in prison and when I was using drugs. If I hadn't "dropped out" for those five years, I would have been much further ahead than I am now. I'm sure I can catch up though.

What hasn't changed?

I like cars, but I can't drive anymore (I'm still prohibited from driving). I could request to have my driving licence returned conditionally, but I don't want to. Mainly for the reason that I'm not a slow driver. I'm afraid that as long as I'm on parole, I could again have problems. I also need adrenalin. Now I try to find it in sports especially: mountain biking in dangerous terrain, skiing and snowboarding. Before I only had drugs and fast cars, so a lot has changed in fact. Love for my parents and sister has stayed with me, and vice-versa. My sister often reproaches me for being in prison.

How do you see yourself today?

I see myself as a normal person; I perceive myself as younger. I feel successful especially in that I have a job I like – it's my hobby. I suppose that other people who didn't know me before might see me as successful. I see myself as bad-weather friend, a guy you can count on, someone who has practically no bad habits – other than cigarettes (I smoke, but less). I think my girlfriend is happy, as is my family, and actually my friends, too.

How does your criminal past affect the way you see yourself?

I don't take it too tragically. It would bother me very much if anyone found out about my criminal past at work. I am ashamed of it and I'm especially worried that I'd lose my job. I don't know how my bosses would react. But I also believe that my colleagues know me well and would not be bothered by it.

What are your experiences with alternative sentences?

Since the beginning I ruminated that if I was released, it would be under supervision. At first it bothered me that I had to keep bringing in some kind of confirmation that I was paying off my debts and that I was looking for a stable job. Nevertheless, supervision as such doesn't bother me. Above all, it's better to be outside than in prison. I was worried from the very moment I was released that I would be sent back if I made a small mistake. I still think so. I am well aware that I am on parole, and that is "holding me back". I just had an experience where my friend went four-wheeling off-road, and although I really wanted to go, I didn't – I was afraid of having problems. I feel that I am on parole and I am paying more attention to the rules. What most helped me change my life was my effort to improve, focus on what I like, to find a meaning to my life. I know that once I finish my current studies, I will go on to

study something else. I've already chosen a faculty. Find a direction in my life. The fact that I had somewhere to go, where to live and something to eat, helped me a lot. Without my parents, it would be much more difficult.

Probation officer's commentary:

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The client first attended consultations with me in intervals of one per month. He was motivated to cooperate. The fact that he was supported by his parents (food, housing) was of great importance. The fact that he used to be a drug user was the subject of our discussions since the very first consultations. I introduced a rule into our probation plan that he was to undergo urine tests for the presence of narcotic and psychotropic substances and poisons. All of the conducted tests have come back negative.

At first, the client could not find work under a proper employment contract: he wanted to work in the field that he had studied. In cooperation with the employment office, he was placed in a special programme – he worked only under an agreement to complete a job. His wage, however, was quite low, which is why his parents supported him, and this support was very important. During consultations, I motivated the client to find a stable job with a higher income and in the field that he had studied, which he managed to do in the end. The Client was also paying off his debt, which arose in connection with his first offence – a traffic accident. He managed to pay it off in full, also thanks to his parents' financial contribution.

At this time, my assessment of the client's situation is that it is stabilised. His current relationship, which began while he was still in prison, has also contributed significantly to this. His girlfriend has never been a drug user, has never been part of a high-risk environment, which the client was well acquainted with connection with his criminal drug use, and had her own goals in life. It is apparent that the client changed his circle of friends and left the drug user environment also thanks to the relationship with his girlfriend.

My work with the client also went well chiefly because he was afraid of repression; he set new life goals and priorities himself. He found a way to be fulfilled at work and in his personal life. He has managed to fulfil the plans and expectations that he had while in prison. I also assess as positive the fact that the client did not wish to disappoint his parents, who had supported him substantially while in prison and learned to believe in him again. This was a certain motivation for the client to lead a proper life and integrate himself back into society.

