

## **The memories of Vladimir Benacek Sr. record his very authentic personal encounters and opinions on the following Slovak and Czech personalities:**

A) Military. Generals: S. Vojtechovský, L. Prchala, F. Čatloš, Š. Jurech, J. Golian, R. Viest, A. Malár, J. Turanec, B. Reicin, V. Šalgovič. Officers: J. Dobrovodský, P. Mudroch, D. Gonda, T. Šlajchart, J. Oškvarek, K. Repašský, V. Žingor, A. Zorič-Svjatogorov.

B) Political and civil personalities: E. Beneš, J. Tiso, K. Šmidke, G. Husák, J. Mlynárik, V. Široký, M. Široká, Baron von Thyssen-Bornemisza, F. Hagara.

### **WHAT IT IS ABOUT:**

**This personal story is a description of a significant piece of the Czech and Slovak national history through unique personal experiences. They are memories of my father, mostly authentic and necessarily sometimes stylized. They are the result of many hundreds of notes and fragments of events that my father randomly uttered and which I had to put together like a puzzle all my life. My father spoke coldly and logically and either avoided or waved his hand at tragic war events. With the exception of the SS men, he did not label anyone with aggressive negatives – he was above the matter. He tried to be helpful even to his opponents. In this text, I tried to proceed in a similarly objective manner, but sometimes it was not possible.**

Father's military performance, 1938-45 stands in the foreground, though his struggle in the Cold War continued. The Slovak National Uprising of 1944 is the most authentic attempt to restore democratic Czechoslovakia from the inside of the masses. What is exceptional, is that the Slovaks chose it by themselves, and moreover, with broad national support guaranteed by the spontaneous determination of tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians to lay down their lives for democracy. And not just hypothetically, as during the Munich crisis in 1938, but in a lasting struggle. How many such authentic national performances does Czechoslovakia remember? There are not many, moreover on such a national scale.

It is absolutely shocking to see how many groups such a spontaneous idealistic national upheaval bothered due to their selfish craving for power: It hampered Slovak communists, who wanted to sell Slovakia to the Soviet Union with the help of Soviet-led partisans. It bothered Czech communists, who saw the Slovak struggle for Czechoslovak western-oriented democracy as a danger to their political takeover. It was also against the interest of exiled President Beneš, who saw too strong a political power in Slovak self-confidence. It tormented the Slovak nationalists, whose fascist rule was crushed by the Slovak uprising. And finally, it tormented Stalin, who did not stand for Slovakia liberated by its own democratic forces.

The vestiges of these five partial interests survive to this day. Their policy is to diminish the importance of the Slovak uprising and even falsify its rational strategies and heroism. This actually implies an intention to ignore the reality of what has been the most adorable chapter in Slovak history. The memories of my father pose, in many aspects, a different interpretation of Czechoslovak history that was not able until now to step out of the communist shadow.

Prague, 30 December 2024

## Vladimír Benáček Sr. (5.3.1918-19.5.1984)



## Memories of my father's military engagement (1937-1949)

by Vladimír Benáček, Jr. <sup>1</sup>

Version of 24.12.2024

*The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right! (W. Shakespeare)*

This Hamletian mission seemed to be my father's destiny. At least, such was the spirit of the world when one was borne in Central Europe with a silver spoon and ushered in the times of three mad wars. His life can serve as an illustration of the Czechoslovak glorious ascends as much as abysmal falls. One had to fight one fight after another, and there was no asking, and often just the perseverance of a self-styled hope in good let one afloat before getting another blow. Kafka was a visionary.

### OUTLINE and period 1937-38

My Father, Vladimír Benáček, was born into an entrepreneurial family. His grandfather Jan, a courageous patriot and self-made man, established a prosperous shoe business in 1863. That was in a Moravian historical town of Třebíč, where his shop on the main square displayed a bestseller: exclusive officer's "Czech" wellingtons, to the dismay of his Austrian and Jewish competitors. "Treat them well and learn from them", he taught his three sons, and each practised it perfectly. The oldest, Josef, learned the agribusiness at the estates of Baron Drasche as his superintendent with the office at the Pardubice Castle. So, my Father, his son, had a privileged background. The middle lad served in Imperial-Royal Railways in Vienna, and the youngest Bohumil (not yet in the first photo) studied military law in Prague and Trieste.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is an extended version of the contribution to an anthology volume by Brenda Love: World War II Memoirs. New York, Amazon Publ., 2023, pp. 36-62. <https://www.amazon.com/WWII-MEMOIRS-Brenda-Love-PhD/dp/B095KJF85Q>



In 1918, all three sons (photo on right, from 1912) diverted their skills to build the foundations of the Czechoslovak Republic. Josef Benáček (standing on the right), having instilled the hard-working aristocratic style of Drasche's management, decided to emulate him and, in 1921, purchased 700 hectares of land with a steam mill, distillery, and a historical mansion in Žembovice, Southern Slovakia. Its value in the 2024 CZ Crowns can be estimated at 500 million (20 mil €). Though not a vast estate, such a deed was later considered an ideological sin, which Stalinism punished by death on the spot or a gulag for life, including the punishment of the following two generations. Thus, my impecunious father and me with my sister we were all punishable from 1948 until 1989 for the grandfather's transgression.



The photo above shows all his family in 1936 when the times were still quiet. Father wears the forester's uniform with a hat. All feel happy, not aware that very soon, there will be two tests of endurance waiting for them: nazism and communism.

My father's life with the silver spoon in his mouth terminated when he decided at 15 to move and study forestry (1933-37) in a residential college. There he learned discipline, handling arms and survival in forests, which became very handy when, in 1937, he volunteered and entered the military to prepare for the war against Nazi Germany. As a sapper and combat engineer, he was trained to build and defend trenches, pillboxes, and bridges.

During the May and September mobilizations in 1938, Father was engaged as the Czechoslovak platoon commander in the first line of pillboxes, where Germans were expected to open the main attack. It was on the weakly fortified border between Moravia and (former) Austria. He considered the Munich agreement a humiliating double-dealing betrayal because France ceded to Hitler and refused to fight together with Czechoslovakia. Father admitted that many soldiers wept when they were ordered to abandon the trenches in such a humiliating way. "We all wanted to fight, though we all knew that our defense would require enormous sacrifices, including our own." However, even well before Munich, it was apparent that France was not poised to enter into a full-scale war, and Czechoslovakia would similarly be marooned as France let Hitler occupy and re-militarize Rhineland in 1936. However, Czechoslovaks still kept an unshakeable naive hope in a French re-alignment at the last moment, once the French saw the Czechoslovak heroic resistance.



Jak by naše republika po „Anschlusu“ byla obklopena německým územím a téměř uzavřena, kdyby tyto hranice byly prodlouženy maďarskými.

After the Austrian Anschluss and with Hungary joining the Nazis, Czech historical lands (Bohemia and Moravia) were nearly encircled. Notwithstanding that the surrounding Nazis did not give much chance for military resistance lasting more than two months with hundreds of thousands of human victims, the Czechoslovaks were determined to fight at all costs. Led by General Vojtechovský, the mastermind of the Czechoslovak military achievements in the control of Eastern Russia and Siberia in 1918, there were plans for long active resistance before hesitating France and Britain would enter the theater of war. Their Munich surrender on the 30th of September 1938 was a fatal blow. There were more extraordinary generals in the strategic leadership, all with the Siberian legionary experience and with the belief in offensive dynamic warfare. Czechoslovak's one million-strong army was mechanically mobile by 40% while Wehrmacht by a mere 10%, relying on horses and feet. Ludvík Krejčí was the

chief commander. Sergej Vojtechovský's 1st Army was defending the whole of Bohemia, Lev Prchala's 4th Army, seconded by Sergej Ingr, defended South Moravia, and Vojtech Luža was in charge of North Moravia's 2nd Army. Josef Votruba, assisted by Bedřich Homola, was in charge of the Slovak defense. Bohuslav Fiala, professor of military strategy, was the Head of Staff, and Jan Netík the head of artillery. It should be known that these generals were prepared to take over the government if the Munich agreement failed and defend Czechoslovakia unilaterally without French entry into the war. All of them were active adversaries of Hitler and later Stalin (if they survived the former). It is a shame that 95% of Czechs are unaware of at least one of these heroes. Munich is not the shame of the Czechoslovaks; it is the blind shame of the French and partially the British.



Both father and mother asserted to us kids that they did not know a single case in which someone would try to shirk the mobilization order in September 1938. Father stressed: "Our army counted over a million adamant, well-trained, and well-equipped soldiers prepared for a lethal resistance." When countered by the argument that such an unequal fight would be useless, Father responded: "Now, no one understands that, but it was

more than a matter of our honor and principle. Yes, it was our duty to the history and the future, but it was also about military rationality. If France, supported by Britain, opened the Western Front in October 1938, Hitler would fall in six weeks. Demilitarized Rhineland, including Saarbrücken and the triangle Düsseldorf, Dortmund, and Duisburg, would never allow Germany a military conquest. What a stubborn logic, negated by reality!"

Otherwise, Father stubbornly refused to talk about his own military experiences, even though he liked discussing military strategy, field combat tactics, and the performance of top Soviet generals. For a long time, he enjoyed commenting on military parades where he considered the Soviets the best actors in the theater of pomp (saying no word about Wehrmacht's towering over them with their pomp).

### **Period 1939-41**

After breaking away from Czechoslovakia on the 14th of March 1939, Slovakia became a "Client State" of Nazi Germany. Hitler immediately invaded the Czech lands the following day and, on March 16, annexed the country, naming it The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. *[Note \*1]: After Munich, Czecho-Slovakia was no longer in any position to defend itself, and Hitler correctly felt he could do anything he wanted. At this point, he was indeed not afraid of any Czechoslovak military effort. Indeed, he did not wish Munich - that was Mussolini's idea - and Hitler believed at this time that Mussolini had denied him his bloody, victorious war. Although no one can see inside Hitler's mind, some historians assume that at this point, Hitler was concentrating on uniting what he saw as old German lands. This included Bohemia,*

*Moravia and Silesia (bits of which were both Czechoslovak and Polish), and also e.g. Danzig, West Prussia, the part of Poland that Prussia had annexed in the 3rd division of Poland, and Memel, which had become Lithuanian. He was not interested in Slovakia, except perhaps not wanting to give it all to Hungary, which was free-riding on his destruction of the Versailles system. So, he supported Slovak irredentist movements and held back Hungary. The Slovak Peoples' Party, led now by Tiso (after their leader András Hlinka had just died), fought just for autonomy because it was even more anti-Hungarian than anti-Czech. That is also why Hitler (through Seyss-Inquart) gave Tiso the ultimatum to declare independence immediately or be occupied. Tiso's declaration on March 14th stopped Hungary, which was now only allowed to annex poor Ruthenia, which also tried to declare independence, and some small places in the East. Also, to show a brotherhood, Slovaks "voluntarily" offered 50,000 soldiers to fight against the commies. This way, it all served Hitler best. And, as we now know, his plans to eventually eradicate Czechs and replace them with Germans. [End Note \*1]*

My father's Czech family settled in Slovakia in 1920 and in 1939 was subject to expulsion into the Nazi-occupied Protectorate Böhmen und Mähren, symbolically "back home afoot" (Čehúni domov pešo! in Slovak). To avoid that, Father decided to stay but had to accept the conditions: to apply for Slovak citizenship (granted to him in March 1942) and to enter the Slovak military since their army lacked officers. So, on September 1, 1939, he was promoted from sergeant to lieutenant, becoming a professional soldier perforce. Symbolically, this happened a mere five hours before the start of World War II. But he had an ulterior motive: to serve in a non-combat unit and be close to the border with Moravia. Thus, he served in the region northwest of Bratislava as an officer for the recruits and reservists.

He did that intentionally because he already served in a clandestine anti-Nazi network. As an officer at the HQ, he had the right to issue military ID cards, which he proceeded to do for the refugees from the Protectorate. In an interview in the 1970s, he described the anti-Nazi organization: "We were a perfectly matching trio – Mudroch, Gonda and me. Three officers in a vast network subject to principles of intelligence, where such cells of three, except for two or three liaisons, knew nothing about all other conspirators. Thus, the Nazi police never broke the whole network. Later, Mudroch and Gonda were forced to participate in the Eastern campaign in 1943; Gonda even organized an unsuccessful escape to the Soviet side. Both were killed as resistance fighters in September 1944.

The outcome of this absurd paradox resulted in the Slovak army's conspirators, supposed guardsmen of the regime, secretly guarding the safety of the Czech refugees, adversaries of Hitler, Jews, and future volunteers in the French and British armies, aiding them to get away from the Nazi-occupied Bohemia and Moravia. Surprisingly, there was no will among the Slovak officers, even among the higher commanders, to busybody about someone else's revealed anti-Nazi persuasion. "We knew each other, and we knew each other's history. Such was the Slovak army, where the majority of officers were anti-Nazi and kept together. The shitbags clustered in the Hlinka's Guard!" Hlinka's Guard was a paramilitary copy of the Nazi SA Korps subordinate to the fascist Hlinka's Slovak Peoples' Party. It competed (unsuccessfully) with the Slovak Army as their fiend and turned Slovakia into a police state.

Father told me once in his rare comments. "At that time, Slovakia was not split ideologically but religiously. Catholics sided with Tiso, who himself was a Catholic priest, and Protestants and Jews sided with Beneš. It was transparent who was who. At the same time, very few Catholics were dire Nazis. The people tried to turn a blind eye to the looming ideological

conflict and avoided getting entangled with anything nasty. The Nazi ideology was considered something exogenous, forced from outside.”

A tricky question remains: Why did he not emigrate to fight abroad, as could be expected from a Czech patriot? Did he not trust such a mission? Was he mesmerized by the fascinating bloom of social life in Bratislava, where the wars in Spain, France, or Britain were filtered out by prosperity, tango, singing, and operettas that allowed one to forget the tragedies of the time? Father must have felt guilty about his weakness. Only that explains his self-sacrificed altruism, where his forged ID cards and enemy smuggling could result in an instant loss of everything. I never dared utter such a question.

The escape route via Beograd worked relatively well until April 1941, when Hitler attacked Yugoslavia. The smuggling of refugees from Protektorat became difficult, but the organized escapes became nearly impossible after Hitler assaulted the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. The Slovak army was ordered to send an expeditionary brigade of 51,000 men in a “friendly relief in a fight against Jewish-Bolshevism.” Many links broke down, and new replacements could not be trusted. Hlinka’s Guard and German Gestapo envoys raised their alert, too.

The Slovak participation in the war against the Soviets was another absurdity. It is a mystery why Hitler did not abuse his despised Slavic “comrades in arms” more and allowed them to hang around throughout nearly all of their war engagements (7/1941-6/1944). That was in sharp contrast to bloody engagements of other Allied armies – of bleeding Finns, Hungarians, or Romanians. At the end of July 1941, 36,000 soldiers were retired to “help with the home harvesting!” Afterwards, the numbers never exceeded 20,000 and slowly converged to 10,000 in 1944. However, the engagement of soldiers was impermanent, with a high rotation, so the number of men called up to fight the Soviets reached 100,000. Compared to the size of the Slovak army after mobilization with 90,000 soldiers and officers, this implies that a great deal of Slovak young men and nearly all officers had a “taste of Hitler’s ‘precautionary’ war in Ukraine and south Russia,” which all of them hated. A mere 1,281 of dead in three years, plus some 3,000 officially reported as “missing or captive” (i.e. deserted), signals that Slovak military commitment was not very supportive, mainly servicing the fighting of other armies up in the front. Nevertheless, all who returned reported that life in the rear was crammed with violence and German atrocities. Slovaks sided with Ukrainians and Russians and not with Nazis. In Ukraine, the Slovak soldiers were often welcomed as pacifiers, in contrast to the brutal Germans. It should be added to the Slovak credit that of the 100,000 engaged men, there were a mere 20 accused of atrocities during or after the war. That does not compare with the atrocities that the Hlinka Guard committed against Slovak Jews in the two local transitory concentration camps. Out of 95,000 Slovak Jews, 71,000 were deported, and the number of holocaust victims is approximately the same.

The above description allows me to open the most mysterious part of my father's life, about which he never uttered a single word. The mystery concerns his life in the Slovak Army during the Slovak war with the Soviet Union. He refused to talk about it, not even to his future wife, my mother. Since March 1942, when Father received Slovak citizenship and still stayed as a military non-combat officer in Slovakia, and November 1943, when he served in Brezno and got acquainted with my mother, the documents in the Slovak Military Archive are limited to three words: “deputy commander Bratislava”, which could also mean the combat in the East. The few facts known to me came from other peoples’ scant communication. When the Nazis planned the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, they counted on the Slovaks, too. The mobilization and the combat training, according to the Wehrmacht style, came in waves.

It is highly probable that, sometime in 1942-43, my Father must have been ordered to fight in Ukraine together with the Nazis.

It did not have to be a shock to him, maybe even a relief. What confirms this is the undeniable letter from Bohumil Benáček, his uncle and former general of the Czechoslovak army, the most pungent anti-Nazi in the family. He wrote to him: "We are all blessing your resolution. It is great to follow the steps of our army in Russia." The family story is that the letter from Prague missed him in the barracks in Slovakia and was intercepted by the Nazi intelligence, who knew already well that "the steps of our army in Russia" meant defecting and fighting on the other side, which the Czechoslovak legionaries did in tens of thousands in WWI. There was a Nazi investigation, which the Slovak commanders hushed by stressing that the historical steps of the Slovak army meant "fighting Bolsheviks." The snag was that we did not know if the investigation happened on the Soviet battlefield or in Slovakia because father always refused to talk about it by retorting: "Please, save me of such fables once forever." And, indeed, the years 1942-43 were completely void in his talks.

So the "fable" turned into a low-key family bush telegraph beefed up by some facts about the Slovak Army fighting the war against the Soviets. The facts were that in September 1942, General Štefan Jurech took over the command from General Turanec. Turanec was a hardliner who would not defend my father. Jurech, as well as two other high commanders, Malár and Kuna, were former Czechoslovak legionaries and anti-Nazi and, therefore, willing to hush the scandal of my father. Jurech secretly collaborated with the Red Army and, on 22 January 1943, even signed an agreement that the whole division would defect to the Soviet side.<sup>2</sup> This agreement somehow failed and was constantly postponed. Maybe our further reading could add a bit about why the Soviet side was permanently far from being supportive. Abwehr (German military police) disclosed the plan only after nine months when, on September 26, 1943, Jurech was recalled from his commanding post at the Russian front. The Gestapo apprehended him 12 months later. Jurech and the initial commander Malár were later murdered in Nazi prisons. To point out the absurdities of the Slovak Army, where double-agency or lasting opportunism was a touchstone, let us mention even the Slovak defense minister Čatloš, former legionary commander in Russia in 1918, backed the anti-Nazi officers and even organized the uprising against Nazis.

Thus, we all lived in a suspicion that in 1942-43, my father's military engagement in the war with the Soviets was true, and he tried to cast bad memories from his head. Another fact also supported this: avoiding engagement on the Soviet front was nearly impossible for any officer. Practically all father's military friends or allies were called up there: Šlajchart, Oškvarek, Repašský, Stanek, Dobrovodský, Žingor, Perko, Vitalay, Gonda or Mudroch.

Another confusing piece of information was passed to me when one of my father's soldiers visited our house in Prague in 1967. I retained his name, Paučír, until today because he opened a new view of my father. We talked alone for some 30 minutes before father arrived from his work. The visitor was his subordinate not only in the Slovak uprising in 1944, but they were friends also "throughout the whole war." He described father as a born commander with a natural authority. Tall and upright and talking directly to eyes. In critical moments, he acted

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<sup>2</sup> Jurech and the preceding commander Malár were later murdered in Nazi prisons. To point out the absurdities of the Slovak Army, where double-agency or lasting opportunism was a touchstone, even the Slovak defense minister Čatloš, former legionary commander in 1918, backed the anti-Nazi officers and even organized the uprising against Nazis.



with a cold-blooded certainty. “All soldiers wanted to serve under him. If he ordered someone for a mission, where their neck was often at stake, hardly anyone declined. Even the most frightened ones turned into heroes.” When I asked how it was in the war with the Soviets, he concluded: “Oh, that was a bummer – better ask your father.”

When father came and embraced his war friend, I was eavesdropping behind the door. “Did you not tell your son about the Russian expedition?” “No, that is not possible. No one would comprehend.” “Why? At least you could mention the craziest of stories about how the company headed by Xxxxxx (I did not catch the name) tried to come over to the Russians and how all were fighting tooth and nail to get back to Germans from the trap when the Russians betrayed the agreement and started to shoot us.<sup>3</sup> And wasn’t it funny how the Germans even wanted to award the Iron Cross to someone brave but brave for high treason! <sup>4</sup> And all claimed not to be involved. How even Králik <sup>5</sup> prevaricated and claimed to see and know nothing!” Father cut him off sharply: “Please, let us change the topic!” So, I was even more confused. Was he in the Eastern expedition with the Nazis? And why was he so silent about it? It became a profound burden on my mind that I was trying to push back.

*[Note \*2]: The Soviet system was paranoid by its nature. They suspected all deserters, captives, or refugees of spying and sabotaging. They especially did not trust those who were not communists by persuasion, which Slovaks, as much as the Polish, historically had little in tradition. Remember how the Soviets treated the Polish officers in Katyn? Practically all Slovak captives (over 3,000 of them until 1943) were sent to gulags if not shot on the spot- Russians always feared free-thinking, especially about democracy or national independence. This explains why the Soviets were so non-cooperative in all attempts of the Slovaks to defect or to launch a national uprising, which was not under the control of local communists and their Soviet NKVD/KGB “advisors”.*

*The transfer of the Slovak captives to the First Czechoslovak Independent Brigade in the Soviet Union formed already in July 1942 as a company of 979 men, was very slow. In August 1943, units reached a brigade of 3,517 soldiers, where authentic Czechs and Slovaks formed a minority. The majority of deserters willing to fight against Nazis were still in gulags. As late as October 1944, due to the belated “redemption” Dukla operation, 3,326 Slovak soldiers finally comprised 20% of the squad, whereas the Czech nationals formed a mere 6%. The remaining were Soviet Czechs settled in Volyn, Ruthenians, and Ukrainians. The Independent Czechoslovak Brigade was never independent, and the Soviets were always in control, both from superior Soviet command and through their informers at the grassroots. [End Note \*2]*

The talk with Paučír turned to persuading the father to use the compensation law 255/1946 and apply for the extension of his military merits for wounds, incarcerations, and illegal activities. “Don’t be a fool! The times have changed. They will revise your case now, increase your pension, and offer better healthcare!” Father declined that with words: “We never fought for any merits or privileges.” Then they talked about their friends who, if they survived

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<sup>3</sup> See the [Note \* 2] below in the text.

<sup>4</sup> There were at least two Slovak soldiers who were awarded the Iron Cross in 1943 (fortunately of the lowest out of the 8 classes, which means nothing): Ján Dobrovodský and Karol Repašský, whom my father knew well and claimed they both were uncompromising anti-Nazi. They were active organizers of the escapes already in 1942 and they were nominated as leaders in the Uprising in June 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Only now, in my 2024 search throughout the literature, I discovered that it could have been Colonel Alojz Králik, commander of the regiment 101. Even though he was considered a pro-Nazi hardliner, he did not betray his subordinate officers who were of a different political orientation. That was in the officers’ ethics at that time.

the war, were all of them somehow punished for their merits by the commies. I remembered such names as Dobrovodský, Žingor, and Josef Trojan. In 1950, the former received 18 years in jail, and the latter two were executed. Vis-à-vis those three, whom he always mentioned with the highest esteem, father always felt somehow downhearted. I wonder, was it because he felt ashamed that he managed to escape from the standard 12 years in prison through his Russian contacts and the steps they advised him?

Another non-documented event was that the father was investigated in Bratislava for his inimical activities in 1942. He particularly disliked this topic about his military infringement and why he was soon acquitted. At least his military career could continue unabated. In August 1943, he was transferred to barracks in Brezno, 250 km East of Bratislava. That was evidently a derogation, even though he retained his position of deputy commander of the local recruiting unit.

As I was writing these memories in 2024, I decided to resolve the two tormenting mysteries. I even acquiesced with the possibility that my father served in the war on the side of Wehrmacht and was punished for an unsuccessful attempt to desert. Thus, I spent some time in the Slovak Military Historical Institute archives. I found the father's military records there, saying, to my relief, that he spent all years 1940-August 1943 in the headquarters in Bratislava and then in Brezno. The mystery of why he escaped the call up to the war was explained by a remark in the diary of General Turanec, the chief warmonger: *In contrast to the bravery of Slovak soldiers who joined with honor the armies fighting against Bolshevism, there are still some of our officers, especially those of the Czech origin, who shamefully invent a myriad of pretexts to dodge that solemn duty.* Father's name is not mentioned, but how many officers of "Czech origin" were there in the Slovak army? Maybe two, or three? It is not very heroic to duck the military duties, but ducking the Slovak military comradeship with Hitler required quite a cunning mastery that honored my father. I gather that father had to be called up to the battlefield even several times and he had to consider the desertion. Thus, the letter from Uncle Bohumil contained a relevant message. Therefore, the investigation and the punishment had their reason. Turanec and Pilfousek, two pro-Nazi officers who were bound to be the two father's potential superior commanders, were in wide disfavor. Their petitions to the minister Čatloš were generally downplayed. So, Father found himself luckily in Brezno instead of fighting somewhere under the Caucasus. And it is a mere 40 km from Brezno to Banská Bystrica, where Golian and his group of conspirators were preparing the Uprising. Maybe the father got a lot of backing from them.

In Brezno, in the waiting room of the railroad station, my father got acquainted with my future mother Valeria, a 19-year-old teacher. Her family opposed such a choice due to their very rational expectations. "Marry anyone, even a chimney sweeper, but not an officer."

## **YEAR 1944 – Slovak National Uprising<sup>6</sup>**

Father's next shining moment came in April 1944, which initiated his top achievement in life: when he was summoned to the defense minister Čatloš to be transferred to the Žilina regiment on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April with the rank of private lieutenant. Father always took it with a

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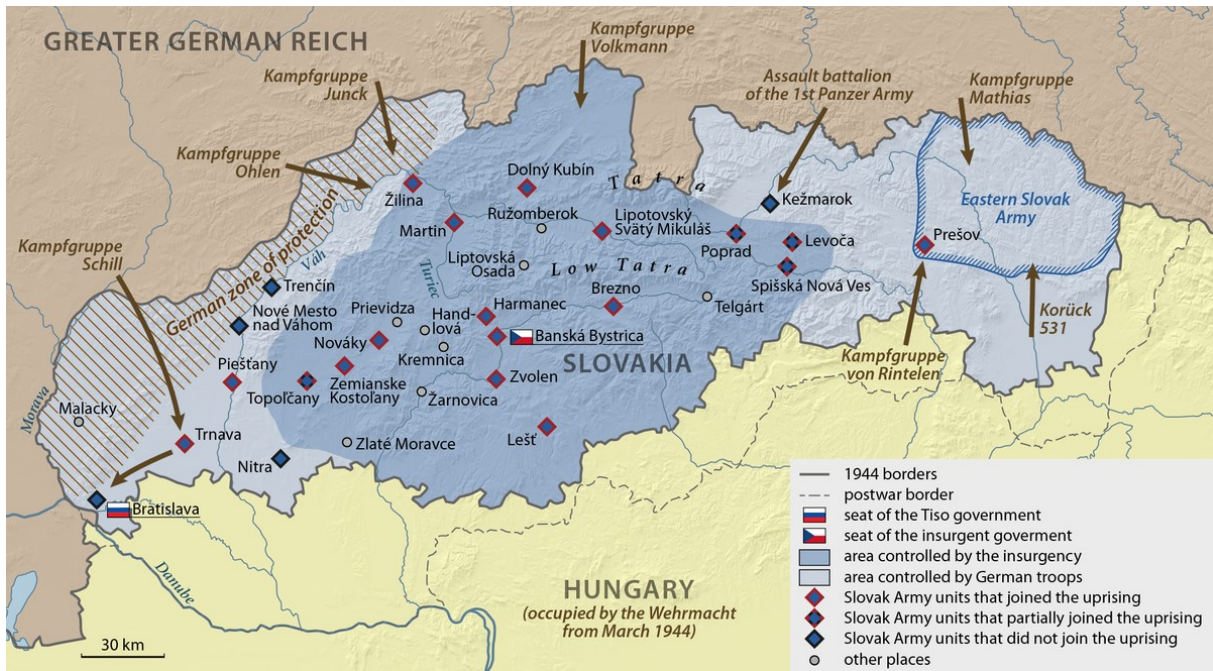
<sup>6</sup> The best introductory reference to this extraordinary (and in the West little known) uprising available in English is <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/slovak-national-uprising-1944>. There is also a well-balanced paper by Sean Judge: Slovakia 1944. The Forgotten Uprising. Wright Flyer Paper No. 34., Air Univ. Press, 2008, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA485285.pdf>

smile how Čatloš trusted him by lightheartedly committing himself to high treason - by ordering him to work on the uprising of the whole regiment of 1,000 soldiers. Čatloš must have been well informed that Father would do that because of his revealed democratic and anti-Nazi acts. Father discovered soon that his two friends Repašský and Šlajchart were also commanders there, and Major Dobrovodský was delegated as the deputy commander with the same aim in early August.

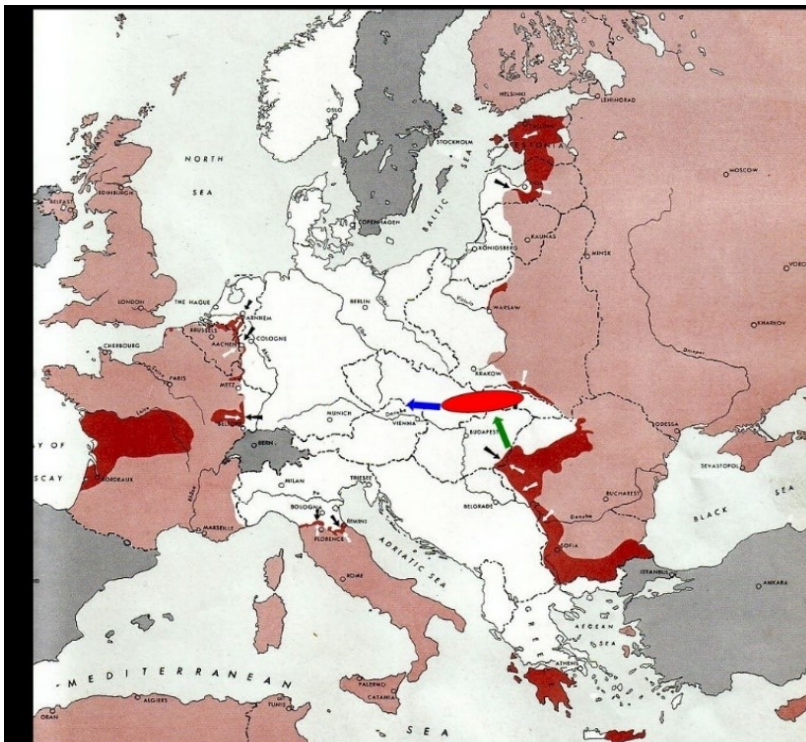
*[Note \*3] – inspired by the speculations of my father]: At that time, Čatloš sent a secret delegation, headed by the chief communist Šmidke, to the Soviet high command with concrete strategic plans on coordinating the Soviet and Slovak armies to liberate Slovakia jointly. The key role was assigned to two Eastern Slovak divisions, numbering over 30,000 relatively well-armed men. These were formed under the pretext of helping Germans defend the northeast mountain passes, but, under coordination with the London government, they were planned to join the Uprising in September under the command of General Malár and Colonel Talský. As always, with such plans not entirely under the communist clout, Stalin treated this agreement with Beneš with a blind eye so that even all other secret missions were left in the clouds. Father claimed that, in the crucial moment, Malár smelled a rat and did not join the uprising proclaimed by General Golian on August 29<sup>th</sup> 1944. Marshall Konev's Red Army, counting nearly 1 million soldiers, was a mere 50 km away but stayed put. Malár knew how the Warsaw Uprising was left high and dry by the Soviets just a month ago. The reason was dominantly political, though crossing the 250-meter River Vistula dividing Warsaw was not easy: it was evident to Stalin that Armia Krajowa was not pro-communist, and therefore, it was left to fail and bleed. Polish cost in casualties was 22,000 soldiers and 160,000 civilians killed by Germans.*

*Wehrmacht disarmed the two Slovak divisions on 2 September without any attempt to occupy the mountain passes. Malár knew that waiting for the Soviet counterattack would be in vain, and the real counterattack would be by the marauding German guns firing from the top down. Notwithstanding the loss of those two key divisions, the father's regiment in Žilina agreed to take the role of the Western rampart of the Slovak fight for freedom to restore Czechoslovak democracy and not to establish Communist rule. They took the challenge. Even though the uprising was being prepared in a hostile environment, its implementation reached the point that 17 garrisons with over 20,000 soldiers rose on one order on 29.8.44, and only five garrisons failed to do so. The situation increased to 47,000 soldiers after 7 days of mobilization and to 60,000 soldiers by the end of September. During the first week, the garrisons consolidated the defenses according to Plan B and took a ring defense covering almost 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> (see the map below). The army resisted for two months as a tribute to Czechoslovakia and democracy. The inhabitants supporting the Uprising felt that the humiliation of the surrender after the Munich agreement of September 1938 and the opportunistic break up of Czechoslovakia needed an uncompromising denial. This was a most heroic gesture.*

*The Slovak National Uprising can be considered the most significant performance of the Slovak nation in its history, where my father had the honor of being one of its many pillars. It was this uprising that finally shaped the Slovak national identity, obscured for 1,000 years under Hungarian rule. The uprising gave Slovaks a mandate to be a self-confident nation worthy of self-government. It was unique: it was the only mass-organized uprising from within the army in the Nazi coalition and one of the largest uprisings against Hitler. Sixty thousand soldiers and 14,000 partisans were involved, fighting against the much better-armed Germans, whose numbers had to be constantly increased, up to 50,000 in mid-October.*



*Dad liked the following analogy (though he took it as a humorous overstatement): Hitler conquered Poland in 5 weeks, France fell in 7 weeks, and Belgium surrendered in less than 3 weeks, while the Slovaks held the front for 9 weeks (i.e. since 29.8. until 1.11.1944). Then, in a guerilla warfare, for the next four months. The uprising was suppressed. It missed its potential geopolitical and strategic intentions due to the Soviet wavering with the support of the Slovak army, which was not pro-communist. However, it had the leadership, cooperation, and enormous commitment of the nation's grassroots. We can call it a national heroism.*



*The following map depicts the situation on the Eastern fronts at the end of September 1944. Surprisingly, the Slovak uprising revealed its sudden enormous strategic geopolitical importance in the war since it would boost the importance of the Soviet army concentrated in Western Romania. The green arrow points to a possible Soviet attack in early October, which would take the German army group "South" to a pincer maneuver, catching it to a cauldron akin to that at Stalingrad.*

*That would suddenly push the front to the north of Budapest and Vienna, as is shown by the blue arrow. Surprisingly, the plan of the Slovak Uprising had the potential to become a battlefield of top military importance. Stalin did not accept such an unexpected*

*strategic chess move. He prioritized the occupation of Bulgaria, the capture of Belgrade, and safeguarding access to the Aegean and Adriatic seas. Fronts to the north and the south of Slovakia had to wait. Thus, the crossing of the Vistula River on the North had a break from July until January, and the liberation of Vienna and Bratislava had to wait until March/April. [End Note \*3].*

Now let us come back to the father's memories and look at his letter describing the call for the Uprising in his garrison: "My dear Lery, the command for assault on Wehrmacht came so suddenly that I could not get home and pick up your photo, nor my new field wellingtons so that I had to survive the war in the torn old ones." This is proof that the commanders were taken by surprise, but once the HQ call was issued, all went immediately into field action.

The Žilina regiment remained in the center of the battles until the very end when the surviving vestiges of soldiers joined the First Czechoslovak Army in the USSR. Major Dobrovodský, one of the most experienced Slovak officers, well-trained in the strategy and tactics of Wehrmacht warfare, for which he received the German Iron Cross award (fortunately just the most ordinary one), took over the command and formed three squadrons. The first two, with the most skilled soldiers, were commanded by Repašský and Šlajchart. These were immediately put into combat with the invading Wehrmacht and SS troops in the West and North. The third squadron of 400 soldiers was patched together from reservists, volunteers, and 100 policemen who became the top fighters. Father's task, as its commander at age 26, was to guard the still quiet South flank of the central battleground along the strategic railroad from Ostrava to the WWII battlefields in Ukraine that proceeded from Žilina through Strečno to Martin.

In three days, i.e., on the 1st of September, this serene area comprising control over 40 villages became a fierce battlefield. Once in the 1960s, we drove to that area, and Father stopped in the middle of nowhere, close to the village Turie, staring in silence. When we asked what happened, he uttered: "Here we made the first assault—an ambush. Germans were on lorries that were easily blocked. We destroyed six trucks, and the Germans lost some 100 men. They had only a few machine guns. Our losses were much smaller. But the next two days turned to hell. We were outnumbered both in men and technique. All of our five tanks were doomed. My three companies held on, but the losses were enormous." Only much later, I found military records saying that on September 3rd, my father was wounded twice by shrapnel: in the shoulder and palm. "In the hospital of Banská Bystrica, they took out the iron, and on the 5th, I rushed back to the frontline in Vrútky. The officers who did not fear to be in the first line were crucial. We all knew that the country relied on us", he mentioned in a typical belittling style in an interview with Roman Cílek for his book published in 1978 (Roman Cílek: *Stopy Orlov. Športovci v SNP*. Bratislava, 1978). But he did not mention that he also paid a visit to his admired friend Karol Repašský, who was dying of wounds in the other hospital nearby.

So, Father fought on. On 18<sup>th</sup> September, the task of his squadron named "Benacek" was again to defend the Rajec Valley (length 20 km), where the Germans tried to penetrate from North and South and take the rebels to a cauldron. The squadron beefed up its power by fighting with the partisans of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Czechoslovak Brigade of Štefanik commanded by Viliam Žingor, another great friend.

*[Note \*4]: Žingor was an eternal rebel – a fighter for freedom at all costs. His partisan base, established in July 1943, was the first one in Slovakia, and with the 1200 rank-and-file, he commanded one of the biggest guerilla brigades. Before the Uprising, the brigade command*

*was transferred to the Soviet NKVD agent Major Velichko, a military specialist in sabotage. But Velichko spoiled the plans he had agreed to with General Golian, to restrain from premature actions before the Uprising started as planned for the middle of September when the Red Army would be closer. However, it was clearly on the command from Moscow that Velichko blew up three tunnels on the key railroad line supplying Wehrmacht in Ukraine. So, the Germans had to invade Slovakia prematurely on 29 August 1944. In mid-August, Stalin was well informed about the plans for the Uprising by Beneš, Píka, and two Slovak missions. NKVD interned these two missions to claim that their military plans failed to reach Moscow. Stalin intended to doom the Uprising because it was not led by communist partisans but by the pro-democratic Slovak Army. Žingor refused to obey the instructions of the Soviet agents that partisans must not fight together with the Slovak army or even sabotage their actions. So he separated from Velichko and created his 2nd Czechoslovak Brigade of Stefanik. They defended the valley from German attacks together with the Slovak army until October. [End Note \*4]*

In October, father's squadron dwindled due to losses greater than enforcements by recruits to a mere 100 men and took part in fights for Martin and Šturec. In the North, it took nearly two months for German tank division Tatra and SS regiment Schill to conquer 60 km between Strečno and Liptovská Osada. The last 10 km resisted for more than a month. When on October 27th, the Nazi army occupied Banská Bystrica, the center of the Uprising, soldiers moved north to the Low Tatra mountains covered with snow.

A spell of serendipity appeared in all that misery. At the end of October, father met a young Ukrainian officer, Major Alexander P. Zorič, who had parachuted into Slovakia with his group of strategic intelligence agents a few weeks before. In fact, he was the chief Soviet mole in Slovakia, whose mission lasted until 1947, when he was the Soviet general consul.

Being both commanders with a high mission while still in their 20s, they immediately befriended. When they parted in Donovaly at the end of October, Zorič decided to flee south. Father trusted him with the address of his fiancée's family in Topolčany as the utmost reliable persons. Was that an act of the father's completely unhinged irresponsibility? Or was he bespelled by Zorič's professionalism and mission<sup>7</sup> to such an extent that he did not consider the risk of putting the lives of the family of his loved one at stake so high? That would be naïve. The situation in the Podmanický family was even more critical than the father could imagine because his future father-in-law, the producer of meat and smoked products, was a civil organizer of the Uprising in the South. He was the executive hand of Josef Trojan, the general director of the Bata-Slovakia estates, whose secret funds financed the uprising. As a military quartermaster until November 1944, he was on the Gestapo list with a capital sentence. The family was also on the Gestapo's radar and even jailed for three days.

Indeed, the Podmanický family supplied meat to the Zorič group hiding in the mountains 25 km east of Topolčany. They risked the lives of the whole family for many months. Still, my mother agreed that the lady agents of Zorič behaved highly professionally, had forged but

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<sup>7</sup> However, maybe it is worthwhile to mention that during his later Topolčany-Skycov mission, Zorič helped defend the ridge of the southern mountains for five months. His group, equipped with false documents, was launching missions to Bratislava and acquired the locations of German fortified positions for the defense of Bratislava, which allowed the Malinovsky army to take a pincer movement in April so that Bratislava surrendered in three days instead of the planned three weeks and only with 120 civilian victims. In March 1945, Zorič organized the liberation of V. Široký and J. Ďuriš from the prison, both future top communist politicians (prime minister and minister of agriculture). They even smuggled them to the Soviet side. Allegedly, the Gestapo raised a reward of 500 000 Slovak crowns for his apprehension. Zorič was a model agent.

credible documents, and one spoke perfect German. They even helped them find where my mother's father was hiding, in Selce village north of Banská Bystrica. That allowed my mother to find a more secure place to hide her father at Žemberovce in the mansion of her future brother-in-law. So my mother could make a risky 100 km transfer that practically saved his life. In each case, Zorič still owed a lot to father.

Let us return from this detour and continue with the transfer of father's unit to Tatra mountains. Writer M. Zlámal (see Kapitán Milkov: Z povstania na Slovensku 1944-45. Moravia Publ., Toronto, 1991) described that situation as both heroism and tragedy: "The valley from Staré Hory to Donovaly (11 km) was full of an endless crowd of soldiers. The stream of thousands led to a single mountain path through the ridges of six hills up to Hiadelske Pass (8 km with a total ascent of 800 m). It offers a reminiscence of the Chilkoot Pass adventure of the Klondike prospectors. But the Tatra pass was full of abandoned baggage, ammunition, scattered machine guns, and even the wounded and dead. The train of ants without heavy guns was an easy target of fire and bombs from German Focke air-fighters. The soldiers were also targets of long-range artillery from Korytnica.

For very long, I could not understand why such huge numbers committed themselves to that seemingly irrational suicidal maneuver. Mountains offered no food, no water, and no shelter. The nearest Soviet troops were 250 km away, and even getting to Prešov (what they expected) was a 200 km long march. Prešov was liberated in late January 1945. As soldiers, they could surrender, which freed them from the summary execution, and they could survive in the POW concentration camps. Or they could rely on wide-spread solidarity, put on mufti and hide in some forlorn village, or even at home. But they did not! Soldiers fighting daily for freedom became proud of their voluntary resistance and could not put up with the humiliation of surrendering or hiding like rats. They reconciled with their potential sacrifice. It was a heroic patriotism. In sheer moral persuasion, many from Dobrovodsky's regiment made it to the end: they fought guerilla warfare and joined the Czechoslovak army that arrived with the Soviets. The paradox is that this was their crime in the eyes of the Soviets, for which they had to be later punished.

It took the squadron four days to get from Staré Hory to Hiadelske Pass (24 km), which they reached on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November. This meant fighting on the way, rationing the water and meat of killed horses, and sleeping in the snow. The next day, they were bound to swarm up over another six hills of Prašivá (Scabby) ridge up to Skalka (1545 m) where military bunkers had been built. This meant to overcome a total ascent of icy 1300 m in 9 km. <sup>8</sup>

I passed through that area in February 1980 in a group of eight trained cross-country skiers with a mere 10 kg in their backpacks and with perfect outfits. The ascent at an angle of 30 degrees caused dehydration in all of us. The father's soldiers had to carry over 30 kilos through snow and ice and zig-zag the steep hills, tripling the distance, being shod in slippery wellingtons. The squadron was suddenly attacked through the fog at the descent from Great Chochula (1753 m). Father later commented: "We did not know where they had come from in that god-forsaken place. That was not the Wehrmacht strategy. It was more akin to the crazy Russian assaults. But they were Germans, maybe SS troops, not the Vlasov ROA army. A grenade burst close to me, and I did not even know I was hit in the abdomen. When we got off the fire, I realized that we must have lost a lot of men and that my wound by shrapnel was

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<sup>8</sup> The two top communist leaders undertook the same march: Slánský and Šverma. The latter died of exhaustion a few kilometers further on at the Chabenec mountain.

so serious that I could not continue. The option in such cases was to drive a bullet through the head or be left marooned and bleeding. But suddenly, I still had the hope to live – it was all due to my fiancée Valerie.” Father decided to descend alone from Košarisko down to Nemecká (16 km), close to Brezno, where he had friends. Years later, in 1956, when the father was operated on to remove the shrapnel, the surgeon admired the miraculous healing of torn intestines, and the only explanation why the mortal sepsis did not develop was that the soldiers had not eaten for days.

It took two days to get down close to Nemecká (meaning “German” in Slovak) village. But there was a German sentry on the road. The young German must have been a born humanitarian because instead of shooting an enemy on the spot, he even took him to the distant station house. So, my father became a POW. He was forwarded to Bratislava and jailed in Kaisersteinbruch near Vienna, where he survived the peritonitis.

From that moment on, my father’s previous, more open recollections about the Uprising – where he found his self-esteem in authentic existence – sink again into the dark. It is another period that he tried to banish from his mind. The provisional imprisonment in Kaisersteinbruch and Stalag XIII A in Sulzbach, Bavaria, must have been a cruel experience, the vestige of which father retained in his yelp “gemma!” subconsciously used when someone was lazy or disobedient. Gemma is an Austrian dialect word for “Go!” – pleasant when uttered by an encouraging friend but nasty when shouted by a prison guard. Soon in January, father was transferred to the Stammlager “Stalag 384” in Altenburg – a historical town south of Leipzig. Not a single word was said in the family about this episode of life for a long.

Only once, in 1962, when Czechs were allowed to take a tourist one-day trip to Eastern Germany, something exceptional happened on our car trip. As we admired the cultural beauties of Weimar, my sister and I insisted on visiting the concentration camp Buchenwald. “A mere 6 km detour!” It was a depressive experience for all. On the way home, father took an unexpected detour. We arrived at romantic Altenburg. Instead of stopping by its castle, we drove to some deserted ground. Father interrupted the silence with the words: “Yes, it was here. The lager... I was lucky, I had longer arms than others. So I could reap more nettles behind the barbed wires. Nourishing delicacy.” Nothing more was said. After a long silence, we continued back home.

Stalag in Altenburg was a subcamp of the Buchenwald concentration (and liquidation) camp. It was opened in June 1940 as Stalag IV E to hold French army prisoners from the Battle of France. Renamed in 1941 as Stalag 384, it held the Slovak army officers as POWs since November 1944. The US Army liberated the town on the 16th of April 1945, but before that, the French POWs organized a charge and took control of the Stalag.

In the (censored) letter he was allowed to send to his family, he described the camp as one with an endurable command and endless boredom in a bedroom for 280 “pieces” crowded on bunks on three floors. He wrote that the other Slovak captive officers (e.g. his old friends Figura, Ján Malár <sup>9</sup>, Oškvarék, Vitalay, and Čány) filled time by learning English and French languages (not Russian!) for their expected future practice. There was no mention of constant malnutrition, humiliating commands, or winter cold they suffered. When we kids were occasionally too particular about the food, Father mentioned, “Just imagine if you had to live with a slice of bread and a bowl of watery beet-root soup – then you would never complain.” He lost 25 kg in 6 months of imprisonment. He admired how the French officers cooperated

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<sup>9</sup> Not to be confused with General Augustin Malár, father’s prison mate in Kaisersteinbruch in December 1944.



and prepared for the camp uprising. When it happened, they apprehended some of the SS guards and celebrated it by singing Marseillaise. “The most astonishing feeling of joy”!

Much later, in Paris, I learned the details concerning father’s conflicts with one of the SS guards. That also explained why we stored shiny wellingtons and a heavy leather military overcoat in the attic, though father never wore them. When the communist regime was slackening in the 1960s and allowed even me to visit the West in 1967, I went to Paris with an address of my father’s French friend from the lager. Though I came uninvited, surprisingly, I found him at home, and he remembered his Czech friend. My Spanish and his French did not make an easy conversation. We labored, but finally, I understood that there was some SS guard, the sadist of the camp, who was particularly keen to bully my father. They both were athletic and two meters tall, like twins. The torture was by hunger, cold, and humiliation. In the moment of liberation, the French formed a trial and offered my father the privilege of shooting him. But he could not do that – maybe he was too frail or did not like kangaroo trials. Only much later did the father add a short explanation. The sadist tortured prisoners by forcing them to walk barefoot in the snow. After the trial, father gave him a fist blow only (he was a trained boxer) and shouted at him to take off his wellingtons and remain barefooted. However, the circumstances of how he got the Wellingtons and the SS overcoat into his possession and why he valued them so much remained in the dark.

Another story from the stay in Altenburg was that Slovaks had to wait for four weeks until Bohemia was liberated in May. Since they remained a part of the US occupational army, they once wanted to visit an army club – a sort of bar. The superintendent chased them out because their uniform was “scrubby.” They explained in vain that the scrubbyness was a result of fighting, hiding, jailing, and sleeping for eight months in them since those precious life-saving uniforms were the only outfit they had. “Can you imagine how proud we were of our national uniforms and how humiliated we were for their scorn?” Except for wellingtons, overcoat, and poor health, father brought the following booty from the Reich: a set of playing cards and heavy ball bearings for the vapor mill of his father – they both were of the Altenburg produce.

But father brought another thing from the war: military tactics and strategy. He liked discussing the distinctions between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army tactics in an assault platoon. He described Germans as a harmonious, well-conducted orchestra where four commanders coordinated the squads, and each soldier knew his task while backing others rationally. They had to zig-zag, run and fall, and move in waves. Soviets were the complete opposite: their assault looked like a chaotic huddle of stones rolling on the dismayed, panicky defenders. But it had its logic – each soldier was an independent unit with a clear task: to get closer to the position of enemies, hide in a short distance, and wait cold-bloodedly for a good shot. Or deploy in the last 50 meters a suicidal mass assault. They lost two to five times more men than the Germans but had a similar chance of victory. Where did father pick up all that? On which frontline and against whom? I’d better not think of it.

Another topic Father liked was the profiles of the leading Soviet generals. He particularly disliked Konev: “He was a raw peasant and behaved accordingly – like a ruthless butcher who treated soldiers as fodder for cannons. His strategy was about quantities. That is the Soviet approach to progress.” Father illustrated it on the ill-conceived Dukla operation (8.9. – 28.10.1944) that Konev approved, though he must have known that the operation would achieve nothing. The cost of gaining that “nothing” was some 60,000 dead or wounded, of which 6,000 were from the 1<sup>st</sup> Czechoslovak army—practically every third soldier. Konev also gave orders to kill the German prisoners of war instead of imprisoning them. Combined with

subservience, that made Konev Stalin's most favorite general. But when the real strategic battles (for Moscow, Stalingrad, Voronezh, Kursk) had to be fought, Stalin cunningly assigned the task to much better strategists like Zhukov (with his precise technical thinking) or Chuikov (the warrior for the suicidal situations of last resort) or Vatutin (with his unexpected military moves he was claimed a match to the German top gun Marshal Manstein). Father's high esteem belonged to Rokossovsky, whom he considered the military mastermind – a genuine rival to the best Germans. The most humane among the Soviet generals who allegedly declared that he had not issued a single order for the death sentence of some Soviet officer or an assault order where he would not try to minimize the losses of the troops. There, he was standing by his Polish aristocratic background. But father admitted that he failed in politics: he did not oppose Stalin in his decision to let the Warsaw uprising bleed, and his controversial political involvement in the Polish government in 1949-56 was doomed to failure because of his complete misunderstanding of the Polish who did not want the Soviet style of rule that he tried to introduce.

The following question constantly comes to my mind: In what kind of mysterious way could Father have already gotten such gossipy information in the 1960s? Under communism, there was no serious literature about the military. And father, as a non-intellectual, had no thoughts about learning that in cafés. The most probable sources were the talks with the war-beaten commanders in Žilina: Dobrovodský, Oškvarék and Šlajchart and his soldiers serving in the East. Maybe also the talks with Zorič-Svjatogorov. Who knows?

#### **945-49 Rise of the Communist Badasses**

In May, suddenly, everything looked like a syrupy climax of the fairytale. The sorcerer was doomed, the princess was rescued, and the conjured family members were free from camps, hiding holes, interrogations, and fears. The way ahead was darting to a splendid wedding. On June 7, 1945, Father happily returned home from Germany. All members of his and his fiancée's large families survived the war, though many were resistance fighters risking their lives.

[Note \*5]: *The family had three other war heroes.*

*The first was his father-in-law Jozef Podmanický, who served as the army finance officer and quartermaster in the rear. I liked his humor: "My unit with provisions was in the rear, but in retreats, we often had to run back as the last ones." He went through the whole eight months of the Uprising, hiding at the end until 21 December when the Soviets entered a small part of South Slovakia – just where he was hiding. There, he was a crucial eyewitness of the high treason of Gustáv Husák, who was hiding in the same place. At that time, Husák was the leader of the Slovak Communists. Later, he was the general secretary of CP in 1969-89 and Czechoslovak president in 1975-89. It was Christmas 1944 when Husák called upon the commanding Soviet colonel accommodated in the mansion where my grandfather was hiding. The colonel asked my grandfather to help him with the translation. So Husák had a witness when he was demanding an audience at Malinovsky, Molotov, and Stalin, proposing that to secede Slovakia from Czechoslovakia and assign it the status of USSR, i.e., the Slovak Soviet Socialist Republic headed by him. He has shown the CP authorization and the rubberstamp of the Slovak SSR, which he prepared well in advance – a clear case of high treason. I think that the belated life imprisonment he was sentenced to in 1954 (for another, this time trumped up high treason) was one of those few that was entirely justified.*

*The other war hero was Father's cousin Bohumil Benáček, who was trained as a military pilot. He escaped dramatically from Bohemia to Switzerland through the Italian Alps in 1944. Then, he smuggled himself to Britain through France and Africa and became an officer in the Royal Air Force. As an English speaker, he became a pilot-navigator. He explained to me once how the horrors of the war crash human thinking: "When I was on the first bombing mission over Germany and when I saw the damage and smoke that my bombs caused to Germans, my soul became flooded by the feelings of an absolute delight." Otherwise, he was a very polite and empathic person.*

*My mum was the third hero because she had the courage and coolness to smuggle her father from one insecure hiding place to another more secure one. She was 20, and the distance of 100 km had to be overcome mostly by hitch-hiking when Slovakia in mid-November was haunted by Nazi commandos apprehending the insurgents. In addition, the personal ID card she forged for her father was not counterfeited professionally. Maybe she took over some skills from the lady spies of Zorič. [End Note \*5]*

The marriage was arranged in September. Father, as the war hero, was decorated with four awards, three of which were of a high military value: Order of Slovak National Uprising II, Order for Gallantry, and War Cross 1939. Father was somewhat detached from their importance. He even allowed us, 8-year-old kids, to use them in our battles between outlaws (positive) and gendarmes (negative) where we could lose all of them. Once, in 1968, when the jailed officers organized an action, "Fight for the Motherland is not for rewards!" (i.e. "we did not fight for being rewarded by jail"), he was reluctant to pin them on. "The war needed courage, but getting these... There were so many strange people at the awarding ceremony: a few former Nazis and so many new commies who took the red banner only when the Russians arrived."



Raised to the rank of staff captain and nominated as the recruitment commander in the Trnava division, Father did not brawl politically for a higher position. He traded his love for forestry for a military career, aiming to build a guarantee of national democratic sovereignty and avoid the fall to communism. However, destiny sided with the opposite. Thus, we can observe how post-war peace

gradually transformed into a new war. This time, the so-called Cold War for the violent sale of the Communist Paradise to the whole world. This holy mission was substantiated not only by the "scientific truth" in the revelations by Marx but also by the Soviet tanks required by Leninism-Stalinism.

The first warning came from his comrade in arms, Viliam Žingor (during four weeks of September 1944, they were successfully defending the Turiec Valley). His message at the end of 1946 was: The Union of Partisans, of which he was the chairman, was overwhelmed by requests for affidavits of being a participant in the national resistance fights from people who did not participate in any resistance. Žingor called them "shit-partisans" and opposed their

registration. The army had perfect written documentation, but guerrilla insurgents had hardly any. There were two motives for fraud: a) The compensation law 255/1946, which granted privileges to veterans in access to employment, pension, and healthcare. b) The political access to power since being a war hero mattered in selecting the public representatives. The Communist party had a special interest in the latter – they needed to outnumber the much greater number of fighters for the Czechoslovak democracy. By gaining the majority, they could take over the selection of political candidates and undermine the credibility of the army fighters by accusing them of collaborating with Hitler, etc. Their political master plan was a theft: to steal the Uprising and use the symbol of Slovak thirst for democracy to symbolize the national fight for communism under the Soviet commanders. This fabrication was completed when the commies took power in 1948. It was used as propaganda until 1989. For example, see the bill of 50 Crowns below. It is the best illustration and a practical guide to how to build communism.



*[Note \* 6]: The profile of Žingor, the punished hero.*

*As mentioned, Žingor was an eternal rebel – a fearless fighter for freedom and democracy. After the war, he became the unchallenged head of the Slovak Union of Partisans. Though he was a communist and a member of Parliament, his idealism did not allow*

*him to side with the communists in uprooting democracy. In 1947, he quit the presidency of the Partisan Union and dropped his communist membership in protest. That meant a warrant of death at the first opportunity the commies had. He was jailed and executed on trumped charges for spying in 1950. When my family was allowed to move to Prague in 1960, my father was searching for information about mass graves of political prisoners at the Dablice cemetery to take the grave of Žingor out of anonymity. No way – all was secret. [End Note \* 6]*

It did not take long, and the first political attack on Father came in 1947 when Uhliar, a communist officer from his division, accused him of being of a bourgeois birth, a sympathizer with the West, and a catholic fundamentalist because of the cross hanging somewhere in his offices.<sup>10</sup> Concerning the latter, Father quickly proved that he was an agnostic. He also asked Uhliar to take down the cross if he considered religious symbols indecent. Uhliar had no courage to do that. The first accusation was much more difficult to dismiss because it was true. When the division commanders stood by Father, it was revealed there was a more powerful person behind the Uhliar's accusation. It was Viliam Šalgovič, one of the most potent Stalinists in Czechoslovakia, who survived in the top security and political services throughout 1945-89. As Oscar Wilde said: "A man can't be too careful in the choice of his enemies." Father was "careful": in the concentration camp, the choice fell on the cruelest SS-mann and in rising communism on the longest-living Stalinist. By a year younger, robust, NKVD and KGB agent with a fake PhD in propaganda, in 1945-51 an agent in military internal intelligence, organizer of the Soviet occupation in 1968, and in 1962-75 the chair of the Control (=Penal) Commission of the CP Central Committee. Because he was scared of him, Šalgovič was deposed by the CP

<sup>10</sup> Until 1948, the Czechoslovak Army was not segregated from Christianity; there were chaplains in each regiment, and the cross in offices was not a banned symbol.

boss Husák to be the President of the Slovak Parliament for 1975-89, which was a mere ceremonial function.

One must give credit to the efficiency of the communist system in crushing down their potential adversaries in the class struggle. This activity, based on the worst in humans: jealousy, envy, greed, and hatred, was the masterpiece of their power. For example, there were 12 persons in family photo no. 4 on page 2. All of them were somehow prosecuted between 1948-50: the loss of property, house, and job. Eviction to a cellar, hard manual work, or a record of "manual work after the basic school" in the young ones' personal "cadre" papers. One must admit the communist meticulousness: there was no single exception. The punishment was proportional to the value of property and the years of schooling. This was the cement of the rule in all communist countries.

In 1945-51, Šalgovič's task was to identify, discredit, or purge the Slovak officers who would be able to command the military coup against communists. Father was one of the targets, as well as Dobrovodský (getting 18 years in prison in 1950) or Žingor (hanged). Once, during their hostile encounters in 1947, the conflict climaxed when Father's hand shot up and ended with a smack. It looked like the end of his freedom before long.

But father had a stronger ace in his cards: it was his Soviet acquaintance from the last days of the Uprising, Major A.P. Zorič, who dropped his intelligence (NKVD/KGB) alias and became the Soviet consul for Slovakia with his private name Alexander Sviatogorov. Alexander was now one of the most powerful people in Slovakia. After 1947, he worked under a diplomatic cover in Germany – indeed performing better in the division of Germany than Putin later in Dresden.

They met at the first opportunity in 1945, and their long discourses were surprisingly free and sincere, notwithstanding their different ideological positions. Alexander tried to persuade Father that he must change his political orientation immediately because Czechoslovakia was predestined to be a part of the Soviet world. The communist rule, coming sooner than later, would open a harsh class struggle where all political opponents and capitalists would be prosecuted, jailed, or even hanged. Alexander stressed that to safeguard his future, Father must immediately enter the Communist Party and become a political animal. Father laughed and argued as a democrat: if most people did not want communism (what he naively thought was the case), no change in the political orientation of a now sovereign Czechoslovakia could be possible. Nevertheless, Zorič-Sviatogorov stood by Father, and Šalgovič and his secret police entourage had to pull back.

After the February 1948 communist coup, Father realized who was right and to which hell the country was bound, so he immediately joined the communist party. That was most probably the most hallowed commitment of his life. Here, the father resigned to heroism because the family became his responsibility. But Šalgovič launched revenge once Alexander was advanced to Germany. Agonized over the attacks on his bourgeois origin and the risks of being sentenced for espionage or similar trumped-up charges, which befell many of his former comrades in arms, Father gave notice to quit the army at the end of 1949. It was rejected. Father gave a new notice and insisted on a direct resolution at the ministry. So he was summoned to a ministry clerk in Prague who informed him that his case was in the hands of deputy minister Reicin, general and NKVD secret agent, who postponed it for further screening. Being in the hands of the notorious snooper and snitcher Reicin was like relying on the mercy of Dr. Mengele. A few months before, it was General Píka, a democrat and army hero, who, through the hands of Reicin, was executed on trumped-up charges. Boosted by adrenalin, Father went

to the premises of the deputy minister, passed so resolutely through his secretariat where no one peeped, and entered with a door bang to Reicin. Reicin, pale as a sheet, signed his approval with a trembling hand. But why did he not send an order for his immediate apprehension? Did he retain some morals? Or was he aware that his absolute power would backfire and endanger his future position?<sup>11</sup> That is another mystery. However, I consider this my father's most valiant feat – there, he fought victoriously the riskiest game for the good of all his vast family.

So Father, with his awards of war hero, some soviet endorsements, and communist membership still safe in his personal “cadre materials”, felt home-free. He could change the military uniform for the green uniform of a hunter and a worker in forestry. On April 1st, 1950 – a symbolic All Fools' Day – he acceded the forestry district “High Tatras” as its director residing in Javorina. The district was huge, and Father could be called, in hyperbole, “the lord of Váh River and Tatras”.<sup>12</sup> We moved to the preserve of its former owners, counts Hohenlohe, including the formal administration of the nearby small chateau in Tirolean style used originally by Hohenlohe as a hunting lodge. Purchased by the government in the 1930s, it served as a holiday refuge for government officials. And so it served for the new elite of commies.

Our spacious administrative lodge in the Tirolean style at the end of the goral village consisted of a sun gallery, an English garden with an alcove, an artificial lake with fish, a pool with a fountain jet, a shooting range, and a wild mountain stream attracting the fishing for trout and grayling.<sup>13</sup> No wonder all our relatives and insiders from the Tatra region came there for holidays. And no wonder Margita, the bored wife of the foreign minister Široký, boss of the Slovak communist party and future prime minister, who was spending holidays in the chateau, loved to come for tea with my mother. Comrade Široký joined my father (and me) in mushroom picking and excursions. Margita was an intelligent woman commanding the career of her not-so-clever husband, whose success was based mainly on simple “yes, comrade Stalin/ Khrushchev/ Gottwald/ Zápotocký!”

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<sup>11</sup> The latter proved to be true: all top commies were scared of him. Reicin was jailed in 1951, subjected to tortures he himself propagated for confessing to made-up charges, and hanged together with Slansky (the communist general secretary).

<sup>12</sup> So was called the renowned medieval ruler of Slovakia Mathew Csák (1260-1321), who spoke Slovak on top of the official Hungarian.

<sup>13</sup> I visited the place after 43 years in 1993. The only modernization in the lodge was a TV antenna on the rotten wooden balcony, which was slanted. The garden was full of weeds up to the waist, so it took me time to find the overgrown fountain. Its fountainhead was still heroically targeting the climax of the sky. The sun gallery was full of butts and dirt, which did not seem to host intellectuals “estranged to the labor class”. However, the chateau was still serving the government officials. However, as they were weary of the small Hohenlohe hunting lodge, they built a communist architectural gem next to it – a wellness paradise. In the post-communism of 1993, it was privatized and turned into President Hotel Montfort <https://hotelmontfort.sk/en/> open to a wider class of well-to-do than presidents.



*This photo of 1950 shows how the foresters were gathering for the celebration of the 1<sup>st</sup> May. There, Široký dominates over Lenin, and Soviet red banners are at the forefront. Stalin does not seem to be disciplined., trailing somewhere behind Gottwald.*

After the summer of 1950, once Širokýs were gone, the political hunt on Father began anew. This time, it was led by comrade Michelčík, the other directorship candidate. The accusations

were of the Šalgovič brand: bourgeois background, shuffling into the CP to undermine its policies, serving in the fascist Slovak Army, and ganging up with people estranged to the life of the labor class (i.e. contacts with intellectuals).

*[Note \* 7]: Communist political litigation.*

*A detour must be made to describe a political "litigation" in a lawless (commie or nazi) state. First, the accusation could be completely abstract and detached from reality (e.g. "enemy of the people"). Second, the political accuser could often be covered by anonymity and not liable to prosecution if his/her indictment is false. Third, the jury runs along the hierarchy of the totalitarian octopus: work department activists, revolutionary trade union, enterprise party unit, municipality, or even district, region, ministry, and central committee. The judgment is thus heavily biased to the personal questions of the accusers and witnesses: "Is that person useful to me?" or "Can I get tainted or promoted?". Security Police, a spinoff of the Gestapo and KGB, do the investigation. Within these, the accused had to juggle and conjure emotions skillfully, facts concerning loyalty to the "cause," and self-criticism. Kafka's process is a good model, though quite a soft one. Nonetheless, as my father's cases show, such processes need not be lost entirely, provided someone is brave enough to stand behind you. However, bringing it to a neutral draw would be pretty tricky, anyway. [End Note \* 7].*

In the time of mass Stalinist processes, these were lethal accusations worth work in uranium mines. Also, the defense was similar: Did any of our workers find me estranged from them? (The result was that all stood by father). Our main visitors in the summer were comrades Široký. Were they estranged from the labor class? Let us ask them what kind of meaning they had on my class origin and CP conduct. No one dared ask Široký, the communist idol (though, I guess, his wife would instruct him not to be involved). Thus instead of getting a sentence of



purgatory in the uranium mines, Father had to accept his first internal exile – instead of Siberia, which Czechoslovakia did not have – in the Gipsy villages in the East. Michelčík won the directorship, and our next destination for 1951-52 was Stara Voda Forestry near Švedlár/Gelnica. The main loser was my mother, whose aristocratic lifestyle had to add keeping a hog and hens and stop thinking of coffee at the Grand Hotel in Štrbské Pleso or Smokovec.

The following memories are of my own, supported by comments from my mother. Nonetheless, in Stará Voda-Gelnica, Father was again a director of the forestry. He could command his lumberjacks, zig-zag the endless forests, practice angling or catching the crayfish for breakfast, and prowl for lynx or a hart wearing the attire of a hunter. The forestry was over-fulfilling the plan, and all looked happy.

The turning point came on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May in 1952 when Father received a command from the communist organizers of the parade that all his male workers must march together in the Soviet style (i.e. in the military march, which was the model for all other behavior) showing the workers' unity with the party. Thus, Father gathered all his lumberjacks from the region well in the morning at the outskirts of the Gelnica district town where the parade took place. His military spirit was re-born at its best, and he commanded them to order by height and file by four. He selected the four leaders and commanded: "Cover spaces! Guys, when marching, the leg must shoot straight up and well off the ground! Then back with a bang! Now, let's make a trial. Company, attention! Forward, march! Left, left, left! Company, halt!" Father was ecstatic how well the lumberjacks were suddenly disciplined and orderly. "Guys, I am sure you will be the best of all! But try to keep the lines straight up and to the right! Company, attention! Chin up! Forward, march!" He was once again feeling like a commander.

In Stalinism, everyone had to participate in May Day, the Feast of Work. Small school kids, pioneers and teenager pre-commie Unionists in their uniforms, as well as workers. Those from villages nearby had to walk in files on their own and start well before sunrise. All had to march and cry the party slogans in unison. Pensioners and unemployed women had to line the streets and wave. Party officials gathered in the rostrum, just in front of the historical church. There was a commission grading the marches. The lumberjacks were the best. And that was a problem.

The average performance is the rule in "egalitarian" dictatorships: the tops are cut out, and the bottoms are pulled forward. One must be neither a laggard nor a go-getter. Moving up or down in the hierarchy is strictly under the party's control. And lumberjacks suddenly crowded out someone privileged in the ranking. At this moment, another detail must be mentioned: There were 128,000 so-called Carpathian Germans in Slovakia in 1938. Gelnica region was one of the centers where Germans worked in mines for metal ores. More than 20,000 of the Germans were conscripted into Wehrmacht, even though the majority of them sided with Czechoslovakia. After the war, the Beneš decrees subjected them to expropriations and expulsions. Some 20,000 remained by 1947 and became unwanted citizens. Many of these who stayed in the Gelnica region moved from closed mines to forestry. So Father's lumberjacks were, to some extent, Germans, though most of them spoke perfect Slovak. This seemingly unimportant fact was bound to add another Kafkaesque chapter to the *La Comédie Humaine* of my family. Its scenario is similar to before.

Commies search for enemies everywhere: The march of lumberjacks was perfect because there were pre-selected Germans who were trained Nazis hostile to communism. Everybody could see how high they elevated their legs – like the SS troops! This was a sabotage and an attempt to turn May Day into a lampoon. But who was their organizer? The laziest among lumberjacks, the leader of the enterprise CP, comrade Vrbiar, scented a chance. There was also a party policy to replace middle-class directors with labor directors. He came with the clarification: the organizer is a bourgeois element abusing the CP membership, who was sacked from the Peoples' Army because of his fascist past, and who is siding with imperialism. Father's freedom and our kids' destiny were again at the margin of an abyss. Stalinism was at



its peak. Fortunately, all his lumberjacks, surprisingly with not so many Germans who served in Wehrmacht among them, stood by him. The kangaroo court had to yield, but Vrbiar got the directorship, and the ministry had to re-assign Father to a harsher penal colony – to Streda nad Bodrogom.

Streda, or better Bodrogszerdahely in Hungarian, is located between the borders of Ukraine and Hungary. 65% of its population of 2,200 spoke Hungarian as their first language, and the next 25% were Roms<sup>14</sup> who spoke Hungarian as their second language (after Romani). The remaining 10% were Czechoslovaks and others who were mainly put away as a punishment. Surprisingly, they formed a fascinating cohesive elite group: local doctor, Roman catholic, protestant and Greek catholic priests, teachers, and a few forestry clerks (as my father was) who did not have much to do since there were few forests. When Stalin died in March 1953, all had to attend mourning ceremonies held in the local school. They grouped and revealed their shared relief that there was one leviathan less.

The most interesting was the most extraordinary couple: the Romani chairman of the State Agricultural Farm and his famulus – his footman. The farm was huge. It included extensive fertile fields, vast experimental rice paddy fields, a network of irrigation channels, orchards, and, last but not least, the vineyards bearing the real Tokay wine. Normally, that would require a set of specialized agronomy engineers, of which none existed. Father always liked to amuse his friends with this story: “Comrade Chairman, how do you manage all those most varied works? You command one of the largest estates in Slovakia.” “Would you think I am an illiterate? I know reading. And I always carry this clever booklet with me. It is ordered by time and explains when, what, and how to do it. Perhaps look here: 28 March: Select and fertilize the potato fields. 31 March: Plow the furrows for the potatoes. 1 April: Prepare the potatoes for seeding. 2 April: seed the potatoes... One gives orders and controls the results – and it is done! But oh, comrades, do not forget to attend our farmers’ ball! And come decently dressed! My wife ordered a ball costume in Kráľovský Chlmec!” (this was the closest little town, a distance of 25 km).

The Romani chairman’s trick of “one gives orders” was that the orders were given to his footman, factotum, and organizational genius, Baron Bornemisza (in Hungarian: Báró von Thyssen-Bornemisza de Kászon et Impérfalva). This aristocrat, by birth and spirit, was the original owner of the nationalized estates. He succeeded in sending his wife to safety in the West, but somehow, he missed the correct move for himself and got trapped under communism. By a mysterious craft, he was allowed to stay on his estates and care of them, though downgraded to Mr. Nobody. How the State Farm leadership was assigned to a just-literate Romani candidate without any expertise in agriculture but with an exceptional sense for human relations and not to some arrogant non-Romani manipulator, as could be expected from the communist secretariats? Streda was simply a God-forsaken place where the communist ideology had no chance to take root. It was a sort of a hell upside down. In June 1953, Father brought new banknotes after the currency reform, where 90% of household

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<sup>14</sup> Romani community was lodged in a Gypsy slum, where I was invited a couple of times by my Romani schoolmates. For half a year they walked barefoot, some of them even in November and March. I was shocked that their floor was a trodden clay and the fireplace had no chimney. Some of the shanties seemed to fall any moment. All Roma kids spoke poor Slovak, although they attended a Slovak school. We communicated in Hungarian, which I had to learn from them.

savings were written off. Our meager family savings of 11,300 crowns were converted to nine strange banknotes (printed in the Soviet Union), amounting to 280 new Kčs. <sup>15</sup>

In a way, life in Streda was a sort of communist Utopia: people of all cultural backgrounds met at a ball: peasants, tractor drivers, intellectuals, aristocrats, laborers, teachers and beggars, communists and anti-communists, Christians and Hungarians, Slovaks and (even) Roms. All were equal, living on subsistence standards and enjoying their common denominator for communication: the best wine in the country pored freely by their Romani guardian angel. The strangest sort of Soviet communism, isn't it? Thus, my mum could share her aristocracy feelings with a downtrodden aristocrat globetrotter, whose invitation to visit his family Madrid gallery of Thyssen-Bornemisza (at that time hosted in Lugano) was waiting for her for another 45 years when she was finally free to visit Spain. For those who dream of living in communist-type societies, the absurd life in Streda is an accurate model. But how do you make it without the punished ones?

### **End of the Father's Semi-hot War Adventures (1955-72)**

In the middle of 1954, the first wave of thawing of the hot Stalinism came. Father was allowed to move from Streda to some smaller town closer to Western Slovakia. Mother opted for Bojnice, 50 km from Moravia. It was the luckiest random choice in the whole country. Bojnice was a village of 2500 inhabitants, who were proud of their castle of the Carcassonne style, preserved city walls as a symbol of independence, botanic garden, the largest zoo in Slovakia, a gallery with modern paintings, music school, thermal spa, tennis courts, large pool for swimmers, divers, and water polo players trained to national excellence by former aristocrat Arpád Tarnóczy, sport airport, a restaurant serving in silver, hospital, the gothic catholic church with its archdeacon Petráš serving as the civil authority, a vast open-air arena for concerts, cinema that performed Fellini's *La Strada* just when we arrived in November 1954, and collective resistance to the collective farming. It was another type of communism upside down. That sharply contrasted with the 3 km distant mining town of Prievidza, immersed in



communism. Or the neighboring village of Opatovce, where the teachers were flogging pupils of 12 years, leaving bruises and drawing blood if their parents refused to join the collective farm. The male locals greeted my mother, the teacher, by "kissing your hands," some even adding "merciful lady." When I arrived in Prague in 1960, I found it a mere wannabe derivative of Bojnice.

While the communism in Streda was akin to life in a kibbutz, the communism in Bojnice had an esprit of capitalist communism, which was introduced in China in the late 1980s by the

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<sup>15</sup> The currency reform of 1953 was a massive "retail" robbery after the preceding 1945 "wholesale" enterprise and 1948 small businesses and housing nationalizations. The fair conversion rate should be 5:1 instead of 50:1 or even 3:1 if the purchasing parity is applied. The purchasing power of salaries dropped by 40%. That was the price for converting the Czechoslovak light industry and agriculture into heavy industry and arms production in preparation for World War III, which the USSR was planning for 1956-58; it was postponed in 1953 after Stalin died. This policy also explains why, in all communist countries, there were always shortages of consumer goods and gluts of coal, cement, and iron, which had no meaningful purpose.

reformist Teng Siao Ping. My father worked in Prievidza town as an ordinary forestry official, often inspecting all corners of the district forests. After returning, he usually had to shake his clothes on the entry in case he caught fleas. No one wanted his place, and we had a miniature apartment in the cellar, which, again, no one wanted - so we had relative peace. When I visited his office, I had to say the communist greeting "Honor to labor!" and address everyone as "comrade." Surprisingly, somehow, the communists did not attack my father, but in May 1959, they attacked me - I was only 12 in the 7th grade. In my personal ("cadre") file, it suddenly appeared a note: "Due to his family background, it is not recommended to study at secondary school. In 1960, he will enroll in the mining school in Handlová". The school apologized to my mother (she was a teacher there!) but said they couldn't change the mysterious edict.

I appreciate the promptness of my father, who soon after gave notice and found the same job at the Regional Forestry Administration in Nitra. After we moved, the edict to become a coal miner miraculously disappeared from my personnel file at the new school. Behind that miracle was my mom since I had joined the newly opened school where she taught, and surprisingly, everyone was trying to help her. Enrollment as a miner was even replaced by a recommendation to Prague's (then elite) high school for foreign trade. I was even admitted there without bribing or any other patronage, apparently due to another erosion in the communist system. So my parents could think about Prague just because of my castigation.

Father was finally approved for employment at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry at Christmas 1960. He was never allowed to climb higher than the ordinary forest economy and cultivation inspector. He loved his job full of traveling, meetings with the lumberjacks, and sleeping on the hay in the lodges of gamekeepers. He always addressed lumberjacks and rangers as "you guys" and liked to compete with them in chopping trees or branches with the axe, unaware that Abraham Lincoln did the same. However, as usual, he was charged with having a bourgeois origin and anti-communist feelings again in 1961 and 1964. It was an easier time for defense, and he survived.

The shadow of Šalgovič disappeared strangely during the political thawing of 1965-68. However, in 1972, his alter ego loomed: František Hagara. He was a brave communist partisan fighter during the war, but afterward, he became a secret police agent from 1945 to 1950 and, from 1964 until 1989, a member of the Central Committee of the CP. In 1966, he proposed selling a ramshackle estate of his relative that no one wanted to buy to the Slovak Ministry of Forestry for quite a high value. The problem was that he was the Slovak finance minister (1964-67). The Federal Ministry of Forestry in Prague sent its inspector, my Father, to assess the purchase. It was a test of his moral integrity since he knew the consequences. Nevertheless, his report was "the estate is overpriced, and it is not suitable for any use by the forestry."

For the rest of 1966-67, Father and our whole family were under screening by the Secret Police (STB) under the code name "Česnek" (= Garlick). The charges were: bourgeois agent, spy, disguised enemy, former fascist officer, and corrupt inspector. There was even an internal political fight between the State Security police and the Federal Ministry, which stood by the father. Even though all accusations of corruption were proven fake, the process had to be stopped by Prague Spring 1968 by an act of the reform minister Smrkovský. Father was even upgraded to the position of Chief Inspector.

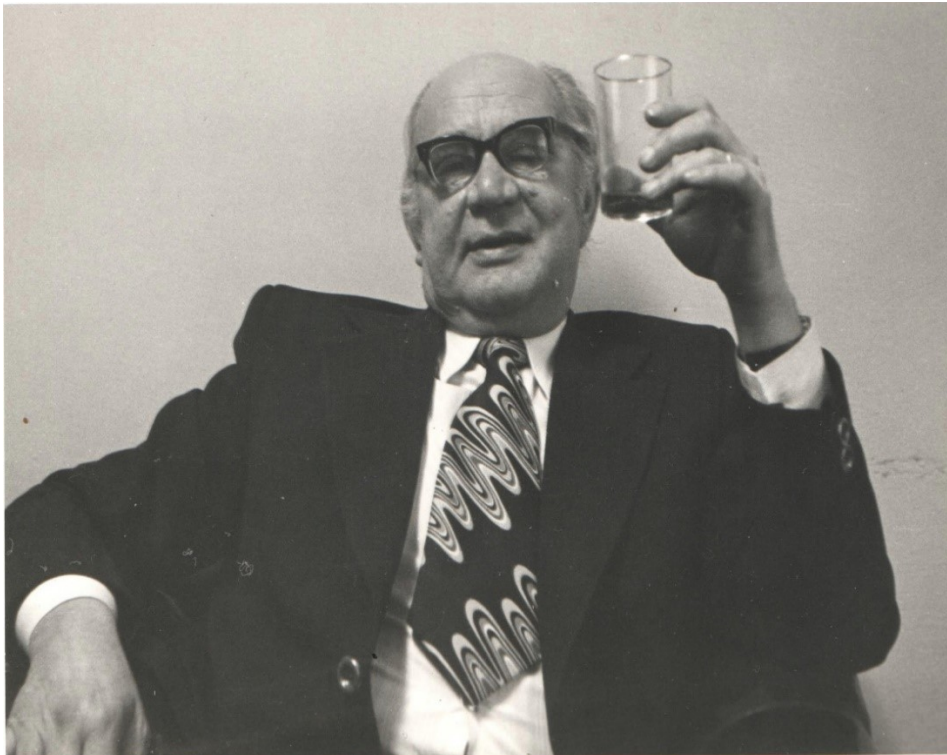
However, after the Soviet invasion in August 1968, both Šalgovič and Hagara rose to high political powers. So, Father had to be deposed from the ministry. In 1972, after fighting for 35 years for a decent society, the history of 1951-54 was bound to start again. Surprisingly, the

Federal Commission for Standards and Norms immediately offered him the position of head of the Department of Inspectors, a job with calm and higher pay. Therefore, 1972 is the date when the theater of WW II could finally be closed for him. At the age of 54, Father could finally, after a long 34 years, become a peaceful soldier on the battlefield of a quiet office bureaucracy. I am extremely sorry that his health undermined in the war did not allow him to experience the Velvet Revolution of November 1989. He would be 71 and even enjoy taking part in the phenomenal demonstrations. He would finally feel the satisfaction won by the courage of students instead of soldiers.

*[Note \* 8]: Communism could have been eluded.*

*Czechoslovakia had a chance to escape communism if the democratic parties triumphed in the June 1946 elections. In this crucial moment of their national history, the Czechs ultimately failed. The voting was the following: Czechia – communists 40% + social democrats (their allies) 16%; national socialists 24 + peoples' party 20%. Slovakia – communists 30%; democrats 62% + 2 small parties 8%. Mandates in the CS Parliament of 300 deputies: pro-democrats 101 CZ + 48 SK = 149 CS, pro-communists 130 CZ + 21 SK = 151 CS. Commies won democratically in all districts of Bohemia (!), and in Moravia, it was a tie. In Slovakia, commies were defeated in all districts. The fruits of the Uprising were its most intensive drivers.*

*Slovaks were much better informed about what scourge communism implied. Nevertheless, they were dragged into communism against their national will. When all 300 000 Soviet occupational troops had to leave Czechoslovakia in December 1945, the chance to avoid the fall to communism highly increased. The army in Slovakia, much less infiltrated by communists than the Czech army, could take over the defense of democracy. However, there were only a few like that in Czechia. The die was cast in the elections of 1946 with the outcome that Stalin predicted but in which Beneš failed. A new calamity could be orchestrated in February 1948, where the commies were the conductors. [End Note \*8].*



*1972: A toast to the end of the war*

In the early 70s, when Slovak historian Ján Mlynárik, sentenced to manual work after 1968, used to come along and have prolonged discussions about the whole world with Father, I learned a bit more about his past and opinions. For example, Father agreed with Mlynárik that expelling three million Germans in 1945-46, without any thoughts about mercy, undermined the Czech moral integrity even more than the shameful Munich unconditional surrender due to the French “hands off” in 1938. Czechs, all filled with “just” vengeance and the brutal treatment of the German minority citizens of 3 million, then had to hide their opportunistic brutality and greed by opting during 1946-48 for the only democratic transition to communism that happened in the world. Father laughed: “Czech communists did not stand idle in Protektorat – they were inspired much more by Hitler than by Stalin. Czech People’s Army emulated the Wehrmacht, their State Security Gestapo, the police Ordnungspolizei, the C-Party NSDAP, ideologists Goebbels, the youngsters Hitlerjugend and the economic emissaries the war command economy of Albert Speer”.

Throughout the 1960s, Father loved visiting the Dalmatian coast. One of his attractions was the talks with the West Germans, who somehow strangely and too often were Wehrmacht veteran officers. When I asked him how he knew, he answered, “Well, it is a guess. First you hear the German and a guy of appropriate age. Then it is the upright military gait or the wounds that usually give the prompt”. The talks with them were very cordial. However, he hated the SS soldiers whom he also recognized by the same method. “How can you talk to such Germans? Don’t you think they wanted to kill you”? “Yes, dear me, but it is the same as what I was supposed to do to them... Well, thank God, now we are both alive, aren’t we?” Could even the arch-enemies belong to two categories: those who can and cannot be forgiven? This kind of weird logic made me speechless.

## **FINAL SEQUITUR**

It is a shock to realize the full dignity and sorrows of one’s father only long after he passed away, instead of bearing all these with him when he was alive. Why did he save us from the Kafkaesque secrets of his exceptionally authentic and veracious life? Was he a hero and hiding his exceptional deeds from others? But that would imply an exceptionality that may come to people exogenously like a gift. That would not be heroic because very few ordinary people could become heroes. Or does heroism require a certain one’s internally contrived, particularly exceptional deed denying one’s natural selfishness? Then, the heroic poise would be likened to a normal human being who was singled out by drawing lots in a game of destiny to take the role of Hercules and perform his twelve arduous labors on behalf of humanity. The crucial thing here is that the morally tested unlucky one takes fate for his duty and does not shrink. They then deny the rationality of an immediate selfish escape and accept the rationality of the social mutuality that one must carry as a personal mission to the end. This is the Hamletian heroism. Then, Father’s resolve to act as a man of moral responsibility to the future of society, by risking his own life – that indeed I consider an act of his exceptional gallantry.

One could even quantify such heroism by estimating the probability of survival from September 1938 through May 1945. Let us set that number as 50% for an ordinary soldier, i.e. only one of two would survive in viable health. However, this number for commanders 2 meters tall and exposed at the frontline should be much lower. In cases of war with Hitler in September 1938 or in uprising battles in August-November 1944, the probability could

decrease for them to 25% or even less. The reality was that since August 29, 1944, Father suffered three wounds and nearly did not survive the last one and the hunger in the concentration camp. Would the rational response not be to dodge all risks and pull back in a Švejk style considered a genetic take for Czechs? But Švejk is a literary parody, and, as such, it does not represent the Czech nation in its ups and downs.

I think Švejk is an entirely wrong view of Czechoslovaks because, during the mobilizations in March-September 1938, some 90% of Czechs and Slovaks were determined to take the risks of the military assignment to defend their homes at all costs. Therefore, all of those were heroes who could overcome their selfishness for a greater human purpose in others, present or future. The spontaneous resolve in September 1938 should be raised to the glory of Czechoslovak history.

Once, not long before he passed away prematurely in 1984, partially also due to his wounds from the war, I asked him to tell me more about his adventures from the war. He concentrated for very long, wavering. Then he said slowly his final statement through the pursed lips: “*Válka ... to je to nejšpinavější lidské svinstvo!*” Or, in a simple translation: “War... War is the filthiest human crap!”. Clearly, he could not continue his story and would keep all that mystery with him forever. Maybe we all should keep this paramount wisdom in our minds.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Vladimír J. Benáček, Jr., was born in 1946 in Trnava, Slovakia, in a 75% Czech and 25% Slovak family speaking Slovak. Since 1960, he lived in Prague. His life changed after his emigration and study at the University of Cambridge (Clare College, 1968-69). After his return from emigration, he could not find decent employment until 1973, when, by a paradox (or mistake?) in the selection, he could work as a programmer at the Computing Center of the top economic ministry – at the State Planning Commission. In 1977, he joined the Department of Mathematical Methods research team at the Academy of Sciences, Institute of Economics, where he worked on the Klein-Stone type of 24 large quantitative models of the Czechoslovak economy. From 12/1989 until 12/1995, he worked as a researcher at CERGE-EI – an economic research and PhD program, which he co-founded at Charles University. From 9/1990 until 1/1995, he was an external teacher of international economics at Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences. He held a full position there as a researcher and instructor from 1/1996 until 9/2022. Benáček’s publications, are available at <https://benacek.net/publications.html>.*