

The Heroes of "Notes from the Gallows"

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There are books we rightly call sagas. Julius Fuchik's "Notes From the Gallows" is one. Written in a Gestapo prison, it has been translated into almost 100 languages, and continues to inspire freedom fighters to this day.

"Notes From the Gallows" is about dozens of people, named and nameless. Some may think they are literary characters, though there is not one single fictitious being among them. They are people with their own names, their own past and future. The reader parts with them at the same time as their life ending in Fuchik's book. Fighting to the last, he asked only one thing of us: "Never forget the people who take part in this struggle... Collect all the evidence you can get on those people who fell both for you and for themselves".

How did the life of Fuchik's book in which he moves us with his sincere descriptions of his comrades-in-arms move on with the years to come and affect us who are also grappling with fascism in our country in such clear terms which even children can understand? From the next page you can move on to see how it took two writers to delve into the past to bring out reality to our very eyes. This is the result of two years painstaking work of interviews, visiting archives and museums, meetings with relatives and friends of the heroes of "Notes From the Gallows".

TRAITOR NO. 26

An order to stand by was issued at the Prague Gestapo in the morning of April 24, 1942: the "big hunt", detective Böhm boasted, was nearing its end. At a meeting arranged with agent-provocateur Dvorak outside the Na Micankach cinema at 10 pm., the SS-men expected to arrest a man they knew under the name of Honza. They claimed he was one of the leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, then operating underground. On that evening it was also planned to arrest the members of the underground group at the Junkers aircraft factory betrayed by the same Dvorak. He re-established contact with Honza at the factory.

It had all started a few months earlier, when some informer found a communist leaflet in the cloakroom of the aircraft

plant's assembly shop and gave it to the Germans. The leaflet called on the assemblyman to "go slow" and hamper fulfilment of the Wehrmacht's orders.

The signal from Junkers was not the first one, and the Gestapo anti-communist section (II-AI) decided that there was an underground communist group operating at the factory. The SS-men sent Informer No. 26 Vaclav Dvorak, a mechanic by profession and traitor by vocation, to the assembly shop.

The newcomer knew his work, a thing that always commands respect. He boldly criticised the new order and incited workers to sabotage.

"Are you in a hurry to get home today?" fitter Barton once asked him.

What took place after that was revealed by SS-man Böhm when he was interrogated after the liberation in 1945. (The examination records are kept in the archives of the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior, Case No. 305-445-4, Sheets 1-21).

"With the consent of the II-AI Section Dvorak joined the underground communist group and began to pay membership fees to Barton", Böhm said. "He gave me the leaflets he received from Barton, and they were photographed and returned.

"In February 1942, Barton introduced Dvorak to other members of his factory group. After work, Barton, Dvorak and others met outside the plant or in nearby streets. I kept an eye on these meetings.

"At the end of February or the beginning of March 1942 Barton told Dvorak to drop in at Jelinek's in Pankrac on a certain day and establish contact with the local organisation. Barton said he had no time for that, and since Dvorak lived in Pankrac, he must take on the job of maintaining contact with this organisation. I would like to stress that Dvorak was completely trusted by Barton."

THE JELINEKS AND THE VESUSILS

Before the war people in Prague thought Pankrac was well-nigh at the edge of the world. Even trams, it seemed were out of breath by the time they got there, winding



Julius Fuchik

their way there, up and down the gradients. The outskirts, separated from the centre of the city by a deep ravine, were inhabited by petty traders, artisans and workers. People who came from the same places or were relatives found lodging near each other. And so it happened that Josef Jelinek and Josef Vysusil, whose wives were both named Marie and were distant relatives, lived on the same floor of a new building.

You probably remember these names from "Notes from the Gallows". Here is what Fuchik wrote about these people:

The Jelineks. "Josef and Marie. He is a tram conductor and she a domestic servant. You should see their apartment. Smooth, simple, modern furniture, a bookcase, a statuette, pictures on the walls - and clean, clean beyond belief. You would say that Marie's whole being is enclosed in that home and that she knows nothing of the rest of the world. But she has worked long in the Communist Party, and dreamed her own dreams of social justice. They both worked devotedly quietly - and never drew back when the invasion made heavy demands on them".

The Vysusils. "Lived in the same building, right next to the Jelineks. They were also named Josef and Marie. A minor official's family, a little older than their neighbours.... They were both not from proletarian families, and their family was not proletarian either. Their way to the Party was somewhat more tortuous, more difficult, but they found it. As in many such cases, it lay through the Soviet Union. They had known even before the occupation what they were striving for, and had given shelter to German anti-fascists in their flat.

"Members of the Central Committee met in their home in the most difficult times, after Germany's attack on the Soviet Union and in the period of the first state of siege in 1941".

Seeing a stranger at the door, Josef Jelinek automatically barred his way into the flat.

"I am from Barton", Dvorak said. Jelinek's start did not escape his attention and he decided there was probably someone else in the flat. He mentioned it in his report that same evening, and the house in Pankrac was placed under surveil-

lance. No. 26 added that they talked in the hall - he was not allowed any farther - and that Jelinek was composed and suggested that they meet at 9 pm., the following Monday at the Tram No. 1 stop at the beginning of Ruska Avenue. He warned him to come with Barton.

Böhm, as the record of his examination shows, said he watched this meeting with two other detectives.

"On the appointed day Dvorak and Barton waited at the appointed place. Dvorak was at the Tram No. 1 stop and Barton on the opposite side of the street. They waited for twenty minutes and then left. I spoke to Dvorak at 11 pm and he said Barton was very angry.

"After that Barton wrote a letter to Jelinek and asked Dvorak to take it to him. In this letter Barton reproved Jelinek for failing to come to the rendezvous. He affirmed that Dvorak, Vasek, was trustworthy and insisted that he arrange a meeting between him and Honza from Pankrats.

"After I had photographed the letter, Dvorak took it to Jelinek. The latter said that this time the rendezvous would take place... Twenty minutes after the appointed time a man I did not know approached Dvorak. He was lean and tall. What struck me was that he kept his right hand in his trousers pocket. I was sure that this man did not trust Dvorak and consequently was keeping his hand on a pistol.

"Note: It was later established that the unknown Honza mentioned here was Jan Vyskosil, a regional functionary of the outlawed Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. At that time he was in charge of the CPC printing plant.

"I met Dvorak at midnight on the same day. He told me that Vyskosil had given him the latest issue of Rude Pravo and instructed him how to go about his conspiratorial job. Vyskosil warned that he would settle scores with all traitors, and showed his pistol. He further said that this was an informative meeting and that he would keep Dvorak in view and give him a serious job to do".

The next meeting with Vyskosil was to take place outside the Na Micankach cinema at 10 pm on April 24.

At 9 pm sharp on April 24 three Opels left the Gestapo building in Bredovska Street (now Politickych Veznu, or Political Prisoners Street) one after another, passed the New German Theatre (now the Smetana Theatre) with its entrance brightly lit up, and turned into Schwerinova Avenue which the people of Prague, out of their alleged devotion to the past, preferred to call by its old name - Vinohrady.

SECRET RENDEZVOUS

There was another meeting in Prague appointed for 10 pm of that same day. "Notes From the Gallows" starts with it. Julius Fuchik - Professor Horak by the identity card - was to meet with his contact Mirek in tram conductor Jelinek's home in Pankrats. Crossing a grass-covered vacant lot, he came to the familiar dark four-storey house and looked about, as was his custom, before entering the yard. It seemed to be quiet and peaceful.

This house on the outskirts was considered one of the most reliable rendezvous. It has not been found out for more than three years. There was a whole network of secret rendezvous and printing shops in Fuchik's memory. They seemed to have dissolved in a big city which outwardly had not changed. As usual, trams slowly ran from one end of Prague to another. As usual, people gathered in Staromestske Square to hear the City Hall chimes and see the little figures of apostles appear in the little windows of the clock tower. And just as usual, lovers of Prazdroj, Prazan and Budvar filled their favourite beer halls.

They were waiting for him in that house. He knocked at the door, as agreed, and it was immediately opened.

Those who knew Josef Jelinek and his wife Marie recall that they too had the same sense of comradeship, justice and concern for others. This is recalled by old tram workers, Jelinek's colleagues, and by peasants in the picturesque villages in Southern Czechia, the native parts of Josef and Marie. Together with local historian Miroslav Tuma, one of the many people who so generously helped us, we went from village to village and from house to house, restoring time-effaced portraits.

There was Vojnice, Marie's native village, with eight farmsteads and amid well-tended fields and a forest in the background. Beyond the hills was Miladotice, Josef's native village. In their minds they probably time and again returned to these villages with their dreamy ponds and pine groves, returned to that merry village wedding which had so happily brought them - the groom's best man and the bride's maid - together. And that is about all Marie cared to remember about Vojnice. Her father slaved from sunrise to sunset in a rich peasant's fields. Her mother died when she was twelve and left her, a frail girl, to look after four men - her father and three brothers. Later her father married again a woman as unfortunate as he himself, a widow with three boys.

When Marie Jelinkova was asked what brought her to the Communist Party, she apparently could not find the suitable words to reply with and instead showed her gnarled hands with fingernails eroded by caustic soda. Let this question be answered by the eyes of the hungry people whom the rich robbed of their wheat which they dumped into the Vltava. Let the answer be rustled by the red flags which she sewed at night for May Day demonstrations. Let the answer be hooted from the screen by the immortal "Chelyuskin" which had broken through the police cordon to reach Prague.

The film "Chelyuskin" was shown one morning in a tiny hall. It was followed by a talk by Josef Vysusil, chairman of a district group of the Union of Friendship with the USSR. He spoke of the land of Budyonny's legendary Cavalry Army, shock workers and courageous Polar explorers, and said the Union was preparing a Golden Book of Friendship as a gift to the Soviet people for the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution. Each could write a few words of greetings in it, expressing his or her feelings, or simply sign it.

And then with the pages of this future book Josef Vysusil and Marie Vysusil, Josef Jelinek and Marie Jelinkova, teachers Josefa Haxova and Max Kozak, and their comrades went from house to house collecting signatures. By far not all the doors were opened to them. Sometimes people threatened to let loose their dogs on them and slammed the doors without hearing them out. And yet, from day to day, more pages were filled. By choosing friendship with the Soviet Union, people chose their place on the barricades of the class-divided world.

"Those were the years of resolute and uncompromising differentiation of views, of people unmasking themselves as they do at midnight at a big carnival", recalled A. Tichy, a colleague of Vysusil's. "The nazi tanks were already on the frontier. There was a danger of civil war breaking out at any moment between those ready to capitulate and those prepared to defend the republic. The latter included Josef Vysusil. We worked in the same railway department. Members of the Communist Party were debarred from the civil service and officially Josef did not admit his membership of the Party. But he never concealed his views. He was convinced that he would have to fight fascism and was prepared for it. And he believed that together with the Soviet Union we were invincible".

Many years after those events, at the USSR Central Museum of the Revolution, we were shown a historical relic - the greetings the Union of Friendship with the USSR sent to Presi-

dent Mikhail Kalinin together with the Golden Book of Friendship.

"The Union of Friendship with the USSR in Czechoslovakia", we read, "wishes the Soviet people further economic and cultural progress on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the USSR.

"promises to remain a true friend of the Soviet people and to fight for peace with them;

"dedicates to M.I. Kalinin, Chairman of the Central Executive Committee, and the people of the Soviet Union the Golden Book with best wishes from millions of citizens of the Republic of Czechoslovakia".

Among those millions were Josef Jelinek, Marie Jelinkova, Josef Vysusil and Marie Vysusilova.

THE ARREST

On their way, the SS-men debated on where to leave their cars. Some proposed going all the way to the place of their rendezvous. Others objected, saying the cars would frighten Honza off and, consequently, it would be better to leave them some distance away. That is exactly what they did. And once again, as it sometimes happens, fate intervened.

The cars pulled up exactly at the house where Jan Vyskosil had been hiding in the attic for already half a year. The SS-men were right thinking that he was one of the underground leaders. Before the arrest of the Party's first illegal Central Committee he was an executive of the Prague underground organisation and now was a member of the second Central Committee headed by Jan Zika. Hearing the purr or the motors, Vyskosil looked out of the window, saw the Opels parking outside the house, and cocked his gun. But the men who had got out on to the pavement were obviously not interested in the house. They - Vyskosil counted eight of them - held a brief powwow and divided into two groups. One immediately disappeared in a dark lane and the other went down the avenue. "They are surrounding the cinema", he decided.

"It was so dark one could not see much around", Böhm later testified.

"The meeting place could be observed only from the entrance to the cinema. Dvorak appeared at five minutes to ten and began walking up and down before the entrance which was lit up because the picture was still on. The show ended at 10,15 and before that he was not approached either by Vyskosil or anyone else. We left at 10,40 and gathered in the Petschek Palace. As agreed, Dvorak came there at 11 pm.

"When I asked him why the meeting had not taken place,

Dvorak said we had probably blundered somewhere and he was no longer trusted. In my opinion, Dvorak got cold feet and gave us the wrong place of the meeting or the wrong time. Defending himself, Dvorak said the best thing was immediately to arrest Jelinek. After a heated argument it was decided to arrest the man.

"I would like to add something here.

"When Dvorak first gave me Jelinek's address in Prague - Pankrac, we went to take a look at this house and the place around it. It was a new residential district. The house had two entrances and there were about sixty families living in it. On one side there was a vacant lot... When we go to arrest Jelinek, we decided, we shall have to guard the house from outside too".

Let us return to "Notes From the Gallows". Here is how Fuchik described the subsequent events:

"Open up! The police!"

"Quick through the window. Escape. I have a pistol; I'll hold them back. Too late. Gestapo men under the windows, aiming pistols into the room. Detectives have forced the door, rush into the room through the kitchen".

Fuchik described the arrest in detail in his book. The record of Böhm's examination, and he was interrogated before the publication of the book, re-creates the scene of the arrest, confirming once again the documentary precision of Fuchik's description.

What happened then? According to Böhm, no sooner were Fuchik and his contact Mirek brought to the Gestapo headquarters than Mirek said he was ready to give evidence and revealed his real name.

"Moreover", Böhm went on, he suddenly said that the bearded man was Fuchik, member of the Central Committee of the illegal Communist Party and that he, K., did only what Fuchik had told him to do.

"When Fuchik heard K. betraying him, he looked at his former contact sadly and at the same time with contempt, and said: "Well, now that you know that I am Fuchik, go ahead!" He looked dignified. From that moment on he did not utter a word.

"In the meantime the Jelineks and a relative of theirs and then the Fried couple were brought in. Another group of ours was making a search in the Jelineks' flat, where they found a great deal of communist literature. In their cellar they discovered crates with leaflets for May Day 1942, as well as many forms, filled and unfilled, forged documents, and a counterfeit

seal of the Prague Police Headquarters. The Jelineks also refused to speak and admit that all these things belonged to them".

The Jelineks' relative Böhme mentioned was Marie's 17-year-old brother Vojtisek Pavlic. We do not know whether he was helping the underground organisation or had simply dropped in to see his sister that evening. But he too was taken away by the SS-men and disappeared without trace.

"I began to describe the Jelinek couple, simple people in whom you would not have seen heroes in normal times", Fuchik wrote. And further: "I cannot say what happened to them during the time that I lay in my cell unfit for a hearing, but I do know that they told nothing in all that time... One day they took the Jelineks away, each to a different place. I searched in vain for any trace of their fate, for people have a way of disappearing utterly after Gestapo handling - scattered in a thousand cemeteries. Oh, what a crop will rise one day from that frightful seeding.

"Her last message was:

"Chief, tell them outside not to grieve for me, and for no one to be intimidated by my fate. I did my duty as a worker, and shall die the same way, too'."

After the raid on the Jelineks' flat, the Vysusils continued to work. It was in the flat of Anna Brozikova, Marie's sister who also perished later, that Jan Cerny, political commissar of an international brigade in Spain and member of the second underground Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, was hiding. Josef Vysusil was arrested a month later. "I was horrified the first time I saw him here", Fuchik wrote. "How much would be lost if he talked! But he didn't. He was brought here because of a few political leaflets". He was brutally tortured, but he kept quiet. When he again came into No. 400, Fuchik said, he declared "in the forthright Nusle manner: 'When I refuse, they get nothing for all their work on my backside'."

The SS-men never learned that Zika and Cerny hid in the Vysusils' flat, that, after the arrest of the first underground Central Committee, Fuchik and Cerny met there to set up the second CC, and that the illegal newspaper Rude Pravo was prepared for publication there.

Time and again we went to Pankrats, to the house from which Julius Fuchik, Josef Jelinek, Marie Jalinkova and Vojtisek were taken away forever on the night of April 24. And later Josef Vysusil and Marie Vysusilova. We did not feel

like entering the house: there were other people living there and another life in which there was little place for the past.

But whose past is it? Isn't it ours? Could the present be possible without the past? Our last hope to find a photograph of Jelinek brought us to the archives of the Prague City Transport Administration. but without success.

Josef Vysusil became a railway-man at the beginning of the first world w a r , at the age of sixteen, and worked as one until his arrest - almost three decades. Perhaps there was something about him?

From the railway archives we received Vysusil's service record and a postwar letter from his parents asking to be paid a pension for their son because "our widowed daughter makes 840 crowns a month and cannot support us".

Judging by the postmark, the letter was mailed in Turice, a place we did not know, on March 4, 1946. Although we did not entertain much hope, we wrote there. Who knows but that some relatives might still be alive. A few days later there was an unexpected phone call to Milada Fronta. The person on the other side of the line introduced himself as Pavel Jarosil, an employee of a research institute.

"My grandmother, Vysusil's sister, has received your letter and asked me to find out when you can come".

Turice is less than an hour's drive from downtown Prague. It is almost a suburb, with wheat fields and high-voltage transmission lines all around. The first house from the road was the one we needed.

Leaning on a stick, Grandmother Marie met us at the gate and invited us in. Despite her advanced years, she has a good memory and remembers the occupation and the parcel she received from the nazis from Auschwitz - it contained a shoe, all that was left after her brother's death.

"We cannot find a photograph of him or of Marie anywhere", we said.

Grandmother Marie showed us all she had saved. The family archive was not rich. Nevertheless, it was priceless: a large group photograph with Josef and his Marie on the right.

"I knew the couple well - how much they loved each other and how lonesome they were whenever they were separated for a day or two", Fuchik wrote. "Months passed now... How many plots she must have invented to bring her husband back.... But she found only one way to get along - to keep the underground job, to do the work of two".

After the w a r someone made a copy of Vysusil's photo-

graph, enlarged it and stuck it on a cardboard adorned with a red star and crossed flags. Who did it and when, where this home-made poster hung is something Grandmother Marie does not know. But t h a n k her we must just the same for preserving it.

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I was not to regret his death 'because he died for us!' We shall soon face a martyr complex of Africans going to their heroes, this would be a serious thing in any society. For not a sten-gun can hold back in such a condition".

Dr. Ambrose Reeves denounced Bantu Education, "whatever the cost, we must make it clear a n d plain to the Government, the members of the church and all the African people that we disagree so profoundly with the policy.... that we cannot be a party to it in any shape or form".

When he awarded "Our Bishop" the Isithwalandwe, o u r Secretary-General, Comrade Alfred Nzo said:

"Dr. Ambrose Reeves held his head very high refusing to be daunted by the savage barbarity of the reign of terror in our country.

"Bishop Ambrose Reeves is well-known not only to our people, among whom he had lived and worked until the regime of terror could not tolerate his presence in South Africa, but we are certain that the progressive and democratic forces in the United Kingdom amongst whom he had continued to work for our cause ever since he left South Africa, hold him in very high esteem indeed. We highly value his contribution as one of the architects of the powerful solidarity movement that has been built in this country in support of the heroic struggle of our people. He deserves the high award of ISITHWALANDWE which is a symbol of the undaunted heroes of our struggle and people".

Hamba kahle

Sithwalandwe!