

DIARIES FROM A CRYPT

The final days of seven parachutists
from the time of the Heydrich Terror

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Preface

It all began with a simple sentence about how, on 28 May 1942, Jaroslav Švarc entered the crypt. That sentence appeared on 28 May 2016 in the contemporary form of a diary – on Facebook. It was little more than an allusion to the events of times long past, but the reactions of my friends and their unexpected interest – along with my need to start sorting the snippets of information I had gathered over several months of intensive research into Heydrich’s assassins into some kind of order – culminated in a daily diary entry. Each day, my readers had the chance to take a peek into the crypt and elsewhere, and witness events that had taken place two generations earlier. I did the same thing again the following year, but with new information and knowledge. Literally thousands of people were following the lives of the seven parachutists and the resistance, and each day they awaited the next episode of the story – all the way up to its tragic end.

The book you are holding is not a historical account. It is a mosaic of fragments from historical publications,

articles, documents and the opinions and conjectures of experts and professional soldiers. Fragments of first-hand witness accounts, and witness accounts of witness accounts. It is a book inspired by the *genius loci* that haunts you as you stand in the dark crypt, watching a candle flicker in the draught. The very one that haunted me as I sat in the choir loft at half past four in the morning on 18 June, in a silence which – knowing what took place there 75 years before – was deafening. It was inspired by the feeling of holding an original letter from Jan Kubiš to Marie Žilanová and realising what a talent he had for writing to the fairer sex – and that he probably would have captured my heart too (even if his handwriting left much to be desired). It contains something of the moments when, reading the diaries of some of the parachutists, I began to feel I had met them somewhere, got to know them and made friends with them. And the moments when, reading personal letters from their sweethearts, a sense of guilt crept upon me, as I would never dream of snooping around in a friend's private correspondence like that. I wanted to share with my readers all the things that inspired me from historical publications, having experienced for myself how cold the crypt is, the texture of the last arch on the gallery next to the choir, how heavy a Colt 1903 feels in the hand, and how beautiful the choir window looks when, sometime after five o'clock in the afternoon, sunlight streams through it and down into the nave.

I can't tell you everything here. I won't share the full backgrounds of all the characters who grace the pages of the diaries. It is simply an imagined account, based

on what a diary written by one of the parachutists in this crypt might have looked like. It is subjective in many places, infused with the magic of the time and place.

No, I was not standing at the bend of the road where Heydrich was shot on 27 May 1942, and I was neither on the choir nor in the crypt of the St Cyril and St Methodius Church on 18 June 1942. All that is left of those events are snippets, which I have attempted – like many before me – to weave into some kind of story and pass on as best as I can, with a great deal of respect, gratitude and love. I am grateful to those seven men, and to all the others who fought in the resistance, for my future. I say that without exaggeration or pathos; it is simply a fact. Just as it is impossible not to love those men – not for what they did, but for who they were.



Crypt of the St Cyril and St Methodius Church

on Resslerova Street / 18 June 1942,

*sometime after 4 o'clock
in the morning*

‘Guys! Guys, wake up,’ hissed Jaroš, shaking them all.

‘What is it?’ groaned Hrubý, but Jaroš signalled him to be quiet. Jožka was the first to understand what was going on; he could hear it too. Valčík slid out of his sleeping bag and quietly slipped into his dressing gown. Jožka grabbed the ladder and placed it gingerly against the wall underneath the air vent.

‘It’s not good news, boys,’ he murmured, peering outside. ‘There’s a whole SS army out there, and they’re surrounding the church.’

‘Weren’t we supposed to be getting out of here today?’ said Hrubý, checking his gun.

‘Well yes, exactly,’ coughed Valčík quietly. ‘Those men outside more or less have the same plan as us.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked Jaroš with a sigh.

‘For us to get out of here in coffins,’ guessed Jožka. ‘What else?’

‘Do you think the men upstairs are aware?’ said Hrubý, glancing at Valčík.

‘Jenda’s watch would have been around about now. I’m sure Opálka is already getting them into position and preparing for the attack,’ said Valčík, looking up at the trap door in the ceiling.

‘He’ll have to secure the staircase up to the choir. The others will fire from the gallery. One will be facing the entrance, the other covering the passageway to the choir,’ guessed Jožka.

‘Why haven’t they come to warn us?’ wondered Jaroš.

‘There isn’t time. They know. We know,’ shrugged Hrubý.

‘What I’d like to know is how they’ve found us now, after three weeks of nothing,’ said Jožka, a shiver running down his spine.

‘Well, mother Moravcová was supposed to be bringing Adolf a cake for his name day yesterday,’ pondered Valčík.

‘Yeah. But Father Vladimír said that he phoned and that she was ill, apparently. She’d gone to hospital with her husband. It was a neighbour who answered the phone.’

‘Maybe. Or maybe not,’ said Jožka through gritted teeth.

‘Mother Moravcová? No way. She’d rather poison herself than say a word. We gave them capsules,’ said Valčík with a frown. They were silent for a moment.

‘Well, it doesn’t make any difference,’ shrugged Jožka. ‘We’ll probably never find out.’

‘Should we go up and give them a hand? If we know what the situation is, what are we waiting for?’ asked Hrubý. He sounded decisive.

‘No,’ said Gabčík, shaking his head and looking at Valčík. He would have gone, willingly. ‘The others will have laid the carpet over the trap door, as always. The crypt won’t be immediately visible. The enemy can’t know that we’re here – our men will try to give us a chance. It’s possible that the Jerries don’t know how many of us are here.’

Valčík nodded, but he was uncomfortable. So was Jožka. Their friends were going to die. Killed in battle, heavily outnumbered. Damn it! Just a few more hours and they would have been out of Prague.

‘We’re just sitting ducks,’ said Jaroš, breaking the silence. ‘They’ll be killed first, and then us.’

‘We’re giving the men a chance. That’s all there is to it,’ said Jožka firmly. He knew how Opálka’s mind worked, and Jenda’s too. Jožka would have done the same as them, if he had been on the choir. If only he hadn’t lost that last game! He would have been up there, fighting alongside Jenda. To the very end. Side-by-side. He knew that staying put was going to be the most difficult decision of his life. But even if they went straight up to fight, without delay, the trap door was heavy and it would have been a struggle to get out. They would have been shot dead before they’d had time to poke their heads out. It was quiet. And then they heard two shots.

‘Those came from our boys,’ guessed Jaroš.

‘But *those* didn’t,’ shuddered Valčík – through the ventilation shaft, they could hear the juddering fire of machine guns. Two, maybe even three. They were hefty, and they were shooting directly at the large windows of the church. There was a sickening sound of shatter-

ing glass. It lasted only for a moment, and yet seemed to last for a terrifying eternity. Jaroš cautiously clambered up the ladder.

‘Someone’s come running out – they’re waving their arms and shouting something,’ he said, describing the scene outside.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if they took down a few of their own men too. God, I hope so,’ whispered Gabčík.

It was an unpleasantly monotonous exchange of opinions. The SS shock troop was trying to get up onto the choir. The three paratroopers were holding them back. Successfully. There were shots from automatic pistols, followed by the sound of rifles and submachine-guns. Then they heard the first explosion.

‘Was that one of ours, do you think?’ whispered Jaroš. Jožka shrugged.

‘They have three bombs up there. And Jenda’s learnt how to use them now.’

Everyone grinned – they couldn’t do much more than that. As time passed, the explosions got more and more frequent. Jožka recognised two of them with certainty. But the explosions that rang out an hour or so later were not made by their bombs – only German hand grenades sounded like that. Inside. Jožka shuddered – those weapons turned enclosed spaces into a shrapnel-filled inferno.

It was shortly after six. The men sat or stood near the way in. Another wave had just ended; there was a moment of respite from the gunfire. Then they heard another explosion and a couple of gunshots. Silence again, and then another gunshot. That could mean anything. Then the rifles again, followed by shots from the pis-

tols. Jožka prayed that one of those pistols was Jenda's 7.65mm Colt 1903. The gunfire continued, and then there was an explosion. Then another, and another. And then nothing happened for a while. Just one pistol shot. Was that a Browning pistol? Josífek had one of those. Silence. And then there was another explosion, and gunfire from both sides. An explosion. And another. A few pistol shots. Rifles. Pistols. Two shots. Another two. Then an explosion. And then there was nothing but silence. The silence stretched on. And on. Too long. There was silence in the crypt, too.

No, Jenda can't be dead, thought Jožka. He'd know... wouldn't he? In France, too, he had known the rotten bastard was alive, even though he and his platoon had got lost. He would know – Christ! Jožka was furious. Uncertainty had seeped into his breastbone. He wasn't sure any more. He wanted to know, but didn't want to believe it. Why was it so damn quiet up there? Why was nobody shooting anymore? Valčík crossed himself. Jaroš and Hrubý did the same. There was a lot of movement outside, but Jožka couldn't see everything. He did, however, see men carrying a carpet over to the corner by the primary school, to the left of his little window. And then they carried over a body. Jožka recognised the jumper: it was their leader. And then another body on a stretcher. Jožka couldn't see the face, but judging by the clothing, it wasn't one of them. Where the hell was Jenda? Had they caught him alive? He hoped that was the case – that Jenda wasn't dead. Although...

A little while later, the enemy began feverishly searching the church again. Did they know the men on the

choir had not been alone? Another twenty minutes passed. The four men in the crypt barely moved a muscle. Their very breathing was almost imperceptible. Suddenly, Jožka felt his heart contract, and he felt as though someone was crushing everything behind his ribcage. The feeling passed as quickly as it had come. He had never felt so sick – sick to his very soul. Was it a premonition? Some more time passed. Intuitively, he climbed up the ladder. From the little window he saw an ambulance arrive and park a few feet away from the primary school. Two bodies were lifted out and the ambulance drove off. And then Jožka knew what had caused the searing pain in his heart. He knew that vest. He knew it very well. But the body wearing it, which was being dumped unceremoniously on the carpet beside Opálka, was lifeless. It was just a bloodstained ragdoll in Jenda's clothes. And then a mass of people and cars blocked his view. Jožka climbed down. Hrubý went to peer outside fleetingly, but quickly returned, pale.

Jožka rubbed his eyes, as though he had got dust in them. There was no dust, however – he was trying to hold back tears, but in vain. They streamed down his cheeks anyway. Hrubý sat down. It was quiet in the crypt. The church was filled with chaos.

Would they come for them, too? Or would they simply die of starvation? Or was there still a shred of hope?

Jožka leaned against the wall. It was cold against his forehead. It hurt, but there was nothing he could do. He felt an odd emptiness inside. And yet also a burning rage, because he was powerless. All he could do was sit and wait. He didn't sob, but the tears continued to fall silently.

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