

PETER E. VLČKO

Every one of us is here today because in some way or other we have known Peter Vlčko. We have known him either as a husband, father, grandfather, personal friend, neighbor, associate, or as an honorary figure. Each one of us has his own perspective, our own personal memories of him and his life. But we have all been touched by this remarkable life.

Some have said Peter Vlčko was a man whose ways and ideas were anachronistic to our modern times and rapidly evolving society. Some have felt that he was out of touch with popular culture and its approach to things. They viewed him as a man who could not adjust or conform. Oh, how little they really understood him. What his critics failed to realize and comprehend was that Peter Vlčko was dedicated to certain traditions and principles from which he was unwilling to depart. And it was primarily this discipline and cultivation that made him so successful at overcoming the odds.

Yes, Peter Vlčko was a controversial man and often a man of controversy. Yet, today as we reflect back on this man's life and all that he has taught us, all past controversy seems to have been transformed into concord, understanding and trust. Although some of us once believed we would have done things differently at times, we now realize he was often right on the core issues. Isn't this what the ancients considered the "wisdom of the elders"? Sadly, we no longer have his guidance and insight. We no longer can consult the gut experience that brought him and others with him through the valley of the shadow of death, and beyond. We are on our own now. Our leader and guide has passed.

An ancient classical Greek poet, Aeschylus, once wrote: "In our sleep pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." We understand that all good things must once end; that life is not endless and that we mortal humans are living here simply on borrowed time. It is primarily through this understanding of our humble and powerless position over our destiny that we comprehend our true nature and the true wisdom and awful grace of God. And it is through this wisdom that we can come to grips with the painful loss of Peter Vlčko.

Out of a humble beginning in a long-oppressed and poor land Peter Vlčko rose above expectations and, against all odds, conquered the challenges he faced throughout his life. Time and time again, Peter Vlčko refused to crumble under the weight of the burdens he faced—even when all seemed hopeless. And amidst death and destruction, injustice and

ubiquitous uncertainty and fear, while others were engrossed in saving their own skins, Peter Vlčko thought of saving others. Tata, you lived as a soldier. You died as a soldier for liberty, justice and equality.

Though we no longer hear his deep and booming voice, the legacy of his words and especially his deeds will continue with us forever. The struggle he helped begin back in his native home in 1944—freedom and independence for his people and nation, and justice and equality for peoples of all ethnicities and religions—has taken the first steps to realization and is moving forward this day. His spirit lives on in the eyes of the Jewish children, whose parents he saved from certain death, and who have left behind a past of fear for a future of hope. His spirit also lives on in the hearts and minds of his own children and grandchildren. May his descendents forever remember and honor the principles to which he dedicated his life—liberty, justice, honesty and equality for all. May his descendents also strive to become the kind of parent and spouse that he was. Just as he risked his own life to save others from death, he also sacrificed himself to bring his children out of the bondage of totalitarianism into a new world of promise, freedom and opportunity.

In order to succeed in the new world, he put aside his professional training as a warrior and re-educated himself as a design testing engineer. He labored hard for over thirty years to provide for his family and their future. Even in the new world Peter Vlčko could not help but to carry on his fight against totalitarianism and injustice. He wrote and published his memoirs in a massive 860-page sweeping story of his struggles. He traversed this country giving speeches on human rights and the ills of communism, fascism and anti-Semitism. He spent days and nights before his typewriter pecking away letter after letter to organizations, community leaders, congressmen and presidents across the globe. He ceaselessly struggled to promote democracy in his homeland and throughout the world, and left a wake of his influence here in America, Canada and in distant lands. It was just two months ago that I received an email from someone visiting a museum in Prague where a display on the contributions of Czechoslovaks throughout the world included a letter from President Clinton to a one Peter Vlčko. The letter praised and thanked Peter for his great contributions to promoting democracy and fighting communism. His file cabinets at home are filled with letters, diplomas and certificates of praise and gratitude for his righteous struggle. His display cabinet is also filled with medals, coins and ribbons honoring him and his activities.

Clearly, Peter Vlčko was a dedicated father, husband and fighter for human rights. Oh, that we all would be half the man that he was. Oh, that we would have half the energy and determination that he possessed and so fervently exercised to help others over the course of his long and full life. Yes, may he forever be for us the bright beacon of selflessness in the dark sea of narcissism and egocentricity.

Peter Vlčko lived a long and full life. His departure, nonetheless, will always be considered by those of us who loved and truly knew him, as much too premature. We will miss you, Tata. And we will never forget you and how you sacrificed yourself for us and others. The Anti-Defamation League once called Peter Vlčko a pillar of an example for all of us to strive to emulate. Personally, I don't think I could ever hope to fill his shoes.

Soon we will lay him to rest in the tiny and humble village of his birth in Slovakia, and the winds of change will continue to blow gently over his memorial on the hillside. Yet, his legacy will remain with posterity forever. His epitaph reads, "Here rests in Lord Christ, Major General Peter Emilius Vlčko, a fighter for the freedom of the Slovak nation, who risked his own life to save others."