

Remembering My Participation in the Slovak National Uprising of 1944

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Although I was well known among my classmates in the War College of Bratislava and among other Slovak officers as an opponent of the Slovak regime, I was ignored by those preparing the Uprising. This was not caused by any lack of confidence in me but rather by the jealousy of those who had been collaborating and were now faced with an insurrection. Yet, where there is a will there is a way, and without waiting for an invitation I found a way to transform my convictions into deeds.

My resistance began when I tried to help the persecuted Jews as much as I could. I saved one girl from deportation and certain death in the gas chamber. It was through these activities that I became acquainted with Army Chaplain Colonel František Kovalčík, serving with the Ministry of National Defense, and with Augustin Pozdých, a Catholic priest. They were both opponents of Slovak fascism and German nazism. With their help I met Ladislav Gejza Krno, to whom I passed military information.¹ They also arranged, with the approval of the Catholic Diocese of Trnava, my secret marriage to Jurana Reichsfeldová, which took place March 25, 1944 at Blumenthal Church in Bratislava.

After graduating from the War College in June 1942 I was assigned to the Department of Logistics of the Ministry of National Defense. There I was in a position to learn about the strength and equipment of the Slovak units on the Russian and Italian fronts. (The first Slovak unit did not reach the Italian front until the fall of 1943. I learned that the Bratislava government was placing orders for Swiss AA weapons, which were earmarked for the German army. My colleagues Major Miloš Marko and Major Štefan Brezanyi were also aware of this.

I was criticized by my classmates from the War College because of my reluctance to serve on the Soviet front. My opposition was such that I could have been sentenced to prison. I had to solicit the help of my physician to

keep from going to prison. Those who cooperated with the regime were awarded with promotions. Because I did not cooperate I was demoted and assigned to administrative work.

This was a blow to me, as I considered myself a good soldier. I felt like a railway car which had been put on a siding. To prove that I was not a coward I applied for active service with one of the two Slovak divisions which were being assigned to the Prešov area. Colonel Štefan Tatarko, Chief of Staff of the Ministry of National Defense, approved my application and Lt. Col. František Krakovský arranged the transfer. I departed from Trenčianské Teplice, where I had been working with the Military Administration, for the front on August 26, 1944, accompanied by my batman, Lance Corporal Martin Laco.

Our train was stopped at Žilina because partisans had damaged the line near Kralovany. We heard that they had shot several German soldiers in the vicinity of the railroad station. We could not resist going and looking at the three dead soldiers, guarded by the Slovak police, returning to the train afterwards to avoid German revenge.

In Prešov I reported to General Staff Col. Viliam Talský and Lt. Col. František Urban. I was assigned to the Logistics Section of the Army Corps HQ. On August 29, 1944, the news that an uprising had been launched at Banská Bystrica struck like a thunderbolt. The action had not been expected so soon. Now whispering was replaced by open and free speech. No one paid any attention to the presence of German military mission officers, formerly considered as allied. They slipped away and obviously their reports speeded up German reaction.

On August 31, 1944 I was going to listen to the 2 o'clock news from London when I heard the noise of armored vehicles outside the headquarters building. Col. Urban was burning documents in his office and he instructed me to destroy all papers. I asked him about General Staff Col. Talský and he replied that he had flown the previous night on Slovak Air Force plane to the Soviet side.

"How about Gen. Malár," I asked in despair. "Didn't you hear him on Radio Bratislava last night, exhorting us not to fight because everything was premature and poorly planned. What else do you expect from him. Prior to his departure to Bratislava he did not leave instructions to his subordinates here on what to do in the current situation. Peter, save yourself as far as possible but do not reveal anything."² Hearing the shouts of German soldiers outside I went to my office on the second floor and attempted to destroy the papers. At that time a German soldier appeared in the door, aimed his

submachine gun at me, and shouted "Hands up!" He disarmed me and sent me to the conference room where all other officers, including Col. Ladislav Lavota were assembled. The mood was desperate and those of us who knew about the plans for the uprising recalled the massacre of Polish officers in the forest of Katyn in 1941, shot by the Soviet KGB.

Later they began to transport us to Štefanik's barracks. In a large room on the second floor, we were guarded by a German sergeant but we could talk. Col. Lavota ordered that funds saved from the headquarter's safe be distributed to us. The only lucky ones were those who had not been with their units during the disarming and were able to hide. At one time a rumor was spread that General Malár had returned from Bratislava to request our release. However he did not appear and our soldiers were escorted to the railroad station. There was another rumor to the effect that we would be sent to Austria.

Captain Karol Kuracina and I made a pact that we would attempt to escape. We would somehow get to the first floor of the building and hide there. Captain Kuracina knew the family of a Slovak officer who was residing in the vicinity of the main gate. He hoped the family would let us use the apartment and help us. We knew that in case of failure we would be shot in the courtyard as a warning to others. The first phase of our escape took one hour. The second phase was much longer. Kuracina managed to escape on September 1 at 1100 hours and I followed at 1500 hours. The wife of the Slovak officer Captain Kuracina had in mind was alone with two of her sons. They provided us both with civilian clothing and we left the barracks with borrowed bicycles. We found another shelter in the home of a shoemaker, where we stayed until September 8, 1944. The son of the shoemaker procured for us forged identity cards. I became Pavel Kunitz, shoemaker. Unfortunately, I have forgotten the names of all the individuals who helped us and to whom I will be eternally grateful.

I managed to arrange the escape of my batman Martin and we left together by train for Poprad on September 9, 1944. Martin hid a small map of the Lower Tatra Mountains in his boot. In the evening we reached Spišská Nová Ves and we were told that the train would not proceed further. We found a small hotel, almost fully occupied with Germans, hoping that "it is dark under a lit candle." We obtained a room, but German controls occurred almost every hour. I spoke some German and we managed to get by.

In the morning we took a train to Poprad. We noticed that there was a track repair team on the train and anticipated that traffic on the line would be interrupted. This happened near the village of Hranovnica where everyone

had to get off the train. This was lucky for us since we were heading south for the Hron valley and Banská Bystrica, center of the uprising.

It was a glorious Sunday morning when we walked into Hranovnica. The village seemed to be deserted because the population was in the church. We could therefore spot German patrols should they appear. Moving from house to house we ran into an elderly villager, who gave us valuable information. A German patrol passed and about fifteen minutes later we crossed a small creek and reached an area which was not controlled by the Germans. We climbed the summit of the Lower Tatra Mountain chain and ran into an insurgent patrol near Pohorela. At 0200 hours we stopped briefly at the sector's headquarters and were led to night quarters.

During the morning of September 11, I was surprised to meet General Staff Major Ján Staněk, Chief of Staff of the Second Tactical Group, defending access to Horehroní. Infantry Col. Michal Širica was commander of the group. During a friendly discussion, Major Staněk showed me the place where German prisoners were buried. They had been interrogated thoroughly and then shot. Even while we were talking one German was led to the place of no return and I voiced my disagreement with this kind of treatment of unarmed prisoners. Staněk, nicknamed "Iron Captain" by his troops, did not agree with my humanitarian ideas. The 2nd Tactical Group made a heroic resistance to German attacks, but Staněk was not fighting in the first echelon and did not deserve sole credit. The successful defense of the Telgart area was due to the heroic fight of various deployed units and their commanders.

Later a car arrived and brought us to Banská Bystrica. The insurgent headquarters knew about my escape from Prešov and I was received by Gen. Ján Golian. I reported on developments in Prešov and my escape. Golian was very cordial and appointed me as Chief of Staff of the 4th Tactical Group, commanded by Cavalry Lt. Col. Ján Malár, and fighting near Zemianské Kostolany in Nitra Valley. He gave me a one-day leave to take care of family matters. During my brief stay in Banská Bystrica I learned about the partisans, about the so called "brotherly help" of the Red Army, and about the discord between the communists and the democrats. I learned very little about the situation in the area of my future assignment other than the fact that our units would have to fight a stubborn defense.

To a casual observer the situation in Banská Bystrica appeared to be jubilant. Nearly all the buildings displayed Slovak, Czechoslovak, and Allied flags and the cafés were full of people debating. Armed groups of youthful partisans marched through the streets wearing red epaulets. Their joyful mood and apparent readiness to fight suggested that the task of the Germans would

not be easy.

From Banská Bystrica I went to visit my sister Růžena in Krivánske Lázy near Dětva, hoping to find there my wife and three-month-old son. I was disappointed in not finding them there. After my departure from Prešov my wife had been evacuated to Sered following the first American bombing raid of Bratislava in May 1944. Currently Sered was in German hands. My sister undertook to locate my wife and bring her to Krivánske Lázy.

On September 13, accompanied by Martin Laco, I reached the headquarters of the 4th Tactical Group in Opatovce. Lt. Col. Ján Malár briefed me on the strength of his unit. It consisted of one infantry company, two antitank guns of small caliber, and one battery of field artillery. The infantry units were deployed south of Opatovce on both sides of the Kostolany-Prievidza highway. The battery and the AT guns were at Opatovce. Thus a six-kilometer-wide sector had to be defended by 120 men, 6 light machine guns, and 6 AT canons. It is small wonder that instead of conducting a serious defense our units had to retreat whenever the Germans advanced.

I considered what I could do in my capacity as Chief of Staff. First of all, I obtained weapons and some hand grenades for myself and decided to reconnoiter our sector. I nearly lost my life before I realized that I was a living target for German snipers. With my binoculars I saw German armored cars moving on the slopes west of the river Nitra in the direction of Prievidza. No one opposed them and they could see our troops defending the highway to Prievidza.

The German drove into the flank of the 4th Tactical Group and the fire of tanks hitting headquarters in Opatovce had catastrophic results. In addition to Opatovce, units deployed near the village of Laskar, south of Opatovce, were hit and those defenders who had failed to dig trenches only escaped enemy fire by a hasty retreat. I returned to HQ and found only one truck and three men loading office equipment. In answer to my question about the whereabouts of the group commander I was told that he had retreated with his personnel toward Handlová. I refused the offer to use the truck. I had spent only a few hours at HQ and knew nothing about plans and orders of the Main Command in Banská Bystrica. On my own initiative I crossed the garden into an open field between the village and the Vtáčnik hills. With my pistol in my hand I tried to transform the rout into a coordinated retreat. I ordered the retreat to the highest point of the Prievidza-Handlová highway, knowing that the crest of the Vtáčnik hills must be defended. Instead of Lt. Col. Malár, I found there Infantry Col. Mikuláš Markus, who was preparing defensive positions. Villagers had been mobilized to dig antitank ditches on

both sides of the highway. Lt. Col. Mikuláš Ferjenčík and General Staff Major Anton Cyprich had been dispatched by the Main HQ to reconnoiter our new defensive positions at the Main Headquarters in Banská Bystrica. Major Cyprich took note of our requirements and Lt. Col. Ferjenčík exhorted us to stop any further German advance. I had several of our men explain that we had been receiving tasks which exceeded our strength.

We also had some problems with the population of the villages in our sector because many of them were ethnic Germans. Handlová itself was a Nazi nest and we could not expect much support from it. Our flag was displayed only by the municipality and it was known that some of the inhabitants favored the German cause. The Germans made full use of their sympathies and we knew that we had to be prepared for anything.

The retreat of the 4th Tactical Group from the Nitra Valley opened Prievidza and Nemecké Pravno to the Germans. This also endangered the rear of the 5th Tactical Group in Turčianské valley. I did not know how the Main Headquarters planned to deal with this dangerous situation but further developments made it clear that this important tactical route had been neglected. The 5th Tactical Group therefore had to retreat from Turčianský Martin to the south and evacuate the whole Turčianské Valley.

I was distressed by the sudden loss of Prievidza, which blocked access to Handlová and to Turec. Remembering the German bombardment of Opatovce, I was considering revenge. Part of my plan was a night sortie against German supply lines. The enemy sent a few tanks to reconnoiter our new defensive positions, but did not start any combat activity for a week.

Our defense in Handlová did not offer any security as there was no solid front line. Small groups of defenders in such a vast area could be attacked from any direction. This was soon confirmed by developments. In the third week of September Colonel Markus surveyed our defensive positions. During his absence at lunch time, enemy rockets began to fall in the vicinity of our HQ. Someone had to have informed the Germans about our location. I tried to find out from where they were being fired and I discovered that they were coming from a hill top located on the eastern edge of the town.

It became obvious that the enemy had penetrated into our rear, endangering not only our HQ but also our supply line leading to Banská Bystrica. We had no reserves, so I had to collect typists, cooks, and tailors and was prepared to lead them personally. But, as during my escape from Prešov, my luck held once more. The telephone rang and an unknown lieutenant reported the arrival of three platoons at Handlová RR Station. I told him to send two platoons to the eastern edge of Handlová, near the road to Svatý

Križ. I dissolved my improvised platoon and began to issue orders for the reconquest of the German-occupied hill. We managed to get access to the hill from the south side without arousing enemy suspicion. One platoon was left to cover us and the second platoon was to attack. I was with the second platoon. Our reservists were not experienced in fighting through forests, and so, instead of surprising the enemy, the Germans surprised us with a swift counterattack. Fire from automatic weapons and hand grenades forced us to retreat. When I looked around I became aware that I was facing the enemy alone with my batman. We managed to escape by scaling down a very steep rock. It was a small miracle. The enemy did not pursue us and retreated. Our company commander reported to me later that we had lost one man and three others had been wounded. Even, if our operation had not proceeded according to plan, we reoccupied the hill top and eliminated the danger to our supply line. We convinced the Germans that we had reserves who were able to fight where needed, gaining a week of relative calm.

As if they had been waiting for this, Russian partisans appeared suddenly in our sector. There were 12 men in the group, led by Yugoslav Colonel Petrovič, as he introduced himself. I was overjoyed because Russian uniforms strengthened our belief that Russians would help us eventually. We needed all the help we could get. Our men welcomed them in a brotherly spirit, but later this friendship evaporated. The Russians avoided combat but made excessive demands. They refused to take any orders from us, saying they were under orders from the partisan HQ in Kiev. When we needed them they disappeared and we came to the conclusion that they were not interested in defeating the enemy but wanted to weaken our will to fight. Col. Markus was convinced that the Soviet High Command favored our collapse.

Alternating with the group commander in the control of our positions, I went on one occasion to inspect our artillery and informed our battery commanders of my visit. I wanted to ascertain the feasibility of firing on the Germans in Prievidza, The scope of our action was limited by the lack of ammunition and the avoidance of major damage to the population. There was nevertheless an article in the fascist newspaper *Slovak* by Dr. Paučo its chief editor which tried to prove that our artillery was aimed to hit the Slovaks and not the Germans.

At the first indication that the Germans were preparing to attack us, the Soviet partisans disappeared. We were glad to get rid of them. The enemy had been informed of our deployment by the German minority in Handlová and attacked our front and our flanks simultaneously. The frontal attack was designed to focus our attention in that area while the flank attacks were to

encircle us. Col. Markus ordered a retreat of the whole group to the hill west of Kreminica. The reserve unit was to slow the German advance on our flanks, thereby enabling the retreat of the first echelon until Handlová and vicinity were evacuated.

But even our new defense line could not resist the German pressure. Following several days of fighting the danger of encirclement reappeared. Our group retreated to a new line near Salka, northeast from Kremnica. Our improvised defense position suffered from frequent strafing by the German air force. Once when we were under intense gun fire from the Germans, I took shelter behind a large boulder and thus saved my life. During the confusion, Martin and Ján Smělý disappeared and I was left alone. At least in the event of capture there would be no one to identify me. Now I had more time to think about what I would do.

Following my escape from Prešov I kept a civilian outfit as a souvenir. To cross the German lines in uniform was as risky as being caught in civilian clothing and accused of participation in the uprising. But I thought that it would be easier to plead innocence in civilian clothing rather than in a major's uniform. I had been promoted to major before the fall of Banská Bystrica. I changed into civilian clothing and left my uniform in a hollow tree trunk, hoping to retrieve it should I remain alive. Thus I became once more Pavel Kunitz, shoemaker. I climbed down into a valley and walked on the highway to the north. I walked normally to avoid suspicion that I was not an innocent civilian. The Germans were less dangerous than the Special Detachment of the Hlinka Guard, fighting against us on the side of the Nazis.

When I came closer to the village of Osada, two Germans jumped out of a ditch and checked my identity cards and against my protest stole my Longine watch. I was glad, however, that they took my watch instead of my life and that they let me go. My target was Ružomberok about 8 to 10 kilometers further.

Osada village disregarded the presence of German soldiers and was living a normal life. German trucks were passing full of captured insurgent soldiers. I had a fear that I would be shot or someone on a truck would recognize me and call me by my right name. However, nothing happened and in the evening I reached Ružomberok railroad station.

From Ružomberok I wanted to take a train to Zlaté Moravce and reach Kriváň, But when I entered the railroad station a German military policeman wished to see my travel permit. Since I did not have any he took me immediately to the Police HQ in the town. There I became a German captive for the second time. It would require a book to describe my interrogation. But

the police report concluded that Pavel Kunitz, shoemaker, did not appear to be an insurgent or partisan. My identity card was returned and I was taken to the Gestapo in the building of the District Court. There the interrogation was more thorough and two SS men and three civilians interrogated me. The police report, my German-sounding name, and the fact that I spoke some German probably saved me. No third degree methods were used and my release was a small miracle. I was even given a travel permit to go to Bratislava, where I was going to look for a job. When I left the train in Zlaté Moravce, I destroyed the travel permit which noted my interrogation by the Gestapo.

The reception by my family was very warm, but I had to sleep in the hay loft. During the time of my hiding my sister had procured for me a forged identity card in the name of Pavel Valko, business clerk. I destroyed the card bearing the name of Pavel Kunitz. It was my duty to protect my wife and my child and I departed to meet my family in Krivánske Lazy. My wife, née Reichsfeldova became Mrs. Valková but there was still the danger that she might be reported to the authorities. With my family I celebrated the most depressing Christmas of my life. Not far from this place my father-in-law, now using the name of Jozef Šimko, lived in hiding, with none of the amenities of a cultural life. But the beauty of nature, a healthy climate, and mountain air gave us the strength to live through the last chapter of our drama before liberation.

At the end of February 1945 the Germans started to prepare defensive positions in our area. They were planning future trenches on the slopes. My military spirit revived and with the help of my brother-in-law Lajci Hošab we traced the line of the defense and dugouts for machine guns. I transferred my family to the village of Dolná Dzová prior to the German arrival.

In Dolná Dzová we experienced the most dramatic moments of the war when on May 4, 1945 Soviet troops appeared. Our joy at the liberation was transformed into distress and suffering. The life of my wife was endangered at the moment when I was passing information concerning German defense lines to the Soviet HQ in the evangelical rectory of Dobroč. Later I was arrested and sent to a Soviet military court in the village of Plytná. This destroyed my last sympathies for the Russians - our liberators. Even my father-in-law was tormented and we all, unable to produce a Communist Party card, had to demonstrate that we were not German spies. Even if we succeeded in convincing our Soviet interrogators, we received no documents testifying to our innocence and we were rearrested again and again by Soviet field intelligence officers. Our lives were in danger until we moved out of

Dolná Dzová and found a shelter in the village of Dobroč. We were left at peace there and my wife stopped fearing she would be raped. There was a shortage of food and the black market prices, even for potatoes, was high. I requested the Soviets to permit us to proceed to the Czechoslovak government in Košice, but they were of no help. It was only after the arrival of Romanian troops in our area that I managed to reach Košice via Miskolc in Hungary. I was once more in the uniform of a Czechoslovak army major. Having obtained a Soviet permit to enter the front zone I managed to bring my family to Košice. Grateful to the Polana mountain which gave us shelter, my father-in-law Berthold Reichsfeld changed his name to "Polanský." Recommended by General Ferjenčík, I was assigned to the Military Office of President Beneš, who was also in Košice. This was my reward for my anti-fascist background and for my participation in the Slovak National Uprising.

Notes

1. Ladislav Gejza Krno was a Slovak diplomat who passed information first to the Czechoslovak Military Mission in Moscow and later to the Czechoslovak Military Mission in Istanbul.

2. Augustin Malár, commander of the Slovak Army Corps in Eastern Slovakia, had been assigned since July 29, 1944 to the German Army Group "North Ukraine".