WE RECKONED COMMUNISM WOULDN'T LAST AND WE'D RETURN AS LIBERATORS

František Beneš (*1928)

Following the Communist coup of February 1948 František Beneš realised his future looked bleak. He saw what was going on around him. What's more, his boss later divulged his assessment from the National Committee in Orlová. It had been written by local Communists. The assessment stated that he was a rebel capable of anything; all should watch out for him. In a fear-ridden period, he soon discovered that a poor assessment wasn't the worst that could befall him. He received a warning that he or some of his friends could be arrested. That came to pass in 1950. He was due to do his military service. But the authors of the assessment also had that planned out. He was going to Orlová to dig coal. Instead of serving in the army, he was to be a slave!

He was meant to report for duty in October. In late summer he considered what to do next. "They started to follow me, to badger me. They later put about a rumour in Orlová that I had helped someone cross the border. People started avoiding me. So I said: It's time to scarper," says Beneš. In the meantime he had become involved in the resistance against the new totalitarian regime. A friend had an illegal transmitter, over which he railed against the regime. This was highly dangerous. The fact that the broadcasts' organisers were unconnected to any Western organisation was irrelevant. And even though they agreed to very short intervals, they were nearly uncovered. One time they saw a car carrying equipment to track transmitters in the centre of the village. "At that time my friend had broadcast for longer than the agreed interval. I ran to let him know and on the way I saw that car!" Fortunately things turned out well. But it was clear their luck mightn't last forever.

At the end of September 1950 Beneš decided to escape. "That last week I slept dressed: ready," he says. It was a matter of grabbing his shoes and running. He had a pistol beneath his pillow. He acquired a habit he never shook off: sleeping with a gun under his head. However, just before his escape his father found the weapon and hid it, burying it in the garden. His father didn't like guns so his son would have to escape across the border unarmed. Beneš's goal in the West wasn't a better life but to join an army that would

liberate Czechoslovakia. Like others, he expected a third world war and that he would return alongside US soldiers.

František Beneš was born on 11. 11. 1928 in Hrušky in the Břeclav district. From a farming family, his original profession was locksmith, though he worked at oil plants. His parents were private farmers who after years of work in the village had finally acquired their own homestead, along with six hectares of leased fields. Following the Communist coup it was clear that sooner or later they would be forced to join a unified agricultural cooperative, an unpopular collective farm analogous to the Soviet kolkhoz.

The atmosphere in the village gradually intensified. “The pressure was omnipresent. This became apparent in the elections, where the Communists scared all the voters into voting for a unified candidates list,” Beneš recalls. In the meantime he had become a locksmith and worked at oil fields in southern Moravia. However, he saw his future rather differently. He would go abroad with friends like those young Czechoslovaks who had left for foreign armies to fight Hitler. What’s more, they had a role model. In 1940 Antonín Bartoš and his father had left the nearby Lanžhot for England. They reached London and Bartoš Jr. later became commander of a special mission: the Clay-Eva parachute group, who at midnight on the night of 12–13 April 1944 were dropped onto Protectorate territory. Active in Southern Moravia, the group were unusually successful. They sent up to 800 reports to London with crucial information: on troop movements, war production and changes in the Protectorate administration.

It is unsurprising that the paratroopers’ courageous feats made an impression on young people in Southern Moravia. “We liked Bartoš,” František Beneš says now. In 1948 he was 20 years old. After the war Bartoš entered politics, where as a National Socialist deputy he highlighted excesses and illegal behaviour. Of course, these were chiefly the work of the Communists. This meant they had a grudge against him even before 1948. And within days of the coup in February he had to escape. That same year Bartoš was already involved in the organisation of the resistance and, with other resisters in exile, was planning to set up secret transmitters in Czechoslovakia… It seemed history was going to repeat itself. Bartoš was of course not the only one who bet on the eternal merry-go-round of history and aimed to draw on his experience of the previous war. Ordinary country boys also wanted to fight, such as František Beneš. Like Bartoš he also joined the National Socialists, whose policies he found appealing.

He reflected on all of this before deciding to flee across the border. Others were to join him on his escape. Their guide was CIC agent František Gajda, who had Austrian citizenship. He was familiar with the border and its far side and would lead them all the way to Vienna. The eastern part of Austria was then a Soviet occupation zone. What if in

the end they fell into the hands of the Russians? Eventually five of them set off on the perilous journey. Some had had second thoughts, others had signed up at the last moment. They expected to return soon. As liberators, as the soldiers from the West had famously returned after WWII. Like their hero Antonín Bartoš. “Everyone would have gone to fight if the third world war had started. We reckoned that communism would last two years, then we’d return,” says Beneš.

On their way to the border they had to cross the main Břeclav-Lanžhot road. Traffic was usually light there after dark. But that night it was very different. It appeared the border guards were on manoeuvres. Or searching for somebody? For them? To this day Beneš is convinced that somebody betrayed their escape. But if that was the case, the border guards’ work was none too impressive. Once the group had crossed the road they realised nobody was on their tails. They headed through the dark forest to Pohansko, a mysterious place in the middle of a deep riparian forest that was once a Great Moravia settlement. Nobody had seen them. On the Austrian side they rested. Beneš looked over their people smuggler’s weapon. “Gajda had a machine gun. I was playing with it and he showed me a single cartridge. He says: This one’s for me,” says Beneš. Later, when he heard about Gajda’s tragic death, he wondered if that was the cartridge that killed him. “I believe he managed to turn his weapon against himself,” he adds.

Gajda’s death had occurred shortly afterwards, in fact a few days later when he was leading another group across the Iron Curtain. He fell less than two kilometres from Lanžhot, on 6 October 1950. Fortunately Beneš himself reached the West, where he hoped to start fighting. He passed through two refugee camps and ended up in the French Army’s guard division. Alongside him were friends from Hrušky. They were eight in total. “They would all have fought if the opportunity had arisen. There were also other garrisons with Czech soldiers, of course. Most of them were young people from Moravia determined to liberate their homeland.”

In the end František Beneš realised war was not going to come and settled in Canada. His brother and his family wanted to join him later but the Communists wouldn’t let them go. He built a handmade tank with the aim of breaking through the Iron Curtain in 1970. That didn’t work out but in the end he escaped via a different route and met up with his brother across the ocean.

Text by Luděk Navara