

PROFESSOR, RESISTANCE FIGHTER, REFUGEE

Zdenko Frankenberger Daneš (*1920)

On the eve of the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands, Zdenko Frankenberger, who was 18, got into a conflict with abusive Germans at Prague's U Fleků pub. In his memoirs he writes: "I started the brawl but real experts immediately got stuck in (...). The Germans were terribly badly beaten (...). That evening a Leipzig radio station announced that German patrons had been attacked by Czech thugs in an old Prague pub and in the morning the German army was rolling into Czech cities and towns." Years later Zdenko learned he had been in line for punishment over the brawl. The Protectorate authorities knew about it and apparently planned to arrest him and send him to a concentration camp. However, he was saved by the intervention of a German representative of the company where he worked.

The future professor of geophysics Zdenko Frankenberger Daneš was born in Prague in 1920. His mother was a dermatologist while his father, also a doctor, focused on research. Zdenko lived with his parents in Ljubljana for a while but he grew up and attended elementary and secondary school in Bratislava, where his father found work at Comenius University. Due to the growing Nazi threat, Zdenko volunteered for the army in 1938 but was rejected. Not long afterward he returned to Prague as Czechs were unwelcome in a Slovakia turning fascist.

In 1939 Czechoslovakia the Nazis turned the occupied Czech lands into a protectorate. Student Jan Opletal was shot dead and his funeral became a major demonstration. In response, the Nazis closed down Czech universities, sent over 1000 students to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and murdered nine students and student functionaries. At that time Zdenko Frankenberger was living with his family at the Purkyně Institute building in Prague's Albertov. He recalls that day: "Early in the morning (...) SS men woke us. They drove us and all the other occupants of the building to the ground floor, stood us against a wall and pointed a machine gun at us. The men were as white as the wall, the women and children cried with anger and horror. I was just as afraid as they were. I looked around and saw my mother. She was standing with utter calm. She held my 11-year-old brother and nine-year-old sister in her arms and explained to them: 'You see, that's a soldier and that there is a machine gun. There are rounds in that belt and as the

soldier shoots the rounds and the belt automatically enter the machine gun. (...) And so on. (...) My mother's behaviour gave me strength."

None of the family were harmed. Like all Czechs, Zdenko Frankenberger was barred from studying. He soon became involved in the resistance. It is not entirely clear which illegal organisation he was in. But it is known that a distant relative asked Zdenko to come in secret to Slovakia to arrange an encrypted connection with local fugitives. In July 1941 he crossed the border and reached Žilina where he fulfilled his mission as best he could, before returning in dramatic circumstances: "I got across the border, but below, before the village, a German border patrolman was waiting for me, declaring I'd crossed the border illegally. I don't know how he knew. Did somebody in Slovakia betray me? Did German border guards spy me from a lookout tower (...)? I denied it, but in vain. The fellow began pulling things out of my backpack until he got to the notebook in which there were notes on the cipher. I went for broke: I exclaimed that it was true, that the border was badly marked on the ridge and spoke as if it were all his fault that I'd reached foreign territory." In the end Zdenko escaped from the border officer, jumped on a moving train and after reached home further adventures.

However, once in Prague he learned that the relative he had worked with in the resistance had been arrested and executed. His uncle met the same fate a week later: "We never learned why. We never received his ashes. But my aunt, his widow, received a visitor after some time. A German officer visited her and handed her a bill for uncle's execution. Uncle's death broke me. I was afraid. I was ashamed of my fear, but I knew that fear was stronger than my will, conscience, faith – basically I failed to cope in that instant. I began putting buttons in my shoes and walking on them all day to get used to bearing pain so as not to give anything away during the torture I expected. But it didn't help. Death was all around me."

In spring 1942 Czechoslovak parachutists sent to Prague from London killed Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich. After the assassination the Nazis carried out wholesale killings and Zdenko decided to turn himself in as an attacker: "I wanted to save innocent victims of the German madness. But before I could get to the police the assassins were caught and died in the fighting." Soon afterward he started work in Heřmanův Městec in a small factory for electronic devices. Through friends he got involved in another resistance group who were in contact with the Allies. After some time he was tasked with exterminating an engineer and physicist, a pre-war Russian refugee, who was said to be "on the trail of an explosive a thousand times stronger than TNT. He was willing to give it to the West but rather that give it to the Russians would prefer to give it to the Germans. (...) Of course, the invention wasn't to be underestimated. It couldn't be a chemical material: there just isn't enough energy in electrons. It had to be a nuclear reaction. (...) I

began looking for the man but I wasn't keen to. Fortunately one night the German police came for him, a number of shots rang out (...) and my impression was that the Germans themselves had done what I should have done." The story of the engineer, who turned out to be alive after the war, is mysterious, complicated and hard to summarise. Zdenko Frankenberger describes it in his memoirs: "The question remains: Did the Russian really have a bomb capable of detonating? Today I doubt that."

Zdenko Frankenberger continued doing various resistance work, during which he met Maria Haňková (1921–1998) and married her in January 1945. Shortly before the end of the war he did something surprising, helping the above mentioned German representative in the company, Fritz Scheel, who feared Czech reprisals, to escape to Hamburg: "He was a kind of political 'supervisor' of the company where I worked. He had constant close ties with the German secret police. But on the other hand he revealed who among us was informing to the German police." Zdenko Frankenberger drove Scheel in a company car, survived an air raid in Hamburg and returned to Prague covertly by a complicated route. Scheel later told him that he had saved him from arrest over the aforementioned pub brawl.

Nazism was soon defeated. Zdenko began studying mathematics and physics. Initially things went well but that changed with the Communist putsch of February 1948: "I just wasn't able to focus on Maxwell equations when I saw the entire nation sink into moral and material destitution. (...) At the same time, constant fear prevailed: Yesterday they arrested Sviták and Koudelka – is it my turn next?" He soon began considering an escape from Czechoslovakia. He made a definitive decision when he learned by chance in March 1950 that a university colleague had written a denunciation of him. Zdenko Frankenberger told his wife that they were going on a bike trip along the Western, closely guarded border. Only there did he tell her they wouldn't be going home: "I admitted that I basically wasn't going back. That she was to decide for herself whether to escape with me. (...) It took around five seconds and my wife said: 'Let's go'." On 14 May 1950 they crossed the border by bike near Bezděk, literally managing to zigzag through border guards. In Germany they applied for asylum and reached a refugee camp near Nuremberg.

Life in the camp was tough, impoverished and in many respects dangerous. Zdenko Frankenberger recalls that it was very hard to get to another country and that his wife "began to fall into despair, saying we'd spend the rest of our lives like the wretches who had lived here for five years already." They tried to get into New Zealand but discovered that a man offering mediation and jobs was probably a conman. By thumb and bicycle Zdenko travelled to the New Zealand embassy in Frankfurt to find out more. On the way back he met US couple Lyle and Doris Slaybaugh by chance when they gave him a ride. They hit it off and the pair offered Zdenko and his wife help if they wanted to travel to the

US. The Slaybaughs lent them money and on 11 March 1952 the Frankenbergers set sail for New York. The Slaybaughs' help was incredible, says Zdenko: "Immediately we became members of their family and friends of their friends. They constantly asked us what we needed and how they could help us (...). It didn't take us longer than two weeks to find work, clothing, footwear, furniture, kitchen utensils and two dozen open-hearted friends." Slaybaugh was in construction and Zdenko recalls saying to him one day: "'Lyle, what you and Doris have done for us, unfamiliar people from an unfamiliar country, is simply immeasurable. How can we ever repay you?' Unfortunately I don't recall the response word for word, but it was something like: 'Oh, you won't repay us. First, thank God, we don't need it. Second, before you get there we could be long pushing up daisies. And above all, if you did pay us back it would be a closed circle and wouldn't lead anywhere. You pay it to somebody else, he'll pay somebody else and that way it will continue and grow'." Zdenko took this as an obligation and later provided similar help to a refugee family from Asia.

Zdenko Frankenberger Daneš has two children, Petr (1954) and Elena (1956), who were born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In the US he worked for Gulf Oil Corporation in Pittsburgh, Boeing in Seattle, the University of Puget Sound in the city of Tacoma, Washington State and for the US Geological Survey in the same place. He has published works in the fields of gravitational research, radioactive exploration of rocks, the composition and dynamics of the Earth, Moon and planets, the interplanetary magnetic field and the microwave radiation of the Earth's surface. In addition he takes an interest in music and various other fields of the arts and is a passionate cyclist. In 2007 he married Julsimo Duisebayeva.

Text by Adam Drda