

ONCE A SCOUT, ALWAYS A SCOUT

Jan Janků (*1921)

He was persecuted by both the Nazis and the Communists. The first made him a forced labourer and the second sent him to prison, where he spent nine years. But Jan Janků never gave in. He adhered to the ideals of scouting and resolved to stand up to both totalitarian systems. His slogan was “once a scout, always a scout”. He has never forgotten a chess game with a fellow prisoner awaiting the death penalty. The prisoner’s name was Miloslav Pospíšil and he came from Bystřice pod Hostýnem. Janků called him Miloš. They were cellmates and together waited for them to come for Pospíšil. To make the time go faster they played chess. “Miloš Pospíšil was a young guy from the Hostýnský Mountains. We got on well. The chess game was developing nicely,” says Janků. “We were around the middle of the game. Suddenly the door opened and they called out: Pospíšil! I wanted to shake his hand, but they wouldn’t allow it. So he just kind of touched my arm a bit. And the game remained unfinished. I don’t know when we’ll finish it. But one day we will,” says former political prisoner Jan Janků, recalling the final moments with his fellow inmate Miloslav Pospíšil. The latter was executed on 4 September 1951 at Prague’s Pankrác prison. He was 33 years old.

Janků himself got 20 years in prison. However, he initially faced the threat of the death penalty. He was connected with resisters in the group Světлана, who were very cruelly persecuted by the Communists. Světлана was a large resistance group comprising in large part former partisans unafraid to take up arms. Security officers had just shot dead Janků’s friend Alois Valenta from Světлана in Valašské Klobouky. And evidence linked him to Jan Janků...

Jan Janků passed through the toughest jails and at Mírov bore witness to the final moments of Count Janos Esterházy. On his release Janků returned to his native Hanušovice.

Jan Janků was born in 1921 into a Czech family in Hanušovice in the Šumperk area, which was predominantly inhabited by Germans. His father was a railway worker. Jan Janků originally wanted to become a priest, though he attended a business academy. However, he was most drawn to the Scouts. He joined in 1936 and went on trips and took part in camps. But then came the Munich Dictate and the invasion of the Sudetenland and the entire family had to leave the border area. After an initial period of uncertainty they settled at Vrbátky near Přerov. However, during the war the German occupiers rounded

up able-bodied young men and sent them to the “German Reich” to work. From there Janků escaped back to the Protectorate and managed to acquire fake documents. He was lucky. Near the end of the war he escaped again, this time getting as far as France. After the war he worked as a driver at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. He didn't make it home until after the conflict had ended. Again he was drawn to the Scouts. However, the Communist takeover was approaching and it was clear that the end was nigh for the Scouts. The Communists regarded them as an organisation whose members believed in different ideals and could even prove dangerous in the future. Jan Janků was also dangerous, as he had done a lot for the Scouts in Hanušovice, organising trips and camps, winning parents' support and finding backing for a Scouts clubhouse.

Immediately after the 1948 takeover pressure for work with youth to be placed under the control of the new regime was felt. In addition, the leadership of the Scouts, brought up in a spirit of democracy, were frequently active in the anti-Communist resistance. They distributed leaflets and circulated information.... This was Jan Janků's case. However, he had already ranked as suspicious. What's more, the secret police had discovered clear evidence leading straight to him. His friend Alois Valenta was a friend of the Světlna group, which carried out armed resistance to the Communist regime. They were often former partisans and represented a worry to the new regime. However, the secret police managed to infiltrate the resistance network. On a visit to Valašské Klobouky Valenta became involved in an armed clash with StB officers. The situation was hopeless and he died in the shootout. A search was then carried out at his home which uncovered a fountain pen engraved with a name: Jan Janků. In those days people had their pens engraved and Janků had innocuously given it to his friend. It was a clear lead. Arrest followed shortly. In the end Janků fell for a secret police ruse. He had a friend who one day wrote him a letter telling him to come in secret to an agreed location. There he got into a diplomatic car, having been told it would take him to the border. But it was actually a trap. “Then we stopped in a forest and suddenly armed men with automatics emerged from the surrounding bushes. They aimed at me and shouted ‘Hands up’,” he says.

Right there they attempted to force information out of him. “I had to sit on a kind of pointed stone and then they tied a noose to my neck and pulled me up a tree. Then down. And then the same again. At the same they started attacking me verbally. But I said I didn't know anything, that I wouldn't say anything,” he says.

His arrest took place on 29 May 1949. He found himself in the notorious Uherské Hradiště jail awaiting trial. He feared the worst, knowing that the death sentence had been proposed for Světlna members. “I feared the rope. That's for sure,” says Janků. “I was

already reconciled to it. I said nobody was waiting for me, that I was single,” he says. In the end he got 20 years and was glad. “I rejoiced: 20 years! No rope – that’s a good thing...”

In the end Janků found fortune in his misfortune in a way, though he did experience the Uherské Hradiště interrogation centre, where dreaded investigators such as Ludvík Hlavačka and Alois Grebeníček worked. During Janků’s time there executions still took place in the yard behind the prison chapel. “A fellow prisoner told me how they’d executed a sick man. He and other prisoners had to carry him on a stretcher. That’s how they carried a condemned man to be executed. They put him down beneath the scaffold and they had to lift him up. So he sat there and they placed a noose on his neck in a sitting position and pulled him up. That man was 20 minutes dying on the gallows...” In Uherské Hradiště Janků was a so-called corridor man, meaning he got to places ordinary prisoners weren’t allowed. He tried to commit all he had witnessed to memory. For instance, the exact location of the execution ground.

Jan Janků was later in Mírov prison, where he worked in the prison pharmacy and as an orderly. He looked after Count Janos Esterházy, who had been a significant Hungarian minority politician in Slovakia. Janků also witnessed his death and found him a priest among the prisoners. Esterházy died at Mírov on 8 March 1957, worn out by his persecution and imprisonment. He had been hauled off to the Gulag by the Soviets after the war and only later returned to Czechoslovakia.

At Mírov Janků had access to materials that allowed him and other prisoners to assemble a primitive camera and take a number of unique pictures.

On his release from prison he returned to Hanušovice and found work on the railways. In 1968 he joined K 231, an association of former political prisoners. After the fall of communism he became involved in the activities of the Confederation of Political Prisoners and has given talks at schools on the totalitarian regime.

He received the Order of T.G. Masaryk from the president in 2010 and the following year was presented with a high Hungarian honour for helping Janos Esterházy.

Text by Luděk Navara