

## ***WE CALLED OURSELVES THE AVENGERS***

**Josef Klečka (\*1930)**

“On the afternoon of 4 May a still unknown to me companion gave the order for me to not leave the cottage. Before he left he pointed to a wardrobe full of guns, so that I could defend myself if somebody attacked me. Then he left. At around noon the door flew in and in rushed a horde of chaps armed to the teeth. The game the StB had arranged had come to an end.” It was to be several years before Josef Klečka saw his native Uhřice again. In 1950, when he was arrested, he was not yet 20.

Josef Klečka was born on 22 November 1930. His father Josef was a labourer, though the family also owned a small homestead that was mainly looked after by his mother Emílie, who cared for four children at home. Josef Klečka attended the general school in Uhřice. The whole family survived the war unscathed and after it Josef apprenticed to be a barber. However, he too got a job as a worker, at a Brno chemicals plant. In 1947 he joined the scouts after making friends in Slavkov, near Brno, with members of a Junák scout troop. He then set up a Junák troop Uhřice.

However, following the Communist takeover scouting organisations were banned. “The troop had to be dissolved, but some of the most dedicated members continued scouting in secret. A group of the most discontented was created and spread to other villages in the area. We resolved to avenge the wrongs that the Communists had done to us. We called ourselves the Avengers.” It was natural for Klečka to become involved in the anti-Communist resistance via the scouts. A group with around 20 members was formed in the summer of 1949 when youths from four neighbouring villages got involved. They were all very young at the time, between 14 and 19. Klečka became the group’s leader.

If his father had known what he was doing he would have been unpleasantly surprised. He was a party functionary. “Father was an old Communist, he believed in communism. In 1948 he attained the posts of chairman of the local organisation and chairman of the Local National Committee in Uhřice. It was a tough decision for me, because I was going against my own father, whom I loved.” Despite the fact the father was a Communist the whole family were regular church-goers.

However, not even his relationship with his father would stop Klečka from fighting against the regime. “One time the Communists held a public meeting at which they wished to convince people of the glories of communism. We decided that we would cut off the

electricity supply to the whole of Uhřice. Immediately after it started the lights went out, confusion ensued and the meeting ended.” The scouts also produced anti-regime posters, circulated anti-regime leaflets in the area and smashed Communist Party glass-covered notice-boards before elections. The last major operation they managed to carry out took place on the eve of 1 May 1950, when they distributed leaflets around Uhřice urging defiance of the Communist Party and Bolshevism. However, when a number of the young men were caught in Dambořice the jig was up.

Three days later a stranger appeared at the Klečka home, offering to help him escape across the border and saying the entire group had been betrayed. But this was a set-up. “Outside the village we got into a car and he took me in the direction of Kyjov. He kept telling me about who all he’d already spoken to in the group and offering to take me across the border. But I absolutely didn’t want to escape. I urged him to drive me home, but at night I ended up at some cottage. I had a growing sense they were manipulating me. But it was already too late.” The next day Klečka was arrested at the cottage, although the StB concluded they wouldn’t get any useful information out of him.

The brought Klečka to the police station in Kyjov before soon taking him to a prison in Uherské Hradiště, one of the worst in the country. Tough interrogations followed roughly two weeks of isolation in solitary. “I didn’t want to speak so they hoped to loosen my tongue by beating me. However, in comparison with others, there was no torture.” After about a month the StB left Klečka alone. They had managed to get everything out of the others, most of who were minors and were not being held in remand. “When they presented me with the signed testimonies of the others, I signed the report too, so I’d be left alone. There was nothing to deny.” He was forced to sign a pledge not to reveal the details of his interrogation.

A trial was held in Brno on 13 April 1951. As the oldest and the group’s leader Klečka was sentenced to five years in prison, the seizure of his property and a fine of 10,000 crowns. His father was forced to stand down as chairman of the National Committee but was not arrested. Of the entire group three other members were also tried, with two girls getting sentences of just months. The others escaped court due to their young ages.

Klečka served the first part of his sentence mining uranium at the Rovnost camp in the Jáchymov area, remaining there for around a year and a half. “They ‘taught’ us to mine in two hours. I worked as a breaker for around six months. Then I was put on mine transport and rode a locomotive.” Klečka handled the heavy mining work quite well. However, Rovnost was ruled by a cruel warden, Paleček, who put Klečka into a special punishment cell a couple of times. Once it was so full that the 20 or so political prisoners stood like sardines in the small concrete cell and couldn’t move a muscle. At Rovnost he also met a

civilian employee he had known previously who helped him out by leaving food in the mineshaft's timbering. As Klečka was a musician from Moravia he was placed in the camp band, with which he played on various anniversaries. In the end Klečka was moved to the Svatopluk camp in Slavkov, where he served out the remainder of his sentence.

After three years he was released on probation at the end of May 1953. Six months after getting out he was conscripted into the army. Following his military service he married and had two sons. As he was barred from doing anything but blue-collar work he got a job at a chemical factory in Holubice, where he ran into lots of former political prisoners. He later found a position on the railways in Brno, where he remained as a labourer until his retirement. In 1968 he became involved in K 231's activities in Brno. "I was convinced that things were getting better. It started wonderfully but soon came to an end. But afterwards there weren't as many Communists."

When communism finally fell in Czechoslovakia in 1989 Klečka could at least return to scouting, whose ideas he helped revive. "I can't forgive the Communists for their crimes. I forgive them today and they kill me tomorrow. That's communism. I hate their bragging. It's one lie after the other. People forget." Today Josef Klečka lives in a retirement home in Brno.

*Text by Jan Horník*