

## ***THEY MOST LIKELY NEEDED TO MAKE ME NERVOUS***

### **Věroslav Sláma (\*1930)**

He never forgot the moment they came for him at his job. He was then an apprentice at the Kovolit factory at Modřice near Brno. "I was just at work. I was sitting behind a table and pay packets were being made up."

It was 26 October 1950. He was sitting with his back to the door but sensed that a stranger had entered the room. "He asks if there's a Mr. Sláma there. I didn't even have time to turn around. Or get up from the chair. Four men came for me. Two of them held me. They immediately asked me where my gun was and put my hands in chains. They dragged me outside. I saw they were all over the place. There were around 10 of them. They came in four cars." This is how Věroslav Sláma describes his arrest. That moment spelled the end of the resistance against the Communist regime he had been conducting with his brother Cyril and other friends. But the secret police didn't get what they wanted that day. They were looking for a pistol that Věroslav Sláma sometimes carried. They knew about the gun and were extremely keen to find it. They raked through the coal in the cellar. It was lengthy, pointless work. Their search was in vain. They didn't find the weapon. So they dragged Sláma off for interrogation. They beat and slapped him. "But I have to say, they didn't do it in a way that would hurt too much. They most likely needed to make me nervous." They wanted him to draw a map of the dead drops where they left reports for agents working with the British intelligence service. He drew one map but it didn't lead them to any discoveries. So he had to draw it again. In the end they drove him to the location of a dead drop by the Austrian border not far from Valtice in Southern Moravia. He guided them to it but it was empty. Věroslav Sláma was sentenced to 25 years in prison for collaborating with the resistance group and the British intelligence service.

Věroslav Sláma was born in 1930 into the family of a gendarmerie sergeant. His father worked in Slovakia during the First Republic. Věroslav also had a brother Cyril and both were raised in a spirit of patriotism. In 1945 Věroslav Sláma was 15. His brother was four years older. After the war the family settled at Želešice near Brno, where the father served at a gendarmerie station. Things were not easy in the village, which had originally been German, but the family put down permanent roots there. The brothers worked at the Kovolit factory in the nearby Modřice. Věroslav Sláma started there as an apprentice after business school and Cyril was a milling machine operator. Thanks to his expertise and experience, the older Cyril became an important member of an underground resistance group centred around Jaroslav Salajka and the future agent Tomáš Oliva, real name Jan

Brejcha. Miloš Procházka from Želešice also played an important role. Young Věroslav also joined the group.

When people began escaping from the country the two brothers helped them reach the West. They brought them to the Austrian border where they handed them over to other collaborators. They were instructed to focus on the relatives of escaped officers and soldiers.

Věroslav Sláma's first assignment was to bring two refugees from a Communist prison camp in Blansko to the border: Jaroslav Salajka, whom he already knew, and former RAF aviator Ivo Tonder.

However, at that time, Věroslav Sláma – observing the principles of conspiracy– didn't know the airman's real name. "I brought both of them to the border. We had picked a spot near Valtice where it was possible to cross. I then returned to Brno alone. I wasn't interested who the second refugee was. I just brought him," he was to say later.

Salajka later returned as a collaborator of the British intelligence service and Tonder happily made it to England. And the group suddenly had a new mission: to get Tonder's wife Jiřina to the West.

The group expanded considerably in this period. They sent reports to the West and Salajka was replaced by Jan Brejcha, code name Oliva. Agent Josef Kolísko, code name Josek Kafka, also arrived. They retained a number of addresses, including the apartment of Bořena Majerová in the very centre of Brno. The group were later dubbed "Majerová et al" by the police.

The resistance men succeeded in getting Jiřina Tonderová happily across. But then a tragic incident occurred. A group of youths from Želešice, most not yet 18, attempted to form an armed resistance group and drew attention to themselves. With the StB searching for them, the youths had to go to ground in Želešice. They received help from resisters and the Sláma brothers. "They were planning to carry out partisan activities in Želešice. I said to my brother: 'Don't be stupid, they have to get out of here'," Věroslav Sláma remembers. They took then secretly to Bořena Majerová's apartment and organized their passage to safety across the Iron Curtain. It didn't work out. They were caught in Austria, in the Soviet zone, and it was clear they knew a lot: the names and addresses of the resistance. Furthermore, the British in Austria sent a message to Brno that the youths were evidently set for extradition to Czechoslovakia.

And that Miloš Procházka and Cyril Sláma were to immediately leave the country. To save their skins. They succeeded but the secret police caught the others. They ended up in

prison and one was hanged. Only agent Oliva managed, after a dramatic shootout, to reach the West. Agent Kafka, surrounded, committed suicide.

Naturally Věroslav Sláma was also arrested.

His trial began on 16 January 1952. The court panel was headed by Jiří Kepák, the feared State Court judge who had shortly before sent priest Jan Bula to the gallows in one of the Babice trials. He had previously been a prosecutor in the trial of Milada Horáková. He was to decide the fates of the 16 accused, among them Božena Majerová, as well as Věroslav Sláma. And his father Cyril Sláma Sr. And Jiřina, the wife of Cyril Jr. Věroslav Sláma got 25 years in prison.

In the meantime, Věroslav's brother Cyril and Miloš Procházka were undergoing training in the British zone in Austria. They returned to Czechoslovakia as agents but things turned out badly for Cyril Sláma. He was caught, forced to collaborate by the secret police and sent back to the West as a double agent. However, his promise to cooperate had been a ruse and he revealed all to the British. This led to further sanctions but as the Communist court could only punish those they had jurisdiction over they targeted Sláma's nearest and dearest. On 21 October 1952 a second trial took place – as revenge for the escaped spy Cyril Sláma Jr. Cyril Sr. got another six years on top of the 14 he already had. His wife, the two brothers' mother, received 11 years. Věroslav Sláma's wife got six. Her father even got 10 years. Other relatives of Sláma's, 13 in total, were also convicted. In all they were sentenced to 74 years in jail. "It was horrendous for our family. We were all locked up: father, mother, my wife, my wife's parents, sister-in-law. Even my wife's 14-year-old sister was arrested..." Their house was seized by the state. "There was nobody left at liberty," says Sláma.

The Czechoslovak intelligence didn't leave Cyril Sláma in peace in the West. He moved to the UK and changed his name to Sadler. He later moved to Zimbabwe. He died shortly before the fall of the Iron Curtain, in 1988, and didn't live to see his wife in Brno. Or his brother.

In the end Věroslav Sláma spent "only" 11 years in prison. On his release he returned by Želešice. He became active in public life following the collapse of communism and was elected a Federal Assembly deputy.

*Text by Luděk Navara*