

THE COMMUNISTS SET OFF FOR OLD TOWN SQUARE WITH GUNS. AGAINST WHOM? AGAINST US!

František Wiendl (born. 1923)

His first route as a people-smuggler led across the Iron Curtain from Nýrsko to the border, somewhere between the villages of Liščí and Červený dřev. That's how František Wiendl initially crossed the border into Germany with a refugee. Into the American zone.

"I had studied the route on a map. It then turned out that the route had been well selected," he says. Then 25, he had no experience of people-smuggling. Neither did he have a choice: his father, who guided refugees to the border, was behind bars. He had been caught writing anti-Communist slogans by militiamen in an armed patrol loyal to the new totalitarian regime. His wife, František Wiendl's mother, was also arrested.

"When father was arrested, his acquaintance, who wanted to be brought to the West, came to us. Apparently father had agreed with his friend in Cologne that he would assist people in escaping in this way. But now, after father's arrest, it was a new situation. I let him sleep over and in the morning Josef Touš, who was a train conductor, tried to guide him. But Schneider evidently didn't keep his nerve and didn't follow orders, so Touš refused to take responsibility. So I decided I'd take him myself," says Wiendl.

They reached Nýrsko by train before continuing on foot. It went well so the crossings could continue. Others also became involved in the organising: Jan Štork, Jan Prantl and the doctor Jiří Krbec. They already knew one another from the war, when they had resisted the Nazis.

František Wiendl was born on 31 December 1923 in Klatovy. He apprenticed as a bricklayer and attended a construction-focused secondary vocational school in Pilsen. He was greatly influenced by the views of his father, also named František. During WWI he had been captured by the Russians and witnessed the violence that followed the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. He always feared that Bolshevism would reach the then Czechoslovakia. The father's views left their mark on the son. The latter inherited his industriousness and democratic outlook and during the war both became involved in the resistance, distributing leaflets and collecting weapons as part of the Lidice resistance group. The father had to go into hiding before the end of the war for fear of capture by

the Gestapo. They also became engaged in armed combat. Fortunately the Americans were near, so the German soldiers laid down their weapons and surrendered.

Following the Communist coup of February 1948 father and son again became involved in the struggle for democracy. To František Wiendl everything was clear. "The Communists set off for Old Town Square with guns. Against whom? Against us!" he says.

Along with friends he first wrote slogans on buildings in Klatovy. Their aim was simply to warn and alert the public. But then things escalated. The Communists increased the terror, making arrests and harassing people. The outlook was extremely bleak. Whoever could and wished to live freely attempted to escape to the West.

Though the border was guarded and defectors were risking their life, the wall of death – meaning the Iron Curtain with electric fences and minefields – wasn't yet in place. Whoever knew the border area and had a bit of luck could reach the other side. Having achieved it, Wiendl's father wanted to help as best he could. But what to do once he himself was behind bars?

So František Wiendl, his son, took his place as a people-smuggler. After his successful first operation, smooth second and third crossings followed. But then the situation became more dramatic.

On the fourth crossing the entire group was arrested. There was a small child among them and he cried. The sleeping pills prescribed by a doctor had worn off. In fact the crossing was successful, but there were hold-ups. Which was a problem. A patrol arrested František Wiendl on his way back. Fortunately he had a release pass, but suspicions were raised, largely because his father had been arrested writing anti-regime slogans.

The following day the secret police visited František Wiendl at his place of work.

Despite the dangers, the group intensified their activities. They worked for free, not levying any fee. The members began working with cross-border agents in the service of the West. And Wiendl got an "offer" from Alois Suty, an agent of the US CIS service: to deliver letters from Western aviators who had emigrated to their former fellow combatants throughout the country.

"I crossed the whole country on a motorbike in those days. From Albrechtice via Bratislava and Třebíč. But I did deliver those letters from the Western airmen," František Wiendl recalls.

However, his final people-smuggling mission was approaching. The plan was that they would bring the refugees by van to an agreed spot, from where agent Alois Suty would take them across the border.

It was 20 November 1949. It was the people-smugglers' last journey. They had no idea the secret police were onto them. On the journey driver Jan Prantl noticed a black BMW in the mirror. It was clear. They were all going to be arrested: Wiendl, Prantl, Krbec...

So František Wiendl ended up in jail, awaiting trial. Naturally it was going to be a show trial. Thoroughly prepared. But first the armed forces needed to capture Alois Suty. At a farm near Klatovy, in Pocinovice. He was to stop off there on 8 April 1950. The inhabitants, the Touš family, were reliable, while in addition they had an agreed signal in the barn and all was in order. However, the night before 8 April, StB and OBZ (Military Defence Intelligence) officers surrounded the farm, setting the perfect trap. In a shootout Suty was injured in the hand and one of the officers was hit in the stomach, probably by a fellow officer in the confusion of the capture.

In the meantime, František Wiendl came under strong pressure in prison. "They shoved me into a dungeon and I was brought for interrogations. I had to talk non-stop during them. In between they thrashed me," he says.

The trial began on 12 December 1950 at the district court in Klatovy. There were 14 defendants and proceedings were relayed by tannoy on the town square. The charges included treason, espionage, attempted murder and public violence. In the end František Wiendl received "only" 18 years. His father got 25, as did the doctor Krbec. Suty was hanged on 12 April 1951 and buried at an unknown location.

Prior to his death Suty was ordered to pay a fine of 10,000 crowns. Indeed, all the defendants had to pay different amounts. And they all had their property confiscated.

František Wiendl was mining uranium in Jáchymov when he accidentally broke through to an old tunnel where silver had been extracted. He and a friend tried to escape. They climbed a ladder but didn't know where the tunnel came out. The pair looked for a way out but they were falling behind in mining uranium. They had no choice but to fill in the

corridor they had discovered. “So we drilled it in and blew up it up. That was the end of it,” Weindl says.

He was released in 1960.

Ten lost years. But he has no regrets.

He’s convinced that he did the right thing. He had plenty of right to resist.

Text by Luděk Navara