

THE HARDEST THING WAS THE INTERROGATIONS...

Bohumil Zhof (*1928)

Bohumil Zhof took a stand at the very inception of the Communist totalitarian system and experienced the cruellest torture imaginable. Electric current in his boots. Electric boots, they called them. "Naturally, the hardest thing was the interrogations. The Uherské Hradiště StB investigated us, but the actual investigation took place in Vsetín. A crew from Uherské Hradiště came to the chateau in Vsetín. Grebeníček, Čáň, Mareček and local officers from Vsetín as well... I was unlucky in that I worked in Vsetín itself and was the first arrested. So I experienced the greatest drama right away that evening at the Vsetín chateau," says Zhof. They arrested him at 9 am. He was then working at the MORAGRO agricultural purchasing agency so was arrested at the slaughterhouse in Vsetín. They brought him to the chateau where he was forced to write down all he knew... In the meantime, the others had been arrested.

"They placed me on a chair and somebody said the rest of them should look at me – I was capable of anything! I had to take my shoes off. They tied me to a bed and two of them took batons and beat me into unconsciousness. On the heels. Then I came to and had to walk and run around them. This was repeated. Again into unconsciousness. The StB men had political prisoner insignia: Čáň, Grebeníček... Hlavačka." Among the Uherské Hradiště StB were investigators who had been imprisoned and persecuted by the Nazis during the war, for illegal activities, for instance. "I said to them: Is this what they taught you in the concentration camps? Of course, I shouldn't have said it... they stuck their boots in... the whole day nothing was written, they didn't need to know anything. Beating sufficed. The interrogations lasted a week for me. The first day nothing was written down. The second neither. I couldn't talk or even walk. It was terrible..."

Bohumil Zhof survived the torture and in the end was lucky. As he had been arrested shortly after the takeover he wasn't convicted under harsh Communist laws and was released after two years. He had to work in the Auxiliary Technical Battalions, but that was survivable...

Bohumil Zhof was born on 1 January 1928 in the village of Hovězí in Wallachia and from a young age was active in the Orel Catholic sports and cultural organisation. In 1948, when the Communists came to power, he was already working. A business school graduate, he had found work at an agricultural purchasing agency. Orels from the whole area met at the Oravecs' cottage in Velké Karlovice, where they studied, debated, danced, sang and

did exercises. However, Orel was full of patriotic young people loyal to different ideals than those of communism. Its very existence made Orel a danger to the new regime and the Communists decided to wipe the organisation out. Along with Rudolf Slavík, Josef Plánka and František Oravec from Velké Karlovice, Bohumil Zhof organised a meeting at the cottage which they dubbed the "1st illegal meeting of the Horní Vsacko Orel". By this time all of them had become involved in the resistance and they considered how to establish a resistance group headed by the bravest of them, Josef Plánka. The group was named Blaník. They planned to construct a secret transmitter but were unable to find some parts and had to abandon the idea. But they at least circulated the "Catholic People" proclamation, warning against the ascent of red totalitarianism.

At this time representatives of the national Orel organisation, Jiří Malášek and Bohuslav Koukal, visited Karlovice. They nettled the secret police, who were afraid that all of Orel's members would go underground and create a national organised resistance network. This was something they could not permit at any price.

"We kept going to Karlovice after the February coup and a priest, Father Antonín Straňák, used to go there with us. We also went there after an Orel pilgrimage that had been planned even before the coup. The main organiser, Oravec, decided to escape across the border and went to his cousin's place somewhere in the borderlands. But they arrested and caught Oravec and took him to prison in Uherské Hradiště, and that's where it all began," Zhof says.

At that time nobody knew how long it would be before communism fell. Some believed it be very quick. "I received an order that a group should be formed. Also what we were to do as a group and how we should carry out resistance. To this day I don't know exactly who it was from. I said from the start that that wasn't the way to do it, that we needed to be more cautious," says Zhof. It cannot be ruled out that provocation of various kinds was involved.

Zhof received more orders on resistance operations whose origins have also remained unclear. They came from an unfamiliar address and were purportedly from the resistance organisation Vietor.

In any case, the secret police got on the trail of the resisters. However, they needed a pretext so their clampdown on them could be genuinely severe. Therefore commander Ludvík Hlavačka decided to hide weapons at the Oravec's cottage and then "discover" them, pretending to have foiled a resistance operation. For certainty, they brought a

whole arsenal to the cottage: seven military rifles, five automatics, a pistol, 300 rounds of ammunition, a machine gun belt with ammunition and 500 machine gun rounds.

It was of course a textbook example of provocation intended to justify arrests. They took place during December 1948. Following the arrest of Oravec by the border in Aš, Josef Plánka was picked up at his secondary school on 21 December. More arrests were made on 27 December: Rudolf Slavík, Petr Haferník, Fr. Stanislav Straňák. And the first arrested in Vsetín that day was Bohumil Zhof. Fortunately his brother Oldřich managed to escape in time and later reached Australia.

Things were a lot worse for Zhof. His detention was followed by a week of interrogations at Vsetín chateau. "I couldn't talk or even walk. It was terrible... Then I saw they'd brought in Oravec and Plánka."

Zhof had already undergone torture involving an electrical current in special boots that the investigators had brought to Vsetín from Hradiště. "They put these boots on your feet when you were in your socks or bare feet. I don't know exactly. They shoved them on me and when they turned on the current it felt like my feet would be ripped off. This was the first day and they didn't even know what some of our names were. But they showed what they had on us. If you haven't undergone it, you can't comprehend it. The electric current was the worst. They had a transformer and turned the voltage up or down. They just said, Turn it up so he remembers. It lifted you up, twisted you, and then you fell to the ground. The room was full. There were people lying on the ground," says Zhof. He adds that everything took place haphazardly. The investigators walked among them and the prisoners' eyes weren't covered, as was the custom during interrogations in those days. "Grebeníček walked and spoke the most." Zhof didn't know him then but later when he was brought to the Uherské Hradiště prison fellow inmates spoke about him. He saw him in the corridor. He also saw much more. Once they brought out a prisoner. He was dead. "His name was Pohůnek – they carried him out when we were bringing food around. The corridor guards said he was a goner, that he'd hanged himself. Others said they'd beaten him to death. I don't know..."

Zhof was in Vsetín for a week and then in Uherské Hradiště for four months. He had to be on his guard at all times. Mainly, he says, so that others wouldn't get in trouble. He was released in 1951 and sent to the Auxiliary Technical Battalions. He had to do three years of work brigade so went down the mines. When he returned to Wallachia he got work in a shop but was immediately sacked. Even after the fall of communism he didn't get to see justice meted out to those who had cruelly tortured him. "It wasn't even a trial. The judge was a Communist and they had ties. One investigator, Zavadilík, excused himself. Hlavačka

excused himself on health grounds but at the same time I saw him in Prague. He lived at Letná and went for walks with his wife! So I saw it wasn't worth it."

Zhof married Marie Štrbíková, who was two years his junior and had also been a political prisoner. Her father too had been a political prisoner and died in a prison hospital, having been convicted for aiding members of the resistance group Světлана.

Text by Luděk Navara