

## ***I NEVER CRIED***

### **Ailsa Domanová (\*1927)**

Ailsa Domanová, a Slovak with British roots, takes pride in the fact that she never surrendered or showed weakness. *"I'm proud that I never did anything to be ashamed of. When the StB interrogations came, I never gave in. I don't even know how many of them there were. I didn't count them. They took my English books, thinking they were code... And when as a 24-year-old I requested that they allow me to cross the Iron Curtain to Britain, because my mother was seriously ill and I wanted to say goodbye to her, they said that she'd die anyway and would be buried without me too,"* she says, describing the atmosphere in Slovakia at the turn of the 1950s. *"But I never cried,"* she adds.

The secret police in Communist Czechoslovakia set their sights on Domanová because of her husband and her own background as a foreigner from the hostile West. Her husband had refused to divorce her and also refused to join the Communist Party. They were keen to recruit him as an important figure in the second resistance; he had fought against Hitler on the Western Front and later during the Slovak National Uprising. After the war he made an important contribution to the hunt for Nazi war criminals and served as deputy military attaché at the embassy in London. Following the Communist coup in February 1948 his promising career came to an end and he found himself on the street. As did his wife. *"On the feast of St. Nicholas they threw me into the courtyard, into the snow. I had a little boy on my hands. And suddenly I became homeless..."* However, Ailsa Domanová and her husband both lived to see the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. She became the first Slovak to receive the Order of the British Embassy for her service to WWII veterans and for her special contribution to relations between the United Kingdom and Slovakia.

Ailsa Domanová was born in the UK in 1927 into a well-to-do family in which both parents had middle-class backgrounds. *"Father was an officer. I grew up in a girls' boarding school and worked for the Red Cross during the war,"* she says. During the war she also met Alexander Doman, a Czechoslovak army officer, in the UK, and was won over by his education and courage. It was the spring of 1944 and the end of the war still seemed distant. At that time her new boyfriend from a faraway country was called Alexander Deutelbaum. He was a member of a Slovak Jewish family from Nové Město nad Váhom and 23 of his relatives died in the concentration camps or were murdered elsewhere. Alexander didn't wish to bear a German name so changed it to Doman. He married Ailsa during his time at the embassy in London. They were starting a family but

in the meantime had to leave for Czechoslovakia. Ailsa wanted to give birth in England but did not receive permission to do so from the Czechoslovak authorities. Her son was born in Czechoslovakia shortly after the Communist coup, meaning the family couldn't travel to the West without the authorities' say-so. What's more, the totalitarian regime was turning their sights on them. Doman was released from the army and Ailsa found herself on the street. She ended up in a working class apartment and washed nappies in a trough. *"Soldiers arrived from the Zvolen barracks and banged on the door. They carried the furniture into the courtyard in the snow. My husband finished in the army. And they didn't let me go to England to my family for another 10 years,"* she says. *"They wrote that it wasn't in Czechoslovakia's interests for them to let me go. I had worse pay than a cleaner. I worked for three years as a seamstress – I re sewed smelly old things, fur coats... Of course they gave me such work on purpose. They were punishing my husband through me. Also by not letting me go home."*

But that was by no means everything. The secret police attempted to blackmail her into giving up information, for instance about who had been invited to the British Embassy. They also needed her passport, evidently for somebody who could make use of it for espionage purposes. *"I didn't even get ration cards for food until I had handed over my English passport."*

All the good she had done for Slovakia and Slovaks was turned against her at that time. At a time that penicillin was scarce in Czechoslovakia she attempted to find it for those in dire need of such medication. *"And suddenly it was a problem – apparently I had been a spy..."* She also helped veterans from the West, participants in the second resistance who were out of favour under the Communist regime. *"We had a tough life. We had to sell everything we had. We were barred from normal employment. I studied pharmacy for three and a half years and simply couldn't work in the field. Fortunately, I have a happy disposition – my ancestors were from Scotland..."*, she says.

When the Communist regime officials finally allowed her to visit her family in England she had to sign a pledge to return. Otherwise, they threatened, her husband would be sent to the uranium mines as punishment. And her child to an orphanage. But she never regretted anything she had done. *"I never spoke about our fate with my husband. We loved each other a lot. I couldn't hold anything against him. He was a wonderful person."* Alexander Doman spoke six languages and was versatile. The same went for his wife. Later, when the regime eased off, she worked as a laboratory assistant and helped many local people learn English. After the fall of communism she campaigned to have a monument to Western resistance fighters erected in the capital Bratislava. It was unveiled in 2003.

*“In Slovakia there were monuments to Russians, Romanians... But for those who fought in the West, who don't have graves, who died in the sea, those people had nowhere where a candle could be lit. It bothered me for years. So I fought for it everywhere. And I succeeded in bringing it about.”* The queen of England thanked her for her work for UK-Slovak relations during and after the war. She received the Order of the British Empire and other honours. In Slovakia she has experienced success and humiliation. At her husband's funeral she saw how quickly glory could turn into indifference, disinterest or even hostility. When Alexander Doman marched through the streets after victory in the war with other members of the Second Parachute Brigade, jubilant crowds had thrown flowers to them. Later when both fell out of favour following the Communist takeover they experienced strange reactions from a number of acquaintances. People crossed the street. Greetings dried up. She sensed the reasons were fear, concern and distrust. And she believed the situation would change for the better, which actually happened. But she had never turned against Slovakia, her new homeland.

*Text by Luděk Navara*