

WE WERE BROUGHT UP IN THE SPIRIT OF ŠTEFÁNIK

Martin Janec (*1922)

“The whole army had fallen apart and we were the last unit that was still holding together. Generals Ján Golian and Rudolf Viest came to us in Donovaly, where we were based,” says Martin Janec, looking back at the time in October 1944 when the Germans drove the Slovak National Uprising back to the mountains. It was time to switch to partisan fighting.

Their unit was tasked with accompanying the legendary commanders of the uprising against the German Nazis and the domestic People’s Party regime on their onward journey. *“This is the most valuable ID that I received and that I possess,”* Janec says respectfully, showing the ID card he was handed by Ján Golian himself. Janec was one of the few that accompanied the great commander to the very end.

However, he himself had been involved in the resistance since 1939, when his entire family were active in the resistance group Obrana národa. *“There were four of us brothers. We were brought up in Brezová pod Bradlom in the spirit of Štefánik,”* Janec says of the values that shaped him. In the town where he was born in 1922 there was a Czechoslovak spirit and a tradition of fighting for freedom. He personally knew many legionnaires who had fought to bring about the First Czechoslovak Republic. He had a strong relationship to the country and enjoyed a happy and harmonious childhood.

This made the threat of Hitler and the subsequent breaking up of Czechoslovakia all the harder to take. *“For us 1939 was really tragic. When the Slovak state was created and they put the Czechs in the Protectorate, many of our neighbours and friends were forced to move. In those days we were living in Bratislava and a large fence led from Robotnícká St. in the direction of the Czech lands. And on that fence was written: Czech, Lutheran and Jew, they’re all one crew. I tell you this for illustration, so you know what kind of times we were living in, and also that we were determined to do our utmost to help,”* he says.

Shortly after the break-up of Czechoslovakia the first democratic resistance organisation, Obrana národa, was formed with the involvement of elite Czechoslovak officers. One of its main tasks was to assist persecuted individuals escaping from the Protectorate. Their route then led through Slovakia and Hungary to Yugoslavia, from where they left for France. There they formed the foundations of a nascent Czechoslovak foreign army.

Many of those who managed to get abroad thanks to the resistance groups subsequently became famous in the international resistance, such as General Milan Píka, who joined the RAF, and the paratrooper Jaroslav Klemeš.

Brezová pod Bradlom became a strategic spot, not only due to its proximity to the border but also thanks to the locals' spirit of resistance. Martin Janec's family, who helped those in trouble to flee, also became a key connection. Martin himself was actively involved. *"Around seven officers passed through our family like this,"* he said. They also hid Doctor Fanfulle, who was threatened with death in the Protectorate at the time.

Shortly after the outbreak of the uprising the young medic Martin helped English airmen who had been shot down and wished to reach central Slovakia. When the armed resistance got underway he didn't hesitate for a moment. At that time there was a partisan group operating in Brezová pod Bradlom, led by commander Jan Repta. He was unwilling to take on untrained soldiers, telling Martin and his older brother Samko they would be most useful in the very middle of the armed uprising.

So the pair arrived after some adventures in Banská Bystrica, to which they had brought the airmen, in the early days of the uprising. He stresses today that this was only possible thanks to the help of good people. Samko fought with the partisans until the end of the war while the younger Martin was offered a place in the University Guard Unit. It was a special military detachment created on the initiative and orders of General Ján Golian. It was entirely composed of students and professors, with the latter responsible for training. Among them were, for instance, the Chovanec brothers, who had been involved in printing anti-regime flyers for some time.

"There were over 250 of us. Mainly university students but also secondary school students and boys before their leaving exams, from all corners of Slovakia. For me this is proof of the Slovakia-wide reach of the uprising against the Nazis and the collaborationist People's Party regime," says Janec. *"We went through very tough, difficult training and then mainly took part in patrols of the foothills of the Low Tatras, between Korytnica and Donovaly, because there's a valley there where it's possible to reach Pohroní from Donovaly."*

They carried out a number of successful operations. The University Guard Unit also cleared terrain in the area of Malý Šturec and in Čremošné. At this time this was an important role as at that time the SS-Schill mechanised infantry regiment was attempting to breach a protected zone so as to reach Banská Bystrica.

Captain Milan Polák and General Ján Golian, who came on an inspection, were satisfied with the students' work during the uprising. One of the members of the detachment, Július Chovan, a well-known chronicler of the University Guard Unit, recalls that the politician Vavro Šrobár also visited the students. He also writes that the Bratislava government infiltrated the unit with student spies; they were uncovered and interned at a chateau in Slovenská Ľupča.

However, for Janec the standout moment was the arrival of the two legendary uprising leaders. "I was just a rank-and-file soldier at the end of the company, in part because I was the smallest," says one of those who accompanied the commanders to the very end.

This was after the quelling of the uprising. It was just these young students that left Donovaly with the supreme commanders on a journey from Donovaly headed for Koží Hřbety.

However, the numerically far superior German forces gradually broke up the University Guard Unit as it retreated, capturing its members. They then caught the uprising's two supreme commanders in a mountain chalet at Pohronský Bukovec. In the meantime, Janec's parents had been arrested by the Gestapo. All four of their sons were then in the resistance but fortunately they survived the war.

The captured soldiers were to be placed on transports to Nazi POW camps. Janec, who had become separated from his unit and joined an unfamiliar one, succeeded in evading deportation. He knew he couldn't hesitate. It was a matter of life and death.

However, he hadn't yet used up all his luck. He experienced the dying days of the war in Brezová pod Bradlom and was reunited with his whole family after it. He was devastated to learn that the commanders he had served with had died at the end of the war. The evidence available to historians suggests that the Nazis probably murdered generals Ján Golian and Rudolf Viest at Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Following the war Janec graduated in medicine and hoped for better times. However, they didn't arrive. As a democrat he rejected the newly installed Communist regime. During this period he succeeded in following his own path without significant compromise.

He was a pioneer in introducing new surgery techniques and methods in the field of congenital malformations of the lower part of the digestive system and birth defects of the genital organs (so-called intersex). He was also an expert on children's thoracic

surgery. He was the first professor of medicine in Slovakia and is today an honorary member of the Slovak Medical Chamber.

He has also been recognised for his resistance activities. He was welcomed by Slovak President Andrej Kiska in a group of selected veterans at events commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, received an award from the National Memory Institute and won the Benda Prize from the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes.

He never betrayed his ideals. For him it was incomprehensible that many fellow fighters from the uprising ended up in Communist jails and that the regime sought to wipe out the memory of the two legendary uprising commanders. He helped organise meetings of old resisters that were also attended by Jarmila Golianová, the widow of the legendary commander, who was herself imprisoned by the Communists.

Martin Janec has a clear outlook in this regard to this day. *“The Communist Party’s interpretation utterly deformed and obfuscated the Slovak National Uprising. It had had a clear direction and target. And that direction was democracy and freedom.”*

Text by Soňa Gyarfašová