

MY GUARDIAN ANGEL WAS ALWAYS BY MY SIDE

Oto Šimko (*1924)

Life or death. Waiting at the local jail in Liptovský Mikuláš to be interrogated by Hlinka Guard officers and the Gestapo, he knew it would come down to one of those things. Escape from the guarded prison was unrealistic. After a heavy going over, when they had tried to extract information about his partisan group, he could barely stand. But still he refused to divulge anything. What's more, he was ill. He didn't know how he'd get out. The Germans were executing one partisan after the other. However, good fortune intervened. As on so many occasions before. Today he is convinced he was meant to survive. In part so he could tell his story.

"My life is a tilde. One day up, the next day down. It's like the old Czech song: Life is just chance," says Oto Šimko, who was born in Topolčany, Slovakia, in 1924. Initially the tilde of his life had an upward tendency. He enjoyed a happy childhood in a traditional Jewish family, experiencing his first years in Topolčany and Nové Zámky before a move to Nitra. His father was an extraordinarily educated man. He had studied law in Budapest and was a lawyer prior to becoming a judge. His mother mainly lived for the family while the real soul of the family was Šimko's grandmother.

"Before the war we never had a sense of what anti-Semitism meant. Our friends were Jews and Christians and no differences were made," he says of his childhood, when he was happiest in Zobor and the surrounding countryside. His best friend was his brother Ivan. He was three years younger and Oto took him under his wing. The pair had a great, harmonious relationship and helped one another in every way possible.

However, everything changed in 1939, when Czechoslovakia was broken up and an independent Slovak state was created on Hitler's urging. Initially his father, who had been advised to escape to Hungary, refused to countenance the situation. A committed social democrat, even under Austria-Hungary, he was also a pan-Slavist and considered himself perhaps more of a Slovak patriot than Jewish. He brought his two children up the same way.

Unfortunately the People's Party soon launched the first injustices against Jews. These were gradually ratcheted up.

“A young person takes it in a bit differently from those already familiar with disaster. We always tried to find some way around it. We covered up the star with something and when they took our radio we made a crystal set and liked to listen to the news. It was youthful stuff,” says Oto Šimko, recalling his feelings at the time. The first real blow was when he was barred from grammar school. *“The fact I couldn’t study was the first major shock for me. I’ll never forget that awful sensation when you feel like an inferior person,”* he says.

In 1942, the deportation of the Jewish population began. Oto was just 18. *“My first guardian angel was by my side in March, when the transports of free people started. At the time I was digging the Šur canal in Svatý Jur so wasn’t at home when they came for me,”* he says, recalling the unfathomable workings of fate. At this time the People’s Party placed his father in a concentration camp in Ilava, where people were held indefinitely without sentence. He was there as an enemy of the state – a Jew and what’s more a social democrat.

The People’s Party regime sent the remainder of the family – Oto, his grandmother, mother and brother – to an assembly camp in Žilina, from where transports ran to Poland. *“It was then that my guardian angel acted for the second time – they stopped transports at that time.”* Instead of to Auschwitz the entire family went to an assembly camp in Vyhne, where they remained for 10 months.

The Jewish prisoners laboured in all kinds of workshops, producing furniture and clothing for the Slovak state. It was then that his father, an acclaimed lawyer, received an exception from the ministry. This was the initiative of then minister of justice Gejza Fritz. The People’s Party regime was short on specialists so the Jewish lawyer was given responsibility for land registers. Oto, who had also been released, was at this time in contact with illegal workers and acquired false papers. He worked as a book binder in Liptovský Mikuláš. When the Slovak National Uprising broke out he instantly declared himself ready to fight, joining the 9th partisan Liptovský Mikuláš unit.

“It’s impossible to describe the change in the feeling inside. Imagine, I’ve got a rifle in my hand and I’m fighting my persecutors and executors. We’re on the same level. In other words, I’m a free man internally. So I too can fight against that evil,” he says.

There were even two Frenchmen in the partisan group. When they captured a fanatic SS man, Šimko was tasked with settling accounts with him. However, he was only able to open fire once the German began to seig heil. When their friend Janko Pressburger was seriously injured they didn’t abandon him to his fate but helped across the mountains.

By then the uprising had been quelled. Šimko headed for Liptovský Mikuláš to look for Dr. Dropp, who hid Jews and partisans. However, on his way there he was stopped by the guardist Kružliak, who threw him in jail.

A round of interrogations and fights began. His investigators wanted to hear all he knew about the partisan unit as well as the recent execution of the Nazi. As a sworn partisan, he refused to speak. At that time he frequently thought about the fortunate coincidences that had saved him so many times. However, he hadn't used up all his luck.

Scabies broke out in the jail and he was placed in the prison hospital. *"Leave my clothes here,"* he told the nurse, who agreed. Summoning all his strength, he managed to escape out a hospital window.

Until the end of the war he hid in Nitra in the basement of a Mr. Truska, who had helped save 10 or so Orthodox Jews. His mother and grandmother were also concealed by good people. When the war ended he met his father, who had also been in the mountains. They were luckier than their extended family. Almost all of Šimko's uncles and aunts died in Nazi concentration camps.

They were still waiting to see if his brother would return but it wasn't to be. *"They had caught him in Nitra and he had been in Sered and in Auschwitz. And then he died on a death march."*

As a judge his father tried guardists and fascist criminals after the war, including propaganda minister Tido Jozef Gašpar, the head of the Carpathian German Party Franz Karasin, Eichman's advisor Dieter Wislicény and the guardist Gombarčík.

Šimko, who had been interested in the question of justice as a young idealist, followed his father and enrolled to study law. However, in Czechoslovakia this was the hard-line 1950s. The tide of his life again inclined downwards. While he did manage to study, when the Slánský trial took place he was removed from the social affairs ministry, where he worked briefly, and sent to work on a lathe.

Later, following the deaths of Stalin and Gottwald, he began to publish his first pieces in the newspaper Práce. His talent was noticed and the daily Smena hired him. There he encountered a strong 1960s generation of reporters, including Gavrila Gryzlov and Sláva Kalný. However, he didn't remain long in journalism as he was kicked out of the newspaper in 1971 following party screenings. He worked as an enterprise lawyer until his retirement.

Following the Velvet Revolution he received a number of awards. President Andrej Kiska gave him the highest state honour in 2017 and he also got the Memory of Nations Prize in Prague.

Years later the past remains alive for Šimko. Not just because he returns increasingly often to his wartime youth in his mind. He was greatly disturbed when the fascist party of Mariána Kotleba made it into the Slovak Parliament in 2016.

“For me personally that event had an additional, I would say emotional, dimension. A few years ago when I saw the Kotleba crowd in their Slovak Brotherhood uniforms, what flashed before my eyes were memories of the days of the wartime Slovak state and guardists marching the streets singing Cut and Chop Till There’s Blood. I read one editorial in which I came across this idea: The tragedy of these elections will be the fact that the living partisans and Jews who survived the concentration camps will die in an era when Slovak, legitimately elected fascists will seig heil in the Slovak Parliament. This concerns me, I feel,” he says.

For this reason he still spends time with young people, like a living book, explaining to them how things were in the past.

“Unlike my brother, who didn’t survive, my guardian angel was with me at every moment. That’s why I enjoy every single day. And as long as I’m here, it’s my duty to speak about it.”

Text by Soňa Gyarfašová