

**WE ESCAPED FROM THE CAMP – I WAS CONVINCED
WE’D PULL IT OFF
Anton Tomík (*1932)**

Anton Tomík took part in one of the most daring escapes from a Communist labour camp or prison. In 1955, a total of 10 prisoners burrowed under the wire and broke out of the Nikolaj camp in the Jáchymov district. Tomík was among them. *“We didn’t run toward the forest but toward the screws, to their barracks. There was a wooden fence between them and us, so it wasn’t possible to see there. Nobody expected we’d escape in that way,”* he says, explaining how the escape succeeded. At least initially. The refugees managed to get a long distance from the camp. They first tried to sneak across the border into what was then West Germany. However, there were lots of armed men and dogs everywhere. So they had to go the other way, toward the interior. *“There were a thousand people after us!”*

They headed for Karlovy Vary, moving at night and hiding by day. *“We were lucky it didn’t rain. We hid in foliage. Then we saw the barrel of a rifle. It was just a game warden. But the next day he reported us,”* says Tomík.

Tomík was wounded in the subsequent chase. *“I was shot. I felt something like as if I’d been hit by a hammer. But I kept running. I realised I was bleeding. They kept shooting. By then there were only five of us. They hit me, but I don’t exactly what happened – for me that day has been erased. In that moment I didn’t know whether I’d hit myself or been hit by somebody. They found me unconscious. I remember a dog licked me. I guess I was covered in blood. They then laid me out in a car and I passed out again. Then I came to and heard a nurse, saying she had to clean the wound. That nurse was so kind...”*

Anton Tomík had been imprisoned as a student as a member of a subversive group. But he himself hadn’t yet managed to actually do anything. He survived harsh interrogations and subsequent imprisonment in the tough conditions of Jáchymov. He also survived injuries sustained during the breakout. He was released in 1960.

Tomík was born in Skalica in the west of Slovakia. His parents were private farmers and naturally were impacted by collectivisation following the Communist takeover. Having refused to enter a cooperative, they were subjected to various forms of pressure and harassment. At that time their son was studying mechanical engineering at a vocational

school. He had originally dreamt of becoming a pilot but was at least able to join the local flying club.

A Christian, Tomík was aware of how priests were being persecuted and how forced collectivisation was hurting his family. Understandably, he had no fondness for the regime. His classmates found some wartime guns and brought them to their dormitory. This was at a time when a major hunt was on for spies and saboteurs and the secret police victimised all who disagreed with the new order. Tomík and his friends discussed resistance. However, he never actually succeeded in carrying out any operations because he was arrested. The whole thing happened very fast. He was caught on a trip to Slovenský ráj, which he was visiting with friends in summer 1951. While he was on his way to a shop to buy bread in Spišská Nová Ves they arrested him and hauled him off to Košice. Immediately afterwards he was taken in a police van to Leopoldov, as if he were a serious criminal. *“They claimed that I’d apparently wanted to set up a transmitter or something. We said we were students... But they didn’t even investigate us. They transported us across the country with our hands in irons,”* says Tomík. The police van looked like a miniature cell (50cm by 50cm) on wheels. The vehicle was sweltering in the summer and bumped along on badly surfaced roads. *“It was hot. It was an awful journey. I thought I’d die. Faecal matter was sloshing about under our feet. It was terrible.”* But that wasn’t the last of the horror.

“The worst thing was that when we were locked up we didn’t know what for. We lay on the bare ground. We had only two blankets and the lights were on all night. We had to lie with our arms by our sides all night. It wasn’t possible to sleep anyway, because they did interrogations day and night and the cries of prisoners were audible. A warden walked about, kicking the doors. We had to walk about non-stop from 6 am. When there was a search, we had to face the corner. During interrogations they put felt on your face and then the investigator shone a light in your eyes. So I couldn’t even see properly. They said we’d be goners if we didn’t sign,” says Tomík.

Solitary confinement was particularly terrible. *“I had a spider in my cell that was the only living creature in my proximity.”*

That was in Leopoldov prison. They were later brought to court in Bratislava, where they had been threatened with the death penalty, despite still not knowing the accusations against them. *“My faith helped me most of all. I’m a Christian and I survived thanks to prayer. I kept reciting prayers – otherwise it would have sent me insane.”*

In the end he got 15 years for alleged treason. *“We saw neither a charge sheet nor a lawyer. It was only during rehabilitation that we learned everything they’d put on us.”*

From court they were taken to jail in Ilava and later to the Jáchymov area. There Tomík ended up in one of the worst labour camps, Nikolaj, in the Krušné Mountains. The conditions were appalling. It was a long march, with each prisoner bound very tightly to the next, from the camp to the mine shaft. *“At the beginning and the end there were screws with dogs and machine guns. It was minus 20 outside and all we had were light jackets,”* he says.

Tomík decided to escape. A group of prisoners had planned a breakout and took him in. Their idea was to burrow beneath the wire.

They succeeded, escaping in November 1955. However, after two days or so they were caught. Tomík suffered gunshot wounds and was captured. He was fortunate. That period was not so severe and he “only” got an additional two years. By coincidence he was returned to Leopoldov, where his jail term had begun. Though the breakout failed, he says it made an impact: conditions for prisoners in Jáchymov improved. They received better clothing and were allowed more heating in winter. Visiting conditions also got better.

Following his release Anton Tomík returned to his native Skalice. However, as a former political prisoner nobody was willing to hire him. So he moved to Bratislava, thinking it would be easier to go unnoticed in a city.

“Then I found a wife, a teacher who risked losing her job if she married a political prisoner. But thank heavens we got married and we’re alive,” he says. And adds that he regrets nothing he has ever done.

Text by Luděk Navara