

THERE'S NO NEED TO BE AFRAID

Branislav Tvarožek (*1924)

It was night and they set off for the centre of Bratislava, as they had done several times previously. The fact it was the eve of the anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia made it all the more magical, though that country had disappeared from the map of Europe three years earlier. The electronics and technology students, aged 16, took out some paint and, not for the first time, painted over swastikas. The same fate befell slogans proclaiming the glory of the Nazis and Hitler. They were determined to do their bit against him, the collaborationist regime and representatives of the People's Party. However, the Germans had guards. *"They caught us red-handed,"* says Branislav Tvarožek of the moment in 1942 when young secondary school students became enemies of the state.

Zdeno Pálka, Pavel Zdút-Šťastný, Miro Zamboj and Branislav Tvarožek were four friends from a grammar school on Bratislava's Legionářská St. *"Pavel's and Miro's fathers were legionnaires, while Zdeno Pálka's family were Czech,"* says Tvarožek, who was born in 1925. Brezová pod Bradlom, where his family came from, was known for its legionnaire tradition, strong ties to the first Czechoslovak Republic and spirit of resistance and freedom-fighting.

Tvarožek's own family also had a strong legions tradition and were involved in the establishment of Czechoslovakia. His uncle, Tomáš Tvarožek, helped found the Czech National Council in 1918 and two uncles, Jan and Juraj, had been Czechoslovak legionnaires. Juraj, a respected architect, worked on several major construction projects, including the Městská spořitelna building in Bratislava and the Metropol apartment building, which boasted a cinema and café later frequented by literary bohemia. His structures were ahead of their time and won acclaim in Finland and Italy.

Juraj Tvarožek also put his signature to a letter that a group of Czechoslovak legionnaires quickly sent to the Slovak assembly on 14 March 1939. It called on deputies not to agree to the breakup of Czechoslovakia on the will of Hitler. They saw his Nazi politics as a threat, arguing that collaborating with him was unacceptable under any circumstances. In addition, they felt it was amoral to abandon a friend, the Czech lands, in its most trying hour. The letter was also signed by Slovak writers Ján Jesenský and Jozef Gregor, as well as future uprising leader Rudolf Viest. Historians regard the letter signed by 14 legionnaires as the first display of opposition to collaboration with Nazi Germany.

Branislav Tvarožek's uncles and father later joined the resistance in the form of the organisations Obrana národa and Flóra. This was the atmosphere in which the teenager grew up.

"We didn't agree with the fact that there were swastikas and all kinds of idiotic slogans around the city. What we did wasn't teenage high-jinks or indiscretion but a fully thought-out act," says Tvarožek of his initial activities as a student. In addition, the group were angered by deportations and how those of Jewish origin were being treated in the Slovak state. This also concerned a chemistry teacher they liked, Professor Gregor.

The People's Party regime investigated the student resisters for a month. They were held on remand at the U Dvou lvů police headquarters in Bratislava, but they didn't let that intimidate them.

In December fellow students followed their lead by painting over swastikas. They were Milan Čapek, Vladimír Pospíšil, Eugen Gerši, Vladimír Rosa, Juraj Rocha and Dušan Viest. The latter was the nephew of the future Slovak National Uprising leader Rudolf Viest and the son of resister Květoslava Viestová, founder of the Flóra resistance group, which was in contact with London.

The group around Branislav Tvarožek were slated for exemplary punishment. However, they were still minors. So in 1942 the regime satisfied itself with barring them from all of the country's schools.

Tvarožek experienced that scenario again seven years later. Whereas he been expelled from secondary schools by the People's Party, he was later banned from universities by the Communists. Indeed, he was arrested and investigated by both regimes. In any case, he says the greatest education he ever received was living alongside the legendary uprising commanders Ján Golian and Rudolf Viest and later at the university at Jáchymov labour camp.

After involuntarily leaving school he got work at the Tunkraum factory in 1942. By then his father Eduard Tvarožek had been tasked with preparing for the Slovak National Uprising in Nové Město nad Váhom.

When the uprising began, Branislav immediately got involved, serving as a member of the University Guard Unit. It was a special unit comprised of 250 students created on the orders of General Ján Golian. His cousin Živodar was also a member and during the uprising they accompanied generals Golian and Viest to the very end. However, the

much larger German force crushed the unit and gradually swept up individual members. Including Tvarožek, who had become separated from his friends.

He will never forget how the Germans wanted to deal with one of his peers: *"Execution"*. He had noticed a soldier who had a Russian star on his uniform; a member of the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps had ended up as a German POW.

"Wait, wait," cried Tvarožek, getting involved in the situation. *"I don't know what occurred to me, but I said that his shirt had burned and he'd gotten that one."*

A German soldier told him that if it wasn't true he'd meet the same fate. In the end that didn't happen and the saved POW ended up in an assembly camp. Gradually around 100 of them were captured and moved to a former barracks for aviators in Banská Bystrice, from where they were meant to be transferred to Nazi POW camps.

After a few days the prisoners were assembled. The German commander told the German doctor that all those capable of work would be placed on a transport the following day. Tvarožek overheard this conversation and understood it, later recalling the moment when understanding German saved his life.

"I have an injured hand," he later told the doctor, asking to be placed among the sick, knowing they wouldn't be put on a transport. When Tvarožek told the doctor he had heard his chat with the officer the latter said that was out of the question. But later he talked him round. Just 25 sick and infirm men remained in the hospital. Tvarožek resolved to escape and rejoin the resistance.

After receiving false documents and clothing through an acquaintance he succeeded in this. He and a Jewish boy named Ondřej made it to Nové Město nad Váhom, where Tvarožek's parents were then living.

He later became involved in more resistance work. Despite the risks, he brought guns from his father to the Snežinský partisan group.

"I believed we would survive it. And we did," he says of the period lasting until liberation. But his hopes of better times were not met.

For him and his father the Communists, increasingly audible after the war, were a source of amusement.

However, in 1948 they seized power. His cousin and fellow member of the University Guard Unit Živodar Tvarožek, son of the financier Tomáš, escaped to the American-occupied zone in Germany. He returned with false papers and the task of relaying reports to the free world. There anti-Communist resistance groups, including the likes of Royal Air Force aviator František Bogataj and the former head of the Democratic Party of Slovakia Michal Zibrín, were already in operation. Živodar believed that, like the Nazi variety, Communist totalitarianism could be defeated.

When Živodar returned to Czechoslovakia, Branislav – then a student at a technical university – put him up for the night. However, Živodar's activities were soon betrayed. Everybody who had come into contact with him, including Branislav, were placed in the dock during the subsequent trial of Tvarožek et al.

“The worst thing about being locked up was that from your free life they suddenly put you in a two-and-a-half metre by one-and-a-half metre cell where you have to be without all the things that you were used to. The arrest was all the worse for coming after liberation, when life was gaining momentum, everybody was doing their best, doing what they could. And suddenly they hem you in like that,” says Tvarožek. Three of his co-defendants got the death sentence, including Živodar. The Supreme Court commuted his sentence to life and he spent almost 16 years in a Communist prison.

Their uncle Jaroslav Dvořáček, who the WWII Slovak state had imprisoned at the Ilava concentration camp, was sent to the Tower of Death, where prisoners drilled for radioactive ore with no protective gear. He later died and is buried in Karlovy Vary.

Branislav Tvarožek got five years in Jáchymov, mainly spent at the Mariánská and Rovnost camps. However, he says he doesn't regret it as he got to know the outstanding people who had founded a prison university there. During free time after work in the mines lectures were delivered and Tvarožek, the youngest inmate, also learned a lot about people. He was handy and made a radio that they listened to together in secret.

In Jáchymov he also worked at an electrics workshop, where he was seriously injured. His eyesight was permanently damaged and he almost went blind.

While in prison his father, who he looked up to greatly, died. On his release the regime placed him in the penal battalions. They later wanted to assign him to a mining job. When he pleaded that he had already spent a lot of time in the mines they left him alone. He worked as an electrician his whole life and in his old age got to fulfil a dream of travelling with his wife. They visited Scandinavia, Switzerland, Israel and China.

Today Branislav Tvarožek says he wouldn't do anything differently. *"The lesson of it all? I think just that there's no reason to be afraid. But it is always necessary to stand up for what's just in life,"* he says.

Text by Soňa Gyarfašová