

4. The Resistance

While our own lives in the late 1930s were by all measure successful, the situation with the Czechoslovak Republic was getting rapidly worse. Hitler was intent on swallowing us whole. In the appeasement in 1938 we lost the land that bordered on Germany, and on 15 March 1939 we were occupied by the Germans. Slovakia then seceded and the remaining states of the Republic, Bohemia and Moravia, became a Protectorate of the German Reich. There is much to remember from those years.

In 1938, when the Germans took control of Austria through their *Anschluss*, many German and Austrian Jews came to Prague where they frantically sought false documents to escape to a safe country. I obtained such papers for seven or eight individuals, which included false Czechoslovak passports for their entire families.

At that time, the National Defense (one of the main Czech resistance groups) did not yet exist. It was formed on 14 March 1939. But I had a good contact at the Foreign Ministry, Dr. Krofta. I came to know him by chance through a mutual contact.

When I first visited Minister Krofta, he advised me that I could get large amounts of money for such false papers. A fake passport could be sold for a million Czech crowns, or more. I replied with some surprise, "Surely, you don't think that I am doing this for money?" In fact, after I gave them their new passports and they obtained visas to France or England. I also gave them first-class train tickets to Paris and 5,000 crowns for the trip.

He asked me, "Who pays you to do this?"

"No one," I told him. "They too ask me who is paying for it, whether it is the Jewish organization, Joint." I did it for humanitarian reasons, however, because it was horrible what was going on.

First one Jew came to me at the restaurant and said he needed some advice about obtaining false papers for his family. He didn't actually want the documents directly from me or expect me to provide them. These were German Jews from Austria who were coming to Czechoslovakia because they were aware of what Hitler was preparing for them. They were trying to get to the West and they thought that this might be a safe way out. I don't know whether someone initially referred them to me, but they simply came to ask me for advice and I told them that I would see what I could do. It then probably spread by word of mouth.

I obtained the fake passports directly from Minister Krofta. He gave them diplomatic passports and he too did it for humanitarian concerns, not for money. He was very obliging. I met him through a friend of mine, Jan Šebelík, who was the General Technical Director of the Pilsner

brewery in Pilsen and who was the Minister's son-in-law. I did not tell Šebelík anything about it. In fact, I did not tell anyone else what I was doing since the fewer the people who knew the less danger there was that it would leak.

After the establishment of the German Protectorate in Bohemia, I was unable to obtain false passports, but at least I was able to arrange for passage from the Protectorate to the Reich. This was done through an official stamp by the Gestapo. It was only for money. At first, it was extremely cheap. For such a *Durchlasschein*, as they called it, they only wanted a couple hundred crowns. But to have strangers travelling on a false passport during the war years, even if I had been able to obtain such documents, was completely out of the question for me.

The family for which I first obtained fake passports had three children. They agreed that once they arrived in Paris that they would write me a postcard, just a simple greeting in German, so that I would know that they had gotten through. I eventually got such cards from four or five families, but I did not keep them. Today, someone might tell me that I should have saved those cards, except that when someone is himself forced to escape, as I eventually was in 1948, he takes a few pair of underwear and a couple of shirts and that is all. And some documents? Not likely!

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I came to the National Defense (národní obrana) like "a blind man to a fiddle" (as the Czech saying goes). My old friend, Jan Hajšman, brought me there. He owned a Prague newspaper. He was in the resistance already during WWI and then became chairman of the Intelligence Service in the Ministry of the Interior. Right at the start of the German occupation in 1939 he became a member of the National Defense group. He was later arrested by the Nazis and shipped to Buchenwald.

Hajšman came to me at my restaurant on Václavské náměstí (Wenceslaus Square) at around eleven in the evening and asked me: "Do you have some time?"

"Of course." I told him, "I will always make some time for you."

"So come with me," he said.

"Where?" I wanted to know.

"To see General Bílý," he said.

"And what am I going to do there, me with a General?"

"You'll see," he remarked. He told me that the Germans already were in Ostrava, in northern Moravia and that we had to do something against them.

General Josef Bílý was the Army's Chief of Staff in Bohemia. In 1938 the government offered to appoint him Minister of Defense, but he declined, stating that he was too old for the task and that they should give it to someone younger. He was about 65 years old at that time. When the Nazis came a year later, however, he voluntarily became the leader of the resistance. I knew who he was, the Army's Chief of Staff, but had never come into contact with him until 14 March 1939.

Hajšman and I went to no. 13, Mikulandská Street, to General Bílý's apartment. The General, lieutenant-colonel Josef Balabán, and lieutenant Josef Mašín were already there, and staff captain Václav Morávek arrived soon after us.

General Bílý told me that they would not want anything from me except economic information. We stayed at his apartment until about 2:00 a.m., discussing plans for establishing the resistance against the Nazis.

The next day, 15 March, was overcast and a wet snow was falling. All of Prague was in a sad state. The Germans were on their way in. From that time, the group met frequently, sometimes twice per day. The first couple of weeks we met in General Bílý's apartment, and after that in the office of Jan Levit, M.D. in Ječná Street, where the group, which I only later learned was called the National Defense, met for two years, until Dr. Levit's arrest. During those years, General Bílý slept at Levit's sister, Louisa's, apartment and she slept at the doctor's office.

So, without any intent of my own, I became part of the military resistance group called the National Defense. It was there, during the first few days of Nazi occupation, that I came to know people whose trust and friendship I would be proud to have for the rest of my life.

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When the Germans marched into Prague the Nazis distributed propaganda brochures about how they got there and what they would do for us. I was in the middle of a crowd of people on Václavské Square. We were shouting "Down with the Germans" as they came through, but fortunately they must have been under orders not to shoot at civilians, so the occupation of the city passed relatively calmly. The city residents generally were very surprised by the arrival of the Germans, who got to the Prague Castle (the official residence of the country's president) without any difficulties.

The president of the Czech government at that time was General Syrový. He did something utterly impolitic: when the German commander arrived at his office, he took his ceremonial sabre, broke it in half, and handed it to him. It was a completely unnecessary gesture and it did not remain secret for long. Even after the people slowly acquiesced to the occupation they did not forget this.

The situation proceeded uneventfully for my business until 15 June when the Germans issued a directive that all restaurants must submit their menus to the authorities to have their prices officially established. Henceforth, all prices could be changed only with the approval of the protectorate government. Prior to that, the Germans had already issued several other decrees and I found out that there were some differences in meaning between the German and Czech versions. The Czech one understandably was more palatable for us.

I went to the bureau where they established the prices. It was called the *Oberlandrat*. On the second floor I came to a door on which the name of the managing official, Mr. Heblain, was posted. Since I had a friend named Heblain, who was one of our wine suppliers from a town called Valašské Klobouky, it occurred to me that he might be from the same family.

The Heblain I knew spoke Czech well, but his wife less so. He leased the local winery and he always treated me very well. One time he took me to his cellars to taste some of his wine. It was a very hot afternoon at the end of July. We tasted and tasted, and when we came up out of the cellar into the heat, I collapsed. In short, I passed out drunk. He put me on his back and carried me to their kitchen where he left me to sleep it off on an oilcloth-covered sofa. I didn't wake up until about 7pm and he asked me what I wanted. I asked for a glass of the wine we had been drinking, called Limbašské.

So, he said, "That's right, that's how a real man does it, no coffee. So now we'll continue."

I said, "No, we're not going to continue. I only would like to refresh the taste of the wine." In this way we came to be on friendly terms.

Another time he took me on a hunt. He had several cabins on a local mountain, called Jelenovská, which he rented out. We spent the night up there and he announced that he would let me shoot a buck. I had been a good shot in my army days, but I had never killed any animal.

We went out at dawn to a hunting stand. There were two sites there, one for each of us. A beautiful buck came by and stood on a nice path in the woods, and Heblain motioned for me to shoot. But I stomped my feet and the buck took off.

"Why did you do that?" he asked me.

"On such a gorgeous morning, I can't shoot such a beautiful buck," I answered.

From that time I have not shot a gun. But now, back to the other Heblain.

I began speaking in German with him, but he told me, "You can talk in Czech with me. As you probably have noticed my name is Heblain. Doesn't that ring a bell with you?" "Yes, I know a

Mr. Heblain in Valašské Klobouky,” I answered. And he said “Yes, and he advised me that when I come to Prague that I should keep an eye out for Vašata and make sure not to harm him.”

He was the brother of my friend Heblain. So we started speaking in Czech and he understood me very well, even better than his brother. I told him that the German and Czech texts of the directive were different. He said: “I know all about it, it's stupid. You can abide by the Czech version since no one can tell you it's wrong. But don't tell anybody that you were here and that I advised you this way. I'll give you one more bit of advice: he who asks too many questions finds out bad things. If you find you need something, however, I promised my brother that you could come here – of course, if it's something dealing with business matters. But don't get mixed up in politics. If you get into political problems, I won't be able to help you. If they are business problems, though, I'll be happy to do what I can.”

I never did go back to see him, since I was up to my eyeballs in politics. I was entrusted by the leaders of the Resistance (also called the National Defense) to gather economic intelligence, which they expressly asked of me, and I also took it upon myself to obtain funding.

Understandably, at the beginning of the German occupation there was chaos. It was necessary to find someone who had a reliable contact with the Gestapo. For that, we needed to have some substantial sums of money. For example, we would buy copies of interrogations of our captured people. In this way, we would receive advance warnings that so and so would be arrested tomorrow, and we would be able to arrange for his disappearance, including a safe passage to the West. Or, it might be necessary to buy a new ten ton truck to hide an illegal radio transmitter.

Not surprisingly, of course, there were not many people willing to donate money for this, so I started by giving my own. I did this with the full knowledge of the director of the Czech Discount Bank, Ivan Petr, with whom I did my business. He told me: “You have a line of credit with us for several million crowns for this purpose.” Petr joined our Resistance group and he brought with him Jiří Sedmík, the former personal secretary of Minister Edvard Beneš in the Foreign Ministry.

I also was a major customer of one large meatpacker of smoked pork products on the Bohemian and Moravian border. I drove there to see if I could get some additional financing for the resistance activities. I was accompanied by engineer Vilém Lorenc. A good friend of mine, Honza Čermák, lived in his building in Prague's Malá Strana (the Lesser Side).

With Lorenc beside me, I asked the owner of the meatpacking firm to donate one million crowns for the Resistance. But the man said “where would I get the one million? No way, I don't want to have anything to do with it.”

I acknowledged that I understood that he didn't want to have anything to do with it, but that he could give the money without telling anyone about it. I certainly wouldn't tell anyone. He insisted that he simply did not have the money, and finally told me: "Well, just so you don't leave empty handed, I will give you 5,000 crowns for the National Defense."

"How much did you say?" I asked him.

"Five thousand."

"Five thousand? Give that to the firemen's ball! Not to the National Defense!" It made me very angry.

Later, he asked engineer Lorenc to buy him one or two buildings in Prague. He wanted half of the purchase price paid on the official books and half paid in cash from black market funds. It showed that he had money enough. But he did not want to give a portion of it for the Resistance. I guess he was afraid.

Lorenc bought the two houses. Altogether they cost six million crowns, and Lorenc got five percent. He then told me: "I will give you my commission, but not all of it. I will give you 250,000 crowns for the resistance and keep the remaining 50,000. I have a number of small debts that I would like to settle."

I didn't want to take it. I said, "You keep it all. I can't ask that of you."

"I will gladly give it," he retorted.

So, he gave it to me and we never spoke again about the owner of the meatpacking firm. Only after the war, when I was already a member of the Advisory Council for the National (Economic) Committee and had under my jurisdiction trade and small businesses, his manager, a Mr. Žežulka, came to see me with the owner's son. Žežulka should have come by himself, since the son had a knack for saying something inappropriate at the wrong time so that Žežulka continually had to shut him up.

Mr. Žežulka informed me that the owner would like to give two million crowns to the National Defense, but that he would need a favor at the National Committee. It was obviously laughable, since it was already after the war. I told him, "We no longer need anything for the Resistance. The country has been liberated and his money is unnecessary. In fact, I know of no organization that could use his money."

I wouldn't take a cent from that man, since I could never forgive him his behavior during the war. Mr. Žežulka pleaded for me to give a recommendation to the Executive Officer in charge of trade and business in Moravia whom I knew well, just as I knew his colleagues from Slovakia.

But I was resolved not to lift a finger on his behalf. I stated: "I don't know those people. And I wouldn't dare recount to them the story of how I even came to make such a request."

When the communists later took the man's business, instead of going to do something else, he jumped from an elevated location in his smokehouse into a vat of boiling water that was used for rendering pigs. It was a horrendous suicide. As far as I know, his son ended up in Australia, but I never followed his case any further.

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But to finish how it was with the money for the resistance.... In the end, the largest donation that I ever got was from engineer Lorenc – the 250,000 crowns. Otherwise, I was giving my own money.

The Mayor of Prague at that time, Dr. Klapka, told me that he knew what I was doing, and because he had a discretionary fund of 4 million crowns, he told the managers of my bank to give me a large line of credit and promised me that after the war he would contribute the 4 million. Of course, during the war he could not use those funds. Unfortunately, the Nazis ultimately uncovered his participation in the Resistance and executed him.

And now a few vignettes of how it was that these funds were used. One time, someone showed up and desperately needed 100,000 crowns. Even in a large business, such as we had, it was not possible to withdraw 100,000 on a moment's notice. That time, I had to sell a painting. It was a Kalvoda. I liked to collect fine art and never sold any pieces that I acquired. This is why several dozen remained in Prague's Municipal House (Which I rented and where I lived) after I was forced to flee after the communist coup in 1948.

In any case, I knew that the painting would fetch a large sum. I found an interested buyer through a gallery on Národní třída. The canvas was of birch trees, which Kalvoda liked to paint. My knowledgeable friends told me that it was not one of the artist's better pieces, but the buyer offered to pay 100,000 for it. I countered that if he were to give me 125,000 that I would sell it. I got my asking price and was able to give the 100,000 immediately to the Resistance.

Otherwise, I was providing my own cash. I donated five-and-a-half or six million crowns just in money. Of course, it wasn't always a matter of just money. Very often it was a question of how to ensure adequate food for people, to those wives and family members of jailed or executed Resistance fighters.

The Germans established a coupon system for buying food. Many of those I was trying to assist were not very adept at getting the best deals for their food. At the same time, I was involved in the wholesale food business through my restaurants. While they would pay perhaps 40 crowns

for a kilo of flour, I could get it for 10. Those were the prices I would pay for whole wagonloads on the black market. I would buy one wagonload on the official market, and one off the trucks. Every time I officially bought a wagon of food supplies, the second one on the black market would be delivered that same day. I bribed the people at the customs office as well. They would leave the first bill of lading unfilled for the first delivery and then complete the sale with the second delivery that same afternoon.

My best friend and the general technical manager of my restaurants, Vašek Čihák, would store the illicit flour under the floorboards of the Repre (the Municipal House, as it was called then in Czech—short for “Representational House”). He worked for me already in my previous business at the Černý pivovar restaurant. We had a great deal of faith in each other, so he also got into the Resistance with me. In the wine bar at the Repre there was a large podium for the live music and underneath would fit a wagonload of goods. I didn't do the packing; most often it was my brother, Jenda, and Vašek.

Unfortunately, I had many sad experiences during the war. A friend of mine, named Franta¹, was a radio announcer. When the German army would have a parade, he would say that the black crows were marching. These indiscretions finally caught up with him. The Gestapo arrested him and he died in a concentration camp. It was Franta for whom I needed the 100,000 crowns on short notice.

When he realized what was awaiting him he told his wife. “If you ever need anything, Vašata will help you out.” She later came to me and said that he had recommended that she look me up. I asked her, “Mrs. Vilma, how much did Franta bring home from his job at the radio?” She responded that it was 5,000, so I said to her, “From his 5,000 he certainly had some deductions right off the top, so he would get 4,000. But he didn't give all 4,000 to you, because he would keep some of it. So how much did he really give you?”

“I will tell you truthfully,” she said, “it was 3,000.”

I told her that she would get a monthly stipend of 3,000 crowns from me and I made the arrangements at the bank. I went there with her and said, “Here at this window, when this teller is working, you give him only a number, 157/3. Remember that.” She was number 157, and the 3 was for the 3,000 crowns. She would then go there and simply say those numbers, not sign anything or fill out any forms, and she would get the money directly from my account.

¹ František Kocourek (1901-1942), journalist, radio presenter and writer who became famous for his ironic portrayal of the Nazi military parade. He died in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

But then she came to me again and wanted 50,000 crowns so she could erect a monument for František in the cemetery at which he was buried. I admonished her, "Mrs. Vilma, we now must feed the living, but I promise you that we will build him a monument after the war."

She came to me again and insisted it was a terrible ingratitude. I didn't give her the 50,000, but I finally did give her another 30,000 and told her that it was sufficient for a memorial, but that in any case it was better to build it after the war.

The truly bad experience came after the war, however, when everyone had to prove how much money they had before and after the war so that they would be paid a portion of the money in the new currency. She telephoned me and wanted to know whether I had reported to the authorities the money that I had given her during the war, so that she could get a percentage of that back in the new currency.

But I told her, "I never gave you anything. Only that which you got from the National Defense."

She retorted, "And where might I find the National Defense?"

By that point I had had it with her, so I told her, "In no. 13, Mikulandská Street."

She went there and then called me again and said, "There's nothing in no. 13, Mikulandská Street."

I continued to bait her and insisted, "But there was a huge sign there for 'Military and Resistance Group, National Defense, General Josef Bílý.'"

She went there again and the residents told her that there was never such a sign there. When she finally came to me in person I told her, "Mrs. Vilma, I will tell you something that I have never told any other woman, that you are a big swine."

For the monthly stipend that I gave her, I could have supported four other families. Such families typically had small pensions and an extra thousand crowns or so would have been a big help to them. But Mrs. Vilma wanted me to pay the tax on the money that I had given her! It was my money, but I viewed it as money of the National Defense, because I was using it for such purposes. No one else asked whose money it was or if it was my own; they were all just glad that the money was available.

Another time my National Defense colleagues suggested that I go to a certain section chief at the Ministry of Agriculture for support. When I got there, he said, "I already know why you are here, but look, if I tell twenty people to give a thousand crowns a month it can be very dangerous. The Nazis might arrest just one of those twenty, and he will betray us and we will all be there."

"I will help you in a different way," he said. "Whenever I can, I will increase your allotted supplies, whether it's flour, sugar, or butter. Right away I can give you 3,000 kilos of butter that's partly from sheep's milk. It isn't as good as butter that's only from cow's milk, but it's still better than nothing."

The Nazis later executed this poor man. This was the result of a long story about a person who he believed to be loyal to him and who turned him in. But his death sentence noted in part that he had regularly provided several restaurants with such large supplies of fat that it endangered the supplies of the Reich. The only good fortune was that they didn't try to go after those restaurants that had been involved and he apparently didn't tell.

All in all, I was incredibly lucky. Even if I was doing the honorable thing, I knew what kind of danger was involved. The fact that the Germans didn't go after the names of the restaurants – or couldn't find out which ones they were – saved my life.

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General Bílý's group typically met twice per week, usually in the office of Dr. Levit. They were brief meetings, always 10-15 minutes in duration so that we would not be together very long. Everyone would receive some assignment. If it were necessary to have an additional meeting, we would phone each other and say, for example, that the meeting would be on Thursday at 2:00 p.m., but this would mean that it would be on Tuesday, at 4:00. It was always two days back and two hours forward from the stated time.

General Bílý called for me one day in 1940. When I arrived, the others were already seated. We were all on familiar terms, but Bílý addressed me formally. "Vašata, stand at attention! I am now going to speak to you as your commanding officer. You know that we have a pact that we must not talk with anyone whom we do not know well, but especially not with Communists."

"So, what's this about?" I responded.

"What did you discuss last Tuesday evening at six o'clock with two men? One was Fučík and who was the other man?"

"Well, that was Pepík Háša."

"And what did you speak about?" Bílý demanded to know.

I explained, "Háša requested that I arrange for Fučík to come to my restaurant on Václavské náměstí without coupons and perhaps even without money. I agreed to make such an arrangement and we did not discuss anything else."

The General continued his interrogation. "And you didn't speak about anything else whatsoever?"

"No, not about anything else at all," I replied. "Of course, I am aware that we are not to talk about anything with anyone."

"At ease," the General told me. "Have a seat, Vašata. I believe you completely, just like everyone else believes you. That's the way it should be done. Of course, it's not possible to avoid speaking with people if they want to speak with you."

General Bílý really did trust me. I had even supplied him with meals for a short while. Because he was hiding out at the apartment of Dr. Levit's sister, it was not possible for him to cook there. We agreed that someone trustworthy would bring him dinner every evening from one of my restaurants. This was done by Vašek Čihák for a period of about six weeks, until other arrangements were made.

We referred to General Bílý as engineer "Svoboda" which is not only a common Czech name, but also means "freedom".

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One time, Bílý said that he needed to go somewhere and had to have a reliable car and driver. I asked Vašek Čihák to drive him in one of my vehicles. They stopped at the train station in the southern Bohemian town of Tábor, and Bílý started to give Vašek some money, 400 or 500 crowns.

Vašek said, "General, I am certainly not doing this for money!"

"You know me?" Bílý asked.

"Of course." Vašek answered. "You were my top national army commander."

"And so why do you want to do such risky business?" the General wanted to know.

"For the cause," Vašek told him "and, I must say, for Vašata, because I do whatever he asks of me. I do not want to place him in jeopardy, where shooting may occur."

Bílý asked him, "And what would you do if shooting broke out?"

Vašek patted his pocket and said, "I always carry something for my defense."

So, this is how they became friends. General Bílý trusted Vašek Čihák and used him after that whenever he needed to drive somewhere.

One time we had the task of obtaining some explosives. The factory for explosives was in Semtín near the town of Pardubice, the place where the Communists would later produce the plastic explosive, Semtex. Prior to the arrival of the Nazis, the commander there was General Husák. Later on, Husák lived in the Prague suburb of Černošice, where my family had a villa. We began our assignment by determining who among us would be the best to approach him about this. All of us knew him, but judged that they as soldiers could not go there. Finally, we decided that since Husák and I had residences in the same town that I should be the one to go to him. So I went.

At first, he was very friendly to me, since he knew me. When I told him what I went there about, however, he began to admonish me, "My friend, stay away from this. Stay as far from it as you can. It's not a thing for you." Then he asked me, "And how did you ever become entangled in such thing?" So, I told him that I was entrusted to do it by General Bílý, which made him pause, and then he said, "Come back in 14 days."

What I wanted from him was the name of a trusted person in Semtín whom the National Defense group could contact for the explosives. We needed to establish a password. He called me back within a week. I went to visit him again and he said, "Everything's in order. I have verified that it's just as you told me. I will give you the password and the name of the individual who is absolutely reliable, but he has nothing to do with the production. He is a librarian, named Dr. Josef Mann. He is the head librarian in Semtín.

Now it came to who should meet with this guy. I conferred with Vašek Čihák and he volunteered to go there. "We have to have some kind of credible excuse for why you are going there," I suggested.

"For this kind of a trip I already have figured out an excuse," he told me. "I have several sets of curtains. I will take them with me and offer to sell them to the librarian's wife." So, he went there and returned with the name of the contact for the explosives and the password.

Balabán came to me soon afterwards and said, "I am coming to you because I was at the meeting at which they entrusted you with this task, but you must not be doing such things. We promised you at the beginning of the war that you would only be doing business related functions. So, don't do anything with this."

I told him: "Brother Balabán, I already have it done."

"What do you have done?" he said with surprise.

"I already have the contact that Dr. Mann provided."

“How did you do it?” Balabán asked. I told him that Vašek Čihák went there and that we have such and such a password and Balabán said, “You have to show me this guy.”

At that time my business was setting up and supplying the cafeteria in the Prague Electric Works, and because of this we agreed to meet there. We each came separately by a different route and entrance. Vašek was already there because he was directing the work. He and Balabán spoke for about a quarter hour and then Balabán told me, “This guy's good. But even so, don't do this anymore. If anything else comes up, please ask that I be involved in it. Naturally, everyone is going to be very satisfied with your result, but you were fortunate that it ended up this way.”

Indeed, it worked beautifully. Lieutenant Mašín would periodically borrow my Packard to drive there. I would make the car available to him through a car repair shop owned by Emil Zeltner in the Vinohrady district of Prague just above Václavské náměstí, past the Museum. I had it arranged so that whenever Mašín would go there he could take the car. The pretext was that the car was in for servicing and Mašín was going to take it for a test drive.

Mašín would borrow the car and drive to Semtín to the gunpowder works for the explosives. One time he came to me and said, “Man, I was in a hell of a situation. I was coming back with the goods, and the Germans set up a checkpoint on Havlíčkovo square. They blocked all the traffic and were searching every car. When they got to the second car ahead of me they suddenly gave up and left.”

I asked him “What would you have done, Joey?”

“What would I have done? Well, I would have gone bang bang, and run away.”

So I said, “That's well and good, but they would find out that it's my car.”

Although the Packard had fake German plates, the Germans could nevertheless tell by the serial number on the engine, which had not been removed, so it would not raise further suspicions in an inspection. It would have been a matter of a couple hours before they could determine whose car it was.

Mašín merely retorted, “Yes, dear boy, there's some risk in everything!”

They also were transporting bombs directly from the Semtín factory. One time, Lieutenant Mašín was taking a bomb to Berlin. It was arranged with a German who was collaborating with us against the Nazis. They were to meet at a train station where some Nazi leader was to arrive on a train. They left the bomb with a timing device, but the train was delayed by an hour so the bomb exploded before the train got there.

The transport of explosives from Semtín went well for quite a long time. Unfortunately, after about a year-and-a-half the Germans discovered what was going on and arrested the librarian. Until then we were able to transport all the explosives that we needed.

After Dr. Mann was arrested, his wife came after me at my restaurant on Václavské náměstí. Someone came to look for me while she waited in the cloakroom. When I got there she started screaming, "Mr. Vašata, if my husband isn't home in two weeks I will make sure to put you where he is now!"

Of course, this was potentially a huge disaster, not just for me, but for everyone involved. Finally, Mrs. Hajšman took a train to Semtín to visit Mrs. Mann. She used the password to get in to see her. Mrs. Hajšman convinced her that even though it was my car that was used, it was done without my approval or knowledge. She explained that the car was taken from the repair shop and that it would do her husband no good if I were in prison as well. She pleaded with Mrs. Mann not to say anything and told her that her finances would be taken care of. Dr. Mann had a monthly pay of about 4,000 crowns, so Mrs. Hajšman told his wife that she would continue to receive that amount from some funds, but that I had nothing to do with it. Mrs. Hajšman then made the arrangements for the payments and for the first five or six months brought the money herself to Mrs. Mann. After that she made other arrangements, so that Mrs. Mann could pick up the money at a bank in the nearby town of Pardubice. It was a good thing that this was taken care of when it was, because the Germans then arrested Mrs. Hajšman as well.

* * *

In the fall of 1940, Vašek Čihák drove General Bílý to a state forest ranger's cabin for a meeting. In this forestry office there was a woman employed who overheard what the General was discussing with the ranger, and was able to figure out that they were discussing the anti-Nazi resistance. She turned him in to the local gendarmes and those idiots, instead of letting someone reliable know what was happening, came and arrested him. They took him in handcuffs to the Gestapo in Tábor. From there he was taken to the Gestapo headquarters in Prague. He underwent a horrible interrogation. I heard that they used metal nutcrackers on his testicles, and other tortures, but he told them that they would not get a word out of him. About a year later, during the time of the martial law, they shipped him to Kobylyisy and there, on 28 September 1941, they executed him.

I was told out that prior to his execution they wanted to blindfold him, but he refused. They told him that he was behaving like a general, that he was brave. They then asked him if he had a final request, to which he replied that he did, which was to give the final order to fire. They granted this request and asked if he was ready. He reportedly said, "Ja! Sie Deutsche Hunde,

Feuer!" (Yes, you German dogs, fire!). That was his end. I don't know whether that was truly the way it was, but this is what was recounted by others in the Resistance. After the war, I encountered his widow, when I was a member of the National Economic Council. We made her our correspondent, in order to provide her with employment.

* * *

At the beginning of August, 1940, the German police arrested me together with my brother and brought us to Pankrác prison. Pankrác was--and still is--the main prison in Prague. It was made particularly notorious first by the Nazis and then by the Communists. The Gestapo interrogated us day and night for about three weeks. It was unseasonably cool that month so we were quite cold at night, and this did not improve our well-being there.

They arrested us because of a stupid blunder. The previous Prague police Chief Jaroš, had made a list of people who were supposed to be on National Councils after the war. He had put our names on that list as well, but without our knowledge. The Nazis then got a hold of it and arrested everyone on it.

When they first started to interrogate me, they said that they already knew everything. So, I told them, "If you already know everything, then you won't be needing me here." They countered, "Look here is the list. And here you are both listed as being members of the National Council in Prague." I said, "This must be some kind of mistake, because I don't even know police Chief Jaroš. He may know me from my restaurants – many people know me this way – but I don't know him. I have never spoken with him about any political matters, nor with anyone else."

When they first brought me there, they bound my hands behind me to the chair with leather straps, and I began to laugh. The chief interrogator was surprised and said, "How come you're laughing?"

I told him that I did not speak any German, although I could understand about 90 percent of what the Germans were saying. My German was never perfect, but it was sufficiently good to understand even the most important things.

The chief interrogator asked me again through their Czech interpreter why I was laughing. I responded, "Because all this time that we have been living under the Protectorate, I have been saying that the German bureaucracies act correctly, according to the rules, and now here I see that you have tied me up like a common criminal without having proved anything against me. And you won't prove anything against me," I added.

The interrogator stood up and came to untie the straps. He was so nervous, however, that after fumbling with them for some time, he took out a knife and cut them loose. For big things there sometimes must be big courage and even a little chutzpah. This is especially true when you have the distinct feeling that you are above them. Morally above them.

When they started again with Jaroš, I steadfastly maintained: "I have never even seen this man. Look, let's cut to the quick. You have your work and I have mine, and we are wasting time. Go ahead and call the Chief at the police headquarters." I knew that he had already been incarcerated by them for several months. "Call him, and he will tell you that it's just a mistake." They laughed, and insisted that I tell them why I was there. "I don't know why I'm here," I protested.

"But you must know!" the interrogator exclaimed.

Finally, I said: "Look, I know why I am here, but I will only say it when I can speak with the police Chief, man to man, equal to equal."

This pissed them off. They said, "Who are you to impose conditions!"

I repeated, "Yes, like man to man, equal to equal. Only then will I tell you why I am here."

"Alright, so spit it out already!"

"I am here because I have two beautiful businesses in Prague and some German wants to have them. You will convict me and then you will give them to him."

At that, one of them jumped up and rose the back of his hand to hit me. The strike was already in the air, but the interpreter said, "No! Don't do it! This man will never tell you anything more again!" The blow didn't fall.

I added: "I know of such a case, although I keep insisting that the German bureaucracies act correctly."

I always carried on me several Vašata business cards, and on the back side I had printed the following rhyme (translated with some poetic license, but remarkably faithful, into English):

Whether at the inn or on the street
everywhere I'm yours to meet
I know all about our food and drinks
but nothing about politics
Who's a friend and who's a foe?

I just work hard – don't want to know
Wishing you a pot of gold
Vašata your friend of old

They found this in going through my belongings and wanted to know why I had it. "Because people always stop me on the street and want to know what I have to say about this and that," I said. "And I tell them, nothing. I give them this. I don't understand politics and I don't get mixed up in it."

At the time that I was arrested, I also had the address of Dr. Mann in Semtín, through whom we had gotten the explosives, but fortunately I was able to pull that out of my pocket and dump it in the gutter one block before we got to the prison. I had my business cards printed with that silly rhyme and always carried them with me with full knowledge and intent aforethought. I never gave them to any Czech, of course; I had them expressly for the eventuality in which I found myself. But they kept insisting that I must know everything.

"Please, if you know everything then tell me what you know," I continued to defend myself.

"We know it from that cop." I continued to insist that they call the police Chief, but they just threw me out of the interrogation room.

* * *

They brought me back for interrogation again the next day. At first, they put me in a large holding cell containing 300-400 seated prisoners, which was overseen by an officer. There were two SS guards, one on each side of the room, and I was getting bored. At first, I stared at one of the guard's right shoulder, until he looked at it. Then I continued to stare at his other shoulder, until he looked back at that one. Next I stared at his belt buckle, on which he had inscribed "Gott mit uns" (God with us). He touched it, but then realized what I was looking at. So, he told me in German to get up, but I remained sitting.

He circled around me and I kept staring at him looking straight into his eyes, and he shouted, "You! Get up!" But I kept sitting and not moving, until the prisoner next to me said in Czech, "You are supposed to get up."

So, I stood up and the guard had me stand with my arms up against the wall. When you stand like that for even just five minutes, your hands begin to hurt. Suddenly, the officer, who was called Franz, announced, "Who would like to clean the corridor? It needs sweeping."

I volunteered. I figured that it would be better than standing there in pain and waiting. I went to sweep it, but then I told him: "This needs to be not only swept, but also washed. It's dirty."

He agreed. I started to take my pants off to wash the floor and was down to my underwear, when he said, "Take six or eight men from the holding cell so that they wash everything, and you be the one to oversee them."

So, I picked all the ones in my group with the same armband – red – which signified counterespionage. I went back to the wash area and said in Czech, "Men, go one after the other to take a leak." There was no other way for me to tell each of them what they could say and not to say during interrogation, in order to keep their stories straight, because I was the one to bring the bucket of water to flush after each one. They all went, except for my brother. I would talk to each one at the urinal and then go fetch another bucket of water for the next guy. In this way, I was able to come to an agreement with each of them, but just not with my brother, who refused to go.

In this situation in prison I was unable to eat even the bread that the Germans were handing out, I was so worried sick. At night I couldn't sleep. It was dreadful.

* * *

One night they transferred me and a bunch of other prisoners to the Petschek Palace² (Pečkárna) for night interrogations. I saw that there were going to be two rows of us for two different vehicles. In one row stood the old police chief, Jaroš, so I lined up in his group. In the first group there remained 15 prisoners and in mine there were 17. The SS-men who were sitting at the end of the van were screaming at us to sit down and so I had to sit on Jaroš's lap, because there weren't enough seats for all of us. This was all entirely by coincidence, although it needed a little help from me, a little planning.

On the way to the other prison I wasted no time in telling Jaroš what I thought. I told him: "You have to change the story about the people on your list, it's sheer stupidity!" But Jaroš demurred: "It's not possible. The war will be over in another six months anyway. The Germans won't be able to finish interrogating 120 people in half a year." I told him: "The war will last four or five years."

"Who told you that?" he demanded.

² Formerly a bank that served as the headquarters of Gestapo for the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. It was here where the interrogations and torturing of the Czech Resistance members took place.

I insisted that the war would last a long time. He concluded by calling me an idiot. That was in August of 1940.

In getting out of the van one of the Germans there announced to me: "One will go home."

"Both," I retorted. I was referring to my brother with that.

But he said again: "Only one will go home." That was all that I could get out of him, but I considered even that to be a minor success.

I continued: "Who will feed the families? There are two of us here. Who will provide for them?"

Later on they confronted me with Jaroš. They said, "There you have police Chief Jaroš."

I maintained that I had never before seen this man. But Jaroš said, "Of course you have. I know you."

"Perhaps from the restaurant," I conceded.

"I don't go to restaurants," Jaroš continued, "I'm diabetic and have to eat at home." Then he added: "You used to live in Žižkov. You had a big apartment with two entrances on the corridor."

I was cursing him under my breath, but continued to insist: "I have never before in my life seen this man. I believe it's possible that he may know me from my restaurants, but he says that he doesn't go to restaurants, so I don't know him. I have never seen him before. Today is the first time."

At which point, they proceeded to beat Jaroš senseless. For some reason, they believed me and not him. All these things are guided by unknown forces. In my eyes, the man was a complete moron. He convinced himself that the war would only last a few months and that the Germans would be unable to complete the inquest. From the 120 people on his list, 108 were executed, only 12 that I later managed to pull out of it were not. All the others were executed, including him.

Whenever he had some acquaintance in the countryside, he immediately put him on his list as belonging to some regional National Council. He identified all these people as belonging to the Resistance, but entirely needlessly. Most of them didn't do anything, I was the only one of this entire group who was, in fact, in the leadership of the National Defense.

During the interrogations, the Gestapo would ask me about various things, but when they saw that they wouldn't get anything out of me, they tried to see if they could get me to identify any

the National Defense colleagues whose names they already knew. They would ask whether I knew the name, Balabán. "I know two Balabáns," I told them.

"Where?"

"One is a plumber on Letná, on Ověnecká Street. The other Balabán is an accountant on Václavské náměstí," I responded. Neither had anything to do with the Balabán who was General Bílý's deputy and was a leader of the National Defense.

Then they insisted that I must know the name, Starý. This was another pseudonym for Bílý. I said, "I know only one Starý."

"Which one is that?" they asked.

"He lives in Vysočany," I told them. "He has a restaurant there and is a vice-chairman of a local business group." So they quickly went to see him and just as quickly found out that he had nothing to do with what they were after.

Naturally I knew what they were after, but I tried to never say no to them. I always thought about their questions for a while to see how I might say something positive, but to derail their track of questioning and not tell them anything in the process.

In Pankrác prison they always woke us up at 7:00 a.m. They opened the doors and ordered us out into the corridor. I was kept in a single cell there. Across from me was cell number 206, in which they were keeping Dr. Klapka, the Mayor of Prague who was the one who had arranged for me at the bank to have sufficient funds for the National Defense. Except now he too was imprisoned.

When we first met there, he said, "Brother Vašata, we should not have gotten mixed up in all this." But I replied, "Brother Mayor, if they let me go tomorrow, I will continue." He pleaded with me not to do it. In the end, they executed him as well. It was a total nightmare.

For our exercise, the Germans would send us out into the prison yard. They would form a large ring consisting of those prisoners who were in reasonably good shape, and inside that they formed a smaller ring of men who were either injured or too old to move very quickly. The commandant of the Pankrác prison, a well-known swine, would stand there with his dog, a German shepherd. I was put in the large outer ring, but I needed to get into the inner one so I could talk with some of my colleagues, who were in bad shape from their interrogations. I went to the commandant and told him that I was recovering from an operation on my leg (which was partly true as a result of the severe motorcycle accident I had had a few years earlier) and that I couldn't run in the outer ring. He told me not to run.

It was audacious for me to pester him, but I continued. I was calling everyone in prison “Herr Kommandant” and spoke intentionally bad German and so it was with him. I said, “Herr Kommandant, I am generally healthy, but I cannot run in the fast circle.” He told me that I could move to the inner circle and that I could run as quickly as I was able. In short, he took my bait.

I moved to the inner ring and ran at a speed so that someone that I would need to talk to could catch up with me. Once he would come to my side I would pace myself for perhaps ten or twelve strides and tell him what was necessary. Then I would repeat it with the next one, and so on. The Germans never caught on. The next day when we were herded out into the exercise yard, I automatically went into the inner ring and so was able to stay in communication with my colleagues.

Most of those people, however, were convinced that the war would soon be over. When I told them that I thought it would last a long time, they would say things like:

“Haven't you heard that America has sent 17 destroyers to England?” In that huge conflict, of course, it was practically nothing. Perhaps it was a means of mental self-preservation.

After some more time in Pankrác prison, a man came to speak with me. He said, “Mr. Vašata, you will go home. I guarantee it. My name is Dr. Adams. I just came back from Ukraine. The people there are good. After the war I will set up my practice there.”

I didn't know what to think of this. At first I viewed him with mistrust, but after a while he began to convince me of his sincerity. “I'm not a Nazi,” he continued, “but an official employed by the Gestapo. True, I am an SS man but you need not be afraid of me.”

This conversation took place in one of the prison holding cells. The whole episode began with the guard shrieking at me and the other prisoners who were talking to shut up. It was then that Dr. Adams came in and brought the guard to attention. He announced that he was Dr. Adams and said, “As long as I am here, no one is going to scream at anyone.” Then, following some introductory remarks, he asked me: “Do you have some friends in Ostrava or in the environs of Ostrava who served with you in the army?”

“I know two,” I admitted.

“What are their names?”

“Ščepanek and Hanke,” I told him. They were good friends and they were German.

He nodded in agreement. “They remembered you well. Whenever they came across one of your advertisements, they would say, we have to go see our friend in Prague sometime.”

“What's with them?” I wanted to know.

“They are already dead.”

“My God, what happened to them?”

“They went as SS men to the front and were killed two days later.”

“They joined the SS?” I asked with alarm.

“No one joins the SS. They were conscripted.” After a brief pause, he added: “They fell in Russia. People who are not considered reliable are called up and sent right to the front. Do you believe me?” he asked.

“Doctor, you give me no reason to think otherwise.”

After another moment of silence, he said: “You will go home. I don’t want anything from you. Occasionally, however, you will give me a half kilo of coffee,” he added.

I ended up giving him coffee for a long time. I had some 4 or 5 tons of coffee hidden for my business. For that, as for all my other black market purchases of bulk foodstuffs, one would get the death sentence. One could thus say that I collaborated with the Gestapo.

When he first came for his coffee at the Repra, my staff called me from downstairs and said: “Dr. Adams is here and would like to speak with you.” I brought him the half kilo. After another month or two, he came again but I no longer had real coffee left, only coffee substitute, so he did not return for it. But I had another incident later where I needed him.

* * *

One morning around the beginning of my third week in Pankrác prison they woke me up at 4:00 a.m. and said they had to shave me. I was shaved by someone named Dr. Jindra, who was someone I knew from before. He advised me: “Lather up really well, because I have been shaving people with this same razor for several months. It's going to be very bad!”

He shaved me and then said: “There are only two possibilities now. They will either drive you to Kobylisy³ to the firing squad or you're going to go home. It doesn't look to me like you're going home, though.”

The Gestapo did in fact take me to Kobylisy with some other prisoners and there they had us stand in a row with our noses pressed against the wall. If someone didn't stand with his nose

³ Kobylisy Shooting Range is a former shooting range located in Kobylisy, a northern suburb of Prague. During Nazi occupation, it was used for mass executions.

right up to the wall, they would hit him. Suddenly, one of them said: "Herr Vasata bitte komm hier zu nehmen" (Mr. Vašata please come here).

I refused, however, and said, "No, I will stand here like all the rest."

"Why?" he said, surprised. It then occurred to me that this did not look very much that a firing squad was imminent.

A few minutes later, the guard singled me out again and brought out my belongings which they had confiscated upon my arrest. I had a tie pin and he told me that he was going to keep it.

"No, that's mine and I must get it back," I shot back.

"Why? I want to keep it," the guard sneered.

"You are not allowed to keep it. It belongs to me." I had several hundred crowns along with everything else so I told him that he could take the money and that wouldn't bother me, but that the tie pin was mine.

"But why?" he wanted to know.

"It's my talisman," I told him. When I was sixteen or seventeen years old my boss brought it for me back from Italy and I always wore it in my tie. I believed that it brought me good luck. He finally relented and gave it back to me. I still have it to this day.

After the night interrogation they brought us back to Pankrác prison and put us in a holding cell. It was a room for about 80 people and there were about 40 of us. All of a sudden they brought in a small group of prisoners, among whom was Emil Zeltner. He was the man with the car repair shop in Vinohrady where my Packard would always begin the journey to pick up explosives in Semtín. He had been shot while trying to escape during his arrest, and I could tell right away that he was wounded. He was from our group and since I had not had a chance to talk to him it was essential for me to do so, but it was possibly my only chance to tell him anything. So, I quickly thought about how I might do this in public. I got up and said in a voice loud enough so that he could hear me across the room: "Emil, no one came to see us in Nové Město! Translate that as, I want a drink of water."

Everyone there including the guard spoke Czech. It caused a tremendous stir among the prisoners, but the young guard, who looked to be about 20 was a Sudeten German who spoke fairly good Czech, but he didn't catch it. He was aware that something had happened, he could see it in the faces of the other prisoners, so he asked what was going on.

Someone translated, as I had suggested, that I wanted a drink of water. He nodded over to the corner of the room and said: "The man can go over there. There is a cup and he can have a drink."

So, I went over to supposedly quench my thirst. A cup was there alright, but anyone who saw it would have been disgusted to drink from it. I had no choice, however, since I had chosen that as my cover.

At stake was an incident with Vašek Čihák. Vašek came after me and some other colleagues to the town of Polička one time to deliver some important messages regarding our resistance activities. My group went on from there to Nové Město na Moravě (in Moravia), but without Vašek. Vašek never went to Nové Město, but I couldn't say anything to Emil about Polička, since that was extremely sensitive and could have given everything away if someone followed up on it. So, I was only able to give this as a clue to Emil because he knew that we had gone on to Nové Město. I hoped he would take it as an indication that I had not divulged anything about the matters discussed in Polička during my interrogation and that he should not either, which he didn't.

Just before his execution around the year 1943, Emil wrote the following final note to his wife: "Dearest Annie, it is 4 in the morning and I am to be executed at 6. I am dying for a great cause. Of that I am aware. You know, how much I loved life. I kiss you, I kiss your mom, and take care of Jaroslav, he's a true man." The idiots at the prison apparently didn't read his letter very carefully, or they might have started to investigate who the Jaroslav was. When Annie Zeltner later brought the note to show it to me and my wife, we were deeply moved.

In the Gestapo's administrative offices in Pečkárna, they began their office hours at 9:00 in the morning. They brought me there around 10 a.m. for final processing. The official there told me one last time to admit my guilt, but I held firm and stated that I had nothing to admit. Finally, he told the interpreter: "Our prisons are so full that we have no more room. We have to let this troublemaker go." His boss had ordered my release in writing. Then he said "Heraus (Get out)!" and threw me out.

And so I went. Unlike in prison there were nice carpets everywhere. Pečkárna was previously known as Petschek Palace and housed a bank with a very beautifully decorated interior. I walked through with the release papers that they had given me in hand, although I had not read a word of what was in them. Then I came to the front doors, there was a guard on each side and I gave the papers to one of them. He saluted and I was out.

Naturally, I immediately went home, and because I had not had a chance to wash myself in over two weeks, I was filthy and stank, so my first priority was to take a bath. Just as I finished my

wife, Linda, arrived and exclaimed: "So you really are home! I came back to see if it was really true, because I went to the prison and they told me that you had already left."

What was I to think of this? It seemed that someone had been trying to get us out. I asked Linda whether she had paid anyone off. She actually really did try to find such an opportunity and was on her way to the prison again, but before she could complete the deal, they had let me go.

On her way back on Václavské náměstí she ran into Pepík Čihák, Vašek's brother who also worked for us. Pepík announced to her that I was already home. She immediately rushed home to see if it was indeed true. Then she told me: "I still have to finish something, because I had made a deal that I would pay 100,000 for you and your brother, 50,000 for each of you, if they let you go. The intermediary was someone named Karel Sušanka, an old communist who played both sides. He worked for the Communists, but when the Nazis would need something he would work for them. I don't believe that he ever put anyone in mortal danger, but that is how he made extra money.

My wife had made an agreement with Sušanka that she would deposit the money in such and such a bank and that he would come in at a certain hour and get 50,000 without any password or paperwork. The teller knew who he was, because my wife had showed Sušanka to him previously at one of our restaurants at the Repra. He came and picked up the money and we waited to see what would happen. But nothing did, so I started to explore other avenues.

After I had recuperated a bit, I began to focus my attention on how to get my brother and friends out of jail. I turned to some lawyers first. When I had hired my twelfth one and it was costing me a lot of money, I told myself that this didn't make sense. I therefore decided to find out from Dr. Adams how the German courts handled these matters. He actually went with me to a local German court, and verified for me how cases were handled in Prague, in the Protectorate, and in the Reich. It was all the same everywhere.

"Why do you want to know this?" Adams asked me.

I confided in him, "Well, I have a brother."

"And where do you have him?"

"Before the First Senate in Berlin," I said.

"That's going to be bad," he told me. Even though I did not expressly tell him that I wanted to go to Germany, he got me a pass. Whenever a person wanted to go from the Protectorate to the Reich, he would have to get official permission from the Gestapo. For Adams it was a small matter to obtain such a pass.

I learned about the procedure for these kinds of cases in Prague and was advised that it was identical in Berlin; that is, that the chief prosecutor of this judicial division prepared each case for the Senate, and that they then would take the cases in the order presented to them.

Among all the Prague lawyers that I had retained and their various personnel there was a certain Mr. Babáček, a Czech man who was an interpreter. Whenever some Germans came, such as a lawyer from Berlin, I would have a hard time understanding them, and if someone came from Hamburg it was all but impossible. Even Babáček had difficulties with the Hamburgers. In any case, I decided to take Babáček with me when I made the decision to go to Berlin. I also took with me 100,000 Reichsmarks.

We took a train to Berlin and went directly to the First Senate, which was presided over by Thierack who later was to become the Nazi Minister of Justice. The offices were on the second floor. In the middle of the stairwell, Babáček collapsed and said that he couldn't go there and wouldn't. So I went up by myself and I went in the door of the official who was designated as the chief of the division. I already knew from Dr. Adams that the chief of this division prepared all the cases for Thierack.

The chief appeared to be a decent man, dressed in a white smock. I asked him if he had the papers for such and such a case. I had memorized the numbers of all the cases for my brother and the 12 others, but I also had them written down just to be sure. The chief went rather willingly to Thierack's office, who thankfully was not there, and said to me: "Yes, it's here, but it's not the number of your brother." "How come?" I asked. "There are an additional twelve here and they are all together," he told me. He pulled the files out and showed them to me. They were all stamped "R.U." (Rückkehr unerwünscht – "Return not requested"). He went on to remark "But this is a very serious matter. It will come up for disposition in two or three months."

I opened up my briefcase and showed him the 100,000 marks and said, "If you help me...", but I left the sentence hanging. I also told him that I had all kinds of goods, such as cognac, other types of liqueurs, coffee, tea, chocolates. I would give him whatever he wanted, if he could somehow arrange to have these cases expunged from the record. He became extremely nervous and, all the while looking at the contents of the briefcase, blurted: "But we can't talk about this in the office of the head of the Senate!" He suggested that we meet again at his apartment that afternoon at a quarter to four and with a shaking hand wrote down his address.

I doubt that I ever spent a longer day in my life than that day in Berlin from 9:30 to 16:00. I had no idea whether this man would be alone, or if he would be waiting for me with the Gestapo, who would nab me and add me to the other thirteen and I would never return home Berlin.

That I might lose the 100,000 marks and come away empty handed was the least of my concerns. And the guy could ask for much more. It was a terrible situation.

Nevertheless, I came to his apartment at the appointed time. Fortunately, the official was by himself although he was very agitated. To my great relief he said that he would be able to arrange something. At the same time, he said that he had done some further investigating of these cases, but that he would be unable to absolve my brother of any wrongdoing – the main reason that I had come to Berlin. Nor could he expunge all the cases. He told me that after thinking about it a great deal, that he came up with the idea of shifting all thirteen cases to the jurisdiction of another court. I actually had anticipated such a possibility, so before I came to Berlin I had arranged with the court in Litoměřice that if the cases were to be transferred that that they all would receive lighter sentences.

We finally agreed that he would come to Prague where we would determine to what court the cases would be moved. In the meantime, he promised that he would put the existing file with the death sentences at the bottom of Thierack's whole stack of cases that were to be processed, so that he would not come across them.

"It's a mistake to put them at the very bottom," I said. "It should be perhaps the fourth from the bottom just in case president Thierack happens to decide to take the bottom file."

"Never! Such a thing would never happen because he has them prepared in order so that all he needs to do is to rubber stamp the sentence, nothing more. This is how it's done. Only the judges in his court may have some questions about these people. He doesn't even say a word, just signs the paperwork. He does nothing else, with a few minor exceptions. I know of perhaps three or four cases since I've worked here that he has done anything more than that." Then he suddenly asked, "And so what will happen next?"

"I don't know what will be next. That depends on you," I replied.

"I still have to think it through. It's so nerve wracking!" His voice and hands were still shaking.

I decided to advise him: "Don't hand out large sums to people. The whole thing would be exposed. You must save it and behave as if you are living on your normal wages. In short, you should only allow yourself few extra luxuries."

He still wanted some additional goods, however, especially foodstuffs. And he asked me "What kind of arrangements will be made for these goods?"

"Once you tell me that it's done, I will trust you that it's so," I told him.

A few days later – a few very long days for me – the man came to see me in Prague. And not in a white smock as I had first met him in Berlin. He came in a Nazi full dress uniform covered with gold and various accoutrements. Right at the beginning of our conversation he informed me that he had stopped in Dresden on the way and that he would transfer all the cases as a less important matter to the local courts there, where the most severe sentence possible would be ten years in prison. Of this he could assure me. Because my colleagues and I believed that the Allies would win the war, there was hope that my brother and the other twelve men would survive. When we had finished discussing the legal aspects, he wanted to know where the goods were.

I told him: “I don't have it all and can't show it to you. I can, however, right now show you a case of tea, five cases of cognac, about 50 kilos of chocolate, and a large bag of coffee, but you must believe me that I will give it all to you.”

“How will you deliver it to me in Berlin?” he wanted to know.

I could see that he was elated with everything, but I told him that of course I would not be able to get the goods into the Reich myself so I offered him a suggestion: “Find yourself a couple SS men with a truck and drive here with them to pick up the goods or entrust them to do it by themselves. We will load up the truck and after that whatever happens with it will be your business.”

“But what if there's an inspection at the border?” he said, worried.

“That's ridiculous,” I said. “Is an SS vehicle ever inspected at the border?” Earlier, I had confirmed that they were not inspected. When the SS came through the regular army guards would just salute and watch them drive by without any controls.

“But I beg of you,” I added, “please don't brag about this at all to anyone. Don't hand out bottles of cognac, or sell them so that we're not found out!”

He promised me that he would keep everything to himself because after the war would end there would be a big scarcity of goods and only then would he sell them most profitably.

And so it was that two SS men really did come in a big truck to take the goods to Berlin. The man came to see me again about two weeks later to inform me that he had received the goods without any problems and that he already had transferred the cases to the court in Dresden. He also said that he wanted two ladies' purses.

He had gotten 100,000 marks, goods worth at least that much again, all together totaling about two million Czech crowns, and now he was asking me whether I could get him two purses. My wife always had perhaps twenty purses in stock because a friend of ours manufactured them. I

would give him, say, four bottles of cognac, and he would give me a dozen of his purses. Linda would end up keeping a couple of them and we would give away the rest as gifts.

“Except” he continued, “I need one made of crocodile skin.”

“From crocodile skin?” I asked. I thought, this must be for his mistress. It's too fancy for his wife. Sure enough, he laughed and said: “Between us men, I promised it to my mistress.”

So I went to my friend who made the purses and he told me: “You want one made with crocodile skin? I will have a hard time finding that!” But a couple days later he came to me and said, “I've got it.”

I don't recall how much it cost me then – five or ten thousand crowns. But since I already had sunk a couple million into the whole affair, this was a minor addition. My guest from the Reich was staying at a hotel in Prague, and when I gave it to him, he packed up and left.

* * *

About three weeks later we learned from our lawyers that the cases had been transferred to Dresden as “lesser crimes”, and that all thirteen prisoners had been moved there as well. Their papers also got new file folders, minus the Gestapo's “R.U.” Once in Dresden, all the prisoners were immediately allowed to have their relatives visit them. I considered it to be a major success, but I reserved judgement until a verdict would be rendered. We visited our colleagues several times along with their wives. Of course, each time we would bring them lots of food.

Some time later, the Berlin bureaucrat came to Prague again and told me: “The trial will be held in one week. If you want, I can obtain a visitor pass for you to attend.” But it occurred to me that by chance somewhere somehow some idiot might say, what's this guy doing here? I also hadn't been officially invited to attend, so I thought it best not to go. I told him that I would await the verdict at home.

He came again two days after the trial and announced: “The longest sentence handed down was 15 years. Otherwise, they were three to five years, and your brother got four. With time served, they have reduced it to two and a half. He will go to Bautzen prison. I have a friend there so he will have it good.” He handed me a visitor pass and told me to go see him.

I went there about three weeks later with some more food, but my brother said he really didn't need it. He was getting special treatment from the Berliner's contact there, including better food. The contact also gave my brother a piece of paper and told him, “With this paper you can walk around the prison and visit your friends.” All of the others in our group had been put there as well, except for the one who got 15 years. He was sent to a mental institution.

The man explained: "Since you have friends who are all in different parts of the prison, use this paper to walk around and visit them when you want to. There is nothing on the paper, except for a few lines. It's just an old piece of paper. If a prisoner is walking around the prison with a piece of paper, no one will notice him. It's already such a practice and no one will stop him. But you have to have it with you."

* * *

When they released my brother – it was still well before the end of the war – he came to Prague by express train in first class. Normally, when they released other prisoners, they would transport them like cattle in metal boxcars. They would sit eight to a row and be chained together.

When he arrived, he told me that I should not have paid anything, that he would have arranged everything himself. How naive! He was an unusual case about which it's best not to speak. However, whenever any of the other imprisoned colleagues would write home their wives would later come to visit me and tell me that their hubbies had indicated to them in their letters that I had arranged everything. But I would press them: "Please! Throw those letters away immediately and try to let your husbands know in some inconspicuous way not to write such things! Let them write that they want to know how Annie or Rosie are doing, but not about me or their special treatment. If some fool were to get it in his hands, it could end very badly!"

In this the Germans were very stupid indeed. The correspondence was in fact controlled in the prisons, but not to the extent that if something vague or indirect was written that it wouldn't go through. With the Gestapo, it was already a different matter. There they generally knew what to do, although I must say that the Gestapo in Prague was third rate, which is why I could do what I did.

* * *

One had to continuously think about how to get at them. It required a great deal of energy and money. The bribes would take various forms and one had to be creative in problem solving. For instance, at the beginning of the German occupation but before the war broke out, the National Defense got word that the president's brother, Vojta Beneš, was to be arrested. Hajšman came to me with the news that Beneš would be arrested that evening at 7 o'clock and he wanted to confer about what we should do. I told him Honza, it's now noon. Give me some time to think about it."

"We don't have much time to think about it, since they are coming to get him this evening," he said, but he agreed to give me a half hour to consider it.

I sent my sister, Annie, to the town of Horky, north of Prague, where I had a house in which my mother had lived for a time. No one was there any longer. I paid Annie to go there and put the house in order. She was unable to do much on such short notice, but she did her best. After she left for Horky, I told Hajšman: "Honza, at precisely 7 p.m., and I mean precisely, I will have a car waiting in such and such a place. You will sit in the front passenger seat. Beneš will get in the back as a passenger and I will come three minutes later as the chauffeur and we'll go."

"We'll go where?" he asked.

"I don't know that yet," I told him, although I already had it planned.

At the appointed hour, he brought with him for added security for the journey Jožka David, a friend of his who would become chairman of the Chamber of Deputies after the war.

After we had left Prague and were in the suburb of Kbely, Hajšman said, "There are too many of us here now that we're out of Prague. I will get out. Before they sound the alarm that Vojta is gone, he will be long gone."

It would usually take the Germans two or three days to start looking in earnest, and Vojta Beneš was not a sufficiently high-profile person about whom to sound the alarm more quickly. When the Germans came to arrest him at 7:00 that evening, we were just leaving Prague.

We had to figure out how to get him out of the nation after he got to my country house in Horky. From there, my brother Pepík took them to another place and from there again at 5:00 in the morning to yet another prearranged spot in Moravia. They called from there that they had arrived. All they said was "Rudolf is here".

From there they went to the Polish border where they were handed over to a Dr. Veselý, who was responsible for further connections. There were some mines on both sides of the border through which they passed from Moravia to Poland. This was not easy, but they made it somehow.

When we had arrived at Horky, Vojta brought out several pieces of gold and asked me:

"Brother, do you think it will be enough before Ed (Edvard Beneš, his brother and the president-in-exile in London) finds out about this?" Vojta and Jožka were both very nervous.

I told them, "You won't be needing anything. Everything is taken care of. In another day, once you're in Poland, the president will know where you are."

From Poland they flew to England. President Beneš had the connections for that and it became his responsibility to get them to England at that point. In exile, Vojta met with my younger brother, Frank, and told him that he had gone through Horky. Frank then wrote me that he met

with someone else's brother named Vojta and masked it in this way in the letter. He wrote that they had gotten together and reminisced about their times on that beautiful, cold river in Horky. The letter from Frank arrived within a couple of weeks, so I soon knew that Vojta and Jožka had made it safely.

Frank was in England as a volunteer pilot for the Allies. It was not long after that that he got shot down and killed.

* * *

The episode I recounted about being arrested by the Gestapo and the subsequent payoffs for my brother and the others were the biggest incidents of corruption in which I ever took part, and I must say that during the war in Prague I paid a lot of bribes. I had a lot of money, but I felt that my wealth was not for me and that I had it for some higher purpose. Almost everyone has a price. It all depends who you are trying to influence and for what. Of course, it's best to avoid such dealings, but in wartime when people's lives are at stake it is the moral thing to do.