

## 6. 1944–1945

Towards the beginning of the year 1944, I went to the meeting our Board of Trade. We used to call it the Association of Restaurant and Hotel Owners. It was a Friday, a beautiful day – almost too hot. The vice-president of the association was chairing the meeting. After the opening remarks, it came to the first item on the agenda. 1200 goose giblets were to be distributed. In practice, that meant that 1200 geese were going to the Reich and we were left with this in Prague. The chairman said that it may go to someone who had proper cold storage facilities so that it wouldn't go bad. It would either go to Repre or to Vařata at Václavské náměstí. He also added that it would be too much work to divide the lot into five or ten parts in addition to distributing it.

One man remarked: "So that's how it is! Vařata came to Repre penniless, got rich, and now we are helping him get even richer." I thought someone had made a bad joke, so I let it be.

A little later, we were discussing how to transfer the giblets – it would need to go from one cold storage to another. Again, the man started going on about how unfair this was. The vice-president told him: "If you want, you can have it all. No one else will take the whole lot. That's why I suggested giving it directly to Vařata or to Repre."

The man retorted that the rich are being given everything, while the poor are being forgotten. In the end he added, "Take it all," and again said something insulting about Vařata.

Finally, I couldn't remain silent: "Listen, I don't know you, but if hear any more dirt about Vařata or Repre coming out of that mouth of yours, I swear I will break it." Everyone went silent and into that silence, the chairman said that the meeting was closed and that we would continue the following Monday. This was Friday morning.

We parted and I went home with Mr. Brandejs. On the way he said to me: "My dear colleague, I wouldn't have done what you did. I know that you are direct."

I answered: "Why not? Who is this idiot anyway?"

"That was Mr. Kirsch, he owns a wine cellar in Celetná Street, not far away from you. He is the chairman of the German trade association. Come with me, we'll go see him and you can apologize to him."

That angered me: "I should apologize?"

"My dear colleague, it's in your interest. You don't know what he could do to you. It's soon to be decided which restaurants should be closed down so that the employees can be sent to Vienna to dig trenches. In short, those who will be made redundant are to be sent to the Reich. This affects you." I said resolutely: "Under no circumstances am I going to apologize. That's out of the question!"

When I got home, there was a real commotion. They told me: “You had a call from the board, Mr. Steinwal called, doctor such and such called, and the like. You are to go see them right away.”

I protested: “I just came from there, why should I go back?” Then they called to ask me to go see Kirsch and apologize to him – apparently it was already arranged for me to go see him and kindly ask him to excuse me and to express my regret. I said: “I won’t do any such thing.”

In the meantime, Kirsch went back to the board of trade. First, he went home like I did, but then he came back and said: “I will tell you which two businesses will get closed down. The German business association will recommend the closure of Vašata at Václavské náměstí and Repré. This will free up 500 people for work in the Reich.” It was in Vienna, but the city was part of the Reich at the time. All of this happened on the Friday.

On Monday I went to see Jaroslav Krejčí, the Prime Minister of the Czech government, and I told him: “Mr. Prime Minister, I have a favor to ask.”

He replied: “How was your weekend?”

“Well, it was alright,” I said.

To which he replied: “And how is your wife?”

I said: “I am not here to talk about my wife, I am here in a very urgent and serious matter and I need your help.”

He said: “Of course, my friend, any time.”

So I asked him: “I need you to tell something to Bertsch .” This Bertsch was a German from the Reich and a member of the government of the Protectorate. He was in charge of economy. He was standing in for a German general who committed suicide during the Nuremberg trials.

Krejčí asked me: “What is your business with him?”

I answered: “I don’t even know him, I have no business with him, but I would like to ask you to call him to tell him that you wouldn’t want any stirrings in among the Prague populace, given the difficult situation at the front. They would surely start if the Municipal House were to be closed down, because Repré is a kind of national symbol. And Vašata at Václavské náměstí should also remain open. Whoever comes to Prague, goes there.”

Krejčí was surprised: “Why would I tell him this?”

I explained the situation to him.

He then remarked: “I would have never thought that you didn’t know the chairman of the German business association. So what am I to do? What do I tell Bertsch?”

I suggested: "Make something up. You can say that it could cause trouble in Prague if these two places were to shut down. Besides, there are few young people there, it's mostly older employees."

He sighed and said: "I will tell him this when I see him," but I retorted: "No, you call him now."

He started explaining to me: "I never asked anything of him..."

"That's all the better!" I told him.

"Alright, I'll tell him."

"Then call him now and tell him that if these two venues were to shut, there would be a risk of unrest. And you should add that you would like to see the businesses like they were before the war. Say there should be flowers everywhere."

Krejčí retorted: "I'm afraid this will end up doing more damage than the few people who would go to the Reich. You have a good plan, but I don't think it will work out. He sometimes asks things of me but I've never asked him anything from him."

I continued to insist: "Call him."

And so I sat in his office until he finally called him and told him that he had heard that the Municipal House was to be closed down. He also explained to him that it was a national symbol and that he would like to ask him to take steps in order to prevent it.

Bertsch replied: "Absolutely, anything you want." I assume he was glad that Krejčí also wanted something from him.

Krejčí then told me that Bertsch said he would take care of it and that he sounded quite happy about it. I said: "You see, it worked!" But I thought to myself, how is this going to end? I wasn't too optimistic.

Maybe ten days or a fortnight later, I received a call from the Ministry of Trade where I had many friends: "You should come around here."

I answered: "Do you think I have the time?"

"You should come, it's quite amusing."

"I know what's it about. Bertsch wants to close down my restaurants."

"No, it's really funny!"

So, I went over there. They let me read the order given by Bertsch and started asking me: "How do you know him?"

I answered: "All I know is that a certain Bertsch is a member of the government, but I've never seen him in my life."

“Don’t say you’ve never met him before.”

“I may have seen him before, but I certainly never exchanged a single word with him,” I told them.

“Tell us the truth, this impossible.”

Naturally I couldn’t tell them about Krejčí so I insisted: “I really don’t know him.”

In the document, Bertsch stated his wish that the restaurants at Václavské náměstí and in the Municipal House had floral decorations wherever possible. It also stated that the restaurants were badly lit and looked sad and that something should be done to remedy that.

I asked: “So what’s going to happen? What are you going to do about this? Write to Bertsch to tell him that you cannot carry out his wish because the chairman of the German trade association, Mr. Kirsch, demands that the restaurants be closed down.”

The official at the Ministry of Trade replied resolutely: “We are not going to tell him anything, we have to obey him. The flowers and lights will be expensive.”

I already had flowers from the municipal gardens for free. I had a written agreement with the municipality that the city of Prague would supply me with greenery, but I went further and asked for floral decorations as well. I gave a large sum to the person responsible for the gardens and we agreed that they would give me flowers every year. He made sure this was the case – we even had fresh flowers regularly delivered to our apartment.

We also already had decent lighting in both restaurants, inside and outside. We didn’t want to make any more improvements because we feared that in wartime, it may be seen as a provocation.

My friends at the Ministry of Trade told me: “It’s an order, here, sign this document.” They had a copy made and I signed a declaration that I had received this order.

I put it in my pocket and told myself: “It’s more trouble every day.” I went home to start working on it.

We put in powerful lighting so that the fuses kept blowing. We had an automatic fuse box so it was quite easy to start the power up again each time this happened. Then I figured out how to fix this. I first spoke to Evžen Racek, who was the director in charge of transformers at the Prague Electric Utility. He told me he had a good relationship with the director of the Electric Utility. He told the director that he has to help Vašata, that he needs a transformer in one of his restaurants but that the one he has is meant to be going to the Pankrác prison. The director said that we had to go see the president of the company.

The president of the Electric Utility was called Schiketanz – he was a German from Liberec and spoke a bit of Czech. They showed him the document of which I had a copy. Schiketanz said

that it had to be done. However, both directors said that the current electricity installation didn't allow that. But Schiketanz said: "I am here on a political appointment, you tell me what the technical solution is."

Racek replied: "The only solution to the problem is to have a transformer installed there."

"Then put it there," Schiketanz answered.

But Racek countered: "I don't have one, the only one I have must go to Pankrác. We've had it prepared for two weeks."

But the president decided: "This is an order from minister Bertsch, the transformer will go to Repra." Decided!

But Racek still had objections: "I don't know, I would need to have a look first to see if there is space for it there."

But Schiketanz ordered him: "Get a car, drive straight to Repra and in two hours, I want you to report back to me. In short, as soon as it's done, come to me so that I can call minister Bertsch to tell him what we have to do. This is a direct order from him and I will be glad to be able to speak to him. Otherwise I don't get to speak to him."

So, this is what was ordered. We installed the transformer, which made electricity cheaper by 32 percent – and the Germans paid for it all.

About two weeks later, I was at home with my family when I received a call from the concierge: "Sir, you need to come downstairs. Two men are here to see you, they are from the Gestapo."

I went downstairs and they started shouting at me. I said: "Why are you shouting? Listen, my German is bad and you can understand Czech. I will do the same as I do with Oberbürgermeister professor Pfitzner. We have this understanding – he speaks German to me, I reply in Czech and we manage to understand each other pretty well."

Pfitzner was the German deputy mayor of Prague. He once asked me: "When I come to dinner at your restaurant, will I get a bigger portion?"

I said to him: "You mean porta?" But he didn't know what it meant. Porta is the head of foam on top of a poured beer. I was joking and so I had to explain to him.

He said: "I don't care how much beer I get. I would like to come in a company of three or four people and I would like to have a good dinner."

"If you have enough rationing coupons, then why not?"

"That's the thing, I want it without coupons." Food and even clothes were rationed at the time. Coupons were cut out of ration books and then we had to hand them over to the city authority.

I said: "Of course, but only if you could call me beforehand. I would like to be there."

“Me too, I would like you to meet my friends.” We thus parted ways on a good note.

And so now, when the men who had been waiting for me downstairs started screaming at me, I stopped them. I already knew what was going on. I told them they had to speak slowly so that I could understand them, otherwise I said I’d need an interpreter. They calmed down a little bit and then I told them: “I received an order to install more lights at the restaurant.”

They asked me: “Where do you have the order?”

“I have it at home.” So, they went home with me – we just happened to have some guests around.

When I brought them the document, they read it and said: “If this is true, everything is in order. But if not, you will hang in less than two days.”

I said: “It is true – you will either have to hang me or minister Bertsch – he’s the one who ordered it.”

They took their leave quite politely and said they wouldn’t disturb the company, but before they left they asked me to hand the document over.

I said: “I can’t give it to you. I will have a copy made and you can come collect it tomorrow – or I can send it to you.”

But they insisted: “Hand it over!”

But I said: “I won’t give this to anyone. This is an important document. What if someone else from another department of yours were to come here? Just tell me where I need to deliver a copy.”

They accepted that and I brought the document over the next day. That brought an end to the whole affair. It was a tremendous success.

The next time I met Prime Minister Krejčí, I expressed my gratitude to him. He came to my place several times. He liked to sing so we always did a lot of singing at our home. It was the best thing one could do in wartime with so much tension everywhere.

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Another month passed when I got a call from that Oberbürgermeister Pfitzner. He told me that General Friderici would like to speak with me.

“A General?” I said, surprised. He was the army commander of Prague. “The General wants to speak with me? Are you sure this is not a mistake? I am no soldier.”

“He needs to speak with you. He says that he wants to meet you at your café – up on the gallery where he won’t be seen.”

I had a few sandwiches prepared and a bottle of good wine. Right at the beginning he told me he had good news for me. He decided that the Municipal House will be closed down and turned a Wermachtsheim – a house for the use by the army. He added: “It will be reserved for the officers only and they have money. I am telling you this in advance so that you can let the people know. Most of the patrons here are Czech.”

I nodded: “At least 70 percent.”

“Well then, tell them that soon the army will be taking over this place. In short, we will be in charge.”

I went back to Krejčí and told him all this. He said: “Well, old boy, I can’t touch the soldiers.” They have been saying for some time that they would like to take over the Municipal House. It’s large with several different cafés, as well as other function rooms. The idea didn’t seem bad at first sight – I would be allowed to stay as leaseholder. The soldiers would spend a lot of money, but I didn’t want this to happen. Actually, I was completely against it.

Krejčí told me: “I can give you one piece of advice. It will cost you, though. You surely know that the army and the SS are pitted against one another. I will give you the name of a man who was a contact within the SS. He could do something to help you – for a fee.” I asked him: “How much do you think it will cost?”

“I would say 50,000 crowns.” It wasn’t a large sum for such a service.

Krejčí introduced me to this man – his name was Mědílek. His office was situated opposite Masaryk train station. I went straight to him and told him that I had been sent there by the Prime Minister and that I needed a contact to some high places within the army and that I knew that Wehrmacht was against the SS.

Mědílek closed the door of his office and we continued speaking in whispers. Finally, he said: “I do have a contact, but I can’t promise you anything. Give me three days and I will get back to you and let you know what could be done and how much it would cost.”

He came to see me the following day and told me: “It would cost you 100,000. Fifty for me and fifty for my contact.”

I answered: “That’s a lot of money, but alright.”

He said: “But I need the fifty thousand now.”

I nodded: “Alright, I will get you your fifty thousand, but I don’t have them on me right now, I will give it to you in the afternoon.” I always did this when I was dealing with such characters.

He came back in the afternoon and said: “The other guy would also like his share now.”

I said: “No way, I already know that I will lose another 50,000, but I won’t give it to you until it’s done.”

He insisted: "But it would be better we gave it to him now."

"Then give him your share and you can trust me that once the business is over, you will get your money. Otherwise I stand to lose 100,000."

Things went quiet for about six weeks until one day when I was sitting in the café, I saw someone carrying coils of rope. There were soldiers outside carrying a large wooden board. They were going to put it where the flowers were. On the board it read: Wehrmachtsheim and they were getting ready to put it up. I thought to myself, that scoundrel tricked me after all. While I was looking at this sorry scene, I saw a car drive up. It was an army car. A man jumped out and went straight towards the soldiers. He started screaming at them and they let the board fall with a big thud.

The board fell down on the pavement and the soldiers stood at attention. The man roared something of which I didn't understand a word. I only saw that their truck came and took the board away and they were running about and making calls.

The next day I received a call from the Oberbürgermeister that General Friderici would like to speak to me again. I said: "What is it he wants again? They've already brought the sign."

"I don't know, but he would like you to arrange one of your..."

And I asked: "And without coupons again?"

"I didn't give you any last time, did I?"

"No, you didn't."

When I met General Friderici again in person, he told me that he had bad news for me. Due to reasons of technical nature, they wouldn't be able to turn Repre into a house for the army – they had a look and it isn't suitable.

I decided to play with him and told him: "But I already told my customers to stop coming here."

He asked straight away: "In short, how much will you lose in revenue?"

I answered: "I don't need that, I don't want any compensation."

He raised his voice: "The German army doesn't need handouts from a citizen of the protectorate. Just tell me how much you need."

I wanted to get it over with, so I said 10,000. A week later he sent me 10,000 marks – 100,000 crowns. I always traded in crowns and I said ten thousand just to give a number. So, in the end I didn't lose any money. The Germans paid for everything.

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Here's another wartime story. Like any other café, Repré was frequented by loose women and my staff told me that one of them was being exceptionally brazen and that she was seeing a German. They asked me to write to her to ask her not to come to our café anymore. So, I wrote to her. This was a common practice if you wanted to prohibit someone from your establishment.

I sent her a note, but she gave it to her German lover. He came to see her every month or so. In short, a few weeks later he came to see me with the letter and told me I'd have to apologize to her.

I protested: "I beg your pardon, don't tell me what I have to do, I don't have to do anything. What is the matter?" He began to holler and I tried to calm him down: "Listen, there's no need to make a scene, sit down, we can deal with this in calm manner."

"But you must!" he insisted.

"I must? Well then, we won't agree on anything. I can see you have a golden party badge, I have never met anyone with a golden party badge..."

I spoke German then, just to make myself understood. Obviously, I was making mistakes. I asked him: "So what is the matter? These ladies aren't particularly well behaved. But why should we talk about this? I'm more interested in that badge of yours, could I have a look at it? I've never seen one like that before."

I was looking at the badge – there was a very low number etched on the back of it, I believe it was number 580. I said: "I'm going to write this down."

He asked: "What are you going to write down?"

"The number of your badge. I will tell you why. Every Thursday, gentlemen from some police force come here, they say they have badges with SD." He remained speechless when he heard that. It was the Sicherheitsdienst, the police of police. Even the Gestapo were afraid of them. I added: "Every member of the SD comes with a story to share when we sit around the table with them..."

I had never actually shared a table with them, let alone spoken with them. I was just trying to scare him.

"When I sit with them, everyone shares a story so I will just say..."

"Dear God, don't! You cannot even mention me."

"Just this little thing," and I pointed at the badge.

"Please, don't mention me at all." In the end we agreed that I won't tell anyone and he will come to the café with his lady for one last time. I would tell my staff so that there is no trouble. After that, she would never show up again.

“That’s the best solution, I agree entirely. And you won’t talk about this with the SD.”

“I won’t, it’s such a trifle, it’s not worth mentioning.”

“I implore you, give me your word that you won’t talk about it.”

“Alright, I won’t talk about it with the SD.”

“It would be best if you forgot about the whole thing. And throw away that number.”

“I have it written down here, but I will get rid of it.”

He kept saying that he was married. “Mr. Vašata, you’re a married man and I am sure you too have committed a slight sin here and there.”

“I haven’t. I have a young wife and I don’t want to be mixed up in any of that.”

He was still pleading with me not to say anything at the door. And that was that, the lady stopped coming to the café and we didn’t have any more trouble with her.

I had many such anecdotes with the Germans. I knew how to deal with them. I wasn’t afraid of them. But all the things connected with the Resistance were high-risk. The people who really were in the Resistance, lived with a noose tied around their necks and always had one foot in the grave.