

## 5. Heydrich

On 28 September 1941, Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's right-hand man, arrived in Prague. The very next day, several people were executed. I remember that one of those murdered was a certain Mr. Špitálský who ran a delicatessen store at Na Poříčí street. This is what Heydrich did as a way of introducing himself. Heydrich was wreaking havoc in Prague.

Some months later, the National Defense received a message from London that it was necessary to carry out a major operation, although the nation was not directly involved in the war. It would need to be something that would benefit the Resistance to the Nazis beyond our borders and our situation in the war. It was suggested that the operation would involve the killing of Heydrich.

They sent three paratroopers from London – the leader of the group was Valčík, the second was Slovakian and called Gabčík, and the third one was Kubiš.

The National Defense was against the assassination because it knew the situation well and was saying: "You can't imagine the consequences if we do this." Instead of Heydrich, it suggested Moravec. He was the Czech Minister of Education and he was fully collaborating with the Germans. His two sons were in the SS. He was also known as Quisling, who was the well-known traitor in Norway. One could find such traitors all across Europe at that time.

Before the war, Moravec was writing for Lidové Noviny, which was a popular newspaper. Every cultured family in Prague subscribed to this newspaper, which was owned by Jaroslav Stránský. Moravec wrote for the newspaper under the penname Yester. In short, this Moravec was working with the invaders. This was not a huge problem, however, because there weren't many such traitors and everyone knew about them.

So, the National Defense was against the suggested target, but the people in London insisted it had to be Heydrich. The man in charge of the operation was Lieutenant Colonel Moravec, who had been Head of the Information Service before the war. He was not related and had nothing to do with the other Moravec, who was a member of the government of the Protectorate.

In the meantime, after the Germans occupied France, they found out that General Eliáš, who was the Prime Minister of the Czech government at the time, was in fact working against them. Because Bohemia and Moravia were part of the Protectorate and Slovakia was a separate state, the Germans had more resources to survey us and they found out that Eliáš was working with the Resistance.

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I have to digress here a bit. One day, I was approached by someone who identified themselves using a password and told me that someone was going to see me the following day. They gave me a passport for Eliáš. It was a Slovak passport with a fake name. Slovakia was a separate state then. The person who gave me the passport told me to take it to General Bílý who would know what to do next. I was to identify myself using another password, but instead I went straight to Eliáš.

He was surprised by this and asked me: “Where did you get this?” I told him the password and he said: “All right, take a seat,” and he left.

After several minutes, I ran away. I thought to myself that it was suspicious. He really was calling the Gestapo. He thought it was a setup.

About a week later, the man who was supposed to inform Eliáš came to see me. He visited Eliáš only a day later after I went to him, because he got drunk. That’s where the misunderstanding came from. Eliáš did not know what was going on and handed the passport over to the Gestapo.

Once Eliáš found out about all this, he came to see me and asked me not to think that his actions were aimed against me. The fault lay with the man who got drunk, which is something that cannot happen in such situations. It was terrible. So, that was my contact with Eliáš, who the Germans ended up executing.

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And how did I come to be involved in the plot to kill Heydrich? When the paratroopers landed in Central Bohemia, one of them came to Prague with a password that we had arranged with London. I gave him civilian clothing for two or three men, ration cards and money used in the Protectorate. Apart from that, we needed some Protectorate identity cards that I managed to obtain through friends at the Czech police.

What happened later on was that the boys who came to take out Heydrich – which I was not aware of at the time – came to see me and told me they had nowhere to stay. So I hid them at the Municipal House, which I was renting. It was possible to do that in such a large building. I told them they could stay for a maximum of five days behind the large pipe organ in Smetana Hall.

They had slept there for three nights when they were joined by another three, so there were six of them. This was towards the end of April. I begged them not to smoke because the hall was regularly checked by a night watchman, light technicians, the caretaker, and others. I also gave them a master key to the Municipal House from the street where the hotel Paris was. That entrance was seldom used and the key also opened the lift. This way, they could get inside without being seen.

On the third day, an electrician called Mr. Tejček came to my apartment. He was from the group of people who were employed by the municipality and whose salary I paid in addition to my rent. They called me “boss”, although technically I wasn’t their boss. He told me: “Boss, there are some men hidden behind the organ who tell me that they are there with your permission, but I want to warn you that this is an extremely dangerous thing.”

I turned pale and begged him not to tell anyone about this. He promised me that he would not tell, but then he said he had to report this to Mr. Mildorf. He was also a city employee and worked as the caretaker of the Municipal House. He was German, but a decent man – a former social democrat with whom I never had any issues as a leaseholder. However, I could not trust him when it came to this matter. I implored Tejček to keep silent about this but

when he left, I got dressed and followed him to his apartment to ask Mrs. Tejček to persuade her husband not to tell anyone. They both promised me to keep silent about this on the condition that the boys left by the next morning. Tejček resisted for a long time, saying that he had to report it, arguing that Mr. Mildorf might also go and do a round of the building or that a night watchman might discover the paratroopers and tell Mildorf – in which case Tejček would risk losing his job. In the end I told him: “Mr. Tejček, you could get in trouble or even lose your job, but I could lose my life!”

I gave a rather conspicuous brown pinstripe suit to Valčík, the leader of the paratroopers. I removed the tags with my name and the name of the tailor, Mr. Havlík; in short, anything that could help identify me. The suit fit Valčík perfectly. I then also asked Josef Kasal, who was a member of my family, to find a hiding place for the paratroopers in Pardubice. He managed to find a place for all four of them (including Čurda) at hotel Veselka, which belonged to a colleague of his called Košťál. He was the son-in-law of minister František Udržal and brother-in-law of Dr. Kaňkovský.

Everything went well at Košťál's until someone tuned them in. Košťál was executed for harboring the paratroopers.

But now I come back to my brown pinstripe suit. In the end, the Germans found the paratroopers in the Saints Cyril and Methodius Cathedral in Prague. The paratroopers killed themselves, rather than be taken alive by the Gestapo. Valčík was wearing the brown suit when they found them. The suit was then put on public display in the window of the Rolný store right next to my restaurant on Václavské náměstí (Prague's main square). I went there three times a day to see if the suit was still there. A sign next to the suit promised a big reward to anyone who, having recognized it or the person it belonged to, would alert the Gestapo or the Czech police. Vašek Čihák, my right-hand man, usually went with me and each time we saw that the suit was still there we would look at each other and say: “Life is beautiful!”<sup>1</sup>

I would like to preserve this moment for posterity and give my thanks to all my employees. I worked with six hundred people at the time and most of them had probably seen me wear the suit. I was worried sick that one of them would rat on me in order to get the reward. I was also worried that people might talk about it among themselves – albeit in good will – and that someone might overhear their conversation. I was also scared of my tailor, Mr. Havlík, who must have recognized the suit at first sight. In praise of my former employees, I would like to say that none of them thought of turning me in, although it seemed that some of them were giving me strange looks whenever I met them. I want to point out that in this respect, practically ninety-nine percent of the nation behaved in the same way as those six hundred people.

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<sup>1</sup> These memoirs were going to be entitled, “Life Is Beautiful,” in light of this anecdote, but just as the book was going to be published in Czech in the late 1990s, the Oscar-winning film, “Life Is Beautiful”, was released and became a popular hit. I could not give the same name to the book, so I entitled it, “Life Was Beautiful,” which is an appropriate title for a memoir and preserves the meaning of the anecdote. – Paul F. Uhlir