

The BCSA 2014 Writing Competition second prizewinner



Photo: Stanislav Marsal

A sound of sauerkraut exploding

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Vojtěch approached that inactive time of midday spent in reveries of past sensations of his youth: the smell of egg and flour pancakes his mother had used to fry and toss high to turn them and smear them with golden honey, the freshly baked vanilla sugar covered Christmas shortbread biscuits melting in the mouth, the warm rye bread with rich butter decorating the glazed stoneware plate, the fragrant ground coffee granules brewing in the pot his parents had enjoyed to drink, as well as the outside sensations: the drying hay freshly sickled off the meadow, the hot slate rock outcrop above the river baking in the sun, the damp floor with mushrooms sticking their heads out of the moss...

A sudden sharp searing newly perceived odour brought him to his present state of mind. The unmistakably unpleasant smell of home grown white cabbage pickled in cheap sharp wine vinegar being warmed up for lunch on a gas ring in the tiny corridor kitchenette invaded his office. Upset, having been interrupted from his intimate sensual remembrances, he shouted at his secretary Věra: "Stop all that punishment of sauerkraut to death and leave the premises at once, go and get instead some more decent lunch in a near-

by side-street workers' café." The invitation was offered despite the February cold weather and the wartime food shortages. "Here is twenty crowns and don't come back till your belly is full, and before you go, open all the windows." He decided to leave as well and have his lunch at home a few blocks away from his office premises while the interior was being refreshed. It was 1945 in Prague and the war was in its final stages; it was Ash Wednesday, St Valentine's Day, about quarter past noon.

The formation of twelve bomb groups of the United States Army Air Forces Eighth Air Force totalling 431 B-17 Flying Fortress bombers took off from air bases located in England in the morning between 6.50 and 7.10 local time for their mission number 146. The spearhead unit of the first three groups consisting of the 398th Bombardment Group with Triangle-W tail code, lifted off from its British base at RAF Station Nuthamstead near the town of Royston in North Hertfordshire, the 91st Bombardment Group with Triangle-A tail code from RAF Station Bassingbourn in Cambridgeshire and the 381st Bombardment Group with Triangle-L tail code from RAF Station Ridgewell northwest of Halstead in Essex was followed by nine other bombardment groups. On the way

they encountered bad weather with strong winds and high and thick clouds over the Netherlands. The radar in the lead aircraft became inoperative being jammed by enemy activity. The spearhead unit was led by the leader of the 398th Group on a detour of the bad weather front, and it separated from the rest of the nine groups which decided to fly over the clouds rather than around them and continued on course to their correct designated target: the centre of the built up area of Dresden.

The separated lead formation of three groups of 137 aircraft became disoriented and off course from its intended destination. Over the German town of Münster the 91st Group was shot up by flak, there was damage to aircraft and wounded airmen. By now they deviated almost fifty miles from their target flying near the heavily defended town of Schweinfurt. To avoid it they dropped further south coming eventually about sixty-five miles off course.

However, their leader stubbornly pressed on regardless despite misunderstandings between him and his radar observer.

The 398th Group had as the leader a newly appointed lieutenant colonel after its previous commander went missing on a mission in late January. He was already making a name for

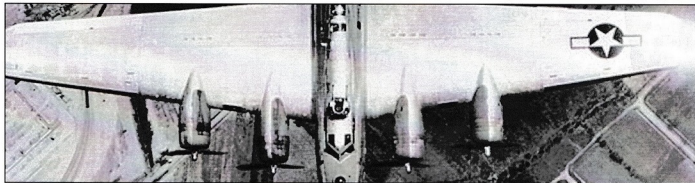
himself as a maniac. He came in from staff to become the group commanding officer. Promptly he told his airmen what a lousy bunch they were; they flew sloppy formations, had poor bombing results; he was going to shape them up. He was a lieutenant colonel aspiring to move up ranks and everybody immediately took an intense dislike to him.

He had guys going up night flying after they had come home from a mission. He was coming from what was believed in statistics. Practice hours, practice missions, night time, and all that sort of thing - statistics meant more to him than winning the war, they felt. He was baiting the guys in his squadron about their sloppy formation flying and that was the one that ended up in a mid-air collision with two of their aeroplanes. It killed about ten or eleven men from his mocking them. So, they did not like him at all...

The leader, with the call sign 'Swordfish Able', was telling the navigators, bombardiers, radio operators, that they did not

which partly faced onto a minor side street but otherwise formed a solid dark silhouette of five to six storeys of mostly rendered neoclassical façades on a long straight avenue lined with trees and laid with tramlines leading eastward from the city centre all the way to its perimeter and was one of the longest streets in the city. The city's history, progress and the nature of country's government could be narrated by analysing the street name changes. Originally this important avenue was called Říčanská, afterward it was renamed Černokostelecká because it was stretching in the direction of the towns Říčany and Kostelec nad Černými Lesy. Later well-known personalities took over the street name and the thoroughfare was labelled after Josef Jungmann, the Czech historian and patriot, following with renown military figures Marshal Ferdinand Foch between the wars and Marshal Kurt Christoph Graf von Schwerin in the time of Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren, then after Iosip Vissarionovich

and Královské Vinohrady. Bombs fell at the foot of Palacký Bridge (Mozart Brücke) and on Emauzy (Emaus) Church and Monastery. The apartment building on the corner of Mácha Square (Mácha Platz, now Jiráskovo) received a direct hit and Mladotvský Palace or so called Faust House and the general hospital on Charles Square (Karlsplatz) were damaged as well as the Jewish Synagogue, one of the largest in the world, on Sázavská (Sasau Strasse) by then devoid of its congregation, transported to its terrible fate in the early 1940s. Its frail state was further aggravated by the Nazi authorities preventing the firefighting to take place after the bombing; it had to be demolished in 1951. The National Theatre stage scenery workshop and store on Viničná (Weinbergasse) caught fire resulting in a loss of 30,000 historical items of great value. There was not enough time for many people to escape into underground shelters. Although the figures differ there were approximately 700 dead and 1,200 heavily wounded;



know where they were, but he did know; he was absolutely convinced even so the lead aircraft's radar gave out some time ago. The lieutenant colonel took over from his navigator and led them on to bomb Dresden; that was his belief. Through a break in the clouds his bombardier reported that he saw a large urban area, a good-looking city, with a meandering river that appeared the same as the designated target. On the leader's orders the aircraft turned and made a short run on with good results. Following planes of the remainder of three groups bombed the same target. One of the pilots in the groups was of Czech descent.

Věra, a teenager of seventeen, just out of school, worked in her first job as a secretary for Vojtěch Fried. Twenty years ago Fried had a hardware store on Petřská in the New Town. Prospering in business, later he became an agent for steel rolling mills and moved to Královské Vinohrady. Presently he was a director of his new import company of packing and office machines. Věra lived with her parents in Pankrác, some distance from Královské Vinohrady and usually brought her modest lunch and warmed it in the office kitchenette. Fried's office was located in a converted flat in a corner apartment building

Stalin during the Communist era, finally receiving in 1962, after Stalin's fall from grace, a more unpretentious name. In the history of the capital it was a great responsibility for this stretch of thin land strip to carry such heavyweight names. During the Protektorat tram lines 10, 11 and 22 climbed the avenue from the National Museum at the top of Wenceslas Square (Wenzelsplatz) through Královské Vinohrady (Königliche Weinberge) and rumbled and squealed uphill toward the suburb of Strašnice (Straschnitz).

On 14th of February 1945, at about half past noon, the corner apartment building got a direct bomb hit, partly demolishing it and starting fierce fires in it and in the neighbouring buildings. Warning city sirens announced a possible air raid five minutes before the bombing, and this was only the second time it was not a false alarm out of many previous flyovers and possible air raids over Prague. To begin with bombs dropped on the Prague suburbs of Radlice (Radlitz) and Smíchov (Smichow). Others found their target in Pankrác (Pankratz), Nusle (Nusl) and Vršovice (Werschowitz). The worst damage received the Vltava (Moldau) region of the New Town (Neustadt)

over ten thousand persons lost their accommodation with over three hundred and fifty buildings destroyed or damaged some of them of national historical importance.

He opens the window of his mother's Prague apartment to let some cold, fresh air in and get the smell of cooked sauerkraut out of the kitchen. He is a post-war baby and his mother, Věra, now in her seventies, is dishing out the staple cabbage diet with few rounds of bread dumplings on the plate. They are having the annual St Valentine's Day celebration, always with the same one course on the menu. She says to her son: "The other day I went to see the apartment building on the street now renamed Vinohradská, my first workplace, destroyed by the American bombers coming from England; it was wiped out by our so called friends, that is still perplexing to this day."

"The first time I dared after so many years. I couldn't recognise the place. A new building stands there instead." As every year, this never fails to remind him: "By the way, this modest meal saved my life as well as Mr Fried's." He lifts the fully loaded fork with sauerkraut and says: "Cheers to that mum," and winks at the photograph of his children hanging on the wall.