

# NOTES FROM THE GALLOWES

by

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## Chapter 6

### Martial Law 1942

May 27th, 1943.

It was just a year ago.

They led me from another grilling down to the Cinema. That was our daily route: from Number 400 down stairs for the dinner which they brought from Pankrats, then back up to the fourth floor. But that day they did not take us back up after noon.

You sit and eat. The benches full of prisoners, busy with their spoons and chewing. It looks almost human. If all of us who will be dead tomorrow should all of a sudden turn into skeletons, the ring of spoons on our earthenware bowls would change into the grating of bones and clopping of jaws. Only nobody thought of that, and no one suspected. Each of us was stoking his body in order to live another week, a month or years.

One could almost say: Good weather. Then suddenly a strange wind struck us, and it was oppressively quiet. Only by the faces of the guards could you guess that something unusual was going on. The proof was that they called us out and lined us up and took us off to Pankrats. Back to Pankrats at noon! That has never happened before. Half a day without any grilling; we are all worn out with questions for which we find no answers. It sounds like a gift from God. But it is not.

In the corridor we meet General Eliash (former Prime Minister under the Protectorate, later executed). Excitement in his eyes, he catches sight of me through the hedge of guards, moves over and whispers:

"It's martial law".

He had no chance to reply to my mute question. Prisoners have only split seconds for the most important communications.

The guards at Pankrats were very much surprised at our early return from Petchek's. The one who led me to my cell gave me enough confidence to tell him what I had heard. I don't know who he is, but he merely shook his head. He knew nothing about martial law - or perhaps he didn't hear

my question. Yet, perhaps - and that quiets my anxiety at having asked.

That evening, however, he came and looked into the cell:

"You were right. There has been an attempt to assassinate Heydrich. He is badly wounded. Martial law in Prague".

The next day they line us up down in the corridor to take us for another grilling. Among us is Comrade Victor Synek, the last living member of the Central Committee of the party, who was arrested in February, 1941. A long slim turnkey in an SS uniform waves a piece of white paper before his eyes, on which you can see in bold print:

"Entlassungsbefehl". "Discharge Order".

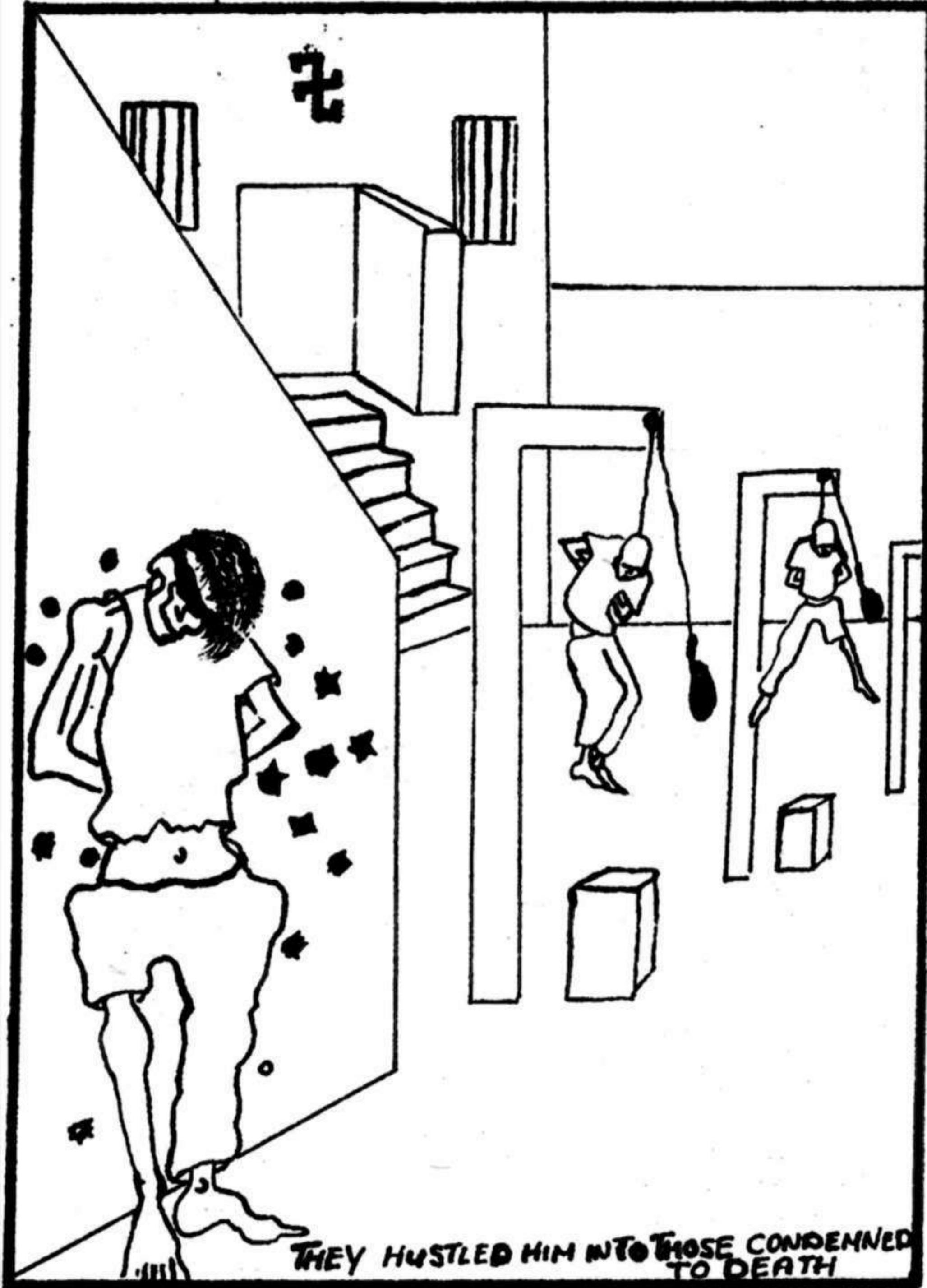
He is laughing crudely:

"So you see, you Jew, you did live through it. Your discharge order! Figs..." At that he draws his finger around his neck in the sign that Victor's head will fly off. Otto Synek was the first to be executed under martial law in 1941. His brother Victor is the first victim of martial law in 1942. They take him to Mauthausen for the bump-off, as their elegant expression is.

The route from Pankrats to Petchek building and back now becomes the daily calvary for thousands of prisoners. The SS guards in buses take revenge for Heydrich. Before they have gone half a mile, blood flows from the faces and mouths of dozens of prisoners beaten with pistol butts. Those who happen to ride with me usually have it easier because my beard is the object of a great many practical jokes, and there is less time for beating the rest of the passengers. As the car jerks along, the guards like to hang onto my whiskers as to a strap in a car, one of their favourite pastimes. That is good preparation for my grillings, which change routine according to the political situation, but invariably end with:

"If you don't come to your senses by tomorrow, you will be shot".

There is nothing very terrifying in that any more. Evening after evening you hear them calling out names down in the corridor. Fifty, a hundred, two hundred people will in a moment be bound hand and foot, laid in autos and carted like slaughter-house cattle to mass execution at Kobylisy. What is the charge against them? First of all that nothing has been proved against them. They were arrested, no connection has been found with any of the major cases, they are unnecessary for further investigation, so they can be used for executions. A satirical lyric which one comrade read to nine others caused



THEY HUSTLED HIM INTO THOSE CONDEMNED TO DEATH

the arrest of all of them two months before the assassination. Now they are in death-cells - 'for approving the assassination'. A woman was arrested six months ago on suspicion that she was circulating underground leaflets. She has never admitted it, nor have they any proof. Nevertheless they have arrested her brothers and sisters, her brothers' wives and sisters' husbands & are going to murder them all because wiping out whole families of 'suspicious persons' is the motto of this martial law. A post-office messenger, who had been arrested by mistake, is standing down in the corridor waiting to be set free. He hears his name called, and they hustle him into the line of those condemned to death, cart him off and shoot him. Only the next day they discover that it was a mistake; someone else with the same name was to have been shot. So they execute the other man, too, and everything is set right. Who can take time to make sure that the people they execute are the right ones? And what is the use, anyway, when their purpose is to kill off the whole nation?

That night I come back very late from my 'hearing'. Down by the wall stands Vladimir Vanchura with a little bundle of his things at his feet (one of the most talented Czech novelists). I know very well what that means, and he knows also. We grip hands for a moment. I can still see him from the upper corridor, standing with his head slightly bowed and his eyes gazing far, far across our lives. A half hour later they called out his name...

A few days later Milosh Krasny stands facing that same wall, a brave soldier of the revolution, who was arrested in October last year. Unbroken by torture or by solitary confinement. Half turned away from the wall, he is calmly explaining something to the guard standing behind him. He sees me suddenly, smiles, throws up his head in farewell and goes on talking to the guard:

"This will not help you at all. A lot more of us are going to fall, but you will be defeated in the end..."

Then again one noon, we are standing downstairs in the Petchek building waiting for dinner. They bring in Eliash, with a newspaper under his arm. He points at it and smiles, for he had just read that they proved he had some connection with the assassination (although he had been in prison for the past eight months).

"Bunk!" he said and started on his food.

While returning with the rest of us to Pankrats that evening, he talks about it jokingly. But an hour later they take

him from his cell and cart him off to Kobylisy.

The corpses are piling up. They no longer count them in tens, nor in hundreds, but in thousands. The smell of fresh blood tingles in the nostrils of the beasts. They 'work' late into the night and on Sundays. They all wear SS uniforms now; this is their celebration, their festival of slaughter. They send to death workers, teachers, farmers, writers, officials; they slaughter men, women and children; murder whole families, exterminate and burn whole villages. Death by lead stalks the land like the plague, and makes no distinction among its victims.

But even in this h o r r o r, people still live.

It is unbelievable, but people still live, eat, sleep, make love, work and think about a thousand things which have no connection with death. Back in their minds there is a terrific tension, but they bear it. They do not bow their heads nor fall beneath it.

In the middle of martial law, my commissar took me out to Branik. The beautiful June was heavy with the sweet of the lindens and late acacia blossoms. A Sunday evening, and the street out to the end of the car-line was not wide enough to hold the stream of returning excursionists. They were cheerful and noisy, delightfully tired, having spent the day in the embrace of the sun and water and of the arms of their lovers. Only death was not visible on their faces, though it walked among them and occasionally aimed his bolt at one of their number. They flop and tumble like rabbits, and are just as cute. Like rabbits! Reach in among them and grab one for your dinner. They huddle together in a corner for a moment, but are soon swarming about again, with their pleasures and worries, full of the joy of life.

I was suddenly transplanted from the walled-up life of prison into this bursting stream of humanity, and the first taste of its sweet bliss was bitter to me.

It should not have been however.

What I see here is life, and what I have just come from is life. No matter what terrific pressure is applied, life is indestructible. It may be beaten out at one point but bursts forth at a hundred others. It is life, and remains stronger than death. Should that be bitter?

And are we who live in cells, right in the midst of horror, of any different metal than the rest of the nation?

Occasionally I went to my hearings in a police car, in which the guard was quite well-behaved. I could look out the window at the street, at the show-windows, at a flower-stand,

at crowds of passer-by, at women. I once told myself that whenever I was able to count nine pairs of pretty legs I wouldn't be executed that day. Then I began to look them over, to compare their lines carefully, selected and rejected with interest in legs - quite regardless that my life depended upon it, as though just lines and not a life were involved.

They usually brought me back to the cell quite late. Dad Peshek always worried whether I would return at all. He embraced me and I told him whatever news I had heard, who fell at Kobylisy last night. Then we were driven by hunger to eat the disgusting mash of dehydrated vegetables. We sang a cheerful song or, if angry and depressed, played a game of dice which diverted our attention completely for a while. That was the way we spent the evening hours when the door of our cell might open at any moment and the death order sound for one of us.

"You, or you, get downstairs. Take everything with you! Quick!"

But neither of us was called in that period. We lived through that time of horror. We think of it now with surprise at our own feelings. How strangely people are built - we can bear the unbearable.

It is impossible, however, to prevent such times from leaving deep traces on our lives. They lie in little rolls of film under the membrane of our brain, and unroll in the form of insanity some time later in real life - if we ever live that long. Or perhaps they will unfold later in the form of great cemeteries, or green gardens planted with the most precious seed of human lives.

The most precious seed, which will germinate and spring to life one day.

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