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The Verneřice Putsch¹

In 1938, Verneřice (Wernstadt in German) was a small town with 1,878 inhabitants living in 293 houses.² Lying almost exactly equidistant between Česká Lípa (22 km), Děčín (22 km), Litoměřice (24 km) and Ústí nad Labem (25 km), it was the natural administrative centre for the surrounding villages and countryside. The importance of Verneřice was underlined not only by the presence of a railway station and post office, but first and foremost a gendarmerie. The latter was taken over on 12 April 1938 by staff sergeant Josef Černý V,³ aided by sergeants Bohuslav Šmejkal and František Cvetler.⁴ Their job was not an easy one. Setting aside the fact that the three gendarmes were meant to ensure law and order in a territory encompassing 40 km², the task was made even harder by the ethnic makeup of the area, which was 99 % German⁵ and by 1938 already infiltrated to a great degree by Nazi ideology.⁶

The situation in Verneřice came to a head on 14 September 1938, when the local leaders of the Sudetendeutsche Partei (SdP)⁷ launched an uprising against the Czechoslovak authorities, a revolt known today as “the Verneřice Putsch”.

1 The author has previously published a study with the same title – KLINOVSKÝ, Petr: Verneřický puč /The Verneřice Putsch/. In: *Děčínské vlastivědné zprávy* /Děčín Local History Newspaper/, 2013, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 3–34. This work is a complemented and expanded version.

2 *The National Archives Prague* (hereafter referred to as NA), f. Zemské četnické velitelství (Regional Gendarmerie Command, hereafter referred to as ZČV), Box 928, inventory (inv.) No. 823, and Gendarmerie Precinct Map (Verneřice).

3 In both the gendarmerie and the financial police, Roman numerals were used to identify a particular employee. In other words, Josef Černý V was the fifth Josef Černý to be employed in the Gendarmerie of Bohemia.

4 NA, f. ZČV, Box 1172, inv. No. 898, Certificates of Organisation from northwest Bohemia.

5 *Ibid.*, Box 928, inv. No. 823, Gendarmerie Precinct Map (Verneřice).

6 The 1938 local elections in Verneřice saw the pro-Nazi Sudetendeutsche Partei (SdP) triumph over the German Social Democratic Workers' Party (Deutsche sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei – DSAP) by 896 votes (21 seats) to 165 votes (3 seats). BÍŽOVÁ, Kateřina – PŘENOSIL, Michael – RADVANOVSKÝ, Zdeněk: *Volby v ústecké oblasti v letech 1920–1938. Změny ve smýšlení německého obyvatelstva ústecké oblasti na základě rozboru výsledků parlamentních a komunálních voleb* /Elections in the Ústí nad Labem region 1920–1938. Changes in attitudes amongst the German population of the Ústí nad Labem region based on analysis of parliamentary and communal election results/. Univerzita J. E. Purkyně, Ústí nad Labem 1999.

7 The SdP was a pro-Nazi, ethnic German party in Czechoslovakia, originally founded by Konrad Henlein and his colleagues on 1 October 1933 as the Sudetendeutsche Heimatsfront (Sudeten German Homeland Front – SHF) with the aim of unifying nationalist German voters following the outlawing of the two German nationalist parties, the DNP and DNSAP. Until it was disbanded in October 1938,

The uprising attracted considerable attention, and after the war the Extraordinary People's Court in Litoměřice oversaw a thorough investigation, thanks to which we can now recreate in detail the events of September 1938.

The first crucial fact was the preparation of civil unrest. The putsch might have (and perhaps was meant to have) resembled a spontaneous eruption of hatred by the “persecuted” German population who could no longer tolerate the hegemony of their Czech masters, but in fact everything was meticulously prepared in advance by a relatively small group of SdP agitators. Although the mood amongst the German population towards the Czechoslovak authorities was anything but cordial, it is worth considering to what degree was the thousand-strong crowd assembled on Verneřice's main square merely a noisy backdrop creating the impression of a mass of persecuted citizens and to what degree were they fully committed fighters in the struggle for the “Sudeten question”.

The ringleaders of the uprising were the pharmacist (and later mayor) Karl Erb, Josef Redlich, Josef Pieke and Karl Stiašny, along with the maltster's mate Karl Sandner and the butcher Ernst Storch. They bear the lion's share of responsibility for planning, supplying and occupying the town during the rebellion.

They were accompanied by several other capable Nazi sympathisers from Verneřice and the surrounding area who helped take over the town and detain a number of local citizens. They included Karl Wiehan, Otto Klinger, Josef Renftel Sr., his son Josef Renftel Jr., Adolf Brosche, Emil Werner and others.⁸

Why Verneřice?

Although it might at first sight seem odd to ask why the Verneřice uprising occurred in the first place – especially in light of events of September 1938 across the Czechoslovak border regions⁹ – upon closer examination the rebellion was so unique it strikes the impartial observer as remarkable.

To fully realise the exceptional character of the Verneřice uprising, we must examine events in the entire Děčín district from a wider perspective. Only then do we

the SHF/SdP played a crucial role in the destruction of the Czechoslovak Republic. See HRUŠKA, Emil: *Sudetoněmecké kapitoly* /Sudeten German Chapters/. BMSS-Start, Prague, 2008.

8 *Státní oblastní archiv* (National Regional Archive, hereafter referred to as SOA) *Litoměřice*, f. Extraordinary People's Court in Litoměřice (hereafter referred to as 729), Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp1664/46.

9 On 9 September 1938 Adolf Hitler appeared at a meeting of the NSDAP in Nuremberg with an incendiary speech aimed at Czechoslovakia, which was broadcast on the radio and served as a signal for local uprisings of German citizens directed by SdP and Freiwilliger Schutzdienst (Voluntary Defence Service – FS) functionaries against the Czechoslovak state. Fanaticised by propaganda, Nazi mobs attacked gendarmeries, financial police authorities and post offices, imprisoning, abducting to Germany or murdering their employees, who were massively outnumbered. The most infamous incidents took place in Gossengrün (Krajková) in West Bohemia, Habersbirk (Habartov) and Schwaderbach, where the local gendarmes and financial police officers were brutally murdered. For more, see BRUŽEŇÁK, Vladimír – MACEK, Josef: *Morový rok. Kronika tragického roku 1938 na Sokolovsku a Karlovarsku* /A Pestilential Year. A Chronicle of the Tragic Year 1938 in the Sokolov and Karlovy Vary Regions/, parts 1 and 2. Svět křídel, Cheb 2017.

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realise that Verneřice was the only town in which the SdP attempted on 14 September 1938 to overthrow the local authorities. In no other local village or town – including nearby Benešov nad Ploučnicí, where the atmosphere was no less febrile¹⁰, did they attempt to do so.

Largescale attacks by the SdP and Sudeten German Freikorps¹¹ against the Czechoslovak authorities and members of the State Defence Guard¹² only began in the Děčín area after 21 September 1938 – i.e. a full week after the Verneřice uprising – and then only in places which lay directly on the border with Germany (Tisá, Sněžník, Maxičky, Dolní Grunt nad Labem, Zadní Jetřichovice and so on).

So why did the inhabitants of this small town, lying 30 km from the German border and surrounded by four cities with military garrisons (Děčín, Česká Lípa, Ústí nad Labem and Litoměřice), decide to launch an attack on the local gendarmerie and occupy both the railway station and the post office, without receiving any military or material assistance from Germany?

A partial answer is offered by Verneřice's geographical location, as well as by the recollections of Liese Köpplinger. In her memoir of the events in Verneřice, she recalls that the local SdP leadership had plotted uprisings by German citizens throughout the district, but for some reason the SdP had called off the plans at the last minute.¹³ According to another source,¹⁴ the message announcing that the revolt had been postponed was meant to have been delivered to Verneřice by a driver from Valkeřice

10 NA, f. Předsednictvo ministerské rady (Presidium of the Council of Ministers), Box 3181, inv. No. 2461.

11 The Sudeten German Freikorps (Sudetendeutsche Freikorps) was created on 17 September 1938 in Germany as a paramilitary organisation under the command of Konrad Henlein and was formed exclusively of Czechoslovak Germans. Its primary goal was to destabilise the security situation in the Czechoslovak-German border region. In some areas of Czechoslovakia (primarily around the town of Aš and in the Šluknov Hook), the Freikorps – thanks to their numerical and material superiority and with the help of SS and SA units – succeeded in bringing under their control large areas of territory which were defended by poorly armed units of the State Defence Guard (known by its Czech acronym SOS). For more, see HRUŠKA, Emil: *Boj o pohraničí. Sudetoněmecký Freikorps v roce 1938* / Battle for the Borderlands – the Sudeten German Freikorps in 1938/. Epoque, Prague 2018.

12 The State Defence Guard (SOS), composed of 31 battalions organised throughout the Czechoslovak Republic, was established by government order No. 270/1936 Sb. as a means of securing the state border in the event of an external attack. It was comprised mostly of members of the Czechoslovak gendarmerie, financial police and national police serving regular duties in the given border area. It was later expanded to include selected local citizens as well as reserve or serving soldiers. The SOS only came together in earnest once the guard had been activated, at which point all members incorporated into the SOS fell under the direct command of the Ministry of National Defence. Its main task was to build forest defences and slow the advance of enemy units until the army could be mobilised. This is one reason why the SOS was only lightly armed (its members were equipped with their service weapons as well as hand grenades and ZB vz. 26 light machine guns). For more, see BENEŠ, Jaroslav: *Stráž obrany státu: 1936–1939* / The State Defence Guard: 1936–1939/. Fortprint, Dvůr Králové nad Labem 2007.

13 KÖPPLINGER, Liese: Wernstädter Putsch aus meiner Sicht. In: *Wernstädter Gebietstreffen in Nördlingen*. Heimatstadt Wernstadt, im Heimatverband Tetschen-Bodenbach e. V. 1982, pp. 13–21.

14 Several pages in German, which were translated from an unknown Czech publication about Verneřice, were sent to the author by Peter Heinecke, who had obtained them at a meeting of Sudeten German expellees in Nördlingen.

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named Rudolf Pompe, who – apparently terrified at the task facing him – failed to pass on the information. Because the plotters had already severed the telephone lines to and from Verneřice, the rebellion went ahead regardless of attempts to get a message through to halt it. From this information we can state with confidence that everything that happened in Verneřice on that fateful day was entirely the responsibility of the local Nazi sympathisers.

Before the bells began to toll

As has already been mentioned, the uprising was certainly not a spontaneous event initiated by ordinary German citizens, but a well-planned and well-organised plot by the SdP. Everything began on Wednesday, 14 September at around 5 p.m., when Ernst Storch, in the company of Karl Erb and the head of the local SdP auxiliary police force¹⁵ Karl Sandner, received the order from the local SdP leadership to launch an attack on the post office, railway station, gendarmerie and the Social Democrat cooperative store. Their instructions were to hold prisoner all Czech citizens in Verneřice and for units of the Freiwilliger Schutzdienst to defend the town until the arrival of the German Wehrmacht. The launch of the uprising was set preliminarily for 9 p.m.¹⁶

The “military” side of the operation fell to Karl Sandner in his capacity as head of the local auxiliaries, although it was Ernst Storch who took command of all FS units. His task was to determine suitable candidates to give the signal for the uprising to begin at the agreed time, as well as to give orders to the commanders of the FS units in individual villages. At 7.30 p.m., a final organisational meeting took place in the house of Ernst Storch, which was even attended by commanders of the FS mounted units. Their role was to block all access roads leading to the centre of Verneřice. An FS unit from the nearby village of Čáslav was to take over Litoměřická street and prevent all vehicular and pedestrian traffic from entering Verneřice from the south. The FS unit from the neighbouring village of Příbram was to control access to the town from the west by setting up a roadblock by the dairy, while an SdP unit from Rychnov was stationed on Tržní náměstí as a reserve force. Access from the north via Benešov nad Ploučnicí was blocked by an FS unit from Valkěřice, while the final point of entry – from the east via Loučky, was blocked by auxiliaries from Loučky, who set up their HQ by the cooperative store. While the butcher Ernst Storch gave orders to the assembled Voluntary Defence Service men, his wife handed out swastika armbands.¹⁷

15 The Auxiliary Police had been created as a security force (Ordnungsdienst) in 1933 within the Sudeten German Homeland Front (SHF). Officially, its role was to defend SHF meetings and gatherings from attack by political opponents, but its members served as de facto Nazi assault units within Czechoslovakia. Following the 1935 parliamentary elections and the creation of the SdP, the Auxiliaries were officially disbanded, but in effect they continued to function within every local SdP chapter. From mid-May 1938, they were joined by units of the Freiwilliger Schutzdienst, which was quietly tolerated by the Czechoslovak state. HRUŠKA, Emil: *Boj o pobranici. Sudetoněmecký freikorps v roce 1938.*

16 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp1664/46.

17 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp1653/46, transcript of a newspaper article in *Leitmeritzer-Zeitung*, 27. 2. 1939, p. 4.

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After the assembled company had vowed to carry out their orders without delay, Storch drove first to the saddle maker Ernst Brosche, to ensure the telephone lines would be cut, and then to the captain of the local volunteer fire brigade, the inn-keeper Pieke. Storch wanted to use the fire brigade as an excuse not only to gather together the town's population but also to send a signal for the uprising to begin; the fire brigade had planned firefighting training that evening as part of an air raid civil defence exercise and were to sound the alarm at precisely the moment when the church bells began to toll.¹⁸

Pieke and Brosche – like the other Nazi sympathisers – immediately promised to do so. Satisfied by the pledges of allegiance from his co-conspirators, Storch returned home, where was waiting for him an FS Vertrauungsmann (confidante)¹⁹ with his subordinates. Storch again explained the gravity of the task, that he wished to avoid unnecessary bloodshed and that opening fire would only be permissible in extreme circumstances. The FS confidante then divided up the various objectives and targets for attack amongst his subordinates. With a shout of *Heil Hitler!* the group broke up and departed to fulfil their orders.²⁰

At roughly the same time as the Sudeten German fascists were finalising their plans to occupy all of Verneřice's key institutions, the head of the local Sudeten German Social Democrats, Alfred Müller, began a meeting in the local cooperative store. He more than anyone was intimately aware that the atmosphere in the town was becoming increasingly tense, and that the SdP were planning attacks both against local Czechs and also against those ethnic Germans who opposed them. The gathering quickly came to a decision; they must defend the cooperative store against the SdP agitators at all costs. For this, however, they needed weapons, and unlike the SdP, they had not been supplied with any. The Social Democrats' only hope lay in the arms they believed were stored in the gendarmerie. Alfred König from Loučky along with Karl Wiener and Matěj Erban from Verneřice²¹ took it upon themselves to obtain the necessary weapons from the gendarmes.

Shortly before 9 p.m., the situation began to become more dramatic. Groups of SdP men moved through the town. They were led by Adolf Brosche,²² who went from door to door, and with a shout of *Everyone out, you cowardly dogs! Those who don't help us will see what happens to them!*²³ ordered the town's citizens to assemble on Verneřice square.

By this moment no-one was in any doubt that the rebellion had begun, so two more German Social Democrats, Ernst Pohl and Alfred Müller, decided to offer their support to the gendarmes and following in the footsteps of their friends set off to the gendarmerie for weapons. They never arrived, however, as some 300 rebels had already assembled in the town square and squads of SdP auxiliary police had begun patrolling the streets.²⁴

18 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

19 This was most probably either Karl Sandner or Franz Chaber.

20 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp1653/46, transcript of a newspaper article in *Leitmeritzer-Zeitung*, 27. 2. 1939, p. 4.

21 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

22 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Adolf Brosche, file symbol Lsp 1662/46.

23 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

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While the gendarmes certainly did not underestimate the situation in the town, they had no inkling a rebellion was about to be launched nor that it would be on such a grand scale. That Wednesday evening the three gendarmes quietly had dinner together and at around 7.30 p.m., staff sergeant Bohuslav Šmejkal decided to take a short stroll around Verneřice to ensure everything was in order. His patrol took about an hour, and at 8.45 p.m. he returned to report that he had seen nothing unusual and that all was quiet. A few moments later, however, there was a knock at the door from the delegation of Social Democrats²⁵, who informed them that the local SdP men were about to launch a putsch.²⁶

Probably at the same time as the gendarmes were learning about the planned rebellion, barber Erich Prenn and gardener Rudolf Wenzel, acting under the command of saddle maker Ernst Brosche, climbed up a telephone pole and with a knife cut the line to Velké Březno, while a second group, which included the miller Ernst Würtig, cut the cables to Benešov nad Ploučnicí.²⁷

Verneřice was completely cut off from the outside world by barricades created from wagons owned by the farmer Josef Renftel jnr and felled trees. Apart from Renftel, Adalbert Veidt, Edwin Härtner and other, mostly younger auxiliary police members were also active in building the barricades.²⁸ Shortly before 9 p.m. in the evening, Verneřice lost contact with the rest of Czechoslovakia.

The putsch begins

At precisely 9 p.m., gardener Josef Reichelt followed his orders and the bells of St Anne's Church rang out through Verneřice, followed by the sound of a fireman's horn belonging to the Verneřice Fire Brigade, commanded by fire chief and innkeeper Josef Pieke. The volunteer firemen quickly responded to Josef Renftel's horn and shortly afterwards a motorised fire engine emerged from the station, hoses were deployed and an attack by auxiliary police and approximately 300²⁹ armed German citizens began on the gendarmerie on the town square.

24 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Adolf Brosche, file symbol Lsp 1662/46.

25 There are some discrepancies as to the exact number of German Social Democrats who appeared at the gendarmerie that evening. In his letter to friends, sergeant Cvetler mentions just one, while in his post-war memoirs Karl Wiener speaks of Alfred König and one other (according to his own testimony, this second man was Matthias Erban), who arrived at the gendarmerie shortly before the rebellion began. Karl Wiener managed to escape through the back door, while the remaining two most likely hid in the attic. Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp1664/46.

26 *Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

27 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Rudolf Wenzel, file symbol Lsp 1667/47.

28 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

29 The exact number of inhabitants who took part in the attack on the gendarmerie remains unknown. The numbers range from 150 to 1,200 (!). Initially, the number of attackers was lower – Social Democrat Ernst Pohl estimated it at some 300 people (Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Adolf Brosche, file symbol Lsp 1662/46, Testimony of Ernst Pohl from 8. 11. 1945). Other witnesses in their post-war memoirs claim that almost the entire male population of Verneřice gathered on the town square (Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46, Report on the arrest of Alfred Schwarz, arrest No. 49/1945, 4. 10. 1945), while sergeant František Cvetler in his letter to friends

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Even though it was Storch, Sandner and Franz Chaber who quickly seized the initiative in the attack on the gendarmerie, they were soon joined by others. While mayor Karl Erb acted as a mere spectator, others began firing wildly from pistols³⁰ and hunting rifles at the gendarmerie's windows, which were illuminated by the lights of vehicles belonging to Otto Klinger.³¹ Those citizens who were unable to get their hands on firearms resorted to throwing stones, which were soon heaped on the floor of the gendarmerie's office quarters. Amongst the unorthodox weapons used by attackers were legs of salami distributed by both the local butcher Storch and Josef Zoellner.³²

The gendarmerie was the only institution in Verneřice whose officers were armed, which is why the rebels concentrated so many of their resources to bringing it under their control. Their firepower was so overwhelming that in two hours the gendarmes under siege inside were unable to fire a single shot at their attackers³³.

The fire engine too proved extremely effective. As soon as it was deployed Franz Weigel³⁴ took command of the hose and without a moment's hesitation began spraying gallons of water into the first floor of house No. 130, thus depriving the gendarmes of their last – albeit theoretical – possibility of returning fire.³⁵

The critical situation inside the gendarmerie was best summed up by František Cvetler: *Černý stayed for a moment inside the station but it proved impossible, as he was faced with a hail of bullets, and he could not return fire as he was unable to see anything. That mob had parked three cars on the square and were shining their headlights at the gendarmerie, blinding us. Černý came to me in the corridor and a moment later I went back inside the station, but I couldn't stay there because more and more bullets were coming through the windows and what's more the firemen started spraying water through the broken windows and the mob were throwing piles of stones at them. I went back into the corridor, and heard someone shouting for us to give ourselves up and lay down our weapons. I replied that we would never surrender our weapons and called on them to leave the corridor. The same voice answered that we must lay down our weapons as the Wehrmacht would be crossing the border at 9 p.m. sharp. I answered once again that we would not lay down our weapons and at that, they threw some sort of bomb at the staircase.*³⁶

The gendarmes were so heavily outnumbered it was impossible even to maintain their position in the corridor, and so they decided to retreat to the attic and squirrel their way into the attic of a neighbouring house. The Nazis, however, spotted the light of sergeant Černý's torch and began firing at the highest floors, with one bullet

immediately after the incident estimates the number at just 150 people (*Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938).

30 Some weapons were smuggled into Verneřice from Germany. One of the hiding places, and most likely not the only one, was a mill owned by Ernst Würdig. *SOA Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Ernst Würdig, file symbol Lsp 1668/46.

31 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp1664/46.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

34 It is possible that the attackers took turns at the fire hose, because other testimonies mention Ernst Brosche and the mechanic Gerich or Kriesche.

35 *SOA Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Franz Weigel, file symbol Lsp 277/45.

36 *Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

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penetrating the wall right next to sergeant Cvetler's leg. It proved impossible to escape to a neighbouring attic, and so Černý decided to try and make it across the roof to Renftel's villa next door. Bohuslav Šmejkal squeezed his way through the hole and joined him on the roof, but František Cvetler never made it that far. The Germans surrounding the house noticed movement on the roof and began firing from each end of the building, the bullets ripping apart the roof tiles near the gendarmes who were attempting to hide behind the chimney.³⁷

As soon as the mob realised that two of their targets were on the roof, they decided at last to occupy the gendarmerie. They made their way up to the attic and demanded that sergeant Cvetler give himself up. Despite being heavily outnumbered, he managed to hide his rifle (the insurgents later discovered it) before giving himself up when the assailants threatened to set fire to the attic; after about half an hour of threats he finally left his hiding place and surrendered to several men in auxiliary police uniforms who never once stopped aiming their pistols at him.³⁸ A little later, massively outnumbered, the two remaining gendarmes – who had miraculously survived the gunfire aimed at the roof and had made it into the attic of Renftel's villa – also surrendered. There they were discovered hiding in a crate³⁹ and like sergeant Cvetler before them gave up without a struggle.⁴⁰ The gendarmerie had fallen and all three gendarmes were taken prisoner in the town hall.

Along with the aforementioned SdP members Storch, Sandner and Chaber, the leaders of the assault on the gendarmerie also included the Bezirksleiter (district head) of the FS in Benešov nad Ploučnicí, Karl Wiehan.⁴¹

Witnesses later identified the Germans who opened fire as Otto Klinger,⁴² the auxiliary police chief of Rychnov Franz Schmeikal, Rudolf Richter and Rudolf (Rolf) Grand, who also stole the gendarmes' rifles and uniforms, Adolf Lorenz, Emil Werner,⁴³ Wilhelm Pietsche, Ludwig Heller,⁴⁴ Ferdinand Mittag, Ferdinand Lehmann, Alfred Lehmann, Karl Palitschka and Eduard Bittner.⁴⁵

The attack on the post office

The gendarmerie with its armed gendarmes might have been a major objective for the insurgents, but it was far from the only one. The SdP assailants also took over the post office and the railway station. The assault on the post office, staffed at that mo-

37 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

38 *Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

39 *Archive of Hildegard Ziemer*, Handwritten memoirs of Josef Renftel, recorded in Leipzig in 1957.

40 A full description of events from the perspective of the putsch leaders appeared as part of an undated newspaper article in the *Leitmeritzer-Zeitung*. The information in the article corresponds to the recollections of the gendarmes and can thus be considered accurate. SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

41 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Franz Weigel, file symbol Lsp 277/45.

42 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

43 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

44 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Franz Weigel, file symbol Lsp 277/45.

45 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Josef Mattausch, file symbol Lsp 1652/46.

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ment by a single postal clerk, Vytůj⁴⁶, began before the attack on the station. However, the attackers found they were unable to force open the reinforced windows and had to make do with threatening Vytůj from outside. Thus it was that the clerk was able to receive a telephone call from the gendarmerie.⁴⁷

At that moment the gendarmes were being besieged by the first salvos of rocks and bullets, which they would not be able to withstand for long without outside reinforcements from gendarmerie headquarters in Děčín. However, individual groups of SdP insurgents had already cut the communication lines and Vytůj could do nothing but inform the gendarmes of this and simultaneously request help. They of course were quite unable to provide assistance, as they were under heavy siege. When they could no longer withstand the attack, sergeant Cvetler had no option but to hang up, and the postal clerk Vytůj was left to fend for himself.⁴⁸ Isolated, under threat, and faced with a hopeless situation with no-one to help him, he gave himself up.

The identity of all the attackers who laid siege to the post office remains clouded in mystery. The ringleader is believed to have been Karl Wiehan⁴⁹, who led the group of assailants together with the Verneřice farm worker and wagon driver Franz Tietze. It was he who is believed to have apprehended the postal clerk Vytůj.⁵⁰ Karl Sandner⁵¹ – axe in hand – is also thought to have attacked the post office, while Josef Mattausch, who ensured communications between the post office and the gendarmerie on the town square, is also believed to have been involved in the attacks on both buildings.⁵² After Vytůj was taken away the post office did not stay vacant for long. According to the recollections of Josef Renftel junior it was occupied by Peter Paul, who lived in the neighbouring house.⁵³

Vytůj might have been on his own in the post office when the insurgents surrounded it, but he was not the only postal employee to be taken prisoner. The head of the post office, Bohumil Věchet, found himself in Příbramská street when the uprising began. A group of some eight auxiliary policemen led by the dentist Karl Stištný jumped out at him and started shouting *Sieg Heil!* Věchet waited for nothing and ran to the post office, where he heard shouting and the sound of objects being hurled at the metal shuttered windows. Given the situation, where the assailants had surrounded the post office and were shouting at the clerk Vytůj to come out, Věchet decided to seek help from the gendarmes. On the square, however, he ran into an auxiliary police patrol who threatened to shoot him unless he turned back. He thus decided to go home, where the auxiliaries Bensch and Werner and one other uniden-

46 It has proved impossible from the surviving documents to ascertain the first name of the postal clerk Vytůj, as well as several other people. They are referred to solely by their surnames, occasionally by their functions.

47 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

48 *Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

49 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

50 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Rudolf Wenzel, file symbol Lsp 1667/46.

51 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

52 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Mattausch, file symbol Lsp 1652/46.

53 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

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tified German were lying in wait to capture him and take him to the town hall. Věchet managed to break away and began to escape, but they quickly caught up with him, threw him to the ground and beat him. Suffering a broken bone, and despite his best efforts to escape, he ended up alongside the other Czechs held prisoner inside the town hall.⁵⁴

Alongside Vytůj and Věchet an important role in the Verneřice drama was played by a two more postal employees – the clerk Zelenka and the post boy Ladislav Erban. The pair were taking an evening stroll through the town when the uprising began. As soon as they heard the fire alarm, they set off for the house of post office chief Věchet, which was already being guarded by auxiliary police. Erban, terrified at the presence of the SdP insurgents, decided to flee into a field⁵⁵ and from there headed towards Děčín. About halfway between Děčín and Příbram he ran into a military vehicle which had been despatched to suppress the uprising.⁵⁶ With his wits about him, Zelenka managed to avoid the auxiliary police patrols, hide in the forest and run to Velké Březno for help.⁵⁷

The assault on the railway station

While the attack on the post office began almost simultaneously with the siege of the gendarmerie, the assault on Verneřice's railway station started in a rather more modest fashion. The last train pulled out of Verneřice at around 8 p.m., leaving stationmaster Jaroslav Pešek as the sole remaining Czech at the station. At 9 p.m., when Verneřice's Tržní náměstí turned into a battlefield and a group of SdP assailants were heading for the post office, Adolf Kobe arrived at the station warehouse. Further groups of men slowly began making their way to the station. When Pešek asked Kobe what was going on and why they had come, he answered that this was nothing, that the worst was yet to come. Meanwhile the train driver Bureš and stoker Jedlička had arrived. The ring of assailants was slowly closing around the station building and so all three Czechs decided the safest course of action was to lock the double set of doors and see what would happen.⁵⁸

They did not have to wait long to find out. At around 10 p.m. the assailants began pounding on the first set of doors and calling on the railway workers to come out and give themselves up. When there was no response, they began smashing their way inside with the aid of axes. This was only partially successful. The first set of doors succumbed to the axes and gave way. The second, however, proved more resistant. As an unspecified number of SdP insurgents tried to force their way into the railway offices, the Czechs tried to raise the alarm using the telephone and telegraph – without success. However, the attackers were also finding the second set of doors difficult

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Adolf Brosche, file symbol Lsp 1662/46.

57 Archive of Jiří Cvetler, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

58 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

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to break down and in the end they gave up, deciding instead to point their pistols through the holes they had made and threatening to shoot dead all three unarmed Czechs unless they capitulated.⁵⁹

The attack on the station was led by Karl Sandner, apprentice maltster and Ortsobmann (local head) of the Freiwilliger Schutzdienst, who was also one of the ring-leaders of the assaults on the gendarmerie and post office.⁶⁰ Karl Stiačný, another insurgent leader, was no less active; he urged the rebels to attack the railway station and following the capitulation of the three Czech railway employees he and Ludwig Heller⁶¹ personally apprehended stationmaster Pešek and dragged him off to the town hall.⁶² They were most probably joined in the attack by Emil Schwarz.⁶³

German anti-fascists

Unlike the other actors in the Verneřice drama, the activities of individual German Social Democrats on that fateful evening remain unmapped and undocumented. Reconstructing their activities that evening is possible only from the testimonies of the Czech Matěj Erban, who remained close to them during the revolt, Karl Wiener and Ernst Pohl.

As mentioned above, the German Social Democrats were meeting inside the worker's cooperative store in Verneřice when the uprising started, and they vowed to defend it at all costs. To this end they designated Karl Wiener, Alfred König and Matěj Erban to head to the gendarmerie for weapons. In the meantime, the SdP insurgents had gathered on the square and began laying siege to the gendarmerie building. Wiener decided it was crucial to inform his Social Democrat colleagues waiting in the store for the delegation to return carrying weapons. To his great luck he managed to escape via the still-unguarded rear entrance of the gendarmerie, crossed the backyard of the milliner's Schanta and reached the main road. There he was spotted, however, by Franz Chaber and Rudolf Richter, and to the sound of their cries sprinted to house No. 266 where he had formerly lived. Hiding in the courtyard, he decided he must get back to the cooperative store at any cost. The building, however, was already surrounded by between 50 and 60 auxiliaries. When Wiener saw them, he turned on his heels and went back to his hiding place, with a separate group of auxiliaries in hot pursuit. He hid in the attic, and spent the rest of the uprising there.⁶⁴

While Karl Wiener was darting between the SdP patrols, the remaining two Social Democrat envoys found themselves stuck in the attic of the gendarmerie, from which

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Rudolf Wenzel, file symbol Lsp 1667/47.

62 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46. It is unclear from both files and memoirs what happened to the train driver Bureš and the stoker Jedlička, but most probably they ended up along with the other Czechs held prisoner inside the town hall (in total they numbered some 13 men).

63 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

64 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

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it was now impossible to escape. There they hid as staff sergeant Černý and sergeant Šmejkal made their escape onto the roof, and later as sergeant Cvetler was captured. Three hours after the gendarmerie fell into rebel hands, however, their luck ran out.⁶⁵

When all the gendarmes had been successfully taken prisoner, the insurgents began inspecting the area surrounding the gendarmerie. Here they found the shoes belonging to staff sergeant Černý and sergeant Šmejkal, most probably discarded to quieten their passage through the attic and onto the roof. The rebel commanders also ordered an inspection of the gendarmerie barracks and other living quarters in the building. During one search, auxiliaries under the command of Franz Chaber reached an apartment where the SdP gunfire had reached a bedroom, destroying a radio and terrifying the married couple who lived inside. After the search Chaber's group was tasked with seizing all official documents⁶⁶ and keeping guard in the building. The assembled crowd were hungry after the dramatic evening, and it was most likely Karl Wiehan who was dispatched to ask for food. To everyone's great amazement, the woman from the apartment returned not only with food but with coffee as well. The rebels continued leafing through the official documents scattered on the floor along with stones, broken glass and pieces of furniture from the devastated gendarmerie. A few moments later the same woman returned, this time to inform them that she had heard footsteps in the attic and that there was almost certainly someone hiding there. Chaber waited for nothing and together with the commander of the Příbram Schutzdienst went up to the attic to carry out another, more detailed inspection.⁶⁷

It was this moment that cost the freedom of Matěj Erban and Alfred König. They too were taken to the town hall, where they were held prisoner along with the three gendarmes and another 11 captives⁶⁸ by several 16-18-year-old SdP auxiliaries armed with pistols.

Ultimately, a key role was played by those German Social Democrats who had remained inside the cooperative store. After Wiener, König and Erban left for the gendarmerie in search of weapons, the rest waited impatiently for their return. When the bells struck 9 p.m., the local Social Democrat chairman Alfred Müller decided with Ernst Pohl to go to the gendarmes' aid. Due to the SdP patrols and the large number of people massed on the square, such a course of action was deemed pointless, and instead they decided to take shelter and hide.⁶⁹

Trying to defending the cooperative store without weapons would have achieved nothing, as the attackers were numerous and well-armed, and this is likely why most

65 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

66 The SdP insurgents came up with various explanations for the occupation of the gendarmerie and thus sergeant Černý was deprived of not only weapons and uniforms from the locked cupboards but also the sum of 650 crowns. *Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

67 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46, Newspaper article entitled *Als sich Wernstadt der Tschechen entledigen wollte* by Franz Chaber, most probably from *Děčín's Nordböhmisches Tagesblatt*.

68 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

69 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Adolf Brosche, file symbol Lsp 1662/46.

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of the remaining Social Democrats elected – like Müller and Pohl – to go home and hide in the safest place possible and wait for the uprising to be over.⁷⁰

Josef Gaube and Oskar Schröfel, however, decided instead to mount their bicycles and – ignoring the danger all around them – set off for the gendarmerie ten kilometres away in Těchlovice, where they managed to raise the alarm with the military garrison in Litoměřice.⁷¹

Heim ins Reich

Around 10.30 p.m. the whole of Verneřice had fallen under pro-Nazi control. Approximately 13 Czechs remained imprisoned in the town hall and would most likely be shipped off to Germany once the Wehrmacht arrived. Pharmacist Erb never made his political speech,⁷² while the SdP leaders began to wonder about the uprisings in Benešov nad Ploučnicí and Česká Lípa, where revolts had also been planned. Sandner and Storch, therefore, picked a reliable man – the commander of the Freiwilliger Schutzdienst unit present with them – to ride off on his motorcycle to Benešov nad Ploučnicí and find out what was happening.

The news from Benešov left both Storch and Sandner paralysed with shock. Not only had there been no uprising in the town – home to the district headquarters of the SdP – but all the town's functionaries had fled, most probably to Germany. The same was true of Ústěk, Police and Děčín-Podmokly. When news came that the regular 10.45 p.m. bus had been spotted, the situation began to become critical for the coup leaders. Storch immediately ordered a patrol of the entire town, telling his men to arrest all local Social Democrats and Communists, cut down the trees on access roads leading to Verneřice and create roadblocks manned by Schutzdienst members from nearby Valkeřice and Merboltice. Guards were ordered to stop searching the “conquered” Social Democrat cooperative store, the volunteer firemen put away their hoses and tried in vain to reconnect the severed telephone and telegraph cables.⁷³

Despite the apparent signs of failure, Erb, Sandner and Storch did not lose hope and decided to wait until midnight, when the Wehrmacht were due to arrive from Germany. They waited in vain. Instead, at around 2 a.m., Köhler, the messenger from Merboltice, arrived with news that the Verneřice uprising had been a huge mistake and that everyone should flee to save their skins.⁷⁴

News of the failed coup against the Czechoslovak state spread like wildfire amongst the Germans, and quickly reached most of the auxiliary policemen. The SdP

70 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

71 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Adolf Brosche, file symbol Lsp 1662/46.

72 The rebels' original plan, once the gendarmerie had been seized and Verneřice brought under their control, was for the pharmacist Karl Erb – as the town's most senior SdP official – to make a political speech in which he would reassure the local population. In the end, however, he merely took part in the attack on the gendarmerie and helped stand guard over the incarcerated Czechs, making sure they came to no harm. Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

73 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46, Transcript of a newspaper article in the *Leitmeritzer-Zeitung*, 27. 2. 1939, p. 4.

74 *SOA Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

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members quickly began scrambling from their roadblocks and guard posts, each desperate to reach the safety of their homes as quickly as possible. The greatest question mark hung over the leaders of the uprising, whose names – unlike the “anonymous” participants – would not remain secret from the Czechoslovak authorities for long.

While Karl Erb made do with hiding at his neighbour's, Richard Reif,⁷⁵ Ernst Storch fled via Valkeřice in the direction of Benešov nad Ploučnicí. He had only gone a few hundred metres before he ran into two motorcycle messengers, who had been given the task of warning all SdP sympathisers in Verneřice that Czechoslovak Army and gendarmerie troops were en route to the town. Storch gave another order – all those who had taken part in the uprising should either hide in Verneřice or flee across the border to Germany.⁷⁶

Most of the insurgents took Storch's recommendation to heart, and dispersed either for home, into hiding,⁷⁷ or across the border. The latter course of action was chosen by Franz Chaber and several of his friends. News of the uprising's failure had reached him shortly after the bells of St Anne's Church had struck 2 a.m. At first he considered fleeing with his fellow auxiliary police officers to the stone bridge in Příbram, but in the end he headed off for his uncle's house in Brusov, six kilometres away. He made his way through forests and meadows, avoiding all roads, and arriving at around three o'clock in the morning. With images of Czechoslovak troops searching for him, he made his uncle and aunt swear they would tell no-one he was in Brusov – not even fellow Germans. Hidden in a hayloft, Franz Chaber began plotting his escape to Germany. It was made easier by knowledge of his surroundings and the willingness of all local Germans to help him.⁷⁸

After three days and nights, dispirited by troubling stories of Germans being arrested in Verneřice, he decided to act, and met Karl Wiehan, who was also in hiding in Brusov. The meeting was brief; the two fugitives decided to ask a mutual acquaintance to take them across the border. At 9 p.m. on Saturday 17 September 1938 they walked to Děčín, where they were taken in by their acquaintance's sister. They made the 25 km journey in eight hours. For both men, haunted by fear, it was far from a pleasant journey, as Chaber recalled: *I will never forget the journey from Brusov to the old town of Děčín for as long as I live. Under constant danger of being spotted, we tramped through fields and meadows and thrashed our way through woods and thickets. We used the stars to navigate our way.*⁷⁹ At 5 a.m. they reached their destination. Chaber – like many other

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., transcript of a newspaper article in the *Leitmeritzer-Zeitung*, 27. 2. 1939, p. 4.

77 For example, Josef Mattausch, who was initially tasked with ensuring communications and later guard duties. When the German Wehrmacht failed to arrive, a group of guards decided to desert their posts and return to town. When Mattausch learnt of the failure of the uprising, he fled first to Třebín and then Ústí nad Labem. *SOA Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Josef Mattausch, file symbol Lsp 1652/46.

78 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46, Article entitled *Als sich Wernstadt der Tschechen entledigen wollte* by Franz Chaber.

79 *Den Fluchtweg von Prause nach Altstadt werde ich mein Leben lang nicht vergessen, immer in der Angst, entdeckt zu werden, gings über Felder, Wiesen, durch Wald und Gestrüpp, die Richtung gab uns der Sternenhimmel.* Ibid.

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SdP insurgents – had originally wanted to enter Germany through the Podmokly/Bodenbach railway tunnel and jump on a train to Dresden. Circumstances, however, intervened. Shortly before they arrived in Děčín one of the many fugitives had tried to jump onto a railway car, slipped, and died. Since then the tunnel had been guarded by Czech policemen, which for the auxiliaries from Verneřice meant they would have to think up a different plan.⁸⁰

Luckily for them, however, a new opportunity presented itself. Another of Chaber's acquaintances appeared in the Děčín hiding place with news that a Reichsbahn (Empire's Railway) employee at Podmokly/Bodenbach railway station was smuggling people across the border in railway cars and was willing to help the insurgents from Verneřice. The fugitives did not need long to decide. At 4 p.m. on Sunday 18 September 1938 they arrived at the station, where they were treated as if they were new railway clerks. At 7 p.m. however, the number of fugitives had grown to 17, and so they had to wait in a cellar before they could be "loaded" onto the wagons.

The moment of truth arrived. All 17 fugitives boarded the goods wagon, and – heeding constant warnings to be silent as the train would be inspected by railway police with dogs⁸¹ – were "exported" to Dresden as grapes. Then the hardest part of the journey began. Holding their breaths, they had to endure two hours of being shunted around the station and then another inspection by the Czechoslovak authorities at Prostřední Žleb station. They could only breathe a sigh of relief once they had crossed the border into Germany. By the time they arrived in Dresden, the number of fugitives had swelled from 17 to 31 men hiding in various locations in the wagons – fourteen brave souls had braved great danger to jump on board the moving train. After leaving their various hiding places they quickly regrouped and were forced to spend the first night in an internment camp. There Franz Chaber and Karl Wiehan immediately applied to join the newly-founded Sudeten German Freikorps. After three days in the camp all those interested in joining the Freikorps were taken by bus to the German village of Postelwitz not far from the Czechoslovak border, where they began military training as part of the First Company, Third Gau Elbe Battalion. This was the first of Chaber's troubles; as a non-soldier as he was assigned to a reserve unit away from his friends. Only by tricking the Freikorps did he manage to get into the same company as the others, which was soon to be deployed to attack positions of Czechoslovakia's State Defence Guard (SOS) on the border.⁸²

80 Ibid.

81 These were either national police – who had been based there since Austro-Hungarian times – or members of the Ozbrojená stráž ochrany železnic (Armed Railway Protection Guard – OSOŽ). This organisation was staffed by armed volunteer railway workers who would keep watch over the railway stations in their free time. They often used guard dogs provided to the railways by the gendarmerie. See KLINOVSKÝ, Petr: Vznik železniční stráže v Břeclavi /Creation of the Railway Guards in Břeclav/. In: *Almanach z V. konference policejních historiků* /Almanac of the Fifth Conference of Police Historians/. Policejní museum ČR, Prague 2010, pp. 192–196.

82 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46, Article entitled *Als sich Wernstadt der Tschechen entledigen wollte* by Franz Chaber.

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A major event for the Freikorps fighters was a visit by Konrad Henlein,⁸³ who promised they would soon be able to return to their homeland with weapons in their hands. Shortly after Henlein's visit, the unit was in fact transferred to Reinhardtsdorf as reinforcements for the border and customs guard of the German Reich.⁸⁴

Soon after taking up their positions in the customs house at Klopot's Mill (Gelobtbachmühle) in the hamlet of Schöna a few metres from the Czechoslovak border, daily skirmishes began, most likely with members of the 28th Unit⁸⁵ of the SOS. Chaber's participation in the skirmishes, in which his unit suffered no injuries, did not last long and he was soon appointed as the unit's accountant. He remained in this position until 3 October 1938, when the Sudeten German Freikorps marched victoriously alongside SA troops into the village of Růžová, where for a short while he was made responsible for the postal service and security. The Freikorps careers of Franz Chaber and his Verneřice comrades came to a definitive end on 10 October 1938, when the unit was demobbed in a ceremony at Děčín Castle and all members were able to return home as heroes. Franz Chaber returned to Verneřice on 11 October 1938, almost a month after the Verneřice Putsch.⁸⁶

For some, freedom. For others, trial

On 15 September 1938 the Ministry of the Interior received a telephone despatch to report that the Verneřice post office and barracks of the gendarmerie had been attacked, the telephone lines had been cut, the gendarmes had been roughed up and the chief post clerk had been shot dead. The despatch also contained the news that the Děčín branch of the national police had refused to send in reinforcements because they numbered just 12 men, and instead a military unit from Rychnov had been dispatched to Verneřice after an appeal for help from a local Social Democrat.⁸⁷

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- 83 Konrad Henlein (6. 5. 1898 – 9. 5. 1945) was a German politician, MP in the Czechoslovak National Assembly and founding leader of the German nationalist SHF movement, later renamed as the SdP. In the autumn of 1938 he became leader of the Sudeten German Freikorps and commanded attacks against SOS units. After Germany's annexation of Czechoslovakia's border regions Henlein became the Nazi Gauleiter (regional leader) of the Sudetenland. He committed suicide after being captured in 1945. See HRUŠKA, Emil: *Konrad Henlein: život a smrt* / Konrad Henlein – Life and Death/. BMSS-Start, Prague 2010.
- 84 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46, Article entitled *Als sich Wernstadt der Tschechen entledigen wollte* by Franz Chaber.
- 85 The 28th unit was commanded by Financial Guard Inspector (II Class) František Voldřich, with his deputy, senior officer František Lindner. The unit was made up of finance officers Josef Kaláš, Alois Zvolský, Ladislav Homola, Julius Kučera, Josef Černý, Jan Švanda, Josef Nožička II (see above for the meaning of the Roman numerals), Erich Rouče and Václav Rejthar. In September the unit was reinforced with military and civilian officers, though the sole name we have been able to track down is that of Czechoslovak Railways guard Vošoust. LÁŠEK, Radan: *Jednotka učení SOS*, part 1. Codyprint, Prague 2006, p. 191.
- 86 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46, Article entitled *Als sich Wernstadt der Tschechen entledigen wollte* by Franz Chaber.
- 87 *Vojenský ústřední archiv – Vojenský historický archiv* (Central Military Archive – Military History Archive, hereafter referred to as VÚA – VHA), f. Velitelství II. sboru (II Corps Command), Box 12401, inv. No. 16041, Telephone despatch on the attack on the Verneřice post office by SdP auxiliary police, 15. 9. 1938.

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While the information in the despatch was mostly distorted, it still beggars the question who was the first to appeal for help and who answered that call. There are several possibilities. Alongside the two German Social Democrats Oskar Schröfel and Josef Gaube, who raised the alarm with the authorities from Těchlovice, and the post office clerk Zelenka, who managed to reach Velké Březno on foot and contact the military unit in Ústí nad Labem, there is also the post boy Matěj Erban, who ran into a group of soldiers near Příbram after fleeing Verneřice.

A more detailed chronology was provided by warrant officer Jan Zilvar from the rapid deployment unit of the Litoměřice gendarmerie, who says in his testimony that he received the news that the Verneřice station was not responding at 1 a.m. on 15 September 1938 from Prague, with orders to set off for Verneřice immediately.⁸⁸ If we assume that one hour passed between the announcement that the uprising was underway and the order from Prague to send reinforcements, news that a rebellion had started must have arrived around midnight. Seeing as Erban ran into the military vehicles near Příbram as they were heading towards Verneřice, he cannot have been the one who broke the news to the authorities. Neither could postal clerk Zelenka have informed them, as he left Verneřice on foot around 9.15–9.30 p.m. and did not arrive in Velké Březno 13 kilometres away until midnight, and also hid out in the forest during the journey. So with the greatest of probability it is the German Social Democrats Oskar Schröfel and Josef Gaube – who could have reached Těchlovice by bicycle around 11.30 p.m. or earlier – who deserve credit for the rapid liberation of Verneřice.

From Těchlovice a message was sent to both the local gendarmerie in Litoměřice, who most likely contacted the smaller unit in Rychnov whom Erban later ran into, as well as the regional gendarmerie command and the national police in Děčín, who, however, lacked sufficient manpower.⁸⁹ For this reason only the army was sent to Verneřice, followed by the gendarmerie's rapid reaction unit based in Litoměřice and commanded by Jan Zilvar, which, however, did not reach the town until around 4 a.m., when it had already been occupied by soldiers. The national police were the last to enter Verneřice.

In the meantime, some 13 people were fearing for their lives in the town hall, among them the gendarmes Černý, Šmejkal and Cvetler, Vytůj the post clerk, Pešek the stationmaster, Bureš the train driver, Jedlička the stoker, the Social Democrats Erban and König, Věchet the head of the post office and Vyhnanovský the teacher. The latter was apprehended at 9.45 p.m., when Werner the auxiliary policeman pulled him off his bike. He and Věchet were the only captives to suffer injury.⁹⁰

After hours of uncertainty freedom finally came when at 4.30 a.m. they heard people speaking Czech. Staff sergeant František Cvetler describes the dramatic and emo-

88 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

89 In view of the situation in the district most national police officers were deployed outside Děčín and only 12 officers were present in the town. There was a similar situation in the gendarmerie, which since May had been deployed to guard the border as part of an SOS unit, and the gendarmerie was only staffed by 1–2 gendarmes with no local knowledge. VÚA – VHA, f. II Corps Command, Box 12401, inv. No. 16041, Telephone despatch on the attack on the Verneřice post office by SdP auxiliary police, 15. 9. 1938

90 SOA Litoměřice, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

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tional moment when a Czechoslovak soldier arrived to liberate them: *At around 4.30 a.m. we noticed that the number of Germans guarding us had begun to thin out, then the last of them left through the front door. We heard him speaking in the hallway but then all of a sudden a soldier ran through the doors that the auxiliary police had been guarding. You cannot imagine how surprised we were! We shouted a salutation at him but he aimed his rifle at us as he did not know who was inside the room. When he saw there were gendarmes in uniform, however, he turned on his heels but at that moment those sitting near the door grabbed him and embraced him and then we all ran out of the building. Awaiting us was a vision you could hardly imagine: the entire square was covered in light and heavy machine guns, two armoured cars and around 100 soldiers.*⁹¹

After this happy reunion with Czechoslovak troops, the authorities began assessing the damage, arresting, interrogating and searching the homes of all those who had taken part in the Verneřice uprising. The greatest damage had been inflicted on the gendarmerie, which had been devastated by gunfire, rocks and water from the fire engines. The gendarmerie's contents had been either destroyed or stolen, as had the apartment belonging to the post office chief, Bohumil Věchet. The aggression of the local Germans had disappeared along with their leaders, and fear of Czech retribution now descended upon the town.

Together the gendarmes and soldiers began arresting SdP leaders in Verneřice. Allegedly heavily beaten⁹² they took the places of the Czechs who had been held captive inside the town hall. The gendarmerie knew the identities not only of the leading figures of the uprising, but even the name of the farmer Josef Renftel Sr., who had started the whole thing off by blowing on the firemen's horn. A military patrol apprehended him as he was heading for the fields: *I was kicked and punched as I was marched to the town hall, accompanied by soldiers with fixed bayonets pointing their guns at me. A senior state official with a velvet cap informed me that we would now all be shot on the town square.*⁹³

But despite the threats, there were to be no executions in Verneřice. After an initial round of interrogation in the town hall all the apprehended insurgents⁹⁴ were taken by lorry and held in the custody cells of Litoměřice Regional Court, where they were once again interrogated.⁹⁵

91 *Archive of Jiří Cvetler*, Letter from František Cvetler to friends, 18. 9. 1938.

92 Mention of Germans being beaten in custody comes from Josef Renftel, who was, however, a direct participant in the uprising and by telling tales of violence at the hands of the Czechoslovak authorities was perhaps trying to justify his actions and sympathy towards the SdP. However, such violence can certainly not be ruled out. František Cvetler makes the following mention of his stolen rifle in his letter: [...] *but I found my rifle again in Přibram in the hands of a certain ruffian, he was hideously punished when I took it back.* František Cvetler does not refer here directly to physical violence against detainees, but he seems to suggest it. *Ibid.*

93 *Auf dem Wege dahin, welchen ich zwischen Soldaten mit gesenktem Gewehr, Bajonett auf, zurücklegen mußte, bagelte es Ohrfeigen und Fußstritte. Ein leitender Staatsbeamter mit Sammetkappchen sagte mir, daß wir jetzt alle am Marktplatz erschossen würden.* *Archive of Hildegard Ziemer*, Handwritten memoirs of Josef Renftel, recorded in Leipzig in 1957.

94 The authorities arrested 27 people from Verneřice and surroundings, including Otto Franz, Franz Schmeikal, Otto Klinger, Josef Renftel Sr., Josef Pieke, Wilhelm Sinke, Franz Weigel, Ernst Brosche, Adolf Kobe, Kurt Rössler, Josef Redlich and Alfred Böhm.

95 *Archive of Hildegard Ziemer*, Handwritten memoirs of Josef Renftel, recorded in Leipzig in 1957.

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Verneřice, meanwhile, was occupied by the Czechoslovak Army. Troops were billeted in the *U koruny* pub, which belonged to the innkeeper Pieke and which was festooned with German flags – at least until the Czech soldiers arrived. The military commander put in charge of the town demanded all citizens given up their radio sets, martial law was introduced, and a curfew was set for 9 p.m. The delivery of daily newspapers was banned and Verneřice was once again cut off from the outside world. Only a few women were allowed – with the permission of the military commander – to leave the town and visit the insurgents being held prisoner in Litoměřice. The gendarmerie also increased security; the National Gendarmerie headquarters in Prague sent seven gendarmes to Verneřice from Slovakia under the command of staff sergeant Josef Franc from the gendarmerie in Cífer.⁹⁶

Conditions for the incarcerated Germans only improved after the Munich Agreement, when on 7 October 1938 all the men were released and taken by lorry from Litoměřice to Mukařov, from where they set off on foot for Verneřice. Two days later the armed forces began to withdraw inside the new borders of what was left of Czechoslovakia.⁹⁷

On 9 October 1938, the German inhabitants of Verneřice were finally relieved as the Wehrmacht marched victoriously into the town. It was meant to be a day of joy for the local Germans, the realisation of their most heartfelt desires, but in the light of recent events celebrations were muted.⁹⁸

For the arrival of the Wehrmacht and Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland had spun the wheel of fate for Verneřice once again, setting off a cycle of violence and arrest, this time with fatal consequences.

Victims and murderers

Following the return from prison or exile of the SdP insurgents, there began a hunt for all political opponents in the town. The victims this time were German Social Democrats, Communists and of course Czechs. Just like the previous month, houses were searched and just like the previous month, mass arrests began – though this time the shoe was on the other foot. The activities of Verneřice's SdP followers during the uprising on 14 September 1938 as well as the arrests of the Nazis' opponents and the behaviour of individual persons was thoroughly investigated after the war by the Extraordinary People's Court in Litoměřice, which attempted to reconstruct – based on the testimony of both Verneřice Czechs and Germans – the events of 14 September and punish those perpetrators who had been saved from justice by the 1938 Munich Agreement. Even though file symbol Tk XII 1523/38 had been lost along with the

96 Other gendarmes deployed were staff sergeants Karel Witner from Sereď Gendarmerie and Josef Šimánek from Trnava Gendarmerie together with Michal Brezina, Jan Brndiar, Josef Buc and Pavel Buch, gendarmes deployed on a trial basis from Bratislava Gendarmerie's auxiliary department. NA, f. ZČV, Box 946, inv. No. 830, SOS.

97 KÖPPLINGER, Liese: *Wernstädter Putsch aus meiner Sicht*, p. 20.

98 Ibid.

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criminal files of those arrested, depriving the courts of a great deal of material – principally witness testimonies – it proved possible to reopen and investigate the whole case. Relying on the testimony of the gendarmes and several other Czech citizens, officers of the newly-created National Security Corps (SNB)⁹⁹ were able to re-arrest Otto Franz, Franz Smeikal, Otto Klinger, Josef Renftel Sr., Josef Pieke, Wilhelm Sinke, Franz Weigel, Ernst Brosche and Adolf Kobe. This time the Czechoslovak authorities also descended upon Karl Erb, Karl Sandner, Ernst Storch, Eduard Bardel, Edwin Härtner, Franz Knöchel, Alfred Lorenz, Josef Mattausch, Josef Reichelt, Josef Renftel Jr., Alfred Schwarz, Rudolf Wenzel, Ernst Würtig, as well as Josef Zörner, Adolf Reymann and Adalbert Veidt.¹⁰⁰ The only ringleaders who managed to escape arrest were Karl Wiehan and Franz Chaber. Witness testimony unveiled not only the fate of the perpetrators but also their victims.

Social Democrats

The first victim of the Nazis' revenge in the autumn of 1938 was most likely Alfred Müller, former councillor and head of Verneřice's Social Democrats, who was betrayed by Alfred Schwarz. Müller was detained by Emil Werner and transported by the German authorities to the Flossenbürg concentration camp in Germany, where in 1942 he died. Two more Social Democrats – Bernhard Kalfus and Alfred Hanke – were also arrested by Karl Stiaštný, the auxiliary policeman from Rychnov. It remains unclear whether they survived the war and in what circumstances. Karl Wiener, also detained by Karl Stiaštný's group, not only survived the war but was one of the few Social Democrats to testify before the Extraordinary People's Court. His testimony was instrumental in apprehending several SdP insurgents. Social Democrat Ernst Pohl also testified in front of the court in the trial against Josef Renftel, helping unravel what happened on that fateful evening in Verneřice. He left voluntarily for Germany while the proceedings against several SdP members was still ongoing, despite being exempt from the post-war expulsions as an anti-fascist. Josef Gaube and Oskar Schröfel – whose prompt actions had helped free the Czechs imprisoned in the town hall – also chose emigration. While Gaube followed Pohl to Germany, Schröfel decided to start a new life in Canada. Alfred König – who along with Wiener and Erban had gone to warn the gendarmes – also chose exile, eventually moving to Gothenburg in Sweden.¹⁰¹

The fate of Verneřice's Czechs

Following the annexation of the Sudetenland most Czechs retreated into what remained of Czechoslovakia along with the entire civil service. Not everyone, however,

99 The National Police (called the Stráž bezpečnosti – Security Guard) and Gendarmerie were disbanded in 1945, largely thanks to the efforts of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). They were replaced by the new Sbor národní bezpečnosti – SNB.

100 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

101 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

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could bear to part with their lives and property in Verneřice. For many Czechs, the decision to try and survive in the new gau or administrative region of the Sudetenland posed not only a risk to their livelihoods but also to their lives.

A significant role in the events of Verneřice was played by the Czech Bedřich (Fritz) Cermann. He was arrested in October by Thomas Mattausch. After interrogation in the town hall he was released by the fascist officials and for the duration of the occupation he likely faced persecution from mayor Karl Erb and other pro-Nazi functionaries.¹⁰² After the war, he vowed to get his own back on the Germans. Cermann, nicknamed the Rauberhauptmann (Chief of Thieves) by the Germans, took matters into his own hands and according to the testimony of several local Germans¹⁰³ he began – together with several like-minded Czechs – to extract his revenge on the German citizens of Verneřice. He appointed himself head of the local Revolutionary Guard (dubbed the Volksmiliz by the Germans) and with his compatriots began arresting and robbing the citizens of Verneřice. Josef Renftel left this recollection of Cermann’s post-war activities: *They took me to the town hall, and after I had confirmed that I had indeed been in the town’s fire brigade, began beating me with a length of cable, breaking my nose and left cheekbone and knocking out my teeth. I fainted, and they dragged me to the school nearby. There in the kitchen I was beaten mercilessly by 5–6 men with rubber truncheons until I no longer knew who I was.*¹⁰⁴

It is worth adding that the Extraordinary People’s Court found Josef Renftel Sr. guilty of nothing more than sounding the firemen’s horn at the start of the uprising and accepting a Sudeten medal, and on 17 December 1946 he was exonerated of the charges against him and expelled to Germany.¹⁰⁵

Other Czechs who were directly affected by the Sudeten German uprising and who returned to Verneřice after the Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland were the post boy Ladislav Erban, his father Matěj and his brother Rudolf. While Matěj Erban was imprisoned by the Germans for four weeks at Dečín Castle,¹⁰⁶ his sons were not arrested until the Czechoslovak Army was demobbed. As soon as Ladislav Erban returned to Verneřice for his personal effects he found himself detained by local fascists Rudolf Richter and Rudolf Grand. As Erban was being escorted to the town hall, they ran into Josef Reichelt on the street, who began urging passers-by to beat him up. Even though ultimately the Germans left Ladislav Erban unharmed, he – like his

102 Ibid.

103 Mentions of the inhuman, brutal and base behaviour of Bedřich Cermann can be found in the memoirs of Josef Renftel Sr. and Elisabeth Tschammler. *Archive of Hildegarde Ziemer*, Handwritten memoirs of Josef Renftel, recorded in Leipzig in 1957, p. 5, and Ibid., Handwritten memoirs of Elisabeth Tschammler, undated, p. 4. Hildegarde Ziemer, who was born in Verneřice, and František Kudrne, the former mayor of Verneřice, also shared their unpleasant memories of Cermann with the author.

104 *Man brachte mich auf das Burgermeisteramt, wo ich auf die Bejahung, da bei der Feuerwehr bin, gleich mit einem Stuck Kabel uber das Gesicht gehauen wurde, mir das Nasenbein und der linke Backenknochen gebrochen und die Zahne heraus waren. Ich fiel ohnmachtig zusammen. Man schleifte mich in die in der Nabe befindliche Volksschule. In der Kuche wurde ich erneut von 5–6 Kerlen mit Gummiknuppeln erbarmungslos geschlagen bis ich nicht mehr von mir wuste.* Ibid., Handwritten memoirs of Josef Renftel, recorded in Leipzig in 1957, p. 5.

105 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

106 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

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father – was forced to spend three weeks in Děčín's prison, before he was released and allowed to travel to Prague.¹⁰⁷ Things turned out much worse for his brother Rudolf, who was shot and injured by local Germans. His injuries were so serious that it was not thought he would survive being operated on. Whether he later succumbed to his injuries remains unclear.¹⁰⁸

Thanks to archive documents it has been possible to reconstruct what happened to the officers of the Verneřice gendarmerie. After Czechoslovakia was forced to cede the Sudetenland to Germany, the gendarmerie was faced with the problem of what to do with all the gendarmes who had been serving in territory which was now occupied. The gendarmerie command resolved the situation by pensioning off all those gendarmes who for health reasons were eligible for becoming reserve officers or increasing the number of officers at gendarmeries.¹⁰⁹ Gendarmes from border districts were therefore spread out across what was left of Czechoslovakia. The three gendarmes of Verneřice met different fates after they were withdrawn from the borderlands, but those fates were certainly no less dramatic.

Josef Černý

It was the gendarmerie's commander, Josef Černý V,¹¹⁰ who found himself in the worst straits. After being withdrawn from Verneřice he was initially transferred to the Bohušovice nad Ohří gendarmerie and then to nearby Třebenice.¹¹¹ He remained in that post until 23 June 1940, when he was deemed redundant and transferred by Ministry of the Interior decree to the Protectorate Political Authority in Roudnice nad Labem and as a former gendarme assigned to the newly-created Correctional Work Camp at Lety. Overnight he was forced to hang up his gendarme uniform and accept his new role as camp warden with the formal title of Office Clerk.¹¹²

Černý served at the Lety camp for almost the entirety of its existence, which meant three years of demanding service, guarding internees of what was initially a correctional camp for “workshy” citizens and later an internment and concentration camp for gypsies. Černý will have been affected by this service on a number of levels. Not

107 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

108 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

109 The author Michal Dlouhý gives an example of the systematic increase in staff at gendarmeries in the case of Kutná Hora – in 1939 a total of nine new gendarmes arrived at the station, whereas the original number was just seven men. DLOUHÝ, Michal: *Černické příběhy aneb Kutnoborská pátračka na stopě* /Gendarme Stories – Kutná Hora Policemen on the Trail/. Naše vojsko, Prague 2012, p. 215.

110 Josef Černý was born into a railwayman family on 12 November 1897 in the village of Stradonice in the district of Slaný. He trained as a joiner, and at the age of 24 joined the 28th Infantry. Following his military service, he decided in 1928 to join the gendarmes. He spent most of his career at Neštětice Gendarmerie in North Bohemia, from where he was transferred to take command of Verneřice Gendarmerie on 12 May 1938. NA, f. ZČV Praha, Box 1130, inv. No. 897, Personnel Card System, Certificate of Qualification for Josef Černý.

111 Ibid.

112 SOA Třeboň, f. Cikánský tábor Lety (Lety Gypsy Camp – hereafter Lety CT), Box 9, sign. 55 2. C. 3, Warden Staff, Josef Černý's personnel file.

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only would he have suffered the loss of prestige and income he had enjoyed in the gendarmerie, but he would also have been kept far from his wife and children in Roudnice nad Labem.

There are only scattered mentions of his service and how he treated internees at Lety. According to memoirs of the former inmates of the Gypsy Camp, Černý was among those wardens who beat internees,¹¹³ while documents submitted during the criminal case against camp commander Josef Janovský refer to Černý's cruel treatment of inmates of the correctional camp too.¹¹⁴ Even his erstwhile colleague Josef Hovorka paints Černý in a negative light, describing in a letter how Černý had refused to allow him to undergo a blood transfusion to treat his typhus.¹¹⁵

In 1943, after a new camp commander had managed to bring the typhus epidemic under control and the Nazi authorities had decreed that all surviving inmates of the Gypsy camp would be transported to Auschwitz, the camp was closed. Josef Černý – along with his fellow wardens – requested permission to return to the gendarmes. However, unlike his colleagues his request was denied, and instead of the gendarmerie he was formally assigned to the Interior Ministry. On 23 June 1943 he was sent (for one week) to the Velké Kunčičky correctional work camp near Ostrava, from where he was transferred on 3 July 1943 to a similar facility in Mírošov, West Bohemia.¹¹⁶

The post-war fate of Josef Černý is unknown, but it appears he survived the war. Despite the aforementioned references to his cruelty at Lety, there is no record of him being prosecuted or punished for his conduct at the internment camps.

Bohuslav Šmejkal

The journey of sergeant Bohuslav Šmejkal¹¹⁷ following the retreat from Verneřice led first to the gendarmerie at Libotenice. There he served until 1943, when he was moved to Bohušovice nad Labem, where he stayed for just two months before being transferred – like many others – to the Theresienstadt ghetto, where the Germans had created a 150-member guard division made up of Czech gendarmes. Commanded by an SS officer, every three months one third of the guards – 50 men – were replaced to prevent them from fraternising too much and building mutual trust.¹¹⁸ Šmejkal

113 POLANSKY, Paul: *Těživé mlčení. Svědectví těch, kteří přežili Lety* (published in English as *Black Silence. The Lety Survivors Speak*). G plus G, Prague 1998, pp. 25, 51, 201, 205.

114 SOA Prague, f. Extraordinary People's Court in Praha (MLS), Criminal proceedings against Josef Janovský, file symbol Ls 678/48, Informant's testimony recorded by the committee of investigation of the Jílové District National Committee, 18. 10. 1945.

115 *Museum of Romani Culture*, Brno, Estate of František Kánský, Letter written by Josef Hovorka to František Kánský on 23. 2. 1943.

116 SOA Třeboně, f. Lety CT, Box 9, sign. 55 2. C. 3, Warden Staff, Josef Černý's personnel file.

117 Bohuslav Šmejkal was born on 13 August in Borotín, in the district of Sedlčany. He trained as a blacksmith, and following his military service in the 48th Infantry he decided in September 1934 to join the gendarmes. After graduating from the Gendarmerie Academy, he was appointed on a trial basis to Verneřice Gendarmerie. NA, f. ZČV, Box 1165, inv. No. 897, Personnel Card System, Certificate of Qualification for Josef Černý.

118 FARA, František: *Četnické vzpomínky /Memoirs of a Gendarme/*. Codyprint, Prague 2003, p. 100.

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was abruptly removed from Theresienstadt as unreliable after trying to help a woman see her husband imprisoned in the camp, something that was strictly forbidden and could have led to Šmejkal being shot for insubordination. After his transgression was discovered he remained calm, denied everything, managed to withstand a barrage of threats and insults from the ghetto commander Karl Rahm, and luckily escaped punishment.

Following his short service at Theresienstadt, Šmejkal was assigned to several more gendarmeries during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia at Nová Ves, Hospozín and Lány, before returning once again to Theresienstadt, his last post as a gendarme. During his service in Libotenice, he helped local people against the Gestapo and financial inspections. In 1943 he joined his brother Antonín, who was in the Resistance, in making so-called “chevaux de fries” – barbed wire defences for puncturing car tyres. At the close of the war he and a colleague threw these on the road to slow the German retreat from Theresienstadt. Antonín Šmejkal was arrested by the Gestapo for his Resistance activity and spent 27 months imprisoned at Buchenwald concentration camp. He refused to talk, saving his brother from certain arrest, and both survived the war. In 1945, Bohuslav Šmejkal learnt of a parachute jump by the Korzár group¹¹⁹, and donated one of his gendarme uniforms to allow them to blend in into the Protectorate and carry out sabotage.

He never, however, left North Bohemia again. He began his post-war career as a staff sergeant in the National Security Corps (SNB – the Communist-era police force) in Žalhostice, from where he was seconded from 23 February 1948 to 1 March 1948 to Ústí nad Labem – without doubt in connection with the Communist coup d'état. Following the takeover, he joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and was transferred from the restive police station in Žalhostice to the SNB District Command in Litoměřice. In 1949 he received a commendation for apprehending a six-member gang of thieves at the Labskozámecký Cold Stores and was evaluated by SNB captain Chyňava as a potential candidate for political commissar, if he was able to attain what the Communists called “higher political maturity”. His career was brought to an end, however, by the evaluation of his superior in 1951: *He comes from a working-class family, and was trained as a blacksmith and farrier. He lacks class awareness and possesses no possibility of further development. He is polite and fulfils orders to the letter. He is slow to work and even slower at thinking. He would no longer pass the SNB entrance exam.*¹²⁰ In early 1951 Bohuslav Šmejkal was given an invalid's pension and on 30 June 1951, this became temporary early retirement. On 30 June 1952 he retired as a uniformed officer with the rank of SNB senior sergeant. He may have been unable to continue in

119 The Korzár intelligence group was parachuted in from the Soviet Union in April 1945 to a location east of town Terezín. TENCER, Emil: Prof. Vladimír Hlůška. *Červené barety. Spravodaj Klubu vojenských výsadkářův* / Red Berets, Journal of the Association of Military Parachutists/, Bratislava Regional Committee, 2003, Vol. 3, No. 3 (18. 10. 2003), pp. 6–8 – see http://www.cervenebaretycsr.cz/images/pdf/citarna/cervene-barety/2003/cervene-barety_2003-03.pdf (quoted version dated 22. 7. 2019).

120 *Archiv bezpečnostních složek* (Security Services Archive, hereafter referred to as ABS), f. Personální spisy příslušníků MV (Interior Minister Personnel Files), Personnel file of Bohuslav Šmejkal, inv. No. 722/11.

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uniform, but he soon continued as a civilian employee. In 1953 he was judged fit to join the state wine-making enterprise in Velké Žernoseky, and from 1969 the Setuza chemical works in Lovosice. The former gendarme entered retirement for good in 1973. In 1977 he moved back to his home village of Borotín in South Bohemia, where he lived happily as a pensioner until his death on 5 July 1987.¹²¹

František Cvetler

While Bohuslav Šmejkal served at several gendarmeries after the occupation of the Sudetenland, František Cvetler¹²² spent the duration of the war at Humpolec Gendarmerie. The sole exception – like sergeant Šmejkal – was a brief period of service at Theresienstadt's Small Fortress. And just like his erstwhile colleague, Cvetler too was undeterred by the Gestapo's strict rules and took the risk of helping prisoners. He helped supply food, cigarettes, uncensored post and messages to and from families and fellow inmates to figures including Vladimír Krajina¹²³, a leading figure in the democratic resistance, dentist Ferdinand Škaloud, gendarmerie colonel Bohumil Hortis, Poděbrady doctors Vojtěch Sailer and Ladislav Filip and Jana Jirásková, the wife of staff sergeant Jan Jirásek, who had been murdered by the Nazis. Cvetler helped many more inmates than these illustrious ones, regardless of their social standing. His anti-German activities at Theresienstadt followed on from his contribution to the Resistance in Humpolec, where he regularly warned citizens of Gestapo house searches. During the crackdown that followed the assassination of the Nazi Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich the gendarmes of Humpolec went even further, when – under the command of Sergeant Antonín Zelinka – they agreed to look after hidden weapons given to them by citizens who feared for their lives. In January 1945, an illegal national committee was founded in Humpolec, headed by the political commissar Dubský, while Cvetler's superior Zelinka was to take command of all gendarmes in the district in the event of an uprising against the Nazi occupiers. He immediately designated Cvetler as his deputy.¹²⁴

At the end of the war, staff sergeant Cvetler saw the opportunity (setting aside the much-longed liberation of his homeland from the occupiers) not only for a well-

121 Ibid.

122 František Cvetler was born on 15 January 1910 in České Velenice, in the district of Třeboň. He trained as an engineering locksmith and after his compulsory military service joined the gendarmerie in 1933. After completing Gendarmerie Academy, he was assigned to the gendarmerie in Děčín. He served at Neštětice and Telnice Gendarmeries before being transferred in September 1937 to Verneřice. NA, f. ZČV, Box 1129, inv. No. 897, Personnel Card System, Certificate of Qualification for František Cvetler.

123 Vladimír Krajina (born 30 January 1905 in Slavice u Třebíče – died 1 June 1993 in Vancouver) was a scientist, politician and leading member of the Czechoslovak Resistance. After the war he became a senior representative of the Czechoslovak National and Socialist Party and following the 1948 Communist coup d'état fled to Canada, where he became a successful scientist in the field of ecology and environmental protection. DRÁBEK, Jan: *Dva životy Vladimíra Krajiny. Pohled do historie /The Two Lives of Vladimír Krajina. View of history/*. Toužimský & Moravec, Prague 2016.

124 ABS, f. Interior Ministry Personnel Files, Personnel file of František Cvetler, inv. No. 3246/10.

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-deserved promotion in rank, which he had stubbornly refused during the Nazi occupation, but a new position too. His dream appeared in the form of an offer of a job in the SNB Regional Criminal Directorate in České Budějovice. In June 1946, he therefore requested a transfer from Humpolec to České Budějovice. References from his superiors, necessary to approve the promotion, were glowing in their praise; it was clear František Cvetler enjoyed their professional and personal respect and they recommended his transfer with great enthusiasm.

From the surviving documents it appears that two months later the recommendation landed on the desk of the national commander of the SNB, Colonel Karel Veselý, who approved it without hesitation on 24 August 1946. But despite recommendations from four levels of command, František Cvetler never became a police detective. On 14 September 1946 – eight years to the day since the Verneřice Putsch – the Ministry of the Interior released a ruling penned by the head of Criminal Investigation Dr Drtina *that a request by František Cvetler, SNB Staff Sergeant in Humpolec, dated 28 June 1946 requesting transfer to the Department of Criminal Police is declined for reasons of service.*¹²⁵

We can only speculate as to the reasons for the refusal. The Ministry of the Interior may not have considered the 36-year-old staff sergeant as a suitable addition to the criminal police, they may already have chosen someone else for the post, or the political influence of the Communist Party might have played a part, as it was busy filling all the key positions in the security apparatus with its people through the Communist Minister of the Interior Václav Nosek, and a gendarme from the democratic First Republic might not have been a favourable candidate.

A key year for sergeant Cvetler – and indeed all citizens of Czechoslovakia – was 1948 and the Communist takeover of power. In March 1948, he joined the Communist Party and in December 1948 he swore a new oath of allegiance to the SNB. This was also the year he was meant to be transferred from Humpolec to Krucemburk, 45 km away, with the explanation that *Sergeant František Cvetler has been based at the SNB station in Humpolec since 28th December, 1938. This long period of service in Humpolec, especially at the time of the occupation (sic), still has an influence today on his performance and it is judged that it would be beneficial both in operational terms and in his own personal interest that he be transferred to a different station.*¹²⁶

Ultimately, however, the transfer to Krucemburk never happened due to a lack of suitable housing, and in 1949 there were plans to move him to Želiv. In the same year he underwent two weeks of political training in Jihlava and he was also vetted for political suitability by the district National Committee. Despite a relatively positive evaluation he did not become head of the Želiv SNB station. In September 1949, he was promoted to senior sergeant and the following year – most likely under pressure from circumstances and using the excuse of health problems – was forced to leave the police. After 17 years in the gendarmerie and SNB, František Cvetler took off his uniform for the last time, worked briefly in an insurance company and finally in the

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

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Kovofiniš factory in Ledeč nad Sázavou, where he spent the next 17 years. He retired in 1967, and after a decade spent as a content pensioner he died on 2 November 1977.

The post-war fate of the insurgents

Whilst in 1938 the insurgents marched back into Verneřice as victors alongside the Wehrmacht, in 1945 the Second Polish Army troops who liberated the town and then the (still self-declared) Czechoslovak authorities who brought it back under their control left no doubt as to who was boss. The town, filled with refugees from various corners of Europe, saw the houses of local Germans ransacked, people robbed in the street, and women raped en masse. One of the victims was the wife of Mayor Erb, Marienna. The clouds soon began gathering above both him and other SdP members who had played a role in the events of September 1938.¹²⁷

As in the case of Josef Renftel (and without doubt other Germans) Karl Erb was seized by a group of Czechs under the command of Bedřich Cermann and brutally beaten before being delivered into the hands of the Extraordinary Court in Litoměřice. Things looked grim for Erb from the beginning. His role in the uprising was well-known, and the testimony of his fellow detainees had done little to undermine it. On December 17 1946 he – together with Wiehan, Storch and Sandner – were found guilty as ringleaders of the putsch of plotting against the Czechoslovak Republic and membership of the Nazi organisations the SdP, NSDAP and SA and condemned him to life imprisonment with 20 years in a forced labour camp, sleeping on a hard wooden bunk every three months. He served less than a year – in August 1947 the former mayor was found hanged in unexplained circumstances¹²⁸ in the cellar of the former Social Democrat cooperative store.¹²⁹

Fellow conspirator Ernst Storch met a similar fate for his role in the uprising. According to the recollection of Verneřice native Hildegarde Ziemer, the former butcher hid from the Czechs in a cellar and the Czechoslovak authorities were initially unable to find him. When his wife fell ill and needed urgent medical attention, a Czech doctor was said to have refused to treat her until she betrayed her husband's hiding place. Storch, like fellow ringleader Karl Sandner, was arrested by members of the military patrol in Verneřice on 24 May 1945 and held in a makeshift prison, where according to records¹³⁰ both were said to have hanged themselves. According to Hilde-

127 *Archive of Hildegarde Ziemer*, Handwritten memoirs of Josef Renftel, recorded in Leipzig in 1957.

128 Karl Erb began his life sentence on 17 December 1946, so it is difficult to understand how he could possibly have killed himself in Verneřice. The former mayor of Verneřice, František Kudrnáč, offers something of an explanation when he says that Karl Erb helped in the investigation of the death of the American airman of Czech origin, Sgt Alfred Lubojacky. Erb is said to have identified the grave where Lubojacky was buried – all under the direction of Bedřich Cermann, who beat him up at the cemetery. KUDRNÁČ, František: *Mimořádná událost 14. února 1945 na Verneřicku* /The Extraordinary Events of February 1945 in the Verneřice area/ – see <http://www.rychnovska.bandac.cz/clanek/106868/mimoradna-udalost-14-unora-1945-na-vernericku/> (quoted version dated 22. 7. 2019).

129 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

130 *Ibid.*, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

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garde Ziemer, however, Storch was loaded into a goods van, taken to an undisclosed location and murdered. If this version of events is accurate, Karl Sandner too was most likely killed by the hands of Czechs.

Other SdP members from Verneřice paid for their lives for their more or less proven roles in the September 1938 putsch. Weaver Adalbert Veidt¹³¹ died in custody, as did Franz Weigel, who had aimed a fireman's hose against the gendarmerie. He succumbed to a skin infection called erysipelas on 20 June 1945.¹³²

Death was also waiting for Josef Pieke, the former Verneřice fire chief, innkeeper and later Ústí nad Labem Financial Authority clerk, who was sentenced to 20 years' hard labour by the Extraordinary People's Court in Litoměřice on 17 December 1946. He began his sentence in Valdice prison, where he died on 27 February 1950.¹³³

The same fate met Adolf Kobe, one of the assailants at Verneřice Railway Station. Convicted on the same day as Pieke, he began his 15-year hard labour sentence in an unnamed prison and spent six years there, dying on 31 August 1952.¹³⁴

The court found haulier Otto Klinger guilty of direct involvement in the uprising; the judge heard how he had shined the headlights of his vehicles at the gendarmerie, fired his pistol at the building and, armed with a rifle, stood guard during the attack and elsewhere in Verneřice. He too was sentenced to hard labour for life. In 1953, following the death of Klement Gottwald and the arrival of a new president, Antonín Zápotocký, his sentence was reduced to 15 years' hard labour. On 5 October 1955 the sentence was lifted, and a week later the Czechoslovak authorities permitted him to leave for Germany.¹³⁵

Long prison sentences were also handed out to other, less prominent members of the Verneřice putsch. In 1946, Rudolf Wenzel, responsible for cutting the telephone lines to Velké Březno, was sentenced by a jury to 10 years' hard labour and was one of the few convicted to serve out his entire sentence. In 1955 he was released from prison by the Czechoslovak authorities and deported to West Germany.¹³⁶

Alfred Lorenz was sentenced to ten years in prison for firing on the gendarmerie. Unlike Rudolf Wenzel, he spent just three years in prison before deportation. He left for Germany on 6 April 1949.¹³⁷ The former Ortskassenleiter (treasurer) from Verneřice Wilhelm Sinke, originally sentenced to eight years in prison, was also forced to leave Czechoslovakia.¹³⁸

Shorter sentences were handed down to Edwin Härtner (five years),¹³⁹ Franz Knöchel (five years, released on parole 5 October 1948),¹⁴⁰ Josef Richter (five years,

131 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

132 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Franz Weigel, file symbol Lsp 277/45.

133 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Pieke, file symbol Lsp 1660/46.

134 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Adolf Kobe, file symbol Lsp 1657/46.

135 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Otto Klinger (it is unclear which one), file symbol Lsp 1665/46.

136 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Rudolf Wenzel, file symbol Lsp 1667/47.

137 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Alfred Lorenz, file symbol Lsp 1661/46.

138 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Wilhelm Sinke, file symbol Lsp 1670/46.

139 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Erwin Herkner, file symbol Lsp 1659/46.

140 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Franz Knöchel, file symbol Lsp 1654/46.

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released on parole 15 October 1948),¹⁴¹ Alfred Schwarz (two years, released on parole 8 February 1947),¹⁴² Josef Mattausch (two years, released on parole 12 February 1947)¹⁴³ and Josef Renftel Jr. (two years, released on parole 10 February 1947).¹⁴⁴

Surprisingly, Josef Renftel Sr. was exonerated by the Extraordinary People's Court,¹⁴⁵ despite admitting to signalling the alarm for the attack on the gendarmerie by blowing the firemen's horn. Josef Reichelt, who had begun ringing the church bells once he heard the alarm and like Josef Renftel Sr. had received a Sudeten medal, faced similar charges yet was also released without charge.¹⁴⁶ Otto Franz,¹⁴⁷ Adolf Brosch¹⁴⁸ and Ernst Würtig also escaped punishment.¹⁴⁹

If we look once again at the complete list of accused and convicted SdP members, missing are the names Karl Wiehan and Franz Chaber, who disappeared in the chaos of the final months of the war and the tumultuous period that followed it and were never found. The commander of the Rychnov auxiliaries Franz Schmeikal and Josef Zoellner, who with Storch handed out sticks of salami to the attackers, were, however, arrested. Inexplicably they were expelled along with the rest of Czechoslovakia's Sudeten Germans and never stood trial.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

The events of September 1938 in Verneřice left a deep scar on many human lives. Even though it was "only" a local uprising which lasted but a few hours, was easily suppressed by the Czechoslovak authorities and took place without loss of life or serious injury, it still marked one of the most significant acts of defiance of the German population against the Czechoslovak state in the district of Děčín. While not every single inhabitant of Verneřice played a direct part in the uprising, the number of those who opposed it was limited to a handful of German Social Democrats, who were quickly targeted for revenge by local Nazi sympathisers. On the other hand, support for the SdP amongst the German population was so widespread that the ringleaders found it easy to hide from the Czechoslovak police and troops.

Thanks to SdP sympathisers and supporters and good contacts with the Reich authorities, pro-Nazi activists in Czechoslovakia were able to create a primitive but effective smuggling network which allowed the insurgents not only to flee to Germany but to quickly join the ranks of the Sudeten German Freikorps.

141 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Richter, file symbol Lsp 1655/46.

142 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Alfred Schwarz, file symbol Lsp 1666/46.

143 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Mattausch, file symbol Lsp 1652/46.

144 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46.

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid.

147 SOA *Litoměřice*, f. 729, Criminal proceedings against Otto Franz, file symbol Lsp 1651/46.

148 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Adolf Brosch, file symbol Lsp 1662/46.

149 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Arnost Würtig, file symbol Lsp 1668/46.

150 Ibid., Criminal proceedings against Karl Erb, file symbol Lsp 1653/46.

The Verneřice Putsch

In the end, it was the Munich Agreement that fulfilled the aims of the Verneřice Putsch. The document represented a catastrophe not just for Czechoslovakia but for all opponents of Nazism – German and Czech – who failed to flee into what remained of the country. Overnight they were transformed from inhabitants of a free country into second class citizens or even enemies of the state who were later systematically liquidated by the Nazis.

Following the liberation of Verneřice in 1945 by Polish troops¹⁵¹ many Czechs released their frustrations of the war years in brutal treatment of the German population, conducting acts of violence without fear of prosecution, motivated by personal revenge, avarice and ambition. It will perhaps never be known the extent to which the official organs of the state took part in the robberies, beatings and suspicious “suicides” of German citizens. The only certainty is that all crimes committed by Czechs went unpunished.

The overwhelming majority of participants in the uprising escaped prison. Only the mayor Karl Erb stood trial and was sentenced to life. Most of those convicted, with the exception of Josef Pieke, Franz Weigel and Otto Klinger, were minor players.

The chief punishment meted out to the German population of Verneřice was the confiscation of their property and most of their belongings and their expulsion to Germany under decrees signed by President Beneš.

The largely bloodless coup by the town’s German population against the Czechoslovak authorities in September 1938 set off a chain of mutual hatred and violence between Czechs and Germans which culminated in the expulsion of the entire German population from a land where their families had lived for generations.

The Verneřice Putsch was recalled in 1957 in Leipzig by one of its chief protagonists, Josef Renftel snr, in the following words: *Only the National Party* (author’s note – he is most likely referring to the SHF), *later the SdP, with their constant clamouring of “Heim ins Reich”, took things so far and led so many thousands of innocent people to disaster. We in the German Agrarian Party, as well as the German Tradesmen’s Party, set as our goal cooperation in economic matters with Czech colleagues in the Prague parliament in order to see our demands fulfilled. The Social Democrats had the same goal. But in nationalist matters we were marching on a different path.*¹⁵²

151 This was the Second Polish Army, the Druga Wojska Polskiego, which was a Polish unit fighting as part of the 1st Ukrainian Front commanded by Marshal Ivan S. Konev.

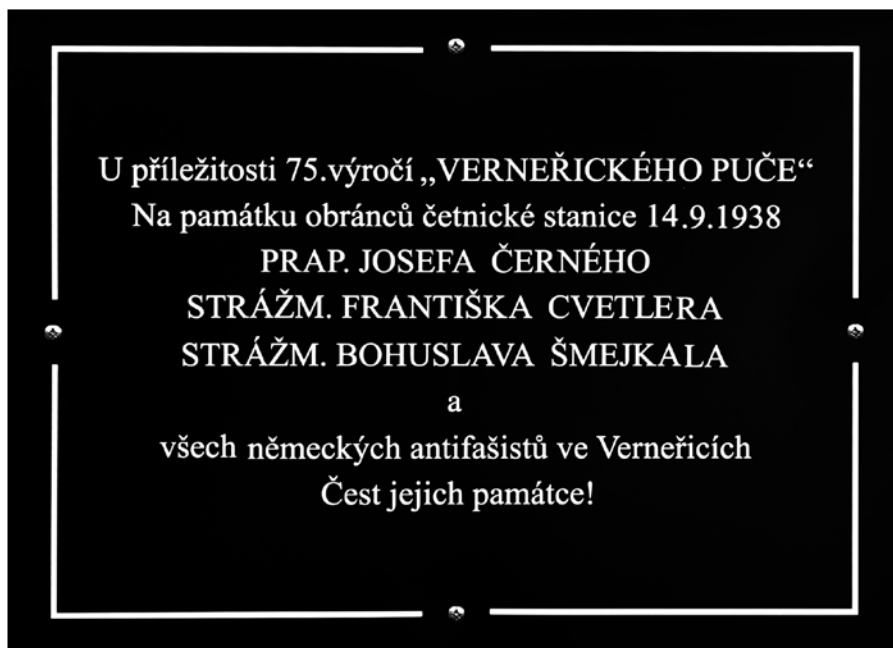
152 *Nur die Nationalpartei, später SDP mit ihrer ständigen Hetze “Heim ins Reich” hat es so weit gebracht und so viele tausende Unschuldige mit ins Unglück gebracht. Wir als “Deutsche Bauernpartei”, sowie die “Deutsche Gewerbetriebe” hatten das Ziel, in wirtschaftlichen Fragen mit den tschechischen Berufskollegen im Prager Parlament unsere Forderungen durchzusetzen. Auch die Sozialdemokratie hatte gleiche Ziele. Auf nationalem Wege sind wir getrennt marschiert. Archive of Hildegard Ziemer, Handwritten memoirs of Josef Renftel, recorded in Leipzig in 1957.*

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The building of the gendarmerie station in the Verneřice square (marked with cross)

Source: František Kudrnáček's archive



The commemorative plaque dedicated to the defenders of the gendarmerie station and German anti-fascists, revealed on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Verneřice Putsch on 28 October 2013



Staff constable Josef Černý (middle), chief of the Verneřice gendarmerie station, as a guard at the Lety (work/internment/Gypsy) camp talking to his colleagues František Kánský (left) and Josef Matějka (right)

Source: Museum of Romani Culture, Brno, estate of František Kánský

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Constable Bohuslav Šmejkal (left) with two of his colleagues

Source: Alena Lízlová's archive

Constable František Cvetler

Source: Jiří Cvetler's archive

Constable Bohuslav Šmejkal

Source: Alena Lízlová's archive

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Verneřice postal clerk Ladislav Erban. As a corporal of the divisional supply warehouse in Uzhhorod in 1926 and “on duty” after the war.

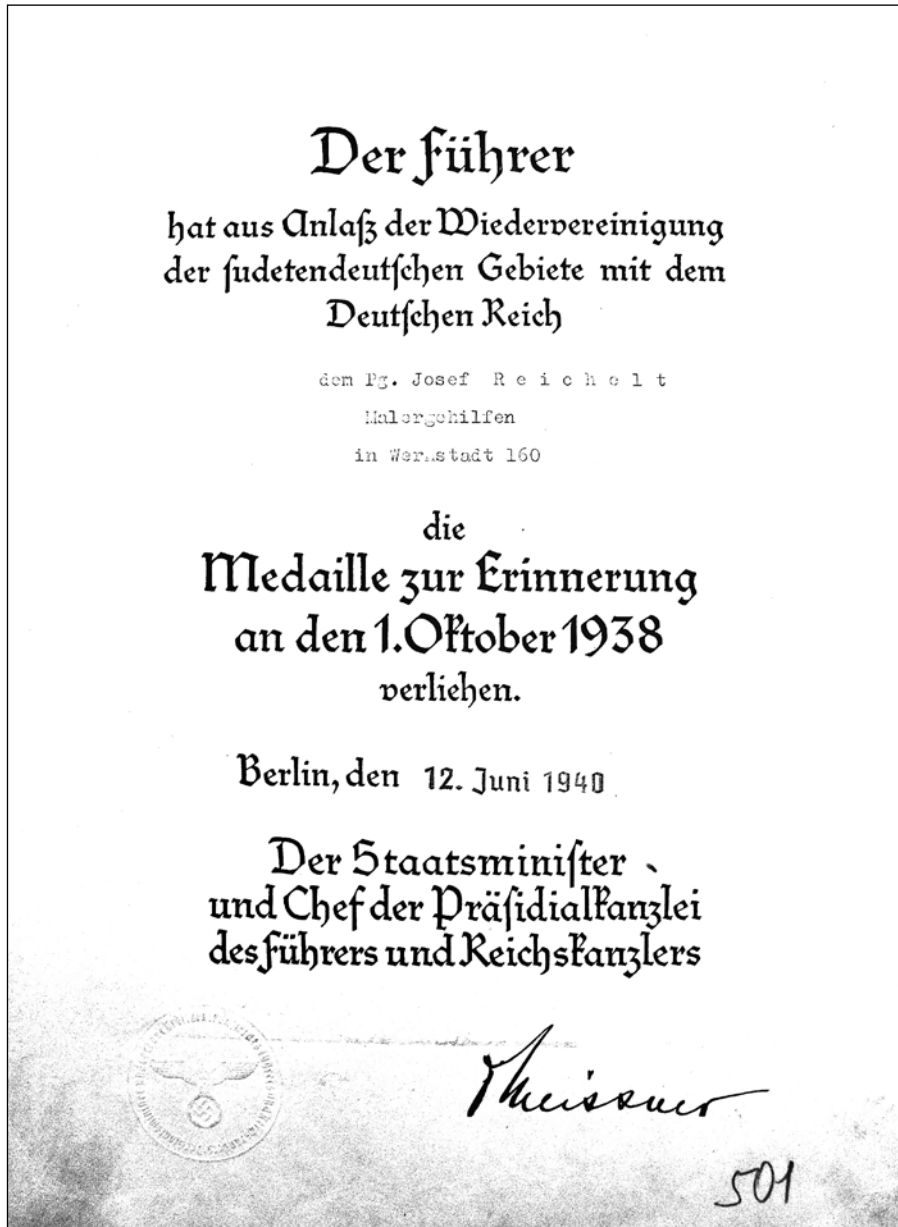
Source: František Kudrnáč's archive



Verneřice railway station

Source: author's archive

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Letter of appointment for “Medaille zur Erinnerung an den 1. Oktober 1938” of Josef Reichelt, one of the Verneřice rebels

Source: SOA Litoměřice, f. Extraordinary People’s Court in Litoměřice, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46

The Verneřice Putsch



Participants of the Verneřice Putsch. Upper row from left: Josef Renftel Jr., Karel Schödel, teacher Schnabel, teacher Rössler, Emil Schwarz, Wilhelm Sinke, Otto Klinger, Josef Veselý, Václav Kammel. Bottom row from left: Josef Hoffmann, Josef Renftel Sr., Karel Stiašný, Alfred Böhm, Josef Pieke, František Weigelt
 Source: SOA Litoměřice, f. Extraordinary People's Court in Litoměřice, Criminal proceedings against Josef Renftel, file symbol Lsp 1664/46



The obverse and the reverse of the “Medaille zur Erinnerung an den 1. Oktober 1938”, awarded to some of the Verneřice rebels
 Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3309578>