

The Journal of the Prokop Company

Its travels in Carpathia, Transylvania & Ruthenia

By Student-Diarist & Marksman

Jaromir Hajek

This century stumbles onwards to its final conclusion, promising a new era where all the subjugated peoples of this world can hopefully cast off Imperialism and Distant Rule so that they may all then be finally free to enjoy true democracy.

I – Jaromir Hajek – Czech student of philosophy at the Royal & Imperial Charles-Ferdinand University of Prague, have like many of my fellow students, pledged my allegiance and my life to the great Order of the Chalice to meet our ‘*Common Aim*’ – the cherished freedom of self-determined home-rule for the peoples of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia, and severance from the Hapsburg Empire.

I keep this secret Journal in the hope that one day I may publish it for the inspiration of others around the globe who like us, decide to challenge their oppressors to gain their rightful freedom.

Friday, 15th February

Tonight was the Full Moon for February. I walked the quiet streets of my beloved city of Prague, through the Powder Gate with its new sculptures silently watching me and on into the Stare Mesto – the Old Town. The parchment scrap in my coat pocket had a code that told me to take a side alley off the Karlova, find a specific iron-studded door, and to press one of those old nail-heads. I loitered patiently, watching a flurry of snowflakes settle on the flagstones, until the door opened and my features were lit up by an oil lamp.

“Are you selling?” said a voice from the dark shape that held the lamp.

“No, my Uncle Pavel bid me to call with his best wishes”, I replied.

The door closed again, and I had a moment of self-doubt – had I recited the secret phrase correctly? Then a sound of another door scraping open, further along the alley, and a gloved hand beckoned me in.

Inside, three men, evidently strong and powerful, and armed with long sheathed knives suspended from their belts, took my overcoat and hat and checked my pockets. I had the tiny pewter medal, the Chalice medallion, concealed in my palm as I had been instructed, but to my surprise not one of these three men offered to shake my hand. I hesitantly followed their directions for me to proceed further inside, all my senses acutely aware, more alive at that one moment than ever before in my life.

I walked down a narrow corridor, and through a curtain masking the entrance to a vast space, the walls covered in shelves of books from floor to vaulted ceiling. There in the centre of this library was placed a great table, and seated around it, several people all of whom were looking directly at me. An elderly man stood up and walked over, offering out his hand, which I thankfully and gratefully shook with a wide smile upon my face. I felt a similar tiny medal press into the palm of my hand as I did likewise to him, as I had been told and he smiled back.

It was our Company’s patron, Professor Dobrovsky, who had summoned us all that cold February evening to his great library. We all met there together for the first time, all of us careful to shake the hand of another to know we all had those tiny pewter Chalice medals. That way we would forever know our own kind. The Professor told us why we had been chosen from the ranks of the Prokop Company, and that as a Special Detachment, we had been entrusted with a new important quest in support of the ‘Common Aim’ at the behest of our Russian admirers and supporters. A chance for Direct Action at last and we were eager.

Our Russian Brothers sought answers to the reports they had of strange occurrences and tales from the north-east quadrant of the Hapsburg Empire – the hinterland above Hungary close to their borders, where for centuries the various races of Central Europe had contested the wild mountains and forests of Carpathia and Ruthenia, and on into the dark lands of Transylvania too. We were tasked to trek to those lands to discover what we could before returning back to Prague.

That night I met all my new comrades for the first time. Our leader was the renowned Vaclav Frik – hunter, explorer and collector – along with three of his most devoted friends and followers, Brenek, Zednik and Nedov – the men I had met at the entrance. We were in awe of all four of these men, masters in whatever weapons they carried, be it pistols or rifles, crossbows or daggers, flails or axes. We volunteers were to be the ‘attendants’ of one of Vaclav Frik’s new ‘natural history expeditions’, only in truth we would be working towards the goals set by Professor Dobrovsky. He set out our path, to travel to the forests and mountains in the East, to see and learn what we

could, and return to him later in the autumn. As to the rest of my party – there was a fellow student from my college by the name of Janos and his younger sister Anna. There was an ex-soldier – a deserter from one of the Border garrisons – by the name of Bichov, Mocker a clerk and translator, and Zermak the elderly teacher.

Frik as our leader, with his three companions and Bichov, would be the true ‘Soldiers’ of our small Company. Janos and I were the Marksmen, while Zermak with his portmanteau full of parchments, maps and books would be our source for all knowledge of the arcane and the occult. But it was Mocker and Anna I admired and respected the most, for the two of them were our ‘Pavisers’ – our shielders. It is no small wonder to me that those of our Order who despite personally abhorring violence would still wish to stand with us when we take Direct Action. That they choose to be the ‘Pavisers’ and would accompany us, be it when we are fighting or sniping, scouting or standing sentinel. And to defend us first before they would think of defending themselves.

We poured over maps and train timetables, made notes in our pocketbooks of towns and villages, and in our own handwritten codes, the names of brave people who would help us in those places. Janos and I were tasked with appearing with Frik and his men for the meeting planned with the Imperial Geological Survey and the correspondents who would interview Frik about his latest ‘adventure’. I was thrilled that my parents would read about my exploits in the newspaper. And we chose the weapons and items we would all take with us, the vital material we would entrust for the protection of the lives of ourselves and others.

I returned back to my own quarters well past midnight, informed and inspired, ready and able.

Wednesday, 6th March

I bade a fond farewell for my Beloved birthplace as we departed early morning upon our trek. We took the Eastbound train towards Kolin from Prague station, and it was not until we were cutting through the bleak gaunt trees of the Fiederholzwald, that the true weight of this great task bore down upon me.

I must have looked hesitant or worried, for Tutor Zermak leaned towards me, offering me distractions with a small leatherbound tome on Ruthenian folklore and a paper bag of boiled sweets. The former was fascinating and enlightening – the latter were quite an acquired taste, sugary and peppery at the same instant, and unpleasant. But grateful nevertheless for the Tutor’s kindness.

We proceeded well along the tracks, and our first night away was spent in the hallowed halls of an educated acquaintance of the Professor’s – comfortable, relaxed and well-provisioned.

Tuesday, 12th March

We had resorted to wagons and horses as we travelled through Moravia, from Hohenstadt at the end of last week, Littau these past two days and now onwards to Olmutz, and to a promised remote and now quite rare safe-house.

In the first days of our journey, in the cities and towns we were guests of secret fellow supporters of the Order. Then later, we either purchased our rooms and beds with gold coin, or entreated on the hospitality of farmers and their families, or on the religious orders, where monks, priests and nuns would provide us simple lodgings in churches, convents and chapels.

While we had travelled leisurely at first, to avoid incurring suspicion from the authorities, first by rail and then by carriages and horses, now we were careful in making new friends, working harder to prove we have no hostile intent to them, eager to learn their beliefs, ways and customs.

But as we climbed the wooded hillsides venturing ever higher into the mountains, we were soon aware we did not travel alone. We had someone, or something, who would follow our trail and who would always shirk back and avoid contact if we waited for them or doubled back upon our path to catch them. It was unnerving at first, unsettling – we soon took to mounting guard at night, especially when the lack of settlements ensured we slept on the open ground under the night sky.

Bichov had proven to be the most nervous of our ‘Soldiers’, and Frik had elected to keep him close by to himself for as much of our travels as possible. Bichov was brave, but he was also slightly bothered by our invisible followers. His fears began to concern me, made me more watchful.

Saturday, 16th March

This day we have boarded ourselves in Leipnik, where we may take a train again in the morning for a short hop eastwards on our journey. We are tired – even the best and fittest of us. From our departure the day before from a village just north west of Olmutz, we made a wide circling route around the north of the main town. We had been warned that the Imperial authorities awaited us in Olmutz – the town’s police accompanied by some gendarmes from Vienna. How they might have learned of our progress we knew not. But Frik wanted to avoid any confrontation at this early stage, so we took several detours around hill-paths, villages and forests to reach the next valley.

This country, the land around us is beautiful – but we have little thought or time to really appreciate it. We hurry constantly, pushing ourselves on at a quick pace, still dogged by that sense of foreboding behind us – sometimes around us. I know not which is worse – the persistent unease that shadows us, or the new threat of unwanted attention from the Imperial authorities.

I am still ready, but I confess, I grow impatient and unsettled that I cannot face my foe.

Monday, 18th March

Last night we were attacked, or to be precise, our lodgings were damaged. Assailed in our rest by dark forces from the shadows, as some of us slept, a few had stood guard and were able to raise us all when it had started in the early hours of the morning.

Someone first tried to force the main door, but we had barred that earlier. Likewise we had shuttered the windows too. Then someone – or something – had clambered onto the roof of our simple stable, and had started tearing at the shingle tiles.

Zednik and Bichov had blindly fired their rifles upwards into the rafters, and we heard an unearthly groan as something slid off the roof. But once we had dashed outside, to see what we had bagged, there was nothing to be seen. No corpse, not even bloodstains. Bichov was unsettled even more from this one encounter, swearing that all was not right these past few days.

We had already chosen to move onwards to rest for a few days at Roznau, as we know we have friendly patrons there to shelter us. But that was an arduous trek over the hills again, to avoid the easier travelled valleys, because we still needed to be cautious with the gendarmes still around. Oddly, as we prepared an early morning meal, Anna found that the fresh milk collected the day before had soured overnight, turned completely as if it was several weeks old. Most strange.

Friday, 22nd March

Roznau has provided us with a well needed recuperation for some of our party, who it is fair to be said, have had their nerves frayed somewhat. Bichov remains the most troubled of all of us, but my good friend Janos is now often startled by fleeting glimpses of unknown shapes around us, and Zednik has taken to muttering prayers as we walk. Frik and Brenek playfully mock him sometimes, but I see that even they scour the horizons and treelines with more intent than before. And Nedov did not say a single word yesterday. Meantime, every moment we stop, Tutor Zermak reads more passages of his books and papers and scribbles down more notes.

We still know no more, but we collectively decided it was no longer safe to sleep outside under the stars of a night-time. To that end, we always sought a decent robust shelter for our security.

Our host, a local Baron and distant cousin of Frik, has allowed us a few nights quiet discreet lodging in a rundown tower on his estate. I am glad I cleverly packed my soft shoes, no use for walking, but they are a wonder of comfort to change into of a night.

And Anna has been an uplifting source of inspiration to us this evening. She would easily have known how depressed some of us had become, but still, she asked Frik if she may sing to us all, of all things, to which thankfully he gave his permission. Anna has a wondrous sweet voice, and her repertoire of simple Bohemian folk songs had a calming soothing effect on all of the party. Even Bichov dozed off into a deep slumber.

And dear reader, that was the first night this week we were not disturbed by any visitations.

Sunday, 24th March

I had strong doubts last night that I would have been unable to make this entry. My pen still shakes in my hand, ink-spots on my trousers not through carelessness, but because I still tremble. Last night was the worst of it. I feared for all our lives at one point – and for all of our souls.

We had remained safe in the ruined tower, cooking, eating and sleeping, keeping watch, making repairs to boots and clothes, or just listening to Tutor Zermak recounting to us what he had learnt so far from his readings while we had travelled. And lucky for us that we had listened to his words.

As the sun set in the West, Janos and I went around our posts, lighting up the torches and ensuring the two braziers were well stocked with wood. It was almost as the last glimmer of the sun slid over the mountain top, that we both saw the long dark shadows reach out from the treeline to touch the base of the tower's wall. Janos turned to call out the alarm to warn the others, but I could not resist looking over the edge, down the wall to see – finally – what these foes were.

I then only recall Janos dragging me down the steps into the tower's upper chamber, as I screamed and screamed, calling out to anyone for my soul's salvation. I know I called for my mother – Nedov told me that later. In the few decades I have lived, I have never known such terror, and such utter helpless paralysis. I had looked into the hooded face of Death, I will swear to that.

These creatures – dark shapes with unfamiliar gait – scrambled up the walls, clambered inwards into the tower, extinguishing lit brands as they went with no more than a passing hiss, as our party mustered to defend ourselves. I at first was of no use, as I lay trapped in some form of an unknown seizure. I could only watch as my comrades formed a hasty battle line to face two, then three, then finally four of these wraithlike shadows. Bullets seemed to only make our foes twitch and writhe,

and only the blades and maces we had to hand, strangely had any effect. To my confused eyes, it was as if my comrades were battling dark smoke clouds, cutting trails into the mass, as those shapes let out hideous screeching screams.

Frik stood in the centre, his men either side of him. Mocker stood close to him too, with his steel buckler in hand, the one he had chosen from the Tabor Armoury. Mocker had often escorted and protected Zermak, but on this occasion, he shielded Frik from some of the creatures lunges. Janos guarded me as I lay prone, still shooting off rounds from his rifle, while Anna stood alongside her brother, protecting him. Anna, with her humble simple parasol, made from that wondrous protective Vulkan material, looked so vulnerable in her own right, but she was immeasurably brave.

Just as I staggered back to my feet, my head still swimming with grim imagery, Tutor Zermak stepped out of our defence line, holding aloft a clutch of withered twigs brandishing them in the faces of our foes. I had thought him foolish, insane maybe, but at that instant he touched a lit torch to the branches he held, and they flashed into a bright vivid blue flame. Instantly the dark clouded shapes screamed in unison and quite literally evaporated before our eyes, leaving us in a still and silent space, the debris of our fight lying around us.

We were all dumbfounded – even the ‘Soldiers’, even indeed Frik himself – only Tutor Zermak seemed calmly confident. We collected our belongings and ourselves together, and re-posted our fires and torches to help us keep watch. And we talked of what we saw – or thought we had seen.

Zermak told us we had fared well! ‘Well’, he had said – I was unsure of that, somewhat ashamed of my conduct I would admit, until Frik later spoke to me. He stated simply that I had lived through it all, so then I would learn from that, and I would be stronger – for the next time. I will admit my own confidence has been shaken, but I restore some courage to myself knowing I travel with a fine company of people. I have resolved to do better, I will not let them down.

Wednesday, 3rd April

We are struggling to cross the high ground of forests and rocky outcrops so that we can get to hopeful safety at Dobschau. What I would give for a fine platter of pork and dumplings, or a bottle of sweet wine. Or just a simple comfort, like a well-stuffed upholstered chair to fall asleep in.

In these hills, we have often been forced to make camp in the open, as no buildings could be found. In these instances, the best places are caves, and we have been doubly fortunate in this. Not only do such places provide a good defence, with only one entrance to guard, but in most cases we have explored them first to ensure our safety and for no late night surprises, and in doing so, we have come across some artefacts that Frik and Tutor Zermak have pronounced potentially useful or even invaluable. We are all now somewhat additionally burdened by these acquisitions – even Anna – but as Zermak has proven more than a few times that these materials help protect and safeguard us, none of us complain now.

As I trudged through scattered pine cones and pine needles, I would day-dream of Prague. It seems a lifetime ago. I do hope there is hot food in Dobschau.

Friday, 5th April

We have decided to cross more mountains and forests and to head to Kaschau. We are exhausted from the infernal assaults upon us. We are all quite strung out. Even if the Imperial authorities are there, and are seeking us out, we would take our chances for a secure roof over our heads.

I have grown to love all my comrades, and more so my dearest Anna. We have pledged we will keep each other safe. Janos has confided in me he trusts me to look after her if he... no, I will not write those words, they are best left unmentioned. We will all be strong, together, always.

Tuesday, 9th April

This night we will see what Outrages will walk the earth around this village, what Corruptions of Mother Nature exist to harm the poor frightened souls who have sought our protection. We are prepared. We expect the worst. But we will do our best.

Weeks have passed since we began on this trek, a journey that has taken on the dimensions of a Crusade from those ancient days of Chivalry. And yes, it is a Crusade, to root out the Evil that has robbed sane men of their intellect, robbed women of their families and children, robbed the children of their innocence. We now know what we strive against in all its dark ugly frightfulness.

From that first night these Creatures attacked us at the ruined tower, nearly every night thereafter they have returned, wherever we were. Long nights of terror, defending our quarters, flimsy hovels or stone barns, or churches or towers, until the dawn's first sunrays would utterly destroy them.

Now fortunately, only Bichov and Mocker have been wounded, but Bichov more seriously. One time, when we had recovered ourselves from the night previous, we talked of all those fateful encounters and have discovered that some evil trickery had been played upon all of us. We all recounted they were humanesque in stature, but where some of us recalled seeing either ragged fur or shredded clothing, others saw only shadow, some would mention claws, while I and a few only saw fangs. We were at odds with each other until Zermak explained.

He told us about the common people in these lands who feared the 'Holzauwolk' – the warlocks and witches who had the power and crafting to summon demonic horrors that played upon a man's own inherent fears. Such Evil Manipulation, to conjure such creations to pit against us. Zermak set out the best possible advice he could and Frik, he encouraged us too. But every night after, those shambling horrors would assail us again and again, screaming and clawing at the walls and doors of wherever we lodged, clamouring to destroy us. And the 'Holzauwolk' trailed and hunted us through those trees, never showing themselves to us so that we could destroy them.

And so, as I finish this page, we sit here in the gathering darkness, awaiting this night and what it will bring for us. Hooded lanterns lay all around us, Bichov is now feverish as his wounds worsen, and we have disarmed him, as he no longer sees us as his comrades. Anna tends to him as best she can, while Zermak mutters in deep discussion with the farmer – his collected items, the lindenwood, the garlic oil, all lay within easy grasp. Frik stands by the hearth, a well stoked fire aflame to offset the unnatural chill that has descended. The rest of us catch sleep however we can, or pick at the food and drink set out for us by the farmer's wife. Some stand guard and I write these words – for this, dear reader, may be the last entry I ever make.

Prepared as best as we can be, knowing what Demonic power approaches us, determined to defend ourselves, and the kind simple folk who shelter us. Or we will die in the trying of all that.

*'As the Curse from the Darkness enshrouds us,
So we stand together to await the First Light of a new Day,
I will not abandon my friends and comrades, nor they me,
And we will seek to destroy the Evil Corruption sent against us.'*

JH