

BCSA 2016 Essay Competition runner-up

The pig, the cupboard and the Reichsprotektor

By J S Mullin
Based on a true story

Dad," Madeleine said," look at these photos I found in gran's old treasure chest." "Let's see," I said, laying them on a window ledge. "Well, well... it's been many years since your gran showed me these."

"They're very interesting dad... beehives where the peach tree is... the same iron pergola just like today and look, there's that messy cupboard by the cellar steps with the wooden crucifix hanging beside it. How old are the snaps?"

"From the summer of 1939 according to the date on the back so... 76 years ago."

"Wow! Anyhow, this one is interesting. Who are those raggedy girls with the flock of geese?"

I took the snap. "Those curly-haired raggedy girls are your aunts, Dana and Pavla. They took the geese to the field across the road every day to feed."

"Gosh, dad, I'd never have recognised them. Now why was that big crucifix there when the family weren't churchgoers?"

I leaned against the wall above the steps that led to the cellar. On my left under a makeshift shelter, was a rough brown-painted door. A hole about fifteen centimetres square and covered with wire mesh had been cut into it. Beside the door, stood a rickety table piled high with metal buckets, flower pots and an assortment of other junk.

"There's a story about the crucifix and your raggedy aunts and great grandpa and granny Petrdlik which took place on this very spot."

"Tell me about it," Madeleine said.

"It was about an official notice issued by the German authorities in 1942 that your gran showed me before she died," I said. "I've searched high and low for it but it has simply disappeared but as far as I remember it read something like..."

BY SIGNING A REGISTER AT THE LOCAL POLICE STATION FAILURE TO DO SO WILL RESULT IN SEVERE PUNISHMENT

By order
R. Heydrich
Reichsprotektor

A hullabaloo raged in the Town Square where a crowd had gathered to vent its rage against the edict. Some were restrained from tearing it from the wall.

"It's a disgrace," someone roared.

"They're controlling our geese and now it's the pigs. Well, I'll not stand for it."

"You'll stand for it alright..." came a nearby response, "...or else."

"I'll ignore it," snarled Karel Petrdlik.

"Be quiet, Karel. Gestapo agents are everywhere," a neighbour said when German soldiers came to break up the melee.

The grizzled Petrdlik cursed all the way home where he found his long-suffering wife, Božena and Dana working in the garden. Pavla was out with the geese. Their daughter, Libuše, mother to Dana and Pavla, worked in a local shop but her husband, Josef had been taken to work in Berlin.

"We're being forced to register our pigs," he told them. "I suppose they're wanted to feed their army at the Russian front. Well, I'm not planning to suffer and starve for Germany's sake like in the Dolomites in the last war."

"What choice do we have?" Božena asked grimly.

"We don't register the pig but hide it."

"Are you serious? We can't hide a pig?"

"Come outside and I'll show you," he said, trooping through a scattering of geese that Pavla was herding through the house into the yard. He led them to the pig-pen where the porker snuffled around, ignorant of the impending drama. "First, we dump the pen and drive the geese around to obliterate traces of the pig."

"And the pig?" Božena asked, her thin face racked with doubt.

"Simple; during daytime, we hide the pig in the cupboard by the cellar steps and let him out at night to feed."

"I married a madman," Božena wailed at Libuše who had arrived home from work. "You'll never believe what your mad father's planning."

"I'll believe it, mum," she said and when Božena explained, "It's absolutely true when the neighbours say, that when Petrdlik's around, there's mischief afoot. Thank God I'm working daytime."

"It'll work if we all play our parts. Just leave it to me," Petrdlik said.

Next day, he cleaned the cupboard out, spread straw over the floor then cut a hole at the top of the door which he covered with wire mesh. Dana and Pavla helped him to prod and coax the pig into the cupboard where it seemed surprisingly content. An hour later, the pig-pen was reduced to firewood.

"Right, girls," he said, "from now on, after the geese are fed at night, put them in their pen then release the pig to forage around. Every morning, any signs of the pig must be hidden."

"But the Germans might find out, grandad," the ten-year-old Dana sobbed.

"Not if we're careful."

The weeks passed peacefully, the geese enjoying the day, the contented porker the night. Everything went as planned until one afternoon towards the end of May, Dana raced home breathlessly.

"Mum sent a message, grandad. The Germans are searching the houses for pigs," she gasped.

"No problem! I didn't register one."

"But they're searching every house."

"Now what?" Božena screeched. "We'll be taken out and shot."

"Let me think, woman," he said, scratching his grey stubble. "Right, Dana, go help Pavla bring the geese back but don't put them in the pen. Hurry!"

When Dana ran off, Petrdlik bade Božena ensure the pig had plenty of water and to throw in any food scraps she could spare. While she was doing this, he brought a metal bucket filled with a sickening brownish-green liquid from the bottom of the garden. He covered it with a piece of linoleum and placed it precariously on the edge of the table by the cupboard. As an afterthought, he went into the house and returned with a wooden crucifix which he kissed and hung above the door as the girls herded the geese into the yard.

"Fine time to become religious," Božena nagged.

**AS OF THE ABOVE DATE
ANY PERSON IN THE CZECH OR
MORAVIAN AREAS WHO
OWNS A PIG
MUST DECLARE OWNERSHIP
WITHIN 7 DAYS**

"Now everyone, here's what's to be done," he said and no sooner had he finished when the street door vibrated from thunderous rapping.

Petrdlik unbolted the door and a sergeant and four soldiers barged in and pinned him to the wall. A youngish officer followed who tapped the sweating Petrdlik's chest with his baton. He had steely blue eyes and an extremely sharp nose which made him look like a ferret.

"I'm Lieutenant Schlechter, Herr Petrdlik. Where is your pig?"

"I didn't register one, Sir."

"Which is precisely why we are here," Schlechter sniggered. "Again, where is your pig?"

"My geese are listed, Lieutenant but I don't own a pig."

"So, we shall see... Sergeant Pitsch, begin the search!"

"Yes sir!" said Sergeant Pitsch. "Schmidt, guard the front door. Muller, you and Gekeler search the house... Keller, the out-buildings."

"Shall we wait, Petrdlik?" Schlechter smirked, slapping his boots with his baton until the soldiers completed their search.

"House and outbuildings clear, Lieutenant," Sergeant Pitsch reported. "Right, men, the cellar next and that

you're not under arrest."

With that, Schlechter and his dishevelled squad departed.

Thus the day was saved, the pig was saved but most of all, Karel Petrdlik and his family were saved... and the bees settled down to a peaceful drone.



"...and that's what gran told you, dad?"

"As near as I remember," I said.

"It must have been hair-raising. Why did the Nazis decide to do that check?"

"Just another example of Teutonic efficiency."

"How could the Czechs suffer it?"

I smiled and said, "Their unique strength of spirit. No despotic tyrant could break that. The backbone of this country was formed by its culture, a land of scholars, teachers, thinkers, writers, scientists and architects. It's evident when you visit Prague. The Czech Republic was fated to flourish."

"How lucky we live in Britain, dad."

"Sure thing... when I was a lad, to me the

of ships like the Clyde-built Queens and the Cutty Sark, of our great explorers and inventors and engineers like Telford and Brunel."

"Now, back to the past," Madeleine said. "It's hard to imagine German soldiers tramping round this yard so long ago, covered in evil-smelling slurry and goose feathers and pestered by angry bees. It's funny thinking about my aunts Dana and Pavla shunting those geese around.

"It seems comical, Madeleine but had Schlechter found that pig, your great grandparents would've been shot... and the rest of the family... God knows. Imagine your grandad coming home from Berlin in 1945, a walking skeleton, to find his whole family lost forever, besides which, your mother, you and your children would never have been born but luckily your granny returned from work to a highly relieved household. As it happened, your mum was born after the war."

"I don't wish to think about that," Madeleine said, shivering, "but one question... why did Schlechter rush off after receiving some bad news?"

"Wait here," I said and went inside and brought a small book and gave it to Madeleine. On the front was stamped the legend 'Denik 1942'.



cupboard."

Petrdlik winked at Dana and Pavla at which they savagely goaded the frenzied gaggle towards the cellar steps and as a bonus, the hives disgorged hordes of bees.

"What's going on?" Schlechter demanded. "It's feeding time and they're starving," said Božena.

"Get them back from that cupboard," Schlechter snarled but too late.

The panic-stricken geese screamed, milling round the advancing soldiers. They flapped so hard that in the confusion, the rickety old table fell over, spilling the buckets, bowls and rubbish against the cupboard door but worst of all, the bucket of stinking slurry fell with a crash and splattered the steps, the geese and the disgusted soldiers.

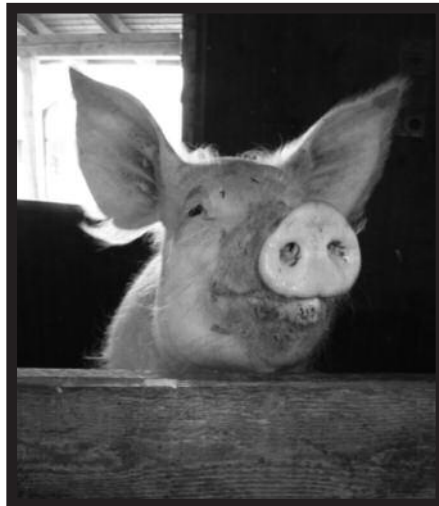
"Sir, there's no pig here," one said.

"Nonsense," Schlechter said. "What's that stench?"

"It's only dandelion leaf slurry we use for fertiliser," Petrdlik said.

Just then, the soldier guarding the front door strode into the yard accompanied by another officer who beckoned to Schlechter and whispered agitatedly to him. Schlechter put his hand to his forehead, a look of disbelief and horror on his face then turned to Sergeant Pitsch.

"Sergeant, a change of orders. Get your men together! Petrdlik, think yourself lucky



war was a glorious adventure in faraway lands. I remember also, in the late fifties, the world changing from black and white to glorious technicolor. As a young man, I discovered Britain had her great writers and poets too like Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, Burns and Shakespeare," I reminisced.

"Really," Madeleine said.

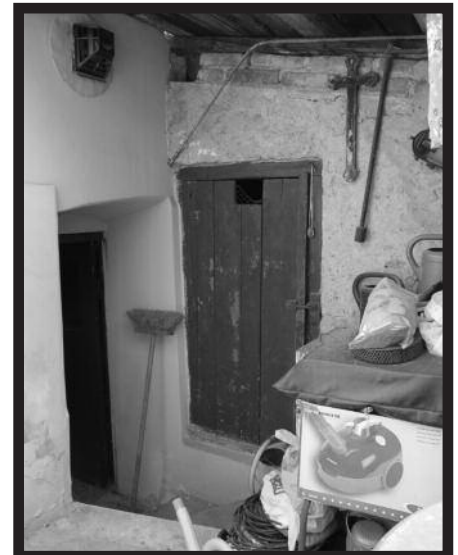
"Britain's a land of great sporting and musical events... from the Proms to the Edinburgh Festival... from Wimbledon to the Open Golf. For me, it's heaven to sit by the Clubhouse at St. Andrews watching the golfers come in at the eighteenth or settling in a deck chair after lunch at the local, watching a cricket match on a Cotswold village green."

"What about the lyrical Irish, Welsh and Scottish folk songs, eh, dad?"

I said, "Did you ever see anything more thrilling than a Highland Regiment marching to the sound of the pipes or the sight of magnificent Highland lochs and mountains and the beautiful lakes and hills of Cumbria?"

"You're very patriotic today, dad and a tiny wee bittie Scottish."

"Maybe so," I said, "but Scotland was at its industrial greatest when part of the Union. I'm proud of our British seafaring heritage,



"This was your granny's diary. Open it at May 27th and see what it says," I said.

"There's only one entry... 'R. R. H. H!'." "What does it mean?" she asked.

"It means... Reichsprotektor Reinhardt Heydrich, Hoorah!... you see, May 27th was the day the parachutists attempted to assassinate him. That's why Schlechter bolted. Heydrich died a few days later. When your Mum and your kids come back from the shops, she'll tell you more."

"So, dad, we have a great deal to thank those poor paras for."

I laughed, "Yeah, they sure saved our bacon..."

"...but for whom?" Madeleine giggled. ©

● Jack Mullin has lived most of his life in Ayrshire, working for the Butlin family and the Rank Organization. In 1971-72, he moved to Prague, where he married a Czech, Libuse, worked for a time in a local engineering factory and then at the British Embassy. Has been retired for 18 years.