

The Life Story of Theodor

By Oldrich Justa

Theodor Hugo Pohl was born on 2nd August 1930 in Trautenau in Czechoslovakia, (Trutnov in the Czech Republic). He was a Czechoslovakian citizen of German nationality; his parents were born as citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Before he went to school, Theodor lived with his sister and parents on his grandfather's farm. His grandfather owned a porcelain factory in the village of Schatzlar (today Žacléř), five kilometres from Trautenau. Since 1937 Theodor attended school in Schatzlar.

During this period, Czechoslovakia began to build defence walls and shelters, afraid of the Hitler-ruled German neighbouring country. German inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were discriminated against. In 1936 the whole mountain border region was declared to be a “border-zone“. Basic rights were abridged.

Hitler took the chance to present himself as the protector of the discriminated German minority in Czechoslovakia. To avoid an armed conflict, the so-called Sudetenland was relegated to Germany after the Munich Conference on 29 September 1938.

Czechoslovakia responded with the mobilization of the army. Theodor's father wanted to avoid fighting against the Germans, and that is why he had to hide in the forest for several weeks.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-2005-0182
Foto: o. Ang. | Oktober 1938

Occupation of the
Sudetenland. German
armoured scout car
driving through a place
in the region
Schwartzau, October
1938.

Source: Bundesarchiv,
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After Germany took over the Czech part of Czechoslovakia in 1939, with a portion being annexed and the remainder turned into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Theodor became a member of the Hitlerjugend [Hitler Youth Movement], like most of the other boys. He and his family did not have to suffer greatly during the war.

Being a German refugee

In 1944 and 1945, more and more refugees from the Eastern parts of the Third Reich were escaping through village of Schatzlar. After Germany's capitulation, Theodor's father got arrested. Theodor and the rest of his family were used as forced labourers on the farms. After they got released and went back to Schatzlar they did not own much more than the clothing they wore. Theodor had a suitcase with a blanket in it. As all Germans, the family was forced to wear white wristbands, identifying them as Germans. The mother got arrested as well. Theodor and his sister had to live on their own for half a year. Shortly after the mother got released, Theo's younger sister Bärbel was forced by soldiers to get on an army truck together with other women. After that, she was gone. The mother searched for her for weeks, which was difficult because the Germans were not allowed to use public transportation or bicycles – but without any success. After several weeks, Bärbel was found in a hospital. She has never talked about this period.

The family, still without the father, was told to go to the collection camp with only 25 kg of luggage each. In the camp, they met their father again. The people were packed in waggons and transported towards West. The train crashed with another one standing on the rails. 9 people died, many were wounded. It was only after 14 hours the passengers were able to leave the train wreck. After staying in two quarantine camps the family and other refugees settled in a little village called Bauerbach in Eastern Germany. They were not welcome there. Hunger was common, not only among the refugees, even among the residents. Fortunately, Theodor and his father found jobs. To improve the poor food situation, Theodor went to West-Berlin by train. He was interested in politics, and he started to join Anti-Communist circles.

Suspected of “Anti-Soviet actions“

On 5 April 1951, he and two other co-workers got arrested during their work and were transported to an unknown place. Their family members were not informed. For weeks, he was interrogated at night and suffered from sleep deprivation. On 25 May

1951 he was sentenced to 25 years hard labour accused of “Anti-Soviet actions“ and “espionage“. No defender was present during the legal process. The verdict was read in Russian. He and his colleagues were transported to the Bautzen camp, which was known for its brutality.

Escape to West Germany

After three years of complete isolation, they got released in a big “amnesty“. They couldn’t leave East Germany. Still, after his release, Theodor started to plan his escape to Western Germany. He succeeded on 12 March 1954. Theodor escaped to West-Berlin and then flew to Hannover, from which he went to Oberbettingen, where he found work in a porcelain factory. He worked there until his retirement. Today he is still a lively old gentleman and from time to time he still visits his old hometown Trautenau.