

Prologue at the Memorial Plaque unveiling in Zvolen on 15th June 2009

Legionnaire, general of army

Josef Šnejdárěk was born in Napajedla, Moravia, in 1875. The year 1900 has not fully come, when Šnejdárěk is leaving his service in Austro-Hungarian army and starts gaining experiences in French foreign legion in Africa.

In the year 1905, they granted him French citizenship and at the beginning of World War I, with the rank of Lieutenant he is moving from Africa to the French–German front. He is participating in the most atrocious battles and is awarded with M.C. Military Cross in 1914 for stalwartness as well as The Order - Knight of the Legion of Honour.

By the end of World War I, he has gone through 18 field marches, 40 injuries and he is sent by the war ministry decree to be available for the Czechoslovak National Council as a liaison officer. Within this function, he had many talks with the general Janin and also with Doctor Milan Rastislav Štefánik. A favourite place for such meetings was the Paris café Aux deux Magots on Rue Bonaparte. There, in the building No. 18, was the cradle of new Czechoslovak state.

At the brake of the years 1918 and 1919, Šnejdárěk brought a part of Czechoslovak legionnaires to Prague, into the new republic of Czechoslovakia. However, the battles were not over for Czechoslovak legionnaires. They are getting to new battles, at this time it is for protection of the newly created republic borders. Events of the year 1919 are running dramatically fast and in their very centre there is always that great experienced professional Šnejdárěk, the winning commander.

In January 1919, he was pursuing Polish troops from Tešín at the front of Czechoslovak forces thus saving the railway connection for the republic in the sections Košice-Bohumín and Karvínske bane.

On 5th June 1919, he is already in Slovakia to take over the command of the II Czechoslovak division. Until then, it had been continuously retreating before Hungarian Bolshevics and it lost the strategic Zvolen. Hungarian red army was military-tuned by revolution in Russia and by a strong desire to great Ugrian empire renewal. Nevertheless, Šnejdárěk stopped the advancing of Hungarian army near Badín, when firstly he proceeded with attack on Banská Štiavnica in the rear of the enemy on 10th June. By this courageous and successful operation, he encouraged

the tired troops. On 13th June he conquered Zvolen by concentrated attack from four sides and chased the Hungarians away towards Lučenec.

In September, he is already in command of Prague garrison and renewing order in the capital city. In further years, as a high officer of Czechoslovak army – since the year 1925 being a general, and since 1930 as a general of army he performed a great deal of work during the Czechoslovak army forming and organizing in Trnava, Olomouc, Košice and Bratislava.

In his heart, he always stays a legionnaire.

From Munich until 1989 legionnaires were forgotten as well as anything of legionnaire origin. In that region, only a few kilometres away from Zvolen, the communistic regime destroyed several-meter high memorial to the legionnaires having been killed and also the name of Josef Šnejdárěk somehow faded away. But it was not always so.

Let us come back to the year 1934, when he became an honourable citizen of Zvolen.

According to the town chronicle, on 1st July 1934, the citizens of the Zvolen town were recalling those bad times of 15 years back during two days long festival, speaking about hard battles with Hungarian Bolsheviks and the centre of attention and respect was the ground commander, general of army, Šnejdárěk.

After accepting the document, he said: “Soldiers, co-citizens! Zvolen and Central Slovakia gathered to give honour and express its gratitude to those, who were fighting and were killed. This gratitude honours you. In the name of these warriors and in the name of the killed ones, I express my gratitude to you. The conquest of this territory provided us with a successful negotiation regarding the borders of our Republic fifteen years ago. The French came to help us here in Slovakia; they were fighting next to our side. They received an overwhelming honour from you, because this honour belongs to my soldiers and co-warriors.” That is all from the chronicle. As a well known fact, Šnejdárěk missed out the reality that in the military conflict related to Slovakia, particularly Czech soldiers had fought. Apart from the French, he also highlighted three hundred Slovak volunteers from Martin as well as others from Krupina and Dobrá Niva, their mothers and also priests, who were supporting and encouraging them in those battles.

According to analysts, the report on Šnejdárěk’s victorious march robbed the Hungarians of determination to attack Bratislava, even though they had a great part of Slovakia in their hands, not to speak about their troops straight behind Danube.

After Munich, Šnejdárěk is leaving Slovakia yet in April 1939 and temporarily becoming an attaché of French-Czechoslovak mission. After France falling, he is leaving for Morocco. There, he was bearing his exile with difficulty as well as the fact that he could no longer fight actively due to his age and health condition.

He is dying in a far Casablanca on 13th May 1945 at the age of 70, shortly after death of his wife Catherine Constantien.

It was possible to transport the remains of the general Šnejdárěk and his wife by his son only in the year 1996; to Šnejdárěk's birthplace, the town of Napajedla. To the citizens of that town as well as the town leadership belongs our thankfulness for taking care of the grave.

In the year 2008, Czech television produced and also broadcasted an excellent film about Šnejdárěk and Minister of Defence of the Czech Republic granted him the "Cross of the state protection" in memoriam at the 90th Anniversary of Czechoslovakia formation.

Dear friends, distinguished guests!

Today, it has been almost 90 years, since this man set Zvolen free and since he lived and made decisions in this house (the house of the Wittmanns, where the memorial plaque is placed). After the front passing, he stayed to live here as well as his wife and their four-year-old daughter. Today, it has been 75 years since the town of Zvolen granted him honourable citizenship. Thanks to your presence, to this war hero – the bearer of orders of Knight, officer and Commander of Legion of Honour, the bearer of three Czechoslovak and three French Military Crosses, but also a British one and an Italian one as well as others – is given honour here in Zvolen and in Slovakia – as it is appertained to Josef Šnejdárěk.

It has been written and read by Mr Hvojník

19th June 2009