

PO STOPÁCH ŠTEFÁNKA

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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ŠTEFÁNIK

by

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SYNOPSIS

PO STOPÁCH ŠTEFÁNKA

Na Štefánika sa inými očami pozerá astronóm, inými vojak, človek s politickými ambíciami alebo hoci aj lekár. Historik Peter Šumichrast z Vojenského historického ústavu je presvedčený, že bez neho by nevzniklo Československo. Soňa Juríková sa vybrala po stopách Milana Rastislava Štefánika a zamerala sa na pár dní, o ktorých sa vie len málo – no predsa mohli mať pre českú a slovenskú históriu zásadný význam. Vyberieme sa teda do Srbska a Kosova na miesta, kde najväčší Slovák takmer položil život.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ŠTEFÁNIK

Milan Rastislav Štefánik is perceived differently by an astronomer, differently by a soldier, differently by someone with political ambitions and differently by a doctor, for example. Historian Peter Šumichrast from the Slovak Institute of Military History is convinced that without Štefánik there would be no Czechoslovakia. Editor Soňa Juríková followed the footsteps of Milan Rastislav Štefánik and focused on a few days in his life that we do not know much about, but that might have played an essential role in the Czech and Slovak history. We will visit the places in Serbia and Kosovo where The Greatest Slovak almost lost his life.

Obhajoba Milana Rastislava Štefánika v celonárodnej ankete o tom, prečo si zaslúži titul Najväčší Slovák, používala prívlastky ako odvážny, zvedavý, sebavedomý, prvý slovenský Európan. Takéto osobnosti si – v zásade právom – stavíme na piedestál. Mňa však zaujímala Štefánikova – človečina. Odkiaľ mal tento pomerne nízky a údajne nie extra pohľadný muž svoju húževnatosť, nezlomnosť? A aký odvážny či sebavedomý bol v krízových situáciách a najťažších chvíľach? Možno najlepšou odpoveďou na tieto otázky bude, ak sa prenesieme v čase a aj v mieste. S historikom Danilom Šarenacom z Inštitútu novovekých dejín v Belehrade sa vrátíme do Srbska na jeseň roku 1915.

„Ku koncu 1915-teho tu prebiehala rozsiahla ofenzíva: Rakúsko-Uhorsko s Nemeckom útočili pri Dunaji a Sáve, Bulhari tlačili z východu a srbskej armáde dochádzal dych. Mali pár artilérií a špeciálnych jednotiek, vrátane 10-tich lietadiel francúzskeho letectva. Jedným z pilotov bol Štefánik, ktorý prišiel do Srbska na vlastnú žiadosť. Asi mesiac na to sa začal ozajstný útok.“

Spojencom sa nejaký čas darilo držať belehradskú oblasť pod kontrolou a práve francúzske či britské jednotky mali pre srbských vojakov veľký význam. Vojaci veľkých krajín predstavovali záruku, že niekto im príde na pomoc.

„Srbské velenie začalo sťahovať vojsko smerom k Jadranu a hlboko v Kosove stratilo kontakt so spojencami. Z korešpondencie francúzskych veliteľov sa dozvedáme, že títo netušili, či srbská armáda ešte vôbec existuje, či sa vôbec niekto dostane až k Jadranskému moru alebo sú medzičasom všetci mŕtvi alebo dezertovali. Hovoríme pritom o stovkách tisícov ľudí. A medzi nimi sa o ústup pokúšalo aj 200 francúzskych pilotov a mechanikov – vrátane Štefánika - ktorí mali navyše obavy z toho, že Srbi podpíšu mier sami za seba a francúzski piloti ostanú v obklúčení nepriateľa.“

November 1915 bol v kopcovitom Srbsku veľmi nepríjemný. Zima, hmla... Podľa historika Danila Šarenaca počas bojov umrelo v srbských horách 40 tisíc vojakov od hladu alebo v boji. Tak ako Štefánik nesmeroval do bezpečia sám, aj ja som mala na srbskom pátraní spoločnosť – Martina Urbaníka, ktorý je organizátorom ultramaratónu Štefánik trail s podtitulom Pochod v boji o prežitie:

„Štefánik tu bojoval o holý život, kedy on musel z mesta Niš transportovať lietadlo a potom z mesta Aleksandrovac musel ísť pešo viac ako týždeň. Skončil svoju púť vlastne v Prizrene, v meste, kde ho previezli raneného do nemocnice.“

O tejto etape Štefánikovho života sa vie len málo. Na našej ceste nás viedli dva zdroje – informácie od Františka Keleho, ktorý sa angažoval v hľadaní stôp Milana Rastislava Štefánika vo svete a denník technika, ktorý so Štefánikom lietal. Oba nás viedli do mestečka Aleksandrovac, v ktorom musel Štefánik núdzovo pristáť. Teraz nás tam čakal riaditeľ Krajinského múzea Ivan Brborič:

„Toto pole je jediné rovné miesto v tomto kopcovitom kraji, kde mohol Štefánik pristáť. Zápisy o tom síce nie sú, ale logika jednoducho nepustí. A utvrdzuje nás v tom aj jeden článok, ktorý napísal John Fortier pre New York Times. Vtedy tu rástla kukurica, čo je ťažký terén na pristávanie aj na odlet.“

When justifying why Milan Rastislav Štefánik deserves the title The Greatest Slovak in the nationwide television poll, we heard attributes such as courageous, curious, confident, the first Slovak European. It is understandable that personalities with such attributes are put on a pedestal. What I was interested in, though, was the human side of Štefánik. Where did this rather short and supposedly not extraordinary handsome man draw his determination and resilience from? Was he able to keep his cool and confidence also in crisis situations and the most dramatic moments? The best way to get answers to these questions is to shift in time and place. Together with Danilo Sarenac from the Institute of Contemporary History in Belgrade we look back at Serbia in autumn 1915.

“There was this big offensive towards the end of 1915: the Austro-Hungarian Empire together with Germany were attacking at the Danube and Sava Rivers, the Bulgarians were pushing from the east and the Serbian army was struggling for breath. They had a few artilleries and special forces, including 10 airplanes of the French air force. One of the pilots was Štefánik, who came to Serbia at his own request. Around a month later a real battle was started.”

The Allies were successfully keeping control of the Belgrade area for a certain time and it were the French and British forces that were really important for the Serbian soldiers. The soldiers of big countries represented a guarantee that someone will come to support them.

“The Serbian high command began to pull back the troops towards the Adriatic and deep inside Kosovo it lost contact with the Allies. From the correspondence of French commanders we learned that they had no idea whether the Serbian army still existed, if someone would actually reach the Adriatic Sea or whether in the meantime all the soldiers were dead or deserted. And we speak about hundreds of thousands of people. And among them, 200 French pilots and mechanics including Štefánik were trying to retreat, worried among other things that the Serbians might sign a peace treaty for themselves and the French pilots would remain surrounded by the enemy.”

November 1915 was a harsh month in the hilly terrain of Serbia, it was cold and foggy... According to historian Danilo Sarenac around 40 thousand soldiers died in Serbian mountains of hunger or in battles. Štefánik was not alone on his way to safety and similarly I also had a companion in my Serbian search – Martin Urbaník, who is organising an ultramarathon called Štefánik Trail, subtitled “Survival March”.

“Štefánik was fighting for his life here, he first had to transport a plane from the town of Niš and then he had to continue on foot for more than a week from the town of Aleksandrovac. He ended his journey in the town of Prizren where he was transferred to hospital with injuries.”

We do not know much about this period of Štefánik's life. On our journey, we were following the lead of two sources – information from František Kele who was engaged in following the trail of Milan Rastislav Štefánik worldwide; and the journal of a technician that was flying together with Štefánik. Both these sources led us to the town of Aleksandrovac, where Štefánik was forced to make an emergency landing. There we met Mr. Ivan Brborič, director of the Provincial Museum:

“This field is the only flat land in this hilly region where Štefánik could have landed. We have no records proving this, but the logic leaves no doubt about it. And there is also one article by John Fortier for New York Times that confirms our assumption. They were growing corn here in those times and that is a difficult terrain for landing and take-off as well.”

Štefánik sa o to pokúsil trikrát a bezúspešne. Dokonca pritom vraj opakovane zlomil vrtuľu. Nakoniec musel svoje milované lietadlo podpáliť, aby nepadlo do rúk nepriateľa a zranený pokračoval ďalej po vlastných. Aleksandrovac si však chce Štefánikovu pomerne neznámu časť histórie pamätať.

„Hovorím s veľkou radosťou, že Slováci a Srbi k sebe majú blízko. Rozhodli sme sa, že v našom malom meste Aleksandrovac Štefánikovi zriadieme stálu expozíciu, ktorá by mala byť dokončená na budúci rok a mala by rekapitulovať jeho ťažký pobyt v Srbsku.“

Soňa Juríková: **“Tu je to všetko hore kopcom, dole kopcom a určite v tej zime pre Štefánika to reálne nebolo jednoduché.”**

Martin Urbaník: **„To, čo my už nezažijeme chvalabohu, ale tu boli státisíce ľudí, ktorí sa valili cez tie hory. Tam sa hralo o hodiny. Smerom ku kosovským hraniciam sa to dvíha. Keď to prirovnám ku Karpatom, tak v Karpatoch sú najvyššie vrchy niečo nad 700 metrov, ale my sme si práve dnes čítali o tom, že sú tu hory, ktoré sú 2 000 metrov, ktoré sú 1 700 metrov. Koniec-koncov sme v údajne najvychýrenejšom vinárskom kraji, tak si myslím, že Štefánikovu múzeu by to tu slušalo.“**

S organizátorom ultramaratónskeho behu Martinom Urbaníkom teda putujeme ďalej. Na rozdiel od Štefánika sa pohodlne vezieme autom a míňame Brus, malebné mestečko Vrnjačka Banja a smerujeme do kosovskej Prištiny. Štefánik s priateľmi vtedy bojovali o holý život, keď ich v horách prepadli banditi.

Martin Urbaník: **„On bol so silami naozaj v koncoch. Mal dve želania: chcel, aby dokumenty, ktoré mal odovzdať Masarykovi, aby odovzdali jeho kolegovia Masarykovi a druhé želanie bolo, aby jeho telo uložili tak, aby ho bulharská armáda nenašla. To boli jeho dve želania posledné.“**

Po siedmych dňoch pochodu Štefánik s obnoveným vnútorným zranením pokračuje vlakom do kosovskej Mitrovice a odtiaľ krátkym letom do obce Prizren. Tam len jediný pilot má odvahu priateľa naložiť do lietadla a previezť ho do Talianska. Historik Danilo Šarenac:

„Dvomi francúzskymi lietadlami sa nakoniec podarilo preletieť kosovské hory. Iba jeden z nich sa však odvážil naložiť zraneného Štefánika na palubu a v hustej hmle s ním preletel len 200 široké údolie Bieli Drin. Štefánik sa tak stal prvým vojnovým raneným, ktorého prevážali letecky.“

Martin Urbaník: **„Ja ho obrovsky obdivujem, pretože viem z vlastnej skúsenosti, čo to znamená prekonávať veľké vzdialenosti v tak ťažkom teréne a keď si predstavím tú jeho situáciu, v ktorej sa nachádzal, o to viac ho obdivujem. Musel mať obrovskú motiváciu.“**

Štefánik tried to take-off three times, but without success. He even repeatedly managed to break the propeller while trying. In the end, he had to set his beloved plane on fire to prevent the enemy from getting hold of the plane and he was forced to continue on foot despite injuries. The town Aleksandrovac wants to preserve the memory of this rather unknown part of Štefánik's history.

"I tell it with great pleasure that the Slovaks and Serbians are close to each other. We decided to create a permanent exhibition dedicated to Štefánik in our small town Aleksandrovac. Next year it should be completed and it will be a recap of his difficult stay in Serbia."

Soňa Juríková: ***"It's all up and down the hill around here, it really must have been difficult for Štefánik in such cold weather."***

Martin Urbaník: ***"Fortunately, we won't be able to experience it anymore, but there were hundreds of thousands of people crossing the mountains. They were fighting against time. The mountains are rising towards the Kosovo border. When compared to the Carpathian Mountains, the highest hills in the Carpathians are a bit over 700 metres, but we have just read today that these mountains are over 1700 metres, or 2000 metres. After all, we are now in the allegedly most renowned wine-growing region, and I think that a museum dedicated to Štefánik would fit in here."***

We continue in our journey with Martin Urbaník, the organiser of the ultramarathon. In contrary to Štefánik, we travel comfortably by car and pass by the town of Brus, a picturesque town Vrnjačka Banja and continue to Priština in Kosovo. Štefánik with friends were fighting for their lives when attacked by bandits in the mountains.

Martin Urbaník: ***"He was really at the end of his tether. He had two wishes: he asked his colleagues to hand over to Masaryk the documents he was supposed to deliver to him. And the second wish was to bury his body in such a way that the Bulgarian army will not be able to find it. These were his last two wishes."***

After seven day of marching, Štefánik with an unhealed internal injury continues by train to Mitrica in Kosovo, and from there it was only a short flight to the village of Prizren. In Prizren, only one pilot has the courage to load his friend Štefánik on board and fly with him over to Italy. The historian Danilo Šarenac:

"Two French airplanes were eventually able to cross the mountains of Kosovo. But only one pilot had the courage to board the injured Štefánik and fly with him in heavy fog through the only 200 meters broad valley of Bieli Drin. Štefánik thus happened to be the first person injured in war that was transported by air."

Martin Urbaník: ***"I really admire him so much, because I know from my own experience what it means to overcome such distances in this complicated terrain. And when I think of the situation he found himself in, I admire him even more. His motivation had to be really strong."***