

## JAN SMUDEK (8 Oct, 1915 – 17 Nov, 1999) – “the elusive Jan“

Jan Smudek was born on 8 September, 1915 in Bělá nad Radbúzou. As he spent most of his youth in Domažlice, he knew the western part of Bohemia very well, which proved advantageous later on. In March 1939 he was a college student when the occupation of Czechoslovakia began.



On the evening of 15th March, 1939 the members of the boy scouts, Jan Smudek being one of them, met in an apartment and swore an oath to fight Nazism until they were defeated or dead in front of the pictures of E. Beneš and T. G. Masaryk. Jan Smudek served as a connection between Prague and Domažlice for the resistance.

Jan managed to acquire a gun at a dance party, where a careless German officer left a belt with a holster with the Luger pistol in it. Jan planned a similar event with his friend, František Petr.

On 7 June 1939, František and Jan shot Wilhelm Kniest, a German officer, who was returning to barracks after a night of drinking. The officer's death enraged the occupiers. The (first) *Reichsprotektor* K. H. Frank himself went to the town of Kladno and proclaimed martial law. As a consequence, 111 people ended up in concentration camps. The true culprits, though, were not found.

The resistance was planning an attack at a train tunnel for which Jan was supposed to deliver a briefcase full of explosives. This led to a chain of events, after which he was given the nickname “the elusive Jan”: On 20 March, 1940 three *Gestapo* officers came for Jan Smudek and questioned him about the briefcase he had brought from Prague. Smudek answered that the suitcase was in the attic where he was also hiding a gun. In the attic, Smudek managed to wound one of the officers and ran away. The *Gestapo* started the largest search operation since the occupation of the republic. Smudek tried to cross the border via Prague, but was caught by two guards on the night 22 March. He shot both of them. After being caught again, he wounded another officer and fled once more. On 25 March he found shelter with the legionary, Josef Sedláček, who helped him change his appearance by dyeing his hair and giving him glasses.

Shortly after Smudek's runaway from Domažlice, the Nazi repressions began. 150 citizens were arrested and transported to the concentration camp Flossenbürg. Some of Smudek's friends were tortured and executed. The newspapers were full of bounties for catching Smudek or at least providing some information. This only helped spread the legend of the “Elusive Jan”.

After having arrived in Prague, Jan managed to flee to France, where he joined the Czechoslovak foreign army, using the cover name Jan Doubek. After the invasion of France he ran away from the hostage hospital, eventually travelling to Casablanca, then to Canada and finally ending up in Great Britain, where he became a fighter pilot and married a British woman.

After WWII Jan returned home as a hero. In the early days of the communist regime Jan started planning his last runaway. In 1947, Jan and his family fled to Germany and then to France. Jan Smudek returned to Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. He died at the age of 84 on 17 November 1999.

It is said his life inspired the 1943 movie “Casablanca”.

## Story on Jan Smudek's life

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### *A letter to a friend, written at the very end of his life*

*My dear friend,*

*I'm writing this letter because you asked about my life.*

*I was born on 8 September, 1915 in Bělá nad Radbuzou. I spent most of my youth in Domažlice, and therefore I knew Bohemia very well, which saved my life several times during the occupation of our home country. When the Germans occupied us, I was a college student and an active boy scout.*

*My resistance began on the evening of March 15, 1939. All the local boy scouts met to swear an oath to fight Nazism until they were defeated or dead. My task in our resistance circle was to serve as a connection between Prague and Domažlice which meant I had to make a lot of trips. I always had to take secret paths to hide from the Nazis ... a pretty difficult job.*

*My most dangerous activity started when I managed to steal a gun at a dance party. One of those careless Nazi officers had left his holster with a pistol in it unattended. My dear friend František Petr planned an attack on one of the occupants, Wilhelm Kniest.*

*On 7 June, after a lot of planning, spying and checking out places, the best chance we could get had arrived. Kniest was on his way back to the barracks after a night of drinking. It was pretty easy to shoot him and run away. We knew that they would be enraged about us shooting one of their officers, but we had not anticipated their brutal reaction.*

*Reichsprotektor K.H. Frank himself came to town and proclaimed martial law. Can you imagine that they took more than 100 innocent people to concentration camps? It was one of a long row of horrible things in my life to watch the people being taken away. And we couldn't do anything. But this made us even more furious and willing to chase away the occupants.*

*The next dangerous action we planned was an attack on a train tunnel. It was my job to take a briefcase full of explosives from Prague to that place. Someone must have seen and betrayed me, because on 20 March, 1940, three Gestapo officers came to question me about the briefcase. I was always very careful, so I answered that*

it was in the attic. I took them there and managed to get the gun that I had also put there. While the Nazis were looking for the briefcase, I shot and managed to escape.

I fled to Prague, hoping I could somehow manage to cross the border and escape them, but I got caught by two guards. I shot them and ran away. A short time later, another Nazi got hold of me. Once again I managed to wound that man and escape once more.

Of course, while chasing me the Nazi repressions on the civilians were horrible: many of my friends were arrested, tortured and executed, innocent people were deported to concentration camps. Newspapers were full of bounties in case somebody was willing to betray me ... without success. I had simply disappeared, which is why people started calling me the "Elusive Jan".

I simply disappeared because 5 days after my first escape from home, I finally arrived in Prague to meet a good companion, Josef Sedláček. Josef helped me change my appearance. Nobody recognised me any more. I also changed my name to Jan Doubek which helped me to get to France where I joined my companions in the Czechoslovak foreign army.

But then the Nazis invaded France, too. Being in hospital then, I once again had to flee, first to Casablanca, from there to Canada and finally I ended up in Britain. After this long row of escapes I could finally do what I had always wanted to do: help my home country to get rid of the occupants. I was trained to become a fighter pilot in the war. And I met a lovely woman who became my dear wife.

When the war was over, I didn't want to stay in Britain any longer but help rebuilding my native country and settle down. So my wife and I returned to Czechia, only to soon realize that a new threat made it impossible to stay: communism. In 1947, I went on my last escape, this time with my family. Strange enough, we fled to the home country of those who had chased me half of my life: Germany. But we didn't want to stay in that country, so we moved to France where we led a good life for 40 years.

During all those years I closely observed what was going on in my home country, and after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 I grew so homesick that I returned home to Czechoslovakia.

*And here I am, finally back to the place where I was born and grew up... feeling that my end is near. I had to spend half a life far away from home, but I am happy to end my life where it began and to know my body will be buried in Czech soil.*