

JOSEF BRYKS (18 March, 1916 – 11 August, 1957)

Josef Bryks was a pilot who actively participated in the resistance from the very beginning in different ways. Nothing broke him down.

Originating from a family of peasants, he was born in Austria-Hungary in the small town of Lašt'any in 1916. After graduation from a business academy he studied at the Military Academy and became a pilot.

His resistance activity

After the occupation of Czechoslovakia, Josef first helped organize the escapes of pilots through Poland. In January 1940 he tried to escape himself to Hungary. He was imprisoned in Slovakia – using a fictional identity until his first wife, who decided to collaborate, revealed his real name. However, Bryks managed to escape through Hungary, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Syria until he reached France and then went to Great Britain, where he became an RAF fighter pilot.

He proved to be an inventive man in captivity. He took advantage of the fact that the Germans did not find any documents with him, and thus managed to conceal his identity.

In Poland, he helped distribute weapons and food during the Warsaw uprising. Bryks also took part in the so-called *Great Escape* (which gave the American film its title). The great escape from the camp in Sagan (present-day Poland) was devised in detail: On the night of March 24-25, 1944, all the prisoners shared the numbers according to which they were to cross a narrow tunnel they had dug using knives, spoons or tins. Bryks and his friend, another pilot, Otakar Černý, were to run quite at the end - they had high numbers. This paradoxically saved their lives, as they did not get out of the camp and subsequently did not become victims of the *Gestapo* that was waiting for the escapees at the end of the tunnel.

Bryks went down in history as he was able to flee from captivity constantly. And even though he was brutally beaten, he did not let himself be broken and continued fighting fascism.

After the war, Bryks received several awards and married Trudie - a girl he had met in England and with whom he had corresponded during his captivity. They moved to Olomouc, but their happiness did not last long. Like many other pilots, Bryks ended up in a communist prison. Trudie and her little daughter escaped back to England. Josef died of heart attack on August 12, 1957, in uranium mines in the Jáchymov region.

Trudie Bryks did not discover her husband's grave until 52 years after his death. She fought for people to find out about her husband's fate and went to the Czech Republic regularly. In 2006 Josef was judicially fully rehabilitated.



Story on Josef Bryks's life

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Entries to Josef's diary

January 1940

After having helped a number of people flee from the Nazi repressions, I decided to leave my country, too, and tried to escape to Hungary, hoping the Germans wouldn't find me there because I was still using my fake identity. But I failed. They caught me in Slovakia, only a few kilometres before the border, and put me in prison.

There is only one way they could find me: my ex-wife must have told the Nazis about my false identity. So she is collaborating with the enemy! What a frustrating disappointment that could cost my life...

November 1940

Thank God, sometimes inventiveness helps saving one's own life! I played a few tricks on the prison officer and finally managed to escape. I even made it across the border to Hungary. It took me weeks of clandestine travelling to get to Yugoslavia and from there to Turkey and finally Syria. Nobody recognized me because I have kept my secret identity all the time.

Even though I first ended up a long way from Europe, I kept my goal: I have always wanted to join the British army in order to fight with the allies to free my home country.

And I finally am where I have wanted to be. A long journey with a lot of detours has come to a preliminary ending: I will be trained to become a pilot in the RAF.

February 1944

It has been a long, hard and dangerous time and way to get here - back again in the European continent, in Poland. And once again the Nazis captured me for the "crimes" I was doing. This time they didn't put me into prison, that is not into an ordinary prison. Here in Warsaw, where they got me, they erected a bigger prison than one could ever have imagined. They call it the Warsaw Ghetto. There are thousands of people pushed together on approximately a square mile, without anything - no food, no real shelter, no work - there is so much misery, agony, dying...

Something had to be done, my friend Otakar and I along with a number of other prisoners agreed. We had to find a way to get out of here. We all know that it is extremely dangerous and may cost our lives. But doing nothing will also cost our lives.

We have been working really hard on this plan. We have prepared everything for this big construction like collecting spoons, knives, tins. This must work!!!!

For weeks we have dug secretly during the nights to get a tunnel that will lead us to freedom. All the people have worked together and we are all filled with hope. I believe that everything will work. The tunnel is very narrow and people will have to crawl through it one by one.

April 1944

When the big escape started, Otakar and I were the last ones to get through the tunnel. We helped all the others to get in. There would be helpers at the other side, we hoped.

But we soon realized that something went completely wrong. People were stuck in the tunnel, we realized that there was a lot of noise outside and someone came in to tell us that we had been betrayed. The Gestapo was waiting for the people to get out of the tunnel, and instead of freedom there was immediate death or in the best case return to the Ghetto.

The few people, Otakar and I among them, were lucky not to be caught because we were supposed to be the last ones to crawl through the tunnel. We didn't even get close to entering the tunnel before we were warned that the Gestapo would wait for us at the other end. The only thing we could do was to leave the secret entry of the tunnel as quickly as possible and behave as if we had never been a part of the whole plan.... But of course, now there is only one hope left to save our lives: the hope that the war will be over soon and we will be alive then.

Mid 1947

I survived the war! Even though they beat me, tortured me, imprisoned me, they never managed to break me and my will to fight for a free world. Finally, after these long years I can return to my home country and I have found the love of my life: Trudie. During all the time of hardship, especially in Warsaw, she was the only one to give me hope to carry on. And now we have been reunited and are living a new life together.

But again I am frightened by the political developments. Communism is just another form of oppression and terror. So I will do what I have done all my life: continue fighting for freedom... And I know they will chase me again and again...

August 1957

They caught me - this time it is the communist leaders that took away our freedom and peaceful life. The only reason I am here, imprisoned in some secret communist regime prison, is that I couldn't stop demanding freedom.

This time, I am too weak and old to think of ways to escape. They would catch me again anyway. So my thoughts are only with my wife and daughter... there are no words to say how much I miss them. I hope they will be able to escape back to Britain for a good and free life. It breaks my heart not to be allowed to see them for one more time ...