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Hunting the Hangman

Written by Howard Linskey

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HUNTING
THE HANGMAN

HOWARD LINSKEY



NO EXIT PRESS

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For Alison & Erin

Hitler's heir is in Prague.
He is going to kill eleven million people.
Two men have sworn to assassinate the Hangman.
Even if it costs them everything.

Introduction

I can vividly remember the moment when this book began to take shape, in my mind at least. Back in the year 2000, I came home from my day job and turned on the History Channel half way through a documentary on the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich; a man I admit I was only dimly aware of.

By the end of that programme, I was hooked on the tale of Operation Anthropoid, one of the most thrilling and extraordinary missions of the Second World War. I started devouring books on the Third Reich and the SOE, trainers of Heydrich's would-be assassins, plus anything I could get my hands on about the Nazi occupation of the Czech capital and the mission to kill the Nazi general. I was determined to recount this story in a novel.

The cast of characters features virtually every senior figure in Nazi Germany, as well as Winston Churchill, the Czech President in exile, Eduard Beneš, the head of his secret service, and the incredibly courageous members of resistance networks in Prague, who lived under constant threat of exposure, torture, and summary execution, and of course Gabčík and Kubiš, the men chosen for the mission. I flew to Prague and went to the key locations in this book, including the Church of St Cyril and St Methodius; now a shrine to the men and women involved in this story, visited by thousands from all over the world each year.

Reinhard Heydrich is perhaps not as well-known as other leading Nazis like Himmler, Göring, Hess, Bormann or

Goebbels but he was an immensely powerful, much-feared, senior figure in Hitler's inner circle and considered his eventual heir. Heydrich was Heinrich Himmler's deputy and the head of the Reich Main Security Office, which oversaw the Gestapo. He was also Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia, which made him dictator of the former Czech territories, holding the life or death of its entire Slav population in his hands, ruling over them all from Hradčany Castle and executing so many (ninety-two in his first three days and thousands were to follow) he became known as 'The Butcher of Prague' and 'The Hangman'. He is also universally acknowledged as the true architect of the Holocaust. Hitler called him 'the man with the Iron Heart'.

What struck me most about Reinhard Heydrich was his lack of compassion, empathy or need for friends of any kind. Even in the SS he was known as 'the blond beast', yet he was not without talent. Heydrich was a virtuoso violinist and an expert skier, an Olympic standard fencer and a man who flew combat missions during the early years of the war, so he did not lack courage. His obvious abilities were almost entirely devoted to his own ruthless self-advancement, however. When he was tasked with the extermination of an entire race by Adolf Hitler, it seems he never once doubted the morality of the undertaking, merely fretting about the length of time it would take him to accomplish the systematic murder of eleven million men, women and children of Jewish origin. At Wannsee, Heydrich chaired the only meeting from which minutes have survived to prove genocide was the Nazis' preferred 'final solution' to the Jewish question.

If I found Heydrich to be a fascinating, albeit almost wholly evil character, I was just as intrigued by Josef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, the men who volunteered to kill 'the Hangman', for entirely different reasons. These two incredibly brave individuals risked everything to strike back on behalf of

a defeated nation, in a move designed to preserve its very existence, and the more I learned about them, the more determined I became to tell their story.

It took me three and a half years to research then write the first draft of *Hunting the Hangman*. The book secured me a literary agent and a year or so later we were sitting down with an editor interested in publishing the book. I then became bogged down in interminable rewrites, including the creation of fictitious episodes that 'fleshed out' the story, partly at the behest of the publisher and partly because I was trying to second guess what he wanted, which is always a risky business. I ended up with a bloated, part-fact, part-fiction novel that didn't really work and, along the way, the publisher's interest waned.

Undeterred, I went on to write six more books and, when each of them in turn was published, I promised myself I would one day return to this story and finally do it justice. Prompted partly by the seventy fifth anniversary falling in 2017 and the release of not one but two Hollywood movies (*Anthropoid* and *The Man with the Iron Heart* that no matter how good, could not possibly tell the whole story), I finally put aside the time to do this. I blew the dust off *Hunting the Hangman* and rewrote it meticulously, removing every fictitious part of it and simply sticking to the core story. To the best of my knowledge, everything that happens in this book actually occurred, though I obviously had to imagine dialogue between the characters and I took one liberty, by setting a scene in Kutná Hora that likely happened elsewhere in reality. When you reach that point in the book you will realise why I found this location irresistible.

The story of the attempt by Gabčík and Kubiš to bring down one of the most powerful men in the Third Reich and its terrible aftermath needed no other embellishment from me. Thankfully I found a publisher in No Exit who agreed

and shared my fascination with Operation Anthropoid, for which I am supremely grateful. So here it is; one of the most exciting, exhilarating, dramatic and devastating incidents of the Second World War and all of it true. I hope you find this story as intriguing as I do.

Howard Linskey – May 2017

Cast of Characters

Josef Gabčík & Jan Kubiš	chosen to carry out the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich for Operation Anthropoid
Reinhard Heydrich	SS OberGruppenführer, Reichsprotektor Bohemia and Moravia, Chief of the RSHA (Reich Main Security Office), Himmler's deputy, architect of the Holocaust
Anton Svoboda	originally selected for Operation Athropoid
Eduard Beneš	Exiled President of Czechoslovakia
Edward Taborsky	Private Secretary to President Beneš
František Moravec	Head of the Czechoslovak Secret Service in exile
Emil Strankmüller	Major; Moravec's deputy; recruited Kubiš and Gabčík for Operation Anthropoid
Winston Churchill	British Prime Minister
Anthony Eden	British Foreign Secretary
Ron Hockey	Flight Lieutenant, RAF; pilot of Halifax Bomber used to parachute Gabčík and Kubiš into occupied territory
Anna Malinová	girlfriend of Jan Kubiš
Liběna Fafek	girlfriend of Josef Gabčík

Paul Thümmel	'Agent 54' – German double agent who spied for Czech secret service
Silver A Team:	Lieutenant Alfréd Bartoš, Sergeant Josef Valčík & Corporal Jiří Potůček
Silver B Team	Vladimír Škacha & Jan Zemek
Outdistance Team	Lieutenant Adolf Opálka, Sergeant Karel Čurda & Corporal Ivan Kolařík
Bioscope Team	Sergeant Josef Bublík & Sergeant Jan Hrubý
Tin Team	Sergeant Jaroslav Švarc & Sergeant Ludvík Cupal
Jindra Resistance Network Prague	Ladislav Vaněk, Jan Zelenka, 'Aunt Marie' Moravec, Ata Moravec, František Šafařík, Josef Novotný
Father Vladimír Petřek	Church of St Cyril & St Methodius
Adolf Hitler	Führer, Nazi Germany
Rochus Misch	Hitler's bodyguard
Heinrich Himmler	Reichsführer SS
Walter Schellenberg	Head of the Reich's Foreign Intelligence Service
Karl Frank	State Secretary Bohemia and Moravia – Heydrich's deputy in Prague
Martin Bormann	Adolf Hitler's private secretary, head of the Reich Chancellery
Adolf Eichmann	organiser of Heydrich's Wannsee Conference
Heinz Pannwitz	Head of Anti-sabotage Section Prague Gestapo
Max Rostock	SS Hauptsturmführer tasked with destroying Lidice
Lina Heydrich	Wife of Reinhard Heydrich
Johannes Klein	Heydrich's driver

1

'The people need wholesome fear.
They want to fear something.
They want someone to frighten them
and make them shudderingly submissive'

Ernst Röhm, Head of the SA (Hitler's Brown Shirts),
Assassinated by the SS on the Night of the Long Knives

Aston Abbotts, Buckinghamshire, Autumn 1941

'So it's murder?' he asked reasonably.

'Not murder, no,' his president answered.

'An assassination then,' František Moravec held up his hands to indicate he had no objection to this, 'just so we're clear.'

'Call it what you will but never call it murder,' answered Beneš, 'an execution perhaps or you *could* name it war,' the exiled Czech leader told the head of his secret service, 'if you prefer.'

'Let's call it justice?' suggested Moravec but Beneš was already tired of this.

'Suppose we simply call it *what must be done*.'

Moravec seemed happiest with that definition for he had merely been testing his leader's resolve. 'But how to do it?' he mused, as if asking himself this and not Beneš.

'How indeed?' said Beneš. 'That part I will leave up to you.'

The President looked smaller here with everything hemmed into his office in the old abbey at Aston Abbotts. His desk was an unfeasible clutter of transcripts, memos and telegrams and he seemed reluctant to allow any of them to be filed away. Every available inch of it was covered in paper. A large bookcase was fixed to the wall behind him and it towered above his shoulders but there was no space here for books. It too had been commandeered for the papers of state. They were piled high in horizontal stacks or wedged together vertically, in such close order that their spines had warped under the pressure of the confined space they occupied.

'It won't be easy,' said Moravec.

'I understand.'

'You want to send men back to our conquered capital to kill the most senior Nazi in the country,' said Moravec, 'a man with the rank of a general who rules like a king. Heydrich isn't just a Nazi puppet. The man ranks second only to Heinrich Himmler. He is Hitler's personal favourite.'

'I would go further,' said Beneš. 'I'd say it is likely Hitler regards Heydrich as his heir.'

'The next generation,' agreed Moravec, 'of the Thousand-Year-Reich he has promised his people.'

Beneš suddenly rose from his seat and crossed the room. It was a restless movement with no specific purpose behind it. He stared out of his window at the garden of his English bolthole. The village of Aston Abbotts was not a new dwelling place; it was mentioned in the Domesday Book but you could walk its entire length in a little over five minutes. There were neat little nineteenth century houses here, tied cottages, a couple of ancient pubs and a Norman church with a stone memorial to an earlier conflict. The former abbey was as good a spot as any for the exiled President's hideaway. Guards patrolled the area discreetly or held back in the shadows provided by

the dark grey stone of the house – and at least one would be in permanent occupation of the tiny, picturesque lodge, a thatched and white-washed cottage by the gate. 'Then it would be an even bigger blow,' he told Moravec purposefully, 'one they would feel in Berlin.'

'What about the British?' asked Moravec. 'Are they going to help us?'

'They will,' said Beneš firmly and Moravec realised his President had yet to ask Churchill for his blessing. 'I know this is no ordinary mission, František,' Beneš continued, 'our target will be heavily guarded.'

'An army couldn't kill Heydrich,' said Moravec and his President seemed concerned he might have already admitted defeat until he added, 'but two men might.'

'Only two?'

'With help from others.'

Beneš seemed satisfied Moravec had already been giving the mission serious thought. 'And you could find me such men?'

'There are many who wish for nothing more than the opportunity to continue the struggle against the Nazis, so yes, I can find you two men.' He spoke as if that was the easy part.

'But they must be the right men?' Beneš realised what he was getting at.

'We'll only get one chance. Fail and Heydrich won't travel anywhere again without an armoured convoy around him.'

'Thousands came to England to continue the struggle when our country fell,' Beneš reasoned, 'there must be exceptional men among them.'

'There are,' Moravec agreed.

'Get them then,' Beneš ordered and he turned back to the window to give Moravec his cue. Their meeting was over. The rain that had been threatening for hours finally came and thick droplets padded against the window outside. Moravec made as if to leave.

'František,' Beneš stopped him, 'make sure they understand.'

'That they might not be coming back?' and Beneš nodded. 'Good men would know that already,' he assured his President.

2

'Set Europe ablaze!'

Winston Churchill's instruction to Hugh Dalton, Minister for Economic Warfare, on the creation of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), July 1940

Josef Gabčík was playing at soldiers again. He had just leapt from an imaginary landing craft, an L-shaped jetty yards from a Scottish beach, into an admittedly very real sea and was now wading towards the shore, chest deep in the salty surf.

Using his peripheral vision, he noticed he was at the head of a dozen men who had jumped into the water. There were a few gasps from his comrades, and a number of loud curses at the initial shock of the cold ocean, but the swearing strangely cheered him, coming as it did in his native tongue. He ignored the icy chill of the water, the salt in his eyes and the burn of the pack's straps on his shoulders, and pressed on.

Gabčík held his rifle high above his head with both arms, trying not to stumble on the uneven, shifting surface of the seabed, bending forward to allow for the 40lb pack full of rocks that was strapped to his back. He advanced as quickly as the buffeting of the ocean would allow.

A few more steps and he was pulling himself free from the grip of the water, which tugged at his soaking fatigues, weighing him down, and he became instantly aware of the

harsh cries of the two British NCOs waiting on the shingle.

'Move yourselves! Move yourselves!!'

'Get out of there now! This is not a fuckin' tea dance!'

Both men were with the Special Operations Executive and, with the sadistic enthusiasm to which Gabčík had become accustomed, they were hell bent on turning him into a commando. As soon as he was free from the surf, he sprinted across the cove in a stumbling run, feet sinking into the shingle, running like a child trapped in a bad dream who cannot get away fast enough. His lungs heaved under the exertion and the breath caught in his throat, before it was expelled in little clouds of vapour that were immediately left behind him as he powered forward.

Now he was almost there, he could make out the giant shadow of the cliff face in front of him, even though his head was down to avoid the pretend bullets of an imaginary machine gun they were assured was in the cliff tops.

'Diggah! Diggah! Diggah!' screamed the Glaswegian corporal. 'Yer fuckin' deed Kubiš!! Unless you get yer bastad heed doon!!'

Like Gabčík, Jan Kubiš would barely have understood a word from the Scotsman's mouth but he would have easily picked up the meaning. That's what it was like here; a few half comprehended phrases of command were all they had to cling to. That and a desperate yearning to one day return to their homeland to fight the Germans who occupied it.

Till then their world was a completely foreign place. These defeated Czech soldiers awoke each morning in a Scottish barrack block in Mallaig, to be ordered around by officers, they could just about understand. As for the NCOs, they were a grim bunch of hard soldiers, with varied and unusual communication skills. Everything was barked or yelled in a guttural holler. That was fine, it was the same the world over and Gabčík was a six year veteran of the Czech army,

when it had an army, but the few words of English he and his comrades picked up were torn and tortured beyond understanding by these career soldiers. The NCOs were cursing now as some of the men made a slow and unsteady progress across the beach.

'What's wrong with you lot? Are you all pissed or something? Gabčík! You short-arsed little runt! All you've managed to prove is your legs are not long enough to get you where you need to be!'

With these inspiring words of encouragement ringing in his ears, Gabčík finally reached the cliff face at a full sprint, almost slamming into it. As always, he did not let up until he was at the very end of his task.

He leant against the rock gasping for breath, a few of the quicker, fitter men having arrived at roughly the same time. Gabčík was pleased that, at twenty-nine, he was among the first there, could still hold his own. His short frame was stocky and powerful, making him capable of feats of strength that would defeat larger men. Gabčík had a volatile temper that could cause embarrassment in civilian life but served him well during a hail of bullets or shelling. And he had already fought, and killed, Germans.

He had beaten Kubiš there by a yard and felt no less respectful of the slightly younger man for it. Jan Kubiš was still a fine soldier and theirs a good friendship, forged under the most maddening of circumstances. As the NCOs got the men together he noticed Kubiš, like him, was quickly recovering.

'That woken you up?' asked Gabčík.

Kubiš was breathless. 'There's nothing like a nice walk along the beach.'

The corporal immediately rounded on him. 'Save your breath, you're gonna need it.'

The Scottish corporal was away again. This time it was

an unrelenting rant at their inability to cover the yards of beach-head within the desired time; a limit Gabčík was savvy enough to assume would always be a few seconds quicker than their fastest man, such was training, such was the army.

'Now you are going to redeem yourselves with a nice gentle climb!'

The NCO cajoled the men into one final effort, an eighty-foot vertical ascent of a sheer rock face.

'Make it look good or we will throw you off this course. You can go and dig potatoes with the Land Army girls. I've seen a couple of them up close and they are a fucking sight scarier than you lot. Now move it!'

And so Gabčík climbed, for he knew it was his only way back into the war. With three and a half thousand other Czechs, Jan and Josef had endured a perilous sea journey to England. The Czech Brigade based itself at Leamington Spa and the two veterans had experienced the boredom of army camp life there with no imminent prospect of a return to action. After a year of frustrated inactivity, the request had gone out for volunteers to join the SOE. Neither man hesitated and they were on the move again; to Mallaig and the six week commando course that was more than two thirds through by the time Gabčík found himself stranded half way up the cliff face.

He clung perilously to the rock; red face pressed against the stone, hissing profanities to himself in Czech. He was about to fail his assignment and would likely be thrown off the course as well, and it was all down to his own stupidity. Had he listened to the instructor when he urged them all to use proper footholds and not just grip the rope with their hands like they always did? The cliff face was too high for that. Gabčík's biceps burned and the small of his back throbbed with the effort required just to stay still. He tightened his grip round the length of grey, wet rope that hung from the upper most point of the crag and rubbed the skin from the palms of his hands.

Moments ago he had admitted to himself he was stuck, unable to go back down and seemingly stranded without the footholds needed to carry him the extra forty feet to the summit. All about him lesser men than Gabčík were making steady if unspectacular progress. The humiliation was too much and it spurred him into action. Rage welled up inside him and it slowly replaced the fear and the doubt; he cast his eyes to the left and spotted an outcrop that was tantalisingly out of reach. If he could just spring from his current spot, he might get enough leverage with the rope to propel himself onto this toehold. Gabčík hesitated for a moment, closing his eyes and summoning up his anger, the storm that had always served him so well in battle. He had to make it and fear of falling must not be allowed to prevent him. If he did not make the jump he could not move higher. If he did not climb higher he would never reach the top and would not then pass out of the commando course, to join the other would-be saboteurs – his only opportunity to engage the Germans and remove the shame he felt at abandoning his country. And so, he jumped.

For a second there was nothing but air around him, then his left foot connected with the rock, his left hand scrabbling for an indent, and it held. He clung there, the rope drawing fresh blood from the base of his thumb, which he contemptuously ignored. Gabčík barely paused. Instead he hauled himself higher and propelled his other hand into the air. He could not see the ledge above him but grasped it firmly and pulled his body upward again, stretching out his right foot till he connected with a large outcrop. And so on it went; Gabčík rising, cursing and rising again, using his self-recrimination to push him on, catching up with the others.

He remembered the last thing the Scottish corporal had told them in the briefing.

'When you reach the top of the cliff I want you to give me a battle cry. Let me hear the roar from each of you. Pretend

I'm a Nazi machine gunner. I want you to scare the shit out of me!'

Gabčík took him at his word and shot over the edge of the cliff with the most bloodcurdling cry imaginable. Even Corporal Andy Donald was impressed.

Gabčík careered past him at a full sprint, only stopping at the rallying point, which was already beginning to fill up with his fellow Czechs, who sat on the ground next to, or on top of, their packs. One of them was foolish enough to let out a laugh at Gabčík's crazed countenance and they exchanged a handful of insulting words. That was it. Without pausing for a moment, Gabčík whirled on his mocking colleague and smashed a fist squarely into his chin.

Corporal Donald immediately began to shout new orders, to have Gabčík dragged away from his hapless victim. Gabčík was in one of his private worlds, all red mist and hot rage, and Donald had seen him like this before. It could start with something quite trivial, an upended mug of tea or the frustration borne of an inability to complete something; assembling a Sten gun blindfolded perhaps. Corporal Andy Donald was a hard man, scared of nobody, but even he recognised this soldier had a truly awesome temper, the kind that, if harnessed correctly, would take him through any obstacle without a second's hesitation; bullets bouncing around him would go unnoticed. It would take a lot to stop Josef Gabčík if his mind was set.

It took three of Gabčík's comrades to haul him away. That is what happens when you train men to kill but don't let them anywhere near the enemy, thought Donald.

'Alright, that's enough! Enough!!'

Had Gabčík really seen Nazis as he reached the top of the cliff? Probably, knowing him. For a second Corporal Donald almost pitied the poor bloody Germans.