

*Honorary citizen of Zvolen,  
General Joseph Schneidarek 1875-1945  
Memorable facts and memorable stories*

# *A General forgotten by Zvolen*

*April 2005 marked the 130th anniversary of the birth of Joseph Schneidarek, the legendary General who liberated Zvolen. May 2005 marked the 60th anniversary of his death.*

Nine years ago (1996) at his grave in his native Napajedla in the Czech Republic, high French and Czech military officers and a military band from France paid homage to this man, an honorary citizen of Zvolen. It was at this time that his earthly remains and those of his wife were transported from Casablanca to his native land. One year before that, at the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, a remembrance letter was written by the Mayor of Kosice, Rudolf Schuster, later President of Slovakia. However, this notable military leader is forgotten in the town that granted him

honorary citizenship in the 1930's, as if in the spirit of totalitarian traditions (communist period 1948-1989) when not even his name could be mentioned. In nearby Badín, not far from Banská Bystrica, a monument commemorating the 1919 victory over Hungarian Bolsheviks barely a year following the birth of Czechoslovakia, was also liquidated by the same totalitarian traditions. It was General Schneidarek who lead the military charge that on June 13, 1919 defeated the Hungarian offensive in the battle for Zvolen on June 13, 1919.



## *Remembrance Letter*

Honourable Guests, I extend my greetings to the members of this gathering, especially the relatives of General Šnejdárěk. I am gratified that his memory lives on. His noteworthy accomplishments have left a mark nearly throughout all of Europe. We here in Slovakia remember him among other things for his work with Milan Rastislav Štefánik\*.

In Košice, we go back to the years 1925 to 1932 when he served in our city and established its military headquarters. A man lives as long as he is not forgotten by his descendents and citizens of towns and cities whose lives were enriched by his efforts. I believe that this commemorative anniversary will keep the flame of the memory of General Šnejdárěk alive.

*Rudolf Schuster, mayor of Košice 31,3,1995*

## *March or Die*

This inspiring book is a fascinating work from the memoirs of General Schneidarek and captures the period of the French Foreign Legion at the turn of the 19th century, World War I and the birth of Czechoslovakia. Joseph Schneidarek (Name in French translation, original Czech name Josef Šnejdárěk) began his career as a military cadet in Austria-Hungary. He left for France and later joined the Foreign Legion. As a French citizen and officer he led soldiers in the trenches during WWI (three times cited for valour in the French Army). He organized Czechoslovak legionary\* units in France, routed Polish troops from Silesia, routed Hungarian army from Slovakia and became a general. To his credit: 43 years in uniform, 17 military campaigns, 20 decorations and wounded forty times. His experiences and memoirs of life in Africa, battles in Europe, and relationships among soldiers of the French Foreign Legion - all this can be found in *March or Die*. The book is read easily and will capture interest of the reader not only with its writing style but also with its many fascinating tales. Excerpts from this book tell us much about General Schneidarek. Only those with connection to Slovakia and city of Zvolen have been selected for this article.

*Read pages 2. a 3. of this article.*



**Former memorial near Badín, a reminder of CS victory over the Hungarian army**

This memorial near Badín from a mid 1930's postcard, commemorates the Czechoslovak victory over the Hungarian armed forces. In the squares, on a cross formation, there are the names of the regiments and battalions that took part in this location battle. On the top, there is the unit from Písek, below from Plzeň, and on the left, from Jindřichuv Hradec. Description on the lower part cannot be deciphered. Under the cross, there is the inscription: **In memory of the soldiers who liberated Slovakia 1919.** The monument designed by prof. Antonín Hrdlička and erected by the statuary firm Horn, Banská Bystrica, was unveiled on October 27, 1935. After being damaged during the period of the Slovak State, it was razed by the communist regime. All that remains is a part of the fencing and two large spruce trees.

\*During WWI, the Czechoslovak army units were made up of "legionaries", a name given to fellow countrymen and former prisoners of war living abroad. There were one hundred and forty six thousand Czech and Slovak troops fighting on the side of the Great Powers, the Triple Entente.





Uncompromising commander, but caring commander too

## How he took charge of the armed struggle against the Hungarian army.

### DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

Battles are relatively easy to fight if the army has good weapons and shoes, if it has sufficient rounds of ammunition and a full stomach.. Our soldier in 1919 had none of that. In spite of this he rose to the occasion, so much more to his credit. The 2nd Czechoslovak division of which I took charge in Slovakia on June 5, 1919 was in full retreat. I quickly took whatever military equipment could be found in the fields, in the forest, in the valleys and mountains, and immediately ordered to attack. Demoralized soldiers were demoted. It is said that I shot cowards. With this, I put a stop to the retreat. I began an overall attack on June 9 which began with the capture of Banská Stianica by attacking the enemy from the rear. (This successful offence was led by Silvestr Blaha, later general Blaha). Hit followed hit. On June 12 with a concentrated pincer attack I captured Hronská Breznica. On the following day, again with a concentrated pincer attack, Zvolen was captured and I chased the Hungarians towards Lucenec. Because our neighboring 7th division was not having much luck in face of the aggressive Bolshevik offensive near Levice, I relocated my whole division within 24 hours and stopped the enemy on the St. Benedikt-Levice border.

### Lifting Moral

### LEADER'S COOLNESS

(Remembering General Schneidarek) Schneidarek never smoked, everyone knows that but he carried a cigarette case. That I know for sure. In it he had some kind of pictures, photographs or something like that. Once, however, he did smoke. I was there. That was during the Hungarian Bolshevik invasion of Slovakia. There was some kind of a "hum" in the front line trenches. Well, how should I say it: there was a great lack of fighting spirit. This happens sometimes, God knows how these panics get started. All of a sudden, Schneidarek showed up with a French rifle in his hand, maybe he had heard a remark, while seeing us before we spotted him. Looking about, seeing us cowering in face of heavy enemy fire, he said: "Who will give me a cigarette?" He got it, jumped up onto the crest of the trench, lit it and smoked it. In the midst of the barrage. He threw the butt away and jumped back into the trench. Maybe he no longer

recognized us. Everyone was on his stomach firing from his rifle as if paid per round. Then we attacked. They had a hard work in stopping us. Naturally, Schneidarek!

## How he used the intelligence network and trickery to strengthen the forces

### WHEN THERE WERE NO ARMY RESERVES

As I said, I intended to attack the Hungarians from Levice in the north. Schueler, from Alsace, French General, was to attack from the west. I don't know who was commanding the Bolsheviks, never found out a thing about him. It was said that it was Béla Kun. We didn't have enough troops, I had to put everything I had into the front line, there were no reserves. Not good. It would have been even worse if the enemy had found it out. I therefore called upon the officer from my headquarters and told him this: "Go to Zilina and from Zilina take a train to Kosice. You will take about a hundred soldiers with you, in military issue/linen uniforms. They will blacken their face and hands and tie a white bandana around their heads in the fashion of a turban. The bandana does not have to be too white. At each train station they will get out and walk about on the platform, speaking loudly as Senegalese. The officer reported that he didn't have soldiers that spoke as Senegalese. I told him that it didn't matter. They will simply blab and every so often say the word "Senegal" very clearly. I counted on the fact that the Hungarian spies would grab onto this word, and I knew that every spy exaggerated in order to get a bigger reward. If he saw a hundred men he would report seeing a thousand. If the Bolsheviks had informers at three stations, intelligence in Budapest would report seeing three thousand soldiers. The officer executed my order very conscientiously. My intelligence informed me shortly after, that Budapest "knew" in 48 hours that Franchet d'Esperey, the commanding officer of the united forces in the Balkans, sent me 'two Senegal regiments through Romania.' My "Senegalese," mostly boys from Prague-Vrsovice did a good job. The Senegal myth traveled even further, from Budapest back to the front line. We found this out when we circled a division of Bolsheviks near the river Hron and on being forced to surrender, they began jumping into the river, even the nonswimmers. We pulled them out and I said to them, "Why are you doing this?" "You should be glad to be taken prisoner by a decent army". They answered: "We are afraid. The commanding officer of the Czechs is a Negro, a cannibal".

## Turning a young rebel into a proper soldier.

### A SLAP IN THE RIGHT PLACE

This is the way it was.

While stationed in Zvolen, in July 1919, my family and I were housed in the home of the Wittmann family. Shortly after midnight, I was visited by a military prosecuting attorney, several captains and Hasler, the famous singer. As I have already mentioned, Hasler was sent to us by the caring Minister of National Defense so that he would, as his famous Greek colleague Tyrtaios did with his heroic sounding voice, uplift the fighting spirit of the warriors and lead them on to valiant deeds.

II.

I lost sight of Hasler earlier in the day during a military inspection (his horse bolted...) and now I was curious to see what he wanted. He came to intercede. I was to sign a death warrant for a soldier charged with enticing a mutiny. Placing the warrant before me, he gives me a dipped pen. I asked, "How old is this mutineer of yours?" "He's eighteen years old," answers the prosecutor." "And what did he do?" I asked. "He's a Bolshevik enticing the men to mutiny. And I said: An eighteen year old youth is still nearly a child and hardly a Bolshevik threat by himself. An army that lets itself be swayed by provocation of an eighteen year old child is no army. In my opinion, the best thing would be to give him a few slaps. And that is what happened. After some time, I was informed that this dangerous Bolshevik became a model soldier and was raised to a captain. I saved the "thank you" letter from his mother.

## Prisoners locked up in the Zvolen movie theater.

### REGULATIONS AND CHOLERA.

My division took many prisoners during the Bolshevik retreat towards Lucenec. As I was walking through Zvolen one day, I saw women and children in front of the movie theater passing food and bread through the windows to the people inside. The theater was guarded by a police sentry and a police officer. I asked the officer what this was all about. And he said that there were 400 Bolshevik prisoners locked inside. "And what about the women and children?" I asked. "Those are their wives and children bringing food for them". He answered. After entering the theater I was met by an intolerable stench and lack of ventilation. The men were standing and sitting on the floor near the walls and wherever they could. Dirt and excrements were everywhere, since there were no toilets. I said to myself: "In 48 hours I will have cholera in Zvolen.". Stepping among the prisoners, I raised my hand and asked for silence. Then I asked: "Where are you all from?" "We're all from the nearby factory. When the Bolsheviks were chased out of the city they forced us to go with them. When returning back to Zvolen from Lucenec we were captured in the forest by the Czechoslovakian army and brought here. Our women and children bring us food." Turning to the police officer. I asked: "Why are you keeping them locked up?" "We have to make a report". He answered. Addressing the prisoners I said to them: "If I let you go will you promise to stay in the area and report for a hearing whenever necessary?" - "We promise!"



During his service in Tunis

\*Milan Rastislav Štefánik, a French General of Slovak origin, together with Masaryk and Benes stood at the front of the foreign rebellion. He was directly involved with the birth of the new Czechoslovak nation. His image is on the Slovak 5000 SKK bank note.



### III.

"Then go! Your women are waiting for you outside." The police were aghast at this unprecedented maneuver but I was more concerned with avoiding cholera among my men than with paper regulations. I fondly remember the procession of the poor prisoners: wives leading their husbands, girls their lovers and fathers - even though weakened, carried their children on their shoulders. Even though the regulations suffered a calamity, the Republic did not collapse and not one prisoner missed the hearing. Health condition of the town and my soldiers remained good and the 400 so called Bolsheviks became good citizens again, as they were before.

## About the memorial at the fatal crash site of M.R.Stefanik

### BRATISLAVA

In 1921, I returned to Bratislava as a commander of the Bratislava division. I came just in time. The former Kaiser/emperor Karol (Charles) made his putsch and I, as the commander of the "(river)Dunaj front" was guarding Dunaj for the duration of the affair. The news came from Prague that in three days, prince Lanza di Scala, the Italian colonial minister would be coming to Bratislava to present me with a decoration of the Italian Crown, with which the Italian King, the Kaiser of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) decorated me. It immediately occurred to me that the Prince, the son of the nation that reveres native and foreign heroes would wish to visit the place where our hero, General Stefanik fatally crashed along with members of the Italian armed forces who accompanied him. Along with the commander of Bratislava En-gineer Corps we went to the place where two years earlier the historical catastrophe took place. It took



Text under this period photograph: French COL of Czech origin, Josef Šnejdárék (standing rt.), commander of the 2nd division of CS army, June 1919 near Banská Štiavnica

us quite a while to find it, since even the modest cross that was to mark the site was missing. Finally with the help of the local guides, we found the place and I said to the commander: "Friend, I am giving you this order: In 48 hours, there will be a memorial in this place with the engraved names of Gen. Stefanik and the fallen Italians. This memorial must look as if it has been here for the past two years. You will find a weathered marked stone and arrange everything necessary for the work to be done. Ask for whatever you need but the memorial must be here in no later than 48 hours. Forty hours later the weathered memorial stood in place. The Italian mission arrived at the appointed time. I was decorated at Namestie slobody

/Freedom Square/ with the prescribed glory and due fanfare.

The Italians came to Bratislava with a car full of wreaths that were meant for the monument of Gen. Stefanik and that of his entourage. The prince gave a moving speech.

I had to think of the shame that would have fallen on our country if the Italians had found the place unmarked with an appropriate and dignified designation. All because of some irresponsible officials.

(Extracts and translations from  
**March or Die**  
By Gen Schneidarek)

## Monumental Battle near Zvolen on June 10-13, 1919

86 years ago in a decisive battle near Badin, between Banska Bystrica and Zvolen the Czechoslovak \*legionaries routed and definitely stopped the enemy offensive and expelled the Hungarian Red Guard from the newly created republic. On this battle field, where the forces clashed with bayonets, there stood a monument (photo on page 1 of the article). The political changeover was much slower in Slovakia than in Bohemia and the former officials remaining in their posts, chose not to abide with the directives of the newly formed government. Furthermore, Slovakia as a geographical entity did not exist and it was mandatory to establish its borders. The first demarcation line was determined as early as on November 25, 1918 with the Czechoslovak forces gradually occupying the newly liberated territory. The occupation progressed rapidly along the Košice-Bohumín railroad, however the remainder of the territory wasn't occupied till just before Christmas. Zvolen on December 21, Banská Bystrica on December 22 and Lučenec on January 3, 1919. After the second demarcation, the Czechoslovak units proceeded to occupy the newly reset territory. Salgótarján and Miskolc were occupied. This action aroused major

resistance in Hungary. The government of Károly fell and was replaced by the revolutionary government of Béla Kun who immediately established a dictatorship and declared war to neighboring countries. In May 1919 the Hungarian recruits attacked the 2nd Infantry Division near Salgótarján and the 6th Italian Legion near Miskolc - immediately followed by two pronged offensives in the Slovak territory. They chose two directions: Through Košice to Prešov and through Lučenec to Zvolen and Žilina. Their intent was to sever the territory into segments. In central Slovakia they captured Lučenec, Krupina, Levice, Banská Štiavnica and Zvolen. This complicated situation needed prompt intervention. On June 1, 1919 the French General, Maurice Pellé became the commander of the Czechoslovak Armed forces in Slovakia. He immediately withdrew the commander of the 2nd Infantry Division and replaced him with Joseph Schneidarek, who gathered the necessary forces and attacked. On June 10 he began his attack towards Banská Štiavnica (Maj. Blaha) through Skené Teplice and Teplá where the encounter with the enemy took place. The enemy retreated with hardly a skirmish to Banská Štiavnica. The Czechoslovak troops

attacked the city from the north and west and captured it within an hour. On June 11, Capt. Zápál led his battalion on to Hronská Breznica near Hronská Dúbrava. The attack was reinforced by Capt. Johanes with a makeshift armored train. The village along with the train station were taken by 09:30. Arms, machine guns, armored train and ammunition were captured. The second armored train on the Kremnica track was eliminated by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Janota as he hurled a wagon full of steel rails in its direction. In the meantime the 2nd Czechoslovak Brigade was successfully defending Badin. The Hungarian Red Guard opened fire against the town starting a fire which destroyed 42 homes. The defense, with bayonets was able to repel the attackers. On 12<sup>th</sup> June Lt-Col. Schneidarek ordered Col. Hanák to prepare for a centralized attack against Zvolen on the following day. The attack began on June 13 by battalion of Col. Kendlík from Badin on to Sielnica, Kovačova and Budča. He was later joined by the battalion of the 2nd brigade. Battalion of Maj. Cypra attacked Zvolen directly from Badin through Hajniky. Lt-Col. Marschan and Capt. Matzek's units through Vlkanová to Sliach and Bakova Jama. Only the advance of Maj. Černoch

near Dolná Mičiná was blocked. All attacks were finally successful. By 11 o'clock, Capt. Balar's battalion entered Zvolen from the north/west. The city was taken with hardly a skirmish. The fall of Zvolen was a major blow to the Red Army. Two days later that the legionaries liberated Tisovec and Krupina, on June 17 Rimavské Brezovo and on June 20th Nová Baňa. Shortly after, the front stopped at the first demarcation line.

The 15th anniversary of the famous battle was celebrated in Zvolen on June 30, 1934 and attended by General Joseph Schneidarek, the regional commander. However, the difficult and glorious times were forgotten later on. During the time of the Slovak State\*, the lion\* reliefs were erased from the monument and the ensuing Communist totality obliterated the rest. Even though today sentiments/opinions have changed today, there's hardly anyone who knows of the battle of Badin.

(Ladislav Chropek,  
Česká beseda - Letokruhy, 2004)

\*Lion - Czech national heraldry symbol (i.e coat of arms).

\*Slovak state - war state, fascist regime



## Curriculum vitae



General of army Josef Šnejdárěk was born on April 2, 1875 in Napajedla, the Czech Republic at present. At the age of 20, he left cadet school, a year later the Austria-Hungarian armed forces and went abroad. In January 1899, he is an officer in the 2nd Division of the Foreign Legion serving in Sahara, Morocco and Algeria. In 1906-1907, he attends infantry training at St. Maixent. During 1907-1911, he serves in the 1st division of the Algerian Riflemen; from September 1911 in the 4th division of the Algerian Riflemen in Tunisia followed

by service in the 4th division of Native Riflemen. During WWI, he serves on the Western Front being wounded numerous times. During the war he works along with Milan Rastislav Štefánik in the building of Czechoslovak Legions\* in France. In 1917, he is assigned to the Czechoslovak National Council in Paris. In 1918, he becomes adjutant to the commander of the Czechoslovak armed forces, General Janin. Following his return to Czechoslovakia, he is the Commander of the Armed forces serving in Silesia against the Poles and Commander of the 2nd division in the battle against Hungary. On September 1919, he is appointed as Military Governor of Prague. In 1919 and 1920, he is assigned to the French Military mission in Czechoslovakia. In 1929-1922, he is the Commander of the 9th infantry division in Trnava and in 1923-1924 - Commander of the 7th infantry division in Olomouc. From December 1924 - commander of the 11th infantry division in Kosice, from 1925 to 1932 - military commander of the District of Kosice and in 1932 to 1935 - military commander of the District of Bratislava. In Bratislava, he begins to construct bunkers, the first ones in Czechoslovakia and referred to as Schneidarek type bunkers, in order to defend the frontier. In 1935, at the age of 60, he retires. In October 1938, he is appointed as commander of the National Rifle Guard. After the occupation of Czechoslovakia, he leaves for France where after the declaration of WWII he assists in the mobilization of the Czechoslovak armed forces. After the defeat of France he settles in Casablanca, French Morocco, where shortly after the end of the war he prepares to return to his liberated native land. On May 13, 1945 he dies. His remains are brought home to Napajedla along with those of his wife Catherine de Constantine in September 1996.



General J.Šnejdárěk in 1932 with his wife Cathérine de Constantin, daughter Mary and son Josef George.

## Schneidarek and today

Schneidarek's impact on Slovakia and former Czechoslovakia is noted in numerous publications, periodicals and bulletins listed on the internet in the Czech Republic and in the world. As for periodicals, however, only in those that were published prior to 1948 and after 1989. Forty years of communism have wiped out his name and those of many other notable figures from the nation's memory. The significance for Slovakia and Bratislava, regarding his successful offensive, was recalled in 2004 in the first publication of the book "Seizure of Bratislava 1918-1920" and in the memoirs of Zvolen in 1993. Joseph Schneidarek published several autobiographical works depicting his military and personal life. His granddaughter, Katharine Wittmann has a residence in Zvolen. It is sad, however, that Zvolen has forgotten its honorary citizen and failed to give him tribute during many National jubilees. In Zvolen there was a street named after him in the period between the Great Wars. It may have been sufficient to prepare an exhibition of documents and memorabilia which are still to be found in Zvolen. Many of these articles, confiscated by the communist

regime from the Wittmann family in 1948, are held by the Zvolen museum, somewhere in its basement deposit, not having seen the light of day for nearly sixty years. They include uniforms, swords, arms, riding equipment and numerous personal articles. Museum records dated Feb. 1948 confirm expropriation of these articles by the museum. The management continues to be oblivious to the country's mandate to "correct the wrongs" and return them to the rightful owner, Joseph Schneidarek Jr. Presentation of these articles would undoubtedly be of interest to many citizens of Zvolen. It would re-acquaint them with this notable individual of the beginning of the 20th century and the times he lived in. The period when Slovakia and Czechoslovakia, with his contribution, successfully established a secure frontier of the newly created Nation in Europe for many years. Regrettably, laws may be cited/articulated in various ways but theft of personal articles belonging to General



Comment tu as appris la nouvelle de la mort de papa ? Des journaux ? J'ai demandé à l'ambassadeur à Paris de transmettre cette triste nouvelle au président Benes, au ministre de la guerre, le général Švoboda et

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au président du Conseil Fierlinger. L'ambassadeur m'a confirmé qu'il l'a fait. Et c'est sans doute ainsi que la nouvelle vous est parvenue. Sois fier de ton père. Il est parti avec la conscience propre. Il n'a pas hésité un seul moment choisir l'exil à l'esclavage nazi allemand. Il n'a pas hésité partir pour l'inconnu, et au début nous n'étions pas loin de la misère. Nous l'avons supporté avec fierté, car nous vivions comme des gens libres. Comme tu sais, j'ai commencé à travailler à l'usine de Vernon, près de Paris. Les Allemands nous ont chassés avec leurs avions bombardiers /naturellement nous n'avons pas attendu qu'ils occupent la ville/ et sommes partis plus au sud. Je suis resté 6 mois sans travail et fus ensuite envoyé à Casablanca où je suis jusqu'à présent. L'âge ne permettait plus à notre papa de participer activement au combat /tu sais qu'il n'avait plus qu'un œil/ mais il travaillait aussi, à sa manière. Il est resté toujours en contact avec le président Benes, admirait son œuvre et regrettait seulement de ne pas être plus jeune comme avant.

L'éloge funèbre fut prononcé, sur sa tombe, par l'attaché militaire tchécoslovaque d'Alger, qui est revenu pas très longtemps avant, des combats sur le front russe, dans les rangs des

unités tchécoslovaques. Le discours fut très beau et malgré que les Tchèques seulement le comprenaient /il fut prononcé en tchèque/ tout le monde, même les Français, avaient des larmes aux yeux. Le cercueil était recouvert du drapeau tchécoslovaque et escorté par une compagnie d'honneur française qui lui a rendu, au cimetière, le dernier hommage de l'armée. Je regrette seulement que papa n'ait plus l'uniforme pour qu'il puisse l'avoir sur lui pour son dernier sommeil. Honneur à sa mémoire. Il est enterré dans la même tombe que maman qui aussi avait un bel enterrement. Beaucoup, beaucoup de monde. Maman était si aimée. Elle travaillait beaucoup pour nous - elle pensait à nous jour et nuit, ne ne devions jamais l'oublier. Honneur à sa mémoire.

J'ai l'intention de transporter leurs corps dans notre pays, mais je ne sais pas quand ce transport sera réalisé.

Je termine, chère Mimi en t'embrassant comme seul le frère peut le faire. J'embrasse Béla, Pierre et Cathérine.

Ton  
Joseph Georges Schneidarek  
50, rue de l'Aviation Française.  
Casablanca / Maroc /

Schneidarek and the Wittmann family will always be theft! History is about remembering. For some unexplained reasons, this legendary general, this honorary citizen whose memory lives with distinction in the Czech Republic, in France and in Kosice where he served, is forgotten in Zvolen. Alas, in the same vein, Slovakia forgets the momentous event that created the independent country of the Czechs and Slovaks in October 1918. This significant date is excluded from the list of National holidays in the Slovak Republic. But that is another story.

Excerpt from a letter, by Joseph George, the son of Gen. Šnejdárěk, informing his sister Mary Wittmann about the death of their parents, shown in the photograph. Their wish to transport their parents' remains to the Czech Lands was fulfilled a half century later.