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The first engineer from Liptovská Teplička

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Through telescopes we can see into the depths of space, through microscopes into the depths of substances and through our parents into the depths of the past. After all, what an enormous difference there was and is between what was written and is written in the newspapers and reality as we know it from our own personal experience. I used to consider many things I knew only from the recollections of my parents to be exceptional, things that never can and never will be repeated. The longer I am in the world, the more I realise and see with my own eyes that almost everything in life keeps repeating itself over and over again.

My father, Ing. Ján Janík (5. 5. 1921 – 12. 2. 1997) was born in Liptovská Teplička (his father was Matej Glejdura Janík and mother Barbora Bulovčáková). His wife Edita, née Lintnerová (8. 10. 1927 – 30. 6. 1996) was born in Trnava, but after her father died she lived from 1937 in Bratislava. My father's ancestors – so far as our family can recall – lived for whole generations in Liptovská Teplička, where they made their living doing hard manual work in the little terraced fields, mountain meadows and coniferous forests. My mother's father, Ferdinand Lintner was from southern Bohemia and until his untimely death he was director of the Slovak Bank in Bratislava and Figaro chocolate factory in Trnava; my mother's mother, RNDr. PhMr. Mária, née Hladitšová, was from Hlohovec and she later worked in Bratislava in the field of cancer research.

From this sketch of birthplaces and careers it can be seen that I and my three living siblings – the eldest being twins (originally triplets), MUDr. Angelika Žoltická, doc. MUDr. Peter Janík, CSc. (both born in 1949) and other sister MUDr. Gabriela Matejková (1954) – are historically, sociologically and geographically a true central European mixture.

How did my father get from his family and social background to a setting where he could become acquainted with my mother and later make her his wife? Here begins a story like those in novels and maybe one day it really could be turned into a literary work.

The story of my father's life inadvertently confirms the objective fact that in the twentieth century Slovakia went through a period of unbelievably rapid historical development. My father was born the oldest son of five children. His parents came from families that had as many as 21 children. My father's brothers and sister also had unusual lives – his sister Bernardína (married name Fendeková) lives to this day in Liptovská Teplička, his youngest brother Stanislav died as a forest labourer (a branch of a falling tree pierced his heart; he left seven children), his brother Jozef was a salesman in a shoe shop

in Liptovská Teplička (he was secretly ordained as a priest and died in a road accident when riding a motorcycle), his brother Štefan is also a Roman Catholic priest and lives in a mission in Nitra (Misijný dom Matky Božej).

As I know from what my father told me, when he was a child people in Liptovská Teplička lived in houses that had floors of trampled earth instead of hard floors and the whole family would sit round a table and eat from one bowl with one spoon that was passed around. (If there had been more spoons it would probably have meant that one person would eat more and there would be less or nothing for someone else). At the same time, this mutual exchange of bacteria was most likely an effective form of vaccination. As a child my father was undernourished, but in the end he grew into a strong man 180 cm tall.

In the course of just a few decades Slovakia has been transformed from such a country to that of a relatively advanced EU country and Liptovská Teplička, which until not long ago was considered an out-of-the-way place, has become a well-known and popular tourist (mainly skiing) centre.

One thing that must obviously be seen as curious is that fact that at home father spoke the local dialect of Liptovská Teplička and at school he was taught Slovak (which they called "the Czechoslovak language") by Czech teachers who themselves did not have a good command of Slovak, which must have been quite entertaining.

When he was 8 years old, he went (on skis) to Levoča, where he attended the church grammar school. It was expected that he would become a priest. He was the third person in Liptovská Teplička to go on to university and the first who did not go to study to be a priest. He graduated from university in Bratislava during the Second World War and became a forestry engineer. He often used to recall his studies at grammar school and university, during which he earned extra money tutoring children of rich families (some Jewish). He was very sensitive to manifestations of injustice (social justice too) from any quarter – including from officials at the church grammar school.

He mentioned how towards the end of the war one (small) Soviet bomb fell on his room in the Svoradov student hostel, but fortunately he was not there at the time. He also spoke about the way people happily shifted allegiance after the war and especially after February 1948 (after the change from a pluralist political system to a regime headed by the communist party), in order to do better for themselves in the changed social circumstances.

Father's first professional place of work was the forest in Malacky owned by the military, where he moved to a village setting with his wife, who had been brought up in the town. (He met her in Bratislava in the large house opposite Koch's sanatorium, when he was tutoring her brother; apparently Koch, the son of the owner of the sanatorium, wanted to marry my mother and he offered my father the sanatorium in exchange for her, but father gave preference to my mother.)

From his time in Malacky, my father remembered in particular a funeral of one of the local officials (in 1945 to 1948 four political parties were allowed and representatives of all four parties came to make speeches at the funeral of the deceased, who they all considered to be one of their members.)

From 1951 my father worked for the Bratislava company Hydroprojekt, which changed its name to Hydroconsult in 1968. This was the company that designed all the important water dams in Slovakia, including that at Gabčíkovo. As he was a forestry engineer, the company put him in charge of the organisational departments (operating sections and centres). In those days computers were not yet in use and whole teams of draughtswomen worked on large drawing boards, copying the numerous designs necessary for large construction works. And it was their work that my father directed. His work earned him a number of government department and company awards (The company building where father worked is now occupied by the Bratislava-Old Town Tax Office.)

Alongside the dams, the company built a chalet beside the Sunny Lakes in Senec, where as children we were happy to spend most of our summer holidays. Father worked for the company even when he had passed the retirement age. When he finally had to leave work, he found another working activity that he enjoyed – he looked after a piece of vineyard at the foot of the Little Carpathians, which belonged to the Vajnory agricultural cooperative.

In addition to his work for the company, Father always found time for his family and for work that benefitted the community. He helped us to prepare for all kinds of competitions between elementary and secondary school students; he was chairman of the Parents' Association at Metodova Grammar School, which we all in turn attended.

We spent the whole of our childhood in a pleasant flat with three and a half rooms in Palisády, a street in Bratislava that stretches from the presidential palace to the castle. When talking about my father, it would no doubt be right to say a few words about his (our) family. My mother studied at the Faculty of Arts. She knew several foreign languages, she worked in the field of scientific and technical information and professional international relations and she was also personal secretary to the president of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

All my brothers and sisters are doctors. My sister Angelika lives in Banská Štiavnica and is a specialist in tuberculosis and lung diseases. My brother Peter is an associate professor in the field of pathology and is at present working in the High Tatras. My other sister, Gabriela, lives in Bratislava and after years working in children's intensive care is now a medical inspector with a health insurance company. I am the youngest child (1956), I live in Bratislava and I am a writer. The children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the first engineer from Liptovská Teplička now form a widely branching family community.

And what message did my father leave for present and future generations? That you must continually develop your abilities, recognise real values, not be superficial, do something useful, but at the same time remember that everyone has the right to a happy, pleasant and enjoyable life. That we should be fair to others and not do anyone any harm.