

THE MYSTERIOUS MOONSHAFT

Antonin T. Horak

If the "Prague spring" had continued, and if trips to Czechoslovakia had not become difficult and even dangerous, I would have done some on-the-spot research into this story.

This is the story of the discovery in October 1944, during the Czech resistance against the German invaders, of a cave in the form of a crescent-shaped shaft, seemingly of artificial origin. Czech friends have confirmed the basic facts of this story, which was made public in March 1965. Unfortunately they have other problems at this moment, and I can understand their position.

The riddle is as strange as it is fascinating. The work of extraterrestrial beings is the first explanation that comes to mind, and is the one I would prefer.

I hope that more detailed research using modern methods will one day bring us the truth about a mystery that is one of the most astonishing in this book and on this planet.

The following true adventure, related by a captain in the Slovak

Uprising of World War II, transpired during October of 1944. Dr. Antonin T. Horak—now a linguist—has attempted for years to persuade speleologists to investigate what he considers one of the underworld's strangest mysteries—an ancient shaft he discovered in a dismal Czechoslovakian cave. The story is taken from a diary written on the scene and is reprinted from the March, 1965, issue of NSS NEWS (National Speleological Society) by permission of the author. The cave in question is located near the villages of Plavince and Lubocna, at about 49.2 degrees north, 20.7 degrees east—Ronald Calais [contributor of the diary].

October 23, 1944. Early yesterday, Sunday, October 22nd, Slavek found us in a trench and hid us in this grotto. Today at nightfall, he and his daughter Hanka came with food and medicine. We had not eaten since Friday, and all we had had before, during the last two battles, was maize bread and not enough of that. Our commissary had been on its last legs anyway; the supply carriers had been dispersed by confusion and the enemy.

Saturday afternoon, the remnants of our battalion (184 men and officers, a quarter wounded, 16 stretcher cases) were retreating through the snow of the north slope. My company was the rear guard. At dawn Sunday, two 70mm. guns opened-up at us from close range—about 300 meters. Having held our position for 12 hours, I ordered a gradual breakup of the skirmish and a slip-off. But in our left trench, someone became careless, and that drew two direct hits—shells, two wounded. Arriving there, I bumped into the enemy, caught a bayonet and bullet with my left palm and a blow on the head, which put me out. Without my fur cap, it might have been fractured.

I came to when someone was pulling me from the trench, a tall peasant. He packed snow on my hand and head, and grinned. Then this rough and ready Samaritan grabbed Jurek, stripped off his pants, yanked a long sliver of steel from his thigh, and planted him bare-bottomed and gasping into a heap of snow. Martin, with a slash across and into his belly, was tenderly bandaged. Building a stretcher, the peasant introduced himself as Slavek, a sheepman,

owner of the pastures hereabouts. With Slavek hauling and guiding, it took us four hours to reach this cranny.

Slavek moved rocks in the cranny and opened a low cleft, the entrance to this roomy grotto. Placing Martin in a niche, we were astonished to see Slavek become ceremonious: he crossed himself, each of us, the grotto, and, with a deep bow, its back wall, where a hole came to my attention.

About to leave us, Slavek went through the same holy rites and begged me not to go further into his cave. I accompanied him to fetch pine boughs, and he told me that only once, with his father and grandfather, had he been in this cave; that it was a huge maze, full of pits which they never wanted to fathom, pockets of poisonous air, and "certainly haunted." I was back in the grotto with my men at about midnight, exhausted, head very painful, soothed it with snow. Martin was unconscious, Jurek feverish. For breakfast-lunch-dinner, he and I had hot water, and, thank God, I had my pipe. I placed warm stones around Martin, and Jurek kept the first watch.

Miserable night. Martin at times conscious; I gave him three aspirins and hot water to sip with drops of Slivovitz [Eds. Note: brandy]. Jurek hobbled hungrily around the two German helmets in which he boiled water to which I added ten drops of Slivovitz for our breakfast. With this deluge of snow, avalanches imminent, and enemy skiers roaming, Slavek may not be able to get through to us with food for days to come. And neither should I try hunting and track up the landscape while I have two immobilized men on my hands. But here we have this cave which Slavek knows only partially; it may have more than this known entrance, and it may contain hibernating animals. These possibilities I mulled over while Jurek was chewing pine bark, and, as expected, he implored me not to go poaching into Slavek's cave and promised to keep mum. And I was not only starved but equally eager to find out what makes self-assured Slavek scared enough to invoke the deities. I started my cave tour with rifle, lantern, torches, pick. After a not too devious nor dangerous walk and some squeezings, always taking the easiest and marking side passages. I came, after about 1 1/2

hours, into a long, level passage, and at its end upon a barrel-sized hole.

Crawling through and still kneeling, I froze in amazement—there stands something like a large, black silo, framed in white. Regaining breath, I thought that this is a bizarre, natural wall or curtain of black salt, or ice, or lava. But I became perplexed, then awestruck, when I saw that it is a glass-smooth flank of a seemingly man-made structure which reaches into the rocks on all sides. Beautifully, cylindrically curved it indicates a huge body with a diameter of about 25 meters. Where this structure and the rocks meet, large stalagmites and stalactites form that glittering white frame. The wall is uniformly blue-blackish, its material seems to combine properties of steel, flint, rubber—the pick made no marks and bounced off vigorously. Even the thought of a tower-sized artifact, embedded in rock in the middle of an obscure mountain, in a wild region where not even legend knows about ruins, mining, industry, overgrown with age-old cave deposits, is bewildering—the fact is appalling.

Not immediately discernible, a crack in the wall appears from below, about 20 to 25 cm. wide, tapers off and disappears into the cave's ceiling, 2 to 5 cm. wide. Its insides, right and left, are pitch black and have fist-sized, sharp valleys and crests. The crack's bottom is a rather smooth trough of yellow sandstone, and drops very steeply (about 60 degrees) into the wall. I threw a lighted torch through; it fell and extinguished with loud cracklings and hissings as if a white hot ploughshare were dropped into a bucket.

Driven to explore, and believing myself thin enough to get through this upside-down keyhole, I went in. Wriggling sideways, injured hand and head below and steeply downward, nearly standing on my head, cramped, though my right arm with the lamp could move in the extended crack above me: the crush got the better of me and I had to get out, back, quickly. And that became a struggle. When out and breath regained, I was too fascinated by the whole riddle and determined to get at it. For the day I had had enough and had to think about tactics.

I was in camp about 4:00 P.M. Jurek had washed Martin, kept

him between warm stones, and I gave him three aspirins and hot water with Slivovitz to sip. I explained to Jurek that the hunt in the cave requires much smoke, poles, and a rope. Thank God, Slavek and Hanka did come with provisions. When they left, I accompanied them to fetch torch boughs, was back in camp about 2:00 A.M., dead tired, but finally we had eaten—Jurek too much—and I got the second watch.

October 24, 1944. Peaceful night; Martin sipped fever-tea with honey; hope we can pull him through. Jurek's posterior is not even swollen, but my head still is. I cut our belts, braided eight meters of solid rope. At 10:00 A.M. was at the wall, anchored the rope over a stick across the crack, and keeping it slung over my shoulder, forced myself again into the grim maw. Like yesterday, the lamp, this time carbide, was on a stick ahead within the jaw above. When it came through and down, it swung freely over some void into which I could not see, and there was again rushing as if from agitated waters. And, unable to turn, I feared a water-filled pit ahead and to end in it—literally—in a headstand.

I wriggled upward, back again; my clothes caught on the protrusions, descended on my shoulders and head, and formed a plug. The resulting struggle nearly caused me to be burned alive. When out and on my feet, I was shaking from exhaustion, and had lurid visions.

There were no loose stones about the wall, and so I hacked stalagmites into short rolls and bowled them down through the crack. They rolled on, causing enormous echoes, and knocked to a standstill, indicating a solid floor and room to turn. I launched the unlit torches after the stones, undressed, keeping the shirt only, and went after the stones and torches. Already acquainted with the meanest fangs in the crack, I came through with only a few cuts, dropped a little, rolled down an incline and was stopped by a wall which felt familiar, satiny smooth like the front wall.

My lamp was still burning next to me, but there were confusing sounds. Lighting some torches, I saw that I was in a spacious, curved, black shaft formed by cliff-like walls which intersect and form a crescent-shaped, nearly vertical tunnel, rather, shaft. I

cannot describe the somberness and the endless whisperings, rustlings, and roaring sounds, abnormal echoes from my breathing and movements. The floor is the incline over which I rolled in, a solid lime "pavement."

All the lights together did not reach the ceiling or where these walls end or meet. The horizontal distance between the apexes of the concave backside of the front wall and the convex back wall is about eight meters; along the curve of the back wall is about 25 meters. To explore further I needed more light and my pick, which does not fit through the crack and must be taken apart.

I left jubilant, in a sort of enchantment mixed with determination to explore this large structure, which I believe is unique, singular.

This time with my head up, with no clothes to ensnare and burn me, I was through the crack fairly unscathed, dressed, smoked a pipe, and was underway to my men. I tried to catch some bats, but caught none. Jurek was boiling potatoes and mutton and therefore inclined to excuse my bad huntsmanship; he even appreciated its hardships when he had to grease the scratches on my back and mend my shirt.

Martin had a crumb of bread with honeyed fever-tea. After 6:00 P.M., I went for a new load of torches, was back at about 10:00 P.M. Jurek got both watches.

October 25, 1944. We had a good night. Martin seems to mend. Am glad that Jurek's thigh is not yet well enough for him to want to go with me poaching for bats. It is better that he knows nothing about the cave's secret.

I went directly to the wall, undressed like yesterday, smeared mutton fat over me, slid my things through the crack, and went in, feet first. Extending the carbide lamp upon a double pole, with four torches burning, still the upper ends of the cliffs remained in the dark. I fired two bullets up, parallel to the walls. The reports caused roars as from an express train, but no impact was visible. Then I fired a bullet on each wall, aiming some 15 meters upward from me, got large blue-green sparks and such a sound that I had to hold my ears between my knees, and flames danced wildly.

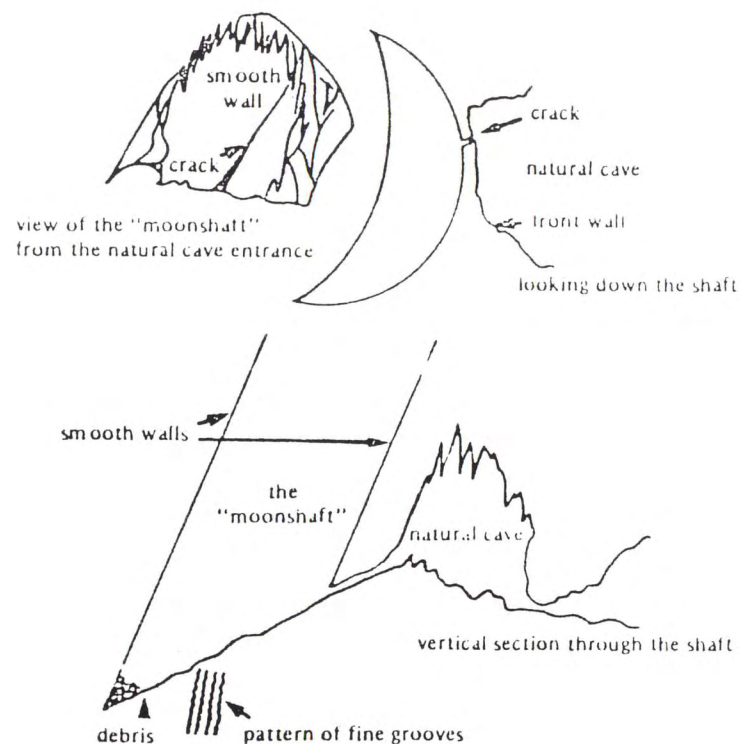


Figure 3. Schematic representation of the mysterious moonshaft.

Assembling the pick caused more uproars. I probed the "pavement," and started digging where the lime is thin, in the horns of the crescent. At right is dry loam; at left I came, at about half a meter, upon a pocket of enamel from the teeth of some large animal; took one canine and one molar, replaced the rest. Digging on nearby, the back wall has, at about 1½ meters below the pavement, a vertical, finely fluted, undulating pattern [R.C.: this has been suggested as an indication of machinery]. It seemed warmer than the smooth surface. I tried with lip and ear, and believe the impression is correct. In the middle, the pavement is too thick for a trenchpick.

When the torches were extinguished, and I was in a freezing sweat, I left the "moonshaft," dressed and went where the bats are, and bagged seven. Jurek stuffed them with bread and herbs and they became exquisite "pigeons."

Slavek and Olga, his other daughter, came about dusk with hay, straw, a sheep's fleece, more medicinal herbs—self-heal and stonecrop—and seeds from the Iris, an excellent coffee substitute. I accompanied him, fetched pine torches, two long poles, and was back about midnight. Martin got the last aspirins, honey-water; and Jurek both watches.

October 26, 1944. It was a good night. I went into the "moonshaft" to continue experimenting. On my longest assembly of poles the carbide lamp did not light the upper ends of these cliffs. I fired above the lighted areas; the bullets struck huge sparks and made deafening echoes. Then horizontally at the back wall with similar effects—sparks, roaring, no splinters, but a half-finger-long welt which gave a pungent smell. After that I continued in my digging in the left moon horn and saw that the wavy pattern extends downward; but in the right horn, I found no such pattern.

I left the "moonshaft" to probe the front wall and its surroundings. Next to the stalactites are some enamel-like flecks which, scraped, yield a powder too fine to be collected without glue, which I will try to boil from our "pigeons' " claws. I wished to obtain a sample of the peculiar material of the walls, but even firing two bullets into the crack, upon the protrusions and hitting them, I received only ricochets, a blast of thunder, welts, and the same pungent smell.

Returning to camp I caught some bats and we again had "pigeons." I ordered Jurek to carefully remove any trace of them, and kept the claws. The Slaveks arrived as usual at nightfall bringing this time a quarter of a deer, ½ kilogram of salt, and a tin of carbide. Jurek took both watches.

October 27, 1944. Martin died, slept into death. Jurek knows his kin, took charge of his belongings, including his wallet with 643 crowns, watch with chain, and my certificate. Now we are free and ready to leave and rejoin our battalion which is somewhere east of

Kosice. With his stick Jurek can march some ten kilometers daily, and we have to move carefully anyway. We will start tomorrow.

At 10:00 A.M. I was in the cave probing passages for a way around behind the "moonshaft"; looked also for ice and poisonous air about which Slavek had spoken, and found none, though there may be some. Then I slipped into the "moonshaft" to sketch, dig, and ponder, and returned to camp at about 4:00 P.M. I ordered Jurek to prepare our packs, clean the weapons, boil food for seven days, and have ready what we will not need to be returned to the Slaveks. He and both girls, as if the family had sensed that Martin died, came, and we carried him into the dwarf pines to the trench where he had received his mortal wound, took turns to dig the grave, prayed, and buried him in a blanket.

October 28, 1944. Restful night, good breakfast. Cut my name, etc., on a leather strip, and together with the golden back of my watch rolled and inserted both engravings into a glass bottle, plugged it with a pebble and a ball of clay mixed with charcoal, and deposited this record in the "moonshaft" on top of the ashes of my torches. It may stay there for a long time, possibly until the structure is completely hidden behind its curtain of stalactites and stalagmites. Slavek has no son to tell about his cave-mystery; his womenfolk don't know about it, and anyway daughters usually marry to other villages. In a few decades nobody will know, if I do not come back and have the structure explored.

I sat there by my fire speculating: What is this structure, with walls two meters thick and a shape that I cannot imagine of any purpose known nowadays? How far does it reach into the rocks? Is there more behind the "moonshaft"? Which incident or who put it into this mountain? Is it a fossilized man-made object? Is the truth in legends, like Plato's, about long lost civilizations with magic technologies which our rationale cannot grasp nor believe?

I am a sober, academically trained person but must admit that there, between those black, satiny, mathematically-curved cliffs I do feel as if in the grip of an exceedingly strange and grim power. I can understand that simple but intelligent and practical men like Slavek and his forebears sense the witchery, conceal it, and at

fear that if the existence of this "moonshaft" is ever made known, it would attract armies of tourists, and all the commotion, tunneling and blasting, hotels, and commercialization which would probably ruin their nature-bound trade and honest life.

On my way back to camp I burrowed and hid the crawl holes which lead towards the wall; the cave may have entrances which Slavek does not know, and some chance discoverer may start blasting "for treasure" before a scientific team can get there. I was in camp after 3:00 P.M., and about 5:00 all three Slaveks arrived, bringing some hard-boiled eggs.

With the hearty Slovak handshakes, we shouldered our weapons and packs and went. When we entered the pines and turned, we saw Slavek concealing his cave and the girls sweeping away our tracks. The moon was bright and the snow glittered.

In the very last days of World War II, on my way towards Bohemia, I revisited the place. The Slaveks lived temporarily at Zdar. I visited Martin's grave and looked at the cave entrance. I had taken the animal teeth I had collected to the curator of paleontology at Uzhorod, and he classified them as adult cave bear, *Ursus spaeleus*. Thereupon I speculated: the crack is too small; the lump of limestone and stalagmites in front of the crack would not let any debris through; this bear seems to have fallen into the "moonshaft," which may have had a connection to the surface.

On my last visit to the place, I examined the mountainside above the cave and found no sinkholes or pits, the assumed connections toward the "moonshaft." But on these steep slopes in the Tatra Mountains, rockslides could have obliterated or filled in any such connections.