

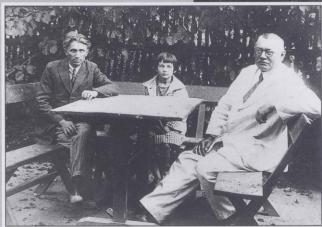
Torso of Hope

Forty-one kilometres north of Brno lies the small town of Kunštát, and only a kilometre beyond, in the village of Rudka, a sandstone massif.

At 9.30 in the morning on 21 October 1928, a large procession left the square in Kunštát and moved off to the accompaniment of a brass band in the direction of Rudka, where a crowd ten thousand strong was waiting. The occasion was an unusual celebration, in the course of which the largest statue of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk in the country was unveiled; this was followed by a folk festival that lasted all day and attracted thirty thousand people. This day seventy years ago marked a high point in the story of two men who left behind a remarkable legacy in this part of the countryside.

František Burian

František Burian was born in 1876 into the family of an estate manager; after finishing school he became a butcher and producer of smoked meats, sausages and other delicacies. As an apprentice, not even nineteen, he went abroad to see something of the world and gain new experience. He wandered through most of Europe, and a few years later returned to Kunštát, where he opened a small shop. In 1903 he added an inn to his first business, and from 1906 on he devoted



(From left) The sculptor Stanislav Rolinek, Zdena Popelková, František Burian.

his time to developing a factory producing smoked meats and other special meat products on a large scale. Thanks to their excellence, they became known throughout the whole Austro-Hungarian empire and were shipped out regularly to Brno, Budapest, Vienna and many other major cities. In 1920-24 Burian served as mayor of Kunštát and chairman of the local school board. His patriotic

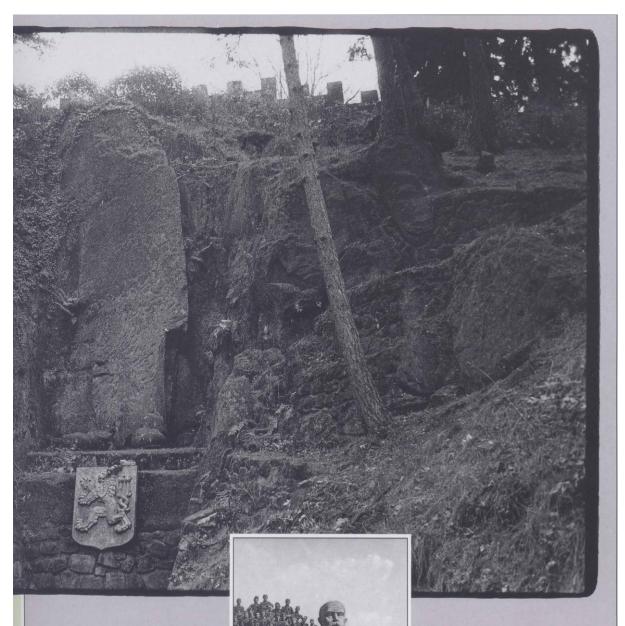




views, a wish to do something meaningful and lasting in his native region for the new Czechoslovak state, formed the leitmotif of all his activities. Sometime around 1927 he happened to come across the work of the self-taught sculptor Stanislav Rolínek, and this gave him the idea for the grandiose scheme that, with the help of Rolínek, he was later to bring to fruition.

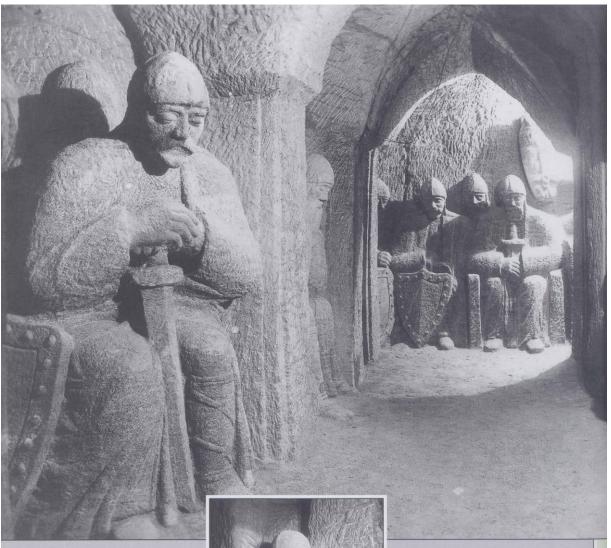
Stanislav Rolínek

Stanislav Rolínek came from Bořitov near Černá Hora in Moravia, were he was born in 1902 as the youngest child of a brewery hand. In 1916 he finished his primary education,



and began his apprenticeship to an upholsterer. After completing his training, he worked in a factory until 1924, when he fell ill with tuberculosis. His first spell of treatment for the disease followed. After his return from the sanatorium in Paseky he took to painting pictures, most of them landscapes. After an unsuccessful attempt to return to work, his doctors recommended long walks in the countryside. In a nearby sandstone quarry, Rolínek discovered his talents as a sculptor. He started to carve out his first head in the sandstone, but the work remained unfinished: Rolínek was discouraged by the lack of understanding and mocking laughter he met

with on the part of the curious local villagers. After that, the shy young man started going to the wooded hillside of Chlum not far from Bořítov. Using a fireman's axe and half of an old pair of sheep shears, he began an enormous carving depicting a group of Hussites. After some time he was discovered by the local gamekeeer, who warned him against trespassing on private property. But Alfons Vladimír Mensdorff-Pouilly of Boskovice, who owned the site, allowed him to finish his work. The whole affair came to the attention of the public, and crowds of admirers flocked from far and near to view the attraction. Among them was František Burian.



Working together

It was not easy to persuade Rolínek to cooperate. During one of Burian's visits to the latter's home village of Bořítov, the sculptor actually fled into the woods. But finally Burian managed to come to an agreement with him on a bold project. Burian purchased a large piece of property with a number of sandstone outcroppings in nearby Rudka. In June 1928, only four months before the tenth anniversary of the creation of the republic, Rolínek and thirty workmen began to carve out a ten and a half metre high monument of President Masaryk. Rolínek worked from a fifty-heller postage stamp stuck onto the scaffolding, later using a photograph and in the final stages a bust of the President-Liberator by the sculptor František Fabiánek. Using ordinary chisels

and hatchets he finished - just in time for the anniversary - what was at the time the largest statue in Europe carved from one piece of stone. The head of the statue measured 1.65 metres, the shoulders 3.5 metres across, the President's hat 85 centimetres in diameter; the weight of the whole figure was estimated at 600 tons.

But this was not the end of the project. After a second stay in the sanatorium at Paseky, Rolínek returned in 1929 to work on a set of artificial caves entitled the Caves of the Blaník Knights. A giant lion was carved to guard the entrance. In October Rolínek's talent and diligence brought him to the Fine Art Academy in Prague, where he studied under Professor Otakar Španiel at the expense of President Masaryk himself. But his studies only lasted for one year, for his disease worsened. He returned to Kun-



trees and shrubs; above it a 26-metre high lookout tower was erected at the top of Milenka hill. Beside the highway the small Ševčík Restaurant was built for tourists, and the Burian Pension. Some thirty powerful elec-



Legionaries - The Cave of the Blaník Knights; destroyed during World War II

stát and began his final work, a larger than life equestrian statue of St Wenceslas for the underground caves. He sensed that his days were numbered. "I'll finish St Wenceslas, and he'll finish me," he announced to František Burian. And he was right. On 11 July 1931 he died in his mother's arms. He was only twenty-nine years old.

The story goes on

Following the death of his friend, František Burian did not give up hope of finishing his project. He worked on, completing at least part of the underground corridors, with statues of the Blaník knights and Czech legionaries, a kingdom of the dwarfs and knights' hall, famous figures in Czech history. Around the statue of Masaryk he created a park planted with exotic

tric lamps lit up this almost fairy-tale scene - until the twilight of World War II and the Nazi occupation.

At the beginning of the war, the attention of the German officials in the district of Kunštát was drawn to the statue of the President-Liberator and the caves with the legionaries, both of whom had strong associations for Czechs. Burian tried to protect what he could, and had Masaryk

walled up. In the park a strange brick building appeared. But this did not satisfy the collaborators, and after further denunciations he was ordered to remove the statue of Masaryk and the figures of the legionaries at his own expense. The ten-metre high statue was hacked away from the hill-side: only the boots re-

mained. The head was sawn into several parts and carried away to a safe place, so that at least something would be left. But even this last attempt failed. Again the officials were tipped off; the head was found and smashed to bits. The legionaries too ended up in fragments.

František Burian had reached the end of his tether, and died soon after.

And still continues

Three years after the war ended came the Communist takeover and the subsequent Bolshevik transformation of the whole society, in the course of which the story of what happened in the war was once again repeated. The only difference now was that there was no longer anything to smash or remove. It was easier to ignore the whole thing. Burian's wife took care of what was left of the project. By the time 1989 came, the complex, once the pride of the Kunštát district, was in a state of decay, and it was in this form that it was returned to František Burian's granddaughter, Zdena Popelková.

Today the small pension "U sochy" is once again welcoming visitors to this remarkable spot. And not only that. Zdena Popelková and her husband and sons decided to renew the family tradition. Each year, with impressive determination, they organize a sculptors' symposium to which they invite professionals and amateurs, Czechs and foreigners. Artists have come from Poland, the Ukraine, England, Turkey, Mexico.

The participants are given sandstone blocks and the chance to work them "freely, just as they wish". The sculptures remain in the natural complex of the Caves of the Blaník Knights - a scattered collection of artefacts linking the great enthusiasm of the first years of the Czechoslovak

republic and the end of the millenium.

Kunštát's most famous citizen, František Halas (1901-1949), one of the greatest Czech poets of the twentieth century, entitled one of his collections of poetry *Torso of Hope*.

A haunting title and one can almost imagine these words also referring to those

sandstone walls and the bizarre plinth with nothing but Masaryk's boots.

Pavel Šmíd Photos: Archives of Zdena Popelková

