

The Swedish Invasion

by *Dave Cleary*

The men were tired. Many wanted to fight, many wanted to go home, everyone wanted this to end. They had arrived outside the city of Brno in early May and over 100 days later, as the end of the long hot summer approached, they were all still outside. Their commander, Field Marshall Lennart Torstenson knew all of this, and knew he had to do something.

Torstenson had a good military reputation as a strong leader, intelligent tactician and innovator. The quick and unexpected movement of his soldiers won many battles for Sweden during the 30 Years War.

In the early 1640s Torstenson led his army towards Vienna conquering most of Moravia before turning back home for a famous victory over Denmark in 1643. He was then ordered to capture Vienna, the home of the Austrian Hapsburg empire, and in 1645 went back to Moravia through Bohemia. He was one step away from Vienna, the only city in his way was Brno.

The Swedes had 28,000 men when they arrived outside Brno's city walls, and they were joined by another 12,000 through the summer. Torstenson's soldiers quickly set up the siege and set conditions for the city of Brno to surrender; once the city fell the army would then continue on to Vienna. Although it was the third time the Swedes had come to Brno it was the first siege, and Torstenson expected to win the city after one week.



Inside the city walls Brno had appointed a Frenchman, Colonel Jean-Louis Baudit de Souche, as the military leader of the city. After Torstenson left for the second time to go and conquer the rest of Moravia, he knew they only had a few weeks to prepare the city before the Swedes would return. But there were only 1500 armed men. A Lieutenant Colonel from Scotland, George Jacob Ogilvy, had about 40 men with muskets and throughout the siege they defended a very important covered road leading to Spielberk, the castle on the hill.

Working with the Jesuit Rector, Father Martin Středa, the soldiers and the people of Brno made sure they had large stocks of food and water, for themselves and their animals. They made weapons, repaired the damaged walls and made the castle as safe as they could by digging deep ditches around them. Finally they took down all the buildings and burned the ground for over 500 steps from the city walls so the Swedes could not hide.

Most of the citizens of Brno knew what could happen in a siege. The conditions inside the city would become worse as summer began. They might run out of food, they might have to eat their horses (this did happen), there would be dangerous disagreements about the best plan, and a disease could make many people sick very quickly. They knew all this but did not surrender.

At different times the people of Brno got help. At the end of July Count Stepan of Vrbno arrived with 300 cavalry, men and horses, and gunpowder. A few weeks later a further 250 fighting men arrived with more resources, including materials to help build 'grenades'. These were small glass balls filled with gunpowder - small, simple, but effective.

The siege began on the 3rd of May 1645, but the city was still safe at the end of August, over 100 days later. During the siege several local legends grew. It is said that one day Torstenson was sitting outside his tent with a large cup of wine when suddenly the cup exploded as it was hit by a shot from Spielberk. Torstenson immediately ordered a smaller cup, so the gunmen would have a smaller target.

Another time Colonel Jean-Louis Badiut de Souches gave instructions for the flags and targets around the city walls to be put up and the trumpets sounded to "...help the Swedes aim better". These events helped the people of Brno stay positive in very difficult times.

In the middle of August Torstenson knew he had to do something, the morale amongst his soldiers was becoming very low. So he prepared his men to attack and told his commanders, "Tomorrow we will attack again. We are stronger than them, we have more men than them. We will win this city by midday, or we will leave."

The story is that Torstenson was in the Blue Lion Inn on the edge of the town and his speech was overheard by the owner of the inn. He bravely went to the castle that night and told the city leaders what he had heard. The people of Brno prepared themselves for another attack knowing that many of them were going to be killed. They knew that 40,000 soldiers were outside, but in the city there were fewer than 2000.

The next morning the Swedes began their attack in six places, and it was not long before they were making progress and it was clear they were winning, although Brno was not yet a Swedish city. Suddenly the city bells

began to ring; they rang 12 times. It was midday. The Swedes were winning but they were not close to taking the city, and so they left.

The small city of Brno had won against one of the best, most successful and strongest commanders and armies in the 30 Years War, but how? Brno had a strong castle (Spielberk has never been taken in battle), they prepared well and worked hard together to support each other. And when the battle came, they rang the bells one hour early, at 11 o'clock.

This important victory gave the Austrian armies time to recover and then push the Swedes back out of Moravia and Bohemia. Later in 1645 Torstenson resigned his command and returned to Sweden in ill health.

Today Brno celebrates and remembers this great event. The bells of St Petrov's cathedral in the centre of the city still ring 12 times at 11 o'clock to remember the famous victory over the Swedes. In one of Brno's squares there is a bronze model of the city showing how it looked in 1645. Finally, there is an astronomical clock in the main square, Namnesti Svobody, that celebrates the victory of the Swedish invasion. Another legend about Torstenson, not just from his siege of Brno, is that he could only be killed by a glass bullet; so at 11 o'clock every day a small glass 'bullet' with the Brno coat-of-arms (it is about the size of a ping-pong ball) comes out of the clock for one lucky person to keep as a souvenir.