

Zatopek

by Jonathan Bruce

The Czech Republic has many of its people and their accomplishments throughout history which they are proud of. Ranging from the revolutionary ideas of the Church reformist Jan Hus, to the political activism and plays of their first prime minister, Václav Havel, there are a great deal of Czechs across a wide variety of fields and subjects that can be used as icons and symbols of their country in various ways. One great example of this is long distance runner, Emil Zátopek. Zatopek achieved a great deal in his life, but is most renowned for his performance in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, where he won gold medals for the 5000m, the 10,000m, and then the marathon - an achievement even more impressive considering it was the first marathon he had ever ran in his life! However, it is not simply his sporting achievements that make him a great icon for The Czech Republic, but also his famously good-natured demeanour, constantly providing a warm and friendly face for a country that during its worst periods was often seen as being cold and inhospitable by Western countries across the world. He also lived during an extremely turbulent and interesting time of Czechoslovakian and Czech history, witnessing and being involved in some of the country's brightest days, as well as some of its darkest. Many of his major live



moments and crowning achievements occurred internationally or in Prague, but the man who achieved these feats was made and moulded in Moravia.

On the 19th September, 1922, Anezka and Frantisek Zatopek gave birth to their seventh child, Emil Zatopek in the small Moravian industrial town of Koprivnice. Frantisek, the patriarch of the household, worked in the local Tatra car factory, while Anezka took care of their many children. The family lived a financially difficult life, evidenced by a school picture of a young Emil, who stands out as the only child not wearing shoes. Regardless of this, the family lived a chaotic yet hectic home life. The children would help out with the many animals in their garden, from goats, to geese, even having bees to look after. Frantisek and Anezka would gather the whole family and sing Moravian folk songs, a joy which Emil continued to do throughout his entire life. Emil's childhood saw the start of his interests in political activism, perhaps sparked by his father's membership in the rising Czechoslovakian communist party, which Emil would often join him for. These meetings were potentially the inspiration for Emil, aged eleven, to organise an essay strike. When told to write an essay on the topic "He who is not lazy, gets the greens", Emil convinced half of the class to refuse to write anything due to his belief that it was a stupid topic. The protest lasted a few days, but Emil still had to write the essay on the Saturday, in response to which he wrote an extremely long one, so the

teacher had to spend half of their Sunday marking it. Ironically, the aforementioned topic for the essay would encapsulate Emil's lifelong journey and achievements.

Potentially the most important part of his childhood, was how it related to his future as a sports star. If you had a time machine and returned to Koprivnice to tell anyone during Emil's childhood that he would be a world-famous athlete, they would have laughed in your face, or possibly locked you up for what would have been perceived as obvious insanity. By all accounts, Emil was a very feeble and unathletic child. When playing sports, such as football, he would run around, with energy, but no real purpose or co-ordination. He was small and skinny, would always avoid fights, and tended to lack any real drive or motivation. One teacher of his even directly stated "you will never amount to anything in life", a comment which may now seem laughable in hindsight, yet at the time would be understandable coming from a frustrated authority figure of the perpetually disinterested and insolent young Emil. However, aside from these very unsportsmanlike attributes, Emil did repeatedly show a strong naturally high stamina. One notable example from his youth was when a classmate wouldn't stop snoring during a school trip, Emil poured an entire jar of table salt into his mouth. Understandably, the classmate quickly rose in a fit of fury, and proceeded to chase Zatopek with a sizable stick around the local

meadow, then the local forests, yet Zatopek constantly kept his distance. While he had many silly stamina related hijinks during his teenage years, potentially the most formative experience happened by chance. A group of local boys decided to do an endurance race around the neighbourhood, looping around the same 1km block as many times as possible. After the first few laps, the boys started dropping like flies, but Emil kept on going. Morning turned to afternoon, single digits turned to double, and eventually people lost count of how many times he had run round. Eventually, weak and exhausted, Emil stopped. The congratulations he would receive from his friends, and particularly from his brothers, would be a memory cherished by Zatopek for years to come.

The boy from Koprivnice wouldn't remain for long however, as a few weeks before his fifteenth birthday, he boarded a train and headed towards Zlin, a small city in Southeastern Moravia. Zlin was originally founded as part of a craft guild for the surrounding regions in the early fourteenth century, with craft eventually becoming a part of its enduring legacy centuries to come. In 1894, a shoe factory was founded by Tomas Bata, a Czech entrepreneur. This factory would help lead the city into a new level of economic success, creating jobs and providing lives for families in the area. It was this prospect of new job opportunities that drew in many young Czech people, where they arrived with hopes and dreams of an exciting

new future. When Zatopek arrived in the summer of 1937, he quickly realised that this idyllic future may have been a little far off. He would be woken with a 5:30 alarm every morning, before starting his 7am shift which would continue until 5pm, with a two hour break in the middle. He would then study until the 9pm curfew, giving him little free time. Totalitarian rules were also enforced, with punishments for bad language, Bata employed Intelligence Agents ensuring that work and morale was kept to the required standards, and the students having to sleep with their hands outside of their bedsheets. His studies at first consisted only of learning how to make the Bata factory's famous shoes, and these combined with long, arduous hours would make for a strange existence in the life of a fourteen-year old boy who was living away from his parents. Regardless, Zatopek would power through these days, eventually progressing to studying Sciences and Languages, the latter of which would become a major passion of his in his future, globe-trotting life. Outside of the rigorous industrial bubble of the Bata factory, the rest of Europe was stepping into its darkest stage of history. The Third Reich had gained power in Germany, and Hitler was beginning to test the waters of how militarily aggressive he could be. One of his early targets was the bordering nation of Czechoslovakia, an invasion which went over with little opposition due to the inaction of the allied forces. One major new rule implemented by the Nazi party was that all Czech factories would be required to work for the Wermacht. Fear and power

dynamics took over the factory, with the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, purging the factory of any unwilling or rebellious workers more than once. Days of before with mild regulations of language and relatively soft-handed Bata Intelligence Agents must have seemed like heaven in comparison to the Nazi led factory.

In these times of stress and pressure, a future diamond was being formed. One day, Zatopek was told by his warden that a race was coming up on the following Sunday, and everybody under his command would be competing. Zatopek attempted to find an excuse not to compete, first feigning a knee injury, and after that failed, he hid in the library on the morning of the race, hoping his absence would not be realised. Fate had other plans, and he was tracked down and forced to attend the race. The race was 1400m long, a meagre comparison to his countless laps he ran in his hometown, or the many metres he likely ran while fleeing his furious classmate. Initially unhappy about having to compete, once he started, Zatopek decided he may as well try to win. As the race continued, his effort increased, putting him into the lead. The finishing line approached, but he was beaten in the final stretch by an older athlete with more training. His second place was still a worthy accomplishment, and he was greeted at the finish line by a barrage of cheers and praise. Even his warden proudly claimed Zatopek as one of his own. This euphoric feeling of praise and

applause motivated Zatopek to pursue long distance running, and he was invited to train for the local club. Over the following years, he honed his interval training method, pushing his body to extreme limits with a dedication so passionate he would regularly eat horrific, off-ration potato Gulash in order to have enough calories to train as hard as possible. He competed all over Czechoslovakia, winning races in a huge range of long distance disciplines. The more losses that the Third Reich suffered in the war, the more wins Zatopek added to his list, even breaking a national Czechoslovakian record in 1944.

