

IN SEARCH OF



SILVESTR

Sparked by a box of old family documents, Jan Beránek embarked on an eight-year quest that brought him from a small Czech village to modern Singapore to uncover the life of his granduncle who died during the Japanese invasion of Singapore.

By Jan Beránek



Jan Beránek is a Czech environmentalist and energy expert. He currently lives in Amsterdam, working for Greenpeace International as the Director for Organizational Strategy and Development. In his free time, Jan is a keen astronomer and astrophotographer. In 2017, he became curious about his family's roots and began his search for his missing granduncle Silvestr Němec.

In 2017, my mother showed me a box of old family documents. Among them was a bundle of papers relating to Silvestr Němec – my granduncle. Within those pages lay parts of the story of my granduncle's life. Silvestr was from a small Czech village in central Europe and was sent thousands of miles away to Singapore by his employer, the Bata Shoe Company, on 31 December 1938. Three years later, during the Japanese invasion of Singapore in 1942, he went missing and was presumed dead at the age of only 22.

My family never learnt what happened to him, and I decided to find out more. Thus began my eight-year quest, driven by curiosity and the desire to gain some closure over Silvestr's fate.

(Facing page) Silvestr Němec, February 1938. Courtesy of Jan Beránek.

(Below) The steamroller used to modernise the main road of Vémyslice. The house on the left is Silvestr's home, and the man on the far right is Silvestr's father. Silvestr is very likely the boy in the hat on the extreme right. Courtesy of Jan Beránek.

Thanks to a dedicated blog I set up, I received useful tips and made new contacts. I joined the Malayan Volunteers Group, an association of the descendants of volunteers in British Malaya. Through searches in archives across several cities and countries (such as London, Prague, Znojmo, Zlín and Singapore), helped by historians from all over and the descendants of Silvestr's colleagues and friends, I gathered an incredible amount of insight and information on the life of my granduncle.

One of the most amazing online resources I used was NewspaperSG, a digitised archive of Singapore newspapers by the National Library Singapore, dating back to 1827. The National Library also holds some truly unique documents within its collections such as the book, *Bata 1931–1951: 20 Years of Progress in Malaya*.¹

When I pieced all the disparate information together, a fascinating, colourful and detailed picture emerged, not only of Silvestr's own life and death, but of a whole community of over a hundred Czechoslovaks who lived and worked in Singapore during the 1930s, the Second World War and the postwar years. I put all this together in my book, *In Search of Silvestr* (Landmark Books, 2025).



