

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority our McLeod County Czech ancestors were NOT from “Czechoslovakia”, that is, the 20th-century state that only came into existence October 1918—by which time the vast majority of our ancestors had already immigrated and was already living the United States of America. In other words, most of our people “got out” of the Czech lands before Czechoslovakia happened.

As the Czech community of Silver Lake and greater McLeod County, Minnesota would come to flourish in the 20th century, the term “Czechoslovakia” would become the defacto term used by our families to refer to their Czech homeland. As we cross into the 21st century, the term “Czechoslovakia” is the place-name that occasionally still slips off the tongue, rather than “Czech Republic”, even though the latter of which replaced the former on January 1, 1993. And so it goes, that “Czechoslovakia” no longer exists as a state, but definitely still exists in the memories of those who once lived there or have traveled there or have cultural roots in the Czech lands.



Map of former Czechoslovakia circa 1985 (Source: The College of New Jersey, www.tcnj.edu)

But what do we know or remember about the country of Czechoslovakia, how it came to be, and what life was like for those who lived there? To address these questions, I am pleased to

provide the first in a series of articles written by Ron Pulkrabek. A resident of the community of Koniska, McLeod County, Minnesota, Ron has devoted a considerable amount of thought, reflection, and research on his Czech heritage, including this brief history of Czechoslovakia.

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By Ron Pulkrabek

“The Hungarians ruled the Czechs for 1,000 years. The Austrian Monarchs ruled for 400 years. In 1918 Czechoslovakia (in Czech and Slovak: *Československo, Česko-Slovensko*) was formed and finally obtained its freedom only to lose it to Hitler and the Nazis in 1939 and to the Russians in 1946. They really only had 20 years of freedom. In 1945 Czechoslovakia had to give part of their country, the Province of Ruthenia and 1,000,000 people, to Russia for liberation payment. Elections were held in 1946 and the communists won 114 of the 300 seats in the Democratic National Assembly. By deceit, Russian backing, and other means, they placed communists in key cabinet positions.

In 1948 the communists staged a revolt and seized complete control of the government. Democratic Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk died under mysterious circumstances (some people say he was pushed from a high-storied window). They arranged a so-called election with only communists on the ballot. The communists set up a police state and put religious and educational institutions under government control. Many clergymen were imprisoned on charges of treason and were retrained to be civil servants. Purges and persecutions followed. The Czechoslovakian people were not happy to serve the Russians, many fleeing to the West and freedom if they could somehow manage to escape.

There was a disagreement between some of the communist leaders. Some were hard line Russian type; some were more liberal who wanted contact with the free Western countries. In 1952, eleven liberal leaders were tried and executed for treason. Stalinist policies were put into effect. They placed controls on food and consumer products; the Russians demanded Czech products at a cheap price. The working people resented the government control and the fact they were really working for Russia. The economy began to slump.

During the 1960's, students and writers criticized the government and demanded intellectual freedom. In the spring of 1968, Alexander Dubcek became party leader and Ludvik Svoboda became president. The Czech government then made startling liberal reforms by granting more freedom of the press and more freedom dealing with non-communist countries. It was called, “The Silent Spring”. The Czechs were hoping to get out from under Russia's grip. Russia did not like these policies and labeled them as threats to the Communist Party. One day in August of 1968, 400,000 troops suddenly invaded Czechoslovakia. Tanks blockaded the streets of Prague. Dubcek and Svoboda met with the Russians and were replaced by Russian appointed people. The Western countries twiddled their thumbs and remained quiet. Russia then censored the press, radio, and television as one condition for withdrawal of the Russian troops. They named Gustav Husak as the First Secretary of the Communist party of

Czechoslovakia. The Czechs brief hope of freedom came to an end. They were sentenced to another twenty-one years of captivity. This is how your relation and ancestors lived for fifty years; no future, no happiness, just keep your nose to the grindstone, keep pedaling, don't look up and keep your mouth closed if you want to survive.

In December of 1989, after forty years of communism and Russian dominance, Czechoslovakia gained its independence. A combination of various influences led to the erosion and fall of the communist domination including a poor socialist communist economy, Gorbachev's action in Russia through Glasnost (*openness*) and Perestroika, (*economic restructuring*) the fall of the Berlin Wall, and growing discontent of the younger generation and Czech leaders who somehow survived the Russian death penalties and prison sentences. Vaclav Havel was elected President on December 29, 1989. President Havel had served four years in prison on minor trumped-up communist charges and was monitored 24 hours a day for many years. He was continuously harassed by petty things such as punctured car tires, broken windshields, and sugar in the gas tank.

In 1993 Czechoslovakia was divided into two independent countries, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. At first there were worries whether hostilities may break out and strict border control regulations would be put into place. It finally turned out to be a "Velvet Revolution" where both countries pursued their own government policies and people could cross the border without a problem.

In 1989, although the Czechs gained their freedom from Russia and freedom of speech, it certainly did not mean instant prosperity. Many people were actually better off under the old system. After fifty years of being told what to do and taking orders; people had to start all over again--the whole country had to start over again. They had to learn and establish whole new government and economic systems."

Next Week: Learn what happened to members of the Ron Pulkrabek family who traveled to Czechoslovakia in 1985 to seek out long lost family who lived on the other side of the "Iron Curtain"

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: tkadlec@gmail.com or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. Děkuji! Tony Kadlec