

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

PULKRABEK FAMILY’S CROSSING OF THE IRON CURTAIN IN 1985

By Ron Pulkrabek

For this week’s article, I am pleased to reprint the next installment of Ron Pulkrabek’s recollections on his 1985 trip to visit his long lost family in Czechoslovakia.

“The following are recollections from my notes 25 years ago from my 1985 visit to Czechoslovakia. Somehow it doesn’t seem that long ago.

Perhaps some of you have forgotten about the Iron Curtain or even the Berlin Wall. After WWII in 1945 Prime Minister Churchill and President Truman signed an agreement more or less giving at least eight countries including Poland and Czechoslovakia and 110,000,000 people to Stalin of Russia. They were subjected to brutal treatment under six years of Nazi rule, were denied freedom and were physical and mental prisoners to Russia and Communism domination for an additional forty-five years. Czechoslovakia had only eighteen years of freedom since it was formed. The Iron Curtain was a strip averaging about 200 feet wide and about 1,000 miles long of No-Man’s Land, heavily guarded by armed soldiers, German Shepherd dogs, land mines, miles and miles of barbed wire fences, towers and search lights. It was built to keep the 110,000,000 million people from fleeing to freedom in the West. It kept people in and information out. This absolutely ripped the heart out of the towns, the farms, the countryside and the people. It was best to learn German; then Russian. Stalin had already killed 20,000,000 of his own people and at least ten of his close family members.

In August of 1985, six members of our family crossed this Iron Curtain and found our long lost relatives, Jirka (George) and Jana who had been lost to our families for over fifty years. Most of our family came to America in 1857. We made brief contact with Jana by mail, ordered our visas from the Czech Embassy, pre-paid our Hotel in Prague, purchased our required hotel food coupons in the USA, rented a Volkswagen mini-bus in Munich, Germany and headed for the Czech border. I will not tell you their last names as 25 years ago they asked me not to write or publish any of the things they told us or we heard. Officials could cause their family great hardships.

We traveled through hilly forests on a small tar road until we were stopped at the Iron Curtain by German Border Guards. We passed through with only ten minutes of checking. One hundred feet down the road we were stopped by Russian/Czech Guards with rifles, a big pipe gate and curled barbed wire stringing off into the distance. They made note of our cameras, checked our luggage mainly for Western magazines and news articles. After twenty minutes of questioning the big pipe swung open and we were in Czechoslovakia. Not so lucky for another person who had everything in his car spread out on the ground. Around the corner we were challenged by other checkpoint guards. [In 1988 it took three hours for our tour bus to cross the Iron Curtain into Russia]

This was a very secluded border crossing with only a few cars passing through each day. What a strange feeling we had as they slammed the last gate behind us. The forests gradually gave way to rolling farm fields of 40 to 100 acres of wheat, small grain and hay. The soil looked like heavy clay but crops looked great! In several places 3 or 4 large combines were working. The straw was picked up by a chopper, blown into a wagon, hauled to another blower at the edge of the farm commune where it was again blown onto a gigantic straw pile. Some fields did have a baler which pushed the bales up a long ramp and into a wagon. The farm communes were quite messy with 8 or 10 combines, ten or twelve big Stieger-like tractors, 8 to 10 bottom plows, manure spreaders, choppers and miscellaneous dirty and rusty machinery. I saw several tiling rigs at work placing tile lines fifty feet apart. A farm commune usually consisted of 640 confined milk cows and 5,000 acres and about 100 workers--didn't see pastures or fences.



Farm scene, near Velké Tresné, Czech Republic in the Czech Moravian Highlands (Vysočina), August 2008.

Most of the roads were in quite good condition with apple trees lining the ditches, but it was illegal to pick these government owned apples. In many cases by the time the government arranged to have the apples picked they rotted and fell to the ground. Very often there were

big signs with a red, crossed hammer and sickle put up by the Russians with the words in Czech, “Be thankful to the Russians; they have protected you for forty years”. The small villages and stores seemed very bleak with gray and dull colors with a slight covering of sooty dust, although individual houses had gigantic, colorful flower and rose gardens and vegetable gardens covering the entire front yard. After leaving Germany and the USA, at times it was like stepping from the lights of a 100 watt bulb to a 40 watt bulb.

About 4 PM we finally stopped in a small village at a deserted looking restaurant with the crossed fork and knife sign. There were no cars or horses in front. The only words we knew in Czech were, “JAK se MAŠ, PIVO and DOBŘE”. That and a little sign language is all you need to communicate. We entered the restaurant/ bar combination into a huge room filled with local men farmers and workers who had just completed their 7AM to 3PM shift on the farm or various places. They were all drinking beer and slivovice (plum brandy) and talking loudly just like any other bar. No women were in the bar. When we entered with three women a hush went over the whole crowd, they all looked at us and speaking was reduced to a whisper as we were probably the first foreigners they saw for fifty years. They were relaxing and unwinding after eight hours of tractor driving, etc, before going home for supper. We saw very little hand farm field work. After all, the old Czech saying in those days was, “The Russians are pretending to pay us, so we will pretend to work”. We had a nice lunch and a few adult beverages for about two dollars each.



Hospoda Na Petrově, Velké Tresné, Czech Republic (August 2008), a place where a weary traveler can get a bite to eat and a cold pivo to wash it down.

We continued through the industrial town of Plzen and on to Prague. After driving around Prague for one hour, dodging streetcars packed full of commuters, construction areas, and missing street signs taken down to confuse the Russian soldiers, we finally asked a cab driver to lead us to the hotel. It was a nice comfortable hotel and we could use our food coupons for breakfast, dinner, and supper. It was dark by the time we contacted Jirka via sporadic phone service to meet us to take us to their apartment for supper. One problem! We had never met Jirka and didn't know what he looked like."

Next Week: Find out if the Ron Pulkrabek family was able to connect with Jana and Jirka and if any pivo and/or silvovice was consumed in the process.

Mluvíte Česky? Do You Speak Czech?

Ja jsem Američan (JA SEM AH-mer-i-chan) – I am American (*male*)

Ja jsem Američanka (JA SEM AH-mer-i-chan-kah) - I am American (*female*)

Kde je toaleta? (Kdeh YEH TOH-ah-le-ta) -Where is the toilet?

As a rule, you should always stress the first syllable of a Czech word!

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