

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

CROSSING THE IRON CURTAIN IN 1985-JANA AND JIRKA

By Ron Pulkrabek

I am pleased to reprint this final installment of Ron Pulkrabek's recollections on his 1985 trip to to visit his long lost family in Czechoslovakia.



“As we waited in the lobby a handsome, grey haired, gentleman was inquiring at the main desk. We took a chance and asked if he was Jirka. Jirka spoke limited English, but somehow we communicated for him to ride with us to their six-story, fifty-unit apartment, arriving in the dark at 9:30 PM. Jirka motioned for us to stand still in the dark lobby while he disappeared.

Soon a lighted flashlight appeared over the 3rd story railing shining down on the steps. Government-built apartments do not have stairway lights or elevators. We reached their heavy, triple locked door. Inside were a one-person kitchen, two tiny bedrooms, a closet sized toilet room, a closet sized bathroom sink room, a small eating area, and a ten foot by twelve foot living room.

They were on the list for many years to occupy this two-windowed apartment. They raised their two children and at times their parents also lived here. Jana and Jirka slept on a pull-out sofa bed in the living room for nineteen years. Hot running water is not available on the weekends. Rent is cheap and they are wishing to buy it someday. Some people had put their young child's name on the waiting list hoping in twenty years the child will have an apartment. Some apartment complexes are half finished; the government abandons the project and the workers steal the material.

Each apartment complex has a “Babicka Boss Lady”. She knows everything and everyone in the fifty units. Apartment owners must check-in with her if anything unusual is happening, like guests visiting from America. She then reports this to higher officials. They must check-in with her when they vote, even though there is only one communist official running. They are required to vote or it can cause your family hardships. It looks good in the official World

Newspaper headlines; “Gottwald wins with 98% of Czechs Approval”. The free world must think; “Gosh, people must like their leaders in Czechoslovakia”.

We were warmly greeted and hugged by petite Jana [my 5th cousin born in 1936] and their grown children, Veronika and Peter; also brother Milos and his wife Elena. Laughs and tears flowed accompanied by toasts of vermouth, wine and pivo. They are from the family branch that stayed in Czechoslovakia in 1857. Jana is a Professor of English at the University of Prague and Veronika is an English teacher, so we had excellent translators. Jana had a wonderful Czech meal prepared for us with roast pork, light fluffy dumplings and gravy, etc, and dessert. Of course there was slivovice and pivo in quart sized bottles.

Jirka had shopped all day for the food, standing in the meat line, the bread line, the liquor line, etc. It is a daily routine. After work Jirka stands in the line and shops for food and Jana does the cooking. Everything is in short supply. One day mop handles will appear and two weeks later the mop bottoms will appear. The Russians and Communists control everything. Many store shelves are empty. No sales. Cloth is scarce and expensive. Many years ago, Jana’s mother, being a good seamstress, sewed Jana a prom dress from their living room curtains.

Jirka teaches computer students; Milos is an industrial engineer; a stocky, well built former boxer/wrestler; Elena is a teacher who speaks five languages: English, Russian, French, Japanese and of course Czech. She is now teaching French, but has been reduced to government required babysitting worker’s children each afternoon (more about that later). They have an eight year old daughter and a five year old son. Veronika’s husband Standa, is going to school, but must soon serve two required years in the Russian/Czech Army. They have a five year old son and a two month old daughter. Jana and Jirka’s twenty year old son Peter is studying to be a plumber although his parents hope he will find something better. He must soon make a decision as to serve two years in the Army or to spend six months digging subway tunnels under Prague which is a dangerous, unhealthy, and does not have many safety rules.

Jana and Jirka have never been members of the Communist party which have made things very difficult for them. Even if you are a top student in your class, if your parents are not Party members, you have a very slim chance at obtaining a higher education. The lowest person in the class has a better chance. Only by pulling a few strings, bribery, or pay-offs can a non-party member receive a higher education. Doctors and dentists are free, but to get the services of a good doctor, money must be paid, “under the table”. People can only leave the country unless they are invited, and with much paperwork. They can only take \$200 in cash. The relation they leave behind are more or less hostages and subject to fines and hardships if the person doesn’t return. A college professor’s salary is under \$200 a month, probably the same as a farm worker or a doctor.

Through all these hardships over forty years, by scrimping, hard work, long hours, doing without, walking, riding tens of thousands of miles on street cars, uncertainty about the

future, and countless worries, Jana and Jirka's extended family have obtained good educations and satisfactory jobs."

EPILOGUE 2010--25 years later

Jana and Jirka (George) purchased their apartment in 1990. Jana, age 73, is semi-retired, teaches English and Czech to small classes, gives small group tours in Prague and translates English novel books into Czech (example "Gone With the Wind"). Jirka, age 77, is also semi-retired, works as a part time computer consultant and is very handy at maintaining their summer homes and gardens. They spend quiet time at their Southern Bohemian cottage in the woods by a lake (more on that later).

Somehow, on a very limited budget, they have traveled to many European and world countries, including the United States and to the Silver Lake area two times, attending the 1989 and 1996 Pulkrabek Family Reunions with over 150 people attending. On one trip they acquired an old, small, "give-away" Winnebago Motor home, with duct work repairs, and traveled around the United States.

Another time they purchased a 15-year old Vega car, which broke down in downtown Chicago during rush hour. Among cheers of bystanders and helpers they pushed the car six blocks to a repair shop. A kind Chicago man let them sleep in their sleeping bags in his apartment for several days, free of charge, while their car was being repaired.

On a one week vacation, their older teenage children visited the Eastern United States, including Disney World in Florida. On this particular trip, with their very limited budget, they found their best value was to mainly eat bananas and to drink milk.

Mluvíte Česky? Do You Speak Czech?

Jana y Jirka (YAH-na EE YIR-ka) – Jana and Jirka. In Czech, "j" is pronounced as the "y" in "yes", in English, i.e. not with a hard "j" sound (or as my cousin Francis John Jilek says, "the 'J' is silent in 'Jilek', just like the 'p' in *swimming pool* ")

Čím je slivovice starší, tím je lepší (CHEEM YEH SLIH-vo-veets-se STAR-shee, TEEM YEH LEHP-shee) –The older the plum brandy, the better.

Co můžeš udělat dnes, neodkládej na zítřek (SO MYU-zhe-sh OO-dyee-lat D-nes, NEH-o-dklah-dey NA ZEET-rzsh-ek) – Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

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