

CZECHOSLOVAKIA CRUMBLES    LAST TERM IN PRAGUE    I RETURN TO ENGLAND  
 SEPTEMBER 1938 - JANUARY 1939

Some of the events of these months I remember vividly. Others are blank in my mind.

The warm summer weather continued well into September. Family and friends wanted to know about England and the attitude to Czechoslovakia of the British Government and people. I smoked a slim straight-stemmed pipe which I had acquired in England and felt flattered to be dubbed "the Englishman". This was not my first pipe. I had my first smoke when I was about 16. I had found a discarded pipe of father's with an S-stem which still contained a little dried, gummed-up black tobacco. I lit it and involuntarily inhaled a nauseating sickly smoke. After that experience I didn't try <sup>again</sup> until later, in Paris, I think, where I had purchased a short thick-stemmed cheap pipe. One afternoon I sat with Mother and some friends in the café "Kölln" on the other side of the Danube. Everybody had cool drinks or icecreams as it was very warm but I had ordered a cup of hot tea with milk, showing off with my newly acquired Englishness. Unfortunately it made me sweat profusely.

September and October saw a confusing chain of events in international politics which led to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Nearly every day brought news which was grimmer than the previous day's news. I will <sup>not</sup> attempt to give an account of the history of those weeks in detail but only relate some of the political highlights which so profoundly changed the life of my family and of myself.

On 7th September "The Times" propounded the view which Chamberlain had expressed to the American and Canadian journalists, taking it to its logical conclusion, i. e. that as Czechoslovakia could not survive in its present form, the German parts - the Sudetenland - should be ceded and given to Germany. The fallacy in this argument was that there were many areas with a mixed Czech and German population and that the ethnic Germans living in Slovakia were completely left out. What "The Times" was saying was "Break up the country and leave the rest to Hitler". Henlein unleashed a vicious campaign against "the Hussite - Bolshevick criminals in Prague". He wanted the country to have a totalitarian regime within the German economic and political orbit. All this was totally unacceptable to the Government and the Czechs. Lord Runciman and his mission returned to London on 15th (or was it 16th) September and on the



same day the discredited Henlein fled to Germany.

Chamberlain had not waited for Runciman's return and report and on 15th September had flown to see Hitler in Berchtesgaden. The situation deteriorated fast. Chamberlain paid a second visit to Hitler, this time in Godesberg, on 22nd September. Whereas the first time Hitler appeared to Chamberlain to be conciliatory, he had in the meantime stepped up his demands. He insisted on the total evacuation of a large part of Bohemia by the Czechoslovak armed forces. On 27th September Hitler announced that unless the Godesberg demands were accepted by 2 pm, German mobilisation would begin at once. In response the Czechoslovak Government ordered total mobilisation. Russia and France stated at this eleventh hour that they would support Czechoslovakia. The evacuation of Paris had already begun. Chamberlain was disenchanted with Hitler and on 28th September announced to the re-convened House of Commons that Britain was willing to join the Allies in guaranteeing Czechoslovakia's frontiers. He closed his speech by the sensational announcement that he was flying the following day to Munich to meet Daladier (the French Premier), Hitler and Mussolini. Chamberlain's supporters cheered and wept with relief, but not Eden, Churchill and Amery. At Munich Hitler presented the visitors with a plan of action. Evacuation of the Sudetenland to be carried out in four stages: the first to begin on October 2nd and the fourth to be completed by October 7th; an international commission to define a 5th zone, the occupation of which was to be completed by October 10th. All military installations, fortifications and factories to be handed over intact. Czechoslovakia was asked to send emissaries to the meeting in Munich. Their treatment was reminiscent to the way Schuschnigg was snubbed. They had to wait for hours and were admitted at 1.30 am to the conference room on September 30th. They were merely told to start evacuation next day. Later, on November 22nd, when Hitler had already taken the 5 zones, a 6th one was added. As a result 719,000 Czechs were assigned to Germany and 250,000 ethnic Germans remained in the Czech parts of the severed torso of the Republic and in addition all the Germans in Slovakia remained too. The main railway lines connecting Prague with other large cities and with Slovakia were cut in 9 places. While the country was on the operating table Slovakia became semi-autonomous (as stated above) on 7th October. Father Tiso, a violent anti-semitic, was installed as head of the Slovak Government. On 10th October the Polish army occupied the Teschen district in northern Moravia on the pretext that it was Polish territory. The population of the area ceded consisted of 77,000 Poles, 20,000 Germans and 132,000 Moravian Czechs. This was what Chamberlain described as "Peace with Honour". Less than 12 months later the second World War broke out.



Benes resigned and left for England. He was succeeded by Dr. Emil Hacha, an elderly judge of unquestioned integrity. He and the Government were now at the mercy of Hitler.

On October 11th Ruthenia, the easternmost part of Czechoslovakia, also declared its autonomy. Hungary too was clamouring for parts of southern Slovakia but had to wait until early 1939.

Total mobilisation put the whole country on a war footing. The people of Bratislava, being right on the frontier were urged to leave. A complete night-time blackout was imposed. As the population moved out, the army with its tanks and guns moved in. Mobilisation appeared to be going smoothly - at least what I could see of it. People were smiling again. We thought if war were to break out now we had the means to hold out for some time and with France's and Russia's declared support for us, Hitler would hardly dare attack. There was an air of optimism. I can't help feeling that but for Chamberlain, Czechoslovakia would not have been dismembered and the War could perhaps have been avoided too.

Erno Weiss had arranged accommodation for us in a hotel up in the mountains in a small town, but the name of that town is one of my blanks. Mother, Anni, Jean and I travelled there with a suitcase each. Father was as safe as anywhere on the farm. The weather continued to be fine and in other circumstances we would have had a pleasant holiday in the hills. But we didn't stay long. Hitler's occupation started on October 1st in fulfilment of the Munich "agreement". The soldiers and their tanks and guns were withdrawn from Bratislava and the blackout was lifted. We returned to our flat in Bratislava, feeling like crying. Only a few days earlier we had high hopes and these were now dashed. Tiso's Slovak state made the situation worse. It was now clear that war would break out sooner rather than later, and also that unless anyone of Jewish extraction escaped beforehand they would suffer and go under. We agonised over what to do, as did all our friends, some of whom were already leaving the country. Our plan was that I should leave first, then Jean, in the hope that Anni and Mother would follow. If at all possible father was to try to extricate himself from the farms and leave too but that didn't look very likely.

For us young people, emigration was not a difficult concept but to start a new life abroad with minimal financial means was daunting for my parents. Father, like most farmers, had all his wealth in the farms; to turn any of this into cash was almost impossible at that time. Even more difficult was it to send money abroad - in fact it could <sup>even more so</sup> only be done illegally with the risk of the money disappearing into the pockets of blackmailers and swindlers.

As I was due to be called up the following summer, my passport expired on my



next birthday, 12th February 1939. That was one of the reasons for me to leave first. Since I had only recently come back from England it was decided I should return there and then help the rest of the family to follow. Anni was engaged to be married to Pali Adler, <sup>they planned to emigrate to Kenya,</sup> therefore only Jean was to follow immediately. Mother didn't want to leave without Ernő. Ernő, working in a bank, was the only person we knew who had some chance of transferring money abroad legally - or at least with the minimum of risk.

I still had exams to take and went back to Prague. I remember little of my last weeks in Prague except that it was a very depressing period with all life gone, like a corpse drained of its blood. I note from my visitors' book that Peter and I stayed at 10 Vjtěšská Street, but I cannot even recall what our digs looked like. On 15th January we celebrated his birthday (which is on the 14th) and some of the remarks in the book reveal the mood of mingled despair and hope. Here are some translated freely:

"The last time in Europe. All the best here and there"

"Though apparently we might become taxpayers in Uganda, it could still happen that we'll be here next year"

At the university the atmosphere was if anything more depressing than amongst the rest of the population. Most if not all the foreign students had left, without having completed their studies. It was clear to me that I too would be unable to finish but I worked hard and took as many exams as I could. But some colleagues and staff failed to turn up. The old political divisions had become blurred: everybody was now more or less in the same boat. The papers were hardly worth reading. They aped the Nazi press, being run by new editors after most of the old ones had been dismissed. Karel Čapek caught a cold at the funeral of a friend but died of a broken heart rather than from the cold. There were suicides among well-known people. The communist and other anti-Nazi papers were closed down.

I spent Christmas at home, saying good-bye to my family and friends. I can't remember much except that I broke down when saying good-bye to Mother. She decided she would come to Prague just before I was due to leave, so that we could spend one or two more days together, but these last hours were terrible too.

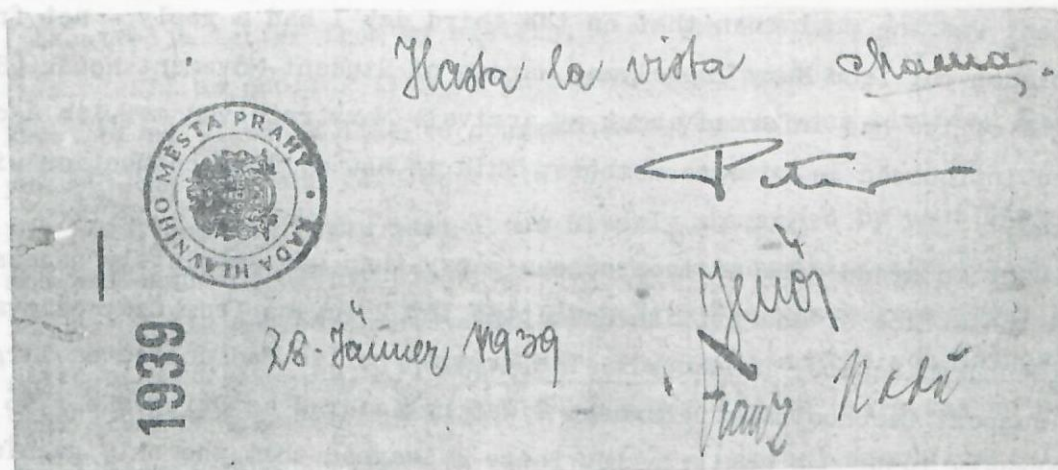
I returned to Prague almost immediately after Christmas for 4 weeks' more work. On 30th January, Mother, Peter, Franz and a friend called Jenő Steiner and his wife Nada accompanied me to the railway station. I had two heavy suitcases packed with clothes, including my evening jacket, riding boots, enough soap and toothpaste to last me for months and some food for the journey. I was



given £ 40, which in value was then equivalent to perhaps £ 800 today. This was a great sacrifice from my parents and had it not been for Erno Weiss, I would not have had the money in English currency. Mother and my friends stood on the platform on that cold day. A whistle blew and slowly the train started to roll. Mother tried to smile but her eyes were sadder than I had ever seen them before. That is the last time I saw Mother. (Jeno Steiner died late in 1985). I settled in my seat. A short young man sat opposite me whose presence I now noticed. I had met him before; his name now is Herbert Lom, brother of Anni née Schluderpacher.

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Mother and my friends who saw me off at the station signed their names on the back of a receipt

It is dated 28th January 1939, two days before my departure and is an error.



We travelled via Germany and I felt uneasy until we reached Oldenzaal in Holland, the next day. Perhaps German officials thought we were Nazis from Czechoslovakia since we spoke perfect German. They were certainly very polite. We landed in Harwich later that day, the 31st January 1939. There were other refugees - for that is what I had become too - who tried to gain admission. Most had probably never been to England before, and they were, I imagine, a bit worried about their reception by the immigration officers, as I was. My passport expired in only 11 days' time. There was some jostling in the queue as several tried to push themselves ahead. But knowing the English mentality, I stood quietly holding my passport. It was my turn and the officer immediately noticed that my passport was due to expire soon; but also that I had been in England 5 months before. "Student?" he asked, and I replied "Yes, I hope" and he stamped my passport and waved me on. The train sped to Liverpool <sup>Street</sup> station through the winter landscape. There was no snow and the countryside looked almost as green as when I had left it about 5 months ago. England was no longer strange to me. I knew what to expect and felt almost at home.