

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JAROSLAV NOVÁK



Copyright © Alena Jirasek - Translation, 2009

**“Only the nation whose men are prepared to take up arms
and fight and, if necessary, die for the freedom of their
country - only that nation has a right to live free..”**

Jaroslav Novák

Dear Readers,

You are about to pick up a book written by one of the participants in the Second World War, a man who had grown up according to the ideals of the first Czechoslovak president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. As a young man patriotic to his country, he did not hesitate to embark on a dangerous path and with his many airmen friends bravely fought against the Nazi Germany of the dictator Adolf Hitler, who had occupied our homeland.

The conscience of a nation is like a great book, whose individual pages are written by the actions and sacrifices of those who did not falter in standing up to the enemy in important moments of their country's history and in giving them a clear answer through physical engagement.

During the years 1939 to 1945, in very difficult and dangerous combat situations, the Czechoslovak wartime pilots in the King's Royal Air Force – the RAF – were the pioneers of freedom for our people at home. One day it will be the pride of the Czech and Slovak nations, that our people took part in the great battle for freedom of the whole of Europe, even if through limited means. One cannot beg for freedom, freedom has to be won by bravery!

The Czechoslovak foreign pilots emerged like new-age knights from the Mountain of Blaník to daringly fight from the first to the last days of World War II. Every second one who stepped out on this path left their life or broken wings along the road to freedom.

Jaroslav Novák, an active fighter with the No. 311 (Czechoslovak) Bomber Squadron of the RAF was one of the brave.

Glory to their memory! Our nation should never forget the costly sacrifice of their young lives!



Wing Commander Vladimír Nedvěď
O.W.L., C.M.C, O.T.G.M., G.M., M.B.E., D.F.C.
Commander of No. 311 (Czechoslovak) Bomber Squadron RAF

I. Introduction

Dear Readers,

It is a great honour for me that you are holding my book. Please accept it as a confession of one of the many combat soldiers and airmen, who served in the ranks of our exile Czechoslovak Army and flew with the British Royal Air Force in the time of the Second World War. Our force in England may have been small in number, nevertheless it was quite significant in terms of its achievements. It took part in every decisive action on the Western front.

Our fighter pilots had already been active and successful in France from the very beginning of the war. One of these, Staff Captain Alois Vašátko, shot down a record of fifteen enemy planes during that time. Another successful fighter pilot was Franta Peřina with thirteen aircraft to his name and a third was Josef František, destroying eleven planes. Of these three aces of the French front, only one survived to war's end: František Peřina.

Following their evacuation to Britain, five flying squadrons were created within the RAF. Three of these were fighter squadrons, operating mainly on Hurricanes and Spitfires, while our bomber squadron flew on Wellingtons and later Liberators. Our night squadron used mainly Beaufighters.

Our boys took part in one of the biggest and bloodiest aerial battles of the entire war, the Battle of Britain, which raged from July – October 1940. In this combat alone, Josef František shot down seventeen German planes. He himself was killed in early October 1940, posthumously receiving a second Distinguished Flying Medal.

Staff Captain Vašátko, hero of the French campaign, later became Commander of the Czechoslovak Wing, comprising the three Nos. 310, 312 and 313 Czechoslovak Squadrons.

On a return trip escorting English bomber planes to a raid on German airfields in France on 23rd June 1942, our fighters were attacked by German FW 190. In the subsequent aerial fight between the Czechoslovak and German planes, Staff Captain Vašátko collided with an enemy aircraft and both planes fell into the sea. The German pilot managed to parachute from his plane, Staff Captain Vašátko, however, found his grave in the Atlantic Ocean. These fighter planes were manned single-handedly.

Our No. 311 Bomber Squadron was founded in July 1940 and was one of the first Allied bomber squadrons that took active part in direct attacks against Germany.

On the night of 30th – 31st May 1942, England for the first time sent over a thousand heavy bomber aircraft to Germany on a mission to bomb the city of Cologne in Operation Millenium. Our No. 311 Squadron contributed three Wellingtons and another two Wellington planes were dispatched from our training centre 105. Operational Training Unit. 41 of the 1043 bomber planes that took part in this raid were lost. Fortunately, all our Wellingtons returned and we suffered 'merely' one casualty, our instructor, pilot Warrant Officer Oldřich Jambor. Jambor had trained pilots on four engine Stirlings at Dumfries aerodrome in Scotland. I knew him very well from that time. Oldřich Jambor and his crew were shot down by a German 'night intruder' fighter on the Dutch border with Germany and they are buried in Holland.

In 1942, our No. 311 Squadron was transferred from Bomber Command to Coastal Command and took part in the prolonged, but ultimately successful Battle of the Atlantic. We fought predominantly against German U-boats and surface warships. The Coastal Command did not exclusively guard the English coast, but sometimes flew sorties as far as 2000 km away from England over the Atlantic Ocean. The Battle of the Atlantic was a campaign of vital significance. Had it been lost, Britain could not have continued importing the food, fuel or raw materials necessary for both its survival or for its ability to provide a base for further Allied offensives against Hitler.

Apart from these damages to the enemy submarine fleet, our squadron experienced one of its greatest victories by sinking the German blockade runner Alsterufer in the winter of 1943, under Wing Commander Vladimír Nedvěď MBE, DFC.

Our night fighter pilots with Nos. 1 and 68 Squadrons were also very effective and one of their best was pilot Karel Kuttelwascher. Karel was an experienced pilot of the Czechoslovak Air Force before Germany had occupied Czechoslovakia. He destroyed eighteen enemy planes during the RAF night time sorties, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross twice within 42 days. No. 1 Squadron's successful 'night intrusion' tactics over foreign bases consisted of targeting slow taxiing enemy aircraft, on departure or arriving exhausted and low on fuel, when they were also less vigilant. These night intrusions were timed a few weeks before and after the full moon, so that maximum visibility was possible.

The twin crews of No. 68 Squadron, on the other hand, could not approach within 20 km of the enemy coastline, lest they be captured with a new secret weapon – radar. Their task instead was to defensively survey the British coast and interior, no matter the weather. They were thus able to detect and prevent many enemy attempts to penetrate domestic defences under the cover of darkness.

And then came the day that changed the course not only of World War II, but of the whole world. On 6th June 1944, coincidentally also my birthday, the Allied armies landed on the European mainland. And so began the decisive battle for Normandy, with three million men, 11,000 planes and 4,000 ships taking part. Our five squadrons were fully deployed in that action. 100,000 men lie buried near the Normandy coast. Our airmen came through this battle with a loss of only five planes - one Liberator and four Spitfires – with two of the Spitfire pilots able to bail out alive. Our air force continued to participate in battles until the end of the war and our boys counted successes until the very last day. The entire Czech and Slovak nation can be proud of the achievements of this small, but extremely effective and brave flying unit based in England during the war.

The main reason why you may be able to hold and read this book at leisure today is that, during that all-encompassing and consuming campaign, airmen and soldiers had to lay down their lives for our freedom. Let us, please, not forget about them. I feel that the touching Kohima Battle Epitaph written in a war cemetery in Burma is apt:

**“When You Go Home, Tell Them Of Us And Say,
For Their Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today.”**

480 Czechoslovak airmen lost their lives while serving in the RAF. The heaviest losses, a total of 273 men - as well as 34 of 51 Czechoslovak RAF airmen taken captive - came from No. 311 Bomber Squadron.

I hope that the following reminiscences at least partially repay my debt of honour to my companions, who have fallen or passed away along the way.

It was my great privilege to serve in the Czechoslovak Air Force in Great Britain and to fight for the freedom of my country.

II. My Childhood

I was born on 6th June 1921 in the small town of Nové Benátky in Czechoslovakia, situated near Mladá Boleslav, approximately 50 km north-east of Prague. My parents were not overly well-off. My father worked as a tinsmith, while my mother only had a basic education. When they got married, they borrowed money in order to purchase a house and moved in. The First World War broke out soon after, however, and my father was recruited into the Austro-Hungarian Army. He spent the war years first at the Russian and then on the Italian front. My brother Venda was born to them in 1915 and my sister in 1919.

When I was six years old, my mother enrolled me in the local Sokol group, which was not only a sporting, but also a very nationally oriented, organisation. I also became a Scout when I was ten. I came to love scouting. I was a scout leader in Nové Benátky until the Nazi occupation, when the movement was prohibited.

In 1929, a commemoration of the 1000th anniversary of the assassination of St Wenceslas was held near Nové Benátky, in Stará Boleslav. That year had also heralded the beginning of the great world depression. My father worked for small land holders and companies. Many of them collapsed and the farmers could not sell their produce and so could not pay my father's dues. As a consequence, he was unable to pay his taxes and we were visited the bailiffs. They wanted to remove anything of value, which in any case was not that much, and my mother, grandmother, as well as we children, all cried. But luckily the matter was somehow resolved and we were able to recover again from this situation.

I too was led to work from an early age, first as a gooseherd and later as my father's assistant. I was quite rueful when in the summer holidays I would see my friends off to the swimming pool or to play football, while I had to stay at home and work, but such was life and I realised that I was a member of a family in which everyone had to contribute their share of labour in order to survive.

At the age of eleven, I started to attend the high school at Česká Lípa, near the Czechoslovak-German border. I boarded with my aunt and uncle in the small village of Hlínoviště and from there commuted to school daily. Hlínoviště lay at the foot of Bezděz Hill, with its ruins of a thirteenth century royal castle, and on the shore of Máchovo Lake, named after the well-known Czech poet, Karel Hynek Mácha. They had no children. My uncle worked as a blacksmith and for the railways. They owned a small holding, two cows, a few pigs and chickens. All of this required much work,

however, and my aunt was unable to manage the property on her own. Each day we would cut grass, feed the animals and go to the forest to gather wood, and in the autumn we harvested the grain, beets or potatoes. For that reason not much time remained for my studies. It was not an easy period, indeed most of my life has been full of difficulties.

I attended the school at Česká Lípa for four years, between 1932 and 1936, years that were marked by the ascent of Nazism. The Czechs in Česká Lípa were in a minority and had to look on the marches of the Hitler youth movement with subdued anger. In 1936 my parents took me back home so that I could be closer to them and I continued my high school studies in the town of Mladá Boleslav. Every day I cycled to school 20 km each way. This was ok in fine summer weather, but not as pleasant in the winter months.

On 15th March 1939, German forces invaded Czechoslovakia. As I was cycling to school early that morning, I came across one of their motorised contingents. They were speeding towards Prague on the right-hand side of the road, regardless of the fact that in traffic in Czechoslovakia in those days proceeded on the left. That was probably the least rule that the Germans were to ignore. From then on, the situation in our country deteriorated rapidly day by day.

I matriculated in Mladá Boleslav on the day of my birthday in 1939 and decided to go to university in Prague. I enrolled at the electrical engineering faculty in Karlovo Náměstí and, together with an older student, found lodgings with a widow at Smíchov. The war had started just before the university year commenced. On 28th October – Czechoslovakia's National Day – students in Prague had organised a peaceful demonstration against the banning of any celebrations to observe the National Day by the Germans. By then, Prague was host to an SS division that had already been victorious in Poland. The peaceful demonstration quickly turned violent. One student, Jan Opletal, was fatally injured and died later in hospital (MUC. Jan Opletal, born 31.12.1914 in Lhota u Litovle, died 11.11.1939).

At this stage, it should be mentioned that the students' hatred of the Germans was increasing daily. Just before the war, not only the feelings of students, but that of most Czechoslovaks, was not very favourable towards England and France. A bitterness remained that Czechoslovakia had been sacrificed by these superpowers (and until then allies) during their conciliation with Hitler in Munich and had simply stood by when - despite all declarations to the contrary - the Germans shortly after walked in and broke up Czechoslovakia.

Instead, a so-called Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia was now established. Our allies also looked on as even Hungary appropriated both southern Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Russia, while the Poles took the Moravian border region. When Germany later occupied Poland, we thought that England and France would also not go to war over this and, as young students, we hoped instead that it would be Russia that would eventually come and liberate us from the Germans. But our idealism was again shattered when - as the Germans were occupying Poland from the west - Russia took possession of a great part of Poland from the east. A number of Czechoslovaks had in fact escaped to Poland shortly before the outbreak of the war, hoping that they would be able to fight against the Germans alongside the Poles. But the speed of the German 'blitzkrieg' was such that neither they nor the Poles had enough time to organise themselves. Those who were unable to flee to France were forced to retreat east toward the Russians and were captured by them. They were interned until the Russians too found themselves at war with Germany. Only then were they allowed to join the Czechoslovak Army that was forming in the Soviet Union, and those Czechs, Slovaks and Sub-Carpathian Russians who had previously served in the air force were permitted to go to England and strengthen the Czechoslovak squadrons there.

But that is just in passing. The main thing was that after Germany occupied Poland and the Western military powers entered the conflict, the Czechoslovak attitude toward our former allies started to change and we again began to fan the cinders of hope and trust in our hearts in the West - a trust whose core strength sprang from the ever growing hatred of the German occupiers. The students proclaimed the day of Jan Opletal's funeral as a 'day of mourning' and organised - once more against SS orders - a massive march through the streets of Prague. There were clashes with the local and German police and several students were arrested. The day however appeared to finish calmly and on the following day studies continued as usual. Of course many stories and rumours circulated and even trophies, such as SS caps and parts of German uniforms obtained in the previous day's scuffles, were on show at the university!

But the whole situation changed dramatically only one day later. German troops had invaded all the universities and colleges during the night and shot nine student leaders: PhDr. Josef Matoušek (born 13.1.1906 in Hořice), JUDr. Jaroslav Klíma (born 8.5.1913 in Prague), MUC. Jan Černý (born 20.11.1914 in Žamberk), JUDr. František Skorkovský (born 1.10.1906 in Trieste, Italy), JUC. Josef Adamec (born 18.12.1909 in Prague), Ing. Marcel Frauwirth (born 8.12.1919 in Zakopanie, Poland), JUC. Bedřich Koula (born

1.3.1913 in in Prague), Professor Jan Weinert (born 18.12.1914 in Prague) and Václav Šafránek (born 11.12.1920). It was also said that some 2,000 students had been dragged off to gaols, later ending up in concentration camps.

Early that morning, as usual hurrying to the university on foot as I could not afford the tram fare, I met a policeman on one of the bridges crossing the Vltava River. He knew me from my daily walks and urged me to turn back, considering what had happened. Nevertheless, I proceeded to Karlovo Náměstí. As I got close, I saw for myself the SS flags flying from the university building and fully armed troops standing with machine guns at every entrance. I came across a few fellow students and we decided to get in touch with a professor who had his office off campus. The professor advised us to leave Prague immediately, but not to depart from the main Masaryk or Wilson's railway stations, as these were apparently heavily guarded by German troops scanning for more university students. I returned quickly to Smíchov and I hurriedly packed all my possessions. I then took a tram to the outskirts of Prague and from there caught a train, reaching my home town late in the evening. In the meantime, notices naming the nine students shot and announcing the immediate closure of all universities for an indefinite period had been posted up in every imaginable place all over the country.

My Youth and Student Years



At 2 years with my brother and sister.



In kindergarten at 4 years – centre row, 6th from right.



6 years old in the Sokol Gymnastic organisation – 1st left in centre row.



First year of high school in Česka Lípa – front left.

On a school outing at the end of second year with class teacher Drozda in 1934.



With the Scouts in Benátky in 1937:



*Our Scout hall
in a castle park.*





With Bohouš Hedrlín and our first cigarette.



With my friend Jenda Kubát in 1938.



Karel Mareš,
a friend from Hlínoviště, 1938.

Průkazka.

Jaroslav Novák
(jméno) (příjmení)

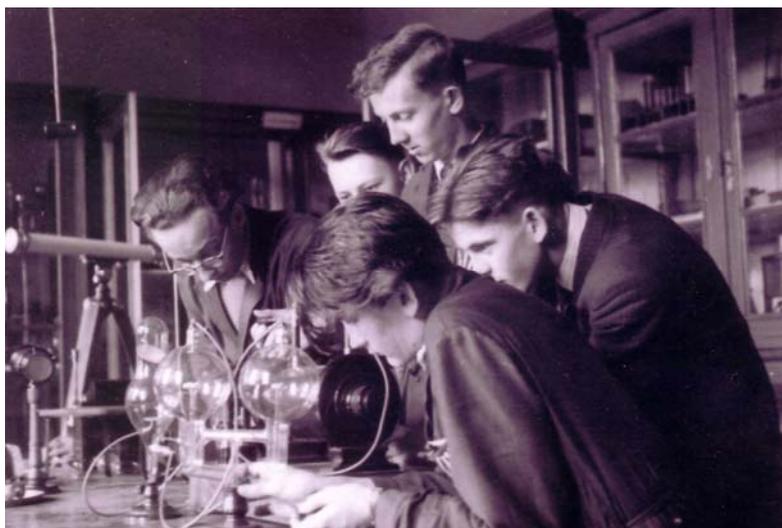
narozený dne 6. srpna 1927 v Nových Benátkách
bytem v A. Benátkách v Legionářské ulici čís. 80
jest ve školním roce 1937/38 žákem sestě B třídy
(slovem)

státní československé reálky v Ml. Boleslavi.

V Mladé Boleslavi, dne 1937

Jaroslav Novák Vlastnoruční podpis. Razítko. Reditel. Jaroslav Janáček

Student card for Mladá Boleslav from 1937.



High school laboratory experiment in Mladá Boleslav.
Top row from left: Pavel Škobis, Mirek Šimůnek, Jarda Mazač.
Front row from left: Jareček Uiberlay, Jarka Šubrt.



'The Berlin-Rome Axis extends to Africa. Englishman: "Now boys. That's enough. This is where we'll cut it."' A caricature by my classmate, Jareček Uiberlay, 1938.



In Sokol, 1937, 1st on the left.



Favourite teacher of maths in Mladá Boleslav, professor Regner.



Professors Novák and Farský from Mladá Boleslav.

*Paule, je pravda, že
 u nás zakázali Wolkerova
 oděvní - Poneš.
 Máme možnost "nová metoda" předání
 Organizace "Studentova Mladá Boleslav" byla
 na programu také v Boleslavi Wolkerova
 což je ontologie samojedů. ale*

*po obrovské ležetě (z vyřazení
 vzhledu, ale po jednání v rámci
 naší práce) již zohledněl s postupem
 že to byl komunistů "*

*Paule
 Škobič
 Maděj
 Nezval
 Jenda Kubát*

*Ještě se mi ještě na Nezvala
 nejho dovali.*

A note between students re the organisation of a poetry evening in May 1939 – the poets Nezval and Wolker banned by the Germans for leftist leanings.



Graduation from Mladá Boleslav, 1939. JN middle row, 3rd from right.



Last photo taken before escaping from Czechoslovakia in 1939. My sister Milada and a group of friends - JN with bear and Jenda Kubát far right.

III. Flight into the Underground

I managed to get a job in the local Carborundum knife sharpening factory, but my distaste for what had occurred was so strong that I determined that, no matter what, I had to try to flee the country and seize any opportunity to help to resist the Germans. An ex-army officer – the Czechoslovak Army had of course been demobilised when the Germans took over – was now employed in the administration office of the factory where I was working. On several occasions, I secretly confided in him that I would like to escape and join in the fight against Germany. One day he came to me and asked if I were really serious about this. After a short discussion, he gave me the addresses of two ex-army officers in Prague, both Colonels. A few days later, I went to Prague and made enquiries about their place of employment. I then managed to get in touch with one of them. I don't remember their names, but when I asked about them again on my return after the war, I was told that they had been uncovered and executed by the Gestapo during the latter part of the conflict.

The Colonel whom I had managed to contact, rebuked me for my naive casualness in addressing a complete stranger in such a matter. He asked whether I had considered what might have happened had there been a confidant of the Gestapo sitting in his place. It would have meant my death, of course, and his probably as well. Nevertheless he promised to help and gave me a contact for another officer via a much more convoluted and discreet route than this, my first excursion into the underground. In exchange for arranging my escape, I was required to furnish the resistance with certain information, such as technical data from the factory where I worked: details of shipments of raw materials, of countries from where these were procured, as well as of the factory's regular business with German companies. I was to collect all this information personally and deliver it to secret organisations in Slovakia and France. I gathered it to the best of my ability and after a very heartbreaking farewell with my family, I left for Prague again a few days later, at the beginning of January 1940.

I met the contact, who was supposed to arrange my flight from the Protectorate, in one of the small cafes in Prague. After exchanging a few secret signs, we left the cafe separately and met at the Vltava river bank. He was also an ex-Major of the Czechoslovak Army, but again I do not recall his name. He informed me of the escape plan and we then arranged that we would meet at the main railway station in Prague two days later and travel by night to a small town in eastern Moravia in separate train compartments. If anyone

asked the purpose of our trip, we were to say that we were wishing to purchase Moravian wine.

We reached Hodonín - the birthplace of the first Czechoslovak president, T.G.Masaryk - in the early hours of the morning. My guide left, informing me that we should meet again at the local cafe at midday. The temperature that day was well below zero and I spent quite a few hours awaiting him nervously - when he did finally turn up, it was already four o'clock. I had been extremely worried by his long delay, for which he gave no explanation. We then started out for a small village on the Moravian-Slovak border. All the way, we followed a man walking in front of us. I did not see his face or speak to him. Then, in the village, the man suddenly stopped in front of a small house, looked at the number and then walked on. I and my companion entered. Another four men were already waiting inside. We were informed that conditions for crossing the border that night were not favourable, however, as the Germans had unexpectedly doubled their guard in that region.

We spent the night as well as the following day in that house, waiting. We left on the following evening. There was a snowstorm and the owner of the house provided us with long white sheets, in which we were then easily able to cross the border, quite close to a German guard post, at about midnight. The snowdrift was at least one metre high and the Germans had no chance to see us in our white cloaks, just as much as it was difficult for us to see each other only a few metres apart. On the other side, in Slovakia, we successfully made contact with members of the underground and by early morning we were on a train to the Slovak capital, Bratislava. There we learned the unpleasant news that the link between the Czech and Slovak underground had been freshly lost, and so at this point I also found myself without my companion, the Major, with whom I had started out from Prague.

To top matters off, I had an extra three fellow travellers with me. I remembered an acquaintance of my brother who was a schoolteacher in the city and managed to contact her. With the help of some of her friends, she organised shelter for us all in a furniture shop. We sneaked in after closing time and slept in the easy chairs in the window display, behind the drawn main blinds. We were woken very early in the morning by the store owner, who told us angrily that if anything happened, he had never seen us, never heard of us and that he didn't want to see us again. After a further desperate effort, we were able to get in touch with a Slovak Protestant organization and these people offered to hide us until we found a way to leave Slovakia. I and another chap thus ended up hiding with a family who had a photo studio on the outskirts of Bratislava. Before long, we were told that an opportunity for a safe

crossing from Slovakia to Hungary had been found. And so it was late one night that we and the two others were driven out of Bratislava, dropped off and told to walk in a certain direction until we found another contact, who would help us further across the border. We found this person, but he confided that the actual guide for the border crossing had been taking the escapees directly to the Hungarian police. By this time, we were right on the border, in absolute darkness and so were unable to even light a match. We could not see our informant's face and it was as if we were talking to a shadow. But after a short discussion between the four of us, we decided it would be extremely foolhardy to try to continue on our own. We had no option left but to turn back to Bratislava, about 20 kilometres away, in pitch darkness, frozen through and what's more, seemingly without a glimmer of hope regarding our future. When we finally reappeared at the door of the people who had been hiding us, we were left in no doubt that they were not terribly pleased to see us again. However they offered to assist us once more, possibly from a sense of Christian duty.

One day, I approached an officer in a bank, requesting to exchange some money. He looked at me at length and asked me to follow him into a back office. He explained that it was extremely risky to request foreign currency without any ID papers and that, by law, he should report me to the authorities. Instead, he gave me the money and even gave me the address of his sister, who lived in Budapest, should I require similar services there.

Two or three days later, the Bratislava contact outlined another plan to me. According to this, he, I, another fellow from Prague and a Jewish girl were to travel to the mountainous region on the new eastern Slovak border, from where – he was informed – we would be conducted safely into Hungary.

And so we started off again early on the Saturday morning, by train, for East Slovakia. The weather was glorious despite the temperature being well below zero and the country looked beautiful under its thick mantle of fresh snow. We travelled the whole day, changing trains once. When we reached the mountains, progress became rather slow. Late at night, we alighted in the small town of Hnúšťa. The man from Bratislava did not divulge any information and so we proceeded together in silence in search of the person who would take us over the frontier. We got lost, but were twice helpfully redirected by local people and after a few kilometres reached our destination.

It was well into the night. We were allowed to enter the safe house after exchanging a few pre-agreed passwords and offered some hot food, which we needed badly. We made plans for the next day and

agreed on the fees for the services to be rendered with our hosts. We got up very early. Again the weather seemed beautiful. The temperature was at least 15 degrees below zero, but the sun was shining at full strength. As we made our way into the mountains, we met people going to mass at the local church – some on foot and some in sledges. At around 10 o'clock, our 'reliable' guide pointed us in the direction that we should take, warned us where to expect and thus avoid both Slovak and Hungarian sentries and bade us farewell. Suddenly, the weather changed and it began to snow heavily. The allegedly safest way was to go through the forest, but this was also extremely difficult. Our Jewish companion was quite sick and so we three men took turns in carrying her on our backs, at the same time laboriously trying to make headway through very deep snow. It became bitterly cold and we may have covered barely 4 kilometres after 5 hours. When we finally emerged from the woods, we saw a small farm house. We walked up to it and asked for shelter and food. We ate a little for some payment, but were told that we could not stay, as the Hungarian border guards were constantly patrolling the area checking for fugitives. After about 15 minutes we had to leave again. We were told which way to go so that we would get deeper into Hungary. It was growing dark and so we chose to continue along an easier road that skirted the forest. It wasn't long, however, before we were stopped by Hungarian soldiers and marched to the nearest police station. We were interrogated for a long time and eventually locked up without any food. I was lucky, as I was allowed to sleep in the guard room where the temperature was just above zero, while my three companions had to sleep on a frosty cement floor in perhaps 12 degrees below zero. In the morning, we were offered black coffee and bread and then loaded onto a horse-drawn sled and escorted back to the border by two 'guardian angels'. The sergeant in charge of the small border post then showed us a map of the district and told us that we had been rather unlucky - if we had originally been shown a route a few kilometres to the east of the one that we had taken, known as the 'smugglers' path', we would probably not have been caught.

It was too late to bemoan our bad luck - there was no hope of escape. Messages were exchanged by telephone with the Slovak border post and at midday we were marched by armed Hungarian border guards back to the Slovak border post. We were then locked up in a small room and guarded by a soldier bearing a fully loaded rifle and a big Alsatian dog. We were finally offered some hot soup in the evening and a fire was lit in the room, so that we wouldn't literally freeze overnight. We could not wash, had to lie on the bare floor and so could barely sleep. It was a very long night. Early the next morning, we were rushed to the local police headquarters, under the keen gaze of all the villagers. There, we were again

interrogated for quite a long time. While I was waiting in a cell for my turn, I ate all the documents and letters which I was supposed to hand over to the Czechoslovak resistance in Yugoslavia. The only papers I kept were those that I wanted to use to justify my story of escape from the Protectorate - my university registration papers. I thought to argue that I wanted to reach Yugoslavia in order to continue my university studies. In the meantime, our companion from Bratislava discovered that he had served together with the commanding police officer in the national service.

When our interrogation was over, we were locked in a large room with one bed and given a large quantity of hot food, probably more than we criminals were entitled to. A short time later, one of the policemen arrived with a large carafe of wine, followed by another carrying a bottle of plum brandy. By midnight our cell was filled with all the police staff of the station and heavy drinking, singing and shouting continued until about four in the morning. I woke with a fantastic hangover, but again to quite a different camaraderie than when we had disbanded. We were prisoners and our erstwhile drinking companions were our captors once more. There were no more jokes. We were taken back to the railway station and then to Hnúšťa, where we were locked up in the local gaol. Next day, we appeared before a judge and were asked all sorts of questions, including whether we had any money. Of course we said no, as was evidenced by the contents of our pockets. But the linings of our jackets were a different matter and I had some Hungarian money sewn into mine in case I was to reach Hungary. As we allegedly, therefore, had no money with which to pay the penalty, we were sentenced to seven days' gaol. After that, we were to be sent back to Bohemia, in other words handed to the Gestapo, which would have meant certain death for all of us. That was a very sad prospect, but while we waited dismally following the verdict, the door suddenly opened and the judge himself walked in. He locked the door behind him and explained that he could not have ruled otherwise, as the people sitting with him on the Bench were pro-German. But he promised to do his best to help us. Late in the evening we were taken to a small room, where the judge and two other men were present. We were offered a hot meal and wine and told that as the gaol was not too comfortable, we would be locked up overnight in a small library next to the gaol. We were advised to keep quiet and not to snore too much.

We had to lie down on the floor again, but at about eleven there was a knock on the door, the door opened and we were led to a waiting car. Later, when we were in Hungary, we were told that the old gaoler whose charge we were in had gotten very drunk. The judge and his companions had personally invited him to the local pub and mixed his drinks. One of the men then took the keys out

of his pocket, opened the gaol for us and let us get away. However as the snow drifts were too deep and impassable, the car could again only take us to the outskirts of the village. Here we were once more pointed in the direction of Hungary. We were also foresworn that, if anything happened, we were to say that we had no idea who had let us out of the gaol. Otherwise, not even God could help us!

It must have been nearly midnight and the temperature 25-30 degrees below zero. We were shaking with cold and we were trying to remember the map that we had been shown by the Hungarian border guard. We wanted to take the 'smugglers' path'. To the best of our recollection, the beginning of the path followed a little used railway track. So we set off and at least didn't have to ford through the snow. We walked without talking, for as soon as we opened our mouths the cold air practically choked us. We felt that the night would never end. When the day finally began to break, we spotted a farmhouse in the distance. It was very risky to approach. But as we were very tired and frozen right through, we felt that we had little choice but to knock at the door. We asked for something to eat and for directions to the closest railway station. We were offered food and paid for it handsomely with some of the money we had sewn in our coat linings. The farmer turned out to have also done his military service in Bohemia – we were in lands that had been Czechoslovak, before they had been annexed by Hungary during the German occupation. After breakfast, he harnessed a horse to his sled and took us to the nearest railway station in Rimavska Sobota. The station was heavily guarded by Hungarian soldiers. We were told that the next train to Budapest was delayed by 12 hours due to heavy snow on the tracks. To have to wait at a guarded border railway station would not only have been frustrating, but also very dangerous and so our female companion offered to use her feminine charms to pre-purchase our tickets. She addressed a man who may have looked Jewish and he agreed to buy tickets for us all to Budapest. When we boarded the train late in the evening, we felt an immense relief that we were on our way to a metropolis with foreign diplomatic missions. For safety, we also gave the train guard some money, so that he would not alert any military train patrol to our presence.

We arrived at the main station in Budapest shortly after midnight. It was not exactly an ideal situation - what do you do in such a place until morning, with the military patrolling through every moment? We quickly counted our collective moneys and decided nonchalantly to go to a night club. We ordered a hearty and tasty meal, some exotic drinks, talked about nothing of consequence and passed off as completely unnoteworthy. But wouldn't the devil have had it – at about 4 am some of the young patrons started a fight

between themselves. Blood was flowing freely and before too long, we heard the sound of an approaching police siren. Again we engaged our secret weapon. She went to the manager, told him who we were and that we would rather not get involved with the police. He understood quickly and undertook to hide us in a small room adjoining the premises. We stayed there gladly until morning. Before leaving at 8 am sharp, we ordered hot soup, paid our bill, thanked the manager profusely and took off in a hired taxi to the French Embassy.

The taxi driver told us that the building was heavily guarded by Hungarian troops and so we were dropped off at some distance from the main entrance. We proceeded inside one by one at intervals, so as not to create any suspicion. When we found ourselves behind the closed doors of the Embassy, we felt a wild joy that, at least for this moment, we were free people again. A Czechoslovak organisation based at the Embassy arranged for the transfer of people from Hungary to Yugoslavia. Here too we were interrogated at length, as it was possible that our group could have been a clutch of German spies.

I had an alarming experience during my interrogation. I was questioned by a Czechoslovak ex-army officer (I will not disclose his name), who asked why I had escaped. I replied that I hated the Germans and would like to join in the resistance. He then told me that this did not tally with what I had told the Hungarian and Slovak gaol guards. I explained that the story of wanting to continue my university studies in Yugoslavia was just a ruse so that I wouldn't be sent back home. But the man ultimately summed up that because I had no military experience I would be useless to the resistance. On those grounds I should be handed over to the Hungarian police and sent back to the Protectorate. At that moment, my whole world collapsed under me. I left the office, sat in the corner of the waiting room and began to weep. I told my companions what had happened. They were speechless and feared that the same would befall them. I then couldn't believe it when I was called back in again and told that I could stay in Hungary. (I later met the same man in the Czechoslovak Army in England and he recognised me. I do not mention his name, because he had enough decency to apologise to me then.) In the late afternoon, I said goodbye to my three companions. I never saw the Jewish girl again, only heard that she eventually made her way to Israel, but that her parents had died in the gas chambers.

I was then driven to the Jewish ghetto, where I was introduced to another three Czechoslovaks, also refugees, waiting to make their way to Yugoslavia. The situation here was comparatively safe, but grim. All four of us had to sleep in an almost horrifyingly dirty little

room with just one bed, table and chair. Bugs and lice were plentiful, but food extremely scarce. We were forbidden to go out or into the city, an order which we regularly disobeyed. It was risky, but freedom was too tempting and fresh air was fresh air! I remembered the address given to me by the bank officer in Bratislava, in case I needed to change my Czechoslovak crowns for Hungarian pengé. In my naiveté and inexperience I could have been taken to the cleaners without this help. I found the correct address with another of the Czech fellows. The door was opened by an elegant lady and I told her that I was bringing greetings from her brother in Bratislava. We were invited to afternoon tea on the following day. It was a wonderful feeling to be treated like a human being again, indeed like an honoured guest. There were a few Hungarians present, no questions were asked and we did not explain anything of our circumstances. We returned encouraged to our ghetto, on King Street, in the very centre of the city. Later during the war I was to hear (and this was confirmed after the war had ended) that not a single person had survived the ghetto - all were killed in the gas chambers in 1944. At this point I should like to mention that a document is said to exist, showing that the German Wehrmacht wanted to trade these Jews for military equipment, mainly lorries. But the Allies purportedly refused this request and all the Jews died.

After 2-3 weeks, we were visited by officials from the French Embassy and told that transport to the Yugoslav border had been arranged for eight people. My luck was in, I was selected and that for the simple reason that I was the only one of the four of us who was in possession of an overcoat. It was felt that, as the winter was still severe, people walking about without appropriate clothing would be too conspicuous. I was taken to the railway station early in the morning, provided with a ticket and introduced to the two other people with whom I was to travel. We took a slow train along Lake Balaton to the border town of Nagykanesza. We had been warned that we should travel separately and not to speak to anyone. But as soon as I sat down in the carriage, a fellow sitting near me started up a conversation. I stuttered that I did not speak Hungarian, but he would not be put off and commenced to speak in German. I said the same and after that, to my horror, he started to converse in fluent Slovak. I felt very uneasy and did not know what to do. He sat closer and closer. In sheer panic, when the train stopped at the next station, I hurriedly jumped out of the carriage and reboarded at the end of the train.

We reached Nagykanesza in the late afternoon and made our way out of the city to a safe house, again according to given directions. When we got there, there were eight of us, so we had all made it. We paid our hosts all the Hungarian money we had left and kept

only a small amount of Yugoslav currency given to us in Budapest. The people who hid us in the city's outskirts were stone masons. We didn't even get to warm our hands there and by ten in the evening, the first four fellows in our party had to climb into a flat open lorry, lie between the stones, carefully cover themselves with a tarpaulin and off they went. Our turn came close to eleven and soon we were bouncing through the Hungarian-Yugoslav border region. Sometimes a person has no time even to realize the danger he may have accepted to get into, if he thinks it will save his life. But I have many times later recalled this escape across the border and only then fully realised the risks to us, had the lorry braked suddenly or skidded on the icy road. We would have had no hope of survival, as the stones would have crushed us to death. Our journey ended well after eleven at some cemetery on the very border. We were told which way to go and we were on our own. We descended into a valley which suddenly appeared to be full of light, but we soon discovered that this was a reflection from the marshes and we found ourselves walking up to our waists in mud. We completely lost our way and after about two hours, when the clouds broke a little, I was able to orient myself by the stars. I then discovered that we were heading for the Austrian border. We quickly turned back and now had to swim across a dangerously swollen creek. It was very difficult and we were all quite afraid, but in the end we emerged safely and, sodden wet, continued through some vineyards in a southerly direction.

It must have been after four in the morning that we reached a small village, where every dog seemed to want to greet us. We knocked on one of the doors and asked if we were in Yugoslavia. When the man of the house confirmed that we were, we quickly but happily ran through the village and into the fields to escape detection by border guards. We did not stop until the next village where we felt a bit safer. It must have been quite a way from the frontier. Later it became clearer to us why our crossing into Yugoslavia may have been so easy. Our four colleagues, who had left an hour before us, were caught by the Yugoslav border police and interrogated all night. So when we passed through there weren't any guards on watch. We spent most of our remaining Yugoslav money on rail tickets to Zagreb. By now I felt almost in heaven - I was sure that now I was safe. We arrived in Zagreb by lunch and asked a taxi driver to take us to the Czechoslovak Consulate. We thought that the diplomatic missions were operated by the Czechoslovak Government in exile, but imagine our shock when the taxi stopped outside the German Embassy flying the German flag. We had to explain to the driver that we did not want to go there, but to the Sokol organisation in Zagreb. He seemed to know what it was and took us there. The Sokols gave us food and shelter - it was glorious, it was marvellous, it was so wonderful to be free again!

I had caught a bad dose of flu, but even though I still felt I really wanted to see the city, we first had to take care of appearances. We needed to clean our clothes, which were full of bugs and lice and mud. It was hard to get rid of the vermin, in those days it was impossible to find something like DDT. We also had to wash our singlets and underwear. That was not such a big task, as I only had one pair of each, which I wore at the same time. There was no such a thing as carrying a suitcase when on the run. I also had only one pair of socks and two handkerchiefs. While these things were drying, I wore my suit over my naked body and tried to stay in a warm place. The people of Sokol were very good to us. They gave us inflatable mattresses and we slept on these in the corner of a big drill hall, my covering being one blanket and my overcoat which had by then dried. Although I felt ill, I was warmed by the knowledge that here I was free and would not be awakened suddenly to be looking down the barrel of a gun. We were offered hearty meals and the next day, despite my cold, I went for a short walk in the city with another chap. I believe that it was on the next night that our hosts bought us tickets to Belgrade and we travelled to our new destination.

We were warned to be very careful, as we had no papers whatsoever. We would have difficulties if we were challenged by the police and could be delayed on our way to Belgrade. I would like to mention that, whenever we travelled by train, all through Europe and later Asia, we went third class. This meant sitting on very hard wooden benches, but even so, it was a luxury to travel this way.

When we reached Belgrade the next morning, we followed instructions to our next stop – the headquarters of the organisation which was mobilising Czechoslovak forces in exile. It was quite a distance away from the station, but time was now not of the essence. We eventually found it and again, after more lengthy questioning, we were allotted a camp stretcher in a big hall and issued with a temporary identity document. We were informed that we had to wait for a few days until a sufficient number of people (at least thirty) would be gathered and that we would then be sent to Lebanon via Greece and Turkey. In the meantime, we were free to move around Belgrade. While we were not given any money, I can only repeat how wonderful it felt to be free and to just walk around the city without any aim. The time passed quickly, the number of escapees swelled each day and soon our new journey began. I had a small amount of money left with which I bought a very cheap suitcase and in it I kept my spare pair of shorts, shirt and hankie, as well as a little notebook that I had been given as a gift. In it I started to write my diary, but later lost it in the French campaign.

I don't know why, but we seemed to always to travel at night. Again, we left Belgrade in complete darkness. We were told that we would be met by a group of Czechoslovak people at a railway stop before Skopje in Macedonia, who had settled and operated a brewery there. At about ten or eleven at night this did indeed happen, the people were waiting for us and were absolutely wonderful. They had brought us much to eat and other gifts. Unfortunately, however, the food was quite rich and not having been used to so many calories for so long, I felt quite ill the following day with vomiting and diarrhoea.

We reached Salonika the following evening and it was there that I saw the sea for the first time. Unfortunately, I could only watch it from the train as we passed by. That evening, I was too ill to go out while we stayed overnight in the city. While I felt very unwell, under no circumstances did I want to tell the group leader. In a situation like this there would be no room to feel sympathy or worry about someone who would hamper the progress of the collective and I was afraid that I might be put off the train somewhere. I was very sick the whole night, but I made a determined effort to walk to the station in the morning and board the train with the rest of the group. We passed through the northern part of Greece, and late in the evening we reached the Turkish border. We were delayed for quite a long while, but eventually we were allowed to board the train again and continue to Constantinople. I partly forgot about my illness when we reached Istanbul and I fell under its oriental spell. The early morning and late evening call of the muezzin from the mosques felt like a dream. We would also never forget an all day ferry trip on the Bosphorus and in the Dardanelles that was organised for us before our imminent arduous journey to the Middle East.

We were questioned again, given new papers and so commenced our seemingly endless trek from Istanbul through to Ankara, Aleppo, Damascus and from there over mountainous terrain to Beirut. It was a long journey and soon we definitely began to feel the hard benches of the third class train carriages. The ascent over the mountains was extremely steep and thus the stretch from Damascus was by special gauge rail. Nevertheless, the little train clambered all the way up to the snow covered ridge. It was quite cold at the highest point, but as we descended, the temperatures again rose rapidly and we suddenly felt as if we were in the tropics. It was the end of March. The three months since I had left home seemed like an eternity. But I also did not know what else lay in store for me.

A lorry took us to the Foreign Legion camp outside Beirut. Here we had to sign papers that bound us to serve in either the French or Czechoslovak Army for the duration of the war. Apart from needing to be inoculated and vaccinated, we were free to spend the few days we had in Beirut in any way we wished. I sold my hat which I had brought from Czechoslovakia and no longer needed to an Arab in a bar. This only gave me a little spending money, but even that was something. I also swam in the sea for the first time in Beirut, the weather was beautiful and life seemed to be so easy.

After a few days, a group of about thirty of us embarked on a small French ship, the Compiègne, and we headed to France. Little did I know that on board the same vessel was a man whose destiny would lead him to become a specially trained parachutist successfully planted by UK services back in the Protectorate and who would become my closest friend in Australia some fifty years later, Karel Niemczyk. How many stories would we then have to recount to each other! The ship called in at Haifa and Alexandria, where we admired the harboured Ark Royal from our ship. The Mediterranean Sea was not too rough during our passage, but rough enough to cause a few of our group to be seasick. This time, I was very fortunately spared this malady and also managed to get some extra rations which the other fellows could not eat. Italy was still not in the war at this stage and so we passed through the Strait of Messina and sailed by the volcanic Etna. Accommodation on board was very cramped and austere, but bearable. We reached Marseilles around the middle of April and after disembarking we marched into the headquarters of the French Foreign Legion in Marseilles, Fort St Jean...

The Road to France



*Belgrade, Yugoslavia,
March, 1940.*



*Skopje, Yugoslavia, 21st March, 1940, on the
way to Greece.*



*Salonika in Greece,
22nd March, 1940.*



Turkey, 26th March, 1940.



*Rayak, Syria,
27th March, 1940.*



*Across the mountains in Syria,
27th March, 1940.*

Beirut, Lebanon, 28th March to 5th April, 1940.



French minesweeper in Beirut harbour, 5th April, 1940.



Drink allowance on board the Compiègne, from Beirut to Marseilles.



Alexandria, Egypt, 8th April, 1940.



Stromboli volcano, 12th April, 1940.



Chateau D'If, prison of Count of Monte Cristo.

Marseilles, France, 14th April, 1940.



At the Gate of Fortress St. Jean.



IV. Disappointment in France

We were not allowed to go into Marseilles centre. In the barracks we again encountered lice, fleas and mosquitoes. The French legionnaires seemed to have become used to the conditions, but we found the situation very annoying. The next day, we were marched to the train station and then travelled to Agde, a small town where the Czechoslovak forces in exile were stationed. We were asked a lot of questions and issued with a uniform – mine was the old two-coloured uniform worn by the French Army in the First World War, complete with all its holes! I was also given a pair of underpants which looked like a pair of pyjamas slit in the middle, with each leg hung separately from a cord at the waist. In addition, I got one shirt without collar and two pieces of cloth, which we wore as socks. At that time, it was not customary for the French Army to wear socks and the cloth was just wrapped around the feet. You would suffer like a dog if you happened not to wrap it up properly, but only had yourself and life to blame. They showed us a heap of old shoes and asked us to pick a pair that would fit us. The only pair which initially seemed alright for my size, and which I was able to put on, later proved too small. I then couldn't find anyone who would exchange it for a larger pair and so had to endure considerable pain.

After a few days, I and several others were selected and transferred to a telegraphic signal unit in Montpellier, a university town on the French Riviera. I started my radio operator training there, but it was no bed of roses. We were billeted in an old stable and at night shared the floor with rats. The training was tough, the discipline ruthless and the food - shocking! Now and then, we were allowed to go into town, but my pay in those days consisted of seven francs a fortnight, plus a packet of cigarettes. Luckily I didn't smoke, so I was able to sell the tobacco and in total had close to twelve francs. If you consider that out of this I also had to buy shoepolish and soap, you will realise that that magnificent sum did not go very far. Toothpaste, of course, was non-existent. That was a luxury that one did not even dare dream of.

Once a fortnight, I allowed myself the grand treat of going to the city, sitting at a sidewalk cafe and sipping a 2 ½ franc black coffee as long as it would last. Let me tell you that despite everything, this almost made me feel like a millionaire. After all, I was not the only one in the same predicament and some other fellows had even less. So why should I complain? They also had no one to turn to, to look out for them, as I did. I had in fact remembered an older chap from my home town, whose parents lived only a few doors away from us in Benátky and who had gone to live in Paris. And so

I had written to him and told him that I was now stationed with the Czechoslovak Army in the south of France. He wrote back, inviting me to spend my first leave, whenever that came, with him in Paris. I was elated, but unfortunately that never came about and indeed my mood also took a downward turn. I had sent him all my civilian clothes, asking him to keep them for me until the end of the war. The parcel got lost in the incipient chaos when Paris fell and I lost all my remaining possessions. In all, they might have amounted to lamentably little, but when you have almost nothing, even very little seems like a lot. I didn't hear of him throughout the war. When I later visited Paris, he told me that he had never been in any army service. At around the same time he had been evacuated from Paris, we were sent to defend the front, returning to the city after the armistice with the Germans and spending the rest of the war there.

On the other hand, some of the boys who had been recruited with me did receive a little extra money from their acquaintances in France or from some other source and so could afford a bit more. On a few occasions they took me along with them and paid for my dinner at a cafe, or for a drink in a bistro. Montpellier is a beautiful city and on Saturdays, our day off, it was also very enjoyable to walk around and sightsee, admiring the buildings, parks and gardens.

The French Army issued us with lunch and dinner and a small cup or 'ear' of wine (a quarter of a litre) at each meal. Even though a lot of the boys who 'had known better' thought it was wine of poor quality, I - not being a 'connoisseur' - liked it. I only wished that there were more connoisseurs in our unit, whose daily rations I could drink. After each pay, I would regularly visit the local bistro, where you could buy a litre of white wine for about 2 ½ francs. A litre of Bordeaux Blanc later that evening, life would again seem as light as a feather.

The war situation had deteriorated substantially by the end of May and remnants of the Belgian Army were sent to our camp. The barracks were now like a sardine tin and the atmosphere was very tense. We could see that preparations were being made to send us to the front - by then I had been in the army for a whole six weeks and, as ammunition was scarce, I had only been to the firing range once and fired two training shots! The rifle which I had been allotted, a La Belle 1885 - 1905, was pre-World War I and could not be loaded with more than one cartridge at a time. Perhaps I was considered such a good shot that I was expected to kill three enemy at one go! At the end of the month, we received our name tags, consisting of an oval disc perforated in the middle and with our

name and number appearing on each side of the perforation. Each soldier was to wear the tag on his wrist and in case of his demise, one half was to be left on the body and the other sent to his relatives.

This calls to mind a minor incident. At morning parade, we were canvassed to see if anyone was able and willing to do office duty. Being very naive, I volunteered. I did not realise then that it's best never to volunteer for anything in the army. And so after the parade, I was made to clean the latrines and sweep the offices! It was on this day that all the new bracelets with name tags were neatly laid out on the sergeant's desk. The sergeant was a known bully. Being a born 'fiddler', I tried to fit one of these bracelets on when he disappeared for a moment. It was a tight fit and naturally the disc broke. I was standing there with a piece in each hand when the sergeant returned and all hell broke loose! As it happened, the name on the tag was Josef Vohnout, meaning 'bend' in Czech. But it was no help explaining that I was bending the disc as it said, before it broke. I was escorted by armed guard to the Commanding Officer and given seven days' confinement to barracks. This was at a time when we were just about to leave for the front and my earnest expertise at office duties had cost me a second sight of Montpellier.

We were given a crew cut, issued with field uniforms, helmets and new shoes. The very next day, we were ordered to go on a fifteen kilometre march, from which most of us returned with shockingly blistered feet. The night before we were to leave, the CO of the unit threw a big party for us. We must have drunk hectolitres of wine. I was as sick as a dog the next morning and when I looked at myself in the mirror, felt even sicker. I also discovered that I had apparently been the centre of attention, when someone had taken a pair of hair clippers and ran it through the middle of my hair from front to back! When it was time to leave, I nearly missed the rollcall for the march to the station. It was one of those beautiful but hot Riviera days and also my birthday. I was nineteen and on the march, in full uniform, helmet and army kit.

On top of it all, the CO had decided that we should do a four kilometre circuit of the city in a farewell gesture to the people of Montpellier. It might have been quite a pleasant sight for those standing and waving little flags along the pavements, but it was heavy going for us and we had to grit our teeth. Sweat was running down my cheeks and the rifle slung over my shoulder seemed heavier and heavier with each successive step. A man in the crowd was enthusiastically waving a Polish flag and shouting: "Long live Poland!" The chap marching next to me, probably in the

same worn-out state as I was, turned to him and told him to go and jump in the lake. When we finally sighted the railway station, we felt as relieved as if we were going on a holiday rather than the battlefield.

We got onto a train for carrying livestock. In the French Army this was a common means of transport and if you were unlucky to be behind a carriage with cattle in it, you got the full benefit of fresh 'country air'. We still considered ourselves better off, however, than the soldiers from the French colonies who had to travel in open carriages. At least we were sheltered from the wind and rain. I was supposed to be on guard duty until about 11 pm, but after the party the night before, I just slept in the straw like a log. On waking up in the morning, we were already a fair way north and travelling through the picturesque Rhone and Saone valley. At one spot, we were passed by another train carrying Sudanese troops. We had a good view of them and admired their fezzes. Their train was better equipped than ours with anti aircraft machine guns installed at the front and back. We also heard the news then that Italy had declared war on the Allies and all other news from that point seemed to be bad. We disembarked late at night and marched into a small hamlet, where we were accommodated in stables and haylofts. It was a very dark night and I still remember the clanking of our boots on the cobblestones as we marched in silence through the sleeping village. I believe, and was also told later, that we were somewhere in the north-east, not a great distance from the Swiss border.

An urgent message came through that a group of 20-30 telegraphists were needed at the front immediately. At that time, our unit had over 200 men and I don't know why I should have been one of the 25 men selected and rushed to the front. I'm quite sure it wasn't because of my skills, because to be quite honest I had none, nor was it for any aptitude for bravery, as I had so far not been in any combat. Everything happened so quickly. There were approximately twelve men in our lorry. We set off on a clear moonlit night. The lorry jolted and rolled all the time - it was impossible to sleep. To this day, I remember that I was allotted ten rounds of ammunition. With the reloading capacity of my rifle, this amount of ammo could have lasted me until the end of the war! As we approached the front line early in the morning, we met columns of refugees leading or pulling their horses or cows and carts or handcarts. It was a pitiful sight. The French Army could also neither move forward nor back as it might have needed on these heavily blocked roads and so this became a contributing factor in aiding the Germans to advance so quickly in France. I vividly remember seeing from the back of our lorry a little girl running out

of the stream of people and being struck and killed by the truck following us. And there were a hundred such cases! We spent the night in a field, already able to hear the sound of bombardment on the front line. The next day we moved just a little further north, having to battle our way through the hordes of refugees and the retreating French Army. I wondered to myself what was the use of going to the front, when so many scattered French troops were already heading south!

We reached a completely deserted small town by the evening. We were informed that this would be the seat of our operations, as the front was only a kilometre or so beyond. We were to serve as a radio unit to the army headquarters in that region. I went on guard duty immediately and was relieved at about 10 o'clock. As the towns and villages were deserted, you could sleep in any of the houses and use anything that you needed. Some of the houses were still burning – they had been set alight by the retreating forces so that they would not fall into German hands. As soon as I lay down on a soft bed – a luxury I had not known for many weeks – a heavy bombardment started up. I had never experienced or even imagined anything like that and it scared the life out of me. The Germans were dropping great flares from their planes, completely illuminating the whole district. The bombing became very accurate – concentrating mainly on roads and railways. I remember that the chaps on guard started firing – a message had come through that the Germans had dropped parachutists at our backs. I don't know if this was true, but I do know that a fantastic panic broke out and you could easily have been shot by one of your own men mistaking you for a German parachutist! I don't think that the Germans did use paratroops in that campaign, but that is only my impression.

We received an order to retreat and so jumped back into our lorries and struggled to make our way south again – of course without lights and under heavy shelling. Once more, it seemed that life would end in a hopeless mire, but I just sat in the lorry clenching my teeth and rifle, listening for further orders. I still remember as if it was today how one of the men started to panic. We had just had a very close shave and yet emerged alive. A chap close to him knocked his helmet off and gave him a terrific blow across the face with the butt of his rifle. The panic was over and a lesson learnt in managing such a situation. The poor man was still lucky. On another occasion I witnessed how someone had simply shot dead such a 'panicker'!

We shuffled south through the burning villages, the flood of refugees and people dying by the side of the road. Early in the

morning, we crossed the river Marne and someone was convinced that we were very close to Paris. If you are in retreat, it is somehow reassuring to find yourself on the other side of a river. Usually the bridges are blown up in the face of the enemy. It then takes them much longer to cross and you have time to prepare your defence position. As we crossed the bridge, I remember that I was rather amazed how deserted it was and said this to my neighbour. Just then, one of the river barges next to us blew up in the air. He retorted that, if I hadn't been such an idiot, I would have noticed that WE were the target of a German air raid and that the barge had only been hit by mistake.

We stopped a short way beyond the river at a so-called 'newly prepared defence position'. A few hours later, we learnt that not long after we had crossed the bridge, the French had blown it up. They had had to leave more than half of their forces behind, as well as the tanks, heavy artillery and spare machine parts which were so hard to get! We didn't even give it much thought, considering we were in the clear, but later that day we were to greet part of that unfortunate army, who had had to leave all their equipment behind and swim for their lives. Our newly prepared defence position was in the region of Romilly. As soon as we reached this area, we were ordered to dig trenches behind a small hill. The Germans must have reached the river later in the morning and started to use heavy artillery from the opposite bank. Their air raids also continued and a petrol refinery in the town just behind us received a direct hit and was on fire. To our great joy, a field kitchen arrived at one stage that morning, promising food at long last. The kitchen wasn't very far from our freshly dug trenches and before we could sample any of its offerings, a German air attack blasted it out of existence along with our hopes of a meal. After more severe attacks from the Germans, we were again ordered to retreat further south.

At this juncture, I should perhaps mention a very unpleasant incident which befell me. In the panic of repeated orders to retreat, I forgot my rifle in the trenches. Instead I had grabbed a shovel and boarded the lorry. It may now seem quite amusing, but if I had been seen by my CO, my mistake could have had serious consequences. I did not remain without a rifle for long, however. When we had a brief stop among the streams of refugees and army personnel along the road, I noticed a few French soldiers having a smoke and something to eat. Their rifles rested unattended in their arms carrier. I looked around, no-one was watching and I had a rifle again! And I must say it was also a bargain, as it was much better than the one I had left behind. I did not agonise too much

about the now rifle-less fellow, he would most probably have done the same in my place.

I would also like to make mention of some soldiers serving with our units, who had previously fought against General Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Even though they were Czechoslovaks, we called them the 'Spaniards'. They had at first been interned behind barbed wire in camps close to Agde in southern France, after they had fled from Spain. I don't know if this is true, but I heard that the Czechoslovak Headquarters there had the powers to extricate them from these camps and transfer them to its army in exile. Not all of them were willing to serve with the Czechoslovak forces, however, and I don't know what became of those men. But all of them were extremely good soldiers, with a lot of combat experience and whenever I later came across them in France, they had a very positive attitude.

Our withdrawal was exceedingly slow, frequently burdened by heavy German attacks from the air. At one point, I was sent back to deliver a message to one of our other units. I was stopped by the French military police, who tried to put me in a unit they were putting together from the retreating French soldiers and about to send back to the front line. I sweated a lot in having to explain my situation to them in broken French and only after producing the envelope which I was supposed to deliver was I finally released. I was then able to successfully complete my mission and return to my own unit. We were attached to the French Headquarters and our primary task was to maintain radio contact with all the battalions under its command. I don't remember if there were many Czechoslovaks attached to this particular headquarters, or how many Czechoslovak units might have been engaged in such radiocommunications tasks. We came across our fellow countrymen infrequently. We only had two officers in our unit, one of them being Lieutenant Süsser. He was very fair and straightforward and had our full confidence. He never let us down and accompanied us right through to Gibraltar, where he was transferred to another ship.

One afternoon, we received another urgent order for our lorries to return to the front to pick up badly wounded soldiers from the Czechoslovak battalion. The drivers went ahead and in the meanwhile we were offloaded with our equipment by the roadside. Our CO had also asked for an additional volunteer to go with each truck. Even though I now understood the wisdom of not volunteering for anything, I did so again. My driver was Jirka Hönig. Jirka was serving in the same unit as I, but so far I had not come across him. He was also a former student and so along the

way we had a lot in common to talk about and became very good friends. We have retained our friendship to this day. Jirka was later very badly wounded in France in the very closing stages of the war and spent more than a year in hospital. As our lorry got closer to the front line, we could hear the sound of intense firing both from small arms and heavy machine guns. But there was very little artillery bombardment and only now and then did a shell fall close to us on the road. We collected the wounded from the front, took them back to the field hospital and rejoined our unit. We then continued our slow retreat to the south.

We reached a small village quite late in the evening. The local residents were desperately packing what they could of their belongings to set out on the roads. There, unfortunately, they caused further havoc and made easy targets for massacre from the air. We billeted ourselves in a small pub. The owner told us that we could have anything we wanted. But even though there was plenty of drink, there was very little food. We did not drink because we wanted to get drunk, but simply to quench our thirst and even washed our hands in champagne. The bombardment subsided a little during the night, but started up again from early morning with full force and ferocity. We were ordered to retreat beyond the River Loire, where we could stop and defend ourselves more easily. That day, as we inched along in our retreat, seemed to be the longest in my life. The Loire wasn't far, but all the roads leading south were hopelessly blocked. Movement was at a snail's pace and the Germans continued with their air attacks throughout the whole day. Their fighter planes and bombers, in particular the notorious, terrifying Stukas, were strafing the refugees and military personnel on the road. Just that one day resulted in countless dead and wounded.

Our instructions were to cross the river in the little town of Gien. We were told that there were in fact two bridges, one a civilian bridge and the other carrying a rail line. We reached the township late in the evening. Gien had just suffered a heavy air raid and most of the buildings were on fire. Our pace became a little faster, but I found the spectacle unearthly - many dead bodies and in one or two cases the silhouettes of burning bodies could also be glimpsed in the buildings.

I really could not believe my eyes, however, when I also saw the fleeing soldiers looting the houses on the main street. I saw one running out of a jeweller's shop with a precious vase. War was evidently able to bring out the darkest in people. We reached the bridge. People were streaming across it in panic, cars and trucks moved over it at a comparatively fast rate - a fast walking pace! I

saw priests administering last rites to those dying on the bridge and blessing bodies floating in the river. The bridge was also damaged in a few places. One of our wheels got stuck in a large hole and we couldn't go on. A great panic broke out behind us and I was sure that we would have been trampled underfoot if we had not liberated the lorry quickly. We lifted the lorry bodily out of the hole together with a few other soldiers and with their help pushed it to the other side of the bridge. Safe again on the other bank, I felt that I had been reborn. However the vision of Gien will remain with me until my dying day. The bridge reminded me somewhat of a drawing of Charles Bridge in Prague that I had seen as a boy. It had illustrated a scene from the Thirty Years' War, when the Swedes invaded the city and fought a battle on the bridge. We then stopped for a while and I and another fellow were sent to identify two dead soldiers sitting with their heads bowed at a building nearby. In trying to get to their identification discs, I lifted one's hand and his whole arm came away! I was filled with horror. I returned and reported what I had seen - they were obviously the victims of an air bomb blast.

A little way out of town we stopped at a farm house. We assumed this was to be our headquarters. I hadn't yet been rostered for duty and so found a room to rest in and there a bundle of sheets and blankets. I untied the bundle, spread the contents on the ground and as I prepared to kip down, a farmer who evidently lived there walked in and started to look around. I asked him what he was looking for in broken French. He told me that he had tied his remaining possessions in a bundle to take away, but that the bundle was gone. I felt extremely guilty and hurriedly helped him to put it together again, stammering a wish for good luck as he was leaving. I was to sleep on a bare floor once more, but by now I had almost gotten used to it. I was on guard duty from midnight. Heavy bombardment and gun fire then started up almost immediately and was to continue for most of the night.

In the morning, some of the boys found and killed a pig and we really looked forward to having something to eat. My task was to go and wash potatoes at a stream and here I made another vital mistake - I left my rifle behind. I also wasn't wearing my army jacket. I heard a rustle behind me at the creek. I turned around. I found myself looking down the barrel of a gun and a French soldier staring at me and cursing me for being a German parachutist. I don't know how, but I eventually managed to persuade him that I belonged to the Czechoslovak unit passing through. We weren't to be granted our roast meal either, as we again received instant orders to move further south.

By this time we realised that the situation was quite disastrous. We had been encamped in a little forest and had heard extremely disconcerting news on our radio: the Germans had reportedly crossed the Loire in several places. It seemed that we could even be cut off and be at risk of being surrounded. We stayed in this position until very late at night and then, in the dark, retreated again. I cannot say for sure, but according to later information we may have passed through a part of the territory already held by the Germans.

The next day, the situation was a little quieter. I think it was on this day that we were informed that France had requested a ceasefire and our spirits sank very low indeed. The French might be able to breathe a sigh of relief, but what was to become of us? The next few days were a bit chaotic. We continued to press southward and a group of us even made plans to make one's hair stand on end. One suggestion was to steal one of the lorries at night, drive it to La Rochelle, capture a fishing boat and make our way to England! Maybe that was a time when we were lucky again, as one of the trucks was commissioned away from us that afternoon and the remaining soldiers divided among the other lorries. I think our plan would have had little chance of success. The Germans were already moving rapidly towards the French west coast and would have probably cut us off. Only one day later, they had occupied Le Verdon near Bordeaux, at the mouth of the Loire River.

We continued on our way and then we were ordered to leave our trucks and wait at a certain railway station for a train that would take us to the Mediterranean coast. It rained in bucketfuls and there was no shelter. We sat back to back under the open skies on the platform, which was just barely marked by a little mound of soil. The water soaked through our uniforms and we were drenched to our skins. We waited interminably, time just dragged on forever and the hours passed without any result.

A cattle train finally arrived and even though the previous carriage occupants had either been livestock or horses and the straw was very smelly, at least the train was shelter. The train proceeded at walking pace and we arrived in the small city of Bergerac late in the afternoon. Here the train came to a complete halt and we waited and waited. By now we were also terribly hungry. There was no food to be had anywhere, but we could see big wine vats on a train on the adjacent siding. We attempted to somehow extract the wine, but in the end it was just simplest to shoot a hole in one of the vats. We then had as much wine as we could drink and even filled our field bottles. We then retreated back to our cattle compartments. I must have slept very soundly the whole night.

When we woke up the next morning, we found that we were still standing at the same spot, but the rest of the train had disappeared! We were stupefied! I never found out why or how this had happened, but I do know that our group leader then made desperate efforts to have our carriage linked up to another train and we finally set off on the last leg of our journey. We reached the little port of Sete and from there managed to travel by train back to Agde, the Czechoslovak Army headquarters.

The situation there was rather chaotic. Some of the soldiers who had travelled on the train from which we had been unhooked were already there and told us the worrying news that efforts were being made to keep all our units in France to serve as a work detail. We were soon visited by French officials who tried to convince us of the advantages awaiting us if we accepted their offer of staying in France. I must say that quite a few Czechoslovaks were persuaded and what became of them afterwards I do not know. I hardly knew any of the men who agreed to stay in France, but some of them had lived in France before the war and had also been recruited there.

Some countrymen whom I do recall quite well were offloaded from an Italian liner in Marseilles just before Italy had come into the war. They were employees of the Bat'a Shoe Company and had been on their way to South America. Of course they did not want to stay in France or go to Britain, but to continue on their war-disrupted journey to the destination of their business.

Only a few men from our unit elected to stay behind. I was among those who declined and insisted that I wanted to get out of France and if possible to continue as a combatant elsewhere. Those of us who had refused to sign were then ordered out of the barracks and put behind barbed wire. It was a sad sight to have some of the Czechoslovaks with whom we had fought side by side now guard us. The plight of this remnant of the Czechoslovak Army must have become known to higher authorities in the French General Staff and I think it was the very next day that General Louis Faucher arrived and negotiated our release. This old gentleman had in the past made the acquaintance of Czechoslovak First World War legionnaires and had spoken up on their behalf and maybe that is why he was also willing to help us.

The following night we slept under the stars outside the little port of Sete. It was wonderful to feel free again. We were told that the next day we would sail out from France. But the armistice agreement with the Germans stipulated that all French ports would now be 'open' cities and so we had to relinquish our weapons before we entered the metropolis. We soon found out that not only were

the cities proclaimed 'open', but no ships were allowed to leave the ports. We marched through the city to the docks and after considerable negotiation boarded an Egyptian ship - the Rod el Farag. Egypt was still under partial British influence at that time. The ship was greatly overcrowded. At most it was equipped to carry a few dozen people - I calculated that there were about 2,500 of us on board. It wasn't a big ship and the port was not busy, but the French tugs refused to take us out. Eventually, our English captain decided to take the ship out without the aid of tugs. Just as we reached the open sea, a motor boat caught up with us. We let down a rope ladder and a few French officers climbed aboard for the chance to be able to join the Free French. Food was scarce and I welcomed the rough sea, as being a 'good sailor', I was again able to enjoy the rations of others. When we neared the islands of Menorca and Majorca, our ship gained speed and made a few evasive manoeuvres. We were ordered to put on our life jackets and stand by the rafts. The rumour circulated that an Italian submarine had been sighted, but we were not attacked. Considering there wasn't a single inch of space on the deck or below it, the trip continued very uneventfully. Here again I was fortunate, as being one of the last to go on board, I could now sleep on the deck. The situation below was much worse. I won't even go into the question of hygiene, that was even grimmer. But in the end, you put up with all that, as long as you felt that you were free!

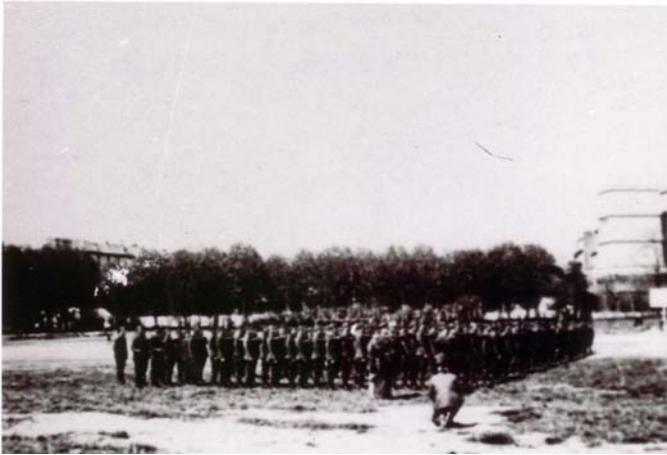
When we reached Gibraltar, the officers and some of the troops transferred to another ship in order to ease the strain on the vessel. You may recall that at that time, in early July, the British air force and navy were obliged to attack French warships. I believe that at the time, the French navy was concentrated in one of the North African ports. We watched aircraft taking off from Gibraltar - one of them crashed on the return flight. Of course, we knew very little of what was really going on in the outside world. After two or three days, we left in a big convoy. We sailed westwards in order to avoid German submarines and then turned north to our new destination, to our new home and more than anything else to renewed hope!

While I was lucky in that I was able to sleep on the deck from Sete to Gibraltar, I had less luck on the leg from there to Liverpool. The weather turned much colder. There was also some rain and so sleeping on the open deck was much less pleasant. Once or twice when it rained, I crept up to the warm funnel. But I was soon chased away from this part of the ship, which was out of bounds to the troops. Food continued to be scarce along the way. I still had my old pair of shoes in my army bag and so sold the pair which had been issued to us before we went to the French front to an Arab on

board the ship. I got half an English crown (30 pence or 2,5/-shillings) for them and to me that seemed a fortune! The trip was extremely slow and monotonous and it took us ten days to reach Liverpool. There, we were also greeted by rain and an overcast sky. The port itself held a few fairly crowded liners. We were told they were mainly full of youngsters being evacuated to America. We couldn't help but wonder, whether we too would one day need to be evacuated from this land in which we believed so much and in which we now vested so many hopes.

In all, the fall of France resulted in up to 4,000 Czechoslovak soldiers and airmen being evacuated to Britain.

From France to Great Britain



Montpellier Army Barracks, commemorating General Štefanik, May, 1940.



Wireless operator training.



The Czechoslovak troops are visited by a French General.



We leave for the front:



JN far right.



On the way to the front line: as refugees retreat, we push forward. Total chaos.



Cheap food on the French front.



Retreating. Wireless operator JN on the left, driver J. Hönig on the right.



We are out of it! The retreat succeeded, we are about to board ship in Sete.



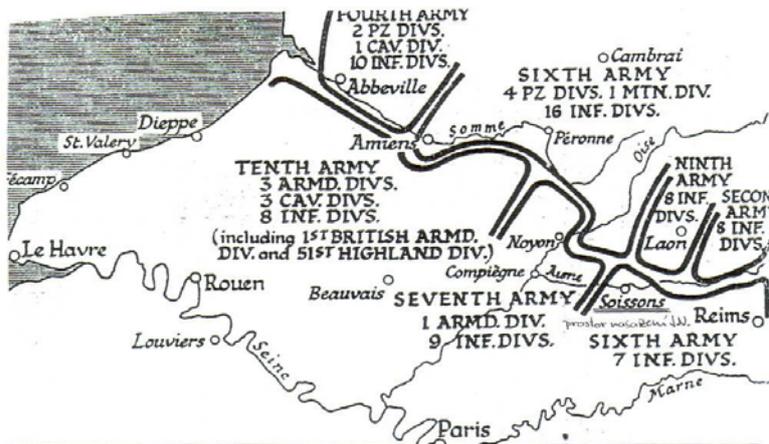
Boarding the Rod el Farag.



A last look at defeated France on 27th June, 1940.

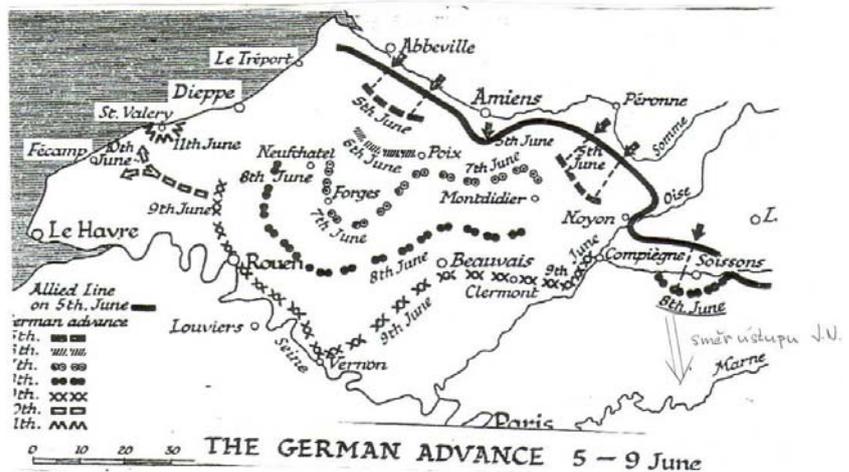


Gibraltar - the end of one era and the beginning of my journey to Great Britain, 2nd July, 1940.



THE OPPOSING FORCES on the WESTERN FLANK 5 June 1940

The situation on the French front on 5th June and the German offensive 5th - 9th June 1940.



THE GERMAN ADVANCE 5 - 9 June

My journey from home.



V. On the Ground and in the Air of Proud Albion

We arrived at Liverpool on 13th, but did not disembark until 14th July 1940. On our way to the railway station, we needed to pass through the city centre. We must have made a sorry sight, grimy from head to foot, in war-torn uniforms and without any weapons. But despite the lack of opportunity to wash on the ship due to the shortage of water, we noticed an immediate and fantastic difference in the people. Some stopped and smiled, some waved to us and a few even handed us packets of cigarettes. We saw signs that the city was preparing for war, sandbags around the main buildings and a few anti aircraft guns on the rooftops. When we reached the station, we found canteens that offered us tea, sandwiches and cake. We had almost no money and didn't know if we would have to pay for this. I myself had just the half crown I had received for the pair of shoes I had sold on board ship. But we were told that the canteens had been set up especially for us and that the food was free. It was all so absolutely wonderful and we were very touched! We were also expecting the usual livestock trains to take us to our next destination. So we thought it a mistake when we were invited to ride in compartments with upholstered seats and that only carried so many so that everyone could sit. We were sure that the carriages were intended for officers only and it took a bit of persuasion before we finally got in.

We transferred to Cholmondeley Park in Cheshire, where the grounds of the castle had been kindly made available for the use of the exiled Czechoslovak forces. We marched from the station to the nearby camp. When we arrived, there were already a great many tents arranged among the trees and on the park lawns. In our transit, we again noticed the unusual friendliness of the people (certainly a far cry from the French), who waved to us or gave the victory sign. The countryside was lushly green and the houses very orderly, with beautifully kept gardens. It was a completely different world from the one from which we had just arrived. Even though I had been in Britain only a few hours and had had enough of war at the French front, I instantly felt that I would again go anywhere in order to help the British in their fight. In Cholmondeley Park we met many friends whom we had not seen since our dispatch to the front nor known what had become of them. The questions flew thick and fast: "Have you seen...?", "When did you last see him?" and so on. We were apparently the last large group to arrive in the camp, with only a few more stragglers arriving after us.

At this stage, we were not recognised as an army as such and were treated more as refugees. But the Czechoslovak Government in

exile, officially recognised on 21st July 1940, was negotiating intensively for our proper recognition.

We were receiving 6d per day, which to my mind was a terrific amount of money, considering we had received only 5 sous (about a penny) a day in the French Army. We were kept reasonably busy in the camp and one of our first tasks was to learn English. We also dug trenches around the perimeter in case of an invasion. Czechoslovak generals came to greet us and - on 27th July - President Edvard Beneš himself came to visit.

At that time, a number of our soldiers had refused to serve under the command of Czechoslovak officers in these British-based expatriate units. Among them were some of the Jewish faith and many members of the International Brigade who, as I mentioned, had come from the south of France. Generally, they were then deployed in the land army. When the Soviet Union later entered the war, several of these leftist-oriented men rejoined us. Some officers also left the Czechoslovak units and later went to fight with the Free French.

A short time later, we were fully recognised as an army in exile and furnished with British battledress, new shoes, shirts and everything that a soldier needs. Our pay was also increased from 6d to 2/- and then to 2/6d per day. We were very rightfully proud of our new uniforms. I and a few of the boys from our unit started to publish a newsletter concerning our life in the camp. Of course it was only typewritten and only a few copies could be circulated. Twice during our stay, we were also visited by Jan Masaryk, the son of our first President and at that time serving as the Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs in exile.

We were regrouped according to weaponry and commenced training. I was rather embarrassed that we should be just sitting in the camp doing very little, while the Battle of Britain was raging in the air. The first recruitment for the air force was launched at that time and I rushed to put my name down. I was terribly disappointed that I was not chosen, while more than thirty of my group from France were accepted. I ought to mention, however, that only a very small percentage of them survived. Late in the autumn, the whole camp was evacuated and the Czechoslovak Army was transferred to the Midlands, with its headquarters at Leamington Spa.

I was again allocated to a telegraphic unit and we were billeted in a farm house a few miles from Stratford-upon-Avon. At first, we slept on the farm house floor. It was terribly overcrowded, but luckily

some Nissan huts were soon built around the main building and the conditions improved. The training was intensive and military exercises frequent. I developed a group of friends, mainly compatriot students, one or two of whom I already knew from France. We often went for walks in the surrounding countryside and talked of what the future might hold for us. That autumn, the Germans carried out their shocking air attack on Coventry and later talked of razing Coventry to the ground. Their bombers flew overhead and from a distance we could see the city in flames. I had the persistent feeling that I was doing too little, that we were sheltering in a backwater. We often went to Stratford-upon-Avon, a beautiful, historic town, and the few Shakespearean plays that I saw there were unforgettable.

At the beginning of 1941, I and five others were selected to attend the officers' cadet academy nearby, where we underwent rigorous training for approximately two months before returning to our unit. To our disappointment, a number of our old colleagues no longer wanted to mix with us. They were suspicious that we would now be pulling with the officers and even tried to set the others against us. I very nearly had 'had' the army by then! In about mid 1941, I heard that there might be new recruitment for the air force and tried very hard to find out the details. When the official announcement came, I raced to the CO's office and asked to be transferred. There were several of us who applied and, after a special interview at headquarters, two of us were selected. The other was my friend, Rupert Krupica. He had been a medical student and later died while training as co-pilot in a Mitchell bomber in the Bahamas.

It was only at the beginning of December that we were transferred to the main base at Winslow, near Manchester. This is where we began our initial training as navigators. I was determined to fly no matter what. When I was asked what I would like to do in case I did not pass the medical examination, I answered that I could not consider anything else but flying. My heart was in my mouth when we later did go for a very stringent medical, but was almost mad with joy when I passed the test.

My friend Rupert was not part of our first group for navigator training, but later managed to get into pilot school. I formed a very good friendship with another chap, who had also been transferred from the army, Vlastimil Skákal. We had a wonderful companionship and remained extremely close throughout the war, with our friendship enduring into later years. Other very good friends included Marcel Ludikar, Emilián Mrázek, Emil Türkl and one or two others. But I kept in closest contact with Vlasta Skákal,

going through navigators' school and then navigators' flying training together. Our instructors were mainly Czechoslovak air force officers with operational experience. The course was attended mostly by Czechoslovak Army officers in their khaki uniforms and by three airmen – Vlasta, Rupert and I. We felt like peacocks in our blue uniforms. It never worried me that I had dropped from my rank of army sergeant to Aircraftman or AC 2 in the air force. I wasn't even fussed about the lower pay.

We didn't stay in Winslow very long. Soon after Christmas, we were posted to New Town airbase near Stranraer in Scotland. Only a few days later, however, we were again restationed, this time to a navigator school in Eastbourne on the south coast.

We started the navigators' school with several Czechoslovak Army officers, but they were billeted in a different part of the city and I always shared accommodation with Vlasta Skákal. Most of the air force boys jokingly called us 'Anna' to indicate how inseparable we were and that nick name stuck with us until the end of the war. Even today some friends still call me that. Vlasta came from Egypt. His father was Czech and his mother Japanese. We were like twins and, needless to say, we got into a lot of joint trouble and mischief. We always pulled together and also covered for each other whenever necessary. Vlasta was my better in many respects. Firstly, as well as two or three other languages, he spoke perfect English. He was also quite well off financially, as in addition to his normal pay, he could draw on a practically unlimited bank account that his father had established for him in England. But the question of finances never came between us. Now and then, I borrowed money from Vlasta, but always repaid it to the last penny. He was very appreciative of this and it was probably also one of the many reasons why he valued my friendship with him.

Eastbourne is a lovely city, usually known as a seaside holiday resort, but during the war it was mainly a training base for the air, army and naval forces. During our stay, the beaches were set with dummy mines and covered in barbed wire entanglements.

The navigators' course was very intensive and we were required to study late at night. This sometimes proved tedious, particularly as the hotel where we were staying was right next to a very large dance hall, the Winter Garden. And so on quite a number of occasions, we threw down our books and spent quite a few hours on the dance floor instead. Generally our absence went unnoticed, but it was a bit harder to get back past the guards after curfew. Once or twice we climbed over the fence from the beach side, jumped into the kitchen through a high window and then crept past the

guard room into our dormitory. My escape from Czechoslovakia probably helped me overcome such small obstacles. We passed our preliminary exams at Eastbourne and from there we were transferred to Dumfries in Scotland, near Carlisle.

Dumfries was the first location where we commenced actual flying instruction alongside our technical training. I recall how extremely pleased we all were to find that one of the instructors was a Czechoslovak flight sergeant, who had already served with the No. 311 Squadron. His name was Oldřich Jambor and he was a pilot instructor. I did not fly with him in Dumfries, but was very saddened to learn a few months later that he had been shot down over Cologne on 31st May 1942, and killed in the wreck of a Stirling four engine bomber (No. 75. Bomber Squadron) of which he was skipper.

My first flight was on 12th April 1942 in a De Havilland Dominia and it was an exhilarating experience. Of course, it was only an orientation flight lasting one hour and fifteen minutes, but it was terrific. We made a large number of such flights besides attending the navigators' school. Our stay in Dumfries was again to be very short, however, and at the end of the month we were transferred to another new base, this time at Wrentham in Norfolk. This was one of the original bases of the Czechoslovak No. 311 Squadron, from where it had operated raids on Germany in Wellington bombers. But on our arrival, it was already an Operational Training Unit or OTU, where our intensive flying instruction really began. This station holds many memories for me, both good and bad. It was from here that a number of our crew went missing. Some friends with whom I had served in France and who were from the first group to join the RAF in Cholmondeley Park lost their lives while operating from Wrentham.

But it was also quite a pleasant station and we often frequented the nearby town of Thetford. Our training was mainly carried out in Oxfords and later in Wellington bombers. Vlasta and I graduated as navigators at the beginning of June, sometime around my birthday. We received our 'wings' and it was absolutely wonderful to be able to sew our sergeant's stripes and observer's badges onto our uniforms. We were extremely proud. We then got a fortnight's leave and Vlasta and I took off for London and from there to Torquay.

At this point I should mention that by the time we arrived at Wrentham, the No. 311 Squadron had been reassigned from Bomber Command to Coastal Command due to the heavy losses in

its ranks. The base held many stories and most of the staff who remained there were also from that squadron.

Many of the men who flew with us on our navigator training were highly skilled pilots with many hours' of operations behind them. To mention just a few: Pilot Officers Alois Šedivý, Josef Bernát, Josef Čapka, Benedikt Blatný, Karel Schoř; Flight Lieutenant Karel Vildomec, Flight Sergeants Arnošt Jedounek, Jaroslav Doktor, Jan Irving and Josef Filler, as well as our navigation officer, Flight Officer Stanislav Kodýtek. These men had also served with No. 311 Squadron before it had moved out. Again, our sojourn in Wrentham was not to last long. We arrived at the end of April and stayed until the end of June. We used the country's interior for air navigation and bombing practice both by day and night. I developed many friendships with our pilots at that time, which then lasted for the duration of the war.

Initially, all the qualified Czechoslovak officers were ranked at the lowest RAF commission as Pilot Officers, while most airmen were also classified in the lowest rank of Air Craftsman 2nd Class (AC 2) until being able to proceed to the rank of Sergeant. Only Flight or Squadron Commanders were appropriately ranked. After the agreement of the Czechoslovak Government in exile with the British Government was made and signed by the Foreign Ministers and Jan Masaryk Lord Halifax on 25th October 1940, proper RAF ranking became possible for the Czechoslovaks. The Inspectorate of the Czechoslovak Air Force was also established, giving the Commanders their own powers.

But to return to the topic of our leave, which Vlastík and I enjoyed to the fullest. To be sure, we were almost overly proud to have done so well and our joy was compounded by the wonderful weather with which we were blessed in Torquay. Towards the end of our time there, Vlasta and I were invited to spend two days in Reading with new friends, sisters Barbara and Monica and their family. I have to admit that this exceeded our holiday leave by one day. We knew that our flight unit would be getting ready to move from Wrentham immediately when we returned, so we thought that no one would notice if we were one day late. What we did forget, however, was that most of the squadron's personal belongings were usually sent in advance by train and when returned, we were noticeably burdened by our luggage. We had no other option but to pack it into the plane taking us to our new destination. This caused a slight overloading, to say the least. I flew in an Oxford with Pilot Officer Loiza Šedivý, in close formation with two other Oxfords. I sat to the right of the pilot. In addition to the two of us, a mechanic was in the back seat, along with various spare parts and of course

all our luggage. In other words, the plane was bursting at the seams.

I was in plane number two, on the left-hand side of the leading plane. Vlasta Skákal was navigator in the number one plane. There was no inter-communication between the three planes and as we reached the aerodrome at Luffenham where we were to land, Flight Sergeant Jedounek in the leading plane waggled its wings to show that he was breaking formation. But we were so extremely close to him that we were near collision. Loiza couldn't see him very well across me and pushed me back suddenly. As I flew backward, however, the pile of blankets on which I was sitting slid from under me and I fell between the seat and the joystick. This then forced the plane to go into an extremely steep nose dive.

At this stage, a lot of stuff from the back of the plane, including the luggage and the flight mechanic, fell forward onto us. I really don't know how I got back on top, but somehow I managed to wedge my right leg into the open window and lever myself backward with everything that was on top of me, so that I actually finished up behind my seat. We had lost considerable height. Loiza had succeeded in straightening the plane back up again, but the momentum was still so strong that even though the plane was level, it was still losing altitude. In the few seconds that this had occurred, all my life up till then ran through my mind. I was convinced that this was the end. But we did land safely, only I was scratched all over, bleeding from some deep gashes and my back felt extremely painful. Some of the chaps who had witnessed our involuntary acrobatics said that it had been quite a show and wouldn't mind a replay. I heard later that the plane in which we had almost been killed had had to go for a general overhaul to correct the structural stress that it had suffered.

Our new station at Woolfox was a satellite aerodrome of the North Luffenham airbase and our training unit was designated as No. 1429 Czechoslovak Operation Training Flight, or COTF. The station was very close to the small town of Stamford in Rutlandshire (now Rutland), the smallest county in England. We were told that Stamford had more pubs per head of population than any other place in England. One day, Vlasta and I arranged to meet Marcel Ludikar in town on a Saturday afternoon, without indicating where. When we eventually caught up with Marcel late in the evening, he was very annoyed and claimed that he had looked for us in every pub in town. When we asked him how many beers he had needed to drink, he complained that an entire THREE! We all had a good laugh about that.

Our intensive training continued and by the end of October we were moved once more to a new station, this time to Church Broughton near Derby. We were still together in one group: Vlasta, Marcel, Emilián Mrázek, Emil Türkl and one or two others. It was here, on 13th October 1942, that we lost one of our crews as they returned from a night cross-country flight. All were killed, with Emil Türkl among them. I still have a coat hanger with Emil Türkl's name on it. It was sometimes a very bitter pill to have to swallow, when you had shared the same room with someone and suddenly they were not there. But that was the war and this was to happen many more times before it was over. In the same crash, we also lost a navigator who had been in the same course as Vlasta and I. His name was Pilot Officer Miroslav Mucha. The crew had consisted of František Fanta, Josef Hrala, Rudolf Jelínek, Miroslav Mucha and Emil Türkl.

We were very content at Church Broughton. It was very close to Derby, where we could spend a lot of our free time. We made lots of local friends. One of these was Edna Dawson, who served with the Auxiliary Territorial Service, or ATS, at that time. She was about our age and had taught dance prior to the war. We are still friends to this day. Our only problem was that the weather had rather worsened and the aerodrome was very often drowned in fog. But unfortunately, we didn't stay long at this posting either. At the beginning of November, we were relocated again, to the aerodrome at Thornaby, close to Stockton-on-Tees in Yorkshire. This was to be my final stop before joining the operational squadron.

This was a rather lonely time for me, as Vlasta and I had to part ways for a while. He was posted to the aircraft recognition training school near Blackpool, where they needed a navigator to complete a crew. I joined a crew that included Sergeant Čestmír Hanuš as skipper, Sergeant Oskar Krebs as wireless operator/ gunner and Zdeněk Řezáč, also a wireless operator. Another chap, whose name I cannot remember, was our rear gunner. Our skipper was much older than we and had been a pilot with Czechoslovakian Airlines before the war. But as the age difference between us was quite large, we never really got overly close. I did however become very good friends with the wireless operator, Zdeněk. He was also an ex-university student. His father had been an official at the Czechoslovak Consulate in Bulgaria and when the war broke out, the family did not return to the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia, but proceeded to England instead. Zdeněk's parents lived in London and he also had a brother, who was serving in the Czechoslovak Army in the UK. Later on, when our squadron regrouped, this crew was also reconfigured. Zdeněk with our second pilot and rear gunner were assigned to a different crew and

I was very upset when they – Emil Palichleb, Josef Bittner, Josef Fišera, Theodor Schwartz, Emil Szeliga and Zdeněk - were all killed during a Liberator test flight on 30th August 1943.

In Thornaby we underwent further critical training and flew cross-country day and night, practising the aiming of bombs, air to air firing and combat with fighter planes. My skipper, Sergeant Hanuš, was not a well man and so it happened that on quite a few occasions I also flew with different pilots. These included Squadron Leader Jindřich Brejček, Pilot Officers Benedikt Blatný and Josef Bernát, as well as many others.

At the end of December, a very unpleasant incident occurred just as we were completing our training and on the very day before our posting to our operational squadron in Wales. Our bombing target range was adjacent to the Thornaby township and while we were practising, all our bombs dropped onto the city and caused damage to several houses. We were met by the military police on landing and put to very stringent questioning. Being the navigator, I was accused of making a mistake in leading the pilot to the target and of opening the bomb doors in the floor of the Wellington bomber when it was still over the city. I, on the other hand, claimed that when the bombs began to drop I had done nothing to that point to make them do so. The plane was wheeled to the hangar, jacked up and tested under simulated flying conditions. It was loaded with dummy bombs and as soon as the bomb bay opened, all the bombs tumbled out, exonerating me from all blame. An electrical short circuit was later discovered and I was immensely relieved! My colleagues joked that I should have been awarded an Iron Cross for bombing an English city, but until the mechanical fault was found, I wasn't laughing. So many things can go wrong in an aircraft and sometimes even bombs can be released accidentally.

We were given a few days' leave and then we moved to our operations base at Talbenny in south-west Wales, near Milford Haven. Our closest city was Haverford West. It was a long train trip to reach the base, but when we got there, we encountered many old friends who had arrived there earlier, including Marcel Ludikar. We were considered inexperienced and called 'greenhorns', even by those who had come only a few days before us. It was a very cold and unfriendly spot and as it was winter, felt all that much worse.

From Gibraltar to Liverpool and Beyond



Setting off from Gibraltar on 2nd July, 1940 on the Rod el Farag. With towel at front: Jirka Hönig; next to him with cigarette: our splendid Commander in France, Lieutenant Süsser; shaving: a navigator from No. 311 Bomber Squadron RAF, killed in action.

JN sitting topmost, front left. With glasses: Jiří Hönig. The others are mainly from the wireless operating unit.



Whiling away time on board ship – group games.

Liverpool 13th July, 1940:



We march through Liverpool to the train station to go to Cholmondeley Park. We have no guns and look more like beggars, but the people cheer us enthusiastically. We are completely surprised and very touched.

Our camp in Cholmondeley Park from July to August, 1940:

The main gate to Cholmondeley Park.



View of the manor house from across the park and lake.

Soldiers in Cholmondeley Park shortly after arrival:



Our first outing, still in French uniform. JN is 3rd from left; 4th from left is Jan Šturza, future parachutist.

Marching to Whitchurch on 5th August, 1940. JN on the left. With concertina is Jiří Osolsobě, wireless operator and later a pilot of No. 311 Squadron. Many men from the infantry enlisted into the RAF, few survived the war.



Our wireless operators' group still in French uniform, waiting for lunch. JN embracing Jan Šturza.

When all is almost forgotten, then at least a stone monument can remind the young that on this piece of English soil lived and trained young men from Bohemia, Moravia and Sub-Carpathian Russia, in order to deflect the cruel blows dealt their homeland by its occupiers.

Glory to all who took part in this battle as members of the Allied forces and air force.



Fallen companions:

After happier earlier times at Cholmondeley Park, many of the men in these photos were to perish in the war - whether as pilots, parachutists or soldiers at Dunkerque. The marked crosses tell the tale.



After our arrival in Cholmondeley - First Lieutenant Reitinger and Lieutenant Žalman are the only officers who had not arrived with us from the French front. Reitinger is speaking to Lieutenant Süsser and Žalman stands 3rd from right.

3rd standing from the left is our commander, Lieutenant Süsser; 4th is Jirka Hönig. 1st seated from the right is Jan Šturza; next to him: JN.



With my friends in front of my tent. 3rd from the right standing is Jirka Hönig; JN is 5th.

The ordinary moments of a soldier's life:



Peeling potatoes. 2nd on left: JN; 3rd : Franta Vostrejš, an ex-Spanish brigade fighter.

Army life: cleaning the latrines.



Cooking. Dobromil Špinka is standing 1st on the left. He was an air gunner and killed in action in 1942.

Digging trenches around our camp. Dobromil Špinka is with a pick; JN below him.



Proud moments.



Prime Minister of the Czechoslovak Government in exile, Dr. J. Šrámek

Visiting our soldiers in Cholmondeley Park.

Foreign Affairs Minister, Jan Masaryk

Jan Masaryk was a great supporter of Czechoslovak airmen, but he also thought most highly of the infantry.



His views boosted our spirit, while his jokes relieved the tension.

Jan Masaryk with Lord Cholmondeley, our host.



Dr. Edvard Beneš - Czechoslovakian President



The first visit of President Beneš to Cholmondeley Park on 27th July, 1940. General Znamenáček gives an official combat operations report to President Beneš after the parade.



President Beneš addressing the gathered soldiers.



Inspecting the wireless operators' company.



Speaking with the 'Spaniards' – men who had fought with the international brigade in Spain, some Communists. A few had refused to fight alongside England, which posed a 'political' rather than any practical difficulty. They were instead stationed in camps in the interior.



The President departs with high ranking officers.

The English Bulldog - Churchill in the Midlands



Winston Churchill and President Beneš visit the Czechoslovak forces.



Speaking to Czechoslovak officers and watching the parading troops.



In the English Army:

A first outing in new battledress with my friend, Franta Doleček.



A Scottish Christmas, 1941.

Motorbike training. JN sitting in sidecar. 1st on the left is Jan Smudek. Jan had been in the resistance in the Protectorate and was wanted by the Gestapo. He narrowly escaped capture by having to shoot two men. After escaping to France and serving in the British army, Jan worked as a radar operator in the night intruder No. 68 Squadron.



On a walk with an English family.



Officers' school:

13th March 1941 at the officers' school at Morreton Paddoy. JN seated on fence, 1st from left.



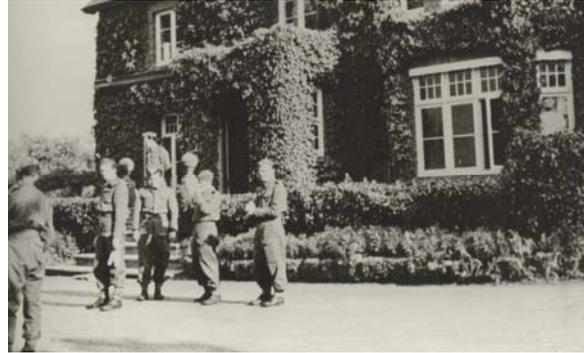
1st on the first on the right is Marcel Ludikar, who came from the infantry and later transferred to the RAF. After the war, he re-emigrated to England and again joined the RAF.

Graduation examinations at the officers' school.





*November 1940 at Fritz Hill,
our winter accommodation.*



Franta Vostrejš 1st on the left.

*Cholmondeley Park, autumn 1941.
A 'garden party' in the wireless
operators' and sappers' quarters.*



*Swimming in the Cholmondeley Park
manor lake.*

*The wireless operator' soccer eleven
playing against an English team.*



Boxing to keep fit.

Training I:

Practising receiving and sending telegraphic news in the terrain. JN lies in the middle, Franta Vostřejš on the right.



With Robert Krupica near a radio receiver. Robert joined the RAF somewhat later and was killed on 23rd November, 1943 with 5 other Czechoslovak boys at the end of their training in the Bahamas.

The total of our guns at Cholmondeley Park – too few and too old and quite unsatisfactory for modern war conflict.



Terrain practice – sleep.

Friends I:

Jiří 'Grandpa' Hönig on 21st December, 1941. Jiří was badly injured near Dunkerque in 1944. He returned to Czechoslovakia in August, 1945.



"In memory of bad and good times, Your Pavel" (Weiss), 11th December, 1941.



"To a friend in good and bad times, from Tibor B.T.F. Funk."



Leave-taking:

Saying goodbye before Robert Krupica and JN go to the RAF. From left: Ing. Pavel Weiss, JN, Tibor Funk. Below him Robert Krupica, Jirka Hönig, Molitor and 'Paddy' the dog.



**Sergeant
Jaroslav Novák**

VI. 'Never Regard their Numbers' - No. 311 Squadron Motto

We now started to learn about our operational aircraft and the surrounding terrain. We also became practised at bombing objects on the water from different heights. Our main duties were to be anti-submarine patrols and to attack enemy shipping. Sergeant Hanuš continued as my skipper, but I again flew with a number of other pilots due to his poor health. This was to sometimes cause disharmony in our crew, as the most important thing was for us all to be in synchrony with each other.

On 26th January 1943, we were assigned to a bombing raid of Bordeaux. Our Wellington was V988, our pilot Squadron Leader Vladimír Nedvěd and the second pilot was my usual skipper, Sergeant Hanuš. The weather was abysmal and the 'met' report could not be relied on. We came quite close to Bordeaux, but were unable to reach our target. I was extremely disappointed. I didn't feel quite so bad, however, after I heard that one or two of the other squadrons had fared no better. Only very few planes reached their goal, which by then was shrouded in heavy fog and our bombs almost fell randomly.

After our first raid, and in between waiting for other missions or the conducting of the anti-submarine patrols, we continued our very intensive training. I think that it was at this time that Sergeant Hanuš was transferred from our crew because of ill health and later posted as instructor to our training unit. Our new skipper as Flying Officer František Fencl, with whom I flew another two ops. He was a very experienced pilot and even though we did not have time to develop a close friendship, I liked flying with him. Our second pilot was Sergeant Ota Žanta, with whom I became very good friends. We hoped that we would eventually be able to fly in a permanent crew together and this we later managed to do for a short while. On a number of occasions when we were having a drink together, Ota would tell me about his flying experiences in France – how, for example, crews were put together just before an operation from whoever was close to hand and how haphazard was the loading of bombs. He recounted how during the German invasion of Belgium, his plane had been overloaded with bombs and how he couldn't get the aircraft off the ground during take-off. He somehow managed to lift the plane over the edge at the end of the strip and then continued rolling over an adjoining meadow until he was eventually able to gain sufficient speed to lift off, just at the last minute. His plane was then attacked by German fighters over Brussels, but he still managed to drop his bombs on the advancing Germans and return. When France signed the armistice, Ota hopped in one of the French bombers and flew it to Yugoslavia. He later made his way from there to England.

In my recounting of these events, I should probably acquaint the reader with the logistics of the flying activities of the No. 311 Squadron. While we belonged to the Bomber Command of the RAF, our targets were stationary, solid points on the land's surface, such as factories, docks, bridges, railway junctions etc. Our transfer to the Coastal Command was more problematic. Our task there was to perform long day and night flights in search of enemy ships and submarines, in all weather conditions, over thousands of kilometres over the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea. Our aim was to find moving targets on these vast ocean plains, having to deal both with boredom and at the same time not lapse in our alertness to any changes to the weather on the surface of the sea.

I would only briefly like to describe the extent of the Battle of the Atlantic. At the beginning of 1942, when we began to operate under the Coastal Command, the German navy had 249 submarines at its disposal. This number was to rise to 393, despite the fact that during that year Germany lost 87 subs.

Our bombing squadron's operational sphere was mainly the Bay of Biscay, that is the eastern Atlantic Ocean, comprising of hundreds of kilometres of open space between the coast of Spain on the south and the coast of Brittany in northwestern France. Between 10th September 1940 and 31st May 1942, the squadron absolved a total of 3113 flights amounting to 26,719 hours while with the Bomber Command. Our crews eliminated 20 Luftwaffe planes and dropped 1,218,375 kg of explosive bombs and 92,925 incendiary bombs on enemy targets. While it was under the Coastal Command until 4th June 1945, the squadron attacked 35 submarines and 4 warships. For all of this we paid with 50% losses of our personnel.

I hope that the reader will make allowance for an account of the very large number of services that needed to support the fighting activities. It is estimated that behind each active flyer there are ten men or women in direct ground services, including the ground personnel of the squadrons themselves and of the airports - whether these be combatant, training, maintenance, production, special or intelligence bases. This group includes the intelligence officer, medical staff, technical staff and in our case also the ammunition loaders, instrument technicians and radio operators. The airport personnel also includes the staff of the Command, administrative services, provisions and cooking staff, their assistants, telephonists, the laundry round, security staff etc. A significant proportion of these jobs were performed by women, serving in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force or WAAF - as drivers, telephonists, barrage balloon checkers and even pilots to shuttle aircraft.

Our next skipper was Squadron Leader Bohumil Liška, who was much older than we were and of course there was no hope of or even the slightest inclination to any friendship whatsoever. He had been a regular air force officer in Czechoslovakia in the pre-war days and we were treated very much like subordinates. Flying really wasn't very pleasant, as we were severely reprimanded for any mistakes or even supposed mistakes that we had made and threatened with tough action. At this time, we returned from an operation before it had hardly begun three times within a month, because of so called 'engine trouble'. I still really don't know why we had engine trouble and in those days I didn't dare ask. It wasn't unusual that I would be severely reprimanded if I didn't bring the plane back to the end point of the patrol within five minutes of the exact estimated time of arrival - after eight hours' flying over the sea. I remember one day as we were returning from an operation, Squadron Leader Liška asked Ota Žanta to hand him his torch. Ota pointed out that the torch was in the pocket behind him, but the skipper could not hear Ota very well and asked him again. Ota gave the same reply, at which the Squadron Leader became very annoyed and shouted the same request again. Ota then shouted back to him "Behind you!!" The Squadron Leader now heard this, but interpreted it as having a fighter plane behind him! In the back, we didn't know anything about this exchange and suddenly the aircraft went into a steep dive. All my papers and instruments shot into the air and I rolled down the passage, trying desperately to hold onto something. It took only ten seconds or so before we levelled out again, but there was mess everywhere. Ota was able to tell us what had transpired after we landed, but our skipper didn't say a word.

It was at this time that Vlasta Skákal joined the squadron and we naturally celebrated our reunion. The celebration was so thorough that I became very ill. I was still flying with Squadron Leader Liška. He suspended me from active duty and sent me for a court martial. Our Squadron Commander was Wing Commander Jindřich Breicetl and I was marched under guard in front of the CO. After dismissing the escort, the CO gave me a great talking-to, dropped the charge against me, re-instated me to flying and even granted me the leave which I was to forfeit. I was very grateful to him, but I was barred from celebrating anything with Vlasta ever again!

I may have mentioned that at the beginning of our operational flying we were using Wellington twin-engine bombers. These were very good planes and most reliable. They carried a crew of six. The crew had to climb into this plane by means of a ladder, which was lowered from the inside. Two doors opened in the belly between the wheels and the crew climbed directly into the pilot's

cabin. The door itself was upholstered from inside and was used as a rest for the navigators when we lay on our stomachs for bombing. To the right of the door, looking towards the front of the plane, was a Perspex opening through which we looked down onto the target and operated the bomb sight. In the front was the front turret and in most cases the front gunner was also a trained wireless operator. On a number of occasions the front gunner was relieved by the wireless operator and they swapped duties. When the crew was in the plane, a collapsible seat was lowered to the right of the pilot, serving as a place for the second pilot. Behind the second pilot, a small corridor on the right of the plane led to the rear. Immediately behind the pilot was the wireless operator facing forward in the plane with all his equipment and behind him facing sideways was the navigator's cabin. Then the passage led to the back of the plane, where on top in about the middle of the fuselage, was the astrodome, where we measured the position of celestial bodies for navigation purposes. At the end of the plane was the rear turret, occupied by the rear gunner. That position was particularly important. In the majority of cases fighter planes attacked from the back. The rear gunner therefore always needed to be on his utmost vigil to spot any fighter at the furthest possible distance, as well as to alert the pilot and coordinate with him during the subsequent combat or evasive action. It could also be said that the navigator and the wireless operator were literally sitting on the bombs like hens on eggs, because directly beneath them lay the bomb bay.

On 19th January 1943 the American Eighth Air Force started day-time bombing raids on Germany. The American Command disregarded warnings given to them by the RAF of the dangers relating to day-time bombing and the Yanks suffered heavy losses. Their formations were broken many times, they often became disoriented and had to find their way back to England in scattered formation. I remember one day late in the afternoon we spotted a number of returning Fortresses, some of which crashed on landing. When the crew got out of these bombers and heard the mechanics speaking in Czech – which to them was a foreign language - they thought that they had landed in enemy territory. When this confusion was cleared up, they were overjoyed at being back in Britain and some of them even kissed the ground in gratitude.

During our time at Talbenny in Wales, the wireless operator in our crew, Zdeněk Řezáč, and I became close, not only because we sat next to each other during combat, but also because we got on very well in other ways. While we were posted together to the squadron, I received an invitation to spend Christmas in Reading. On our holiday to Torquay, Vlasta and we had in fact met two girls, Monica

and Barbara, who were sisters. One was a nurse and the other a school teacher and we had spent a few pleasant days with their family at the end of our leave. Barbara was also sometimes called Bobby.

I didn't have any plans and so was glad to accept the offer. On Christmas Day, I was invited to go to the hospital where Barbara worked and there the Matron asked me if I would like to take part in presenting some gifts. As we inspected these gifts, I particularly noticed a knitted hare about half a metre long in the middle of the table. This toy left such a strong impression on me that I couldn't stop looking at it. I must have told the Matron how much I liked it. I'm not quite sure how I came to be invited to make the presentations. Perhaps airmen and particularly those that were on active duty were quite popular at that time. What I do know, is that I ended up with that long-eared hare! It then became my mascot and for the rest of the war I never flew without it. In the merriment of the New Year's Eve party at the base, it was christened 'Bobby' after Barbara's nickname. Bobby caused much mirth among the different crews. But no matter how much fun they may have made of him, it happened that a few times during unexpected callouts to a flying op I forgot Bobby and when the skipper or one of the crew found out about this, I had to race back to the barracks in a duty car to collect him under the pretext that I had forgotten some navigational tools! And Bobby is still my constant companion to this very day!

We were kept extremely busy at the Talbenny base and between operations we did a lot of local flying, as well as - of course - a lot of fooling around! The weather in Wales was unpleasant and flying therefore rather risky - more so due to the elements than any enemy action. I continued to fly in the crew of Squadron Leader Liška and our second pilot was Flight Sergeant Ota Žanta. Žanta was made skipper of our crew at the end of April and we flew together until the middle of May, when we were transferred to Beaulieu in Hampshire. I tried everything to get back to flying with him and nearly succeeded, but received the sudden bad news early in the following year that he had failed to return from an operation.

It was the middle of May when we said goodbye to our faithful Wellington bomber and started training on a four-engine Liberator. The Liberator was a much larger plane and also required a bigger crew, but I liked the plane very much. We were to fly in Liberators until the end of the war. Beaulieu itself, as well as the base, was one of the nicest places where I had ever been. It lay in New Forest and was actually surrounded by truly beautiful woods. It was about half way between Bournemouth and Southampton and quite close

to London. The summer of 1943 must have been the loveliest we spent in England. It was splendid to spend our days off cycling in the countryside around Beaulieu. Beaulieu Castle, its surroundings and the village nearby were all very picturesque. In the opposite direction and very close to the aerodrome lay the small village of Brockenhurst, with its railway station and quaint pub, the 'Rose and Crown'. Not only did we forget time when we were in the Rose and Crown, but also forgot a lot of our money! As soon as we had finished dinner, we would cycle down to the village and when our drinking was interrupted by the call of: "Time gentlemen please!" at 10 o'clock, we would cycle back to the base with heavy legs, zig zagging in an untidy peleton. We made a good acquaintance with the publican. On a number of occasions we were signed on as guests and continued to party after the 10 o'clock closing. We often sang Czech or Slovak songs in the pub and these became popular with the locals. They even got to know many of the words, not all of which are translatable for the ladies! When I visited the pub a few years after the war, our names and messages were still there written on the ceiling in lipstick. Messages such as: 'Let death go to hell'.

Flying Officer Schoř became my new skipper and Josef Tichý the second pilot. It was an excellent crew. We all got on extremely well and I became particular friends with Emil Mikulenka, our wireless operator. The Liberators of course had more crew, consisting of two pilots and three wireless operators, who performed triple duties and were constantly changing - one operating the wireless, one the radar and one the gun in the top middle turret of the plane. In addition there was the navigator, who by all accounts had the most critical job, the flight engineer and a rear gunner. Sometimes we also carried a second flight engineer, whose function it was to operate the guns on the side of the plane. Some of the aircraft were also fitted with a front turret and we would then carry a front gunner. Our crew, therefore, normally consisted of eight, sometimes nine men. My position was in the nose of the plane. During the day, the view from here was absolutely fantastic. If the Liberator was not fitted with a front turret, it then had a gun in the nose and was operated by the navigator in times of combat.

In mentioning the front turret, I recall how on one winter night operation, shortly after we took off, we tried to lock the front gunner securely in the turret. When we opened the metal doors leading there from my very tiny cabin, however, the great pressure of air blowing from the turret made it extremely difficult to close it again. With the temperature close to or below zero, it was even harder. As I struggled to close the door in my heavy gloves, the

handle broke off. I desperately tried to hold the handle in place in order to keep the door shut and eventually I managed to reach the intercom and call for help. It then took me and the flight engineer over an hour to fix it. It was essential that I give my skipper an accurate flying course, but this was difficult with my maps and pencils scattered all over my instruments. In these circumstances, I could only record time sectors in pencil on the table itself. I also had to watch my mascot Bobby, so that he wouldn't get sucked out of the plane. I really don't know how I caught up on my work and brought the crew home safely. I was always quite concerned that my navigation was as reliable as possible, so that I would not cause the crew any unnecessary anxiety or even some fatal error. My astrodome was just above me and if I wanted to see what the pilots were doing during the day, from there I could look straight into the pilots' cabin. I had quite a large table, but it was not always large enough for all my equipment and for Bobby, who always took position in the top corner. It was usually only possible to get to the front of the plane after the front wheel had been retracted and then one still had to climb on all fours. This was sometimes very difficult, especially in winter, when we wore a heavy flying suit and boots. But all in all I really loved the Liberators and was very happy to stay with them until the end of the campaign.

Our practice period with the Liberators lasted until mid August, when we completed all the cross country test flights and were again ready for operational duties. One of the highlights of our stay was the marriage of one of the navigators, Pavel Kubín. A number of us got invited to the wedding. His bride was a girl from Brockenhurst and the wedding took place in the local church. I would have very much liked to go, but unfortunately that day I had to complete my final cross country flight, which lasted 8½ hours and it took us almost around the whole of Britain. Vlasta Skákal did attend the ceremony, however, and when I met up with him late in the night after our return he told me what a wonderful occasion it had been. Pavel Kubín was in Ota Žanta's crew. I had wanted to fly with Ota again and made it known that I would like to rejoin that crew, with the permission of the Squadron Commander of course. But unfortunately, as I have mentioned before, they all went missing on a flying mission a few months later. It was also shortly after our resumption of operational flying that the crew of Flight Lieutenant Palichleb were killed and with them my friend Zdeněk Řezáč.

I was now flying with Flying Officer Schoř. It was a good crew and we liked being in each other's company. We were rostered to fly the first op on our new aircraft on either 20th or 21st August, but at the last minute we were rescheduled to the second round of operations on 22nd August. The first two sorties were led by Wing

Commander Jindřich Breicetl and Squadron Leader Václav Korda. In those days, however, the German fighters were particularly active and, according to reports, our Commander and his crew were shot down on 21st August by seven JU88's. The men lost were Wing Commander Breicetl DFC, Vilda Jakš, Josef Felkl, Josef Halada, Eduard Pavelka and Michal Pizur. Not long before, I had had a drink with Pizur and he had confided to me that if he survived the war, he would never sit in another plane. With them was also Emil Mrázek as wireless operator and so I lost another very good friend. Emil was billeted in the same hut and occupied the bed next to me.

For the mission of 22nd August, our plane was commanded by Squadron Leader Vladimír Nedvěd. The weather was literally miserable and within a few hours of leaving England, as we were flying in and out of clouds at approximately 500 feet above sea level, I spotted a German submarine. I quickly alerted the skipper, but before we had a chance to turn around and go into attack, we lost sight of it. We dropped a marker buoy and sent a message back both to the base and to headquarters, so that an intensive search could be continued by the next aircraft. We were very disappointed that we had been unable to attack, but it was made virtually impossible by the weather. I continued to fly with Flying Officer Schoř and his crew, in which the first wireless operator was my good friend Emil Mikulěnka. I wished I could have stayed with them longer, but at the end of September I was transferred to Northern Ireland, to the base at Aldegrove.

On one of the first missions in the short time that I was posted at Beaulieu, I nearly forgot Bobby behind. It was a very dark night with low cloud cover and three crews were posted for active duty. We were briefed that German patrols were very active at that time and for our own protection on the way back we were to meet at a special rendezvous a few hundred miles south-west of England and only from there to proceed in formation back to base. In that way, we would have much greater firing power if we were attacked and thus much better chances of survival. We all had a short meeting and dinner together before starting off.

Our crew was scheduled for first take-off. Quite often we sang as we were driven to the aircraft, but somehow on this particular night no one was in the mood. The second crew was skippered by Flying Officer Adolf Musálek and the third by Pilot Officer Metoděj Šebela. After we had clambered into the plane and I found myself in my tight little cabin, I discovered to my horror that I didn't have Bobby with me. I told the skipper and he requested the tower to send a duty car back to our plane, understandably not mentioning the missing hare. And so I rushed to the barracks, grabbed Bobby and

raced right back. It was about 11 pm when we took off. It was one of those dark, unfriendly nights. It was also pretty bumpy and the pilots had to rely on their instruments all the way. Of course we could not keep radio contact with the base. The only admissible messages would be only the most important, such as the spotting of German craft or submarines, engagement with enemy fighters or the sighting of downed aircraft afloat on the sea. The loss of our Wing Commander was still fresh in our minds and the atmosphere throughout the mission was quite tense.

Eight hours later, our wireless operator picked up a message from the third crew reporting engine trouble and that they had had to cut back one engine. We surmised that they would have either been recalled or diverted to an aerodrome within safe reach, where they would be out of danger of being attacked by enemy planes. We did not expect to meet them therefore at our meeting point. When the time for the rendezvous came, I was fairly certain that we were circling around the correct location, as by then I was reasonably sure of my navigation skills. And so we orbited in that area for about 25 minutes in the hope that we would be joined by the second crew. The weather had not improved and at 1,000 feet we had a thick carpet of clouds beneath us and another blanket for about 3,000 – 4,000 feet above us. When the other crew had not appeared after about 30 minutes, we proceeded back to the base on our own. It was 29th August 1944. We reached the base safely, still tailed by bad weather, nearly finishing in the balloon barrage at Southampton due to a slight miscalculation, but everything turned out fine. Only on landing were we informed that the plane of Flying Officer Adolf Musálek had crashed immediately after take-off and all on board were killed. Pilot Officer Šebela had been diverted to Gibraltar and we were the only crew to return home safely. Pilot Officer Šebela and his crew went missing in action by the end of the year.

The day after we lost Flying Officer Musálek's crew, we had a day off in between ops. I was in the barracks writing letters when I heard someone outside calling that a Liberator was coming down in a steep dive and was about to crash. I ran out of the hut and a few seconds later we heard an explosion and saw dense smoke coming out of the forest about two miles away. I picked up my bicycle and rushed to the spot. I remembered that during lunch Vlasta had told me that his crew were rostered for afternoon flying practice at evasive action in combat, or cork screwing as it was called. And that was exactly what the unfortunate plane was doing. My heart was pounding, I was sure that Vlasta must be in that plane. It took quite a while to get to the scene of that tragedy. The ammunition was still exploding, the whole plane was on fire and we could see

burning bodies in the wreckage. Once on the spot, however, I discovered that it was not Vlasta's crew, but that of Flying Officer Palichleb, some of whom were the crew from which I had been taken two months before. And so it was here that I lost my friend, Zdeněk Řezáč. Zdeněk had come to me only two hours earlier, after lunch, and asked me why I looked so unhappy. I had told him that my leave had been cancelled due to my imminent posting to Northern Ireland and Zdeněk had expressed his regret at my transfer from his crew, as they were all going on a holiday following that afternoon's exercises. He had wanted to spend his leave with his parents in London. While I was very relieved that I had not lost Vlasta, my feelings were muted by Zdeněk's loss. I cycled slowly back to the base and just as I was entering the gate, someone told me that one of our crew had been involved in combat and had returned with a damaged plane. And so I now quickly cycled to the perimeter where the returning Liberators were usually parked. As I got there, the body of the dead gunner, Andrej Šimek, was being taken out of the plane. His skipper, Josef Stach, one of our very experienced pilots, was to survive the war, but killed five months later, during the test flight of a German Siebel plane which had been left in Czechoslovakia.

I was very sorry that I had been taken out of Flying Officer's Schoř's crew and posted to Northern Ireland, but of course during the war no one questioned orders, they were simply to be unquestioningly obeyed. Four new crews were thus formed and the Command probably thought that Northern Ireland was a much safer training ground than the bases in England.

The captains within the four new crews were Flight Sergeant Ján Lazar, who was to be my skipper for the flying tasks that I still needed to complete, Flight Sergeant Jaroslav Friedl and Warrant Officer Rudolf Nedoma. Emil Mikulenka was also transferred with us, all in all it was a great crew. We weren't at all pleased that we had to make the journey virtually across the whole of England to Scotland, by ship from the port of Stranraer to Belfast and then by bus to Aldergrove and the base. The travel took two full days and a night, when we could have done it in 2½ hours in a Liberator! Travelling by train in those days in England was also not very pleasant. They were overcrowded, often delayed due to bombing raids and in the darkness also very dimly lit in order not to be noticeable to enemy bombers or fighter planes.

Our accommodation in Aldergrove was the standard. During our stay, we were able to visit Belfast several times and I also fitted in a trip to Dublin. This had to be done in civilian clothes, of course, and so I borrowed a suit from another chap. I travelled by train and a

friend booked me into a city hotel. It was quite incredible to walk along fully lit streets at night. It was a sight that I had not seen in five years. It was also wonderful to look in shop windows and see a variety of goods or to walk into a restaurant and order practically anything I wished. Such experiences were now absolutely unheard of in England, as well as on the continent. I remember returning late to my hotel room, switching on the light and nearly dying of fright when I saw that the windows were not blacked out. I dived for the switch and immediately turned off the lights. Only then did I fully realise that, for the first time since 1939, I was in a country that was not involved in the war. I was literally burning with the desire to somehow send a message to my parents back home, but then realised what a risk it would be and the problems it could have caused my family and so abandoned the idea. I was only to spend 1½ days in Dublin before returning back to Aldergrove.

The Aldergrove airfield was on the banks of Lake Loughneagh, but the weather during our stay there was very inhospitable. If my memory serves me well, the Belfast of that time was also not a city to which I would have much desire to return. Our pilots were undergoing rigorous training and of course we always flew with them. We completed the exercises by 10th November and returned via the same route to Beaulieu. We were then given a fortnight's leave, one week of which I spent in London. There I learned from friends that I had been granted my commission. I was extremely surprised, but also very pleased. I know that for this I owe gratitude to Squadron Commander Nedvěď. I obtained my uniform while still in London, and was appropriately proud. Needless to say, I had been very proud to wear any air force uniform, but I felt a certain satisfaction in earning this one. The only thing that marred my joy when I got back to camp was that Vlasta did not receive an officer's commission. This did not cause friction between Vlasta and me, but did so with some others, who had expected but did not get one.

I was very happy to be back at the Beaulieu base. I liked that airfield the most of all our stations. We recommenced our training immediately after our leave and were again ready for operational duty by the beginning of December. The weather that winter remained adverse and on two occasions on returning from night patrol we had had to land at an American base at Dunkeswell. This was a base in Devon and due to its high elevation had good visibility, when other areas were fog-bound. We spent a few days there before we could return home. We were amazed at the differences between the American and English bases. It seemed that, in comparison, the Yanks were living in the lap of luxury. And no wonder - they were collecting more than twice our pay. But of

course they came from a different world. One evening, at an entertainment night, I met the American actor Jerry Colonna and we all had a few drinks. The Dunkeswell officers' mess closed at 10 o'clock, but the boys in my crew asked me to join them at the sergeants' mess, where a big party was in progress. I and my skipper, Flight Lieutenant Tobyška, invited Jerry Colonna to join us and he was pleased to accept. By then the bar was closed, so one of the ground staff procured a barrel of 90% alcohol anti-freeze, which we mixed with orange juice! Luckily I wasn't in the mood for drinking, but I recall how several of us had to get Jerry Colonna back home with considerable difficulty. I was shocked to see that when the Yanks played cards, especially poker, there were sometimes hundreds of pounds on the table. This gave me goose bumps, as at that time my monthly pay as a pilot officer was 18 pounds. We returned to Beaulieu from Dunkeswell under quite bad weather conditions, but were extremely glad to be back after five days at the American base.

On my return from Northern Ireland, I made an excellent friend, Sally Van der Gucht. She was a nurse at the local Brockenhurst hospital and lived in Camberley, in Surrey. Several times she invited me to spend a weekend at the family's home at Camberley, located close to Sandhurst Military Academy. Sally's father was an ex-Major in the Indian Army and her brother was also an army Major. They had a lovely home and I spent quite a few very pleasant weekends there. Her father was a very dignified old gentleman and her mother spoke French fluently and must have been of French origin. I met a number of fellows there from the Free French Armée de l'Air. One of them was a Commander of the Free French Squadron and I was later sad to hear that when France was liberated and the squadron was returning home to France to take up duties, he and his crew were killed on their take-off from England. I met a lot of elderly ex-army officers in Sally's home, including colonels and generals, and I was rather embarrassed to be treated practically as an equal by these 'big brass'. On a number of occasions I was asked to play bridge in the homes of these gentlemen and although I was not always overly confident, they tried to make me feel comfortable, at which my affection and esteem for England and for English people only increased. Sometimes Sally and I cycled to the local pub for a drink and one of the very regular visitors - a family friend and ex-army colonel - always said to Sally: "Don't do anything that you can't do on a bicycle!"

The winter of 1943-4 was not too severe and of course in Beaulieu it was quite bearable. We spent Christmas at Beaulieu and I remember there was a big party on Christmas Day. According to intelligence information, the German Navy was quite active in the

Bay of Biscay and I was in a crew that was rostered to be on call. I was terribly disappointed that I could not go to the party, but after much persuasion on my part, I was allowed to attend on the condition that I would leave at 10 pm. It was easy to agree to this, but extremely difficult to keep. Even though I did not touch alcohol in accordance with flying regulations and only sucked on lemonade, I lingered until midnight.

At the expected time of the briefing, when we awaited to hear to which part of the Bay of Biscay we would be dispatched to chase some destroyers, we were told that the torpedo ships had not yet set out and that our operation was being deferred. The next day brought the splendid news, however, that our squadron had been given the special task of trying to locate and destroy an Alsterufer, a fast German ship used for transporting raw materials from Japan. These ships were called blockade runners during the war. We were given its position a few hours previously and we were given to understand that this information would be updated during our flight. I was allocated to the crew of Karel Schoř and we had the privilege of first take-off, thus having the greatest chance of attacking the blockade runner. We lifted off and I navigated the plane to the exact estimated location. But what was to happen this time? After about four hours' flying, we received the message that we were to return immediately, because the weather was rapidly turning against us. What can I say - I nearly cried with disappointment that such an opportunity again could not be fully exploited. Not only I, but the whole crew, felt quite down. Just before touch down, the radio operator received the news that another of our planes had continued in the mission and succeeded in hitting the ship. It was my friend Olda Doleřal's crew, which included my other close friends, the radio operator Marcel Ludikar and navigator Zdeněk Hanuř. In fact it was 'Zdenda' who had dropped one of the bombs directly behind one of the Alsterufer's chimneys. Olda then finished off the action through accurate gun fire. We landed in a good mood. The main thing was that it was a fellow crew that had sunk the Alsterufer. Victory over this German blockade runner belongs among the greatest successes of No. 311 Squadron.

We were not called to duty till 27th December, but after returning from this whole day's operation, I ran into our Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Nedvěd outside of the barracks. He asked me how I had enjoyed the party. Well, I couldn't very well boast about how long I had stayed, but after exchanging a few words about the party, as well as the mission from which I had just returned, I was told to stay grounded for seven days. I was a bit grizzly about this, but not as much as when I was then sent on an op on New Year's Eve and on another a short time after.

We were constantly busy until the middle of January, when I was given two weeks' leave. On my return at the beginning of February, I was told that we would soon be transferred, but no one knew where. I was pretty miserable about this, as I really loved Hampshire for its beautiful countryside, pleasant weather and - even though we were bombed once or twice - its close proximity to London. It was war and the bombing not unexpected. I like to remember how in the middle of summer on practice bombing flights we would fly along the coast between the mainland and the Isle of Wight and up to Bournemouth, the limit of our range. It was lovely to observe the beautiful beaches in this area, but of course we were at war and not on holiday and we could steal only brief glimpses of this scenery and continue to wherever we were needed. My love of England grew more and more and I absolutely adored flying, despite the dangers that were associated with it.

Our squadron, No. 311 Bomber Squadron, moved from Beaulieu to its new base at Predannack on Lizard Point in south Cornwall on 23rd February 1944. It was there that very shortly after our arrival we lost the crew of my good friend Ota Žanta. By then I had also nearly succeeded in getting back to Ota's crew. Ota's navigator was Flying Officer Kubín from my navigator course, who had been married in Beaulieu only a few months previously. The rear gunner in the crew was Lád'a Kadlec. Lád'a had only one leg, he had lost the other when his Wellington was attacked by German fighters on a bombing mission over Germany earlier in the war. My friend Bohouš Vaverka, also a close friend of Ota, was taken out of the crew just before its fateful operation.

We officers were accommodated at the holiday hotel Phildhu, two to three miles from the airfield, on the rocks overlooking the beach. In good weather we could see clear to Penzance. It was a beautifully picturesque location. The hotel could no longer be used for tourism and was now used exclusively by the air force. We visited Penzance and the surrounding countryside at every opportunity. On the other side of the peninsula was the small town of St Ives. It was a lovely little spot with a typical fishing harbour, where the fishermen mainly trawled for lobsters. It was wonderful to have lunch or dinner in one of the local cafes and feast on fresh lobster.

Even though it was still only the end of February when we were transferred, the weather there was much warmer than in Hampshire and on a sunny, windless day we could even have a swim. I continued to fly with Ján Lazar. I was the only officer in the crew at that time, which was not entirely pleasant. It made no difference when we were flying, but whenever we were diverted to other

airfields, I as an officer was supposed to go to the officers' quarters, while the boys went to the sergeants' accommodation. Whenever that happened, however, I usually took my stripes off and joined the boys in their quarters. Several times while we were stationed in Predannack, we flew to Prestwick in Scotland, where most of the Liberators were sent for major service and overhaul. We usually took two Liberators on the way up, one of which was left behind, and then the two crews flew back together in the other plane. We would always improvise a card table at the back of the Liberator and played poker. It often happened that when the game was at its most interesting, one of the non-participants must have given a signal to the pilot and the plane would take a sharp evasive action. All the cards and money and sometimes we too ended up rolling all over the floor. The names we then called the pilot cannot be listed here. No real conflict ever ensued, however, and we all ended up having a good laugh over it, especially the one who was winning!

Shortly after our arrival at Predannack on 28th February, we only very narrowly escaped disaster. After taking off on an operation at 11.30 pm, we discovered that fuel was leaking from one of the main tanks and flowing into the main body of the aircraft, presenting a great danger. Ján Lazar gave strict instructions that no one light a cigarette and we called base to inform them of the problem and to say that we were returning. We dropped our depth charges in the sea and made an emergency landing only thirty minutes after take-off. It was usually hazardous to land with an excess load of fuel, even without bombs on board. But Ján executed a perfect landing and we were ecstatic to be in one piece. The aircraft was tested under normal flying conditions with half filled tanks and everything appeared to be ok. The tanks were declared to be intact and we were severely reprimanded. But we were certain that there was a fault and felt rather bitter about it. On our next op on the following day, we flew in a different Liberator, named 'U' for Uniform. 'P' for Pappa, in which we had flown the night before, was assigned to a different crew. When we returned from our mission, we were told that the crew of 'Pappa' had also had to turn back due to the same problem. The tank was found to be ruptured at the top and the fuel thus only started to leak when the plane was in a climbing position. Nothing was said to us or to our skipper, however we felt that the blame was still accorded to us, while the other crew was exonerated.

We were kept extremely busy at Predannack and so had the feeling that something big was about to happen. The concentration of ground troops kept increasing, while supporting bomber and fighter squadrons were being transferred to our area.

In the middle of April, I had a rather exciting experience. It was April 18th and the weather was extremely bad. Vlasta Skákal had been on call, but because all the missions had been cancelled, he asked me whether I would go to Penzance with him. I wasn't in the mood that particular evening and said that I would rather stay at the base, have a drink in the officers' mess and for a change go to bed early. As I was going to dinner, I heard that an urgent order had come through from headquarters that two Liberators were needed for an operation that night despite the bad weather. Vlasta was rostered to fly with Warrant Officer Jaroslav Friedl, but when it was ascertained that Vlasta had already left, I volunteered to take his place. I quickly packed my navigation instruments including Bobby and we all rushed to the op room. We learnt that we would not be returning to Britain immediately and that further instructions would be given to us along the way. We took off before midnight in a heavily clouded sky and flew most of the night in low clouds. Early in the morning we received an order to turn toward Gibraltar. As we flew close to the Portuguese coast the weather improved greatly, as did our mood at the thought that we would spend a few hours in the warm climes of Gibraltar. When we passed Lisbon, I went to the flying deck to have a yarn with the pilots and while there asked the second pilot if I could sit in his seat and try a bit of 'flying'. He agreed and as I flew the plane on this lovely morning under the southern sun, life could not feel better. I was looking toward the Portuguese coast in the distance and just as we were about to turn around Cape St Vincent, the southernmost part of Portugal, I spotted a submarine emerging from the water. I raised the alarm and dived back to my place in the navigator's cabin in the nose of the plane, so that I could give the wireless operator the exact coordinates for transmitting to Gibraltar. Of course the sub had also spotted us and disappeared under the waves before we had a chance to attack it. We dropped a marker buoy at the location and after circling several more times, continued to Gibraltar. By then we had already been in the air for twelve hours and our fuel was getting low. We landed in Gibraltar on 19th April. Even though we had not slept all night, we had a quick wash immediately after the lengthy debriefing and headed to town. It was wonderful to see oranges, bananas and lots of tropical fruit again after so many years. It occurred to me that young English children were unlikely to have ever seen a banana, as these were not imported during the war, or at least you never saw them in the shops. It was an exhilarating experience and we did not return to the base till very late in the afternoon. After a few drinks with our meal, we fell into bed and slept like logs.

Early in the morning, we were informed that we were to make ready for the next part of the op, but we were allowed to go back to the city for two hours and buy bunches of bananas, oranges, as well

as many other things to take back to our friends. We were also briefed that German activity in the Bay of Biscay had escalated and that we should be particularly alert all the way back. We took off late in the afternoon and it was dusk by the time we approached the northern part of Portugal. In the middle of the Bay of Biscay, shortly after midnight, we spotted firing on the water in the distance. A little later, the radar operator announced that he could see five blips on his radar screen. We pressed on, not knowing what to expect. I, somewhat bravurely, said to Jarda Friedl: "Let's go and add a little oil to the fire!" When we had approached to a distance of about 10 miles, I gave the wireless operator our exact position. He then put it in code and sent it back to base in case of an emergency, such as to report the presence of the enemy craft or if we were shot down. I darkened my cabin, prepared my bomb sight, switched the depth charges to 'ready' and directed the pilot towards the target. But the night was too dark. I lay on the bomb sight and when we were quite close, perhaps half a mile away and still descending, I asked the mechanic to drop a flare through the flare chute. The flare was usually attached to a small parachute and normally started to burn immediately on leaving the plane and brightly lit up the entire scene. We were at a height of approximately 500 feet, still in descent and apparently directly over our target, when the flare illuminated the space below us. To our horror, we recognised that we were above four German destroyers accompanying a submarine that was protected in their middle. The convoy opened up at us with all its armoury. It was real hell, with tracers flying everywhere and exploding shrapnel drumming on the metal body of the Liberator. Our only reason for surviving was the fact that by then we were too low, in the middle of the formation and that some of the anti aircraft guns were unable to deflect to such a low angle.

I directed the skipper to the submarine and when the sub was dead on in the bomb sight, dropped the depth charges. As soon as I dropped them, I shouted to Jarda on the intercom: "And now let's get out of this hell!" Which he happily did. We sent a message to Britain giving the sub's exact position and then shadowed the convoy on radar at a very respectable distance for about twenty minutes. It was moving reasonably fast and when we returned home we were told that, although other aircraft had been directed to the area, the convoy itself was too close to German fighter bases to enable attack. I remember how, when we were in the middle of the crossfire, the thought that my bananas would not taste too good mixed with the salty water of the Bay of Biscay flashed through my mind. However we sighed a deep breath of relief on touch down at our base in Predannack and were extremely happy to be home alive and well after more than thirteen hours in the air. I took some

bananas with me when I later went to London and gave a small bunch to Sally for her father. She subsequently told me how he had enjoyed explaining how the bananas should be eaten to his guests at a big party he had given. They evidently brought back a lot of memories to the old gentleman of the time that he had served in India.

The weather continued to improve and we spent some lovely days in Penzance and in St Ives when we were not flying. This part of the world was naturally out of bounds to all civilians, both from near and far, and so the beaches were deserted. On 4th June, as we were returning in very bad weather from an extremely long op, I remember coming out of the clouds on our approach to England and to our immense surprise there below us, close to the Scilly Isles, lay practically the entire home fleet. We thanked our lucky stars that they didn't open fire at us with all that they had, because we very well knew that the Navy fired first and you only got to asking questions if you survived! It was only a brief sighting of the fleet and soon we were in cloud again. We were nearing our base. At about a distance of five miles, I informed the skipper of our exact position, packed my navigator's gadgets and crawled to the flying deck. I noticed from the altimeter that we were at only 400 feet and still descending in heavy cloud. I drew this to the attention of the skipper, as our airfield was situated on a rocky outcrop some 300 feet above the sea. Ján most probably thought that he would see land and our base at any moment, but the clouds were rolling close to the ground and the visibility was thus smaller, indeed less than two miles. Ján therefore decided to climb to gain altitude, but we entered a heavy cumulus cloud and all of a sudden were caught in an uplift resulting in a steep rise. This caused our fuel tanks to show 'zero'. Ján was desperate to straighten the plane and thinking that we were out of fuel, gave the order to prepare to abandon the plane. It was only after we reached a height of 5,000 feet that we got out of the clouds and the plane was level again. We could then correctly assess our fuel situation. We could no longer land at our base and were diverted to St Davies, a base further north, approximately 30 minutes' flying time. We landed late in the afternoon and spent the night there, returning home on 5th June. Usually after ops, we got 24 hours' rest from the time of landing, so after I'd had a wash and a shave, I went to spend the day in St Ives. I was to learn afterwards that only half an hour later the base was shut down and no-one was allowed to leave!

When I woke up the next morning, on 6th June and my birthday once more, I heard the news on the radio that the Allied forces had landed in Europe. I rushed back to the base as quickly as I could, for I knew that our services would be urgently needed. Our crew

was not rostered on that day, but I was glad to be back at the base. The whole squadron was at the ready and we had been doing intensive flying all through the previous month and the beginning of June. Our main task was to patrol and attack any German shipping that may try to attack the transport ships of the Allied forces heading for Europe. One of our crews, composed of Jan Vella, Leo Linhart, Karel Kvapil and Vilém Kauders, successfully attacked and sank a German submarine that had penetrated the Allied shipping route. The first three crewmembers were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross or DFC for this action, but all four were lost when their Oxford crashed in mountainous northern England while going on holiday.

The weather that June was not very favourable and so the Allied forces in Europe sadly lacked the air support they might have had. The bad conditions also affected our ops, which were carried out regardless. Often we had to be diverted to different aerodromes and this sometimes presented certain associated inconveniences, such as not having any toothbrushes, shaving gear or spare laundry items etc., but we took this in our stride and just got used to it.

In our later operations in Cornwall, we lost the crew of Flying Officer František Naxera and during an op on the second front we also lost the crew of Pilot Officer Karel Novotný. He was a young pilot and extremely nice. He had returned only a short time beforehand from the Bahamas, where he had just finished his training. Despite his youth, he was a very good pilot, crashing in bad weather on returning from a completed mission in the mountains nearby.

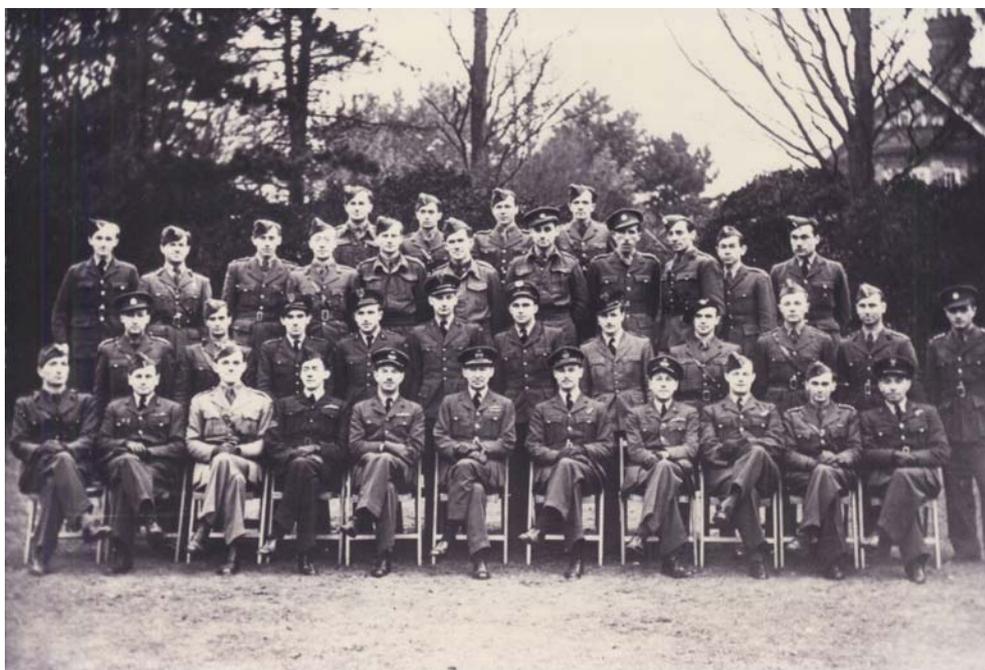
Our nerves started to strain a little by the beginning of July. We were quite stressed and so were very pleased when our ops eased slightly. Another squadron of Wellingtons was posted to our airfield and as our missions diminished, theirs increased and they suffered fairly heavy losses.

At the beginning of August, when the Allies were already quite well-established in Europe, we were informed that our squadron would be moved again. So on 8th August we were transferred to Scotland, to the Tain airfield about 30 miles north of Inverness. I didn't fly in my own crew from Predannack to Tain. I remember how we flew through a very heavy electrical storm on approach to our new base. In a storm like that there is quite a lot of electricity inside the plane and, if you watch the propellers, sparks follow the blades. This creates the impression that the propeller is on fire. It is an interesting sight, but could be a terrific fright if seen for the first time. I had been in such a situation several times before, but this was the worst atmospheric tempest that I had flown in up till then.

Our operational duties in Tain were patrolling the Norwegian coast and attacking enemy shipping in the area. When I arrived in Tain, I had just reached the number of operational hours that would allow me to leave the squadron and be transferred to another Command, such as the Training or Transport Command, or to any other flying duties that were not operation-based. While I was very happy in Ján Lazar's crew, I was starting to feel very tired and felt it would be good to have a change. Nor did I like the prospect of the very long nights in northern Scotland, where the winters were eternal and daylight minimal. I flew two more ops with Ján Lazar and then indicated to the Squadron Commander that I would be interested in a transfer to the Transport Command, if such an opportunity arose. And so at the end of August I farewelled No. 311 Squadron and left for the Transport Command school in the Midlands.

In the Royal Air Force

Training II. *In the photos below we were merely the Czechoslovak contingent. But in many cases we taught in large navigational courses with hundreds of other navigator students.*



Navigation students in Eastbourne - First row: 2nd from right is Zdeněk Hanuš. Second row: 1st from left is Pospíšil, 1st from right is Holubář. Third row: 1st from left is JN, -, -, Doležal, -, Mucha, Pavel Kubín, Penk, Dušek, -, -, Vlasta Skákal. Fourth row: 1st from right is Zikmund, 2nd is Stříbrný.



Czechoslovak group in Dumfries.

On the left: a group of Czechoslovak officers still in army uniform.

Standing from left to right: Zdeněk Hanuš, Jaroslav Doležal, Pavel Kubín (+13.3.44), Miroslav Mucha (+13.10.42), Petr Filip Dušek, Robert Sigmund.

Sitting left: Viktor Penk, Teodor Pospíšil, Josef Stříbrný (born in Lidice, the civilian village raised to the ground by the Nazis), Vilém Holubář.

Right group: standing 1st from the left is JN, 2nd is Vlasta Skákal, the others are British instructors.



*No. 1429 Czechoslovak Operation Training Flight (COTF),
Course No.: 11 (15.9.-21.12.42), Church Broughton.
Airmen from the crews of the first pilots – Sgts. Huňáček and Hanuše.
Standing - from the left: Sgt. Josef Bogdan, Sgt. Stanislav Huňáček,
Sgt. František Navrátil and Sgt. František Hnilica.
Sitting - from the left: Sgt. Antonín Kříž, Sgt. JN, Sgt. Čestmír Hanuš,
Sgt. Zdeněk Řezáč († 30.08.43), Sgt. Zdeněk Glier /Glír/.*

In early June 1942, I proudly received my wings





Our first operational plane was a Vickers Wellington Mk. IC, a twin-engine medium bomber, with a bomb capacity of 4,500 lb (2,041 kg), 4-8 defense machine guns and attaining a maximum speed of 235 mph (378 km/h). The Mk. IC had a crew of six: a 1st and 2nd pilot, radio operator, navigator/bomb airman, nose gunner and tail gunner.

My very good friend, W/O. Oldřich Jambor, pilot instructor. He was killed during the night-time Operation Millenium (1,000 bomber aircraft over Cologne) flying with No. 75 Bomber Squadron RNZAF. His plane was shot down and only the tail gunner survived, becoming a PoW.



No. 311 Czechoslovak Bomber Squadron RAF



*Crew of Karel Schoř near Liberator GR Mk.V BZ7 630, called KITTY.
From left: Karel Pumpr (flight engineer), František Sadil (wireless operator/airgunner), Emil Mikulenka (WOP/AG), Josef Tichý (2nd pilot), Karel Schoř (captain/1st pilot), Ladislav Tarana (tail gunner), JN (navigator/bomb aimer), Viktor Tégel (WOP/AG).*



S/Ldr. Tobyška leads personnel of No. 311 Bomber Squadron on parade at Beaulieu. JN between 5th (Emil Mrázek) and 6th in line.



Roll call of No. 311 Squadron in spring 1943, JN behind 7th and 8th man on right.



Celebrating the 3rd anniversary of No. 311 Czechoslovak Bomber Squadron, 3rd-4th August, 1943, Beaulieu. W/Cmr. Jindřich Breitcetil, DFC, President Edvard Beneš and Commander-in-Chief of Coastal Command, AM Sir John C. Slessor, KCB, DSO, MC.



Friends II:

Emil Mrázek, WOP/AG. No. 311 Squadron and my very good friend, killed on 21st August, 1943 with W/Cmr. Breitcetil and others in Biscay Bay. They defended themselves bravely, but were shot down by 6 Nazi fighters.



Karel Mrázek DFC, DSO, brother of Emil Mrázek. Karel Mrázek was a very successful fighter pilot and leader of the Czechoslovak Fighter Wing.



Vladimír Nedvěd DFC, MBE, Commander of No. 311 Squadron, my skipper on 3 operations and my friend.



Ota Žanta, one of the squadron's best pilots and a wonderful friend. Shot down over the Bay of Biscay on 13th March, 1944.



Láďa Kadlec, airman and brave amputee, perished with Ota Žanta.



Ján Lazar with family.

Josef Balejka, 2nd pilot in Ján Lazar's crew.



Josef Bílek, wireless operator in our regular crew, in the uniform of the Foreign Legion.

Marion Patzelt, 1st January, 1941, as a soldier in the Middle East.



Marcel Ludikar.

No. 311 Squadron wireless operator/air gunner, W/O. Arnošt Pollak /Polák/.



Training new operational crews for No. 311 Czechoslovak Bomber Squadron:



Northern Ireland, late 1943.

Back row from left: Sgt. JN, F/Sgt. Emil Mikulenka, Sgt. Alois Nebesáček, F/Sgt. Nedoma, W/O. Sadil, Sgt. Weiss.

Front from left: F/Sgt. Jaroslav Hala, F/Sgt. Ján Lazar, F/O. Josef Stříbrný, F/O. L. Král, W/O. Viktor Tegel, F/Sgt. Jaroslav Friedl, Sgt. Karel Pumpr.



Beaulieu, January, 1944. Crew of Captain W/O. Ján Lazar.

Back row from left: W/O. Ján Lazar (1st pilot), P/O. JN (navigator), F/Sgt. Sigut (2nd pilot), W/O. Sadil (WOP/AG).

Front from left: W/O. Viktor Tegel (WOP/AG.), F/Sgt. Alois Nebesáček (rear gunner), Sgt. Heřman (WOP/AG.).

General Janoušek transfers command of No. 311 Squadron from W/Cmr. Nedvěd to W/Cmr. Šejbl in February, 1944.





W/Cmr. Nedvěd leads flying personnel of No. 311 Bomber Squadron on parade, Beaulieu, 1944. Second in command is S/Ldr. Korda.



Leave-taking with our respected W/Cmr. Vladimír Nedvěd.



Crew of Captain W/O. Ján Lazar, Predannock, 1944.
Standing: W/O. Balejka (former defender of Poland and fighter pilot of No. 303 Polish Squadron), P/O. JN, W/O. Ján Lazar, Sgt. Sadil, Sgt. Heřman.
Sitting: F/Sgt. Josef Bílek and Sgt. Alois Nebesáček.



I flew many operational flights with F/Sgt. Jenda Lazar, all of them over many hours. We did not have luck with subs, however. We only shot at one on 2nd March 1944 - with an unclear result. Jenda was an employee of Baťa and after the war he worked in Kenya and later went to live in Australia.



F/Sgt. Jarda Friedl - my skipper during two U-boat attacks in April 1944.

A friend of Jarda Friedl in Beaulieu.



The southernmost point of Portugal, Sagres, during a flight to Gibraltar on 20th April, 1944.



18th April, 1944 on the coast of Portugal. In this area we found the German supply U-boat.

D-Day 6th June 1944



On return from a mission on 5th June, the day before D-Day. We had sighted the large number of ships heading to the continent.

From left: Sgt. Leitensdorfer, Sgt. Sadil, Sgt. Heřman, WAAF driver, W/O. Ján Lazar, Sgt. Synek, Sgt. Nebesáček, P/O. JN, W/O. Josef Balejka.



On 5th June, 1944 - in live discussion with ground staff and operational airmen. The invasion is within reach. It is also to our credit, because without the prior destruction of submarines, the invasion may not have been possible.

From left: Alois Nebesáček, Vašek Leitensdorfer, JN, -, Heřman, -, Jan Lazar, Synek, -

Friends III:



On holiday with my companions from No. 311 Squadron at a beach in Cornwall.



In Cornwall with my good friends Venda Jílek, Vlasta Skákal, Bohouš Vaverka (standing) and Běda Procházka in 1944.



With Daphne's child, born after her father, a British Major and tank leader, was killed at the D-Day landing. Daphne and Vlasta became close for several years after that. Daphne even visited Czechoslovakia. They did not marry, however, as the Communist system may have made it difficult.



My best friend in No. 311 Squadron, navigator Vlasta Skákal.

VII. Flying with the Transport Command

This training lasted approximately four weeks. We were separated into groups - navigators, pilots and radio operators, each group attending different lectures. Our only combined instruction was meteorology. The lectures started at 8 am and continued, with a break for lunch, until 4 pm. Naturally, we also had a lot of homework, so there was not too much free time left. Even so, we did find time to now and then drop in to the local town and visit the pub or cinema. I was very proud of the fact that I had passed the written exams with very good results and had topped the class in maths and spherical trigonometry. Soon after we finished our lessons in theory, we were transferred to the Bramcote No. 105 Operational Training Unit (OTU) air force base in Warwickshire, where we continued in practical flying training. My skipper there was Josef Kuhn. He was also a very experienced pilot from the No. 311 Squadron, with a Distinguished Flying Medal and all the other decorations to his name. He was a very fine fellow and a good friend to me. Our training was carried out mainly in Wellingtons and was quite rigorous.

Towards the middle of October, just before our training ended, I took severely ill and had to go to hospital. As I had to remain there for nearly a fortnight, I was taken out of the crew and was discharged from the Transport Command. I was extremely disappointed and immediately after my discharge from the hospital requested an interview at the Air Ministry. I put my case very strongly and stated that if I could not fly with the Transport Command I would like to be sent back to operational duties. A week after my visit to the Ministry, I was informed that I was to be posted to No. 24 Squadron at Hendon in London, where I should continue to fly with the Transport Command. I was glad at this news, as my friend Sally was also living in London at this time and this way I would have many more opportunities to meet with her. My skipper was an Australian, J. Bone, and our wireless operator a New Zealander, whose name I unfortunately can no longer recall. There were quite a number of Czechoslovaks flying with this squadron, some of whom had also come from No. 311 Squadron. We were billeted out from the base and I shared accommodation with four other Czechoslovaks in a private home in Golders Green. One of my housemates was also a navigator and another two were radio operators.

I was transferred to No. 24 Squadron at the end of November. The weather at that time was extremely bad. We were unable to fly at all for nearly a fortnight due to very thick fog and smog. It then cleared briefly, but immediately turned worse again. I was thus

able to perform only a few flights with Flying Officer Bone, mainly transporting passengers and carrying out medical duties on DC 3's. Towards the middle of December, the Air Ministry informed me that I was again to transfer back to the Transport Command training base. In vain did I try to convince headquarters to let me stay with No. 24 Squadron and not even the intervention of my Squadron Commander helped. I arrived late at Bramcote and was severely reprimanded. However it was soon realised that I had already passed all my exams and two days later I was told that I could take three weeks' leave. I thought it rather ridiculous, as I did not have enough money to go on such a long holiday, nor consequently the inclination. I thus remained at the base and while the boys rushed off to lectures in the morning, I either lingered in the officers' mess reading books and magazines or rested in my quarters. The weather was very unpleasant that winter and there was not much point in going out.

I was put in a new crew, skippered by Flying Officer Václav Ryba. He was also an ex-pilot from No. 311 Squadron, a very nice fellow and an extremely good friend. On 20th January 1945 we were transferred back to Bramcote and to renewed training. Once more we underwent quite intensive theoretical and practical instruction and did a large amount of flying. Our course finished on 13th March 1945 and we were issued with a special certificate permitting us to fly in passenger carrying aircraft. The standard was very high and only those who passed with an aggregate of 70% of all exams, and not less than 60% of any particular exam, were issued with this certificate. My average was somewhat higher and I was very proud of my results. I was also extremely keen to be transferred to an operational flying squadron as soon as possible, as I was hoping that I would be able to fly with a very good friend of mine, Václav Jílek. His navigator was Alois Volek. Rumour had it that they did not get on so well and both were willing to change to different crews. I wrote to both of them before I left the OTU to let them know that I would be arriving shortly and was looking forward to a reunion with them.

We were given a fortnight's leave and at the end of March we arrived at our new base, Holmsley South in Hampshire. Our new unit was No. 246 Squadron, which consisted of Liberators and operated mainly between England and Calcutta, the Azores Islands and Iceland. The day before we arrived, the sad news reached us that Václav Jílek and his crew, including Alois Volek, and all the passengers had been lost while taking off from the Azores.

Just as I was due to leave No. 105 OTU at Bramcote, Vlasta Skákal arrived with a new group to begin similar training. I was extremely

pleased that we would again serve in the same squadron. A big party was held in the officers' mess on the day we arrived at Holmsley South. This was wonderful, not only because of the party itself, but because it gave us a chance to meet most of the members of No. 246 Squadron, as well as the CO, who was a really great man. Holmsley South is situated in New Forest, not very far from the base of Beaulieu, which we already loved so much. We enjoyed every minute of our stay there. We had the chance to revisit our locale, the Rose and Crown in Brockenhurst, and many of the other places that held so many fond memories for us from the time we had operated missions from there with No. 311 Squadron.

We went on an orientation flight soon after our arrival in Holmsley South and not long after I was sent on my first operation to India. I flew with Flying Officer Ryba and Flying Officer Kopal. Flying with the Transport Command was extremely interesting and I felt I would have loved to have done it all the time. Our flight started in Lyneham. We were cleared, collected our passengers and cargo and took off early in the morning. We flew over southern France, landing at Luga airport in Malta seven to eight hours later. By then of course, France had been liberated and the fighting continued mainly in Germany. We spent the night in Malta, visiting the capital Valetta, where we had something to eat and drink at a pavement café and studied our surroundings. Although Malta was less than half a day away flying time from England, it felt so vastly different to us - its people, lifestyle, architecture, even its vegetation. But above all, Malta and its citizens had suffered terribly from the Italian and German bombing attacks. Their heroism had constantly boosted the morale of the Western Allies. Their contribution to our victory will forever be recorded in the history of World War II in golden script. Walking through the ruins of this city, one was constantly reminded of this sacrifice.

Early the next morning, we left for Cairo. We flew over a picture blue Mediterranean and landed in the desert at Cairo West aerodrome, between Cairo and Alexandria. Cairo and Egypt itself were quite different again. It was as if we had landed in yet another world. To us, Cairo felt like the true threshold of the Orient. The city centre may have been cosmopolitan and even European in parts, but you needed only to walk a few hundred yards to find Arab quarters, mosques and everything else breathing of the East. But most of all I was enchanted by the clear desert nights above our airfield, so quiet and still and glittering with a million stars!

Vlasta had already joined No. 246 Squadron before I had left on this first trip and had given me the Cairo address and telephone of his

parents. So I rang them immediately after my arrival and introduced myself. They were very pleased to hear from me and invited me and another crewmember to join them for lunch. The two of us took the bus to Cairo and were met by Vlasta's parents at the bus terminus and driven to their home. Vlasta's mother treated me like a son and insisted that I spend the night with them as well as the following day. The routine was to stop in Cairo for three days. There, a so-called 'slip-crew' who had been waiting for the next leg for a similar amount of time would pick up the plane and passengers and fly on further east. The other member of my crew returned back to the aerodrome and I thus spent two days with Vlasta's parents. On the third day, when the next incoming crew arrived, we took off in their plane at 11 pm, flew eastward across the desert and landed at Shaibah on the Persian Gulf. This landing spot varied from time to time in bad weather or sandstorms. The heat in these regions was scorching and so we would usually land at Shaibah very early in the morning, have breakfast and refuel and then take off at sunrise for the next stop, Karachi. The temperature as the sun came up was already about 115 degrees Fahrenheit, but by the time we reached a flying height of 10,000 feet it was much more pleasant. We would then fly the full length of the Persian Gulf and along the coast of the Arabian Sea to arrive at our destination late in the afternoon.

We usually stole a little time out to visit Karachi city, which was much poorer than Cairo and, of course, quite different again. Here there were fewer signs of Western influence to be found. We would catch up on some sleep in tents erected on the aerodrome and then leave for Calcutta, flying non-stop across the whole of the Indian sub-continent. This leg took us between seven to eight hours. The flight was extremely interesting, especially as we reached the River Ganges and turned toward Calcutta itself.

The rainy season is much more hazardous for flying. Visibility is generally greatly reduced and the turbulence in the big cumulonimbus clouds is not recommended to anyone desirous of reaching old age! Sometimes in very heavy rain it seemed that we were almost flying underwater! We would land at Dum Dum aerodrome, which is used commercially right up until today. Calcutta is an extremely overpopulated city, very dirty and quite dangerous to move about in by yourself, so we usually visited the city in groups. I cannot describe how shocked and horrified I was by the caste differences and the astounding poverty. One caste treated the other worse than they would their animals and people were dying in the streets without anyone seeming to notice! In the mornings, bullock carts went collecting bodies from the gutters until they were piled high and at every few feet always the beggars -

some deliberately crippled in order to survive the cut-throat trade of mendicancy! Calcutta was also very hot and humid. It was almost impossible to sleep in the big hall in the barracks in which we were billeted with only one single fan turning slowly overhead. As this part of the world is a malaria zone and Calcutta one of the worst habitats for the malaria carrying mosquito, we were also under very strict instructions to always sleep under a mosquito net.

We normally stopped in Calcutta for two days and very early in the morning of the third day leave for our journey back. Sometimes we also dropped off mail at the small airfield at Allahabad north-west of Calcutta. On the return journey, our stopover at Karachi was less than 24 hours. We would again take off early in the morning, flying most of the day to the top of the Persian Gulf before reaching Cairo, where we spent another few days before returning to England. We would leave Cairo in the middle of the night, arrived in Malta early in the morning and then in one more hop we were home.

After my first operation to India, I was transferred back to my original crew with Flying Officer Josef Kuhn in No. 246 Squadron at Holmsley South. I believe that I spent my most enjoyable and best time in England throughout all the war years there and until today I still consider it the best part of my life. It was a practically carefree life. We did a lot of flying, which at that time entailed little danger, and we lived in what was in our opinion the best part of England. Whenever we were not flying, we explored the surrounding district and especially nearby Beaulieu. If we were off duty, Vlasta and I would spend most of our time with a nearby family and whenever we were needed at the airbase, they just rang us there and we went back at once. We were also blessed with an extremely fair Squadron Commander, who demanded discipline, but also allowed us considerable freedom.

At the end of April 1945, as we were on our way back to India, it was pretty obvious that the end of the war in Europe was imminent. We were in Cairo from 22nd - 26th April and Vlasta Skákal's parents organised a big party for us and their friends, some of whom were Yugoslavs living in Cairo. It was a fantastic celebration and whisky flowed as beer would at a typical British party! I remember not being able to drink too much, as I must have caught something along the trip and wasn't feeling too well.

During our stop in Cairo, it became evident to me more than ever before that I was about to embark on a new era. I have to admit that during the whole war and while I was in the RAF one of the things I viewed with most trepidation was the idea of peace. Not because I did not wish to see the end of the misery of war, but

because I did not know what was going to happen to me afterwards. I loved flying, both operational and just for the thrill of it and I also treasured all the tremendous friendships which I had developed during the wartime. While there had been quite a few occasions when I was pretty scared, I would never have retraced my steps or given up flying.

Shortly after our return to England from this April trip, the Germans formally surrendered on May 8th and all hostilities on the European battlefield ceased. Of course guerrilla fighting continued on both sides for some time longer, but this was negligible. The end of the war was being celebrated everywhere and most regulations were being broken. I was also very pleased that I could share the celebrations with Vlasta, who was then also back in England. The English spring and summer of 1945 were particularly beautiful and I found it difficult to think about having to return to Czechoslovakia. I decided that I would leave the forces as soon as possible and try to make it in 'civvy street'. In the meantime, we still enjoyed our time in the southern Counties immensely. We took whatever off-duty opportunity we could to visit Bournemouth and the village pubs in the vicinity and had a really good time. However, the thought that all this was going to finish soon continued to rattle in the back of my mind.

Before my next flight to India, scheduled for June, Wing Commander Vladimír Nedvěd from No. 311 Squadron paid us a visit. He kindly told us that he was due to fly to Czechoslovakia in a few days and that he would be willing to take any letters we wished to send to our parents or friends and post them for us once he got to Prague. At that time, ordinary communication was still very sporadic and unreliable and so I jumped at the opportunity to write to my parents, not knowing whether they were still alive. I gave them brief news of myself and asked them to send word back about themselves to me at our base at Holmsley South. By then my parents had also made enquiries about me and my sister had even personally gone to Prague to various command headquarters to enquire if there was any record of a Jaroslav Novák. Czechoslovak Army records were still sketchy at that stage, but I was not listed anywhere, because I was serving with the RAF. My sister was told that there were indeed three Jaroslav Nováks in the army and air forces, who had all been killed during the war. But they could not be completely certain or give her any more particulars at that time. My sister perspicaciously did not tell my parents what she had learnt and was making preparations for another trip to Prague, when the records might be expected to be in better shape. She wanted to confirm whether I had in fact served in the forces or if I might still be alive, when my letter arrived. The postman handed it

to my mother as she was on her rounds in the city. She did not pay it much attention at first, as there was no return address. She also did not immediately recognise my handwriting, which must have changed somewhat in the five years or more that I had been away. But then she became curious about who could be writing, looked at the letter again and noticed the message I had put on the back of the envelope: "Jaran is well and hopes to see you soon." I had written this message in case the letter could not be delivered and for possible broadcast on the radio. Only then did she realise that the mail was from me! She was still afraid to open it and asked a neighbour to read it out for her. Only when she had listened to everything I had written, did she run to my father's place of work and also gave him the good news. My parents and sister then immediately wrote back to me and I was to find their letter waiting for me at the end of the month upon my arrival from India. I was to leave again almost straight away and so I wrote an answer and gave it to Vlasta Skákal in Cairo, asking him to post it for me when he got back to England. He put in his air force shirt pocket and then forgot about it. His mother then washed the shirt and the letter with it. She confided what had happened on my way back and so I wrote another letter, which I then posted home myself.

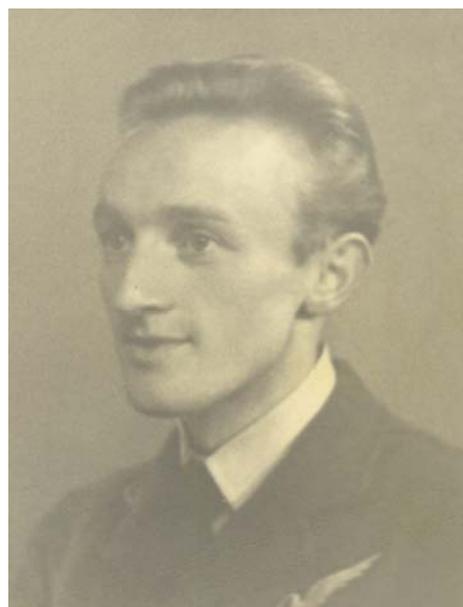
We were sent to Reykjavik at the beginning of July and also stopped at Prestwick airbase on the way. I had never been as far north as Iceland before and it was wonderful to be in a country with such fully stocked shops or such beautifully clear air. At that time there was also no night. Not only the air, but the city of Reykjavik itself seemed to sparkle with cleanliness. We thoroughly enjoyed our two day's stay there. Soon after our return we were sent on another trip to India, not knowing then that it would be our last. On our way back through Cairo we were told that all Czechoslovak flying personnel were being recalled and that we would soon be returning home to Czechoslovakia.

No. 246 Squadron RAF



FOGELMAN. CONSTABLE. HEMMING. WRIGHT. WESCOTT. CROSS. EVANS. TRACEY. MAWSON. ANDREWS. TERRINGTON. CRAWFORD. MORGAN. LOCKE.
SIBTHORPE. MACDONALD. CHRISTIAN. HEWSON. VASS. SACKFIELD. FRASER. JOHNSON, C.R.F. FYLAN. BOWEN. SCOTT. FLEMING. ROBINSON. STASSIN.
JOHNSON, A.H.E. WALKER. MORRISON. BRICKWOOD. DOBSON. HAMES. STAINER. KOPAL. KUHN. DOLEZAL. NOVAK. STROUHAL. TECEL. DEGREEF.
KENDALL. WILLSON. HANUS. COODALE. THWAITE. MAY. GRUNDY. MILLS. HARTLEY. BARHAM. FORREST. WARDLE. SPARLINC. CENIN. EVANS. COCK.
LAVIN. CINNAMON. THACKER. STIERS. VANFLETEREN. FIELD. BAKER. KOVAC. SADIL. MASON. LAWRENCE.

The elite flying personnel of No. 246 Squadron RAF.



No. 246 Squadron RAF navigator, Jaroslav Novák.

Cairo, 1945:



Pilot Venda Ryba and navigator JN in Cairo, 1945.



With Vlasta Skákal's mother, Vlasta and Venda Ryba, in Egypt in 1945.



A nice looking guy!

VIII. The Bitter Taste of Victory

Even though I was looking forward to going back home, seeing my parents and friends and country again, I was terribly sad to leave England. I had grown to love it very much, it was the country where you may say I had grown from boy to man. The people there had all been so wonderfully fantastic to me and I had been prepared to fight with them until the end. But unfortunately that was life and on 24th August of that year, after a very sad farewell to our friends in the village and squadron, we boarded a Stirling bomber and left for Prague. Before we left there was a rumour about that we would be able to return to the RAF and No. 246 Squadron after a brief spell in Czechoslovakia, but unfortunately that's all it was – a rumour. Before we left, I already knew that the situation in Czechoslovakia was not at all good and that there were tremendous shortages of practically everything. Even though in England most goods were only available on coupons, one could at least still obtain them. I used up all my coupons and even borrowed money to buy food, textiles and everything that I thought could be in shortage back home. And although my financial situation was by no means great, by today's standards the goods that I took back for my family would definitely be classed as excess baggage!

We landed in Prague in the afternoon and the weather seemed to be smiling on us. The sun was shining, it was pleasantly warm and after some short formalities we were driven to a city hotel that for the time being was to be our accommodation. We were instructed to return to the aerodrome by a special bus early the next morning to complete the remaining registration. Soon after we settled in our hotel room, I put through a phone call to our neighbour in Benátky. I asked him to tell my parents that I had arrived and that I begged them to come to the airport the next day, so that we could see each other again as soon as possible after those long 5 ½ years!

That night I went out with Vlasta Skákal and a few other boys to investigate Prague night life. There was not much to sample and I felt that somehow people were generally suspicious and not very trusting. But of course one could not blame them after six years of German occupation. The next morning I was given food coupons and fourteen days' leave and then came the moment that I had dreamt of the entire war – my reunion with my parents. Our meeting was very moving and emotional and even my father cried. Our neighbour drove us back to Benátky in his car and I spent two weeks with my parents, visiting friends and catching up on all the news of what had happened in my absence. The separation had been long and I felt almost a stranger in my own family. I then

returned to Prague and started flying with a military transport group from Ruzyňe airport.

My first trip was to Paris. We flew in an old JU52, one of the planes left behind by the Germans and it could be said that it was not in the best condition. A short time later I was sent to Moscow. I wasn't terribly keen to go there and tried to swap that trip for one back to England, but being in the army you could not choose or argue with your superiors about where you would like to go. I cannot forget the night before the flight. Jarda Hájek came to ask me if Bohuš Vaverka could stay with me in my hotel room, as Jarda was expecting some female company. I had no objections, as Bohuš was a very good friend of mine. I had known Bohuš for many years. I had first met him in the Montpellier military camp on the French Riviera, where we served in the same battalion. I didn't mix very much with him at that time - he was a sergeant and I just an ordinary private. But I remember that he had a wonderful voice. He had been a soloist at a concert arranged for us shortly before we left for the front by the Lord Mayor of Montpellier and the French-Czechoslovak Alliance. I then lost contact with him, but met him again later in England, in Cholmondeley Park camp. In my opinion, Bohuš was particularly blessed by luck. In 1940, he was already accepted into the air force, while I was still vainly trying. Very early on in the war, a plane in which he was wireless operator crashed shortly after take-off and all the crew except for Bohuš were killed. He was found badly burnt and injured in a forest near the aerodrome and he spent a long while in hospital. Bohuš had been a good looking and always popular with the girls. He took his facial burns badly and would cover his forehead with his hair.

When he recovered, Bohuš was attached to a special squadron that was responsible for dropping parachutists in enemy occupied countries to support the resistance movements. On one of these missions Bohuš's crew was sent to North Africa, from where it was a much easier to drop the parachutists into southern Europe. The skipper, Captain Anderle, refused to take Bohuš along on that occasion on the basis of wanting to train a new wireless operator. Bohuš was very upset. Like all of us, he always loved opportunities to get to know new places and countries and felt that he was deprived of the chance to see North Africa. He protested to the squadron leader, but as his skipper was quite adamant, the squadron leader promised Bohuš that he could transfer from this crew to another flying the North African sortie. They never did return, but were shot down over the Mediterranean on 10th December 1942 on their way from Cairo to Malta. And so Bohuš joined our squadron and was attached to my old crew - the crew I was trying so hard to rejoin after having been taken out of it -

skipped by my friend Ota Žanta. Bohuš flew with Ota Žanta for a while as Flight Sergeant and early in 1944 he was given his commission and promoted to Pilot Officer. He was informed that from that day he would cease to fly with Ota Žanta and transfer to another crew as first radio operator. I remember that day very well, as Bohuš was extremely upset and tried to plead with the Squadron Commander to remain in Ota's crew, which consisted of most of his friends. But his request was refused and Ota Žanta and his crew went missing on their very next operational flight!

I believed that there was a special bond between Bohuš and me. I liked him very much and even though I never flew with him in any crew, we were very good friends. We talked practically the whole night about the situation back home, the difficulties which we were already beginning to encounter and our prospects of succeeding in civilian life. I flew to Moscow early in the morning, while Bohuš proceeded on his way to England. I had told him how much I envied him and also confided that I was not keen to fly with a crew that was unknown to me. I would have much preferred to continue to fly with the pilot, wireless operator and flying engineer with whom I had previously flown to India.

Our aircraft to Moscow was a larger version of the JU52, the JU352, and our passengers were mainly officers who had served in the Czechoslovak contingent in the Russian Army during the war. They were now returning to study at the military academy there. At the airport we faced enormous obstacles prepared for us by Russian officialdom. We were interrogated for a very long time before being eventually allowed to make our way to the city and the Hotel Internationale, our home for the next few days. I was billeted in the same room as Mirek Vilda. He was quite a large man and a loud snorer, so it was quite impossible to get any sleep. During the war he had flown with No. 311 Squadron as first radio operator. He had flown many hours over the sea and received a fully deserved DFC for his skills. He was a fantastic guy. He was the only person in No. 311 Squadron to use the polite form of address with everyone. We would sometimes go for a drink together and end up spending the whole evening in the pub. Our friends used to tease us that when we got back home we would be accused of having made a dent in the British beer reserve just between the two of us. And that on arrival I, being thin, should exit the plane first so as to give the impression of how badly we had had it in England, while Mirek should exit last and preferably via the rear door. Unfortunately, on our way to Moscow a part on one of our engines had broken down and naturally there were no spare parts to be found in Russia. We were thus stuck in Moscow for nine days. We didn't really have too bad a time. We managed to go to a concert and an opera. During

the day, there was nothing for us to do but walk through the city. We even took time to visit the Lenin mausoleum. One of the chaps from the Czechoslovak Embassy told us – and I don't know if this is true - that when Lenin's body was originally placed there, it had not been adequately preserved and eventually fell apart. But according to the chap from the Embassy that presented no problem to the enterprising Russians and someone else the image of Vladimir Ilyich was found to take the place of honour!

We were pleased when we were finally able to leave. Moscow was becoming colder and the night temperature was well below zero. We arrived home to the unfortunate news, however, that we had lost another two crews. One was on a Liberator plane that had crashed on take-off while bringing Czechoslovak refugees back from England. All the passengers were killed together with the crew, among them Bohuř Vaverka. Luck had run out for him at last! The other crew that perished was the one from which I had been taken out to fly to Moscow. Thus my regular pilot and also very good friend, Joe Kuhn, with whom I had flown to India and elsewhere many times before that, was lost together with our former wireless operator, Lojza Strouhal. The navigator had been a Czechoslovak pre-war air force navigator who had spent the war years back home. There was also a third fatal crash at that time, but I did not personally know the men of that crew. Such news was also difficult for my family and friends until they were assured that I was not among the casualties. Shortly after returning from Moscow, I was sent back again. This time we flew a JU52 and our passenger was the new Czechoslovak Ambassador to Russia, with his family and other staff. The JU52 had a much shorter range than the JU352 and we had to make a number of stops before we reached our destination. We spent one night in Warsaw, where we tried to sleep in a hotel without any window panes and with the sound of intermittent shooting. These were reportedly skirmishes with the remaining so-called 'Vlasov Army', or part of the Russian Ukrainian Army captured by the Germans and recruited to fight against the Russians. On the next day we landed at Ozero and from there we flew to Minsk. Our accommodation here were army barracks showing heavy scars of war. Our room again had no real windows and the beds were a few planks of wood nailed together and hessian sacks filled with straw. We slept fully clothed and under all our spare clothing, as the temperature at night also fell below zero. On our arrival in Moscow the following day, we were billeted in the same hotel as on our first visit, close to Red Square. We were scheduled to stay for only two days, but a heavy snow storm extended this to five. Our aircraft was completely snowed under and when the temperature rose above zero during the day, the snow melted to form ice five inches thick on the wings and on the

plane body. It was about three days before the Russians could enlist a special steam machine to unfreeze our plane and only then could we depart.

I was again pleased to be back. Even though I was rostered to fly to Moscow once more, I somehow managed to squirm out of it. This was lucky, as that flight became stranded at Warsaw airport for a month due to engine trouble. Also luckily, I managed to wangle a flight to England and back on a Liberator. Even though this was only for two days, I was extremely glad to have the chance to see my good, old England again. I wasn't so lucky on the way back. The weather was not the best on our departure and when we got close to Prague, we found the airport completely covered by low clouds and fog. We were asked to turn back to England! On the way there, we were advised that England was also fog-bound and that there was nowhere to land. We tried Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, all with the same result. We had 27 men, women and children on board as passengers, mainly members of the former Czechoslovak Government in exile and their families, and while the flight was supposed to take 3½ hours, 4½ hours later we were still over Belgium - also with no place to land. Eventually we were instructed to fly to northern Germany to an aerodrome near Münster. The Liberator was equipped with the latest radar navigational equipment and I worked out the course as soon as I got our exact position and led the pilot to our destination. The weather was getting very foggy and it started to get dark. When we were five miles from the aerodrome according to my navigation, I gave the pilot our position and expected time of arrival and climbed out from my cabin in the nose to the deck. Two minutes later we were above the aerodrome, which however looked as if it had been heavily bombed. There were craters everywhere. The pilot doubted the accuracy of my navigation, even though I assured him that that was the right location. While we argued like this, another two minutes went by and we passed the air field. In those days, there was no radio and no ground radar at the aerodrome. Eventually the pilot accepted my judgement and we turned back to find the runway. By then the light had deteriorated further and we had difficulty in finding the aerodrome again. Then we noticed a row of lights and believed them to be the runway. We made the approach to land, but when we were low enough, we discovered that the lights were a military convoy of lorries on the main road. But as we quickly rose in altitude, the pilot discovered that our number three engine had started to falter. This was the engine which supplied most of the hydraulic pressure. We then turned back to the airfield and even though there were no lights and I don't know how we did it, we landed safely. Full credit for this had to be given to the pilot. On landing, we discovered that what had looked

like craters were in fact just holes that had been filled in with a different surface colouring to the tarmac. Of course, we couldn't have distinguished this from the air. I was very glad to be on the ground at all and once again thought I could do without such dramas. But of course any thoughts of giving up flying didn't last for very long!

While we were at Münster aerodrome, I happened to be speaking to the British navigation officer based there and mentioned that I was not terribly happy with my return to Czechoslovakia or any prospects of work there. I speculated on how difficult it would be to return to England and wondered where else there might be to go. He looked at me and said: "Why not try South Africa?" From that moment, I began to think about the possibility. But that is another chapter of my life and the hardships that I encountered in order to get there were enormous. Only my great determination and the ability to simultaneously stick out both antennae and claws at the right times enabled me to eventually reach that country. When I finally made the decision to make all effort to leave for South Africa, I investigated every nook and cranny, avenue and detail. Miloš Kupa, a friend at the Ministry of Foreign Trade with whom I had served in the army in France and England, was of great assistance. He gave me the names of companies that were interested in, for example, having Czechoslovak trade representation in South Africa. I contacted some of these and later came to work for one of them. But that was only a part of my quest, the other was tackling the South African immigration office. The South African Government at that time was attempting to recruit a number of suitably qualified immigrants. One of the conditions was that the applicant had to prove that they had 50 pounds in a British or South African account. And that I did not have.

I mentioned this over time to several old army friends who had become businessmen after the war. One of these, Tibor Funk, said that he would help me and introduced me to an acquaintance. This man told me that if I were to bring a suitcase of jewellery through Czechoslovak and British customs and deliver it to another contact in England, I would be paid the 50 pounds. It was a great risk and at first I did not agree. But I later estimated that for the time being I had no other options. I decided to go ahead – I would either obtain my freedom or nothing. I checked that there was nothing else in the suitcase besides jewellery and took it with me on my next flight to England. I left it at the back of the plane, covered in blankets and other things and knew, or at the least hoped, that I was unlikely to be checked at the airport the next day. After all the passengers had disembarked and at night, I returned to the airport and asked the guard if he would let me retrieve some personal

items that I had forgotten in the plane. The guard did not object and I was happily able to get the suitcase through the customs zone. I then hurried to Baker Street near Marble Arch and by late evening found the address that I had been given. A different man to the one I had met in Prague gave me a cheque for 50 pounds - I had my ticket to freedom! Or so I thought.

The next day I received a terrible shock. We were to fly back in the afternoon and so I only had a little time. I waited outside for the bank to open and then rushed to deposit the cheque in my empty wartime account. But as I tried to present the cheque, I was told that it was not valid. It had been dated ahead of that day. I nearly died from shock there and then. My great dreams had immediately evaporated. I did not have time to return to Baker Street. And so I returned to Prague with only an invalid cheque and dashed hopes in my pocket. I immediately went to see Tibor Funk and explained what had happened. I told him that if I did not receive my payment, I would shoot his acquaintance on sight. Tibor reassured me that everything would be ok, but I had no idea when I would be able to go back to England and claim my money. I was finally able to exchange a flight to Paris for one to London with a colleague and collect another cheque and new 'ticket to freedom'. Thus I was able to eventually get to South Africa. But I was also to face many more difficulties along the way, of which at that time I had no inkling.

My next trip from Ruzyně was rather interesting. It was November 8th, 1945. Again, we flew a JU352, this time carrying the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, and his staff on an official visit to Paris. He came to talk to the crew on the flying deck. He knew that we were all ex-RAF members and so felt at liberty to talk freely. He stated that the Czech and Slovak people were trying to please the Russians too much, 'brownnosing' as he put it. At Le Bourget airport we were met by an official welcoming party complete with red carpet and guard of honour – not for us, of course, but for Minister Masaryk. We were put up in a hotel next to the Louvre facing La Place de la Concorde and I think that was the only time I have slept in a room that resembled a royal suite. Except for the fact that there was no hot water and the electricity was rationed due to the shortage of power in those days. We stayed in Paris for six days on that trip and I loved and enjoyed the city as always, despite its austerity measures.

On our return home the political situation kept changing quite rapidly. Having experienced life in Britain, I particularly felt the difference. Shortly after our repatriation, Vlasta Skákal again left for England and from there he was sent to Egypt from where he had originally enlisted. The RAF generously sent people home at its own

expense. I also met my skipper from No. 311 Squadron, Ján Lazar, who had worked for the Bat'a shoe company before the war and was posted to Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia shortly after being demobbed. I met him and his wife and son before their departure. I started to have the feeling that one by one my friends were leaving and that there were only a few good old friends left from the war years. As I have already mentioned, I had just lost my skipper and wireless operator from the British Transport Command and Bohuš Vaverka. Around this time, Josef Stach, a very good pilot from No. 311 Squadron, was also killed over our territory in a Siebel plane 'inherited' from the Luftwaffe. I heard that when these planes were being assembled for the Germans by Czechoslovaks during the war, they were subtly sabotaged. Rumour also had it that the local underground informed the air force authorities of these faults after the war, but that the warnings were not heeded and cost the lives of several of our wartime heroes.

A certain number of my former colleagues had decided to join the Czechoslovak Air Force. Not many thus remained at Ruzyně, having been sent to various training stations. Among them was Marcel Ludikar who had transferred to Coordination Command. We now flew transport planes and carried passengers, but even though some of the pilots and crew who had flown during the war had started to fly commercially, we began to sense the animosity that was growing between military air transport and the newly formed Czechoslovak Airlines. I also thought it unfair that some of the airline crews who had happily flown at home before the war but in Britain had claimed that their health was not good enough to fly operationally, had suddenly recovered and now claimed that we did not have the training and licences to fly with passengers.

We were also now required to attend strongly Communist-oriented political lectures. To this I objected strongly and recall that after my first return from Moscow, one of these political commissars tried to tell us how wonderful Russia was and how terrible the West. I got stuck into him and asked why the Russians needed to track and keep lengthy records on every visitor if they were so confident. He exploded and said that people like me, meaning ex-RAF staff, could not be trusted and should probably be watched even in Czechoslovakia. I told him in plain language to go to bloody hell. He retorted that I would regret my statement and that 'they' would know what to do with me. But one good result that came of it was that I didn't have to attend the political talks! And this was already on the cusp of 1945-46, not even yet 1948 - the year of the putsch!

I was still flying fairly regularly, but requested that my name be put on the demobilised list. In those days, any goods that were

available could only be bought on coupons. As air personnel, we were given extra rations and this, of course, was very handy. When I returned from one of my trips to London just before Christmas and went to claim my ration cards, I was told that my coupons had been cut to civilian level because I would be leaving the air force. I went to the unit commander and complained bitterly. I asked him the difference between someone on the demobilised list who still flew regularly and someone else who may be registered as a flier but almost not flying and still collecting extra rations. The Commander's name was Major Liška, not the same Liška with whom I had flown during the war nor his brother, but a different chap altogether. To the best of my knowledge he had been with the Fighter Command during the war. He told me that they had to keep their own staff in a healthy state and could not especially look after those who were about to leave for civilian life. I was only a Captain and therefore subordinate to him, but I told him in no uncertain terms that no such special privileges were afforded us during the war. I also surmised that then 'we staff' were more dispensable. But that he had probably forgotten about that. And I sent him to the same place as I had previously sent the political commissar.

All these instances of being outspoken did not greatly help my standing in the air force. But I still had quite a few good friends, one of them being Marcel Ludikar. About three months after my return, Marcel arranged for me to move into a small but perfect flat of in one of his brother's buildings. This was a fantastic help and I appreciated it very much. Accommodation at that time was extremely difficult to get and the process was usually politicised. So even the flat that I had obtained was not secure. The so-called housing institute insisted that I was not authorised to remain there and tried very hard to kick me out. But I dug my heels in and stayed. It was also through Marcel, and the help of Jan Masaryk, that after I left the air force I managed to get a job with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Another thing that really began to disturb me was that a few – luckily not too many – of the chaps with whom I had served in the air force turned out to be leftist-oriented and lectured others about the misery of England compared to the paradise to be found in Russia. My blood boiled when I heard them. But I was still able to be immensely proud of my own personal friends, none of whom had turned coat and continued to own up to having fought for freedom in the West.

While I still flew in the air force, I desperately tried to find a means of leaving the country and getting to South Africa. I made a number of trips to London on JU52s, stopping in Brussels or Amsterdam on the way there or on the way back. I also flew to

Paris several times and I particularly recall a flight on 9th February. We took off from Prague in fairly bad weather. The pilot was Karel Lancik, with whom I had not flown before. We had a strong head wind and ran into a heavy snow storm just beyond the border. Visibility was practically nil and at the time when we should have already been in Paris, we were only about half way, somewhere near Frankfurt. By then we had insufficient fuel to reach Paris and barely enough fuel to return to Prague. I directed the pilot as close as possible to Frankfurt airport. When we eventually came out of the clouds, we found ourselves in nearby mountainous terrain. The visibility was so bad that we did not even dare look for the airport and the pilot decided to turn the plane back to Prague. On the way back we covered the same distance in one hour that had taken us four hours flying against the storm. The seats of a JU52 are not arranged in the conventional way, but line the side of the plane, so that the passengers sitting on the left face those on the right. Many of them had been airsick, bruised or even injured in the rough weather. Two even had to have head wounds treated by the ambulance crew on landing. One of the passengers was an orchestra conductor, whose presence was desirable in Paris the next day. When we arrived, the commanding officer rebuked us for not taking the risk of landing at Frankfurt. This was sheer ignorance, as the pilot could not have toyed with the lives of the passengers and crew or risked destroying the plane. We took off again on the following day and we reached Le Bourget airport in five and half hours with a much less fierce head wind than previously.

I continued flying till the end of April and then was transferred from Ruzyně airport to the Prague suburb of Kbely, from where I was to demob. Unfortunately, I had a bad infection in my leg requiring a small operation and this delayed my discharge from the air force until the beginning of June 1946. I then went to headquarters to collect my final pay. I was told that due to my rank as Captain in reserve rather than Captain in active service, I had been overpaid for the past six months and thus there was virtually nothing owing to me. And so ignominiously ended my duty in my beloved air force. One last incident that happened to me before I finally left my country is also worth mentioning. I held a Czechoslovak passport while I was flying with the Transport Command and before I left the service, I applied to the Ministry of Defence to keep it. After several visits to the Ministry, I was given a document to say that I was entitled to keep the passport. About two weeks later, at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, I heard a knock at the door of my flat. When I opened, a policeman and a chap from the air force whom I only vaguely knew - I think he was in Fighter Command - began to question me, asking me my identity etc. I said that they must already know very well who I was. I was then told that they

had come to arrest me, because I had stolen a passport from an air force unit. I told them to go and jump in the lake and slammed the door in their face. One of them put his foot in the door, however, drew a revolver and barged in. They pushed me inside and interrogated me further. I explained that I had permission to hold the passport and showed them the Ministry of Defence certificate. They instantly changed tack and the guy from the air force began to call me by my Christian name. They were now exceedingly polite, but said that nevertheless they had to take the passport away for checking at the Ministry of the Interior and that I should get it back in two weeks.

I never did, of course. When I went to collect it, I was told that it had been lost on the way between the Interior and Defence Ministries. Numerous phone calls to the Ministry of the Interior later, I was informed that I could not obtain a new passport until the 'lost' one had been found. I then resolved to go there in person and not budge until I was given my passport. Public opening hours at the Ministry were on a Thursday. I found the department dealing with passport matters that day closed and to my surprise a notice on the door stated that their opening hours were on a Tuesday. That just seemed too silly and so I knocked on the door three times. There was no answer and so I entered the room. A fellow in civilian dress sat at a desk reading some papers and three other uniformed policemen were seated at separate tables. I greeted them, but did not receive a reply. I repeated my greeting and again there was no response. The fellow at the desk did not even lift his head. So I introduced myself and said that I had come to enquire about my travel document. This man got up without a word, walked over to the door, looked at me and spoke for the first time: "I told you that you can't get a passport until we find the one that was lost and if we never find it, you'll never get one." He then opened the door and shouted: "... and now get out!" I kicked the door closed, got hold of him by the neck and shouted back at him: "What did you say, you b...?" Two of the three policemen then jumped up, grabbed me and threw me out of the office. The door slammed behind me.

Maybe I was lucky that I had not been thrown directly in jail, but I did not let the matter rest there. The next day, I put on my full Captain's uniform complete with all my medals and went back to the Ministry. A guard with a machine gun at the main entrance stopped me and told me that the Ministry was closed to the public. I told him that I was on an urgent military matter and walked past him. He saluted me and I was in. I walked straight into the office from where I had been thrown out the day before and this time it was quite a different story. The two policemen who had ejected me

were the rank of Corporal. They jumped to attention and saluted me, even the guy at the desk got up. I asked once more when I would get my passport. This time he was quite apologetic and after a short explanatory discussion, he asked me to kindly fill out an application for a new passport. I told him that he should have told me that the day before and walked out. It still took me many months before I finally managed to obtain a new travel document.

Not long after my demobilisation, I received news from South Africa that the director of a company for which I was trying to get trade representation in Czechoslovakia would be visiting Europe. He also wished to stop in Prague and see me in order to find out how the company was doing. One afternoon, as we were sightseeing in the city, we walked past a café in an elegant building. A pretty blonde sat at one table accompanied by a well dressed gentleman, later introduced to us as a Romanian businessman. As soon as she saw us, she ran out of the café and began to embrace my colleague as if they had not seen each other in ages: "Jack, what are you doing here? It's so nice to see you!" After much excitement and embracing, it was decided that we would all meet the following day and have dinner together. Many topics were discussed during this meal and I learnt that this lady, Kamella U., was also from South Africa and on a visit to Europe. After Jack H. had departed from Prague, Kamella stayed on in a small hotel in the city centre and I and my girlfriend Jitka invited her to dinner in the flat. Kamella accepted the invitation and we had a lovely evening. As the time came for her to leave, she asked me whether she might have a few words in private and outlined her situation in the hallway.

She was originally German. When she had found out that her mother had survived the war and was now living in Berlin, she tried to do everything she could to reach Europe and make contact with her. She had met a Polish air force officer in London and he had promised to help her get to Berlin. He told her that 'he would arrange everything', but that it would only be possible from within Poland. At that time, many Polish soldiers and airmen had been repatriated back to their country and for this reason there were many ships transversing between England and Poland. He arranged for Kamella to travel on the same boat with him. As soon as they were on board, he informed Kamella that the ship was a military vessel and that only officers' 'wives' were allowed on the boat. He therefore arranged a wedding with Kamella before the ship's captain, but disappeared in the first Polish port along with her South African passport. Kamella was now on her own, without any travel documents. The Poles regarded her as a German spy. She was able to be issued with temporary papers at the Czechoslovak Consulate in Warsaw and had come to Prague. She then tried to

get documents through the British Embassy, in order to be able to return to South Africa. I asked her what she expected to do without money or papers in a town, where the majority of people detested Germans, and also promised to help her.

She mentioned that she was a commercial artist and that she worked as a commercial artist for some big companies. After a lot of searching through some women's magazines, we managed to find one or two examples of her work and these were very good. I contacted a few companies in Prague and, after much persuasion, managed to convince two of them to give Kamella some work. In the meantime, Kamella's savings ran out, she was no longer able to pay for her hotel and so moved into my place. When her temporary Czechoslovak documents expired, I was again visited by the secret police. I was threatened that if I didn't throw her out within a week, they would issue a warrant for my arrest for assisting German spies. Luckily I had some contacts, who were able to arrange to have the deadline extended, but only for a short time.

Kamella continued to work on the commercials, however her work must have been more sophisticated than what was required by her employers and she often argued with them. I told her that if she lost her job and income, she would most likely end up in jail. She listened to me, fortunately, and we continued daily visits to the British Embassy and the Ministry of the Interior every second day.

By then, we had run out of all money, hers and mine. Kamella mentioned that she had 20 American dollars, but that the banknote had a slightly unusual colour. She had obtained it from someone who had needed to leave Poland in a hurry and because he could not find a bridge quickly enough, he had been obliged to swim a river. The banknote had thus become a little discoloured. I had a look at it and considered that we should try and cash it. I put on my uniform and we set off for the best night club in Prague, where I surreptitiously offered it to the head waiter in between ordering several glasses of whisky. After a short negotiation we accepted the exchange rate that he offered, took the Czechoslovak banknotes and left quickly. As we now had some money again, we treated ourselves to a good dinner.

All of a sudden, things began to turn for the better. Two Prague companies accepted Kamella's designs and she heard from the authorities in South Africa that her documents would be reissued at the British Embassy. And as it happened, I also got my passport a few weeks later. When I waved Kamella off on the departing plane, a heavy stone fell off my shoulders. While she was very pretty and was obviously thus able to quite easily enlist assistance, she was

also more than a little trouble, not in the least between myself and my girlfriend Jitka. I met Kamella once again in London and once more in Johannesburg. But that was a completely different situation, almost a different life and very different problems.

Now that I had my passport, I left Czechoslovakia, my beloved home, for London by train and from there continued to South Africa. I never thought in all my life that I would be as glad and relieved to see Germany, as when I crossed the border from my own country, in the middle of the night of 1st September 1947. Soon afterward I was to write in my diary: "I am leaving a country which I have loved with all my heart, for whose freedom I went off to fight and was prepared to die, a country which betrayed me so much".

I was very lucky once more, however. After the Communists took over, most of my friends who stayed behind were persecuted. Many were arrested and spent long years in jail. Even my good friend Marcel Ludikar was arrested shortly after the events of February 1948 and interrogated for a long time. He escaped to the West on skis across the Šumava Mountains while on temporary release. Several of our other friends also escaped successfully, some of them crossing the border in the same manner as Marcel. Others managed to get hold of aircraft and fly to Germany. There were even some cases of hijackings. Unfortunately those that were caught suffered the same fate as most of those who had stayed behind – long term jail sentences. That was the reward we got for fighting for the freedom of our country. Our only crime was that we had fought on the wrong side - with the Western Allies!

Veteran airman, Jaroslav Novák, after his return to his homeland.



IX. The Road to Uncertainty

Two days before I was resolved to leave, I visited my parents in Benátky. I told them of my intentions and our parting was extremely difficult. My mother, grandmother and sister were crying and my father, too, had tears in his eyes. I also wondered whether we would ever see each other again and was not too hopeful of this as I took the bus to Prague. It would be another seventeen years before I met with my father again and nineteen before I could visit Benátky and the rest of my family once more.

Very early on the morning of 1st September 1947, my friend Marion Patzelt picked me up in his car and took me to the the Prague main station. Břetíček Friedrich and his sister Jitka were already waiting for me there. Jitka and I had been seeing each other since the time I had returned from England and we were very close. I had wanted to marry her and our arrangement was that, once I was a bit established in South Africa, she would join me there. Unfortunately, life was to take quite a different course. They helped me load my two suitcases into the train compartment and it wasn't long before the train took off in the direction of Cheb and the western border. The familiar Czechoslovak countryside passed by outside the windows. I wondered whether everything would go to plan and if my crossing to Germany would really succeed. We reached Cheb late in the afternoon. A very thorough and strict inspection of the wagons and luggage then commenced. Finally after more than two hours, all the carriages were sealed up with us inside - the Communists were afraid that someone may still jump onto the moving train - and the train again took off slowly. I could hardly believe it. I would also have never imagined that I would be so happy to see Germany, now in complete ruins, and to stand on its soil. I closed my eyes so that I could forget the problems I had just left behind and momentarily dropped off to sleep. I was not conscious of much going on around me, after all I was now FREE!

The journey across Germany took all night. We reached the coast just before lunchtime and I transferred my luggage onto a passenger ship. When the white cliffs of Dover again came into view, I felt I was dreaming. Once in England, I boarded a train bound for London and took a taxi to Kamella's address. I slept on her floor, but that was alright, it wasn't the first or the last time. The next day I bade her farewell and set off southward, to a friend of Daphne in New Forest, where I had served with No. 246 Squadron.

Daphne was a good friend of Sally. I had met Sally when our squadron was based in Beaulieu and we got on extremely well, but

unfortunately Sally came from a class which would have precluded any thoughts of marriage. When I later transferred to the Transport Command, we were based very close to where Daphne lived with her mother. I took Daphne for a drink a few times and introduced her to Vlasta. Daphne had been married to an English Army officer who had led a tank unit on D-Day, 6th June 1944. When the unit had disembarked, Daphne's husband opened the top hatch of his tank in order to plan the first attack and, at that moment, the Germans shot his head off. Their daughter was born three months later, never to know her father. Daphne and Vlasta then also became close.

From New Forest it only a skip and a hop to Southampton. My ticket to Cape Town was for two days' time. My friends assisted me greatly right up till my departure. From the deck that afternoon I waved to them and to England for the last time.

The boat was by no means a luxury vessel. During the war it had been used as a transport ship. We slept in raised hammocks and ate in shifts, but it was bearable. We only stopped once along the way, for about three hours in Madeira, where we had the chance to go ashore and look around the town. I made acquaintance with another Czechoslovak on board, Mirek Miller. Mirek had served at No. 310 Czechoslovak Fighter Command as a mechanic and later found employment in a steel factory as a fitter and turner. Our friendship lasted throughout my stay in South Africa.

Cape Town was one of the most beautiful cities that I had ever visited. Unfortunately though, I did not have time to admire its attractions. When we arrived, a letter from the director of the company for which I was to work was already waiting for me at the port, instructing me to go to a hotel in the very exclusive suburb at Sea Point. I spent the night there and the next morning I met with my new employer. He told me that I would have to stay elsewhere, but he didn't say where and did not give me any further assistance. Nevertheless, I found somewhere quickly enough. One of his first questions to me was whether I had brought any product samples from the company that we were going to represent in South Africa. I showed him the little that I had, mainly textiles. He inspected them and selected a few, telling me to take those and go to sell them. I was in shock, I had never sold anything and so I asked him for some advice as to where to begin. He said that I should look up companies that produced textiles in the phone book. That was all very well, but I did not know Cape Town and so had no idea how to get from place to place and on top of that I had no money. He lent me 30 pounds, for which I had to vouch with my signature and then

off I went to ply my trade. That wasn't too pleasant a beginning to a new life in a new country.

Actually I was very lucky, as I managed to get an order for several hundred metres of pyjama material just from one company. But when I proudly told the director of my success, I was flabbergasted once again to be informed that my income would consist only of commissions determined by the suppliers. And as the company already had a branch office in Cape Town, my commission would be half again. I was also told to book a ticket to Johannesburg for the next day, where a motel room had been reserved for me for two nights. I would then have to find somewhere else to stay. And so began the next difficult part of my life. I had never imagined that I could be treated more harshly.

I presented myself at the company office the day after my arrival in Johannesburg and met two employees, both of them former soldiers like myself. One was an ex-officer of the South African Army and both had taken part in the North African campaign. So I chatted to them for a while and asked them how the company operated. I was unable to find out very much, however, as the director himself was in Cape Town. His secretary, a young woman, also came in. She asked me who I was and if I needed any help. I told her that I would look after myself, as I had by now entirely lost confidence in the company. It was Saturday and I knew that my accommodation was only secured over the weekend. And so I walked around town all afternoon, looking for somewhere else to stay. There was a great shortage of available housing so shortly after the end of the war. It was quite difficult to find anything. In the end I did manage to find something, even though it was quite rough, and stayed there for two weeks before finding something more decent. But on Monday, I had to start work. It was very hard and nearly broke my heart.

Most of the best commercial representations of Czechoslovak companies were already taken up by other travelling salesmen. The ones left to me were the ones that nobody else wanted or that had goods that were either hard to sell or made very little profit. When I protested, I was told that the others naturally knew the market and local conditions better, explaining their greater success. I wasn't overly impressed, but I began to work hard. My entire earnings consisted of what I was paid on commission after the goods were sold. And as I was not familiar with the market, my life was quite tough. Apart from that, I did manage to strike up a friendship with the secretary of our company, Clare Mills. Sometimes on a Saturday, I would take her to Zoo Lake. We kept in contact throughout my stay in South Africa. After my arrival in Australia, Clare and her mother joined me and Clare became my

wife. Our marriage endured for 40 years. We understood each other very well, we both loved the theatre, music, opera and travel, when we could later afford it. Clare also later worked with me in the camera shop and was a wonderful companion to me.

I worked five days a week and on the weekends made little excursions out of Johannesburg in order to get to know the area better. All in all, the job was relatively interesting, but I had to work pretty hard to make ends meet. That Christmas I was to spend on my own.

It was nearly February 1948. One of the directors of a large textile factory in Czechoslovakia was due to visit South Africa. I was glad that I might be able to speak with someone who may have news from home. Although I did not know this man personally, I had at least heard about him through Jirka Hönig. However, the Communists took over during his trip to Johannesburg and the government changed. None of us knew what would happen next, politically or commercially. And so I raised the idea with him, whether the company would be willing to transfer their trade to me. I explained that I wasn't completely satisfied with my position at the local company. He was unable to give me any affirmative news, on the contrary, he thought that most probably there would also be great economical changes. He was right.

I left the company after his departure and tried to obtain some of the already established contacts for the factory for myself and in one or two cases I was successful. This did not go down very well with my former employer, however. The hostilities went so far as the director contacting the immigration authorities and declaring me to be an untrustworthy person. He recommended that I be deported back to Czechoslovakia. This was quite dramatic and for me very bad news. I was summonsed by the secret police and interrogated for several hours. I was informed that I could remain in South Africa for the moment, but that I would have to report to the police each week and couldn't travel beyond Johannesburg. It was all quite draconian, but what could I do? A month or two later I received a letter from the Czechoslovak Consulate in Cape Town, advising me that my passport had been cancelled and that I should return home immediately. I ignored that instruction, but I was not exactly in an enviable position – to have to report to the police without a valid passport. At that time, I managed to make contact with another countryman, who had been living in South Africa for some time, Václav Nosek. He offered me a job that was quite similar to the one that I was doing, but with slightly better conditions. I accepted. I was still being hounded by my previous employer, but by then I had become a little more inured.

Nevertheless, my situation seemed almost completely hopeless. I began to consider whether it may be best to leave South Africa altogether and return to England, where most of my former colleagues had now re-entered the ranks of the air force and achieved officer status. While I thought much about this possibility, the reality was quite different and I needed to do something immediately. My new employer had received a commission to sell Czechoslovak leather gloves in South Africa. Gloves were very popular at that time - no self-respecting lady could go to afternoon tea gloveless. The sample collection was absolutely stunning, the promised remuneration also extremely lucrative. I was offered 10% to take on the commission, which was almost unheard of. The payment - of course - was to come only after the goods had been ordered and delivered. I worked day and night and some of the orders that I received were more than pleasing. I started to feel that the sun was again shining on me and that I might be able to live a respectable life and even have some savings.

Then came the day when the manufactured goods left Czechoslovakia and were on their way to Hamburg. All the invoices came in time and were utterly accurate. Unfortunately, a dock strike started just as the cargo reached Hamburg and the gloves had to remain on the mainland. That was a Friday. In the next few days, as the goods were waiting to be loaded up, the South African Government placed a dramatic embargo on all undelivered or unoffloaded imports in order to protect its own markets and expenditures. The whole world was exhausted by the long war and there was a shortage of just about everything, including money. Most post-war governments therefore needed to import goods, but tried to limit this to only the basic necessities that they could afford. Import controls were thus established in most countries. South Africa was slightly better off in this respect than some other places, because it had not been affected by the war directly as such, but it had fought in North Africa and Europe and had thus also suffered losses of revenue and industrial capability.

All my orders were thus cancelled and I lost everything, including my employment. I had no money, no job, only debts. I sat at home on the brink of tears. Now what? As I have mentioned, my employer was to pay me my commission on the arrival of the ordered gloves. I tried to negotiate other business avenues with him, but unsuccessfully. And so I turned to the wholesalers that I knew and offered them my skills of travelling salesman under any conditions determined by them. One of them suggested that I try and sell their warehouse overflow. I accepted their idea and terms and so travelled around Johannesburg and surroundings selling mouth organs from shop to shop. Later, I also added hand

accordions to my repertoire. The work was extremely demanding, but I was able to subsist from the profits. It took more than six months before my situation improved. My former employer had gained further representations and was willing to take me on again. By that time, I had repaid all my debts to him. Life settled down a little. Some goods required travel of a broader nature and I now began to journey around the whole of South Africa.

This period marked a significant change in my whole way of life. I was still in touch with Clare, whom I had met at my first place of employment. We often went to the pictures, concerts and parties. I began to play tennis with my English friends and we also formed a modest bridge club, where we met once a week to play cards. On some weekends, Clare and I went together on outings around Johannesburg. At that time, I took a lot of pictures. After the war, I had bought a camera from Srp and Stitz in Prague (I am not absolutely certain of the spelling), a company that mainly made microscopes. However they had also manufactured two camera models. I had thought of attempting to represent them in South Africa and so bought one as a sample. But commercially these models were not a competitive item, as post war cameras from Germany and Japan were already beginning to appear on the market. I had also purchased a small 16mm Microma camera, even an enlarger, and so I now had a new, interesting hobby. I was greatly encouraged in this enterprise by my friend Mirek Miller.

So that was my private life. Unfortunately, even in South Africa it would be affected by dramatic political events, which were beginning to take a turn for the worse, rather than for the better. In May 1948, the democratic government of General Jan Smuts lost the general election. General Smuts was a loyal friend of England and had cooperated with the British Government during the war, both on a political and a military level. The South Africans had fought alongside Britain. The opposition National Party, however, was pro-German and had it been in power, the country would have remained neutral. Now it formed government and we didn't know what would happen next. It immediately introduced the policy of apartheid with the support of the white Afrikaner community and caused an outcry in the democratic world. And so I found myself in a politically unpredictable country once more.

The new government was not only anti-black, but also anti-Communist. It began to restrict the import of goods from Communist countries. This particularly began to affect our trading. Additionally, democratic countries and some others protested against the harsh treatment of the black population and began to implement embargoes against South Africa. The situation wasn't

exactly rosy. Commerce was heavily influenced by these events and became harder with each day. I even received a number of strong warnings to immediately return to Czechoslovakia. Of course I completely ignored them, as I knew what would await me. I had already heard news of the arrests and imprisonment of my air force colleagues. I just tried to survive and began to also slowly consider the possibility of going elsewhere, where the situation might be more acceptable. I thought of Canada, but was concerned about the problems that existed between its English and French speaking citizens at the time. I was somehow drawn to Australia. As a continent it did seem to be a bit too far removed from the rest of the world – travel then was still mainly by boat – nevertheless, I did visit the Australian High Commission in Pretoria. I was received in a very friendly manner and the conditions of passage seemed to be quite reasonable. I now began to think quite seriously about that country.

At that time, I was still in touch with Lilka Bergmanová, a very good friend of mine, who lived in England. I had met her several times in Czechoslovakia after the war, when I had visited Jirka Hönig and his family in Choceň. One day, she wrote to me to tell me that she was moving to Australia and that her trip would take her via South Africa. We agreed to meet up in Cape Town and then spent a wonderful two weeks in Johannesburg. Lilka was Jewish. I had met her after the war at Jirka Hönig's family in Choceň. We became friends and began to correspond. Lilka had had a very colourful, but sad life. She and her whole family had been imprisoned in the Terezín concentration camp. One day, the Gestapo dragged out her mother, father and sister and told Lilka that they were being taken to another concentration camp. Lilka of course wanted to be with them, but the Germans did not allow her to go with them. As the train taking her family away took off, Lilka ran after it, jumped on and clung to the buffers all the way to somewhere near the German border, where the Gestapo detected her. They then threw her into the carriage onto which she had clung. Unfortunately her family was not inside, only other prisoners. She was unaware that she had taken a ride to the 'death factory' of Auschwitz. She never did see her parents or sister again.

All the prisoners had to strip off when they arrived and their clothes and possessions were taken from them. Lilka wore a small golden cross on her neck. To her it wasn't just an ornament, she thought of it as a good luck charm and did not want to give it up. She took it off and carefully put it under her tongue. A guard saw her despite her caution and struck her in the face with unbelievable force. She fell to the floor, making her spit out the cross and the guard then pocketed it. Lilka wasn't gassed at Auschwitz because

she was seventeen or eighteen at the time and the Germans probably thought that she would still be able to perform some sort of useful service to the Reich. She was placed instead in a work camp. The conditions there and the treatment of the inmates were almost unbearable. Death was a daily occurrence and strap beatings were given in place of food. In my opinion, when someone claims today that the Holocaust never happened they are completely blind. If they only knew and listened to people like Lilka, they would be unable to make such assertions. The crimes that the Germans committed against the Jews are inconceivable today.

Lilka left after the fortnight we spent in Johannesburg, but we promised each other to meet again on Australian soil. I now had an additional reason to get to Australia.

We managed to gain rights to sell sheet glass. This was a very large and lucrative business and my financial situation greatly improved. I travelled throughout the whole of South Africa selling glass and my bank account was growing fatter. This situation was not going to last long, however, after the English firm Pilkington Glass built a large factory for manufacturing sheet glass right in South Africa. My resolve to leave and move to Australia only strengthened. If I had stayed, I would have had to look for another job. That was in July of 1951. Most of the ships sailing from England to Australia were full and it wasn't entirely easy to obtain a boarding ticket. However if one tries, things sometimes have a way of working out. And so I bade my farewell to South Africa at the end of August 1951 and set off for a new continent.

X. A New Home

The journey from South Africa to Australia was very pleasant and it was one of the best holidays I have ever had. We sailed on a small Blue Funnel Line vessel of approximately 10,000 tonnes, which carried 27 passengers apart from its cargo. The crew were wonderful, the passenger group very diverse, we all soon became friends. George from Greece was going to Australia with the intention - if feasible and profitable - to start up a textile company. Then there were the Irish reporter Tom, Mavis from Australia returning home from a holiday in England and a lady from Israel with two children going to join her husband. We would meet on the deck, play cards and go for drinks before and after meals. A group of people of quite various backgrounds and ages, but all very pleasant and congenial. It seemed as if we had known each other for ages. We stopped in Durban before heading directly to Freemantle and then to Melbourne where we disembarked.

Everything there was quite new and different from anything I had ever known. At first, I did not know if I would get used to it. After two days in Melbourne, our party had diminished to three - George, Tom and I. Tom was continuing to New Zealand, his next ship was to leave from Sydney. George was planning a little travel around Australia first in order to find a suitable location for his planned factory. We finally parted company in Sydney and went our own ways.

The only person I knew in Sydney was Lilka. She met me at the railway station and arranged accommodation for me in a city hotel for a short time. Since we had last seen each other in Johannesburg, Lilka had formed her own circle of friends. We still stayed close and she helped me in finding work, which at that time, shortly after the Korean War, was no easy matter. She introduced me to one of her acquaintances, also of Jewish origin, who offered me a job as a travelling salesman for textiles. In this, however, I did not have a lot of success. Most businesses had overstocked in anticipation of the escalation of the Korean conflict. I left the company after a short time at my own request.

Now began the serious task of looking for a new job. Each morning I got up at around 4 o'clock and bought a paper in which I searched for suitable work. I would then go and stand in line at various offices. After three weeks, someone suggested that I visit a smaller wholesaler with a warehouse full of nylon stockings which he apparently needed to sell. The wholesaler lent me a suitcase and I travelled by train from one end of Sydney to the other, visiting small shops until I had sold all the stock, at the same time doing

myself out of my job. I should also mention here that I again worked for a commission rather than a steady wage. And so I was only able to eat when I had sold something and ate very little when I had not. I still bought the advertising papers and looked for jobs, until, around 15th December 1951, I saw an ad for a salesman in a photography equipment shop. I responded immediately, passed the interview and was hired shortly before Christmas. From then, my whole life changed. I remained in the photography business for more than 50 years.

Christmas was quickly approaching and I was very happy in my new job. The company that I worked for was called C.T. Lorenz Photografic and the shop was located in the very centre of Sydney, on the corner of Pitt and King Streets. Half the store concerned itself with the sale of optical goods and the other with photographic equipment. The owner was Mr C. T. Lorenz and the general manager Joe Mitchell. I was very aware that I needed to learn a lot, not only in shop administration, but also in terms of photography skills. The company itself had three other outlets, one in Newcastle, another in Brisbane and a third in Melbourne. The headquarters that ran everything was based in Sydney. 50% was owned by a different, larger company, Hanimex, whose general manager was Jack Hannes. In time, Hanimex became one of the largest photographic companies in Australia.

I did not begin full time work until after Christmas. I found accommodation in a small boarding house in Neutral Bay on the other side of the harbour and travelled to work by ferry, which took approximately 25-30 minutes. I then walked approximately 1 km to work from Circular Quay. Until that time, I had lived temporarily in the very centre of the city in Air Force House, a home for ex-airmen. By that time, I was already a passionate amateur photographer, using the two small cameras and enlarger that I had brought from South Africa. On Saturday evenings, when most of my fellow residents went to the city in search of entertainment, I took over the shared bathroom with my equipment and developed my films and print photographs. One day, the lads came home while I was still working in the bathroom. The developer and fixative were stored in beer bottles in the showers and one of the chaps, in his somewhat intoxicated state, simply grabbed one of the bottles and drank its entire contents. It happened to be the bottle containing fixative and how he felt afterwards or whether it then 'fixed' him, I don't know. In any case, it was the end of further developing for that evening.

More and more Christmases came and went and I spent these alone. I tried to continue to improve my professional knowledge, as

I was very keen to stay in my present employment. I would visit different parts of Sydney in my spare time and take photos. I should perhaps also mention that I had bought my first camera in Australia even before I had begun to work for Mr Lorenz. It was a Zeiss Kontax 2 and I had bought it for 162 pounds at Kings Cross Camera Centre. It was a very expensive camera in comparison to my later wage, which was 9 pounds, 17 shillings and 6 pence per week.

I was still in regular contact with my family in Czechoslovakia. They were suffering considerably – both materially and politically. The Communists held the country in a stranglehold. Members of my family were being persecuted for my 'desertion' from the country, but even more so for my participation in the British Royal Air Force. I knew what was happening back home, but I must have sometimes not been careful enough in my letters and my parents were victimised simply for what I had written. All outgoing and incoming mail was strictly scrutinised. I had tried to support my parents financially ever since I had left and even though I may have occasionally needed to forego something myself, I sent them parcels or money each month both from South Africa and from Australia. This helped them enormously.

I also tried to maintain contact with my friends in South Africa. I corresponded quite regularly with my friend Clare. That is why one day I was quite shaken, when I heard that she had become seriously ill. Clare had previously had trouble with her eyes, one of which had been operated on. Shortly after the operation, however, she was accidentally knocked down and lost sight in that eye. Later, Clare's other eye also started to give her trouble and it seemed that there was only a 20% chance that she would be able to retain any eyesight at all. I tried to lift her spirits as much as I could through the mediation of a common friend. Almost miraculously Clare recovered and still had remnant sight in the second eye. I then made the big decision to make Clare the offer of coming to Australia, where I would look after her needs. She came with her mother, a wonderful woman, whom she loved. As I promised, I looked after Clare till the end of her life.

My circle of friends in Sydney grew. One very good friend was Miloš Černý and his wife Miluška. I had worked with Miluška for UNRRA in Prague, but lost contact with them after I left in 1947. Late one evening, at the beginning of 1953, I was arranging the shop window when I heard a knock on the glass. And there on the other side were Miloš and Miluška. That was the beginning of our great friendship in Australia.

For commercial reasons, the company needed to replace the manager in the Newcastle branch at the beginning of that year and I was asked to take over this position. I was somewhat disappointed, as I had already become quite accustomed to being in Sydney. I had also already invited Clare and was sure that she would like Sydney. Apart from that, I was due to shortly receive my Australian citizenship. I was told, however, that I would either accept the position or that I might need to look for other employment. And so on 30th June 1953 I left Sydney by train and close to midday arrived in Newcastle, which was to become my new home.

I thus also obtained my citizenship in this city. It was not a very ceremonious occasion, but took place in the course of a normal legal proceeding. The judge wore a serious, immobile expression. Two other fellows were ahead of me. The first was called and received about one year's prison, the other was also sentenced and then came my turn. The judge whispered: "What did he do?" in the clerk's ear (I heard it well) and subsequently, at the judge's instruction, the clerk gave me my certificate.

I started a new life, in new surroundings and without friends yet again. The previous branch manager found me lodgings with a lady in one of the suburbs, New Lambton, and from there I travelled to work by bus. I also had to find another secretary. The previous one - a very capable young woman - also had to leave within two weeks. It wasn't easy to find someone, but our instructions were strict. In the end another employee, an eighteen year old lad, also left and so I had to start completely from scratch.

The Newcastle premises were quite small, located on the first floor of another shop. Business in Newcastle was also quite slow, there was not much interest in photography at that time and it was sometimes difficult to obtain cameras and other equipment - I had to try very hard. Newcastle was a large industrial centre. Its main activities were steel manufacture, at that time employing about 30,000 people, shipyards and many small businesses. Headquarters were quite demanding of me and I seriously considered leaving the company and returning back to Sydney.

There was also quite a housing shortage and considering Clare's imminent arrival, this problem became quite acute. However all was ultimately resolved and Clare arrived in Australia in October 1954 and the following year, on 7th May 1955, we were married. Life was suddenly a lot more pleasant. Mainly I had a companion in whom I could trust. After our wedding, Clare started to work in a solicitor's office and assisted me in the shop on the weekends.

Clare's mother was also of great help, she cooked for us and in fact looked after the whole household.

I had joined a photography club immediately after my arrival in Newcastle. I began to take photographs on a much bigger scale than before. I took part in both local and international competitions. Photography became not only my great hobby, it could be said that it quite took over my life. I founded a federation of photographic clubs, which eventually included 22 clubs from the region. Clare supported me greatly both in this interest and in my work. She did not take photos herself, but had excellent taste and was my great critic. With her help, my work became better.

I was very successful in my photographic endeavours. I became a member of several organisations, including the Australian Photographic Society, or APS. I was on several committees, travelled locally as a judge in photography competitions and gave talks about the art and methods of photography at public clubs and organisations.

At that time, I also organised visits of various orphanages, hospitals and nursing homes. I screened 16mm films borrowed at various embassies. Television was still not so available in those days and so my film shows were always quite welcome. I still did not have my own car, but I always found willing and good helpers. These visits were interesting, but sometimes also sad, especially in the orphanages and old people's homes.

My work in world photography and successes in competitions resulted in my being asked in 1964 to present both colour slides and black and white photographs to a judging panel in Sydney. After several weeks, I was awarded one of the most significant distinctions of the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP) in Zürich, the Artiste FIAP or AFIAP. I am immensely proud of this recognition to this day. In 1971, I organised a large conference for APS in Newcastle, attended by 250 members not only from Australia, but from the whole world, which was immensely successful. For this work I was awarded a further international award, the ESFIAP, similar to the AFIAP, but given for excellence in service in contributing to the progress of photography by work and achievement. In addition to taking photographs and working in the shop, which in itself demanded a great amount of time, I began to devote myself to another great love, flying. This activity usurped first place for a while, photography however endured as my greatest hobby and still is today.

As I have mentioned, in 1956, our company, which at that time owned four shops in different cities, decided to sell the Newcastle

branch. After much deliberation and calculation, Clare and I decided that we would try to buy the shop if we could find someone who would give us a loan. We did not have enough ourselves even for the deposit, but we did find a willing lender, even though they demanded quite a high repayment interest rate - 25%. It was a big risk and required much hard work, but we believed that we could do it. We signed the contract and on 1st July 1956 became the owners of a company, which we called Novak Camera Co. Pty. Ltd. We had to tighten our belts for many years and to work literally seven days per week. Progress was very slow, but after a time, we began to see our way out, repay our debts and trust that the day would come when we would have none. We believed in our joint effort and were also able to plan a little for the future. Five years after our purchase, we found out that the two storey building in which our shop was one of eight, was for sale. Together with the other shop owners we agreed to obtain another loan and bought the building. And so again we found ourselves burdened with another enormous debt and there was no other alternative except to once more throw all our abilities and energy into our work. In 1961, we were even able to buy our first car and it seemed as if everything was proceeding well enough and 'as it should'.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be so. Clare's mother became seriously ill in the second half of 1962 - the doctors found that she had cancer. She succumbed to her illness on 15th December, which was a tremendous blow to both of us, particularly of course to Clare. It was a very sad Christmas for us that year. I still don't know how we survived it all and kept the business running at the same time. We had to completely rearrange our lives.

I was still in contact with my family and despite all our hardships, also tried to support it financially. In one of his letters my father had confided that he would like to see me one more time before he died. I realised that because of my financial situation I was not able to invite him to visit us in Australia. We had just bought a flat in a block of home units in the suburb of Merewether and our bank balance was very low. But we did promise him that we would try to fulfil his wish and make his journey to Australia possible.

To ask him to visit us was virtually unthinkable. But when I considered that he was almost 79 years old and that anything could happen at any time, the thought of not ever seeing him again convinced Clare and I that we would borrow the money from somewhere and invite him over. I contacted several travel agents and tried to find out if it was possible to buy an airline ticket on instalments over a period of about six months. I finally found one agency that agreed to this proposal.

But then began the even greater complication of gaining permission for my father to travel from Communist Czechoslovakia to capitalist Australia. The whole trip was in the stars, not the heavenly ones, but rather in the Czechoslovak Communist ones. There was much correspondence, my father spent a lot of time running around the bureaucracy, begging and bribing. But he was resolved to come to Australia no matter what and also did his utmost to make it happen. His efforts paid off. He gained permission to visit for four weeks, which was absolutely fantastic. And then came the weekend when I greeted my father on Australian soil. To this day I do not know how he managed it all, he knew no English, only a few words of German. His courage and determination however helped him to overcome all obstacles. At the airport in Prague he was given a sign about 20x20cm to hang around his neck, which said: "I don't speak English. I am going to Australia to visit my son and would be grateful for any help you may be willing to give me."

I informed my good friend Marcel Ludikar about my father's trip. He was serving with the RAF in Singapore at that time and was thus able to gain access to the transit lounge to meet with my father. My father, however, was suspicious that this could be someone hired by the Communist secret police to lure him into conversation with a Westerner. He nearly expired from fright that he would have to go back and so refused to speak with Marcel. Finally he calmed down and arrived in Sydney without any major problems.

I could see father coming through the passport control. When he came out of the customs area, we fell into each others arms and cried and cried. For a long time, we were unable to speak at all, we didn't even know what to talk about. But then I took my father to the parking lot and drove him to the hotel where I had arranged our accommodation. I quickly ordered some food and left dad to relax after his long trip. I was quite shattered by his poor appearance, he looked like a hunter from the Russian steppes. The first thing that I did after breakfast on the following morning was to take him to David Jones department store and bought him a completely new outfit. I couldn't believe my eyes how his appearance immediately changed, it was as if he had lost 20 years. Instead of a farm worker he was suddenly a well-off pensioner.

I took my father on a tour of Sydney and we talked of my mother, of the family, about his trip, about his job, of our acquaintances, but I felt as if he wanted to say something else, just could not start. He was still wary and continued to look around himself to see if anyone was following or listening to us. I assured him that no one was likely to be interested in us here. He then began to tell me what was going on back home. He told me how, shortly after the

Communist takeover in 1948, the authorities had come to our house, confiscated all my things and interrogated the family about my whereabouts. He recounted how he was questioned at the police station and asked to write me a letter, saying that he was terminally ill and urging me to come home to see him before he died. He refused. He told me how they had told him that I was a traitor and that I had collaborated with Dr Milada Horáková - an opposition politician later condemned in a show trial and executed - on destroying our new 'democratic' homeland. It was dreadful for me to hear that, especially when I realised that many of my letters must have been used by the Communists against my family and friends. It took both of us a long time to recover from this talk. After that, however, my father began to feel freer and happier. We spent another day in Sydney and then moved to Newcastle.

Clare was really taken with my dad. I still don't understand how they understood each other. She only knew a few words in Czech, but they got on like a house on fire and communicated all the time. My father was amazing, it was hardly noticeable that he didn't come from an Anglo Saxon world. He behaved like a real gentleman and when he didn't understand something, he would ask. We travelled around Newcastle a lot and visited many of my friends and acquaintances. I even introduced him to our Mayor, Frank Perdue, whom I knew personally. My father fell in love with Australia from the very first moment and would have even liked to have moved here. But my mother vehemently objected. And then the sad day came when we had to say goodbye. It was very difficult, I did not know if we would ever see each other again. My father warned me not to come back while the Communists were still in power. Clare and I missed him for a very long time after that, but life went on.

In 1965, I received an unexpected visit from my long time friend from Benátky, Břetka Friedrich and his wife. It was a tremendous surprise. We had known each other since we were six years old. They stayed with us and we spent a wonderful week together. Břetka was employed by British Airways and each year he was able to use two free tickets to fly anywhere. This time, he decided it would be Australia. Naturally, we spent a long time speaking about the situation back home and I wondered if it might be possible for me and Clare to also visit. Břetka wasn't particularly encouraging, but thought that perhaps because of our Australian citizenship it might just be possible. And so Clare and I began to plan a trip to my home country.

There was to be a great photographic exhibition in Cologne, Germany, the next year. The photographic company Agfa Gevaert was planning a tour to this exhibition and invited businessmen from

New Zealand and Australia to come along. Clare and I had already planned a holiday to the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, but because it was only for 10 days, we decided to join the tour to Cologne as well. I consulted my family. They would have been extremely happy to see us, but still counselled against the idea. Nevertheless, we set off in mid September 1966. We broke away from the larger tour group in Switzerland and flew to Prague. The reunion with my family was again extremely moving, but our great happiness had almost been spoilt by my inattention. I had left all my documents at Prague airport, which would have been a catastrophe, had not my friend Břetka, who knew many airport staff, been able to find them again. Those first few days at home were exhilarating. Visit followed visit, everyone wanted to talk to us, there were a million questions to answer. But we still had to be very careful in what we said, so that it couldn't later be extracted from anyone under duress. When the time came for us to leave, the most affected by our departure was my father. He begged us to take him back to Australia. It goes without saying that this was heartbreaking. After a long and sad leave taking, we flew to Germany, where we again joined our tour group.

The exhibition in Cologne inspired us, as did our subsequent return home. We travelled through America, Mexico and Hawaii and returned to Australia very tired, but full of many lasting impressions from around the globe. Hard work was unquestionably waiting for us on our arrival. Our debts may have been diminishing, but the work was no walk in the park.

Not long before our departure for Europe, a friend asked me whether I would ever like to go back to flying and even arranged for lessons for me with an ex-RAF instructor. And so I returned to something that I really loved, this time as a pilot. I flew whenever I could, sometimes I did not even know what to prioritise - flying or business.

The situation in Czechoslovakia began to change in 1967. The Slovak politician Alexandr Dubček became premier and attempted to change many things for the better. The nation supported him, but the Communist leadership had other plans. Dubček's Communism with a human face was also not popular with Moscow, indeed its acceptance had the opposite effect.

The beginning of 1968 saw another Fotokino exhibition being planned in Cologne and Clare and I began to consider how fine it would be to see my parents again. At around the same time, after a long and troublesome negotiation with the Czechoslovak authorities, Clare and I had been successful in gaining permission

for my nephew Vašek and his wife Věra to come on a work exchange to Australia. Vašek had studied geology at university in Prague and Věra was an anthropologist. We had agreed that at first they would live with us. But the expected date of their departure kept getting postponed and we did not quite know when they were likely to arrive. About five days before we were due to leave for Europe, I received a phone call in the middle of the night telling me that the armies of the Warsaw Pact had invaded Czechoslovakia. Clare and I determined to still visit my parents, despite all the risks.

When we eventually arrived, my family was enormously happy to see us, even in light of the great upheavals taking place at that time. In addition, we also tried to work out how to help Vašek and Věra to get across the border. We sought advice from the British Embassy in Prague, who advised us not to try to do anything different in the matter except for my nephew and his wife to proceed as had already been arranged. I was unhappy with this advice, but could not do very much. When we arrived in Germany, I also tried to approach the Australian Embassy there. A very pleasant gentleman suggested that they should first head for Vienna and in this they were also helped by my friend Břeťa. Břeťa's sister Jitka now lived in Austria and she was able to write a letter of invitation to Vašek and Věra, enabling them to visit her. They arrived in Vienna within five days and a few weeks later we were able to pick them up in Sydney. They first stayed with us for several weeks and Vašek then obtained employment in Western Australia as a geologist. Six months later, we were also able to assist Vašek's brother Jaran to come to Australia and later still, my sister's daughter Pavla and her husband.

Between the years 1968 and 1978 we visited Europe several more times. We worked hard and in the meantime I also devoted myself to my newly discovered passion, amateur flying. Later, when I was more established in my business and better financially situated, I tried to give amateur flying my full attention. I became a member of the Royal Newcastle Aero Club in Maitland and took part in many of its activities, such as its Tiger Moth air races and 'safaris'.

The Tiger Moth Air Race was an air race held every two years from 1977 to 1998, with an air show held at the end. It was named after the main planes that took part, a number of historical two seater DH.32 Tiger Moths. There were up to 20 planes in some of the air races, but for the inaugural show, we had gathered about 35 flying legends. The planes were piloted by both men and women – in mixed crews the women tended to take the role of the navigator. The show lasted from Friday till Sunday. The races were managed

by my friend, the club president Jack Fahey, who had flown Dakotas in Burma during the war supplying the jungle rebels. The aim of the air race was for the pilot and navigator to fly as fast as possible over a certain course, using the least amount of fuel.

I recall my first race very fondly. I hired a small two seater plane, a Cessna 150, and took my wife Clare along. The weather was pretty bad. As we were landing at Taree, I could see all the Tigers lined up beautifully on the tarmac as if on display and wanted to take one last photo. I asked Clare to hold the gear stick, although she had never flown a plane before. She took the task quite seriously, but not for long. She flew calmly for a while, but then all of a sudden we started to lose altitude quickly. "Clare darling, wait, we can't do it that way." I took over the command and corrected the nosedive. We still had to do another circuit, but this incident caused us to be delayed and thus to drop out of the planned flight path. Each flight, or a projected course and estimated time of arrival, had to be announced in advance. Suddenly, we received the message: "Where are you?" and so I gave the controller from Sydney our position. "Where do you want to land?" I asked him to extend our time of return by 30 minutes. Air control in Australia is of a very high standard. The air force base is also located at close by Williamtown and so aircraft must fly in allocated corridors. As soon as any plane deviates from its course, central ground control begins to search for the pilot and orders them to return on course or to the correct altitude.

As I have mentioned, fuel consumption played the greatest role. Another friend, Bob Copas, had a metal construction attached to the body of the plane fixed to the upper wing of the Tiger, where he carried his girlfriend, Lace Maxwell. Lace would perform various acrobatic moves during the flight. Anyone who watched this from the ground was absolutely fascinated. Bob and Lace attended the air shows regularly, but precisely because of the construction and accompanying demands on the plane's engine and thus fuel, would usually come in on the last rungs of the competition. Bob had an interesting way of taking-off. As soon as he had lifted the plane off the ground, he would sharply lift the gear stick, hopping to about 10 metres and there he would level out. On 26th June 1994, Bob and Lace were to demonstrate their skills at Luskintyre Airfield for a charity function to benefit children with cancer. Bob performed his usual start. The Tiger Moth has a gas tank on top of the wing and thus has a gravitational method for channelling fuel. Possibly an air bubble got into the hose when the Tiger levelled out and the engine momentarily cut out. Bob was unable to lift the plane and both he and Lace on the wing were killed in front of the sick children. Both were passionate pilots and sometimes that is how a flying life ends.

Two weeks before, Bob had called me to say that he would like a copy of a short film I had shot of the 1992 Tiger Moth Air Race, because it contained about five minutes of him and Lace performing. I had sent him the footage. I don't know whether he had received it, but he probably didn't get to see much of it.

Other important factors were speed and accuracy of navigation, culminating in flying through an aerial triangle at the airport. The plane's time was measured in the middle of this triangle. Sometimes it happened that the wind would blow the Tiger out of the triangle and the pilot had to do another circle. This meant a delay of approximately five minutes, quite a big loss in the race itself.

All the Tiger Moth Air Races were quite different, one of the reasons being the attendance each time of new participants of various nationalities and professions, from doctors, to professional pilots to farmers. There was a South African and an American employed as a Boeing 747 pilot. Everyone had something to talk about. I did not participate in the races, but filmed and photographed the whole event. In total, I produced eleven films.

For me the air race started on Friday, when I left work early, collected the car and drove to the Aero Club. I would arrive in time for the 6 pm "briefing", where all the participants were familiarised with the course of the flight and the event regulations. I would then stay in a nearby hotel, so that I needn't have to undertake the hour long drive back home. Saturday morning at the airport was all abuzz, The planes were being polished in order to reduce resistance, everything was being checked and fuel was being rationed to the exact drop. The first of about three or four stages commenced at 7 am. All the planes slowly lined up in a queue, then taxied accurately onto the start line and from there the starter waved each plane to take off at exact one minute intervals. The planes took off in either a northerly or westerly direction. I would film the start of half the competing field and then jump in a Cessna and continue to film in the air. From here, you could see a long chain of bi-planes gently swinging on the wind and I can tell you, it was a truly spectacular sight.

Each stage was of approximately similar length and the planes would land on an air field after every 200 to 300 km or so. There, measures of time arrived and fuel consumed would be taken and this information would determine the new order of take-off. The last plane would start first. The second stage led southward and the day would end in a happy hour. The crews would discuss the

day's events over two or three beers, but called it quite an early night so as to be fit the following morning.

On Sunday, the last stage of the flight took us to Sydney and then back to our Newcastle airbase for the air show. Apart from the Tigers arriving from the race, there was a Spitfire, a Mustang and various other jets from the nearby airbase on display. I filmed and took pictures of everything. That evening, after the air show, the prizes would be awarded and we would all depart for our homes full of pleasant memories. For me, however, the work had not ended. It took me another six months after each air race to develop the photographs, edit the films and add a soundtrack.

The Tiger Moth Air Races are an amazing part of my life. Whenever I see the race footage again, I have a happy feeling that I experienced all of this and knew all of these people, who were all good friends. When I interviewed them and asked them about the flight, I liked to listen to their jokes and hear their talk of planes. I can honestly say that the Tiger Moth weekends were among the best of my life. After the flying finished and prizes had been given out on the Sunday night, returning to normal life on the following day was always difficult. I had been able to live in a completely different world for three days, when I would have liked to perhaps stay in it forever. The Tiger Moth Air Race was simply something that I loved with all my heart.

Each year, the Royal Newcastle Aero Club also organised a so-called 'safari', or flights to various parts of Australia. Most interestingly, the flights were to destinations that an ordinary mortal would almost never be able to reach. For example, we landed on a remote property in the Kimberley, in northern Western Australia, where the nearest township was two days' travel away. Excursions to such places were extremely interesting. Personally, I found a particular affiliation with Central Australia and absolutely loved flying there. I visited Uluru, or Ayers Rock as it was formerly known, eight times. This is a monolith, of which only 1/3 can be seen above the surface. It is a very popular landmark and, in the days when this was more common, was scaled by a large number of people every year despite the great heat. I climbed this rock for the last time and with considerable difficulty when I was 63 years old, but I was assisted by my great friend Fred Newbert, who used to fly with us as a passenger. I usually flew with John Farrelly as my co-pilot, with whom I used to swap controls on each stretch. I also visited Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory on five occasions. I took a flight circumnavigating Australia in 1985, went to Western Australia six times and to Tasmania twice. The reason

for the frequent trips to Western Australia was that my nephew resided there.

During these 'safaris' I came to love Australia. It is such an unspoilt and natural country. You cannot find similar fauna – kangaroos, wombats, koala bears, platypus or Tasmanian devils - and flora anywhere else in the world. If there was inadequate accommodation for all the crew, we would sleep under the open skies. Sometimes there were eight, sometimes twenty planes. Often, there was only one gas pump at the smaller airports and the more there were of us, the slower was the progress of the safari. Sometimes we even needed to refuel from barrels, because the only way to bring in enough gas was by truck. At these times, we had to be extra careful, especially when the barrels were low. There was often dirt at the bottom and it would have been a catastrophe if this had seeped into the plane's gas tank or the carburettor. Sometimes we filtered the fuel, but not always. Another potential hazard was water in the gas and we had to check for this both before and after refuelling. It happened to me about three times that I had some water in the fuel tank. This was also quite dangerous, as water entering the carburettor could seize the engine. Flying regulations in these parts of the country are very strict and must be adhered to, especially those relating to take-off and landing.

Flying above the uninhabited regions of Australia - mainly desert or wilderness - is fascinating. If you are about to fly into an inhospitable area with a light aircraft, you have to report everything that you are planning to the closest ground control station. After you have crossed the uninhabited area, you must again report to the local ground control, who will telegraphically let the previous one know that you have called in safely. And so you keep being handed over. It often happened that John and I were requested to look for lost tourists, but for the most part this is a near impossible task.

Our biggest danger was the weather. Most of us pilots were so-called 'weekend pilots', that is, we tried to fly mainly in good weather conditions so that we did not have to rely too much on instruments. In truth, many of us were not too sure about this topic. Another problem was flying at night. Many of our pilots did not have a special licence for night flying. I did not have difficulty with this, as I had the licence and actually really enjoyed flying at night time. Our instructor was always joking: "If you need to make an emergency night time landing, don't turn on the headlights or you'll see how bad the ground is."

No matter how small the plane, it is the pilot who has the last word, the same as any pilot of an Airbus or Boeing. Sometimes it would happen that the meteorological report was not too accurate. On one occasion, as we were flying south from Horn Island near Thursday Island at the top of Australia, the weather worsened considerably after takeoff. All the other planes decided to fly above the clouds, but I reasoned that the clouds would thicken and I would not be able to see the ground. I felt that if I could not orient to landmarks, I would become lost. Amateur pilots in Australia are not supposed to fly lower than 500 feet above ground. The weather became worse still and we had to fly even lower. The only alternative would have been to return to Horn Island, but as we had no radio contact we did not know what the conditions there were like either.

Fortunately, I had flown the same route about two years previously and remembered being able to land on Lockhart River, directly in the middle of an aboriginal community. I recalled that the airport lay on a river that led to the sea. We did have Global Position Services or GPS on board, but John my co-pilot, who used it, had forgotten to re-charge it and so it was unworkable. We flew over the ocean between various islands and I was then able to locate the river mouth from a map. I immediately made for the river, stayed at 200 feet until we could see the airstrip, then turned the plane around and landed. In the meantime, the rest of our group had not had any news of us and began to worry. But we caught up with it again the following day. Two months later, I learnt that a passenger plane had crashed at Lockhart River under much better conditions than we had had. Quite often we had to simply turn back to our starting point because of bad weather.

Once we flew from Coolangatta airport on the Gold Coast to our base at Maitland, which is very close to the large air force base at Williamtown. Our Australian fighter jets take off from here. Three squadrons of F-18 planes and a combat Hawker Hawk aircraft are based there. Several days per week are 'active', that is when exercises and manoeuvres are held. Whenever we fly near Williamtown, we use a special corridor, in which we must fly at 500 feet above a small rivulet. We had two Automatic Direction Finding of ADF devices on our Cessna, which enable the finetuning of bandwidth and from this to establish one's position. But one of these ADFs stopped working during our flight. When we were approximately 15-20 km from our base and had to turn west, the ADF seized up. I was therefore flying according to the second device until I discovered that I was off-course. I asked my co-pilot for an exact position, but as we debated this for another 2½ minutes, we had flown another 8 km. And so it happened that we

entered the space of the air force base, where we were naturally unwelcome.

All of a sudden, an F-18 flew underneath me at very great speed. I got a fright, looked at John and said: "Lucky he missed us!" But as soon as I had said this, the ground control called us on our call sign: "Romeo-November-Papa, what is your position and altitude?" I replied that I was flying at 700 feet. Williamtown tower (WT): "Reduce altitude to 500", which I repeated, as all altitudes had to be confirmed. WT: "What course are you flying?" "280", I replied. WT: "Go to 270."

When we had landed, a message was waiting for me at the Aero Club: "Call the air force base immediately!" That sounded ominous. I was a member of the officer's mess at Williamtown and knew some of the girls who worked in the tower and on radar. And so I called the base and asked who was on radar duty at 11:30 am. It had been Julie and so I asked to be connected to her: "Julie, this is Romeo-November-Papa, the person who flew into your air space. What will you do with me? Will you take away my licence?" Rather than Jaroslav, I'm generally called Jan here. Julie said very calmly and pleasantly: "No Jan, you won't lose your licence. I only wanted to tell you that if you ever get into any more difficulties, please get in touch with us and we will help you out." I thanked Julie and all was resolved. I was very lucky, it was the first time I had been so close to a supersonic jet. At first, I was puzzled how Julie had known my call sign and then I realised that the pilot of the F-18 must have read it on the underneath of my wing and reported it to the base.

We did have to be very careful on some of the smaller aerodromes when landing and taking off. An uneven or rough surface of the air strip could easily damage the undercarriage and propeller. A cross wind could also be very dangerous on smaller air fields with shorter air strips.

My wife Clare was wonderful. She accompanied me on most of the safaris and we shared some very special moments. When we had landed somewhere of an evening, we would usually have an early 'happy hour', enjoy a beer and grill some sausages. It was a rule on these amateur trips that the pilot could not drink 8 hours before the start.

In all, the safaris took about three weeks and so a trip cost me up to \$ 3500. But they were fantastic holidays, because we were in the company of our friends and we were doing what we loved, that is flying.

All of these activities and travels were demanding both on our time and finances, however, and in 1978 I had already begun to realise that in order to maintain our viability, we would have to expand our business operations. We therefore opened a second branch in the Charlestown shopping centre in April of 1979. This required much organising, money, solid work and extra effort. We also needed to find new, reliable staff and somehow managed to master everything. But not everything goes completely smoothly all of the time.

The 1980's brought both good and sadder experiences. My wife and I holidayed in Africa, for example, and visited Jenda Lazar in Kenya where he now ran a leather company. We were also very fortunate to visit and meet Joy Adamson there, the author of 'Born Free'. Our parent company Camera House, however, got into financial difficulties and at the beginning of 1983 went into liquidation. A group of managing directors was formed in order to help the company out of the crisis. I was among them and we immediately went to work on effectively repaying the company's various debts. We wanted to know that we had done everything possible to be able to look firmly in our guarantors' eyes again. We succeeded and by the end of the year we were able to establish a new company together with a few of the remaining members and shareholders. I was elected one of the directors of the new company. I knew what awaited me, but was convinced that we would overcome most of the obstacles and difficulties that were in store. We gradually accomplished to restore the faith of some of the initially doubtful suppliers and within two years, we again became one of the leading photographic companies on the Australian market.

At the end of the decade, in September 1989, Clare and I again set off for Czechoslovakia. I wanted to attend the 50th anniversary of our high school matriculation in Mladá Boleslav. On the way we spent several days in Singapore exploring the city. Then on board the flight to Prague I spent some wonderful moments with the crew of the Il-62. We got on very well, they were visibly happy to hear that I flew myself and that I had been with No. 311 Squadron during the war. They showed me all the instruments, looked at my photographs and I listened to their communications with the air control in Bombay over the headsets. It was a very pleasant encounter. When we had landed in Prague and dealt with all the necessary controls, I was again able to meet with my friends and relatives who had come to collect me. We visited my brother in Šternberk, my sister in Benátky and went sightseeing to Mladá Boleslav and Hlínoviště. Czechoslovak television asked me if I would be willing to take part in a programme about wartime pilots.

The filming was to be on the same day as my meeting with my school mates. I went to the reunion first and then had to leave to go to Prague to take part in the filming. When I returned, there was not much time left to be able to reminisce with my friends. Some had also been unable to attend.

In November of that year, of course, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia fell and the official position toward those who had previously been persecuted was to change irrevocably.

1989 had marked one of our most profitable business seasons and we had finally nearly achieved our longtime dream – by the New Year we were to be completely financially independent. I say 'were', because while humans may plan, God can alter. On the first working day after a wonderful Christmas, on 28th December 1989 at 10:20 am in the morning, we were hit by an earthquake.

We had just opened the shop when the whole building suddenly shook. This was followed by another, even stronger tremour. The lights went out, some of the walls cracked, cameras and other equipment were falling off the shelves. The city was in chaos. Traffic signals were not working, the water had been cut off, there was smoke and dust everywhere. A number of patients died in the hospitals when their life maintaining equipment was deprived of electricity. Forty five minutes after the earthquake, the entire city was closed down and its inhabitants evacuated. Army units from up to 300 km away were arriving in order to take charge of the situation.

The first media reports assessing the disaster did not come till 2:30 pm in the afternoon. The lady that had been cleaning at our house arrived in shock and tears to tell us that our house had been heavily damaged. What we saw there, left us completely despondent. Everything was in ruins, some of the walls had cracks up to 10 cm wide. I do not wish to go into deeper descriptions, but all our joy from our successful dealings was gone. We were to endure much anxiety, worry and pain. Only a moment ago we had been celebrating the end of our debts and now we again had to borrow from the bank, this time another \$200,000 for a new house and all the accompanying costs. And so, with broken hearts and another large financial burden, we tried to start again from scratch.

In May of 1990, I organised a two day conference of our company in Port Macquarie, approximately 400 km north of Newcastle. I was relatively tired from the constant problems in our business, we still had not recovered enough from the earthquake to have repaired and fixed everything. The builder, who was working on the building

in which we had our premises, needed to close all the shops for a period of three days. In the end this did not happen, but even so, all the repairs and subsequent changes had quite exhausted us financially. I did not want to go to the conference by car and so I hired a small two seater plane and flew to Port Macquarie with a girl from one of the shops. The trip only lasted 1½ hours, the weather was sunny and the flight was without incident. On the way back, the conditions were much worse. The low clouds necessitated that we flew all the way to Newcastle skirting the coast at an altitude of only 200-300 feet and only then could we proceed above the river to our airbase. I was glad that we had made it home at all. A week later, the shop was broken into and goods valued at approximately \$3000, mainly videocameras, were stolen. Someone had smashed the display window and then wrenched out the metal grill by attaching it to a car and driving forward. The police phoned me at 1:30 am in the morning to come and secure the exposed shop. Such were the trials and tribulations of daily life.

In June, Clare and I again set off to England via Hong Kong. I was on a quest to find a plastic cockpit cover to fit a particular Spitfire model that we wished to exhibit in our shopping centre for the anniversary of the Battle of Britain. I thus also visited several RAF bases such as the ones at Duxford, Manston, Beaulieu and Coninsby, the home of one of the Tornado Fighter Squadrons. I then continued to the Museum of the Battle of Britain, with its vast collection of planes that includes the most familiar models of Spitfires, Hurricanes and Lancasters, the RAF Museum in Hendon, and the Memorial to Airmen Who Have No Known Grave 1939-1945 at Runnymede, near Windsor Castle. I also met with several old friends at a reunion organised at the Czechoslovak Embassy in London: Josef Bílek from my crew when it was commanded by Ján Lazar, Eileen, Ján's widow, Vilém Munk and his wife Gabriela, who too had emigrated. Vilém had also been a member of the RAF during the war. On the last day of our stay in London, I was also able to attend a service for Czechoslovaks in the Central Church of the Royal Air Force, St Clement Danes.

In Manston we observed a spectacularly grand air day organised to commemorate the anniversary of the Battle of Britain. We spent the night at a friend of Clare's in Portsmouth and the next day we traversed practically the whole of southern England to arrive at Penzance. On the following day we visited St Ives, where I had spent many pleasant days during the war. We then set off across England in a northerly direction, to Yorkshire, in order to visit some friends in Harrogate and on the Saturday, we headed to Scotland. I wished to visit my friend Jirka Höning in Greenock, where he lives with his wife. It was fabulous to be able to meet with such a good

friend after all this time. Before departing England we were still able to squeeze in a visit to the area surrounding Stratford upon Avon, the birthplace of William Shakespeare.

After our return to Australia, we organised a big exhibition on the theme of the Battle of Britain anniversary in Charlestown Shopping Centre. At the end of October we again attended the big biennial event for historical planes, the Tiger Moth Air Race. During my time in England, a television station had also filmed our reunion for the occasion of the Battle's 50th anniversary. The camera managed to capture me clasping my lucky wartime mascot, Bobby the hare, in my arms. When the programme was screened at a late date, it was seen by Barbara, the girl who had originally given him to me. She didn't have my address, but got in touch with our RAF organisation in London and was able to obtain a contact for me. She then wrote to me in Australia and our renewed connection even made the headlines of the local Newcastle newspaper.

In 1991, I was invited to travel to what was now the 'Czech and Slovak Federative Republic' in order to be promoted to Colonel by the new government. The best part was that I met with a small group of my flying friends, whom I had not seen for a very long time. I attended the first air show held in Pardubice and also met up with Arnošt Polák. At fifteen, Arnošt had been sent to England with a convoy of other Jewish children, where he first worked on various farms. He joined the air force at eighteen and trained as a wireless operator. He flew with No. 311 Squadron until the autumn of 1944 and then, like me, transferred to No. 246 Squadron. On his return to our home country after the war, he discovered that all of his closest family had been killed in concentration camps. Only he and his brother Felix, a participant of the Dunkerque landings, had survived. In his later years, Arnošt acted as secretary of the Association of Free Czechoslovakia in London.

12th April 1992 to the day was the exact 50th anniversary of when I first climbed aboard a training aircraft. I celebrated this by visiting our Aero Club and entering in a flying competition. I may not have won, but was more than pleased that I could still fly half a century later.

A week after Easter in 1993, I received a visit from two Americans. One of them introduced himself as a pilot and professor of aeronautics at NASA. His brother had perished on a Liberator during the war when it had been shot down during an American raid on the Plojest oil fields in Romania. I showed him my extensive collection of air photographs and also organised that he could go up in a Tiger Moth for a scenic flight. He was thrilled and promised

that he might try to come again the following year. In gratitude, he gave me an American "Wings of Fame" badge as a gift.

In April, as every year, I marched in the Anzac Day procession that commemorates the famous landing of Australians and New Zealanders in Turkish Gallipoli in 1915. I attend this march annually with our flying air force group. That year I also attended a gathering at the Czech and Slovak Sokol National House in Sydney, where I came across a wireless operator from No. 311 Squadron, Tonda Kříž, for the first time since 1945. We had trained together and even flown together several times. It was a warm meeting after so many years.

At the end of October 1993, I attended the last Annual General Meeting and conference as a director of Camera House. Considering that it had been ten years since the founding of our association, a big celebration was planned. Clare and I were given a set of cut crystal glass and I also received an award in recognition of services in our organisation. I had also prepared a surprise for Clare at that moment. While I held an approximately 15 minute speech thanking my colleagues for their contribution to our success, the employees of the hotel where the conference was held organised a bouquet of forty fresh red roses, one for each year Clare and I had been in business together. Then, as I also thanked Clare, one of the employees came forward and presented them to her. It was a surprise to everyone and was very well received.

The year 1995 was significant in particular for the celebrations held in honour of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. Clare and I decided to use the opportunity to visit our loved ones in the now Czech Republic once more. We landed at Prague Ruzyně airport on Thursday 27th April. We visited Benátky and my high school in Mladá Boleslav, where I met with several of my former schoolmates. We also travelled to Šternberk to see friends of my brother Venda's wife and to Valašské Klobouky to visit my wartime friend, Josef Balejka. It was actually quite cold, but everything was in full blossom. On the way back, we stopped in the spa town of Luhačovice.

On arrival in London, we made our way from Heathrow airport to the Air Force Club in Piccadilly, where we were booked in. All the events were to be held in Hyde Park, only a few steps away from Piccadilly. Again, I met with many old friends, for example with Josef Bílek and his wife Ursula. We listened to the Queen Mother's speech and on the Saturday evening went to the Theatre Royal to see a performance of 'Miss Saigon'. On Sunday, we attended the celebrations at St Paul's Cathedral, where many world politicians

and heads of state had gathered. The festivities concluded on Monday in front of Buckingham Palace in the presence of three members of the Royal family, the Queen, her sister Princess Margaret and the Queen Mother, who had all also attended the celebrations 50 years previously.

On 9th May we returned to Prague to be present for the unveiling of a memorial to fallen airmen in front of the Ministry of Defence in the suburb of Dejvice. We attended the ceremony despite the dismal weather and then continued to the Ministry and later also to an official reception at the British Embassy. I met with Marcel Ludikar and we had a wonderful time reminiscing.

In the second half of July of that year, I took part in a long safari circumnavigating Australia, this time on my own. There were ten planes and, counting breaks, we spent a total of 42½ hours in the air, covering 8,000 km. If I were to list the places where we stayed for at least one night along the route, from Maitland these would be Broken Hill – Alice Springs – Tindale – Darwin – Dum In Mirrie Island – Jabiru (Kakadu) – Burketown – Normanton – Longreach – Tibooburra and White Cliffs. The weather was very clear, although we did have a strong wind. We spent three weeks in completing the trip, sometimes sleeping in hotels and at other times out in the open, but it was absolutely fascinating. For example, there are many crocodiles in the Gulf of Carpentaria in the north and so if we wanted to go for a dip, we had to be very careful not to become an unintentional meal. Fortunately, I did not give the crocs a chance to have a taste of me.

1996 was the most memorably tragic year of my life. Clare wasn't feeling too well and tests revealed that she had water on the lungs. The doctors gave her antibiotics and sent her home. Her own general practitioner was away on holidays at the time, but when she returned, she immediately sent Clare to the hospital. There, over a litre of water was pumped out of her lungs and further investigations showed that Clare had cancer. Clare asked how long she may have to live and was told that it would still be a long time, after which the hospital appeared not to take interest in her progress. She was back in hospital at the beginning of February, but her treatment did not seem particularly effective and her health deteriorated. Not even a well-known herbalist, who tried very hard and gave us a certain amount of hope, could help. My darling Clare died on Saturday, 20th April 1996. For me it was an extremely painful loss. I had no interest in making any plans for the future and my life became quite aimless.

In 1998, our company was to hold another one of their half-yearly conferences, this time in New Zealand. Clare and I had been looking forward very much to going there together, but unfortunately, she had not lived long enough to take part. It turned out to be a very interesting event. We naturally did much sightseeing, by historical paddle steamer across Lake Wakatipu, ten kilometre long speedboat rides on Dart River and taking an outing to Milford Sound, a large ocean harbour wedged between steep mountains, fringed by beautiful waterfalls cascading from the summit. On our return, there was an air force reunion of the Blue Orchids – or of ex-RAAF friendly organisations - in Newcastle. This is an event that is held twice a year and I always find some good friends there with whom to reminisce. My spirits began to lift a little.

In early 1999, my secretary Esmé, who had been with me for 20 years, was sadly killed in a car accident. I was visiting my nephew in Western Australia at the time and returned immediately to pay respects at Esmé's funeral.

I was fortunate to be able to visit the now Czech Republic again in the European summer. For my 78th birthday, on 6th June, I went to another air show at Pardubice and there I had the opportunity to fly in an acrobatic plane with the former world champion in air acrobatics, Ivan Tuček. As we flew upside down, Ivan asked me what I thought. I told him: "This is nothing Ivan. In Australia we're always upside down." It was fantastic, but remembering this time is also always somewhat poignant, as Ivan was killed while training in the same plane in Austria only two months later.

At a meeting of former airmen at the Dejvice Memorial in Prague on 10th June, I met with an acquaintance, Honza Štursa, with whom I had fled the Protectorate in 1940 and then made it all the way to Cholmondeley. He went on to serve with the British parachutists. He told me that after the war he got together with our Commander Josef Süsser and started an export business in Prague. Unfortunately, Süsser was a British agent. When he was uncovered, he managed to flee from the country in time. Honza, on the other hand, was caught by the Communist secret police and interrogated for seven days. He was beaten with sticks and whenever he fainted, he had a bucket of water poured over him, was stood up and beaten again. He learnt to sleep upright. He was sentenced to prison for five years and laboured in the Jáchymov mines, hauling uranium ore with his bare hands!!! When we met, he walked with the aid of a stick and had contracted cancer from his exposure to the uranium. But he held the rank of Colonel – it was after the fall of Communism. Despite his serious illness, he

presided over a legionnaires' association and fought assiduously for the rights and compensation of former freedom fighters. Ironically, he himself did not live to see any financial recompense, because he succumbed to his malady on 10th February 2000. One of the last things that he said to me was: "Shoelace, you were never afraid of anything, it was you who got me out of the country and into the resistance." I had earned this nickname in the army for being so thin.

At the end of August, I invited my former Commander, Vláďa Nedvěd, to come up to see me in Newcastle while he was visiting Sydney from Queensland. He came on 14th September and I organised an interesting programme for him. I took him to the Aero Club and on a Tiger Moth flight. We visited the local vineyards and the holiday resort of Nelsons Bay. In Williamstown, Vláďa was shown the last model of the Hornet fighter plane, the F/A-18. That evening, Vláďa gave a talk to the pilots and he made another speech on the anniversary of the Battle of Britain on the following day.

One of the most significant events of the year 2000 were the Olympic Games in Sydney. The preparations were terrific, evident both in the precise organisation of the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as in the transmission of the sporting events. This success was also made possible by some 47,000 volunteers, some of whom also came to Sydney and paid for their own accommodation and keep. Equally spectacular were the planning, organisation and achievements of the subsequent Paralympic Games.

2001 again began tragically. We were given the sad news that my nephew had been diagnosed with liver cancer. His wife Věra and many others tried to do everything that they could for him, but unfortunately their efforts were all in vain and Vašek died on 5th January. It was a great blow, especially to Věra.

That summer I participated in another safari and was also kept busy with renovations of our shop in Newcastle. I additionally had to learn many new tasks, as there had been a revision of the Australian tax system in the previous year. I was greatly helped in my accounting by my very good friend, Joe Magno.

On 11th August I happened to meet a very old acquaintance, Karel Niemczyk at a cultural programme and lunch at the Sokol Czech and Slovak National House. We had first met in 1940, but only fleetingly, on the ship Compiegne from Beirut to France. It could not have occurred to me then that we would become the best of

friends. Karel was one of the giants of our resistance. In Britain, he joined the British parachutists and had the very best credentials for this task. If he believed that something was right, he did not deviate an inch from his conviction. He was very well equipped in languages and besides Czech and English spoke fluent German, Russian, Yugoslav and some Polish. On 3rd April 1944 just before midnight, Karel was dropped behind enemy lines - into the Protectorate - with the parachutist unit codenamed CALCIUM. Where many other units had already failed and perished, CALCIUM's task was to renew contact between the Czechoslovak resistance and London after a year's silence. Karel was an exceptional member of the group. He was able to maintain contact with his headquarters, all the while several times just narrowly escaping with his life. At the beginning of March 1945, for example, Karel was walking with Lieutenant Kabele from the so-called Triad Council (the leadership of the main underground resistance in the Protectorate) towards Velké Meziříčí to an arranged meeting. They were pushing their bicycles uphill, when a car without its engine on suddenly came from around the corner ahead of them. The car came to a halt approximately 20 metres behind them, four Gestapo officers jumped out and shouted: "Stop, put your hands up!" Lieutenant Kabele was closer to the Gestapo. He lay his bicycle in the ditch and put his hands up in the air above his head. Karel was somewhat smaller than Kabele. He had the presence of mind to hide behind Kabele and only raise one arm in the air. In the other he held a gun. He allowed one of the Gestapo to come very close and then fired. He wounded the nearest of the four quite seriously, the driver only slightly and the other two were driven into the forest. Then he and Kabele also ran off quickly and lost themselves among the trees. Kabele was also lightly wounded in the leg and found it difficult to walk. Karel pushed and pushed him to go on, because he knew that if the wounded man was captured, tens of other lives would also be endangered. Had the lieutenant not been able to continue, Karel may have been forced to shoot him. In the end, both reached a safe haven.

Karel was also known for his disagreement with the leadership of the Triad Council, with whom CALCIUM was in league. When they wanted him to pass unsubstantiated information about the status of the resistance to the London headquarters, he refused to do so.

Regrettably, I don't possess many wartime photographs of Karel, as he was unable to pose during his skirmishes with the Gestapo. After the Communist takeover, it was not viable for Karel to remain in Czechoslovakia safely. He ultimately successfully settled in Sydney, where he died on 31st July 2005. His loss pained me very much.

He also had the unbelievable luck that he survived the war. The parachutists at that time had losses calculated at 92%. From the time that we met, we remained the closest of pals and we tried to spend every free moment in each other's company. We would visit each other often and always had something to talk about and connect to. Sometimes, we had differing opinions on world events, but respected each other greatly. To me, Karel was one of the greatest heroes of the Czechoslovak resistance.

On 11th September 2001, the world was struck with calamity, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York. The lives of many people were permanently affected by this disaster and I must say that I will also permanently carry the memory of this event with me.

The years 2003 to 2005 were also not very easy for me. Once more, life brought many personal hardships, that I again needed to overcome. In addition, I lost two close wartime friends, with whom I had shared times of both happiness and hardship in the RAF. Marcel Ludikar was born in 1920 in Paris to a Czech father and French mother. The family name was quite well known, as Marcel's uncle Pavel had been a world renowned opera singer after World War I. Marcel was educated in Czechoslovakia, attending the Křemencova Street high school in Prague. In summer of 1939, he and a group of school friends were able to obtain student tourist visas and he departed the country to visit his father who at that time worked in Bulgaria. His plan, however, was to join the Czechoslovak Army in exile. His journey took him through Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey, then to Beirut in the Lebanon, Marseilles and Agde in southern France. There he enlisted in the already formed Czechoslovak Army and after the fall of France in June 1940 was evacuated with everyone else by British shipping to Liverpool. He was also at first temporarily accommodated in the tent camp at Cholmondeley Park. He passed the officers' course and after a time he volunteered for the Czechoslovak units in the RAF. He flew with No. 311 Squadron as wireless, as well as radar, operator. He was in Olda Doležal's crew when they sank the blockade runner, the Alsterufer, in December 1943. During the war, Marcel's mother lived in Paris. When the French metropolis was liberated in 1944, Marcel received a special permit to fly to visit her, but when he arrived, he learnt that she had died only a few days earlier. After the war, he returned to Czechoslovakia and flew with the Transport Command until the political coup in 1948, when he was arrested and interrogated. He was able to flee, however, on skis over Mount Špičák in the Ore Mountains to Bavaria and then several months later he arrived back in England. In 1949, he married Hana Feierabend, daughter of Ladislav

Feierabend, Finance Minister before the war. He returned to the RAF, became Squadron Leader and remained in the service until 1975, having also been stationed in Singapore, for example. He then worked at the UK Ministry of Defence until 1981. After the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, he was promoted to Brigadier and in 1995 to General Major. I used to joke and say to him: "I can't understand how they could have made you a general, when you never even learnt how to play poker!" Unfortunately Marcel died in England in October 2003 and I lost a wonderful lifelong friend. Marcel Ludikar held many significant decorations awarded by both post-Communist Czechoslovakia and by Britain.

Marion Patzelt had begun to study medicine before the war broke out. He flew with us in No. 311 Squadron. He also flew a few operations with captain Tobyška on a B-17 bomber. Marion also became acquainted with members of 8th USAAF, who took him along on a mission to bomb the Czechoslovak town of Most, at that time used by the Germans to produce petrol from coal. We met later in No. 24 Squadron, but by then Marion was no longer flying, due to health problems. After the war, Marion married in England and moved with his wife to Prague. He returned to study medicine, but the times were again unfavourable to him and Marion, like the other airmen, was prevented from continuing in his studies by the Communist regime. Shortly after our return to Prague, I had lived in the same block as Marion in the apartment owned by Marcel Ludikar's brother in Vršovice. Marion had a car and on 1st September 1947 it was he who offered to take me to the train station from where I departed Czechoslovakia. Marion wasn't too flush and so also worked as a tutor at the university. At that time, he was already married and his wife was expecting. His son Chris was born on 31st December 1947 in Helston, Cornwall. I don't know how Marion escaped himself, but he obviously did. In England he wished to resume his medical studies, but his father-in-law was unable to support him and so Marion returned to the RAF, where he worked in the marketing and publications section from 1949 to 1968. He attained the rank of Major and was awarded numerous decorations for bravery and services to the RAF and USAAF. He died in May 2005.

My book 'Byl jsem letcem R.A.F.' (translated as 'I Flew with the RAF') was published in Czech in July 2004. It had been written from my memoirs by PHDr. Libuše Konrádová, but I had personally hoped that the book would be more detailed. Unfortunately, I had no influence over the book's completion.

I was invited to attend the book's launch in Prague. My friends Darja and Robert were about to be married and so I did not hesitate

and set off for Czechoslovakia. The wedding was wonderful and after several days I travelled via Prague to the spa town of Libverda. There I met with Bernard Lebovič, who began to use the name Peters after the war. Bernard was from a Jewish family in Sub-Carpathian Russia. He defended Tobruk with the 11th Infantry Battalion under Colonel Karel Klapálek. He took part in many dangerous reconnaissance missions in enemy-occupied territory. His Commander was wounded on one of these missions and Bernard dragged him back under enemy fire to their own trenches. He took an opportunity to join the RAF as a wireless operator. After initial training in the Bahamas, he was transferred to No. 311 Squadron together with the crew of Jan Matějka. He arrived just as I was leaving for the Transport Command. On 2nd October 1944, their Liberator was keeping guard near the Norwegian coast and the crew decided that they would like to have a look at one of the fiords. As they were leaving, the Germans peppered them with gun fire from one of the Norwegian lighthouses. One of their engines was damaged and a part of their rudder was blown off. Fortunately they all returned to Tain alive. Very few of Bernard's relatives survived the war. After the war, Bernard flew with the Transport Command. He reportedly even transported General Heliodor Píka, while he was still deputy chief of staff in the Czechoslovak Army, to Romania to receive a decoration from that Government. (General Píka had served with the Czechoslovak Army mission to the Soviet Union from 1941, but attracted the ire of Communist hard-liners by supporting the policies of the democratic Czechoslovak Government in exile. He was arrested after the putsch of 1948 on fabricated charges, accused of high treason as a British spy and hanged. His execution marked the beginning of bloody political purges). Bernard later emigrated to Britain and founded a chain of fast food outlets there.

After fourteen days in Libverda spa, I moved back to Prague and attended the book launch. I also visited my old school in Mladá Boleslav where I had graduated and gave a speech that attracted interest. At the end, the students asked me how they could show their gratitude to us airmen for what we had done for them. I answered: "Be proud to be Czech. Be proud to be part of a nation that gave the world so many exceptional men and women. And also be proud that there were men in this country, who were willing to go and fight and even die for its freedom."

2005 was quite a tragic year. On 31st July I received news of the death of my best friend, Karel Niemczyk and shortly afterwards of Bobby's 'mother', Barbara, leaving me completely demoralised.

On 19th February 2006 I had scheduled a week-long holiday on Lord Howe Island together with my former Commander Vláďa Nedvěď and his wife Louise. Both are wonderful companions. Lord Howe Island is located approximately 600km east of Australia. The mountainous island has about 400 permanent residents and restricts guests to a maximum of another 400 at a time. The weather there is pleasant and the waters warm, one could not ask for more.

At the end of July that year, I attended an annual event held at the Williamtown air force base officers' mess, where I am a member. This event is called OLD AND BOLD.

At the beginning of June, I was informed that I had been awarded honorary citizenship of my home town, Benátky nad Jizerou. I needed to consider at length whether my health would allow me to receive the formal presentation in person. In the end, I resolved to travel to Czechoslovakia once more. 17th September 2007 was a grand day both for me and the whole township. My arrival in the afternoon hours was photographed and filmed by many cameras, but I managed to steal away and have a brief look at an exhibition of memorabilia from my life at the local museum. It was very carefully and tastefully put together and I was thrilled. The ceremony began at exactly 6 o'clock. I was seated in the centre of the official table, next to the Mayor and the Deputy Minister of Defence on my right and a representative from the Air Force further to my left. The Mayor opened the ceremony with a speech. He then invited an actress, also originally from Benátky, to read my biography which she recited very nicely. Local musicians filled the gaps between speakers with music appropriate to the occasion. The Deputy Minister of Defence then also spoke, concluding by thanking me for all that I had done for our country. Then came the moment for my speech. I had prepared a few notes, but spoke for about 12 to 15 minutes without them. At the end, everyone stood in my honour and gave me a one minute ovation. I then asked the Mayor whether I could tell the audience the story of my mascot, the knitted hare, that had sat all the while on the table in front of me. The Mayor allowed me to speak about Bobby for another two minutes and then the official part of the evening came to a close. The guests were invited to view the museum exhibition and to a prepared food buffet. I was still signing books and photographs half an hour later. I spent the remainder of the evening in the company of Eva, a former schoolmate and my old friend, Břěťa Friedrich. We did not get back to the hotel till eleven that night, after a fantastic and very successful evening - one that I will never forget. Benátky can now say that they had their own active airman in Britain.

Toward the end of my stay I spent many pleasant moments in northern Bohemia with the Votava family and with friends in Moravian Olomouc. I was also greatly assisted by my friend - and the friend of many other wartime airmen - Jan Horal, who arranged accommodation for me in Hotel Duo. I had known him for a very long time and he always tried to assist us all in any way. Not many would go to the lengths to help out that he has!

All in all, my last visit to the Czech Republic was very productive and enjoyable. From my travels I believe that I can say that Prague and the Czech Republic have made much progress. I would wish that it continues to prosper and become one of the leading and defining members of the European Union.

Happy memories

I first met **Edna Keeley** (née Dawson) at a dance in Church Broughton while I was still in training. Our friendship continued after the war. Edna had always tried to help me out, including saving treats from her own rations. She had a daughter, who I believe lives on the Isle of Wight.



In ATS uniform, 1942.



At war's end, 27th October, 1945.



Edna and her family, 1967.

Sarah Van der Gucht – 'Sally'



Sally and I in winter, 1944.

Sally became an early very close friend in England. She had had a very religious upbringing. I visited her often where she lived in Camberley near London. Her brother went to Sandhurst Military College and became Major. Sally married a British officer when I was in South Africa.



Barbara Harridge – Bobby's 'Mother'

Vlasta and I became friends with Barbara and her sister Monica during a holiday in Devon in July, 1942. Barbara also invited me to Reading for Christmas. While I was there, I was asked to give out Christmas presents to children in a local hospital. There, I admired a particular toy - a personable knitted hare that had somehow engaged my attention. I was unexpectedly given Bobby - as he was christened later after Barbara's own nickname - in reward and from that time he was my lucky mascot on all my flying operations. Bobby and I have been inseparable to this day.



Barbara and I also corresponded for a long time after the war and only lost contact once for a number of years. However when I visited Britain in 1990, I was filmed with Bobby by BBC television and Barbara recognised us. She got in touch with an airmen's club, which helped to re-contact us. Barbara died in 2005 after a battle with cancer. In her last letter she asked me to organise a good home for Bobby after I am also gone. However it is hard to think about parting from such a faithful companion. Monica married an US airman and moved to America. We are still in touch.



I thus learnt many years later that Bobby was in fact knitted by Barbara's mother. Bobby is 40cm tall and his ears are another 15 cm long. Here he is dressed in uniform and decorated, when I first obtained him, he was of course quite bare and had not yet received any medals.

Life in post-war Czechoslovakia:



Jitka was the sister of my best friend in Benátky, Břetislav Friedrich, whom I had known since 6 years of age. I gave Jitka English lessons after the war and we became close. Jitka supported my departure for South Africa and was going to join me, but changed her mind.

Vlasta Skákal visited from Egypt in autumn, 1946. He hired a car and we made several group outings together. Here, taken by Břetíček, from left: Jitka, JN, *Vlasta*, Daphne and my sister, Milada.



The road to freedom:



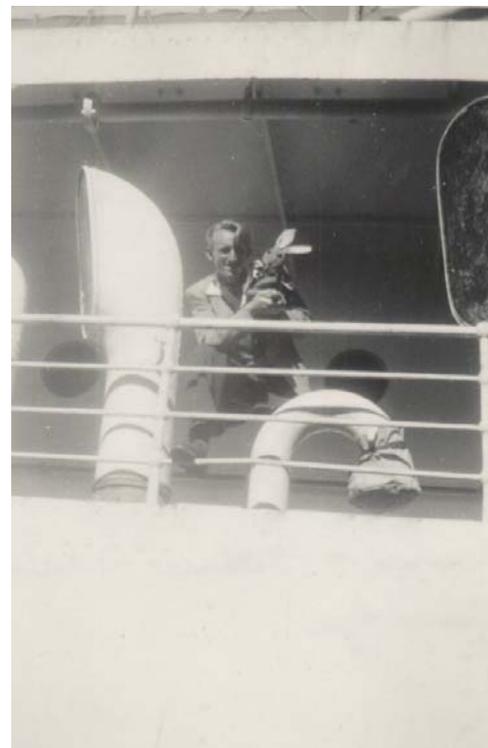
On 1st September, 1947, Marion Patzelt took me in this car to the main train station – it is my last snapshot of Prague.



In South Africa.



In Johannesburg I met the famous Czechoslovak travel writers Zikmund and Hanzelka in 1948.



Bobby and I leave for Australia, 25th August, 1951.

Australia

A first photo of Sydney and the Harbour Bridge.



Australian beginnings.



Lilka Bergmanová was a wonderful friend in my early years in Australia. She married a medical student and later moved to the United States. They had two sons, I believe both doctors. Lilka died in 2003. She was a brilliant and very capable woman.

My life's companion, Clare Mills.



Clare in South Africa.



Our wedding 7th May, 1955.



Clare's mother at Merewether, 1960.



My two passions.



In front of one of two Novak Camera Houses, a successfully established business after much arduous work.

Tiger Moth Air Races.



At the starting line.

"All ok."



"Nearly there yet?"





"Sydney belongs to us!" - Tiger Moth over Bondi Beach.

"The finish is in sight!"



Landing.



Lace Maxwell, sitting on a VH-UNA, in which she and her partner Bob Copas were killed at Luskintyre airport on 26th June, 1994.



Bob and Lace in action, 1992.



Tiger Moths on the airfield.



*April, 1984 at Uluru,
with the Kata Tjuta
in the background.
We used to land
right next to Uluru.*

Kata Tjuta.



*On top of Uluru in
1984 with John
Farrelly and Fred
Newbert.*

Solo safari flight with Clare and Bobby to Central Australia. At Uluru, 1981.



Participants of the 1985 safari.

A typical outback air field, Drysdale station, Northern Territory.





*With my co-pilot
John Farrelly in
Cooktown, 2001.*



*Participants of one of
the last safaris.*



*With Clare next to a
Tiger Moth with which I
sometimes flew.
Newcastle Aero Club,
1990.*



*My father's visit,
1964.*



At the Equator, Kenya, 1978.



*With Clare at a
half yearly company
meeting in Fiji.*

Newcastle earthquake, 1989: Before.



After.



Our unit is on bottom left, another investment property on top right, and indeed the whole building, is severely damaged.



Lifetime achievement award received from our business association in 1993.



Post-Communist recognition in Czechoslovakia in June, 1990.



With Josef Bernát DFM and Jarda Hájek – 'boys' who taught me how to fly in 1942.

Memorial plaque in Honington, East Wretham to those fallen comrades, who did not return to their airbases. They numbered 273!



Quite a few veterans still remained in 1990. Today, only a handful are left.



Our beloved tavern, the Rose and Crown. This is where we spent all of our free time. One evening we wrote: "Let death go to hell!" and signed all our names in lipstick on the ceiling.

Friends re-met after the war – the Czech version of the OLD AND BOLD:



With Vlasta Skákal, after many years, in Egypt.



With Marcel Ludikar on his visit to Australia.



With Honza (Ján) Lazar and Pepík (Josef) Balejka in Prague.



With Jirka Hönig and our wives in Scotland in 1995.



With Arnošt Polák in Prague.



With Vláďa Nedvěď, our splendid commander, in Newcastle, 1999.



With Ivan Tuček, flying acrobat and world champion in 1999.



With Joe Pařez and Josef Balejka in Prague.



With Karel Niemczyk in Sydney.

Karel Niemczyk



Cholmondeley Park, 1940.
KN front row, next to unit leader.



KN, 1942.

No. 138 Special Squadron was a unique unit, which operated to drop agents into enemy territory, including occupied Czechoslovakia. A small squadron, it comprised of approximately 10 airmen or 2 crews. 1 crew perished during training. The remaining operational crew flew under F/O. Anderle and performed over 20 special flights before crashing in a 'routine' flight between Cairo and Malta on 10th December, 1942.

Karel volunteered and trained to be parachuted behind enemy lines as part of a group code-named CALCIUM. Their mission was to re-establish contact between the resistance and UK HQ. Where other groups had failed, CALCIUM achieved successes and survived.

Parachutists had to operate under assumed identities: KN's false Protektoratkarte in the name of Karel Nechvílek.



JN co-pilot – flight above a free Czechoslovakia.



Colonel Jaroslav Novák – official portrait.



Jaroslav Novák – honorary citizen of his town of birth, Benátky nad Jizerou - 17th September, 2007.

In Conclusion

So that is the end of my diary, in which I have tried to describe as accurately as possible the events and recollections that I have accumulated throughout many years.

I have lived and still live a normal life. As a young boy and student I tried to complete my studies and graduate under very constrained conditions. In the next part of my difficult life, I decided to leave my home and fight for the freedom of my country. In that effort I was only a very small link in the chain that was supposed to pull victory over to the side of the Allies, but even so it was a link that could have been replaced by another. I was then driven to leave the country that I loved so much, but one which had betrayed me. I was obliged to seek a new land that would accept me as its citizen and found Australia.

In my new home I tried to fulfil my civic duties to the best of my abilities, but here again I was only another small link that helps the whole nation towards prosperity, satisfaction and success. I had hoped that the world would be better for realising what a catastrophic event the war had been. Perhaps the world has improved somewhat, but there is still much at which we are inept.

I cannot judge if I have been a strong enough link in that long chain, but I have tried to help others and not harm anyone. I hope that in this endeavour at least I have succeeded.

I confess that some of the times along this path were not at all easy, particularly when I had to witness the passing of so many of my friends and dear ones. I firmly believe, however, that all my life's companions are faring well there 'up above' and watching over us. I would like to thank them for all the times that we spent together and it is to them that I dedicate this memoir. They will remain in my heart forever...

Colonel Jaroslav Novák



Translator's Note

I had first become aware of men of Jaroslav Novák's stature living in our midst thanks to my father, Jan Jirásek, who had for many years been active in the new wave of Czechoslovak emigré life in Sydney – firstly in the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences that he helped found in the early years of his exile in 1972 and later jointly with the older established Sokol organisation. Apart from regularly screening movies of interest to the Czech and Slovak community in Sokol's Ponrepo Film Club - named after the first cinema that opened in Prague in 1907 - my father also organised more solemn social commentary programmes to mark the 1948 Communist putsch, the Soviet invasion of 1968 or the National Day each October. Among them, for example, is a tribute in 1998 to General Heliodor Píka, who is mentioned in the preceding autobiography. It is at one of these gatherings honouring the overlooked heroes of our country that I believe Karel Niemczyk and Jaroslav Novák became re-acquainted with each other.

In 2001, the movie 'Dark Blue World' - outlining the fate of wartime Czechoslovak airmen to the outside world for the first time - premiered in Sydney. Both Karel Niemczyk and Jaroslav Novák were invited by the Consul General of the Czech Republic to introduce the film to the audience with a personal account of their experiences.

In 2004, I volunteered to translate the recently written recollections of Karel Niemczyk, mainly for his family. It is a story, however, that had not only already attracted the interest of post-Communist Czech television, but in its subsequent English form also the archive of the Imperial War Museum in London. When Jaroslav Novák asked me if I would also translate his completed memoir in 2008, it did not take me long to decide to do so. I feel privileged to have been requested to take part in the retelling of such a fascinating life.

For ensuring the completion of these recollections in Czech, great thanks go to Jan Votava and Josef Říha. These two young men are both dedicated to documenting true post war Czechoslovak history, passionate about seeking out real life personages who are still able to recount their experiences first hand and about bringing their stories to light to the Czech public.



I am also proud that the threads of my father's legacy - in his efforts to ensure that the Czech nation's knowledge of its protagonists does not flicker – find a continuity of hands to weave the past into the present.

Alena Jirasek (Jirásková), czlink@hotmail.com