

Prologue

FULL CIRCLE is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely incidental. The settings are accurate as best as I can remember them. Many no longer exist and others have been transformed, eradicating all traces of the past. This novel attempts to acquaint the reader with some of the locales and events that made this period so memorable, and leave a record for those who may one day wish to revisit the past. It is but one story of thousands such untold stories of people displaced by the two wars, the Second World War and the ensuing Cold War; stories of people overwhelmed by the onrush of greater events—the flotsam left behind by the tide of history. It begins at the onset of the Second World War with the betrayal of the Czechs at Munich, and follows the protagonist through the Cold War. It covers both wars because they are indelibly linked—the second being the consequence of the first.

WWII drove 12 million people from their homes, leaving Europe awash with refugees. The newly emerging Cold War cut short the euphoria of victory over the Nazis as the Iron Curtain slammed shut. Three years after the war, there were still more than 800,000 refugees in 370 camps in the three Occupation Zones of Germany, and 25 in Italy. More than half were in the U.S. Zone. Regardless of their former status, the refugees became known as DP's, or Displaced Persons. This was an acronym that hid a multitude of affiliations: People from all over Europe who at various times were sworn enemies; ethnic, religious, or economic emigrants and their entire families, seeking a better life elsewhere and able to carry as many personal possessions as they were able to haul; enemy collaborators or sympathizers trying to elude justice, or political refugees, mostly single persons, uprooted by a brutal political system and having to flee their country with only the clothes on their backs to evade persecution.

The Czechs and Slovaks escaping the communist regime following a coup d'état in 1948 were an unexpected mix in this volatile cauldron. Many fled their country hoping to join a patriotic legion they believed was being formed in the American Occupational Zone of Germany by an exiled Czech general, but instead were stripped of their political refugee status, and first absorbed by and then submerged in the stagnant Displaced Persons pool. Their hopes of returning home as liberators were dashed. Ultimately, they were scattered to the four corners of the world, principally to Australia, Canada, Argentina, and a host of other countries. U.S. Public Law 778, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, passed by Congress on the last day of its session, initially excluded the Czechs, but ultimately permitted 2,000 to be admitted to the United States, if they had a sponsor.

The initial surge of Czech escapees tapered off as the border, the Iron Curtain, became a maze of electrified barbed wire and clear fire zones. But still they came. The numbers are difficult to come by, but over the years, the estimates run from the low of 65,000 to a high of 200,000—a substantial number for a small country. Over the course of the Cold War, more than 8,000 were shot at the border trying to escape or died during the subsequent interrogations by the StB, the Czech Secret Police, whose methods reportedly rivaled that of the Gestapo; 240 were executed for political reasons, and as many as 7,000 died in prison because of inhumane treatment. About 250,000 were imprisoned, many in the infamous uranium mines of Jáchymov, and their untimely deaths continued beyond their statistical relevance.¹ None of the Czechs escaped with the idea of emigrating. They all hoped to return and continue their lives under a democratic system—a dream not easily extinguished.

Emigration is the answer to hope and desperation, but an emigrant's scars never really heal. Torn from his home, family, and country, from life and the predictability of future as he knew it, from the comfort of common language, friends, relatives, and parents, from the intimacy of customs and the familiarity of the national fabric, the immigrant refugee faces an uncertain future laced with apprehension. Invariably, he finds himself at odds with the new culture, foreign in all respects, from language and its nuances to history, customs, politics, and attitudes. He may manage to disappear in it, but is brought back to reality each time he utters a foreign-accented word. In truth, he never fully assimilates, remaining imprinted with his past so long as his mind is able to remember his roots. At best, he remains a curiosity, an oddity, a presence in, but never an imbedded part of his adopted land.

My sincere thanks go to the many people who had encouraged and helped me, foremost among them Ruth, my partner in life, who patiently read all the iterations, made valuable suggestions, and kept my syntax in line, my daughter JoAnn, who coaxed me to write it, Robert Amussen, the Canadian editor who read the first draft and steered me in the right direction, Mary Susan Malone, whose judicious insight cemented the story, and my friends at the Skagit Valley Writers League for their critical help and moral support.

¹ Křivka, Zdeněk: Twentieth Century Communism Through the Eyes of its Victims (Komunismus ve dvacátém století očima jeho obětí), Confederation of Political Prisoners of the Czech Republic, 2009.