

10. Road to Exile

And so, we got ready to make our escape. I told Klička that we were coming within two or three days and that we would be in touch. That was around mid-July 1948.

In fact, I had found a different route that Jan Hajšman prepared for me and that led through Cheb. It was the most difficult route, but it seemed safe. We had agreed that Vašek Čihák would take me and my family to Karlovy Vary and from there take the road to Cheb.

We arrived to Karlovy Vary and in a restaurant, a waiter recognized me. He asked me what I was doing there. I said I would stay only a couple of days. A car was supposed to be waiting there whose number plate I had noted, but it wasn't there. I remembered that Hajšman had said that the man would drive from either Karlovy Vary or another town. I called the other place and the man was there and told me, "I'm waiting for you here."

I told him, "But we agreed for you to meet us in Vary." He arrived within half an hour and we set off.

I was with my wife and daughter Jana. My eldest daughter, Linda, was at a boarding school in England. I sent her a message to not, under any circumstances, to come home, and that I was sending her a ticket from London to Prague but that she was not to use it and should await further news.

When I went to the bank to get money for the ticket, the clerk told me, "Mr. Vašata, I'd like to talk with you." I said, "Certainly. Here?" He shook his head, "We can't talk here. Let's go outside. There's something I want to tell you." Once we were outside, he told me, "Surely you don't want your daughter to come?"

"And why not?" I asked, acting surprised.

"It's terribly dangerous for her. Don't you know where you live?"

"I know I was born here and will die here as well," I insisted.

"The thing is, you don't want to die too soon," he told me.

Obviously, I didn't tell him I was about to leave, nor did I suggest anything else.

We arrived at Cheb in the morning, just as the army was carrying out some military exercises in the area. The soldiers stopped us several times, but the driver had an arrangement so that he was allowed to pass through. Also, in the car were another two or three other people. They were some engineers. We went to a café in Cheb, but we were too conspicuous. It was clear that we didn't belong there.

Suddenly one of the engineers left for the bathroom and came back with a Communist badge. My wife stared at him and asked him, "Are you an official Communist?"

He answered, "Mrs., somebody has to wear a badge. I am a Communist but I'm coming with you, I'm also running away. But this badge can help us because people are staring. So, let them see that we're here on official business."

It was getting dark when we left the café, along with the other two or three people. We parted ways because they weren't going to take our route. They took another path but later we on we met up with them in Germany.

We were walking and suddenly a man in a black coat appeared in front of us. My wife said, "This man will be our guide."

To that I said, "Please, are you Sibyl? How can you know that he'll be guiding us?"

But my wife insisted so I didn't argue with her. He turned into the street where we were meant to meet a court official in a flat. We got there and the man was also there so we waited for the official together. The official finally came, and he laid out a deck of cards in front of him and said, "It's doesn't look that good. There will be some difficulties but go!" And he added, "This man will be your guide."

We left Cheb by a small path. Dogs were barking at us. Anyone could have come outside to ask us what we were doing there. We walked for about an hour. Our guide suddenly said, "We have to hide behind those trees because the border guards pass through here. They are on motorcycles and have dogs with them."

Jana, who we told we were going fishing (I had taken a fishing rod) and picking blueberries, kept asking, "When are we going to pick the blueberries? When are we going to go fishing?"

It was completely dark and patrol guards drove past not far away. The guide said, "We have to run across a stretch of field here." There was a small stretch of rye. He took Jana in his arms. After a while I carried her as well. We got to the forest and maybe another fifteen minutes later, and he said, "You're free to light up a cigarette here." I didn't want to but he kept saying it was safe, "Why don't you light up?" He lit up a cigarette himself, but I explained to him that I hadn't smoked since I was 13 and I wasn't going to smoke there, of all places!

We walked along a muddy path. It was almost a swamp and we were wet up to our ankles. We came out of the forest and then we walked some two hundred paces until we got to a house that had a sign saying, "Franz Muller Schumacher". I felt like crying. During the whole war, I had worked against the Germans and now some Franz Muller Schumacher was going to save me from my own people.

They let us in and I gave him my gold watch in exchange for letting us stay the night. He asked me if I also had a golden chain to go with the watch. I told him I didn't. My wife had hidden it. She noted that he didn't need the gold chain, the watch was enough.

There were two sons. They were still in military uniform. Their mother chased them out of their beds and wanted my wife and Jana to sleep there. My wife didn't want to because she had some jewelry hidden on her and she didn't want to fall asleep for fear of them being stolen.

When we got up in the morning, the wife had dried our shoes and gave us breakfast. She told us that she was going to church, which I found suspicious, so I quickly said we would come with her. She shook her head and said no, that she was in a hurry. We gathered our things too and left.

There were signs pointing to places in Germany. On our way we ran into the wife with some German police who arrested us. She had denounced us. I believe she had been under orders to do so.

They led us to the police station and told me to open my briefcase. I said, "No, I am under the protection of the British government. I'm not going to tell you anything nor am I going to show you anything. I want you to take me to or call either American or British representatives. I will only speak with them."

The Germans were still quite jumpy at the time so they must have asked themselves, "God knows who this is?" They called to Tirschenreuth, which was about an hour away and told us to go there.

I should add that that same morning I was approached by some Czech person who told me, "Brother, I hope you don't have any dollars on you. You're not allowed to have any." I was surprised, why wouldn't I be allowed to carry dollars. He said, "Not here. You should exchange them into marks." So I gave him my money and he exchanged them for old marks. The new marks had been brought into circulation two days earlier. Which I didn't know, so he basically robbed me of my money.

We finally got to Tirschenreuth where they started interrogating us. The other three people from Cheb, including the engineer with the Communist badge, were there as well. He also interrogated us and his nametag said "Tobias Burda". He spoke perfect Czech. I told him that I had a password and that I had to speak with the British. He told me I could tell him the password.

"No, I won't tell you it," I said to him.

"You have to tell me, otherwise I won't let you go any further."

So, I told him the password, but it didn't mean anything to him. The password was meant for a higher official. He then put us in a group with another 12-16 Slovaks who had worked in the woods and who also had run away. They didn't have a penny whereas we still had some money.

We then went to Regensburg. It was a well-known refugee camp in Germany. We went there and we had several of the Slovaks with us. At the train station, I bought everyone soup. It was late at night and we went to announce ourselves at the Goetheschule as we had been told to at

Tirschenreuth. Once we got there, we were surrounded by people who knew me mainly because of my name.

They let us stay the night at the office. My wife and Jana lied down on the sofa and I stayed awake until the morning. In the morning, I said, "We're going to Frankfurt." The others tried to convince us to stay. They gave us some chocolate and also some butter, saying we would need it. I explained to them that we had British visas waiting for us in Frankfurt

"That's nonsense, everyone says they have a visa."

"But I do have a visa," I insisted.

After the February coup, I went to the British embassy and asked for a visa. That's when they pointed out that my passport had expired.

I said, "What does it matter in such a predicament whether my passport is expired or not?"

A while later, I received a call from someone who was Vice Consul. He was the Chief of Intelligence for Eastern Europe. His name Harold S. Gibson¹. It was he who told me the password and he also gave me a number. He had been in touch with London and explained to me, "When you present this number at any British Consulate, you and your family will get visas." In fact, I had been working with him when I was in the Resistance, so I knew him well and therefore believed him. What he said turned out to be true.

We arrived in Frankfurt and the following day I went to the British Consulate. It just so happened that it was a holiday. It was the beginning of August and it must have been some British holiday, so the Consulate was closed.

I therefore went there again the next day. They told me, "It's true, you do have a visa ready for you here. You will receive a British visa wherever you are, be it in Turkey or Austria. We can't however put it in a passport that's expired. Your passports are expired."

I said, "Do you know what's going on in the Czech Republic? Does it matter? I couldn't have had them renewed."

They told me that there was a Czech Consul in Wiesbaden where I would be able to renew our passports.

But he was no Consul. He might have signed himself as Consul "Karel Havránek," but he was a Doctor and he was apparently only Honorary Consul. He asked me, "How long do you want the passports for?"

"For five years," I told him.

¹ Harold Charles Gibson (1897-1960), head of Prague station of MI6 between 1945 and 1948, vice-consul.

“Five years? Why would you need it for five years? We will be home by then,” he said. He nonetheless renewed them for the five years for both my wife and me, and added Jana to both our passports. The British knew that the passports had not been legitimately renewed but this way, they were protected. I had a renewed passport and they gave me the visa.

I went to Wiesbaden and wanted to speak with the boss. It was an American occupied zone. After I had seen that the Burda guy was an idiot, and that the password didn’t work on him, I wanted to speak with the person in charge of the zone. I went there but there was a secretary who said he couldn’t let me in. When I came there for the tenth time saying that I wanted to speak with the man in charge, but the secretary wouldn’t let me in, I wrote down the password on a piece of paper. I gave it to him folded in two and told him, “You mustn’t open it. Go and give it to your boss.”

The moment the boss got it, he stormed in and shouted, “Where is the man?”

I said, “Here I am.”

“Come in.” He threw out the secretary and said, “What’s going on? You have the right password.”

“This is the password I got from Gibson in Prague”, I replied.

He said to me, “You can stay here.” There was a villa in the suburbs of Frankfurt where MPs and other prominent people stayed while their paperwork was being prepared.

I nevertheless said, “I don’t need anything. I have money.”

He asked me, “Are you sure you don’t need anything?”

“I don’t need anything from you except to leave this country.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll do that.”

“I already have plane tickets to London,” I told him. I had phoned London and they had sent me plane tickets to Frankfurt. The whole process took around 2 weeks.

Now this man offered to take me to London in their private plane, but I shook my head and said, “I don’t need anything from you because it happened to me that I couldn’t get anywhere with that password. If somebody comes and says that they have a password, they should be given assistance.” I explained to him the whole affair with Burda.

So, he asked me, “What do you want me to do then?”

“I need a clearing,” I said. When a refugee came from Germany, they needed to have a clearing in case they did something bad, so they wouldn’t be returned to Germany.

It was around 4:50 p.m. This office was open until 5 p.m. He picked up the phone and said, "Ask Mr. White and Mr. Black to wait for me, I'm coming over." We got in his car and drove there. He introduced me to Mr. White and Mr. Black, who were spies.

He told them, "You give him a clearing, and you give him an affidavit and transportation.

They asked, "Tomorrow?"

"What do you mean tomorrow?", he said. "Right now."

They brought the forms. He took me back and asked me if I wanted him to take me to Frankfurt. I refused, "I have return train tickets, so it's not necessary."

"When do you want to leave?", he asked.

"Now!", I exclaimed.

"Right away?", he said, surprised.

"I don't know about immediately, but on the first plane that's available," I told him. Back then, there was an airlift from Frankfurt to Berlin. Every few minutes, an American plane took off. The Soviets had decided to close the road by land that was meant to be open. The Americans therefore had to bring supplies to West Berlin by air. It was quite unpleasant and the situation was very tense.

I had everything ready and he told me, "The plane is leaving soon, so I will see to it that it waits for you." We took the train and went to the airport as agreed, and the plane was in fact waiting for us.