

12. America

My wife wanted to go to America, but I didn't want to. I wanted to stay in England. Then we received a message that we were allowed to leave for the U.S. right away. We first went for a medical examination to make sure we didn't have tuberculosis. Everything went smoothly, but then suddenly my wife had to go to hospital with pulmonary thrombosis, which is quite dangerous. Back then, my wife's condition caused some complications, but in the end we managed to leave for America.

We arrived in the US at the end of November 1951. Dr. Petr Zenkl lent us £200 for the road. That was at least \$800 and I returned that money to him within a year.

Mrs. Herbenová (the Herbens were friends of our family) was waiting for us upon our arrival. It took a while for us to get through immigration, but not too long. I bought a copy of The NY Times and I told my wife, "If I had \$50,000 I would now buy these shares." I was pointing at IBM, but she knocked the page down and said, "Your first worry should be whether they're looking for someone for \$50 a week. Forget about stocks and shares."

We spent only two or three days in New York. We stayed with the Herbens and then took a train to Chicago. We got there at 8:00 a.m. and we went to the Kubelíks, who were living there at the time and had invited us.

In Chicago we started literally for scratch. I found a job in a hotel restaurant. When I got there, they told me I had to start as a bus boy. I started as a real nobody from the very bottom. There were typically around 500 guests. I was working as a bus boy and I saw how terribly they were treating the glasses. They brought a large platter of glasses and just shoved them into a dishwasher. I was mortified and said, "What are you doing?"

So, I went to see the man who was in charge of buying supplies and I told him, "Why don't you buy more dishes so that the glasses don't get broken like that?"

He said, "It's fine, don't worry about it."

He even told me that he needed me to take stock of the old glasses that weren't being used anymore because they weren't modern enough so that they could be returned to the store. He said, "I will get 50% and I will give you 20%". He was getting a kickback from each that was purchased.

I refused and said, "I don't want anything like that." And sure enough, I never took anything.

I came home and I was in a bit of a state. There was already a message waiting for me that they were missing a waiter for the banquet that night and were asking me to come. So, I started off as a bus boy and then I immediately became a waiter. The waiters that I saw weren't all that good, so I pretended as if I knew what I was doing and everyone was happy.

I also saw how people stole things. I was telling this to the lady who owned the place. I believe her name was Viner and she spoke a bit of Czech. She told me, "I'm going to church tomorrow so come with me." On the way, I told her how much was being stolen. They would

bring the goods and the chef would sign off however many pounds were being delivered without even weighing the stuff. I told the chef, "This cannot weigh ten pounds."

He retorted, "That's none of your business."

I also told him that the food for the staff was very bad. In Prague, I had 500 employees and we didn't cook separately for them even though it would have made for a decent restaurant, 500 lunches and 500 dinners. They had the right to choose. The person in charge of the kitchen would highlight four meals at lunchtime and six meals in the evenings out of which they could choose as they wished.

It also happened that they came to complain that there was too little to choose from. I used to say, "Listen, how often did your mum give you choice of three meals, whatever you had for lunch, you also had for dinner. Here you have something different for lunch and for dinner." Especially the ladies behind the counter at Václavské náměstí complained that the food was making them fat. I told them, "Then eat vegetables even though meat is better. Eat so you don't get fat otherwise you'll regret it. When you gain 10kg, it will take you 2-3 months to get rid of it. Eat sparingly, they will give you however much or little of what you want."

So I told the chef in Chicago, "You cook so badly that it can't go on." I went to the staff cafeteria and Mrs. Viner asked me where I was going. "I'm going down to the basement to eat."

But you have first class food not third," she said with surprise.

There was a hierarchy: directors and headwaiters were in first class, waiters were in second class and the rest of the staff, who were mainly black, had pork goulash every day. It can be good, but not if it's the same every day. Besides it wasn't very well cooked. I told the chef, "You have staff but they steal from you. If you don't give them good food, they'll steal it from you."

He said, "If you see that somebody is stealing too much, tell me or throw them out."

I thought to myself that I wasn't there to throw people out and I didn't want to introduce myself in that fashion, but I could see very well how the place was run.

Mrs. Viner said to me, "Always let me know when you see people stealing." I had warned her several times and then on 31 December 1951, the main cashier broke his leg and she told me that I would take his place. So, I went from being a bus boy to waiter and then cashier.

I was advancing quickly. She soon came to me and asked me what was new. "Not much," I said, "but two people asked for an advance."

"Oh, didn't I tell you that we only give advances for the time people have actually worked? When they have worked two days, they will get two days. But today is Friday, meaning that pay day was yesterday so they haven't worked any additional days." Then she sighed and said, "They won't be coming back."

I doubted that and told her, "One of them who took \$100 has been here for 8 years."

She replied, "He won't come back."

"The other one took \$60 and has been here for five years." I said that I would bet that they would come back.

She said, "You will lose. You must know that it's not possible just to give money to people like that."

In the end I had to pay \$160, for she was right. They didn't come back.

I worked at the cash register for a month before the cashier could come back with his leg in plaster. Mrs. Viner told me, "Now you should go down to the store room to find out what's going on there."

I told her, "I've already had a good look. I know how stuff gets stolen from there." They would deliver goods, let's say 80 pounds of pork and 180 pounds of beef, and they wanted me to sign for it. I said, "No, we have to weigh it first."

The deliveryman refused, saying they never weighed the goods on delivery.

I declared, "Now we're going to be weighing things! With every delivery!"

They called in the chef who said that it was fine not to weigh it.

"That's not fine," I said. "You sign for it. I'm not going to sign for it."

The chef explained to me, "The thing is that if we were to get everything as it is written on the delivery note, we would also have to buy horse meat. As you know, we have no use for it. We only get beef. That's why we have to make a compromise."

But I said, "That's too much. That's way too much. If it were 10% less that's one thing, but it's 30-40% less."

The chef then told me, "You use percentages for everything."

I tried to explain to him that percentages were a good thing and that they had a big impact on losses and profits, but it was to no avail.

Even when I worked there, I didn't have dinner there. I would leave at 6:00 p.m. and sometimes I would take maybe two ribs to eat, but otherwise I would eat at home.

Then my next role at that establishment was overseeing room service. This involved trollies with food to be delivered to individual rooms. There were maybe 120-130 of them. They were delivered between 6:45 and 7:15 p.m. I would make sure that they contained what the guests had ordered. I had a guest who wanted a special "fillet mignon" every night, so I had to make sure that it wasn't ever missing.

Mrs. Viner once told me, "You will make a career here. Both my sons are studying law. You can take over from me. You will become Executive Director and I will retire. But you mustn't be so ceaselessly controlling."

I told her, "But there's an incident every day."

I would also wait at the gate through which people left work and I would watch out so that they didn't take things with them. I once told the chef, "Look at that boy but not too obviously." He was black and about 14 and stole on a daily basis. I asked him, "How many of you are there at home?"

"Two" he answered.

"And what you're carrying is for at least five people."

The chef laughed at that, "My wife also brings home something every day. We have people who buy from us regularly."

It was terrible. What kind of profit would that place have to make not to go bankrupt! They kept it going only out of prestige. It was in a good location, I have to give them that.

There were incidents daily at the gate. Often loan sharks would come to take money from someone's salary for a loan they hadn't repaid. Almost every black person had problems related to loans. They would pay only the first instalment and wouldn't pay the next one and so they would come and take away what they had bought.

I often tried to put a word in and told them, "Let them have it for a little longer."

But the loan sharks said, "They will pay one installment and then they will sell the fridge or the TV so they can buy drugs or alcohol, and run away."

I once met up with another person who was also guarding the gates and he told me, "You'll get used to it. If you want to be left alone, don't search people too thoroughly. People are stealing, don't you know?"

I said, "But to what extent?"

He replied, "If you want to be left alone, you should keep quiet and not stay here for long." He meant the gate through which people were leaving.

About two weeks later, Mrs. Viner asked me to come see her and her office. She said she would start training me for a month or two, so I could take over from her.

But I told her, "Don't count on me. I won't stay here. All this stealing would drive me mad."

"So what do you want to do?", she asked.

"I don't like it here. I think I'll go to New York." This is how things were with me in Chicago. I was there until the beginning of May and my wife until June. She came to New York with the Kubelíks, who were going back to Europe. They brought her with them. I had bought a small restaurant on 75th street between 1st and 2nd Avenues in Manhattan. It was only a little later that I realized that things weren't much better than in Chicago. One was again surrounded by thieves.

I put down a deposit for the restaurant and the solicitor told me, "I will take care of it for you." And then he asked me, "Don't you remember me?" I shook my head. His name was different from when he was in Prague. He was Jewish and he had changed his name.

Suddenly I remembered him from when I was buying Restaurant Evropa from the company M. Reiser & Sons in Prague. The current contract was made by the same lawyer. I bought the establishment from Mrs. Černá for \$4000.

There was space for only 30-40 people. It was small and the place was called Beseda. It had a good reputation and I was already making plans for the future.

I was mainly encouraged by Honza Michalčík, who was helping me here as best as he could. The heating ran on coal and when I was busy serving I often forgot to feed the fire. Honza said to me, "You know what? I will go to your restaurant and drink two coffees. In short, you will give me two coffees and I will take care of feeding the boiler." Honza Michalčík had been in New York since the First World War. He knew the local environment well and always had good advice. He was a very kind person. It's a pleasure to meet honest and decent people. When people who had lived in America for a long time complained that the young generation of doctors and engineers who came to America didn't want to work, Honza Michalčík told them that he could show them two people who knew how to work hard and who could be an example to others. He told them to go see the Vašatas.

I was also working at the United Nations at the time. When I bought the restaurant I had an opportunity to start working as a janitor at the UN. I took the job, as any extra income was welcome.

I should probably tell in more detail how I came to own Beseda. The wife of Honza Michalčík, Mařenka, was employed in the kitchen of the owner, Mrs. Černá. Mr. Černý was sometimes so drunk that he wasn't capable of pouring the soup and would often fall into it. Mrs. Černá was at her wits end. Somebody told her that he wouldn't stay alive more than another 6 weeks and told her to stick it out. But he lasted for another five years. We didn't have anything to do with him. She was the owner and I bought the shop from her for the \$4000.

I received \$1000 from the Kubelíks. Rafael gave it to me and Honza Michalčík told me, "Buy it. I will lend you the money since you have \$1000."

I found out later that Mrs. Černá doubted that we would last there. She said, "They would run away in 6 months. These are not people for this sort of work. The wife is too proper; she won't be able to handle the hard work that we do."

Not long after this the whole building was put on sale. I went to see the agent who was in charge of the sale and asked him if he could give me a lease agreement for at least two years. However, he told me that the building was for sale only and told me to buy it. I said that I didn't have the money and I still owed the \$4000 to Mrs. Černá. The building cost \$22000 and everything was to be paid within three years.

I didn't know that the purchase of the building and the restaurant could be financed in a different way; that I could go to a bank and say, "I'm buying this. There are four floors with flats and I can take it over." They would have given me a mortgage for 20 years, but I didn't know this. I thought that I had to pay within three years. Honza Michalčík ended up lending me the full amount for the building and I bought it.

I wouldn't like to live through such years, however, ever again. Our only moment of rest and enjoyment was when we (me, my wife and our daughters Jana and Linda) went to the river in the summer to cool down and we each bought a cone of ice cream for a quarter. That was our only luxury.

At the same time, I was working at the UN and the man who was in charge found out who I was. He told me, "You can't do this. You can't handle all of this: washing the dishes at the restaurant, serving food, and coming here." I said it was necessary. I was earning \$58 a week, which was a decent amount of money at the time. The usual pay was \$30, if it was a night shift, it was \$50 and then it went up to \$55.

The manager told me, "Don't come here from 8:00 p.m. if your restaurant is open until 9:00 p.m. Come here at 10:00 p.m. I will check you in. I will find you a place to sleep and find you a pillow. You need to get some rest! I'm a decent man."

He once told me, "I need you to clean and paint all the radiators because they're dirty. You can take one or two extra guys for the job." He came back in the morning and the radiators and the cooling systems were all done, including in the entire corridor. We were completely wet with sweat.

He said, "You are crazy. No one has ever broken a sweat here." It was a company that had been contracted by the UN, called Viktory. The manager told me, "This is stupid. I thought you would leave me alone for six weeks and you did everything in one night." He told me to go have a lie down and to only turn up once to show I was at work. So, I showed my face before going home so that people saw I was there.

I never gave him even a dollar or a bottle of something because I never had one. He once told me, "I can imagine what it is like when somebody comes from such a situation you were in. I know everything about you. You fell from a very high position."

What was I to tell him? That's life. I was lucky to have run into such a kind person. He was from Puerto Rico and spoke Spanish and English.

He told me, "Don't tell anyone what I do here and how I am treating you, but I can't bear to look at you and not want to help."

I was there until I was asked to sign an application to the unions, but I didn't like some things about it. It sounded like we were aiming to eradicate capitalism. I said, "No. I want to be a capitalist myself one day. I want to be a private entrepreneur."

The manager kept insisting, "Sign it. Don't hesitate. It doesn't mean anything."

I didn't sign.

He said, "I will be able to keep you for another 4-6 weeks, but then I'll have to let you go. It's because of the unions, I don't want to get into any trouble with them." I was there for almost a year and it was easiest money I have ever made, but life was difficult.

The beginnings were very hard, especially for my wife. One August, it was extremely hot and we didn't have any air conditioning. In those days, when a restaurant had air conditioning,

they would advertise it. Nowadays, it's completely normal. I was the caretaker in the building that I eventually bought. I did this so we could have free accommodation where we lived with Jana, our eldest daughter, Linda with her husband, and their young boy. There were six of us living in the flat.

In that terrible August heat, I was washing the stairs and when I was about half way through, my wife came down the stairs. She told me, "Jarda, you are well on the way to start feeling sorry for yourself. That would be a tragedy for the whole family because we all depend on you." I was really contemplating letting everything go.

This is how things were with us in the first half of the 50s. I felt that I had made a mistake to leave England. I was a highly respected man there. My passport said that we had been given the rights of British citizens before gaining full citizenship. We had a small restaurant which was a kind of Czech club, but the only way of carrying on would have been by buying supplies on the black market and I couldn't afford to do that because of my reputation.

From the very beginning of our exile, I became a member of the Council for Free Czechoslovakia. We had surprisingly good information about what was going on there. We even knew what was being discussed at the Central Committee of the Communist Party within a few days of that meeting. I can say that now. We used to buy the information from someone who was present. We knew what was going on but there was little we could do. Petr Zenkl chaired the Council and Jozef Lettrich¹ was the Deputy Chairman.

I once sat in for Ferdinand Peroutka. He always asked to be represented. He used to be represented by Julius Firt² and then it was me. Some person in Australia wrote in a newspaper, "What kind of council is it if Mr. Peroutka³ can be represented by Mr. Vašata?" Peroutka surprisingly (because he didn't usually react to this kind of thing) wrote back to him saying that he could choose from 142 members, but that he picked Mr. Vašata. Moreover, he could say that Mr. Vašata never asked him how to vote and he never told him how to either.

Peroutka once told me at a dinner, "I am older and more experienced and I like your fighting spirit, but I will give you one word of advice: you must know everything but you must not say everything that you know." I have been acting according to this ever since then.

I also sometimes went on Radio Free Europe where I spoke about the economy, although we had go into exile for true political reasons because we were in danger of going to prison or worse. Those who ran away in 1968 were completely different kinds of refugees than we were. They came for economic reasons and they were terribly disappointed to find out that one had to work hard in the West. They were surprised that you could have a good life in America, but for that you had to work hard. It was also necessary to find your way around how things worked first.

¹ Jozef Lettrich (1905-1968), Slovakian politician, from 1945 to 1948, leader of the Democratic Party and president of the National Council of Slovakia.

² Julius Firt (1897-1979), writer, publisher and politician (Radio Free Europe).

³ Ferdinand Peroutka (1895-1978), politician and journalist for *Lidové noviny*, *Přítomnost*, *Dnešek*, and Radio Free Europe.

When we opened our restaurant in New York we couldn't sell any alcoholic drinks, not even beer because we didn't have a license. I had to wait for five years to get a license. When I went to the office administering licenses with Jana, the man who was deciding whether to give us one told me, "I would be glad to give you the license, but could you show me proof that you either have French or British citizenship." It didn't occur to me then that I should have said that I had a full citizenship rights in the UK and I didn't tell him anything about it. So, we had to wait.

I did well to have bought the building. Today it is worth a few million. It's because of the value of the land. The building itself is not worth much but if anyone were to buy it, they would buy it because of the land in Manhattan.

In the same way, I bought the property in Callicoon, NY later on in 1959. We had just refurbished the restaurant. Back then, a guest at my restaurant came to me and told me to buy the house in Callicoon from Erik Fischer. He said it would suit me because we were a big family. Even though I wasn't convinced, we went to have a look at it with my son in law and we liked it a lot. There were beautiful trees on the way, but what really struck me were the massive pine trees on the property.

I knew that I wasn't able to buy the house at the time. So I said that I had heard about the house from a certain Mr. Doubek and to that they said, "Yes, we know him." The Fischers were originally from Germany. In the end, we told them that we'd come back with our wives in the spring. I needed to think it through. In mid-May they wrote to us to come have a look with our wives; otherwise they would put it on the market.

I threw away the note, but my wife asked me why I had thrown it away.

"It's about going to have a look at the house."

"But I would like to see it," she said.

Honza Michalčík had just bought a car around that time but he didn't know how drive it. It was an Oldsmobile. He told me, "You know how to drive." And I said, "Yes." So I drove the car to Callicoon but in reality I didn't even know the US Highway Code. I didn't go fast so people kept overtaking me and sometimes they got annoyed at how slow I was going, but in the end, we got there. Honza really liked it and my wife did too. Honza egged me on, "Ask them how much they want."

They said they wanted \$20000. I said that Franta Doubek had told me \$18000. They agreed to it, "Alright then. We want \$10000 now and the rest at 5% interest for ten years," they said.

Honza Michalčík insisted, "Buy it."

In New York, a man called John Batha asked me why I didn't make my restaurant bigger and better. All the other nations have restaurants that represent them better, but we only had this. I said that it was only a question of money.

He asked me, "How much do you have in mind?"

“It would cost \$60000, but I only have \$20000 though I could borrow some more.”

He said, “Then I will lend you \$30000,” and we went to a lawyer.

We had an appointment at the office of a lawyer called Šulc on 72nd street. We were meant to meet at 7:00 p.m. and we waited for him until 8:00 p.m. but he didn’t show up. As we were leaving, we told each other that it probably was just a bad joke when suddenly he appeared and asked us where we were going.

“Where are we going? We’ve been waiting for you for an hour,” I said.

He started to explain, “I’ve been driving in this city for over 30 years and never had an accident before. I never even had a tire puncture, but today I had one right on a bridge. It took me some time to call for help and then when they finally showed up, they towed me and fixed it, and now I’m here. So where are you going?”

“We’re leaving because we thought that you were pulling our legs.”

He said, “I would never dare to do that. You’re my clients after all.”

We went back to his office and we signed the deal. I paid back everything in the 60s’ and ten years later we built another extension to the restaurant. We built a kitchen in the yard because ten years earlier, the city didn’t let us build it there. However, a new building inspector came and said that he would give us the permission.

I went back to John Batha and asked him if he could lend me some more money. However, he told me that he couldn’t this time because he had invested it. It wasn’t such a problem. I borrowed \$50000 from the bank. I already had \$50000 and I borrowed another \$50000. Business was good back then so we could keep the repayments up to the bank. I think we borrowed the amount for 15 years. We also paid the Fischers for Callicoon and Honza Michalčík for the original building loan. In short, we were able to make the payments easily so we didn’t even feel it.

But then came the oil crisis of 1973. Our heating ran on oil that was mainly imported to the United States. We ended up changing it to steam, which is expensive but reliable.

After that, things got better but soon enough, business started going slow again and I ended up paying for it. I had to invest my own money in the business and in the end I decided to sell it. At that time, my daughter and her husband decided they would buy it. I sold it to them for \$50000 and because it is a limited company, the man who was taking care of our taxes told me, “You still have \$50000 in that company.” It was the money I had invested in when business was going badly. I said that I counted on the money being theirs.

I have something else to tell you about the restaurant in New York. About 80% of the customers who came to us at the beginning were Jewish. Those were people who I knew from Prague and those who used to come to Prague from Vienna and Budapest. When we started in New York, our prices were extremely low because of competition. For instance, you could get soup, a roast duck, and a dessert and coffee for \$1.25. It was almost like it was free. The prices went up slowly, but the old customers were dying off. The young ones were

not used to Czech cuisine so in the end, about 90% of the customers were American and the remaining 10% were Czechs who had come to visit New York from another state or from Europe. To visit Vašata was one of things to do in New York. Sometimes when I ran into Czechs outside New York, they always told me, “Yes, I’ve been to your restaurant.”

The young owners who bought the restaurant from me were doing the right thing. I have to say that I had to admire them for being able to keep all those staff, especially when the business wasn’t doing half as well as it used to. They hired a chef who had been trained in Prague and who had worked in various restaurants in the U.S. In the end, they were able to convince him to do things our way. It took my daughter, Linda, a lot of work to bring him over to do things the way we were used to. The restaurant could only exist if the things were done the same way as they had been done for 30 years. More than half of all orders were still for duck. Almost every restaurant in New York had duck on their menus, but none of them were quite like ours.

Many quite well-known people used to come to the restaurant, Johnny Carson for instance. He was one of our earliest customers. Back then, TV channels had their studios here on 1st avenue and he would come to us for pork. Every time he came he had pork. Then there was Mr. Trump, the millionaire. He used to come with his first wife, Ivana, who was Czech. She always had chicken with paprika sauce and he always had pork with dumplings and sauerkraut.

When we knew that someone famous had come to the restaurant, we didn’t bother them by paying them any extra attention. We didn’t want people to bother them either, but usually some of the other customers would notice. We were also visited by other famous Czechs and Americans, such as the tennis stars, Ivan Lendl and Martina Navrátilová.

One lady wrote in *The New York Times* that she had our dill sauce and that it had a lot of parsley except it was dill! She wrote that it was very tasty and that the dumplings were peculiar because they had pieces of bacon in them. Some of the pieces of bread that were in the dumplings were of a darker color and she thought it was bacon. Such an expert from *The Times* or some other newspaper can help a restaurant a lot, but they can also do a lot of damage. We were lucky that when a food critic came, we usually didn’t know them and that was a good thing. This way, we were being written about without us knowing. In the later years, there wasn’t much written about us except for some magazines. The magazines would sometimes print a little story about us or around Christmas, the newspapers would print a short recommendation, “If you want something Christmassy, go have duck at Vašata’s.”

In addition to the restaurant, we also bought Callicoon in 1959, as I already mentioned. That year, it was still run by the Fischers and in fact, in 1960 as well. In 1961, MEZKULINY⁴ was founded. This stood for International Marble Players of New York. We played marbles, had themed costumes, and a big party with friends on Labor Day.

After every long weekend spent at Callicoon, every other person would hurt their leg from volleyball or from some other sport so they weren’t able to go to work. We told ourselves

⁴ *Mezinárodní Kuličkáři, N. Y.*, or, literally, International Marble Players, N. Y.

that we had to come up with something else, some sport that doesn't demand much effort without danger of getting hurt, so we came up with marbles. We kept at it for some time and people still play from time to time. We used to thoroughly enjoy these tournaments, it was a lot of fun.

We were a very Czechoslovak group because we all liked to remember what it used to be like when we were back in Czechoslovakia. All in all, we didn't believe that we would be able to go back again. It didn't look like the situation was going to change. However, it did change in the end.

After 1989, I returned to Czechoslovakia several times. A couple of times I went with my grandson, Pavel, and once I went on my own, but I found that people to be completely different than before. We have probably also changed, but I could sense an innate jealousy and maybe even hatred. That's the consequence of 40 years of Communist rule. From the point of the view of the economy, a lot of damage has been done and it may be difficult to improve things. It will take time.

I think it will take at least this generation and the next before the nation is what it used to be, before people get used to the fact that when you give your word, you have to keep it. That will take a long time. I have had some nasty experiences in this respect. After what I've seen there, I told myself that I would finish my life journey in America. What is most important to me above all are a person's word of honor, true friendship, and mutual trust. I had seven good friends in my life. I have to name them alphabetically, every one of them were outstanding: it starts with Cardinal Beran⁵, he was a great friend. Then, Vašek Čihák, then Honza Hajšman. Then it was Vladimír Krajina, Rafael Kubelík, and Dr. Karel Steinbach⁶.

And I also can't forget Ferdinand Peroutka. They helped me and I learnt a lot from them. They were true friends and I can't say that any one was better than another. Every one of them was brilliant. It was great that I was able to meet many of them again in America.

I should also mention Cardinal Beran's visit to America and how it happened that we knew each other. I met him in 1945. He had spent the war in a concentration camp. He became Archbishop in 1946. We used to hold meetings at the Municipal House. This is where political prisoners and people from different walks of life met. Beran was always one of them. The meetings were held every two weeks and he was seldom absent. After a meeting, around 9.30 a.m., we would sing together.

He always told me, "Listen. Once the singing starts, give me a nudge and I will leave. Or I will give you a nudge."

I asked him why and he said, "You will see. They will surely start singing the song about the nun. I have heard it a thousand times and I'm sure you know it as well as I do. It's not appropriate for me to be around when they sing it. They do it on purpose so that I leave."

⁵ Josef Beran (1888-1969), cardinal and Czech primate.

⁶ Karel Steinbach (1894-1990), M.D., friend of Karel Čapek and Ferdinand Peroutka, organizer of social activities of Czech exiles in New York.

And then he added, "But I do like singing and you also like singing. Do you have a place where we could sing here?"

I said, "I live here."

So, we went upstairs to our flat and sang, sometimes to 11:00 p.m. He always had a car waiting for him. We called each other brother.

Once I asked him, "I don't know what to call you. You're a Doctor."

He answered, "I have two Doctorates. If you want to call me Doctor, you can call me Doctor. Or you can call me Josef or you can call me Beran, as you wish." We agreed that I would call him "Doctor."

Then I once told him, "Doctor, I have to tell you the truth. I'm not a Roman Catholic."

He asked me what I was. I started to explain, "I belong to the Czechoslovak Church. When I was 22 or 23, I entered this Church along with my younger brothers because my wife was a member. When her father came back from the war and saw how the Catholic Church was blessing guns, he and his whole family left it, so they were without a religion. Later on, when the Czechoslovak Church was founded, they became members and the grandfather was in the Council of Elders.

I thought we would get married at the town hall but Linda, my future wife, wanted to get married in a church. So, we went to the Czechoslovak Church and when we got there, I said that I didn't have a religion. The priest there told me, "Then, join our church if you want to get married here." It was a formality. That's how I became a member of the Czechoslovak Church. But during the Second World War, I regretted it because the Czechoslovak Church didn't exactly behave correctly. Some of its leaders willingly collaborated with the Germans.

This is how I explained my faith to Beran and he said that it didn't matter. He said, "If you want, I can arrange for you to come back to the Catholic Church. This is something I can do straight away. But it doesn't matter which Church you are a member of. You are an honest man and you believe in God, and that's more than enough. Whether you pray in the forest or in the Church, it doesn't matter where."

When Beran came to America as a Cardinal, I went to meet him at the airport. He asked me, "Where is Mrs. Linda?"

I was stunned, "Doctor, how do you remember that my wife's name is Linda?"

He smiled and said, "There are a lot of Mařenkas, Boženkas, and Růženkas. I won't remember who was Boženka and who was Růženka, but in my life, I've only met one Mrs. Linda. That's why I remember her name." And then he added, "She was a beautiful, kind and hardworking lady, and I always remembered her with fondly."

I said, "We will meet again." That was in 1972.

Some years later, we saw him in a large room. It was a great hall and there were many people there. He stood there and people were kissing his hands, and he told me, "Not you and Mrs. Linda, neither."

Then he leaned in and said, "It's as if God sent you here. See how I look and what they made me wear. I always wear a ceremonial robe and now they gave me trousers and they fall down."

I told him, "We can do something about that."

"I can't find buttons for the braces," he complained.

So I told him, "Let people make a circle around you and I will fix it."

We fixed it and I explained to him, "There are no buttons. It's some kind of new system and I don't even know what it's called. I think it's Velcro, but the main thing is that it's done up properly. It's a very good system, don't move I will do it up on the other side as well." He said that he let people kiss one hand and with the other held up his trousers so they didn't fall down.

That was our second encounter in America. Then we met up several times more. The people around him said, "Mr. Vašata, you disturb his eminency too often." I said to them, "Not his eminency. I'm going to see my friend Beran and when he tells me he's had enough, I won't come back. But he always invites me and to come whenever I want." In fact, I also wanted him to sign some greetings I was sending to friends in Czechoslovakia and he happily did so every time.

That's how the years went by. Things were good and things were bad. Every day I thank God that my wife's illness doesn't get worse (she had a stroke and was partially paralyzed) because I don't dare ask God for it to get better. That would be a miracle and we've already lived through one.

That was when we had a car accident. It happened on 5 August 1988. My wife was in an ambulance and Jana went with her. Two hours later, my daughter Linda and I drove to the hospital to see her. Linda was behind the steering wheel and suddenly we saw that a heavy truck was coming straight at us. Luckily, we had already stopped because Linda hit the brakes when she saw that it was coming at us. We were lucky because we were in a big and heavy vehicle so even such a large truck didn't destroy it completely. That was a true miracle because people who were standing around all said that we must have been killed, but then suddenly Linda opened the door.

When she saw that the truck was coming at us, she said, "Hold on!" But I didn't have anything to hold on to. I was wearing my seatbelt so the only thing that happened to me was that one of the vertebrae in my spine was damaged and two at the top had their discs knocked out of place. But I still managed to go on despite the pain. My leg was also hurt after the accident and I use a walking stick now. It was, however, a true miracle and I know I can't expect another one, so I thank God that my wife's illness isn't getting any worse.

I also thank God for giving us kind and healthy children, kind and healthy grandchildren and their wives, and for the fact that we are all still together. I'm also glad that my old homeland is free again. That's also a kind of miracle although things will be very difficult and it will take a long time for people there to set things straight again. Although it doesn't concern me anymore, I am still glad that I lived to see it.