

'Mimi' Eva Jirankova

27 November 1921

Prague, Czechoslovakia

I lived with my family in Prague during the winter, but from May to October we lived in our country house, in Revnice, which is 30 kilometres from Prague. Throughout the war we stayed in Prague mainly because we had no cars to take us to our villa. On 15 March 1939 my father received phone call from a man at the foreign ministry to warn us that the Germans had crossed the border and would arrive in Prague in two hours. I was seventeen years old when I stood at the living room window, with my father, as we watched the tanks roll past our house. The man who phoned us was later shot.

On my wedding night in 1942, the Gestapo stormed in at 3am and arrested my husband. He spent a month in prison in Prague and then he was sent to a concentration camp. In January 1945 my husband and fellow prisoners were ordered to march from Breslau, near Auschwitz, in Poland to Dachau, near Munich. They had to walk at night, so the planes didn't see them, often through thick snow, and during the day, they hid in the woods. It took them four months. Many of them died along the way, and those that survived were starving and freezing. They were liberated from Dachau by the American army in 1945 when I finally was able to see my husband again.

Between the end of the war, in 1945, and the Communists taking over, in February 1948, we had a very privileged life in Prague. My daughter was born in May 1946 and my husband was the managing director of his family's publishing house and a newspaper, *Lidove Noviny* which still exists. We had two and a half wonderful years before we had to flee the country and leave everything behind. In May 1948 when we tried to cross the border, by foot, we were arrested. They kept me in prison for only a few days, as I had a small baby, but my husband was kept for four months. They held him in the same prison in which he was held during the war. Eventually there was an amnesty for the prisoners when the new Communist President Gottwald was elected and my husband was released.

In November 1948, we managed to get our immigration passports, but at great expense. We arrived in Paris only speaking a little French, with nothing except a little bit of jewellery that I had managed to smuggle out, which I could sell. We lived in a tiny room in a hostel in the Latin Quarter, which was full of refugees who had fled the country. We lived on bread,

pancakes and wine. We had permanent residence in France, we never got permission to work but we were happy to be free. Many of my friends who couldn't leave ended up in prisons or were made to work in uranium mines and died of leukaemia. Their only crime was that they were born in bourgeois families. My brother finished studying law, but was never allowed to practise and had to work as a labourer for all of his life.

We arrived in London in November 1951 as penniless refugees. I spoke four languages but not a word of English, but luckily my husband did. We lived in a flat in Hammersmith, which we found with the help of the Czech refugee trust fund, where we paid a small weekly rent. My husband was a doctor of law, a journalist and as he spoke a few languages he was able to obtain a job with the Foreign Office, where he stayed for twenty-five years, until his retirement.

I secured a job selling ladies hats at Wollands in Knightsbridge, on a weekly wage of £7 plus 1% commission on sales. This was the first job I had ever had and I loved it.

In 1961 I worked in the millinery department at Liberty's. After a year of selling hats there, I was sent to the fashion shows in Switzerland, Italy and New York to look at the new collections with a view to buying for Liberty's. I was at the first collection of Yves Saint Laurent in Paris when he left Christian Dior. It was an exciting time to be in fashion. I was now going to Paris about four times a year which was such a contrast to when I was in Paris the first time – now I was staying at a very grand hotel instead of the refugee apartments in the Latin Quarter.

In November 1989 there was a revolution in Prague and Vaclav Havel became the new President of Czechoslovakia, but unfortunately my husband died exactly one month before this. In January 1990, I went to the Czech Embassy in London, to ask for a Czech visa so that I could go home after all those years. I cried when I received it. Our house, in Prague, became the East German Embassy during the Communist era and at the fall of the iron curtain, we got our house back with the help of the British Ambassador. Now I go to Prague sometimes six times in a year.

I would say to young people: be polite and caring, it does not cost anything. Also that sport is very important, it keeps one healthy and out of mischief. I also think that one year of military service would be good for discipline and to see the world.

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