

My Father's Travels

France, 1930

I went to Paris together with my brother Ivan to see the *Colonial Exhibition*. Each French colony had a stand there; in the stands there were restaurants with colored staff, which was very attractive. There was the Czechoslovak stand as well – it was called “At the Cannibal” and the visitors could observe Czech cannibals there. We also saw the opera *Othello* by Verdi. It was a nice performance. Before the performance a group of Czech tourists tried to get in and they were not admitted because of inadequate clothing.

Next day I said good-bye to Ivan, who turned back home and I considered where to go next. I looked at advertisements and among many attractive French regions I chose *Emerald Coast*. I traveled to its centre, *St. Malo* by train and I made a boat trip to Jersey and Guernsey, nearby islands which belong to Britain. There were numerous mansions of moneybags on the islands. I also visited a small island Mont St. Michel which is connected with the mainland for several hours a day. There is an old monastery on the hill with a statue of Archangel Michael in a suit of armor with a sword on the top. There was also a unique tide-driven power plant nearby – the tide there is the greatest in Europe.

As I was watching the power plant, I noticed a steamboat which looked like the paddle boats on the Vltava. It was waiting for the high tide to sail into the mouth of the river. I got on the boat and opened a conversation with a lady. She spoke about her bad experience with Englishmen. She accommodated two English soldiers during the war and they robbed her; on the other hand the Germans were well-behaved. I tried to oppose her, but it was a wild-goose chase. She then introduced me to a countrywoman.

I sailed together with her three stops upstream and she led me to a farm, which was situated well high above the valley. I spotted two older women and two boys¹ working in the field. They were drying the mowed barley turning them on the ground. I took a fork and joined them. As they later told me, they thought that I was sent to them by God. When the work was finished they offered me a drink – apple wine drawn from a barrel on the ridge. After a while they disappeared – the boys ran in town and the women took a cow and a few goats for pasture. After a while another woman appeared and brought me into the house. She made me a bed in a niche.

The family was strongly religious and the woman showed me some sculptures of saints. As they told me, their father is catching fish near Island. They also had a flock of sheep which had been entrusted to a shepherd and would return in autumn. In the evening the family gathered for a prayer and I was invited to join them. Being unbeliever, I only muttered something. They asked me to translate my prayer in French.... Finally, we found out that our prayers were the same – the Lord's Prayer. I also joined them in their morning prayer; they explained me that their father was praying on his trawler simultaneously with them.

¹ 10 – 12 years of age

I went on working at the farm. On Sunday they took me for a short trip in the surroundings with occurrence of menhirs. Time was passing quickly and it came the time to return home. The leave-taking was touching – they incited me to pray every day. I made for the railway station at St. Malo, got my luggage and asked about the connection to Prague. The dispatcher didn't hesitate a minute; he told me that I would be there at 8am next day.

Yugoslavia, 1935

My uncle Ladislav was a great fan of Yugoslavia. He visited that country every year, usually in spring. He liked to tell various stories from there. I only succeeded to get there after finishing my studies of law in 1935. I took a train to Rieka, a town on Yugoslavian-Italian border². I saw the familiar Italian health resort *Abazia*, situated nearby. I met there a Czech youngster from Prague who tried to pal up with me. His only interest was – women. Tarts from whole the town were pursuing us and there was no quiet place to stay overnight. I had to hide from him and leave.

I got on a boat sailing to *Dubrovnik*. The voyage was scheduled for two days, so I ordered some meals and a cabin for sleeping. I was so tired after settling the matters that I went to my cabin and slept until morning. When I climbed onto the board, I saw the rising sun and I could observe the sea. At 7am sailors called the passengers for breakfast – they served tea with gingerbread. After breakfast I continued observing the surroundings. We sailed along the North Dalmatian coast with a few tiny health resorts. At the intermediate landing at *Split* I saw *Diocletian Palace* and watched the vivacious life on the embankment, which served as the marketplace. It was so nice that I decided to interrupt my voyage and stay here overnight. I spent a few hours at a swimming bath with rocks from which one could jump into the water. In the evening I made for the sea promenade. It was crowded with people, especially sailors in uniforms. I stayed overnight at *Hotel Praha*.

From Split I sailed to town *Korčula*³. It is an ancient town with narrow streets⁴. It is situated at a narrow channel. There is a monastery on the opposite bank high over the channel with a statue of *Virgin Maria*. Sailors on the ships passing by pay respect to Her believing in Her protection. There is also a watchtower on the rock which used to serve for observing the enemy (e.g. Turks)⁵. At the Korčula town there is a solely well and the citizens carry the "living water" home in cans. They usually drink "kysnica"⁶ – a mixture of rain water and wine. In the evening the citizens gathered at the town gate and they discussed politics.

Finally I sailed to Dubrovnik. I spent much time there in a private orchard with ripe figs. One could see from that place right to Italy. The evenings there were magnificent. I visited Dubrovnik once again, in 1937. It was however connected with a sad event – the death of *President Masaryk*⁷. There were black flags all over the town. In the afternoon a funeral ceremony took place. An orchestra played *Largo* from the Symphony "From the New World" by Dvorak. The ceremony was disturbed by a few Czech tourists who came there in swimming trunks and they must have been shown out.

² In Italian *Fiume*

³ Korčula is a town on an island of the same name

⁴ *Marco Polo* was probably born there

⁵ Father also mentions Mount St. Ivan (Monte Vipera) mounting over Korčula and Orebič

⁶ kyšnica

⁷ Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was the first Czechoslovak President. He was much respected in Yugoslavia, as he had defended maliciously prosecuted Yugoslavians at a legal proceeding.

The Soviet Union, 1933

I traveled to USSR with a group of Czechoslovak and Austrian journalists and influential personalities together with my brother Ivan⁸. The voyage was related to the official recognition of Soviet Union; similar expeditions were organized by Soviet foreign minister *Litvinov* in order to open his country to Europe. At the beginning, there also was the musician Vít Nejedlý⁹ and his mother traveling with us.

Our group went by train to Warsaw. The participants looked around the city and had a festive dinner. I had a bad migraine and stayed in the hotel. In the morning we continued to the border station Negoreloje, where our carriage was coupled to an international express train destined for the Far East. In the train, there were many Japanese, for whom it was the fastest connection to Europe at that time. We went across a gloomy land of swamps and inferior vegetation until we reached the border enclosed with a barrier of barbed wire. We had to leave the European carriage and undergo a personal inspection. It was done mostly by women in uniforms scaring the pants off us; they were unsuccessfully raking in my luggage for a while. We were then led by stages to the Russian “warm” carriage¹⁰. We were assigned to one compartment of a bunk bed. The carriage was full of naked people; they lay on beds and played chess. There were sleeping clothes and other necessary things available. There also was a lady responsible for the carriage that willingly provided the necessary services. The windows were closed and it was not allowed to open them, as there were thieves on the roof who tried to pull passengers' luggage out with hooks when the train was moving. At noon the passengers suffered from heat. There was a policeman in charge of several carriages who permanently passed through the corridor. The train went quite fast and the ride to Moscow (with three short stops) took 6 hours.

Moscow

As we arrived at Moscow, there was a guide expecting us on the platform. He lined us up and explained us some basic matters. He spoke German and understood a little Czech. Then he brought us to a bus standing in front of the station building. The bus took us to a hotel, situated on the river bank. We had a nice view at the Kremlin.

The hotel was an older building. There were crowds of people around its entrance trying to get in contact with the guests. The interior was quite neat. We were instructed not to leave shoes in the corridor (to be cleaned), as it is usual in the West, because they might be stolen. I found everything o.k. in my room except for one detail: there was no plug to the washbowl. I had to plug it up using a sheet of paper.

According to our plan, we had to visit *Tretjakovskaja Gallery* in the afternoon; in the morning we were free. We first looked around the Kremlin together. Most members of our group then went to see the Lenin Mausoleum – there was a long queue in front of it. I went with Ivan along a street that led to a square. There was a building looking like a department store in the square and we wanted to see what they are selling. We were however spotted by a group of vagrant boys, who snatched the newspaper that we had just bought and fled. Another group of boys tried to rob us. I took a few coins and shared them among the boys. They examined them and shouted “Czerkesian¹¹ money!”.

⁸ I went there instead of my uncle, Prof. Emil Svoboda

⁹ Son of Zdeněk Nejedlý

¹⁰ těpluška

¹¹ A nation in the north Caucasus

The traffic was growing high. We noticed some trams hung with people. We wondered where are the people streaming and it was said that to work. It was 9am and we wondered what time they start work. As we found out, it was related to the reform of measuring time: the “*five-day*” was introduced instead of a week and the “*outgoing day*” instead of Sunday¹². Those people were streaming to their second job; most of them had to cope with 2-3 jobs each day.

We took a roundabout way to our hotel for lunch. We had vegetable soup and fried fish with potatoes. They gave us a great surprise: coffee made of green grains boiled in water; they wanted to prepare a treat for us and didn't know how coffee should be prepared. After visiting Tretakovskaja Gallery we were shown the *University Town*. It was an irregular agglomeration of modern buildings.

Dneprostroj¹³

The scheduled departure of our train was 9am. We got on a “warm carriage” which was already full of people. They advised us to buy as many bottles as possible of mineral water “Narzan”; after drinking it one could change one bottle at railway stations for a roasted chicken.

The town is situated around the power station consisted mostly of single-storied houses. We could see people sunbathing on their flat roofs. We admired the giant structure which was built with rather primitive means. A wild thunderstorm drove us into a large dining room. Our hosts provided us with thin tea with a little bit of sugar but extensive explanations of two guides. They gave us an account of whole the development since the *October Revolution* up to the present creative endeavor aimed at completing the five-year in 4 years, according to equation

$$2+2+ \textit{enthusiasm of people} = 5$$

Kharkiv

In those times (1921-34) Kharkiv was the Ukrainian capital though “*no Ukrainians lived there*”. The town was decorated by a number of ultra-modern buildings by a famous French architect. In 1934 the Ukrainian capital was moved to Kiev. From Kharkiv we left for Rostov-upon-Don. We went across a lonely prairie except for the *Don Basin*, which was densely populated¹⁴.

Rostov-upon-Don

At first glance Rostov appeared as modern, well-ordered town. However a short walk along the Main Street showed me something different – I saw lots of trash everywhere and when I peeped in at one of the sporadic meat shops, it was swarmed with flies. We visited Selmashstroj, the main pride of the town. It was an industrial complex producing agricultural machines, including combine harvesters and tractors. The complex was finished up with American help. When entering the factory we were thoroughly inspected; I had a small camera and the wanted to seize it. I had to exert much effort to retain it. We met there

¹² Pjatidnevka, vychodnyj den

¹³ Dneprostroj is a huge hydroelectric power station built on the Dněpr. It used to be a pride of “socialist construction”

¹⁴ Father also mentions another hydroelectric station that they visited - *Dneproges*

Austrian *Schutzbidler* –members of a left-wing movement, who withdrew to Soviet Union after their defeat. They were unhappy about that – their living conditions here were rather bad relative to West Europe and they were not allowed to leave USSR.

Next day we undertook a trip to *Zernograd*¹⁵. I was a giant sovkhos (state farm), situated at the edge of the prairie, east of Rostov. On the majestic entrance, there was a large inscription “Purge for strengthening the government and administration”. We entered an object which looked like a football stadium and there were crowds of people. The “purge” was just going on. We stayed there for half an hour watching the ceremony. The general manager was the first in line, other managers followed. Each of them confessed his sins and pledged for realization of the project “2+2+ *enthusiasm of working people* = 5”, i.e. the five-year plan in 4 years. We could not find out who of the managers was “purged” and who was repudiated. Our guide tried to persuade us that the present problems would disappear after introducing the latest technology; the highlight would be seeding grain from an airplane.

In the evening we returned to Rostov and next day we continued in our journey – we pulled out for Caucasus.

Caucasus

There was a vast prairie land between Rostov and Caucasus, which was inhabited by *Kalmyks*. These people led a nomad life and allegedly they were Buddhists. The prairie was just in blossom and it offered a nice view; the flowers looked like chrysanthemum. The train suddenly stopped in the middle of the prairie due to some failure and we had to wait for a reserve locomotive. People left their “warm” carriages and started to pick flowers. They decorated the whole train including the locomotive. Finally the train started to move again and we could observe the wall of Caucasus lifting before us. In the afternoon we arrived at Vladikavkaz, which was called “Ordzhonikidze” at that time. The town is an important strategic point as it controls the ancient Georgian road leading to Mt. Kazbek (5640m), the second highest peak in Caucasus.

We stayed at Vladikavkaz overnight and in the evening we saw a traditional performance – *dzhigitovka*. It was very nice and most actors were Czerkesians, who are noted masters in horseback riding. Next day we got on a bus and climbed along the steep road leading to a saddle, which is almost the same height as Mt. Kazbek. The saddle is the border between Europe and Asia.

Black Sea

We went by a night train to Batumi, which lies on the coast of the Black Sea. We saw a nice beach with several tankers anchored in a bay. We were tired after the night traveling and had a strong desire to bathe in the sea. A few of us (including me) did that, but it was a catastrophe. The surface was covered with an oil layer and the oil got fixed to our bodies. Fortunately, the driver of a car passing by got off and washed us with petrol; we could put on our clothes. That demonstrated the generosity of Russian people – Czech people would probably say “*Mind your own business!*” in such a situation.

¹⁵ Grain Town

The boat *Krym*¹⁶ came for us at 10am. It sailed for Odessa, but we wanted to get off before that, at Crimea. We (me with Ivan) got a cabin on the lower deck. I lay there down in bed and fell asleep. All the participants who fell asleep on the deck were robbed. By noon we had dinner with the captain. He greeted us. The menu was abundant – we could choose various fruits, roasted fish, roast pork and meat pie and we drank Georgian wine, both red and white. We sailed along the coast and landed at several harbors on the way, including Kerch, which lies at the outset of Crimea peninsula. In Kerch I got to know Erna Kurtieva, a short, round-faced lady of a slightly Asiatic appearance. I corresponded with her for several months from Prague.

Our boat finally landed at Yalta harbor. Yalta is a summer resort which used to be a meeting centre of the imperial upper crust. Among the villas of Russian parvenus there was also a villa of Karel Kramar¹⁷. We stayed at the health resort.

We first visited a public swimming pool on the beach. They didn't use any swimming clothes and men were strictly separated from women. There were numerous guards on the beach who watched that nobody swam more than 20m away from the shore. Then we went for a walk around the coast. There were many people on the beach, all bathing naked. I met a Czech who was boldly wearing a badge "Red partisan". He was a cobbler. We visited his workshop. There were many people waiting in a queue and he repaired shoes using special glue. I spoke to a lady who warned us that this man offered smuggling people across the border and he killed and robbed them. Although we were not able to verify that, we kept a careful eye on him.

Above the sea resort there is a wonderful countryside, the woodland area *Jalja* with mostly fir and beech forest. Next day we took a look at the most luxury part of the resort which used to belong to Czar and his court. We embarked on *Krym* again and set off for Odessa. I got a heavy diarrhea and I was afraid of being infected by typhus or cholera. Fortunately a doctor came and gave me some pills; I soon recovered.

Odessa

From Yalta we were sailing for Odessa along the coast, it was one day's trip. We passed at a distance the military harbor Sevastopol. The captain arranged a royal dinner in honor of us and he personally cared for the passengers. The menu consisted of fruits, fish and the Russian specialty – meat pie¹⁸. After landing at Odessa we set out for a walk. However the town made an oppressive impression – the shops had poor supplies and citizens were harassed by police. We were twice ordered to cross the street without any reason. The culture seemed to be very scanty; only two cultural events were offered to people – a monkey exhibition and one film. It was the film "Hero"¹⁹ depicting the rescue operation of icebreaker *Krasin*. The film was projected at several cinemas at the same time. The traffic was low and trams were chock-full like in Moscow – people were hanging on the steps.

On the other hand, the beach was worth of note. It was crowded with people who covered themselves with sand. It might have some therapeutic effect.

¹⁶ Krym = Crimea

¹⁷ Karel Kramář, Czech politician and 1st minister president of Czechoslovakia. He was an avowed opponent of Russian communism

¹⁸ piroženoje

¹⁹ Geroj

Kiev

From Odessa we went by train to Kiev, which was the last stop on our tour. We visited *Lavra* – a large monastery complex which now served as a junk shop selling out various religious articles, especially icons. When walking along the Main Street we met a Czech family. They invited us to their home. We drank there tea and biscuits and gave them some expendable things like socks and underwear. Father had two jobs – he worked as a baker in the night and was a guard at a swimming pool at day. His wife did some home help. They had two schoolchildren. When we were leaving their home, three policemen surrounded us and took our hosts away.

We visited a former royal cathedral, whose interior looked like a scrap yard and many windows were broken. One member of our group gave us explanation about its history and outfit.

The last act of our journey took place on the Polish border where we had to pass through a thorough inspection of luggage.

Salzburg, 1938

I went to Salzburg²⁰ with Ivan. At Salzburg railway station we took a bus which brought us to Mondsee Lake. After lunch we went on by cog-wheel railway to Mt. Schlafberg. The weather was nice and there was a beautiful view. We turned back and I saw Ivan off to the railway station, because he traveled to Paris. I decided to take look of the Salzburg Castle. I peeped in at its interior, which was rather dilapidated. Then I climbed on a hillock above the city, took a map and started to study the topology of the centre. A lady came to me and asked me to look at the map, so we got acquainted. We went into a garden restaurant, which belonged to a complex used for regular music festivals²¹. The restaurant was full of Nazi youth. We had dinner there, the dish was very good quality. I returned home by train.

Father describes how he fell asleep in the compartment and woke up in the arms of a young girl. There was also an incident during the way: a Hungarian lady asked the guard for something in her mother tongue and he repeatedly answered “Nem tudum Magyarum”. She held that as an insult of her nation.

Istanbul, 1937

Father went by train to Varna²² across Romania. At the Bulgarian border a Romanian custom officer cut up his suitcase with a knife, as he was not able to open it. Father asked the Czechoslovak consul for help and he got a lawyer who accompanied him. In Bulgaria the train stopped at a little station and the stationmaster asked the passengers for a sum of money for dispatching the train, which was not understood by the foreigners. At the Varna railway station there were horse-pulled coaches instead of taxis. Father went by a coach to the hotel, where Ivan was waiting for him. The price for the transport was “rather high and father refused to pay so much; Ivan covered that for him.

Father and Ivan spent two days in Varna waiting for the ship to Istanbul. They mostly bathed on the beach and father experienced an adventure when he “fought for life”. There was an Italian ship anchored in the bay and father tried to swim to it. After 20 minutes he however

²⁰ In Austria

²¹ Probably Salzburger Festspiele, a summer music festival

²² Bulgarian seaside resort and town

saw that he was carried away by the stream to the open sea. He became frightened and started to shout to the boats that were sailing around. One of these boats took him to the Italian ship, which however was just going to sail away; the next landing should have been in Greece. He tried to explain his situation to the captain and other sailors with no effect. Finally, a cabin boy showed him mercy and took him to the nearest point of the shore. In the meantime Ivan sat on a bench reading an English newspaper and had no idea what his brother was experiencing...

We sailed to Istanbul on a Bulgarian ship "Czar Ferdinand". It was an old-world, shabby ship which was rebuilt into a floating hotel. We should have been accommodated there for 4 days. There was a miscellaneous society on the deck and we tried to make contacts with the girls there. They were mostly Bulgarian and were accompanied with their mothers, which made such contacts difficult. Finally we approached to Bospor. We spotted settlements with minarets and whole of the coast was dotted with fortresses with artillery outfits. Finally our ship landed at a shore which looked like the embankment in Prague²³. As the ship was landing, there was a fight between sailors and the cats which tried to get on the deck and many of them drowned.

There was a dinner in the ship restaurant. There were about 20 guests and the captain held the chair. There were 12 courses on the menu, including fruits, smoked fish, beef soup, pork fillets, omelets, etc. We drank meager-quality wine. After dinner, there was a noisy dancing party. I preferred to sleep in my cabin.

In the morning most tourists made for the Hagias Sophia church, which now served as a mosque. Its interior was colossal, but the outfit was very poor if compared to our baroque churches. There were numerous icons painted on the same pattern. After the tour we visited a restaurant. There were many newspapers and magazines available for reading and the waiter brought us hookahs. We drank coffee, which was excellent everywhere here, and juice; alcohol was prohibited. In the afternoon we took part in the excursion for Princes Islands. There were ruins of the rulers of the *Ottoman Empire*. There were some eunuchs living there who begged when they saw foreigners. Then we sailed to a huge "Town of the dead" with numerous cemeteries on the Asiatic side of the straits. There was a main road nearby and I observed the traffic of crowds of people and animals; if a car appeared there, the driver tried to get the right of way by blowing his horn. Next day we visited the bazaar – a market place of vast dimensions. One could buy there even prohibited products, including alcohol.

Water Expedition on the Vltava, summer 1946

We started at Lenora²⁴, a village on the high stretch of the Vltava. Weather was steady and water level was good. We set out in the afternoon – it was a mystery tour at that time. In the evening we came to a village that was still inhabited by Germans. We spoke with them; they were ready to leave in the next days. Most of them were carrying holy pictures to a chapel which was one kilometer away. We helped them – the pictures were mostly that of Virgin Maria. We stayed overnight with one family and slept on sacks of hay. Next day we set out for Frymburk. The river was meandering here at that time; now it is flooded by Lipno Lake. We bathed a little there and decided to stay at the gendarme post. At night we were woken by

²³ The embankment at Palacký Bridge, the landing place of steamboats

²⁴ Lenora is a usual starting point for water expeditions. The high stretch of Vltava lay in the "Sudetenland" – the region annexed by Germany in 1938

barking – a gendarme was feeding a pack of forlorn dogs. I don't know how they had been treated – there were no dogs around there in the morning. We went on running downstream and succeeded to get over the impassable stretch “Devil's Cataracts” with a military transport. The soldiers recommended us to stay overnight at a mill near Vyšší Brod²⁵. There was a Czech manager at the mill who was exploiting several German families; he was afraid of the future when Germans would leave. The monastery was closed. The manager offered us an eight left here by American soldiers.

When setting out the canoe I got injured – I cut my foot. For the further way we had to look for a help. We found a young man who was willing to join us; he accompanied us up to Budejovice²⁶. We camped at Hluboká Castle and we met there Mary, my wife's friend. She joined us and we sailed up to the confluence with the Otava. We had some disputes with Mary as for the further trip and I decided to travel alone by train for Davle to see a doctor. When I came to our family doctor, there was just a German soldier having a tooth pulled out. He was screaming a lot.

Italy, September 1968

On the first days after the Soviet invasion²⁷ we didn't expect that we could realize our planned trip to Italy. We send a message to my wife's Italian friend²⁸ that we were not able to come. However the situation soon changed for better and there were no obstacles for traveling abroad.

We went by train to Rome through Vienna. When we arrived at Rome in the evening, we tried to contact Lída's friend but nobody answered the phone. So we went to their place. Nobody was at home, but a neighbor helped us to contact their daughter and she sent us the keys. She also informed her parents who were staying at their summer residence “Castello” (a small castle). We traveled there next day. Lída's friends were well informed about the Soviet invasion and they admired the resistance of Czechoslovak citizens. Lída took the opportunity to chat with her pre-war friend and her husband, who played viola in *La Scala*.

Next day we went by underground to *Ostia*, an ancient harbor near Rome. We wanted to bathe but the water was rather polluted. So we went by train farther, to a place where Lida remembered forests. We found there a few dry trees amidst warehouses and factories. However, the water was quite clean. We bathed a little and traveled back to Castello. In the morning we took a look of cultural landmarks. After touring round the town we found a refuge in a nice central park. *Villa Borghese* is probably the only place in Rome where lovers can meet. Other places are quite unsuitable for that. On another day we visited the Holy Father's residence, which lies at a lake among residences of the rich. We entered one of these residences and entered into conversation with the guards about the Soviet invasion. They were so moved that they let us bathe in the residence. In the afternoon we ate pizza in a restaurant and set off walking along the road. The people passing by in cars stopped and wondered why we are walking. We had to tell them that we had a road accident. A good soul gave us a lift to the public transport.

²⁵ Vyšší Brod (Higher Ford) is a place where the Vltava turns to the north; there is an old monastery

²⁶ České Budějovice (Budweis), a town in South Bohemia

²⁷ On August 21st, 1968

²⁸ My mother studied Law in Italy for one year before the war; she succeeded to find her old friend's address. Mother was fluent in Italian.

We reserved a day for seeing the Vatican Gallery. It is very large and foreigners mostly limit their tour to a few exhibits. Several times we went to the seaside – one could get there by bus or by underground. We spent in Italy altogether two weeks.

November 1, 2010

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