

Czechoslovak Refugees in the Displaced Persons Camps in the Early Cold War

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Abstract: The paper deals with various aspects of the life of Czechoslovakian refugees at the displaced persons camps in Allied-occupied Germany and Austria. About 60,000 people left the country within a few years following the Communist takeover in February 1948. The first steps in the “free world” brought them behind the walls and fences of the camps, where accommodation met only very basic needs. Wooden shacks, former prisoner-of-war camps, military barracks, schools, factories or even more primitive housing, such as tents or train cars. The atmosphere in the camps was extremely tense because of the widespread belief that the Cold War would quickly change into an armed conflict between the USA and the USSR. But as time passed, people remained long months or even years in the camps, sending visa applications, waiting for work permits and transport to a new home. The camps could be likened to a unique microcosm, with prostitution, black market, subversive activities of Communist informants, violent and boozy clashes as well as churches, chapels, libraries, schools, kindergartens, shops, craft workshops, sports associations, scout troops or even the recruitment offices for Western armies. Moreover, the first magazines, brochures and leaflets were published there, and the first seeds of political activity were born. Nevertheless, their existence and everyday operations are almost forgotten by contemporary historiography.

Keywords: Communism, Czechoslovakia, displaced person, exile, International Refugee Organization (IRO), migration, United Nations

Spring 1945. The Third Reich fell apart, and the Allies liberated Czechoslovakia. The communists returned much better prepared from exile in Moscow, where they had spent World War Two. They learned how to penetrate all critical sectors, occupy crucial positions in the regional and local governmental bodies, work with propaganda and convince voters with endless promises to vote for them. After winning the election in May 1946, they gained control over the coalition government’s most important ministries (defence, interior, information and agriculture). They were preparing themselves, step by step, for the inevitable conflict with their coalition partners, the non-communist parties and pro-Western politicians, biding their time until the right moment to seize

absolute power. It happened to be a governmental crisis, which developed in late February 1948.¹ Altogether twelve members of the government representing three non-communist parties announced their resignations in protest against the illegal activities of the Communist-controlled State Security Police (StB). According to the Constitution, the president would have to accept the resignations and set up new elections. The Communists saw the crisis as an opportunity to take absolute power. They used Soviet support and labour unions that occupied the streets of Prague and other major cities: a general strike was organized, and any resistance by democratic elements of the Czechoslovak society was eliminated. President Edvard Beneš wanted to avoid civil war or even a Soviet invasion, capitulated and met all Communist conditions. That was the beginning of forty-one years of oppression. The Intelligentsia, Catholic clergy, Jews, pro-West citizens and farmers – especially wealthy ones referred to as “kulaks” – became enemies of the new regime.² From the moment of the coup, the floodgates of communist oppression opened, and the first politicians, journalists, and academics, who had criticized the methods of the “Reds” did not linger; they fled Czechoslovakia to avoid imprisonment.

The main direction of emigration from Czechoslovakia led through the Šumava mountains in the southwest to Bavaria, part of the American occupation zone of Germany. People from Moravia and Slovakia used the southern route to Austria, especially to the western sectors of Vienna. The StB estimated that about 8,614 people left the country illegally by the end of 1948. Between 1948 and 1953, State Security indicated a total number of 43,612 refugees.³ Manual workers accounted for almost one-third of this number, while farmers, students, soldiers, tradesmen and clerks made up some ten per cent.⁴

After their crossing, refugees usually reported to the Bavarian Border Police, were registered, issued ID cards with a photograph and stamp “der illegale Grenzgänger” (illegal border crosser) and handed over to the US intelligence service CIC (Counter Intelligence Corps). Afterwards, they were transported to a detention camp at the Goetheschule grammar school complex in Regensburg, where they filled out the necessary forms, underwent interrogations and continued to a camp under German administration deeper inland after a few days. As 50–100 people from Czechoslovakia came to

¹ Karel Kaplan, *The Short March. The Communist Takeover in Czechoslovakia 1945–1948* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1987), 174–188.

² For more about the development of Czechoslovakia after 1948, see Josef Korbela, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia, 1938–1948: The Failure of Coexistence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

³ Annual reports, 333/14: Emigration, Archiv bezpečnostních složek Praha (Archives of Security Services Prague – ABS).

⁴ Czechoslovak Escapees, December 1948, AG-018-007: Records of the International Refugee Organization 1947–1952, Box 23, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Archive Geneva.

the American zone in the spring of 1948 every day, the reception centre in Regensburg ceased to have sufficient capacity in May, and two more were established – in Schwabach and Deggendorf, both in Bavaria. At the end of 1948, many Czechs and Slovaks were dispersed in a dozen facilities.⁵

International help

Millions of Europeans lived outside their home countries in the late 1940s. The continent lay in ruins, needing time and peace for recovery, but had to deal with a massive humanitarian crisis and increasing tension instead. The International Refugee Organization (IRO), an intergovernmental body of the UN, was founded on 20 April 1946 to deal with the new wave of refugees from dozens of nations.⁶ It assumed most of the tasks of the earlier United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which had existed since 1943. The headquarters of IRO was in Geneva, but it had twenty-five regional offices all over the world, employing 4,000 people, both international and local staff. UNRRA's eligibility policy can be described as chaotic at the beginning. Its activities were primarily dictated by the demands of occupation authorities and were, to a great extent, designed to identify the displaced persons (DPs) in its care. These included Holocaust survivors, former forced labourers returning from Germany, expelled German minorities from Eastern Europe and, above all, people escaping from Stalin and his Communist regimes or those refusing to be repatriated behind the Iron Curtain.⁷ However, the great emphasis of its successor, the IRO, was placed on the registration, identification and classification of persons placed under the care of the organization. The purpose was to establish those eligible to receive assistance from the organization from those not entitled to receive it (people leaving only for economic reasons, not due to political or ethnic persecution, war criminals, Nazi collaborators etc.). The IRO's most urgent task was to keep the DPs alive: feed, lodge and clothe them. The next thing to do was to determine the type of assistance the DPs were entitled to receive: voluntary

⁵ There is a number of personal memoirs on time spent in the camps available in the Czech language, while in English, there are just a few, such as Camp Lechfeld, Hochfeld – Sandra Novacek, *Border Crossings* (Detroit: Ten21 Press, 2012), 157–177; Camp Schwabach – Charles Ota Heller, *Prague: My Long Journey Home* (Annapolis: Abbot Press, 2012), 127–146; Camp Jägerhofkaserne in Ludwigsburg – Miroslav Rechcigl, *Czechmate: From Bohemian paradise to American Haven* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011), 100–110.

⁶ See Louise Holborn, *The International Refugee Organisation: A Specialised Agency of the United Nations, Its History and Work 1946–1952* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁷ See Kim Salomon, *Refugees in the Cold War* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991); cf. Mark Wyman, *DP: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* (Philadelphia: Balch Institute Press, 1989).

repatriation, resettlement in a third country or settlement in the local economy, i.e. in the countries which hosted the DP camps, mainly Germany and Austria. Repatriation was to be offered to all individuals. However, if any individual feared persecution in the home country, said person could then be resettled in a third country. Another duty of the IRO was to accord legal and political protection to the DPs, a task which UNRRA had performed in only a limited capacity. In order to facilitate the movements of DPs, the IRO was equipped with transportation services by land, sea and air. During its operation, the IRO became the largest mass transportation company in the world.⁸

People from Poland, Hungary, Baltic countries and the Balkans were telling gruesome tales of Communist terror and persecution and asking the IRO for protection. The US and the British governments, the major contributors to the IRO budget and the ones whose occupation armies controlled large regions in Germany and Austria, facing this considerable influx of refugees from the East, were sceptical at first and did not want to take full responsibility. On 21 April 1947, they even closed the gates of the IRO camps to the newcomers. Due to this “freeze order”, the first several thousand Czechoslovak refugees after the Communist takeover in February 1948 were placed in facilities under the German/Austrian administration. Hygienic conditions and accommodations met only very basic needs. Many were little more than wooden shacks, former prisoner-of-war camps, military barracks, schools, factories or even more primitive housing, such as tents, train cars and various provisional accommodations. Every day, about 200 refugees arrived in the US zone of Germany alone, and their presence was becoming a serious political issue. Finally, in late summer 1948, after months of negotiations, the American military authorities in Germany fully recognized the Czechs and Slovaks as political refugees, escaping their homeland because of fear of persecution and thus allowed them to move to IRO camps gradually. This happened thanks to a lobby among influential British politicians and pressure from the US Department of State, considering that the United States was morally and politically obligated to afford maximum assistance to these refugees. However, the IRO camps remained open to them only until 15 October 1949 (31 August 1949 in Austria). Until then, they were admitted to IRO care and maintenance. For such refugees, the organization would pay for transport to third countries in the case of admittance for immigration. However, not everyone was able to meet the deadlines and arrived later.

In addition, the security screening procedures served as a “sieve”. Newcomers filled out lengthy forms and endured a detailed interview led by IRO officials or CIC operatives, asking the refugees about their past, career, family background and opinion

⁸ *The refugee in the post-war world: preliminary report of a survey of the refugee problem*, directed by Jacques Vernant (Geneva: United Nations, 1951), 45–61.

of the Communist regime. Persons suspected of being communist spies or those considered by IRO as not being in imminent danger became “ineligible for the protection from IRO”. Those who convinced the IRO reviewers that they fled Czechoslovakia due to serious political, moral, ideological or religious reasons and showed sincere willingness to live and work in another country received the stamp “eligible” in their documents and headed to the newly established DP – transit centres, from which led a straight path to freedom.

Living conditions in the camps were challenging; in some cases, there was a lack of drinking water and a permanent lack of fuel and coal for heating during winter, and the need for supplies became more and more urgent. The camp authorities appealed for help from the International Red Cross, CARE, YMCA, International Rescue and Relief Committee, National Catholic Welfare Conference and many Czechoslovak auxiliary committees established in practically every Western European country. Despite these combined efforts, coordinated and fully effective assistance was not provided for several months before the diplomat Jan Papánek (1896–1991) stepped in. He was a man with a detailed knowledge of the USA. He had served as Consul General in Pittsburgh before the war and, since 1945, had held the office of Czechoslovak Ambassador to the United Nations. The new Communist government unsuccessfully tried to force him to resign. Nonetheless, he was able to keep this important position thanks to his contacts in the UN. He arranged the admittance of 2,000 Czechoslovak refugees into the USA, beyond existing strict immigration quotas. He also protested against the Prague coup in the UN Security Council, accusing the Soviet Union of interference in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia, thus endangering world peace and security. The proposal for an independent investigation into events in Czechoslovakia was, to no one’s surprise, vetoed by the Soviets, and the matter remained on the agenda unresolved. In early May 1948, Papánek took the initiative to establish a new humanitarian organization in New York, the American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees (AFCR), which focused on taking care of Czechoslovak refugees.⁹ Thanks to Papánek, it received significant financial support for its start-up from Eleanor Roosevelt, governors, senators, businessmen, journalists and other important figures. The headquarters in New York City functioned with skeleton staff; regional offices were opened in Germany, Austria, Norway, England, France and, shortly thereafter, in Canada. Due to limited funds for paid staff, dedicated volunteers did most of the work. During four decades of the Cold War, AFCR assisted about 130,000 people during their stay in the displaced persons camps and, later, during their

⁹ Slavomír Michálek, “The American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees and Its Leader Ján Papánek,” in *East Central Europe in Exile Volume 1: Transatlantic Migrations*, ed. Anna Mazurkiewicz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 49–64.

resettlement into host countries. In the 1970s and 1980s, it also assisted refugees from Southeast Asia.¹⁰

Life behind the walls and fences

I would liken it to a unique microcosm, where you could have found prostitution, a black market, violent and boozy clashes between the members of nations, as well as churches, chapels, libraries, schools, kindergartens, sports associations (in the Czechoslovak case, it was the famous *Sokol*), scout troops and also nascent political organizations and political parties. The representatives of political parties at home, either dissolved or morphed into harmless satellites of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, tried to pick up their activities in exile and rebuild their shattered structures.¹¹ They worked in modest conditions, with minimal funds and a lack of human apparatus. The internal organization, daily operations, publishing of official party materials and ways of communicating with the member base had to be radically adapted. The first party units had begun at first in the camps by organizing meetings and assemblies. Even the camp administration was usually built on a party key, not based on the capabilities and authority of the candidates. Each party had to have representatives in this administration, and the party composition of this body, acting as the communication link between the inhabitants of the camp and IRO authorities, caused the first controversies and quarrels, which would become so typical of exile politics in subsequent years.

A considerable journalistic activity developed early in the camps, even though conditions were far from favourable. There was a lack of paper, printing-ink and printing machines. At first, word of mouth spread the news about developments outside the camps. It was customary to call a weekly meeting where journalists informed the audience about the latest events. The first newspaper-like publication, *Deník* (Daily), appeared in May 1948 in the Dieburg camp. Its editor, Emil Lašák, always prepared several copies on a typewriter. The length of each issue was determined not by the number of news items

¹⁰ Voluminous AFCR archives are deposited at various locations: Jan Papanek Papers at the New York Public Library, at the archives of the Bohemian National Hall in New York City, in the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Smaller ones are to be found in a number of personal collections of Czechoslovak émigrés (Josef Pejskar, Bořivoj Čelovský, Hubert Ripka, Adolf Procházka, Pavel Tigrid, Ota Hora, Martin Hrabík, Otakar Machotka, Helena Koželuhová, Marie Provazníková etc.) at the National Archives of the Czech Republic in Prague.

¹¹ Martin Nekola, “Czech Political Parties in Exile in the Early Cold War,” in *Cold War: Global Impact and Lessons Learned*, ed. Alison Palmadessa (Hauppauge [NY]: Nova Publishing, 2019), 107–126.

but by the quantity of paper on which the editor could lay his hands. There were similar papers like *Hlas tábora* (Voice of the Camp) in Unterjettingen, *Čechoslovák* in Wiesbaden. *Svoboda* (Freedom) in Frankfurt, with its first issue in September 1948, was the very first weekly periodical, published by Pavel Tigríd, later an editor at Radio Free Europe, publisher of a well-known quarterly *Svědectví* (Testimony) and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Czech Minister of Culture. After 1949, there were many new titles like *Československé noviny* (Czechoslovak News) in Pforzheim, *Doba* (Epoch) in Ludwigsburg, *Tribuna* (Tribune) in Murnau and many others.¹² Upon closer examination of the content, we see all kinds of contributions: political news, practical advice for newcomers related to life in the camp, poetry, jokes, quotations from the speeches of exile leaders and helpful information about visa applications and resettlement.

The Czechs and Slovaks stayed in various displaced persons camps.¹³ The refugee community in each of them was individual in many ways, and each deserves separate research. Two camps, however, can be considered exceptionally important. First, Camp Valka near Nuremberg had served as a Soviet prisoner-of-war camp. After the war, the Americans converted it into a shelter for Latvian and Estonian refugees. From this period comes the name itself – Valga is also the name of the border town between these two countries and a symbol of good relations and cooperation. In October 1949, the first 400 Czechs and Slovaks, who had failed the security screening for various reasons, were transferred there. At its maximum occupancy, there were about 1,200 Czechs and Slovaks out of 7,000 inhabitants.¹⁴ Valka was a rather small town, consisting of hundreds of wooden huts arranged in blocks. There were six small rooms in each hut, equipped only with hard beds with straw mattresses, a table and chairs and a small iron stove.

Life in the camp was harsh. Refugees sent to Valka had little hope of finding a job in Germany or emigrating unless friends abroad could arrange it for them. A distressing situation of this sort can bring out the worst in people, from stealing the post to falsely denouncing visa applicants – an anonymous denunciation sent to a foreign embassy or consulate was enough to scupper any hope for a visa. There was a wide variety of people: youngsters – recruited by the French Foreign Legion and sent to Algeria or Vietnam – but also the ill, drunkards, petty and serious criminals, single mothers or families with small children. A steady rise in the number of criminal cases gave Valka a bad reputation which German newspapers liked to dwell on. The camp was also infiltrated

¹² See Vojtěch Nevlud–Duben, “The journalistic Endeavors of Czech and Slovak Exiles (1945–1964),” in *Czechoslovakia past and present*, ed. Miloslav Rechcigl (Hague: Mouton, 1968), 844–847.

¹³ Germany: 70 camps in the US zone, 9 in the French zone, 12 in the British zone; Austria: 19 in the US zone, 8 in the French zone, 5 in the British zone; Italy: 16 camps.

¹⁴ More about Valka, see Martin Nekola, *Na cestě za svobodou (On the Way to Freedom)* (Prague: Universum, 2020), 29–34.

by Communist agents sending regular reports back to Czechoslovakia about living conditions. These were later used – together with horror stories by repentant returnees – as propaganda to show the rottenness of the West and warn against leaving the Communist paradise. The mission of the infiltrators was simple: spread disinformation, false accusations and fear, criticize life in the Capitalist West, divide the émigré community and undermine people's common sense.

Rudé právo (Red Justice), the most widespread daily newspaper in Czechoslovakia during the Communist era, included remarks about suffering children, German terror and crimes against the refugees in virtually every issue from the early 1950s. At the end of 1954, Czechoslovak State Security launched a project called *HEPND – Hnutí exulantů pro návrat domů* (Movement of the Émigrés to return Home).¹⁵ Officially, it appeared to be a citizens' initiative to organize the return of those who had changed their minds, were dissatisfied with the living conditions in the West and decided to return. HEPND published a magazine called *Hlas domova* (Voice of Home), which the infiltrators distributed to the camps, primarily to Valka. It contained pieces attacking the exile leaders, accusing them of profiting from and abusing poor people in the camps for their political goals. The authors carefully selected rhetoric, language and the phrases they used, avoiding ideological background or praise of the Communist regime; instead, they emphasized patriotism, sentiment, family, homesickness, even religious elements and poetry. The HEPND campaign culminated in May 1955, when presidential amnesty was announced in Czechoslovakia, and the authorities promised everyone who came back from the West would not be prosecuted. However, only 1,169 people out of tens of thousands took the opportunity and returned. They were immediately used for propaganda – their testimonies – in fact, pre-prepared scenarios – were broadcast on Czechoslovak radio and served as a warning and prevention measure.

For the émigrés who gained visas and started a new life in different parts of the world, the memories of the time spent in Valka remained vivid even after decades. In all recent oral history projects focused on the émigrés after 1948,¹⁶ Valka's misery, hopelessness and bad reputation played a significant role. Valka is still perceived as a dark side of emigration. The camp existed until the late 1950s; it was demolished due to the construction of the new Langwasser housing estate. The remaining refugees were sent to the nearby camp in Zirndorf.

¹⁵ Monika Mandelíčková, "Repatriace československých exulantů po roce 1948 a komunistická kampaň za návrat domů (Repatriation of Czechoslovak Refugees and the Communist Campaign to Return Home after 1948)," in *Studia z dějin emigrace. Sborník studentských prací*, ed. Karel Konečný, Tomáš Motlíček (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2003), 9–19.

¹⁶ For example, the oral history project at the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Between 2010 and 2014, more than 300 interviews with the Czechs and Slovaks who had arrived in the USA as refugees were recorded.

The IRO camp No. 646 at Ludwigsburg north of Stuttgart consisted of three connected camps housed in former Wehrmacht military barracks: Krabbenlochkaserne, Jägerhofkaserne and Arsenalkaserne. The buildings themselves were more than 150 years old. Most of its residents were Polish and Czechoslovak, and the camp was also a student centre, equipped with a large meeting hall and basketball and volleyball courts. The conditions for its inhabitants, in general, were much better than in Valka. During the day, the behaviour of refugees was carefully monitored by the camp police, and any violations were punished according to IRO guidelines. Again, the long period of waiting for visas in uncertainty was depressing, regardless of the attractions of sports activities, spiritual care in the wooden church and manual work in craft workshops. The students in Ludwigsburg were missing regular daily exercise, education and activities to increase their skills, which would improve their chances as visa applicants and job seekers. That was the main reason to establish The Masaryk's University College of Czechoslovak Students in Exile on 28 October 1948, the Czech national holiday and the 30th anniversary of the foundation of Czechoslovakia. The college was named after the first Czechoslovak President, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937). A number of former university professors, who also stayed in the Ludwigsburg camp, started teaching economy, philosophy, sociology, literature and international relations lessons on a daily basis in Czech, Slovak, English, German, French and Spanish, enabling the students to carry on their research and academic work. Professor Vladislav Brdlík (1879–1964), one of the leading Czechoslovak specialists on economy and agriculture, became the moving force and the college's rector. He tried to get exiled Czechoslovak professors, residing in German camps at the time, to Ludwigsburg as visiting lecturers. The club of spouses of US soldiers serving in Stuttgart offered to give free lessons in English conversation and also supported the college with instructional materials and professional literature from the USA. There was an avid interest in studying at Masaryk College. In the early 1950s, the number of students, who took part in the classes, passed exams, wrote seminary works and got a certification at the end of the semester peaked at 250. The IRO recognized Masaryk College as an official education facility, and secondary school diplomas and vocational certificates issued by the college were taken into account in the immigration proceedings of the applicants to various countries. The disadvantage was a permanent fluctuation of students. In 1951, the majority successfully resettled, including the professors, and the college and its programmes were discontinued.¹⁷

¹⁷ More about Ludwigsburg camps in NACR. See: Bořivoj Čelovský Papers, box 12, Národní archiv České republiky (National Archives of the Czech Republic – NACR).

Conclusions

In January 1950, 33,570 people from Czechoslovakia were in the care of the IRO, of which 19,271 were in the American occupation zone of Germany alone. At the same time, statistics indicated that the IRO had mediated the emigration of 12,281 Czechs and Slovaks.¹⁸ The European continent was still painfully recovering from World War Two. Cities lay in ruins, and factory production halted. For example, France was plagued by constant political turmoil and high unemployment, and rationing schemes operated in Britain until the early 1950s. Suddenly, the slowly emerging economies of Western European countries were to be hit by an influx of massive migratory waves from Eastern Europe, which they were indeed unprepared for, and the population did not hide their concerns. Due to the difficult situation, the refugees were pinning their plans and hopes beyond Europe.

The United States of America stood on the pedestal of the dream countries, but it adopted stringent immigration quotas and waiting periods extended up to eight years. More and more people were leaving for Latin America. Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela offered cheap land for farming and abundant work for technology and civil engineers, medical doctors and skilled craftsmen. Australia and New Zealand also needed young blood and experts in various fields. Still, the six-week voyage to the other side of the world and the obligatory two-year working commitment to any position assigned by the government discouraged many. Canada accepted factory, mining, forestry and agriculture workers with open arms. The administrative process usually took several months, and each country could set different conditions. In some places, only young and single people were accepted; some countries preferred families and the elderly, too. People dreaming of America had a hard time finding a US citizen or company to provide them with an affidavit confirming accommodation and employment for the applicant. Various forms, invitations and reference letters, stamps and confirmations accompanied daily life in the displaced persons camp. With each refused visa request, frustration deepened, people stopped believing, became demoralized and disappointed by the “free world”, feared the future, missed the relatives they had left behind the Iron Curtain and felt trapped in a vacuum of uncertainty.

Every camp that hosted the Czechoslovak exile community after February 1948 was unique in many respects and deserves a separate study. This paper can be considered a brief introduction, an attempt to stimulate a new wave of interest, motivate students and inspire research projects, spark a debate on how to elaborate on the topic and place it into the broader framework of migration and exile research in post-war Europe. Now is probably the best time to do so. Many witnesses can still be interviewed, and archival

¹⁸ Council of Free Czechoslovakia. *In Search for Haven: The Story of Czechoslovak Refugees* (Washington D.C.: Council of Free Czechoslovakia, 1951).

documents are being declassified. Moreover, the phenomenon of migration as such resonates with unprecedented intensity in Czech society due to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine.

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