

How I DID Make It

by Vojtech Joseph Vala

It was December 18, 1986, when I was released from a communist prison in Czechoslovakia. I paid for my past mistake, an illegal attempt to escape to the west, with ten years of my life. My story about my attempt to illegally cross the border into Austria in my gyro helicopter, which I built by myself, is recounted in my previous article in the Spring HLAS.

In 1986 Czechoslovakia was under a strict communist regime. Sometimes it was described as one big prison for its citizens, closed off by a virtual Iron Curtain on the western borders with Germany and Austria. For any Czechoslovak citizen, travel to a western country came with many bureaucratic obstacles:

- the application for a passport.
- a promise from a bank to convert foreign currency (Devizový příslib).
- two signatures from the applicant's employer, one from the top manager of the company.
- a signature from the Chairman of the Communist Party.
- the most important document, the Výjezdni doložka (Permit to Travel). This document was under the control of the Secret Police, the famous StB and permitted the holder to travel to any western country and to Yugoslavia.
- an entry visa to the western destination country.
- and finally, a flight ticket.

continues on page 4



A communist Passport had to be accompanied by a "Permit to travel" before applying for Visa to any foreign country

CALENDAR OF EVENTS



REGULARLY SCHEDULED ACTIVITIES

CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SCHOOL

Children's Language School will begin the Fall Semester online the week of September 16, 2024. The Czech beginner's class will meet on Fridays at 6 PM. Advanced speakers will be meeting on Mondays at 4:30 PM. Slovak Language children's classes continue to meet on Sundays starting September 15, 2024. Beginners will meet at 9 AM, advanced speakers at 10 AM. Our Fall 2024 semester will end the week of December 4, 2024. For more information, or to register a student, please visit our website at <https://cshamaryland.org/>

ADULT LANGUAGE SCHOOL

CSHA is one of the few organizations in the USA that offers Czech and Slovak language instruction for adults. Beginning, intermediate and advanced online classes are offered on Saturday mornings. Fall semester classes will begin on September 7, 2024 and end on December 7. For more information about the fall semester, contact Lois Hybl at 410-428-6012 or e-mail: LHybl@verizon.net or info@cshamaryland.org.

HERITAGE SINGERS

We welcome singers of all voice parts. Contact Margaret Supik (443-739-2025) for more information or if you want to join. Future events will be announced on the CSHA website <https://cshamaryland.org> and on our Facebook page. Our next singing opportunity will likely be Veterans' Day at the Bohemian National Cemetery.

CSHA ONLINE - For more information about any of these activities, joining Heritage Singers or to register for classes, you can contact CSHA at: info@cshamaryland.org.

The CSHA Board of Directors will respond to answer your questions and provide information, and we are eager to hear your ideas and suggestions. Also, please check our website www.cshamaryland.org and follow us on Facebook at Czech and Slovak Heritage Association of Baltimore.

FEBRUARY 2024

The CSHA General Meeting was held virtually on Sunday February 18, 2024. The newly elected Board of Directors was introduced and reviewed the current financial standing of the organization to prepare the budget for the upcoming events.

APRIL 2024

The 3rd CSHA Spring Festival took place on Sunday, April 21, 2024, at the Maryland State Game & Fish Protective Association at Perry Hall. It featured live music by Orchestra Prazevica and included children's activities and sports games.

OCTOBER 2024

The 36th Annual CSHA Festival will be held at the Legacy Hall in Sykesville, Maryland on Sunday, October 27, 2024, 12-6 PM. Please stay tuned for upcoming updates on the program and volunteer opportunities to get involved in planning and helping at the event.

NOVEMBER 2024

Celebration of Veterans Day will be scheduled on November 11, at 11 AM at the National Bohemian Cemetery, 1300 Horners Lane, Baltimore in lieu of the Memorial Day celebration that was canceled due to the inclement weather.

DECEMBER 2024

The traditional Christmas Carol singing at St. Wenceslaus Church in Baltimore is tentatively planned for Sunday, December 8, 2024, at 2 PM. We are already coordinating with Mikuláš and Anděl to bring children traditional goodies. The church is undergoing some important changes at this time. In the event that we cannot be at St. Wenceslaus, we will make every effort to find a new venue for our most popular children's activity.

CSHA BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

OFFICERS:

President - Petr Justin
Vice President - Dana Petran
Secretary - Lois Hybl
Treasurer - Zuzana LaBuff

BOARD MEMBERS: alphabetically

Rob Hořel
MacLean Lunko
Dave Mitchell
Russ Rezek
Margaret Supik
Barbara Vann
Francis (Fran) Vojik
Ann Zelenka

HLAS - Dana Havlik - editor

Olga Mendel - graphic design

If you have any suggestions or comments or want to contribute to the Hlas by writing an article, email us at info@cshamaryland.org.

President's Message

Dear friends,
Welcome to our quarterly newsletter. I hope everyone is enjoying the summer and taking time to rest and recharge.

Our Association, together with a handful of volunteers, is starting to prepare for our traditional fall Festival. This very popular event will once again be held in Sykesville, MD. The local Legacy Hall suited perfectly to our needs and was a great meeting place for our Czech and Slovak community.

Come to the Festival on Sunday, October 27, 2024 and bring your family and friends to introduce them to our culture. We will once again offer traditional food, drinks, and entertainment. If you are interested in volunteering at the event, please let us know. We rely heavily on volunteers to make this event a success, and we will need a lot of them again this year. Also, if you are interested in purchasing an advertisement in a special issue of our newsletter HLAS, which everyone will receive at the Festival (e.g. in memory of loved ones or for special occasions such as anniversaries or birthdays) or becoming a festival sponsor, you can find the attached form to do so.

As a true soccer (fotbal) fan, I followed two big tournaments taking place this summer. Copa America in the USA and Euro 2024 in Germany. Both events were full of exciting moments. I focused primarily on the Slovak and Czech national teams participating in the European competition. Although our boys did not reach the medal level, the Slovaks in particular gave some heavy favorites a hard time.

You may remember, from the last newsletter, my son's challenge that I run a local 10-mile race with him. I am happy to report that our first running event together went fantastically. We both crossed the finish line in a very good time and most importantly enjoyed the local running community. The Finish Village at the Baltimore 10-Miler is truly unique among other similar events. Maybe this will inspire others to train for next year's 10-miler. I always remember Emil Zatopek's motto: "When you can't (take it anymore), press on."

Thank you for your continued support and we will see you at the 36th Annual Czech and Slovak Festival.

Se srdečným pozdravem,



Petr Justin - CSHA president

The Third Spring Festival

Our 3rd Spring Festival took place again at the Maryland State Game and Fish Protective Association in Perry Hall – this year after Easter on April 21. Over 100 visitors attended including many of our older members. It was wonderful to see everybody having a good time and lively conversations.

The guests enjoyed delicious food including cheese, meat, vegetables and fruit platters provided by Peter Justin,

homemade pork stew (vepřový guláš) and chicken paprika (kuře na paprice) prepared by Dana Petran. The hotdog and sausage stand managed by Kate Wychgram, who prepared her famous sauerkraut, was very popular.

CSHA volunteer bakers Jarmila Marney, Ivanka Kenjova, Dana Petran and Dana Havlik baked a variety of traditional pastries and desserts. Our barman Ross Rezek with his helper Sasha managed the essential beer and wine corner bar.

by Dana Havlik



Bakers and their beautiful pasties



Vanický clan and Dana Petran

continues on page 8

continued from page 1

In my situation it was almost impossible to collect all those documents and signatures. I had been sentenced to ten years in prison and seven on parole after my release. During my seven years parole no travel was allowed. I had to be very careful not to make any mistakes; even the smallest error was a direct ticket back to prison. I was 46 years old, almost too late to completely change my whole life. An eventual escape to the West was my last possibility for a decent life. It was crystal clear to me that my next travel plan had to be carried out with all my military knowledge and experience, and as part of a top-secret conspiracy. My enemy was too strong, and I knew it.

In the secretive, so-called gray, socialist community there was one very important phenomenon - the Network of Friends. It was very informal: I have a friend and he has a friend who has a friend, who knows a friend... A friend with the right position in society could fix almost any problem or direct you to another trusted friend for help. To have such a network or build it, it was necessary to have the right job or to be in the right place at the right time.

Quite by chance I met one of my new contacts in Prague, a dog trainer whom we can call Mr. Z. He mentioned that he had a very important friend, also a dog trainer, whom we can call Mr. S. Mr. S. was the manager of Slovanský dům, a very famous restaurant and entertainment facility in Oldtown Prague. Dog training was his hobby, and he was very good at it; he was, with his dog, part of the Ministry of the Interior, Ministerstvo vnitra. Luckily, I am a dog person too.



Vojtech Vala reuniting with his daughter and grandson

So, I said to my new contact, *"Mr. Z., can you, please, connect me with Mr. S.? I am looking for some good job and Slovanský dům could be a good opportunity to find it. I am speaking fluently in German, English, Russian and a little bit in Dutch, maybe it can help."* Just a week later Mr. Z. told me that we were invited to see Mr. S. in his office.

First, we chatted with Mr. S. about training our dogs. Then I briefly introduced myself. In telling him my life story I also mentioned that I had served in the U.S. as a diplomat in Washington DC. My words about America and DC were a stroke of unbelievable luck.

"I was with my father and my mother as a teenager in New York in 1973 as well," said Mr. S. *"My father was accredited as a diplomat in the United Nations Headquarters in New York. It was a beautiful time for me in the U.S."* We spoke for at least 20 minutes about life in the US, in New York and in Washington DC. America connected us instantly.

"What do you need, Mr. Vala, from me and how can I help you?" asked Mr. S. That was a question directly from heaven and my answer was very simple.

"I need a job and I will be happy if I can work for you at Slovanský dům, Mr. S."

"When can you start?"

I replied without hesitating, *"Immediately!"*

For the first two weeks I had a simple desk job, mostly learning the basics of the restaurant and bar business at Slovanský dům. Then I was introduced to my new job partner, a bartender in the Slovanka night club. By chance he was also Chairman of Communist Party Chapter in Slovanský dům. I learned very soon that he was a master of all the tricks and ways to make money for the company, and for us as well. The average monthly salary for an ordinary citizen in 1986 was about 3000 crowns. My income was suddenly between 10 and 15 thousand a month. But the most important aspect for me with my new job was almost daily contact with foreign tourists and especially with prominent representatives of the communist regime, who were frequently our guests. During one of my nightly shifts, I was introduced to a colonel from the Central passport and visas office in Prague. He was my highest-ranking contact, and I started to regard him as a person who could make my dreams come true. I offered him a free drink, then a second one, then free drinks for his friends. I waited patiently for my moment. What would be his reaction?

"Vojtech, I know who you are. Tell me what you need from me and how can I help you?" This was the Colonel's first question, and I was prepared for it.

"My daughter, Denisa, is living in Holland as an illegal immigrant, together with my two-year old grandson Ronald. I did not see

Denisa for several years and I never saw my grandson. Is there any chance for me to travel to Holland, for one week and see them?" He was silent for a while.

"Let me think about it," was his answer.

It took him only a short time; he approached me again and gave me a simple instruction, *"Visit your local passport office in Prague 8 and apply for a passport!"*

"But Mr. Colonel I am afraid that this will be my direct delivery back to prison!"

"As I said, apply for a passport! What part of my instruction is not clear?"

I did what he ordered. The officer in the local passport office asked me: *"Did you have any passport in the past?"*

"Yes, I had."

"What kind of passport?"

"Diplomatic." Now, I thought, that's it, *"this is a red flag for them."* But nothing bad happened. Approximately two weeks later my passport was ready. I could not believe what I had in my hands - my passport with my name, my photo and with all necessary stamps. Obtaining the paper from the bank was a piece of cake. But what about the Permit to Travel to the West?

This was my next question to the Colonel: *"How can I apply for Permit to Travel? This is under strict control of the authorities, and it demonstrates my intention to travel to the West. They are not stupid. I am very afraid!"*

"Do the same as with a passport! Do not be afraid! Understand?" I learned later, in Holland, why the Colonel was so sure that everything would be OK. All the other signatures, to my surprise, were only formalities.

The last obstacle to overcome was the entry visa for Holland. At the Dutch Embassy in Prague consular employees were Czech citizens and I was sure that they were connected to the StB – secret police. There had been some very tense minutes waiting for that one stamp on my new passport. So, where are we now? I have my passport, currency for travel to Holland, Permit to Travel, and round-trip ticket. That week before my departure was one of the most stressful times of my life. I was sure that StB agents would pick me up early one morning and that would be the end of me.

My D-day was August 8, 1989. I gave my passport to the Passport Control Officer at the airport, and he returned it to me with a strange gesture. I knew immediately, *"Here it is! Something is terribly wrong!"*

Then I heard him say, *"Please, sign your passport Mr. Vala."*

Seriously? I had tried for several months to do everything according to the book and finally I made such a stupid

mistake. I had not signed my new passport!

In the international transit hall of Prague's Airport, I learned that my flight would be delayed one hour for some technical problems with the aircraft. One more hour of torture. How many secret agents were around to see me? Ready to arrest me? Finally, we were airborne and twenty minutes into the flight I heard the captain announce:

"Now we are crossing the state border of Czechoslovakia. In forty minutes, we will be landing in Amsterdam Schiphol Airport. Have a nice flight" My dreams were finally coming true, I could hardly believe it.

After a brief passport control in Amsterdam, where my daughter Denisa was waiting for me, I could say what was in my heart, *"I will never go back! I am here in the free world forever!"*

Later that day I saw my two-year-old grandson Ronald for the first time. The next day two officers from the Dutch Secret Service visited with me and they had some very pointed questions.

"Mr. Vala, who sent you to Holland and what is your mission? We know that you are on seven years parole and yet you have an original passport and all other necessary documents for travel to the West. Can you explain this situation?"

My debriefing lasted several weeks, and I told them all the details of my plan, step by step. They had resources in Prague to verify my whole story and they were satisfied with my explanation. I learned from them that the High Military Court in Příbram neglected to send a message to my local passport office in Prague 8 about BLOCK (that was official speak) for any travel documents for me. My Colonel knew about it, and it was easy for him to check it and then instruct me to apply for a passport and Permit to Travel. How easy it was!

It took me a year and a half before I received my immigration visa to the US. It was a very interesting time in Holland with my daughter and my grandson. The Dutch Secret Service helped me a lot during this time. In December 1990, I left Holland for the US and landed at JFK Airport in New York. My sponsor, Bobby Thomas, and another American friend, Guy DeLort, were my welcome party at BWI airport.

I had started living my American dream!

Vojtech J. Vala is a member of CSHA, living in Maryland since 1990 with his wife Milada. He holds a Master's degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the Military Academy in Brno, Czech Republic, today's University of Defense. Mr. Vala is now retired, but still active as a pilot, an aircraft mechanic and FAA aircraft inspector.

Remembering Tom Hasler

by Bill Hamilton

Tom Hasler, a CSHA member and a founding member of our Bolton Hill Gray Panthers group, died at age 82 on November 30, 2023 after suffering a stroke at home.

Thomas Martin Hasler was born November 16, 1941 in Prague during the Nazi occupation and annexation by Hitler of the Sudetenland, which the Germans folded into what was called the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Hasler's father, Karel Hašler, was a popular Czech songwriter, actor, director, and playwright who also had a political side. He wrote *Ceska Písnicka*, or *Our Czech Song*. Before his son's birth, Karel Hasler was arrested by the Gestapo because of the patriotic nature of his songs and was killed at Mauthausen concentration camp one month after Tom was born. Arnost Lustig, a Holocaust survivor and author of books about the Holocaust, considered Tom's father as a symbol of the non-Jewish victim of the Holocaust.

Tom's mother, Charlotte Jurdová, was a linguist with a doctorate from Charles University in Prague. Tom and his mother fled to Australia, where he learned English. In 1958, Tom and his mother emigrated to Santa Barbara, CA, then moved to Connecticut. Tom began college at age 16, studying political science at Hobart College in Geneva, NY. He obtained an M.A. in European history and journalism at the University

of Michigan, then moved to Lebanon for an internship at The Daily Star, an English-language newspaper in Beirut.

There he met and married Hallie Sether, better known as Bonnie, a New Yorker who was pursuing an MA in Middle East Studies at the American University of Beirut. They had no children. When they returned to the U.S., Hasler took a job with The Evening Sun, where he worked for 16 years covering government and city affairs. He gained U.S. citizenship in 1975. The couple bought a house in Bolton Square, and he lived there after her death in 1995.

Hasler made several trips to Prague to learn more about his father and to support the production of a documentary about him, *The Immortal Balladeer of Prague*, broadcast on Czech television. On returning to Baltimore, he wrote a script for a screenplay that he hoped to produce about his father, entitled *The Balladeer of Liberty*.

He was a member of the Bolton Hill Swim and Tennis Club and for years was an avid tennis player. He was a participant in First Friday happy hours held in Rutter's Mill Park, a tradition founded by members of Memorial Episcopal Church decades ago. He was a board member of the Bolton Hill Community Association and a member of Czech and Slovak Heritage Association.

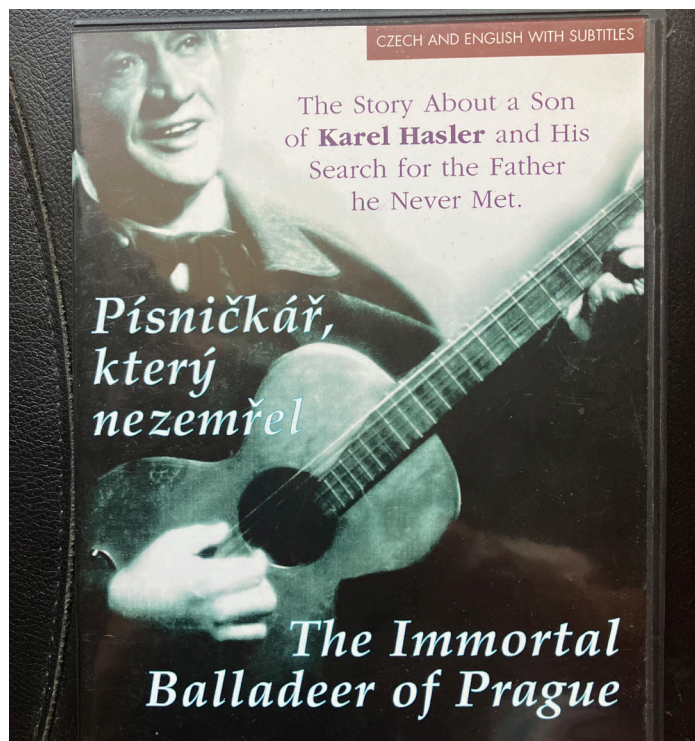


Tom Hasler with Arnost Lustig

Tomas shared his memories in the recordings with the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library at the following link <https://ncsml.omeka.net/items/show/4212>



Tom at his father's sculpture "The Songster" (2009)



DVD Cover of Tomas Hasler's movie about his father Karel Hasler

Czech and Slovak Recipe Corner:

by Dana Havlik

Elderflower lemonade - (Bezová limonáda – "Bezovka")

One of my childhood memories is a big glass jar full of a mysterious yellowish liquid on the top of the kitchen cabinet in grandma's kitchen. Every summer she made lemonade from elder bush* flowers - Bezovka - which always made me think that one can make a drink from just about anything. Of all grandma's "natural creations" this one was one of my favorites, and the handwritten recipe has been preserved in our family on a small piece of paper and stuck in the cookbook along with many others.

INGREDIENTS:

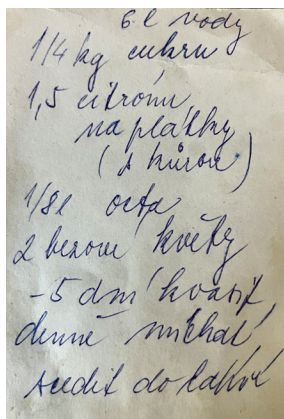
6 liters (25 cups) of water

¼ kg (1 cup) of sugar

1 ½ sliced lemon

1 ¾ cup vinegar
(5%)

2 bunches of
elderflowers



DIRECTIONS:

Mix all ingredients in a large glass jar with a lid, let it ferment for 5 days and stir it daily. After 5 days strain the lemonade into individual bottles and chill.

*Elder bushes are commonly found in woodlands and hedgerows in moist shady areas and along lakes. They have fluffy white flowers - elderflowers - in summer, which later become blue-black berry clusters - Elderberries.

IN THIS ISSUE:

| | |
|---------------------------|----------|
| How I DID Make It | pp.1,4-5 |
| Calendar of Events | p.2 |
| President's message | p.3 |
| The Third Spring Festival | pp.3,8 |
| Remembering Tom Hasler | pp.6,7 |
| Recipe Corner | p.7 |



The VOICE of The Czech & Slovak
Heritage Association
P.O. Box 20261
Baltimore, MD 21284-0261

www.cshamaryland.org
info@cshamaryland.org

U.S. POSTAGE PAID
NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
Permit 5543
Baltimore MD

Postmaster: Dated material, please do not delay.

continues from page 3

The music was provided again by Orchester Praževica performing Czech and Slovak folk songs that brought a number of dancers to the dance floor. This year the children's program included not only the art and craft activities, but thanks to Zoe Justin and their friends, who volunteered to organize "Children's Olympic Games", our youngest guests enjoyed competition in various sports disciplines, winning medals and fun prizes.

The CSHA Board of Directors would like to thank all our guests for coming and enjoying our third Spring Festival. We also want to welcome all new members who signed up at the entrance with our Treasurer Zuzka Labuff and joined CSHA on that day. Finally, we want to extend our gratitude to all dedicated volunteers, who helped with the preparations, decorations, children's activities, and the cleanup to make this event possible. We are hoping for similar participation and support during the Annual Fall Festival in October that will be held again in Sykesville Legacy Hall.



Kate Wychgram with Dana Petran and Dana Havlik