

Journey with my Lost Father

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We wave a handkerchief
on parting,
every day something is ending,
something beautiful is ending.

Jaroslav Seifert, *Píseň/A Song*, 1929, translated by Ewald Osers

On returning to Prague I imagined I had seen my father. His slim figure, elegantly dressed in a dark single-breasted suit, white shirt and blue tie, appeared in the distance. He paused at Knihy bookshop in Na Příkopě Street to look inside and check his reflection in the shop window. His hair was swept back, the receding hairline exposing his high forehead. Rimless spectacles framed his grey eyes, glinting in the bright morning light. The permanent smile on his lips, which I so loved, was still there. He checked the time on his Omega watch, lit a cigarette and walked on. Pushing through the crowd, I hurried to catch him but he disappeared into the darkness of Prague's many passageways that criss-cross the inner city. I delved into the labyrinth of shadows to search for him.

At the far opening of one of the long tunnel-like arcades, I spotted our car parked at the kerb. Behind the wheel sat *táta*, my father Rudolf. Terrified I would not reach him before he drove away I started to run. I had to get there before it was too late. I ran desperately, my heart pounding, my long steps getting steadily shorter as I continued, my struggle becoming harder the further I went. I shouted as I ran, my adult voice turning into a child's shriek: 'Wait for me, wait for meee.'

There was no need to worry. Rudolf waited patiently, finishing his cigarette. He appeared gloomy and preoccupied, but as soon as he saw me, he cheered up. '*Ahoj, Ivane! Where is your Mum?*'

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he asked through the open window and, after I finally opened the passenger door using the handle I could hardly reach and climbed into the car seat next to him, Rudolf added, remembering: 'Oh yes, she said she'd follow us on a train, we'll have to pick her up from Beroun; she has to finish a dust jacket design for publication.'

Enormously relieved that I had found him I sat there, admiringly looking up to him. I was out of breath, unable to speak.

I was nearly five years old.

His jacket was draped over a battered violin case on the rear seat; the brightly enamelled Communist Party badge decorated the peak of the jacket's lapel. He was reading densely typed documents pulled out from his packed leather briefcase and propped up on the steering wheel, making notes in the margins with a gold fountain pen.

When I was older I learned that the papers must have been from the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Two years earlier, in 1949, he had been promoted to Deputy Minister and since then I had seen him only occasionally. He had to travel abroad, attend trade negotiations, Ministry and Party meetings, consult with other departments and write extensive analytical reports and economic statistics long into the night. Rudolf was putting all his knowledge and skill into trying to improve the difficult problem of the country's ailing centralized economy. His time at home was limited to precious moments, which had to be savoured and appreciated. Even there I saw him sitting in his armchair or at his writing desk constantly leafing through books and documents; regretfully, he did not seem to have that much time to play with me.

I recalled how Heda, my mother, and he had argued the night before. They thought that I was asleep, but fragments of their sentences, whose meaning I hardly understood but found fascinating, penetrated the apartment walls into my bedroom.

'Rudlo, you have to leave your job immediately ... I've talked to lots of our old friends and they all say you have to go, whatever happens ... Your position, high up in the Ministry, puts you next in line as the scapegoat when things go wrong,' she pleaded, sounding very worried. 'Haven't our families suffered enough during the war? It's a miracle that we both survived ... And now this. I can't face any more difficulties ...' They must have

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been sitting in the living room on the red L-shaped sofa, facing each other. Rudolf got up and started pacing the floor. I heard the parquet blocks squeaking under his steps. Often, seeing other children being looked after by elderly family members, I wondered where my other relatives and grandparents were. Heda explained gently that they had all died during the war but never went into any details.

'Kitten, the Party needs me . . . You know I tried to resign once but they ordered me to carry on.' Apparently there could not be any respite, the five year plan had to be fulfilled and the Soviets were putting the Czechs under constant pressure. There was no one else there to take his place.

'But, Rudlo, you've heard about the arrests, the disappearances, all the people at the top are vulnerable . . . When did you see your friends Eda, Artur and Evžen last? Where have they gone suddenly? Don't you know they've been arrested? Haven't you noticed most of the ones who are disappearing are Jews?'

'That's preposterous, Heda, you worry too much. The Party would not sink to the same level as the Nazis. There must be a totally rational explanation for this . . . I haven't gone through the camps for nothing . . . To give up on what honestly I believe is right . . . If all the decent people leave now, things will get even worse.'

'Micula Bradová, your cousin, phoned this morning.'

'What about? How's she? We should go and see them, I suppose,' said Rudolf, and I heard him stop and strike a match to light his and Heda's cigarettes.

'It's too late,' said Heda. I heard her blow out smoke.

'Why? Kitten, what's happened?' Rudolf was shocked.

Heda carried on, saying that there had been a party in the town of Ústí nad Labem to celebrate the anniversary of the construction company where Micula's husband Rudolf Brada was a director, and that Micula was as worried about Brada's steep rise in the Party ranks as she was about Rudolf. Micula had decided that it was the right moment to end it, and blurted out loudly in front of everyone how the Party had replaced all the important people in Ústí with incompetent ones and now nothing worked and there was a lot of corruption. On account of her 'little' public complaint Brada had been dismissed; it looked as if he was out of danger. 'I should do

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the same with you,' added Heda. 'Rudlo, please think of your family and Ivan. It's not just us; we're responsible for him and his secure future now. What if they arrest you?'

Rudolf started pacing again. He was silent for some time. Then he begged Heda to believe him, he thought of both of us all the time, all he did was done for our better life. What reason could they have to arrest him? It could not happen to him, only those who made mistakes could possibly be in danger. His affairs were completely watertight. Comrades at the top including Gregor, his superior, knew that he was doing his best, they endorsed and supported him, he got every decision he made approved from above. He worked day and night, what he did was for the good of us, the country and the Party. He reminded Heda of how President Klement Gottwald thanked him when he had returned from London.

The living room went quiet. Rudolf sat down. I assumed that Heda went over, put her arm round his shoulders and had drawn him to her as I heard her tender offer in reconciliation: 'Look Rudlo, let's go to Lišno – or better still to Nouzov and Doctor Škeřík's as there it'll be more private – for a few days before you go away again, and talk this over more ...' I lost concentration then, and fell asleep.

Rudolf gathered his papers, put them in the briefcase and left it on the back seat. Our car was a beige Škoda Tudor 1101 saloon convertible, with a streamlined body and chrome 'smiling' radiator grille, the first post war production design. We called the car 'Ferda' after the ant, Ferda Brabenec – a heroic character in the Czech children's stories by Ondřej Sekora that I enjoyed leafing through at home. Ferda had folding tubular steel front seats which could be converted into comfortable couchettes when the backs were dropped. Rudolf, with my help, kept the car polished whenever he had a spare moment. He had bought Ferda second-hand three years ago. Not many people owned cars in the early 1950s and Rudolf sat in 'him' proudly. I always enjoyed being with Rudolf, sharing in his pleasures.

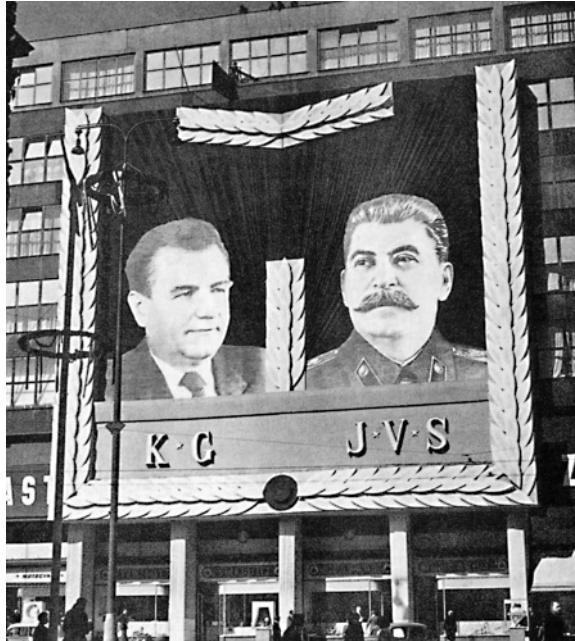
'All right, settle down and we'll be off to Nouzov. We'll take the slow route through the countryside. It'll be more fun. Let me roll down the roof and then it will be perfect.'

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Rudolf got out to open the roof. This was the best way to appreciate a sunny spring day. We were parked in Ovocný trh, in Staré Město – the Old Town, where dark classical buildings stood on all sides colourfully dressed in both red and red-blue-white flags, and yellow hammer and sickle signs. The larger than life and rather intimidating portraits of Gottwald and the Greatest Leader Josef Vissarionovich Stalin, their names having been made clear to me, cast their watchful eyes on the bustling square below. Similar scenery was encountered in the rest of the town. Long red fabric banners stretched the full height of buildings framing Socialist slogans and pictures of the Communist heroes Marx, Engels and Lenin. Even shop windows had their goods shrouded in scarlet drapery and images of our beloved President. The May Day and Liberation Day celebrations were imminent. Then the proletarian masses, whose attendance was compulsory, demonstrated peacefully through the streets carrying placards, waving flags and singing songs and praises to our Party leaders. Along the Letná Plain the Party organized the Czechoslovak Army parade, which I liked watching, displaying shiny Russian tanks that rolled noisily along the streets leaving clouds of exhaust fumes behind. The tanks were followed by trucks towing large cannons and anti-aircraft guns, some with sharp-pointed Katyusha rocket launchers bunched up on the rear platforms, and the helmeted, khaki-dressed military units marching with rifles and machine guns drawn in readiness. ‘They are here to remind us of the Red Army’s victory over Nazism and who’s in charge,’ Heda had whispered to herself while holding my hand when we stood on the pavement the previous year.

Presently Rudolf returned into the car and we set off. In my teens Heda described to me how Rudolf loved to travel; it was always an adventure for him, a man and his machine in affinity with nature. In July 1931, as an eighteen-year-old, he and some friends had bought a 1926 Dodge – an old-fashioned car with a cubic body and spoke wheels – in Cleveland after they had attended a YMCA conference there. They had explored the east coast of the United States, taking turns driving, stopping at all the interesting sites and spending nights in hostels and hotels. The car served them well and they sold her at a small profit before returning to Europe.

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Gottwald and Stalin (Kaplan Productions Archive)

The boys did not report their experiences to their parents; Rudolf's strict mother, Berta, who doted on her only child, was very protective and would have forbidden him this escape into the American wilderness had she known of it. When Rudolf's father, Vítězslav, learned details of their trip he kept boasting about his son's successful exploits to his drinking companions in Prague cafés.

At the next traffic lights Rudolf pulled a cushion from the back for me to sit on to improve my view. The open car gave our journey another dimension, with extra sounds, scents and light. The wheels whispered on the cobblestones, which we called 'cat's heads'. They covered almost all of Prague's streets; even the pavements were carpeted by smaller granite setts laid out in geometric patterns. We came to Na Františku, the Vltava quayside, and I pointed at the large steamboat, also decorated by red banners, battling against the flow of the river. At the Charles Bridge, we drove under the Old Town

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Bridge Tower and I tipped my head back to inspect the stonework. Mysterious dark groups of statues guarded the river crossing and sped us on our way. Many had figures expressing threatening gestures, their extended hands pointing fingers at us as we passed. Rudolf slowed down and translated the strange Hebrew lettering of the unusual gilded sign over the statue of Jesus that we passed: 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts'. To reach the left bank we passed through the arch between the western bridge towers. We continued through Malá Strana – the Lesser Town quarter crowded with fairytale medieval houses with clay-tiled roofs, hugging the steep inclines leading up to the President's extensive Hradčany Castle, looming darkly over this part of Prague from the hillside. To my young imagination this majestic gathering of buildings looked like the unapproachable den of a sorcerer who spread a callous web from it to capture his unwary prey.

I noticed Rudolf's abrupt visible discomfort while checking the rear view mirror. 'What's the matter, táto – dad?' I worried, not knowing the reason for his sudden change of mood, only thinking that my sinister view of the Castle – or perhaps my parents' nighttime conversation – might have something to do with it.

He did not answer for a while.

'Oh, nothing, I thought I saw someone I know being driven behind us.' He spoke softly. Within seconds a big black car overtook us with three people squeezed on the rear seat; the guys on the outside had heavy leather coats and a crestfallen figure was squeezed in between.

At Náměstí Sovětských tankistů – Soviet Tank Troops Square – where the first Russian tank to liberate Prague was displayed, we waited for the junction to clear as the people's militia brigade with their polished rifles, black boots and red armbands marched by, practising for the big day. I glimpsed *Rudé právo*, the Communist daily newspaper, and its prominent headlines. The whole paper, each page, was pinned up in glass display cases, usually with readers gathered round.

'What's that about, táto?' I asked.

Rudolf, distracted and deep in thought, reluctantly read to me while we were waiting: 'A united agricultural co-operative

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achieves 100 per cent in its milk production target. Another blow to our capitalist enemies. Long live the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Long live the Party General Secretary Rudolf Slánský.' Apparently there were shortages in all sectors including food supply. Our economy, despite optimistic proclamations, had not yet recovered from post-war gloom and the Communist Coup in 1948 so the papers accentuated any positive news.

People in the queue outside the state-owned Pramen grocery store watched the procession without interest, patiently waiting their turn to scour the half-empty shelves for the basic ingredients of the Czech diet, vepřo-knedlo-zelo – pork, dumplings and sauerkraut – usually washed down with strong Prazdroj or Pilsner Urquell lager. They were like orderly busy bees waiting to taste the magic pot of honey, which was just out of their reach. They looked scared. Their faces were tired, sour and pessimistic. Many, even women, wore boiler suits smelling of industrial oil. Others were dressed in formless blouses or checked shirts, dowdy long skirts or baggy trousers and drab coats. Most women had no make-up and wore old-fashioned flowery headscarves while men covered their heads with patterned wool hats, so different from Heda and Rudolf's endeavours to look elegant and smart. People did not complain, gossip or protest. They did not trust their neighbours or friends; anyone could denounce them for making the slightest negative remark against the regime. Despite Communist propaganda and empty slogans like

WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE,
TOGETHER WITH THE SOVIET UNION FOR THE WORLD'S
PERMANENT PEACE,
WE ALL DECIDE ABOUT OUR BETTER LIFE,
TOGETHER WITH THE SOVIET UNION WE WILL BE HERE FOR
EVER,

everyone looked after their own family and kept their private thoughts to themselves. They might have been Party members and attended Party meetings but that was only done to increase their standing and prospects in society and at work, and help their children to gain university places, not for their belief in the Red

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Revolution. The main aim was to have a proven proletarian background going back generations in their Party personnel 'cadre' file. To make sure order was kept, leather-coated men loitered on nearby street corners pretending to be invisible.

We breezed through the Smíchov suburb, heading south-west, the rushing air ruffling our hair. The Škoda's Red Indian emblem on the bonnet pointed to the relaxed mood of the countryside, providing a welcoming release from the uneasy, tense and stifling atmosphere hanging over the city despite the bright day. Rudolf looked more comfortable, some colour returned to his cheeks and I glanced round to check the road behind. Our Škoda was the only car there.

'Looking forward to Nouzov?' Rudolf asked.

'Yeah, it'll be great!' I replied, and tried to picture the settlement of the modern 1930s summer houses lost among the rolling hills on the edge of the vast Křivoklát forest and the exciting adventures our trip would undoubtedly bring.

The last villas of Prague disappeared behind us.

On the open road nothing much happened. I was bored and demanded 'Do your magic, táto!' Rudolf fumbled in his pocket, trying to find a suitable coin. He knew only two tricks: one with a coin, which he skilfully fished out of my ear, and another with a hat, pulling a handkerchief from its obvious emptiness. I did not know who taught him, perhaps his father did and it went back generations. I always laughed a lot, enjoying the performance, and asked to see the tricks at the most inconvenient time – while Rudolf drove the car. Much later, I regretted that he had no chance to teach me so I could pass this particular skill on to my boys.

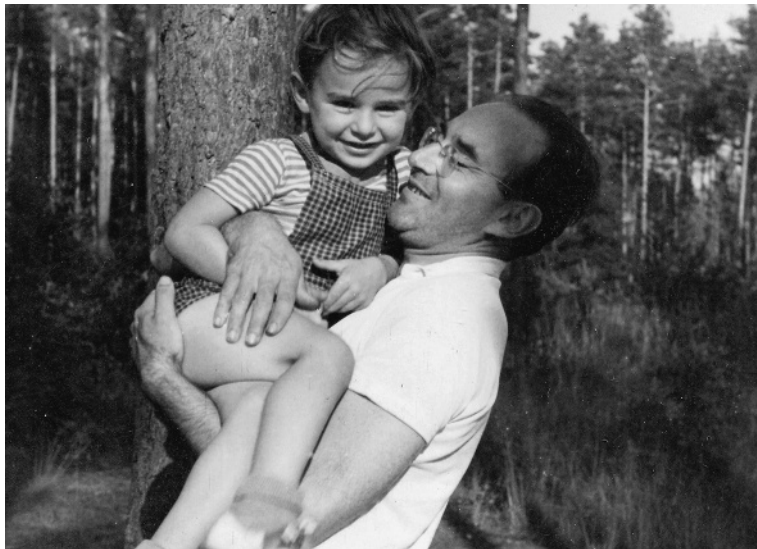
Beyond the town of Černošice toward Doutnáč Hill, we penetrated the dense mysterious forests of tall pine trees, dotted with sunny clearings and wild meadows with raspberry canes and blankets of strawberry and bilberry plants mixing with the moss. There was hardly any traffic. Rudolf suggested we had a break and steered into a lay-by which had a clearing above it. We climbed up to it and settled on the moss. He stretched out on the ground, lying back with his arms folded under his head, not bothering about dirtying his shirt or trousers, and whistled a tune. He watched the white clouds

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chasing each other in the sky. I copied him, wondering which cloud he was looking at, possibly the fluffy one shaped like a white elephant or the one like a spaceship. I tried to nibble some strawberries but they were not ripe.

'I've an idea,' Rudolf said suddenly and he went back to the car and brought out the battered violin case. He remained standing, took his tie off, got the violin out and begun tuning it. 'We'll have a little concert.'

I remained lying down while he started the beautiful melody of the *Romance* by Antonín Dvořák. Rudolf became absorbed, recalling the notes in his mind, half-closing his eyes, as the haunting, typically Czech tones of the violin floated through the Bohemian wood. There was silence from the birds and insects as the violin strings reverberated through the trees, their branches full of needles humming in the wind, providing the accompaniment for the missing orchestra. The surrounding dense boughs formed an acoustic canopy, preventing the sound escaping and reinforcing the enchanted setting.



Ivan and Rudolf, 1951

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Below us, a dark group of cyclists stopped, mesmerised. They stood like mysterious salt statues with their bikes between their knees, listening. Dvořák was Rudolf's favourite composer; he knew his major compositions by heart, and especially loved the Cello and Violin Concertos and the *Romance*. Rudolf finished the slow melody line to loud applause and 'bravo, bravo' exploded from below. I joined in and Rudolf was startled, he had been too involved to notice his audience. He bowed towards the cyclists to thank them. He was not exactly Josef Suk, the violin virtuoso, but he was competent and the location made all the difference. I so wished to be able to play like that when I grew up.

After a while we went back to the car. Rudolf started the engine and switched the radio on. From the speaker on the dashboard came the violin melody of Dvořák's *Romance*. Rudolf looked at me in amazement. Sweet moments like this lodge in the mind forever. I could trace my love of music to that point in time; it must have been then when I recognized how much music contributed to the experience of life. Music broke all the barriers between people, even in those difficult times.

We drove out of the woods and onto a field road with a still-young wheat crop planted either side. The green hairy heads of wheat, splattered with stains of early red poppies, formed rhythmic waves along the field surface here and there. The road dipped and bent in between the waves and, at times, its visibility was lost.

Antonín Dvořák, *Romance*

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A brown hare with long ears and a hairy tail darted off among the stalks, disturbed by the noise of the car. Nonchalantly Rudolf leaned over, opened the glove compartment and pulled out a leather holster. He was busy driving and dropped it in my lap. 'Open it for me but don't touch the trigger,' he instructed.

Astonished, I undid the retaining strap and saw a small gleaming semi-automatic pistol. Gingerly I pulled it out, fascinated, with no time to experience fear. This was fantastic, real cops and robbers! It was so heavy, cold and powerful, blue metallic in colour. Rudolf extended his hand while looking at the road and I passed the pistol to him handgrip first, the barrel pointing away from us like a gunslinger passing a weapon to his comrade-in-arms during a battle for life and death. We drove after the hare, which had foolishly followed the edge of the road. Rudolf put his foot down, then, drawing level, aimed and fired the pistol from the open side window: baaannnggg. His hand jerked back, his other hand steadily steering. The smell of spent gunpowder invaded the car and evaporated through the rolled-down roof and windows. The hare carried on as if nothing had happened, disappearing into the heart of the field. Rudolf shrugged, but kept toying with the gun, throwing it up and catching it, frowning, testing its weight in his hand.

Then as if he had second thoughts, he gave the weapon to me trustingly: 'Put it back, please, big boy, and don't forget I love you with all my heart,' and smiled at me, patted my hair playfully and carried on driving toward our destination.

I mumbled in reply 'I love you too, táto,' but I don't think he heard me over the roaring car engine.

With these amusements, Rudolf came to the top of my limited view of the world. On one hand, an intelligent man, impeccably behaved, conducting important state affairs; and the next minute driving a car while performing magic tricks, followed by the beautiful violin and then the gun! I was proud of my father; I admired his ability to have that many special skills. However, our bonding was never completed and the pistol, officially issued to all high-ranking Party members and ministers at that time, could not provide protection against the fate awaiting Rudolf, Heda or me.

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We stopped at the Beroun railway station to watch a few steam trains passing through until mother arrived. Heda emerged from her carriage rather pleased with herself. I was always in awe every time I saw her, especially outside the family circle. Her small thin figure, her round face with a strong firm jawbone and made-up red lips, her auburn hair and large lively green eyes radiated her ever-present overabundant energy and beauty. Wherever she was she exuded an aura of charm and sophistication. Her determined resolve, emphasized by her intelligence and insight as well as her great looks, has always drawn circles of male admirers and Rudolf was thrilled to have her by his side. My mother questioned and probed everything, never accepting any given situation. Her 'life's motto' in difficult times, while shaking her clenched fist, was '*My se nedáme!*' – we won't give in. That is why she was such a great survivor.

Heda also had a story to tell. At one of the stops before Beroun, at Karlštejn, with its magnificent castle where the train track meanders along the Berounka river valley, the female train guard had stayed on the platform without leaving the train door open for herself. Having waved the train off she jumped on the step and tried to open the door. It must have stuck and she was left hanging on the handle outside while the train, puffing smoke and soot, gathered speed. She yelled for someone to pull the emergency brake lever. Heda was sitting in third class on the standard varnished slated seat, each slat fixed with shiny brass screws all lined up, watching this drama unfold. She leaped up and pulled the red handle. She told us as we drove to Nouzov that this had been her dream since childhood – to pull a train's emergency brake – and today her dream had been fulfilled.

At Nouzov, we stayed with a good friend of ours, Dr Rudolf Škeřík who had a teenage son, Pavel, and a friendly fox terrier called Ťapka – Paws. Škeřík had owned the well-known Symposium publishing house since before the war and was an avid art collector. My mother designed dust jackets and bindings for him until 1948 when he was forced to close it down, as private business was not encouraged by the Communists. Their summer villa with large windows, French doors and a pitched, overhanging roof was built on a sunny slope with the dark forest behind; it was set apart

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from the rest of the settlement's houses. The veranda on the south side, the most popular area of the house, created a pleasant transition between the outside and inside and was the most convenient place to spend the day sitting on rattan armchairs and easy sofas. The villa's privacy was its best attraction, a place that provided a peaceful sanctuary in contrast to the tense and oppressive Prague.

Pavel loved Heda and tried to display his youthful infatuation as often as possible. Both Heda and Rudolf tolerated this adolescent behaviour with amusement. The previous summer Pavel had raced off with his village friends to the municipal pond. In a while they were back, laughing like lunatics. Pavel, barefoot and in his wet swimming trunks, brought an armful of white and pink water lilies still dripping with water and deposited them decoratively at Heda's feet where she sat reading on the veranda while Rudolf, in his customary suit next to her, was absorbed in his paperwork. Pavel's comrades were not far behind, lugging a big white sign with red lettering: 'PICKING OF WATER LILIES IN THIS POND IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED. BY THE ORDER OF THE VILLAGE COMMUNE COUNCIL.'

Later Pavel, who had a red Jawa 250 motorcycle, took me on rides round the village sitting on the tank. To give me another surprise he opened the garage to reveal a grey car with a futuristic, streamlined, teardrop body and a fish-like fin on the rear bonnet. 'What's that?' I exclaimed in admiration.

'That's a Tatraplan we just bought second hand from the Cement Works National Enterprise Company in Beroun. Do you want a ride?'

Without waiting for my answer, Pavel climbed in and sat me next to him. In this car we cut the air smoothly on the forest roads and the typical roar of the rear air-cooled two-litre engine dissipated behind us. I was in pure heaven and, without recognizing it, was becoming acquainted with a car that ran like a string of beads connecting the events of my life.

During the long lunches which stretched into the afternoons the adults had heated political discussions. Dr Škeřík was an experienced, sensible and tall man, and his gesticulating hands underlined everything he said. Rudolf, lawyer-like, listened carefully

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while smoking his pipe and then calmly put forward an opposing argument in defence of his own view. It was his duty to help his country, he insisted, and not run away when problems arose. Anxious, Heda pleaded with Škeřík to help her. He took her side and tried to change Rudolf's mind. Their opinions were too complex for me to understand or remember. I lost interest and joined the local children, Pavel and Āapka, to walk in the woods and cycle on the roads. We rowed and paddled on the pond, flew a large kite with a dragon face and roasted sausages on the campfire – I enjoyed the spring, beauty and freedom of the countryside rather than worrying about my parents or my toys in our Prague apartment to which we would soon have to return.

Toward the evening we heard snippets of Dvořák's Violin Concerto from a distance; Dr Škeřík must have persuaded Rudolf to play a movement or two.