Back to Bohemia

A father returns to a past buried by pollution and 40 years of communism

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Heinz Heinrich gazes across the street at the house in Vrchlabí where he was born. *(© Pete Martin)*

TRUTNOV, Czechoslovakia – When my father left his childhood home here 51 years ago, he and his family were fleeing an imminent war and certain deadly oppression under Nazi Germany.

When he returned last weekend, he came in search of the spirit of reform that is sweeping a land he had long stopped calling his own.

He came away from his four-day visit with the mixed emotions of a man who finds his former home a shambles and the new owners desperately trying to clean it up.

He rejoiced at how the Czechs are revolting against 40 years of Communist rule, but regretted that his own memories have been trampled, dirtied and turned into something unrecognizable.

For this small industrial city 125 kilometres northeast of Prague near the Polish border was once a bustling German-speaking town, part of the Bohemian Sudetenland that took up one-quarter of Czechoslovakia before the Western allies signed it away to the Nazis under the Munich agreement of 1938.

My father, born Heinz Jorg Heinrich in 1922 to a bank manager and a society lady in a village a few kilometres away, spent his elementary school years and subsequent winter and summer vacations enjoying the carefree comforts of the privileged upper-middle class.

He searched for wild mushrooms under pine needles in the forest, took trips with his parents in one of the few cars owned by locals at the time, visited his grandfather's mansion where he swam in an indoor pool and dressed for dinner, and skied and went on sleigh rides at a nearby mountain resort.

Heinz at age 12. (© *Heinz Heinrich)*

It was a lifestyle Bohemia would not see again. First the Nazis, then the Russians, then the Czech Communists, through war and Stalinist diktat, wiped out whatever privileges people had in this land of good beer and fine crystal.

Trutnov today smells of the coal-burning that fuels its textile mills. Its buildings look like they haven't been cleaned since the war. Its streets are covered in cinder grit.

Its 25,000 inhabitants can be friendly when they feel like it, indifferent when it suits them. No one is rich, fashion doesn't exist, alcohol is bought and consumed freely.

Heinz talks animatedly with a woman who has spent her life in Trutnov. *(© Peter Martin)*

Much of that could soon change, with the rise of the Civic Forum party to power in a national government. All over Czechoslovakia but especially in Prague, ordinary citizens campaign for the reform of a socialist state that until recently took its orders from Moscow.

In Trutnov, change will come more slowly. Its country folk react cautiously to developments in Prague, and want to be sure freedom won't be crushed like it was when the Soviets invaded in 1968.

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My father talked politics to waitresses, hotel receptionists, garage porters, local Civic Forum leaders, restaurant owners, even some foreign businessmen.

But for a man who is often sentimental, especially after a few glasses of schnapps, in Trutnov he was curiously detached.

No tears, no brooding outside old haunts, no real desire to see who now lives in the places he once lived in.

"It's like going back to a future with no past," he explained.

"And what past there is is buried in pollution."

Taking a look into the past: Heinz peeps into a villa next to his old school in Trutnov. *(© Peter Martin)*

Pulling into Trutnov, he recognized what he thought was his old elementary school. Over local beer and Turkish coffee, the schoolmaster explained in Czech and German that the school was actually next door; he was in the former villa of the textile mill tycoon who owned the school.

The school director phoned ahead to the only hotel in town, and we – my father, mother, photographer Peter Martin and I – rolled down the cobblestoned street to the city centre.

We came upon the square at night, a beautiful medieval square with an arcade all around and fountains and light standards and benches in the middle.

Long ago, my father had told me how his mother had been in love with two bankers whose branches were on opposite sides of that square. One was her husband, the other was the man who would later be my step-grandfather, the one we always called by his first name.

My father pointed to the two former banks, now offices and state-run shops, and sketched his family history for Pete: the divorce, moving in with his father, being sent away to British boarding school in 1938, then emigrating with his mother and stepfather to Canada in 1939, where he got an engineering degree from McGill University and began a lifelong career in aviation finance and planning.

The square appeared unchanged since my father's day; we later learned it had been restored in 1982, its facades painted different colors and its crumbling buildings shored up and re-plastered.

Gwen and Heinz outside Heinz's old house in Trutnov.
(© Peter Martin)

Over supper in a bad Italian restaurant tucked away in the recesses of the square, my father toasted us with white wine and traded German food names with Pete, whose mother is German.

"Happy homecoming," Pete said.

"It doesn't feel like home," my father answered.

First, there was the language: No-one spoke German anymore, only some of the older people.

Second, the environment: the dilapidated state of the buildings, the dirt and soot everywhere.

Third, the lack of streetlife; people are too poor to go out. A standard car costs a year's salary, a vacation in Cuba three times that.

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The bartender at the hotel had told us of a Civic Forum leader in the nearby ski resort of Pec pod Sněžkou, so we drove out to meet him.

It turned out the fellow had been born in the same town as my father – called Hohenelbe in his day, now known by its Czech name, Vrchlabí. It also turned out the leader of Civic Forum, Václav Havel, kept a home in Trutnov.

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From the restaurant window, my father could see the massive ski-jump he and his friends used when they were kids. It was on a hillside across the street from his house. We got in the car to investigate.

The house was in sad shape, divided into apartments, run-down. My father pointed out the half-moon fountain with its lion's head and the railing where he and his friends would balance and infuriate his worried mother.

"A nice lovers' rendezvous spot," said my mother, while my father wound his way up the hill on foot to the ski-jump. It was abandoned and wasn't the same one he'd used anyway. The past had died a long death. My father didn't want to go into the house.

We travelled on to Vrchlabí, in the foothills of the Riesengebirge, or Giant Mountains. It began to snow.

My father found his grandfather's house, now an orphanage or a day-care centre, we couldn't figure out which. The children were in crazy costumes for a party.

Jeff and Heinz walk to the ski-jump in Trutnov. *(© Peter Martin)*

At the top of the stairs, my father pointed out where a giant portrait of the Austrian emperor had once hung. And he found the downstairs living room where his grandfather had kept a cigar cutter on a little string that hung from the ceiling over his chair.

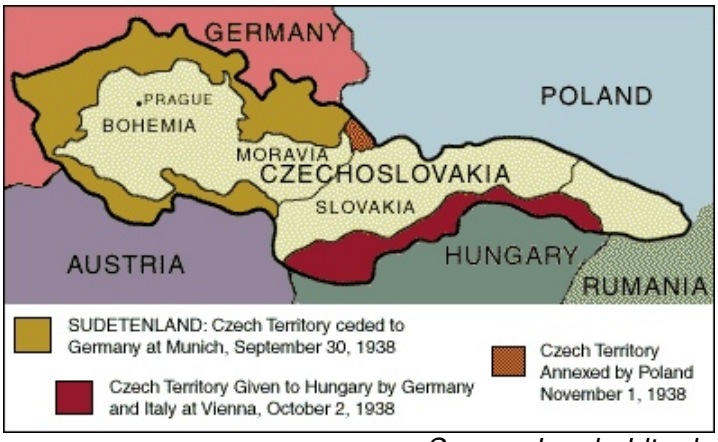
We drove on down the main street in that quiet town of 15,000 people.

Beside what used to be a bank, my father pulled over and said: "That's where I was born."

He didn't want to go in at first; he thought it too forward of us. But after three heavy knocks, a young boy came to the door, then his mother in jogging pants, and we went in.

"I was born at midnight," my father told us.

"My mother got up from her regular poker game to have me."



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I'd heard the story before; it was part of the family mythology.

He hadn't been back inside the high-ceilinged, two-bedroom apartment for 66 years, but he'd passed it until as late as 1938 on his way to annual winter ski outings at the 2,000-metre-high Schneekoppe, or Snow Peak, a short distance away.

My father had come full circle, regaining his past from his first initiation into life. But it hardly seemed to matter anymore.

"If my mother were here to see how run-down this has all become, she'd have gotten on the first plane back to Canada," he later said, and we knew he sort of felt the same.

In the car back to Trutnov, my mother opened a chorus of A Foggy Day, and we raised our voices against the fog and the gloom of an irretrievable past.

My father stared straight ahead from the driver's seat. I don't know what he was thinking, and I didn't ask.