

A Journey to Freedom

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The night was serene, although, filled with intense anxiety and fear. A courageous young man embarked on an incredible journey with his family. The journey was supposedly a vacation, but the young man had concocted a much more brilliant plan. He knew it was likely he and his family would not return to the land that suppressed their freedom and right to express themselves. The monumental movement created feelings of new promises and fresh opportunities. The man stealthily loaded all his belongings onto a 76' Volkswagen. Apparently, he was preparing for more than rest and relaxation on the beaches of the Mediterranean. Ironically, the young man was my father. He is a man of impeccable valor, risking everything to provide a more prosperous life for his family.

In the twentieth century, a great movement of Slovaks occurred during the reign of communism. Thousands of Slovaks sought relief from religious oppression and economic hardships. In a desperate attempt for political asylum, many individuals and families like ours left loved ones to conquer the new world. These courageous individuals entered a foreign territory without money or knowledge of the language. They were magically drawn to freedom, which is innately given to everyone by God.

We departed on our journey, leaping on a bridge that fused a penitentiary and a promise land. Getting permission from the Czechoslovak government to vacation in Yugoslavia was almost impossible in the early 80's. Although for two bags of beer, vodka, and whiskey usually anything could be attained in the communist world. After some complications, we received the necessary documents to travel to Yugoslavia, a country that acted as the bridge that fused two uniquely distinct societies. In one society atheism prevailed and human rights were violated. It was a place where people were brainwashed. The society produced individuals who were programmed, manipulated, and constantly coerced into believing one ideology. Their freedom to think and allow their mind to flow freely was nonexistent. On the other end of the bridge, lay a land of liberty where man has the opportunity to prosper to his fullest capacity. It was a society of freedom, in which a human could use his innate rights.

Complications had already begun at the Hungarian border. The guards said we needed more paperwork. They also requested a search of all our belongings. After an hour of exhaustive inquisition, they let us through. The enormous spiritual drive possessed by my parents caused them to choose to cross the bridge to the side of the free society. My father was consistently pursued to join the Communist Party. If one was not Communist in Czechoslovakia their opportunities and education possibilities were limited. His spirituality overpowered the Communist persistence to convert him into an atheist peon. Withal, my parents valiantly chose to immigrate so that our family and generations to come would not encounter the controlled tyrannical society that the communists developed.

Immigrating was the only possibility to escape the solitary life in Eastern Europe. Like many oppressed Slovaks, my parents frequently imagined seizing the many opportunities of a free society. The United States is a place where people could allow their God given talents to benefit themselves and not a falsely theorized government. As we stood on the bridge of freedom, our minds were absolutely determined to reach the other side. Freedom existed beyond the Austrian and Italian borders. The first attempt was to cross to Italy. Our hearts pounded as we approached the Italian border. I recall several guards dressed in Nazi style uniforms checking visas as our Volkswagen entered the station. I stared at the guard's response as my father handed him the passports. He expressed a puzzled look and nodded his head. He smirked arrogantly and uttered something in Italian telling us to turn around. He said that in order for him to let us pass, we must first obtain a visa from another free society. My father beseeched him, even offering him a gold bracelet but he refused to allow us to pass. A point of no return was approaching. To amplify the situation my mother received an Italian stamp in her passport, signifying that she had attempted to cross the border. If we were to return to Czechoslovakia past the set date of our vacation a prison term for my parents was possible. So with a full tank of gas we headed for the Austrian consulate seeking political and religious asylum. After hours in line, we received visas. Although, our problems were far from over. Czechoslovakia had recently made an agreement with Yugoslavia not to let any of their citizens pass to Austria. Thus, our family made an unsuccessful attempt to cross the Austrian border. The question was could our family escape lifelong tyranny, harassment, and belittlement of the Communist regime. The promise of a life filled with prosperity could not force my

parents to defy their beliefs and give in to the Communists disproportional majority.

The last day of our scheduled vacation in Yugoslavia was near and our Yugoslavian money was all spent. Luckily, God was there at our aid like so many other times. As we stopped at the gas station, my father tried to sell a set of tools to the station attendant. This was a last minute attempt to get some money so we could continue our persistent journey to freedom. The man bought the tools for one thousand two-hundred dinar, unfortunately the gas cost over six hundred dinar. With a full tank of gas, we headed for the Italian border. The journey now leads us back to Copper, to the Italian consulate. There we befriended a polish family that was also going to Italy. Communication between my father and the agent at the consult was a mix of German, English, and, Italian. He told the agent that he had attained the necessary visa from Austria and that he wanted an Italian transit. The agent complicated the situation by saying we needed five hundred marks to pass the border. The polish family offered to loan us the necessary funds so we could cross. After receiving the transit, we headed for the Yugoslavian-Austrian border. The polish family was in the car in front of us as we approached the guard.

On that hot summer day, we embarked on our last possible option. We attempted to cross the Austrian border. As our cars approached the border, everyone was filled with frustration, anticipation, and unparalleled anxiety. If the guards refused to permit us, we would be forced to return to the prison of the communist system. Fortunately, it was late in the afternoon and the guards were jaded. The guard waved his hand allowing the Pole to cross. We slowly followed with our hearts throbbing and every emotion building. The guard waved his hand and let us through. We crossed the border and immediately stopped on the side of the road. The emotions erupted, as we celebrated the huge triumph. We had crossed onto free soil. My father explained to me that we were entering a different world and that we would never return to the communist tyranny of our native country.

Emigrating from the Communist block was a dangerous event that many families embarked on to escape communist society to reach a paradise of freedom. Our decision to immigrate allowed our family to accomplish goals that were unimaginable in communist Czechoslovakia. Such opportunities were nonexistent in a totalitarian regime. The educated, successful individuals were forced to lower their standards to the common class.

Immigrating has allowed me to open my mind to different ideologies and receive a non-bias education. The journey to the United States was clearly the most important, influential, and colossal event in my life. In 1993 our family revisited our native homeland of Slovakia. After the breakdown of communism in 1989, Slovakia was finally free. Unfortunately, the remains of a failed system were evident throughout. It was devastating for me to see a country with such hard working; intelligent people became disfigured and lead astray by communism.