

Leaving Czechoslovakia



From 2009 to 2013, the NCSML conducted nearly 300 oral history interviews through its landmark project **Recording Voices & Documenting Memories of Czech & Slovak Americans**. The project was an effort to collect and preserve the stories of 20th century immigrants who fled communist Czechoslovakia. No one could have anticipated the personal drama conveyed in these stories. **Leaving Czechoslovakia brings this oral history project to life presenting the stories of these émigrés in their own words.**

First Panel

Not everyone left for the same reason. The number of Czechs and Slovaks who left during the Cold War is estimated to be between 180,000 and 600,000. In addition to the United States, many went to Australia, Switzerland, and Canada. This panel addresses the communist coup in Czechoslovakia and what it meant for the country's industry and education, as well as its people.

Second Panel

This panel touches on Jewish emigration from Czechoslovakia during World War II. According to census figures, there were more than 350,000 Jews in Czechoslovakia in 1930 and only 44,000 in 1948. Most were killed, but many escaped to other countries. Czechs and Slovaks also left throughout the country's 40 years under the communist regime with a sharp increase in 1968 when the Warsaw Pact Invasion brought Russian troops into Czechoslovakia to crush attempts at reform. It is thought that more than 25,000 Czechs and Slovaks fled as a result.

Third Panel

The ways people left Czechoslovakia varied as the Cold War progressed. Most crossed the border on foot in 1948. However, this became impossible with the advent of barbed wire fences and no-man's land between Czechoslovakia and the West. People began gaining permission from the government to leave for work or study and then failing to return. Others went on organized bus tours to a Western country and disappeared before reaching their destination.

Fourth Panel

Crossing the border of Czechoslovakia was not the end of anyone's story. Thousands of Czechs and Slovaks found themselves in West Germany or Austria as refugees. They would often remain in a camp for months, or even years, while their visas were being processed.

Fifth Panel

As they spread out to every conceivable part of the U.S., some Czechs and Slovaks sought their compatriots while others deliberately tried to distance themselves from their countrymen.

Sixth Panel

Many Czech and Slovak émigrés established successful careers in the U.S. that were not the same ones they had in Czechoslovakia. They began these new career paths because their diplomas were often unrecognized in the U.S, leaving them to do nothing but retrain. Similarly, those who returned to Czechoslovakia while it was still communist also had trouble finding gainful employment. Very often those who had left illegally were handed a prison sentence in absentia and were threatened with arrest should they return. However, most who went back were not put in prison due to an amnesty in 1968, but they still met with adversity. Most found it difficult to secure a good job, access to education, or a good apartment.

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Exhibit Rental Information

Leaving Czechoslovakia is comprised of six retractable panels that tell the stories of Cold War émigrés from Czechoslovakia. Images of documents and original photographs bring these sometimes harrowing tales to life, as does a supplemental DVD of actual interviews of these 20th century immigrants (optional).

Exhibit Contains:

- 6 panels that retract into a metal base (opened like a roller shade), each housed in a black zippered bag. The opened panels are each 36 x 72 inches in size.
- 3 short poles for each panel (in bag with panel)
- Optional DVD (if chosen, player or projector and screen must be provided by the borrower)
- All panels and DVD fit into one box (14 inches long, 14 inches wide, 48 inches tall)
- Box weighs approximately 76 lbs.

Space Requirements:

- 21 linear feet (allowing for 6 inches between each panel). This figure is based upon all six panels being set up in a row, but they can be in any configuration within a space.

Time:

- Duration of exhibit is negotiable

The NCSML traveling exhibition program is generously supported by American Czech Association, Los Angeles and American Sokol Los Angeles.

Procedures for Booking:

Shipping costs to and from the venue must be paid for by the borrower. The NCSML Traveling Exhibit Coordinator will ship via FedEx and include return shipping labels. The borrower will be billed by the NCSML Finance Director after the exhibit's return to the NCSML.

Setting up the exhibition:

- Remove panel (rolled up in metal case) and three poles from bag
- Place metal case on floor and turn small metal piece on bottom so it is perpendicular to metal case
- Put together three poles to create one long pole with a screw at one end and a tapered opposite end
- Screw bottom of pole into perpendicular metal piece on case bottom
- Pull up on panel to unroll it
- Attach the hole at the center top of panel beam to the top of the pole (tapered end)

Questions about this exhibit?

Contact:

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Leaving CZECHOSLOVAKIA HOW?

Very often, if there was any suspicion that an individual might try to emigrate, his or her passport was confiscated at the last minute and all travel plans were cancelled.

1946

The ways that people left Czechoslovakia varied as the Cold War progressed.

Following the coup in 1948, many people crossed the border into Austria or West Germany on foot, often led across by a paid guide. The border was guarded and soldiers were instructed to shoot at those they found escaping to the West.

As time went by, however, the Czech border with West Germany and the Slovak border with Austria became virtually impossible to cross on foot. Hence upon fences of barbed wire were erected and a no-man's land was created between Czechoslovakia and the West.

Irina Kovarova remembers traveling by train on a school exchange to West Germany in the 1960s. "Going across the Iron Curtain — that was a huge experience. We went by train, and the crossing of the border was a major thing. The police went through the train with the dogs. That was not the worst part. The area, the no-man's-land and the barbed wire, that was quite fearful. But then you ended up on the other side and you felt really good that you were there."

As the Cold War continued, Czechs and Slovaks left, more generally, by gaining permission from the government to travel to the West to work or to study and failing to return. Those looking to emigrate would often travel to Yugoslavia and attempt to cross the border there, or take an organized bus tour to a Western country and disappear from the group once they reached their destination.

1980

HELENA FABRY
Left as a child with her family in 1948.

CHARLES HELLER
Left as an adult for Italy in 1948.

PETER HRUBY
Went to the West in 1968 as a student.

JOHN PALKO
Crossed the border with his family in 1948.

KAREL RUMEL
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

VALENTIN TURANSKY
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

KAREL KANSKY
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

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Refugee camps

Crossing the border successfully wasn't the end of the story. Thousands of Czechs and Slovaks found themselves in West Germany or Austria as refugees — without money, accommodation or contacts. Most often, refugees would be taken to camps such as Ludwigstube or Volka Lager in Germany and Traiskirchen in Austria. They would then remain there for months, sometimes even years, while their visas to the United States, or elsewhere, were being processed.

1980

BOHUSLAV (BOB) RYCHLIK
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

PAUL BRINDVSKY
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

PETRA SIMA
Left as a child with her family in 1948.

MONICA ROKUS'S
Left as a child with her family in 1948.

EVA DERMAN
Left as a child with her family in 1948.

JIRI PEHE
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

TOMAS PAVLICKA
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

ROBERT COBSON
Left as a child with his family in 1948.

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