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AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive
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REFUGEE VOICES

Interview No. RV212

NAME: Pavel Novak

DATE: 28th November 2017

LOCATION: Newcastle, UK

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Jana Buresova

[Part One]

[0:00:00]

The interviewee is Pavel Novak, at his home, on the 28th of November, 2017 – in Newcastle.

Mr. Pavel Novak, it's a great pleasure to speak with you this morning. And thank you very much for kindly agreeing to be interviewed for the AJR Refugee Voices Project. May we start by telling us where you were born and when?

Well I was born on the 7th September 1918 in Stříbro, in western Bohemia. It's a small town. And Stříbro means in Czech, 'silver', because there were silver mines there. It was the last 150 years a German-speaking- predominantly German-speaking town, because of the mining tradition. My father was Deputy Station Master in the town. I had a sister, seven years older. I don't remember much of my childhood. Just some stories and sweets, because when I was four years old, we moved to Plzen [or Pilsen], which my father got promotion there-

Sorry, to Pilsen?

To look after the railway track in western Bohemia. And I was sent to a Czech- a *Kindergarten* to learn Czech. And I'd soon forgotten any German. And all my schooling was in- thenceforward in Czech. Well, Pilsen- Stříbro had a very small Jewish population. A

doctor, a pharmacist, a lawyer, my father's- my father's family. A small factory for mirrors… and a small shop keeper.

And what were your parents' names please? And what were your parents' names, and where were they born?

[0:03:06]

My father was called Rudolf and he was born in Hostomice, which is another small town in Bohemia. He was one of four boys and one girl. My grandfather was called Maurice Novak and the Novaks lived there for several hundred years as wool traders. And 'Novak', in Czech, is a very common name. Exceedingly common. But rather as a Jewish name, it means 'Newman'. It was given to people who were new in a community or you know, in a profession. My father's three brothers, the youngest was called Pavel. I'm named after him and he was killed in the- right at the beginning of the First World War. The other one became a very prominent gynaecologist in Vienna. And the third one had an up-market shop- fashion shop, in Prague. And my father's sister married a small factory industrialist from Vienna. My grandfather- my grandmother in Hostomice I never knew, because she committed suicide in depression well before I was born. And my grandfather married again. And his wife become- became to me my real grandmother, was called Julia. And they had a daughter called Rosie - Ruzena. My grandfather, whom I was very fond of, was a very liberal Jewish man. He didn't keep a kosher house. His favourite pastime was to play chess with an old priest. He was head of the local community- Jewish community for many years. And took some services. And I spent many holidays - school holidays - with my grandparents. And my grandfather came to see me in Pilsen when I was Bar Mitzvah. I don't know very much about my mother's background. She came again, from western Bohemia from a small place called Spalene Porici, which really in the Sudetenland, the German-speaking region. She spoke- my father was completely bilingual. My mother spoke better German. I never knew my… maternal grand- grandfather. He died a long time before I was born. But I knew very well my grandmother, who lived in Plzen [Pilsen] and whom I used to visit with my mother. …

What are your earliest memories from your childhood, that- any special memories from your childhood?

[0:07:47]

Well, as I said, I have very little memories till I was four. But when I moved to Plzen, I got involved with… friends. We used to go outing, joined the Maccabi. I used to go skiing with my father in western Bohemia. And I still have to come back to my father. He was a civil engineer, which was rather rare for- rare as a profession for a Jewish man. He was a very brilliant student. Passed all his exams with a First Class. And at that time, students who did that were receiving a ring from the Emperor. But my father didn't get it because there was another man who did the same achievement and he wasn't Jewish. I still have a watch which my father got as a prize. Well, coming back to Plzen, stayed there till I was fourteen, fifteen. And then I moved with my family to Prague, where my father got a promotion and he wanted to be in a place where I could go to university and live at home at the same time.

So-

My sister, in the meantime, well, she was seven years older, graduated. And she married in 1934, a dentist [coughs] and they had a child called Edith Sonia, born- my niece born in 1935. Well, from 1935 on, I lived in Prague.

May I interrupt you for one moment? Where did your father study? Which university, because it-

My father studied in Prague at the German Technical University.

And you came to Prague from Pilsen?

1935 I came to Prague. And… But then did all my- finished my secondary education there. I was top of the class. I had many friends there. I particularly recall one, Peter - he was Jewish, and Jirika, non-Jewish, and with whom I went out very often. And I joined a group of students. We went for outings. The atmosphere in Prague was vibrant, cultural. It was reminiscent of the German-Czech-Jewish triangle of Kafka's time, in Prague. And of course in- after the rise of Nazism in Germany, some German refugees came to Prague. And particularly after 1938, there was Thomas Mann and his daughter and, well, many other prominent ones. All my friends and myself were left-wing without any party affiliation. It

was only natural for my background in students at the time. I had to decide what to do at university. I didn't really- wasn't attracted to medicine. Didn't want to sit- law wasn't any good under the political situation. I wanted really- was interested in architecture, but I thought my drawing wasn't good enough so I started civil engineering as my father did.

And which university did you attend?

[0:13:06]

In the Czech Technical University Prague for a year and a half. Well, I had really once- after 1938, I had only one thought to finish my studies as quickly as possible and get out. Because I- I saw the situation. My father was prematurely pensioned after the Munich Agreement. And… I simply had to try to finish my studies as soon as possible. …

How did your father react to being pensioned off prematurely?

I didn't…?

How did your father react? How did he feel when this happened? When he was pensioned early?

Well he was… depressed. He also- he wasn't a rich man. He- I think he just about managed to go out. But he understood my sentiments and my feelings and supported it. In 1937, when I finished my secondary schooling, I went for a holiday to England to an International Friendship club in Worthing, in Sussex, and made some friends there, which was very beneficial later on. Of course the situation got critical with the Nazi occupation in 1939. My brother-in-law was arrested the second- immediately after Hitler marched into Prague on the 15th of March. My brother-in-law was arrested on the 16th. It wasn't political, or Jewish. It was an economical reason, but- and he was released after about ten days. But anyhow, I knew I had to get out. Now, 'get out' meant really to go to England, which was the only possibility. I didn't have a chance for a visa. But there was window of ten days before the visa requirement in 1st of April '39. So my father queued for a railway ticket to England one way. And I applied for Gestapo permit to leave the country which was necessary to get out. And I had to leave by the 30th of March to get on British soil before the end of March. And I didn't

get a permit until- on the 29th I still didn't have it. I had my suitcase packed- packed to go but I couldn't leave without the passport. Then on 30th of April [March], in the morning, I got it. So I took my suitcase, I came with my parents and took the train from the Prague main station. I still remember my parents on the platform. My father- my mother crying, saying she will never meet- see me again. My father with a very grave face. And that's how I left. On the journey I was in the front of the… train, but I found some friends in the rear and decided to change to the rear of the train, which again, was fateful. When we got to the Dutch border, to the German town of Bentheim, it was clear that I couldn't make it to England in time. And the Dutch authorities said they are full of refugees; they can't let the train through. Except the first half- they said 'we take the first half' of the train where I was originally. And of the second half 'we take...' [sound interruption]

Could we go back to the division of the train?

[0:18:38]

Yes. So the train was divided into half. And, I was in the second half, where only women, children and married couples were allowed into Holland. And, well, there were twenty-twenty-five young men left on the platform in Bentheim. We were marched off, under arrest, to a school, luckily by the German police, not by Gestapo. And the German police really didn't know what to do with us. We- it was really a hopeless situation. I mean, I had no money, no visa, no train ticket - nothing. And, that carried on for three, four days.

Where did you stay ultimately?

Well we were under arrest in that school. And then the British Consul in Holland learned about that group of twenty people and told the Dutch authorities he would give them temporary visa if they let us in. Which the Dutch readily agreed. So after four days, we crossed the border into Holland… And so, hungry, exhausted but happy I got on a boat train to England. What looked like a disaster when I was interned on the German border, proved really a blessing. Because people from the first half of the train, who were in Holland, some of them didn't make it out and died in the Holocaust. Well, when I got to Liverpool [Street] Station I still didn't know- I was there, didn't know what to do.

Do you know- sorry. Do you know why those people were not allowed to – from the first half – were not allowed proceed?

[0:21:14]

Well they- it was already in April, and they didn't have visas to England. Once- after the 1st of April the door was shut. You had to have a visa, you had to have a- to get that you had to have a guarantor in England for fifty pounds.

But if your twenty men were allowed…

Pardon?

But the men were allowed after four days… Why not-?

Well, the group of twenty people- we got the visa in Holland because it was guaranteed by the British Consul. But the others- people who went in without- in the beginning didn't have a visa. So I had a visa for three months' stay in England. So when I got to Liverpool [Street] Station I didn't know what to do. I had a cousin in London who tried to get his family out. But nobody else except the friends I knew from my '37 camp. And then I saw a man on the platform with a Jewish- with an armband with Jewish lettering. And he was from the German Jewish Refugee Fund. And he picked me up and sent me to a hostel in Wimbledon temporarily, because, I mean, I wasn't German. But they said they'd take me in. So, I sent a letter to my mother saying that I managed to get to England after six days leaving Prague. And then I had really only two thoughts of how to help my family and how to… complete my studies. And on the first part there was very little I could do really. I had no funds. …I saw various people. I had no funds for a guarantee for them, two visas. And my parents wouldn't have left without my sister. My sister wouldn't have left without her husband. And they all- so they stayed behind. My sister asked me if I could help to find her a domestic permit where she could keep her child. But I couldn't find anything because of that. And she couldn't part with the child like the [Nicholas] Winton train or- no, she said she can't part with the child. So, I contacted my two friends from the…the camp in Worthing. And amongst them- one was a young journalist and the other one was a daughter of a working class family in Worthing. And she said if I can get some pocket money, they would take me in. And I could

travel to Brighton to technical college, to register as a London University external student to carry on the form until the summer of ’39. Well I did that. I registered for the second year civil engineering. But of course I had to pass the first year exam as well. Well, I managed to do that. But in summer ’39 it was clear that I couldn’t stay with that family anymore. They were- didn’t have really the funds. But a rather well-to-do family in Worthing decided to take me in for at least a couple of months until things got sorted out. And eventually I managed to get registered with the Czech Refugee Fund in London.

[0:25:58]

The- did you mean the Czech Refugee Trust Fund?

Yes.

Thank you.

And… they took me into a refugee hostel in Worthing. And with the pocked money I could travel to Brighton to carry on with my studies. Well that situation, it persisted until the declaration of- well, the declaration of the war in ‘39/’40. In 1940- by spring of 1940 I finished my studies for the London University external exam. But I didn’t have the examination for the second and third year. I had to do that and do some coursework. Now with the occupation of France, the refugees were asked to leave the southern coast. I mean the German refugees were interned in the Isle of Man but I was Czech. So the Czech Trust Fund said I should go to London. I didn’t want that; I wanted to go to industrial centre where I could work as a technician and help the war effort - and finish my studies- my exams. So eventually I was sent to Sheffield to work in a factory as draftsman. Well, when I got to Sheffield the factory was bombed. That was- The Blitz started and again, I had to look for something else. So I found employment as a joiner’s apprentice in a small place which did bespoke furniture. Was allowed to boil the tea and glue and do some simple work. And attended the Rosenheim Technical College for course work, which I finished. When the Blitz started properly on Sheffield, I found myself working on roof repairs and without insurance and I thought, well, that can’t carry on. So I applied for the International Student Fund for a grant, and managed to get a grant for twenty-five pounds which enabled me for half a year to stay in a refugee hostel and prepare for my for the final examination of London University

external exam. I still had to do the second and third year and decided I'd do it in one go. And in May 1941, I went to Nottingham which was a place where – Nottingham University College, where you could take the exams. And for two weeks sat the London University exams. And returned to Sheffield. And then came the invasion of the Soviet Union and I, I applied as- I volunteered for the Czech Army - without knowing whether I finished my exams or not. So I went to Leamington Spa for my medical for the army and passed. And they said, well, they'd call me up. They can't cope with the influx just then. They'd call me up. So I went back to Sheffield and found out that I'd passed all my exams and got a London University Honours degree. But I still had to decide what to do, because I was waiting for the Czech Army. So I managed to get the assistant engineer's post with the Trent Navigation Company in Nottingham. And started looking after the navigation way from Nottingham right down to the Humber. Then the Czech Army called and by that time, the bombing of the railways was taking place and the navigation became of national importance. So the company said I shouldn't apply for deferment and the Czech Army said, "Yes, of course, carry on." So that took me to '42. Then a job was advertised at Nottingham University College for Assistant Lectureship and I was interested in it. And the Czech Army said, "Yes, we agree because we're sending out people to complete their technical education for reconstruction." So I joined the staff at the Nottingham University and that was really a very full time job teaching… mechanical subjects. Eventually I managed to teach hydraulics which I was particularly interested in.

[0:32:50]

And-

And… [coughs] that situation persisted.

And did you-

But in 1942, I met a first year language student at the university. When I asked her name she said, "Elizabeth." I said, "Shall I call you Ellie?" And we started going out, dating. And in 1943 we got engaged and married in summer '43. In the meantime, I found out that a- a group of young people in Prague were arrested for distributing communist literature. Amongst them was my friend Peter and they were sentenced to death and Peter was executed.

Well, when I was in Nottingham, as I as deferred from the Army, I joined the Home Guard. Did the normal duties, but because I also spoke some German, I got some training in- in intelligence, interrogating. And after the fall of France, I was sent to hospitals to interrogate German prisoners of war who were not debriefed in the front. I recall one particular incident. A- a German prisoner, a German non-commissioned officer in the hospital. I knew from his papers that he came from Stříbro, which was my home town. So I asked him, "Where is Stříbro?" And he said, "Well, it's in southern Bohemia- southern Bavaria." I said, "You are lying. It is…", and I told him the exact location. And he was so completely taken aback that here was that man in a British uniform, without insignia, telling him where Stříbro was, that he- he sang like a bird. He gave his details of his regiment, in fact details which were found to be rather useful by the British Army. So, I was very glad of that. I'd better mention my wife's parents a little.

[0:36:00]

May- may I interrupt you before- please?

Pardon?

May I interrupt you? Before we speak- you speak about your wife and her parents- at the hostel, at the refugee hostels where you stayed, were there many arguments, political arguments, between the Communists and the non-Communists and the Social Democrats? Because in Worthing, there were sometimes some fights between the refugees.

Yes. Well, I can't recall any arguments in Worthing. In Sheffield it was predominantly Communists from the Sudetenland. I don't particularly recall any arguments, because it was really predominantly Communist. I must say, I can't recall political arguments in the hostels.

And you were going on to say something about your wife's family?

Yes, well, my wife's father- father and mother came from the Bukovina, from very Orthodox background. Parents of my- father of my father-in-law was a very poor Talmud teacher. And my father-in-law… when he was thirteen, fourteen, he was told he's very gifted; he should go to a secondary school. And his father refused because the teachers were priests. So he became

an apprentice blacksmith. And eventually moved from Orthodox Judaism and eventually later on became practically secular. When he was fifteen or so, he ran away and made his way to Vienna and started in a school for- secondary education, for supporting himself as a worker. And eventually entered the Vienna University for lawyer degree and became the first Jewish working-class lawyer in Vienna. He was a very committed Social Democrat and eventually became the Mayor of the Viennese district. After the Dollfuss [putsch] he was arrested. But freed after some time. And when- after the occupation of Austria, he was immediately arrested and sent to Buchenwald and Dachau. My mother [in-law] whom- she came after him in the meantime to Vienna. They married. Tried everything to freed him. And eventually with the intervention of the British Labour Party and the Trade Movement he somehow got freed from Dachau and they came to England in May '39. He was- they were in London. He… became quite an ardent Zionist, but they returned to Vienna in '45. And a few- a year or two later he became the President of the Jewish Community in Vienna although by that time he was completely secular. And they were- his appointment was really a political Social Democrat appointment.

And yourself- how would you describe yourself in terms of Jewishness? Would you consider yourself a Liberal or how would you describe yourself? Or are you not religious?

[0:41:19]

Well, practically secular. I mean, like my grandfather… Liberal, but in my professional life I was completely secular. Here, when we came back to England which is much, much later, I joined the Reform synagogue here in Newcastle. [sound break]

Pavel, where did you study English?

Well I studied- I learnt English- we had English at school. In the- the Czech system of secondary education, you- you could choose as a foreign language either French or English. And I chose English. So I had English for… four years in the secondary school. Then I went to England for the holiday camp. And I was good at English. I remember that I got a prize from the British Cultural Attaché in Prague – the [inaudible] of Shakespeare. So, English was no problem when I came in '39. And then of course I had the six years… during the war up to '45.

So when you were teaching, English was not a problem?

No… no.

In terms of the Jewish faith, how did you get on with your father-in-law who was Orthodox?

He was- by that time he was more secular than I. He was absolutely se- absolutely hundred percent secular. He made the whole journey from very Orthodox to very secular.

And during your stay in Sheffield and in Worthing, how did you spend your leisure time with other refugees from Czechoslovakia?

[0:43:59]

In Worthing, I had… one or two- one or two friends. A friend whom I knew in Prague made her way to France. And before the fall of France I got- managed to get her a domestic permit. She came to Worthing. So she was my friend and I saw her. I saw also another girl who was a daughter of a Czech writer whom I knew. In Sheffield I really didn't have any other friends. It was too intense, the whole thing. I mean I was in Sheffield from… 1944 till – about seven months. And it was just… work. I was in a hostel for breakfast, went to the Sheffield City Library with a piece of bread or something. Stayed there all day. Back in the evening. I mean I did two years of the university in a go- the examinations in a go. So there was no time for any friendships.

Were you aware of tension between the ethnic German refugees from Czechoslovakia and the- the Slav refugees in the hostels?

Well as I said, in, in Worthing it was mixed. But in Sheffield it was pure- really German refugees from the Sudetenland. And there was one when her doctor who I met in Prague. But there were only two of us in the hostel. I'm not aware of any particular tension.

I ask because the Czech Refugee Trust Fund used to separate people as far as possible depending on where they came from, whether they were from Prague or whether they were German speakers.

[0:46:32]

Yes.

Yes.

Well that may have been a situation in London and I tried to avoid that as much as possible. I just didn't want to go to London to the refugee atmosphere.

Yes, because that would have been very…

Yes, I know.

… refugee orientated in that regard. Yes.

Yes, I know. No, I mean, that was- in 1940 when they wanted me to go to London and I said, "No I don't want to." So…

When you married, where did you live at that time?

I beg your pardon?

When you married- when you got married…

Yes?

…where did you live?

Where did I?

Live?

[0:47:39]

Where did we live? Well we eventually found a one-room accommodation with a cooking facility and bath- bathroom on the corridor - in Nottingham. And we stayed there till all the end of the war. My wife graduated in ’44 and got a teaching job. And- well as I say, we stayed there till the end of the war. And then of course started another situation. Do you want me to carry on with that?

Yes.

Well in 1945, we had to decide what to do. Whether to stay in England, or move on or return. My wife’s parents returned to Vienna. And when the call came from the Czech authorities for technically qualified people to return to help with the reconstruction, I volunteered. And I was in the first plane that landed in Prague in… June ’45. I remember flying in a Lancaster sitting on the floor. I’d got a length of cloth for my father. I thought I get him a winter coat. By that time, the rumours came through about the Holocaust. But I still hoped and returned basically because of that call and because I wanted to help my family in- in- surviving in Prague. Well when I got to Prague, I eventually- I found really only one uncle… and my grandmother. My step-grandmother who survived Terezin. She was old and ill so I suppose they thought she was not worth the transport. She would die. But she survived. So… I found a flat in Prague with my grandmother and a carer [coughs]… and a cousin who returned also with the Czech Army. And my grandmother and my- one of my uncles turned out to be the only survivors as well as one cousin who, when the call came for transports he didn’t answer, went with false papers to Moravia and survived the war there. I… wasn’t really allocated a job, but I found a job which I liked at the hydraulic research station in Prague. Because I always liked the subject. And that’s where I started working in Prague. I found that my sister and husband were transported to Terezin in 1941. And in ’42, in May ’42 transported from Terezin to Zamosc which was an extermination camp. That was really before Auschwitz got going. My parents went on a transport… also in ’42, to Terezin. And I’m sure they hoped to meet at least my sister there. And- and actually they got to Terezin a week after she was transported east. They never got out of the train in Terezin. The train was two- two days at the station in Terezin, and then directed to Sobibor, another extermination camp. …So they

really all perished. I lost my parents, my sister, her husband, my niece, uncles, aunts, cousins - thirteen persons of direct family.

[00:53:35]

My wife followed from England in September ’45. Now for her the situation was difficult, because she had to learn a new language. But being a linguist, she managed very well. She got a job teaching English. …I mentioned my friend Peter who was shot in ’41. I think it’s important- I would like to say a little bit about the family. Petr had a brother, a sister. And they lived with their mother. I liked the whole family very much. I’ve been in touch with them. The sister- well they were Jewish. The sister was married to a lawyer, non-Jewish lawyer, Ivan, Ivan Sekanina, a Communist lawyer. And in 1933 in the Reichstag fire, one of the accused was a Bulgarian Communist, [Georgi] Dimitrov. And Ivan volunteered to defend him, which he did successfully that he was acquitted. The Nazis never forgave him. And the day after the invasion Prague, he was arrested, deported to Berlin and executed there. Peter’s older brother Pepek, was a bookbinder apprentice. He was about two, three years older than me. And I later found out when my wife translated a book about Terezin and the children there, that he went- was deported to Terezin and was teaching there – boys. He was in- in love with a lady, Helena, whose husband was also shot. And she had a child and he looked after them. And when they were deported to Auschwitz, he’d volunteered to go with them. They went straight to the gas chambers. Pepek survived the selection. But in despair, committed suicide, running against the electrified fence. I remember him as a great admirer of Van Gogh. He particularly liked *The Night Café*, and he had a copy of it bound in linen and carried it in his pocket right to Auschwitz. The sister, Sekanina’s widow, Truda [Gertruda Sekaninová-Čakrtová] and her mother went to Auschwitz where the mother died. And Truda survived the death march. And she was one of the first persons I saw in Prague. If I leave the chronology, she had a… very fate - interesting life as well apart from what already happened. She was employed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was a member of the Communist Party and became Deputy to Jan Masaryk, the son of the former President. And she- in 1949, she was in, in the United- creating-in the Proclamation of United Nations - Proclamation of Israel. She married again, and had a son the same age as we did. And we saw quite a lot of her. But in the 50s, to which I can come later, with the Communist putsch when her second husband was arrested, he committed suicide. Truda was demoted to furniture restoring. We still saw a lot of her in Prague. And again, if I jump ahead in the Prague

Spring- Spring, she was rehabilitated. And with the Soviet Invasion [August 1968], she was one actually of the Deputies- there were four Deputies who voted against the invasion. Well, she was one of them. Well, again - of course - demoted. And she became later on a permanent member of the Charter Movement. And the Head of the Movement for the Abolishment of Death Penalty.

[0:59:27]

Charter 77.

77. I've been in touch shortly with her son a couple of years ago. Anyhow that's jumping ahead.

That's- that's very interesting… But may we go back to your arrival in Prague, after the war?

Yes.

How did you feel? How did you cope with all these horrors?

How did I-?

Cope? How did you feel? How did you deal with everything?

Yeah, well… I always- I liked Prague. It wasn't easy life, but I liked it. When I worked at the institute I liked the work. And I was only surprised by how political the whole atmosphere was. All my friends were members of the Communist Party by then. And after some time, they said I have to join a- a political party.

Did you join-?

Well, I had only the choice of Social Democrat or Communist. The Social Democrats were in a disarray, so rather reluctantly I joined the Communist Party in the Institute in '46. Well I worked there and then in 1948, there was a possibility of a scholarship for six months to go to

United States to visit research laboratories. My wife said I should go. I didn't want to go because she was pregnant with our first child. But eventually it was decided that I should go and return, before the birth of the child. So I left in February '48. And of course a couple of weeks later the Communist putsch took place in Prague. My wife kept assuring me she's okay. Well I continued my travel in the States and eventually worked for three months in Fort Collins in Colorado. I found the atmosphere in the United States very depressing. It was the height of the McCarthy movement. I remember one incident particularly. When I was in Washington D.C. I visited the [National] Bureau of Standards. And the Head was [Edward] Condon. He was also involved originally in the Manhattan Project, and his wife came from Czechoslovakia. So when he asked me, "Where are you staying?" and I said, "At the YMCA" he said, "Come and stay with me because my wife wants to speak to people like you." So I stayed there for four or five nights. When I left, about three, four weeks ago, I found that Dr. Condon was …had appeared before the non-American Activities Committee because of the charge that even after the putsch, that people from Czechoslovakia stayed with him. It was that- it couldn't have been anybody other than me. In Hollywood I met people who were great friends of Jan Masaryk, who, to this day of course I don't know whether he committed suicide or was murdered. He was probably murdered. And in June '48 I sailed back to England on the Queen Elizabeth. My cousin in London pleaded with me not to return but I had my family there - my wife. And whilst I was on board the Queen Elizabeth I received a telegram that our daughter was born. She didn't wait for me. So I returned to Prague.

Could we- Pavel-? Could you please tell us how you felt when you first went back to the homeland?

[1:05:05]

When what?

When you went back to Czechoslovakia after the war? How you felt about returning? What it was like?

Do you want me to start? Well… Well, let's go back to 1945 when I returned back. It was a very mixed feeling. Uppermost was the problem of… family and their fate and trying to find

them. Then of course I found my pre-war friends. Some of them I already mentioned. One or two. And I got immersed in- in the work. Joining the Communist Party proved to be a mistake but I thought that that was a party which resisted Fascism - the only one - during the war. Which was of course a mistaken feeling. But at the beginning, after all in 1946 there were free elections which the Communist Party won. So it was still a democratic country with Benes as President and Masaryk as Foreign Minister. In general population feeling against me I can't recall any particularly special problems of either animosity or friendship. Perhaps friendship. I traced my father's days. And I found an- an employee in the Director of the Railways who worked with my father, and who though non-Jewish. And when I contacted him he said, "I've got two things for you which your father gave me." And it was one or other porcelain dog, Rosenthal, which my mother valued very much and which my son now has. And the other one was a ball of wood – wool, which I unwound and inside were some gold Anglo- [Hungaro]-Austrian coins which I now gave to my grandchildren on their birth. As I say, the atmosphere in Prague- eventually it got worse. We have to go to the '50s then. When I returned in- from the States, United States, I was nominated as Deputy Director of the Institute - unofficially. Officially I was never appointed… partly because of my Western background. And I did feel the mistrust of the Party or the authorities. Well the only thing I could do is resolve that to work for moderation and not to harm anybody. But as I say I- I did work in that function. I was Head of Section. And that carried on. And then in 1951/52 the atmosphere, well, after the Communist putsch in '48 the atmosphere changed radically. Political trials began. And of course one of them was the infamous trial of twelve prominent Party members, the so-called Slansky Trial. And there, the anti-Semitism was quite evident. Of the twelve accused, six or seven were what they called originally 'Jewish-origin'. I knew two of them. One of them was Mr. Loebl who during the war was in England- during the war looking after a children's home in Cumbria. And the other one was a Head of the Planning Authority. Of the twelve accused, eleven were executed. And only Loebl – Jantchi Loebl was sentenced to life imprisonment. Fi-four of five years later they all were rehabilitated. And I remember Loebl talking about writing his life story. He never had a pencil or paper. He wrote it in his mind on the prison wall.

[1:11:56]

In that atmosphere, that got gradually worse and worse, the only thing was to form very, very close friendships with people of similar background, people who came with the Czech Army.

One or two people who were Holocaust survivors. So we had really a life where we concentrated on the children- children's education and on very, very close friendships with people, eight, ten families where you could talk openly about your feelings. I carried on the work at the Institute. And then one day, when I was asked to go to Poland for consulting on some instrumentation which I developed, I was told that I wouldn't allowed to go. Perhaps I ought to state also, my wife… occasionally had permission to go to Vienna to see her parents, but I never could- was allowed to go with her. She could take one child, or travel alone. But always somebody from the family had to be- stay behind as a sort of hostage. The situation for my wife was very difficult. She was an exceptionally talented philologist. She learned Czech very quickly. She translated quickly from Czech into English… books and periodicals. But she never was regarded as Czech. She wasn't regarded as English, she wasn't regarded as Austrian, she was always in limbo - something in-between.

Did that upset her?

[1:14:32]

It upset her, yes. But she lived with it. And as I say, in that close circle of friends, we didn't- we had our reasonably good life. So coming back to that day when I was due to go to Poland, the passport- well, I didn't have a passport. You never had your- you had to keep it in the office. I was told I wasn't allowed to go, I wasn't allowed to travel for eight years, west or east, because of my background. I was demoted from Section Head to Division Head and eventually ended up as a scientific worker with one technician. I remember, one day I got a telegram from UNESCO, asking me to come to Paris for a consultancy on the model of the Mekong Delta. And when the Director called me and said, "We cannot allow you to go. Can you send a wire saying you can't come because of illness?" So I said I refused to do that. I said, "I'm willing to send a wire saying I can't come, but nothing else." The Soviet Head of UNESCO Scientific Division will know why. Well, that situation persisted. I eventually became interested in what is called Socialist Academy, which was really a Czech parallel of the Adult Education, and eventually became in charge of the technical lectures in the Prague district. As I say, although I wasn't allowed to travel, I was allowed to work in that low capacity. I was allowed to take a Doctorate, and I was allowed to take Readership at the university. And that came to '66, when the first signs of Prague Spring appeared. And it was very clear, it wasn't in 1967- my wife and I, by that time- during the early 60s she worked as

a translator and on Prague Television, but was dismissed. And then she found work at the Charles University as a teacher of English. So we both of course embraced the Prague Spring enthusiastically. And it was the first time in ’67 that I was allowed to travel with my wife to Vienna. And then, eventually, in ’68 my daughter came with us on holiday to Yugoslavia and my son went to England to learn to push some trolleys in Worthing Hospital and learn English. For the first time the family was abroad. We returned of course, to Prague. And then came the Soviet invasion. I remember our daughter bursting in our- bursting in our bedroom and saying, “Mummy, Daddy, they’re occupying us!” And it was true. I had a call from the brother of- my brother-in-law - he was visiting from the States the first time since ’48 - asking me to get him from the hotel at the airport to the American Embassy. I drove to the Prague- to the airport and against a column of tanks, to get him there. And then started ten days of deliberation. What to do? My wife wanted to leave immediately. We had exit permits for four days in Austria. For four days. And a- and a visa to Austria. By that time, in 1967, I was appointed Director of the Institute of Academy of Sciences of the- of the Institute of Hydrodynamics of the Academy, something which was completely unheard of before the Prague Spring. And I didn’t want to leave the Institute. I felt very torn in our situation and didn’t know what to do. Then I decided I wait until Dubcek - and the Politburo, which was in that- Inter- transport to Moscow during the invasion - will come back, and see. And when Dubcek came back and weeped in the radio I said, “That’s it. We can’t stand it anymore.” And when I phoned a friend and she said, “Pavel be careful on the phone.” I said, “For goodness sake. Not again.” So I said, “We leave.” Our son was at the time in England. We didn’t know where. And we thought whilst we are leaving he will try to come back. So eventually we left about ten days, eleven days after the invasion, with a couple of suitcases.

[1:21:38]

A weeping daughter. She didn’t want to leave because she had a boyfriend there and started the university studies. I remember driving to the frontier… and all the road signs were reversed to confuse the invasion army. And when I got to the border. the border guard looked at me. There I was, in our East German Wartburg, with a weeping daughter, a couple of suitcases and four days’ exit permit to Austria. And he said, “Don’t worry, the Soviets are on the other crossing. You are alright here. And I’ll see you in free Czechoslovakia.” And gave me the passport. And that’s how we started in Austria. We went to my wife’s schoolfriend in Vienna. And again, had to decide what to do with our lives. At that time, there were openings

to Switzerland and Canada, but we wanted to go to England because of our wartime experience, our whole life-time experience. And… I looked around. I had got two offers from universities in the United States but we wanted to stay in England and with my [coughs] wartime experience felt that I must first of all get the family together. So we went to the British Consulate to apply for a visa to go to England. And I remember, when we told the Consul that we had- we were in England during the war, the war effort, the British degrees, son in England, she didn't particularly listen to us. She had two poodles and was more interested in her poodles than what I told her. She just said, "Well, come back in a week's time." So after a week we came back, and the whole atmosphere changed because at that time the Wilson government gave directives that people of our background should be allowed back and given visas. So we were given a visa for one year without restriction and made our way back to England.

Where did you stay in Vienna? Were you put in a camp?

[1:24:48]

In Vienna we stayed with my wife's friend in- about thirty kilometres outside Vienna. Her husband was a head of the local hospital. So when we got to London, I made my wave to- my cousin who was by that time living in London. Parked the car and the first thing I knew was that I got a parking ticket. Cause I parked in a place. But I was let off when I told them I didn't know the rules.

What was your cousin's name?

Seidler.

Seidler.

He had a textile business. So I started looking for a job in England. And I had some offers. But eventually through an acquaintance in Aberdeen, I was told to contact Newcastle. They were looking for somebody with my background. So I did and when I came to Newcastle to speak to them, I immediately felt the difference. Because the other offers I had were to help me, but Newcastle gave me the impression they needed me, which is a big difference. So I

accepted the job as Head of Hydraulic Division in the Civil Engineering Department as a Senior Lecturer. And we moved to Newcastle. My wife started teaching German in Wallsend in the working district of Newcastle. Found it very hard, because she liked adult education; she wasn't used to teaching children. And particularly felt, what's the point of teaching German to English children who didn't have a book in the house? [coughs] So eventually she gave up her job and found a… job in evening classes and adult education. And eventually she found a-a position as a German conversation teacher in a prestigious school in Newcastle. Well I, in the meantime, in 1970, was appointed as Professor of Hydraulic Engineering at Newcastle. I was already a Professor- a visiting Professor at City University London, and of course in Prague I had a Professorship from the Academy. And well, I started work in Newcastle for fifteen years… and on the whole it was successful. When I retired it was the biggest postgraduate school in Hydraulic Engineering in UK. Well… When I retired we travelled a lot. My wife joined me. We used to go on skiing holidays in Austria, in France, in Switzerland, Italy. I used to travel to international congresses, practically all of them. I- In '89, I got the Honorary Membership of the International Association of Hydraulic Engineering Research - only the second British citizen to achieve that and the only Czech. I forgot to say that we got naturalised in 1973.

[1:29:39]

Was that a difficult decision?

Decision, what?

To take British citizenship?

No, certainly not. I mean I still- I'm still a Czech citizen. I never lost it. I have dual nationality. But it was for us a great day when we got British passports. My children, in the meantime, my daughter graduated in computer science at Newcastle and got married to an agricultural student form Leeds. And eventually they moved to London. And they went very Orthodox. My daughter is- a member of the Lubavitch. They live in Stamford Hill and she's completely immersed in her family. My son was accepted in the medical school, but it was too difficult. For him the language was problem. So after two years he gave up and started pharmacy in Sunderland, where he graduated. And he worked as a pharmacist ever since. He

married and he got two children. One- his eldest- my grandson. I mean I have now fifteen grandchildren and one of them, my grandson in, my son's son - he's now a consultant in Oxford. And his partner is a doctor and his son is a- his daughter is a clinical psychologist so they are very successful. My daughter's family is spread over the world. Four grandchildren are in London, five are in the United States, in America- in New York and Los Angeles. In Paris. And I have a great-granddaughter who married and has a grandchild, so I'm a great-great- grandfather by now. Well, we carried on. I had a satisfaction of getting a highest Medal of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic for my ninetieth birthday. I also had a medal, Hydraulics Structures Medal from the American Society of Civil Engineers. They only- the first non-American citizen to get that. And five years ago I got the Honorary Citizenship of my birth town – Stříbro – which was a… quiet satisfaction. Well, we carried on. Here, we joined the Newcastle Reform Synagogue. My wife died four years ago and I moved here. Well that's abbreviated… history. I don't know what you would like to hear, well...

How did your children adjust to life in Britain?

[1:34:22]

My daughter-

Was it difficult for them?

My daughter… adjusted quickly because she got married after three years here. And as I say, she moved completely; her life is now family and religion. For my son it was much more difficult. First of all he was younger, was a teenager. He had language problems. Later on, there were the marriage problems. But I think he's got now a satisfactory life.

Is there anything that you would like to add? Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Well, I don't know. What should I add? Well, that it may seem like an extraordinary life. But I keep thinking of my favourite author, Karel Capek, the Czech author who wrote a trilogy

called '*Ordinary Life'* in which he postulates really 'there is no such thing as an ordinary life'. And I agree with that. I don't know you have to ask me if you feel anything missing.

How did people respond to you? How did English people respond to you when you came back to Britain to live after '68?

I think they- I think the answer is: very well. We made some very good English friends. When we moved to Wickham, where we lived for over forty years, the friends are still there and I'm still in – of course – in touch with them and they became very close friends. Then I had my circle of friends at the university. Here, the friends are partly from the Reform Synagogue. Some non-Jewish friends as well, but I- I think at the university I felt completely part of it.

Were you conscious of feeling glad to be free of the Communist regime? Of being watched and listened to on the telephone? That sense of freedom, here?

[1:38:00]

Well… we came here basically… after our experiences in Czechoslovakia, because we were looking for a free country and stability. It makes me of course very angry with the latest political events… But that will pass.

Do you have a special message for your family, or for someone watching the video of your interview?

Nothing beyond what I said… that they should value the freedom which we have and hope for stability and friendship.

Tremendous. Thank you very much indeed for this interview. Thank you.

Thank you for seeing me. Perhaps I raced through it too much.

[End of interview]
[1:39:52]

[1:40:00]

[Start of Photos]

Photo 1

Yeah, well that's me, in about 19- late 20s. Perhaps 1930. Taken in Plzen in the Czech Republic.

[longer break – preparation of photographs, taking leave of Pavel's friend]

[1:45:48]

Photo 2

This is my father, photograph taken probably around about 1910.

Photo 3

My parents [Elsa née Eckstein and Rudolf Novak] with my sister. Photograph taken probably round about 1915 or so. *Do you know where?* 1915/16.

Photo 4

My sister, Käthe, photograph taken probably round about 1915 or so.

Photo 5

My sister's wedding photograph. Käthe and Fritz Popper taken about 1934 in Plzen in Czech Republic.

Photo 6

These are my parents. The photograph taken about 1933/34, in Prague - no sorry, in Plzen.

Photo 7

That's me. Photograph taken about 1937 in Prague.

Photo 8

My friend Peter- Peter Stiasny, who was executed in 1941 in Prague for distributing Communist literature.

Photo 9

Me and my wife [Elizabeth, née Maurer] in probably 1975 or so, in Newcastle.

Photo 10

My daughter, Suzanna Segelman. Photograph taken in the 1980s… in Newcastle or London.

Photo 11

It's my son, Michael. Michael Novak at- his wedding photograph in about 1990 in Birmingham.

[End of photographs]

[1:48:31]