American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees Inc.

1948-1980
Over many centuries the territory of Czechoslovakia at the crossroads of Europe was the victim of incursions of neighbors. Its people were subjected to repressive rule that resulted in waves of expatriation of many thousands of individuals and families to escape from injustice, threats of persecution or even death for their religious beliefs or opposition to a new political order to seek security and life in freedom. Among these, the best known was Bishop Jan Amos Komensky (Comenius), educational reformer, teacher of nations in the 17th century, and in World War I Thomas G. Masaryk, Edward Benes and the famous astronomer, General Milan Rastislav Stefanik, who worked for the independence of Czechoslovakia.
The Republic of Czechoslovakia established in 1918 became the haven of thousands who fled from Russia after the communists came to power. They were housed, fed and employed in all fields of endeavor. Schools and even a university were provided for the young. The Russian library and archives established in Prague were the largest in Europe outside the USSR.

In the 1930s Czechoslovakia gave asylum to thousands of Germans fleeing from Nazi oppression, among them Thomas Mann, Italians from fascist Italy until Munich in 1938, when these and Czechoslovak citizens by the thousands fled from the border regions first seized by Hitler, and even in greater numbers after the German occupation and partition of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.

After World War II in 1945 the brief restoration of democracy and independence ended tragically with the communist coup d'état with the support of the Soviet Union in February 1948. Again thousands of men, women and children fled from their homes in despair to escape arrest or persecution and even death because they opposed communism and all totalitarian regimes. They fled with little but the clothing they wore, leaving behind their homes with everything in them, sometimes even beloved family members who were ill or too young and unable to accompany them at that time.

Dr. Jan Papanek, then Permanent Delegate of Czechoslovakia to the United Nations protested the communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia in the Security Council of the United Nations and immediately began to plan how to provide help for the thousands fleeing to Germany, Austria and other western European countries. With a small group of friends, after initial negotiations, the American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees was founded to extend immediate aid to the escaping Czechoslovak citizens, to provide not only the basic needs to survive, but also to seek opportunities that would enable them to become self-sufficient and independent in countries of the free world that would receive them.

The AFCR was incorporated on May 3, 1948 under the laws of the State of New York. It is a tax exempt organization as a public charity according to Section 501 (C) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1969 and at that time was registered with the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid of the Department of State.

From its inception the AFCR has an Executive Committee, a Board of Directors and a Committee of Sponsors that include people representing many facets of American life including leaders of organizations of Americans of Czechoslovak origin. Dr. James T. Shotwell, President Emeritus of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, whose interest in Czechoslovakia was first manifested when Thomas G. Masaryk led the struggle for its independence in World War I, accepted the chairmanship of the Board of the AFCR and served in that post devotedly until the end of 1957, when he was elected Honorary Chairman. Dr. Jan Papanek was elected President and Malcolm Davis of the Carnegie Endowment, Alfred Politzer, President of the American Committee for the Liberation of Czechoslovakia of Cleveland, Ted F. Silvey of the CIO and Mrs. Frances B.
Stoddard were its first Vice-Presidents. Miles Rehor, New York lawyer, gave generously of his time and efforts as Treasurer during the first years with Mrs. Howard M. Morse as Assistant Treasurer. Andrew J. Valushek journalist and then head of the Slovak Gymnastic Union Sokol was Secretary and Mrs. Anna Peppel was Assistant Secretary. Dr. Rudolf Sturm was Administrative Secretary and was succeeded by Dr. Ivan Taborsky. Vojtech Jerabek soon followed and has remained at headquarters with Dr. Papanek over the years. He is presently Executive Director. Dr. Kenneth D. Miller served as Chairman from 1957 to 1967 and Malcolm W. Davis followed until 1970. Jan Hird Pokorny became Chairman and continues in the post to the present.

Officers, board members and sponsors of the AFCR included such prominent persons as Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Senator Herbert H. Lehman, Governor Frank J. Lausche of Ohio, Colonel Joseph Triner, President of the Czechoslovak National Council of America, Judge Otto Kerner, Drew Pearson, Dorothy Thompson, Marcia Davenport, leading representatives of Czechoslovak press and organizations and Dr. Petr Zenkl, President of the Council of Free Czechoslovakia. They were all people who knew and had sympathy for democratic Czechoslovakia and for the victims of the new dictatorship.

In November 1948 Dr. and Mrs. Papanek visited refugees in Germany who were housed in unused barracks and in the dilapidated wooden buildings that had served as overnight sleeping quarters for the masses of men, women and youth that had attended Hitler's rallies. They were in desperate need. They suffered cold and hunger. They lacked warm clothing, shoes, blankets, food. While their material needs were vital, uncertainty about their future was nerve-recking. The visit was reassuring to the refugees for Dr. Papanek was known not only for his humanitarian service helping refugees who had fled to Prague from the border areas annexed earlier by Hitler, but also because he had directed efforts to provide much needed food, clothing and hospital supplies for the Czechoslovaks who fought in France and England during World War II and money for their families, as Delegate of the Czechoslovak Red Cross. He assured the refugees that there were concerned people in the free world who wanted to help them as he did, even while he informed them that there were many difficulties and problems that had to be overcome.

The refugees needed to have someone to speak to in their own language, to learn of the possibilities of integration in the country of first asylum or about resettlement elsewhere. They needed to discuss opportunities of employment, not only for those who had the education, training or previous experience in a profession, but for those who worked in all other fields as mechanics, farmers, craftsmen, et al. They needed to be urged to study the language of the country in which they hoped to start new lives. Moreover, they had to be advised about existing restrictions on working in certain occupations or professions. Many would have to prepare themselves for new vocations and acquire new skills in the months they waited for integration or resettlement.

Medical care, schools for children, ma-
terial assistance, vocational retraining and language classes had to be provided. The refugees needed assistance to establish contacts with relatives or friends in the free world and to secure personal documents which they dared not take with them as they tried to escape for fear of being caught by the communist police. Field offices in Europe were essential. Changes in existing immigration laws and regulations were required in some countries before refugees could be admitted. Working relationships were set up with government officials and the post World War II occupation authorities of the countries of first asylum in Western Europe, primarily in Western Germany and Austria.

The AICR became one of the voluntary agencies cooperating with the Department of State and other federal offices in Washington. Working relations were established with the International Refugee Organization (IRO), subsequently with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM).

Headquarters of the AICR offices were established at 1775 Broadway and are presently at 1790 Broadway in New York, N. Y. 10019. Its original staff of one salaried member grew to two and presently numbers 10 in expanded office space. Branch offices have been established as needed.

The main European office of the AICR was opened in Munich in 1948. By the end of 1950, 30,000 Czechoslovaks had fled from their homeland. For the distri-

bution of relief supplies and for the processing for resettlement branch offices were established in Ludwigsburg and Camp Valka near Nuremberg. By 1957 there were offices in Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Nuremberg and Stuttgart in Germany; Salzburg and Vienna in Austria, Salerno and Trieste in Italy; in Paris, London, Oslo, Montreal, Toronto; Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo in Brazil. With a diminishing of numbers of new refugees in 1960 many of the camps as well as auxiliary offices were closed.

At present the AICR has offices in Munich, 8000 Munich 5, Reichenbachstrasse 12/L. and Zirndorf in Germany; in Vienna, Gumpendorferstrasse 5a, 1060 Vienna and Traiskirchen in Austria; in Paris, 3 rue Jules Lemaitre, 75012 Paris and in Rome, Via Carlo Dossi 14, 00137 Rome.

The AICR was fortunate to have the services of dedicated volunteers, both individuals and organizations, not only in New York, where Mesdames Stoddard, Morse, Papanek, Hurban and Boor with Mr. Jaroslav Pokorny were stalwarts, but also in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas and in other states in lesser numbers. The voluntary services ranged from lectures to inform groups of the needs of the refugees, appealing for funds, collecting tinned food, clothing, medical supplies, etc. to send to the camps to help secure assurances for immigration, counseling and eventually providing housing and employment for the refugees as they arrived. CARE provided food parcels, clothing, blankets, etc. when they were most needed.
There were volunteers in Canada, in Norway and other western European countries, Australia and elsewhere overseas who helped in this work. The fine record of effort and early achievement, the self-sufficiency and advancement of the refugees in their varied fields of work, their becoming assets to the communities in which they settled, provided satisfaction and pride to the volunteers who worked indefatigably to help those who needed help.

The European representatives of the AFCR included Rev. Joseph Novotny under and arrangement with the YMCA, James K. Stoddard, M. D., Dr. Jaroslav Peel, Mrs. Constance Sefl, General Frantisek Dastich, Ferdinand Jicinsky, Rev. Blahoslav Hruby, Michael A. Farrell, Dr. Kenneth D. Miller, Dr. Ivan Taborsky, Dr. Jindrich Andrial, Dr. J. John Brazda, Dr. Vratislav Trcka, Dr. Bedrich Syrovvy, Dr. Barbara Podoski, Jan Kuncir, Miss Eugenia Tausig, Dr. Maria Miller, Dr. Bohumir Bunza. At present Frantisek Meloun is European director in Munich, Ctibor Peeva in Vienna, Dr. Jiri Opopensky in Paris and Mrs. Mira B. Vanek in Rome.

Over the years the staffs of the European offices numbered five to sixteen as the numbers of refugee registrants fluctuated. Services in Europe depended and continue to depend on the cooperation and contractual support of the Government of the United States and private donations.

The scope of AFCR services to refugees grew with the contributions and generous regular gifts of many thousands. The major support came as the result of the hard fought court action of Dr. Jan Papanek to win the suit brought against him by the communist regime of Czechoslovakia in the Supreme Court of the State of New York to take possession of the remaining unspent $100,000 that were entrusted to him for relief of needy Czechoslovaks during World War II by generous donors.

The principal supporters of the AFCR from 1948 to the present include Council of Free Czechoslovakia, National Council of Women of Free Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovak National Council of America, Czechoslovak National Association in Canada and its Women's Council, Czechoslovak Committee of Cleveland, Bata Shoe Company, CARE, Czechoslovak Relief Committee in Oslo, Czechoslovak Women's Council in Exile in Chicago, Boston AFCR headed by Mrs. J. Philip Lane, members of the Executive Committee, Mount Airy Lodge with donations and employment, Olga Vondracek and Frederick Novy II, some corporations, members of the Board, sponsors, a few who left legacies and others who wish to remain anonymous.

In its thirty two years of service the AFCR provided not only material aid, food, clothing and medical aid, but also scholarships for students to make possible the completion of university studies in Europe and the United States, supported schools for Czechoslovak refugee children and with the dedicated help of Anna Kva-pilova and Ragnar Anderson in Oslo, provided for summer vacations annually for an average of 100 of them in Norway, published a reader with the help of CARE helped with language courses and vocational training in Europe and the United States, translated documents, arranged for Social Security cards, organized special projects, such as the Ellenor Lane Boston Branch's supplying beautiful layettes to expectant mothers and Christmas pack-
ages for scores of families, helped arrange for the support of handicapped refugees and medical care when needed, traced relatives and friends in various countries of the world, provided loans in emergencies, counseled Czechoslovak refugees wherever they were on such matters as registering patents, legal matters, claims, resumes, publishing books, office interviews, naturalization procedures for citizenship, social assistance, travel, personal problems, etc. In this way the AFCR came to function in a sense as a consulate would for its people.

The most important activity, however, was and continues to be resettlement assistance. Since 1948 the AFCR has registered and processed some 115,000 Czechoslovak refugees for resettlement or integration. Those who came to the United States were met upon arrival, housed temporarily, provided with pocket money and when arrangements were ready to have them met, were sent on to sponsors who provided initial food, housing and employment and helped in their orientation process. The same procedure was followed in Canada. The AFCR negotiated with government representatives of all countries that accepted our refugees. The majority of the 115,000 Czechoslovak refugees remained in Germany or Austria or went to countries of Western Europe, Canada, Australia, United States, and fewer to countries in Africa and Latin America.

Special resettlement projects were arranged for a great number of difficult-to-resettle people — the aged, tubercular and otherwise ill, handicapped people and families with many children, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada, England, Denmark, Australia, and the United States compassionately accepted many. However, there still remain scores of the original difficult cases in countries of first asylum, mostly in Germany, and new ones have kept about equal the number of those who cannot emigrate. The AFCR provides supplemental help for these.

In the 1960's the AFCR helped many Czechoslovak refugees receive some indemnification from the UNHCR's Indemnification Fund for the persecution by the Nazis they endured during World War II.

Over the years the setting up of watch towers, placing of mines along its borders, the clearing of the forested boundary areas, barbed wire fences, electrified trip wires and increasing border patrols with trained dogs made escape from Czechoslovakia much more difficult and dangerous and the numbers of refugees decreased.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet and Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 after the so called Prague Spring caused a sudden great wave of over 100,000 men, women and children to seek asylum in the West. Thousands of them remained in Western Europe, for the most part in Germany, Switzerland and Austria where the governments made special provisions for housing and employment of the professionals and those with special skills. The AFCR offices were again swamped with responsibility for arranging to place them, working together with other voluntary organizations. The greatest numbers that chose to go overseas were helped to emigrate to Canada, Australia and the United States.
The aid provided by the countries of first asylum, mainly Germany and Austria and the support of the Government of the United States of the refugees during their stay in Europe was inestimable. Without this government support the AFCR would not have been able to carry on. So, too, was and is the service of the intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that is responsible for the legal protection and counseling of political refugees and provides some limited financial support to eligible refugees integrated in the countries of first asylum. The Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) makes possible the overseas transportation of refugees to countries of permanent resettlement at very low cost. Without this service the tens of thousands of refugees could not have been resettled. The refugees are to repay the travel costs to the AFCR and the AFCR remits the money to ICEM.

The AFCR extends its humanitarian services in Europe without discrimination to many Hungarians, Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians, as well as to Czechoslovak refugees. In 1972, the Department of State invited the AFCR together with the other resettlement agencies in the ACVAFS to help in the resettlement of the Asians expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin.

In 1975, the AFCR was one of the agencies that was asked to participate in the resettlement of refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam and later Laos. Dr. Jan Papanek went to the Marine Camp Pendleton in California to set up the American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees field office there.

Then days later he asked his wife Betka, who had been a volunteer with him in the AFCR since its establishment to come and help him. They worked together until the Camp closed, taking on additional workers as space was allotted and the arrivals increased. The majority of refugees processed by the AFCR were single men, and small families. Registration indicated personal data, their education, former occupation, rural or urban background, language facility and the preference of the area or state they wished to live in the United States.

Sponsors who volunteered to help an individual or family were listed from all states with details of their choice as to age, sex, education, some English or French requirement or no, training in a craft, profession, or for manual labor, with a description of the housing they would provide and employment they could offer.

The AFCR's hard working staff besides the Papanek family included case workers, secretaries and interpreters. The work, 6 and occasionally 7 days a week entailed, not only registering the refugees and arranging interviews with sponsors. There were the mailed-in and telephoned offers of sponsorships, records to file, daily reports to take to headquarters 10 miles distant, Agencies' and Task Force meetings to attend at noon and late afternoon, arrangements to transport refugees for security and medical examinations, tickets to secure for their departure and inform the sponsors about meeting them on arrival.

A second AFCR field office was opened in Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania with Klement Simonic in charge of securing sponsors for the Vietnamese and Cambodians who were billeted there. The working process was the same as in Pendleton.
When in 1979, the Government of the United States decided to receive many more of the great masses of refugees who risked their lives to escape from Vietnam in small boats and overland and somehow reached Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong or elsewhere, the AFCR and the voluntary agencies that were active in the resettlement of the 135,000 in 1975 are presently involved in helping resettle these.

The AFCR has helped secure sponsors for thousands of Indochinese refugees in the United States. These sponsors provide housing, needed clothing and food, employment for adults, assure attendance in schools for the children, send adults to English classes, help orient them to adjust to America's new and to them strange ways. The primary goal in the work for the Indochinese as for those from Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe is to provide opportunities that will make possible the self-sufficiency of the newcomers as soon as possible. Yet, all are adjusting to the new life and are contributing members of our society with an appreciation of the freedoms it affords.

The expanded Indochinese program has necessitated the taking on of 5 staff members at headquarters who speak Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian and Chinese and the opening of new offices in Boston, Salt Lake City and San Francisco with more than 20 additional employees.

These additional services were made possible with contractual agreements, cooperation and support of the Government of the United States. The financial accounting of the AFCR is subject to the examination and control of both New York State and United States' federal authorities.

The expenditures of the AFCR in serving refugees since 1948 are conservatively estimated at $7,000,000 without consideration of the incalculable contributions of time, effort and money of both individuals and organizations all over the world.

This brief history of the American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees cannot adequately acknowledge the good will, sacrifices and services of the thousands of compassionate people all over the world who contributed to the sum total achievement of the thirty two years of humanitarian service.
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