



JOSEF
FRANTIŠEK
ROCHLA

MAN OF FEW WORDS

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Cover photo: Josef František Rochla

'A Moment of Hope' photo on page 5, courtesy of George Scott,
depicting his father, Jiri Snabl, and his father's niece, Liduna

JOSEF FRANTIŠEK ROCHLA

MAN OF FEW WORDS

by MIMI KUTTELWASCHEROVÁ

Some people included herein had no children. As a surrogate daughter, I record what I knew of them, and offer it as an addendum to the CHILDREN of HEROES project, chronicled on the Embassy of the Czech Republic's website.



1939/ INVASION/ REGROUP in ENGLAND

Josef František Rochla was born on 13 September 1909 in Lipník nad Bečvou, a spa town in Moravia in what was then Czechoslovakia. Exploring the scenic countryside František developed a love of mountains. As a motivated student in the local Catholic Silesian school, he engaged himself in helping the community.



The town of Lipník nad Bečvou

After secondary school, he enlisted in the Czechoslovak army serving as a border guard. He was 29 years old when German forces surged over the Czechoslovak border on 15 March 1939. His position was overrun – there was no chance to mobilise.



František joined the thousands escaping German occupation. Many entered England by ship through Liverpool. Nearby CHOLMONDELEY CASTLE was offered by the family to establish a Field Camp where the men were gathered.

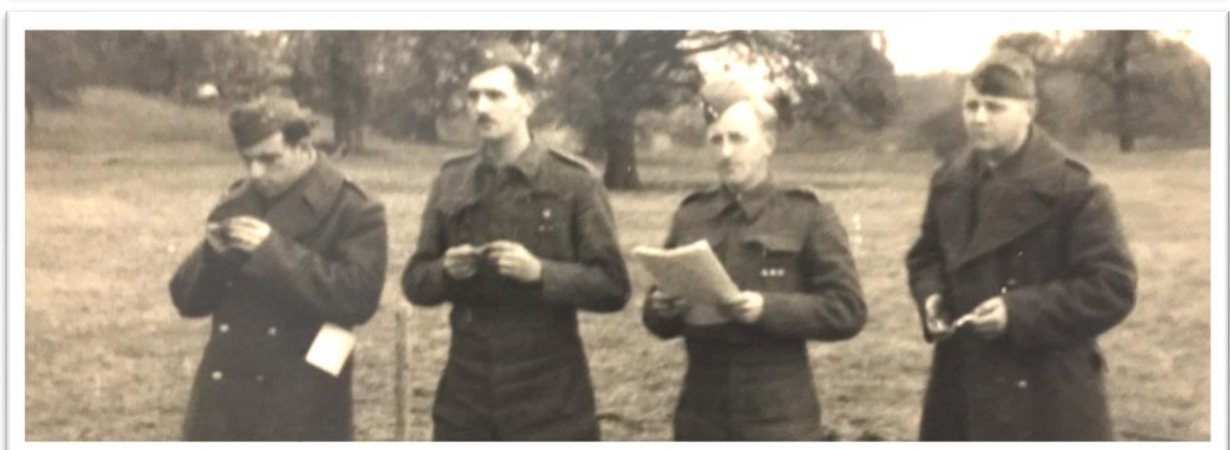


Cholmondeley Castle



The Field Camp within the Castle Grounds

Their military ranks were gradually reinstated and Captain František Rochla was embedded in the supplies unit of the Czechoslovak division.



The soldiers gathered in the grounds of Cholmondeley Castle

Winston Churchill decided to establish a Special Operations Executive for subversive activity behind enemy lines. From the CHOLMONDELEY CASTLE Tented Camp, about 300 volunteers were sent to Scotland for secret training by the British Army in sabotage, and intelligence gathering.



A few of František's younger colleagues were selected to be parachuted into their homeland for a secret mission: OPERATION ANTHROPOID. The plan was to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich, a key figure in the Nazi hierarchy. As leader of the SS (secret police), Heydrich oversaw the brutal occupation of defenceless Czechoslovakia.

As Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Heydrich was routinely driven in an open-top vehicle through the streets of Prague. Operation Anthropoid identified these journeys for the assassination attempt.

The mission succeeded but the young soldiers lost their lives. Their sacrifice is commemorated by a plaque (pictured) in the grounds of CHOLMONDELEY CASTLE and retold in many movies, including *Anthropoid* (2016).



František served with the Allies until Czechoslovakia was liberated in 1945. At the 1948 Yalta conference, President Josef Stalin of Russia promised Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt that he would allow free elections in the Central European countries he had liberated.

On the 12th of May, František, with the Czechoslovak armoured forces, started his journey back to Czechoslovakia, the first units reaching Plzeň on the 18th. There was a victory parade in Prague on the 30th of May (pictured above).

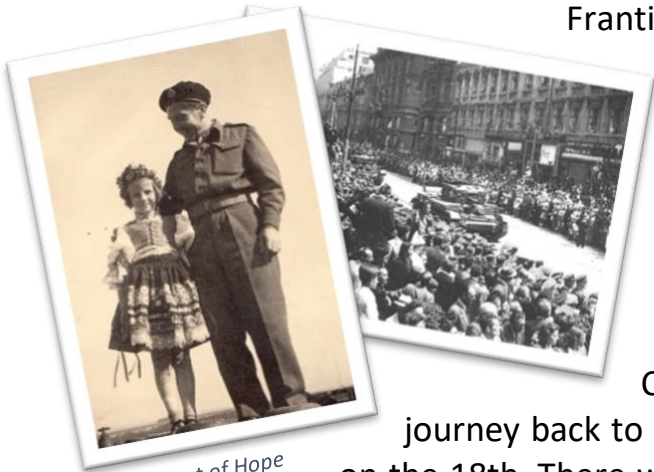
Captain František enrolled at Charles University in Prague to study Sociology and Philosophy. His choice was inspired by how the patriotic feelings of fellow Soldiers fuelled resistance to the occupation of their homelands.

From Moscow the Communist leaders ruthlessly controlled the liberated countries. Men and women who had returned to their homeland were identified as potential traitors. Labelled *Those who fought with the West*, terror crept through the population as arrests of these people started.

František prepared to escape a second time but before he left he gave his research papers to his trusted colleague, Dr. Boublíka, for safe keeping. Among those papers were names of Czechoslovaks who had served with the Allies during the War. Preserving the incriminating evidence, Boublíka was risking his own life. He successfully concealed the papers within his bookshelves. František arrived in London seeking asylum among the Czechoslovaks who had remained after the war.

Meanwhile, Fr. Jan Lang s.j., a fellow Czechoslovak refugee who had already arrived in England, was continuing his religious studies at the Jesuit Heythrop College. Rapidly, Fr. Jan became the spiritual leader of the Czechoslovak Exiles in London. The Jesuit Centre at Farm Street, Mayfair, offered a room on the first floor where he led Czechoslovak Mass and gatherings for the new exiles. František and Jan Kuttelwascher were reunited at one of the Masses.

With an increasing sense of commitment to help this community, František was ordained a Secular Priest in 1955 at the age of 45. Fr. František's uniform was a white, removable priest's collar.



A Moment of Hope



The Jesuit Centre



1964/ VELEHRAD SET UP IN LONDON

Fundraising enabled the purchase of a property to house a new Czechoslovak centre. This included selling tickets for Cheese & Wine parties held at the Kuttelwascher home in Uxbridge. Raffles for crates of wine and Czechoslovak beer kept the coffers filling.

The Robinski brothers owned a food import business behind Wormwood Scrubs Prison and donated to the fund raising. Father Jan donated the restitution money for his time in a Nazi concentration camp. Father František contributed his own personal savings. Roxana MacKay, a Czechophile who translated at BBC Radio Free Europe, contributed a sizeable sum.

The USAF (United States Air Force) stationed in Ruislip near Uxbridge had Czechoslovak, Polish and Russian immigrants in their ranks.



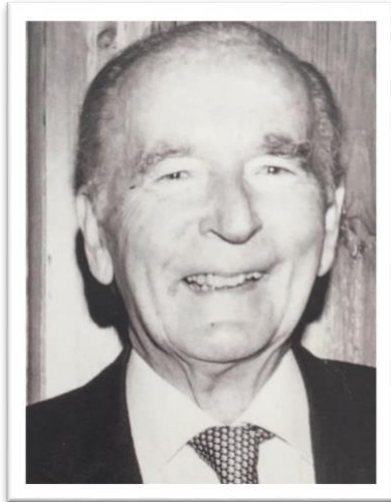
They were soon befriended. Under the command of Colonel Osetinski (Russian descent) and Colonel Ralph C Tutor (whose wife, Cecelia Pokorny, was Czechoslovak), the USAF contributed generously to fundraising functions.

An ambitious plan for Grand Balls (pictured) in Caxton Hall was encouraged by the Americans Wives Club whose generosity provided abundant food and drinks. The Jesuit Order agreed a top-up loan.



By 1964 there were sufficient funds to buy a property in Notting Hill. No. 22 Ladbroke Square (pictured below) was purchased and renamed VELEHRAD. It was made a Registered Charity with three trustees.

Velehrad's first trustees were Count Josef Czernin, Milada Kuttelwascherová and Father Jan Lang s.j.



Count Josef Czernin



Milada Kuttelwascherová



Fr Jan Lang s.j.

As well as supporting other parishes, Father František lived at VELEHRAD much of the time. Fr. Jan had an office there. Several widows had low-cost rooms as lodgers. Roxana MacKay had accommodation. New émigrés were offered a roof over their head, a dormitory bed and a communal dining room.



Velehrad, 22 Ladbroke Square





Milada Kuttelwascherová with Štěpán Zavřel

The young artist Štěpán Zavřel escaped Czechoslovakia in 1959. He moved to London in 1965 to work at the Richard Williams Studio for animated films. His temporary home was VELEHRAD before he settled in northern Italy.

He jointly established The Bohem Press Publishing House. His contribution to the Czechoslovak tradition of illustrating children's books is displayed in La Fondazione Štěpán Zavřel art centre and museum.

In his checked shirt and leather hiking boots, Father František resembled a displaced mountain man. He explored the London canal network visiting émigrés to record their stories. His priest's white collar in his rucksack ready to wear before knocking on the doors of churches to ask for overnight shelter. Fr. František supported the community, conducting baptisms, communion and funerals. Czechoslovak schools were set up.

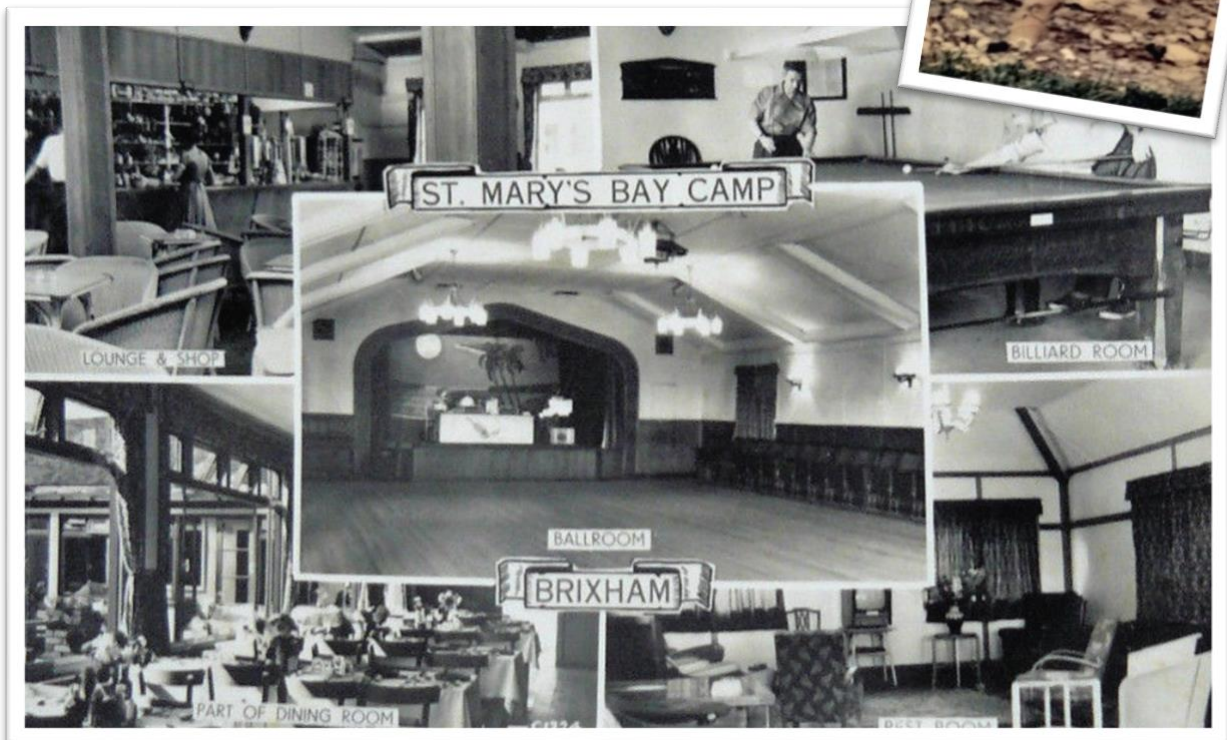
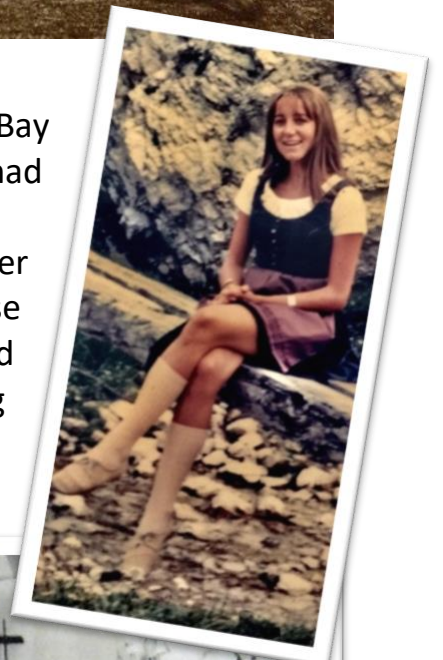
1968/ TABOR IN BRIXHAM



St Mary's Bay Holiday Camp, Brixham, Kent

From 1968, the city children were taken to St Mary's Bay in Brixham, Kent where, in 1924, a disused airfield camp had been converted into a Children's Holiday Camp.

As a young teacher, Milada Kuttelwascherová's daughter Mimi (pictured right) was enlisted by the priests to organise the children aged from 5 to 13 years old. The Priests loved football and athletic games. They encouraged swimming in the cool sea by running into the waves wearing black hand-knitted swimming trunks donated by the nuns.



Invariably, the sodden trunks stretched to below their knees raising screeches of laughter as the children tried to catch the priests charging through the waves. Fr. František treated everyone to rides on the nearby miniature Dymchurch railway with ice creams for all. After TABOR (Czechoslovak word for holiday camp), the children returned home with sun-kissed skin, rosy cheeks and seaside memories.

When distressing information leaked from the CSSR of men and women imprisoned for their beliefs and war time allegiance, VELEHRAD found a new focus. Fr. František knew many as he had recorded their alliances with the Allies. Fr. Jan knew some too – priests like Vaclav Nemeč and nuns like Sister Bibi. Teachers and academics were arrested by Stalin’s secret police, many of whom perished. Nemeč was repeatedly imprisoned for reading pastoral letters from the pulpit even to an empty church.

Sister Bibi’s convent was confiscated. The outspoken Mother Superior was imprisoned and executed; the nuns were forced to leave the convent, to wear civilian clothes and transported to work in state chemical factories. Many did not survive those dangerous conditions.

Prayers were not enough. Remaining silent would give strength to the perpetrators. A gallery of photos of prisoners was set up on the inside walls of VELEHRAD. Father Jan would say, “We must keep their names alive so they have a chance to stay alive. The communists find it easier to execute the nameless.”

A newsletter was started, entitled PRISONERS of CONSCIENCE.

A sketch of barbed wire wrapped round a candle was the motif on the front cover.

Mrs Kuttelwascherová recalled how Peter Benenson (who founded Amnesty International and whose Solomon family originated from Russia) frequently visited VELEHRAD helping with the PRISONERS of CONSCIENCE project.

In addition, there was ongoing work being done on restitution from the German government for victims.

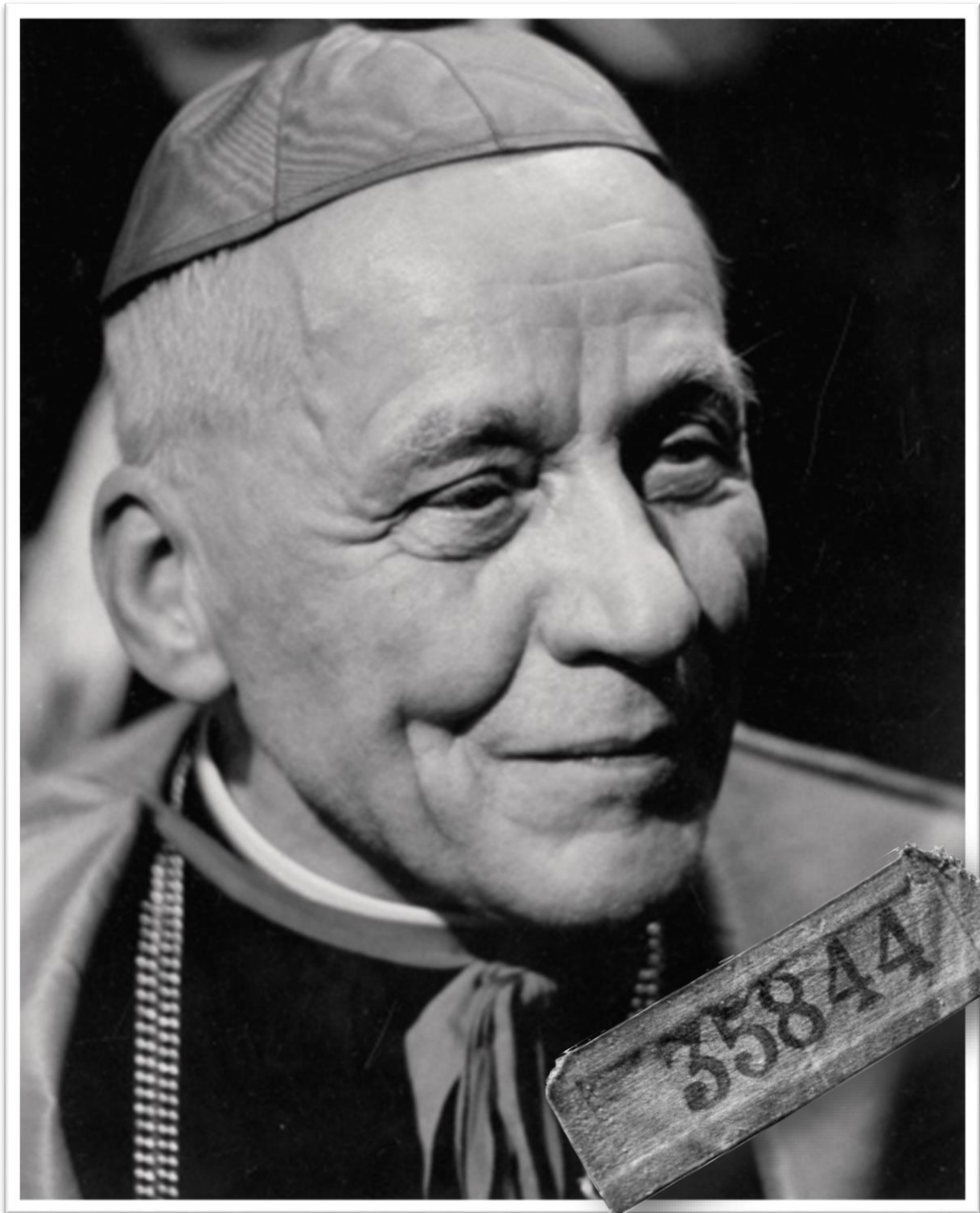
A white candle, wrapped in barbed wire burned in the entrance of VELEHRAD. It also burned before the altar at weekly Masses conducted by Father František.

He carried new issues of the newsletter in his rucksack and delivered them during his ministry work.



Czechoslovak Cardinal Beran was one of the prisoners who was named and who shared a prison cell with Václav Havel, the future President. After release, His Eminence came to VELEHRAD to meet the émigré families.

Cardinal Beran is buried in the crypt of St Peter's Rome, a place normally reserved for Popes.



Cardinal Beran and his Prison Number

1957/ PILGRIMAGE TO ROME

A Pilgrimage to Rome (thought to be around 1957) was organised for the community to meet up with other émigrés in Europe.



1967/ HIKING THE DOLOMITES

As the heavy routine at VELEHRAD eased, a holiday was organised. Driven by Mimi Kuttelwascherová, five passengers, including Frs. Jan and František, travelled slowly through France, Germany and Austria, stopping off at Czechoslovak Émigré centres for hospitality breaks and an exchange of news. Emerging through the Brennan Pass they arrived in the Italian Dolomites. Priest's collars had been removed in favour of hiking boots and rucksacks. At the end of a long valley, Vigilio, the FODARA cattle herder, was waiting.



A Fodara cattle herder awaited the travellers

With Fr. František silently leading the group, the six hikers climbed for several hours. An old wooden Alpine chalet, Refugio di San Vigilio FODARA, was home for the next two weeks. A tiny stone chapel nearby was open. These hidden communities had survived centuries with their Ladinish language still spoken.



Refugio di San Vigilio, Fodara



The group hiked the tracks made by Alpine cows

Hiking the tracks made by Alpine cows, Fr. František chose the day's summit to be climbed. Monseigneurs Planner and Škarvada (later a Bishop in Prague) joined us. We lit candles in the tiny chapel as our Czechoslovak Hymns and prayers echoed in the dark mountains.

At the nightly campfire, Jaroslav Škarvada (pictured above) recounted how as a young man he left Czechoslovakia to study for the priesthood in Rome. His group travelled in an old bus and slept in the vehicle. One day they woke to see all their possessions had been stolen from the top of the bus. They continued the journey in what they wore. Arriving unshaven, hungry and scruffy, they started their studies.

A revelation by Fr. Lang was chilling,

"In Terezin concentration camp we slept on wooden bunk beds. Blankets were so threadbare we lived and slept in the same clothes week upon week upon many months. Early each day we were woken for a head count and marched out to start back-breaking work. Those who didn't wake or walk were shot. For several days I had had a fever. I was so thin I hardly made a bump under my blanket. The guard dogs got more food than us. That day I woke to find all strength had left my body. I knew I could not reach the door. The men shuffled past me and left. One man threw his blanket on top of me. I lay waiting for the inevitable. A guard stood in the doorway, his dark silhouette with a raised gun in hand was my last sight. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer."

Father Lang paused as we sat round the embers.

"I knew this was my eleventh hour. I waited for the guard to approach. There was a loud bang. When I opened my eyes I heard snoring. The men were back. I must have passed out for many hours. I knew I had survived another day."

On one hike Father František admired the flowers and pulled up a small gentian by the roots. Further up the mountain he placed that flower into a new place.

"Let's see how it survives here."

The following day the plant looked limp.

"This is like us, uprooted we are fragile and must try to make a home in a strange place."



~

Jaroslav Škavrada spent most of his time abroad. In Rome, he worked as a secretary to Cardinal Beran and also cooperated with the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Vatican Radio. He was ordained bishop in 1983, ten years before he returned to the Czech Republic. He died in Prague at the age of 85.

Under the Communist regime Sister Bibi secretly organised prayer gatherings. She eventually escaped and found her way to Ireland to a sister convent. She then returned to Prague to work at the Archbishop's Palace as housekeeper and manager for the resident surviving clerics under Bishop Skarvada.



Dolomite Gathering outside a Chapellette

1968/ INVASION/ ESCAPE to ENGLAND

At VELEHRAD, pastoral work increased massively in August 1968 when the Warsaw Pact tanks invaded Prague. Near the statue of King Wenceslaus two students, Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc, self-immolated in protest. Hundreds of Czechoslovaks were stranded in London. Police would bring Czechoslovak passport holders to Velehrad. The priests delegated emergency food and cash needs to Mimi Kuttelwascherová.

The Women's Royal Voluntary Service responded to her call for help, arriving with ingredients to make large cauldrons of stew. Two men from the Home Office arrived almost immediately with emergency funds for each person. Extra rooms at nearby 17 London St. were made available by Mr & Mrs Kuttelwascher to house more stranded Czechoslovaks. Every space was filled with frightened people trying to contact their families. Many chose to stay, seeking political asylum.

Out of this situation new young blood surfaced to help VELEHRAD. Father Pazderka s.j. came to help the ageing priests. Father František was asked to become the resident priest at TWYFORD ABBEY, a care home for clerics run by The Alexian Brothers, where pastoral care was more manageable.

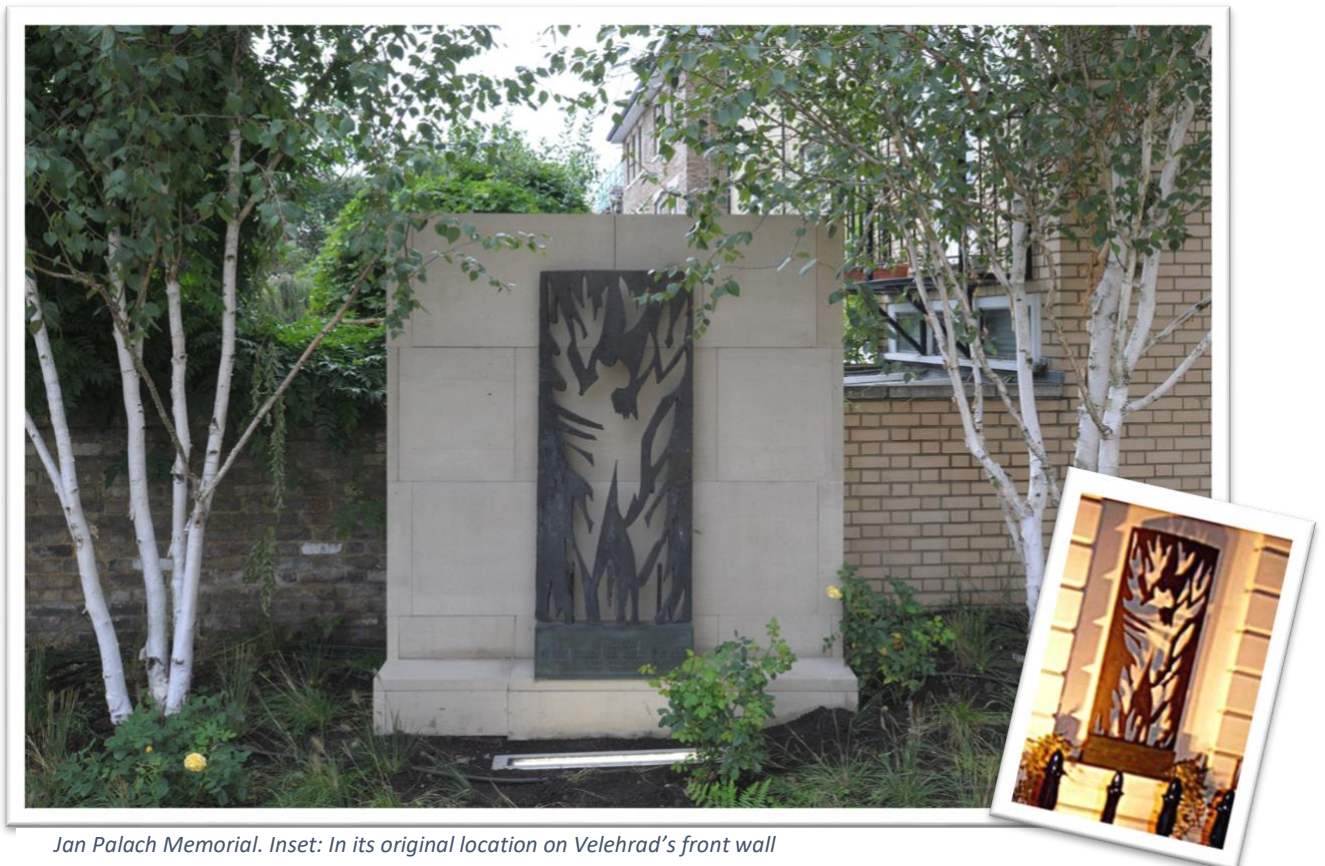


Twyford Abbey

Fr Jan Lang focused on working behind the scenes on cases for Justice and Restitution. A strong following emerged of supporters and helpers at VELEHRAD to continue the work of the centre under Father J Lang.

A memorial was commissioned by Fr. Jan Lang and created by the renowned Czechoslovak Sculptor František Bělský. It was originally displayed on the outside wall of VELEHRAD (inset below) to honour the sacrifice of the two students Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc in response to the 1968 invasion.

This sculpture is now relocated within the garden at the new Velehrad (pictured below). The Velehrad community and other politicians and dignitaries congregate around the memorial every year for a ceremony, raising a Czech and a Slovak flag in commemoration of Palach's death.



Jan Palach Memorial. Inset: In its original location on Velehrad's front wall

Fr František continued working on his written records. Each week he walked the Grand Union Canal to meet Jan Kuttelwascher for Czechoslovak lunch, music, dancing and memories. Eventually, Fr. František retrieved his documents from Dr. Boublíka. He combined his parallel works into one and completed his thesis at The Open University.

On full retirement Fr. Josef František returned to his beloved homeland.

He died on 28 February 1992 near his birthplace, leaving his legacy *Roots of Patriotism*.

The old VELEHRAD was sold but successfully continued in a new venue. It remains a lasting legacy to the first Trustees and émigrés who survived their uprooted lives.

1986/ EPILOGUE/ THE YALTA MEMORIAL



THIS MEMORIAL WAS PLACED
HERE BY MEMBERS OF ALL PARTIES
IN BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT
AND BY MANY OTHER SYMPATHISERS
IN MEMORY OF THE COUNTLESS
INNOCENT MEN WOMEN AND
CHILDREN FROM THE SOVIET UNION
AND OTHER EAST EUROPEAN STATES
WHO WERE IMPRISONED AND DIED
AT THE HANDS OF COMMUNIST
GOVERNMENTS AFTER BEING
REPATRIATED AT THE CONCLUSION
OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR
MAY THEY REST IN PEACE

Europe was reorganised
at the Yalta Conference,
4-11 February 1945, held
in The Crimea near YALTA.

As a result of the decisions made,
countless thousands lost their homelands. Those
that escaped spread across the world. Many never spoke of
their ordeal. They are remembered in Angela Conner's 1986
sculpture, *Twelve Responses to Tragedy*, in the Yalta Memorial
Gardens opposite London's Victoria and Albert Museum.



Czech Ambassador H. E. Marie Chatardova lays a bouquet at the memorial



Scan the code for the dispositions of
The Czechoslovak Brigade in Britain
during World War Two

With grateful thanks to my editor and designer, Gray Elkington