

CONTENTS

Introduction / 1

I

THE OLD WORLD

- 1–Beginnings / 13
- 2–The Birth of Resistance / 21
- 3–The Noose Tightens / 37
 - 4–The Arrest / 47
 - 5–In Captivity I / 53
 - 6–In Captivity II / 59
 - 7–Surviving / 66
- 8–False Beginnings / 74
- 9–Political Refugee / 91

II

THE NEW WORLD

- 10–North American Arrivals / 101
- 11–Newsmaking in the New Land / 106
- 12–University Beginnings / 112
- 13–The Weyerhaeuser Connection / 123
- 14–Foundations for the Reserves / 130
 - 15–Various Battles / 139
- 16–Reserves Established / 144
- 17–Student Relations / 160
- 18–Becoming Known / 167
- 19–Happy Returns / 173
- 20–Closing Down / 184
- Epilogue / 188

Select Bibliography / 191

About the Author / 193

Index / 195

Introduction

DURING THE WAR *Krajina* was a just a concept. At least for me, initially. And not a very clear one at that. With a small “k” the word in Czech can mean the countryside. With a capital “K” it is a person’s name. Since it’s impossible to detect capitals in spoken language, I became thoroughly confused. Moreover, as a person, Krajina is masculine, as a landscape it’s feminine, and around our family table it could be used interchangeably. Since I was seven at the time I was not too swift in grasping which was which; my brain merely registered the existence of some vague entity by that name. Somewhere.

It didn’t help much that there was another entity bandied around the family dinner table at that time called *Drtina*. With a small “d,” it means a material which has been crushed. But as is the case with Krajina, Drtina could also be a person’s name. These mysteries were not explained by my parents: I think it was presumed that the greater the confusion in the minds of their progeny, the less likely my brother and I were to talk about either Krajina or Drtina at school.

When I first began hearing of these confusing entities, Krajina was either hiding from the Gestapo or being imprisoned by it. Drtina was permanently in a London exile, broadcasting weekly commentaries in Czech over the BBC, invariably predicting a sad end for the Third Reich. Both Krajina and Drtina, now fully materialized, are pictured alongside my father and two other prominent Resistance members on an oft-reproduced photograph as they met at a Prague airport in May 1945. Drtina was being welcomed from his London exile. For added piquancy, in the background there is a tank with some boisterous Red Army types on it — an ominous sign of things to come.

Slowly I began to understand that the “landscape” my parents referred to during the war was in fact this man with a dark mane which extended in a triangular fashion into his forehead. One of my father’s best friends, though at that time he seemed seldom to smile, Vladimir Krajina was always kind to me. As I grew older I realized he was a great national hero who during the war had provided the Allies with valuable strategic information.

Along with his wife Marie (always referred to in our family as Mánička) and their daughter Milena, Krajina took up residence after the war two floors below in our apartment house. Milena was my exact contemporary. She not only attended the same school but was also in the same class. To complete the Krajina family group, there was a perennially smiling grandmother, Marie’s mother.

It has become morbidly fashionable in today’s Czech Republic to downplay the role of its wartime underground. Perhaps it did not produce such spectacularly colourful personalities as the Norwegian Max Manus or the Yugoslav Tito, but there were some sound reasons for this.

In wartime, there were over 1,000 kilometres of mostly hostile and mountainous terrain between Berlin and Belgrade, while the Norwegians, though Nazi-occupied, were mercifully separated from Hitler by an ocean. On the other hand the distance between Prague and Berlin is a mere 280 kilometres and over excellent roads. This is why it was so much easier for the Nazis to keep sabotage and partisan activity at a minimum in the Czech Protectorate. However, they were far less successful in controlling intelligence leaks, and this is where the Czech underground was second to none.

Also, the Norwegian underground came into existence only after the Nazi invasion of April 1940; the Yugoslavian even a year later. By that time, having been active for more than two years, the Czech underground had provided spectacular services for the Allies. Of course, also during that time many of its members had been imprisoned and executed.

The Norwegian resistance hero Manus, too, was being hunted, but periodically he was able to take a breather in neighbouring neutral Sweden, where he relaxed and sipped coffee or something stronger with the MI5 types at the British Embassy. And Tito was surrounded by his fellow partisans in territory effectively controlled by them. He was also supplied fairly regularly via air and sea by the British.

Nothing like that was available to Krajina. By comparison, for nearly two years between 1941 and 1943, with the Gestapo relentlessly hunting him down, Vladimir Krajina was mostly alone, being hidden by good people who risked their lives by providing him with shelter. One can imagine the effect such tension would have had on a man with lesser conviction and determination. Krajina not only survived but also managed, most of the time, to make sure his radio messages reached the Allies.

In touch with a highly placed Nazi official during those two years, Krajina and his group sent radio messages to London about such incidents as Hitler's cancellation of his plans for the invasion of Britain, the date of the planned Nazi attack in the Balkans and — perhaps most important of all — the date of Hitler's invasion of the USSR. Churchill duly informed Stalin but the Soviet dictator, true to form, distrusted any such news emanating from the West. He made no preparations, which cost the Soviet Union several thousand lives initially, millions in the long run.

For four years during the war, Krajina was either on the run or engaged in a dangerous chess game with the Gestapo. On every move depended the lives of many people. It was utterly exhausting both physically and mentally, yet nothing could thwart his determination. Even the Allied victory in 1945 did not bring the relaxation and complete return to his beloved botany which he craved so much. There was now a new enemy in the form of yet another madman. This time his name was Stalin.

This writer remembers a group of Czech wartime Resistance workers meeting in their New York City exile during the 1950s. Somehow the conversation turned to the 1942 film *Casablanca*, which featured a supposed leader of the Czechoslovak wartime underground with the Hungarian name of Victor Laszlo. It was played by Paul Henreid, a refugee from Austrian Nazism.

To a man they had loved the movie, although not as a documentary but as a well-acted fairytale. To start off, the idea that Laszlo, the most sought-after escapee from the Nazis, could be walking about in Nazi-controlled Casablanca in a well-ironed white suit while sipping champagne cocktails at Rick's Café Americain may have appealed to the Hollywood mogul Jack Warner, but would have certainly been inconsistent with the actions of a genuine conspirator. By contrast, Krajina, the true Czech underground leader, adopted a different name and grew a beard before he ventured out in public in the remote Czech Paradise area.

In the film there is a scene in which the Vichy police break up an underground meeting and Laszlo escapes with the head waiter from the café explaining that “the police broke up our meeting, we escaped in the last moment.” When detecting such meetings in the Czech lands, the Nazis always made sure that such meeting places were completely surrounded. Moreover, Krajina never attended such gatherings, preferring walks through dark streets and, if possible, a one-on-one arrangement.

Perhaps least believable in the film is the incessant clever banter among the Gestapo Major Strasser (who for some reason wears a dress *Luftwaffe* uniform), the police chief, Rick and Laszlo. Strasser bargains with Laszlo, and when Laszlo refuses to divulge the names of underground leaders throughout Europe, he informs him that “it is my duty that you stay in Casablanca.” In reality it would have been his duty either to take him back to Germany or have him shot.

On the subject of the European underground leaders in Paris, Athens, Amsterdam and even Berlin, it's significant to note that Krajina always did his best not to know anyone beyond the closest group of conspirators precisely for that reason: so that under torture he could not have betrayed them. Also, the Nazis kept an air-tight control on communications be-

tween the various parts of their empire because the emergence of anything resembling an underground network would have spelled an end to their designs on controlling Europe.

And when Laszlo tells Strasser that even giving him the names of the leaders would not help the Germans because “from every corner hundreds, thousands would rise in our place” — and these people the Germans would be unable to kill — he is unfortunately sadly mistaken. As Krajina saw after the assassination of the SS leader Heydrich, the subsequent murderous rampage of the Nazis prevented the underground from ever again repeating its major successes.

And speaking of the Heydrich assassination, just how naïvely the Americans initially saw the European Resistance is evident in a 1943 Hollywood film called *Hangmen Also Die*. In it, after letting a group of students go without checking a single identity, a Prague university professor is arrested by the Gestapo and he asks: “On what charge?”

Had he seen the film, Krajina, who saw many a bloodied body brought to the Gestapo headquarters when he was incarcerated there, would probably have produced a sad smile. Especially after Heydrich’s death, those arrested wouldn’t have dared to ask anything. The standard procedure was to stand quietly facing the wall while the Gestapo thoroughly ransacked your apartment.

But there is one scene in *Casablanca* with which not only Krajina but quite likely every Resistance member would agree was authentic. It comes when Rick, while bandaging Laszlo’s injured hand, asks if he had ever wondered if it’s worth all this: “You might as well question why we breathe. If we stop breathing, we will die. If we stop fighting our enemies, the world will die.”

In a way Vladimir Krajina’s career was reminiscent of a Walt Disney character in his prize-winning 1938 film, *Ferdinand the Bull*. It tells of a magnificent animal chosen for the bullfighting ring. But Ferdinand prefers to smell the flowers instead of fighting and, eventually, after failing to engage the toreador, is returned to his pasture. According to the narration, he’s sitting there still, under his cork tree, quietly smelling his flowers. He is happy. The flower-loving Resistance fighter may have been a thorn in the Germans’ side, but unlike many of his companions,

he refused to carry a gun. And — also unlike many of them — he survived to smell many more flowers, for, after his emigration to Canada, he was happy under his beloved Douglas firs in British Columbia, with perhaps one Disneyesque factor added: the botanist Vladimir Krajina suffered from hay fever.



In 1948 the Krajinas and my family took a winter vacation together in the Orlice Mountains. Shortly after New Year's Eve, Krajina, his daughter Milena, my father and I climbed on skis to the top of 1400-metre-high Kralický Sněžník. We had lunch there and then started to make our way down via another route.

Soon it began to snow and with the wind up it was obvious there was a blizzard in the making. In the middle of the woods we suddenly came upon a creek which had overflowed its banks and now had become a sheet of ice some five metres wide. What followed was proof of Krajina's uncanny ability to deal successfully with emergencies in his own ingenious way.

Because of the storm and approaching darkness we couldn't return to the hotel where we had eaten lunch. But going forward across the icy strip that extended down into the steep valley would be equally dangerous. While the rest of us stood about undecided, Krajina assessed the situation, then took command, ordering us to take off our coats and tie them together. Taking hold of one end, he lay down on the ice and, inch by inch, nudged himself to the other side, holding on to his metal-tipped ski pole with his other hand. With the aid of the combined coats onto which we held for dear life, his daughter Milena and I then followed his example, with Krajina on one side and my father on the other. The last one across was my father, following Krajina's example with the ski pole as a brake in case of a possible slip.

This quick-witted ability to solve difficult problems ranked right up there with Krajina's incredible survival instinct. Again and again it manifested itself with both Nazis and Communists.

Within months after the frozen stream episode came his and our escape to West Germany, following the February Communist takeover

of Czechoslovakia. We were briefly interned with him in a Frankfurt refugee centre.

I did not see Krajina again until I arrived in Vancouver in the mid-1960s. By that time he was not only well established at the Botany Department of the University of British Columbia (UBC) but also as an important advisor to the provincial ministry of forests and of the forest industry.

The circumstances of his life may have changed but not his talents, boldness, determination or his loyalty to his friends and, in my case, loyalty even to their progeny. I was toying with the idea of graduate studies in the humanities during the 1960s, although my undergraduate grades were not that encouraging. The UBC department in question was not enthusiastic about admitting me, but Krajina knew very well that if a department member vouched for an applicant, the situation could change. Krajina approached a Czech student who had once spent a considerable amount of time at his house — now a junior member of the department in question — to ask him to present my case as my sponsor. The timid man begged off, explaining that it really wasn't the proper thing to do, presenting all sorts of excuses which Krajina found frivolous. It was obvious that the young professor was not about to risk his career just because it concerned a fellow Czech.

That, of course, was inimical to Krajina's conviction that when it concerned the fate of a countryman, a true patriot must be ready to put his hand into the fire. I recall him sadly informing me that nothing could be done, at the same time leaving no doubt as to what he now thought of his young protégé, whom until then he had considered a friend.

Fast forward about eight years: my first novel had been published in Toronto both in its original English and in a Czech translation. The reviews were exceptionally good, and I was resting on my laurels quite comfortably as a result.

A phone call from Vladimir Krajina came soon after. He had just finished reading my novel. Though now a patriotic Canadian, he still considered America to be the beacon of the free world and didn't like my frequent criticism of the U.S. in the novel. In his merciless opinion he noted that some of the chapters of the novel could have been easily

published in the Czech Communist Party newspaper *Rudé Právo* — to help with its anti-American propaganda.

Thinking about it now, almost forty years later, I have come to the conclusion he may have been at least partially right. My intent had been to show how newly arrived, idealistic immigrants were sometimes unable to cope with America's idiosyncrasies, even blemishes. And for dramatic purposes I may have overstated them.

But here was Vladimir Krajina all over — unabashed, undeterred and unafraid of offending people when it came to stating what he believed to be the truth. Speaking to a first-time novelist in his thirties, the son of his good friend, he quite likely considered the call to be something of an educational nature. After all, he was a professor with impeccable credentials, even though these were hardly in literary criticism.



Krajina straddled two different worlds during two different ages. More than half of his life would be spent in the new one, which provided him with great freedoms, while at times during his earlier life the restrictions placed on such freedoms were hardly imaginable.

He was born into a pre-World War I Central Europe in one of the most prosperous corners of the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was a sleepy corner with its all-powerful emperor already seventy-five years old, an enviable age at the time. As a result, when steam engines were the norm and the first airplanes were taking to the air, his lands were run according to the horse-and-buggy customs of the early nineteenth century. Austria-Hungary was actually more comatose than sleepy. The first Czechoslovak president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, estimated that his country would need fifty years for democracy to take a permanent hold. At the time of the Munich Agreement his country was barely twenty years old.

Despite his origins, Krajina adapted well to Canada. And many times. He may never have fully mastered the Queen's English (though some claim that he succeeded in transforming it into Krajina's Own), but he certainly understood the spirit of the land, its requirements and his

duties. At the same time he contributed his bold forays in the quest of truth and his valiant attempts to do the right thing.

To some, Krajina's personage may seem an anachronism in this century imbued with post-modernist subjectivism and outright self-indulgence. But for most of us the idea that men of his moral fibre would be out of place at any period of human history is hard to fathom.