

## **The story of the Jelens in Alberta.**

We, Pavel and Sylva Jelen, came to Alberta on 14. August 1973, crossing the US-Canadian border in early evening, by car, at the magnificent border crossing point of North Portal, Saskatchewan. We remember well the welcoming words of the admitting officer, who, after filling out the necessary permanent immigration papers and handing us the copies, welcomed us to our new home country and advised that we should take particularly good care of the taxpayers form.

The explanation why we entered this rather unusual way is simple. We came to the US legally, with Paul having been admitted to the University of Minnesota in 1969 (landing in New York on the way to Minneapolis, coincidentally, also on 14. August). After completing the Ph.D. studies and spending one additional year at the University of Illinois, Paul decided to seek permanent university employment, and the University of Alberta had offered such. Thus we entered Canada as regular “landed immigrants”, not as political refugees, as was, at those times, the usual route for Czechs and Slovaks fleeing from the Czechoslovakia occupied by the armies of the Soviets and their subordinates, after crushing the “Prague Spring” liberalization movement of Alexander Dubcek. Of course this was not in line with the policies of the then communist Czechoslovakia, and we were henceforth treated by them as having illegally left the country and thus becoming traitors and criminals in their eyes.

However, the story of our new life in Canada starts many years earlier and does have political overtones. We both lived in Prague, Sylva’s connections being also strong to her birthplace, the town of Havlickuv Brod, famous as the centre of the nationally important potato growing area. Sylva’s grandfather was, before the WW2, one of the key personalities in the potato growing business and a very successful self-made farmer. This gave the whole family a very negative image in the eyes of the new Czechoslovak communist regime that came to power in 1948, and there were some severe repercussions for all family members and even more serious events that the family had to endure. Paul’s family fared slightly better, the main difficulty being the “poor fit” with the proletarian image as Paul’s father was a lawyer, almost by definition an enemy of what turned out to be a criminal regime. Paul paid the price for the situation by not being admitted to any University after finishing the high school (with stellar results). After 2 years of “clearing up” his image as a factory worker, the party decision was modified to allow him to study, but only mechanical engineering (as the regime experienced a chronic shortage of qualified engineers). This turned out to be one of the lucky “strikes of fate” as, after choosing the food engineering as his specialisation, Paul started as an engineer in a regional dairy company, with a good prospect of advancement and interesting problems to solve. One of the company’s plants experienced serious problems in dealing with whey (a bothersome and economically burdensome by-product of cheese making). Paul used this, in the atmosphere of gradual liberalization in the society, to apply to the University of Minnesota to study technological methods of dealing with the problem, at that time well advanced in the USA but neglected in Czechoslovakia. Sylva, as a newly minted MD, worked in a national pharmaceutical company.

As went the words in one of the popular songs of that time.... “The fragrance of time was sweet”, and the past negative experiences well in the background. However, after the Prague Spring events came and went, the offer from the University of Minnesota became irresistible and, with our 18 months old daughter Sarka, we decided to “take the plunge” and experience the student life once again, this time in the USA. We did not leave with the intention never to return; on the contrary, the recent positive experience with the Prague Spring developments gave a comforting feeling that the final decision can still wait. We were young and naive.

The beginnings of our Canadian life were comfortable. We knew what we are getting into after experiencing 4 years of University life in the USA; we knew the language; the position of an Assistant Professor brought with it helpful collegial and social connections; and the University atmosphere offered lots of opportunities for developing individual interests and finding one’s place in the society. We became quickly absorbed into the Canadian University milieu, and had little desire, at least at the beginning, to associate specifically with any members of the Czech community, whether organized or not. We found a few newly arrived Czech friends of the same interests and inclinations, but beyond those, it was mainly long-time Edmontonian residents with whom we associated. We were not in a position needing assistance, and we did not seek any. If anything, some of the recently arrived immigrants of Czech origins viewed us with distrust. We came from the USA (at that time USA was a dream of all Czechs, including some that came first to Canada), and we left Czechoslovakia as a whole family, and with the “official blessing” at that! In other words, we were highly suspect. We did not seek any contacts with the local Czech society, and it took a number of years to become involved in the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences of Alberta. There was little to no attempt from the established Czech community, in particular the “organized officialdom”, to seek active involvement from us.

The first years of the University life were busy. As an ambitious emigrant, the Assistant Professor wanted to prove that he can be at least as effective, productive and successful as his well established Canadian colleagues. This turned out to be a time-consuming task. Writing research grant proposals and research papers – the yardsticks of university career success – took lots of evening and weekend time, the time than could have been spent with the family. Luckily the timing of our move to Canada was optimal with respect to bringing up the children – the two daughters that came with us were at the pre-school age so that the schooling posed no problems. After a few initial attempts to break through the impenetrable fortress of local medical interest, Sylva’s decision - to abandon her attempts to re-qualify for continuation of her barely started MD career - was one of the wisest and most positive decisions, fundamental for our successful and conflict-free amalgamation into the Canadian society. She was the true guardian of harmonious family life, supporting greatly the university career which took lots of international travelling and similar activities. Also in this regard the Canadian society provided an ideal underpinning of the professional ambitions. Most of his professional life Paul was proud to represent Canada in the various international organizations, in positions to which he was nominated by his colleagues, based on qualifications rather than political or personal connections

as used to be the norm in the old country. Especially memorable in this regard was the life-long association with the Canadian National Committee of the International Dairy Federation (FIL-IDF Canada), culminating in the nomination for the prestigious IDF World Prize, a rare honor that only one other Canadian received earlier. The purpose of the prize is to honor significant lifetime contributions to progress in the international dairy field.

We were able to take a full advantage of the University sabbatical program, which sounded like a dream to someone brought up under severe restrictions concerning any chances to travel and see the world. The sabbatical sojourns took the whole family wide and far, including Switzerland (on 3 separate occasions); New Zealand twice, also Australia and Japan. With the various international projects (bringing at least the principal researcher to several other countries including Norway, Germany, South Africa, Nepal and more recently China), our adopted country gave the whole family an unprecedented chance to enjoy the free life to the fullest - something that in the society where we came from one could not even dream about.

Integration into the local Canadian life followed several lines, including school, concert life, community league involvement, and especially, mainly through Sylva's leadership qualities, the lifestyle and fitness activities. Through the 30 years of her very successful community fitness program, she became a well known fitness leader, respected throughout the physical education community. This is perhaps the best example of how the move into the new country helped to develop hidden talent and resulted in the new home benefitting in the process. All three daughters, born in three different countries, (Czechoslovakia – now Czechia; USA; and Canada) carry forward, in their respective communities, this strongly inherited passion of their mother for active outdoor life and love for nature, in engagement with others. We became members of the Alpine Club of Canada and offered volunteer assistance in their activities on several occasions. On the local scene, we organized a small tennis club, offered some teaching activities and, for several years, organized a tournament for junior players.

Our decision to become Canadians (while retaining the Czech citizenship also) did not come lightly, especially since we had the “back door” open for us for some time. We knew that our decision could have negative consequences for the more immediate family members left behind in Czechoslovakia - parents, a brother, a sister, and at least two cousins. Fortunately these hardships were not as severe as we feared. During the difficult times of limited travels, mail censorship and our status (in the eyes of the Czech regime) as illegal emigrants, the contacts with these family members were limited to non-existent. The regime did allow the aging parents to visit Canada on a limited basis, and this way we always kept the lines of contact open, even though, right from the first years of our new life, we knew that the real home for the rest of our lives is Edmonton, not Prague. After the first years of establishing our Canadian identity, when the political situation in Czechoslovakia was rather unenviable, our limited interests in the affairs of the old homeland started to increase. This accelerated rapidly after the “Velvet Revolution” of the 1989, through the gradually developing active personal connections in the Czech university and musical circles. The former was assisted by the Canadian Government targeted program for

Canadian university professionals - expatriates from several countries of the former Soviet bloc. As a result, ongoing cooperation was developed between the University of Alberta and the University of Chemical Technology in Prague, resulting in annual student exchanges, Paul's annual participation in the committee for state examinations of graduating M.Sc. students, and occasional faculty visits both ways, as well as reciprocal activities with other Czech universities, including a formal course deliveries. The musical connections started with the very first visit of the old homeland after it became free of the communist straitjacket, and developed into a very active ongoing assistance to some of the top international Czech classical musicians in organizing their tours of Western Canada. This focus combines our ongoing positive feelings - indeed pride – in the Czech cultural heritage, especially in the realm of the classical music, with the sense of contributing to our new home country. We are happy that these efforts strike a good balance between the two seemingly competing lines now running in our lives, giving expression of the cultural identity acquired in the old homeland through activities for the benefit of all Canadian classical music concert goers.

These lines will be much more blurred in the three branches of the Canadian Jelen clan, as all the daughters got fully Canadian education and the Czech traits has become secondary, particularly with the younger two being married to “full-bloodied Canadians”. Only the Czech-born oldest, married to another new Czech immigrant, has enough in-law connections to the old country to keep the Czech line active. In the third generation, however, the Canadian side of the line predominates almost completely here also.

We are proud Canadians, enjoying catching up with many aspects of the Canadian culture and history which we missed being educated under the banner of Marx and Lenin. Only now we are learning about the origins and operations of the Hudson's Bay Company, soaking up the history of the Canadian Pacific or the Kettle Valley Railways, and taking pride in the successes and commiserate the losses of the Edmonton Oilers or the Montreal Canadiens. We feel totally at home in our new country and are thankful for all the blessings that the providence accorded us. Not returning to the “socialist paradise” in 1973, as we were commanded by the comrades, was one of the few pivotal lucky decisions we, the Canadian Jelens, have made.