



Andrea Fecko's story of

Eliska



In the 1920's, every Sunday, Eliska Kadlecova, her brothers and sister would take walks with their father through the streets of Prague. He was an engineer and taught them the history of the buildings, the architectural styles and the myths that make Prague what it is. Eli, my mother, loved her city and thought she would never leave.

Eli was born on the 6th of January 1916, the Feast of the Three Kings – Epiphany. Prague was in the midst of the First World War, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire was coming to an end.

Eli's father was in charge of building factories for the production of sugar all over the country. Her mother stayed at home with Eli, her brother, Venda, who was four years older, her brother Mila, who was six years younger and Olga, who was born in 1924.

They lived in a big apartment above her grandparent's *hospoda*, called the Red Mill which was central to their lives. On a hot day, my grandmother, who loved the peace of Sunday, would sit on the balcony, her feet in a basin of cold water, books at her side, and eat ice cream from a big bowl. It was a glorious childhood and Eli was bright, beautiful, funny and beloved, especially by her grandmother, who adored her and her brother Venda.

Their grandfather had a moustache that twirled at the ends and always wore a watch on a chain. In the *hospoda*, he always sat at the table that was reserved for him specifically. The children accompanied him, in a horse drawn carriage, to collect rents at properties they owned. They also loved feeding the horses that brought the beer barrels.

Eli was full of mischief. Being the oldest sister, she was often required to look after her younger siblings. When she took them to the park, she would sometimes ask the park attendant to keep an eye on them whilst she went on a date. After a few hours she would pick them up on her way back. Once, when she had not completed a dress making assignment, she asked a friend if she could use hers. Eli got an A for the project, and the friend got a C!

For Christmas they had a traditional Czech menu. They fattened two geese on the balcony: one for the family and one for the customers of the pub, who could not afford a good dinner. There were also carp in a basin filled with water. These were butchered and bonked on the head respectively by the cook, and they were one of the reasons Eli was never squeamish when it came to catching fish or skinning animals.

Eli spent a lot of time in her grandmother's *hospoda* doing whatever chores were necessary. She was a favourite with the customers and loved being there.

Her brother Mila, a beautiful boy, was favoured by his father because of his love and talent for all things technical. He was also full of mischief and would give his friends boxing lessons if they did his homework.

Life changed dramatically in 1930, when one day Mila, calling out to a friend as he crossed the road, did not see the truck that killed him instantly only seconds later. Eli's mother's hair turned grey overnight and her father was never the same. The family moved to a villa in the suburbs, not wanting to see reminders of Mila at every turn.

As a young woman Eli had many suitors. She went to balls and afternoon dance teas, always attired with a sense of fashion and style. She attended a school for home economics and was a most gifted chef, artist, and needlewoman.

At the age of 23 she met her first husband, Dr. Vaclav Skakal. He was a doctor of law and a member of Prague's high society. They were married in 1939, just as the war was beginning. They lived in his mansion and had a fulltime housekeeper and chauffeur. All of Eli's clothes, including shoes, belts and gloves, were tailor-made. Artists, judges, politicians and musicians were their company. They had no children.

As World War II progressed, the parties continued with even more abandon, since no one knew what the next day might hold. Czechoslovakia was occupied by German forces. Sometimes German officers would move into their house. My mother told me of one time, when the Germans were leaving, she was standing next to a woman who was holding a baby. One of the soldiers came up to them and bayoneted the baby. It was an awful time.

When the war ended, there was much celebration. The trials of the war had solidified the identity of the Czech people. Men who had escaped Czechoslovakia to join the Czech Free Forces in France and England returned and were feted by their compatriots for their patriotism and heroism. Life found a semblance of normality.

In 1946, my mother went to an afternoon tea dance with a girlfriend. A man asked her to dance. He told her he would marry her, and that he had danced with her many years before. She did not remember this and protested that she was married. He said it did not matter and made a date with her. She did not keep the date. A few weeks later she was getting off a tram in downtown Prague, and there he was again, changing a flat tire on his car.

As soon as he saw her, he came to her and said, "We had a date. Now, don't move, you are coming with me." And so started Eli's romance and love affair with Josef Baus, known as Pepa. Eventually Pepa went to visit Dr. Skakal to tell him he wanted him to divorce his wife and that he, Josef Baus, intended to marry her. Dr. Skakal called him a thin-toothed snake and dared him to find a lawyer who would handle the case. Pepa did find a lawyer and the divorce went through.

My father, an engineer, had worked in India and Persia and was now posted to South Africa for three years. This was darkest Africa as far as my mother was concerned, the end of the earth, but she was prepared to go, as she knew they would return in three years. My father left for South Africa and my mother joined him there in November 1947. Before she left, her father insisted she take all her jewelry, sewing it into her clothes, hiding more in her toothpaste. She remembered sitting with him at the airport as he was taking his leave of her with great sadness. She didn't know that he had terminal lung cancer and hadn't told her, so she would not change her plans.

The flight to South Africa took three days, with overnight stops in Amsterdam and Nairobi. Finally, on November 10th, she arrived in Johannesburg. They were married on the 15th. Unfortunately, just before Christmas, when she was six weeks pregnant with me, she received a telegram with the news that her father had died. She was in a foreign country, with Christmas taking place in the heat instead of the snow, with no friends or family, overcome by homesickness.

My parents lived in a company house, met a few Czech families there and made some South African friends. They bought shares in a Czech company that designed and manufactured clothes. When I was born in August 1948, their love was complete. My father was 45, my mother 32.

In 1950, my father was called back to Prague for a conference. The Communists had nationalized his company, but he believed his job was secure. When he arrived, his passport was taken away and he was told to ask us to return. He had been in the Czech Free Forces and many of his comrades in arms were

now imprisoned by the Communists. So my father knew he wasn't safe. Through a Czech consul he got word to my mother, telling her to stay put. My mother, whose English was still very limited, was left with me in a house that the company would no longer pay for, not knowing if and when my father would return.

A Czech family heard of our plight and took us in to live with them. Because my mother was a competent seamstress, she got a job in the factory she had shares in and would leave me with the family during the day. She would go early in the morning, by train, surrounded by Africans, which for her was very new, and come home quite late at night.

Six months later, after escaping over a river into Austria in the dead of night, my father returned to us with nothing more than a valise. My parents sold my mother's jewelry and with the proceeds put a deposit on a house. They bought a second-hand bed and couch and a lovely oil painting, which I still own. The bed stands were tomato boxes and they sat on these to toast the oil painting.

My father found work, and my mother continued working as a seamstress so she could stay at home with me and earn some income. They were immigrants in a time when there was no help for immigrants, and yet, they did the best they could and enjoyed life whenever they could.

Our house was always perfectly kept and flowers from her garden always adorned the table. My mother would often go for walks and gather cuttings from other gardens.

Life was good. Every day, before my father came home, my mother would brush her hair and put on lipstick in order to greet him. Dinner was always a three-course affair of her excellent cooking. In the evening they would sit together, my father playing patience and my mother sewing hems or beading. They would listen to the radio and at 7pm my father would make tea.

Every Monday evening they would go to the movies. My mother loved them, and the theatre. She also loved to read all the gossip magazines – mostly to see what everyone was wearing. Friday nights were spent playing Canasta with their Czech friends, the Borgens. They alternated between houses, and when the Borgens arrived, Steve would kiss my mother's hand and my father would kiss Lilly's hand.

My mother had a sparkling voice. She would sing to me at night, and whenever we travelled, the first thing she asked, as we set upon our journey, was, "What song should we sing?" They were always Czech songs.

There were picnics and gatherings, food and baking. My parent's love endured, and my father would say that he always loved her ringing laughter. She remained funny, elegant and graceful.

In October 1968, my mother and I were finally able to visit Prague. It was just as beautiful as she had described to me. But then the Russians invaded, and we had to sneak onto a bus of foreign geologists to escape the country. She still loved Prague, but once again couldn't stay.

My father died in 1978, at the age of 74. My mother did not break, she did not crumble, but she never ever looked at or considered another man, although they did look at and consider her.

In 1980, my husband, daughter and I moved to North Vancouver. As I would not move without her, my mother immigrated once again in 1981, to Canada. Here she continued being a devoted grandmother, mother and friend. She was always gracious but always had her own opinion.

Towards the end she was depressed, arthritic, and had senile dementia. She refused a hip operation, and my daughter remembers visiting her in the care home. My mother gyrated her hips, making them click, and said, "Listen: castanets!"

She died in 1999. Her ashes are now in Prague, with my father's. I took them there, mixed them with potting soil and dug them into the Czech earth. She would have approved.