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ZDENEK PRAZAK

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AGE 26

FEENEY: This is May 10, 1988. I'm Brian Feeney, and I'm here today to interview Zdenek Prazak. ( break in tape ) Mr. Prazak, I wanted to begin by asking you when you were born.

PRAZAK: I was born in Prague, in Czechoslovakia, in to 1925, and I gonna have schooling in Czechoslovakia. And after that I have for the business college evenings. And after 1943 I start working in a business I sell the sports goods until 1945, after the came Czechoslovakia free again, I was working with young organization called it Nadish [ph] (Slovak). This one was a young organization to fight the Communists. And I was work with them. I had some schooling with the

groups, and I was very interested go on town, and I make a speech against Communist till 1948. After 1948 the was called pooch [ph]. The Communists, they get over the country, and start really hard time with all these people that was against the regime.

FEENEY: Tell me what it was like when you were growing up though, when you were a young man in Prague?

PRAZAK: I was, uh, I was, uh, very interested about soccer, I go in sports. And my second hobby was dance. The only thing, mostly the young, the young people go dance, afternoon Sunday, call Sunday tea, till two to five on a Sunday afternoon, and the girls came and have nice dance with the music, and it was really classy. You know, that they are doing, mostly Sundays afternoon. And after I was old already I go on a Saturday night and, and go to balls, you know, the nice balls. In between time I go teaching in a dance special school in Czechoslovakia, in all Europe. And, you know, for young people go in the schooling for dancing, was very nicely go, and after that have nice evenings with the young ladies. She have a nice dress, long dress, and I have the tuxedo, you know, the end, this schools, and it was really nice time. I

was enjoyed the, the dancing with the. And the sports, go soccer most of the time, you know, soccer or the hockey, you know, this one was the main sports in Czechoslovakia. And I have uh, a really nice memories for my young life. Only thing is, till 1948, after the Communists take it over, my father was president in a post office, and he don't want to sign the Communist papers for the himself and for the employees. And the Communists put him in a jail, and after a couple of years he was in jail, they put him in a night, they suspended him for president job and put it him working nights, just counting money and working nights. And his health was not so well, and he gave, between time he gave the message, ( incoherent speech ) "Not, my life, good life in Czechoslovakia." And the Communists, he believed are going to be a long time in a country. And he say, "It would be much better if I go and left the country. I have some relatives around Cleveland. He say we visit them, and we're going to have a better life than this regime in Czechoslovakia.

FEENEY: What was it like, though, in Prague, for you, during World War Two?

PRAZAK: When I was a young fellow I, this time I was, you know, quite young. I, I was, you know, everybody, I heard from my parents and my uncles and everybody was against German. And this time already, I ( he laughs ) I don't go much, and I have the German school in my class. I don't make too much attention. I don't speak, I don't like speak Germans, and after 1948, after I left the Czechoslovakia I go to Germany, I stay there a couple of years, in a camp. I'm missing the German language. I don't have any idea I'm going to be need it, you know, in my life, some German language, yeah. And much about this life in, in between Germans coming, I don't know much about, you know, I was quite young this time, and I know more after the life at, uh, '45, you know, after there was the German, after the war, I was more interested about these politicians, against the Communists, yeah.

FEENEY: So what was life like for you in Prague then between 1945 and 1948?

PRAZAK: 1948 was, everybody was really happy and the, the around the wartime, the people was no much, not much dancing out, and everything was quiet after the German was occupation, and after 1945 the life was very nice

and start the gymnastics Sokol, every four years in Czechoslovakia, and all these young people go and, working in the Sokol and working in all these different groups, and have happy life doing, between the sports and dance and gymnastic, everything was nice life for the people till 1948. And after '48, over a hundred thousand Czechoslovakian people left, and started a really bad time. 1950 was the worst time in Czechoslovakia.

FEENEY: What convinced you to leave in 1948?

PRAZAK: No, this is the first time, this message from my father, he say be no much life, going to be a long time the Communists are going to stay in our country, and I was young. And she say, "You have some relatives in Cleveland." He say, "Be better you left this country," and the second thing, I was about, I pass the papers against the regime, and the organization was decoded underground, and he catch us later, you know, this. And I have couple of fellows who was working with me, and after that he catch, catch the core group. The people most leaving the country, ought to be in a, you know, I was lucky already just about half an hour before the Communist

police came our home already. I have the message from one lady, she came and gave us her daughter. She was luck, you know. The Communists take her in jail, and she gave my mother a message, maybe going to be find me. My mother called me right away what place I was working. And I tell my boss, I have the teeth problem, and I'm going to right away see the doctor ( he laughs ) and I left the country after that. I have the connection with somebody to help me go to Germany.

FEENEY: Did you feel very bad about having to leave Prague and your family?

PRAZAK: No, it was, this time already I was thinking about freedom and about, more I was, you know, I was only son. My mother, she was a little bit, you know, crying and excited. She don't want much go, and my father, he was in jail this time, and I was thinking, you know, they are going to see some freedom. Was, I know that already, already this, everybody was very count, the Communist police, and he check everybody, "What are you doing?" And was not start right away after the Communists take it over. I see that already we no more know much freedom, and he, doing everything

the against the young people especial, you know. You know one, the young people was against these Communists right away. And the Communists don't like that already. Some of the old people have family. You know, he stayed, too, and some people have the business. The Communists take it right away, the business, and the people have to, was situation this time already was not so well for free country people, what would like freedom or anything else, was not so good for. That's how I left and I stay in a camp in a free country in Germany, and I meet many, many of my friends left the country, too. And I had . . .

FEENEY: Did you leave together?

PRAZAK: I, with my friend really I left. He was with this organization, too. And I gave him the message, "You already couple people left to Communist police take it and put it in jail. I say next going to be, the people are maybe going to talk in the jail, and explain somebody was in against the regime and passed these papers and doing everything against. And I says it's better, and he agree with me. He said, "I don't want to stay here anyhow." You know, he wanted to go out. ( he laughs ) For freedom, you know. At this

time I was a young fellow, and everybody, the young people, like it, you know something the students, all different countries, you know, was in Polish and Hungary and all the different places. Everybody, the young people, he want better life, you know. Help me for, for a go, left Czechoslovakia at this time, and especially if I have relatives here, you know, my wife, my mother's sister, she was in here, and I came to visit them. Only thing, the people have the farm, I don't stay there for long. Only thing I want working in some nice places, business, sell some sport, sportsman good, or so many things, you know, it was, I was not farmers, you know. This situation was, for me was a little bit difficult. I was working in Germany in a camp. I was secretary at the YMCA. And I doing the tournaments for volleyball and soccers and have the, play chess in our YMCA, and was for me was a very good life, of freedom.

FEENEY: You mentioned a camp in Germany. Was it a camp for refugees?

PRAZAK: Refugee camps, yeah. Refugee was, was Czechoslovakian, was three camps in Czechoslovakian, and after that was Hungarian Camps different, and

Polish and Ukranish. Everybody, nationality, mostly have his own camp. And after a while we split, some people go to Australia, go to Canada, go on United States, and I have not so many, the Czechoslovakian, he put a couple with Ukranish or Polish people, one different camps already.

FEENEY: How long were you in the camp?

PRAZAK: I was there over two-and-a-half years, yeah. And I, first year I don't have this, I was just stay in a camp, and after a while was a job for the American YMCA was there, and everybody know that already I like sports, and I make the organization, and I start make it tournaments and volleyballs and chess tournaments and some speaker came in YMCA and talking about his experience with different, what he works doing that. And the people was interested, have nothing doing in the camp. And he enjoyed the YMCA at this time.

FEENEY: When did you decide that you would leave Germany and come to America?

PRAZAK: I wait for my number. I have this register, and I must wait till my number came to United States. And go on a boat from, I go from Hamburg to, first I go to

Halifax, and after that half people go to Canada, and after the boat go to New York.

FEENEY: What year was that that you came to the United States?

PRAZAK: 1951, yeah.

FEENEY: Do you remember the boat passage, what it was like?

PRAZAK: I very, this one is close to, you know, forty years will be. And, you know, I see the big buildings, and I see, you know, the Statue of Liberty, and so many things. And I was a little bit, before I came to New York already, I was a little bit shook up over some young fellow, young fellow, he die, and, a young fellow, he never die, his father die, and, in a boat, and he ship, he throw his place, too, in the water, yeah. And the boy left. He was about thirteen years old boy. Have nobody, mother, you know, she die already, and the boy stay alone till New York some Catholic organization pick him up and help him, give him a little bit life. And everybody in the boat was a little bit shook up over his father, you know, he die.

FEENEY: Going back to your ocean voyage, can you tell me anything more about what happened during the time, how

long was the voyage?

PRAZAK: Oh, I really, exactly, I don't remember that. This one is quite time, you know. It's, many times I was thinking, you know, what happened before, and it's a long time, you know. It's exactly what happened that I was, I really with, with this life in the United States very happy. And I never was back in Czechoslovakia. My, after my mother and my father died, my wife, she was born in the United States. She go visit my parents and my granddaughter. I never was back, and I never will go back til Czechoslovakia will free.

FEENEY: How did you feel when you came into New York Harbor for the first time?

PRAZAK: This one was for everybody go in a boat and look around and see the Statue of Liberty and see all these big buildings. And first my vacation, I was staying in, some Czechoslovakian lady. I say, first my vacation I want to go see, go back in New York. And where I worked already was in July, and I came in New York already was over a hundred, and so hot already, I say, "Oh, I came the wrong time to New York already."

You know, nobody was much, for weekend in New York everybody go on the beaches and the horses and, you know, I was very thrilled. I see the New York, and after a while I take my children visit to boat ride around Liberty and show him everything, why I came the United States. And children like that, though, yeah.

FEENEY: Now, it was 1951 that you went to the United States.

PRAZAK: Uh-huh, yeah.

FEENEY: And you were processed through Ellis Island?

PRAZAK: Yeah, uh-huh.

FEENEY: Do you remember what it was like to go through Ellis Island?

PRAZAK: It was very formal and very quick. He just give us, everybody have in a pile papers, and he give us, you know, check, the fellow's, gentleman was there, and everybody have his own papers, and he go through the process, you know. And he, I believe that he took at us pictures and some fingers, everything go, you know, we'd finish the piles. And that was very quick and very nice, and then some people came, you know, next to boat. I came there already, and had the American

flags. And gave us donuts and coffee and welcome you in United States, and, you know, all these people was very happy, came to the United States, for free country, yeah.

FEENEY: Did you have an interpreter to help you at Ellis Island?

PRAZAK: No, was a few people was in a boat with us speaking was English already, and some of the Polish people or the German, he go always with the immigration camp and help us through the language, you know. And say, you know, what place you go, and I say, "I'm going to Cleveland, and a couple of my friends already wait for me in New York in a boat. I came, and I stay a couple of days with my friends, and he showed me a little bit of New York, and I go to right, a couple of days I left to Cleveland.

FEENEY: There were no other examinations at Ellis Island? They just process these papers?

PRAZAK: Was just processing in a boat. No any, no doctors, no nothing, you know. They check us in Hamburg before I came in a boat already. Everybody must be healthy to go on the boat and everything. And I just came to New

York, this man was very quickly, you know, the papers, check the papers and go through with that. And he said he's going to send the paper to immigration office in Cleveland, the pile, yeah.

FEENEY: Did you have friends meet you on Ellis Island?

PRAZAK: Yeah. I have couple of friends came a little bit early to New York already, a couple of friends from my town. He was waiting for me, and he said, "You stay our place couple of days. I'm going to show you a little bit New York, and was really very thrill city New York and United States part, you know, New York. And after that I take a train to Cleveland.

FEENEY: And you have relatives waiting for you here in Cleveland?

PRAZAK: Yeah. I had the relatives. I have my mother's sister and a cousin, yeah. He wait for me, and was on a farm, and he want to, he want I'm going to stay there already. I stay a couple of months. Only thing, I was not farmer, you know. I was, make it and in a grow in a big town. And I don't know much about farms, you know.

FEENEY: What was your first impression of Ohio when you got here?

PRAZAK: It was very nice. I, after that I go and work in Cleveland, in Czechoslovakian business. It was Czechoslovakian, the gentleman, and the owners and everybody in the family knows speaking Czechoslovakian. This one was a big help for me. Only thing was bad for my, I not speak any good English. You know, I stay with the family for about three-and-a-half years, and I helped in the stock room. I was stock man.

FEENEY: How did you learn English?

PRAZAK: I go in the night school. This time, and going a couple of times in a week, I was more interested looking for the girls. Now they're about speak English, you know. Was different girls from different, from India, Arabs, and Germany and Polish. And this time I was young boy, you know, I was more tried talk with other language with the girls, you know, and go dance and everything else.

FEENEY: Tell me about the first few jobs that you held when you were here.

PRAZAK: I have this, I was stockman working in the, this business, and after a while I was small boy. Always I want some restaurant, and I going to meet some cook, and he say he need a partner, and I start open a restaurant with my partner. And I have that three-and-a-half years. I was waiting for liquor license from Columbus, and was so many numbers waiting for. And after three-and-a-half years I gave up that. I said, oh, was without liquor license there, no making any money, yeah. And I start working in a private club, in Clifton Club where I work, it was thirty years, yeah.

FEENEY: Was it difficult for you when you first settled here in America?

PRAZAK: No. I was, I would break, you know, I stay with, I stay with a Czechoslovakian, you know, the family, and I hear every business there. Everybody talk to me in Czechoslovakian. This one was break for me. Only thing later I found that was not so good, the only thing I now have to start speaking English right away.

FEENEY: Mr. Prazak, what were your expectations coming to the United States?

PRAZAK: Uh, this one is, uh, hard explain, you know, everything, what the situation is. I think, I think the main thing was the, for me, all these years, and I was, and I will be, is the freedom for the, for myself, I love the freedom, and that's the main thing for me.

FEENEY: So life in the United States as an immigrant has meant mainly to be free for you?

PRAZAK: Yeah. That's, uh, that's my happy, all these forty years I'm here I'm grateful this country give me the freedom and a nice life.

FEENEY: Mr. Prazak, thank you very, very much for speaking with us today.

PRAZAK: You're welcome, sure. Thanks so much.