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In the Beginning

THE LITTLE GIRL WHO HAD JUST MOVED into the house next door eyed me curiously, index finger in her mouth.

"Where did *you* come from?" she demanded.

In my childhood this was not a question that might have the sophisticated connotation of sexual precocity of some children today; it was far more basic. In the melting pot of our first generation born to immigrant parents in the mining village of Jefferson in southwestern Pennsylvania, this question was often the opening gambit to determine exactly which section of central, eastern, or southern Europe one's parents had emigrated from. It was a necessary frame of reference that established identities and sometimes even loyalties. So in response to that query, it was natural for me to state the country of my parents' origin. Or the one I thought it was.

"I'm a Czech."

"Me, too!" the girl grinned. "My name is Roseanne."

My mother, arms immersed to her elbows in hot soapsuds, straightened from the tin washtubs placed on two chairs in the middle of the kitchen. Raising a hand dripping with suds to push back a blonde tendril from her perspiring forehead, she frowned at me slightly.

"No, Sophia. You are Slavish—a Rusyn," she corrected.

In that casual, almost flippant way children have, I countered with, "Well, what's the difference?"

She echoed, "What's the difference?" Her brows furrowed in consternation. "Let me tell you."

She gave the matter careful consideration while she scrubbed a grimy shirt collar on the corrugated washboard and searched for proper words in English. Still thinking, she slowly wound the shirt through the hand wringer until it plopped into the clear water in the second tub. Only then did she dry her hands on her apron and beckon my new friend and me to sit down. She patted my hand with her damp, warm one.

"You and Mary and Eve are sisters from the same family, but are you exactly the same?"

I conjured up images of Mary, four years older, and Eve, six years older. Both were slender blondes with gray eyes. On the other hand, I was chubby and had dark eyes and hair. The comparisons made me giggle.

"That's silly." We all chuckled.

Mother rose to slice thick slabs from a loaf of bread just removed from the oven, slathered them with butter and jam and poured clabber milk from a ceramic pitcher into large glasses. She set the food on the table with its immaculate red-and-white checkered tablecloth, our second best. While Roseanne and I devoured our snack, she told us the story of her native country.

"You remember the picture of the Old Country that Anne showed you?" Mother asked, settling into her chair.

"It's a map, Mama."

"So . . ." She smiled, watching us begin to eat the delicious food before us. "Good . . ."

My eldest sister, Anne, was actually my half-sister, and she had aspirations to become a teacher. She practiced on us

younger siblings. While I was an eager student who quickly learned to read, geographical concepts were a bit hazy. My recollection of the map of Czechoslovakia was that it resembled the old-fashioned boots with lacing up the front that some of the older women still wore. No doubt the boots would have been more fetching on a young lady with a curvaceous leg. Still, it was an easy shape to remember. The calf is Bohemia, whose capital is the city of Prague, the ankle is Moravia, the foot Slovakia, and the toe Ruthenia. Secretly, I liked the idea of that section being my parents' origin, as it is the toe that aims a kick, although Ruthenia is too small to kick at anything much. At the top, where a zipper or laces would begin, are the High Tatras, the most spectacular mountains in all of Central Europe. But it is the Carpathian Mountains, further to the bottom of the map, that my parents were familiar with and described in glowing terms.

Like my new friend I was soon caught up in the legend of how Czechoslovakia began, told just as Mother had heard it from her mother and as I, too, would hear it again and again, never tiring of the story.

It seemed that once upon a time there was a mighty king named Svatopluk I, who ruled a kingdom in Central Europe called the Great Moravian Empire. He had two sons, Svatopluk II and Mojmir II. As a loving father, when he grew old, he turned over the kingdom to his sons and retired to live in a monastery. On his deathbed he summoned these two sons and told them that as long as they remembered to be brothers united in loyalty, they, their people, and their lands would thrive. If they disobeyed and competed with each other for power, they would be separated; without each other's support they could not survive long.

Their promise to remember and obey was discarded as soon as the sons dried their tears over the death of the old king.

Each son resumed his struggle for increasing territory at the expense of the other. In time, as the old king predicted, weakened by division, they were overcome by marauding Germanic tribes from the west and Hungarians from the east. The kingdom came to an end, and the people were separated, as Czechoslovakia remains to this day.

"And now you see why you two girls must always try hard to be friends and help each other, not like those wicked, greedy brothers," she concluded.

My childhood reaction was to form a strong, indelible impression of the evils of sibling rivalry. Still, the guidelines had been clearly established. My new friend Roseanne was almost kin, but not quite.

Long after, when I retold the story to my own children, the underlying truth in the fable was brought home to me. While Mother's telling was a simplified account of various interesting and diverse ethnic groups, it is ironic that despite the centuries that have passed since the actual historic events the destinies of the Czechs and Slovaks have remained entwined for reasons other than geographic proximity. Politicians, taking merely size into consideration—and not understanding the history that divided these peoples—artificially conjoined the areas of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and Ruthenia into the state of Czechoslovakia.

The division that was centuries old rapidly deepened, ensuring another separation. Czechoslovakia existed as a united democratic nation, the only one in Eastern Europe, for only a brief period after the First World War before being divided once again. After the Second World War, Bohemia-Moravia and Slovakia became two parts of Communist-ruled Czechoslovakia while Ruthenia was annexed to the Soviet Union.

Both peoples—Czechoslovakians and Rusyns—are fiercely individualistic and probably exhibit a character similar to the

North American rather than to other Europeans. They remain deeply attached to the soil, tending to face problems with an earthy practicality. The survival philosophy of both ethnic groups can best be summed up today in the words of the writer Karel Čapek (d. 1938), whose words were read clandestinely over the shortwave radio during the brief Czech revolution in August 1968:

During the Thirty Year's War we lost much of our population, but we survived. We lost much of our resources, but the human spirit is the strongest weapon and we did not lose our soul. You must believe in an ideal and live for it . . . and we shall survive if we remember what we are.

Čapek's words were uttered for years afterward, of course. And certainly at the age of six such a concept was beyond my ability to comprehend. What was already clear to me, however, was that in some mysterious way my fate and that of my family was linked to those we lived with in Jefferson.

In my determination to be obedient and not cause trouble, I finished my bread that day, slipped off the wooden kitchen chair and shook my head in eager agreement as a friendly overture.

"Let's go play."

"You come when I call," Mother admonished, her hands already back into the washing, soapsuds drifting over the top of the tub. "Remember to set the table before your father gets home."

The words floated over my head as we skipped outside. After shooing chickens scratching for worms in the dirt of the front yard, my new friend and I sat down. Soon we escaped European rivalries imported to North America and the reality of our environment by inventing a game of make-believe of our own.

Jefferson Mine was hardly working at all when the decade of the 1930s rang in. The price the checkweighman gave for a ton of coal was twenty cents compared to the seventy cents that prevailed in the 1920s. Every pay stub that Father and my older brother Adam brought home had "snakes," the wavy lines showing that after deductions for rent, medical, and work supplies such as carbide, dynamite, and caps, and the store balance, there was no net amount received to take home but rather a deficit. Beneath the snake was the amount still owed, that dreaded big "bulance," as my parents pronounced it, that grew and grew and for us assumed the proportions and importance of the national debt.

In nearby Cedar Grove my parents' friend, Shorty Steve, who had earned six hundred dollars in the previous two years, had not received one cent of his sweat-earned wages, as all he got was snakes.

"Sunna ma bith! Hate them damned snakes, Mikel!" He lisped to Father over a glass of wine under the peach tree in our garden, exhibiting a stack of receipts. And so Father arranged for the *Skoda*, or Russian Brotherhood Organization, to carry Mike and his life insurance premium payments on credit a while longer. That is, after checking if there were enough assets in the lodge treasury, because this also was rapidly diminishing.

Joining them in the shade of the tree for a glass of Father's homemade elderberry wine, Big John gulped a swig and shook his head sadly.

"I don' unnerstan, Mike. Was so good. Now so bad. Be worse."

Father and Shorty Steve commiserated, and the talk went back to the decade of the 1920s, such a short time before. In the twenties they had worked as many hours as they wanted. Black ore dug out became dollars to send to the family in the

Old Country or to put into the bank to save for a farm. Children being born every two years was not the grinding concern and cause of even more deprivation that it had now become. But now there was only the emptiness of defeat.

"Where we gonna go, Mike? Every mine out. What we gonna do?"

"Nothin' to do," Father pointed out. "No place to go. Here we have house, garden. Maybe mine does t'row us out, maybe not."

Anxiety shared with good friends was not quite as decimating as a lone ordeal. And in Jefferson, even when the mines did not operate very often, my parents could still feed their burgeoning family. By the time the 1930s arrived, there were nine children in our family. Before it was over, there would be ten. And my parents believed in our need to stretch, to run, and grow. In the nearby cities of Washington, Wheeling, or even Pittsburgh, this would not be possible for several reasons. The most important one was economic. But also, my parents had set their destiny a decade before upon the Jefferson coal mining camp, situated in the tri-state hills where southwestern Pennsylvania conjoins with the tips of West Virginia and Ohio. The terrain resembles that part of the Carpathian Mountains in eastern Czechoslovakia from which they had emigrated and for which they always remained a little homesick.

The "patch," or village, was a dozen or so rows of hastily erected wooden structures set in straight lines on "red dog" roads made from the red, burned coal leftovers called slag. Each house had a matching outhouse set at a fair distance away but plainly in view. The white-painted, flimsy shacks were small, three or four rooms only, and had black tar paper roofs that absorbed heat in summer and did not dispel cold in winter. Ours was perched on the crest of a hill where thick, junglelike foliage had to be beaten back each spring to make a

garden. The lush greenery would reclaim the land if one turned one's back on it for even one rainy season.

From our window the view of another tiny settlement in the valley below was a picture for a postcard. This was the Bottoms, where about twenty houses were scattered over the valley floor. Here more prosperous families owned larger houses with an acre or more of their own land around them. At one edge of the Bottoms wound Cross Creek—narrow and shallow and filled with sulphur water from mine refuse—in which we swam in summer, but it turned treacherous in spring when the high waters overran its banks following rapid thaws.

The railroad track dissecting the villages of Jefferson, the Bottoms, and nearby Penobscott, another mining patch up the road, lay about a half mile away. Trains were the main route to the larger outside world and a never-ending source of fascination to those who dreamed of far away, mysterious lands.

All around our village were tall oaks to climb, maples for syrup and gathering russet and gold leaves in the fall, stately white birches, and elms reaching to the sky. But that pastoral setting was deceptive. As the "bulance" hung over our sense of economic security like a shroud, beneath us there was the mine itself. Although the entrance was over a mile from our shack, awareness of the importance of the mine dominated our lives and was as ever present as the air we breathed. One summer evening, gamboling barefoot across a meadow, I chanced upon a large indentation in the ground and pointed it out to my brother Nick, two years older.

"Watch out!" he warned. "You'll fall into the mine." And he gestured to where the opening led far below.

Visions of slipping downward deep into the black recesses of earth to be buried alive filled me with such dread that I raced as far and fast from it as I could, though knowing that all

around underneath the grassy surfaces, serpentine tunnels might plunge straight down into other caverns.

Not everyone in our patch or even every member of my family shared my dread of the mines. Later I understood that the dangerous occupation of mining coal might even be one that men loved, as my father and brother Adam, and others did. Adam succumbed to its lure before he turned fourteen, tall and strong and daring—pitting his youthful strength against the mine's hazards. But too often danger triumphed. Not only did mining bring with time the wheezing, spitting, black lung disease that ate away the lining of lungs or caused maiming accidents—sometimes it brought brutal death. That fact was to be forever etched in my mind and soul in the year before I started school.