

THE LAST TRAIN FROM PRAGUE

by Rob John

Prague. The capital city of Czechoslovakia. July 1, 1939. 11:30 at night.

It was a cold night for July. A chilly wind blew sheets of newspaper across deserted streets. As the owner of a cafe near the station said goodnight to his last customer and prepared to lock up for the night he noticed something strange.

People had started appearing as if from nowhere, hundreds of people, carrying suitcases, all heading in the same direction, all heading for the station.

'That's odd', thought the cafe owner. 'Last train's gone. Won't be another train leaving tonight. What's going on?'

Then as the people came closer and started to pass his door he noticed something else odd. Although it was very late at night many of these people walking towards the station were children.

Nine-year-old Milena Fleischmann was one of those children. Milena was excited. Excited to be walking through the city streets so late at night; excited to be carrying her own little suitcase which her mother had helped her to pack that afternoon. But most of all excited that she and her four year old sister Eva and their little cousin Helen were going on a train journey. A very long train journey which would take them to a country far away; a country called England.

Milena had first heard about England a few weeks earlier. She knew that the German Nazis had come to her country and there were rumours that some people - particularly Jewish people - might not be safe. The Germans had already come looking for Milena's father and he had gone into hiding and one night as she lay in bed Milena heard her mother talking to her uncle.

They were talking about trains... special trains...trains that could take children somewhere where they'd be safe.



Her mother said that she had to get Milena and Eva on one of those trains but her uncle wasn't sure.

'Let's leave it for a few weeks', he said. 'Things aren't so bad. Maybe everything will be alright. Anyway we can't put the children on a train and just send them away all by themselves, can we?'

'Yes, we can,' Melina heard her mother say. 'We must. Time is running out.'

A few days later Melina's mother told her that a great adventure was about to happen. She had managed to get three seats on a train which would take children to England. Parents wouldn't be able to go so Milena would have to be very grown up and look after her four-year-old sister Eva and her little cousin Helen who was only two.

'How long will we be away from home?' Milena asked.

'Just a few weeks,' said her mother. 'Just until things have settled down.'

'What's England like?' asked Milena.

'Oh, its lovely,' said her mother. 'The people there are very kind and they have nice cakes and...a king.'

Next day Milena's mother taught her the words to the National Anthem and on that chilly July night as she carried her case to the station Milena found herself quietly singing, 'God save our gracious king. Long live our noble king.' They were the only words of English that she knew.

The train was waiting for them at the station. Melina's uncle helped the three children up into the carriage and they found their seats. Milena sat little Helen on her lap and tightly held Eva's hand. Milena's mother, grandfather and grandmother stood on the platform holding white handkerchiefs ready to wave as the train drew away.

Some of the grown-ups were using their handkerchiefs to wipe away tears. The train was ready to depart and the grown-ups and the children stared at each other through the engine smoke. Melina's mother kept a brave smiling expression on her face as if to say 'This is going to be fine. Trust me. You're all going to be fine.'

A little girl sitting near Milena started to cry and suddenly a woman on the platform couldn't bear it any more. She climbed up into the carriage picked up her little girl and carried her back down to the platform. At the very last minute she'd changed her mind and decided that she couldn't be parted from her daughter. The train whistle blew.

Then just as the train started to move the woman changed her mind yet again. She pulled open the carriage door and passed the little girl back up onto the train. The girl sobbed even louder as the train pulled away but she wasn't to know that by putting her back on that train her mother had almost certainly saved her life.

The journey to England took two days and two nights. To Milena it seemed a blur; a dream. Later she remembered little things like the other girls in the carriage taking it in turns to hold little Helen and the way everyone admired Eva's long curly hair. She remembered eating gherkins and meat sandwiches which her mother had made with dark rye bread. She remembered the train stopping at the German border and soldiers coming into the carriage and searching their luggage.

She remembered that her case was full of new clothes which her mother had made for her. The clothes had been made two sizes too large so they would still fit her as she grew bigger. She remembered the autograph book which her grandfather had given her the night she got on the train. He had written in it 'Your grandfather loves you very much.'

She remembered arriving in Holland and people giving them bananas and cocoa and she remembered crossing the sea on a boat from Holland to England; being given sandwiches and cups of English tea. She remembered that soft white English bread tasted horrible after the strong dark rye bread she was used to and she was shocked to find that English people actually put milk in their tea.

Soon they were in London where they were met by English families who had agreed to look after them. The three girls went to live with a kind family near Manchester.

Later both of Milena's parents managed to escape from Czechoslovakia and eventually found the children safe and well and speaking perfect English. Eva had actually forgotten how to speak Czech.

Milena and the two hundred and forty other children who travelled on that train with her were some of the lucky ones.

On the 1st of September another train prepared to leave Prague. Two hundred and fifty children were on board and once again hundreds of grown-ups lined the platform with white handkerchiefs and tears in their eyes. But this train never set off. Germany had invaded Poland earlier that day. It was too late. The war had started and the children were taken off the train. It's believed that all but four died during the War.

Milena has never forgotten that journey. Somebody said to her recently that she must have been very brave to get on a train at the age of nine with no grown-up to look after her.

'No,' she said. 'I was just a little girl having an adventure. It was our parents who were brave. Our parents deserved medals for putting us on that train.'