

## Foreigner

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Speaking only a few words of English, with an accent at that clearly marked me as "foreign" when I arrived in England. In the past I had not considered nationality to be my main identity to others, but clearly I was now the Czech Boy. I was proud of my country and knew that it had been victimized by Hitler, so I accepted the new designation which neither offended nor thrilled me.

But then I learned how to exploit my new-found uniqueness. When London children were evacuated to safer locations far removed from the city, I went to live with a working-class family in Northampton where I was a novelty. When the family entertained visitors I was paraded out to tell my story. I began a little embellishment here and there. "You poor thing" and "you haven't seen your mother for how many months?" were typical responses interspersed with audible sighs. I found myself the center of attention and was showered with pity and sympathy as well as occasional gifts of candy. That only increased my appetite to retell the events of my young life.

As I blended more into English culture and society I no longer needed to behave so shamelessly and I tended not to speak about my personal history even though my Czech heritage remained an integral part of me. How many times have I faced the question, "should I open up to people about my background or should I let them guess about the origin of my accent?" I usually err on the side of silence for fear of appearing to exploit the past, perhaps as a reaction against my occasional boyhood exaggerations. Likewise, I never refer to myself as a survivor of the Holocaust – I prefer instead to call myself an "escapee".

Returning to Prague many years after we left, my cousin Paul and I were walking in the park near my former residence when he asked me, "Could you live in Prague again and be Czech?" I had a difficult time knowing how to answer. I feel both Czech and American so I am drawn to both countries. What part of my heritage should dominate? Finally I replied that I would have to choose America. My wife and children were American so my adopted country had become my home. Paul felt the same way for similar reasons.

As time passes, my Czech identity may seem to recede, but by no means disappears.

October 24, 2009