

FLEEING FOR Faith AND FREEDOM

By Eva Walburger

My siblings and I grew up hearing stories of how our parents sacrificed to live the gospel, and we have been blessed for their efforts. I have developed a deep sense of gratitude for all that they and other early Czech Latter-day Saints did so that their posterity could receive the blessings of the gospel.

My mother was born in Poprad, Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia). Her father served in the Czech army during World War II, and his was one of many military families that fled into nearby woods for safety from German occupiers. For five days, my grandparents huddled under a blanket with my mother and her sister, ages one and five, eating a ration of sugar cubes.

My grandparents were not members of the Church at this time, nor did they pray often. However, during this ordeal, their hearts were softened. My grandmother wrote in her journal: “This very night I felt a longing for kneeling down to ask for help from someone who had a higher authority. So I went a little ways into the forest, knelt down, and prayed with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. I pleaded for help.”

Her prayer was answered. Some families in the woods were killed upon discovery, but my grandparents and their two daughters were miraculously protected. Through this exhausting and trying experience, the Lord planted a seed of faith and trust in my grandparents’ hearts.

As they sought religious freedom, my parents were blessed by the kindness and acceptance of Latter-day Saints around them, from Czechoslovakia to Canada.

Faith and Persecution

After World War II ended a few years later, my grandparents were still living in Czechoslovakia when two young missionaries knocked on their door. After attending the small branch and taking the discussions, they received a witness of the truthfulness of the gospel and decided to be baptized. The evening of the baptismal interviews, however, the missionaries and Church leader did not arrive. At the next branch meeting, my grandparents learned that due to political upheaval, all of the missionaries had been required to leave the country. Any further religious practice would now also be prohibited. Nevertheless, the small group of Saints in the area kept their faith, now directed through local leadership and priesthood keys. My grandparents and my aunt were baptized in secrecy in 1950.

Over the next several years, members of the branch, including my grandma and my mother (now in her

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teens), were sometimes taken in by the secret police for questioning about their religious practices. One time my grandmother was questioned aggressively for five hours. Her questioners told her they would put her in prison for five years if they learned she was teaching religion to her children.

She recorded: "I stayed peaceful and said, 'If you think that I do something wrong teaching my children religion, then you can lock me up.' They didn't answer. From that time on they called me in repeatedly. They talked against the Church, and they tried to get us off our faith. The more they tried the more I clung to the Church, [for] the true Church was always persecuted."

My mother wrote in her journal: "In these most difficult years, members met on Sunday in our branch president's apartment. We couldn't sing loud so we whispered. We didn't want our branch president in jail. For 18 years we were gathering like that and we were dreaming of the time when we all would be able to go to the Rocky Mountains and settle in [Salt Lake City]." They had hope, even though at the time families were seldom granted paperwork that would allow them to leave the country.

As my mother grew into her twenties, she prayed longingly to be able to marry a member of the Church and somehow be sealed in the temple.

Finding a New Life

My father, who was raised in a farming village, was living in the city going to school when he met my mother. My mother was beginning her career as a professional opera singer. As they became acquainted, she introduced him to the Church. Although he had not been baptized yet, my parents married on February 18, 1967.

At the end of that year they were blessed with the arrival of my older brother. Eight months after his birth, the branch president received a revelation that the members should prepare to be led out of the country to a place where they could worship in freedom. In August 1968 the

Russians invaded Czechoslovakia, creating chaos at the borders and throughout the country. The branch members who had obediently prepared escaped to Vienna, Austria.

My grandmother, who left the country with my parents, wrote: "At night when everybody in the apartment house slept, we said good-bye to our home and quietly slipped away in fear that the baby might start crying. We had to do all this in secret because we had in our building three spies who worked for the secret police. We were blessed by the Lord. We escaped. When we left we knew we [would] never return, but we didn't know where we would go from Vienna either. At this time we couldn't worry about it. The



My parents arrived in Calgary with only a suitcase, a baby buggy, and a few dollars. The Canadian members immediately started helping my family with transportation, shopping, and finding a home.

Lord revealed to the branch president His promises to us if we stay faithful to Him.”

Welcomed to a New Land

My grandmother, my parents, and two other families lived in the basement of the Böcklinstrasse church building in Vienna for over a month. During this month my father took the missionary discussions and was baptized. Many members of the three families found jobs, and they pooled their wages together until they were all able to immigrate to Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Due to bad weather in Calgary, their plane landed in Edmonton on November 5, 1968.

Leaving behind relatives, a culture, and a land they loved must have been a daunting sacrifice, but the hardships were in many ways just beginning. Arriving in Calgary with only a suitcase, a baby buggy, and CAD \$32, my parents were in great need.

The Canadian members immediately started serving my family, generously providing help with transportation, shopping, and finding a home to rent. Within a week my parents and my grandma had a home furnished with beds, a table and chairs, a couch, a crib, bedding, dishes, and even some food in the cupboards. My mother wrote in her journal how surprising and thrilling it was to see these unexpected furnishings and how grateful she was for the service given.

Along with deep feelings of gratitude, however, were other emotions. Culture shock was very real and difficult to deal with. The first year of living in Calgary was filled with English classes and frigid walks to work for Dad. They were doing everything possible to establish a sense of

home, but still this was a trying time with so much change. The Saints of their new ward in Calgary worked through the language barrier to become a support system to the newly arrived members. Each Sunday my family gained strength as they attended sacrament meeting to renew their covenants, relying on the Spirit to teach them English.

The Blessings of Eternity

Our family of five was sealed together in the Cardston Alberta Temple in October 1976. My mother had set her sights on this day over 20 years earlier, and finally, in a country and language that she would have never imagined as a youth, her prayers were answered. I was then almost eight years old, and I have wonderful memories of my parents' sparkling eyes and smiles as we children entered the sealing room.

My grandmother was also at the temple that day. I recall her excitement at seeing the temple lights as we had arrived in Cardston. Years later, after retiring from her job in Calgary, she moved to Cardston and gave many hours of service in the temple. She loved to play the organ and help inspire reverence there. Her testimony and love for the Savior were evidenced through her kindness to everyone around her. She is to me an example of a strong Latter-day Saint woman.

I feel overwhelming gratitude to my parents—the pioneers in my family—for their sacrifices of career, extended family, homeland, and possessions. It seems they gave up so much, but the Lord has so abundantly blessed them—and their posterity—for living the principles of the gospel. ■

The author lives in Idaho, USA.



SERVE THE REFUGEES

“It is our hope that you will prayerfully determine what you can do—according to your own time and circumstance—to serve the refugees living in your neighborhoods and communities. This is an opportunity to serve one on one, in families, and by organization to offer friendship, mentoring, and other Christlike service.”

Linda K. Burton, Relief Society General President, “I Was a Stranger,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 14.