

Czech Republic

Slavs settled in a central European region of Moravia in 6th century. The region borders on Germany, Austria and Poland. The beautiful landscape with mountains, gentle highlands, valleys and lakes is covered with forests where bears and wolves, pheasants and partridges still find sanctuary. The continental climate provides plenty of rain. Winters are cold but summers are warm.

Moravian Empire was established in 9th century. At the end of 9th century Czechs formed an independent Bohemia. It became a part of Charlemagne's empire in 11th century. In 1526 it came under Habsburgs.

After the disintegration of Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 it became a western style democracy of Czechoslovakia.

The country had a 22 percent German minority in Bohemia who was not willing to integrate. Slovaks also resented Czech domination. When Hitler came to power in 1933 the Sudeten Germans pressed for self-rule. After Hitler annexed Austria in 1938 he offered support to Sudeten Germans and in a Munich pact Czechoslovakia lost much of their country.

These German-speaking Bohemians fell for the Hitler's dream of Greater Germany. In 1939 German troops occupied Bohemia and Moravia.

President Benes went into exile from where he planned the future of Czechoslovakia. Germans killed tens of thousands of Jews and many Czech intellectuals. Czechs did not present much resistance against Germany so they suffered fewer losses than other nations who resisted Germans.

As the Red Army approached on 5.5.45 Czechs joined them against Germany. Czechoslovakia was re-established and they expelled most Germans.

In 1946 election president Benes was restored as president but communists controlled education, communication, and interior. Anticommunist parties were banned and many anticommunists were imprisoned or killed.

By 47 the communist position weakened. People wanted to get rid of them but Russians restored them to full power.

In 53 after Stalin's death the new regime began a gradual democratisation. Prague spring came in 1968 when the new moderate president Dubcek tried to distance himself from USSR. Warsaw Pact countries sent 600 000 troops to invade the country and they abducted Dubcek and replaced him with Husak who let Czechoslovakia become a tightly controlled Soviet supporter.

The gradual reform began in 1989 with the first free elections in 1990. Dubcek became the president of the federal assembly.

In 1999 Czech republic and Slovakia became two independent countries.

At present Czech republic has a population of ten million and 94% of them are Czechs. They joined NATO and are in the process of joining UE.

Gustav Hamrozi

I was born as the third of the five children in 1950 in a small town on the river Olza in Czech Republic near Slovak border.

My father was a coal miner and mum looked after the children. When Germans occupied Czechoslovakia my father had to serve in the German army. After the war he was captured by the British army and became a POW in Denmark. He felt very lucky that Russians did not get him because they sent most of POWs to Siberia.

When communists came in power my father had to join the communist party. He built a house and my family still lives there. My parents are church going Catholics but I have never been religious. I am not saying that I don't believe in God but churches place too many restrictions on your life.

As I grew up I loved to read books about travelling to other countries. I specially remember a book about Hanzelka and Sigmund's travels to South America and Africa. I loved their adventures.

I dreamed about seeing the world but I realised that it would never be possible if I lived in a communist Czechoslovakia. Nobody was allowed to prosper enough to be able to take a holiday like that. In communism you were not allowed to open a private business or earn more than you needed to survive from one pay to the next. You were not allowed to speak your mind and try to change things.

After primary school I finished the agricultural college. I worked for a few months before I was called into the army for three years.

I was in the army for six months. They put me on a border patrol and that gave me the opportunity to escape to Austria. If Austrians returned me or if I got caught I would get a minimum four years jail. As it was I was sentenced to three and a half years jail in my absence.

I went to Vienna refugee camp. Australia readily accepted migrants in those days and I was happy to go and experience new adventures in a completely different country.

I arrived to Australia in Nov 1970. After a couple of days I got a job with BHP in New Castle. Soon I met the first Czech families and spent my first happy Christmas with them. Most of them worked with me in the blast furnace. It was a dusty, hot workplace and different work than what I was used to.

I lived in a camp for six months and saved a bit of money. I needed a holiday so I bought a car. I heard that a man from home lived in Darwin so I headed North. It was a dry winter and the weather was very pleasant for travel. On the way back I stopped at Coober Pedy opal fields and tried my luck opal mining but did not find a fortune.

I ran out of money so I sold a car and travelled with a friend to Port Augusta and from there by train to Sydney.

I began to work for General Motors Morris. When I got bored I flew to Darwin again and there I found a job in the forestry workshop. The pay wasn't good so I joined a friend who was going to Nhulunbuy on the Gove Peninsula in the Gulf. I found a job with Nabalco aluminium factory. I was lucky to move out of Darwin just before cyclone Tracey destroyed it for Christmas 1974.

Nabalco provided good board and good pay. I saved enough to send my parents money to buy a car. I also bought a plane ticket to Sydney and that's where my nine-month travelling adventure began. This was the highlight of my life.

I wanted to go to go to Rio de Janeiro for a yearly festival but I stopped in Tahiti and Peru first. There was a revolution and a curfew in Peru. I wasn't allowed to travel for ten days so I missed the festival in Rio de Janeiro. I went through Bolivia and Brazil and stopped in San Paolo; I saw Inca's lost city in Cusco.

I met many young backpackers and we travelled South America together by bus. In Ecuador I met a Canadian man and we went on a canoe trip down Amazon River as far as we could before we reached the Indian Territory in the Amazon jungle and it was too dangerous to go any further. There were five of us on a locally made tree canoe.

I wanted to go to North America to see my uncle's family in Chicago. I could not get a visa for America so I went to Toronto, Niagara Falls and Montreal. From there I flew to Maroco. I bought a small motor bike and headed for Madrid to see the bull fights. I travelled on my motorbike through Portugal to France to see the Eiffel Tower. I went through Belgium, Holland and Sweden to Germany.

They did not allow my little bike into the big tunnel so I took the Hannibal trail over Alps near Italy. There was snow and the road was often too steep for my bike so I had to push it up.

I was afraid to go home because I would go to prison for escaping. I came to Vienna and rang my parents to meet me there. They told the Czech authorities that they will try to make me return home so after a month they got a passport and we had a happy meeting. From Vienna I travelled through Italy to Greece where my bike finally broke down. I took a bus to Istanbul where I met young people who were going through Asia by train. Some went to see the world while others wanted to get cheap drugs. We went through Iran, Pakistan and in India I visited the beautiful Taj Mahal.

Asian countries are interesting but poor and the food is bad. In Bangkok I met a Polish man from Australia and we travelled to Singapore and back to Darwin together.

I started to work for the Forestry Department again but I soon met friends who were rebuilding Darwin after the cyclone. They gave me casual building jobs and told me about Lightning Ridge.

In 76 I went to Lightning Ridge to mine for opal. As I came to town I received the call from the bank that there was no money on my account. I counted on still having a few hundred dollars. I had no money, no food, no car and no accommodation.

I turned to other Czechoslovaks and asked for jobs to earn my keep. I met a Slovak opal buyer Joe Belicka and began to mine with him on percentage. He provided spending money and paid all the mining expenses. We worked at Carter's rush where everybody around us found lots of opal but we found nothing. In six months we did not find enough to pay for the food we ate.

Later we mined at New Year's rush and found enough to be comfortable for a couple of years. I worked with Joe's machinery while Joe was cutting and buying.

Since then I went Sapphire mining and travelled around but Lightning Ridge was calling me back. It became my home.

In 1991 I returned to Czech Republic. Communism collapsed and I was no longer afraid to go to jail.

I met a woman who was a little girl when I left home. She was practically our neighbour and she still lives next to my home. She was divorced but had no children. We got married and we had a son. I spent most of the time with her for the next four years. My wife's parents and my parents did not like each other and my wife decided that she did not want to come to live with me in Australia. She works as a dental assistant and lives with our son. I decided that I could not live in Czech Republic. People there live different lives and they think differently. If I was rich they would expect me to give expensive gifts. If I gave everybody an equal amount everyone would think that they deserved more than the others. If I gave more to someone others were jealous.

If you tell them that you are poor they look down on you and think that you failed in life. If I told them how much money I spent on my travels they would say that I was showing off. They judge you only by the amount of money you have. They don't understand that I enjoyed my adventurous life. They would have to live many lives before they could experience everything I did. Perhaps I should have saved some money instead of spending it on travel but I enjoyed it and I am not really sorry.

Lightning Ridge is the best place in the world for me. There are beautiful places in Europe, I specially loved Alpine country, but no other place offers you the freedom to be whoever you want to be and to do whatever you want to do when you want to do it.

Lightning Ridge means the whole world to me; here are interesting people from every corner of the world. Nobody looks down on anyone else and everybody has an equal chance to find opal.

When I ran out of money I found some casual work to keep me going. Until late eighties you were not eligible for unemployment benefit if you lived on opal fields. If you chose to live here you could not say that you were looking for a job. When unemployment became a problem across Australia social

security payments became available to those that had no luck with opal. Since then most miners are on unemployment benefit. You get enough money to survive but not really enough for mining expenses. Many miners work on percentage for those that have machinery and can pay for the fuel and maintenance.

Unfortunately Lightning Ridge changed for the worse since I came in 1976. At that time miners trusted each other. They showed you the opal they found. There was no ratting or stealing. There were less breakdowns when we had less machinery.

When someone found a good parcel they invited the whole town to a BBQ and showed the opal they found. This gave you new hope that one day you will also be lucky. Miners were a big family then. Since the social security provides for those that can not find opal, miners are afraid to disclose if they find something.