

Remembering *the* Trust

Dr Jana Burešová presents a detailed history of the trust fund that was set up in 1939 to help Czech refugees. The fund was closed 40 years ago this year

Several historical anniversaries and commemorations have already taken place in 2014-2015, but there is an additional one which should not pass unrecorded: the 40th anniversary of the Czech Refugee Trust Fund's closure in 1975. To some readers this event will be meaningless, but to many former Czechoslovak refugees it has considerable significance, for the trust played a major role in their lives in exile.

As a consequence of the September 1938 Munich Agreement which ceded the predominantly ethnic German Sudetenland region to Nazi Germany, masses of internally displaced people fled to rump Czechoslovakia, and in January 1939 the British government granted a gift of £4m to the Czechoslovak government, for humanitarian assistance to the refugees and, where possible, their permanent settlement overseas. (See also Brown, Martin D. (2006). *Dealing with Democrats*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, regarding the gift.)



The situation was exacerbated by the subsequent annexation of Bohemia and Moravia on March 15-16 1939, causing a further refugee cohort comprising Czech and German-speaking anti-fascists, notably communists, social democrats and Jews at risk, as well as some Germans and Austrians who had previously sheltered in Czechoslovakia, including the writer Thomas Mann, befriended by the father of BCSCA member, Lady Milena Grenfell-Baines.

Between October 1938 and March 1939, the trust's predecessor, the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC), had helped around 3,500 refugees to escape to Britain, and mostly bore the cost of accommodating and maintaining them since they were not then allowed to work, except as nurses or resident domestics. Funded from public donations to appeals such as the Lord Mayor's Fund for Czech Refugees, resources gradually dwindled, so on July 21 1939 the British government established by deed the Czech Refugee Trust Fund, responsible to the Home Office and Treasury.



Although essentially charitable in nature, the trust was subject to political developments; thus, its initial role was to assist refugees from territory which prior to October 1 1938 "belonged to the Republic of Czechoslovakia", and to deal with the refugees' maintenance and training in Britain pending their final settlement elsewhere.

Unlike the BCRC, the trust was generally not directly involved in rescuing people from Czechoslovakia; nevertheless, its representatives operated there until August 1939, and continued supporting the late Sir Nicholas Winton's *Kindertransport* endeavour commenced in Prague earlier that year, but the onset of World War II intervened.

The trust not only inherited the BCRC's structure and staff, it also inherited the latter's refugees (officially transmigrants), effectively trapped in Britain from September 1939. Sums from Britain's gift to Czechoslovakia were duly diverted to the trust for the longer-term maintenance and training of the diverse refugees, but providing economic accommodation for thousands of people with no means of their own was highly problematic.

The solution adopted was hostels. Houses, former hotels and boarding schools were rented and adapted across Britain, but particularly in London, which had the greatest concentration of refugees. Despite the challenges of community living and shared duties, residents of hostels such as Fortis Green in north London, were co-operative and supportive. Former residents such as Pavel Seifter (future dissident and Czechoslovak ambassador to London 1997-2003), have kept in contact with one another. Other residents, though, found it harder to adapt to their new lifestyle.

In addition, the trust opened a special hostel based first in Broadstairs, then in Edmund Castle in Hayton, Cumbria, for some forty unaccompanied children, until they could be reunited with their parents or placed in foster homes. A number of *Review* readers were cared for there by Hedy Fromings's mother, the hostel's dedicated matron, until its closure in December 1942.

By 1942, most Czechoslovaks in Britain were employed and actively involved in the

war effort, often on behalf of Britain and the homeland, contributing in a host of ways. For example Czechs worked with the Czechoslovak Red Cross in Britain, did service in the Allied armed forces and Bletchley Park or packed parachutes... as was fortuitously later recalled by the British authorities.

According to the trust's records, of the 12,000 refugees in Britain (presumably those in its care) in 1945, 50 per cent settled here, 30 per cent emigrated to a new country, and only 20 per cent returned home post-war. For some repatriates, however, the reunion was short-lived, and they were re-admitted to Britain in 1948, due to February's communist coup and overthrow of President Edvard Beneš's government.

There then followed an entirely new phase in the trust's existence. Whilst the trust continued to care for dependent refugees remaining in Britain, its remit was extended in November 1948 to include the returnees/new refugees. As in war-time, some newcomers worked in trust offices or, like Zdeňka Pokorná, helped nurse patients in the trust's "rest home" in Brett House, SW15.

The major problem, though, was accommodation. The refugees had fled with few possessions, and usually with little money. Unfurnished accommodation to let was "virtually non-existent", and furnished accommodation only available at rents higher than refugees could afford, the trust reported. Recognising that hostels had served their temporary purpose, trustees implemented a long-term policy; they "devoted a major part of their endeavours" and financial resources to the provision of furnished self-contained accommodation for letting on a non-commercial basis. Forty-eight freehold buildings provided some 290 flats, with accommodation for some 900 people at any one time.

My own childhood memory of living in trust fund properties is one of sharing and caring; nonetheless, I was aware of certain tensions between some residents, and between residents and the trust. Flats were fully furnished, generally with solid serviceable items not selected for their



aesthetic merits, and as the trust's annual report of March 1955 noted, some tenants complained "that the furniture does not suit them". The attachment describing an average day for British and Czechoslovak staff, lists a seemingly infinite spectrum of duties and tasks for the refugees' benefit: employment, health and welfare issues, requests for larger/smaller flats, English language and various educational/training courses, clothing allowances, emigration, management of trust properties... yet somehow they coped.

The situation, however, was unsustainable. In 1952-1954 trustees had felt it was right to help Czechoslovak refugees still in Germany and Austria, and were permitted by the Home Office to bring a limited quota to Britain; two more houses were bought in 1954, 29 Palace Court, W2 (close to the present Czech and Slovak embassies), and 23 Belsize Park, NW3, but the Trust's circumstances were changing.

With Home Office approval, trustees acquired corporate status in March 1956, under the Charitable Trustees Incorporation Act, and by July 1957 the trust's very existence was threatened. The minutes of a trust meeting held in July 1957 alarmingly stated that "the cash in the treasury fund available for the purposes of the trust was in sight of exhaustion."

Remedial action to conserve funds was discussed, for instance requesting the National Assistance Board to assume responsibility for the maintenance needs of the relatively few remaining dependent refugees, but the key shifts were indicated in trust minutes dated July 1958; they were to have an ominous impact on the 1968 refugees. The provision of accommodation for refugees was to be regarded as a temporary measure of assistance; tenants were encouraged to move out of trust flats, and the admission of new tenants was restricted as far as possible. Paradoxically, despite the trust's precarious financial situation and limited future, loans to purchase houses were given to refugees "judged reliable and capable of repaying such loans by instalments". Finally, funds were to be raised by selling or mortgaging trust properties. The process of dissolving the trust had begun.

In 1959 at least four buildings were sold, plus five more in 1960, 23 Belsize Park among them. The trust drew up fresh budgets and plans in June 1963, its liquid



Above: Property previously owned by the Czech Refugee Trust Fund in Rutherford Street, London.

Picture: Jana Burešová
Opposite page: images of Czech refugee children at Edmond Castle, Cumbria, on the occasion of Lixi's birthday
Pictures: Hedy Fromings

resources amounting to £185,000, sufficient for "normal needs" for the next three years but insufficient for the longer term. In 1965 trustees were advised that they were not legally empowered to borrow money on the security of their remaining buildings and use the proceeds for current expenditure. A year later, the Home Secretary instructed that the trust's commitments be reduced as soon as possible, and to avoid taking on any new cases. The trust's fate was literally sealed – to the detriment of the next and imminent cohort of needy refugees.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 20 1968 by Warsaw Pact armies at the behest of the former Soviet Union to "normalise" the brief liberalisation period known as the Prague Spring, gave the trust no reprieve. In a blunt statement headed 'The 1968 Czechoslovak "situation"', trustees adhered to their September agreement that in the event of "another Czechoslovak refugee problem of any size in the UK it could not be part of their obligations or duties... because any such new problem would be too remote from the kind of purpose for which the trust was created, and one with which the trust is not organised to cope." The government was like-minded.

Only 18 buildings comprising 141 flats

remained as at the trustees' meeting of November 1968. More buildings were sold later, including 92/93 Brook Green, W6, and 29 Gwendolen Avenue, SW15 (near the former London home of President and Mrs Beneš at number 26), where BCSA member Mrs Zdena Kolářová had a flat from 1951-1955. Some other properties were taken by community housing associations, such as the Hampstead Old People's Housing Trust. None of the decisions were taken easily. Conflicting considerations at this juncture were weighty. Some elderly and ailing refugees needed ongoing care, and secure accommodation. New refugees needed the help afforded to earlier arrivals in Britain.

Ultimately, the trust's work was entrusted to the British Council for Aid to Refugees (now the Refugee Council); well regarded by the Home Office, it was then headed by Dame May Curwen who, as national general secretary of the YWCA in 1938, had led the newly created YWCA Refugee Committee "To help in any way possible

with the problem of refugees, particularly Czechoslovakian refugees."

The demise of the Czech Refugee Trust in 1975, it is suggested, should not be mourned, for in part it reflects the declining needs of the wartime and early post-war refugees in its care, and their increased independence and integration into the wider community. Rather, its achievements and contribution should be celebrated, especially by refugees who have benefited from the trust's assistance in some way.

Despite its perceived faults or failings, the trust was a unique entity during World War II, providing a service and level of support not available to refugees from other countries, and provided a degree of security that would otherwise have been unattainable post-war. In all, it assisted or had been the mainstay of 15,701 refugees from Nazism, and 4,086 refugees from communism, at some of the most critical times of their lives.

Dr Jana Burešová and Emeritus Professor Charmian Brinson are currently preparing a book about the CRTF. Both are committee members of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies, which includes the former Czechoslovakia, and is based at the University of London.

● *Readers' personal experiences of the Trust would be welcomed.*