

# Malá ale naše (Small but ours)

**Ivan Margolius** marks 80 years since the Sudetenland was signed over to Nazi Germany by France, Italy and Great Britain and follows some of the consequences that occurred in September and October 1938

**A**mong the key anniversaries to be remembered this year is the occupation of the Sudetenland regions of Czechoslovakia following the Munich Conference held 80 years ago in September 1938 by Germany, France, Italy and Great Britain without Czechoslovak government participation.

It was falsely perceived that the concession of Sudetenland – under pressure from its German majority population, supported by Nazi sympathisers, to be included within the Third Reich – would satisfy Hitler's expansionist ambitions and remove the threat of war. The agreement was signed in the early hours of September 30, profoundly and devastatingly sealing the fate of large parts of Czechoslovakia's territory and all her citizens.

Subsequently the annexation of Sudetenland to the Third Reich was carried out quickly between October 1 and 10. The agreement divided the Czechoslovak borderlands into four zones which were occupied by October 7. In addition a further fifth zone, claimed falsely to be inhabited by a majority of German speakers was also taken over by October 10. Later, in November 1938, Czechoslovakia was forced to give up parts of Slovakia, Ruthenia and Moravia to Hungary and Poland.

The agreement was perceived by the Czechoslovak population as a great betrayal by the Western European nations and had a greatly negative effect on the moral of the Czechoslovak people especially among the troops of the Czechoslovak Army who were not able to defend their country despite being well prepared and equipped. After all

Czechoslovakia signed the Czechoslovak-French Alliance Treaty in Paris on January 25, 1924 committing France to providing military assistance in case it was attacked by Germany.

Heda Margolius Kovaly in *Hitler, Stalin and I* wrote: "people ... looked to the west with such reliance... Karel Čapek and Masaryk and others looked toward Britain; all artists and writers admired France. And all those great powers, which could have stood with us and helped us, just abandoned us. They collapsed in front of Hitler.

"As an immediate reaction, the Czech poet František Halas wrote in his 1938 poem *Song of Anguish (Torso naděje: Zpěv úzkosti)*: 'The bell of treason tolls and tolls, whose were the hands to knell it, it was sweet France's and the proud Albion's, and we had so loved them.' That's how it was. We had loved them."

This sudden annexation which prompted many Czechoslovak citizens in Sudetenland to seek immediate refuge in a truncated Czechoslovakia created many problems, especially in Prague due to a lack of available accommodation. Also there were many citizens fleeing the country for abroad altogether.

Very soon, in October 1938, the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, a voluntary organisation, was set up in London to provide temporary hospitality in Britain for especially endangered refugees. Between October 1938 and March 1939 the British Committee brought 3,500 refugees from Czechoslovakia to Britain. Then the Czechoslovak Refugee Trust was created on July 21, 1939 by the British government.

Its purpose was assistance for certain categories of people who sought refuge from Nazi persecution following the ceding



**Czechs expelled from the Sudetenland, filling in a questionnaire for the refugees' office, in Prague in October 1938**



**Sudeten priests welcoming the arrival of the Nazis**



**Members of the Freikorps**

to the Third Reich of the Sudeten part of Czechoslovakia under the Munich Agreement, and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by the Germans in March 1939. These refugees comprised not only Czechoslovak citizens but several hundred Germans and Austrians who had gained asylum in Czechoslovakia after escaping from Nazi persecution in their own countries between 1933 and 1938.

Before the committee was created, several appeals were launched in Britain for

subscriptions for the relief of the refugees, among them were those by the Lord Mayor of London Sir Frank Bowater and the *News Chronicle* and the *Manchester Guardian* newspapers. The Kindertransports started in December 1938 and Britain had taken in nearly 10,000 youngsters from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria and Poland by the beginning of the war in September 1939.

However, what is rarely known was the enormous and heroic effort organised by the



**Bouda artillery  
fortification in  
the Orlice  
Mountains**



Czechoslovak authorities set up to rescue as much of the vital commodities that would have been captured had they been left in the Sudeten.

On the morning of October 2, 1938 the commanders of the border fortifications, bunkers, blockhouses, casemates built between 1935 and 1938 in imitation of the French Maginot Line, received orders to evacuate and take all movable military installations, weapons, ammunition and equipment either beforehand or with their retreating troops. The evacuation of the military equipment from the thousands of border fortifications and defences, which was made to prevent it falling to occupation forces, continued until the morning of October 9.

In the evening of October 3, telegrams from the Czechoslovak Ministry of National Defence in Prague, gave orders to evacuate the most important government offices and military establishments as well as a stockpile of raw materials, industrial products. They were to be removed even if they were not fully completed together with manufacturing and testing machinery from all Sudetenland zones due to be occupied by Germany as designated by the Munich Agreement.

This vast logistics' exercise which had to be completed quickly and efficiently was totally unforeseen and unplanned for and became a large headache for the organisers who not only had to gather the necessary expert personnel to oversee the task but also arrange the varied transport forms required to carry out the complex undertaking. Each region was allocated a military officer to manage the evacuation evaluating the equipment, materials and products and ensuring an adequate supply of railway goods wagons and road transport.

Part of the fifth zone to be occupied consisted of the Moravian regional towns of Kopřivnice, Studénka, Hlučín, Bílovec, Opava and Nový Jičín although only about a third of the population was German. One of the main reasons for the occupation of Kopřivnice was the location of the innovative and prosperous automobile and truck manufacturing Ringhoffer-Tatra company which the German leadership wanted to include in the Third Reich. It would directly benefit by acquiring its machinery and products especially the heavy trucks manufactured to support the war effort.

The new Third Reich border line followed closely just outside the factory fencing enclosure. Hans von Ringhoffer, the owner

of the company, managed to stop the incorporation of the works into the Reichswerke Hermann Göring. He was concerned mainly because the Tatra headquarters were still based in Prague Smíchov. Nevertheless throughout the occupation and war it had German management led by Franz Pilny and Ludwig van Bako with Hans Ledwinka acting as deputy director and go-between for the workforce.

The population of Studénka, north of Nový Jičín, heard of the imminent occupation on Monday October 10, from the town loudspeakers on Thursday October 6 at 4 o'clock in the morning. At that time, in addition to the Kopřivnice works, Ringhoffer-Tatra's branch of Wagon Works in Studénka housed its aircraft manufacture then making its model T-131 biplane trainer built under licence from Bucker Flugzeugbau GmbH located in Rangsdorf bei Berlin based on the Bucker's model Bü-131. The Czech town administration left Studénka on Friday October 7 and until Monday October 10 the town was in a state of anarchy with paramilitary Sudetendeutsches Freikorps taking over the town executive and local manufacturing enterprises.

On the morning of October 10, the German occupation forces entered Studénka and nearby Kopřivnice. First to arrive were soldiers on motorcycles, then motorised units, with open trucks towing small calibre cannons accompanied by infantry. They were later followed by tanks. These Wehrmacht units took over the town administration and factories which had remained closed during the day from the Freikorps. The next day the Tatra aircraft factory opened for work with a German gatekeeper letting workers in individually while checking their identity papers supported by the German troops.

The Ministry of National Defence also specifically ordered the evacuation of the Studénka aircraft engines, completed aircraft and airframes. On October 8 Major Stanislav Pergler drove to Kopřivnice and then to Studénka to assess all the elements which had to be moved to the truncated territory of Czechoslovakia. Pergler phoned the factory and was told that the Czechoslovak Army unit had left and the factory had been cleared out already and was being guarded by the Freikorps.

Pergler was stopped by the station master at the railway station who confirmed that several wagons remained in the factory which were impossible to remove but five or

six more stood at the station loaded with evacuation goods which were able to depart later.

Unable to carry out his inspection Pergler returned to Nový Jičín where he met an air force flight lieutenant who had organised the Studénka evacuation. He confirmed having rescued seven aircraft bodies and wings, six engines, one dis-assembled prototype aircraft and all the specialist materials and the most precious of manufacturing machinery by the railway on the evening of October 7. It was delivered safely to Sousedík electric machinery factory in Vsetín then owned by Ringhoffer-Tatra. Some already completed aircraft were flown to safety for storage at Olomouc airport which was the Moravian and Silesian base for Czechoslovak military planes. Out of the total of 35 T-131 aircraft made, 20 units were completed during the German occupation, despite the evacuation. The production of Tatra aircraft was shut down for good by May 23, 1939.

After the Czechoslovak Army artillery unit had evacuated the massive Bouda stronghold fortifications under the Orlice Mountains in north east Bohemia part of Sudetenland and was marching along the road toward the nearby village of Těchotín on October 9, it approached the edge of a forest.

A woman ran out of her cottage and called after the soldiers sobbing: "You're leaving, but now what'll happen to all of us who're staying behind?"

## In numbers

### Czechoslovakia First Republic (1918-38)

Territory: 140,508 sq km  
Population: 14,729,536 citizens

### Post Munich Agreement

Territories lost to Germany, Poland and Hungary: 41,596 sq km  
Population lost in total: 4,922,440 citizens

### Czechoslovakia Second Republic (1938-39)

Territory: 98,912 sq km  
Population: 9,807,096 citizens  
70.4% of the territory and 66.58% of the population remained of the pre-Munich First Republic period.