A Returned Exile

The word exile has a very special meaning for me, and my immediate three generations before me, both paternally and maternally. Upon the 1939 arrival of the Nazi’s in Prague, my Czech grandfather’s family properties and possessions were confiscated. They were returned in 1945, only to be seized again during the Communist takeover in 1948. My grandfather and his parents were forced into exile, twice in 10 years, leaving their 700-year history in Czechoslovakia behind before eventually settling in Boston, Massachusetts.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, my father returned to Prague in an effort to reclaim, restore and preserve our family’s art collections and property, which are now open for the public being used for exhibits, events, and cultural festivals. My parents have dedicated the last 26 years making these collections accessible to the public and for scholarly research, with the mission of making history and culture relevant in the 21st century. But the return from exile was also about re-establishing our deep-rooted family history.

It was not just properties and possessions that were confiscated. It was an attempt to erase my family’s identity and connection to our ancestral roots. I am not sure what the destiny of these properties would have been, or if they would even have existed at all, if history had not unfolded the way it did. For me, as a “returned exile” twice removed, the powerful nature of the term is evident: it gave our family an opportunity to create a new future. Being an “exile” has interestingly created a new history and a new generation of experience that would not have otherwise existed. My family’s initial removal from then Czechoslovakia eventually reinforced our country bonds more strongly by bringing us closer to a culture that we had not experienced in the United States, but which has played an integral role in reaffirming our family’s Czech identity and historical presence. Rather than thinking of exile as a loss of something, I think of it more as a generational life journey latent with struggles, hope and opportunity.