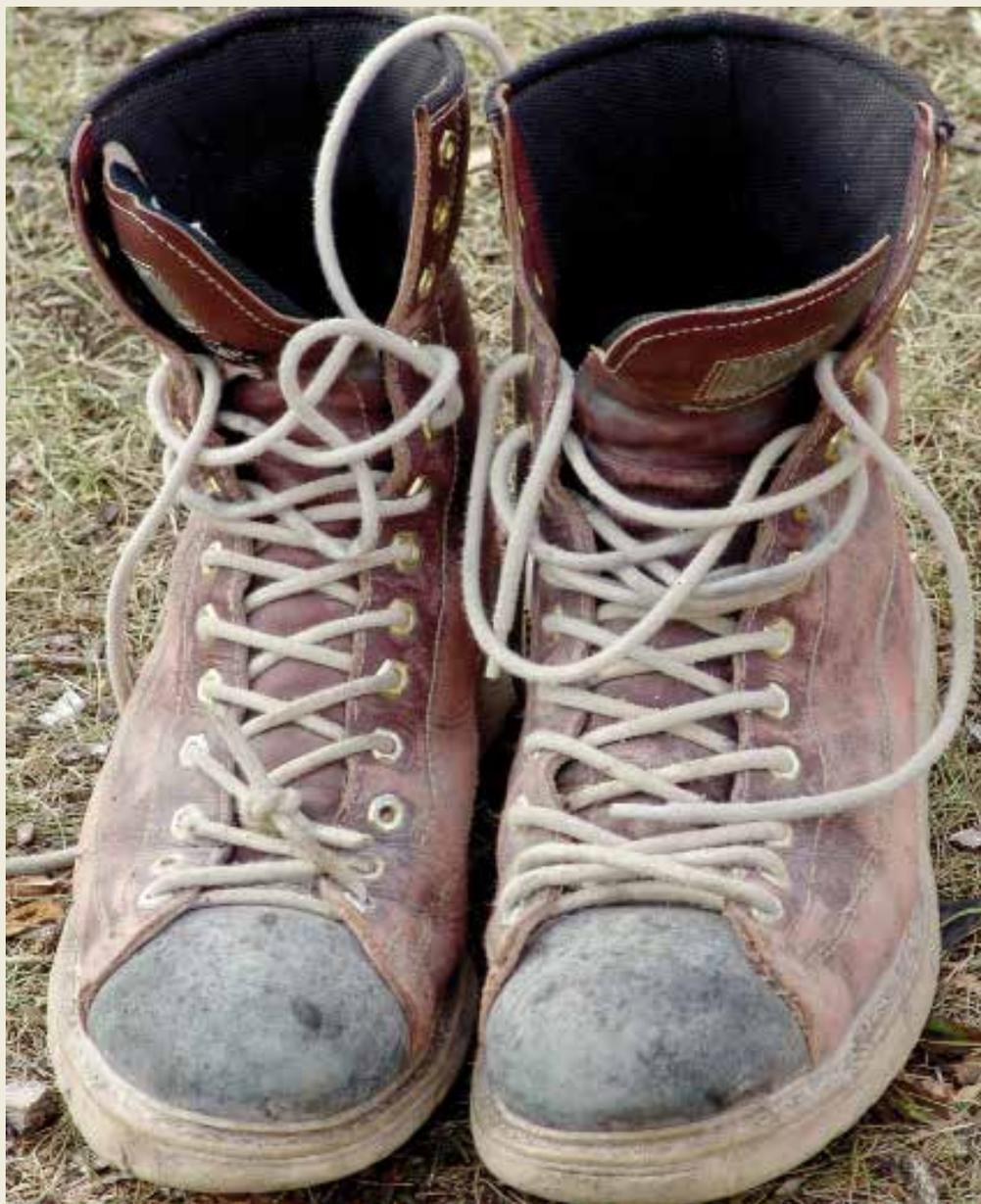


One Per Cent Luck

From Castle to Construction
and a few hair-raising tales in between
The story of Fred Sirotek



by Francie Healy

One Per Cent Luck
From Castle to Construction

“**Y**ou don’t need to win the lottery. You only need to have a tiny bit of luck – One per cent will do – as long as it comes at the right time.

“Of course, sometimes it’s not luck at all. It’s just knowing when to avoid stupidity.”

–Fred Sirotek

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Dedicated to the memory of people who did not have
that one per cent luck when it counted the most.

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People

They all played a role

Alexanian, Aram

Fred's and Nadia's brother-in-law; Fred's friend and business partner.

Alexanian, Lida

Fred's sister-in-law; Nadia's sister.

Anderson, Art

One of Fred's business partners and friends.

Beneš, Josef

Fred's uncle; Bedřiška's middle brother.

Beneš, Josef

One of Fred's cousins; Bedřiška's nephew

Beneš, Václav

Fred's uncle, Bedřiška's oldest brother.

Beneš, Václav

One of Fred's cousins; Bedřiška's nephew.

Benešová, Maruš (Marie)

Wife of Fred's cousin, Milos

Burns, Roy

One of Fred's business partners and friends.

Čada, Jaromír (Jerome Čada)

Milu's husband.

Čada, Milu (Miluška, née Sirotková)

Fred's sister.

Franceschini, Len

Fred's long-time friend and business partner.

Gabčík, Jozef

One of the Czech soldiers who assassinated Reinhardt Heydrich.

Greenberg, Michael

Fred's lawyer; also one of his business partners and friends.

Gunderson, George and Sylvia

Clients and friends of Fred's. George became a partner with Fred in Commemorative Products Ltd.

Heggtveit, Bruce

Famous sportsman and owner of an Ottawa sporting goods store; started Heggveit Construction.

Kubiš, Jan

Another Czech soldier responsible for assassinating Heydrich.

Lacasse, Marcel and Denise

Good friends and neighbours.

Lang, Josef (Joe)

Long-time friend, from Fred's boyhood, who fled the Communists with the Sirotek family.

McDougall, Bill

Contractor and business partner.

McGlashan, Clark

Partner in Commemorative Products Ltd.

Sirotek, Bedřich

Fred's father.

Sirotek, Bedřiška (Sirotková)

Fred's mother.

Smudek, Jan

Scout leader who shot some Nazis.

Strong, Maurice

President of CIDA.

Vodsedalek, Tony

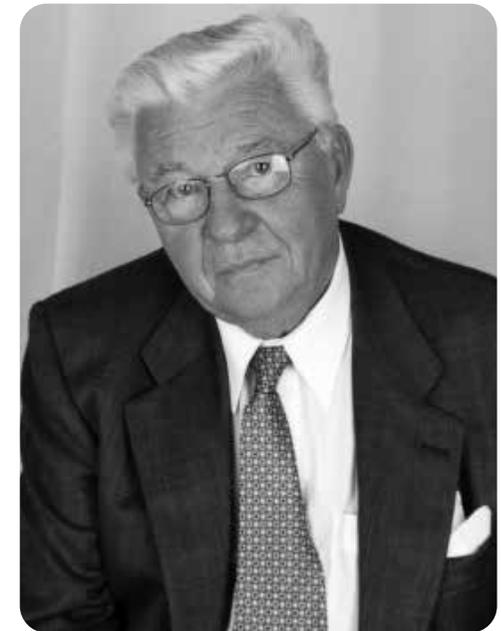
Friend from one of the refugee camps.

Foreword

More than I can say

When you've lived as long as I have, you realize life is fleeting, unpredictable at times, exciting, challenging, rewarding, hurtful, joyful, and perplexing – but always a journey.

There's also a fair bit of luck to it. The luck comes in small ways you might not notice. But it's there, winking at you, giving you hope and direction all along the way. It's easy to miss, but it's there. It's unpredictable. It can't be ordered or purchased. It just happens. Its twin – bad luck – behaves the same way. Neither is to be ignored. You'll find instances of both throughout the following pages.



Fred Sirotek

Sirotek family photo

Your life passes by, with all its ups, downs, joys and sorrows; and if you don't record it, you're the only one who really knows about it.

I wish I had started recording my life earlier. But I forgive myself for not doing this. When you're in the midst of starting a new life, as I was, there's no time for anything BUT life, and that's probably a good thing.

The trouble is, when you finally sit down to tell it all, you realize there's more than you can say, and sometimes more than you can remember.

I have been perhaps more fortunate than many, on one hand, because of my business success. On the other hand, there are things I have lost, or missed, because of it. I missed being fully there as my children were growing.

In my generation, Dads in Europe were mostly off at work, so it seemed normal. When they also had to hide from the political police, as my Dad had to, their presence was even rarer. I am not sure my children recognize the influence that experience had on my approach to being a father. My European-born wife did. But now I wonder: what did I miss? It was a toss-up. Be there, or provide for my family in the best way I could.

My life began on November 13, 1929, in another country, in another era. History made that era seem so much longer ago. There were so many changes. Some of them were horrific.

At first I was living a normal life with a loving mother, hardworking father, and an older sister. A few months before my 10th birthday, Hitler and WW II suddenly arrived on the streets where I lived. It wasn't a normal life anymore.

Just one week after the coup in our country gave the Communists full control, my father decided to walk away from 25 years of his achievements, take us he-knew-not-where and start all over, in a new language. We left behind our tight network of friends and family. It was as brave as it was wise. With the benefit of now knowing what transpired, there is no doubt in my mind that not one member of our family would have survived. I watched my father, a prominent Prague businessman, willingly demote himself to a tradesman.

But we made it. We survived Hitler and we survived almost three years of mostly Communist power. While we were itching to get out of Europe, ready to emigrate to anywhere – as long as it was a long way away from Europe – The U.S. and Canada were the preferred countries by far. The U.S. was at the top of the list, since my father still had some contacts from the days he built the Czechoslovakian pavilion there in 1933, and we knew not a soul in Canada.

But Canada has been good to us and provided the opportunities that we were seeking. For that we were, and continue to be, thankful. I have learned about life and about business. I have learned to be wary and also to trust. I have learned to love, to hope, to work hard, to succeed... and also to fail. I've also learned that it's not the failure that counts, but what you learn from it and how well you use that new knowledge. I want to tell you about it. Perhaps in some small way you will know, through my story, who I am.

I cannot find the proper words to tell how indebted I am to my biographer, Francie Healy. This project started as a

record that would touch on a few highlights. It would be a simple accounting for the benefit of grand- and great-grandchildren. I thought it might be a dozen pages, and it would contain the kind of things I would have most liked to know about the lives of my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. I wish I had tried harder to make the time to ask them about their memories and experiences.

It was Francie's enthusiasm that broadened the scope from "a few highlights" to a multi-chapter book. Her interest in what she was writing led to my digging up records and remembering things and stories that I had long ago forgotten. The project led me to ask for help from the so very few others in my life still alive who refreshed me on details that were hazy.

This book is a detailed description of the life of one kid born in Europe between two World Wars. A kid who started out not so very well off but who was judged to have a silver spoon in his mouth just before he reached his teen years.

The silver spoon didn't last. Before I was out of my teens, my family and I were as flat broke as anyone could possibly be – living in refugee camps in the American part of Occupied Germany; being housed and fed courtesy of the International Refugee Organization. And being infinitely grateful for the sawdust-extended macaroni meals (really!) that we lived on for more than a year.

During WWII I attended the same school as my father had. I was headed towards a degree in Engineering. Half-way through eight years of high school in Czechoslovakia, I

had opted to take advanced studies in construction, such as drafting or how to design a steel column.

Had it not been for our urgent need to escape Communist Czechoslovakia, I would easily have attained my degree, but it wasn't to be.

Once in Canada, not having an engineering degree only held me back a little, however, when I had to hire an engineer to put an official stamp on something I could easily have done myself. By the time I was officially retired, I had built too many buildings to count: dozens in Ottawa, more in other parts of Canada from New Brunswick to London, Ont.; to New York State, and on every major English-speaking island in the Carribean between Antigua and Trinidad.

This book is a true-life description of up, down and up-again fortunes.

Most of all, it's about the important role tiny bits of luck played in my life. For instance, having a father who recognized that the Communist regime was even more dangerous than the Nazis and not being shot dead getting away from them. Can you fathom how the ordering and pre-paying of a goat dinner you hoped not to eat could save your life? These are only a couple of examples of the kind of simple luck I have experienced.

We managed to assimilate in a new city, in a new country, continent, language and culture – and end up being accepted and making a good living.

There are others who made it, some in a much bigger way. But odds are the tiny amount of “the luck factor” did not play such a spectacularly great and lifesaving role in their lives as they did in my life and my family’s.

Not that success came easy. But you know, if your work is also your hobby, it helps. My desire to make my family as secure as I was in my young days was a big factor and great incentive. The actions on my part that were wise, and those that were not, are self-evident. If only one reader might avoid mistakes I have made, or benefit by the right thing I might have done, I shall be very pleased.

I have done my best to be as accurate as possible in the telling of events, whether the issues were minor or of high importance. Much is based on my memories. Part comes from what was related to me by my parents, and part from other sources I consider reliable.

The research to confirm the accuracy of some events led to discovery of the most incredible and generally-unknown details related to the responsibility for the start of World War II. I discovered what action (or lack of action) might actually have prevented the war from starting. The details are so well documented that they are beyond dispute. The question that begs asking is why these details received such an infinitesimal amount of publicity.

More on that subject in the early chapters of this book.

I have learned many simple but important things over the course of my life, and I share them with you here.

Given a chance to do it all over again, would I do some things differently?

Absolutely, but given the same set of circumstances, the principal actions would remain.

- I would devote a few hours every year to my memoirs.
- I would take no pictures if I did not intend to note where, when, and what was photographed.
- I would continue to see the bottle half full rather than half empty.
- On my death bed, I would never say: “I wish I had spent more time at the office.” (I have put in my fair share. But it beats standing in line at a soup kitchen.)
- I would continue to value and follow advice I have received over the years.
- Live on half of after-tax income, no matter how little that might be.
- Luck and work are partners. Usually the harder one works the luckier one gets.
- Just as even ugly clouds have a silver lining, huge success can have bad side effects.
- When things look so bad that they cannot get any worse, don’t believe it. They can.
- The shroud has no pockets.
- Always speak kindly and softly. You may have to eat your words.
- The road to hell is paved with good intentions.
- If your day job watch has the alarm set for 9 to 5, get rid of it.
- If your calendar lists Saturdays, Sundays and holidays as “days of rest”, get another calendar.

- A Chinese proverb says: The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is today. That is true about far more than trees.

The Rotary Club of West Ottawa

Back in 1957, when the Rotary Club of West Ottawa – the second one to be established in Ottawa – was chartered, it extended a membership invitation to prominent people and long-established companies, just as it does today.

But in 1957, Sirotek Construction was only six years old. I was 27 years old, and I had not as yet attained special standing in the commercial construction classification. However, since I had done some work for members of the Ottawa club, they welcomed me as a member. Now I am proud to be the last living original charter member of the West Ottawa Club.

Eventually I would have qualified for membership anyway, because over the years Sirotek Construction did work in Canada, the U.S., and the Caribbean.

In subsequent years, I was elected to the board of directors for both the Ottawa Construction Association as well as the national Canadian Construction Association.

Thank you, Gert

Gert Tracey has been an immense help, not only in monitoring the progress of this story and catching the odd timing error. She has also reminded me of a number of interesting facts that found their way into the script. It was comforting to know that her attention to detail was ever-present.

Frederick B. Sirotek
Ottawa, 2014

Preface

An extraordinary journey

The request came out of the blue.

I was the editor and main writer for *Ottawa Renovates* magazine (still am, at this writing).

One day I received an email message from Paul Scissons in advertising. A reader by the name of Fred Sirotek had gotten in touch with him and asked how he could reach me.



Francie Healy

The reader had read one of my feature stories, and wanted to know if I could do something like that about *him*. It wouldn't be for publication or anything like that. It would just be about his life – a story for his children and grandchildren.

Sure, I said when we finally spoke on the phone. Maybe it should be longer than the feature stories in *Ottawa Renovates*, however. Maybe it should be more like 5,000 words or so, but I'd know once I met him and we talked some more about it.

Not long afterwards we sat in his bright, comfortable office

in his Ottawa home and started talking. I had brought a small digital recorder with me. It's a good thing I did, because I was about to hear a story so large, on so many levels, that handwritten notes could not have done it justice.

I don't know how many hours I stayed in his office that day, but I had arrived mid-morning and the sun was setting by the time I left. I realized this was no 5,000-word story. This was bigger than that. Much, much bigger.

Every week afterwards for a year and a half, Fred Sirotek and I spoke by phone. I put him on "speaker" and recorded every bit of it. Then I transcribed it and turned it into narrative form.

It has been an extraordinary journey.

I learned about this man I had never even heard of. I was struck by his cleverness, his wit, his fortitude, his memory, and his depth of wisdom.

I was astonished by the story itself, by its breadth of joy, hardship, anguish, fear, compassion, determination, and success. And I learned more history than I ever thought I would. I realize now I knew next to nothing about WW II, even though both my parents were part of it. But my parents' story came out of wartime London when they were a young Navy WREN and Officer in a different kind of drama altogether.

WW II in Fred's time, and his parents' time, was European. It was Czech. It was more shocking and brutal than anything

I had heard or could have imagined. I had to know more, and thus began my own education. I researched, I read, and I learned.

Fred's story became alive to me. I could see it. I could hear it. I could feel it.

I knew nothing about Communism, and certainly nothing about Communism in Czechoslovakia. Here I was, a comfortable Canadian who had never had the slightest thought about fleeing my wonderful country. And now, through Fred, I was experiencing the sadness and terror of having to leave country, friends, relatives, heritage and all possessions behind.

As I listened to him telling his story, I saw Canada through a stranger's eyes. I imagined what it would be like to suddenly find myself trying to understand a new language in a new land, without anything remotely familiar, missing the support of my strong extended family, and knowing there would be no turning back – knowing that failure would mean starvation.

I imagined what strength it would take to draw on everything I had learned in only 20 years (the age Fred was when he arrived in Canada) and the wild determination to survive – not only survive, but to be supremely successful.

As his story continued, I laughed and I empathized. I gasped at some of Fred's close calls and was awestruck that he managed to survive. I began to see what kind of man he is, and I was deeply impressed. I described him to my friends as "a fine, good, honest man, a man I am fortunate to know".

But I also realized I would only know a fraction of it. I could see there were layers of profoundly interesting elements to this man – layers that perhaps even his wives and children couldn't tap into. I could see gentleness, and I could see hardness. I could see brilliance beyond my ability to understand, and I could see a man who, perhaps, might not always see the forest for the trees. I could see his joy, comfort and satisfaction with success; and I could see glimpses of sadness, perhaps deep down, perhaps never discussed with anyone.

For a story that was supposed to be 5,000 words, this narrative took off from my first meeting with Fred. I'm so glad he allowed me to keep going with it, and to learn and grow with it.

I will never forget it, or him.

Francie Healy
Mallorytown, Ontario
2014

Another perspective

What others say

When I was growing up, my father would often say to me: “Associate with people who are successful. You will learn a lot from them.” I followed my father's great advice, and at every opportunity I would do just as he had advised.



Len Franceschini

That's what led me to associate with Fred.

We were both young at the time – he an aspiring and successful small general contractor, but moving ahead fast. After often doing business with Fred (as I was the manager of a building supply material company in Ottawa) I soon became aware that Fred had the foresight and “smarts” to make it big in our industry – and he did.

We joined up in business together about 1962 or '63 and have been together ever since – both using each other's skills to work toward a successful team of solid businessmen.

So it goes on. We have done well together and are now winding down, reaping from our success and enjoying our senior years.

Fred has always been a great partner, creative and imaginative. I am sure you will enjoy this well-written, accurate story of a successful Canadian businessman.

–**Len Franceschini**



Lida Alexanian

I first met Fred Sirotek through my husband, Aram Alexanian. He had met Fred on a renovation site of their first store in Ottawa by chance, when Fred was looking for a job. Fred had emigrated from Prague two years earlier.

Fred got the job and the two became friends. Both were starting new careers in Ottawa in 1951.

Fred was a hard working and a very personable fellow. My husband and I were invited to a few of his social gatherings. In the coming years when my sister came to visit me in Ottawa, Fred met her at a concert and both were enamored by each other and within a short time they were married on a snowy, brisk day in Ottawa.

Thus began a very close and amicable relationship which lasted over the years in good and sad times and still close in friendship although I lost my husband and sister almost 20 years ago. Fred and his family have always been in a close and caring relationship with my family throughout our long

history together.

Fred has always had a goal and achievement orientation and a very acute business sense which has always given him the strong and determined personality of reaching to the top. He is a truly a self-made man and whenever he senses these qualities in people, he has lent a helping hand in times of adversity.

He always reminds me of a diamond with hard edges, but of precious value.

–**Lida Alexanian**



Fred and I met on what was probably the coldest day of the year in 2004 when he moved in across the street from us.

Being neighbourly, I walked over and introduced myself. He did the same, then strategically went back to Florida, where the temperature was about 40 degrees warmer than Ottawa. He asked me to check in on the house and water the plants periodically until his return in April, which I did – and still do to this day during the winter months while he's enjoying the south sunshine.

Since his move in 2004, we developed a friendship, solving the world's problems over many business and political discussions and martinis. I've learned more about World



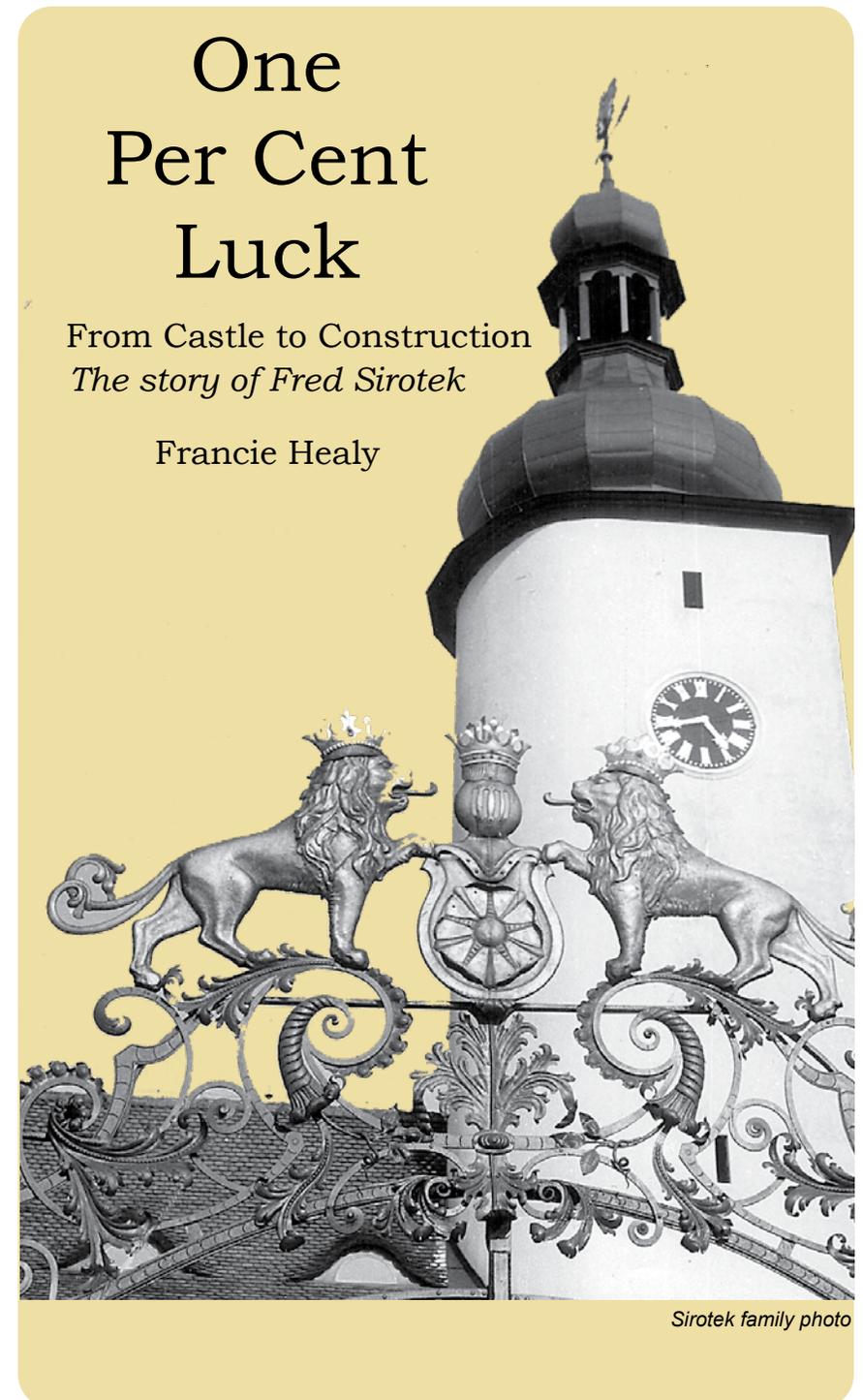
Marcel Lacasse

One Per Cent Luck

War II and European history from Fred than from school or any book that I've read on the topic.

It's been a pleasure to be befriended by Fred, and my family and I are richer for knowing him. Listening to the stories of the past 70 years has been educational, heart-wrenching, and entertaining. It has equally been nice to meet his family and extended family through Gert, and we've appreciated the time we spent in Florida, escaping the northern winter from time to time.

-Marcel Lacasse



Early Years

The people who came before, when everything was ordered, understandable, and simple.



Milu Sirotek (Miluška Sirotková) on the lawn circa 1931. To the right, Fred is trying to emulate Milu's pose. Behind them is Bedřich's first car.

Sirotek family photo



Fred and Milu

Sirotek family photo

Parents & Grandparents

Earliest roots

Sometimes, in order to know a person, it's useful to understand his roots.

Fred Sirotek's roots go far, far back – to the Austro-Hungary Empire and long before that. In fact, everyone who immediately preceded his own generation was born at the end of that rule, which lasted from 1618 to 1918.

Fred doesn't know much about many of those early people. He has only vague memories of visiting his maternal grandparents at the family farm. He does know his grandparents and great-grandparents lived long lives, into their late 70s and 80s, which was remarkable for people born in the middle of the 1800s. His own mother lived until she was 94.

But it is his parents whose accomplishments, intellect, quiet strength, bravery and approach to life are reflected in Fred's character and what he has achieved.

The Communist coup took place on February 25, 1948. A little more than a week later, on March 6, Fred's father, Bedřich Sirotek, made the decision to walk away from 25 years of work.

Five weeks later, the whole family was crossing the border to the US zone of occupied Germany, after dark, across a farmer's field, with what possessions they could carry a mile, hearing dogs barking and gunshots fired by the border guards – the same guards who were being rewarded with extra pay for arresting or killing people who tried to escape the country.

That was the speed of life-change for this family. They were a group of five people out of about 400,000 citizens who managed to escape. Thousands did not make it and spent years in jails. Hundreds died trying.

Bedřich Sirotek was a prominent builder in the City of Prague. He also built the Czech pavilion for the World's Fair in Chicago (1933) Brussels (1935), and Paris (for Pilsen Brewery) (1937) and rebuilt a chapel in Holland that memorialized a famous Czech saint.

He bought their apartment building in 1936, the lumber yard in 1937, and Straz Castle in 1939.

As one testament to his integrity and bravery, Bedřich was deeply involved in the underground activities during the German occupation. But he managed to keep both himself and his family alive.

He was also a man of great foresight. Apprehensive of the political developments in Czechoslovakia from the very moment the war ended, he sent his daughter (Fred's sister), Milu, to Switzerland in 1945 just weeks after the war ended

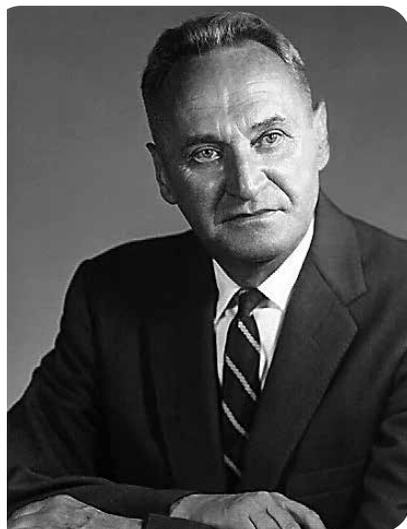


Between the two World Wars, Bedřich promoted his business by exhibiting at several international fairs. Subsequently he was awarded the contracts for the construction of the Czechoslovakian pavilions at the World's Fair in Chicago, USA in 1933 (top photo); and in Brussels, Belgium in 1935 (middle photo). In 1937 he built a restaurant for the Pilsen Brewery in Paris, France (bottom photo). He also reconstructed a chapel in Utrecht, Holland.

Sirotek family photos

to learn French, and Fred to Great Britain in 1946 during the summer school vacations to learn some English.

He also started to develop a plan to get some money out of the country because the Czechoslovakian Koruna was not freely convertible to hard currency. But the semi-Communist regime made that plan impossible.



Bedřich Sirotek (Fred's father)
Sirotek family photos

A great opportunity presented itself. Bedřich met a Jewish businessman who came to Prague looking to buy thousands of crates as packaging for Palestinian oranges for export. Bedřich said he'd take on the project of making the crates and selling them to him.

So Bedřich set about completely retooling his lumber yard with all the equipment needed to build orange crates from wood, cut just millimeters thick rather than 2 x 4 or other construction lumber. He also filled up the lumber yard with all the wood that would be appropriate for tens of thousands of crates. Part of the purchase price of the crates would be deposited in banks outside the country, and therefore safe from the Communists who at that time already had significant control. It seemed to be an excellent business plan.

However, the Communists refused to grant him the permits for exporting the crates, delaying the permit for an ever-

increasing number of reasons. Not one crate was shipped out. When the family left Czechoslovakia, expensive machinery and lumber – and a whole lifetime of work and assets – were left behind.

Fred says it was a good move nevertheless, because neither of the Sirotek men would have survived the Communists beyond the next year or two.

The Communists ended up with 100 per cent of the Sirotek assets. When restitution finally came more than four decades later, Fred and his sister Milu were negotiating the rent they would charge the City of Prague for the use of their property after the title to the real estate was returned to them as heirs. One arrogant manager had the gall to say they should be grateful that they had “looked after” the assets for the Siroteks for the whole time they were gone.

Bedřich started in business in 1924. His first vehicle was a motorcycle with a sidecar. By 1939 he had three different automobiles, but the Germans confiscated the newest and best one.

He was involved in “anti-German” activities, but he was very careful – and wise. Fred remembers one instance where Bedřich was invited to join an underground group and ended up in a room with about 100 people.

He came back from that meeting declaring there was no way on earth he was going to join. The group, he said, was too big, and it was therefore reckless and dangerous. He said with

so many people, somebody somewhere would say the wrong thing or would “break” in an interrogation, and everyone could end up being killed.

Bedřiška Benešova Sirotek, Fred’s mother, was what Fred describes as “a classic wife” of the times. “Obedient is not the right term,” he says. “Maybe you could say ‘consenting.’”

He says she didn’t give his father “a hard time” about anything – with one exception.



Bedřiška Benešova Sirotek
(aboard the S.S. Samaria, July 1949)
Sirotek family photo

In 1933, when Bedřich was building the Czechoslovakian Government pavilion in Chicago, part of the pavilion was a restaurant with a big section devoted to a beer salon. The time was right: prohibition had just about ended.

Pilsen Beer Brewery offered Bedřich the beer hall franchise. He immediately wrote a letter back home to Bedřiška and asked if she’d like to move to Chicago with the kids for the duration of the world’s fair. Her immediate response was: “NO!”

But then, perhaps a few days later, she thought maybe it

would be a good idea. She sat down and wrote another letter. By the time Bedřich received it, it was too late. Someone else had taken the franchise. That person ended up making \$1 million in 1933.

“So that idea didn’t work,” says Fred. “But maybe it’s just as well it didn’t happen to us: Chicago, 1933, a million bucks... and maybe an Al Capone target...”

Bedřich went to primary and secondary schools from 1905 to 1914, and from 1919 to 1923. Later, his son, Bedřich Jr. (Fred) would attend the same secondary school (from 1944 to 1948).

There is no record of what Fred’s father did between 1914 and 1919, except that he was a prisoner of war in Italy at the end of WW I. One document on file shows he worked for an engineer for about a year in 1923, and started his business in 1924.

Fred never, ever, saw his parents argue. He says he figures they must have had conflicts, but they were never expressed in front of the children.

Bedřiška was good at running the house and the kitchen. The little village she was born in, Mlecice, was about 30 or 40 miles from the second largest city in Bohemia, Pilsen. She was sent there by her father to apprentice in the kitchen of the biggest hotel in the city. Ever after, she was a superb cook. Fred says her particular specialty was duck with cabbage and dumplings. It was so special that she ended up teaching it to

“a whole chain of people”, including Fred’s daughter. But it’s so much work that it doesn’t happen often.

She was the only one in the family of her generation who outlived the Communists – by three years and two months. All her brothers died – only one from natural causes. She had to suffer news of the deaths of all, without attending their funerals, because to return to her native country during the Communist regime would have meant her own death.

Only one brother was allowed to visit the Siroteks in Canada when he was past retirement age (and no longer deemed “useful” to the regime).

Bedřiška went to Prague with Milu early in 1992 during the time of the restitution process at the end of the Communist era. She died there in 1993. She was two months short of 94.

Grandparents

One of Fred’s grandfathers was a farmer. He was “significantly overweight”, and his wife, a delicate, small woman, was just the opposite.

His other grandfather was the first generation with the first name “Bedřich”. He was a master carpenter, born in the



Bedřiška and Bedřich in Canada in later years.
Sirotek family photo

Czech village of Nečín. He was apparently a good craftsman and successful; however, from what Fred was told, his grandfather squandered a great deal of money on gambling. It had such a negative effect on his son, on Fred’s father, that Fred’s father detested anything to do with cards for the rest of his life.



The first Bedřich Sirotek: Fred’s Grandfather; Bedřich’s father.

“He wouldn’t touch cards with a 10-foot pole,” says Fred. “He wouldn’t have known an Ace of Spades from a Seven of Hearts.” Some of that must have rubbed off on Fred. He limits his gambling to quitting when he is up 200 per cent or down by \$100.



Marie Benešova, Fred’s Grandmother; Bedřiška’s mother.
Sirotek family photo

Bedřich’s parents did not have a farm, so they didn’t have a lifetime support system the way farmers so often did. In their older

years, Bedřich supported them completely. In return, Fred's grandfather helped Bedřich at the plant, doing whatever he could for his age. He was the one who was there when Fred was a little boy and the barn door fell on him. (See "Nine Lives", Chapter 30.)

Cousins

Bedřiška's youngest brother, Josef, and his wife, Jarmila, had one daughter, Jarmila, who also escaped from Czechoslovakia, ended up in Canada and settled in Montreal.

Bedřiška's oldest brother and his wife, Marie, had two sons, Vaclav and Josef. Another brother, Jaroslav, had Milos, whose wife is, as of the date of this writing, the only living survivor from that generation of the regime.



The castle

*Beautiful, historic, magical...
while it lasted*

Bedřich Sirotek provided a good life for his wife, Bedřiška, his son, Bedřich Jr. (Fred) and his daughter, Milu. They were privileged and fortunate – so much so that the Sirotek children spent their summers in the family castle in the town of Stráž nad Nežárkou in one of the wings of the castle their father had renovated. It was magnificent – complete with an enchanted, dramatic, fairytale-like history.

It was built in 1264, and it had seen almost every human story possible, including suicide, betrayal, fire and death. Many years later, in Communist hands, it became a home for the deaf and dumb, a barracks for border guards and a home for developmentally challenged girls.

Now it is resplendent as a tourist attraction, cultural centre, concert hall and museum. But when Bedřich bought it from the bank in the late 30s, it was in rough shape. He spent untold amounts to rejuvenate the buildings, so much so that it survived 42 years without becoming an absolute derelict – with just about no maintenance.



Photo courtesy of Mrs. Doubrava

Milu with her new husband, Jerome Čada, at their wedding in the Castle, New Year's Eve, 1947.

It was the last happy event there for the Sirotek family.

Sirotek family photos



Part of its long history included the famous Czech operatic soprano, Ema Destinova, (Feb. 26, 1878–Jan. 28, 1930) She was famous not only in her native Czechoslovakia but also for several performances with the Berlin Court Opera; at Covent Garden's Royal Opera House in London (where she sang *Madame Butterfly* with Caruso and as Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*) and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York (*Aida*). She also sang opposite Caruso in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, under the direction of Arturo Toscanini. North Americans might think of her as Prague's Maria Callas.



**Milu's wedding party.
Fred is far right.**



The dining room of the castle, set for Milu's wedding

Sirotek family photo

Ema Destinova bought the castle in 1914. She eventually fell in love with and married a man who, after her death in 1930, ended up squandering all her money and the castle itself.

She had wanted to be buried on the castle property, but that wish was not fulfilled. She is buried in Prague, in a burial section reserved for the most famous of Czech personalities. Now there is an Ema Destinova exhibit at the castle with photographs, personal belongings, letters and some of her operatic costumes.



Bedřiška and her brother, Josef make a toast at Milu's wedding.



A meal in one of the castle rooms. Milu is facing the camera.

Sirotek family photos



The castle was full of many beautiful fixtures and pieces of furniture. This was one of the heating stoves.

The Sirotek children had wonderful adventures and happy times in that castle. Milu was married there, to a Czech lawyer, on New Year's Eve, 1947, in the "Castle Chapel" attached to the church in Stráž nad Nežárkou.

Three months and 10 days later, the Siroteks were refugees.

Bedřich had hired the Czech Film Board to record Milu's wedding. But by the time the film was edited and ready for them, the family had left, and it was never viewed by anyone.

"It might be around somewhere," says Fred. "But I doubt it. Sixty-four years and several Communist governments is a long time. I do not even know if the original Film Board exists."



Photo taken from the castle courtyard.

Photo courtesy of Mrs. Doubrava

When the family had to flee the country, they believed it might be the last they'd ever see the castle.

Amazingly, they were wrong. The castle ended up in Sirotek hands once again nearly 50 years after they left it with the Communists. Bedřich was gone by then, but their grown up

children, along with Bedřiška, were able to return to reclaim some of their birthright.

“Five minutes before the Commies were kicked out of Czechoslovakia’s government I thought I’d never, ever set foot there again,” Fred recalls. “My kids don’t speak a single word of Czech, because there was no point in teaching them a language spoken by only a few million people in a country they could not even visit (because under Czech laws they would be considered Czech citizens.)”

But Gorbachev came along and began the road to the collapse of Communism in Czechoslovakia and throughout Europe.

Fred and Milu got the castle back in 2003 when property that had been seized by the Communists was returned to its original owners. But it was a mess.

Some of the most unique parts of the castle were demolished by the Communist regime: a dozen beautiful heating stoves, decades old, were removed. The baroque staircase and terrace that Ema Destinova built was demolished. Interior historic alterations were made. Fortifications were used as the dumping point for garbage for decades.

The castle was in one of the most hardened Communist areas of the country, and it was the most difficult property to get restituted because of the Communist residual influence after the fall of the regime.

Fred and Milu spent close to \$1 million fixing it up enough

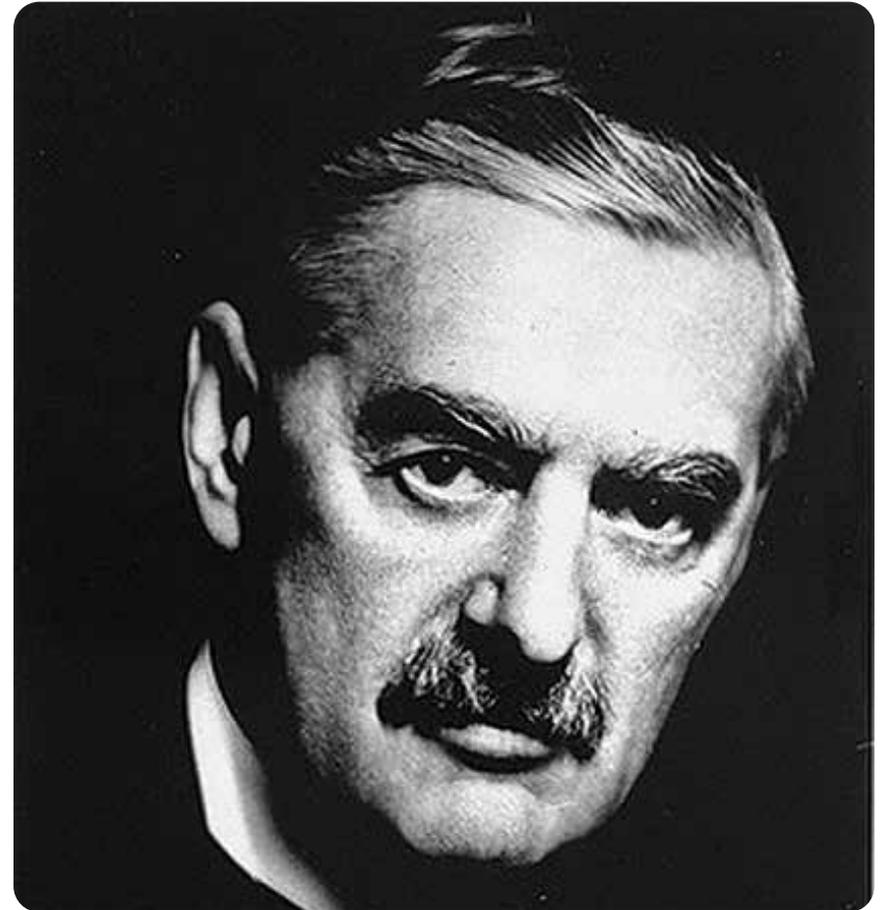
The Castle

to sell it. A man with a master's degree in music bought it, spent another fortune on it, converted it into "the castle full of music"; and it now attracts world-class performers. There is also an extensive exhibit of the life and music of Ema Destinova.



Overture to WW II

Neville Chamberlain knowingly signed an agreement that assured Hitler's power, and considered it a solution for peace. WW II didn't need to happen.



Neville Chamberlain

Photo courtesy Wiki Commons

“Peace for our time”

Or how to empower a monster

History often takes on a new perspective with the passing of time. Some say the more time passes, the more we understand.

But, as of this writing, nearly 70 years after the start of World War II, we still don't understand everything there is to know about it. We're still reeling from its monstrosity and tragedy, from its more than 50 million deaths: from its destruction and unspeakable cruelty.

It changed the lives of the Sirotek family overnight. It changed every person in the world who was touched by it, and in many ways set a course for their children, and their children's children.

Few seem to know that WW II didn't need to happen at all.

In fact, it almost didn't happen, except for British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, whose brash and insensitive actions began a course of events that led to the largest war in history.

Since its inception in 1919, Czechoslovakia was made up of Czechs, Slovaks, and significant minorities of Germans, Magyars, and Poles.

More than three million Germans lived in a part of Czechoslovakia that bordered Germany. It was called the Sudetenland. It was rich in resources, including coal, and rich with industry. It provided the majority of the country's steel and electricity. It was also an essential zone of defense against Germany, with border fortifications built as a defense to increasing Nazi aggressiveness following WW I.

Led by Konrad Henlein of the Sudeten German People's Party, many of the Germans in the Sudetenland wanted to separate and become part of Germany. Hitler was very much behind such a move, and had already made devious plans towards that end. One of those plans included war – invading the country.

Czechoslovakia was strong enough to resist such an invasion if it had the support of Britain and France, with whom it had a treaty. Historians such as William Shirer (*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*) say they had the resources to go after Germany and win – quickly.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, “The Soviet Union also had a treaty with Czechoslovakia, and it indicated willingness to co-operate with France and Great Britain if they decided to come to Czechoslovakia's defense, but the Soviet Union and its potential services were ignored throughout the crisis.”

If Britain and France had stood behind Czechoslovakia and made it known that they would protect it, their public support, combined with the Soviet Union's backing, would have sent a strong message to the German people that Hitler

would certainly lose, and that would have strengthened a growing opinion in certain German sectors that Hitler had to be stopped.

A German conspiracy was in the works to get rid of Hitler. The conspiracy was orchestrated by Lieutenant Colonel Hans Oster of German Military Intelligence and assisted, along with other high-placed military leaders, by Ludwig Beck, who was the Chief of the General Staff of the German Army. They knew Hitler was out of control and Germany would lose if he started war with Czechoslovakia. Secret meetings led to the decision that Berlin's Police Chief would arrest him the moment Hitler gave the invasion order. War was about to be over before it started. So was Hitler.

German emissaries went to England to tell Chamberlain that the German Army would immediately arrest and overthrow Hitler if he carried out his plan to attack Czechoslovakia. But they were ignored.

Prime Minister Chamberlain arranged to meet with Hitler at Berchtesgaden, near Munich, to negotiate an agreement. Hitler didn't have the slightest interest in negotiation, however. He demanded that the Sudetenland be handed over to Germany, or he'd take it by force.

Chamberlain believed that keeping Hitler happy would avoid war. In September, 1938, Germany, Britain, France and Italy met. Czechoslovakia was not included.

The four countries decided, despite being told that Hitler would be overthrown by his own army if he invaded

Czechoslovakia, that his demands for the Sudetenland should be granted. They completely abandoned the Czechs. They said if the Czechs didn't like the agreement and wanted to fight Germany, they would be on their own. They would not receive help: mutual defence pact be damned.

Chamberlain proudly returned from the Munich meeting as a victor and hero, declaring he had secured "peace for our time".

In fact, he had saved Hitler from being arrested, deposed, and perhaps killed by his own people.

And, rather than peace, Chamberlain had assured a world war.

"If Hitler had been killed and the Nazis deposed," writes Terry Parssinen, author of *The Oster Conspiracy of 1938: The Unknown Story of the Military Plot to Kill Hitler and Avert World War II*, "the coup would have brought to power men dedicated to restoring moral order to Germany and peace to Europe. World War II would never have taken place; fifty million people would not have lost their lives; and the shape of the twentieth century would have been vastly different."

Other sources place the number of WW II deaths at more than 80 million.

Shortly after the Munich Agreement was signed, German troops occupied the Sudetenland. Now that the Sudetenland was part of Germany, Czechoslovakia had no defence whatsoever. Hitler got exactly what he wanted, and no one

stopped him.

The following March 15 (1939), he marched into what was left of Czechoslovakia and took over the rest of the country and its substantial military equipment.

World War II started without a single shot being fired.

Less than six months later, Hitler attacked Poland, leaving it divided between Germany and Russia. Now the shooting war began.

It could have been so different.

Fred Sirotek was two months short of being 10 years old.



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The German invasion

Fred Sirotek was only 10 years old when Hitler took over, changing the lives of every Czech citizen and endangering those, like Bedřich Sirotek, who risked certain death by trying to protect the Jews.



Hitler in Prague shortly after the invasion

Photo courtesy Wiki Commons

Hitler's men came to call

*In the blink of an eye,
everything changed*

It was March 15, 1939, about six months after the Munich Agreement. Fred, 10, had been waiting with Milu, 14, for the streetcar to take them to school. They waited and waited, but the streetcar didn't come. They noticed strange military vehicles and unfamiliar soldiers driving on the "wrong" side of the street.

Fred and Milu ran home out of breath, blurting out what they had seen: "Soldiers! Military vehicles! Wrong side of the road!"

Their dad, Bedřich, had heard the news on the radio. He sat them down.

"From here on," he told them, "you must never, ever, repeat anything that has been and will be said in this family. These will be dangerous days."

The children never forgot it, and they obeyed it well.

"I grew up 20 years that day," remembers Fred, now in his mid-80s, emotion in his eyes.



Hitler and his army in the streets of Prague

Photo courtesy AFP

The grownups weren't surprised. There had been great tension and many rumours long before Hitler arrived. Fred's father had tried to see about getting the family out of the country. Bedřich was a worldly man who had travelled; he had built the Czechoslovakian pavilion for the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, for the Brussels World Fair in 1935; and the Pilsen Brewery Pavilion for the Paris World Fair in 1937.

But now that Hitler was in, there was no way of getting anyone out. It was as if everyone in the Republic of Czechoslovakia was in jail.

The Czechs, of course, were very angry, and the resistance was beginning to show very soon, starting with protests by university students. The Germans' response? They shot many of the students and shut down the universities. Then

they shut down the theatres.

“When something happened that they didn't like,” recalls Fred, “they just stopped it – by whatever means were necessary, no matter how brutal.”

When the universities closed, Fred's father hired a now-out-of-school medical student, the son of a friend, to be a first aid medic in his prosperous sawmill and lumber yard.

The medical student had a friend who was a Scout leader by the name of Smudek. All leaders in the country were being targeted by the Germans. Any leader, including a scout leader, became first on the list for the concentration camps.

So when the Nazis went to pick up Smudek, he shot a couple of them. Then he was in even bigger trouble than before. The Gestapo was really out to get him now.

They investigated every person and place where Smudek might have gone. They eventually connected him to his friend, the medical student, who was now working for Bedřich Sirotek. When they couldn't find the medical student, they “interviewed” his employer.

Bedřich wouldn't say where his employee was, so the Nazis beat him so brutally that one of his kidneys was kicked loose. It was an injury that would plague him throughout the rest of his life and almost prevented the Siroteks' immigration to Canada.

There was deep anger about so much. One of the worst was

the *Einsatzgruppen*, or Hitler's mass killing squad, which had as its sole purpose the killing of as many "dissenters" or Jews, all civilians, as possible.

This killing squad was founded and supervised by Reinhardt Heydrich, a Nazi leader and a good friend of Hitler's. Known as 'The Butcher of Prague, Hitler appointed him to run the country, now re-named Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, because his predecessor was not brutal enough. Heydrich was reputed to be even more brutal and ruthless than Hitler.

By 1939 the death squads had murdered at least 65,000. (That number eventually grew by the end of the war to an estimated 2 million: 1.3 million were Jews, including women, children, the elderly, and the disabled. These savage killings were in addition to the millions of concentration camp murders.)

A small underground group of Czech men, at the request of the Czech government-in-exile and authorized by the British Joint Intelligence Committee, attempted to assassinate Heydrich on May 27, 1942.

Two Czech sharpshooters, Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík, and a team of three more Czechs, parachuted into the Bohemian hills so they could watch Heydrich and wait for their chance to kill him.

Six months later, in an act of bravery and great drama, "they killed him, the cruel son of a bitch," recalls Fred. (It wasn't instant. On May 27 they critically wounded Heydrich with a



Heydrich's car after bombing.

Photo courtesy Wiki Commons

grenade, which they threw at his car, and he ended up dying of sepsis in hospital on June 4.)

When that happened, Hitler was so enraged he unleashed a *ratisage*, or widespread man hunt. Heydrich had become a Nazi martyr. Fred says Hitler's original goal was to kill 20,000 Czechs in retaliation. That was his quota, but history records about 10,000 were arrested and 1,300 murdered.

The Gestapo was picking up the targeted people between midnight and the deadline for the morning newspaper. The "suspects" were arrested, tried, convicted and executed by the time the paper (over which Hitler had full control) went to press. Their names were printed in the paper. Their crime was their "approval" of the assassination of Heydrich.

Later, the members of the Heydrich assassination team were

located in the crypt of a church. They fought back, but all committed suicide rather than be caught.

The Gestapo connected one of the assassins to the village of Lidice. So in the middle of the night, the soldiers picked up all the men of Lidice between the ages of 16 and 70, brought them to the village square, and shot them one by one.

Then they rounded up the women and children. Most ended up in a concentration camp and were killed there; about half a dozen “suitable” children were wrenched from their mothers’ arms and given to German families to be “Germanized”.

Then the soldiers burned Lidice to the ground. After the war, fewer than 20 children and a small number of women returned. But their homes and their village were gone.

A couple of Bedřich’s friends were captured in Hitler’s manhunt to avenge Heydrich. Bedřich, prominent as president of the Contractors Association, was in grave danger of being arrested, too. The soldiers went for their “suspects” at night, and that’s why Bedřich made himself scarce at night. His family didn’t see him for months at a time.

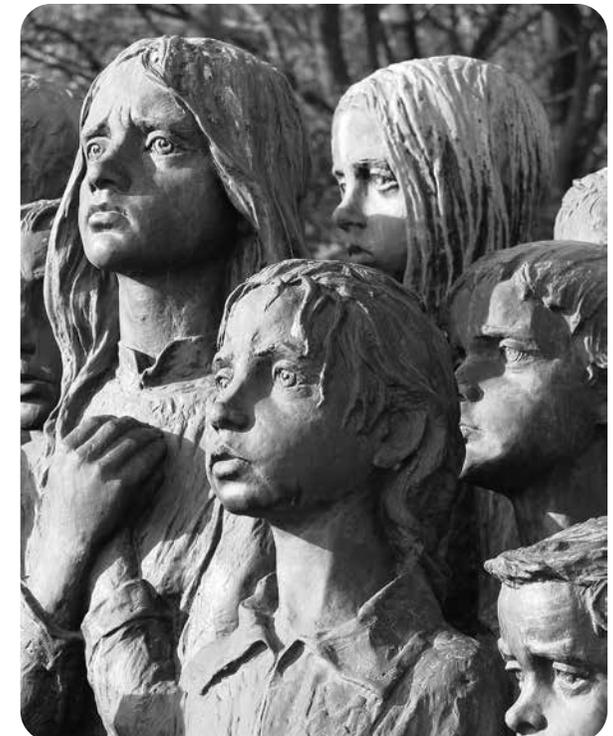
Bedřich knew what he was doing by staying away.

One black night in 1942, Bedřiška was awakened by officious pounding at the door. She didn’t know who it was. She hoped they wouldn’t wake young Fred, sleeping on a nearby daybed.



A sculpture from the 1990s by Marie Uchytlová stands today overlooking the site of the old village of Lidice. Entitled “The Memorial to the Children Victims of the War”, it comprises 82 bronze statues of children (42 girls and 40 boys) aged one to 16 to honour the children who were executed in the summer of 1942.

Photo and information courtesy of Wikipedia and Wiki Commons



She grabbed her robe and threw it over her bedclothes while she walked to the door. The pounding didn't stop.

Hitler's men barged into the apartment and stormed through the rooms. They were looking for Bedřich, and they were looking for him with their bayonets. Bedřiška could only stand aside and hold her breath.

They barged into the bedroom where she had been sleeping, and where young Fred was now sitting frozen on the small day bed, his eyes wide and terrified.

With the points of their rifle-mounted bayonets, they tossed aside the covers on Bedřiška's bed, even though they could see no one was there. And then suddenly, violently, they jabbed their bayonets from both sides under the bed. They didn't even look. They just jabbed and jabbed and jabbed.

When no one made a sound, when they couldn't feel a body impaled on the end of their bayonets, they brushed past the terrified family and marched out the door in pursuit of their next victims. They said nothing. Bedřiška, young Fred, and his sister, Milu, were stunned into silence.

More than 70 years later, Fred remembers it as if it were yesterday. He knew at the time they were looking for his father. He also knew his father was hiding out where the Nazis couldn't find him, that his father was one of the Third Reich's many enemies.



The war years

*“The only good German
is a dead German”*

From the minute Hitler marched into Czechoslovakia, life changed. The lives of the Czechs would not be the same again for the duration of the German occupation.

Almost immediately, it became illegal for anyone to listen to short-wave radio so they could not hear international news or (especially) foreign propaganda. All households were ordered to remove all short wave wiring inside their radios. If anyone was caught with short wave, they were marched off to prison or a concentration camp. It is said that in the first year of the war, about 1500 people were imprisoned for listening to London-based broadcasts. (www.historylearningsite.co.uk/radio_nazi_germany.htm)

Another one of the first things to change was language. Teachers were forced to learn German so they could teach it to the children. Children were forced to take their studies in German, not just to listen to subjects in this foreign language but to write reports, in German, about what they had learned.

Young Fred Sirotek had a typewriter and he knew how to use it. So he'd type his reports in German, and at the same time he'd make carbon copies, which he sold to his classmates.

It was his first business venture – at the age of 13. It was probably a small indication of the successful businessman he would become.

But he probably couldn't have imagined that someday his career would be in countries far across the ocean – especially one where he would spend the rest of his life.

Fred, like most Czechs, vehemently resented learning German. But it came in handy for the Sirotek family later, when they had to flee from the Communists and live for a time in Germany.

During the occupation by the Germans, the feeling was “The only good German is a dead German”. That changed very shortly after the war, when the built-up hatred subsided. Fred got to like many of the German people he met as a refugee in Germany. They were ordinary people, just as the Czechs were, whose lives had also been changed drastically because of a war over which they had no control. They probably had less influence on the Gestapo than the average Czech had on the cruelty of the Czech State Police during the Communist regime.

Learning German came in handy for Fred later still, when he met his wife-to-be, Nadia Bostandjian. They communicated in German because it was the only language they shared.

But before that, before the occupation by the Germans was over, understanding German became a way for Fred to listen to or participate in conversations he might not otherwise have understood.

In Bedřich's circle of business acquaintances was a German purchasing agent for the I.G. Farben Company, Germany's largest chemical corporation. Fred says he was “a decent sort of guy”. On one occasion, about midway through the war, the purchasing agent was at the Sirotek home for dinner. Invariably, as it always did in those days, the talk turned to war.

It was after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into the war. Bedřich commented that it was going to be much more difficult for Germany to win the war now that the U.S. was in it. Bedřich had spent time in the U.S. on a contract in 1933, so he had a better-than-average idea of American capabilities. He said he figured the war would now be an uphill struggle for the Germans.

Fred recalls how the purchasing agent shook his head vehemently.

“You CAN'T be right!” he said. “There is no way Germany can afford to lose the war!”

The agent explained he had been on the Russian front and he had seen the huge atrocities the Germans had committed there. “If Germany lost the war,” he said, “I can't imagine what the Russians would do to us in retaliation.”

Bedřich said he figured it was still going to be a challenge.

All of a sudden the purchasing agent asked: “Do you know what would happen to you if I were to report this conversation to the Gestapo?”

Fred remembers how his father deftly and immediately changed the subject.

He also remembers as clearly as if it happened yesterday – how the conversation paused, and then the purchasing agent said: “There’s one thing we Germans have got. We’re working on an explosive so powerful that one bomb could wipe out the entire city of London.”

Later, after the purchasing agent left, Bedřich remarked how strange it was that such an intelligent guy could believe something so preposterous could even be contemplated. He was amazed that the propaganda machine was able to sell the idea even to the knowledgeable part of the population.

Little did he know about nuclear energy.

Gestapo list

There was apparently a Gestapo List that rated the top 10 per cent of the “influential” population according to how much of a threat they were to the Third Reich and how important it was to have them murdered.

This list was reputedly in full force by the time Reinhardt Heydrich was killed. It made it easier for the Gestapo to zero in on their identified targets.

In later years it was said the Communists had a similar system based on the wealthiest of the population.

Moonshine

Alcohol, like coffee beans, bananas, oranges or pineapples, was not available. But, while the Siroteks could not grow bananas, they were not totally devoid of alcohol.

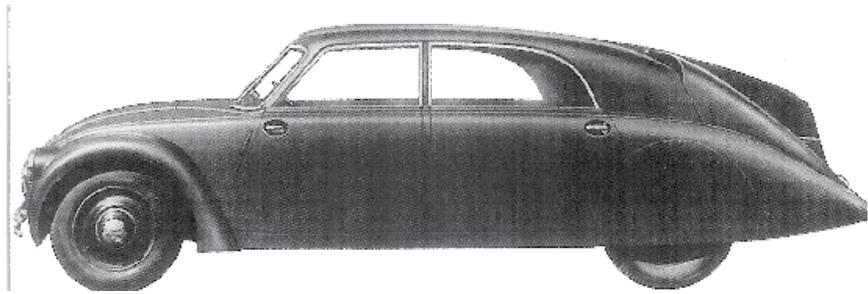
In the Sirotek family, Fred’s father and uncle made moonshine. At the lumberyard there were many massive fruit trees. They were so tall you couldn’t get at the fruit on top anyway, so they waited until it fell to the ground – all nicely ripened but smashed up. They put the fruit into big wood barrels, allowed it to ferment, and distilled it. They didn’t make a lot of booze that way, but four or five barrels would yield maybe four or five litres of a kind of schnapps.

Bedřich’s automobiles

When the war started, Bedřich had two cars and bought a third one. He didn’t even license it at the time. He just bought it and put it away in the garage. He knew, with the way things were going, a car would soon be hard to get, so he stocked up.

But his careful planning was short lived. The Germans had sales records of everything. They knew about the new car. One day soon afterwards, they walked in, gave him some money, and demanded the key. In minutes, the new car was gone.

Fred thinks his father probably received fair value for it, at least. As far as he can remember, in 1938, the Czech currency was about five Crowns to one German Mark. In 1939, Hitler set the currency at 10 crowns to one German Mark. So the soldiers could buy twice as much of anything because they



Bedřich's Tatra car was requisitioned by the Germans.

Photo courtesy Fred Sirotek

paid for it in German Marks, which was mandated to be a legal currency in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (formerly Czechoslovakia).

At the end of the war, Bedřich had the same two automobiles – and the permits that said he was allowed to have them. Cars were still in short supply in 1948 when the Siroteks were escaping to Germany.

Almost the end (Horses stopped the war)

History books record how, during those last days, the Germans, perhaps Austrians, and Americans actually stopped the war for a few hours.

They did this in order to rescue the beautiful Lipizzaner stallions, being held by the Germans in Hostau. The horses had been transferred there by the Nazis, because the area was less likely to be bombed. The Germans arranged to have about 400 prisoners of war care for the horses. The Germans were great admirers of the Lipizzans. So was U.S. General George S. Patton.

Both the Americans and Germans were certain the Soviets, advancing into Protectorate territory, would claim the horses and probably turn them into horsemeat.

So they actually stopped the war. The Americans crossed into the German territory, to Hostau, to bring the horses out. Then they rode or trucked the horses 35 miles across the border into Kotztinz, Germany, which was destined to be in the U.S. zone of occupied Germany. And the war continued.

But the horses were safe and out of the territory that the allied commanders had previously decided would become occupied by the Soviet troops.



Brave deeds

The heroism of Bedřich Sirotek

Bedřich Sirotek was a smart, brave and honorable man. During WW II he stood by his countrymen and did his part to protect them from the Nazis. He took risks that might have killed him and his family. He probably never thought of himself as a hero, but that's what he was.

Food during the war years

Food supply changed drastically under Nazi rule, and it was tough on the Czech people. Fortunately there was Bedřiška's brother, who was a farmer. The family was able to get things like butter, eggs, milk.

But the struggle to bring it to Prague, with cars and trucks randomly stopped at the city limits to be searched for food, and strict food rationing, has had an effect on Fred to this day. He still hates to see food wasted.

Bedřich was involved with food in a brave and risky way. One of his employees, a young Jewish woman, was one of many taken and placed in a "transfer camp" set up by the Germans in Terezin, a small town just north of Prague. Somehow she got word out to him that everyone there was very hungry. Could he do anything to help?

In order to survive in the German camps, you had to be useful. As long as you were able, Hitler would put you to work doing something. When you got old or weak or sick (most commonly through malnutrition), you were sent to the gas chambers. But if you were young and healthy when you went to the camp, you stood half a chance of surviving. The best way to help anyone in a transfer camp stay alive was to somehow get food to them, although it was help at very great risk.

Thus began Bedřich's work as a food-smuggler. He'd get big slabs of smoked bacon from the butcher in the village. The bacon was just solid lard, but it was the highest-calorie food available, and so necessary to people who desperately needed the calories. (Much later, when the Sirotek family fled from their country, they took this kind of bacon with them because it was anyone's guess when they would be able to eat again.)

Bedřich wrapped the bacon in brown paper. The packages were the size and shape of a carton of cigarettes.

Not far from the transfer camp, the road crossed a rust-colored railroad track. Here the Jewish workers were escorted by guards on the way to their work stations. A Czech operated the traffic gates when a train was passing.

Bedřich filled up his car with boxes of bacon and delivered them to the guard at the railway crossing. The guard would stash the cigarette-carton-sized bacon right down beside the similarly-colored railway tracks, where they would not easily be seen by the guards. The Jewish workers would then pick

it up and share it when they returned to the transfer camp.

This went on for some time until one day Bedřich was surprised to see not the familiar Czech guard at the gate but a German soldier. The Germans must have discovered one of the packages by the railroad tracks, and brought in a German soldier to replace the Czech gate operator, who was probably arrested.

Bedřich didn't miss a beat. He jumped out of his car and sauntered over to the soldier's post. Speaking German, he told the German soldier that he was lost on his way to such-and-such a village, and could the soldier give him directions?

He had purposely moved the conversation into the soldier's turf at the gate and away from the car. If the soldier had seen what was loaded in the back seat, Bedřich would have been arrested on the spot and sent to a concentration camp himself.

Eventually, near the end of the war, some people managed to escape from the camps. One more of Bedřich's employees, a second young Jewish woman, was one of them. She had not only survived the camp but had gotten married while she was there. Then she and her husband had somehow made it out alive. If they were seen by the Nazis, they'd be shot. They had to hide. But where?

Bedřich was in the business of building prefab barracks, easily adapted to anything. Deep in the middle of one of the state forests (where he had a friend in the forestry department), he adapted one of his prefab buildings into a cottage for the

couple, who made it through the rest of the war.

Fred didn't know what the couple did in later years, after the war, but he suspects they, too, fled Communism and could very well have gone to Canada or the U.S., as so many did.

A slab of bacon was easier to come by than a pound of coffee or anything that didn't grow on the farm. Fred says no one saw a coffee bean, banana or orange in five years.

Terezin medal

Perhaps the most beautiful testimony to Bedřich's incredible, unselfish and dangerous acts on behalf of the Jews was a medal he received from the imprisoned victims of Terezin.

It was very simple and handmade: a black ribbon; a safety pin; and a brass tag. The date on it was June 16, 1942.

In the bottom right corner of the tag was an illustration of a jail window. It was nicely made, Fred says, considering the person who made it probably only had some hand-fashioned tool.

It was a statement of deep gratitude from the people for Bedřich's efforts to deliver food to them.

Fred had it in his possession for many years. In his 80th year, he gave it to a Jewish Museum in Prague. He felt it was best kept in a place devoted to memorializing the horrors of the Holocaust.

Risky transport

Immediately after Hitler took over, the Czechoslovakian Army was dissolved. Bedřich hired a Czech general, now out of a job and unemployable.

One day two men with Latino names escaped from a German Prisoner of War transport train. The place they chose to jump happened to be where the railway track intersected Bedřich's lumberyard.

The night watchman brought the men to Bedřich, who was sleeping that night in his office at the lumber yard. (He did this because if the Nazis were looking for him, they'd first look at home. In that case, he would immediately be alerted by telephone and leave his office, which would then not be safe, either.)

At great risk, Bedřich transferred the men to his private office on another floor in the apartment building where the family was living. It was easier to provide them with food there than at the lumber yard. Only Bedřiška knew they were there. Fred and his sister didn't know about it at all – not until after the war. If the Germans had found out, all the Siroteks would have been murdered.

The men stayed for a few days. One of them was very ill and probably would have died had he remained on the train. Bedřich supplied them with new clothes so there would be no remnants or evidence from the POW camp – no army issue from the time they were first captured. He made sure they had food. He also cleverly fabricated certificates with fake German stamps. The documents certified that the men were

returning from a particular place because the factory they had been working at in Germany was bombed out, and there was no use for them anymore. Bedřich wrote everything in German.

The sick man recovered. Bedřich loaded them, with their new clothes and documentation, and also with Czech, German and Swiss money, on a lumber truck. He had left a hole in the load for them; then they were covered with lumber. To an outsider, it was just another lumber truck.

The Czech general, now one of Bedřich's employees, drove the truck to within a stone's throw of the German border, let them out, and said: "Go!"

Later, when the war was over, the Czech army was being reassembled.

The general wanted to regain his title and position in the army. But he first had to go through an investigation to make sure that, during the war, he had remained a loyal Czech citizen.

He was asked what he did during the war to show he had not collaborated with the Germans.

"Among other things, I drove Prisoners of War to the border," he said, and explained what had happened. The investigators had nothing but the general's word. They asked British intelligence if they had any information on the two prisoners of war who were helped by Bedřich Sirotek.

So the British investigators spoke to Bedřich. They asked what he could tell them about the existence of the PoWs.

"I can't tell you much," said Bedřich, "but I can give you all the clothing we stripped off them and all the POW paperwork they left behind." He handed them the clothing and documents.

The British offered to pay for Bedřich's expenses for looking after the men, but he declined.

Gratitude and appreciation

Bedřich thought that was the end of it. But his brave deeds didn't go unnoticed. A short time later he was invited to attend the British Embassy to receive a special document.

It said: "This certificate is awarded to Bedřich Sirotek as a token of gratitude and appreciation for help given to sailors, soldiers and airmen of the British Commonwealth nations which enabled them to escape from or evade capture by the enemy."

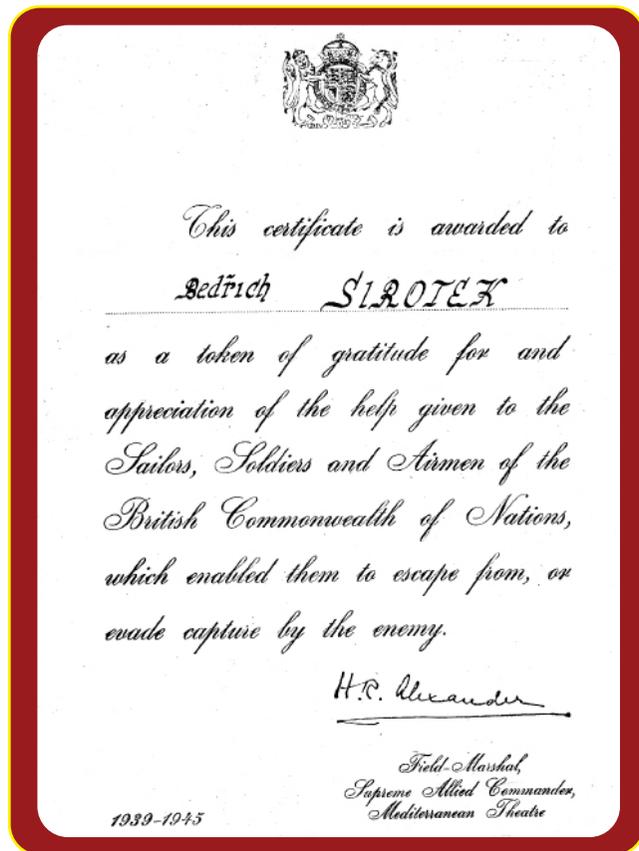
It was signed by Viscount Alexander as Commander of the Forces in the European theatre.

The fact that a general had driven the truck and had used his story to demonstrate his anti-Nazi activities was another one of the "luck factors" in the Siroteks' lives. This was luck of major consequence.

*

When it looked as though the family would finally be able to immigrate from German refugee camps to Canada, the last requirement was an interview with the Canadian Consul.

The consul asked them to read from a newspaper of their choice so they could prove literacy. They read in German. Everything seemed to be going smoothly until the consul said he could not give Bedřich the visa. He explained the medical officer had said Bedřich had been badly injured (when the Nazis beat him so badly they dislodged a kidney) and he was not now capable of supporting himself and his family.



Fred reached into the family file and produced the certificate signed by Viscount Alexander, WWII Field Marshall (and later, the Governor General of Canada). It seemed to impress the consul. He said he'd get back to them.

About five days later, the coast was clear. Bedřich was issued the visa to Canada.

It was that certificate that caused the Canadian visa officer to overrule the medical report which was an obstacle to getting Bedřich into Canada.

*

Three years later, when the family had safely landed in Canada and started a new life, Viscount Alexander made another appearance, this time in person.

Bedřich and Fred were in Ottawa, in their second year of doing business in Canada. They were hired to build the greenhouse at Government House (Rideau Hall). They happened to mention to the staff that Bedřich had a certificate signed by the Governor General.

"He might want to talk to you," they were told.

And so the two construction immigrants went into Government House, washed the construction dust off their hands and faces, and had a visit with Viscount Alexander.

"He was the most gracious sort of guy you can imagine," says Fred.

War is over, sort of

The Communists rushed in to wrestle control from the Nazis. But relief was short lived. The Siroteks had to leave if they wanted to survive. It was the start of a whole new life – one they couldn't begin to imagine.



Border sign on German side

Photo by Fred Sirotek

Liberation of Prague

From elation to cruel reality

The Russians arrived in horse-drawn wagons and Model-T Ford trucks to cheering crowds: not exactly fancy, but the people didn't care.



Russians liberate Prague, 1945

Photo by Karel Hájek, Wikimedia Commons

Not far behind them were the top Czech politicians returning from exile, some of whom were indoctrinated and/or brainwashed to favour the Communist doctrine.

The politicians had slipped out of the country at the first sign of Germany assembling soldiers at the Czech borders, and lived in exile in Britain. But before the end of the war, when it became obvious that Germany was losing in Russia (as

everywhere else), the Czech politicians moved from London to Moscow, where President Beneš signed a “friendship” and non-aggression treaty with Stalin. The Czechs needed a powerful friend; and after all, the Russians were their neighbours.

The fact that Mr. Chamberlain did not honour the mutual defense pact with Czechoslovakia in 1938 didn't help the Western image. Friendship with the Russians seemed sensible. What could go wrong?

Artificial victory

And so, a few days after the Russians first entered the country, the Czech politicians returned triumphant, right along with the victors.

The entire city was elated. They didn't care who was pushing the Germans out. They were just so happy that they were gone and war was really over.



Milu with Russian soldiers

Sirotek family photo

The fact that the Czech politicians arrived on the shoulders of the victorious Russians was a great boost to the politicians who belonged to the Czech Communist party, and it had been planned as such.



Czech politicians, once in exile, arrived with the Soviets to cheering crowds.

Photo courtesy Wiki Commons

As Fred says, that was the very first, if subtle, step in the Communist takeover.

“It started right then, the day the war ended in Prague,” he says. “The Communists’ constant effort in gaining control ultimately led to the point where they felt they had enough power, eventually, to take over completely. Of course, people couldn't really see that; they were just so glad to get rid of the Nazis.”

The Russian soldiers were boors. Fred, who was 17, recalls being amazed as he watched one of them take off his shirt and inspect it for lice. And he remembers the vast quantity of alcohol they brought with them. He says they must have found a distillery somewhere along the way in their long

march to Prague. They even filled gasoline cans with vodka. (“You’d drink the stuff and burp gasoline fumes for hours afterwards.”)

Many of the Russians pilfered homes and buildings. There were stories of women and girls being raped. The Czechs may not have known it yet, but they were leaping from the frying pan right into the fire.

Wanton destruction

In Stráž, the Russians moved their horses into the Sirotek castle courtyard.

Fred describes the family’s beautiful Chinese bowl that was on display inside the castle. It was huge, about a foot and a half or two feet in diameter and hand-painted: a beautiful piece of china. The soldiers brought it outside and used it to feed oats to the horses. (Amazingly, the bowl didn’t break, but afterward it was badly scratched.)

“How the Russians managed to beat Hitler at his own game, I don’t know,” Fred says. “It must have been sheer determination and numbers. as well as American help.”

The German soldiers were frantically trying to get away from the Russians and into the clutches of the Western Allies. They’d be prisoners of war, but better to be American prisoners of war than to be captured by the Russians, to whom they had been monstrously brutal.

The people of Prague might have been thrilled to be liberated from the Nazis, but the end was ugly. Fred describes those

last days:

“The front between Germans and Russians and the Allies was closing in,” he recalls. “The Brits, Americans and French didn’t get much resistance in the last weeks of the war because it was pretty obvious the jig was up; but the Western Allies stopped at the predetermined, agreed-upon, line. But the Russians were fought by the escaping Germans every inch of the way.

“The Germans had sort of behaved themselves in Western Europe and France, but they were absolute monsters with the Russians. They were brutal; they killed people on sight by the thousands. The German soldiers did their best to get to the Western Allies’ Front to avoid becoming Russian prisoners of war.

Orchestrated uprising

“The Communist elements were pretty well organized, though,” says Fred. “Directed by the Czech Communist politicians who had been in exile, they orchestrated an uprising in Prague the day the war ended. The object was to slow down the escaping troops and therefore get more prisoners of war. The road pattern in Bohemia was such that all roads led through Prague. A bottleneck in Prague would stop the traffic. The Russians wanted German prisoners to rebuild what the Germans had destroyed in their country.”

The population at large could not know the motivation for the Russian-created uprising or anticipate what it would cost in life and property. It was too early for the Czechs to grasp the fact that the interests of the Russians were, and would

always be, ahead of the interests of the Czechs.

The uprising was an easy sell. “The only good German is a dead German” was the feeling of most Czechs after such unspeakable abuse.

Knowing victory was theirs, angry Czechs unleashed years of justified anger. They tore down German signs. They seized the communications systems that were rightfully theirs. They fought and created barricades with turned-over streetcars, but the retreating Germans fought back – and viciously. Streets and buildings were torn apart.

Black market money

In 1946, Bedrich sent Fred to England to study for two months. He provided his son with money for travel, food and lodging. But British currency wasn't available to him in Prague during those years, except on the Black Market, so that's where he obtained the cash. Much of it was in the form of 10-pound notes.

During the war, the Germans had launched a program to make perfect fakes of British currency. The forging was under Hitler's orders and orchestrated by the SD, the intelligence agency of the Nazi Party. Eventually the forgers became so good that they produced identical copies of 10-pound notes that were perfect. The money even contained serial codes and was widely circulated.

But the plan went sideways. The notes were so good no one, not even the experts, could tell which was real and which was fake. And so, when Hitler paid a Turkish agent in British

pounds for British military secrets, the payment to the agent turned out to be fake.

But who was cheating whom?

“The information was fake, too,” says Fred.

However, after D-Day this masterfully-reproduced fake currency was still finding its way all over Britain and elsewhere. When Bedrich bought the money to send with Fred to England, no one would have been able to say how much of it was fake and how much was real.

The British had to try to protect themselves. If anyone wanted to use a 10-pound note, buyers were required to provide their name and address to merchants.

Among people spending British money, and stating their names and addresses, were Fred's landlords, the couple who rented him a room. No one knew if the rent money they received from Fred (via Bedrich) was real or phony.

When Fred's two months were up, he reimbursed them with authentic cash, and as a result, Bedrich had to pay twice.

Prague vs London

During his two months in London, Fred learned many things about the differences between London and Prague.

Traffic laws were one of them. At home in Prague, street signs such as “Slow Down” or “Caution” or “STOP” were,

well, suggestions. “You stopped when you had to,” explains Fred.

But in London, he was surprised to see a stop sign on every street corner. “And the cab driver stopped at every one of them!” he says, aghast. “I thought that was unbelievable.”

Around residential properties in Prague there were walls – masonry walls that could be six feet high. In London, there were two-feet-high hedges. “And everyone respected that.”

Police cars in Prague were common, inexpensive vehicles, cheap to run. But the Brits had Jaguars.

“It was really impressive to see a cop with a Jag that could out run anything on the road,” he says.

And with that, he figured out why the British survived the war.

He noticed the City of London was heavily bombed. St. Paul’s Church was sitting pretty in the financial district, even though everything around it was levelled.

“It wasn’t that the Germans had tried to save the church,” he says. “It was pure fluke.”

He observed that even though London had been bombed mercilessly for years, “people simply put up with it. Many of them had spent their nights in the Underground rail system. Prague, on the other hand, had only been bombed once (“and even that was a mistake”).

“It was obvious to me that there was a big difference between the Brits and anyone else in Europe. It left a big impression on me.”

The fight continues

The war was over everywhere else, but, because of the uprising, it still went on – at street level – in Prague.

“After the horrors of Hitler for six years,” Fred continues, “Czechs hated the Germans now more than ever before. They might take a potshot from the roof of an apartment building at a German soldier trying to dismantle a barricade. But the Germans would retaliate by setting on fire the whole apartment building and anyone in it.

“On most blocks in Prague, you’d find written on the walls of apartment buildings these memorials: ‘Here died so-and-so on May 9, 1945’ – the dates were mostly after the war was formally over.”

“The Germans did not stop fighting. They were trying to get out of there. More property was destroyed in those few days than what was destroyed during the war. The city was in a horrible shambles. If a German soldier had half a chance of getting to the Western Front, he’d shoot anything in his way to get to it.”

Feeding on Czech anger and using the uprising for their own purposes, the Russians were responsible for close to 2,000 Czech deaths in those last days alone.

Before that terrifying and violent time, Fred and his family were living in an apartment building in Prague. His father's business was about 5 km away from the centre of the city. The business property spanned a few acres.

Sawdust retreat

The family took refuge there. They stayed and slept in one of the deep pits that was half full of sawdust. They figured it was the safest place. It was deep in the ground – and there were no windows.

But they heard the noise: the guns, the bombs.

Fred likens the sawdust pits to a tornado shelter. A building might be wiped off by an explosion, but they'd still be safe in the sawdust pit. And in fact, the roof of one of the plant buildings was hit by a canon shell. It made a hole the size of a room.

It was about May 12 by then, and things were pretty well dying down. At one point, finally, mercifully, the shooting stopped.

“We stuck our noses out,” Fred remembers. “The Germans weren't there anymore. The Czechs were the ones with rifles.”

He recalls the only major Czech city liberated by the Western Allies was Pilsen. The Russians took over all the other cities in Czechoslovakia.

When the Red Army rolled in, there was cheering and dancing

in the streets. There were flowers and music. It was a jubilant welcome. Prague was liberated at long last. The people were elated. The Russians had rescued them.

Within a week, meetings were held with Russian and Czech politicians to organize the new government. Chairing the meetings was Czech Communist leader Klement Gottwald.

Most of the Czech people were unable to see it then, but life was about to change again, and not for the better.



Coup & flight

Hitler bullied Chamberlain. Gottwald bullied Beneš. Both bullies won

Once the dust settled after the liberation of Prague, life went on. But it would never be the same again.



By the time Fred was 17 years old, he had spent nearly all his teen years under Nazi rule.

Sirotek family photo

By now, Fred was 17 and had spent nearly all his teen years under Nazi rule. By comparison, peacetime with the Russians in charge seemed like a vacation.

In those early days following the war, the Communists put on a good show of working co-operatively with the other political parties, but managed to outlaw the most dominant party from the years before the war.

There were, and still are, numerous political parties in Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic). The party with the biggest percentage of the popular vote was awarded the most important national departments – those with the most control.

In the first election after the war, in 1946, the Communists received a significant percentage of the vote. They were the strongest political party. So they ended up with the Department of Defense, Police, and Information – which covered the media. It wasn't a stranglehold on power, but it was a pretty good grip.

“Then,” recalls Fred, “They started to push their weight around.” For starters, any cop who was not a Communist got kicked out of the police force.” The most popular and strongest political party in the pre-war days, the Agrarian Party, was outlawed “because it failed to prevent the German occupation”.

Eventually, infuriated by this, ministers of the departments run by the other political parties submitted their resignations in protest.

This was well thought out. Resignation in protest was a popular way to declare maximum opposition to an action or lack of it. The resignations were, therefore, anticipated.

The Communist party had lost support in the two years when they were semi-ruling the country. They would have lost their “strongest party” position in the next elections scheduled for 1948.

A coup was the way to maintain and increase power.

Fred remembers how, on Feb. 25, 1948, the Communists bussed their members in from all over the country and staged

a massive demonstration, with armed militia and police, in one of the main squares of the city. On this one day they took power of the whole country.

He explains how Klement Gottwald, Prime Minister and leader of the Communist Party, got into his car and drove 20 miles outside Prague to see President Edvard Beneš, who was ill, at his vacation residence.

Gottwald threatened the president, declaring he could expect “blood in the streets”. He said the ministers who resigned had betrayed the country and now the country was in total chaos. He told Beneš that it was an emergency, and the Communists needed to take over right then and there.

The Communist Party, which had control over the media, broadcast the noise and hysterics of the mass demonstration over the radio.

Gottwald demanded the president listen to the radio, to immediately accept the resignations, and appoint Communist members to the top jobs of the three ministries that had just been vacated.

The president, believing the demonstration to be real,



Klement Gottwald
Photo courtesy www.cojeco.cz



Edvard Beneš
Photo courtesy [Wiki Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Beneš.jpg)

caved in and signed the document. The coup was a success. Czechoslovakia became a 100 per cent Communist country – and stayed that way for more than 40 years.

It was a deadly serious matter for the Siroteks. Bedřich called another family huddle on March 6, just a few days later.

“We managed to live through Hitler by the skin of our teeth,” he said. “We will not manage to live through this.”

Within days the borders were closed and special “Exit Permits” were required to leave the country.

All business bank accounts were frozen, and cheques had to be co-signed by a member of the “Action Committee” that was appointed by the Communists in all businesses of any size. Action Committee members at the banks would not approve the cashing of cheques not so co-signed.

By this time, Bedřich Sirotek, as a successful businessman, was too rich for the Communist regime. Being on the Gestapo blacklist had been bad enough, but this was worse. He told his family they would leave with, hopefully, a suitcase as soon as they could find a safe way to escape.

By early April a safe escort to the border was almost arranged. On a Friday evening Bedřich received a call from a friend advising him he was on the list for arrest the following Monday at dawn. Their time was up.

The Siroteks left Prague on Sunday and crossed the border at night on April 10, after Bedřich rapidly finalized the



The Tatra car that was used to take the Sirotek family to the border.
Sirotek family photo

arrangement to get them across.

They drove to a little spa town near Karlsbad, where they stayed in a small hotel. A distant relative brought the car back to Prague so it would not be found abandoned and raise suspicions in case of a delay in the departure. The reliable crossing escort Bedřich had found was to get them across the border into Germany from there.

“I don’t know what led us to him,” says Fred, “because he was a total stranger to us, but my father trusted him. He was well paid for the extreme risk he exposed himself to.”

And he deserved every nickel. If he had been caught, the punishment would have been severe. It was risky all around. There were reports of instances where people, who were expected to carry all their valuables with them, were robbed and abandoned, even killed, by the very guides hired to lead them to safety.



The train station where the Siroteks and Joe Lang were picked out of the crowd and taken to the police station.

Sirotek family photo

The Sirotek guide arrived at the hotel where they were staying. He said he'd take the luggage in his car to a village very close to the border and get Milu across the border that night. The others – Fred, his parents and Fred's friend, Joe Lang, would take the train next day. The guide would meet them at the train station.

Still a friend all these years later, Joe recalls that just before they left the boutique hotel “for a shopping-for-carpet trip”, Bedřich gave the manager of the hotel money to buy a young goat and told the hotel manager that they would have a fine feast when they returned.

When Bedřich and Bedřiška, Fred and Joe arrived at the village near the border, they noticed a policeman watching to see who was getting off the train. Fred's mother had a scarf

over her head, and she was ignored. To the cop she was just another woman getting off the train. But the cop eyed the three men and ordered them to the police station.

“What are you doing here?” the cop asked.

“We need some rugs,” said Bedřich, “so we came to see what we can get at the discount at the factory here.”

“The rug factory has been closed for three years,” said the cop.

“Oh,” said Bedřich.

“Have you got any firearms?” said the cop.

“Yes,” said Bedřich. “I happen to have a gun...”

“Have you got a permit for the gun?” the cop asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Bedřich. He took the permit out of his wallet and handed it to him.

“That permit,” said the cop “is for a 38. This is a 45.”

“Oh,” said Bedřich.

“Do you have the 38 with you?” asked the cop.

At this point Fred could hardly breathe. He figured they were dead in the water. He spotted a rifle rack on the wall (he wondered: were the rifles loaded?) and he thought: we're

not going to walk out of here without handcuffs.

“Yes,” his father said about the 38. “I happen to have that as well.”

But the cop wanted to know more.

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“We’re staying at a hotel at the spa,” said Bedřich.

Immediately the cop reached for the phone and called the hotel.

“We have Siroteks and a friend here,” they could hear the cop saying. “They say they’re staying at your hotel. Is that true?”

Again, Fred held his breath.

“Yes, yes,” said the cop into the phone. “Uh-huh... The wife and daughter are staying there too? Uh-huh... Oh, okay.” The cop took that statement to mean that Bedřiška and Milu were at that moment at the hotel – which was not, of course, the case.

The hotel manager told the cop they’d be back soon because they had asked him to buy a goat for dinner. He said it was up to him to cook the dinner and have it ready for them when they returned.

It was at this point, Joe recalls, that the cop let the men go

to wander the small streets of the town. But not without a hard stare.

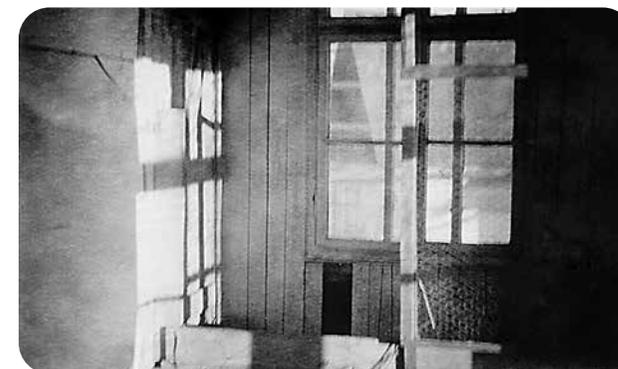
“I’m going to keep the weapons,” the cop said. “There’s a train going back in an hour. Be on it.”

They stopped at a local restaurant for lunch. There, inside the restaurant, were Bedřiška and the border crossing guide, who had been late (causing Bedřiška a fair bit of anxiety). The guide had already taken Milu to the border the night before, so she was safe.

The border crossing contact slipped Fred and Joe into his car and drove them to within a kilometre of the border. He hid them in an abandoned chicken coop and left to look after Bedřich and Bedřiška.

The chicken coop was large, for a chicken coop: big enough to stand up in. And it had a window. Fortunately it wasn’t cold, even though it was early April.

“I think we were relatively comfortable,” says Fred. “It sure was quiet. We certainly didn’t make any noise. Had we been discovered there, it would have been game



The chicken coop where Fred and Joe spent the afternoon. (The family brought almost nothing with them, but Fred remembered the camera.)

Photo by Fred Sirotek

over. The jails we would have been sent to – we would probably not have left alive.”

After dark, the border-crossing guide collected them and escorted everyone – Fred, Joe, Bedřich and Bedřiška – about half a kilometre across a meadow, which was downhill. It was about halfway to the border.

He pointed in front of them.

“The lights over there?” he said. “That’s a mill. There’s a creek; across the creek, that’s Germany. The mill owner will put you up tonight and get you to a refugee camp tomorrow.” And he left.

They hurried to the mill in the dark. Only the creek separated them from Germany. The three men jumped the creek, Bedřiška did not quite. They heard dogs and gunfire. The border guards were on duty all night. They could see them the next morning still patrolling back and forth.

The mill owner put them and their meagre possessions into a horse-drawn wagon and took them further inland to a refugee camp. And then they felt safe. They had practically nothing to their names.

A new life was about to happen. They had no idea what it would be.



The morning after their escape, now safe “on the other side” in Germany, the Siroteks prepared to travel further away from the border, to a refugee camp, in a horse-drawn cart. Shown here with Joe Lang, Milu and Bedřiška are members of the German family – mill owners and their daughter – who put them up for the night. In both photos is a German border crossing guard. Fred believes it was the presence of the guard, probably hired by the mill owner, who was largely instrumental in saving their lives – in keeping them from being grabbed by the Czech guards and dragged back into Czech territory, even once they had made it across. Only 20 feet to the right of the photo at the bottom was the border, with Czech guards staring at them. It was ironic that the uniformed German soldier who, only 34 months earlier, would have shot them on sight, had now saved them. “Hitler would be rolling over in his grave – if he had one,” says Fred with undisguised glee.

Photos by Fred Sirotek

Life in Germany

*Exile: when all of life is
turned upside down*

One day the Siroteks were living in a castle. The next they were in a German refugee camp with barely a *pfennig* to their names. Except for some dental gold that a friendly dentist sold Bedřich at the last moment, a diamond ring that belonged to Bedřiška, and a bit of money put aside in France, they had a few clothes and nothing else.

Life had changed almost in the blink of an eye. Their privileged past was behind them. Their homeland, their history, their extended Czech family, their memories – the very air they breathed – were behind them. There was no turning back.

CIA investigation

The heads of families of any refugees arriving in the U.S.-occupied zone of Germany were interviewed by the CIA. Bedřich was no exception.

The CIA interviewer couldn't speak Czech, and Bedřich couldn't speak English, so the CIA provided a translator. Through the translator, one of the questions was: "Who helped you, if anyone, to leave Czechoslovakia?" It was

explained to him by the translator that the CIA needed the name of this person in case they needed a similar service.

Bedřich, suspicious, answered carefully.

“I don’t know his name,” he told the translator. “He was tall.”

A week or two later the translator disappeared. He was not a local translator but a Czech who had been planted there by the Communists. Unknown to the CIA, whatever they were collecting was brought directly to the Communists by way of the translator.

“The CIA,” recalls Fred “didn’t have the reputation of being the brightest star in the sky.”

Had Bedřich revealed the name of the fellow who helped them escape, that man would have spent the rest of his life in jail – or worse.

“My father,” Fred adds, “had remarkable foresight in many ways.

The family lived in several refugee camps. After that one night at the mill on the border, they went to a camp in Hof, still very close to the border, where they stayed about a week. Next came a transfer to a camp in Moshendorf, and three days later to Schwabach.

Then they stayed at a camp in the little Village of Unterjettingen (in a type of prefabricated barracks that



The Moschendorf Refugee Camp, April 1948

Photos by Fred Sirotek

Bedřich had manufactured during the war), even further from the border; and after that in the small city of Ludwigsburg in former military barracks. The city was in remarkably good shape, almost without damage, because it had no industry.

The buildings at some of the refugee camps were prefabricated

buildings of the type that had been made in what was left of Czechoslovakia and shipped into Germany for shelter for the people who had been bombed out during the war.

“For all we know,” says Fred, “they were buildings my father had manufactured.”

Milu, married at the castle only three months before the family fled the country, was met a few weeks after crossing the border by her husband, who, because of his work (import-export business with Switzerland), had been able to leave the country at the same time, but legally. They too eventually settled in Canada.

The rooms in the Unterjettingen camp were large, 30 x 60 ft. or so, providing sleeping space for about 40 people per room. In Ludwigsburg, the rooms were about 30 x 30 ft. There were two or three families per



Joe Lang and Bedřiška at Unterjettingen Camp, April 1948. Bedřich is looking out the window, just behind Bedřiška.

Photo by Fred Sirotek



Joe Lang at Unterjettingen Camp, April 1948

Photo by Fred Sirotek

room. Showers and toilet facilities were “military style” and, since “military” meant “male”, every second floor became the female washroom and shower.

Exile isn’t any fun, especially when you’re already emotionally exhausted from having your whole life turned upside down. In exile in war-destroyed Germany, there were no perks to make you feel better, to soften the edges, to help with transition.

Sawdust macaroni

Fred remembers life in a massive hall with double bunk beds and dozens of people. And macaroni. Horrible, sawdust-filled macaroni. Refugee camp food was supplied by the International Refugee Organization (IRO). They shipped flour and other basics from the U.S. to Germany, where it was then processed into elbow macaroni.

During the days of rations and the black market, a bag of flour was a most valued commodity. So naturally there was stealing. Desperate thieves would replace what they stole with sawdust. The sawdust would simply get mixed in with the flour.

Sawdust macaroni was about 95 per cent of the refugees’ diet. It filled their bellies, but it didn’t provide much nutrition. Fred says he can’t remember ever seeing so much as a slice of meat.

The food “was better and more of it than in the German concentration camps,” he says, “which was intended to kill you eventually. None of us in the refugee camps died of hunger.

But it wasn't exactly fare for a culinary art competition."

Since then, Fred has not eaten so much as a single piece of elbow macaroni, ever.

In hindsight, the handling of flour for the macaroni notwithstanding, Fred adds that the IRO did a great job for thousands of refugees at the end of the Second World War.

Just the ticket

The Siroteks had one small ace up their sleeve. They had Milu, who was at that time living in Switzerland with her husband. Fred would hop on the train once in a while to meet her at the border, and she would hand him a suitcase full of food. It wasn't elaborate food, but it was better than macaroni, and it was the sort of thing they wouldn't be able to get anywhere else – cured ham, for instance.

But it was a challenge getting to the Swiss border. Trains cost money, which the Siroteks did not have. Normally you paid for your ticket at the departing station and handed your ticket to a ticket collector at your destination. But in 1948 and 1949, the German rail system was still impacted by the terrible effects of war. Most of the minor railway stations had not yet been rebuilt and fully staffed.

Fred would get a ticket from the departing station to the next stop only. He would get off the train at the station just prior to his destination, buy a ticket for the last bit of the trip and then hop on the train again and hand in his ticket at his final destination.

"It cheated the rail company," says Fred, "but it got me there."

Dental gold

Bedřich's interests were not jewelry or diamonds. His business was real estate and construction – not the kind of assets fit for export.

So when the Communists took over Czechoslovakia in 1948, Bedřich was stripped of almost his entire net worth. But just before the family left Prague to cross the border, he bought, from a friendly dentist, about a pound of soft dental gold. It was a strip of metal about 3" wide, 18" long and about 1 mm thick. It was worth about \$44 an ounce. That dental gold was the family's saving grace in the rough, sparse conditions of refugee camps.

Every so often Bedřich or Fred would take a snip of the gold, take it to the Jewish refugee camp in Stuttgart, sell it to the jeweler there, and get German marks.

With the money from the jeweler, the Siroteks would buy chicken soup and other canned food from the grocer next door whose inventory included just about everything the military PX store handled.

The food improved their diet and thus their health. The gold lasted almost the entire 15 months the family was in Germany.

(Ever afterwards, and not surprisingly, Fred has had a special affinity to gold, no matter what its value.)



Stuttgart, four years after the war ended.

Photos by Fred Sirotek

Strange picture of a city

Stuttgart is in a valley surrounded by hills.

It was the closest large city to the Ludwigsburg camp, so during his time as a refugee, Fred saw it several times.

Each time he went to visit the Jewish refugee camp located on one of the surrounding hills, he could look down on Stuttgart from the streetcar.

There was something about the city that puzzled him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He thought it looked so dull, so lifeless. There were apartment buildings everywhere, but they looked cold. What was it about that place?

Finally, it clicked.

There was no glass in any of the window openings of any of the buildings – not a single pane! No window frames either,

During the war, every building had been burned out on the inside. What Fred was seeing was four or five stories of outside walls.

“The sun was not reflecting on the windows,” he says. “It took me six months to realize what was wrong.”

Black market

He remembers that Germany was already full of refugees. There were Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, people from the Baltic States, from East Germany. They had all moved west with the defeated and retreating German armies. They had

had enough of the Communist system and they wanted out, even if it meant following the Germans, who had in most cases treated them so horribly.

Life had been unbearable for them under Communist oppression, and many of them first saw the Germans as their heroes, their rescuers. That image was quickly dashed. The Germans – who could have had full, loyal support from some of the areas that were under the Stalin regime if they had behaved differently – treated them like dirt and killed thousands. But in spite of that, the people still preferred to be refugees inside West Germany than to have to stay behind in the Communist regime.

Everyone in Germany, refugees included, was so miserable with the rationing system. The black market was the true mode of commerce, and it was crippling.

“Before the currency change, you’d walk into a store that sold cameras,” says Fred, “and you’d see three rolls of film on the counter. That’s all.” If you wanted to buy a camera, you’d have to get it by bartering with American cigarettes or other products on the black market, or pay the black market’s exorbitant price.”

Just how bad was it? The black market price for a package of American cigarettes was 300 Marks. The price of a train ticket from one end of Germany to the other was also about 300 Marks. That package of cigarettes was 25 cents in the military PX store.

Economic miracle

In the post-war years there was a German Finance Minister by the name of Ludwig Erhard. He had been a Nazi resister during the war, a brilliant man who made a huge change at great risk. What he did in 1949 turned out to be an economic miracle. He changed the currency, and overnight everything changed. Instead of receiving ration coupons, people were handed 50 New Deutsche Marks. Everyone received the same amount; at once everyone was financially equal.

Fred says it was an “unbelievable change”. There was no more rationing. Cigarettes went back to a regular price rather than being the equivalent of a month’s wages on the black market. There were products in the stores, and they were affordable.

The workers still received the same wages, but the difference was that very quickly their pay would buy them groceries, and there were groceries to be bought. It was the beginning of true recovery for Germany.

That was great for all who had a job, as all wages were paid with the new mark. But all the old marks were worthless. It was not a good situation for the Siroteks.

But there was help, as small as it was.

New money

During the war, the purchasing agent for I.G. Farben – “the General Motors of the chemical industry in Germany” – had tried to get a pre-fab building, of the sort Bedřich built,

on the black market. He needed one for his company, but he couldn't get a permit to buy it. Bedřich, who was president of the Builders Association in Prague, sold him one of his buildings. The purchasing agent paid for it with a railroad car full of gasoline – more valuable than gold.

Somehow Bedřich still had that purchasing agent's address. When the currency suddenly changed and their old marks were worthless, Bedřich sent him a letter.

“We're refugees in Germany and we're flat broke,” he wrote. “Can you help?” The agent immediately sent them 50 “new” marks.

Pride over manners

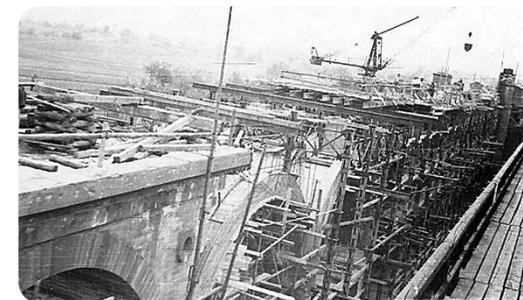
Now that the mark was worth something, Fred applied and got a job at an American military motor pool, driving around U.S. officers. One very young officer having asked, and been told, Fred was from Prague, asked him: “What's Prague like?” and to clarify the question further, he added: “Does it have flush toilets and electricity?”

Fred, amazed at the question, letting his pride show (forgetting his manners is the way he describes it), told the young officer that just the previous year, Prague had celebrated its 600th anniversary of establishing the first Central European University – long before America was discovered. The young officer didn't ask much more after that.

Road to Nowhere

One day Fred and his pal, Tony Vodsedalek, decided they'd hitchhike from the refugee camp into Nurenburg. They figured they'd get an easy ride on the Autobahn. Lots of traffic there, no doubt!

They made their way to the highway. But to their surprise, the Autobahn was deadly quiet. There wasn't a car on the road. Baffled, they decided to walk down the road a bit.



The bridge on the turnpike to Nurenburg. Fred and Tony weren't going anywhere.

Photo by Fred Sirotek

They found the reason. The bridge half a mile away had been bombed out and not yet completely rebuilt.

That highway wasn't taking anyone anywhere.

Get me out of here

The Siroteks were busily trying to find a country to which they could immigrate. They were willing to go anywhere. They wanted to get out of Europe so badly they could taste it.

Following the postwar dividing-up of Germany, there was the historic and terrifying international crisis that was caused when the Russians blocked highway access to Berlin, with the resulting British-American airlift to bring supplies to Berlin (with more than 200,000 flights in a year). That worked out

to a flight landing every four minutes.

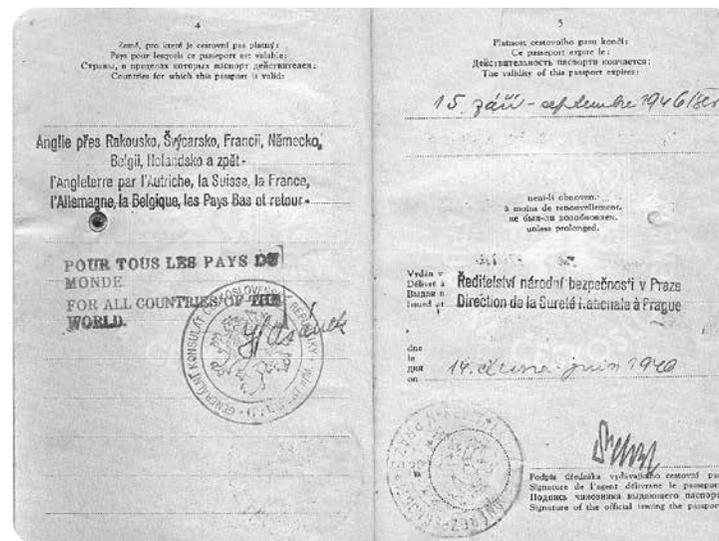
“When you stood anywhere on the flight line,” recalls Fred, “you could see four airplanes in the sky heading for Berlin. Even coal was being flown in to keep the Berliners warm in the winter. The scheduling was so tight that when a flight was delayed by as little as one minute, the pilot could not land and was sent back. We expected there would be World War III any time. We wanted out of there.”

To try and see if getting a visa elsewhere would be easier, Fred and another refugee went to Paris to canvas various embassies. Fred had a 1946 passport issued for his trip to Great Britain, but it was limited for travel to very few countries and was valid for only a few months. Now, in 1948, that passport had expired. Some enterprising person in the refugee camp went to a stamp maker and had stamps made that said a passport was good for six years, and extended to all countries of the world. The French and others probably knew the stamps were fake but tended to look the other way for political refugees; otherwise Fred would never have been able to travel from France to Switzerland.



The Strasbourg Chief of Police was of Czech heritage.

Photo by Fred Sirotek



Pages from the passport issued to Fred on June 14, 1946 and valid to September 15, 1946 – three months for travel to Great Britain and back over named countries. The second stamp on left side, extending the validity for travel to ALL COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD, was added in 1948 in the refugee camp.



The stamp on this passport page, also added in the refugee camp, extends the validity by six years to 1954.

Sirotek family photos

French surprise

They travelled by train to Strasbourg. The Chief of Police there was of Czech heritage. They asked to speak to him about how to get a temporary French visa so they could visit the embassies in Paris. The chief told them there wasn't anything he could do for them at that moment because it was after hours. He said they had two choices: they could go back to Germany and return to Strasbourg in the morning; or they could just spend the night at the police station and they'd get the paperwork done the next day.

Fred and his fellow traveler thought that the latter sounded like a good idea. They'd spend time in the waiting room, drinking coffee, maybe chatting with the cops if they spoke German, wait until the sun came up and save the trouble of dealing with the lower-level custom and immigration people all over again.

But they were in for a big surprise.

They were processed like common criminals and thrown behind bars with all the drunks. What made it even worse was that they didn't speak French, so they couldn't understand anyone.

They listened as the cops brought in the hookers from the streets. As they were being processed, they figured the dialogue must have been pretty juicy, because the whole jail kept breaking out in laughter every few minutes.

"I really, really regretted not being able to speak French,"

Fred says with a laugh, "just so I could have understood what was being said."

The next morning the Chief was good for his word and the young men got their French temporary visas. But it was all in vain, because all the embassies in Paris turned them down flat.

Ooh la la

While Fred was in Paris, he stayed at an accommodation for travelling students. He was 19.

The accommodation happened to be at one end of the Red Light district in Montmartre.

A few of the brothels had been closed up and the property was made available as dirt-cheap housing for students travelling around after the war. The houses had not been renovated or upgraded in any way.

So Fred slept in a room with mirrors on the ceilings and walls. It was an odd situation – and one he'll never forget.

Going home – to the refugee camp

Fred's sister was still in Switzerland, so Fred thought he would visit her on the way back to Ludwigsburg. To get a Swiss visa, he had to get a return visa from Switzerland to France. That proved to be no problem.

However, instead of returning to France, Fred just wanted to go back to Germany. But he could not go through customs

and immigration, because he was never supposed to have left Germany in the first place. He was able to slip back into Germany at an unguarded spot of the border without incident.

Fortunately, Canada, the U.S. and Australia began actively admitting refugees, so the Siroteks applied to Canada and the United States. Canada was faster getting back to them than the Americans, so they went through the Canadian system.

The Siroteks were at the Ludwigsburg Camp the longest, from about July, 1948 to their departure the following year: March for Bedřich, and July for Bedřiška and Fred.

Fred's friend, Joe Lang, had an uncle in Iowa, so he went to live in the United States, arriving in late July, 1949. After harvesting the corn and completing other farm chores, Joe relocated to Chicago to work on construction jobs.

A year later he was drafted in the U.S. Army for a term of two years during the Korean conflict. Because of his knowledge of the Czech and German languages, he was assigned to do his military service in Germany as a translator. The government paid for his Bachelor's degree, and Joe received fellowships to earn Master and PhD degrees. All his three degrees were in electronics, development design, and research, spanning a study period of nine years.

Joe served 29 years with Bell Laboratories, a branch of the AT&T Company (American Telephone and Telegram). He reached the level of Director of Digital Transmission.



Brand new world

Canada! What would it hold for them? How would they get by, practically without a penny to their names and in a whole different language?



Fred aboard the SS Samaria for Canada, July 1949

Sirotek family photo

First days in Canada

Let's make a living!

Bedřich was to go to Canada first in order to find a job and a place to live. It was a requirement of Canada's immigration rules that he get established before his dependents could follow.

By March 5, 1949, the family received his first letter. He was safe in Canada, had a job and a place to live.

But by April 10, their first anniversary of leaving Czechoslovakia, Fred and his mother, Bedřiška, were still living out of a suitcase in a refugee camp. There was nothing to do but sit on their beds and listen to the radio for spare-time enjoyment. Bedřiška's entire kitchen, supplementing the refugee camp kitchen, was a hot plate on a small table. Her pots and pans were old cans.



Bedřich on the SS Samaria, March 1949.
Sirotek family photo

Finally, by June 16, they had their medical checkups and were told to have their belongings ready for June 20 with departure on June 21.

They, as Bedřich had a few months earlier, travelled on SS Samaria, a troop ship chartered in 1948 by IRO from Cunard SS Co., with about 4000 other refugees on board. It wasn't luxury by any means. They slept in three-tier bunk beds. If they tried to sit up in bed, they'd either hit the bed above them, or the ceiling. (When the ship was put back to passenger service in 1950, it was refitted to carry 25 first- and 650 tourist-class passengers.

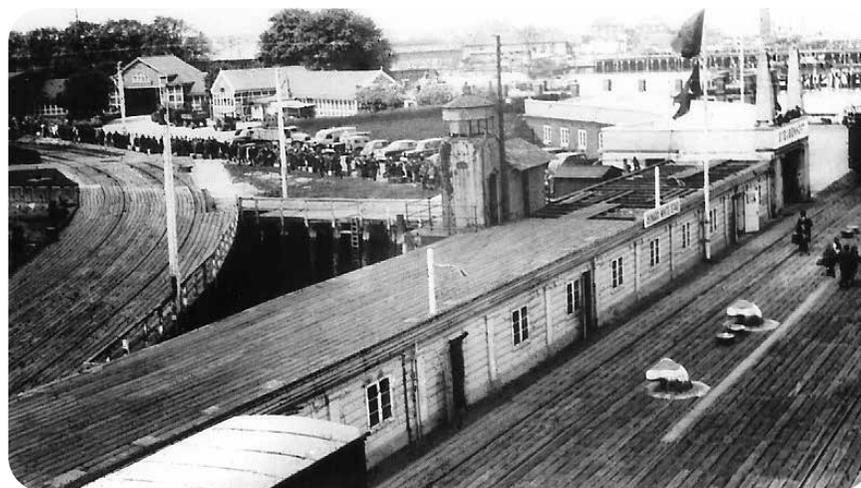
By July 9, the ship entered the St. Lawrence River. The sight before them was something so overwhelming Fred can barely describe it even now. He says the first astronauts, looking down from space, couldn't have been more in awe than he was at that moment.

It was early in the morning and they had just wakened. They had been in the wide-open sea the night before, but now here it was: the mighty Gulf of St. Lawrence. It seemed bigger than the whole country of Czechoslovakia.

"We could see the shore on the starboard side, but not at all on the other side," he says. "It was a brand new world."

Dignitaries on the docks

A day later, again in early morning, they landed in Quebec City. The ship docked, and they could see big cars arriving. They wondered who the dignitaries might be. Who was so special among the passengers to warrant that kind of



The dock at Quebec City, where the Siroteks landed: one of their first sights of Canada, 1949.

Photo by Fred Sirotek

welcome? What was going on?

They expected to see people emerging from these impressive cars in formal clothing. But they were only men with blue jeans and with hammers: the longshoremen, arriving for work. Cars in Canada certainly were different.

After fast immigration processing, they departed by train to Toronto.

It was like jumping into the abyss. What was Canada, what was Toronto, and how would they be treated? Would they live as paupers or otherwise? They were not accustomed to being poor. Anyone looking in from the outside would probably see at once that this was a family who knew not only how to survive but how to succeed. They would not be paupers. They were about to do what it took, whatever it was, to make sure of that.



The family's first home was two rooms behind the ground-floor store of a real estate agent on Bloor St. West, Toronto.

Sirotek family photo

Their first living arrangements were two rooms behind a store on Bloor St. West, close to High Park.

Blue Cadillac

That part of Bloor St. was, at the time, a strip of auto dealers. They brought back a memory of something that had happened two years earlier, when Fred had been standing on a sidewalk in Prague.

It was an early summer evening, and he was waiting for a streetcar.

A blue Cadillac convertible silently approached. It seemed to float along the street – slowly, enticingly. There was a Strauss waltz on the radio, and a guy with his arm around his girl. It was a lovely picture in Fred's eyes. He imagined himself behind such a steering wheel some day.

A year later, he and his family were flat broke and happy to be alive.

And now, Fred walked along the Bloor St. strip, and there it was – a big beautiful dark blue convertible.

“All that stands between that Cadillac and me,” he said to himself, “is money.”

It wasn't a facetious remark. The emphasis was on the word “all” – not on “money”. He was confident that money would come eventually.

It was the other things that no longer stood in his way. He could buy a Cadillac or any car he wanted. He was not a victim of Communism. He was in Canada. He was free. He didn't need a permit to allow him to buy a car. He didn't have to give a special reason to have an automobile. Once he had the money, he could just buy it, and that would be that.

(Later he avoided buying a Cadillac for years, even when he could have bought a Rolls Royce. He felt subconsciously if he actually bought it, it would mean he had gone as high as he hoped he could go. Where could he go after that? The challenge would be gone.)

Different attitudes

Fred and his father wasted no time trying to get *Canadianized* as quickly as possible and to make a living.

But Fred noticed not all the people who had just come to Canada had done likewise.

There were the politicians, still thick in politics and behaving as politicians did during the War years, attempting to form a government in exile. Naturally, that was hopeless, but it took them forever to realize it.

Then there were people who were vocal about being dissatisfied with anything they could possibly criticize: not finding the right food; limited public transportation; whether people did or didn't wear neckties to concerts, and so on. They were totally ignoring all the better and more pleasant features of the land. And, adds Fred, there were so many. It was the classic "jar" case: half full, or half empty?

But there were other people like Fred and his family, who said: "This is what it is; we're here now; and very likely we'll stay here the rest of our lives. Let's make a living!"

Job search

Fred started looking for a job immediately – something he had never done before.

Even with his limited knowledge of English, he looked through the Help Wanted section of the paper. He'd spot a possible job (a dishwasher, an elevator operator: almost any place for someone who didn't require much English) and then spend valuable time just trying to figure out where the job was located, and how to get there in a brand-new, very large, city.

By the time he figured that out, and arrived at the location, the job was filled.

He remembers the label people put on him and his family. They weren't part of what is now called "the visible minority", but people spotted them easily anyway. They were called Displaced Persons, or DPs for short. It became a nasty expression, much in the way most people regard the word "nigger". They were looked down on.

"In those days there was no such thing as getting monthly support to get settled," says Fred, referring to a much better welcoming system for refugees now.

At their wits' end trying to find jobs, Bedřich and Fred heard it was tobacco-picking time, and labourers were needed on tobacco farms in Chatham, Ontario. So they got on a bus and went to Chatham.

However, once they got there, they faced a problem. How would they find out where a tobacco farm was, and how to get there? People did not take kindly to these two "DPs" stopping them on the street to ask where the nearest tobacco farm might be.

Next stop, Windsor

So that didn't work, either. However, somebody told them there was a compatriot contractor in Windsor who might give them a job. So they found their way, by bus again, to Windsor, located the contractor, and got themselves hired. They still only had a suitcase each to their names.

And that's where they made their next home, in a room in a tiny house owned by another compatriot – a barber, Fred recalls. Fred slept on a cot in the living room; his parents slept in

the one room they rented. Bedřich was making \$1.25 an hour; Fred was making 75 cents an hour – that is, when there *was* work. There were many days when there was work for only a few hours, or none at all. Their income was under \$20 a week.



In Windsor, they lived in a couple of rooms in this small house.

Sirotek family photo

If you ask Fred if he felt that was going to be the way things were for the rest of his life, he almost laughs.

“Oh, no!” he says. “No way! No how! It was obvious to me that this was not the job I was going to have forever. It was just a question of learning the ropes, learning English, biding our time, figuring out which side was up.”

Salesmen’s folly

He bought “home improvement” magazines that had advertisements for building materials, windows, kitchen cupboards, house heating systems and so on. Fred wanted to know more about the products, so he filled in the little coupon on the page that promised the advertiser would send information in the mail. (It was many years ago, long before the days of web sites.)

The advertisers didn’t always send brochures in the mail.



Bedřich in front of his employer’s work truck in Windsor.

Sirotek family photo

Instead, they saw this as a perfect sales opportunity and sent sales reps to the addresses of people who had inquired.

Soon a whole bunch of salesmen started showing up at the door.

“They were very brief conversations,” says Fred. “It was obvious within the first few seconds that we were not going to buy anything.”

However, Fred did learn about the products available – and about something else. He learned that was the way people did business in Canada.

Canadian construction: new ballgame

Their work with the contractor quickly taught Bedřich and Fred that, much as they knew the industry back home, construction there and construction in Canada were as

different as night and day.

In Europe, a house built with two-by-fours was unheard of. Houses were built with concrete blocks or brick.

Kitchen cupboards were furniture, not part of the house – not built in. When you moved, you took the kitchen cupboards with you. In Europe, 10 degrees below zero (Celsius) was really cold. Streetcars had trouble operating. But in Canada, minus 25 was not all that unusual.

Construction in Europe and in Canada, says Fred, “was like comparing a model-T Ford to a modern Chevy, where the only thing in common are four wheels.”

Building materials were different, too, because of available resources. Europe had more sand and clay to make bricks, but in Canada there were more trees than anything else.

Ottawa beckons

Bedřich and Fred learned fast, and a few months later they got a call from Ottawa.

A former Czech military attaché at the Czechoslovakian embassy, who had resigned in protest of the Communist coup, was looking for a way to make an alternate living. He and his friend, a famous sportsman and owner of Heggteit Sporting Goods store in Ottawa, decided to start a construction company. The thing was, they needed someone to run it. They proposed the job to Bedřich and Fred. It was a perfect opportunity.

Fred remembers being surprised the first time he and his father travelled on a regular, non-immigrant train in Canada, from Windsor to Ottawa, to be interviewed by their potential new employer. It was the first time he had ever seen a dining car and sleeping car on a train that was not an international train. In Czechoslovakia, you'd be right across the entire country in a day, and there was no need for such luxuries as dining or sleeping cars.

He also remembers tipping attendants at gas stations. And the terror of wondering what they would do if they had a medical emergency or ran out of work and had no food. They were completely unaware of any kind of “social net”, which in those days would have been the Salvation Army.

“It gave us the incentive to work our butts off to make sure we didn't end up sleeping under the stars,” Fred recalls. In all his years on the North American continent, he is proud of the fact that no matter what, he did not ever collect one penny of employment insurance.

Meet you at the Forum

When they first arrived in Canada, the Siroteks were astonished that Toronto didn't have an opera house. They were told that every so often an opera company would come to Toronto and perform in a tent, but that was it. A tent? they gasped. Really? No Opera House? They could hardly believe it. Prague had about the same population, and had two Opera Houses! However, they reminded themselves that old Prague had considerably more time to attain opera houses than young Toronto. (Prague had, after all, a

university 150 years before America was even discovered.) And they'd much rather be there, opera house or not, than in Communist clutches.

They were pleased with a performance of *Porgy and Bess* with Eartha Kitt at the Royal Alexandra Theatre. It was their first introduction to Gershwin and Black culture (and the amazing Eartha Kitt), and they were enchanted.

Later, after moving to Ottawa, the first opera they attended in Canada was in Montreal in the 1950s. When they learned that Verdi's *Aida* would be performed at the Montreal Forum, they were anxious to go. A forum! they thought, envisioning a Roman-style amphitheatre. They piled into the car and drove to Montreal for the performance.

"But where did we end up?" Fred asks now. "In a HOCKEY RINK!"

And, he adds, "A hockey rink is a hockey rink is a hockey rink. The acoustics weren't there, the ambience wasn't there. The sound was awful."

Little by little, day after day, they learned Canadian ways: customs, language, building, business practices. Day by day they were building what would become their remarkable future.



Ottawa

*Where the new life blossomed...
and just got more interesting*



Top, Bedřich and Bedřiška, just after arriving in Ottawa with all their worldly possessions. Bottom, their first car – a used Jeep – in Canada.

Photos by Fred Sirotek

First days in Ottawa

Putting down new roots

It was September, 1949 when the Siroteks moved to Ottawa. Fred was astonished that on October 1 the puddles on Ottawa streets were frozen. Wet concrete and frost were not compatible. He has never forgotten that observation. Weather-wise, he realized, all bets were off after October 1.

The family rented a house in Ottawa East, on Rosemere Ave., a short distance from the Pretoria Bridge and about three blocks east of Main Street.



The Siroteks' first residence, on Rosemere Ave., Ottawa, until they built their own home.

Sirotek family photo

Not exactly what it sounds like...

Their neighbours were a French Canadian couple by the name of Patenaude, who were as helpful as they were nice. In the course of conversation, Mr. Patenaude asked Fred

about his father's profession back in Czechoslovakia.

“Oh,” said Fred proudly, “he built things there. He undertook a variety of projects. I guess you'd call him an undertaker.”

Eventually it became obvious to Fred that the term “undertaker”, was NOT synonymous with “developer” and had a different meaning in English – that his father didn't spend his life dealing with dead bodies.

But the term made sense to Mr. Patenaude, because Bedřich built things and employed carpenters. The Sirotek men worked with lumber... so perhaps it was coffins, for all he knew. (The misunderstanding was cleared up in short order.)

But in a way, Fred's term “undertaker” wasn't completely outrageous. In the old days, for one thing, that is what carpenters and builders often did. They built coffins.

Two decades later, Fred had a subcontractor, a carpenter in the West Indies who was indeed an undertaker as well as a contractor. And back in Czechoslovakia, immediately after the end of the war, when so many people were killed during the uprising in Prague, the city literally ran out of coffins. Bedřich's carpenters set about making many coffins during that time at the lumber yard. Fred remembers what the coffins looked like. He describes them as being “Halloween-type” caskets – wider at the shoulders than at the foot and the head.

So – undertaking, undertaker... Fred wasn't that far off.

“Mushy and miserable”

Bedřiška adjusted to the move and the changes, the new culture, the new land and language “as well as you could imagine,” Fred says proudly of his mother all these years later. There were significant differences in the food stuffs available and some products were not on the market at all.

When Fred was a kid, one of the most basic parts of his diet was yogurt. He can remember taking a glass jar full of yogurt to school for a snack, just as most of the kids did. He was also accustomed to rye bread.

So when they moved to Canada, the Siroteks were surprised and disappointed not to be able to buy yogurt, which only became available in Canada decades later.

And they did not like what he calls “the white mush” – white sliced bread. All they could find was white bread. They'd make toast out of it and that was okay, but when it came to making sandwiches, the white bread, to their taste, was just “mushy and miserable”.

But these things paled in significance with their gratitude for Ottawa, for Canada, for safety. Mushy bread was far better than the slop they would have been fed in jail.

Eventually they did discover two bakeries that sold rye bread in Ottawa: first Kardish Bakery and then Rideau Bakery. During the Siroteks' first years in Canada, they were the only places where they could get wholesome rye bread.

Bedřiška had to learn how to cope with white flour. Fred says she finally figured out how to adjust her methods of cooking dumplings – a diet staple – to that bland white flour, but it took awhile.

First Date in Canada

It was a winter day in 1950. Fred had no vehicle. But he did have a date.

He took her to Standish Hall across the river in Hull (now renamed Gatineau) to go dancing. To get there, they went by bus. Afterwards, he took her home in a cab. The total cost of the evening, cab included, was about \$8, a good deal of money in 1950. (According to a Bank of Canada inflation calculator, worth about \$79 in 2014 dollars.)

He couldn't afford to take a cab from her house to his house in Ottawa East (about half the distance), so he walked an hour. It was 11 p.m. and 20 below zero when he set out for home.

Steak lesson

Traditionally in Czechoslovakia, and in most of Europe, a cow or a bull didn't get killed until it became absolutely useless. So when you bought beef at the butcher, the cow had been killed just before it died of old age and/or had stopped producing milk.

As a result, beef had to be cooked and boiled and broiled and cooked again, just so you could cut it. It was not served any other way. But that was all right, because steak was not part of the usual meal anyway. (A classic Czech meal is roast

pork, dumplings and cabbage.)

When the Siroteks ordered beef in a restaurant and were asked how they wanted it cooked, they'd always ask for it Well Done, more out of habit than anything else.

Some years later, when Fred was dining out and requested "Well Done", the waiter frowned at him.

"Why the face?" Fred asked.

"Well Done," the waiter said. "That's just before you throw it out. Rare is the way to go." So Fred took a stab at it and said he'd like it Rare. And from that moment on, he didn't eat steak any other way.

"I like it practically still walking," he laughs. "It's the difference between shoe leather and something wonderfully edible."

After the Communist regime fell, he took a member of the Czech Embassy out for lunch. They went to a steak house.

"How do you want it?" the waiter said.

"Still alive," laughed Fred.

His Czech guest ordered it Well Done.

Fred didn't say anything. But he offered his guest a piece of his Rare beef.

"I think I converted him," he says.

First reasonably steady job

Bedřich and Fred started with Heggveit Construction. Bedřich did the estimating and pricing the jobs; Fred produced the plans for some of the work to be done. And when there was nothing to price or plans to draw, they worked with tools as carpenters or labourers to earn their keep.



This was the first house the Siroteks built for Heggveit Construction.

Sirotek family photo

They built a few houses, converted a third-floor attic into a separate apartment with an outside stairway, and did several minor alterations.



Bedřich, early construction days.

Sirotek family photo

But their ex-military employer was unhappy that the company did not get more of the work for which they submitted quotes. He thought Bedřich was pricing the bids too high. The employer started to do the estimating himself without consulting either Bedřich or Fred. Occasionally Fred and Bedřich found out the contract price, and they didn't think it was high enough

to make a profit. They contemplated alternate ways of making a living. One idea was to build a house they could either sell or live in.

The concerns about the profitability of the Heggveit Construction Company were proven to be valid. Within a year or two of Bedřich's and Fred's departure, the company went out of business.

Prelude to Sirotek Construction

The Siroteks were not quite ready to start a construction company of their own, but the declining fortunes of their employer accelerated the process. They did not want to be in any way connected to a bankrupt operation.

They had a diamond ring that Bedřich had bought for Bedřiška years earlier. It was the only collateral they had. At the bank's request, they took the ring to Birk's, had it appraised, and the bank loaned them \$1,200 – a nice sum at the time, but not a fortune.

Land Purchase and Financing

They bought a \$400 lot near Carling and Kirkwood Ave. They decided to build a house on it and maybe sell it when it was finished. But to finance the construction, they needed a mortgage.

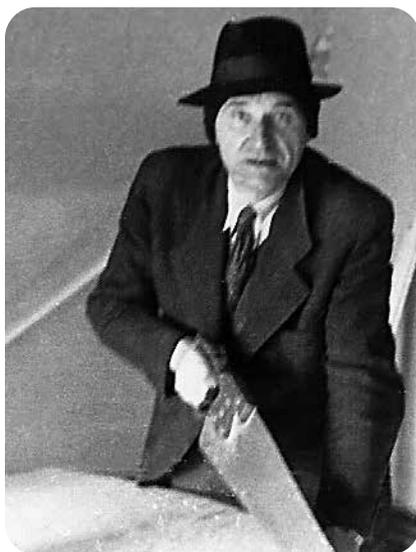
They went to an insurance company, Equitable Life. The manager looked at them. He saw two guys who had been in the country for a year and a bit with a miniscule net worth. He turned them down flat.

Bedřich and Fred were ready to accept this for the time being, until someone suggested they check out a lawyer by the name of Michael Greenberg. Mike handled all kinds of mortgages. They were told he had three secretaries who did nothing but process the mortgage applications.



The first house built by the Siroteks near Carling and Kirkwood in Ottawa. It was the start of Sirotek Construction.

So off they went to Mike Greenberg's office. By the time they were finished chatting, Mike said: "I think I might be able to do something for you." A few days later, the Siroteks had a mortgage commitment.



Bedřich, hard at work with a saw.

Sirotek family photo

Ironically, the mortgage came from none other than Equitable Life. Mike Greenberg had obviously supplied Equitable Life with a lot of business. He must have told them he believed the Siroteks would be okay, and that was that.

Sirotek Construction is incorporated

The purchaser of the adjoining lot hired the Siroteks to build his house as well. That led to the Siroteks buying yet another lot across the street.

Now that a third house was about to get under construction, it was time for Sirotek Construction to be born.

As it turned out, the first house was not sold. It became the Siroteks' first "owned" house in Canada, and they lived there for many years.

Bedřich and Fred asked Michael Greenberg what they had to do to start their own construction business. What permits did they need? Any licenses required? What exams did they have to take and pass?

They were told to get letterhead printed and to put a shingle on the door. They were surprised that they didn't even have to go to City Hall,



Taking a break: Top, Bedřich. Bottom, Fred.

Sirotek family photo

or any other place for that matter to register – nowhere at all. (Of course, eventually they had to get a business number, employment insurance and workmen’s compensation.)

“There weren’t opera houses in Ottawa or Toronto,” says Fred, “But we didn’t need a license to start a business. Good trade.”

The shoestring: not long enough

It was not an easy start. The construction of the three houses was funded entirely from the mortgage advances. At one point the advances were a week or so late and the Siroteks didn’t have enough money to pay the wages to the two employees they had. They also had no credit.



Another house build by the new company, Sirotek Construction.
Sirotek photo

Fred’s brother-in-law, his sister’s husband, was the answer. He and Milu had arrived in Canada from Switzerland about

six months earlier, and he had a job. He didn’t have any money, but his job gave him credit-worthiness.

In those days Household Finance was the lending company for nominal amounts at interest rates just under the usury laws. So Milu’s husband borrowed \$200 and gave it to Bedřich and Fred to make the payroll that week.

Injuries

But the construction business was playing hard on Bedřich. During the first winter he broke his leg and some ribs, and figured it was time to pack it in.

He landed a job with Central Mortgage and Housing Corp, and quit the construction game. His job was the “Plan B” to fall back on if the building business did not fly: their “food insurance policy”. The company was making only nominal amounts of money.

Free publicity

At the time, their street was called Thomas St. (but the name has since been changed to Thames St.).

And at that moment in history, when the third house on Thomas St. was being built, the animosity between the West and Russia was still high. Nuclear war was considered a real possibility.

So Fred built a “blast wall” just outside one of the basement windows. There was a story and photo about it in the local paper. It was free advertising – something Fred could not afford to buy.

More houses on “loaned” building lots

Michael Greenberg owned some building lots on Queen Mary St. in Ottawa East and he told Fred he could build on these lots and pay him when the houses were sold. Fred accepted the offer, and built three or four houses there. One of his later contracts included the demolition of a two-storey house. The cost of the demolition was about the same as moving the house to one of these lots, so that’s what Fred did. Whatever the house sold for was almost all profit.



This house, slated for demolition, was moved instead and sold.

Sirotek photo

First cost plus contract

While he was still in his first year of being in business, Fred drove by a house in an upper-middle residential area of Ottawa and he noticed a concrete slab next to a house. It was obviously intended to be the floor of a detached garage. He knocked on the door of the house and offered to build the garage. That was his first cost plus contract.

As it turned out, it was not his last. The owner, Roy Burns, was



Fred's first garage, and the start of better things to come.

Sirotek photo

an executive of Keyes Supply Corporation, a multi-product wholesale distributor who hired Fred to do another building for the company in 1954. They became such good friends that he was the Best Man at Fred's wedding to Nadia in 1955 and one of the partners in Commemorative Products years later.

Canada was at the time providing only two things for free to immigrants. One was the voyage on a troop ship. The other was once-a-week English language lessons. The teacher and Fred's family became friends. When she learned that Fred was in business, she put him in touch with a friend of hers, and he built their house as well.

Except for his own and one decade later another in Barbados, it was the last house he built. The owner of that house, George Gunderson, was the engraver and art director of a corporation that printed Canadian currency. He and Fred also became friends and in years to come was another of the partners in Commemorative Products Co.

Korean War Steel Shortage

The Korean War started, and suddenly Canada experienced a steel shortage. When they were packing the few things they could carry across the border while they escaped from



Fred designed, built and installed wooden trusses at a time when steel was not available.

Sirotek photos

Czechoslovakia, Fred took along a set of designs for wooden trusses.

It was a totally illogical thing to pack when you're running for your life. But with his European high school education (equal to the first half of an Engineering degree) and that booklet, Fred designed, fabricated and installed several roofs that could not get steel at that time. If the proof of the pudding is in eating it, the proof of design is in its longevity. At least one of the buildings that has Fred's roof (It started as a small movie theater in Buckingham. P.Q.) is still up, refitted more than once for different uses. None has ever failed, a statement some are unable to make.

Commercial Construction

After he had done a few commercial jobs, Fred decided residential building wasn't his cup of tea. He knew commercial work was where he belonged.

And it was the beginning of his success, the success that would grow and mature over the years. It was becoming clear that Fred didn't have to fear being a pauper and could even, perhaps, look ahead to comfortable living.

This was in spite of the fact that, when the Siroteks arrived in Canada, with a castle and all their beautiful possessions left behind for the Communists, they were flat broke.

Success came slowly and with a huge amount of effort. Sixteen-hour days were normal.

Were they surprised that they started to do well? Everything had looked so bleak only a few years before. Did the Siroteks expect they would succeed?

“We had to,” Fred says. “There was no other option.”

He likens it to the story about why a rabbit always outruns a dog.

“The dog is running for his meal; the rabbit for his life,” says Fred. “We believed we were running for our lives.”



The 50s & 60s

Business bustled—and then boomed

Sirotek Construction comes to life

Fred had built a few small warehouses and other non-residential buildings, but what really got his attention was his first oil company customer. There was potential for repeat business; they built something all the time; their credit was good; and they knew exactly what they wanted.

That was the experience and realization from the first job – an addition, in 1952, to a service station owned by Cities Service Oil Company on the corner of Carling and Bronson Ave. (The company no longer exists, but in 2013 the building, somewhat modified, is still there, although it’s not a service station.)

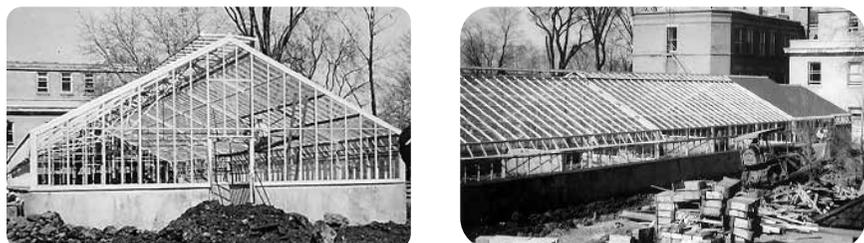


The first service station job was an addition to one at Carling and Bronson in Ottawa.

Sirotek photo

It was also the year when Sirotek Construction built a greenhouse at Rideau Hall, the Governor General's residence. The G.G. at the time was still Viscount Alexander, whose signature on a certificate issued to Bedřich was the reason the Siroteks were permitted to immigrate to Canada in spite of the medical officer's recommendation to the contrary.

To this day, Fred has never met another G.G. while in office.



In 1952, Sirotek Construction built a greenhouse at Rideau Hall, the Governor General's residence.

Sirotek photo

Service Stations galore

During the next two years the company built nine more service stations. The oil companies must have liked their work, because almost before he knew it, Fred was building something for every oil company around: Sun Oil; Shell; Regent; Supertest; White Rose; B.A. Oil, Petrofina, Globe Oil, etc.

"I practically had a corner on service stations," he says. "If it was to be built between Hawkesbury, Pembroke, Brockville and Cornwall, chances are I was going to build it."

All of 76 of them were built before he graduated to bigger projects. And – not surprisingly – he got more efficient about it. The first ones took about three months to build. The last

took about six weeks.

In those days a traditional service station was a small building with a little office, two bays, and a pump island with two pumps, maybe four. They were not at all what they would become (with a roof over four different aisles, two pumping sides, a convenience store, a Tim Horton's, a car wash, etc.)

Years later most of Fred Sirotek's gas stations became small shops for something else, or they were demolished to make way for "super" stations. But back then they kept him busy.



There was almost no end to the service stations Fred built in the Hawkesbury, Pembroke, Brockville and Cornwall areas.

Sirotek photos

A school board's comeuppance

Just when you'd expect him to get tired of service stations, Fred put in a bid to the Ottawa Public School Board to build a new school.

But the architect looked at his bid and dismissed him as a builder of service stations only. The architect told the school board not to accept the Sirotek tender for that reason. The school board gave it to someone with a bid that was higher by \$5,000 – and that was a lot in those days.

Fred was understandably furious. In his frustration, he sat down and wrote a letter to the school board asking why his low bid was not accepted. He sent a copy of the letter to the newspapers.

As it happened, everyone must have been mad at that school board. It seemed half the population of Ottawa hated it. City Hall hated it.

Almost immediately Fred's simple letter of complaint became a media explosion, with numerous stories about the board's shabby work ethics and its cavalier spending of taxpayers' money.

It was as if Fred's letter was the trigger the media needed to tackle the school board.

The board had the power to do what it wanted. However, the debenture it had for that particular project wasn't high enough, and it needed to get it increased. To do this, it required City Hall approval.

The city said a loud "NO" to the increase. It blasted the school board for giving the contract to the higher bidder.

It was a drama that was played out in the papers for many months, and each time Fred Sirotek's name was mentioned. It was instant and unexpected publicity for him, brought about by an innocent letter.

To add to the flying sparks, one of the school board members said, in public, that not all the low bids were the cheapest, and in fact sometimes the low bid ended up costing more. Fred saw it as a slur on the quality of Sirotek Construction work.

He hit back and began a slander suit against the board member. Eventually he dropped it, but the action made more headlines. The dialogue went on and on. The City controllers and aldermen were pushing for him, and he got the kind of publicity he could not afford to buy.

The Board was an independent body and eventually got its way. But it never did it again.

Untying the hold-back

Sometime later there was another tender called for by the same school board. Sirotek Construction was again the lowest bidder, and this time it got the job.

Business friends warned Fred it would take forever to collect his hold-back money for the garage. Everyone knew hold-back money, 10 per cent, was a thorn in the side of builders. Money tends to stay tied up for a time at the end of a job

because one small thing or another thing needs repair or alteration, and it can interrupt cash flow for a long time.

But the architect suggested that the school board and the contractor delete “repair work” from the contract, terminate it, and then write a fresh contract for any needed repairs for a small amount of money. It worked. Fred got his holdback on that job faster than any other.

“They didn’t want to get into another hassle with me,” he says. “Maybe it was an acknowledgement that I got a raw deal the last time.”

The Banker

By the mid 50s, four years into its existence, Sirotek Construction started to get over its growing pains. The Sirotek name lost the “Displaced Person” connotation, and the company was starting to be recognized. It had built about half a dozen service stations and completed several contracts for the Department of Public Works, National Research Council and Defence Construction. It had started to become profitable and credit-worthy.

It needed a storage space. Fred’s kitchen table was no longer adequate for office work.

There was a property on Carling Ave., not far from the first house the Siroteks built, that became available for rent. It had a small farmhouse just big enough for a small office, and an old barn for storage. Fred leased it.

Not too long afterwards, the owner, who lived about 200

miles away in North Bay, stopped by. He said the property was for sale.

Fred paused for a minute.

“What do you want for it?” he asked.

“I promised my wife I wouldn’t sell it for anything less than \$40,000,” said the owner.

Fred said he’d take it.

He had a line of credit with the Royal Bank and he thought since the property, being a good investment, would give the Bank additional security for their loans, it would warrant an increase to his \$20,000 line of credit.

So he paid the bank a visit. He was in for a surprise.

The banker scowled at him. “How could you be so irresponsible?” he snapped. “This is almost your entire net worth!”

The banker got up from his desk and paced. His face was red with anger.

“We’ll have to consider negating your line of credit,” he barked. “This is incredibly stupid!”

In fairness, from the banker’s perspective, Fred was just some young guy in his mid-20s who spoke broken English. Probably, to the banker’s thinking, it took a lot of damn gall

for a kid like that to expect an extension on a line of credit. This was the 1950s. For someone that age to already have such a large line of credit was extremely unusual.

But the kid had already committed to buying property – about 12 acres on Carling Avenue with a farmhouse and a barn. He was going to pay \$40,000 for it.

Clearly the banker had no idea where this young man had come from or what he had accomplished.

When most young Canadians were being swept away by Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley, Fred Sirotek was building, planning, and making money. He had survived the Nazis and the Commies in his homeland. He had started out at 21 years old in a new land with a new language – and nothing else.

The banker should have put together the pieces of the puzzle. Refugee? Not even 25 years old? A \$20,000 line of credit with the main branch of the Royal Bank in the nation's capital? Just bought a big chunk of property?

You'd think that would have told him something.

He didn't know the half of it. He probably never would. His loss.

Granted, the banker's comments worried Fred for a moment. If the respected manager of the Royal Bank in Ottawa was so mortified that he was going to end Fred's line of credit, maybe, he thought, it wasn't such a good idea.

Or maybe, he figured, I should just open an account somewhere else.

As it turned out, he didn't need an increase in his line of credit. And anyway, the bank manager retired and was replaced by a more agreeable fellow. So the problem simply went away.

Fred bought the property. Within six months, he received an offer from a buyer for the back half of the property – for \$64,000.

“Mr. Banker,” thought Fred, “you're not so damn smart after all.”

City of Ottawa planning board approval was required to sever the property. But Mayor Whitten was not pleased. In fact, she said: No Way! (or words to that effect).

Charlotte Whitton was the famous (some would say notorious) Mayor of Ottawa. History records that she had “issues” with Jewish people – that she was, in fact, blatantly anti-Semitic.

Fred hadn't known this, but the offer for the back end of the property had come from a Jewish group who wanted to develop it. Even if Fred had known, he wouldn't have cared less who the buyers were. And anyway, Jews were some of his best customers. But they did happen to be Jews, and Charlotte said NO.

Because the city wouldn't permit the buyers to buy half the

property, the purchasers decided they'd just go ahead and buy the whole thing. The City couldn't stop that.

But the buyers said they wouldn't pay any more for the front half than they had been willing to pay for the back half, even though it was obviously worth more.

Fred bought the property for \$40,000. Eight months later, he sold it for \$128,000.



Fred bought land on Baseline Road and built a building for Sirotek Construction.

Sirotek photo

He said later if he had consulted the bank before he had committed to the property, he might not have bought it.

With the money he received from the sale, he bought a chunk of land on Baseline, built his own building, and had money left over.

The experience didn't do much for Fred's opinion of the politicians. Nor did the experience increase his respect for one banker's business acumen. It was a factor in his decision, some years later, to change banks.

School days

First it was service stations. Then it was schools. Fred went on to build an addition to Canterbury School. He built a major addition to Laurentian High school (not in existence anymore; it's now, in 2014, a shopping centre). He also built the engineering and physics buildings for Carleton University as well as a high school in Belleville, Ont.

There is only one job, a school (still standing) that Fred has not ever seen, either when it was under construction or afterwards. It's the elementary school in Brighton, Ont. At the time, he explains, "a very competent super ran the job and everything was going so well that my presence was not required."

For 90 per cent of what Sirotek Construction built, plans were prepared by architects and engineers, and then the project was put out for tender to contractors. In the beginning, Sirotek, which did have the staff, was asked to produce the plans. But later it was more practical to hire an architect to prepare them; the architect's fees were included in the price.

Almost too many to count

Schools and university buildings, like service stations, were just part of a vast spectrum of jobs undertaken by Sirotek Construction.

There was a slaughter house. There were almost all the bridges and overpasses for the Ottawa River Parkway; a sewage treatment plant; a hotel in Prescott; several furniture-moving warehouses; a Hydro-electric substation; numerous buildings at the Experimental Farm and National Research

Council; bottling plants and warehouses for Canada Dry in Ottawa, Hull, Toronto, Peterborough and Montreal; cross dock freight sheds for Canadian National and Pacific; aprons at Upland Airport; the City of Ottawa bus depot, fire stations and library; additions to buildings for the Canadian Mint and Atomic Energy; office buildings; and parking garages.

There was also the RCAF target tower in Winchester, Ont. (the building from which the military observed how good a job aircraft did in bombing targets). There were apartment buildings. There was the Dominion Observatory (part of the Experimental Farm).

There were buildings all over Ottawa and into Hull. There were churches: St. Ignatius, St. Sebastian, St. Aiden's. There were shopping centres. There were office buildings.

There were the cabanas and a canteen building at Mooney's Bay. There was a huge chicken house at the Experimental Farm. (It was a thousand times larger than the one he spent a day in just before escaping from his homeland a decade earlier. And there was more. Much more. (See Appendix for a full list.)

Fred had a 3 ft. by 5 ft. aerial photograph of the City of Ottawa, and he put a coloured pin wherever he built something. The pins in some places were so close together he ran out of space.

He had about 100 people working for him plus his sub-contractors. He had an office staff of eight or nine, and a 10,000 sq. ft. warehouse as well as outside storage, all on



Fred built the family home on Prince of Wales at Hog's Back, Ottawa.
Sirotek family photo

Baseline Road on two acres of land.

In the mid-1950s Fred built the family house on Prince of Wales Drive at Hog's Back.

Directly across the street he bought 15 acres or so. (It was known at the time that Hog's Back Road would get extended.)

He tried to subdivide it into commercial development, but ran into arguments with the city related to the section zoned residential. Part of it ended up as the Rideauview Shopping Centre. Part was sold to an oil company.

The residential part was sold off and claimed as a capital gain. The tax department wasn't happy about that and took him to court.

"The issue was that I had bought this intending to build a whole bunch of little buildings on the commercially-zoned part and lease them, but I didn't know at the time what to do with the residential part if I could not get it rezoned," explains Fred. "The tax department said that since I didn't know what I'd do with the residential part, it meant I probably

intended to sell it, which made it inventory and then subject to tax.”

However, the judge ruled in his favour. He said just because he didn't know what he was going to do with the land didn't mean he could not have done something with it to qualify it for capital gain.

The issue made the law books as a precedent.

Office Building in Saint John, N. B.

In 1964, Fred had several companies. Each had a line of credit with the Bank of Montreal.

When he was launching a new project, an office building in Saint John, N.B., with his minority partner, Art Anderson, he had an idea.

Rather than taking out a construction loan, what if he amalgamated all his lines of credit into one? It would be cheaper, interest-wise, than a new construction mortgage and it would eliminate the legal fees involved.

So he had a chat with his bank manager, Mr. Hale, and Mr. Hale agreed. Plain and simple. The project began and several months later was well underway.

One Friday morning, the bank manager called. He said he was being transferred, and he'd like Fred to meet his successor. It was the day before Fred was to leave for his periodic trip to the West Indies, where he had construction projects underway on several Islands, so they had to arrange

a meeting that very day.

They went out for lunch, talked about business and the amalgamated lines of credit. The new manager, Mr. Hill, thought it was a good idea, too. But he'd ask his head office supervisors to confirm it was okay.

Just before he left the next day, Fred began to wonder. What if the bank head office people said no?

He called his financial controller from a stopover in Montreal and told him his concern. He was flying to Barbados and connecting with a flight to Grenada that Saturday. Telephone conversations or telegrams were not necessarily private on the islands, so they came up with a code. If there was anything negative to report, his controller would send a telegram. It would say: Trouble on the hill.

Fred didn't really think the telegram would come. It was just a precaution. All seemed fine. But by noon on Monday, it did.

He wanted to call his controller, but the telephone company in Grenada was on strike. So Fred hopped on a plane, flew to Barbados and called from there.

He learned the bank had started sending back his cheques. They hadn't bounced as NSF; they were described as “not arranged for”, whatever that was intended to mean. By lucky coincidence, most of those cheques were payments to companies in Saint John, N.B.

By Wednesday afternoon, Fred was back in Ottawa.

At that time there was a bank exchange charge on out-of-town cheques. Since the cheques hadn't bounced but had been marked "Not Arranged For", the "out of town" fee – a small one, but a fee nevertheless, was used as explanation.

Fred sent letters to all the cheque recipients and told them to ignore the cheques they had just received. He was going to issue them new ones on a local New Brunswick bank, therefore saving them the "out of town" fees.

Meanwhile, the Bank of Montreal had frozen all his accounts and was not even going to honour his payroll cheques. That almost guaranteed that he would be out of business by the Monday following the Friday that the payroll was not paid.

The solution? You might say it was one of those Eureka! moments.

Fred recalled that he had an old account at the Royal Bank downtown. It probably had about \$100 in it, and the only reason it existed at all was because he had forgotten to close it once he stopped using it years earlier. But it existed. Whatever receivables came in that week were deposited in the Royal Bank account. That was more than enough to cover the payroll.

He used his Bank of Montreal cheques, but slapped a label over the Bank of Montreal info and replaced it with Royal Bank information. (People, not computers, were processing cheques at that time.)

He stalled for time. His brother-in-law, Aram Alexanian, provided Fred with some capital by purchasing, sight unseen, half interest in an apartment building Fred owned. This was good for about two weeks, and it was all Fred needed.

He used his significant receivables to pay off the Bank of Montreal, and that was that. He was not going to darken that door again.

The Bank of Nova Scotia had a reputation of being "pro business". Fred met the manager of the main Ottawa branch, told him he would like to do business with him, and asked what kind of line of credit he could expect.

The manager apologized for only being able to authorize about \$50,000. Fred said he'd take it.

As of 2014, he has been doing business with them, in multi-million-dollar volumes, for more than half a century. But he has not done "five cents worth of business" with the Bank of Montreal since that day. Business development people from the BoM would show up at his office once in a while. Fred would allow the front-desk secretary to let them come in, but then he'd tell them he wouldn't offer them a chair because they wouldn't be there long enough to sit down.

He told them how the Bank of Montreal almost put him out of business. And he would never, ever, be their customer again. Now, more than half a century later, he will not buy stock, bonds or anything remotely connected with BoM.

"If I hadn't had that forgotten Royal Bank account," he says,

“it might have been impossible to open a new account fast enough to make everything work.”

And that, he adds, was The Luck Factor working once more. Just that little bit – that one per cent – made all the difference.

Not so surprisingly, decades later, the same Bank of Montreal, albeit a different branch, had done just about the same thing to a company in Hamilton belonging to the Alexanians. Fred was glad to return the favour by extending a loan to that company which the BoM was about to sink as well.

New banking philosophy

Difficult as that time with the Bank of Montreal was, it taught Fred something he never forgot.

During his first 15 years or so in business, he felt if he wasn't using his line of credit to the max, he was underperforming and should be doing more.

That changed when the Bank of Montreal pulled the rug out from under his feet.

From then on he determined he would always deal with at least two banks at any given time, and he would always have some mad money up his sleeve for just such an occasion as the Bank of Montreal fiasco.

“No more,” he says, “would one idiot be able to put me out of business in five days.”

Almost too many to count...

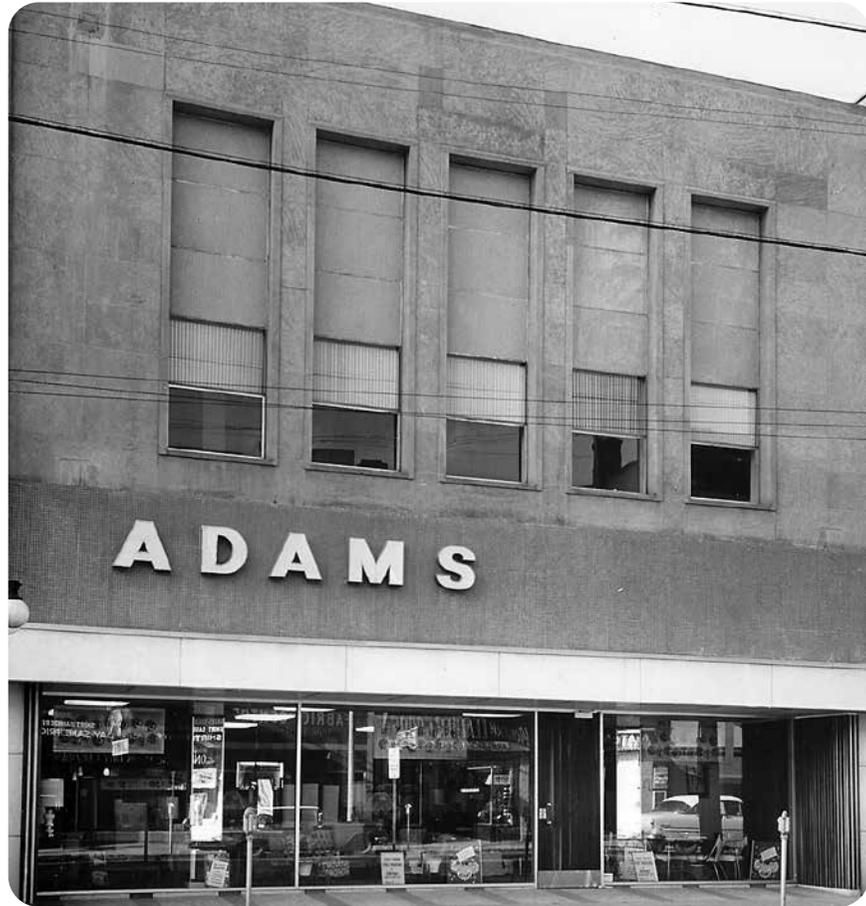
On these pages is a small sampling of the range and diversity of buildings by Sirotek Construction in Ottawa in the 50s and 60s.



City of Ottawa Transportation building



Bethel Pentecostal Church, Ottawa



Adams Furniture Store, Bank Street



Tippet-Richardson Warehouse (first stage)



Fire Hall and Health Centre, Carling Avenue



Parkdale Bridges



Laurentian High School



St. Patrick's Home, Ottawa



St. Sebastian Church, Overbrook, Ottawa



CN Freight Sheds

Sirotek photos

Mishaps & oddities

Or: Don't blow the roof off

If you work in the construction industry, you have to be prepared for surprises. The Siroteks knew this from the beginning, of course. But some of the situations they encountered were unusual, to say the least. A few such adventures were hair-raising. Others were just plain odd.

Fire on the Roof

In 1953, Sirotek Construction was only two years old. It wasn't well fixed for money and capital, so it was limited in the size of the jobs it could take on.

The company was hired to do work on a "warehouse"-style government building on Booth Street in Ottawa. The job was to replace the metal roofing with a wood deck and asphalt shingle roof.

Sirotek Construction replaced the roof according to the plans. They were almost completely finished when the building area under the new roof deck started being used again.

No one seemed to have bothered to check what work was being done in that area. It was a test lab for materials and fire resistance. A huge furnace was right there under the new roof.

In about two hours, the new – wooden – roof caught on fire. And so Sirotek Construction was called to tear off the new roof and replace it with – you guessed it – a metal one, just as there had been in the first place. It was two jobs in one, you might say.

Cold floor rising

Sirotek Construction was commissioned to build a target-practice shelter for Connaught Rifle Ranges at Shirley Bay near Ottawa in 1957. Its shape was similar to a long bus shelter. It had a back wall, a floor, and a roof, but, unlike a bus shelter, it was built of concrete. And it was much bigger than a bus shelter. It was about 200 feet long, with only seven feet between the floor and the roof. That was the “personnel trench” for the people who serviced the targets.

Construction began one cold week in winter. The plans called for a 2-ft-thick concrete slab floor with a wall sitting on top of the floor and a cantilevered roof over it.

The concrete structure was built in sections maybe 50 ft. at a time, but because it was under construction, there was nothing to protect it from frost.

Halfway through the job, the concrete floor heaved and lifted. It seemed the engineer hadn’t considered that, or had somehow forgotten about harsh Canadian winters and what frost can do.

The problem was solved, but it meant cutting through the brand new concrete every four or five feet, digging down

deeper, below the frost-line, and filling it with more concrete.

“It was a design fault that we got paid for,” says Fred. “The engineer should have known better.”

Ironically, the engineer of the shooting range was the same one who had given Fred a hard time in regard to doing work for the Public school board. (See the chapter “The 50s and 60s”.)

Just doesn’t hold water

Mission: to build an oversized swimming pool. Big enough, in fact, to put a model ship in. It was a ship-testing tank for the National Research Council (1958), about 200 by 400 feet and six or seven feet deep. The plans called for a floor of asphalt.

Sirotek Construction laid the floor as directed. When the



NRC Ship Testing Tank

Sirotek photo

tank was ready for water, a powerful pipe began to fill it.

But there was a problem. The filling system was too powerful, and in no time it washed a big hole in the asphalt.

So they changed the filling system. All was fine...or so they thought.

Water was filling and filling...and then the water level stopped rising. It wouldn't go above a certain level. That was because it was leaking through the floor and into the stone beneath.

“The asphalt leaks!” the NRC planners said.

“We didn't say it was waterproof,” said the paving company. “Why didn't you ask? It stops leaking only after thousands of rubber tires go over it.”

The ship testing tank is no longer there, and to this day Fred doesn't know for sure how they solved the problem of the leaking floor. He figures they probably put a tarp or a sealer on the asphalt before they filled the tank with water again.

Blown to smithereens

It was 1961, and Charlotte Whitten was mayor. Sirotek Construction was hired to build a Juvenile and Family Court complex with a family courthouse and juvenile detention centre: two buildings side by side.

Under the family court building was a basement where mechanical necessities – such as hot water tanks and a



Family and Juvenile Court

Sirotek photo

furnace – were located.

By coincidence, the furnace had been specifically CSA (Canadian Standards Association) tested and approved. Sirotek Construction installed it as part of the overall plan.

It was a beautiful complex. Everything was in place and functional. It was just about through its one-year guarantee.

And then all of a sudden, in the 11th month, in the middle of the night, there was a massive explosion. The Family Court building was blown to smithereens.

The reason: natural gas. But why?

It was a gas-fired furnace with a pilot light. There was a photoelectric cell that should have been looking through a tube at the pilot light. When it “saw” the pilot light and the thermostat called for more heat, it told the controlling valve to start the gas coming. If it didn't see the pilot light, the valve would not open.

After 11 months, the inside of the furnace would have had

some soot. In the heat, the soot would have become red embers but not have the all-important flame needed to instantly light incoming gas.

But for some reason, the tube was never found afterwards, so it was impossible to say whether it had not been there in the first place, or if it had been destroyed in the explosion.

It was assumed that the photo electric cell saw the red embers as the pilot light. Gas was permitted to fill up the furnace. The embers lit the gas with some delay and caused a minor explosion inside the furnace, but big enough to blow out the front door of the furnace.

But this is where the gas burner was attached to a large gas line supplying the burner. The gas line broke. Gas filled the basement. Sparks from the ventilating fan lit it. And the whole place exploded. Fortunately, because it was in the middle of the night, no one was hurt.

Fred expected there would be a lawsuit of some sort. He knew his name would be scooped into the net of all the “players”, including the plumber, the furnace manufacturer, and CSA, who had had that very furnace in their lab in order to inspect it for compliance with CSA standards.

He waited. But nothing happened. As it turned out, three out of four of the “players” were insured by the same insurance company.

“I don’t know who picked up the tab for re-building,” he says. “Just being named in a lawsuit would have been most

damaging. I was lucky again.”

A supersonic job

You don’t build one of these every day: In 1962, Sirotek Construction was hired to build a supersonic wind tunnel at Uplands Airport in Ottawa. It was 5 feet by 5 feet, but located in a very large building.

On one end was a huge tank that got pumped up with compressed air and a valve that opened in a fraction of second. The compressed air would shoot out for a few seconds – long enough to show you if an airplane was going to fall apart. It could be used with a model of an airplane or just about anything: a rocket, a car. Testers would put the model in the wind tunnel and adjust the speed accordingly. On the other end was a major structure that permitted the huge flow of air to reduce the velocity.

A few years after Fred’s company finished with the building that housed the tunnel, several times more air storage was added on the outside of the building, therefore increasing the duration of supersonic speed capacity.

The wind tunnel still exists. You can see the tanks at Uplands Airport.

Going with the tide

There are lunch breaks and coffee breaks, but who ever heard of a tide break? Sirotek Construction did, and it was a serious matter.

In 1964 they were building an office building in Saint John, N.B. close to the shore of the Bay of Fundy. The entrance to the building was on Water Street.

It was about 75 feet from the edge of the shore. They had to dig down to the rock, which was fine... except that the rock was below tide level. The footings were above low tide but below high tide, and the land between the building site and the sea was reclaimed land porous as Swiss cheese.

So in order to pour the footings, they had to do the work at low tide and then get out of there before the tide came back. They couldn't leave the wooden formwork between shifts because it would float up. They had to build it and fill it with concrete during the same shift. There were two low tides and two high tides, with about 10 hours of "safe time" to work.

"If you're a landlubber," says Fred, "thinking about tides just doesn't happen. It certainly was a surprising experience."



Harbour Building, Saint John, N.B.
Sirotek photo

Between drink two and drink three...

Fred had several obstacles to face on some jobs, but a challenging one, while he worked in the West Indies in 1965, was alcoholism. Rum was good, and it was cheap – an irresistible combination if a person had a weakness for the bottle.

He particularly remembers two inspectors who were employees of the architects. One was drunk every night. The other was drunk 24 hours a day when he could get away with it. To keep an eye on him, his employer sent the inspector's wife to the island.

But of course she could only do so much. When he went to another island, she'd drive him to the airport; he'd fly to a job on another island and although he couldn't get a drink on the airplane, there was a bar waiting for him right in the airport when he got there.

If Fred's superintendent had any questions for him to answer, he had to try to have a conversation with him as quickly as possible – between the second and third drink. The first drink was not enough to calm his anxiety; and he was too far gone after the third one.

Two of Fred's employees (one smashed up one of his cars) couldn't stay off the bottle; the other was dispatched home before he did any damage. Fred was able to deal with drunken employees by firing them, but when they were working for someone else, there was nothing he could do.

Almost a disaster

The plans showed a concrete roof built in such a way that, in Fred's opinion, it would collapse.

“Please explain to me why this roof will stay up and not collapse under its own weight,” he said.

He was head-to-head with a Hamilton engineer at the first meeting for the Rideauview Shopping Centre, which Sirotek Construction was contracted to build.

The engineer gave him a long explanation about why the design was okay. Fred was still concerned about it, so the engineer gave him another lecture on design at the next job meeting a month later.

When Fred raised the issue again, he was told he was there to build from the plans and not to question the design work of a professional. His questions and opinions were not welcome.

Fred didn't have his engineering degree, but his knowledge and 15 years of experience told him there was trouble ahead.

He ordered his superintendent to put steel cables around the columns to maintain some stability of the structure before the supporting shoring was removed.

The engineer just shook his head and shrugged.

“You're wasting your money,” he said, “but it's your money, so go ahead.”

The superintendent followed Fred's orders, but, in his mind, since the engineer said it wasn't necessary, he had the cables put on, but not as tightly as they might have been.

The workers began removing the false work. The cables tightened up. The columns had moved: they were stopped by the cables. The building would most certainly have collapsed.

The whole roof had to be removed and was re-designed in a conventional way with steel joists instead of a concrete folded plate roof.

The owner, his lawyer, the engineer, the architect and Fred met in the owners' office. The lawyer looked at the engineer.

“We have a problem, right?” he asked. “What kind of job did the contractor do?”

The engineer didn't criticize. In fact, he said the workmanship was not to blame. But nothing was said about the fact that Fred Sirotek had averted a disaster.

The lawyer told Fred he could leave the meeting. And then, behind closed doors, they made some kind of a deal that would make the building right – without a lawsuit.

Fred got paid for building it, demolishing it, and building it again. But the architect, who had immigrated to Canada from England about two years earlier, moved back to England, his reputation ruined.



Rideauview Shopping Centre with roof dismantled

Sirotek photo

“If I had followed that engineer’s advice,” says Fred, “we could easily have killed someone.”

It was one of those Ottawa secrets lost in history. No one ever knew what had almost happened, or who picked up the tab for the extra cost.

And a 13-ton door on wheels...

If a wind tunnel was unusual, the building to house a linear accelerator in 1966 was even more so. The National Research Council hired Sirotek Construction to build it, but the company didn’t have any idea what would be in the building. They assumed it had something to do with nuclear science – perhaps medical radiation.

Part of the building was nothing unusual, but parts of it

certainly were different. One of the rooms was about 100 ft. long and 75 ft. wide. It had concrete walls that were four feet thick, and a concrete roof that was three feet thick; 100 per cent of it was going to be underground. There was only one way to get in that large room, and that was through a door that weighed 13 tons. The door was riding on railroad wheels.

Fred says it was a miniature version of an accelerator in Switzerland that was about two miles long.

There was another odd thing about the linear accelerator, but it had nothing to do with the building – at least, not directly.

Because it was unusual, there was a story about it in the newspaper. The story mentioned in passing that the contractor of the building was Sirotek Construction. It is worth mentioning that the name “Sirotek” is so classically Czech that Fred’s origin would be obvious to anyone who knew the language.

Almost immediately afterwards, Fred’s office received a phone call – a call he was glad not to be present to take.

It was from the still-Communist Czechoslovakian embassy. They left a message to say they’d like to talk to him.

“And you can be sure it was about the accelerator,” Fred says. “Needless to say, I did not call them back. Anything nuclear would be of interest to a spying agency”.

They didn't call again, but it was interesting that they would show interest in him for the first time ever. This was 1966, nearly 20 years after the Sirotek family had fled the country.

"The cold war was pretty active at the time," says Fred.



Not always easy

Some dark clouds are bigger than others.

Perhaps the mark of a successful person is the ability to forge your way through the dark ...and emerge into clear skies – sometimes against all odds.



Sirotek convoy moving a warehouse (and almost hit by a train)

Sirotek photo

Steeling for the worst

Sirotek's Waterloo

It probably shouldn't be surprising that successful men have their bleak moments, their dark holes, their gut-twisting threats to the future.

Fred Sirotek is perhaps luckier than most, because he really only had two such experiences. But this one was so bad that he began making plans to close his construction company and leave Canada for a warmer climate.

It was 1966, in the middle of one of his many successful peaks. His company was hired to build the physical education building at the University of Waterloo. The project, begun in July, was supposed to be finished by the fall of 1967.

Except for some unexpected difficulties with soil conditions, everything was going along just fine until one event stopped them in their tracks.

The steel erectors went on strike just as the foundations were finished. Erecting structural steel is one of the few phases of construction that can be done during winter without the temperature interfering. The strike didn't get settled until March, which meant that valuable time in winter was gone, but in the meantime the huge basement had to be heated.

And then, to make matters even worse, in April, when the structural steel was up, the masons went on strike. That strike lasted the entire summer.

The year 1967 was almost completely lost. The cost of enclosing and heating the worksite so the masons could work during the winter months was enormous, as was the cost of heating the building itself. The project was scheduled to be



Physical Education building, University of Waterloo, in 2014

Photo by Arisa Alexanian

finished by the fall of 1967, but it was almost a year late. The job overhead cost for an extra year, together with the costs related to the extra winter, wiped out any chance of making a profit. It became a matter of damage control.

By mid-summer 1968, Fred started to commute between Ottawa and Waterloo in an attempt to try to limit his losses to “only” \$10,000 a week – rather than \$20,000 a week. It was a mess.

During the few months that followed, he wished he could resign, but he had no one to give his resignation to. He envied the cab drivers. All they had to do was drive. Fred couldn't sleep. It was the only time in his life when he hated

what he was doing.

Reputation starts with innate ethics and honesty. It impacted every aspect of Fred Sirotek's life in business, but perhaps most especially now.

Fred's vice president was a very capable engineer and administrator, and Fred wanted him to own a piece of the company. But the company was worth a lot of money, so it was not practical to sell him shares. The way to accomplish that, without involving payment for shares, was to start another company.

In order to benefit from the good reputation of the Sirotek name, the new company's name was Sirotek **Contractors** Ltd. The company was incorporated just as Sirotek Construction was awarded the Physical Education contract in Waterloo.

Sirotek Construction had the contract, but it subcontracted it to Sirotek Contractors. Sirotek Contractors then subcontracted all the trade work.

So when everything went sour in Waterloo, Fred could have gotten out of it simply by letting Sirotek Contractors go bankrupt. That company was worthless; he could have just walked away and not looked back.

“It would have been a lead pipe cinch at one point to say, we're losing money, so – sorry, fellows, you're not getting paid,” says Fred. “Subcontractors would have taken the haircutting. It would have been that easy.”

But that was not an option to even consider; it simply wasn't part of his code of ethics.

By late summer most of his operating capital was gone. The bank line of credit was exhausted. He needed another \$100,000.

He had been operating with a \$100,000 line of credit from the Bank of Nova Scotia, but he had used that up as well as his own money. He had fixed assets, but not the cash needed to complete the job. He couldn't go to the bank and simply ask for an increased line of credit. His financial statement would certainly not warrant an increase.

So he went to the bonding company that had issued the performance bond guaranteeing his full performance under the construction contract. He told the bonding company the story. They brought in their top people and listened.

"Let's see what we can do," they said.

Three or four of them, along with Fred, drove to Waterloo (from Toronto) to take a look at the site. When they returned, the settlement officer gave his opinion. He was impressed.

"I didn't see what I expected," he said. "This job is in full swing. Usually by the time we're called in, the job has been shut down and lawsuits have begun."

The bonding company felt Fred's situation could be salvaged. They sent a Chartered Accountant to Ottawa to look at his books. Their report? He simply needed another \$100,000.

They agreed to guarantee not only his additional line of credit but the first \$100,000 as well.

But first they had to be certain they were secure in their guarantee. It meant signing many documents related to Fred's assets.

At one point they asked about a company, Wentmore Inc., that was in his wife's name. Could they have that as security, too?

"Well," said Fred, "the thing is, that might lead to divorce..."

"Okay!" they said. "Forget it!"

"The company was safe enough anyway," says Fred. "But if everything went to hell in a hand basket, Wentmore was my basement window to crawl out of."

Fred went to the Bank of Nova Scotia. He told them about the bonding company's guarantee. They gave him the further \$100,000 line of credit. It meant the bonding company just about owned him, but the bank loan was doubled to \$200,000.

Throughout 1967 and 1968, Sirotek Construction did only insignificant projects, because of lack of operating capital and the inability to produce performance bonds.

Fred says he managed to finish the job with the shirt on his back and not much else, so 1968 was a year in which to

liquidate what assets were left.

He had an auction sale of the contents of his office, warehouse and yard. The closing down of the office was more expensive than he had thought. Stripping the company of whatever he could and declaring bankruptcy would have been the cheapest way to go, but that was not an option he would consider, either.

Discouraged and next to broke, he closed down the company. He was sick of construction. He was sick of winters. He was sick of unions. He was going to move “south of the Mason-Dixon line” where it was at least warmer. Maybe he could start again.



Business matters

The ups, downs and challenges

Sore Loser

It's surprising how bitter competitors can become. Fred was eventually told that one contractor who had done business with Sun Oil for years was furious when Sun Oil gave Fred the job of building the very first service station he put a bid on.

The competitor was so angry he raised a huge fuss all the way up to the top of the company. He cancelled his credit cards. He complained that he had accommodated their needs during the war, when construction materials were in short supply. He said their loyalty was lacking by doing business with some “upstart immigrant”.

But maybe there was some other cause for frustration.

Fred made a 30 per cent markup on the service station, and still underbid the competitor – who must have been planning a 50 per cent markup.

Big loss, big anger. Sore loser.

Copies: a messy business

In those early days of Sirotek business, the way of doing things was so far removed from our technological ways

of today that it's hard to imagine. Contemporary business people do not know what it was like to function with things like messy carbon paper and Gestetner printers, or phones permanently attached to walls. Before office photocopiers, if you wanted a copy of something, you typed it again. There were thermal copiers in the 70s, but if you left a page from one of them in the sunlight, the ink would disappear. Fred enjoys looking back on those times, if only to marvel anew each time at the ease of business and communication thanks to ever-changing, innovative, empowering technology.

Different classes and attitudes of employees

There were employees in Fred's life, and there were employees.

For example, there might have been two jobs going on across the street from each other when rain got in the way.

One super would report to Fred: "It rained; so we shut the job down."

The super across the street would say: "It rained; but I tried to get raingear; I tried to get tarps; I tried to get a pump; not even tarps were available, so we had to shut the damn thing down."

The second one is the kind of employee Fred valued. The final outcome was the same but more often than not the result would be different.

"That kind of guy was worth double the money," he says. "He tried. The other guy was looking for an excuse to shut down and go to the bar."

He said the employee force usually sorts itself out. The good ones tend to stay, and the others go. Even at that, the best employee in the construction business lasted about five years at most. It was just in the nature of the work.

Fred found his employees just about everywhere: from a guy knocking on the door to Fred himself finding a person on someone else's job and saying, "This is pretty good work. Who's the super? I'll pay you 20 per cent more than what you are getting now."

One super walked through the door at Fred's office on Baseline Road. "He had to be 75 if he was a day," says Fred. The super admitted he was "way up there in age", but he could do the job Fred advertised. He said he'd work for him for two weeks. If Fred didn't like it, he didn't have to pay him. If he did, he could hire him for whatever he planned to pay for that job.

The man had just returned from India where he was running a foreign aid project – a challenge because it was in a country with a huge surplus of manpower and so everything was done by people, and not by machine. He pointed out that he had devised a concrete mixer drum that was turned by a stationary bicycle.

The super stuck it out for a year and a half and did a good job, showing no signs of slowing down. He climbed ladders and moved like anyone half his age.

But one day he said he wasn't feeling well, went home for lunch and died.

Fred was sorry to lose him.

Narono Building

When Fred was at his highest peak in business, he planned on building the “Narono” office building in downtown Ottawa. He found the property and arranged for the plans to be produced. He negotiated the sale of the property to Manufacturers Life Insurance Company and a lease-back to a company he incorporated to own the building. He finalized the mortgage financing with Manulife Insurance. The documents were dated July, 1968.

But then the difficult situation in Waterloo happened, and, says Fred, “I couldn’t go ahead with the project.”

So he sold the entire deal at his cost to unload it. The buyers used his plans for the building, and took over Fred’s lease and mortgage commitment.

The Narono Building was constructed, occupied, sold and re-sold several times.

Then, in 1997, almost 30 years later, there was a depressed office market.

Fred received a letter from Manulife. It said his mortgage and lease payments were now in default – as were the municipal taxes. They wanted a cheque for \$1.5 million. When could they come to pick it up?

Fred had signed the original mortgage. So he went to a lawyer to find out what he was obligated to do. His legal and

accountants’ fees just for this were more than \$15,000.

Fred could have foreclosed on the building, but due to poor maintenance the underground garage levels had gone through almost 30 years of salt “eating the hell out of the concrete and re-bars in the floors.”

Fortunately, the market went up, and the issue went away by November, 2000.

The name “Narono” comes from Nadia Robert Norman. There is a still a sign over the front door that says “Narono Building”.

West Indies contract

As Fred was closing down operations in Ottawa after the Waterloo fiasco, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), called for tenders for work in the West Indies. Fred figured he’d have a good chance at it because of his prior experience from a contract with them in 1965.

But because of the Waterloo crisis, he didn’t have enough money to bid on the new contract. Fortunately, he knew that a London, Ont. contractor, Bill McDougall, was interested in international contracts. Fred and Bill had known each other from a few professional meetings and conventions.

They made a deal over the phone.

Fred would get the plans and tender documents and prepare the bid. Bill would submit the tender. If the bid was successful, McDougall would sub-contract 100 per cent of

the work to one of Fred's companies for the amount of the bid, less \$50,000, and they would split any profit over and above that.

They got the contract.

"We did all right," recalls Fred. "I was whole again."



One of many schools in West Indies built by Sirotek Construction for the Canadian International Development Agency.

Sirotek photo

Some days Fred would work straight through the night. Winston Churchill, it was reported, could work around the clock if he got half an hour of sleep every four hours. Fred did that on occasion as well. Sometimes he grabbed that half hour on an airplane en route to another project.

This was especially true when he was running the second group of projects in the West Indies, where the saying "If

you want something done, do it yourself" was perhaps truer than at any other time of his life.

Sirotek Construction had up to 400 employees in the region at the time, but "Finding good talent was not easy". He brought in four Canadians at first and ended up with six or seven. The rest were local.

In the West Indies he was travelling constantly among 13 building sites on nine islands, and when he embarked from boat or aircraft, he had to work fast before hopping on the next flight or boat out of there. A normal day began at 6 a.m. and ended after midnight.

The Golden Bolt

As Canadian historians will remember, there was a tradition in the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Canada's first transcontinental railroad. It was an iron spike, but in subsequent railroad completions, the tradition continued with a ceremonial gold spike.

In like manner, especially fitting because it was a Canadian project, when the structural steel on each of the Sirotek buildings in the West Indies was finished, it received a gold peg, with a public ceremony – the turning of the last bolt.

It was something the Sirotek staff invented for the sole purpose of getting more publicity for Canada.

The idea was successful. The ceremonies for each of the four schools drew great media attention and were a boost in

publicity for Canada's investment in the West Indies.

Commerce City Investments

Fred's idea, following Waterloo, of moving south of the Mason-Dixon Line, did not go away, but the asset liquidation, started in 1968, was interrupted by the West Indies contract, since Fred had moved his family to Barbados so he could manage the project.

After the West Indies, he and the family moved to Ogdensburg, N.Y., and re-started the process he had vowed after Waterloo. Once again he began liquidating his assets.

But he got a bit sidetracked. He and his business partner, Len Franceschini, had a property, two little farms of 12 acres each, at Russell Road and Industrial Avenue. Rather than just selling them, they decided he'd build on them through their company, Commerce City Investments.

The property was in a good location. Fred and Len had bought the farms in the early 60s, but the City of Ottawa couldn't decide whether they'd allow them to sub-divide the properties, or how. The city was concerned about connecting Industrial Ave. with Innes Road and couldn't decide which way the road should go. At one point there was even talk of turning trains around on the property.

So Fred and Len had to just sit on it for years. Because of the confusion related to the sub-division, it wasn't saleable. But they couldn't sub-divide it or build on it either, until the city got its act together.

They decided they'd get a set of plans for a building that would go right in the path of the city's potential plans for the road. They figured it would force the city to do something, and it did. It finally made a decision about where the road would go.

It took almost two years to conclude the deal with the city. Fred and Len decided to build something – a building for light industrial use – rather than sell the land.

That building leased up immediately. So they added to it, and before they were finished, they had 300,000 sq. feet at that location – all leased.

“And,” says Fred, “the move to south of the Mason-Dixon line went by the wayside.”

Further land and building ventures

The City of Ottawa opened up a new business park on St. Laurent Blvd. Commerce City Investments bought part of it and built more buildings. Two were commercial condominiums, and another was an office building.

When all the Russell Road land was built on, Fred and Len acquired more land further east, and four more buildings went up.

With that success under their belt, they bought some land in Mississauga and built a couple of buildings there as well.

Commerce City Investments started out as a joint venture with Imperial Life, a great source of mortgage money. Fred

Commerce City Investments *(Some of the buildings)*



Commerce City Investments Ltd. Buildings:
Top photo – CCIL Central, Building No. 1, Ottawa
Middle photo – CCIL East Building No. 4, Ottawa
Bottom photo – CCIL Building No. 2, Mississauga

Commerce City Investments *(Some of the buildings)*



**Top photo – CCIL Office Building in Ottawa Commerce Park
Middle photo – CCIL Central, Bldg. No 2, Ottawa
Bottom photo – CCIL Bldg., 3030 Conroy Rd., Ottawa**

and Len stayed in the deal until the ownership of Imperial Life changed, and the new owners had different objectives.

“The new owners made us an offer to buy them out,” says Fred, “and it was one we could not refuse.”

In 2005, he adds, “we decided it was time to cash in. And we did.”

Frantek buyout

Fred casually mentioned to Len that the fabulously successful SirTech software company in Ogdensburg [see “Into the Gaming Game” in “Other Ventures”] was having trouble finding a reliable distributor of computer software in Canada. He said it might be a good idea to set up a regional operation in Ottawa.

At first Len wasn’t so sure, but he did some research and figured maybe it was a good plan after all. One of his sons-in-law was available. They could put the son-in-law in charge of the computer products operation and see what happened. They’d start a wholesale operation to cover the Ottawa market.

Both partners put in \$25,000, took some vacant space in one of their rental buildings, and set up shop. They called it Frantek.

Within a couple of weeks, the operation blossomed more than they had thought possible. There were inquiries right across the country: Canada had been grossly undersupplied.

The partners did not expect the operation to explode like that.

But this was during the 80s, when the Canadian dollar was dropping fast. They’d publish a catalogue with prices, and within no time at all it would be out of date because the dollar had dropped again.

They operated at break-even for about two years because inflation and the plummeting dollar were gobbling up all the profits. Telephone expenses alone at that time were \$20,000 monthly. Fred and Len kept adding more money until they had plunged about \$1 million into it. It was going nowhere.

And then the sun came out. There was a fight for a takeover of the Canadian market; a wholesaler from the U.S. opened a shop in Toronto, and another one offered to buy the Frantek Ottawa operation.

Fred and Len didn’t make any money at it. But they did get their investment back.

Real Estate as currency

While the number of his commercial construction projects were increasing, Fred introduced a new concept. He called it his “Package Program”.

He would take on both design and construction, and it was a valuable service to his clients.

At one point he extended the service even further by offering

to take his clients' existing real estate as part payment on the construction contract.

The first time he did that, he sold the old property and building quickly, so he thought it was a pretty workable idea. He decided to promote it a bit harder.

The Rosco company was located in Le Breton Flats and needed a bigger building. They asked Fred for a proposal.

Fred gave them a price and offered to take their old property as part payment.

But before he could figure out what to do with it, the National Capital Commission expropriated the whole area. Problem solved!

Fred says he had to be the only contractor in the City of Ottawa who ever took a piece of property as part-payment.

A bit of advice

“In real estate,” says Fred, “90 per cent of the time, *time* will bail you out. You may have to hang on to a property for a few years, but even if you screw up, if you wait long enough you'll find you didn't screw up as badly as you thought.”

Betrayal

Al, Fred's right-hand man, was one of his first full-time office staff. He did a pretty good job – or so it seemed – running the office, dispatching the pickup truck drivers and supervising the bookkeeping.

He was on board for several years when his eyesight started to fail, badly. And it was this problem that showed him up for who he really was.

Al was juggling the books. Because of his deteriorating eyesight, he lost track of what he was doing, and his scheme started to fall apart.

One day Fred received a call from the principal of a lumber supply company.

“You owe us a pile of money,” he said. “My controller wants to sue you because your Al is giving him the run around, but I told him I wanted to talk to you first”.

And then Fred found out Al had been telling them stories about why the bills were not being paid.

An investigation uncovered invoices for material for Al's house and boats for himself and his friends charged to Sirotek Construction.

“Al, you're on holidays,” Fred told him. “Give me the key to the office.”

Fred called the auditors and detectives, and they found untold amounts of money stolen. Fred eventually got the title to Al's house, but it covered only a fraction of what Al had taken.

After the auditors identified the fraud and the investigators

got his confession, it was time to decide if the cops should be called.

Fred's lawyer suggested that there was no point. If Al was in jail, the company would never get any money from him.

But that turned out to be a mistake. Fred never did get his money back, and Al went on to steal from others.

Fred called the people who had previously employed Al and who had not given him negative references. He asked if Al had defrauded them as well. They said he had, but because they were in a cash-and-carry type of business, they did not know by how much; nor could they prove any amount.

There was a big desk in Fred's office. When he went through all the paperwork, it would have created a pile about 10 feet high. There were hundreds of pages of invoices, demands, excuses, statements.

After Al was fired, Fred had all Al's calls directed to him.. One call after another came in, and they all said the same thing: "When are we going to get paid?"

Within a week, Fred paid out about \$150,000. He started to be concerned that he might run out of money when the calls stopped as suddenly as they started.

Fortunately (there was that luck factor again), business was good at the time and he had the cash to make most creditors happy. If he had not had the money to satisfy all the creditors

immediately, he probably would have been sued, and his reputation would have been ruined.

As it was, he recalls, "It was a rough time. The stress took years off my life."

The Hoodwinkle Theory

Fred got into a conversation with a colleague one day about the way people react to things. The colleague was a generation younger than he was.

This was his question: "If you were to accidentally open a letter directed to your business partner in a given venture, and the letter said: 'Following up on the conversation we had the other day on the plane, if you can hoodwinkle your partners into the deal we were discussing, I'm in; let me know', what would you think?"

His colleague immediately answered: "I would be upset!"

So Fred decided to try the question on someone else – someone of his own generation. He called the man who was his partner in New Brunswick.

"Art," he said, "if you were to discover such a letter, what would you think?"

Art's answer was immediate, too.

"I'd call you and say, 'Hey, Fred, what kind of line did you feed the guy?'"

Art had known Fred for 20 years at that point, but he probably wouldn't have said anything different had the question been posed years earlier.

Fred concluded there were two ways to look at things, and it depended on your generation.

One generation would react negatively, assuming it was something underhanded.

Fred's generation would assume it was something interesting and automatically ask: "Oh, yeah? What's the deal?"

Just one bad apple

Delivering tenders on construction work on time to public agencies is mandatory. If you are late by seconds, the tender is rejected.

So on the day a tender had to be submitted, all the sub-contractors would send their own quotes for the amount they would charge for their part of the operation. At the 11th hour, Sirotek Construction would be receiving swift phone calls from plumbers, electricians and so on. Fred recalls there would be perhaps 100 phone calls between 1 and 2:30 in the afternoon of "tender day". You'd answer the phone, the voice would say a price, you'd record it and hang up. Fred says he received quotations in this fashion for millions of dollars worth of sub-trade work each year.

Construction companies trust that if you get the job, the sub-contractors you have chosen will honour the price they have



One of several buildings built by Sirotek Construction for Canada Dry.
Sirotek photo

quoted.

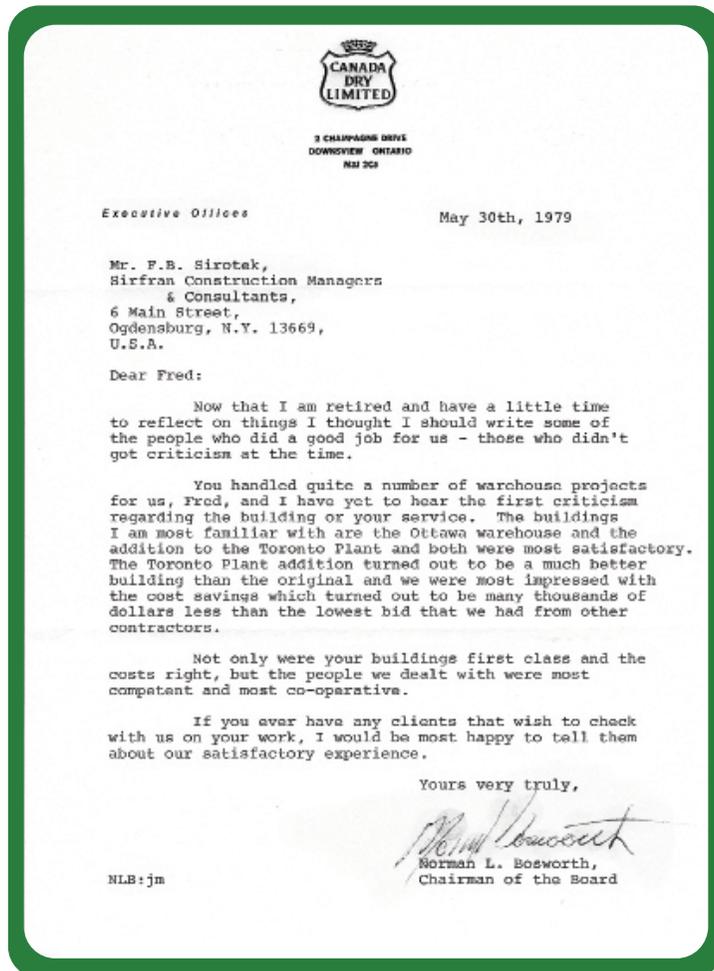
In all Fred Sirotek's experience, there was only one company that let him down. It happened way back in 1954; it was a "measly little job". Belton Electric quoted an amount; Sirotek got the job; Belton then said, "Oh, we made a mistake. It will cost \$3,000 more."

It was wrong and unfair, but there was nothing to be done about it. However, says Fred, it was the only time, in 60 years of business, a sub-contractor was dishonest with quotes. Unfortunately, it happened when he was first starting out, and when he could least afford it.

The champagne of mortgages

Sirotek Construction built several buildings throughout Ontario to be leased by Canada Dry. When one was built and occupied, it was mortgaged to finance the construction of the next one. On it went with each successive building. There were no issues; Canada Dry was a prime tenant; everyone was happy.

It was such a good, secure situation that when they applied for a mortgage on about the fifth or sixth building for Canada Dry, in the presentation to a mortgage company manager, the manager was asked if he wanted to see pictures of the building.

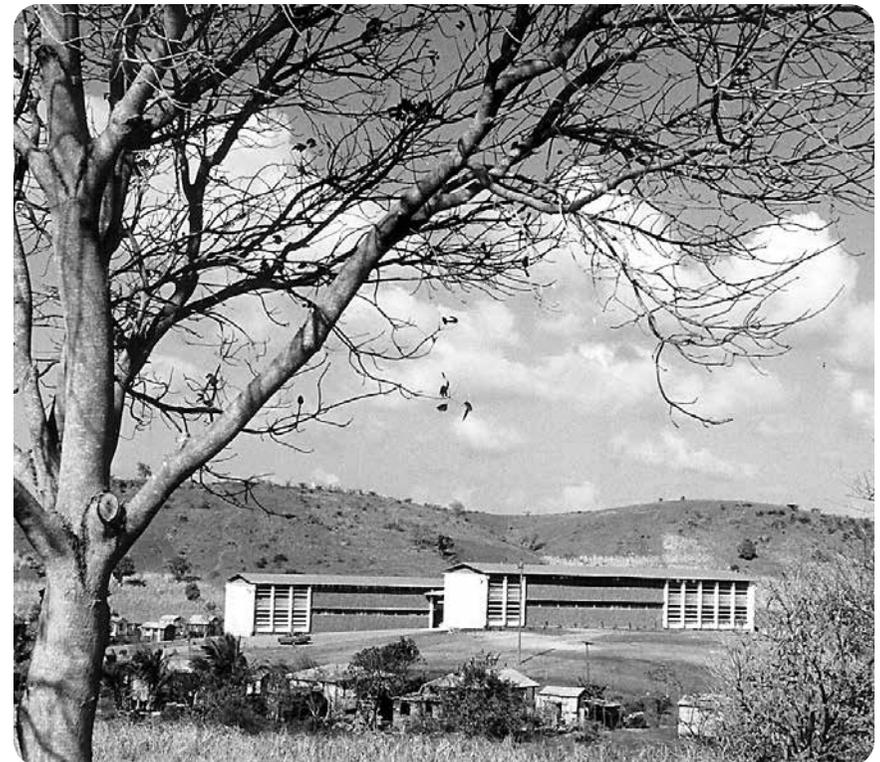


A letter of appreciation from the Chairman of the Board of Canada Dry in 1979.



Away from home

As if leaving life as you knew it behind and starting a successful career in a new country weren't enough, Fred moved his young family to the West Indies, where Sirotek Construction went to work on nine islands. Fred checked out the Middle East as a possible business venture, too, but decided against it.



One of several schools in the West Indies by Sirotek Construction.

Sirotek photo

The Middle East

Construction based on Sheikdom money

Saudi Arabia has known it has oil almost forever, but places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi have not. When oil was discovered in these places in the 1960s, the Sheiks spent a lot of the money on building.

Fred was at a social occasion when he happened to meet the architect who had just designed the airport terminal in Abu Dhabi.

It was at the time when Fred's construction business was flying high. He had already proven himself. He had stepped from contracts in Ottawa, Brockville and Pembroke all the way to the West Indies to work on nine different islands at the same time. So the step from there to the Middle East was not as big. Surely he could get involved there, too.

Dubai and Abu Dhabi were villages with a few two- or three-story buildings. There were no ports for ships. And now construction fever had hit. There were contracts all over the Middle East.

There was no foreign aid as there had been in the West Indies. This was Sheikdom money. Any construction contract would be easy to finance, because the Sheiks paid huge sums up

front as a down payment. (There was a catch, however, says Fred. They practically owned you if you didn't perform to their liking.)

It was difficult for a single construction company to compete with the companies from other low-labour-cost countries who were not paying what Canadians and Americans paid for carpenters and other tradespeople, and most of the skilled labour had to be brought in. But Fred decided to price the airport terminal anyway. He hopped on a plane and went to the Middle East.

His bid was high, and a South Korean company got the contract, as expected. But it was an experience to remember.

At the suggestion of a member of the Canadian embassy Fred also went to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. The embassy provided the contact to a chap who was obviously well off. It was unclear why he was so wealthy, and if indeed he was as great a friend of the royal family as he claimed.

He went to dinner at the man's home. There were 15 other men present. There wasn't a woman in sight, but you could hear female voices and children elsewhere in the house.

If you happened to see women on the street, they were in full body covering.

Fred's contact did not speak any English, so he provided an interpreter. He gave Fred a bit of an insight on local practices. Fred didn't know if the man was describing a prior practice, if it was still current, or true, but women were apparently

so badly treated from birth that a baby girl would be put in the desert in the sun for the first 24 hours of her life. If she survived, then she had "earned" her life.

He learned about insurance: There was presumably no such thing. Everything that happens, he was told, is the will of Allah. To insure yourself against his will is sacrilegious.

He learned about laws and the courts: They didn't really have *them*, either. Instead they had councils of seniors to hear the story. The council decided, and their decision was final.

He learned that the ultimate proof and credibility before such a council was the swearing on the Koran. "But you can't do that if you're not a Muslim", the contact said.

Fred realized there was no way he was going to get involved in a construction contract in the same way he had in the West Indies, where he understood the language, and the Anglo-Saxon lifestyle, more or less, was the way of life.

"This was a new ballgame," he says. "There was this chap ready to guarantee that I would make a killing working for the royal family. All I needed to do was to give him 100 Grand up front and he would introduce me."

Fred suggested that that was not fair, he deserved more and proposed an alternative. He would give him half of the profit. They'd be partners; he would do the introduction and local P.R. contacts, and Fred would do all the work.

But the man wasn't interested.

“If I could have used a local guy who could swear on the Koran, I would have felt a bit better,” Fred says. Otherwise, it just wasn’t going to happen.

But we parted in a friendly fashion. He retrieved my passport from the local police station and gave me a letter for the police officer at the airport, presumably advising that it was okay to let me leave the country

He adds the experience in Jeddah was somewhat depressing, especially when all he could see was one type of people – men – and all the women were hidden by burqas.

He remembers on the way out climbing up the steps to the airplane, and there was a non-Middle-Eastern stewardess standing in the doorway.

“I looked at her and said: ‘God, you look good!’ I hadn’t seen a female person for days. It was as if females simply didn’t exist.”

At the airport he chatted with an American who was also leaving. “Do you have your letter to get out of here?” the American asked.

Fred did, but he had no idea what it said.

“I hope it’s okay,” said the American, “or you’re not going anywhere.”

Then he said: “If we’re lucky, we’ll get out of here in two hours. We’re booked on the King’s airline.”

The King’s airline meant if the King or any of his family members wanted to go somewhere, they’d arrive at the airport and take whichever plane was ready to go.

“You don’t know exactly when you’re leaving until you’re on board and the engines are running,” said the American.

“Put that all together,” says Fred, “and you ask: ‘Is there enough tea in China to make it worthwhile?’ ”

His subsequent experience in Guyana, he explains was not good but, the danger was cut and dried. However, when he was in Saudi Arabia, he met a fellow who had a chilling story. The man said the punishment for theft was severe, and the fear of that punishment was real.

To demonstrate, he dropped his wallet on the sidewalk and went for lunch. When he came back, it was still there. It was still there because you literally lose your hand for stealing. So no one dared.

He says in the Middle East he should have had body guards to make sure he didn’t get punished because he’d broken some custom he didn’t know anything about.

Fred remembers there were actual bars in Dubai and Abu Dhabi where you could get a drink. But you couldn’t get one in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia.

He was warned not to even think about taking a bottle into Saudi Arabia. All the printed material on the subject strongly advised against it, pointing out that the delays in travel plans

could be “extensive” – a euphemism for being in jail for an indefinite period.

Fred is not sure about the accuracy of what he was told, because he was not there long enough to get a second opinion. Nor is he aware if the conditions described still exist, if ever they did.

Bill McDougall, his partner for the second stint in the West Indies, went to the Middle East for a visit to see what he could find out about taking on new business.

“It was the first time in my life I have paid an unmitigated fortune for a bottle of gin,” he said. “When I finished it, I washed it out, wiped all fingerprints off it, put the empty bottle under the bottom drawer of the hotel room dresser and closed the drawer so the bottle was unlikely to be discovered anytime soon.”

Was Fred sorry he experienced the Middle East, especially since he didn’t get any work out of it?

No, he says.

Would he do it again?

No, he says.



Middle East journal

February 22, 1967

Following are notes written by Fred during his trip to the Middle East in 1967:

“Left on an overnight Air Canada flight for London, arriving early in the morning. Spent three hours sightseeing in the City of Westminster and downtown London. Left the following day, Sunday morning, on Middle East Airlines, for Beirut.

“Beirut, while apparently the most civilized of the Middle East cities, is not the place the travel brochures make it out to be. The Lebanese lira is approximately 30 cents, and while the prices are not ridiculously high, they are no bargain, either. Beirut has the largest gambling casino in the middle East. It is operated as a casino and a night club. It distinctly shows the New York and Las Vegas affiliation, and it is half-owned by American interests.

“The Canadian Embassy, through its Commercial Counselor, is certainly trying very hard to promote Canadian business, but it is obviously fighting an uphill battle against international competition.

“This is where I leave on the next leg of my trip, after having been given a variety of letters of introduction, including one “To Whom it May Concern”, written in both English and Arabic. I was also briefed on local customs and regulations –

normal “do’s” and “don’ts”. While these were not completely accurate, they were most helpful.

“Forty-eight hours later I was again headed for the airport, and picked up a flight for Kuwait, where I would have a three-hour stopover to make a connection for Dubai. Since Kuwait is one of the countries where the importation of any liquor is strictly forbidden, I was advised not to take any with me. I had therefore left the remaining portion of my bottle of rye at the Embassy – a move which I later learned to regret.

“Since my stopover in Kuwait was so brief, I did not bother getting a Kuwaitan visa, and therefore I was, for a three-hour period, confined to the in-transit lounge. The refreshments served in the lounge were all complimentary, and you could have anything you wanted – providing you wanted coffee, tea, or soft drinks.

“The terminal was incredibly filthy and old, but apparently a new one is under construction at this time. My connecting flight departed almost on schedule, 10 minutes after one, and, with a one-hour time zone change, arrived in Dubai at 3:30 in the morning. The city presented a remarkably nice picture from the landing aircraft. The Sheik’s palace was the focal point, and the entire grounds were lit up like a Christmas tree. Everything was particularly nicely prettied-up in honour of King Hussein from Jordan, who visited this area during the week prior to my arrival.

“Dubai is not yet benefitting from any income from oil royalties, but has for years prospered from gold smuggling

to India. Tied up in a primitive harbor were insignificant-looking 40- or 50-ft.-long vessels, locally built, that I was told would smuggle millions of dollars worth of gold at a time. Apparently with the help of as many as three diesel engines, they were capable of developing up to 30 knots an hour. The town by day did not look anywhere near what the night-time aerial view suggested. The collapsing old houses and poorly-finished or unfinished new buildings are certainly nothing to write home about. All cars and trucks were equipped with oversize tires, which makes it possible to travel from point A to point B as the crow flies without getting stuck in the sand. By far the most popular vehicle is a four-wheel-drive Land Rover.

“Ten hours later I was proceeding on a Gulf Aviation flight to Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi is remarkable for more than one reason. For its population of 5,000, it has an oil income of \$75 million a year. It has one third-rate hotel and no fourth-rate hotels. It has an 80-mile-long pipeline to get its water, which is sold for \$7 per thousand gallons. It has one airport runway, but is building a second one. It is a sort of island in that at high tide it is impossible to cross a shallow area submerged under about three feet of water. It is, therefore, building a bridge 1100 ft. long – the longest in the Middle East. In order to build a bridge, the contractor first built a causeway, and on completion the causeway will be dredged out from under the bridge. It intends to build a deep water harbor, which will have to reach some two miles out into the Gulf. The remarkable thing is that after the major public works have been built, the deep water harbor probably will not be required. In years past, the tonnage loaded and off-loaded amounted to about 10,000 tons a year, while now,

during the heavy construction boom, they are off-loading about 7,000 tons a month. It is not unusual for a ship to be tied up for a month and a half, waiting to be off-loaded.

“The only hotel in Abu Dhabi provides accommodation, food included, for \$25 a day. It also operates the only bar in the Sheikdom. However, liquor can be purchased from the local Grey McKenzie stores at bargain prices. The duty on the Island is only two and a half per cent, and no other taxes are applicable; and that explains the price of less than \$2 for a bottle of Black & White Scotch.

“Next stop – Bahrain. Halfway between Abu Dhabi and Bahrain is the Sheikdom of Qatar, where our plane touched down at Doha. The terminal building in Doha explained why Abu Dhabi should have one as well. It is a beautiful, big modern building, and the airport does not have any more flights than Abu Dhabi does. It was at this airport that for the first time I tasted Communist Chinese canned orange juice. On arrival in Bahrain, it was not very difficult to choose a hotel to stay in, inasmuch as there is only one, operated by the Gulf Aviation people. Since I had no reservations, I was advised that I should consider myself lucky to share a room with another traveler. It turned out that this traveler was an American consulting engineer, presently living in Athens. Among other qualities, he was very good at forging vaccination certificates, having forged his own to get into Saudi Arabia from Ethiopia. He obliged an English chap whose Cholera papers were not up to par to let him go from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. As I was re-confirming my flight the following morning from Bahrain to Dhahran, the Gulf Aviation chap proceeded to list the variety of vaccination and

other documents that were required, and asked me whether I had them all. I was okay all the way until he started asking for a “stool culture certificate”. Considering that this was a document I had not heard about, and that it takes at least three days to obtain it, and that Bahrain certainly was not the place to spend three days, the change in my travel plans was a distinct possibility. However, in order to give it a good old college try, I trotted over to the American Mission Hospital, if for no other reason than to at least establish what this certificate looked like.

“Since it was Friday, and Friday is the Arab day of rest, I could not find a doctor anywhere, and consequently returned to the hotel without seeing a prototype of a similar certificate.

“Gulf Aviation obviously had to have seen the certificate before, so back on the phone to them I was, and it was at this point that they volunteered the advice that if I had not been in Bahrain more than 72 hours, I did not require this certificate. Apparently it takes at least 72 hours to set it up. Notwithstanding that the guy was the cause of my sweating blood for an hour, I thanked him kindly and proceeded to settle myself as comfortably as I could in the only bar in Bahrain. The hotel, in addition to operating the only bar, also operated the only dining room that was fit to eat in.

“It is not too difficult to see why Saudi Arabia is afraid of importing cholera from Bahrain. Bahrain is an island, which increases in size about threefold during low tide. If the bugs prosper in the swamps as much as the stink, they are obviously doing very well.

“Twenty minutes after takeoff from Bahrain, we were in Saudi Arabia in Dhahran. As predicted, the customs officer indeed opened every bag, and having spotted my one-ounce bottle of shaving lotion, he carefully opened it and sniffed it to ensure that it was not liquor. With some apprehension of things to come, I proceeded on Saudi Arabian Airlines towards Jeddah. By the time I was through breakfast and lunch, it was obvious that the Saudi Airline and I did not have the same taste. I was very thankful that my eating habits did not demand three meals a day, since I was obviously not going to get three meals a day for the next few days.

“Starting at Dubai, and all the way through Saudi Arabia, women were noticeable by their absence. The service on the aircraft was handled by stewards; there were no waitresses at any restaurant. In fact so far, now in the fifth day of my travel in this area, I do not think I have seen any more than a dozen veiled figures, and most of them were either at the airport or travelling on the same aircraft. I have yet to travel on an Arab-operated airline where the temperature in the cabin would be anywhere near comfortable. Considering that the Arabs look as if they are cold in the midday sun, I wondered how they were putting up with the 45- to 50-above (Fahrenheit) temperature inside the aircraft. Maybe it was the view out the window over the endless millions of acres of sand, and the knowledge that sooner or later they would come down to it, that kept them from complaining.

“Looking out the window of an airplane over Saudi Arabia offers a dismal picture of sand everywhere – pink, yellow, red, white, orange. Only sand, and not a drop of water or a speck of green.

“Travelling on a relatively old-fashioned twin engine Corvair, the flight from Dhahran to Jeddah, which can be accomplished in the space of two hours by jet, took almost eight hours. I have not regretted this experience, because my flight not only stopped in Riyadh, the Saudi Arabian capital, but also in Medina, the sacred Arab city, and was flying substantially lower than jets travel. The stops and the aerial views of both cities were relatively uneventful. The only observation worth noting was the anti-aircraft armament alongside the runway in Riyadh. Not only were the guns plentiful; they were also manned.

“The airport arrival lounge more closely resembled an open market hall than an airport building. Inasmuch as the departure lounge was more sophisticated, I assumed that we were ushered in through a facility that was put in operation in order to accommodate the thousands of pilgrims that were starting to gather in Saudi Arabia for their yearly trip to Mecca and Medina.

“Saudi Arabia does not allow any tourist traffic as a matter of policy. All foreign visitors are either pilgrims or in Saudi Arabia on business. This automatically explains the lack of hotels, absence of advertising geared for tourist traffic, and lack of knowledge of foreign languages except in business circles. When I later expressed my dissatisfaction with the hotel accommodation I had, I was advised that I should consider myself lucky, inasmuch as during pilgrimage it is extremely difficult to get a hotel room of any kind.

“Saudi Arabia is a different world. I am sure that during my short stay of only three days, and having only been in circles

accustomed to Western life, I did not come anywhere near to completely finding out just how different it is. But the following should produce some idea:

“One of the biggest problems was to establish what time of the day it was. The airlines operate on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). Jeddah is GMT plus three hours, but Beirut is GMT plus two hours; and the departure or arrival time can be quoted in either. The Eastern Coast operates on GMT plus four, except in summer, when it is GMT plus five. The American Oil City on the east coast, however, operates on GMT plus five all year round. While the airlines operate on Greenwich Mean Time plus so many hours, the population at large operates on sun time, which is sundown. Sundown is, give or take half an hour, at 6 o'clock in the evening (as our watch setting would indicate), and the variation is somewhere between 13 and 15 minutes a day. Unless you know what you are doing, you have to wait until the next day's evening newspaper to find out what time sundown was in order to establish whether your watch is set correctly (that is, providing you know how to read Arabic). Since it is so completely unusual to look at your watch at approximately lunchtime and have your watch read 6 o'clock, most people who are used to 12 o'clock being either lunch or midnight set their watches on sun time plus six. That means when they look at their watch they automatically add or deduct six hours, and the result comes fairly close to the Arabic sun time.

“When someone quotes the year 1385, that does not mean they are quoting a historical date. That was last year, equal to our 1966.

“The months do not necessarily agree, either, because there is a different number of days to a month as well. 1967 is the year of 1386, which is that number of Arabic years from the date of their prophecy and the prophet's travel from Mecca to Medina. The New Year, Ramadan, was on December 12th last year. The Pilgrimage holidays follow 90 days later, and therefore Higry (pronounced Hasch) was on March 12th this year. All business virtually comes to a standstill during Higry, so it is not a good idea to have any shipping scheduled for a month before and a month after. Higry stands for very serious religious concentration, and a very rigorous fast. Business is only conducted between the hours of two and six, which really is 8 o'clock in the evening until midnight, and not with any real concentration.

“There are no magistrates, division, county or supreme courts. In fact, there are no courts at all. All matters of dispute are handled by a religious leader, who listens to the arguments of the parties in dispute, and decides – not always Solomon style – and his decision is final. Divorces are handled in a similar manner, except that a divorce becomes a *fait accompli* as soon as the husband decides he wants one, and the only matter left for decision is the matter of support of his ex-wife and children. If this seems rough on the womenfolk, they are not as badly-off as they used to be. Now, in the instance of the death of the head of a family, the womenfolk have the right to 50 per cent of the inheritance. This means, in the case of only one brother and one sister, an equal division. But when there are one brother and 10 sisters, the brother gets 50 per cent and the sisters divide the other 50 per cent. This is a great improvement over the days when female babies were buried alive immediately after birth.

“The deep religious influence is very noticeable. Five times a day it is time for prayers, and it is not uncommon for an Arab to excuse himself, get up from behind his desk, walk over to the corner of the room, face Mecca, and pray. When his prayers are finished, he puts on his shoes and joins you to continue your business discussion. Until recently, insurance was not available because fire or death is Allah’s wish, and it is inconceivable that you would be insuring yourself against his wish. Insurance is now available, but the Government still does not recognize it – it simply ignores its existence.

“Tea replaces our coffee and is served in small glasses and with lots of sugar. It is consumed at least twice as frequently as we drink coffee, but then, the glasses are no more than one-third of our standard cup. Coffee is available in hotels, and if you order *Café American* you get a jar of Maxwell House instant coffee and a pot of boiling water.

“The driving habits of the Arab are worthy of mention, but both the manner, speed and noise of the car horns are impossible to describe. They must be experienced. Considering that some of the old streets are only inches wider than one car, and yet the streets remain two-way streets, it is possibly quite justifiable that the drivers’ frustration should be satisfied on the newer two- or four-lane roads.

“Dogs have a dog’s life in Saudi Arabia. History has it that a dog had once bitten The Prophet, and they have been in disgrace ever since. The best a dog can expect is a kick.

“Communication is a problem. While telephones operate

quite efficiently within any given city, long distance calls leave something to be desired. International calls become that much worse. International cables are always transmitted through London, England. The result of that arrangement is that a cable from Jeddah to Beirut, a distance of a thousand miles, travels an additional 8,000 miles to London and back to Beirut, taking probably two days to arrive at its destination.

“The seat of the Government is in Riyadh, which is where all but one Federal Ministry is located. The only exception is the Foreign Office, which is located in Jeddah. No Foreign Office is allowed to be located anywhere other than Jeddah with only one exception, and that is an American Consul in the American Oil City of the East Coast. Perhaps it is just as well, because Riyadh is far more religiously oriented in that a special police force is on duty to see to it that no one smokes in public, and that everyone attends the five-times-a-day prayers in the mosques. The terms of reference of this Police Force do not exclude foreigners.

“If obtaining the proper documentation and entering Saudi Arabia is a headache, leaving it is no different. After arrival and within a few days, it is necessary to register with the police department. In order to leave, an Exit Visa is required, and this is only obtained if you provide a letter from the person or firm that sponsored the issuance of your Entry Visa. I am not sure what my sponsor’s letter to the immigration authorities said, because it was written in Arabic. While I had no trouble learning to read Arabic numerals, I have not attempted to decipher their writing. They write from right to left, starting on the back page.

“The bazaar and cab drivers were the only two areas where I was surprised. Neither the cabbies nor the operators of the individual stands in the Bazaar would make any special attempt to either entice you to buy from them, or bargain about their prices.

“The Saudi Arabian Airline is owned by the king. The purpose of its existence is not to provide service or to make money. It has been established primarily to provide transportation for the Royal Family. Whenever any member of the Royal Family decides to travel, he goes to the airport and boards the plane that is ready to depart. But it departs for his destination rather than where it was scheduled to go. The timetables and the flight routing, therefore, change quite frequently, and in direct proportion to the airport where aircraft might be required for the transportation of the Royal Family. When I enquired about my flight departure, the time was quoted to me in Arabic time, Jeddah Airline time, and Beirut Airline time. Since this was the flight that I had no intention of missing, I was at the airport three hours before departure.”



The West Indies

*Centipedes, Mice, and
John Diefenbaker*

The first time Sirotek Construction went to the West Indies, it was on contract with the Canadian Government to build a school in Antigua and Dominica; two in Grenada; a large warehouse on St. Lucia and a small one on St. Kitts. Fred was 36 years old.



A school in the West Indies: one of the 13 buildings Fred built under the second contract for CIDA in the West Indies. Fred moved his family to Barbados for about two years.

Sirotek photo

About five years later, when he was 41, there were more projects to be built. There was another school in Antigua and in Dominica, and several University of West Indies

buildings, including a students' residence in Barbados and a house for the Chancellor of the university. There were also many extramural buildings on Grenada, St Lucia, Montserrat, St. Vincent, Trinidad and St. Kitts.

Home sweet home: Barbados

It was a big enough project that Fred moved his family to Barbados, where they lived for about two years. The older children went to a private school, and the family lived in a rented house within sight of the students' residence that Fred's company was building.

"I could see the job from our living room," he recalls.

When he wasn't working in Barbados, he was travelling to the different islands where other work was going on. Sometimes he'd visit three or four islands in one day. He flew by commercial or chartered airline or went by boat.

It was generally a safe time in Barbados in those days. The Siroteks' front door was just a wrought iron gate with a padlock on it. The windows didn't lock at all.

Dogs...and other critters

Along with the house, they inherited two dogs. One was a Black Lab and one was a German Shepherd. The German Shepherd looked tough and had a loud bark. The Black Lab slept all the time. But, says Fred, the German Shepherd was "an unmitigated coward, but would wake up at the drop of a pin". It would do all the barking and posturing if someone came to the house, and then leave it to the Lab to do the



Sirotek Construction built something on every major English speaking Island from Antigua to Trinidad. In running the projects, Fred would sometimes visit as many as four island in a day

Sirotek photo

work of guarding while it (the German Shepherd) hid under a table.

There were things to get used to in Barbados: centipedes "the size of a 12-inch hotdog", mice, cockroaches (with a

6-inch wing span) and the odd rat.

The floors of the house were terrazzo. The walls were concrete.

“If you dropped a spoon on the floor at breakfast time,” says Fred, “the sound was still bouncing by dinner time.”

So, to muffle the sound, they put carpets on the walls as well as on the floor. The carpets had fringes.

One day Nadia looked at the carpet on the wall and thought it didn't seem quite right. She peered at it for awhile and then realized what she was seeing. It was a long tail of a rat, blending in with the fringe.

She called in some workers from the street. They hesitated, not knowing *what* this woman wanted. But they came to investigate and chased the rat away. The rat took one long jump from the rug to the wrought iron door, and it was gone.

Irresistible

There was a rule at the school in Bridgetown, Barbados, where Fred and Nadia wanted to place Linda for kindergarten. The rule said they wouldn't accept any child younger than five.

Not realizing this, Nadia took Linda to meet the Mother Superior. Linda was not going to be five until more than a year later. When Nadia discovered the rule, she was at first terribly disappointed. But Linda's sweet charm seemed to create an exception to the rule.

Mother Superior took one look at her.

“Well of course,” she said, “we'll take this cute little girl!”

West Indian enterprise

Fred was impressed with some of the West Indian people who had the energy and skills to make a living, but who were held back for lack of funds or credit to get started. He could sympathize, because he had experienced that, albeit at a different financial level.

They had a maid whose husband was a fisherman. Some days he'd catch a lot of fish. If he could sell them all that day, everything was fine. But when he couldn't, he'd have to give away the rest or throw them out. Some days he didn't catch anything.

The maid said if they had a freezer, the problem would be solved. Her husband could catch the fish, sell fresh what he could, freeze the rest, and then sell it later to suit the demand.

The maid was skilled at sewing. If she had a sewing machine, she would be able to do some sewing within the community and make her own money. There were many such cases of people with marketable skills, but no money at all.

Every Island had a Canadian bank, but the bankers weren't interested; nor could they manage small loans of \$300 for a freezer or \$150 for a sewing machine.

A visit to Maurice...

Fred had an idea. He figured the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) could provide money for a micro-loan co-operative, managed in conjunction with Canadian bankers; and members of service clubs such as Rotary, Lions or Kiwanis, to facilitate loans for people who were skilled and willing to run micro-businesses, but who had no access to credit. What an opportunity for Canada to do good at the grass roots level!

Of course, if anyone didn't repay the loan as promised, it would not be economically feasible to try to collect it, so there would be some losses. But it was a valuable idea and worth trying.

Lloyd Francis, Fred's Member of Parliament in Ottawa, arranged a meeting for him with Maurice Strong, who was then the new president of CIDA.

Fred flew from Barbados to Ottawa to present his idea to Mr. Strong. He thought it would, in addition to helping the people on the Islands, be a great public relations move for CIDA.

Mr. Strong spent the first 15 minutes lecturing about how difficult it was to spend the 0.7 per cent of the Canadian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) allocated to foreign aid. He said the amount was a moving target because the GDP was growing every year.

Fred thought the desire or need to get the money out

was a good reason for Mr. Strong to give his idea serious consideration. But then he made a fatal mistake.

"If you put a million dollars into this kind of a setup," he told Mr. Strong, "it will take 10 years before it will be lost to bad debts".

Mr. Strong instantly lost all interest and the meeting was over in seconds. Fred believes if he had said it would take \$10 million a year to keep it going, preferably per island, the idea might very well have been realized.

Eventually under Maurice Strong's management CIDA took over the entire 10-storey Jackson building at Bank and Slater Streets in Ottawa. (The huge additional overhead was a great help in spending the 7 per cent of the GDP.)

... and moments with Dief

Local West Indian politicians weren't helpful in making it known that Canada was paying for the projects. If they admitted that Canada had an involvement at all, they would refer to it as the wonderful things *they* were doing for the electorate, with a bit of help from Canada. But of course Canada was footing 100 per cent of the cost.

John Diefenbaker vacationed in Barbados when Fred was living there. Fred asked Mr. Diefenbaker if he would be kind enough to visit one of the job sites that was being funded by CIDA. He offered to get the local paper to send a reporter, and suggested Canada might get some mileage in publicity.



Diefenbaker (at left), vacationing in Barbados, visited one of the projects being built by Sirotek Construction for CIDA.



Diefenbaker (centre, at top of ladder) in action: visiting a Sirotek job site.

Sirotek photos

Fred figured the press Canada would get would be invaluable if Mr. Diefenbaker would participate. He did, and with his participation, it became a news story. Canada got a full page of publicity in the local paper.

Sad and shocking incidents

Sad things also happened those days in the West Indies.

Fred's Canadian secretary rented a nice little apartment on the edge of the ocean. One night a man climbed over her balcony, cut her telephone line and raped her at knife point.

It was shocking, horrific, and everyone was upset. After the secretary went to the police and hospital, Fred gave her holiday time to go to Puerto Rico to visit her Canadian friend, and to recover.

She did come back to the West Indies and to her job. The Sirotek team from Canada did not want something similar to happen again. They decided all six of them would get gun permits. That way the word would get out that they were carrying guns (although they really had no intention of actually buying any) and they would be safer.

“I don't think I would do the same today,” reflects Fred. “It might invite a burglar to come and try to steal the gun.”

One day he went to one of his job sites on St. Vincent's. When he got there he could see that the whole island was in mourning. There had been several deaths, including an 11-year-old boy. Someone had spotted a floating keg in the

ocean. It was labeled “jet fuel”, but everyone figured it was a phony label – that it was really rum and the “jet fuel” label was designed to keep people from stealing it. They smelled it, and it smelled, they said, exactly like rum. They were sure it was – until it became a terrible, fatal, drinking party. Several died, and many were hospitalized.

Vitamins

Fred was told many times to take vitamins when he was in the West Indies. People said – whatever it was, whether it was in the air, the rum, the water – plan on taking them or you will start feeling awful.

Fred only listened with half an ear.

But the advice was sound. Fred found out for himself that he did feel awful, and revived when he began a regimen of vitamins.

West Indian laborers’ health and safety

Fred issued all the workers hard hats, but the workers would show up for work barefoot.

When they were scratched, the scratch would fester dangerously. Fred’s job super was worried about them. He was sure they were going to get Tetanus, or worse.

So Fred donated about \$1,000 to the Red Cross and arranged to have all the workers vaccinated. It was a good deed, and sensible.

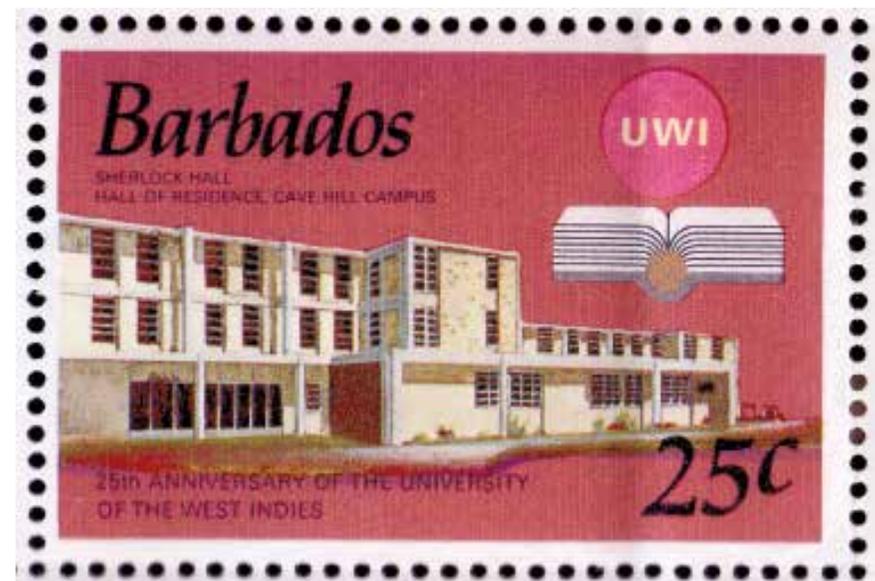
However, something went horribly wrong. One of the workers must have been allergic to the vaccination, and he died.

It could have ended up as a lawsuit, but the diplomatic contract agreement between Canada and Barbados agreed that the contractor and its employees would be held harmless as a result of anything except willful neglect.

It was one of those things, under normal circumstances, few people would even think about. But in this case there was actually a chance of getting sued for something good and helpful.

Barbados postage stamp

The students’ residence at the University of West Indies campus in Barbados, built by Fred’s company, was considered significant enough to warrant being put on one of the postage stamps produced by the Barbados Post Office.



Linda's rash

One day, when the family lived in Barbados, Linda broke out in a rash. The next day it got bigger, and bigger still the next.

Back in 1965, Fred had built a house for a British doctor who had moved to Barbados. That doctor's name came to mind now. Nadia took Linda to see him.

The British doctor put some medication and a bandage on the rash and told Nadia to bring Linda back in a week.

The rash grew.

The next week, the doctor put more of the same medication and another bandage on Linda. And each week it went on like this. The rash grew; the doctor administered *more* cream and *another* bandage.

She had bandages on her cheek. Her arm. Her leg. She looked like a mummy. Now it was a bigger bandage.

While he was flying back from another island, Fred said to himself: enough is enough. Linda was going to fly back to Canada to be seen by a doctor at home.

"Get packed," he told Nadia when he returned.

"Maybe not just yet," said Nadia.

She had taken Linda to a local (indigenous) doctor two days earlier. The local doctor took one look at Linda, said: "Oh,

you poor girl", got out some violet-coloured liquid, and painted the inside of Linda's mouth with it.

"And today," said Nadia, "She seems much better."

Sure enough, within a very short time, perhaps a week, Linda was completely cured.

The British doctor had told Nadia that Linda must not have a bath, so poor Linda hadn't had a bath in four weeks.

The local doctor just laughed. "Of course!" he said. "Go swimming! Have a bath!"

Fred and Nadia did not ever figure out what the violet liquid was or why it worked. But they were very grateful that it did.

Exhaustion

By the time Fred had finished the contract in the West Indies, he was played out. He had been operating very long hours almost every day, seven days a week, for close to a year and a half.

"If anyone had offered me a million dollars to do it again," he says, "I would have turned it down."

Northward bound

Once all the projects in the West Indies were completed, the Sirotek family was ready to move, but not back to Ottawa.

Rather than returning to Canada's winters and Canadian

income tax rolls, Fred bought a house in Ogdensburg, N.Y. He already had his U.S. green card. His plan was to commute to Ottawa to liquidate all his assets and then move a long way away from the winter's cold.

But it didn't work out that way. (See the section "Other Ventures".)

Fred and Nadia went back to Ottawa. They had not sold the family home on Prince of Wales – the house Fred built way back at the beginning, in the mid-50s. Others had lived in it: Fred's parents, his sister, then Fred and Nadia again, then Linda and her husband.

Fred and Nadia bought a condo for themselves on The Driveway.

It was the beginning of a new era in their lives.



Other ventures

When you have a nose for business, you enjoy challenges and risks and taking on new things. You're also a creative thinker who finds innovative solutions to tricky problems. Not all of Fred's enterprises worked out, but he had an uncanny talent for spotting potential.



Another Sirotek Construction building: 116 Lisgar St., Ottawa
Sirotek photo

Construction stories

*Tales of wonder, intrigue...
and ice cubes*

Fred still loves the story told to him by an architect.

The architect had a job at a convent. At one of the job meetings with the Mother Superior, she asked the architect if he would please be good enough to talk to the contractor to see if he could do something about the dreadful language the workers were using.

Well, said the architect, yes, their language was awful, but these guys were rough and tough. They called a spade a spade.

“That wouldn’t be too bad,” said the Mother Superior. “But they don’t call it a spade. They call it a fucking shovel.”

CIDA and crazy spending

When Sirotek Construction built the first set of schools and other buildings in the West Indies in 1965, they worked with Canadian Foreign Aid, which was run out of about 10,000 sq. ft. of office space in a “temporary” building in Ottawa – one of the buildings constructed during WW II. It was a building that stood between the Parliament buildings and the Supreme Court of Canada.

The Foreign Aid construction department was run by one man. He was the one who dealt with all the architects, engineers, contractors. He was tough and demanding, but when you wanted information, you got it quickly.

Five years later, in 1970, Maurice Strong had taken over Foreign Aid, now called the Canadian International Development Agency, or CIDA. Strong moved the operation into the Fuller Building on Albert St. in Ottawa, and CIDA was now several floors full of employees. Next he moved CIDA to the Jackson Building on Bank St., and the employees now filled up the entire multi-storey building. And yet, says Fred, when you needed information, it took forever to get it.

Sirotek Construction built the next set of buildings in the West Indies under contract with CIDA in 1970. They were identical in size and purpose to the buildings constructed in 1965. And yet they cost at least three times more. Fred says they were over-designed to a ridiculous extent.

“The 1970s buildings could withstand “hurricane, earthquake, tsunami, atomic bomb attack – all at the same time,” says Fred. “But both sets of buildings – built in 1965 and 1970 – are still standing, equally fine.”

As an example of over-design, Fred says the columns in the 1965 version were 6-inch H, but in 1970 they were 12-inch I. The cost between the two is astronomical, he explains, “to be measured in factors of 10”.

To explain it further, he says the 1965 version buildings could

be compared to the expense you’d incur if you took a cab to the airport. The 1970 buildings would be more like hiring a tractor trailer for the trip – with two trailers.

“Maurice Strong apparently wanted to spend his 0.7 per cent of Gross Domestic Product,” says Fred. “It didn’t seem to matter if it was spent well or badly.”

Safety Measures

Even though hard hats and seatbelts were only an “option” in the 50s, Fred made them mandatory on his jobs and insisted on them. All his vehicles, personal and business, had the “seat belt option” (that cost extra in those days). There were never any vehicular accidents, so he couldn’t judge their effectiveness.

Hard hats were another matter. Fred says they saved at least two of his workers’ lives.

During the construction of Rideauview Shopping Centre, a crane was used to place concrete into beams. Cranes have outriggers, or legs that stabilize the machine.

One of Fred’s workers stood on the formwork 10 feet off the ground. He was handling the concrete operation when all of a sudden, one of the outriggers broke. The crane boom started to collapse. It was heading straight for the worker. He jumped, but the boom caught him by his leg. He fell, mangling his leg in the process, and landed on his head on the concrete floor below. The fall was so harsh that his hard hat split. But at least it wasn’t his head. It was a terrible injury,

but thanks to the hard hat, he was alive.

On Oct. 25, 1958, there was a massive explosion on Slater St., Ottawa, when a janitor detected a bad smell in the basement of a building across the street from the Jackson Building.

The janitor, checking on it, switched on the light and instantly ignited the natural gas that had leaked into the basement through the night. The janitor was killed, and many buildings were severely damaged.

A row of houses that had been turned into shops was destroyed beyond repair. Fortunately, it was a Saturday morning and a rainy day, so no one else was in the vicinity for shopping or anything else.

In the months that followed, Sirotek Construction was one of the contractors engaged for the re-construction of the Jackson Building, which, while not destroyed, was in bad shape. Windows were blown in, partitions knocked over. Great shards of glass were stuck in desks and floors. The building had to be repaired in stages, and Sirotek did several floors.

Part of the work involved installing pipes and wiring. One time one of Fred's workers was drilling holes through one of the concrete floors. He was standing on scaffolding with an air-powered drill, drilling from the bottom up, holding the drill by its two handles over his head.

Suddenly the drill got caught on the reinforcing steel. Instead

of the bit turning, the drill itself turned; one of the handles of the drill, at the worker's head level, hit the side of his hard hat. The force put a hole in the hard hat – a hole that otherwise would have been in the man's temple. Again, a hard hat saved a life.

“These examples made it so obvious to me why construction workers had to wear hard hats,” says Fred. “The statistic seemed to be that one worker got killed for every \$1 million worth of construction work. At that point we must have done at least \$20 million worth with only that one serious accident.”

Revisions, revisions, revisions

When Sirotek Construction was building the lineal accelerator building for the National Research Council, the engineers and architects were a Montreal firm. For some reason there were far more revisions in the drawings after the work started than would ordinarily be expected. In fact, the revisions came so fast and furious it was hard for anyone to keep up with them. What made it even worse was the waiting around for all the copies of the revisions to arrive from Montreal, and by then there were new revisions anyway.

Fred asked the firm to give him a copy of the revised drawings and let him get them reproduced locally, so at least it would be faster than waiting for the mail from Montreal. The revisions were so constant that even *that* took up too much time.

So Fred got a blueprint-copying machine and had it set up

on site. Then he hired an operator to run the machine and take care of all the copying and distribution. In the end, they printed about 2,000 copies, each one numbered with page and revision numbers.

When the job was done, Fred filed a claim for the cost of the machine, supplies and personnel.

“It cost a bloody fortune,” says Fred.

The architects balked and advised the department not to pay the claim. When Sirotek filed a suit against the Department of Public Works *and* the architectural firm, they changed their position and suggested that a settlement might be a better thing after all. As long as they had nothing to lose, they had one position. But they knew the court was not likely to believe their version.

The claim was paid in full plus \$5,000 for Sirotek’s legal bill.

Concrete and ice cubes

When you pour concrete, it looks like porridge. But not for long, because it hardens. When it hardens, it creates heat.

In Canadian winters, heat is a good thing, because, in relatively cold weather, it keeps the concrete from freezing while it’s hydrating.

However, in summer, concrete-heat can be a detrimental thing. When the air temperature is high and concrete is creating more heat, the water in the concrete evaporates too quickly, and that is not good for the quality of the concrete.

When Sirotek Construction was working on the lineal accelerator building during summer, the walls were three feet thick. That’s what they faced: too much heat. Solution? Ice cubes. It was someone’s job to go out and get ice cubes for the job. They’d add buckets of ice cubes to the concrete as it was being poured.

How many ice cubes?

“Probably enough to supply several bars for a year,” says Fred.

Not always so smart

Consultants and professionals aren’t always as right and as knowledgeable as they think they are, says Fred.

Sirotek Construction did an airplane parking apron job at Uplands Airport. It was about two acres in front of some hangars where they parked the jets; Sirotek did the concrete pavement, and it was about a foot thick. The expansion joints were filled with sealant to prevent water from getting through.

“Needless to say,” says Fred, “if you are designing something that has to serve an airport and support something worth millions, you’re going to use good products. You’re not going to be cheap about it.”

And so Sirotek construction used the specified product, the very best joint-filler on the market.

Fred had some of this hugely expensive material left over.

Later, when his company was building the bus depot for Ottawa Transpo, he planned on using it for the bus depot floors. It was a significantly better product than what was specified.

But the engineers refused to approve the substitution. They didn't want "X" product; they wanted "Y". Fred knew "X" was the best they were ever going to get.

So the Sirotek crew took the "X" cans and painted them to say "Y", and carried on.

"When they were finished," says Fred, "the engineers declared the joint sealer used for the bus depot as the best stuff under the sun!"

Bad Attitude

"There were other things that were just plain perplexing: for instance, the Canadian government inspector who was so grumpy and unpleasant that no one could figure out what was wrong with him. Fred eventually discovered why.

Fred's employees were Canadians who had given up their homes and automobiles in Canada. While they were living and working in the West Indies, they were not obligated to pay Canadian income taxes. Through an agreement between Canada and the Islands, the employees did not pay any taxes in the West Indies, either. Fred supplied their accommodation and their vehicles, so they were living a pretty good life – free housing and cars, good salaries, and no income tax.

The inspector, on the other hand, was employed directly by the Canadian government, and his income taxes were regularly deducted from his paycheck. So he was annoyed, to say the least. His grumpiness was constant.

"It just shows you," says Fred, "how you can run into problems you can't possibly anticipate and can't fix."

Expect anything

When Fred's company was starting work on one of the schools in Antigua, a man told Fred he'd like to sub-contract some labour for the job and charge a fixed price per cubic yard to mix the concrete.

Labour was always the "uncertain thing", especially in the very heavily unionized Antigua, so Fred readily agreed, and they decided on the price. The man hired the workers, Fred provided the concrete mixer and the material.

A few days later Fred showed up on the job, and saw that the workers were walking around as if they were half asleep.

"HEY," he said. "Get these guys to work! If that mixer's not running, you're not making any money!"

He went back another day. It was lunch time. The mixer was running empty, gobbling up gasoline as it went.

"HEY," said Fred again. "It's lunch time! Why have you got the mixer running?"

“Well, boss,” said the sub-contractor, “you told me if the mixer wasn’t running, I wasn’t making any money.”

How, Fred asks, can anyone respond to that and still remain "politically correct"?

It was one more reminder to him to always expect the “unexpected”.

Unusual assignment, innovative solution

There was another inspector who had quite a story to tell. This fellow, of Chinese origin, had been assigned during WW II to come up with a solution to the bathroom needs of female pilots who were ferrying planes to Great Britain. Male pilots had no problem. They’d use a funnel and a hose and be done with it. But women? They’d have to fly from Gander, Newfoundland with no bathroom facilities.

The fellow said at the time he was fresh out of school, young, with a prim-and-proper Chinese upbringing. He was inexperienced and had not seen a naked girl, ever.

The government gave him \$100 to find a girl on the street to explain to him the female anatomy and how it worked. (A high school graduate with so little experience would be hard to find today, remarks Fred.)

The fellow figured it out. He devised a kind of mask that would fit over the female’s “peeing” parts, with an attached

tube. It was like the men’s setup, but with a mask rather than a funnel.

Fred likes that story because it showed how you can also deal with all kinds of situations you might not ever anticipate, and yet find a solution.

“It’s a sad day when you don’t learn something new,” he says.

Bridgesitters

When Sirotek Construction was building a bridge on the road to Hull [now Gatineau] from Ottawa, there was a dilemma. With the late bar-closings in Hull, how could they give the concrete used in the centre pier time to dry overnight? All it would take would be someone speeding over from Hull at 2 a.m., collide with the supports, and the whole bridge could collapse.

Solution? Fred hired two police cars with flashing lights. The cars sat there all night. It worked! People saw the flashing lights, thought “Cops!” and steered clear.

Better than the alternative

Sometimes a whole string of expletives can be a good thing.

Fred remembers a time when his frustration got the better of him and his language was what you might call “salty”, to say the least.

It was during his time in Barbados. He was at a project meeting with some architects and engineers. One of the engineers started mouthing off about the ethics of one of Fred's sub-contractors – unfair comments that also reflected on Fred.

Fred defended the sub-contractor, and he wasn't exactly calm about it. His words were pretty colourful.

Later, after the meeting was over, he called the chair of the meeting to apologize for his bad language.

“Actually,” recalls Fred, “he thought my reaction made sense. As for the salty language, he said it wasn't all that bad. In fact, he felt lots of swearing was sometimes helpful.”

To explain, the chairman recalled his terrifying moments as a WW II rear-gunner in a bomber over Germany. The sky was lit up with flak. Their plane took a hit and was heading down.

He could hear the captain over the intercom: “Come on, you goddamn @#%@% thing, get your #@&*%&* nose up, before we hit the ground!”

It was far more reassuring that there was a serious effort underway to keep the plane flying, he said – far more so than had he heard: “Our Father, who art in heaven...”



Police business

*Still soggy with fumes...
after all these years*

Not many people can say they've owned a police station.

Fred Sirotek and his business partner, Len Franceschini can. Better than that: they had three of them.

It started with an ad in a paper during the time that Fred made Ogdensburg, N.Y. his home town. It said the New York State police were looking for someone to build three new stations. One would be in Niagara Falls, one near Rochester, and one just north of Plattsburg.

So Fred and Len, always up for an adventure where building and real estate were concerned, took a look at the plans and made an offer to the N.Y. State police department. The offer was accepted.

But the plans had problems. Fred spotted wasted space, for one thing. And then he pointed out that the main station's office, that was to have bulletproof glass in the window and a self-locking door, had a 2"x4" frame wall. The wall was to have wood siding on the outside and drywall on the inside.

“So if someone wants to kill you,” Fred pointed out, “they can just shoot you through the wall!”



The New York State police station in Brockport near Rochester, one of three that that Fred and Len Franceschini owned and leased to the state.

Sirotek photo

The police saw he had a point. So they asked him to re-work the plans. He did. The changes to the plans were an improvement to the use of the space by the police and made the buildings easier to covert to other tenants if the police department did not renew their 10-year lease. Then Fred and Len bought the land, built the stations and leased them back to the cops.

This was in the early 70s. Years later, when the police moved to another building, Fred and Len leased the Niagara Falls station to a local hospital as a rehab facility for about 10 years.

Fred gave his part of the properties to his children. Len continues to own his original interests.

Eventually, Fred's children and Len sold the one in Niagara Falls.

The station they built in Rochester came to an odd impasse.

Like most police stations, it had its own gasoline tank and pump. One day, while the tank was being filled with fuel, a major quantity of gasoline was spilled and went into the ground. The New York State Department of the Environment ordered the cops to move out, and the building was left vacant.

But New York State kept trying to "fix" the gas-soaked land by sucking out gas fumes. They shoved pipes into the ground, vacuumed out the air and fumes. They did this for about 10 years. Fred says they spent several times the value of the building trying to fix the problem, and they are not finished yet.

Meanwhile, the cops were still paying Fred's kids and Len full rent for a vacant building. Fred asked what they were going to do about this ridiculous situation. They told him they were now going to dig up the property, remove the contaminated dirt and then re-sod and re-pave it.

"But what are you going to do with the gasoline that's under the floor of the building?" Fred asked.

"Oh," said one of the sergeants. "The engineers say there is no contamination under the floor."

“Well, okay,” said Fred. “Good luck with that, but I am told the fumes inside the building would choke you. So that tells me there’s a problem under the floor as well as outside the building.”

But he had a suggestion. “Why don’t you buy the building?” Fred asked. “Buy it for 300-grand, put a fence around it and forget about it!”

That was clearly the best and most obvious solution, but it did not fit the operating pattern for the department and there was no provision for a purchase in the budget.

However, the Department’s “decontamination budget” had unlimited funds. So they could just keep spending big bucks to try to dig or suck out gasoline from the bowels of the earth.

Fred’s daughter, Linda, now handles that piece of property for Len, herself and her brothers. It is still vacant, still soggy with fumes.

The last building, in Chazy, north of Plattsburgh, is still being occupied by the police.



Into the gaming game

Practically an overnight success

One of Fred’s friends, an Ottawa lawyer, had a client in Ogdensburg who died shortly after he started a foundry supply business there. His widow continued to run the business, but needed additional capital and some management help.

The lawyer brought this to Fred’s attention, and Fred decided to provide both.

So he bought a piece of the business. He got it to the place where it was breaking even, but that was all.

Computer games

Meanwhile, the client’s son, Robert Woodhead, was attending Cornell University and was planning on getting into teaching at university level. His downfall was his obsession with computers. He spent far more time on them than he did on his classes, so the university kicked him out for a year.

Robert Woodhead had created several games for the Apple II and talked about creating a computer game mimicking the popular “Dungeons and Dragons”.

Fred didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about. Robert Woodhead told Fred that Dungeons and Dragons was so popular people were obsessed with it, addicted to it. He told Fred there were actually people committing suicides over the game.

The Apple II computer was brand new then. Fred had just bought one based on the young man's advice, then hired him to show him how to use it.

Robert Woodhead did return to Cornell and finished his course, but he didn't teach. He just kept on designing computer games. He designed one that simulated Dungeons and Dragons, and it was overwhelmingly popular with all his friends.

At one point he asked Fred if he could take his computer to a game show out of town. Fred was a bit concerned, but agreed if his son, Norman, went along on the trip.

While the two young men were there, they witnessed astonishing potential right before their eyes in the form of eager young "game geeks" who were watching a preview of their game. They figured they could make a business out of it.

They called the game Wizardry. It was fame waiting to happen.

By this time Norman and his older brother, Robert Sirotek, were in their early 20s. Fred thought about it. If he put \$25,000

into the game business proposed by Robert Woodhead, and got Robert and Norman involved from day one, they'd get a taste of what it meant to start a business. And he figured \$12,500 per son was much cheaper than tuition to a business school. This would be their real life education – cheap even if it didn't make them any money. But it did.

Wizardry was a phenomenal success, and went on to become widely acclaimed almost immediately, making huge amounts of money.

Sir Tech Software Inc.

With Fred's financing, Robert Woodhead and Fred established a company with equal ownership, and eventually Fred handed the business over to the kids. They were the right age and the right generation.



Affiliated & subsidiary companies

A little of this, a little of that...

The Sirotek bridge division, Canam Construction, Ltd., was a subsidiary of Sirotek Construction. Like so much else in Fred's business world, it came about as the result of a chat.

A fellow who was a superintendent working for someone else went to see him about going into the bridge business together. Fred put him in charge of the new division, financed it, and administered it. If it had failed, it would simply have been a subsidiary that did not succeed.

Better safe than sorry

It was 1966, the same year the Heron Road Bridge was being built in Ottawa. That bridge collapsed while under construction. So it made Fred Sirotek apprehensive and extra-cautious.

Canam Construction was awarded a contract for a series of bridges, including some on the Ottawa River Parkway. Fred looked at the plans and was concerned about one of them.

The design had adopted a new twist that was developed in France, and Fred was not anxious to be the first one in North America to test it.

Based on his experience with the roof of the Rideauview Shopping Centre, he went to the engineers and to the owner. He told them the design made him nervous and that he wanted permission to get another design opinion. They agreed, so he went to an engineering firm in Toronto.

What do you think? he asked the other engineering firm.

The other engineers came back almost instantly and said, rather than spending time on reviewing the design, let's consider: how much damage could a whacko do with one stick of dynamite?

The answer, of course: A lot.

The design was modified. Canam Construction got paid for the modification, but this was an insignificant amount compared to the overall cost. Without the modification, the overpass might not ever have collapsed unless a terrorist came along. In that case, it wouldn't have had a chance.

Better safe than sorry about terrorists, even back in the 1960s. The question had to be asked, and all precautions taken.

Other business directions

There were other, smaller, companies in Fred's life. Some were related to construction; some weren't. Some began and ended as ideas.

Each company had a casual start of some kind.

Souvenirs

Fred once built a house for a George and Sylvia Gunderson, and, in the true Sirotek pattern, they became friends. George was the art director and engraver for The British American Banknote Corp. He had a neighbor, Clark McGlashan, who was in the silverware business, but who had gone bankrupt.

George and Clark produced an engraving of U.S. President John Kennedy, who had just been shot. They figured they could put his engraved portrait on a silver spoon, and it would sell as a souvenir.

But because of Clark's bankruptcy, his credit was zero. So George would have to guarantee all financial transactions. That made him nervous. He confided his concern to Fred. What did Fred think?

"Incorporate a company," Fred suggested.

Would Fred like to go into the deal with them, then?

"Sure," said Fred.

Now the three of them were partners: Fred, George and Clark.. They called the company Commemorative Products, Ltd.

They didn't have the slightest idea if it would work. But the investment was "negligible", says Fred. Someone in his office would handle the administration.

They produced the silver spoon, and began selling them.

It was an instant success. Little did they know they had hit the new start of a trend – silver spoon collecting.

Then came Canada's Centennial year, 1967: perfect timing for more spoons.

“That year Commemorative Products made more money than the Banknote Company,” said Fred. “Everyone wanted a spoon.”

Then Avon took it on. The company kept making money for about 10 years. It was nicely running on its own.

But the partners learned spoon collecting goes in cycles.

When Fred came back from the West Indies, he moved to Ogdensburg. The American Bicentennial was coming up – a shoe-in, he thought, for lots of spoons.

He was wrong. This time it bombed. It lost money. The spoon-collecting craze was fading. Added to that was American interest and taste, which was not like Canadian taste when it came to delicate things like small silver spoons.

Construction utilities

A man who was selling specialty products for the construction industry – for example, sealers and weather-stripping – approached Fred one day. He proposed a partnership in a business. There was a big markup on construction specialty products.

Fred agreed. He set up the business as Construction Utilities Ltd., and his office did the bookkeeping. It worked fine for a while.

But there was a glitch: the guy turned out to be an alcoholic. So the business was doomed.

Meanwhile, one of Fred's friends from the days in the refugee camps in Germany, Tony Vodsedalek, living in Montreal, had lost his job. He called Fred. Did Fred have anything he could do?

As it happened, Fred did. He had had trouble getting plumbers to do good work on gasoline piping in the service stations he was building. He needed someone to manage that particular aspect. So Tony moved to Ottawa. They converted construction utilities to a plumbing contractor, later renamed Ottawa Mechanical Services, and managed the plumbing and piping at the stations Fred was building.

Tony's company did well for a long time but ran into trouble and went out of business 15 or 20 years later.

Two other businesses got started but didn't go anywhere for various reasons: Linoro Trading and Ridell Electric.

Quick as a Wink

In the early 60s a new-style Fast Food business opened in Ottawa. It was unusual and ahead of the times: it was a drive-through hamburger joint. It was so popular that cars were lined up and down the street, so popular that the City



Winky's seemed like a good idea, but it just didn't fly.

Sirotek photo

of Ottawa established bylaws for such businesses if others were built.

Fred's friend, Mike Greenberg, had a son-in-law, Sol, who was excited about doing just that – starting his own fast food outlet. Sol was in the food business, and it seemed like a good fit.

Sol was going to call his business Winky's, as in "Quick as a Wink". His special approach to it would be a terrific sauce for the hamburgers (which he actually bought at a local grocery store). Sol asked if Mike and Fred wanted to go into it with him.

They thought it sounded reasonable. The three of them each chipped in \$5,000 and borrowed the rest. Three outlets were built in 1961 – and closed a few years later.

Unfortunately, although Sol was in the food business, he didn't know enough about running a fast food stand, and he hired the wrong person to run it. Winky's just didn't fly.

Mike did something very decent – an example, says Fred, of Mike's integrity. He told Fred that since he had brought the deal to Fred, he would pick up the bank loan (about \$100,000). Fred thinks Mike might have managed to recover part of the loss by way of tax credit.

Baby comes first

Fred travelled back to Europe for the first time in 1958, to attend the World's Fair that was being held in Brussels that year. He couldn't help but notice the huge sensation hitting Europe – the Hula Hoop. He hadn't heard or seen anything about it in Canada.

He was very close to finding its manufacturer and ordering thousands to bring back to Canada.

And then, a much bigger event happened: Nadia went into premature labour with Norman. Fred dropped what he was doing and hopped on the next available flight.

Of course, his instincts had been right. The Hula Hoop hit North American "like a ton of bricks" and was around for several years.

Wine representative

At the end of Fred's second stint in the West Indies, he stayed behind in Barbados for a while to dispose of office things and tools; and Nadia and the children returned to Canada.

It was Easter, and Fred came up with an idea. Barbados was halfway to Brazil, he thought, and the famous Carnival in Rio de Janeiro was about to start. So he asked Nadia to come back from Canada and join him for a few days. They'd go to Brazil. Could she get hotel reservations?

Nadia called back to say the only way to get a hotel room in Rio during the carnival was to take a South American tour.

So tour it was.

Nadia left Ottawa; Fred left Barbados; and they landed in Rio half an hour apart.

From Rio they went to, among other states, Chile. It happened that they were in Santiago on their wedding anniversary. So Fred bought a couple of bottles of local Champagne, and then he and Nadia shared it with some friends they had met on the tour.

"It was a pretty good bubbly," says Fred.

He liked it so much that when he returned to Ottawa, he looked for it. But he couldn't find it. So he wrote to the wine makers Vina Concha y Toro, Santiago.

"I'd like to be your representative," he said.

They wrote back to say they already had a sales representative for Ontario and Quebec, but they didn't have anyone for the Maritimes.

As it happened, Fred was doing business in Saint John, N.B. Not only that, but one of his New Brunswick tenants used to be the Mayor of Saint John and was now an MPP.

With that connection, he was able to get the wine quickly listed to the New Brunswick liquor board.

Then he promoted the wine in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. They loved it. They didn't have any Chilean wines in those provinces, either, and they were highly intrigued – so intrigued that they sent the entire board to visit Chile to see where the wine originated.

Fred received a \$50 commission for the first shipment of wine to New Brunswick. At that time, the wholesale price per bottle of wine was from a low of 50 cents to the Chilean bubbly at about \$3.

"So getting a commission covered a hell of a lot of cases of wine," he says.

But within a month or two, the dictator took over in Chile and made a deal with Bronfman (Seagram's). All the reps were fired, but their severance pay was double the commissions they received in the previous two years.

So technically Fred was entitled to \$100. But he didn't even bother to apply for it.

Brazilian temptation

When Fred and Nadia were in Brazil, they took a trip to Brasilia, which is right in the middle of Brazil. Fred might have started another venture at that point, but thought better of it before it went any further.

Brazil wanted to populate this region, but it was smack in the middle of the bush.

In the late 50s, the president of Brazil, Juscelino Kubitschek, had an ambitious plan for developing the new capital in the interior. The Brazilian government would sell the land at \$1 an acre – as many acres as you wanted. Your only obligation was to do something with a certain percentage of the acreage. If you couldn't afford to build on it just yet, you could buy your way out by giving back a portion of the land. They gave you citizenship as well.

It sounded like a good idea to Fred.

And then he thought again. He was a Canadian Citizen. He had a Green Card to the United States. So when it came to business, he had the run of North America.

Why am I thinking of thousands of acres in Brazil?" he asked himself.

He didn't act on it. But still. It crossed his mind.



Family

*So many things to remember and cherish:
small stories, fragments of stories,
moments in time. These are the very
fabric of a family.*



Top: Fred, left, with his mother, Bedřiška, and sister, Milu, circa 1932; and, bottom, on March 18, 1989 – Bedřiška's 90th birthday.

Sirotek family photos

Beginnings, endings, memories

Stories last a lifetime

One of Fred's earliest stories happened when he was so young it's not in his memory. But he has heard it, and he loves it.

When he was about six weeks old, the family lived at a location that was only four or five blocks away from the birthing hospital where he was born.

On one occasion, his mother put him in the pram and took him and his four-year-old sister, Milu, out for a walk.

They approached the street where the birthing hospital was. Milu said: "NO! Don't go there! The last time you went there you brought this little kid home!"

Fred does remember this, however: the time Milu put salt in his coffee. He was five. (It was a European custom, to let small children drink coffee.)

Milu did this because Fred had been kicking her under the table, and she was fed up with it.

Fred complained to his mother that his coffee tasted funny.

Bedřiška tasted it and immediately knew, of course, there was salt in it. Milu was admonished; Fred remembers it all these years later. (Now in their 80s, they are close and caring friends.)

Marriage and babies

Fred met Nadia in 1954. She was the sister of the wife of a friend, Aram Alexanian, who opened a carpet store in Ottawa. Fred and Nadia met while they were attending a concert at the Capitol Theatre.

Nadia was an Armenian from Turkey, where Armenians have a long history of terrible abuse. The Armenians had as good a reason to leave Turkey as the Czechs did for leaving Czechoslovakia when Hitler moved in and when the Communists took over.

Nadia was visiting with her sister, but at least her departure wasn't an illegal border-crossing in the middle of the night.

The only language Fred and Nadia had in common was German, not a native language for either. They were married in 1955.



Nadia and Fred Sirotek, 1991
Sirotek family photo

It didn't take long to settle into life as a young married couple in Ottawa.

Fred vacated the second floor of the farm house his company was renting on Carling Ave. He and Nadia rented an apartment, and then Fred started to build a house on Prince of Wales Drive, near Hog's Back.

Although in later years the family re-located to accommodate Fred's work, it was the Prince of Wales house that was always "home base".

Robert was born in 1956. Two years later, Norman came along. But Fred and Nadia had to wait eight years before they had their little girl, Linda, born in 1966.

Many years later there would be grandchildren: Megan and Amanda (whose dad is Robert); Charles (whose dad is Norman); and Devon (whose mother is Linda).

Language dilemma

In those early days, Nadia didn't understand Czech or English, and Fred didn't understand Armenian or Turkish. But they got along just fine in German. Fred's command of English was decent and getting better every day.

Nadia's English came more slowly. She was at home with their first baby, and naturally she spoke to little Robert in her own tongue: Armenian. This was the language Robert first learned to understand and speak.

After a little while, it became obvious that there was a problem when little Robert and his father were unable to communicate. Neither could speak the other's language!

But they were quick to remedy the situation. Nadia switched to English, thereby practicing it more; and she spoke to Robert in English. By the time Norman and Linda were born, language was no longer an issue.



Fred with Robert and baby Linda.
Sirotek family photo

Tripe Soup

Shortly after Fred was married to Turkish-born Nadia, he came home from his office one day and, in his usual way, asked what was for dinner.

“I’m not going to tell you,” said Nadia.

“Oh?” Fred asked. “What’s so special and different?”

“Not going to tell you,” Nadia insisted.

With an air of mystery and triumph, she served the dish.

Fred tasted it.

“Oh!” he said. “It’s tripe soup!”

“How,” demanded Nadia, not too pleased, “do you know about Tripe Soup? It’s a *Turkish* delicacy!”

“Nah,” said Fred. “Tripe soup is to the Czech construction industry what chicken soup is to the North American office worker.”

And thus began a life-long debate. Was it the Turks who brought Tripe Soup to Prague in 1600s or 1700s? Or did they learn to prepare it once they were there? Did the Turks learn the art of making the soup in Prague, or did they *bring* it to Prague?

Turns out it was part of both their childhoods. Each liked to claim their nationality had it first.

But Tripe soup never caught on in Canada.

Christmas Eve Carp

There was another tradition from Fred’s childhood that he remembers well. It was the Christmas Eve meal of carp, which was as important to the festivities as turkey is to Christmas Dinner in Canada.

But young Fred had a phobia about fish bones – he doesn’t remember why – so Bedřiška removed or ground up the bones and turned the meal into carp hamburger (meat loaf) for him.

That didn't seem to catch on in Canada, either.

Cuckoo Clock

During an average day during his early construction years, Fred was outside the office, going from job to job, supervising. He had to do office correspondence and administration after normal business hours.

So he would return to the office at about 5, and settle in to all the paperwork. Suddenly he'd look at the clock. It was invariably long past midnight, and he realized he'd better get home.

After a few years of this, Nadia bought him a cuckoo clock to help him stay more aware of the time. The clock would strike on the hour and the half hour. It was an eight-day clock.

Fred became so accustomed to the sound of the cuckoo clock that, so as long as it was "cuckooing" regularly with lots of cuckoos, he knew it was still early. When it only cuckooed once or twice, it jolted him to an awareness of the hour – one or two in the morning – and it was time to go home.

"When it was cuckooing its head off," says Fred, "I had lots of time."

It still didn't give him enough sleep.

Lost and found ring

One wintery day in the late 50s, Fred and Nadia went to the Chateau Laurier for dinner. (The downstairs grill was still operating in those days.)

Nadia was wearing, as always, her diamond ring – the one that had been Bedřiška's, the one against which Bedřich was able to arrange a loan to get them started in Canada.

They got back into the car after their meal, and Nadia gasped. "The stone is gone from my ring!" she said.

So they got out of the car and went back into the Chateau Laurier. Nadia went to the coat-check room. She looked and she looked, and there, all of a sudden, on the carpet, was the diamond.

The coat-check attendant said: "Gee, I thought I saw something shiny over there..."

If the diamond had fallen out a few minutes later, on the snow-covered sidewalk, it would never have been found.

Nadia's music

In her younger days in Turkey, Nadia taught piano. When she came to Canada, she didn't continue; but when the family moved back to Ogdensburg from the West Indies, she was intrigued by a nearby university with a high-level music school.

Nadia decided she'd like to study music some more, and to

get her playing back up to speed.

She was eligible to be a full-time student if she wished, so that's what she chose to do.

She excelled at music, of course; and in her mid-40s, she was the oldest student in the graduating class.

Fred threw a graduation party in Potsdam N.Y. for some of her school friends and teachers. He gave a short speech to say that he figured now he could give up his business career and live off the avails of her performances.

Nadia's talent enhanced Fred's own lifelong love and knowledge of classical music. In the early 1970s, he and Nadia bought a Steinway, which remains in the family; Fred's and Nadia's granddaughters are now playing it.

Hi, Dad!

The nature of Fred's work meant he started his day in the early morning before the children got up, and would often return after they were in bed.

When he was building in Saint John, N.B., he was gone for three days at a time.

One day, after being away like this, he skipped going into the office after he returned midafternoon and went home instead.

Robert and Norman were doing what kids do, racing around the house, busy with something or other.

"Hi, Dad!" they said with a casual wave – and kept on going.

Fred looked at Nadia.

"I've been away for three days, and that's all they can say? 'Hi, Dad?'"

"That's because," said Nadia, "I don't think they realized you were away in the first place."

Split pants

One day, when Fred left Ottawa to go to Saint John, N.B., it was rainy, so he wore a raincoat over his suit. He didn't bring an extra suit.

On the first day he was there, he bent over to do something... and zip! His pants split!

He had to run around for two days, wearing a raincoat in the sunshine.

He never, ever failed to pack another pair of pants when he was going out of town.

One bunch too many

Fred kept forgetting his and Nadia's wedding anniversary, and Nadia was becoming increasingly annoyed.

After many missed occasions, he finally decided he'd better do something about it.

So, in the interest of efficiency, he put in an order, a year in advance, for flowers to be delivered on the *next* wedding anniversary date.

Pleased with himself, he promptly forgot about it and went on with his business.

It happened that there were suppliers for Sirotek Construction who appreciated his business. They would often send a little gift to say “thank you”, usually in the form of flowers that would show up at the house. They’d arrive unannounced with nothing more than a very small card.

One day Fred went home and saw a new bunch of flowers on the table.

“Oh,” he said. “These are nice. Who are they from?”

If it were slapstick, this would have been the time for Nadia to hit him over the head with a wooden spoon.

The flowers were from Fred himself. It was their wedding anniversary. He had forgotten again.

Shipping holiday

During his first stint in the West Indies, Fred thought it might be fun for Nadia and the children to spend some time in Grenada, his favorite island. Even better, Nadia’s sister and her children flew down to join them.

Sirotek Construction shipped a lot of construction material

via Saguenay Shipping Lines. They were good customers. And so it was reasonable to book his family’s return passage from Grenada, via Venezuela, on one of their ships that could accommodate a few passengers.

The ship normally went to Venezuela, picked up bauxite and brought it to Saguenay.

Almost the minute they boarded in Grenada, Robert was really sick. Fortunately the Norwegian captain was able to get them to a doctor in Caracas and could interpret the doctor’s Spanish instructions. Armed with about \$200 worth of medicine, they continued with the trip. Robert did get better and all was well.

The kids had a great time. The Captain even ordered a swimming pool to be built for everyone on the deck of the ship.

Nadia reported that on board ship the kids’ Coca Cola drinks, ounce for ounce, were more expensive than the rum.

The return trip by ship extended their holiday by 10 days, but no one complained.

Feisty Linda

When Linda was only three years old, the Siroteks moved to Barbados, where Fred was managing the construction of 13 buildings on nine islands in the West Indies.

The family had to get used to new dangers, which included very large and poisonous centipedes. They could make an

adult sick and could possibly be fatal to a child, so it was a serious and frightening situation.

To make things more worrisome, little Linda kept getting up at night, dragging her blanket along with her. She'd settle into any room of the house, preferring to sleep on the cold floor. Centipedes hitching a ride on that blanket were a real possibility.

Rather than terrifying Linda with tales of monster-sized centipedes, Fred and Nadia told her there were mice in the house and if she got up in the night she might step on one and be bitten by it – or worse, step in a mousetrap.

The house did, in fact, have mice. Like cockroaches, mice are part of most households in the West Indies, especially when the front door is wrought iron grillwork, just as house flies and mosquitoes are part of life up North. So there were mouse traps around. Fred and Nadia could hear them snapping at night. What they told Linda was true, even if they were far more worried about centipedes than mice.

Linda, on the other hand, was a feisty little girl who wouldn't be fooled into anything as mundane as fear.

"I'm not afraid of those silly mice," she said. "I'll just give them a judo chop! Chop-chop!"

One day she almost got her chance. It was dinnertime. Fred heard a "snap" in the adjoining kitchen. He went to look and found a mouse caught in a trap by its nose – dying but still alive, flipping up and down.

He called to Linda.

"Linda!" he said. "Judo chop needed in here!"

Linda ran into the kitchen with her arm at the ready for the judo chop. She looked at the wiggling mouse.

And then, cool as a cucumber, she shook her head.

"Not today," she said, and left the room.

Linda still seems to have that cool spunk, even though she doesn't remember the incident. In fact, she barely remembers Barbados. There are little flashes of things, like her brother having a terrible earache, or the dogs next door that scared her, or the pattern on the bedspread. But not centipedes and mice.

But the episode did earn her a nick name "Chop-chop" for a while.

Norman and the bully

When they returned from Barbados, Fred decided to send the boys to Ashbury College. He wanted them to have a fine education. But more than that, he wanted someone else to do the teaching and nagging about manners and respectable behavior.

Fred felt that because he was so often away at work, when he *was* home he wanted to do more than "police parenting". He decided to let school and schoolmasters help with that.

So both Norman and Robert attended a private school—Ashbury in Rockclife.

At Ashbury, Norman came up against a kid who was a bully. The bully bugged him and other kids. He was a highly disliked pest.

One day the bully went too far.

All of a sudden, people noticed he was spending more time in the bathroom than tormenting his peers. It seemed someone had put Ex-Lax into the brat's hamburger.

Norman was brought before the headmaster and reprimanded—but not too vigorously.

The bully had learned his lesson.

Mask collection

Before Fred and Nadia decided where in the warmer parts of North America they might settle, they thought it was time to take a good look at the U.S.A.

One year the family drove from Ogdensburg, N.Y. to California and back; and the next year, from North to South all the way to Mexico.

In one Mexican town, they couldn't figure out how to get out, so Fred asked a cop.

"I'll show you!" the cop said. He went ahead of them on his motorbike and took them all the way to the road out. He did

not refuse a tip for his trouble.

The route took them by a market square where, among other things for sale, was a stand with wooden masks. Fred found a huge one that was 2x4 feet. The kids insisted that he buy it; he paid about \$10 for it.

But where to put it? So they made it useful. They placed it over the backrest of the back seat and hung towels over it.

After that, Fred started buying masks. He bought them the way other people might buy souvenirs. He became a collector. Now one wall in his house is dedicated to masks from around the world.

Flying Solo

The previous summer vacation, the Sirotek family drove westwards across the U.S.A., all the way to California. Disneyland was their destination.

But Rob and Norm, teens by now, were booked to go to a summer camp with their cousins outside of Toronto before the family could make it back by car. So Fred and Nadia decided to let the boys fly back.

They dropped them off at the airport in San Francisco. The boys boarded the flight, and that was that.

It was no big deal to anyone in the family. The boys were pretty flight-savvy by now; Robert had already gone to Brussels on his own. Fred remembered his own youth, when

he flew from Prague to London at age 16.

As they were about to land in Toronto, the stewardess wanted to know where their parents were seated. She was amazed that they were not notified that there were two unaccompanied teenagers on board.

Rob the teacher

Fred and Nadia wanted their children to learn Canada's second official language, so when an opportunity came up to send Robert to Brussels to stay with Nadia's relatives, they acted on it.

They sent him for the two months of school vacation for total immersion. They expected when he returned he would have some command of the French language.

But he didn't. He didn't seem to have learned a word.

However, he left behind his own gift: a whole bunch of people who could chatter away in English.

Ogdensburg

Linda remembers living in Ogdensburg, N.Y. when she was five. The family had moved back North, not to the Prince of Wales house but to Ogdensburg, N. Y.

For a year, they lived near Dundas, Ontario. As children so often do, Linda recalls quirky things about that house, like the smell of cows, and sparks coming out of the old electrical system any time anyone tried plugging or unplugging

something.

She recalls moving to Ottawa, to Ogdensburg, to Dundas, back to Ogdensburg and then to Ottawa again for Grades 9 and 10.

Was it difficult, moving around as much as that? Linda says it wasn't "problematic or troublesome". Actually, while brother Norman was still around, life could be entertaining. He could be a big pest. But he could also be useful at times.

In Ogdensburg, Linda was the "different kid" at school, or felt she was. Her Canadian clothes and accent weren't the same as the other students', and that made her stand out.

Norman the boxer, and other stories

There were a couple of schoolyard bullies who threatened to beat Linda up. She told Norman about it. So Norman gave her lessons on how to fight – all the tips and tricks and distraction techniques of boxing and fending off enemies.

Fortunately, his instruction was not needed. Linda found other allies. She became friends with someone who had several brothers and sisters who wouldn't be pushed around. Other kids didn't want to mess with that family, so just hanging out with them was protection enough.

Rob's rude awakening

In Ogdensburg, living in a house right next to a police station had its advantages, but it could also lead to embarrassments.

Robert would sleep so soundly that waking up was a problem.

“You needed a siren,” says Fred.

Rob was aware of this himself, of course, so when he had to be awake at a certain time and had to rely on the alarm clock, he’d set the wake-up music on his radio to the maximum volume.

One morning in summer, he was in the house alone. The windows were open to the police station next door.

The alarm went off, the music played, but Rob slept on and on.

All of a sudden he *did* wake up – by someone who was shaking him.

He looked up into the eyes of a great big cop.

Police are aware that when someone is being hurt or killed, a perpetrator’s “trick” is to turn up the music so loudly that it drowns out the sounds of distress. The cop obviously thought that’s what might have been happening in the house next door, especially when he went to investigate and found the door was unlocked.

So the cop following the loud music had made his way up to the second storey, and there was Rob, snoring away, oblivious to the deafening music in his ear.

But he *did* wake up more or less on time.

Look behind you

Rob had another experience, more or less, with the fire station. When the family lived at Prince of Wales and Nesbitt St. in Ottawa, there was a fire station directly across the street. Fred says the firefighters were most considerate; they’d start their sirens two blocks away.

One day Robert was taking a shower and the steam from the bathroom triggered the fire alarm. He closed the door to the bathroom and the steam quickly dissipated. Suddenly he heard fire sirens at a distance, but saw nothing. Five or 10 minutes later the truck stopped in front of the house. It turned out the fire department couldn’t find the house that was the source of the problem, even though it was right under their noses, so to speak.

There’s this boy, see...

Fred likes hearing Linda’s stories even now. It gives him a different perspective on her childhood. As it often goes with parents, he didn’t know about many incidents at the time. He was too busy doing what he thought was the most important thing for him to do – to provide financial security for his family. He still worked long hours and he was simply unaware of things happening in his children’s lives.

For instance, when Linda wanted to change universities, he wasn’t aware of one of her main motivating factors: *a boy*.

She was attending Clarkson University in Potsdam. She was a business major, and Clarkson was primarily for engineering students. She was dating a fellow who was about to graduate.

He'd be moving to a place about six hours away.

In truth, Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania *was* much more suited to Linda's path of education. But it was also closer to her boyfriend. She was able to talk her parents into letting her go to Wharton – strictly as an academic move, of course.

But first she had to find a place to live.

Compromising safety: not an option

It was the middle of her junior year. Linda and Fred took a trip to Philadelphia, but were aghast at the housing choices left to her. They looked at campus housing, but noticed certain things – like broken furniture tossed out of windows and left to litter the courtyard, and so on.

They looked off-campus, but the areas were simply not safe. They might find a cute little three-storey walkup, but next door there would be a boarded-up, graffiti-covered slum house. Some of the houses had front doors exhibiting damage where they had been kicked in. There was no parking near any of these places. It wouldn't have been safe to park on the street perhaps blocks away, and then walk home at night in that neighbourhood. In fact, someone was shot in the head right along the route Linda would have taken on foot, had she not been able to drive and park her car close to her destination. The school was in a high-crime area, a bad part of the city. When the advertisements in the paper consider burglar bars on ground floor windows an asset you know there is a problem.

Finally Linda and her dad spotted a modern high-rise at the edge of downtown. There was safe underground parking. It was clean, and it was in a better part of town.

Fred was able to get Linda set up in a small apartment with underground parking in that building. It was perfect for her. (They had to convince the rental agent that Linda was able to pay her rent and was not the typical “undergraduate student”). It also meant her parents could sleep at night and not be concerned about her safety. Linda stayed there until her *summa cum laude* graduation day.

Nadia's illness

Before university, while Linda was still in high school, she, Robert, and Norman worked at Sir Tech, a software game company initially funded by her father and handed over to his children in 1981.

Great sadness struck the family in the early 1990s when Nadia was diagnosed with lung cancer, which two years later metastasized to her brain. She had a brain operation, but six months later the cancer was back. She died on February 24, 1994. She was 65.

Family talent

Before Nadia became ill, Fred remembers happier moments: for instance, walking into the Sir Tech office when Linda was still a teenager.

“There was my little girl interviewing this great big guy [really big, about 6'5”, in his 30s, adds Linda] who was looking for

a job. She hired him.”

Linda’s passion (besides gaming) has always been horses. She is appreciative of her parents for providing her with the ability and resources to be able to keep horses in her life right into adulthood.

She wasn’t as passionate about piano. Her mother was a serious, highly accomplished pianist and piano teacher. Linda played and says she got to be “pretty good at it”, but she was more technical than emotional, and “was allowed to quit” when she was 12. She would like to play again...if only it didn’t require so much time and dedication.

Flaming Duck

Linda remembers the time she almost set two boats on fire.

She and her husband, Ian, would sometimes moor their boat together with Linda’s parents’ boat, and share a meal. Linda, who is an adept cook, decided she would cook duck on the barbecue on one of the boats. She got it smoking... then... *flaming!*

She turned off the barbecue, but the layer of fat was fuelling itself and the fire wouldn’t go out. The fire was leaping two feet in the air. If it had caught on the canvas cover, they would have gone completely up in flames.

Fortunately, in a “calm sense of panic”, they were able to smother it.

“It turned out to be the most fabulous meal ever,” says Linda.

Burning weed(s)

Fred has always loved fires. Even when he was a kid, he was a firebug. He still loves to have an excuse to start a fire in the fireplace, even if the room is just one degree lower than it should be.

One day he was burning some garden stuff in the back yard, which happened to be right behind the Ogdensburg City Hall and the police station.

Fred went into the house. Meanwhile, the garden debris started to smoke. Nadia was still in the back yard.

All of a sudden she looked up to see a cop, who had poked his head around the corner of the house.

“What are you burning?” he asked, casually (but with a purpose). “What is it?”

Nadia apologized for the smoke, but that was not his concern.

The cop said later he thought it smelled like marijuana.

Fred had no idea what weeds he was burning, but says it sure wasn’t that.

Travelling with the boys

Fred recalls a particular trip with Robert and Norman to Switzerland, France, Italy and Germany.

They were in Germany for a little while, and Fred decided

he'd take the boys to a bar. They were about 16 and 17.

Fred asked the hotel concierge to tell him where a nice bar would be.

Well, said the concierge that depends. Is it the kind of bar where the girls come to you, or where you go to the girls? Apparently there were only those choices.

Whatever it was, Fred and the boys ended up in some bar anyway. It had a stage performance and also a big movie screen showing steamy scenes.

Everyone sat side-by-side at several long tables.

After a short while, a "working girl" on Fred's right, after watching some sexy action on the big screen, leaned over to him.

"Wouldn't you rather be doing it than watching it?" she asked.

Fred laughed.

"Let me introduce you to my two sons," he said.

"Oh!" she said. But if she was taken back, it was only for a moment, because then she tried to chat *them* up.

The boys weren't interested. Robert had a crush on a girl back home in Ottawa, and he was deep in thought about how to send her flowers.

Career notes

Bedřich Sirotek's career started in 1924 and was stopped by politics in 1948.

He was in business about 24 years, and politics caused him to be almost flat broke when he was 50.

Fred Sirotek's career started 1951. Fifteen years later, labour unions were the cause of his "almost failure"; but he kept on going. He retired in 2001, when he was more than 70.

Getting the kids started

At a certain stage in their lives, all the children were given help with transportation and housing. Fred gave Rob a Chrysler. Norman received an Impala. And Linda had a car by the time she went to university so she could commute safely between school and residence.

He gave Rob and Norman each \$50,000 when they were buying their first homes. Linda got the whole house – the family house on Prince of Wales in Ottawa. This was not more privileged treatment, but Fred felt it was not her fault that she was born 10 years later than Rob, so she did not have the benefit of any of the profits from the operations that took place before she was born. No one, says Fred, ever complained about that.

That number, please...

The years ending in "9" were significant in Sirotek lives:

1899: Bedřich's and Bedřiška's birth year

1929: Fred's and Nadia's birth year

1939: WW II started

1949: The Siroteks arrived in Canada

1969: Fred was recovering from almost being broke

1989: The Communists were finally kicked out of the Republic of Czechoslovakia

1999: Fred and Gert bought the house in Florida; it was the start of retirement

2009: Oliver the wonderful cat came into Fred's and Gert's lives when they rescued him from the Humane Society.

Gert

At one time, Gert Goodeve had been a secretary to one of the lawyers in the law firm Fred used. When she was leaving that job, Fred's vice president hired her.

In the late 60s, she got married and invited Fred to her wedding, then moved to Toronto. Afterwards they stayed in touch, as friends sometimes do when they have worked together.

When Gert's husband died in the 80s, her daughter Ellen called Fred to tell him the sad news. It was about 10 years later when Nadia died of cancer.

Gert and Fred continued to stay in touch, and when she came to Ottawa to visit her sister, she'd give him a call.

"We sort of cried on each other's shoulders," says Fred. "And before you know it, we stopped crying."

Daughterly dedication

Gert's daughters, Ellen and Nancy, are like Fred's own children. He is touched by the fact that they are "so very, very good" to him.

They were there for him in 2008, when he was hit with a strange illness called *Polymyalgia Rheumatica*.

It hit Fred like a thunderbolt. It debilitated his muscles so badly he was "absolutely useless". Putting on a dressing gown was a terrible struggle because he couldn't move his arm. If he sat in a chair, it had to be precisely the correct height off the floor; any lower and he wouldn't be able to get up again. In one instance, the couch was a tiny bit too low, so Fred had to slide a book under his bottom to give him an extra inch or so. He couldn't drive. He couldn't get out of the passenger side unless someone helped him.

He went to the hospital emergency department, but no one knew just what it was. They suspected maybe it was the statins he was taking for high blood pressure.



Fred Sirotek and Gert Tracey
Sirotek family photo

He was referred to a neurosurgeon who was busy, and he couldn't get an early appointment.

So the illness went on for about two months before it was correctly diagnosed. During that time, Fred and Gert were deeply concerned and understandably upset.

At this point, Linda had started a new job and didn't have vacation time. Gert called her daughter, Ellen.

"We're in really big trouble here," she said, "and we need your help."

So Ellen and Nancy gave up their vacation time and went to stay with them. Ellen went first, and Nancy followed. They were there to bring Fred to doctors' appointments and blood tests. Ellen arranged to have bars put in the shower. She ordered a lift chair and ran the household for about two weeks before Nancy



Gert's daughters: Nancy Banks (top) and Ellen Good-eve (bottom) *Sirotek family photos*

arrived to take over.

Finally, when Fred saw his doctor, he described his symptoms. The doctor sent him to get a blood test. He said the lab would call him with the results by late afternoon; Fred was to call before 5 p.m. At that time, the doctor said, he'd tell him what to do. He gave him a prescription but told him not to get it filled until then.

Fred called the doctor just before 5. The doctor said: "Yes, get the prescription filled. And by Thursday you should be able to go dancing."

The magic ingredient in the medicine was Prednisone, a synthetic corticosteroid. It worked. By the third day, Fred was fine. But he had to go through two months of hell to discover it would take only three days, with the proper medication, to recover.

It also re-confirmed for him the unselfish dedication of his stepdaughters. He says he will always appreciate their concern and help.

♥ Family snapshots



Bedřiška & Bedřich. c.1972



Fred & Bedřiška, c.1985



Linda & Ian Currie, Oct. 1, 1994

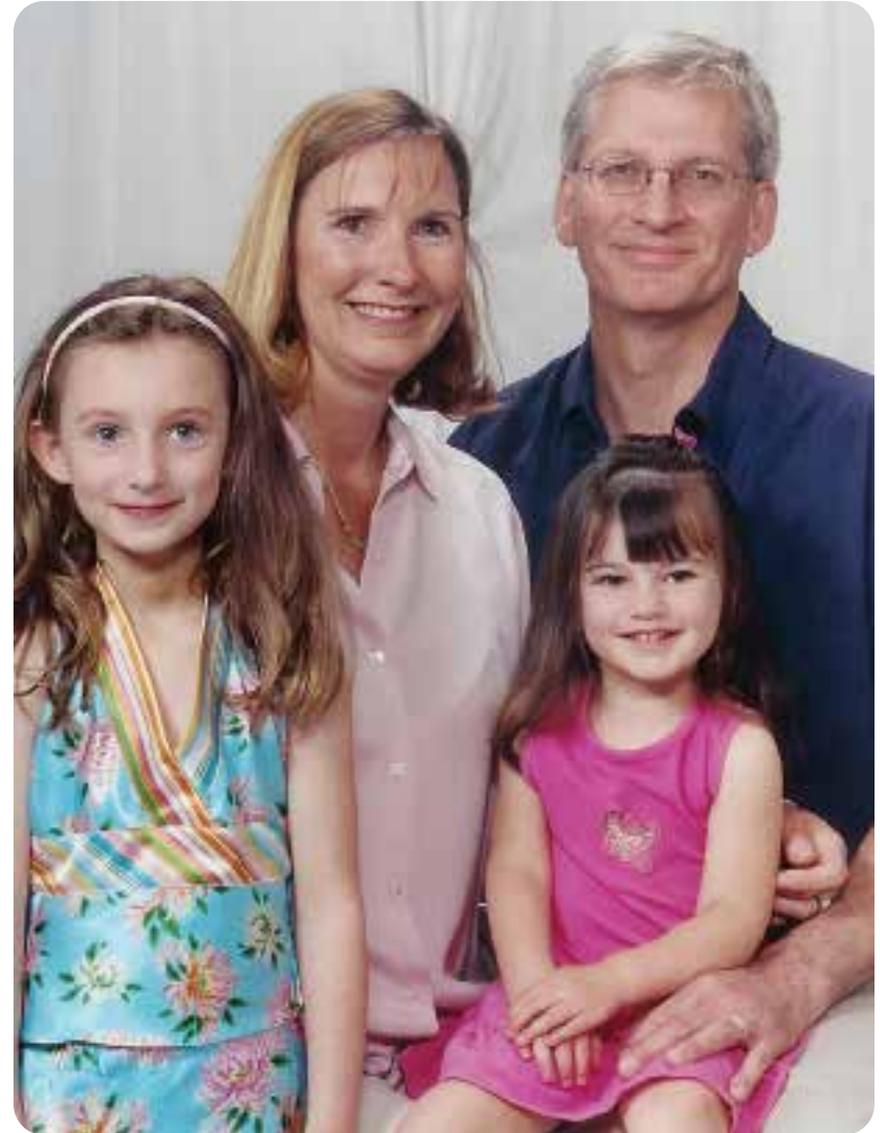


Nadia & Fred, 1982



Bedřiška & Milu, c.1985

♥ Family snapshots



Amy and Robert Sirotek with children Amanda, left, and Megan June, 2004

On these and the following pages: Sirotek family photos

♥ Family snapshots



Norman Sirotek with son, Charles, c. 2008



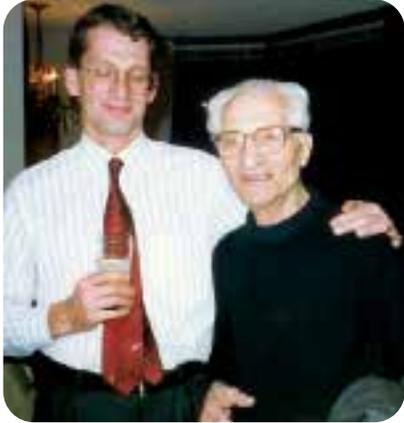
**Nadia, Linda, Fred
Paris, 1989**

♥ Family snapshots



Linda and Ian Currie with daughter, Devon, c. 2003

♥ Family snapshots



Robert Sirotek with his grandfather, Nadia's father
March, 1989



Cousin Jarmila Benešová with Bedřiška, c. 1985



Milu with (left to right) Amanda Sirotek, Devon Currie, Megan Sirotek
c. 2005

♥ Family snapshots



Charles Sirotek, c. 2009



Norman Sirotek, c. 1982



Devon Currie, 2012



Amanda (in front) and Megan Sirotek, 2009

♥ Family snapshots



Megan and Fred Sirotek



Gert and Fred, 1996

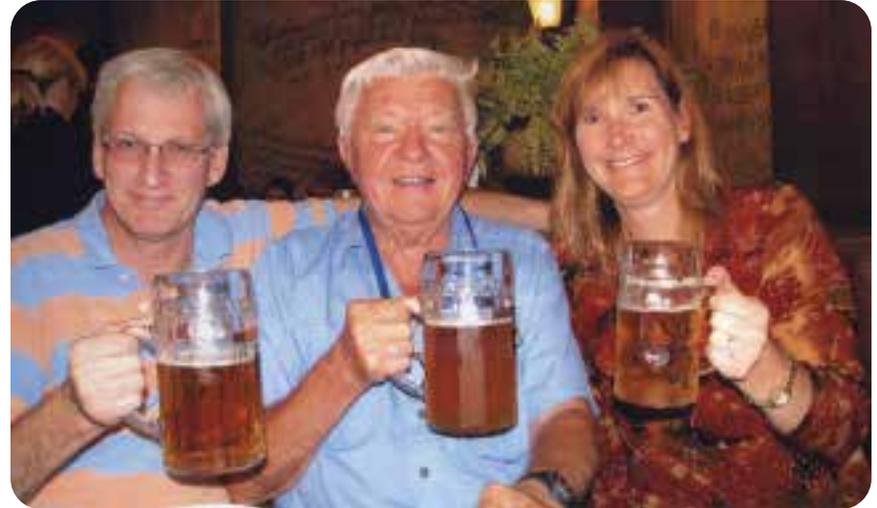


Charles Sirotek, c. 2002



Linda Currie on Gemini, 2010
photo by Carole MacDonald

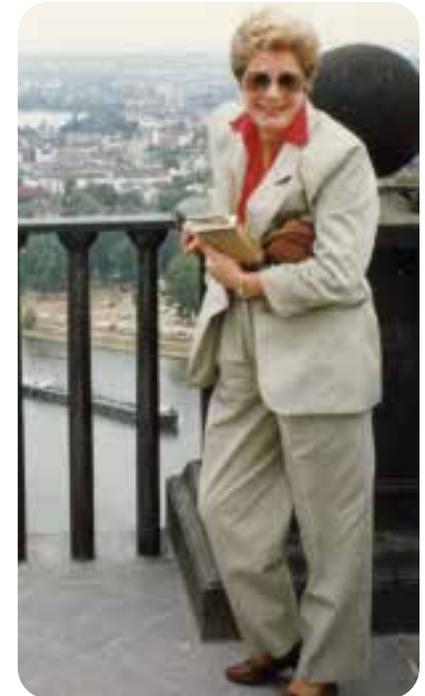
♥ Family snapshots



Robert, Fred and Amy Sirotek, c. 1995



Valerie and Norman Sirotek,
c.1998



Gert Tracey, 2002

♥ Family snapshots



Miluška (Milu) Čada
Christmas, 2013

Pets

Especially a particular cat of character

The Sirotek family had several pets, starting in Fred's childhood in Czechoslovakia.

Harik

One of Fred's favorite pets in Czechoslovakia was a German Shepherd called Harik. He was one of the watchdogs at



Bedřiška, Harik and Fred circa 1942

Sirotek family photo

his father's plant. Harik was a working dog, but when the children were there, he was also their beloved pet. Harik was safely fenced in the plant yard and could not get out.

Harik was killed by the Communists in the five-week period between the time the Communists took over and the family fled the country. He was found dead on the railway tracks one day. It would not have been possible for the dog to get out and get on the tracks to be run over by the train, so the family knew he had been poisoned and put there.

It was known that the dog was well-loved by the family. Fred thinks there was a message in the killing of Harik: "This could be in store for you."

Poodle

In Canada, there was a Miniature French Poodle. Fred and Nadia got him shortly after they were married, and he was fun to have around. But when Robert was born, the dog's behavior changed. He became unbelievably jealous of baby Robert. He was nasty towards the baby and suddenly forgot he was housebroken. Fortunately, Fred's parents took him in, and he lived a long life with them.

Monkey

In Barbados, there was a misbehaving monkey. Nadia decided it would be nice for the children to have a monkey as a pet when she saw it in a store, so she bought one. It was a tiny thing.

The trouble was, it was not a domesticated monkey. It was probably caught as an adult. But it sure knew its diet.

Grasshoppers and cockroaches would occasionally fly on the terrace where the cage was kept and settle down within

reach of the little guy. If it was the grasshopper, it was eaten instantly. A cockroach was pushed away.

The monkey was still wild. And it didn't like the idea of a cage at all. It bit and scratched. It was nasty. Finally one day, when he was on a leash, it chewed through its collar and escaped, never to be seen again. Fred says he wasn't sorry to see it go.

Afghan

Back in Ottawa there was an Afghan Hound who was a beautiful dog but who had been abused and was inclined to run away from home. One day he did just that. He was hit by a car, and when his broken leg would not heal, he had to be put down.

Puss

When the family lived in Ogdensburg, one day Norman came home from school with a pronouncement. "This cat," he said, "followed me all the way home!"

He opened up his jacket, and there it was. But Norman looked more bedraggled than the cat did. He had been scratched half to death.

"Can we keep it, please?" he asked.

From that moment on, the cat became a member of the family. Linda named it Puss.

Puss had its problems at first, however. Across the street

there was a great big Great Dane the size of a small pony, and that dog chased Puss. He obviously thought it was fun, but of course, Puss was petrified by its size.

One day the poor cat, chased and frightened, disappeared for three or four days – no doubt lost after being chased. But it came back – thin, scruffy, hungry, and seemingly with new resolve.

The next time the dog and Puss met was in the middle of the street. The dog marched up to the cat, waiting for it to run. But Puss smacked him, claws extended, right across the nose, so hard there was blood. The dog stopped in his tracks, as if in total disbelief... and never came near the cat again.

Puss was with the family for a long time and died of old age years later.

Oliver

Perhaps one of the most treasured pets is Oliver.

For several years, Fred and Gert were attracted to a cat in their Ottawa neighborhood that often came for a visit. (The fact that Fred fed the cat half a can of cat food brought the animal back for many visits.) Often the cat, whose owners were at work all day, would have nice long naps at Fred's and Gert's house. Gert said if only he was a "lap" cat, she'd like him better.

In November, 2009, when they were in Florida, Fred picked up the newspaper and spotted an article from the Humane Society in West Palm Beach. It was called "The Cat of the



Oliver

Photo by Francie Healy

Month", with a photo of a beautiful long-haired cat called Oliver.

"And the ad," recalls Fred, "described him in absolutely *irresistible* terms."

Fred got into the car, drove for half an hour to West Palm Beach, took a look at the cat, and liked him.

“Is he returnable if my wife and he do not get along?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” said the Humane Society people.

Fred paid for the cat. They put him in a cardboard cat carrier, and he brought him home. During the trip, Oliver began to meow, so Fred let him out of the box and let him explore every nook and cranny of the car.

Once home, he brought him into the house, put him on the floor, and let him wander. The cat went through the house “as if he was buying it,” says Fred. “He jumped on the beds, under the beds, into the bathrooms, on top of every chair. It took him about half an hour to inspect the house.”

Finally, Oliver walked over to Gert, sat at her feet, and just looked at her. She picked him up.

“Ten minutes later,” says Fred, “returning him was not an option.”

Oliver is a cat of character. He loves company: all people, no matter who walks into the house. However, at first, he was incredibly shy and would avoid or even fear people. Fred thinks he might have been abused. But now Oliver is most definitely a people-cat.

Oliver lives like an emperor in both his Ottawa and Florida

residences. He gets, and fully expects, a midnight snack each night. It’s just a handful of dried cat food (unlike his carefully-measured canned food during the day); but if he doesn’t get it, he makes his displeasure known. Each night he sleeps between Gert’s head and the headboard. But if he doesn’t get his midnight snack, he’ll lick at Fred or bite Gert’s ear.

“He has trained us well,” says Fred. “He is the cutest and funniest cat you have ever seen in your life. People look at him and say when they come back after they die, they want to come back as Oliver.”



Good people

Fine people, both friends and business partners, were an important part of Fred Sirotek's life.



Fred with long-time friend Joe Lang in the early 1990s

Sirotek family photo

Friends & partners

Cemented by a simple handshake

Fred Sirotek is clearly no pushover, and yet he seems to have a kind of innocence when it comes to friendships and business. He trusts, and is trusted; and only once, throughout his entire life of making deals or partnerships, did he ever have one that went sour.

Amazingly, every single business deal of his began as a handshake. Every single one, that is, except the one that turned out badly. The one that failed was, from the start, signed, sealed and delivered with every “t” crossed and “i” dotted, drafted and approved by lawyers.

But in all others, the business relationship began with a conversation, a handshake, a verbal commitment. They might eventually have been followed up by paperwork, but the first promise was between two individuals, cemented by mutual respect and trust. In all cases, if there were follow-up documents, they were never looked up and re-read. In some cases, they were misfiled, never to be seen again.

“My partners and I didn’t even have mean words,” says Fred.

Mike Greenberg

Fred met Mike for the first time when asking him to arrange for a mortgage. It turned out to be a long-lasting friendship

that included several business partnerships over the years.

Fred says Mike was a great partner to have, and in all his dealings with him he found him to be completely above board, reliable and honest – a man of great integrity.

Mike owned a whole street of building lots on Queen Mary Road in Ottawa.

“Build houses on any of them,” he told Fred. “Pay me for the property when you sell the houses.”

Fred did build several houses on that street. But it was not the most popular part of Ottawa at the time, so Fred didn’t build too many.

But later on, when one of his other construction projects included the demolition of a house, instead of demolishing it, he moved it to one of Mike’s lots. It was an ordinary two-story house, and moving it to one of the lots cost about the same as it would have cost to demolish it; so the eventual sale price was found money.

“There was one deal I proposed to him, which he refused to discuss because one of his other clients was also interested in it,” says Fred. “He was game to take part of the action, but it would have to be my decision only, with no input from him. I dropped the idea. Had I been successful, and if it ever became known that Mike had a part in the deal, no one would have believed that he had not been involved in the decision-making process.”

Mort English

There was an auction in Ottawa for some Department of Highways surplus land. It came down to two bidders: Fred and a man standing behind him.

“The other bidder had seen only the back of my head, and I did not know who he was,” says Fred. “When I turned around, I realized he was one of my prior customers, someone for whom I had built a building.

“In one sentence, with five rows of people between us, we made a deal. We bought the land jointly.”

Zeev Vered

Zeev came from Israel and worked for Fred for several weeks on a particular job in 1958. They got along famously and discussed starting a business partnership. But it didn’t quite develop, and Fred still wishes he had pursued it further. However, Zeev did very well for himself, and they stayed friends for a long time.

Art Anderson

One year the National Harbour Board of Canada was looking for proposals from people who would be interested in buying a chunk of land from them in Saint John, N.B., and putting an office building on it. The plan was that the Harbour Board would then lease a couple of floors. It seemed like a good deal to Fred. He would buy the land and build a building, and have instant, long-term tenants.

However, there was a neighbor, Art Anderson, who didn’t like

the idea of a new building. He thought it would diminish the value of his much smaller property. So he filed an objection to the issuance of a building permit. And the argument was on.

The woman who handled real estate dealings for Fred's company went to Saint John for the council meeting when the building permit was going to be discussed, based on the plans Fred had prepared. By now he had already sunk a fair bit of money into the project, and a problem with the building permit would cause him a good deal of grief.

The hearing for the building permit was adjourned and deferred for a week. The real estate manager called Fred from Saint John.

"I think," she said, "you should make a trip here."

Fred was annoyed at the neighbour, and he went to Saint John ready to roar at him. This guy was screwing up his deal and costing him money.

"He's not such a bad guy," said the real estate manager. "What have you got to lose by having a drink with him?"

So Art Anderson and Fred met at the hotel bar and had a drink.



**Art Anderson,
circa 1964-65**

Sirotek photo

They talked, and before they parted, they came up with a deal: Fred owned 80 per cent of the deal; Art put in his land and owned 20 per cent. The building used his lot for parking. They benefitted proportionately from the rental income, as well as the value of the building and property, when it eventually sold for \$1 million, cash to mortgage.

They remained partners for decades.

Bill McDougall

Bill was a London, Ont. contractor. When he put up money for a second contract in the West Indies, he and Fred had not known each other very well. They had met socially maybe a few times over a period of several years. It, too, became a successful partnership and friendship.

Len Franceschini

Len Franceschini was, and continues to be, a friend and big part of Fred's life. He, too, started out as a business associate. He was the manager of a premixed concrete company, and Fred was buying his concrete. They got chatting and became friendly, but they weren't what you'd call bosom buddies.

One night Fred was in his office on Baseline Road. It was just after he had made a deal to buy two small farms that happened to adjoin Len's concrete plant. Len saw the lights on in Fred's office as he drove by late at night and decided to drop in.

"Hi, neighbour!" said Fred.

“Neighbour?” said Len.

So Fred told him about his option to buy the two properties.

“Do you want in on the deal?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Len.

“Give me a cheque for half of what my deposit was and we’ve got a deal,” Fred answered.

Len wrote out a cheque, they shook hands, and they became partners from that day forward.

Nearly 40 years later, when Fred and Gert went to Key West, Florida, they stopped at the Franceschini winter residence, which was about two hours from Miami. Len had been nudging Fred to buy something there, but at that time Fred and Gert had been spending their winters travelling to other warmer climates such as Africa and Australia.

On this trip, they stayed at Len’s and Muriel’s house. Len was still determined that Fred and Gert would buy property in Florida, so he called the real estate agent who had sold him his house. The agent came to drive Fred and Gert around to give them a tour and show them what was available.

They looked at two or three nondescript houses; then a couple more: one on water, one on a golf course. Now they were getting interested. Skip all those not on water or not on a golf course, Fred told the real estate agent. He showed

them one that happened to be on the same golf course that Len’s house was on. By that evening, Fred and Gert thought maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

“We bought the house the next day,” says Fred. That was in 2000. They paid about \$300,000 for it. In 2007, it was reassessed at \$700,000. By 2011 it was back down again to \$300,000.

Four years after they bought the house, the center of Hurricane Jeanne went by about 40 miles north and did \$20,000 damage to the house, knocking down the pool enclosure. The next year Hurricane Wilma went right over the house but fortunately did practically no damage at all. Had Wilma done as much damage as Jeanne, the house would have been up for sale. Having anything repaired after a hurricane was both pricey and difficult.

“Some of the places we went to in the first part of the decade we probably wouldn’t dare go to now anyway,” says Fred.

Joe Lang

Not a business friend but an important part of Fred’s life is Joe Lang, the fellow who escaped from the Communists with Fred and his family in 1948.

Joe’s father owned a small village mill in the border area on the south side of the country, then about a three-hour drive from Prague. Fred and Joe were classmates, alternatively first- and second-best in class.

Joe ended up with a spare room in the Sirotek apartment in Prague. He was practically one of the family. When it came time to leave the country, Joe went with them.

Joe's family suffered terribly under Communist rule. His father died in a prison, and his brother spent years in prisons as well.

Once they got out of Czechoslovakia and into Germany, Joe emigrated from Germany to the U.S., because he had an uncle in Iowa. He had a distinguished career at Bell Laboratories. One day Bell Labs sent him to Berlin to talk to Siemens. From there he went to Rome. That meant the plane would cross Communist Czechoslovakia. The plane had a problem, and made an emergency landing in Prague.

“So there he was,” says Fred, “travelling on an American passport. With a German sounding name like ‘Lang’, he was not recognized as being one who escaped decades earlier. If I had been on that plane, with my unmistakably Czech name, I would have been arrested. There had been an arrest warrant outstanding against me since 1948.”

Fred and Joe have maintained their friendship at a distance because Joe still lives in the States, now in California. In their 80s now, their emails are lively and informative.



The life left behind

If the Siroteks had not left when they did, they would never have survived the years ahead in Communist Czechoslovakia. At first, they had no idea it would last as long as it did; and then, as the decades rolled by, they were sure it would never end. It was a dark 40 years in the country's history.



Czech sign during the Communist regime: "WARNING! Border Zone. Enter only on authorization."

Wikimedia Commons

Communism 1948–1989

Absolute power corrupts absolutely

Fred and Milu could not have imagined that it would actually be more than 40 years before they would lay eyes on the castle again. Before leaving the country, Fred and his friend Joe Lang had removed some of the most unique contents, thinking it would only be a matter of time before the family got them back again.

Some things were left with one of Fred's and Milu's uncles – their mother's youngest brother – who lived in Prague.

Still others were left with their mother's oldest brother, who ran the family farm in the village where she was born. But that brother was accused by the Communists of sabotaging their "five-year economic development plan". He was arrested and convicted to years of hard labour in a uranium mine and, when he did not die fast enough, he was shot and killed.

After the brother was arrested, the escaped Siroteks sent word to his family to get rid of everything they had left with them (burn if need be) so they could not also be accused of "harbouring property that "belonged to the state". They did

get rid of all but a few chairs from the castle's formal dining room. (These finally ended up in Fred's and Gert's house in Florida many years later.)

"Why were we stashing things away?" asks Fred, now in his 80s. "When a bunch of my father's Jewish friends were escaping the Hitler regime in 1938, my father was safeguarding a lot of their property. Six years later, they got it back. So when the Communists first took over the country, no one was ready to believe that the regime would survive as long as it did. But it did not take long to realize that the regime could last forever."

Fred's mother, Bedřiška, had three brothers. She was the only girl.

Her oldest brother was murdered by the Communists and one died naturally of old age. She was in Canada when she heard about their deaths. She could not return; she had to suffer this awful news far away from her native land.

The Siroteks received news about those Communist years when Bedřiška's surviving brother came for a visit after he had retired. People were allowed to travel after they had



Milu and Bedřiška with Bedřiška's brother, who, because he was retired, was able to travel to Canada.

Sirotek family photo

retired. They were considered a burden on the system, so the government didn't care if they didn't return. Fred's uncle used to visit them in Canada several times for two or three weeks at a time.

The Action Committees

Very quickly – within a couple of weeks of the Communist coup – the Communists established "Action Committees". In every business with a given number of employees, they designated one or more Communists to be the "mandatory assistant business managers", but with veto power on any decision. If you, as a business owner, wanted money, even to pay the company's bills, your cheque would have to be co-signed by a member of the Action Committee. This in most cases was a person or persons who, two weeks earlier, were your employees. If they did not endorse the cheque, the bank's Action Committee would not cash it. An Action Committee was embedded in every business. It now had more power than the owners of the companies.

As a result, it was only a matter of time before all businesses were closed up and the entire population started to "work for the government", as the only employer in the country.

There were very few things you could do as a self-employed person. One example was Fred's freelance photographer friend, Boris, but only as long as he took photos in a certain "approved" category.

Agriculture

Bedřiška learned that her oldest brother, who owned and

operated the biggest farm in the village even though it was only about 50 acres, was visited by the farm equivalent of the Action Committee shortly after the Communists took over.

“We’d like you to be the example,” they said. They wanted him to happily donate his farm to the newly established village farming co-operative.

Bedřiška’s brother told them to get out. There was no way he was going to give away the farm that had been in the family for umpteen generations!

“You will regret that,” he was told.

In the centrally-controlled economy, the farmers who refused to give up their farms were told what to plant, what to produce, when to harvest, and what animals to raise.

If a farmer was told, for instance, to raise chickens and produce 40 eggs a day, yet he only had 20 chickens (laying one egg a day at most), he was considered to be defying the system and he was eventually arrested. If farmers were told to harvest 100 kg of cucumbers per given size of land, it was impossible in May but easy in September. Failure to deliver the exorbitantly prescribed quantity at the prescribed time (even though it was impossible) would be interpreted as sabotaging the system. The quotas were impossible to meet, but the farmer was charged, convicted, jailed or worse, and his farm was confiscated.

That is what happened to Bedřiška’s brother, who refused to

“willingly donate” his farm. He could not then produce what he was ordered to, and he was sent away for “re-education”. In his case, “re-education” took place at a uranium mine. And it was there, in deplorable, inhumane conditions, without seeing his family ever again, that he was shot and killed.

Meanwhile, Bedřiška’s sister-in-law and two nephews were left without a husband and father. They were allowed to remain in the farmhouse. They were tenants on their own land.

During those years, 200,000 were arrested or otherwise prosecuted. Untold thousands died in prisons or were executed.

Many years later, in 1990, when Fred and Milu were finally able to go back, they saw the farmhouse. It was abandoned, dilapidated, not fit to live in anymore. Once Fred’s aunt died, the farm house was just left to deteriorate.



Bedřiška’s brother’s farm was abandoned and dilapidated after his wife died. Bedřiška’s brother was murdered by the Communists.

Sirotek family photo

Patriotic stealing

No matter what it was, everything was owned by the state. As no one was safeguarding it, you'd take what you could. And if you didn't steal from the state, you were considered by your peers to be depriving your family.

The regime, it has been said, mastered "The Seven Marvels of Communist Achievements":

- Everybody has a job.
- Notwithstanding that everyone has a job, nobody is working.
- In spite of the fact that nobody is working, the economic plan is being fulfilled 100 per cent.
- The plan is being fulfilled 100 per cent, but there are no goods to buy.
- In spite of the fact that there is nothing one can buy, everybody has all they need.
- Although everybody has everything they need, everybody steals anything they can.
- In spite of the fact that everybody steals things, nothing is missing.

"That, I suppose," Fred says, "is how it goes when the State is the only employer and owner of everything. The people pretend to work, and the state pretends to pay them."

Information

During WW II, the Nazis ordered that short wave wiring be removed from radios and forbid listening to any broadcasts from London under threat of arrest and concentration camps.

The Communists, attempting to achieve the same result, disrupted all broadcasts from Radio Free Europe, London, and Voice of America. If you were caught or it was reported that you listened to any of them, you'd be punished in some way – possibly by suddenly having problems at work, or being fired, or getting kicked out of school.

Mail

Personal mail was checked, especially mail to and from the West. There was no privacy of speech, even in letters between friends and relatives.

Press and literature

There were about 10 newspapers, all controlled by the Communists. They also had control over book publishing and provided a list of prohibited authors. In the early 50s, all "non-conforming" books were removed from the libraries. It is estimated that about 27 million books were destroyed. Theater performances and films were also strictly controlled.

Elections

Immediately following the Communist coup, the election laws were changed and Czechs no longer voted for individuals. Now they could only vote for a slate of members of parliament presented by the permitted political parties or not show up to vote. But voting was mandatory. If you didn't show up to vote, no matter what the reason, it was considered an act of defiance and you'd suddenly have problems at work; your children might not be admitted to or be kicked out of a school. In spite of the probable recrimination, some people still refused to take part in that

kind of voting. As a result the government had to admit that the attendance was only 97 to 99 per cent.

Economy

Consumables and food were generally shoddy and in short supply. After 1948, trade with the West disappeared – shifted to Eastern Europe where the quality was of minimal concern. Shortages were blamed on the weather or the Western Imperialists who were accused of things like dumping the potato bug from airplanes on the fields and thus ruining the harvest. There were no private businesses. Services such as car repairs, dry cleaning, hair care, chimney sweeping or radio repair shops were provided by “State Services”. But spare parts were missing, and the services were substandard.

New cars were in extreme short supply. Meat was available only sometimes. It took 10 years to get an apartment, and then you normally had to share it with another generation of your family. Rents were cheap, but the buildings were falling apart. Scaffolding at apartment buildings in Prague was not for repairs to the face of the building but to stop things like balconies or soffits, that were falling off the buildings, from killing people on the sidewalks.

Under the Nazi regime there was rationing of certain goods. It was still in existence in Czechoslovakia in 1953.

The Czech Currency exchange

On June 1, 1953, the currency was exchanged. The first 300 koruna were exchanged at the rate of 5:1. Any amount over that was exchanged at 50:1 – meaning 90 per cent of a person’s savings were gone – confiscated. If you hadn’t saved

anything, it didn’t make much of an impact on your life. But if you had, you were finished. It was the government’s way of making everyone equally poor. West Germany had changed its currency in 1949 but for an entirely different reason. It had to get rid of billions of marks printed during the Nazi era before it could put the country back on its feet. Czechoslovakia did it to make the rulers rich and the nation poor.

Travel abroad

In order to be permitted to travel abroad, you had to have:

- An invitation to come and visit, certified by a notary
- Extract from arrest records
- A statement from the military confirming compliance with military service and their approval of the travel
- An exit visa
- Permission to purchase foreign currency
- Customs declaration
- A passport

The permit to travel was not issued if there was concern that the traveler might harm the “good reputation of the country” or if it was not in the interest of the country to permit the travel.

The request for the permit to purchase a very limited amount of hard currency had to be supported by the employer, the union and the “block leader”. Refusal of a travel permit could be based on something as minor as a report by the block leader that the traveler did not decorate his windows on Labour Day or May 9, – the holiday commemorating the

liberation of Prague by the Red Army. There were only five travel offices in the whole country. On returning from a trip, the traveler had to report on whom he or she had met and what they had discussed.

Border with Austria and West Germany

The border was secured in many places with barbed wire and an 8,000-volt electric fence. Trees were removed. There were guards with dogs, and some areas were mined. The “security belt” was as wide as 12 km, where access was permitted only with a special permit. Hundreds were killed trying to escape. Some 400,000 people did make good their escape by various means or failed to return if they were abroad.

Education

Basic school was eight years; middle school, four; university, four to five years. There were never any tuition fees, and admission to university education was in the past based on the abilities of the students. However, under the Communist regime, hundreds of thousands of smart kids were ineligible for university education because their parents were the “wrong class”, while kids with limited academic abilities but who had the “correct” kind of parents were admitted. School principals decided who went to middle school or university. Kids could be blocked from higher education or could be kicked out of school altogether for something as simple as attending a concert by an “unapproved” group, or for trying to listen to Radio Free Europe.

Brainwashing and propaganda

Kids at school were under the constant pressure of Communist propaganda, which declared the wisdom of Communism and condemned the West. The brainwashing was sufficiently successful that there were actual cases of kids asking for capital punishment for their parents who were found to be guilty of being “class enemies”. Wives divorced convicted husbands because, as spouses of these “enemies”, their lives were hell.

This terrible culture of fear, dishonesty, unfairness, cruelty, theft, corruption and murder went on for 42 years and became embedded in the Czech psyche.

It was absolute power...corrupting absolutely.

Famous victims

During the almost three-year period after the war, but before the Communists took over; Milada Horakova was a member of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party. She was also a political activist during the Nazi years. She ended up in a German Concentration camp, but survived.

At the end of the war she rejoined her party and was elected a member of parliament. After the Communists took over, like so many other non-Communist politicians, she was arrested for treason. She and 12 others were put on trial on fake charges. Three, including Milada, were sentenced to death by hanging.

There were petitions from famous people, including Eleanor Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, for her life. Some said: She's a woman! Can't we do something? Must she be hanged?

The Communist concession? Hang her last.

"That was her so-called privilege," says Fred. "She lived 20 minutes longer than the others."

Jan Masaryk, Czech-born son of Tomas Masaryk, the first President of Czechoslovakia, was once an ambassador and then Czech Foreign Minister (in exile in Britain when Czechoslovakia was occupied by the Nazis). He ended up back in Czechoslovakia after the war and maintained his post as Foreign Minister. He lived in one of the government residences in Prague Castle. He was the only non-Communist cabinet minister after February 25 1948. Shortly after the Communists took over, he was found dead on the courtyard below his third floor bedroom window. The Communists labeled it a suicide, although the evidence pointed to murder.

Hard Currency Stores

The some 400,000 Czechs who escaped, once they were established in other lands, sent money back to help support relatives who were left behind. Bedřich and Bedřiška Sirotek did this, too. The possession of hard foreign currency was illegal, but the government established stores where one could buy products not available in the stores and pay for them in "hard currency coupons" that were made available for purchase in foreign countries. Tourists in possession of foreign passports could also shop in these stores using their

own hard currency (not coupons).

One of Fred's very-distant relatives was a Communist hunting-guide for Germans. The nationalized forests fenced in sections that became reserved hunting grounds. (When Fred and Milu travelled back all those years later, Fred got out of the car to see what he thought looked like a strange animal behind a fence along one of the forests. It was strange all right. It was a huge, nasty-looking wild pig.) The hunters prepaid their trips, but the guides appreciated tips in hard currency, even if illegal.

So there was hard currency from other countries. Someone had access to it and then...well, who knows what happened to it after that? But, Fred says, after more than 40 years of the entire population working for nominal salaries, suddenly there were many who had millions. It was rumored Swiss banks had many accounts belonging Czechs. (There were no travel restrictions for high-up Communists.)

Wir Sind Zuruck! We are back!

—German soldiers during "Prague Spring"

When the Communists took over in 1948, they were brutal. This went on for 20 horrifying years.

Finally, in 1968, Alexander Dubcek, a reformist, was elected the First Secretary of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. His reform influence lasted only seven months, from January to August.

Not happy with Dubcek's reforms, the Soviet Union and

all members of the Warsaw Pact (except Romania) invaded the country – even though Czechoslovakia was part of the pact – in order to stop him. Dubcek’s short-lived period of liberalization has been named “Prague Spring”.

The Warsaw Pact included the Soviet Union, Albania, Poland, Romania, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria.

The thing that was almost funny – but hurtful and tragic – was the arrival of the tanks from East Germany. As they crossed the border, they kept shouting: *Wir Sind Zuruck!* We are back! They were there in 1939, and now they were back in 1968.

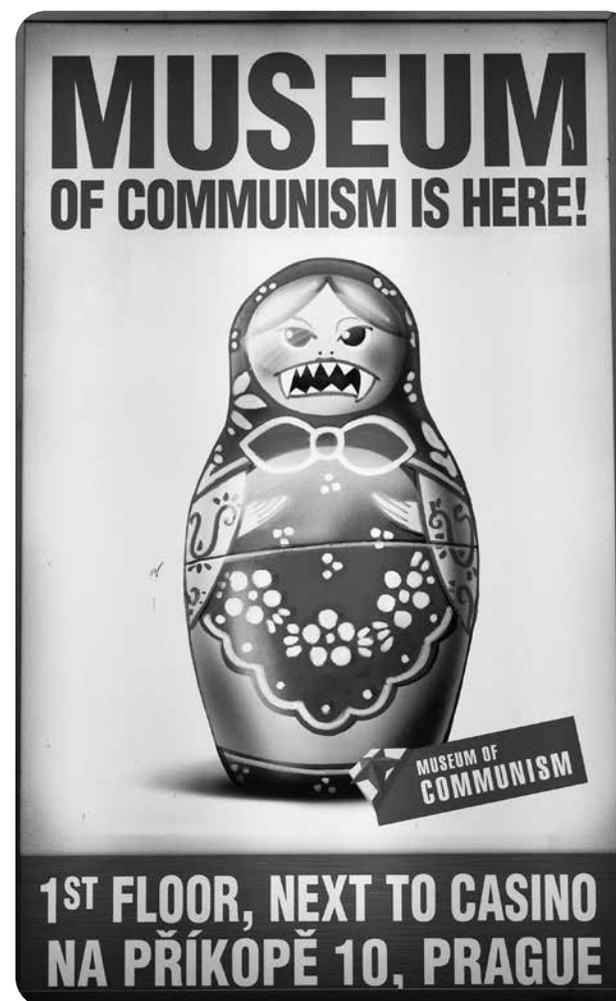
Dubcek was yanked out of Prague and flown to Moscow. It is not known how he was treated there, but he was demoted from his high power position. He died in an automobile accident in 1992.

From 1968 to 1989, it was strict, harsh, mean Communism again in Czechoslovakia. The Communists had their way once more.



Forty years later

Finally it was over. Bedřich was gone, but Bedřiška was able to return with Fred and Milu, and they claimed restitution. But the heart of Czechoslovakia was not the same, and probably would not be for many years to come.



Poster advertising the museum in Prague – dubbed “Communism—the Dream, the Reality, and the Nightmare”.

Wikimedia Commons

After Communism, beginning 1989

Morality unrestored for years to come

It is said that the beginning of the end of Communism began in a back yard in Amherstburg, Southwest of Windsor, Ont., in 1983.

It was during a visit by Mikhail S. Gorbachev, who was at that time in charge of Agriculture for the Soviet Union. He had come to Canada for a three week tour to educate himself. He was accompanied by the Canadian Minister of Agriculture, Eugene Whelan. Mr. Whelan talked about it years later at one of Fred's Rotary Club meetings, and Fred has never forgotten it.

As most visitors to Canada do on their first trip, Mr. Gorbachev wanted to see Niagara Falls. On the way back to Toronto, he said he wanted to see where Canadian people generally shop for food. The driver took the next exit along the Q.E., and he was shown a supermarket. Then another. And another. Gorbachev apparently wasn't making sense of it.

He rephrased his request. Could he please see a store where *ordinary* Canadians shop? It took a bit of convincing to help him understand THIS was where ordinary people did their

grocery shopping in Canada.

He visited farms in Western Canada. He asked to speak to a farmer, so he was introduced to one. The farmer explained he had 600 acres. How many people run it? Gorbachev asked. The answer: Just himself, his wife and their son when he was home from university. Gorbachev asked if he could see another farm. This time it was a bigger one, about 1,000 acres. In this case, the answer was similar, but the farmer employed one or two workers.

It obviously made an impression on him. In the Soviet Union, there were hundreds of workers on farms, and they still could barely get the harvest in.

While touring Canada, Mr. Whelan and Mr. Gorbachev were accompanied by the Russian ambassador Alexander Yakovlev, who happened to be on very friendly terms with Eugene Whalen.

Later, it is said, at a backyard reception at Eugene Whelan's home in Amherstburg, Ont., Gorbachev had a heart-to-heart talk with Ambassador Yakovlev. It is reported he was deeply impressed by Canadian ways and said the old ways at home had to change.

Communism finally ended in Czechoslovakia 1989. For Fred and Milu, it meant they could safely travel back to the country of their birth.

Two of the people they sought out were the children of their murdered uncle (Bedřiška's brother).

It had been 42 years, and they might as well have been living on different planets.

One of the cousins, Josef, met with Fred once for dinner and then refused any subsequent invitations. To this day, Fred doesn't know why.

The other cousin, Vaclav, was more sociable. Fred wanted to know about Vaclav's life, and in fact about life in Communist Czechoslovakia.

He started the conversation by stating he could understand why some people might have felt compelled to join the Communist Party, because life would be hell otherwise; and no one could hope to be admitted to a university without being a Party member.

Vaclav said he absolutely did not agree – that it was a matter of principle. He couldn't see any justification for joining the Party under any circumstances.

Two or three years later, after numerous visits, Fred met Vaclav's girlfriend. "The only thing I hold against Vaclav," the girlfriend told Fred privately, "is that he joined the Party."

Fred was baffled. He confronted Vaclav.

"How could you?" he demanded. "And if you did, why the hell did you have to lie about it? Your father was shot by those bastards! *How could you?*"

No, said Vaclav, his father wasn't shot. There was an outbreak of typhoid, and that's how he died.

"Is that how he got the gunshot hole in the back of his head?" demanded Fred.

Vaclav's father's body had been sent back to the village in a sealed casket, but the family had opened it. The hole in his head had been obvious.

And now here was his son, denying it by saying his father had died of typhoid.

"I think Vaclav was brainwashed," says Fred. "Or, after the regime was over and he realized what he had done, maybe he had to deny it in his own mind."

Fred recalled that Vaclav had told him he had learned how to fly a small private airplane during the Communist regime. At the time Fred had thought it was odd. Weren't the Communists alert to anyone who could just fly across the border and be gone?

Then, when he realized that Vaclav had in fact joined the Party, it made sense. As a Communist, Vaclav had been permitted these perks.

Gratitude for Bedřich

In recent years, Fred's long-time friend, Joe Lang, who escaped with the Sirotek family back in 1948, sent Fred a book. It was published in the 1990s in the Czech language.

It revealed hundreds of stories about people escaping the Communist takeover.

There were photos of countless bodies against electrified fences – people who had been shot on sight as they tried to flee. Other books went into details of the cruelty the Czech political police showed to people who became the victims of the regime. Thousands were murdered in jails and hard labour work camps, including one of Fred's uncles.

Fred says it is remarkable that not one of those who ordered or committed those horrific deeds has ever spent a single day in jail in spite of the extensive evidence available.

Joe Lang said the book and other published evidence reconfirmed his great appreciation for Bedřich's success in getting them to safety. Bedřich had made it easy for them. He kept them alive when so many others perished.

Systemic depravity

Communism might have ended in 1989, but, says Fred, the crooks stayed in charge, running the country. Before Communism, Czechs were known as being among the people with the most integrity in the world. But Communism changed all that. It corrupted them.

The "good" Czechs had either escaped or were dead.

"The most decent of them, if they stayed, would have been killed," says Fred. "Only the gangsters were sure to survive."

He says it took two generations to corrupt the population”, and “It will take at least four generations to bring it back to something reasonable.”

For all those years, everyone received a paycheque from the state. And they stole what they could. Stealing was the “name of the game”. The high-up Communists received the same paycheque as anyone else – plus what they could steal, and their thefts were bigger. They had more opportunities, so they ended up with the money when it was all over.

When Communism ended, the people who had been running the country (those in higher ranks) were the only ones who knew all the ins and outs of the country, and they continued in their positions.

“They might call themselves capitalists now,” says Fred, “but really they were just rich ex-Communists with their fingers in every pie. There was no such thing as conflict of interest.”

They didn’t call it stealing. They called it “tunneling”.

For instance, explains Fred, let’s say there’s a manager of a factory producing widgets. The widgets cost the state \$5 to produce. The manager’s wife establishes her own export company. The manager sells her the factory’s widgets for \$2, even though they cost \$5 to produce. The wife exports them for \$10.

“It’s justified,” explains Fred, “by the fact that local consumers wouldn’t buy the widget at any price, and so all these workers who make them would be unemployed. Therefore, by the

state paying to get the widgets created, and by the manager’s wife exporting them, the employees benefit because there’s now a demand for widgets.” But in the meantime, no one questions the deal.

At the end of the regime, there was restitution of real estate, but not restitution of what might have been *contained* in that real estate – the contents of a store, for example, or, in the case of the Bedřich Sirotek plant, tens of thousands of dollars worth of lumber. Unless you had a detailed inventory list, you couldn’t claim it.

“And how do you create a detailed inventory just before you escaped 40 years ago?” asks Fred.

If you owned property personally, it could be restituted. If you owned a company, or shares, you could forget about it, no matter how big or important the company was.

Any property that was not owned personally was sold on the open market “in good faith”. (“To – guess who?” asks Fred. “To big-shot Communists.”) So, because the property was sold “in good faith”, it was not returnable.

You could get property back if it was still sitting around in a public sort of way – not sold but being used, like the castle.

If Bedřich Sirotek had incorporated his company rather than operating it as an individual, Fred and Milu would not have been able to get any of the family properties back.

The post-Communist Czech government sold the automobile

factories to Volkswagen. They sold the famous Czech beer breweries and distilleries to South Africa. Everything was for sale, and was sold.

“You name it,” says Fred. “If property had been corporately owned, it was not subject to restitution, and it was sold to the highest bidder” – not to the highest bidder for the property, but to the one who offered the highest bribe.

He adds: “You can imagine the bribery and kickbacks when selling billions worth of real estate and contents.” But even by 2013, no one had to answer for their illegal dealings. Just before he left office, President Vaclav Klaus dismissed dozens of high-profile corruption cases involving millions. People accused, indicted or being investigated for fraud or embezzlement were free to go with no questions asked. The opposition government tried to impeach him, but didn’t succeed. The truth about what they did never came out.

The moral depravity filtered through to almost every element of society; this way of doing things caught on.

Beer would be listed on a price list posted on the wall in a bar in English as 50 Czech Korunas (Kc), but in Czech the sign would also say: “Half price for Czechs”. A similar sign in a parking lot would show, in English, “Parking: 20 Kc per hr” (but half for Czechs).

Someone opened a large Japanese restaurant and charged exorbitant amounts for food, unless you were a Japanese tourist on a prepaid tour. The menu would list Coke at the equivalent of \$10, soup for \$25, and so on. This would

impress the Japanese tourists, who thought they were getting a great deal on their pre-paid tour with *a la carte* ordering. But in fact, the Czech tour operator would pay only a fraction of that amount.

The politician responsible for taxi licensing got into the act, too, and told taxi drivers they could charge whatever they wanted. The prices had to be posted somewhere in the cab. But tourists and business people in the vast majority of civilized cities are used to cab prices being regulated. So they didn’t look for posted prices, at least not the first time they hopped into a cab in Prague. And then they found they were paying \$50 or \$75 for two miles.

Considering there are about 5.4 million foreign tourists visiting Prague every year, there was a lot of money to be made on the backs of the unsuspecting. Complaints to the police did not get any results. It was perfectly within the law. Was the politician who pushed this regulation through so stupid that he did not know any better? Or did he get rewarded by those who benefitted by this incredible act?

A waiter in a restaurant would approach you, saying, “May I offer you the restaurant’s specialty [for instance, oysters or almonds]?” The implication was that it was a free offer. But then the customer would be charged ridiculous prices: \$10 an oyster, for example.

Attacking ice cream cone

Among the things the Communist dictatorships controlled vigorously was movement of people. As a result, while the aim was to keep the non-Communists under control, it also

limited the criminal element.

With the fall of the Communist government, the renewed freedoms made the criminal element more mobile; and some of the less desirable types discovered that Prague was a great city to pick the pockets of the tourists.

Warnings were (and still are) publicized to watch your purses, to never carry money or wallets in hip pockets etc., because the pickpockets are very skilled. Crowded streetcars are the favored operating field.

But not all are so well skilled, and in fact are primitive and rough in their approach.

Such was Fred's sister's experience.

One day Milu bought herself an ice cream cone from a street vendor and wandered, window shopping, along a major street in Prague. She was particularly interested in the window of a high-end jewelry store – so perhaps she looked like a woman of means.

Suddenly a thug was at her side, grabbing her purse, mumbling: “Give me money!”

Milu hung onto her purse, but she didn't think about defensive acts suggested in self-defense lessons. Instead, she did something else.

In a flash, she drove her ice cream cone smack into the thug's face.

The thug, stunned and temporarily blinded by ice cream, took off.

It may be the first and only time in history anyone has used an ice cream cone as an attack weapon.

The castle returned

Fred and Milu got the family castle back. The fellow who bought it from them paid a lot of money for it and spent many times as much to restore and renovate it.

There was a bit of luck even in the state of the castle. After the Siroteks left, it was taken over by the border guards – the same people who would have shot them on sight.

The castle went through many transitions: as an institute for the deaf and dumb and as a home for mentally challenged girls. But it never did become a literal pigsty, with pigs and cows living in it, as it happened with other castles.

Not that it was well maintained. The roof was half rotten. But it was functional. Fred thinks it might have had to do with its early reputation as the home of Ema Destinova. The Communists had claimed her as a “Communist singer”, although she died long before the Communists took over. There may have been some respect for her history; in any case, it was a lucky thing. Otherwise the castle might very well have been destroyed.

13 year fight in courts

Bedřich Sirotek had been in the midst of negotiating a sale

of an apartment building prior to their 1948 escape. There was a signed agreement of purchase and sale, but he had not received the purchase price.

The heirs of the people who were buying it (but who hadn't paid for it) claimed ownership. It took Fred and his sister 13 years of legal wrangling to get that apartment building back into Sirotek hands.

Fraudulent friendship

Milu's husband, Jerome, had a good friend who, when the Sirotek family was about to flee, offered to keep some of their things. No one expected their exile to last that long – certainly not for decades.

Fred's uncle, Bedřiška's one surviving brother, visited Canada when he was allowed, by reason of his advanced age (and therefore his perceived uselessness), to leave Czechoslovakia. He managed to bring small things: family photographs and paintings (one that might be by an old Dutch master; it hasn't been appraised) that had been cut out of their frames.

One time, before he left for a visit to Canada, the uncle asked Jerome's friend what he could take from the Sirotek belongings to bring with him.

"I don't have anything to give you," said the so-called friend. "The deal was that I would keep it until they came back, and they haven't come back." He knew perfectly well, of course, that the Siroteks were not able to go back – at least, not if they wanted to stay alive.

Years later, when Communism had ended and they were able to go back, the uncle had died and no one could remember the name of the "friend". Jerome, too, had died.

In one family notebook somewhere, they finally did find the name and the small town where he lived, but they still couldn't track him down. Fred tried, but 40 years had just been too long. He even spoke to people with the same name, but they said they didn't know what he was talking about.

One of the items was a complete sterling silver tea service – including sterling silver cups and saucers. It was called the President's Service and there were only two in existence. One was owned by the Czech president; the other by the Sirotek family.

"Not everyone was honest," says Fred. "Those items exist somewhere in someone's hands. But who knows where?"

Familiar Face

Boris Prochazka was Fred's boyhood friend from Stráž. When Fred returned all those years later, he looked him up. They arranged a meeting in Prague, and Fred wondered if he'd be able to recognize him.

He did, instantly. Boris had exactly the same mannerisms and "look", even though he was 40 years older.

Boris was a photographer who taught Fred some good basics about photography before he left the Republic. Boris



Milu Čada with Fred's boyhood friend, Boris Prochazka, in 1991.

Sirotek family photo

went on to make a career out of his photography. It was one of the professions that was mostly uncontrolled by the Communists, as long as he kept taking the “right” kind of pictures – i.e., nothing negative or journalistic.

Home away from Home

When Milu and Fred went back to settle restitution of the family property, they realized it was going to take a long time. So they thought they'd better find a place to live. It would have been an impossible task in those days, because there were no vacancies whatsoever. However, one of the first things Milu had returned to her was an apartment building she had inherited. They converted the attic space into a little apartment and kept it until 2010, when Milu sold the building.

There were furniture and possessions by now, so some were shipped to Ottawa and the rest was given away to the few remaining relatives and friends.

Reminders of the Past

Milu and Fred noticed some of the barricades at roads leading to West Germany. There was a road and a customs house, and a big concrete pier on each side of the road. In between was a massive concrete I-beam “that would hold a 20-storey building”. Fred can't imagine what they did when someone wanted to drive through, because it would take a major piece of equipment to move the I-beam.

They also saw old machine gun pillboxes built in the 30s. They were the kind of pillbox that Bedřich was recruited to man in 1938 when the Czechs worried that Germany would invade the country. Before 1939, it was well-defended with these pillboxes everywhere.

Smell of hope

When they arrived in Prague in the early 90s, it seemed as though the whole city was under construction. There was scaffolding over about 75 per cent of all apartment buildings. But the scaffolding that may have been there for 20 years was not there to repair the face of the buildings. It was placed in front of the buildings to *stop things* – flowerboxes, whole balconies – from falling on sidewalks and killing people.

“The whole city looked so crummy,” recalls Fred. “If you walked through it, the dust from the scaffolding would fall. All you could smell was dirt.”

But five years later, when the buildings were returned to original owners, there was another smell: the smell of paint. It was refreshing and hopeful. Bit by bit, the scaffolding was

coming down.

Thank you, Mr. Gorbachev

Fred and Milu were on one of their trips back from Prague after settling their property, and Milu told Fred she had a couple of tickets to an event in Ottawa, at which Mikhail Gorbachev would be a guest speaker. Fred said he'd very much like to attend.

It was an event with about 200 people in a big room, so there was lots of room to move around, say hello, and shake hands.

At one point, Fred looked up and saw Mr. Gorbachev and his interpreter looking straight at him. They exchanged the usual niceties, and Fred went on to say: "As one who was born in Czechoslovakia, and who had to escape when Communism took it over..." (Mr. Gorbachev's face seemed to fall)... "never in my wildest thoughts," he continued, "did I ever think I'd be put in the position to meet the president of the country that harboured that regime."

Fred became aware of Mr. Gorbachev's obvious discomfort at these words, but he continued: "...I didn't think I'd meet the president whose country originated the Communism program... and *thank* him for reversing it."

The discomfort disappeared immediately. Mr. Gorbachev smiled broadly and shook Fred's hand.

Fred always wondered if, in those few seconds, Mr.

Gorbachev wondered if he needed a bodyguard as well as an interpreter. But he needn't have worried. Fred deeply appreciated Gorbachev's role in freeing Czechoslovakia from 40 years of Communist rule.



Single again!

Ain't no marriage here...

In the early 1990s, a law was passed in the now “free” Czechoslovakia that some of the real estate that had been confiscated under the Communist regime could be returned.

However, there was a restitution process. First the applicant had to fill in the required forms in person in Prague. And there was a strict deadline.

The restitution law provided that only citizens of the republic could get their properties back, but they had to show evidence of their citizenship.

Fred had not lost his citizenship. But before he did anything else, he had to get an I.D. card to prove it.

He was at the Police Station in Prague, the office that was in charge of the identification process. He began producing his birth certificate and other required documents. Milu was waiting in the car.

“Are you married?” asked the person behind the counter.

“Yes,” said Fred.

“You need to provide all the same documentation for

your wife, then,” he was told. That meant birth certificate, passport, a police check and so on.

But his wife, Nadia, was born in Turkey and living in Canada.

“Are you kidding?” asked Fred. “For the past 45 years she has been living in Canada. There’s no way we can get all that documentation out of Istanbul and have it translated to Czech before the deadline!”

The policewoman couldn’t have cared less. Not her problem. Her body language was telling Fred that she’d be perfectly happy if he could not qualify to get his property back.

After a short debate, the official handed Fred an address for the restitution legal department and told him to go there so they could “explain it to him.”

So Fred and Milu drove to the next address, where Fred met two lawyers. One was in her 60s. The other was in her 20s. He told them what happened.

“Oh, yes, you’ve got a problem, all right,” said the older one. “And the deadline won’t be extended, so there’s nothing much you can do.”

But the younger one thought for a minute.

“Where were you married?” she asked.

“In Ottawa, Canada,” answered Fred.

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. “Were you married by a judge or at the city hall?”

“We were married in a Catholic church,” answered Fred.

“*When* were you married?” the woman asked.

“1955,” he said.

“Aha!” she said. “Religious marriages after 1950 are not legally recognized. As far as the present laws are concerned, you are *single*.”

Fred laughed with relief and also at the wonderful irony of it.

“Will you please phone the police station, speak to the police captain, and tell *her* this?” he asked. The lawyer said she would.

Fred bounded out to the car.

“Guess what!” he said to Milu. “I’m single!”

When he walked into the police station again, he could hear the police captain on the phone.

“Oh?” she was saying. “In a church? In a Catholic church? In 1955? Okay. So he’s single, then.”

Fred got his I.D. card. And everything else fell into place.

If Fred and Nadia had been married by a judge, and not in a church, Fred might have been prevented from filing the restitution claim.

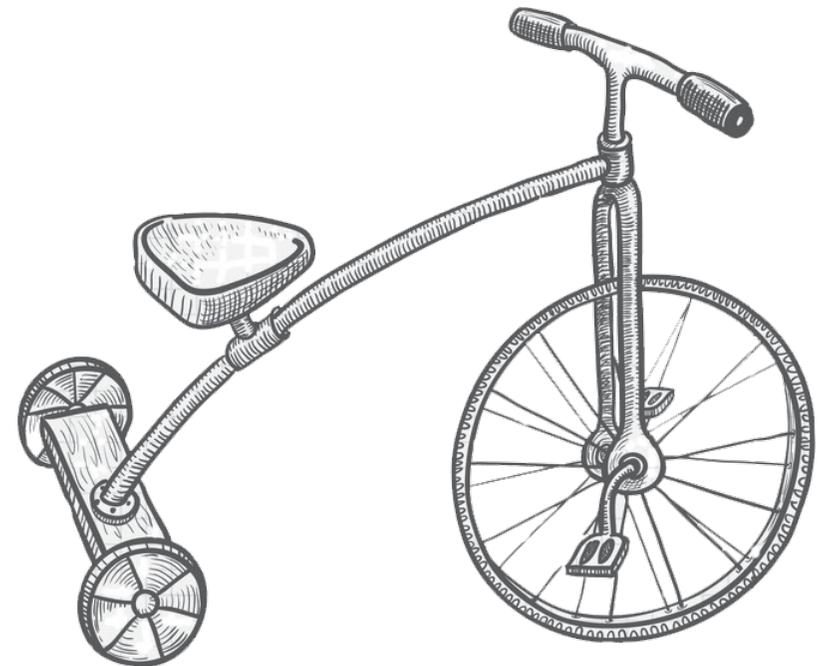
“It was one more instance,” he says, “of Lady Luck smiling at me.”

His Czech passport still says he’s single.



That was close

From early childhood into his 80s, Fred narrowly avoided harrowing situations and death. In every case, he sees “the luck factor” at work – that one per cent, that little bit, that saved him.



Nine lives

With Lady Luck Standing By

Many people have a story they can tell about how they outwitted fate. Call it luck, slim chance, near-miss or guardian angel. It doesn't happen that often, but when you need it, it counts in a BIG way.

Fred Sirotek has sidestepped death more often than most. He's like a cat with nine lives. He tells about these incidents with a combination of awe and relief, as if he can hardly believe them himself.

Tricycle luck

When he was about five years old, Fred was playing in his father's lumber yard. He had his tricycle with him, as usual. At the end of one of the storage rooms was a big door. Little Fred wandered in with his tricycle and decided to see what was beyond it.

But there was no "beyond". It was just a door and frame: a barn door, waiting to be used on a building under construction. Fred, curious, grabbed the door by the door handle and pulled. He pulled hard. It fell on him. It was heavy, very heavy – between five and six feet wide, and taller than an adult male. It should have killed the little boy.

Just before it came all the way down to crush him completely, it was stopped by his tricycle.

Fred doesn't remember the pain of it, but he does remember his grandfather lifting the barn door away from him. With a broken arm, broken collar bone, dislocated shoulder and three broken ribs, Fred still tried to get back on his tricycle.

He was surprised that his arm didn't work.

"Funny how you remember things like that," he says. "I even remember my dad being given the instruction not to permit me to fall asleep, to make sure to keep me awake."

He spent two weeks in hospital. At first he was in a partial body cast. He remembers it being so itchy and hot that he began screaming. The doctors put him in traction rather than a cast, and that was a bit better. Fred jiggled the weights of the traction so they rested on the night table beside his hospital bed, and that gave him some relief. (At five, he was already clever enough to figure out such a thing.)

That tricycle, there at the right place at the right time, was his very first taste of luck, and he hasn't forgotten it.

Disappearing plane

Following WW II, Bedřich was determined that his children would learn to speak the international languages of French and English.

In 1945 he sent Milu to Switzerland to attend University in

Freiburg and to learn French. A year later, during school holidays, he sent Fred to Great Britain to learn English.

It was Fred's first flight. He took a PanAm plane to London from Prague. When he got to London, his luggage was not taken off the plane. It had inadvertently been checked to New York. When the error was discovered, the bag was found and taken off the plane.

That flight left London, but never arrived in New York. It simply disappeared off the face of the earth. Fred says it might have been one of the first of Bermuda Triangles.

This didn't endanger his life, but for a young man on his first airplane trip, it was far too close for comfort.

Missed Flight

It was 1956 and Fred was making a bid on a freezer and cooler building for the Ottawa division of the Swift Meat Company. The head office was in Chicago. He decided to deliver the bid to their head office in person and to meet the people he might be working with if he won the bid.

He got on a plane in Ottawa on Easter Sunday and headed for Toronto, then to Chicago. Something happened with the airline scheduling, and he missed his flight from Toronto to Chicago. So he grabbed a flight to Windsor and took a cab to Detroit, where he planned on getting on one of many flights from there to Chicago.

It was late in the day by then. He had hoped to catch the

second last flight out of Detroit, but the cab didn't get him there in time and he missed it by five minutes.

He took the next flight – the last one of the day. He landed in Chicago around midnight and took the shuttle bus from the airport to the hotel. The radio was on in the bus, and it was reporting the latest news. The passengers heard that the previous flight, the one Fred had just missed, crashed in Flint, Michigan with no survivors.

Five minutes, one per cent luck, and one more of Fred's nine lives.

Lightning does strike twice

During one of Fred's trips across the continent, the American Airlines plane was hit by lightning – twice.

The plane had a closed-circuit TV screen in the cabins that would show what the pilots were looking at through their windshield. Passengers seemed to like this feature.

That night the flight was smooth and peaceful, until – WHAM! It was hit by lightning.

Passengers could see and hear the lightning and the pilot talking to the control tower. The pilot's voice was calm, ordinary, casual.

"We've just been hit by lightning," he said and requested a higher flight elevation.

Fred says the pilot sounded as if he were ordering a cup of coffee. No one paid much attention to it.

But then, about two or three minutes later, it happened again. And the pilot's voice was still matter-of-fact: "We've been hit by lightning once more," he told the control tower and repeated his request.

Fred and his fellow passengers weren't concerned. The pilot was much too calm for anyone to be worried.

The fact that all was not well became obvious when they were landing, and the fire trucks, lined up on both sides of the runway, came into view. But by that time they were only a few feet off the ground, and in seconds they had landed.

It was only after the plane was safely on the ground that the passengers were told that the lightning knocked out many of the on-board instruments. (When giving this information to the tower the pilots must have turned off the audio to the passenger section.)

Fred says the landing was "pretty normal". He wonders now if it was the same pilot who heroically landed the plane in the Hudson River in 2009. Odds are it wasn't, he says, but it was a remarkable landing nonetheless.

Living close to the edge

In 1959, following the massive 1958 explosion on Slater Street in Ottawa, Fred's company was involved in rebuilding

the badly-damaged Jackson Building. They were working on three floors and also on the roof.

One day Fred went to check on something on the roof. He was walking around the flat gravel surface, blueprint unrolled in his hands, reading the plans. Ahead of him was nothing but the flat gravel roof surfaces, or so it appeared. The building immediately adjoining the Jackson building was exactly the same height, with exactly the same flat roof, 10 storeys high.

But there was a 10-ft wide laneway gap between them.

Just by chance, Fred's hand, holding the blueprint, shifted a bit – just enough for him to see what was beneath him. His very next step would have brought him to his death on the pavement 10 floors below.

In that case it was perhaps one second – and sheer luck – that saved his life.

Close train – very close

When Fred was right up to his armpits in gas stations in the late 50s and early 60s, there were too many sites to visit in a reasonable amount of time.

If he wanted to go and see a site in Brockville, for instance, from Ottawa, it would take time just to drive there. He'd spend 15 minutes on the site, then turn around and come home, and the day was almost finished.

So he decided he'd be more efficient about the way he visited

potential sites, and he chartered planes. Rather than jump into his car, he'd grab a plane and a pilot and see the lay of the land from the air. That way he could even see more than one site in one trip.

One day, when he was scheduled for an appointment with an oil company representative at a site in Pembroke, it looked as though he was going to be very late. Half an hour before his appointment in Pembroke, Fred was still in Ottawa.

So he arranged for a chartered plane from the Carp Airport. He hopped in his car and, wasting no time, drove to the airport.

On a downhill stretch of the highway he saw a farmhouse and barn, with a tractor trailer parked in front of it. He didn't realize they were completely blocking his view of a railway crossing, which he was quickly approaching, at the bottom of the hill.

And then suddenly, to the left, hidden from view by the truck, house and barn, was a fast-moving train, steam pouring out of the engine at a point about the same distance from the crossing as he was. Fred was going too fast to stop in time. So he floored it even harder to get over the tracks.

"I could see two heads popping out of the right hand window of the locomotive," Fred recalls, "and when I crossed the tracks, I glanced back and saw the same two heads pop out of the left hand side – to see if I had made it. The train missed me by a few feet."

Safely across, he took his foot off the accelerator and let the car roll to a stop so he could catch his breath and calm his nerves. The airport was within sight.

He climbed into the plane and turned to the pilot. “Flying must be safer than driving,” he said.

It was that luck factor again: another lucky moment – about half a second’s worth – and it saved his life.

Mountain surprise

It was one of those times in the West Indies when Fred had to travel to several islands in a couple of days. This time he had to go from Barbados to St. Vincent, St. Lucia and Dominica. Between St. Lucia and Dominica was the island of Martinique.

He chartered a plane in Barbados. When he and the pilot left, the weather was fine. The pilot flew by sight, VFR (visual flying regulations), not by instruments (IFR).

They stayed overnight in St. Lucia. The next day the weather was not so nice. It was overcast and cloudy.

But they took off from St. Lucia. Shortly after they were in the air and in the clouds flying IFR. The pilot reached for his “flight chart”: *a world atlas!*

Once he was above the clouds, the pilot was about to put the atlas away, but Fred took it and began studying the heights of the mountains on the various islands.

At one point, the plane started to rumble a bit.

“Oh, good,” said the pilot.

“What’s good about it?” asked Fred.

“We’re over Martinique,” he answered.

The highest mountain in Martinique, Mt. Pelé, was 500 to 1000 feet lower than the plane as he started to descend to a lower elevation.

“Are you sure that was the mountain when the plane rumbled?” asked Fred.

“Pretty sure,” said the pilot.

Finally they broke through the very low clouds and flew about 500 feet above sea level. They were approaching the island of Dominica from the Southwest side of the island. The airport was on the Northeast.

The pilot circled the island’s south end so he could spot the airport without going through the clouds again. All of a sudden, out of a big cloud, there was a massive column of water. They were flying towards it, and met it. The water was so thick and heavy you couldn’t see a thing out the windshield.

The pilot tilted the airplane to left and navigated by the ocean surf. (It was the side of the island that got the trade winds

that produced white waves.)

Looking straight down, the pilot could see the surf even though he couldn't see the nose of the airplane a few feet in front of him, because it was so flooded with rain. The cloud and the column of water was about half a mile in diameter.

The pilot was looking out the left side. Fred could not see anything because the water on the windshield was obscuring everything.

Except, that is, for one *flash* of a second. Suddenly, in that fraction-of-an-instant, he was looking at a mountain, sticking out of the side of the island, dead ahead of them.

He grabbed the pilot's shoulder and pointed at the windshield. The pilot got the same instant glimpse. He veered away from the mountain with seconds to spare.

After 15 or 20 seconds, still in the column of water, he leveled the airplane and started to circle back to the island.

"Forget the island," Fred said, breathless from their perilously close taste of death. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Can't do it," said the pilot.

"Why not?" asked Fred.

"We'll run out of gas before we find another island," he said.

In another minute or two they were out of the column of

rain and back into a view of clear water underneath them, a green island to the left of them – and practically on top of the airport.

They landed. Fred headed across the tarmac to the customs department.

"Oh," said the pilot. "Don't bother."

"Don't I have to clear customs?" asked Fred.

"Nah," said the pilot. "I put you down as crew."

If they *had* hit that mountain, Fred's life insurance would have been invalid. It did not permit the operation of an aircraft.

Exploding boat

It was a nice summer's day in the early 70s, so Fred and Nadia decided to take the children for a boat ride on Black Lake in upstate New York.

They hadn't done this for a while, and the 20-ft. inboard jet-propelled runabout had been in storage for a couple of years while they lived in Barbados.

After about half an hour on the lake, they ran into a weedy area, and the weeds started to interfere with the jets.

Fred was driving. He stood up to look over the windshield to get a better view so he could avoid the weeds, when all of a sudden he heard a "slap!" and the engine died.



One of the Sirotek boats. This was the 30-ft “Little Super”. The boat that exploded was a different one – a 20-ft. runabout. Unfortunately there isn’t a photo of it in the family archives.

Sirotek family photo

When he looked back, it was the 50 lb. fiberglass-covered plywood lid of the engine compartment that was in the air, floating down like a piece of paper, 40 or 50 feet in the air above him.

There was smoke. And flames. The engine was on fire.

As he was throwing life jackets, cushions and anything that would float into the water, he shouted: “Everybody get out!

Now! The engine’s on fire! Swim upwind!”

While they were jumping out and getting out of the way, he thought he’d try to put the fire out with a fire extinguisher.

Only young Linda was wearing a lifejacket. With Linda in her arms, Nadia jumped out one side of the boat. So did Norman. Robert dove out the other side. But, without realizing it, of course, his momentum pushed the boat right over Nadia and Linda.

Norman shouted: “Mom and Linda are under the boat!”

Fred immediately dove out of the boat, purposely pushing the boat away from Nadia and Linda as he did so. Once he was in the water he was not about to climb back into a burning boat that had 20 gallons of gasoline on board. He was now concerned that the partially-filled gas tank might explode.

They all swam upwind, away from the smoke and burning boat. Unfortunately, this meant they had to swim *away* from a nearby island.

As luck would have it, another couple in a boat saw the smoke, pulled the Sirotek family into their boat, then hightailed it away.

The Sirotek boat didn’t explode as Fred had feared. But it burned to the waterline and sank next to the nearby island. The only thing to remain afloat was the empty gas tank still

attached to the wreck by the gas gauge wire.

Once they were safe on shore, Fred noticed a big scratch on the tip of Linda's nose. He realized that at the time of the explosion in the engine compartment, Linda had been kneeling on the back seat, looking backwards over the engine compartment. The flying lid had scratched her nose.

“Had she been leaning just two inches further to the back,” says Fred with a shudder, “the 50- pound lid would have hit her under her chin and she would have been decapitated.”

Two inches. Again, it was an example of the one per cent of luck that seemed to be with them when it counted the most.

Sepsis

Fred had never heard of Sepsis – until he got it. He says if he had known about it, he would have died of fright right there in the hospital.

One Thursday evening in April, 2008, in Florida, he started feeling miserable – so miserable that he went to bed early, at about 9 p.m., the earliest he had gone to bed in decades.

The next morning he was tired and still feeling awful. He had gotten up to go to the bathroom 11 times. He told Gert about it, and told her he would go to see a doctor if he felt that miserable for another day.

Gert suggested if he was going to see a doctor he shouldn't wait. It would be easier to find a doctor on Friday than over

the weekend.

Little did they know that her suggestion would turn out to be one of the luckiest things she could have advised.

Fred picked up the phone and called doctor Oo, who had seen Fred a year earlier for sleep apnea. The doctor, of Burmese heritage, was a lung specialist, but he was the only doctor Fred knew in Florida.

The doctor, by some miracle, was able to see him right away. So by 10 a.m. he was checking Fred over. He did the usual tests – blood pressure, temperature and so on. Then he looked at him.

“You're a very sick man,” he said, “Sicker than you realize.” He told him to go to Emergency at the nearest hospital right away. He said he'd call ahead and tell the medical staff what to do.

By about 2 p.m. he was checked into one of the hospital rooms. He had a fever of the kind he had experienced only once before in his life, in the Middle East a few decades earlier.

And he was cold, so cold that he asked the nurses to turn up the thermostat. The medical staff attached him to various drips and he fell into a deep sleep.

By 3 a.m., he was aware that a nurse was checking on him, taking blood pressure and so on. He complained that he

was perspiring a lot. The nurse realized he was not only perspiring. He was soaking wet from perspiration.

Within minutes, a whole army, it seemed, of nurses and attendants was stripping him and his bed down to nothing. Even the mattress was soaked.

It took about two days before Fred was strong enough to ask what was wrong.

The doctor said it was Sepsis – a massive, invasive infection that got into his blood stream. It could have been caused by almost anything, from a cut in his finger to a urinary tract infection. It turned out it *was* because of a urinary tract infection, and that's why he had gotten up to go to the bathroom so frequently overnight from Thursday to Friday.

He was released from the hospital about four days later. He was alive. The infection was gone. But he figures he probably came as close to dying as he did over Dominica, when his plane missed the mountain by seconds.

Gert's suggestion that he get a doctor right away was the first bit of luck in that incident, and primarily what saved his life. If he had gotten sick a day sooner, they might have waited a day before deciding whether to call a doctor, and that would probably have been too late – the second bit of luck.

The next stroke of luck was simply knowing a doctor who would see him immediately – especially considering the doctor was the only one he knew – and the doctor

remembered him well enough to realize at once that he was very sick.

Sepsis, not treated quickly with aggressive antibiotics, causes massive trauma to organs. If it gets into even one organ (kidney, lung, brain), there is a small chance of survival. People die of it simply by waiting a few hours.

According to 2013 statistics, each hour about 36 people die of sepsis and more than 1.16 million people are affected annually in the U.S. (www.news-medical.net)

Goodbye to the demon Nicotine

When Nadia became ill with lung cancer, it impressed Fred enough to realize he'd better quit smoking.

He was a voracious smoker. When he had less than a carton of cigarettes in his desk, he became uncomfortable. He went through six, seven or even eight packs a day. Three cigarettes were often burning at the same time.

He'd reach for the phone with his right hand, and automatically reach for cigarettes with his left. He had an ashtray that was the size of a large plate, and deep. He remembers it was emptied about three times a day.

In November 1992, he told himself he was going to quit smoking on April 1 of the next year. It became a kind of mantra. He'd repeat it to himself many times a day: "On April 1, I quit smoking."

By the end of March he was so self-hypnotized that he actually did it. He smoked his last cigarette on March 31, 1993, and that was the end of cigarettes forever. His hands kept reaching for his cigarettes for about six months, but he didn't give up, probably buying himself yet another of his nine lives.

For anyone who says I can't break the habit," says Fred, "if I could do it, anyone can."

Almost fatal fall

In 2010, when he was 81, Fred was at his son's house.

The house has a sunken living room two steps lower than the dining room. The fireplace platform is at the same level as the dining room.

It was one of those freak moments. When he was walking around the dining room table, Fred's right foot missed the edge of the floor and he was falling. As he was falling, he could see out of the corner of his eye a chunk of granite that was the fireplace platform, and his head was about to collide with it. If his head had hit it, it would have killed him.

In a fraction of a second, he turned his body and avoided the granite. But he broke his pelvis. He fell on what was the only bit of hardwood floor that was not carpeted.

Fred says it was the most violently painful thing that ever happened to him in his life. After a month in the hospital it took more months of recovery and rehabilitation.

One per cent will do

It might start with a conversation, a notion, a question. It's that one per cent of luck (no more!) that can change the course of your life.



Airplanes: a good place to test your luck...but not the way you think
Photo by Dylan Graham

Luck & happenstance

Crash landing? Listen to the steward

Some things are just a matter of luck. Some people have it. Some don't. All you need, though, says Fred Sirotek, is a little. Even the tiniest bit, about one per cent, can get you through or even change your life.

He has had lots of it, not necessarily in big parcels. But he's had those small moments of happenstance that have made his life go one way instead of another. Who knows whether "one way" was better than "another? Fred can't know, of course, but perhaps his success speaks for itself.

Or maybe it's simply a perception of things, the ability to see when Lady Luck has kissed you.

Fred was on his first trip to the West Indies in 1961 or 1962. He and Nadia were travelling on an Air Canada Vanguard. They were going to Barbados, because from there Fred planned to go to St. Vincent to check on a project he was bidding on.

On the way, they were to stop over in Antigua. As the plane was about to land, there was a sudden thump. A bad thump.

It woke Fred up. He looked at Nadia. “What gives?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered.

The wheels touched the runway and rumbled for a few seconds. Then there was a sound like a “snap”. Fred was sitting by the port side window. He could see the wing going down, down, down. The wing had a flap that was four or five feet wide. It was ground down to nothing, producing millions of sparks before the plane finally came to a stop. It also kept hitting the runway lights, and sparks were flying everywhere, right around the fuel tanks located in the wing.

For some reason, and obviously unbeknown to the pilot, there was a trench dug at the start of the runway, and the excavated material was next to the trench. They were landing in the dark.

“You know how you hear about what people think of when they think they’re in their last seconds of life?” asks Fred. “How they think of their mother, their children, their grandmother, God, whatever? My first thought was: ‘Put your bloody shoes on!’ because if I was going to try to get away through fire, I had better have something on my feet.”

Fortunately there was no fire, but it shook Fred and Nadia to the core.

Through the ordeal, Fred got to know the steward who was directing the escape from the plane.

How can a crash landing have an element of luck? you ask.

That part happened later, in the late 1960s.

In 1968 or 1969, The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) called for tenders on a school building in Guyana, so Fred went to take a look at the site.

As luck would have it, the chief steward on that flight was the same one who had been on the plane that had such a bad landing in Antigua. Because of that incident, they were almost like old friends; otherwise they might never have noticed each other.

They started chatting. They chatted for the entire five-hour flight.

The steward told Fred that Guyana was a dangerous place, and he gave him some advice. He told him to make sure he didn’t take a cab, *ever*, unless he knew the driver.

“But I don’t know anyone there!” said Fred.

“Then,” said the steward. “Take the Volkswagen mini-bus from the Georgetown airport. Make sure that’s the *only* one you take, no matter how crowded it is.”

So Fred took the mini-bus, and sure enough, it was chock full of people literally sitting on top of each other. But it got him safely to the hotel.

The next day he went to see the High Commissioner’s office for Canada. The office was just around the corner from the hotel. There was a doorbell. He rang it. A buzzer let him in.

He noticed the closed-circuit TV camera above the door.

Fred told the receptionist who he was, what he was doing there, and that he wanted to see the High Commissioner. Once inside, he asked the receptionist if it was true about only getting a drive with someone you knew. And was Guyana really that bad?

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” the receptionist answered. “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

Then she announced him to the High Commissioner and pointed at the door to his office. There was a buzz from the High Commissioner’s office door. She went to the door and opened it.

Fred asked the High Commissioner, too, about safety in Guyana. The High Commissioner told him not to worry too much about it.

“Then why,” Fred asked, “do you need to have a locked door between you and the receptionist’s office?” There was no answer.

After his meeting with the High Commissioner, Fred went back to the hotel. He told the desk person he needed to go to a certain small island a few miles away, and asked how he could do that.

“We’ll get you a driver we know well,” the person at the desk said. “It will be okay.”

The hotel-recommended driver brought Fred to a rowboat that ferried him and two or three people to the island. On their way to the dock, the cab driver told Fred the tiny little island was under absolute control of the local union steward, who was not a very nice guy.

Fred tried to chat with the guy rowing the boat, too. But he was not very talkative. Fred could feel great tension in the air.

By the time he got back to the hotel, he knew he wasn’t coming back. He knew he wouldn’t touch the place with a 10-foot pole. It was just too dangerous and unsure.

While he was killing time waiting for a flight out the next day, he went into the bar at the hotel. He got talking with a Brazilian man, a diamond cutter and his friend, an Israeli. They hit it off, and as the evening wore on they decided to go to another bar just across the street.

When they were about to leave, the diamond cutter said he’d get the cab.

“A cab?” asked Fred, incredulously. “You said it’s only across the street!”

“Oh, yes,” said the diamond cutter. “But no way do you cross the street on your own, especially after dark.”

The street was 100 feet wide. The bar was about 200 feet away. The diamond cutter explained there was a term for what happened frequently to people in Georgetown: “Choke

and rob”.

There would be two guys on a scooter. One would grab your neck with one arm, his elbow under your chin. With his other hand, he'd hold a knife to your jugular. The other guy would go through your pockets, take your watch band, grab your rings and gold chains on your neck if you had them. In seconds they'd be back on the scooter and speeding off into the dark night.

Even though they were a group of three, crossing the street was not considered safe. If Fred had not met these two new friends, he would have just walked across the street by himself, perhaps with nasty consequences.

That was one construction trip for Fred that did not involve any construction.

He believes some of his decision, and his safety during that trip, was the result of a little bit of luck that began with the crash landing in Antigua. A steward on a flight like that is a person you'd remember simply because of the circumstances.

So later, to run into the same steward who knew about the pitfalls of Guyana, and to have a long chat with that steward, who happens to impart valuable information – well, it just has to be a bit of luck.

Fred figures if he had not been forewarned by the steward, he would have gotten into a cab in Guyana with an unknown driver.

Had he not chatted with the cab driver and the fellow who rowed the boat, he might not have ended up with a bad enough taste in his mouth about the place. Had he not then met up with the diamond cutter, he probably would have just walked across the street in the dark.

He might have found out too late that it was no place for his construction company to do business.

It wasn't earth-shattering, this luck. But in some small way it might have changed the course of Fred Sirotek's life.

In recent years, Fred notes a news story about a Canadian businessman missing in Guyana.

Fast action

It was Grey Cup game night in the late 60s. Fred was driving home from his Waterloo project in his Buick Riviera, and he was driving fast along the 401.

All of a sudden, in his rearview mirror, he could see a car approaching from behind – a lot faster than Fred was driving. The right hand lane was full; Fred couldn't move into it immediately. The other driver was maybe 150 ft. behind him and not slowing down. So Fred floored it. But the guy behind him kept up his speed and at one point their bumpers actually made contact. It was touch and go; Fred nearly lost control. Finally he saw an opening in the right hand lane and pulled over. The speeder passed him.

Fred was angry. He followed the driver into Oshawa. When

they stopped beside each other at a stoplight, Fred rolled down the window.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.

At once he could see the guy was so drunk he could barely speak. Fred took his license plate number and called the cops.

It was another one of those incredible instances of a small amount of luck. But for a fast, strong car and an opening in the right lane at the last second, that could have been the end of Fred’s life and perhaps others along with him. He arrived home that night.

“That’s all it takes with luck,” he says. “Just a bit.”



Epilogue 2020

Six years have passed since the first publication of this book in 2014. In six years, things change, especially when you are 90, your eyes are failing, and you’re unsteady enough on your feet to use a walker.

Despite that, despite the passing of so many years, one of my sharpest memories is leaving my native country at the height of my youth. It’s more than a memory. It’s part of my story, part of who I am.

Henry Nesvadba is now the only person alive who knew me in the refugee camp. He was the baby of the family, only two years old, when his sisters were 18 and 19, my age at the time, and his family was leaving the camp, as mine did.

Looking back, being overrun by Germans under Hitler during World War II was stressful enough. But at least with the Germans you knew what to expect. If you didn’t get caught doing something or being something they didn’t like, you’d survive without going to a concentration camp.

The Communists under Stalin, on the other hand, would run right over you if you had more than two nickels to rub together. While they only had partial control, you could exist. But when they grabbed full control, as they did in Czechoslovakia in February, 1948, it was disastrous for

families like mine. We had wealth. We had a 40-room castle that we used as a summer cottage. It was a target on our backs. My father knew we had no choice but to walk away, and he saved all our lives because of it. It changed our future in ways we never could have imagined.

Here I am now, a contented Canadian, living through another kind of history in the making. This year, 2020, the world is rocked by a pandemic. Our neighbours to the south are suffering in self-inflicted misery, bad behaviour, unrest, and an unpredictable economy. But I am happy to say I am living comfortably at home. I am surrounded by good people.

There has been a guardian angel throughout my whole life – the angel who holds that precious 1 per cent Luck, looking over me, giving me hope and opportunity at every turn.

This luck continues into my later years. In my very late 80s I found a kindred spirit in Florida, where I spend my winters. Helen has become a close friend and companion, with whom I spend time, meals, drinks and make lasting memories, and who is also in my age group. She has become a very important person in my life.

If I were to do it again, I would not change much.

Fred Sirotek
August, 2020

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He was a 10 year old boy who lived a happy, carefree life in a real, honest-to-goodness castle in Czechoslovakia.

One morning, on his way to school with his sister, Milu, everything changed forever when they saw Hitler's tanks, guns and soldiers parading in the streets.

In the months and years to come, Fred remembers the terror of the Nazis, barging with guns and bayonets into their home late at night in search of his Catholic father, who risked his and his family's lives to help his Jewish employees and friends.

When WW II was over, the family's struggles began anew with the Communist takeover of their country. One night the family made a dramatic escape across the border to Germany.

Eventually they landed in Canada and started the slow business of building a life. Fred began a business that went on to become one of the premier construction and land-holding companies in Ottawa.

Fred Sirotek is in his 90th year. He's a handsome, white-haired, sharply intelligent, outgoing guy. From his home in Ottawa, he remembers it all. More, he sees it through the wisdom and perspective of time. He has learned things about WW II that he (and probably most others) didn't know – for instance, that it was actually British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who, with a flourish of a pen, condemned the world to Hitler. He also learned the terrible things that happened to his country during the 40 years of Communist rule.

With writer Francie Healy, he shares all this along with photos of the chicken coop where he and a buddy hid before they crossed the border in 1948; the beautiful castle they left behind; the refugee camps his family stayed in; and the WW II troop ship that brought them to Canada. He also shares photos of many of Ottawa's landmarks – buildings and bridges and overpasses his company, Sirotek Construction, built through the 50s 60s and 70s.

And he has stories to tell – stories about construction, business, life, family, and a brand new life in Canada. Some will make you laugh. Some will make you shake your head in wonder.

He attributes much of his success to luck—but only a very little bit. “Just about one per cent is all you need”, he says, “as long as it comes at the right time.”

It came at the right time for Fred in almost every chapter of his life. That one per cent of luck saved him from death before he was 20. It helped him avoid near-disasters in construction, in the air, at a railway crossing. It gave him a unique appreciation of life.

That, along with a wicked sense of humour, make his stories irresistible.