

One per cent is all you need

Fred Sirotek was a 10-year-old boy who lived a happy, privileged life in a beautiful castle in Czechoslovakia. By the time he was 19, he and his family were flat broke, living courtesy of the International Refugee Organization in refugee camps in the American part of Occupied Germany. And by the time he was 25, he was on his way to becoming an immensely successful Canadian businessman.

His is a story of success against all odds. It's also about the important role tiny bits of luck can play in a life.

Fred Sirotek's luck was not in winning a lottery. His luck was having a father who recognized that the Communist regime was even more dangerous than the Nazis. It was his ability to arrive in a new country on a new continent, to learn a new language and culture. It was being in the right place at the right second. It was in ordering a goat dinner that would never be eaten, or missing a flight by five minutes. Sometimes it was just in a conversation that directed him to a potentially life-saving decision.

Fred remembers the day in his childhood when Hitler's tanks, guns and soldiers suddenly began parading in the streets.

It was a day that changed his life forever.

In the months and years to come, he experienced 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.

And when the horror of WW II ended, he remembers a new struggle with the Communist takeover of his country. He and his family made a dramatic escape across the border to Germany, where they landed in a refugee camp. Eventually they made it to Canada. Barely out of his teens, Fred began a business that went on to become one of the premier construction and land-holding companies in Ottawa.

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 at almost every turn and gave him a unique appreciation of life.

– Francie Healy

