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MY RAF PILOT FATHER, THE GREAT ESCAPEE

[Ian Willoughby](#) with PETRA TONDER (1)

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RAF officer Ivo Tonder played an important part in what became known as the Great Escape, a mass breakout by Allied airmen from a German prisoner of war camp in March 1944. But this was only one of many escapes by the Czech pilot, who evidently had nerves of steel – and a lot of luck. I recently spoke with his daughter, Petra Tonder, who came to our studios with a copy of *In the Heavens and in Hell*, a book by Tonder and the famous photographer Ladislav Sitenský. In the first half of a two-part interview, Petra Tonder describes her father's remarkable adventures during the war.

“My father originally had done his pilot training in Czechoslovakia before WW2 as his military service, but he hadn't stayed in the air force, so it wasn't as available for him to get out as it was for many pilots.

But a man called Karel Sláma, who had done training with him and had become a good friend, met up with him and they decided to escape.”

How did they escape ?

“The long route through Slovakia, Hungary, Turkey, Beirut. That route. Quite a few people did it.”

He joined the RAF in 1940 and, if I have it right, two years later he was shot down over occupied France ?

“No, over the Channel, on his way to Cherbourg.”

What became of him then ?

“He ended up at Stalag Luft III. He terribly, terribly wanted to escape.

I was just looking at the book in preparation, and what struck me was how unbelievably they all worked together. How unselfish they were. They really worked together.

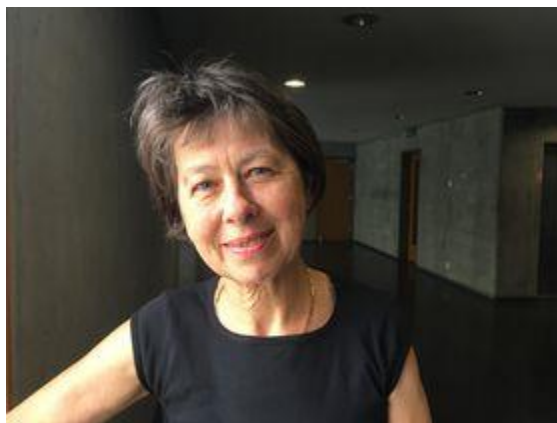
For example, he just wanted terribly to escape and one of the British officers said, OK, there's a little chance of jumping off a train – and here is a handful of raisins, a bar of chocolate and a compass, just in case you manage it.

Well he didn't. The window was nailed down and it didn't work.

So when he got to the camp he gave it in. I think I would have eaten it [laughs]. They were hungry, you know.

There were many, many occasions where I thought, Gosh they really all pulled together in such a nice way.”

This jail Stalag Luft III was known as a POW camp that couldn't be escaped from. But he was one of about 75 British officers who got out in what later became known as the Great Escape.



(Petra Tonder, photo: Ian Willoughby)

“Sixty-one got out. I think 75 actually got out but they caught 15 straight away. Sixty-one actually got away from the camp. And they shot 50. Three got to England: two Norwegians and a Dutchman. A tunnel once caved in on my father for quite a long time and he took a week off digging after that.”

Many people will know the movie The Great Escape. What was your father's view of the film ?

“He thought it was awful [laughs].

I just wanted to boast a little bit. This is quite interesting perhaps for Czechs.

There were about 20 Czechs in the camp. Three of them were on the escape.

Twenty people didn't have to draw lots. Hundreds of people took part in the escape and 20 people had done so much, mainly digging, that they didn't have to draw lots. And all three Czechs that escaped were in the 20: Valenta, Dvořák and my father.”

For people who don't know the story, how did they get out of this notorious camp?

“They dug three tunnels. When a tunnel was planned there was kind of excitement that the Germans sensed and they kind of knew that something was going on.

So they thought they would dig three. They called them *Tom*, *Dick* and *Harry*.

My father was almost from the very beginning digging *Harry*, which was the one that they did escape from.

The digging was extraordinarily hard work. It would sometimes cave in. It once caved in on my father for quite a long time and he took a week off digging after that [laughs].”

Your father was recaptured...

“Very shortly afterwards.”



How did that happen ?

“OK. He was a kind of prominent escaper, inasmuch as they thought they had a really good chance.

They had train tickets. He went with someone called Johnny Stower and they were supposed to get on a train.

Well, as you perhaps know from the film, that was correct, there was an air raid during the escape.

They had electricity down there and it went out. Some of these men had never been down there and they got claustrophobia.

They had two stations that were a little bit bigger, two metres by 60, where they changed. They had rails and lay down on a little thing on rails and were pulled to the next station.

They couldn't be too long, because the rope might break. And in fact the rope did break.

Johnny Stower was already out and patiently waiting while my father had to... somebody panicked and kicked and broke the rope and he had to crawl down on his belly and tie up the rope again.

Altogether they came up very late, as you perhaps know from the movie; there were a lot of things that were correct. The tunnel was short. It wasn't in the woods.

So again, how unselfish they were, after years for some of them, for daddy a year and a half. You'd been in this awful muddy hole with 4,000 other men and suddenly you're out, but no, hang on a minute, you've got to wait and pull up a rope so the next man knows he can come. They were really only metres away from a watchtower.

The train had gone by that time, so they decided to walk. But they were kitted out to go by train, with little shoes and everything.

And there were a couple of metres of snow. It was March, but there was a lot of snow.

But nevertheless they walked at night and made a hole in the snow in the day and slept. They got to the Czech border and there were just piles and piles of people. Hitler had brought in an enormous amount of soldiers, all the Hitlerjugend – the place was just swarming with people. My father survived only because the Gestapo in Prague asked to interview him.”

There was a huge manhunt ?

“A huge manhunt. They then did get on a train. They had coupons for food and had lots of food. There was quite a famous little story at the train station. They had something to eat and then there was a Gestapo check.

And my father thought, I’m not going to sit here waiting for them to come and ask me for my papers.

So he got up and went over to the Gestapo and showed them those papers and said, Look, I think they’ve made a mistake with our tickets.

You could only buy tickets for short distances, for some reason, in Germany at the time.

And the Gestapo man took them to where the young woman had sold them the tickets and started shouting at her, Can’t you see these are foreigners, you’ve sold them the wrong tickets [laughs].

They had amazingly good papers.

My father was supposed to be an engineer working for Focke-Wulf. And Johnny Stower, who came from Argentina and spoke perfect Spanish, was supposed to be a Spaniard, also working there.

He was going with my father for a holiday in Prague – that was the story.

There was a passport control on the train and they passed.

But the people who had checked their documents were just leaving and the last one turned around and said, Do you know what, that man – Johnny Stower – has exactly the same trousers on as the man we captured earlier today.

It was an Australian kind of plum-coloured uniform that they thought might pass as civilian.

The inspectors came back and properly checked. Then they saw that their jackets weren’t lined, they had chocolate... he didn’t stand a chance.

So they were taken to Liberec and put in jail. There were four men already in the jail, four from the Great Escape.”

Your father was then sentenced to death ?

“My mother arrived in England with two pairs of skis and an evening dress.”

There were six of them in the prison cell in Liberec and after a few days four of them were taken out. A little while later Johnny Stower was taken.

My father was saying, This isn’t right, I’m a British officer.

They were threatening to execute Czechs as traitors. He had assumed they’d be returned to the camp.

In fact all five were taken out and shot.

My father survived only because the Gestapo in Prague asked to interview him. So they drove him to Pankrác [prison].

He first of all said that he hadn’t escaped from Czechoslovakia, that he had been in England anyway before the war.

He said he hadn’t hung out with the Czechs at all. He’d hoped to get a British squadron, his English was quite good and he didn’t mix with these Czechs at all and never spoke to any of them.

But he was in an all-Czech squadron [laughs].

Also there was a Czech who had got himself into some kind of trouble and stolen a Spitfire and flown and joined the Nazis. He was later executed as a traitor.

“But my father knew this man quite well because they had left France together on the same ship, and my father was very friendly.

Anyway, they brought this man in and my father thought, Oh my God, my story’s going to be blown here [laughs].

And the man said, “Never seen him before in my life”.

This same man gave in so many people and betrayed so many people. But my father he didn’t betray.

That was lucky. Otherwise they would have tortured him I presume. They wanted names of Czechs in England in the RAF.”

Your father survived all of that miraculously. Tell us something please about your mum.

“My mother was half-Jewish. Her father was Jewish. And she was a very good skier.

When she was 18 or 19, quite young, she happened when Hitler came into Czechoslovakia to be in Switzerland, skiing in an English-organised race.

One of her brothers was also out of the country, on his honeymoon in Oslo. They somehow communicated and he said, Go to England.

She arrived in England with two pairs of skis and an evening dress. You need to put on an evening dress for prize-giving [laughs].

When my mother got my father’s obituary she joined the RAF.

She worked for The Czechoslovak, the magazine, for some time.”

And your parents met in the UK ?

“This man Sitenský, who wrote the book, was the same age as my mother, a month apart, and they knew each other well.

He also knew my father – he was on that same ship leaving France.

He would sometimes say, I’m going to London and I’ll see Jiřina Ascherová. And my father would say, Give her my best regards [laughs].

He knew Zika, mummy’s middle brother.

One day he was walking with somebody else in London, on a little break, and they bumped into mummy. She said, You’re the man who keeps sending your best regards.

She had always gone, I don’t know who the hell he is, but send him my best regards back.

My father said, “We have to fix this”. He invited her to lunch, but she had already had lunch, so he went to have lunch with his friend.

Then he went back to the magazine and asked if she’d have dinner but she said, I’m already having dinner with somebody.

So my father joined them and they went out as a threesome [laughs].

Then one more date as a threesome and he was shot down over the Channel.

My mother had fallen in love with him the moment she saw him.

She was working on the magazine and suddenly they put his obituary on her desk.

Mistakenly, of course.

Yes. But twice they didn’t hear from him for a long time and twice they thought he was dead.

That would have been the first time. And after the Great Escape they didn’t hear from him.

So basically she met your father, fell in love with him – and then didn’t see him for how many years? It must have been several years.

“Well, when she got his obituary she left the magazine and joined the RAF. My father always said she wanted to replace him [laughs].

What would it have been ? Two years, something like that. Not awfully long.

I presume they got married here after the war ?

“No. What happened was he got back... He was sentenced to death by the Germans and sent to Colditz to await execution, which was supposed to be in 99 days. Actually I worked it out and I think the 99 days must have been up. He was still at Colditz when the Americans did this sortie to rescue Colditz – on his birthday. On April 16, the Americans arrived [laughs]. I’m not quite sure exactly what day he got back [to London], but he was rescued on April 16 and it must have taken a little while to get back. He heard that the friend he used to hang out with, who my mother had been good friends with, had got married – and he assumed it was to my mother. But he found out that it wasn’t and on May 3 they got married. My father said, “Ještě nepadla pusa – we hadn’t actually kissed yet” [laughs]. But they just got married.”

Next week in part two of this interview Petra Tonder recalls her parents’ tribulations in post-1948 Czechoslovakia, her family members’ dramatic escapes from the country and much more.

<https://www.radio.cz/en/section/one-on-one/petra-tonder-pt-2-a-childhood-escape-pulled-across-a-river-on-a-plank-on-an-inner-tube>

PETRA TONDER (2)

A CHILDHOOD ESCAPE, PULLED ACROSS A RIVER ON A PLANK ON AN INNER TUBE

[Ian Willoughby](#) 24-07-2018

Petra Tonder’s father Ivo Tonder took part in the Great Escape in 1944 and later also succeeded in breaking out of prison in his native Czechoslovakia. There, like many former RAF aviators, he had been persecuted by the Communists after their 1948 takeover. In the second half of a two-part interview, Petra Tonder shares details about her own incredible journey to freedom as a very small child, and the lives her family led in the UK. But first she discusses her parents’ post-war return to – and subsequent escape from – Czechoslovakia.

“My father, very early on, made a little trip back, just a 36-hour trip, and he thought it wasn’t a good idea to come back. But of course, they came back.

My father wasn’t very well. He went down to some ludicrously low weight at one point. He was just skin and bones. So perhaps for that reason he fainted.

He was still in the Czechoslovak Air Force. They were living on Dlouhá (street in Praha) and he was waiting to be picked up to be taken to an air field and he just passed out.

So they took him to hospital and they never really did figure out what was wrong with him.

But my parents decided – they really didn’t like what was going on in Prague, and also there was Daddy’s health – to move to the country.

They bought a farm above Mariánské Lázně. I think my father was extremely happy there – my mum perhaps a little less so [laughs].

They spent a couple of years farming.

My brother Ivan was born in 1946 and my mother was pregnant with me in 1948, in February 1948, when the Communists ‘won’ the election.

It was very, very clear to them that they had to get out. They had been told in Prague... my mother would go to Prague.

And local people told them that if they didn’t join the Communist Party they would drive them off the land.

They knew they had to go but they couldn’t get permission. They tried everything.

So when I was... according to my father six weeks old according to my mother eight weeks old – my mother was more reliable... we made our first attempt to cross the border.

And it was a disaster [laughs]. It poured and poured with rain and they both had backpacks filled with nappies, which became extremely heavy. They weren't waterproof like nowadays [laughs].

Somebody saw them, and they were picked up."

Was your father then imprisoned ?

"My father was imprisoned, first of all in Cheb. Ada Hoffmeister, who was my father's cousin, probably would have helped.

So he didn't stay terribly long in prison.

Then they tried again and they put my father in prison for longer.

Then my mother tried. That was a major, major attempt, with lots of people involved, to cross the border, at Sušice, and again we were caught. And this time they imprisoned my mother too.

Actually my favourite bit of my father's story was his trial.

There was a time, in 1949, when we actually went to Brno and tried to steal an aeroplane. Karel Sláma was involved.

My father was going to see Karel Sláma and he walked up the stairs and the StB took the lift, or the other way around, and he saw him being arrested.

Everything was foiled. They had found a plane but it was pouring with rain... every attempt went haywire.

So my father was imprisoned. He spent six months waiting to be tried and when the trial actually came around he was supposed to be the head of a group of 20 people which included politicians, doing some, I don't know..."

It was some fabricated nonsense that they were accused of ?

"It was fabricated nonsense... My father told this story really amusingly. It gave Daddy energy to talk about these things – he would laugh all the way through the whole thing [laughs].

He said he was very lucky because as the purported head of this organisation he was the first person to be tried and everyone was fresh.

Twenty people were being tried and they all had somebody in court, so there was a big audience. They started by saying, Have you ever been sentenced for anything before or tried before?

He said, Yes. They said, *What was the verdict ?*

He said, *I got the death penalty.* They said, *What are you doing here ?*

He said, *Oh it didn't work out* [laughs].

He did it all like Švejk, with all this funny politeness that Czechs can do. And everyone slowly started to laugh. So in the end they didn't give him very long – I think a year, and he had already sat for six months.

He sat that out. But then they didn't let him out.

He thought, God, this is ridiculous, I can't help my family, sitting here in prison.

So he escaped, with a young man. The two of them escaped together and walked from Blansko to Vienna, I think. So he was out. The young man who he had escaped with decided to stay and work for, I'm not sure, maybe first the Americans and then the British, getting people out.



Ivo Tonder in 1940 (archive of Petra Tonder)

My father immediately begged him to get my mother out. Which he did. But my mother's escape was very, very difficult."

With you and your brother ?

"No, just by herself. She was in prison. My brother was in Moravia, in Přerov, with some people who had taken a huge liking to him when he was a small child.

I was in Prague with my grandmother."

So how did all three of you get out?

"Mummy escaped, finally, on her ninth attempt. She had been in hiding in Slovakia for a long time and finally they got her out.. Gustav Polák got us out. A year or two later he was caught taking a young woman, who was shot dead, across the border.

He was tried and we read the trial records and he described how he came to Prague and picked me up and then picked my brother up in Přerov.

The only thing I remember is he took an inner tube and put a plank over it. He sat us on it, took off his clothes and put them between us, and swam across the river, from Slovakia [into Austria].

The British wouldn't let my father come get us, but they did send a plane.

It was dodgy, because we were in the Russian area.

But somebody was very quick thinking and said that we were very sick, we had something contagious, and had to be taken to hospital in the West.

1951 we arrived in London. It was in the newspapers. We used to have a clip but it seems to have got lost [laughs].”

When you were growing up, did your parents talk a lot about their lives here? Or were they looking to the future and building a new life in the UK ?

“No, they talked a lot about Prague. They had grown up in the First Republic, both of them from comfortably off families, and it had been wonderful.

There was an excitement during those years. There was so much energy.

I especially grew up thinking there's this wonderful, wonderful country where I want to go and live [laughs].”

I presume you spoke Czech as a child?

“I spoke Czech until we went to school. But because my parents had been in England during the war and spoke perfect English, it was just so easy to drop into English.

So I'm afraid we didn't keep up our Czech as much as other children did.”

Did you regard your father especially as a kind of superman, because of all these escapes and so on? I think I would. He must have been a hugely impressive fellow.

“No, he was an extremely likable man. He was laughing all the time, very laid back, so he wasn't...

“I don't know how one imagines a superman would be [laughs], but he wasn't. He was a very, very nice man.”

What did your folks do for work in England ?

“Next year, in February, there will be a big exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts [in Prague] of what my mother's brother, Zika Ascher, did. Just by Stavovské divadlo [the Estates Theatre], on Rytířská, the Aschers had a shop selling silk and fabrics mainly.

My uncle continued to do that in England and asked everybody who was painting at that time to do designs for fabric: Matisse and Henry Moore and just about everybody. The most unlikely people, like Lucien Freud.

Hugely unlikely people did designs for him.

My father worked there for a while. But they didn't get together terribly well. Both my parents worked for Zika for a while, but they soon left.

My father started up his own business, doing the same thing. Well, not the same thing.

For Zika what he did was silk-screen printing, hand printing. Not all the other amazing things that Zika was doing. Daddy just did printing and he decided to open his own business, just printing. He wasn't in competition with Zika.”

Did your parents much follow events here ?

“Absolutely. Mummy worked for the BBC and for Radio Free Europe.

She didn't miss a news bulletin [laughs]. She walked around with a little radio and knew who was choosing the news that day. She was a news junkie.”

I guess both your parents lived to see the end of communism ?

“Yes.”

Was your father rehabilitated or did he receive some award ? Can you tell us about that, please ?

“Yes. First of all, in 1989, the three of us – mummy, daddy and me – jumped in a car. I was living in America and I don't know how I happened to be there.

We drove here without stopping. We didn't even stop to have a coffee [laughs], we were just so excited.

We went up to Mariánské Lázně to see the farm and spent the night there.

We then came to Prague and it was, Havel na Hrad, Havel na Hrad.

My parents never took British citizenship so they were able to vote for Havel. I wasn't – I was British by then [laughs]. It was wonderful. Then we came back, quite a few more times.”

Wasn't there some point where Havel – if this is the right word – rehabilitated the RAF men?

“They came back I think in the beginning twice a year. Certainly once a year.

They were flown in, red carpets, tea with Havel.

They moved them around and kept them really busy [laughs] – all these poor old people being dragged off to listen to talks and to dinners.

And then... now I'll tell you about my father's death.

In 1995, 50 years after the end of the war, he was supposed to come to Praha. I think even the Queen was supposed to be involved. But he was very ill by then.

My brother phoned me – I was living in America – and said, "If you want to see Daddy alive, you'd better



Ivo Tonder receives the appointment decree to the rank of Major General from Czech ambassador Karel Kühnl (Photo: archive of Petra Tonder)

come. I somehow managed to come. My father was in a hospital but they let him come home and I in fact spent three weeks sitting with him. He had got married on May 3, at the end of the war and the anniversary was coming.

He couldn't do any of these things [participate in memorial events] but five days before he died the Czech ambassador, a lovely, lovely man, came to the house.

We had a party, champagne, lots of people came, and the ambassador gave him something making him a general or whatever.

And Mummy became a major [laughs].

He gave him a certificate, because he couldn't come to Czechoslovakia. So then, I was sitting with Daddy. It was May 2, at night, about four in the morning, so actually it was already May 3.

And he said, Right, now I'm going to die – call your brother.

Mummy had hurt her back and was sleeping. My brother, who was coming over whenever he could, was exhausted because he was also running his business.

I said, "Daddy, you're not going to die right now" [laughs].

Perhaps I didn't say it, but I really thought he wasn't going to.

But what do you do ? You have to obey at such a time.

So I phoned my brother and said, "Ivan, you've just got to come over." I woke Mummy and she came down.

Then Dad insisted that we all take a glass and he poured out something or other, some alcohol [laughs].

He made speeches: what a wonderful wife my mother had been, he said really nice things about my children and my brother's children, all of this stuff.

And he said, "Now I'll die". He sat back -

Around an hour or two later he woke up and said, "Hergot, co tady ještě dělám ?!!" (What the heck am I still doing here ?) [laughs]

But in fact he was on a lot of morphine and he didn't properly wake up again and died that night.

But he had been a little shocked to find himself still there [laughs]."

Wow, that's quite a story. What's your story ? You were telling me earlier you moved to Praha in 2010.

"Yes, when my mother died."

What led you to come here to Praha ?

"I had always wanted to. I had always known I would, if circumstances allowed. So that's what I did."

What was the draw ? And how have you found living here ?

"I love it. I love the country.

"I feel a sort of sympathy with the people. I don't think they're any better or worse than anyone else, but somehow I feel more sympathy for them.

These are kind of my people. Even though my Czech is horrible and I'm a foreigner here, just as I have been everywhere. But that's OK [laughs]."