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## **CHILDREN OF THE STORM**

### **The story of the Greeks in the Czech Republic**

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#### **Historical background**

The victorious resistance and struggle of Greece against the triple occupation of its lands by the fascist German, Italian and Bulgarian armies in 1944 and the end of the Second World War in 1945 did not bring peace to its people. Greece remained a deeply divided nation of republicans against monarchists and of communists against anti-communists. With the support of the British, the King of Greece was restored to the throne. Right-wing repressions continued to be as vengeful as they had been during the period of the Metaxas dictatorship of 1936-1940, with hundreds of thousands of resistance fighters/communists of the resistance movement of 1941-1944 persecuted, murdered, imprisoned or sent into exile to the Greek barren islands. This politically polarized situation fostered a civil war, which broke out in 1946 with the ferocity and ugliness that characterizes such wars.

On the one side there were the government forces and, on the other side, the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) formed by the communists in October 1946. The Civil War lasted until 1949, when the government army, supported by the USA, defeated the DSE. With the involvement of the USA, the Greek Civil War became a war theatre where both capitalist and socialist camps flexed their muscles and sought to establish their claims over zones of interest and influence in the "Cold War".

This left hundreds of thousands dead, a devastated countryside, and a crushed economy. Sixty thousand Greeks were forced into exile in socialist countries, where they were granted the status of political refugees. Though most have returned home, some didn't. This is their story. Of all the socialist countries, only the Soviet Union took in more Greek refugees than Czechoslovakia. In 1948, a transfer of children from the war zones was carried out in a highly organized fashion. The majority of the children, with the consent of their parents or relatives, were gathered in missions headed by leaders with detailed lists of their names, age, gender, etc. Protected by DSE fighters, the groups walked through the mountains towards the borders of Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria with the receiving countries on standby, ready to provide medical care, clothes and food.

From Albania and Yugoslavia, the children were put on trains and cargo ships for destinations which were kept secret for fear of interception by British naval ships and enemy attack from the air. On their way to Czechoslovakia, the children were accompanied by medical personnel, doctors and nurses, and by young women. The adult refugees arrived in 1949 from Albania and Yugoslavia, immediately after the defeat of the Democratic Army of Greece. By the end of 1950, the number of Greek political refugees in Czechoslovakia numbered 12,095, of whom 5,185 were children. The majority of the refugees and the children were housed in the emptied residences of the Sudeten Germans, who had been forced to leave Czechoslovakia in 1945. Some children were reunited with their parents in Czechoslovakia, while some who had been taken out of Greece by mistake, or in revenge for "Frederica's children" (the Queen Mother had seized 28,000 children from the war area for re-education in "Children's Cities"), were eventually re-united with their families. The "war of the children" is a dark chapter of the Greek Civil War.

Most of the Greek children were in northern Moravia and northern Bohemia. The refugees received generous help from the Czechoslovak state and from ordinary citizens. 'The expense was enormous. For each child, the state budgeted 600 crowns per month and for its daily food 45 crowns'. (L. Papadopoulos, 1999, 'The Day of the Return'). This was at a time when Czechoslovakia was itself struggling to recover from the disastrous world war in Central Europe.

All political refugees went through schooling and technical education. A large number, in response to the urging of the Greek Communist Party, acquired technical skills and started work in the factories. The children went through the regular school system, becoming more privileged than their peers who stayed behind in the backward areas of Northern Greece. A special aspect of their education was political; in the early 1950s, the children would march into the canteens and would sit down to their meals only after they had shouted out slogans such as "Long live Zachariadis" - Nikos Zachariadis was the Secretary General of the Greek Communist Party. They learned the symbols of the Greek Communist Party, and were brought up to believe in the values of the socialist system. When the Children's Homes were dissolved (the last one was dissolved in 1962) the children joined regular Czech schools, where they continued to have special extra classes in Greek language and culture, which are still offered today, though in a more limited version. Every two years, all Greek communities gathered together for the Pan-Hellenic Festival. Ultimately, the Greek refugees, while remaining and feeling Greek, gradually acquired and assimilated aspects of the host culture, and the young generation was soon comfortably integrated into Czechoslovak society.

After more than 30 years of harmonious co-existence with the people of Czechoslovakia, 10,000 Greek refugees took the opportunity to return to Greece after an amnesty granted by the Greek Government in 1975. Most returned between 1985 and 1990. An important consideration was the transfer of pension rights from Czechoslovakia to Greece, which was not agreed until the mid-1980s. But the welcome in Greece for those returning was less than generous - the wounds of the civil war were still too fresh. Ultimately, only about 3,000 Greeks remained in Czech lands, forming the core of the present-day Greek minority.

### **The scene today**

After 1989, the Greeks in the Czech Republic re-organized themselves and formed the Association of Greek Communities of the Czech Republic. Except for the Greek Community of Prague, the majority of the Greek Communities are in the Moravia-Silesia region, in places such as Brno, Ostrava, Karviná, Krnov, Jeseník, Šumperk, Trinec and Bohumin. The Greeks who have remained are happily integrated into Czech society, while some who left in the past, have again returned from Greece. Most Czech Greeks are bilingual and bicultural, while safeguarding their Greek identity and promoting Greek culture. The Greek dance ensembles Acropolis in Prague, Prometheus in Brno, and those of the other communities are well known to the Czech public. Many Greek and Czech literature books have been translated for the benefit of both cultures. The Greek Community in Prague publishes Kalimera, the only journal in the Greek language which covers the history and activities of the Greek communities in the Czech Republic. The journal is financially supported by the Czech Ministry of Culture. Many activities of the Greek minority receive generous financial support from the Czech government, and local municipal authorities from towns with Greek communities. The General Secretariat of Greeks Abroad of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs also provides textbooks for learning the Greek language, and financial assistance for the Pan-Hellenic Festivals. Since 1989, Greek-Czech trade has also flourished. Czechs have discovered Greece as a tourist destination, and Greek tourists now flood into the Czech Republic, especially Prague and Karlovy Vary. Greek food and wine are popular supermarket products, and there are numerous Greek restaurants. The local Greek community has played a big role in the growth of Czech-Greek trade, along with Czech-Greek organizations such as the Club of Friends of Greece in Prague, the Friends of Nikos Kazantzakis, Hellenika in Brno, the Lyceum of Greek Women in Brno, and the Czech Society of Modern Greek Studies in Brno.