A race through Prague
By Ota Pavel
Translated by Paul Wilson

Not much of Ota Pavel's slender literary output has been translated into English, but his remarkable set of stories, How I came to know Fish, can still be found through internet search services such as abebooks.com. This memoir describes the escapades of his father, a Ralf Cramden-like dreamer, who was the Electrolux vacuum cleaner representative for interwar Czechoslovakia. Pavel's father was Jewish; his mother was not. His father was deported during the war, and How I came to know Fish tells the tale.

What makes this collection even more remarkable is that Pavel wrote these stories after he was diagnosed with severe manic-depressive psychosis, which kept him hospitalized for months on end. Pavel died in 1973, aged 43.

This short story, A Race Through Prague, was ably translated by Paul Wilson and published in 1983 in the now defunct Cross Currents Annual.

When the Communists became one of the leading parties after the war, my father joined them immediately. He took Mother and my brothers along with him. I was the only one too young for such matters. He joined that party of Communists enchanted, as were many others, by the Red Army.
In his case, the moment of enchantment had taken place on the box -seat of a horse -drawn wagon driven by a long-haired Russian soldier, who was giving him a ride to Bustehrad. Father also believed that here at last were just and decent people who would not divide mankind up into whites and blacks, Jews and non -Jews. At least that is what they all promised in their books and speeches, all the way back to Lenin.

After their return from the concentration camp, our parents lived it up. They would go dancing in the Belvedere and the Barbarina. The wine flowed freely, as though they were trying to make up for all those years of privation, poverty, and humiliation. Arnost Lustig used to call on us a lot in those days, because he studied and went on sprees with my brother Jirka. Most of all, Lustig loved to dance with Mother. He was a wonderful dancer, like a light breeze drifting across the dance floor, and Mother was very fond of dancing with him because my father stamped and puffed like an elephant when he danced. Mother was a beauty and Lustig was just a touch in love with her. Once a handsome, fair-haired man invited her to dance and Father nodded, indicating that Mother could dance with him. The gentleman began to woo her, and halfway through the number he told her, "You're so beautiful." He couldn't take his eyes off her. Mother laughed, for what woman wouldn't have been pleased? And then the handsome man added, "But I'm curious to know what you've got in common with that Jew."

"Three children," said Mother, and she finished dancing and sat down beside. Father again.
My father met an American called Johnny at the Belvedere. Johnny was beautiful, like an unspoiled maiden, and he had paws like a bear. Father always said that whenever Czech girls saw him, they took their clothes off, but I was only fourteen at the time and didn't know what that meant. Today, however, I know it was mainly because there weren't many Americans in Prague and probably only one Johnny. And he really was a cool customer. He flew fighter planes against the Germans and knocked a couple out before they shot him down and turned him into a bit of an invalid, with a slight limp in his left leg. But he still had his courage, and people would scatter when he drove his Willys jeep through the streets of Prague. What was more, he had an important position in the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which was trying to help the Czechs out. His pockets were always full of dollars, and he gave gallons of gas to my father and thousands of American cigarettes, sweaters, coffee, jam, and packages of chewing gum. Father accepted it as a member of the Party, and the fact that it came from an American didn't bother him a bit. Who else should accept American goods if not the Jews, who had suffered the most?
At the same time, Johnny was good-hearted. He said he had relatives somewhere in North Bohemia and that he owned some beautiful tenement houses there and that one day he was going to manage them properly. But he never had time to go and look at the buildings himself.

The elections of 1946 were drawing near, and Father took it into his head that our family should do something for the victory of Communism. His idea was that on the eve of the elections we would run through Prague. We would each wear the number of a political party and thus predict, by the order in which we ran, the outcome of the vote. Mother declared that only Father could come up with such an idiotic idea, but Father wouldn't listen to her. Today, when I think back on it, I have to admit that Father had the right idea. It was strange, and beautiful.
Early next morning, Father disappeared with the idea of dragging Johnny back for the race, since an event like that ought be have army backing. They arrived late that afternoon, and Johnny apparently hadn't wanted to hear anything about it. But father managed it. We didn't know how, but it was obvious that if he could sell electric vacuum cleaners in villages where they had no electricity, he could also win Johnny over. They showed up late in the afternoon. I can't remember whether the sun was shining or whether it was overcast. I only know that Johnny was a little looped. He had a bottle of whisky under the dashboard and he was mumbling something. I went close to him and heard very clearly, "Let the scurvy old world croak. . ."
My father had managed to bring him around completely. While we went to change into our T-shirts, Johnny practiced driving his jeep in circles on Farska Street, one foot on the gas, the other on the fender, smoking a cigar. He was wearing a spanking new American Army colonel's uniform and he looked great in it. If a woman had walked by, I thought, she would have taken her clothes off at once. But he was waiting for us.

I had two brothers, so there were three of us. Father, naturally, was not going to run, for he was past his prime, and horribly bandy-legged. For a hundred crowns and some of Johnny's American chewing gum, he had recruited another boy to be the fourth in this race for Communism. Mother fastened our numbers on and silently cursed Father. But Father's eyes

were ablaze. He was convinced that this race would bring about the victory of Communism once and for all. And he was also convinced that the race would be a great achievement. We went outside. Johnny, we discovered, had already emptied the bottle of whisky. The first to start was Hugo. He had a magnificent chest, and on it, pinned there by Father himself, was Number One, the Communist Party's number in the election. Next, Father sent off the boy who was running for a hundred crowns and the chewing gum. He gave him Number Three. The Social Democrats, whose number it was, would be second. Third to be sent off was Jirka, wearing Number Two. He represented the People's Party. Father left me till last. The Czech Socialists would be fourth. Father chose me deliberately because I was the best runner, and if something happened, I could get away fast. I had trained with the Sparta Sports Club under Father Jandera. I had strong thighs and was quick off the mark. Father Jandera predicted a great future for me as a sprinter, but I didn't have the will to train. Athletics is hard work. Father ordered me to limp a little, perhaps so I'd keep my distance from the others, and perhaps to demonstrate what miserable shape the Czech Socialist Party was in.

We ran out of Strossmayer Square, along the Embankment and into Prikopy Street. It didn't seem to me like such a bad idea at all. I was running almost alone through Prague, I was the focus of attention, the Communists clapped and the Czech Socialists jeered a little. This was neither training nor hard work.
It was a strange race in which my father had decided the outcome in advance. The Communists first, the Czech Socialists last. And so it went. We were not to pass each other. Flags flapped in the windows, people were dressed to the nines and in a festive mood. I even stopped limping, thrust my chest forward, and showed off my powerful legs as they pounded along over the cobblestones. It was rather intoxicating, but my father rode behind me in the jeep with Johnny and occasionally called out, "Great! That's great! But put a little more limp into it!"
Johnny was driving along behind me. I caught sight of him three times when I stopped to pull up my socks. He was driving the very best American vehicle, the one they say won the Second World War. It was a Model WB, sixty horsepower, with incredible acceleration. Jeeps had been used as mine detectors, for breaking down blockades, as handcars on the railways. And now one of them was being used to back up Communist elections. The jeep had beautiful whitewall tires and there was an American star on the hood. It was like a strange, pale-green fish with bulging eyes. Johnny looked great up there, smoking his umpteenth cigar and humming something to himself, probably the same song about the scurvy old world my father had learned from the miners in Bustehrad when he was small to make Granny Malvina feel good.
I don't know what possessed Father to have us run up Wenceslas Square, where the Czech Socialists, for whom I was running in a limping and distant fourth place, had their headquarters. We turned out of Prikopy into the long square, and up ahead I could see a huge crowd in front of the Melantrich Building. As I drew closer, my soul began to shrink. So did the aisle of people into which I was supposed to run. I looked around for my father, my last hope, yet I knew him too well to believe in that hope. He had some bad qualities but he wasn't chicken-shit, as Jews were sometimes called. He never took an insult lying down, he'd already beaten up a couple of fellows who had cursed or harmed him, and he had been to court a few times because of it. The top Jew in the world for him was neither Mr. Einstein nor Mr. Chaplin but Baer, the boxer who had knocked out Schmelling. Before the war Father

had a boxing ring set up in our flat and we had to learn how to box. I was seven at the time. Mr. Hrabak and mainly Mr. Jenda Heimfemek, who won the silver Olympic medal in Amsterdam, came to coach us. But I suspected that everything I'd learned when I was seven would be useless to me now.
There was only one thing to do. Not run at all. That is what I did. My legs stopped all by themselves, I stood there and the jeep braked to a stop too. Father might have said, "Climb up with us, buddy." Up there with Johnny's uniform, in that fabulous jeep of his with its great acceleration, his genuine American Colt 45, my father's fists. But he didn't. It was Baer he loved, not Einstein. He leaned out of the jeep and gave me the order: "Run, damn it! And limp!"
My brothers and the chewing-gum kid had already vanished. First I began to walk, and then in front of the Czech Socialists' headquarters I broke into a slow trot. It was interesting: until then only a few people had paid any attention to our race, but on Wenceslas Square it was different. People there understood at once what the point of the race was. They were intelligent. They were only silenced by their own astonishment at my audacity in making fun of them right in front of their own headquarters. There was a collective gasp, then a roar, and then they surged after me. A race at Strahov Stadium would have looked pale beside this. At once I stopped limping as Father had advised, and began to apply the lessons of Father Jandera: *Explode out of the blocks! Lift your knees high! Eyes straight ahead! Go*!

It was too late. The circle closed in and the lanes were blocked with people. Up ahead, my brave brothers had vanished, and the jeep with its crew was trapped somewhere behind me. Johnny blew the horn piercingly, but that was all.
There was nowhere to run, and so I stopped and waited. My legs were trembling, and if it could have, my heart would have leaped out of my body and started beating there all by itself on the paving stones, so they would take pity on me. By now they were very close. Then one of them leaned forward and snatched my number off. Another hit me in the face with such force that 1 fell on my knees. They began to beat me. As I tried to dodge the blows, 1 saw their eyes. They were the eyes of office workers, doctors, engineers, business men, though the first person to hit me must have been a butcher, because it was a terrible blow.
I knew those eyes. These people were beating me for those future, distorted, and half-truthful radio reports and those naive stories; they were beating me for the stupid and idiotic acts we would commit when we finally triumphed tomorrow. They were beating me for our treachery and for the murders we commit.
1 collected all this in advance. They ripped my shirt and my shorts off and I stood there naked on Wenceslas Square, covering my groin. I was a good-looking lad then, but not good-looking enough to be able to stand proudly in the middle of Mother Prague, just as I was. A stream of blood from my nose and face trickled down over my chest and legs. Then Johnny's jeep appeared. When Johnny saw me there covered with blood, he stopped, pulled out his Colt, and walked slowly toward me through the silence. But he didn't start shooting. He stuck the Colt back in its holster, took me in his arms, and carried me back to his jeep, and the blood soaked into his beautiful uniform. Father was sitting in the other seat, clenching his fists in rage.

Then Johnny drove through Prague like a madman. Back at the apartment building where we lived, he carried me into our place. When Mother saw me, her first impulse was to light into Father, whose wonderful idea all this had been. Father ran back down the stairs shouting that he was going for a doctor. Dr. Ptacek had huge spectacles and a lot of bandages. He washed me, patched me up like an inner tube, and wound me up in bandages. The next day I didn't wake up until evening. Everything hurt and I thought I was dying. Someone was waiting humbly in my room. Through the cracks in the bandages I saw Father smiling at me. He wore a red carnation in his lapel. He said something I couldn't understand. I shook my head and he leaned close to me and repeated it. He was trying to make me feel better, perhaps even to give something to me. I saw his beaming face, and finally I heard clearly what he was saying: "We won!"
Johnny was standing behind him nodding that we indeed had won, completely unaware that in this very victory he had lost those beautiful tenement houses in the north that he hadn't even looked at yet. Afterwards Father told me that he had talked with Mr. Hruby, a member of parliament, and that next year they would accept me, though I was only seventeen, as a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.
I lay there in bed, my head aching and my neck, back, and legs swollen and sore where they had kicked me and on which I limped for a long time after that, even without my father's urging. I looked sadly at Father and
wondered whether I would ever again be able to play hockey for Sparta.
At that point, Johnny apologetically pulled from his bag the most wonderful shirt I had ever seen. A real American officer's khaki shirt made of linen, with small lions and officer's stars sewn onto it. It was cuddly, something I needed to put in bed beside me to play with like a teddy bear or a doll. I wanted to fall asleep and look forward to having it still there, and wake up, then go back to sleep, certain that no one would ever take it from me.
Then I slept for a long time as a future member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia with an American shirt for special occasions, and by the time I had recovered completely, the Communists had the power they'd been yearning after for decades, and they began to establish order in this land.

My father also did his best to help Communism overtake and surpass capitalism, as Joseph Stalin desired. He tried as hard as he could, even though a lot of Jews told him he was a meshugge. The Party never entrusted him with an important position, but at least they made him chairman of some kind of entertainment committee or other, and he would walk (he no longer had his American Buick) from store to store, trying to find plaster deer, gnomes, and dancing wind-up dolls for raffle prizes. When he got me into the Communist Party after I turned seventeen, I went along with him. I was impressed at the time, but when I think back on it today I can see that because of all those meetings, those raffles and public demonstrations of friendship, I never learned to dance and I had a lot fewer girlfriends than other fellows my age, which will go on haunting me for a long time to come.
He defended Communism wherever he went. His main argument to prove that we weren't going downhill and were about to overtake capitalism was that the coffee grinder in every shop was always busy. Among his close friends, he would explain that he had been a Communist before there even was a Communist Party. As a boy he had even given some poor boys muffins from the farm. On the run from the Foreign Legion, he had read to illiterate Spanish Communists from their own newspapers, though he himself couldn't speak Spanish. He had sung Avanti Popoli in the Fernando prison. He had had the railings and

fences painted for the soccer players of the Kladno Sports Club. As a sailor on the Tereza Taja he had transported Russian noblewomen escaping the October Revolution, and he gave them nothing but sardines to eat. When they fainted from the heat, he bathed their beautiful breasts with water. These were incontrovertible proofs, although in the last case, even though the October Revolution and that handful of sardines may have had a role to play, those beautiful aristocratic bosoms somehow didn't fit in.
But so be it! The fact is, my father was close to Communism, and he was often in the company of bums, vagrants, and poor people. And more than anything else, he had a generous heart.
When the Communists won in Bohemia, his close friend Heller, who owned a factory, told him, "You're crazy. You're even helping them out."
Then Heller left for England and opened a fur-coat factory, just like he'd had in Czechoslovakia. My father was no longer in business as he'd once been. He made a living any was he could. We became worse and worse off, but the important thing for my father was that friendship, brotherhood, and above all, equality of race, existed. That was worth any money.

By that time, all our parents had left was a little house near Prague.
Once I came out to visit them but I couldn't see anyone about. I entered, afraid that something had happened to them. They were in the back room. Mother was lying on the couch wrapped up in a blanket, her face turned to the wall. Father was sitting in his drawers at the table, and he was crying. His hair had fallen over his forehead, and his tears were dripping onto the newspaper in front of him. It was Rude Pravo, the Communist Party daily to which he subscribed and without which he couldn't have made it through the day. I leaned over him and brushed the hair from his forehead. For the first and last time in his life he slipped into my arms, the way children do. By that time I was already a man. I held him and looked over his head at the newspaper, where he had underlined with a red pen:

Rudolf Slansky, of Jewish origin,
Bedrich Geminder, of Jewish origin,
Ludvik Frejka, of Jewish origin,
Bedirich Reicin, of Jewish origin,
Rudolf Margolius, of Jewish origin.

The list of Jews went on and it was blurred with tears. When he had calmed down, he looked absently at me, as if he didn't know who I was, and said, "They're killing Jews again. They're looking for someone to blame it on all over again."
Then he stood up and punched the newspaper and shouted, "I can forgive murder- even judicial murder, even political murder. But a Communist newspaper should never print 'of Jewish origin.' The Communists are dividing people up all over again, into Jews and non-Jews."
And then he punched Rude Provo again, and it fell apart as though it had been made of rotten winter leaves. The antique table with its inlaid deer collapsed. He sat down and sighed deeply. We all knew he was thinking about how useless all those demonstrations and flags had been, those speeches about truth and justice, how pointless had been the blood that dripped out of me onto Wenceslas Square. He was thinking too of how pointless it was that even Johnny had gone with us, that fabulous fellow who later bought himself a ranch

somewhere in Texas and was raising cattle. Even the plaster deer for the raffles were pointless, and that doll in the pink skirt that danced when you wound it up. My father stood up and went into the woodshed. There he picked up the biggest axe, the one used for splitting logs. I was afraid and I went after him. Mother begged me to leave him alone; she'd never seen him like this before. After awhile I pulled myself loose and ran out after him. I ran up to the gate on which he always painted a five-pointed star every May Day. Today he had carved two large stars into the wood. I stood there and counted the points: one-two-three-four-five-six. . .

I moved closer, as though I couldn't believe my own eyes. Father thought I was going to efface those Jewish stars, and he raised his axe. But I had no intention of doing that, for I understood him very well. At that gate he had ceased to be a Communist and had become a Jew once more. We looked at each other. He had something in his eyes that I had never seen there before, the terrible disappointment and despair of a man who thought he was crossing a river on a solid bridge only to discover that the bridge wasn't there at all. In those eyes too were Slansky and Margolius, swinging at the end of their ropes. All around in the dusk birds were singing, and it was like the old Jewish Psalms. He let the axe fall and sat down in his underwear in the chair that stood ready to welcome guests worn out by their journey or by life. He was expecting them to come for him too. But no one did. He had no power and he wasn't in charge of anything. He was too small a fish. At the time, all he did was raise rabbits.

When I looked outside that night, he was still sitting there in the chair. A golden star was just falling, and it was more beautiful and perhaps more just than all the stars in this strange land.