

## Helena Novakova ... A Lifetime Celebrating Freedom with Service and Adventure



In May 2018, Helena Novakova led a group of fortunate '72 travelers on a two-week Grand Tour of the Czech Republic, her home country. Along the way she shared tales of her personal odyssey from the chaos of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to adventurous and intriguing challenges in the West and beyond, which became the nucleus of a written narrative, [\*Fifty Years and Three Worlds\*](#). Available to all classmates through a posting on the Women of '72 pages on our class website, it tells Helena's story as the child of parents who were born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire but matured in the first Republic of Czechoslovakia. Helena herself was born in post-war Czechoslovakia and grew up in communist Czechoslovakia.

Through Helena's story, we get to experience her migration to the West and intoxicating first tastes of freedom. And more than 20 years of her work with American schools overseas through ISS (International School Services, based in Princeton) in South and Central America, Spain, Kenya, Kuwait, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and the Philippines. One of her children was born in Peru, the other in Kenya, and they now live in South Florida, where Helena works as a financial advisor while also cultivating her passion for the outdoors and challenging herself physically through cycling, dragonboat paddling, birdwatching and nature trail hiking.

Attracting the notice of Princeton theater students researching life stories of the first women at Princeton, Helena's story became one of eight features in *All Her Power*, the Lewis Center's film commemorating 50 years of coeducation. An edited version of *All Her Power* featuring Helena, together with classmate Vera Marcus, is available for viewing on the [Princeton72 website](#).

### ***The Princeton chapter... serendipity and determination***

Helena left her native Czechoslovakia in 1968, five days after Warsaw Pact armies began the invasion that crushed hopes for change during the exuberant "Prague Spring," arriving in the U.S. one year later. Her Princeton story begins with two Princeton students, Bill Merritt and Steve Hayward, both '70, who were sheltered by her family during the invasion. Helena tells that part of her story here:

I arrived in this country on July 4, 1969, landing at JFK on a TWA flight from London. My eyes were popping out watching the display of fireworks lighting up the night sky as we approached New York, the City that Never Sleeps. Unaware of the customary Independence Day celebrations I thought wow, so THIS IS AMERICA!

I had \$18 in my wallet, a small suitcase, and my two Dunlop Maxplay tennis rackets. I knew nobody except two youngsters, Princeton University students, who had sought shelter with my family in Czechoslovakia during the 1968 Warsaw Pact Armies invasion.

Upon arrival in the U.S., I had a governess position secured in Darien, CT for six weeks, which paid enough for me then to travel around the US and Canada for six weeks via Greyhound bus. My plan was to absorb the beauty and serenity of this vast land, as well as experience the pulse of several famous metropolitan centers, and then return home for my fourth year at Charles University in Prague. The first stop on my itinerary was Princeton,

where Bill Merritt, one of my two Princeton contacts, offered to show me around his beloved university.

During that visit Bill introduced me to Professor James H. Billington, who had recently conducted a seminar based on Eastern European affairs of 1968 prompted by Bill upon his return from Czechoslovakia. I was overwhelmed by the warm welcome I received from the Billington family.

Fate now intervened, changing my original plans. In Czechoslovakia the hardliners closed the borders that August! My family warned me to extend my stay in the US, but my J-1 visa allowed me to stay only for 90 days. It was about that time that a Soviet sailor swam to shore in Maine but was returned screaming to his ship by U.S. Border Patrol agents, who did not understand his Russian when he said he wanted to defect. They thought he was a stowaway. That mistake led then-President Nixon to proclaim that all Eastern European refugees be granted asylum. Thanks to that sailor's misfortune, the process of legalizing my extended stay in the US was now underway.

As these events were unfolding, I continued on to Washington, D.C., the next stop on my Greyhound tour, and Professor Billington advised me where to go and whom to see. A Princeton student, Stew Dill, was working that summer as an intern in D.C. and introduced me to congressman John Brademas (also a friend of the Billingtons), to whom I explained my dilemma. Mr. Brademas intervened with the State Department and was instrumental in legalizing my status.

As I was completing my six-week tour around North America, I received news that my visa was extended, and Princeton University became my sponsor. The university offered me work in the Library of Population Research and as a visiting professor in the Slavic Department, where I conducted classes and made language tapes in conversational Czech. The Billingtons kindly invited me to live with them. A few months later, the Czech government ordered me to return by a specific date, or be tried and sentenced. This was one of the most difficult decisions I ever had to make. With the blessing of my family, I threw in my lot with Princeton and the U.S.

With three years of university completed in Prague, I was very fortunate to be able to continue my education at Princeton and graduate with the Class '72. Accepted as a junior matriculating in the fall of 1970, I moved during the second semester of that year into a dorm room right above the tennis courts – where I also spent a great deal of time in practice and competition during my student years.

Over all these many years and for so many reasons, my ties and heartfelt gratitude to Princeton University have only deepened and strengthened. While my parents gave me a very happy childhood in the circle of my family in Czechoslovakia, I grew up in a system where things were either black or white, no questions allowed. The decades that followed immersed me in a vastly more complex world of free will and free thinking, coloring my rich life experience with rainbow hues, as well as shades of gray. I am honored to share my many-colored story now with the Princeton community that gave me entry into that world.

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