

# VLADIMIR JOSEF KRAJINA

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Vladimír Josef Krajina looms so large in my consciousness that my talk will probably sound more as an ode to a great man than an objective assessment of his life. But then, what a life that was!

To begin with, there is the unique family background (unique even by Central European standards, where hardly any generation manages to live its life in tranquility) of service and sacrifice: Vladimír's brother Emanuel was murdered by the Gestapo in the Kaunice dormitories in Brno, his nephew, also Emanuel, an officer in the Czechoslovak air force in Great Britain, died in a tragic accident in the Battle of Britain, and another nephew, Jaromír, lost his life in the First World War. And so many Krajinas participated in patriotic organizations like Sokol that it would take pages to enumerate them all. 1)

Then there is Vladimír's meteoric career in his chosen field, botany. He was twenty-two years old when he graduated „summa cum laude“ at the faculty of science, Charles University. He continued his studies in Hawaii, Japan, Romania, Germany, Switzerland, England and France. At the age of twenty-three, he organized an international conference and at twenty-four was classifying the flora in Hawai and discovering new plant species.

At the ripe age of twenty-nine, on the basis of his work on plant communities in Mlynica in the High Tatras, he was appointed Associate Professor in geobotany and plant systematics at his alma mater.

Following the Communist coup d'état in February 1948 and his escape from Czechoslovakia, Krajina continued his work at the University of British Columbia, where he became a member of the science faculty, teaching botany and forestry, and initiating progressive conservationist and ecological trends ahead of any place on this continent. Many consider as his single greatest botanical accomplishment his development of an ecosystem classification for British Columbia, „a set of intricate biological blueprints that have built a bridge between ecology and practical forest management“. Among his publications on the native forests are „Ecological Reserves in British Columbia“, published in 1978 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) and „Securing Ecological reserves“ published in 1985. So great was Krajina's contribution to ecology and forest management that one of his colleagues at UBC, Prof. Hamish Kimmins, described him as „a Churchill of the forest ecology world.“ He saw him as a man who was not happy with certain forestry practices in Canada, „a blunt honest man who spoke his mind...“ who „told some company chief foresters that if they practised in Europe the kind of forestry they were practising in British Columbia, that should be reason enough to put them in jail.“ 2) Not surprisingly he became extremely unpopular with a few of them.

His work in this area kept him active into his late seventies. As R.J. Challenger observed: „Every day he made his way to a small, decaying hut at the University, where he spent long hours carefully annotating reams of computer printouts containing information on over 2,500 species of indigenous trees, shrubs, plants, ferns and flowers.“ 3)

The magnitude of Krajina's work is reflected in his writings as shown in a list of his publications prepared by Prof. Jan Jeník of the Department of botany, Charles University (Preslia, 64. 4 – 92)

Krajina also had a powerful impact on his students. According to Jack Walters, the former head of the UBC forest research „Krajina was the essence of what a university teacher should be. His legacy to us is the wellbeing of our great natural resource – the forest.“ „And that legacy is indeed formidable. It is not only the thirty-four graduate students, who studied under him, but it is his central idea that forests should not be exploited without regard to ecology. Krajina's influence finally reached the industry.“...“Because of Krajina's work and only because of Krajina's work, the province is able to carry out its planned intensive forestry program on sound ecological basis.“ 4) Krajina's influence on the forest industry was also acknowledged by Jack Toovey, chief forester of B.C. Forest Products: „...we have a program in our company that can be directly traced to his ideas as have most forest companies.“ 5)

At least equally significant as his scientific work is Krajina's involvement in the political life of his country and indeed of Europe. When Hitler's Germany started its march to conquer the world, Vladimír Krajina joined a small band of men and women who gave a new meaning to the word „heroism“. Early in November, 1939 he walked in a funeral procession paying the last tribute to Jan Opletal, a student mortally wounded a few weeks earlier by bullets from the Nazi machine guns. Several days later, the student dormitories were attacked by the SS units at night, the students dragged from their beds and some 3,000 of them transported to concentration camps. Seven student leaders were executed and the universities closed. Krajina became a member of an underground coordination unit, the „Political Centre“, where he concentrated on organizing secret radio telegraphic contacts with President Beneš. At the beginning of 1940, he became a member of the „Presidium of the Central committee of the Resistance“, where he continued to organize secret information service.

With the Nazi pressure growing, one after another, resistance leaders and even potential resistance workers were arrested by the Gestapo. Many in the underground counselled a temporary cessation of activities. Krajina was not one of them; he was suggesting new plans for resistance. Another leading political figure, Prokop Drtina, said about Krajina: „I already had respect for him as resistance leader, I was aware how brilliantly he performed this important work, and I was convinced that with any luck he will play one of the leading roles in the resistance.“ 6) His assessment proved correct. Before Krajina was finally captured by the Gestapo, more than 20,000 dispatches were transmitted to London, among them a report on German intentions to invade Scandinavia, the Low Countries and France. He transmitted information on Nazi plans in the Balkans, on the timing of the Nazi supply convoys to North Africa and, most important of all,

information on the Nazi intentions to invade Russia. That information reached Stalin but he chose to disbelieve it. Lord Vansittart offered this explanation of Stalin's incredible blunder: "One of the greatest dangers of Communism is the fundamental idiocy of so many of its followers. So it came about that the hermits (of the Kremlin) rejected Krajina's warning as they rejected ours." 7)

It is not clear whether Krajina intended the information about Hitler's plans to invade Russia as a warning to Stalin or as an attempt to deepen the mistrust between him and Hitler which Krajina saw as the most important work he did during the Second World War. This aspect of his work was subject of an interview with Kevin Griffin published in the Vancouver Sun in December 1989. In it, Krajina stated that a German double agent supplied him with a list of 33 German spies - mainly ethnic Germans in Russia - who formed the nucleus of the Nazi information network in Russia. Krajina delivered the list in January 1941 (at a time when he had a price of 500,000 Reichsmarks placed on his head by the Gestapo) to a Soviet military intelligence expert in Prague. The German spy ring was liquidated. According to Krajina, when Hitler heard of the destruction of his spy ring, he thought that Stalin was going to attack Germany. „In my opinion“, Krajina said, „Hitler jumped the gun and invaded Russia on June 22, 1941, one year ahead of when he planned to do so.“ 8)

In this same interview Krajina described another example of his work during the war. A man who worked at the Škoda factory in Pilsen told Krajina that tanks built at Škoda for shipment to General Erwin Rommel in North Africa were being loaded in Genoa on February 9, 1941. Krajina transmitted the information to London. That day several British destroyers and cruisers attacked the Genoa harbour, sinking a number of Italian ships and inflicting other great damage.

Krajina's communications with London were not limited to receiving instructions and transmitting information but often touched on profound national issues. On May 12, 1942, he sent a message in which he warned against assassination of Reinhard Heydrich: „The assassination would not help the Allies and would have unforseeable consequences for our nation...If for external reasons a gesture is necessary, why not choose a home-grown Quisling, in the first place E.M.“ (obviously meaning Emanuel Moravec). 9) Forty-five years after Heydrich's assassination, in answering questions for the B.B.C., Krajina (and I am indebted to Mr. Mirko Janeček for lending me his copy of this fascinating document) repeated his objections to the assassination but at the same time quoted with full approval the very different view of Prof. Václav Černý, particularly three sentences which he described „immortal“. The first sentence reads (in translation): „The liquidation of Reinhard Heydrich was as a matter of fact the greatest exploit of all European national liberation movements against nazism and the most important guerilla act of the second world war.“ The second and third sentences read: “Reinhard Heydrich was the first and only German in history who dared to come to Bohemia to publicly state on Czech soil that the Czech lands will not remain the homeland of the Czechs. For that the Czechs killed him.“ 10) The only change Krajina suggested was that the last sentence should be corrected to read: „For that the Czechoslovaks killed him“ because one of them was a Slovak - Gabčík.

Krajina did most of his transmissions from an area in northern Bohemia known as „Czech Paradise“. One day, the Czech poet Colman Cassius, sunbathing in the warm sun among the rocks, witnessed a Gestapo hunt of a fugitive who against incredible odds managed to escape. Cassius immortalized the escape in his epic poem, „Balada z Českého ráje“ (A Ballad from the Czech Paradise). 11) Only after the war did he find out that the fugitive was Vladimír Krajina. On January 30, 1943 Krajina's luck ran out. Hundreds of Gestapo and SS men occupied Turnov and the neighboring area. Before being captured, Krajina swallowed a capsule of potassium cyanide. Part of the capsule was struck out of his mouth by one of his captors and the remainder forcibly pumped out of his stomach.

After his capture, Krajina was interrogated for two months at the Petchek Palace – the Gestapo headquarters in Prague - by among others, Hitler's chief hatchet man in Bohemia and Moravia, Karl Hermann Frank. Then he was taken to the concentration camp in Terezín where he was held as a hostage to be used by Frank in any future negotiations with the Czechoslovak authorities should Germany be defeated.

In Terezín, Krajina met his wife, Marie, who had been transferred there from the concentration camp in Ravensbruck. His name was placed first and Marie's second on a list of prisoners to be executed. The execution was scheduled for April 1945. It was stopped a few hours before the appointed time by a German general who gave orders to the camp Gestapo commandant that no further executions were to be carried out.

On May 1, 1945, Krajina was taken to Prague for negotiations with K.H. Frank. Krajina refused even to talk to him. 12) On May 7, his Gestapo guard surrendered to him in one of the ironic twists of history: a prisoner accepting the surrender of his jailer. Krajina immediately joined the military action and had the pleasure of accepting as well the surrender of a German unit.

The end of the war brought a new challenge for Krajina. Most likely, he would have preferred to continue his scientific work. At the same time, he was not prepared to see the Nazi dictatorship replaced by the Communist one. He was offered and accepted the position of Secretary-General of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party. Together with men such as Hora, Ursíny, Čížek and women such as Horáková and Koželuhová, he became an outspoken critic of the abuses perpetrated by the police which took its orders from the minister of the interior, Nosek. In one of his speeches in Parliament, he stated: „The first prerequisite of real democracy is that all organs of state power respect the law of the land.“

The Communists tried to silence him. The Minister of the Interior ordered one of his intelligence men called Pokorný to visit Karl Hermann Frank in his cell and interrogate him about Krajina's conduct in the concentration camp. Pokorný produced a report suggesting that Frank implicated Krajina in the betrayal to the Gestapo of two parachutists who as a result were captured and executed. When confronted with Krajina, Frank categorically denied having made any statement implicating Krajina. On the contrary, he stated that he was forced to sign the statement he didn't even read (it was in

Czech, a language he didn't understand) and that a statement he himself wrote was entirely favourable to Krajina.

On September 10, 1947 three almost identical parcels were delivered to non-Communist members of the Czechoslovak government, Petr Zenkl, Prokop Drtina and Jan Masaryk. All three parcels contained bombs. Krajina helped to establish that the bombs were prepared on the instructions of officials of the Communist Party, one of them being Alexej Čepička, who during the war betrayed his secretary to the Gestapo (she was executed) and later married Gottwald's daughter and became Minister of Justice!

In February 1948, the Communist Minister of Interior refused to carry out a decision of the government respecting reorganization of the police. Ministers representing non-Communist parties resigned, believing that President Beneš would not accept their resignation. During the most critical days Krajina asked for an audience with the President. When told that Beneš would not receive him, he left a message warning the President not to place himself in the same position as his unfortunate predecessor, Emil Hácha. Beneš, contrary to the assurances he gave the leaders of the democratic parties, accepted their resignations and a new reign of terror began.

I was privileged to hear Krajina's last speech in Czechoslovakia. It was a passionate testimony to the invincibility of the human spirit, a declaration of unshakeable faith in the victory of truth and freedom. A few days after his escape he was personally thanked for his contribution to the Allied war effort by Winston Churchill.

In Prague, the Communists attacked him as a traitor and a criminal, sentenced him to twenty-five years in jail and ordered that his name be removed from every text and scientific reference. Krajina later observed: "I was raised to the level of Orwellian no-man." 13) In London, the Soviet agency Tass and its publication „Soviet Monitor“ attacked Krajina for his alleged conduct in the Terezín concentration camp. Krajina – a refugee and practically penniless, sued. He lost because the court viewed Tass as an agency of foreign government and therefore protected by diplomatic immunity. Krajina appealed to a higher court and finally, by a special leave, to the House of Lords. There, on November 23, 1949, Lord Vansittart delivered an eloquent speech: „Professor Krajina has a magnificent war record...but I do not ask you to take my word for it. One of the most brutal of all Germans, Karl Hermann Frank, described Krajina as „the bravest man in Czechoslovakia“ (Lord Vansittart was apparently referring to Frank's statement made to General Ečer during his first questioning in Germany). 14) The Lord Chancellor in reply stated: "I agree with the noble Lord without reservation with what he said as to the character, the antecedents and the courage of Dr. Krajina. It is deplorable that a person distinguished by his war record for resistance to the Nazis should be grossly libelled without being able to obtain any redress..." 15) He then concluded that, unfortunately, Tass, as an agency of the Soviet government was entitled to diplomatic immunity.

Krajina received many honours, including the Order of Canada and the Czechoslovak Order of the White Lion, First Class. The honour which probably pleased him most was the creation of a large ecological reservation on the Charlotte islands in British Columbia,

bearing his name. I like the citation for the Doctor of Laws Honoris Causa he received at the spring convocation of Notre Dame University in Nelson on May 6, 1973 which reads: “We honour today a man who is not only a fine scholar and a leader in his profession but also a champion of our free political system. With all this he is a modest man who has ever been ready to help the young, the displaced, the underprivileged. He has given of himself and his life unsparingly to foster education especially in his professional field of botany. As researcher, teacher, and a private citizen Vladimír Krajina has earned the respect and affection of those who passed his way. Dr. Krajina’s colleagues describe him as a man of incredible generosity, high political and moral integrity, inexhaustible energy and complete dedication to his family...In his life of service he has touched many and those he touched he touched deeply indeed.”

As Krajina’s life entered its autumnal season, he was getting tired of his fame. When *Kanadské Listy* in Toronto published my first article on Krajina, he wrote to the paper’s publisher, Mirko Janeček, that the “saga“ I wrote about him was too pretty to be true. His letter continued:“ ... when one reaches an age which his closest and dearest comrades have not reached, although they had the same right, the starched collar starts squeezing my neck.“ At another occasion, when I mentioned that in my view he was one of the greatest war heroes, he answered:“ I ceased to be a hero when I left Czechoslovakia.“

More and more, our plundered and tortured planet was becoming the focus of his thinking and feeling. The earth and the individual human being. On the back of a copy of the monthly publication „The Czechoslovak Abroad“ he scribbled {no doubt – at least partly - with tongue in cheek} many years ago: „From the springs of the mighty river Doubravka in the Chotěboř country let us try to save man and let us not allow him to perish in a herd of wild animals.“ Vladimír Josef Krajina tried. God, how he tried!.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Dobroslav Krajina : “Pamětní list Rodu Krajinů“ {Commemorative register of the Krajina family}
2. Quoted by Gordon Price in “Vladimir Krajina”, *ForesTalk*, Spring 1981, p.31
3. “Vladimír Krajina, Czech Ecologist and Freedom Fighter: “A True Prophet”, *Kaleidoscope*, Winter 82-83
4. Quoted in *ForesTalk*, Spring 1981, p. 31
5. Quoted in *ForesTalk*, Spring 1981, p.31
6. Prokop Drtina: ”Československo můj osud“ (Czechoslovakia my destiny)
7. Great Britain, House of Lords Official Report, vol.165, No.127, November 23, 1949, p. 927
8. The Vancouver Sun, Friday, December 8, 1989
9. Dispatches items 790 – 280 – 11; 792 – 225 – 11; 793 – 250 – 11; 794 – 225 – 11
10. “45 let po atentátu na Reinharda Heydricha“
11. Czech paradise is a scenic region in Northern Bohemia
12. Vladimír Krajina, “Politické procesy”, *Svobodný zítřek* (1949)
13. Quoted in Gordon Price: “Vladimir Krajina“, *ForesTalk*, Spring 1981, p. 31

14. Great Britain, House of Lords Official Report, vol. 165, p.927 and Vladimír Krajina, "Politické procesy", Svobodný zítřek (1949)
15. Great Britain, House of Lords Official Report, vol. 165, pp. 937-8