

THE  
SILVER VOICES





# THE SILVER VOICES

*by*

JOHN HOWARD



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At the House of the Boundaries

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ERA VULGARIS

*To  
Bill Jacob,  
Joel Lane &  
Mark Valentine*



*“Thus the stranger trembles in darkness  
As he softly raises his eyelids over a human shape  
Far away; the silver voice of the wind in the hallway.”*

- Georg Trakl



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## BOUNDARIES

### *An encounter in Bohemia*

When I was eventually demobilized in 1919 I returned to the position in the family business that I had left nearly five years before. I soon resumed travelling throughout Central and Eastern Europe, trying to re-establish old contacts and make new ones. I spent much time in negotiating the sale of our products, and in seeking potential new agents in the major cities of the region. There was a great deal of work to be done. The break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and all the new and redrawn frontiers that now snaked across the map – the results of the numerous treaties following in the wake of Versailles – had done great harm to the economic unity of the Danube area and beyond. The delicate balances of trade, which had only been achieved, slowly and ponderously, over the previous decades if not centuries, had been seriously damaged. The life-giving stream of commerce needed to be made to flow smoothly once again, and the company was depending on me to play my part. And that was something I had never turned away from, no matter what the situation.

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On the occasion that I am going to describe, I had travelled the short distance from Vienna to Prague. In Vienna I had been filled with sadness for what had been lost. Only two years before it had been an imperial capital; but Vienna was now merely the oversized head atop the tiny, shrunken, and ailing body that was the new Austria. So it was with a sense of relief that I journeyed across yet another new frontier into what I still thought of as Bohemia, but which I had to learn to call Czechoslovakia. As with Vienna, the war had left Prague unaffected physically; psychically was a different matter. The contrast could not have been more complete: in Prague a liveliness and vitality filled the air. Prague was now the capital of an independent state once again, and the crowds in the streets seemed to feel that old President Masaryk, high in his castle of Hradčany, symbolised, perhaps rather oddly, a new and young country with much to do and still more that it wished to do: a country that was going places. And the business possibilities would be, hopefully, tremendous.

But that was not all. On the other side of the ledger there were the grievous losses of the youth and mature manhood of the nation, which the recent exploits of the Czech Legion far to the east, fast becoming legendary, did not quite make up for. And there were still many, whether Czech, German-Austrian, or one of the other nationalities, who even then still looked back to the days of the Dual Monarchy with nostalgia and regret. The blank areas on numerous walls, left by the removed portraits of Franz Josef or Karl, seemed to summon up the feeling there was indeed something missing, even amidst all the bustling practicalities and evidence of hard work going on all around Prague.

I was staring at such an empty space on the wall in the large, low, and dimly-lit hotel restaurant where we had just sat down. I remembered the room from years before, crowded with stolid Habsburg civil servants eating lunch, drinking beer, and discussing the political complexities of the day. Nevertheless, I was in a very positive mood, as I had just signed an agreement to considerably expand our agency in Prague. A good luncheon at least was called for, with perhaps a fine dinner that evening, and drink, and

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entertainment. I was shaken out of my reverie by a light pressure on my forearm. My companion, sitting opposite me – it was James Shaw, a sensible young man even then, and who did well for himself and now manages our Toronto office – had leant forward to rouse me from my thoughts.

He inclined his head almost imperceptibly. “You’re under observation.”

Before I could turn round and see for myself, a shadow passed me, and a man sat down at our table, next to Shaw. Smiling, he nodded at us both, removed his hat, raised his arm and snapped his fingers.

“Another beer each, gentlemen, yes? Dark beer, I think?”

I was too surprised to react immediately. I had heard stories of such brash behaviour passed on from our representatives travelling in the United States; some of them retailed by Shaw himself, who had been there. It was not meant to be rude or disrespectful, I had been assured, but if that was the direction in which business was moving in the New World, I for one preferred the commercial practices and courtesies still to be found in Old Europe.

A foaming glass of beer appeared on the table in front of each of us, including my surprise guest (or did he think I was his, I wondered?) who lifted his glass in an unmistakable toast.

“Gentlemen, your health!”

I raised my glass and drank. Shaw drank also, and put his glass down, wiping his mouth with a napkin. He raised an eyebrow. I knew that meant that he wanted to know what was happening, but that he would tactfully plead another appointment or other reason to make his departure and leave me alone if I so wished. I shook my head in what I hoped was also a similarly subtle manner. I now knew that I was committed.

“Thank you, Mr...” I hesitated. By now his features were beginning to look slightly familiar to me. Perhaps he was one of the many people I had shaken hands with over the last few weeks in one of any number of offices, factories, restaurants, or beer-halls. But Shaw, who had been with me for most of the trip, showed no sign of recognition.

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You do not quite remember? No?” He drank again. “I did not wish to intrude, but I see you sitting there, yes, sitting here in Prague, and I think to myself that this is an opportunity that will never repeat again. And I think that we are now perhaps all, how do you say, pieces of flotsam and jetsam washed ashore here, by the recent conflict?”

“You must forgive me, “I said. “I have been working very hard, and I do not fully recall...” I drank some more beer. It was truly excellent, the way I remembered it from before the ‘recent conflict’. I tried to study the man opposite, but without staring too much. It was all so unexpected.

“I put you out of your misery, Captain Williams,” he said, laughing. “Or I suppose it is Mister Williams now?”

“You know my name. Yes, I do think I remember having met you before, but how and where...? I’m still not sure...”

“Do you remember Sternbergstadt? Or Steaua de Munte as one has to call it now. Summer 1917, in Sternbergstadt, Transylvania.”

And then it all came back to me. Of course I’d never forgotten my time in Transylvania, then in Hungary and now part of a greatly expanded Romania. It was probably the only part of the war that I would not choose entirely to forget, if I should ever have the choice. Romania had had a good war, eventually. As I had done, even including what I always spoke of as my ‘escapade’ in Transylvania – which if I spoke of it at all, which was seldom, was in a prepared and well-rehearsed version.

My unexpected guest who seemed to remember so much about me was Hauptmann Friedrich Michaelis, once (I presumed) of the Imperial and Royal Army, stationed in Sternbergstadt – and my one-time jailer.

### *A lost country*

Michaelis laughed again and held out his hand. “Surely we are no longer enemies?” he said. “You have had a good war. The tables have been turned. I am the one who has possibly lost my country,

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everything. In any case, our dear old Europe has changed beyond all recognition. Do you not agree? Come, please.”

I stretched out my hand, and we shook. He also shook hands with Shaw, who had been keeping a most admirable and uncharacteristic silence. Here were two former enemies, now no longer enemies, even if certainly not friends. But we did have an aspect of a shared past, that much in common: he played an intimate part in my Transylvanian ‘escapade’. Although we were caught in the middle of war, we had managed to create something else above and beyond it, something that had briefly brought together soldiers fighting on two different sides, even if temporarily not in combat, but still in a state of war, and which put that aside even as another contest took place between us. Far from home, detained against our will, I had helped to create a corner of England, to bring it to life deep in the country of our enemies. When it was all over, we had naturally still parted as enemies, but ones who had shared much, and could perhaps appreciate what the values of what we had done could offer. They were values that would now be needed in the new and frontier-ridden Europe, where old values were largely meaningless, more than ever before. Michaelis and I had been captains of opposing forces, and while involuntarily together had captained opposite teams, in what was surely the first cricket match ever to have been played in Transylvania.

More beer appeared in front of us, as if by magic. There was a small bottle of schnapps, too. A waiter was now hovering close by with menus. “I would be honoured if you would allow me...” Michaelis said, as he beckoned to the waiter. “They know me well here. I can recommend --” He spoke to the waiter in a rapid flow of German, switching at the end to Czech and a little Magyar. The waiter nodded and obediently wrote Michaelis’ order on his pad. They exchanged a joke and the waiter went away smiling.

“We will make a fine meal, gentlemen,” Michaelis said. “I sense you are festive.”

“Yes, we have concluded our immediate business in Prague satisfactorily, sir,” Shaw answered. He looked at me for confirmation.