

Escape on the Elbe

A story that is not in any history books: in April 1948, the paths of two people cross in Decín on the river Elbe: Josef Novák and Ladislav Feierabend. Feierabend is facing a show trial following the communist February coup. Taking flight on the Elbe is the only way to escape to the west for the former Czechoslovakian finance minister. For the Elbe boatman Josef Novák and his wife Štěpánka, this is a chance to put a little money aside. Their great aim: America.

The film recounts the escape on the Elbe as a family story from the Europe of the Cold War. Feierabend had already been forced to flee the Germans in 1941, becoming the finance minister of the government in exile of Edvard Beneš in London. But his Conservative Agrarian Party was no longer part of the government after 1945. Feierabend became persona non grata. Josef Novák, on the other hand, was accused by the Czechoslovakian secret service, the StB, of having been too friendly with the Germans. He came from a German-Czech family, in which nationality was never an issue.

Escape on the Elbe is a piece of local history, a story about home but without any of the usual sentimentality. The country to which the Nováks return after the revolution has changed completely. Josef Novák can now finally tell his story of the Germans and the Czechs, of escape and return to the Sudetenland. The life of Ivo Feierabend, the son of Ladislav Feierabend, who died in 1969, is also different. He commutes between the USA and Prague, trying to keep his father's memory alive.

The filmmaker Holger Rada and the author Uwe Rada look at the story of their great uncle Josef Novák from a European perspective. Germans, Czechs and Americans are part of a common narrative - and the river that made possible the spectacular escape aboard the Elbe barge CSPL 346 in 1948 now flows through a Europe that is almost entirely without borders.