

MIRA!

by Richard Bach

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MIROSLAV SLOVAK was an airline captain. He lived in a world of unhurried and constant routine, a world of airspeeds and altitudes and estimated times of arrival; of passenger manifests and fuel loadings and instruments humming softly in the night. A quiet, gentle life. But on the evening of March 23rd, 1953, at 7:35 p.m., Mira Slovak made the very slightest change on just one small dial on the instrument panel of his DC-3 airliner, and he flew into international headlines.

In spite of the change, the airplane looked normal. The engines ran smoothly on. The few small cracks in the aluminum skin had been properly repaired, and the white lettering CSKOSLOVENSKÈ AEROLINIE stood out neatly in the moonlight. A routine flight, 26 passengers aboard, bound from Prague to Brno, Czechoslovakia. The same was written on the pilot's flight plan: Prague—Brno. . . heading 093 degrees. A route almost due east, toward Russia. But even as Slovak radioed, "All is well," to the airline control stations on the ground, he turned to change his compass, that one small dial, from 093 to 273 degrees: almost due west. And then he made other changes. His DC-3 dropped quickly down from 6,000 feet to 100 feet above the ground, dodging hilltops, running below the communist radar.

He pushed the throttles forward, increasing engine power from Cruise to Maximum Except Takeoff. And the destination of the 26 passengers changed from Brno, Czechoslovakia, to Frankfurt, West Germany. After planning for two years, after living under communism until he could bear it no longer, Mira Slovak was making his race toward America.

The first comment came from his bewildered copilot. "Captain. . . the compass. . . this is not the way to Brno. . ."

Slovak turned to his navigator, sitting directly behind the copilot.

"Helmut," he said coldly, "please do not shoot the comrade copilot unless you find it absolutely necessary."

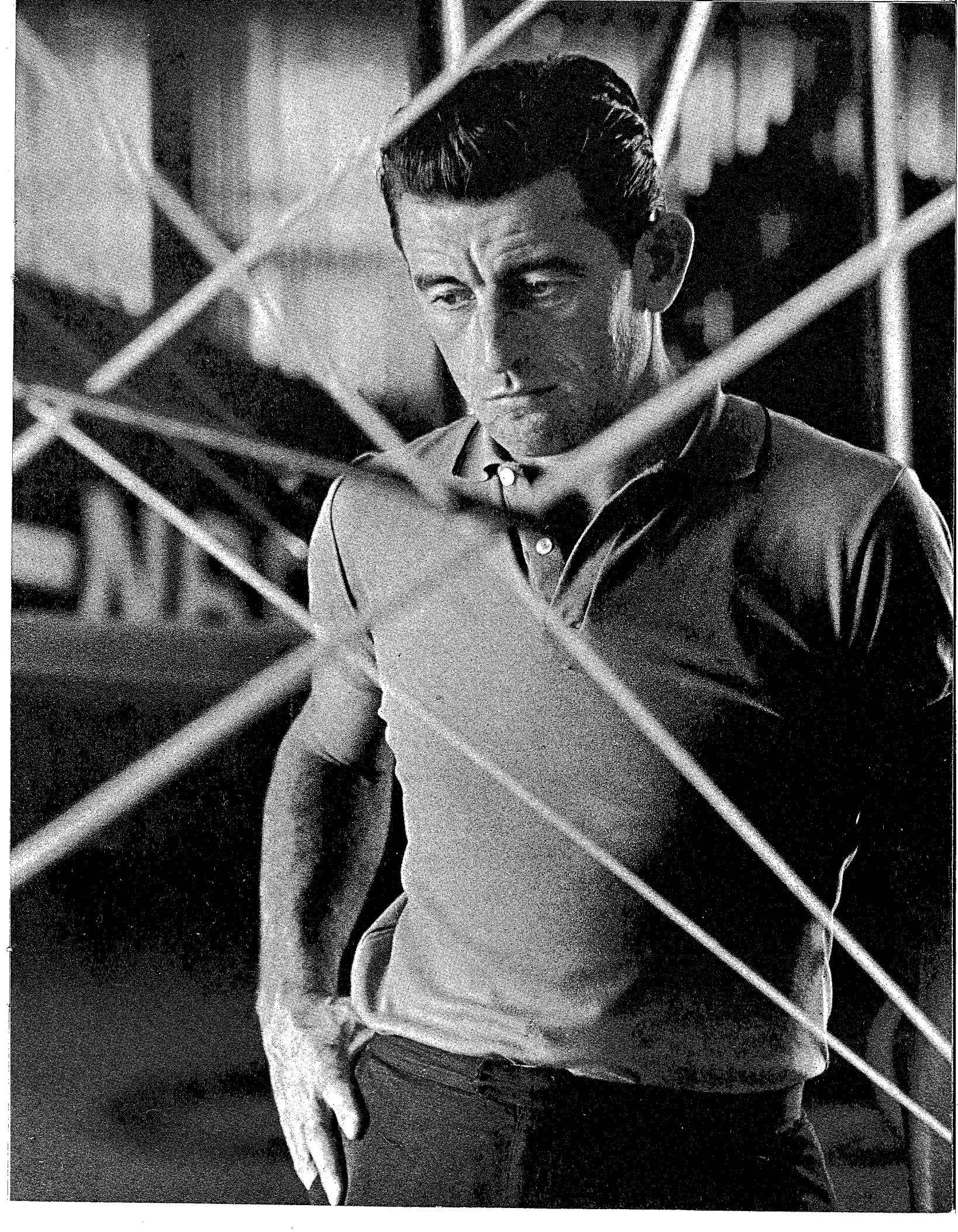
There was a brief violent struggle as the copilot bolted from his seat, ran into the gleaming arc of a heavy gunbarrel, and sagged to the floor.

"Lock him in the baggage compartment, Helmut, and then come back and fly copilot for me."

With the dissenting second pilot and six surprised communist officials locked away in the baggage compartment, Mira Slovak's worries had barely begun. If radar was tracking his aircraft, there could be no mistaking his plan, and klaxons would be shrieking that moment at interceptor stations on both sides of the iron curtain. The MiGs would shoot him down, if only to keep the world from knowing that anyone could be unhappy with communism. The American and West German Sabrejets would shoot, taking his radar-return for a bomber ready to launch World War Three. Slovak thought about the fighters and eased his transport lower, until it just cleared the treetops in the moonlight.

Half an hour later, there were neon lights in the

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villages, and he had to bank sharply to dodge church steeples. The border had been crossed. Slovak climbed the transport away from the ground, and Helmut took its microphone and his best English in hand.

"Hallo, Frankfurt Radar Control. We are Czechoslovakian Airlines DC-3 from Prague, escaping the communism. We have no bombs on board. Permission please to landing at Frankfurt Airport."

At 9:55 P.M., surrounded by sirens, flashing red beacons and military security vehicles, the great black tires of the Czech transport rolled to a stop at Frankfurt am Main, and its engines went quiet. At 9:59 P.M., at the instant he stepped down from the airplane into political asylum, Mira Slovak said goodbye to his country; to his home; to a calm, routine \$1,600-per-month job flying airplanes. He came to the west without knowing a word of English, with two uniform shirts packed in a flight bag. His only other possession was a tenuous thing called freedom.

The headlines in the morning papers were the western world's first notice of Miroslav Slovak, airline pilot, lately of Prague, Czechoslovakia. They were not to be its last.

In the sunny July of United States 1963, a pack of giant Unlimited-class racing hydroplanes blasted the water of Idaho's Lake Coeur d'Alene into white stripes and roostertails, roaring 180 miles per hour down the long blue straightaways; two of them raging in battle for the number one position. High on the press platform, a radio announcer spoke steadily into his microphone, absorbed in the battle:

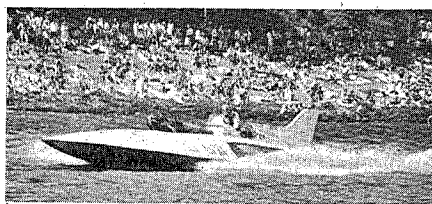
"...and chopped off real close, boy, got buried off there. They are bunching close to the outside right now, Mira Slovak in **Miss Exide** is refusing to give ground, and takes over the inside corner. This is turning into a grudge match between Bill Muncey and Mira Slovak, the Czech freedomflyer. They come down nose-to-nose..."

The faint wisp-drone in the microphone changed quickly to the scream of racing engines blazing full throttle into the turn.

"...here comes **Miss Exide** now, with Muncey less than a boat-length away, closing up the gap, and... **MIRA SLOVAK HAS DISINTEGRATED! HE HAS DISINTEGRATED, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! THEY'LL HAVE TO GET OUT THERE REAL FAST, THE FLARES HAVE GONE OFF THE RACE**

IS STOPPED AND EXIDE HAS GONE DOWN! THE BOAT JUST SEEMED TO DISINTEGRATE RIGHT ACROSS THE FINISH LINE THE BOAT HAS DISAPPEARED WE SEE A HEAD IN THE WATER, IT LOOKS LIKE A HELMET IN THE WATER AND COLONEL GARDNER IS OVER THE SIDE, GETTING TO HIM..."

In a thousand sports pages across the country that evening came a photograph of a giant burst of white water, filled with blurred shreds of boat-pieces, and the tiny figure of a man thrown 150 miles per hour onto the surface of Lake Coeur d'Alene. A thousand captions mentioned that the driver was a Czechoslovakian refugee who had flown across the iron curtain to freedom, and that he was expected to live. It was announced, however, that he would never race again.



One year later, the press platform was set above the sagebrush just north of Reno, Nevada, and it mounted television and motion-picture cameras, pointing toward tall orange-checked pylons rising out of the desert. For the first time since 1949, the National Air Races were running, and there in the main event, the closed-course races for the Unlimited-class airplanes, was a stubby all-white Grumman Bearcat fighter, pitting itself against a field of sleek P-51 Mustangs.

Again the howl of great engines in the microphones, and as the big machines slammed into shuddering tight turns around the pylons, 12 million people watched through the cameras.

"...out of the first turn at the scatter pylon, it is Bob Love breaking ahead in **Miss Bardahl**, followed by Clay Lacy in number... and **LOOK AT THAT** through a hole in the pack and right down on the deck is that big white Bearcat going wide open...and taking the inside corner around the number two pylon it is Mira Slovak, the refugee, and **look at him go!**"

In telephoto lenses, now and then, the cameras caught bits of sagebrush flying from the white racer's propeller blades. The Mustangs flew twenty feet above the desert, the Bearcat flew half that high, 400 miles per hour in the straightaways, streaking into turns with instant hard vertical banks.

When the dust of the race and the flying bits of sagebrush had settled, the cameras hurried to cluster about a

stubby white airplane striped gray in engine-oil, heat waves boiling from its cowl; and about the new National Champion of Unlimited Pylon Racing, who turned out to be a refugee from communist Czechoslovakia, a new American citizen and, when he wasn't racing, an airline pilot once again, a second officer for Continental Airlines.

Television lenses zoomed to closeups of a tall black-haired pilot who had been hunted across western Europe by communist agents, who had been broken, burned and nearly drowned in eight years of hydroplane racing, and who had never seen a pylon until three days before the Air Races opened in Reno. Even on nationwide television, he called the pylons "buoys". The lenses held for a minute's interview, then they were gone and the races turned into an empty bank of bleachers in the sunset, a white Bearcat parked alone on the runway, and a tall black-haired pilot leaning against one narrow landing-gear strut of his borrowed racing-plane.

"They ask me why do I want to race, I getting all banged up and not allowed to keep any of the money because of my airline job, and maybe even losing the job if the company think is bad for people to hear about my racing. Publicity? To me, publicity is nothing, zero. But when I am out there racing, they are mentioning my country, Czechoslovakia. And the refugee situation is mentioned to the people who are watching. And in every article that is written about me is the escape from communism mentioned...one line only, maybe, but it is mentioned. This is my way of telling the American people that communism is a pretty big danger, if you don't watch out for it."



He carefully inspects the airplane tire as he talks, as though it should listen to what he has to say.

"People look at me racing and they say, 'he was airline captain in Czechoslovakia. That's a pretty good job. If anybody want to give up that job, and his home and his friends, maybe there's a good reason for it...!' This name Mira Slovak for a couple of three days they will remember, then they will forget. But I think they are always going to remember the refugee from Czechoslovakia and the guy who escaped communism, and be thankful for the free country that is America." He taps his fist lightly against the steel of the landing gear. "You want to know why I race? That's why I race."

Slovak's airshow biplane speaks the same language as her pilot. The Czech-built Bucker Jungmann was the first major purchase he made after he joined Continental Airlines. A meticulously painted golden-lion crest of Free Czechoslovakia stands the full height of its rudder, and in small gold letters under the cockpit-rim: "The Poor Refugee". Slovak flew the biplane in the national aerobatic competition, a side-event at the Air Races, although it was drastically under-powered for aerobatic flying in the thin air of Reno's high desert.

"I am married to that little Bucker, but it is sitting up here in the dust. I flew it up here and I leave it here for the people to see. When I walk by, and it's all covered with dust, I don't look at it, or I shouldn't, because when I fly I spend half an hour to fly and half a day to cleaning it and polish. Now it is sitting in the dust and don't think that it isn't hurting me to see it that way. But I have to pay some kind of a price for the idea of the Air Races and to maybe have people stop for a minute and look at it and think this same thing again, that this airplane is here because America is the only country in the world where you can truly be free. And that's worth any price, to be free." He turned suddenly from the airplane. "My God, anybody who want to be a communist in this country has got a mental problem!"

Slovak seizes every chance he can to speak to service clubs, to schools—to anyone who will listen to him. It is a quiet talk that he gives, about his escape, about racing, and a very little bit at the end about what it felt like to live in a land where the State has become all-powerful. The duty of a refugee, he feels, is not to aimlessly wander the world, but to find the free people, and see that they do not take their freedom for granted.

"Most Americans don't know too

much about communism as far as what it is really like inside. I try to remind them not to listen to what communists say: everybody happy, and sharing things together, and big peace slogans. I tell them the misery and the terrible things which been happening in my country. Over there, they have only one way of keeping the communism on the people, and that is dictatorship, and force, and the secret police. Americans have heard all this before, but I think is important never to forget. . . in this country, a man can always be worth something; in communist country, a man is worth nothing."

Slovak moves to pace slowly back and forth in the darkness growing under the wing of his borrowed racer. "So I race, and I try very hard to win. The publicity when you win the race gets you on top, and from there you can reach the people. They wouldn't let me fight the communist in Korea, now they won't let me fight in Viet Nam; so this is my very simple way, my little way of fighting communists for what they did to my country."

Mira Slovak's strange battle is a long one, but an easy one to follow, for it is all fought in the newspapers and magazines of his adopted country:

"Bill Boeing's racing hydroplane **Miss Wahoo** and its immigrant driver set a new lap record on Lake Washington today. . ."

"REFUGEE WINS REGATTA!"

"Mira Slovak, refugee from communism, realized the dream of his life today by capturing the President's Cup on the Potomac River. About 50,000 people saw the former Czechoslovakian airline pilot drive Bill Boeing's hydroplane **Wahoo** to victory in one of the world's most prized powerboat races. . ."

"... **Miss Wahoo**, with her colorful freedom-flying driver, will be racing today. . ."

"... when asked if it wasn't the wildest ride since he stole an airplane behind the iron curtain and escaped to freedom, the daredevil Czech just grinned. . ."

"Mira Slovak, the intrepid Czech refugee, has been named to the Hydroplane Hall of Fame. . ."

"**MIRA SLOVAK U.S. CITIZEN NOW**"

"... champion hydroplane driver Mira Slovak, a refugee who escaped communist Czechoslovakia, said he plans to enter the National Air Races. . ."

"**CZECH REFUGEE NEW AIR RACE CHAMP**"

Today, the Poor Refugee is an airline captain once again, flying Boeing 727 jet transports for Continental Airlines instead of DC-3s for Cskoslovenskè Aerolinie.

And today, knowing what he has done to tell the story of that escape to free people everywhere, and watching him at air shows and around the racing pylons of his adopted America, you can't help but think that here is that rare strange sight—a happy man. ~

