

Speaker Series – *The Golden Maze: a biography of Prague* with Richard Fidler

Interviewer: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner Library Speaker series. We'd like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and the Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced. Today, we're joined by writer and broadcaster Richard Fidler. For more than a decade now, he's presented his national radio show, *Conversations with Richard Fidler* on ABC Radio. *Conversations* podcast is the most popular in Australia with more than six million program downloads a month. Richard is also a bestselling author, publishing his first book, *Ghost Empire* in 2016 and co-authoring *Saga Land: the Island Stories at the Edge of the World* the following year. Richard is joining us today to discuss his newly published third title, *The Golden Maze: a biography of Prague*. Welcome, Richard.

Richard Fidler: Thank you for having me.

Interviewer: [00:00:43] So I'll start with my first question. In the opening chapter of *The Golden Maze* as you describe your first trip to Prague in early 1990, which coincided with the last days of the Velvet Revolution, the Czech people were celebrating the recent end for decades of communist rule. Vaclav Havel had just been installed as the president of the new republic and the atmosphere was festive and optimistic. Can you speak a little bit about this and how it inspired you to write this book 30 years later?

Richard Fidler: [00:01:07] At that time I was living in London with a comedy group that I was a part of way back in the day. We were performing a theatre season and '89 was Europe's Year of Miracles, where one by one the old Stalinist police states set up after the Second World War just fell down. Those governments all fell down in a wave of popular uprisings. First it was Poland and then Hungary and then East Germany, and when the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, I was kind of jumping out of my skin just absolutely wanting to be there because it wasn't far from where I was living at the time, you know, London, that's just down the road by Australian standards. So when our theatre season ended, I met up with my girlfriend and we went to Berlin, first of all, and we had a pretty amazing time there, which I haven't written about in the book, because it's just not germane, because it's not about Prague. But

after Berlin, we went straight to Prague, which was then the capital of the nation of Czechoslovakia, which was, I thought, I found myself amongst the happiest group of people in the world at the time. They'd overthrown a particularly cruel regime,

And the festive winter atmosphere in Prague was just fantastic. It was just so joyful and and fun and a bit mad. Everyone not quite believing this happy, happy accomplishment. The history of the 20th century in Prague had been so, so full of horror and disappointments and repeated invasions first, you know, from Nazi Germany and then the Soviet Union in 68. It just seems things had turned out far better than anyone could possibly have hoped. Vaclav Havel had been at the helm of this peaceful revolution which took the name the Velvet Revolution. And suddenly these cruel apparatchiks had been turfed out of Prague Castle and out of the Central Committee building and replaced by Vaclav Havel, this absurdist playwright, with wonderful instincts, a great sense of dignity and a desire to restore dignity and democracy to to his own people. So the whole thing was like a giant ongoing party in a place which just at the time also happened to have the best and cheapest beer in the world, so you can see why that was. It was a kind of a wonderful time and a place to be there.

Interviewer: [00:03:15] It sounds absolutely amazing. But in chapter eight of the book, you mention a conversation that you had with prolific Czech author Marek Toman. And he was giving you a tour of Czernin Palace, which now houses the Czech Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And you asked him what it means to live in a small nation that becomes the plaything of great and terrible neighbours. And I think he answered you, "it means that every situation feels temporary. When things are good, it feels like it can't last for too long." And you replied to him, "and yet the bohemians built this city like it was going to be here forever to be enjoyed forever." And I thought this quote brilliantly summed up Prague's turbulent history, and enduring beauty and spirit of artistic and intellectual inquiry. And the history you detail so beautifully in the book depicts a city often subject to the political will of external powers, whether it was the Holy Roman Empire or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Nazi Germany or Mother Russia. This imposition is often without consultation or against the will of its people. What are your thoughts on the impact of this on Prague's community and cultural identity?

Richard Fidler: [00:04:21] The Czernin Palace itself was a good place to sort of start thinking about that. The Czernin Palace is in the castle district of Prague. It's a

great big, hulking baroque monolith of a building. It's probably the biggest and probably the ugliest baroque structure in Prague. It's just a sort of a big arrogant pile. And as you say, I was there with my friend Marek Toman, who's an author, and also a diplomat who works in the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Marek has written a novel where the main character is the Czernin Palace itself, who's a bit difficult and a bit grumpy and falls, falls in love with the beautiful and sweet convent that's across the road. So Marek was showing me around and explaining the history of the place to me, which I knew a little bit of, but he gave me the full history of it. The Czernin Palace was built in the 1700s by a sort of disgruntled nobleman in the Hapsburg Empire who had been overlooked by the emperor and thought he'd build a bigger palace than Prague Castle down the road so he could look down on the emperor. And it's that, it's that petty. And so he built this big monstrosity of a palace that is just a little bit higher.

So you can slightly look down on, on the emperor's castle just down the road, the more famous Prague Castle. And, walking around it Marek was showing me these famous rooms. In one of the rooms he showed me this was where the Nazi commandant, Reinhard Heydrich, had his office. There was Hitler's second in command, really, who was Hitler's sort of governor of of Prague and Bohemia during the Second World War. This incredibly cruel figure, perhaps the most vicious and coldest of the Nazis. It was Heydrich that came up with the final solution, that chaired the meeting on the final solution for the Jewish people of the German Reich. And it was in Prague that Reinhard Heydrich was assassinated by a Czech and Slovak assassin who'd been trained especially for the job. And the response to that from Nazi Germany was fierce. Hitler ordered an entire village, several thousand people to be murdered in retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. So I'm walking through the corridors of this palace and, you know, here's where Reinhard Heydrich had his desk. And then he took me into another part of the palace in the corner, which was the office where the foreign minister used to have his personal living space.

And the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia in the immediate post-war period was a lovely man named Jan Masaryk, who was a charming man who played the piano, and we sat at his grand piano that was there looking out over the snowy sort of castle district of Prague. And, this was after the Nazis were kicked out at the end of the Second World War by the Red Army, by the Soviet army. And after just three years of a sort of a half baked restoration of democracy, a Stalinist coup d'etat took place and a Stalinist regime

was put in that became made the country, the vassel state of the Soviet Union. And it was here that he showed me the bathroom where Jan Masaryk fell to his death in 1948. It was said that he committed suicide because he was so unhappy about this or that. But almost certainly he was murdered, and almost certainly he was murdered by assassins from the KGB who or the NKVD or MGB or whatever they were called at the time. And he showed me the spot where Jan Masaryk fell from the window and where his body was discovered at dawn the following day.

And this, with his death, that was the last hope for democracy in 1948. So that's that's why I had that feeling, while I was there in that room looking out over the castle district of Prague, just this feeling of how tragic that century was, and how contingent it all is, as as Marek said. And I think that feeling of that is always there amongst them. It's a feeling that Australians aren't really very familiar with, unless they're Australians who have arrived here from countries which have had a more horrific past and they've arrived here as refugees. Most Australians just aren't familiar with that idea that the whole existence of the country can be changed. Your country can be invaded by a much bigger power that is just there across the border. No matter how decent a democracy you build, which is what they did in the interwar years, they built a very decent democracy, that it was a proper democracy and offered human rights to all its citizens.

Well, it was smashed by Hitler and again, it was smashed after that by Stalin. So it just gives this is a whole different feeling about the 20th century. The thing that they learnt from the 20th century in particular in that country and in that city, was they took a very different lesson from it than Westerners did or people in the English speaking democracies.

I think when we think of what happened in World War Two, in places like Australia, the United States, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the like, we sort of tend to see it as there was this great and evil power in the middle of Europe. The democracies were slow to rouse themselves, but when they did, there was the kind of moral weight of the universe behind them, demanding a kind of a victory over the forces of evil. And so it came to pass. The forces of darkness in Hitler's Germany were profoundly and utterly defeated, and the good guys were completely triumphant. But people who live in the Czech Republic, people who live in Poland and in other parts of

that part of the world, they had to draw a different lesson. They'd had, like I said, a proper democracy. They'd had human rights. They thought they were a member of the Club of Democracies in the 1930s. But it turned out the Western democracies were feeble and didn't come to their rescue. And so they saw a perfectly decent nation smashed by Nazi Germany and then occupied by Stalinist Russia. So when you do that, you don't walk away after World War Two with this thing that, good triumphed over evil because they saw that it didn't. And and I think you can't help but see the world and your own future very differently once you've been through that that kind of an experience.

Interviewer: [00:09:49] Yeah, it's something that's quite universal in small European countries, isn't it? It is very difficult for Australians to relate to, as you mentioned.

Richard Fidler: Yes. Yes, indeed.

Interviewer: So one of the other aspects of Prague that you mentioned in the book is its rich cultural and literary tradition, which a lot of people are familiar with. It's a very popular image of Prague. Many examples pop up in the book from traditional fairy and folk tales, which are the scary kind, not the ones that we're familiar with, to Kafka of course. I was thrilled to find that Mozart gets a mention, as does legendary womanizer Casanova, who I was very chuffed to find out spent his senior years employed as a librarian.

Richard Fidler: Yes, he did.

Interviewer: Just outside Prague. So Prague seems to have an enduring appeal to writers, artists, musicians over time. Why do you think this is and do you think it's still the case?

Richard Fidler: [00:10:41] Prague itself, its name in Czech means threshold. And there's a wonderful legend about that, about the witch, Princess Libuse, who was said to have founded the city. She's a legendary figure. There's no evidence that she existed other than the fact that she's mentioned in these old folk tales. The most likely real reason though, for Prague getting its name as threshold, is that it was set up as a kind of a trading post at a place where it was easier to cross the Vltava River or the

Moldau River, as the Germans call it, on the Central European Silk Road, went through Central Europe between Spain and then China. So it was called threshold because it was a place where you could cross the river. That seems like the most likely explanation. But it also has this lovely secondary meaning. And I see Prague as a place where strange creatures of the imagination have crossed the threshold of Prague into our world. It's Prague where we get the story of the Jewish Golem created by Rabbi Lowe from scraps of river mud from the Vltava River, a monster made out of clay, who's a guardian of the Jewish community and who then sort of runs goes runs wild. It's Prague where the word robot enters the language. That appeared in a play written in the 1920s by the Czech playwright Karel Capek, who wrote a play called *R.U.R*, where you see these artificial humanoids on stage that he called robots, which robot comes from a Czech work, which means forced labour.

And it was Prague where Franz Kafka wrote *Metamorphosis* and Prague's never mentioned in *Metamorphosis*, it's never mentioned in *The Trial*, but you just feel that the landscape of Prague, the cityscape of Prague, is throughout both those stories. And it's in *Metamorphosis* that you have his character, Gregor Samsa, waking up one day to find himself transformed into a huge cockroach. So Prague seems to be the natural place where these creatures of the imagination come into the world, this threshold. It's also a crossroads of Europe. There's a wonderful drawing I found, a print from - God I don't know when - I think it might have been from the 17th century, which drew the map of Europe as looking like a great lady on her side, and her heart is where Prague is, where Bohemia is. So Prague has been this point of intersection between the Western Slavs, between the Germans and the Jewish people of the area. And the same time, you always had Polish people, Hungarian people and a great many German people and Jewish people living in the city on an ongoing basis. So it's always been this crossover point. That's been the plus side, if you like, the upside of having great and terrible neighbours on your border. It does mean that your city can be a point of intersection between all these nearby cultures. And at the same time, the Czechs want to insist on their own distinct culture and reasonably so because they've always worried that they would have it going to be subsumed by their greater and more powerful neighbours.

Interviewer: [00:13:23] Prague's changed a lot over time, and modern day Prague has become a tourism hotspot. The figures you quote in the book, that in the two decades between 2000 and 2019 - which is when you last visited - annual visitor numbers, have

jumped from 2.6 million to just under eight million, which is huge. And I love to quote from one of your interview subjects, Vratislav Brabenec, a former political activist, musician and member of the brilliantly named People of the Plastic Universe, and he said “once it was Russian soldiers, now it's tourists. I can't decide which one is worse.” You spent some time in Prague last year while researching this book. How does this modern day Prague compare with the one that you first visited 30 years ago?

Richard Fidler: [00:14:04] Oh, yeah, I thought a lot about this. I mean, there are there are so many tourists in Prague. Well, up until the COVID crisis, there have been so many tourists in Prague, so many, so many at even the middle of winter. The Charles Bridge, when it's not snowing, is still full of sightseers and tourists. And I wondered if I even had a right to complain about that, given I'm I'm just one of them, you know. But I can I can complain, I suppose, but it seems unfair to do so.

One of the problems about having the place loved to death like that is firstly, it drives the locals from the city centre, which is happening in beautiful cities, picturesque cities all over the world. It's even happening in Hobart, you know, where people can no longer afford to live in the city centre, when the landlords can rent their place out as an Airbnb. And so then the character, then this charming centre of the city is given over to people wandering around from elsewhere who don't stay and who contribute nothing other than what they bring to tourist industries.

It means there's been an exodus of, you know, significant shops, you know, shops that once sold. Well, to be honest, to be honest, I don't think there were shops under the communist regime that sold nothing much in particular. There were shops that sold under communism, as I recall, that sold like about ten different kinds of mineral water. And that was that was sold as medicine, like mineral water from, you (inaudible) would be given for arthritis, whereas a mineral water from (inaudible) would be given for headaches or migraines or something like that. All those shops are gone, of course, and they've been replaced by the kind of touristy shops we often see in the main central malls in Australian cities that ones in Australia that sell novelty boomerangs and, you know, kangaroo paw can openers and tea towels with Uluru on them. Today in Prague you find instead, shops that sell matryoshka dolls - which are actually Russian rather than Czech - bottles of absinthe and Franz Kafka tea towels, but not Kafka's books. There is all of that. That's the price I think they've paid to fix up the city. When I first

went there and with the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, the place was sagging and falling down. The upkeep of the buildings just it was in a bad state. There was a lot of scaffolding.

The buildings were grimy and rundown, but they had a kind of a charm to it, I thought at the time, I kind of love that. When I went there for the first time, I was able to stay in this hotel on Wenceslas Square called the Grand Hotel Europa, which is being renovated at the moment, being turned into a five star business hotel. But when I went there in January 1990, it was this Art Nouveau palace with incredibly ornate and beautiful fittings with threadbare carpet and wallpaper peeling. And it was it was a bargain. It was it was incredibly cheap to stay there. The lobby was full of people working for the secret police, which gave it a kind of a seedy glamour. And they were some of the rudest hotel staff I've ever encountered in my life. So, it has changed profoundly and part of the price of that as well, by having the streets so full of tourists, is that during those daylight hours, it's lost a little bit of that magic. It's lost a little bit of that eeriness, that prickling sense of strangeness that I detected when I was first there. But you can still get that feeling, at late at night and very, very early in the morning.

I found that if you cross the bridge at like 2 am, that Charles Bridge at 2am, or walk through parts of Mala Strana or the old town in those wee small hours, you again, you get that prickling feeling of oddness, of something that's about to appear but never quite does, which is a delicious feeling. And I'm glad to say you can still get that feeling, but you need to be alone in the streets to have it.

Interviewer: [00:17:31] It's a shame, isn't it? Either that or go in the middle of winter.

Richard Fidler: [00:17:35] Go in the middle of winter there's still a bazillion tourists there I'm afraid. That's when I was there. There's absolutely nothing for it. They are trying to do something about it. They are sick to death, of hordes of young British men arriving on stag nights to get themselves massively drunk on tons of beer and end up puking in the streets. I mean, they're a bit, they're a bit tired of that.

Interviewer: It's the scourge of Europe.

Richard Fidler: It's the scourge of Europe, I'm afraid. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's interesting to go there as an Australian. They think of Australians by and large as being cultured people, but the Brits are total bogans in their mind.

Interviewer: Just don't get mistaken for one. That's the important thing.

Richard Fidler: That happened to me once. You know, and this is where it brings again to the kind of the long arm of history. When I was there in 1990, someone heard me in a bar, the beer halls there, because they heard me speaking English and assumed I was British and came up to me and said, "Oh. Why did you do it?" I said, "what are you talking about?" He went, "Oh, Chamberlain. Appeasements. 1938. You people. You sold out our country."

Interviewer: [00:18:32] But that is such a heartbreaking story.

Richard Fidler: [00:18:35] Oh, it's a it's a terrible story how the British and the French sold them out. It's a terrible story.

Interviewer: [00:18:39] And I'm not surprised that that's something that's embedded in the national memory. So I've just got time for one last question. And, as this is a library podcast, we always finish by asking for reading recommendations. Do you have any suggestions for our listeners?

Richard Fidler: [00:18:54] Yes. I have been using the COVID crisis to, I've been forcing myself - not forcing myself but, because I always have to read so much for my my radio program. I am trying to go back to reading more slowly and for pleasure. Let's say I don't enjoy the books I have to read for my show, but you know what I mean. Picking a book of my own choice rather than having it put in front of me, is a real pleasure. So, I've gone back to a couple of classics that I've always meant to read and and I finally read them. And the first of those was *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, whose real name is, of course, Mary Ann Evans, which I discovered is so completely wonderful. I know if you've read it, but it's it's one of the absolute classics of English nineteenth century English literature. And it just contains a whole universe within this little small town that it takes place in. And it's a truly great novel because you read it and you think, oh, this is a novel about this. And then you go, oh, now, now I see it's actually

a novel about this. And you go, oh my God, it's actually about this. So, I love that feeling. And the precision of her language is amazing.

But I have to say, though, as much as I loved *Middlemarch*, the star book I've read over this year has been *The Master and Margarita* by the Russian novelist Mikhail Bulgakov, which is again another absolute classic written in the 1930s. It's an extraordinary novel of what happens when the devil comes to 1930s Moscow with these henchmen, one of whom is an assassin, another is a choirmaster, and the third one is this disgusting black cat. And it's intertwined with the story of Pontius Pilate. It's all done so brilliantly and thrillingly, and it's hilarious at the same time. And terribly moving. So, it's so wonderful to pick up books you've been meaning to read for ages that you know have been hailed as classics that you approach with high expectation and you go, "oh, man, this deserves all of the praise it's had over the decades."

Interviewer: [00:20:39] So it lived up to its reputation. Thank you so much, Richard. Thank you for your time.

Richard Fidler: [00:20:44] It's a pleasure. Thank you. Lovely to chat.

Interviewer: [00:20:46] If you'd like to hear more from Richard, *The Golden Days* has recently been published by Harper Collins and is available now at all good local booksellers. We also have several copies available via our online catalogue in book, e-book and e-audio formats. While you're there you can also check out Richard's previous titles or take advantage of some of his reading suggestions. You can find many of these titles in several formats available for reservation in our online library catalogue. Thank you for listening and look out for more upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library What's On and social media channels.