



# Christmas in Prague

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OXFORD BOOKWORMS

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GLOSSARY

ACTIVITIES: **Before Reading**

ACTIVITIES: **While Reading**

ACTIVITIES: **After Reading**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Christmas 1957

**I**t is night, and the fields near the village are white with snow. The village is quiet, but not everybody is sleeping. Eyes are watching the roads and the fields near the village, because this is Czechoslovakia and the year is 1957. Across the fields, only half a kilometre away, is the Austrian border, but the people of Czechoslovakia are not free to go to Austria. The border guards watch day and night – and they carry guns.

In a house in the village a man and a woman are talking. The woman holds a six-month-old baby boy in her arms. She is excited, but she is afraid, too.



*The border guards watch day and night.*

‘Tell me again,’ she says. ‘Did he get to Austria all right last night?’

‘Yes, he did,’ the man says. ‘Nobody saw him, nobody heard him. But last night was easy because the sky was dark. Tonight it’s more difficult – look at that moon!’

‘But it’s Christmas night,’ the woman says, ‘and the guards are

*drinking in the guardhouse, yes?’*

*‘That’s true,’ says the man, ‘but sometimes they come out and drive up and down the road for a time. So you must be careful, and you must run fast – very fast.’ He looks at his watch. ‘It’s time to go.’*

*The woman puts on a white coat and a white hat. The baby wears a white coat too, and the woman carries him on her back.*

*‘Good,’ the man says. ‘White is best when there’s snow. Nobody can see you. Now, are you ready? Let’s go.’*

*They leave the house and walk quickly out of the village. After a time they stop and the man says, very quietly:*

*‘OK. Do you see those trees? Turn right there and go fifty metres. When you come to the road, go across it quickly and run down the hill through the trees. Then you come to the river. Turn left and go 500 metres. The trees finish there and you can walk through the river easily. Across two more fields, and you’re in Austria. Our friends are waiting for you in the second field. Go now. Goodbye – and good luck!’*





*sound is the crying of the baby.*

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**England 1995**

‘**H**ey, Jan, look at this!’ Carol said. She had a letter in her hand and took it across to her husband at the breakfast table. ‘It’s from the Oxford Orchestra,’ she said. ‘They’re giving concerts in the Czech Republic this Christmas. They’re doing three concerts in Prague and they’re asking me to go because they need a harpist. Shall we go to Prague for Christmas? I can play with the orchestra, and you can come with us.’

‘When are the concerts?’ asked Jan. ‘I always have a lot of work in the weeks before Christmas. I must finish writing my new book then.’

Jan taught Czech at Oxford University and wrote books about languages. He was born in Czechoslovakia, but came to England with his father when he was very young. He met Carol when she was one of his students at university.

‘The first concert is on December 20th,’ Carol answered. ‘Are you free then?’

‘No, I’m sorry, Carol,’ Jan said, ‘but I can’t come before December 24th.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter. You can come for the second concert. It’s on December 25th.’

‘But what about my father?’ said Jan. ‘We can’t go away and leave him at Christmas time. He loves a family Christmas with us – you know that.’





*Jan's father came slowly into the room.*

Josef Vlach was sixty-eight years old, and his eyes were bad. He couldn't see very well, so he lived with Carol and Jan.

'Josef can come with us,' Carol said. 'He often talks about Prague at Christmas. He says it's the most beautiful time of the year there because of all the snow on the old buildings.'

'I know,' said Jan. 'But he only talks about Prague. He never wants to go there. Every time we ask him to come with us, he says no. I don't know why, but I think it's because of my mother. When he thinks about Prague, he remembers her. You know, sometimes he cries when he looks at his photo of her – after all these years!'

Just then the door opened and Jan's father came slowly into the room.

'Good morning,' he said, and sat down at the table. 'Is there any coffee?'

'It's cold now,' said Carol. 'Shall I make you some more?'

'Thank you, my dear,' he answered. 'You're very good to me.'

Carol went out for some coffee. Jan looked at his father carefully. 'I must ask him now,' he thought, 'while Carol is out of the room.'

'You're very quiet, Jan,' said the old man. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, no,' said Jan quickly. 'Nothing's wrong. It's just ... I want to ask you a question, but I ... I ... it's difficult.'

Jan stopped. His father smiled.

'Difficult? Why is it difficult? Are you afraid of an old man?'

'Of course not,' said Jan. 'But I *am* afraid of your answer. You see, Carol wants to go very much. She loves playing her harp, but it's Christmas time and—'

'Stop!' said Josef. 'What are you talking about? Where does Carol want to go at Christmas?'

'To Prague,' said Jan. 'And I would like to go with her. We want you to come too.'

'Ah!' said the old man. 'To Prague. I understand now.'

The room was suddenly very quiet. Jan drank his cold coffee and waited.

The old man took something out of his pocket. It was a photograph of his dead wife, Jan's mother. He spoke very quietly – not to Jan, but to the photograph in his hand.

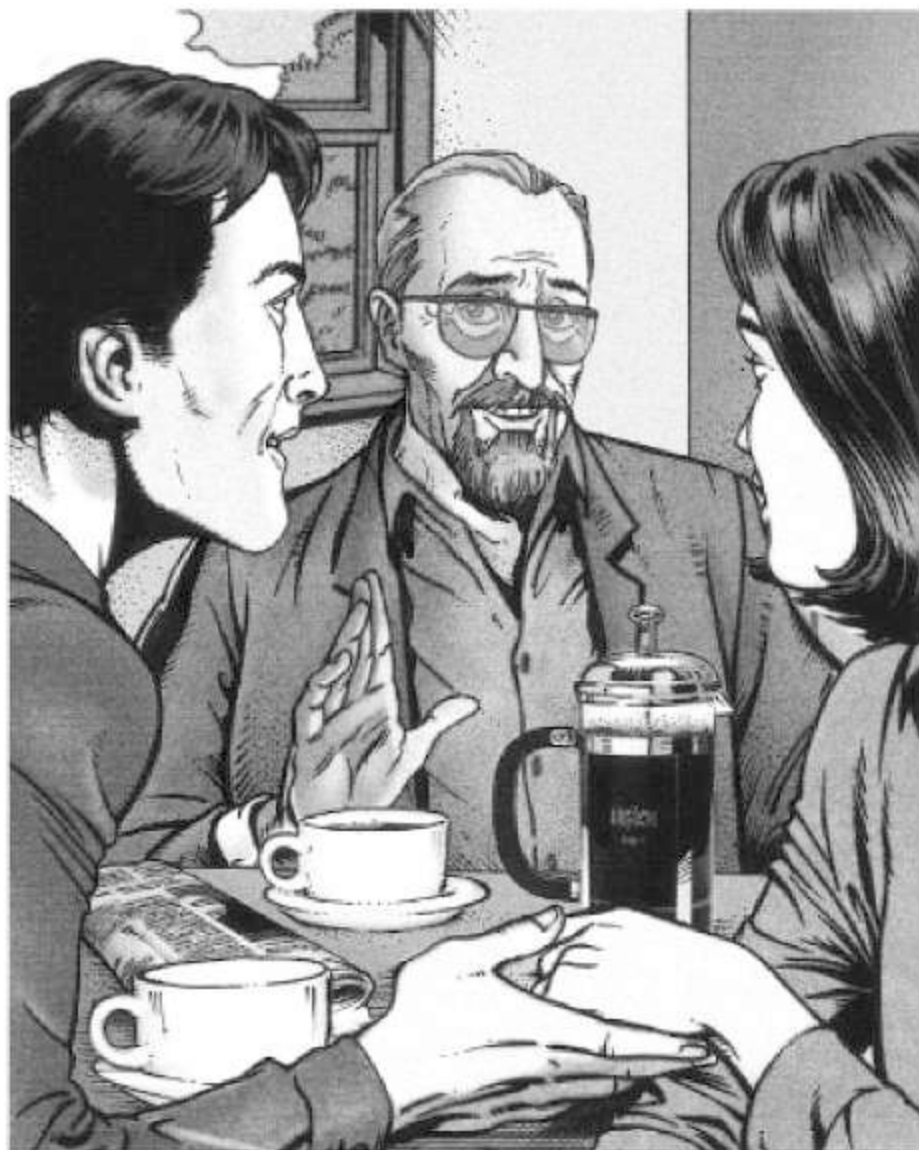
'Perhaps now ... before I die ... just once I can go back again ...'

Carol came back with some hot coffee. She looked at Josef, then at Jan.

'Shhh ... He's thinking about Prague,' Jan said quietly.

Carol put the coffee on the table and sat down. The hands on the clock slowly moved through two long minutes. Then the old man put the photograph back in his pocket.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Let’s all go to Prague for Christmas. It’s beautiful there when it snows. I remember it so well ... so very well.’



*‘Let’s all go to Prague for Christmas.’*

## The accident

The first rehearsal began at nine o'clock and finished at two o'clock.

'What a long morning!' everyone said.

'I'm sorry,' said the conductor, 'but we have very little time. The first concert is tomorrow night and a lot of important people are coming, so we must play well. Now please go and eat. This afternoon is free, so you can go and look at this beautiful city. Tomorrow morning we begin again at nine o'clock. Please don't be late!'



*'We must play well.'*

Carol left the rehearsal room with Alan, one of the first violinists.

'What are you going to do this afternoon, Carol?' Alan asked.

'I'm going to get a quick sandwich, and then I'm going shopping,' Carol said. 'My husband Jan and his father are arriving on Sunday. Monday is Christmas Day, and I haven't got any presents for them. I must find something this afternoon – our only free afternoon.'



*'I must find something this afternoon.'*

'See you tomorrow, then,' said Alan. 'And good luck with the shopping!'

'Thanks,' Carol said. 'There are some wonderful shops in the Stare Mesto, the old town, so I'm going down there.'

Carol went into a lot of shops that afternoon. In the end she got a book for Jan and a picture for his father. When she left the old town, it was nearly dark. It was very cold, so she walked quickly through the streets back to her hotel. There were Christmas trees in all the shop windows, and the city looked beautiful. There was a lot of noise too – people, cars, taxis, buses. 'Everybody's doing their Christmas shopping,' Carol thought.



*'Jan! Jan! It's me, Carol!'*

Suddenly she saw a man across the street. It was Jan! Why was he in Prague so soon?

'Jan!' she shouted across the street. But Jan didn't hear her. He walked on. Carol shouted again, very loudly.

'Jan! Jan! It's me, Carol!'

A lot of people stopped this time. They all looked at her. The man stopped too. He turned and looked at Carol for a minute, but he didn't smile and he didn't speak. It was a very long minute for Carol. Her husband's eyes were cold, and Carol began to feel afraid.





*There was a sudden noise and somebody shouted.*

Then he moved and began to walk away from Carol down a little street. Carol did not understand it, but she knew one thing – she did not want to lose him.

‘Perhaps he didn’t see me very well. It’s so dark now ... He’s going ... Where is he going? Jan, come back ... Are you ill?’

She ran across the street.

There was a sudden noise and somebody shouted. Two





*'Can you go to the hotel and look for her there?'*

Alan left. Half an hour later he was back.

'She's not at the hotel,' he said. 'I spoke to two or three people in the hotel, and they say that Carol wasn't there at breakfast this morning. And they think that she didn't sleep in her room last night.'

'I don't like this,' said the conductor. 'Carol is never late for rehearsals, and she knows that these concerts are important for us. I think we must tell the police.'

'Shall I do it now?' Alan asked.

'Yes,' said the conductor. 'Please go now.'

## Nobody understands Carol

Carol slowly opened her eyes. Her head hurt. She closed her eyes again.

A man said something. What was it?

'Carol,' she heard. 'Carol, can you hear me?'

'I can hear you,' Carol said. 'But I don't want to open my eyes. My head hurts. Who are you?'



*'Who are you?' asked Carol.*

'It's me, Giorgio Rinaldi, the conductor of the orchestra.'

'Mr Rinaldi?' Carol opened her eyes again. Her head didn't hurt so much this time.

'What are you doing in my bedroom?' she asked angrily. 'What's happening?'

‘This isn’t your bedroom,’ said Mr Rinaldi. ‘It’s a hospital in Prague. You had an accident yesterday. Can you remember anything about it?’

Suddenly Carol remembered everything. The old town ... the Christmas trees in the shop windows ... Christmas presents ... Jan ... *Jan!*

She sat up.

‘Jan! Where’s Jan?’ she asked Mr Rinaldi.

‘Please, Mrs Vlach,’ said a woman quietly. ‘Don’t get excited. Lie down again.’

Carol turned her head. It hurt again. Near the door of the room she saw a woman in a white coat – a doctor.

‘But I must see Jan,’ Carol said. ‘Where is he? I must find him ... I can’t ... Oh, dear.’ She put her hand to her head.

‘Who’s Jan?’ the doctor asked Mr Rinaldi quietly.

‘Her husband,’ he answered. He took Carol’s hand. ‘Listen, your husband is coming. We told him about the accident. He’s on a plane from London now.’

‘On a plane? Why? He’s here in Prague. I saw him in the street, near the old town. I called out to him, and he saw me, but he didn’t stop ... He just walked away from me. Please find him ... please ... I must talk to him ... I must...’

The doctor moved nearer to the bed.

‘Jan is coming soon, Mrs Vlach,’ she said. ‘Please don’t get excited. It’s not good for you. Now, lie down again and close your eyes. You must sleep, and I know you’re feeling very tired.’

Carol lay down and closed her eyes. The doctor was right. She was tired. But why didn’t they listen? Why didn’t they understand? Jan was in Prague, and she must find him ... talk to him ...

The doctor looked at Mr Rinaldi and spoke very quietly. ‘Let’s leave her now, please. She needs to sleep. You can come back later.’

Mr Rinaldi and the doctor left the room. They closed the



















## Who is Pavel?

The old man drank some water and looked up. ‘Pavel,’ he said. ‘I must ask you to look at this photo.’ He put his hand in his pocket and took out a photograph of a young woman. ‘Do you know this woman?’

‘Yes,’ said Pavel. ‘That’s a photo of my mother, Lenka. She died when I was very young. But my grandmother had many photos of her, and we often looked at them.’



*‘Do you know this woman?’*

‘Did you live with your grandmother when you were young?’

‘Yes, I did. But how do you know all this?’

‘Because,’ said Josef, ‘Lenka was my wife.’

‘Dad, what are you saying?’ said Jan.

Josef looked at Jan. ‘My boy, don’t be angry with me. I didn’t tell you many things about your mother. Perhaps I was wrong. But I wanted to forget ... not to forget your mother, only to forget that terrible night in 1957. Jan, this man Pavel is your twin brother. You can see that it’s true. Look at your faces.’

Pavel looked at Jan. ‘So, I have a brother,’ he said. ‘My grandmother never told me that.’

Jan smiled. ‘And my father – our father – never told *me* about a twin brother!’ He turned to Josef. ‘Dad, why didn’t you tell me?’

‘It’s a long story,’ said the old man. ‘It begins many years ago when a young man went to Prague University. He was there for seven years, and in his last year he met a beautiful young woman.’

His eyes turned to the photo.

‘She was so beautiful! Of course, the young man fell in love with her, and they got married in 1956. But things were difficult in Prague then. People were not happy and they were not free. Lenka and I, and a lot of our friends, wanted to change things. But it was dangerous work. The Russians knew about us and they watched us all the time. Then you two boys were born on a wonderful day in June 1957.’

‘But you went away,’ Pavel said angrily. ‘Your wife died, and you left the country. You went away to England and began a new life. You didn’t write, you didn’t telephone. You weren’t interested in me – your son!’

Josef’s face was very sad. ‘Pavel,’ he said. ‘I thought you were dead. Look. I must show you something.’ From behind the photo of his wife he took out a letter, and gave it to Pavel.



*'You weren't interested in me – your son!'*

The letter was old and yellow. Pavel opened it and began to read. The letter was in Czech, and it was his grandmother's writing.

I write to tell you, Josef, that your wife is dead. On Christmas night the guards shot her on the road at the border. She carried Pavel – your baby son, and my grandson – on her back, and the guards shot him too. Your wife, and your son, are dead. Your 'friends' came and told me yesterday.

You have Jan, and a new life in England. And what do I have? Nothing. You took one grandson away from me, and now my daughter and little Pavel are dead – because of you. Don't write to me, and don't come back to Prague. I never want to see you or hear from you again.

Stanislava

Slowly, Pavel put the letter down. 'I understand now,' he said quietly. 'What a terrible letter! How could she do that to you ... and to me?'

'Stanislava loved her daughter very much,' Josef said sadly.

‘She loved you, too, and didn’t want to lose you. I see that now. But she never liked me. And after that letter, how could I go back to Prague? You were dead, Lenka was dead ...’ He put his face in his hands.

The room was very quiet. Then Pavel put his hand on his father’s arm. ‘Stanislava is dead now,’ he said. ‘You and I can begin again ...’ He smiled. ‘And learn to be father and son.’

Josef’s face was wet with tears. He put his hand over Pavel’s hand and smiled back at him, but he could not speak. Now there were tears in everybody’s eyes.

After a minute or two Jan said, ‘Dad, I know it’s difficult for you. But can you tell us about that Christmas in 1957? How did it all happen? I’d like to know ...’

‘Yes,’ said his father. ‘You, and Pavel, must know.’ He turned to Pavel. ‘But what did Stanislava tell you?’

‘Very little,’ Pavel said. ‘She never wanted to talk about it. She told me that my mother died in hospital. And you went away to England. That was all.’

‘I can understand that,’ said Josef. ‘Poor Stanislava! She lost her daughter, because of me. And she never liked our work for freedom, you see. She didn’t understand. She just wanted a quiet family life.’

‘Christmas 1957 ...’ said Jan.

‘Yes,’ said Josef. ‘In October and November of that year things got more and more dangerous for Lenka and me. Our friends told us: “Leave, before the Russians get you. Get away to Austria, and then to England.” We didn’t want to leave Czechoslovakia, of course; it was our home. But we couldn’t stay. Our friends helped us, and Jan and I got across the border on the day before Christmas, December the 24th. It was night. There was no moon, and we got to Austria all right through the fields and the snow. But the next night ...’



*'Leave, before the Russians get you.'*

'December the 25th,' said Pavel. 'My grandmother told me the day. My mother died in a hospital bed in Prague, she said.'

'Lenka died in the snow, on the road at the border,' Josef said. 'She was so near Austria ... so near us ... with you, Pavel, on her back ...'

The old man's voice stopped, and again, he put his head in his hands.



















# Christmas in Prague

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## ACTIVITIES



## ACTIVITIES

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### *Before Reading*

**1** The title of the story is *Christmas in Prague*. Find the answers to these questions.

1 Where is Prague?

2 Was life in Prague in 1957 very different from life there in 1995? How?

**2** What do people do at Christmas in Britain and many other countries? Make three sentences. Use some of the words from this list.

*dinner, family, music, presents, children, holiday*

**3** Read the back cover of the book. How much do you know now about the story? Tick one box for each sentence.

	YES	NO
1 Carol and Jan are married.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Carol's father is called Josef.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Josef is English.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Josef lived in Prague a long time ago.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Josef is afraid to go back to Prague.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**4** Read the story introduction on the first page of the book. Are these sentences true (T) or false (F)? Change the false sentences into true ones.

1 Jan was born in London.

2 Jan's mother lives in Oxford with her son.

3 Josef often talks about his wife.

4 Josef has a photograph of Jan's mother in his pocket.

5 Carol plays the guitar.

6 Carol wants to go to Prague for Christmas.



## ACTIVITIES

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### *While Reading*

**Read Chapter 1. Underline the mistakes in this paragraph and then correct them.**

It is midday. This is Czechoslovakia and the year is 1967. Across the fields is the German border. In a house, a man and a woman are talking. The woman holds a baby girl in her arms. She puts on a black coat and a black hat. They leave the house and walk slowly out of the village. The man says goodbye and the woman begins to run. The baby opens his eyes and is very quiet. At the trees, the woman turns left and soon she is at the river. She sees a black car but the men in the car do not see her.

**Read Chapters 2 and 3, then answer these questions.**

*Who*

- 1 ... wanted to go to Prague to play in some concerts?
- 2 ... was writing a new book?
- 3 ... talked about Prague but never wanted to go there?
- 4 ... went shopping in Prague?
- 5 ... looked at Carol in the street, but didn't smile?
- 6 ... couldn't stop because there was no time?
- 7 ... was angry because Carol was not at the rehearsal?

**Before you read Chapter 4, can you guess what happens? Tick one box for each sentence.**

- |                                                          | YES                      | NO                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Carol is dead.                                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Carol is in hospital, but she can't remember anything. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Carol is in hospital and she is going to be OK.        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Read Chapters 4 and 5. Choose the best question-word for these questions, and then answer them.**

*Why / What / How*

- 1 ... did Carol feel when she woke up in hospital?
- 2 ... did Mr Rinaldi think that Carol was very ill?
- 3 ... was it a difficult time for Mr Rinaldi?
- 4 ... did Carol shout 'Jan' when she saw Pavel through the window in her door?
- 5 ... did Jan bring for Carol?
- 6 ... did the doctor say about Jan and Pavel?

**Read Chapters 6 and 7. Put these sentences in the correct order, and complete them. (Use as many words as you like.)**

- 1 Carol played in the concert and her family \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2 Pavel changed his name because \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3 Pavel found that he had a father, a brother \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4 Stanislava said Pavel was dead because \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5 Stanislava told Pavel that his mother died \_\_\_\_\_.

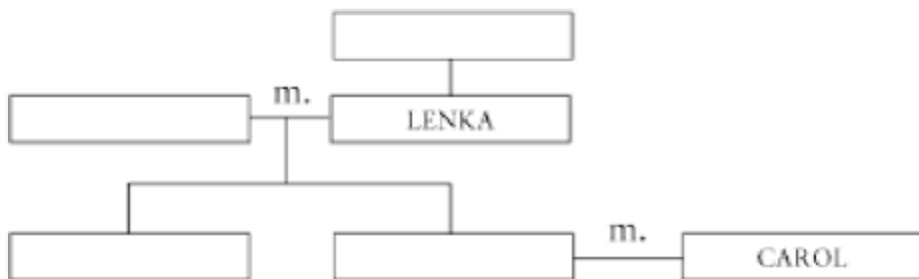
## ACTIVITIES

### *After Reading*

**1** Fill in the names in this family tree, and then write ten sentences about the people. Use these words.

*father, mother, son, grandmother, brother, wife, husband*

**Example:** *Josef is Jan's father.*



**2** What happened in 1956 and 1957? Match these halves of sentences and join them with these words.

*and / because / but / so*

- 1 Josef and Lenka got married
- 2 Josef and Lenka wanted to change things in Czechoslovakia
- 3 Josef and Lenka couldn't stay in Czechoslovakia
- 4 Josef carried Jan across the border on 24th December
- 5 Lenka tried to cross the border with Pavel on 25th December
- 6 Stanislava didn't want to lose Pavel
- 7 \_\_\_\_ she told Josef that his wife and son were dead.
- 8 \_\_\_\_ after that they went to England.
- 9 \_\_\_\_ had two sons, Jan and Pavel.
- 10 \_\_\_\_ it was dangerous.
- 11 \_\_\_\_ people were not free or happy.
- 12 \_\_\_\_ the guards shot her.

**3** Mr Rinaldi telephoned Jan to tell him about Carol's





### **Explain why.**

- 1 Stanislava was a bad person because she told Josef a lie.
- 2 Stanislava was very unhappy, not bad.
- 3 Josef and Lenka were wrong to do dangerous things when they had two babies.
- 4 Josef and Lenka were right to work for freedom; that was more important than their children.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joyce Hannam is an experienced teacher and lecturer. She has taught English in several European countries, including Greece, Spain, Turkey, and the Czech Republic. She now lives in York, in the north of England, and works mostly with Japanese university students and business people from Germany, Italy, France and Spain. Her stories for the Oxford Bookworms Library also include *The Death of Karen Silkwood* (at Stage 2), in the True Stories series.

Joyce Hannam is married to a musician and has one young daughter. All three of them enjoy singing at all times and in all places. Her story *Christmas in Prague* was inspired by a visit to that city.