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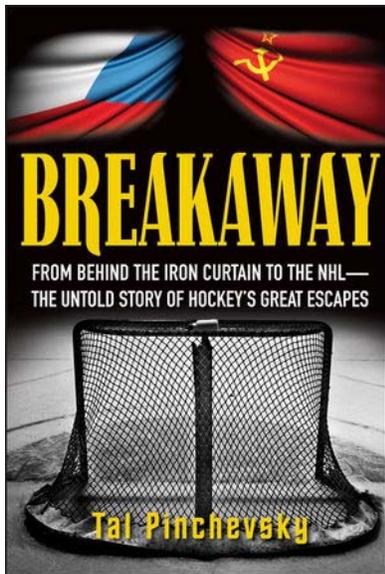
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## Pinchevsky's *Breakaway* scores for freedom itself

Book Review by Josh Brewster | Hockeytalk.biz

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October 2, 2012 – It's hard to believe that it's taken so long to see a definitive work published on the critical story of hockey player defections from behind the Iron Curtain prior to the fall of communism.

While the NHL has been transformed permanently by the mass emigrations which came as a result, the vital story of breathtakingly brave risks taken by so-called privileged athletes is one that has received short shrift in the post-Cold War world.

Tal Pinchevsky's *Breakaway: From Behind the Iron Curtain to the NHL – The Story of Hockey's Great Escapes* emerges victorious as the first definitive look at the players' struggle for freedom. From the high-profile case of the famous Stastny brothers to Slava Fetisov's receipt of a work visa from none other than Mother Russia itself, "Breakaway" lays bare the history of such pursuits, which were impacted greatly by the context of the time during which this high-stakes effort for freedom took place.

Journeys through treacherous woods, pursuits by KGB agents, shuttling between hotels across continents are just some examples of the precarious positions in which hockey

players and their families found themselves after choosing defection over slavery to a brutal totalitarian system.

Pinchevsky's book moves fluidly through countless interviews while highlighting on-ice events with a strong chronological thread against a backdrop of humans navigating tyrannical waters. Notable NHLers including Vaclav Nedomansky (the first defector) through the last, and youngest, Petr Nedved, risked life, limb and their relatives' safety when they chose to defect.

*Breakaway* begins with a brief recounting of The Prague Spring in 1968, during which Soviet troops arrested Alexander Dubcek, the Communist Party leader who had taken steps to abolish censorship and promote freedom of the press in Czechoslovakia. With Dubcek sentenced to the barracks for years in what is now Ukraine, brutal Soviet repression followed and wouldn't lift until the Velvet Revolution, led by dissident playwright Vaclav Havel some 20 years later. To this day, 1998-99 NHL Hart Trophy (MVP) winner Jaromir Jagr wears the number 68 in honor of the uprising, and is known to have kept a photo of famous anti-communist Ronald Reagan with him during his career.

"Czechoslovakia was this place with a real democratic tradition, even before World War II," Professor Robert Edelman of UC San Diego tells Pinchevsky. "They did not have massive anti-Semitism. It was kind of a different place."

The fact that the Czechs led the way is no surprise. After a tortured existence during WWII, the Czechoslovakian respite was so terribly brief. Before Nedomansky became the first to bravely escape in the 1970s--which Pinchevsky illustrates in devastating detail--there was Bohumil Modry, one of Europe's top netminders of the time, rounded up, with his teammates, and sentenced to years in Soviet uranium mines. Modry's case sent the chill the communists wanted to send down the nation's sporting spine.

The most famous early case is laid bare in Pinchevsky's recounting of the saga of the Stastny brothers, Peter, Marian and Anton. The author moves through the harrowing saga of Michal Pivonka, a Czech who quite literally walked to freedom with his young girlfriend through dense Yugoslavian woods into Italy, with help from an unnamed, unknown Czech expat and Washington Capitals' brass, including GM David Poile and fellow executive Jack Button. One of Pivonka's immigration attorneys relays the fact that during his escape, Pivonka was being hunted by people with guns.

Many defectors would learn later that their families had been harassed by communist authorities. Professional demotions and other embarrassments were in store for family left behind.

"What if your parents got sent to prison," Pivonka asks the author, "Or your sister got kicked out from her school?"

From there, stories of a frustrated young Petr Klima and other junior Czechoslovakian players including Petr Svoboda and David Volek follow.

The Czechs were rightly enraged by the Soviet occupation of their country. Their revulsion was, the author explains, shared by millions more who lived under Soviet rule. In North America, taunts emanating from the stands or from fellow players that included a slam at "commies" were, ironically, quite to the delight of defectors.

"You would hear it all the time," Pivonka tells the author. "They called us Russians. I think Americans didn't know much about geography. So any Commies were just Russians. Any trash talk you heard was turned that way. It was fine with me. I didn't like the Commies either."

Most importantly, Pinchevsky delivers key interviews with former Red Wings executives Nick Polano and Jim Lites. Two of the most important actors in the defection drama, Polano and Lites worked strenuously - and at great risk to their own safety - to deliver Klima (in 1985), and later, Russian Sergei Fedorov (1990), to the Red Wings.

With Mikhail Gorbachev in office, and "Glasnost" (Openness) an emergent policy of the suddenly transforming but still-communist Soviet Union, the story turns to Alexander Mogilny, the youngest, and first, Soviet hockey player to defect, then to national junior team linemate Fedorov.

The stories of the most famous Russians, the "Green Five" of Vladimir Krutov, Alexei Kasatonov, Sergei Makarov, Igor Larionov and Slava Fetisov dominates much of the second half of the book.

During the late 1980s, as Russians begin to feel emboldened by Gorbachev's policies, Larionov and Fetisov begin openly discussing the idea of joining the NHL teams that had drafted them. Larionov would ultimately end up in Vancouver (later, Detroit and New Jersey), while Fetisov joined the Devils in a fascinating story involving GM Lou Lamoriello, original co-owner John Whitehead, who President Reagan named deputy secretary of state in 1985. This paved the way for late Devils' owner John McMullen to work with Whitehead and Lamoriello in ultimately bringing Fetisov to New Jersey years later (Fetisov would later win the Stanley Cup with Larionov in Detroit).

Pinchevsky lays out the story of Fetisov, who insisted on becoming one of the first Russians to be granted a work visa in the United States, and resisted the idea of defection.

In one of the many notable perversions practiced by the Soviet Union, privileges were bestowed upon Russian athletes. A higher living standard, automobiles that would have taken years for an average Russian to acquire, and other perks served as compensation for Soviet-era players. This fact has caused a good deal of resentment amongst many people who emigrated or defected to the United States and Canada, but in fairness to the athletes, none of them, not athletes, not commoners, were free, and all of them could be—and some were—imprisoned according to the whims of the party. So much for "privileges."

The hypocrisy inherent in the Soviet system is explained in one of the book's lighter moments.

"As you know," said Soviet ambassador Yuri Dubinin to the Devils' Whitehead, "All Russians are equal in our socialist society. Nobody is more important than anybody else...but when it comes to who has the best apartment, we have two tall apartment buildings...on the top level of one apartment, the best apartment is used by our top army general. And the top floor of the other apartment is used by our top hockey player, who your team has drafted."

Pinchevsky honors Eastern European contributions to the NHL and argues rightly that the game is better off with their current, widespread inclusion in the world's top league.

*Breakaway* could use a few pages here and there devoted to what life behind the Iron Curtain meant for common people, including dissidents, persecuted Jews and other religious minorities. In fairness to the author, however, the focus of the book is the players' escape to freedom. Here, as promised, Pinchevsky delivers in grand style, offering countless interviews, finely woven, that read, in its best passages, like a great spy novel.

Some Czech players now in the twilight of their NHL careers, who remember the Cold War, have confided in this writer that the story of Soviet rule isn't taught to the degree you'd expect in a freedom-loving America. You have to wonder about what North American-bred children of Czech and Russian—also Finnish—defectors and émigré's have been taught by our schools in the post-Cold War era. Intentionally or not, *Breakaway* does

its part to educate North Americans, especially, and importantly, young readers. While sticking to the rich history of Eastern European hockey and its great teams, Pinchevsky infuses the urgency and desperation of the cause of the defectors, moving briskly through countless interviews with the era's most important figures. Long overdue, *Breakaway* scores for freedom itself.

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