

A publication of the Czech and Slovak Heritage Association of Maryland

How I Did Not Make It

by Vojtech Joseph Vala

My story is about my failed attempt to illegally flee from Czechoslovakia in 1977. My life at this time was unbearable. I was constantly under surveillance by the StB – secret police, could not hold a passport and travel out of the country was impossible. Practically speaking, I was less than a citizen and without a real future. I was living in the lowest level of socialist society and without any possibility of changing my status. I was still dreaming about my trip to the West and my focus had to be on, “How to do it?”

As it happens often in life, an unexpected chance helped me to solve my problem. A TV mechanic mentioned, while he was

working on my personal TV, that in his basement he had a new, never used aviation engine, a 65 HP Walter Micron in its original packaging. He offered it free to anybody who would take it from his basement. I wasted no time and in short order an aviation engine was in my basement. My big idea was simple: I would build some kind of flying machine with this engine and use it for my flight over the border to the West.

Czechoslovakia at this time was in the grip of a severe communist regime, everybody was watching everybody. The construction of any flying machine was restricted, and

continues on page 4



Gyrocopter with mannequin pilot. Author's aviation friends named it "Stuffed Vala"

CALENDAR OF EVENTS



REGULARLY SCHEDULED ACTIVITIES

CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SCHOOL

Children's Language School resumed the Spring online classes the week of January 8, 2024. The Czech beginner's class will meet on Fridays at 6 PM. Advanced speakers will be meeting on Mondays at 4:30 PM. Slovak Language children's classes continue to meet on Sundays and started on January 14, 2024: beginners at 9 AM, advanced speakers at 10 AM. Our Spring 2024 semester will end the week of May 12-19. For more information, or to register a student, please visit our website at <https://cshamaryland.org/>

ADULT LANGUAGE SCHOOL

CSHA is one of the few organizations in the USA that offers Czech and Slovak language instruction for adults. Beginning, intermediate and advanced online classes are offered on Saturday mornings. Spring semester classes started on January 13, 2024. For more information about the fall semester, contact Lois Hybl at 410-243-1710 or e-mail: LHybl@verizon.net or info@cshamaryland.org.

HERITAGE SINGERS

We welcome singers of all voice parts. Contact Margaret Supik (443-739-2025) for more information or if you want to join. Future events will be announced on the CSHA website <https://cshamaryland.org> and on our Facebook page. Our next singing opportunity will likely be Memorial Day at the Bohemian National Cemetery.

CSHA ONLINE - For more information about any of these activities, joining Heritage Singers or to register for classes, you can contact CSHA at: info@cshamaryland.org.

The CSHA Board of Directors will respond to answer your questions and provide information, and we are eager to hear your ideas and suggestions. Also, please check our website www.cshamaryland.org and follow us on Facebook at Czech and Slovak Heritage Association of Baltimore.

FEBRUARY 2024

The CSHA General Meeting was held virtually on Sunday February 18, 2024. The newly elected Board of Directors was introduced, and they reviewed the current financial standing of the organizations so the budget can be prepared for the upcoming events.

APRIL 2024

The 3rd CSHA Spring Festival will take place on Sunday, April 21, 2024 from 12 noon to 5 p.m at the Maryland State Game & Fish Protective Association, 8735 Honeygo Blvd, Perry Hall, MD. It will feature live music by Orchestra Praževica, delicious food, pastries, beer, soft drinks and coffee. The program also includes activities for children, face painting, games, etc. The admission is \$5 for Members, \$10 for Non-members and is Free for children.

OCTOBER 2024

The 36th Annual CSHA Festival will be held at the Legacy Hall in Sykesville, Maryland on Sunday, October 27, 2024, 12-6 PM. Please stay tuned for upcoming updates on the program and volunteer opportunities to get involved in planning and helping at the event.

DECEMBER 2024

The traditional Christmas Carol singing at St. Wenceslaus Church in Baltimore is tentatively planned for Sunday, December 8, 2024 at 2 PM. We are coordinating with Mikuláš and Anděl to bring children traditional goodies.

CSHA BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

OFFICERS:

President - Petr Justin
Vice President - Dana Petran
Secretary - Lois Hybl
Treasurer - Zuzana LaBuff

BOARD MEMBERS: alphabetically

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MacLean Lunko
Dave Mitchell
Russ Rezek
Margaret Supik
Barbara Vann
Francis (Fran) Vojik
Ann Zelenka

HLAS - Dana Havlik - editor

Olga Mendel - graphic design

If you have any suggestions or comments or want to contribute to the Hlas by writing an article, email us at info@cshamaryland.org.

President's Message

Dear friends,
Welcome to our quarterly newsletter. I hope everyone is having a lovely spring season.

At the first meeting of the year, on February 19th, a new Board of Directors was installed and will be serving for the next two years (2024-2025). Thank you to those of you who voted this election cycle and I wish the new board the best and much joy in their endeavors. On the newly installed board you can find many familiar faces and also some new ones. Please see bios of our new Board members in this newsletter.

Traditionally, the month of April brings our first event of the calendar year. The 3rd annual Spring Festival will take place on Sunday, April 21st. This will be an exciting occasion to get together again. For a reasonable entrance fee, a fantastic program awaits everyone, which includes live music by the Orchester Praževica. The place has indoor and outdoor space. We will have enough refreshments, tasty food, pastries, beer,

soft drinks, coffee. And of course, there will be entertainment for our little ones, such as various children's crafts, games, face painting, etc. Come and have fun and support our mission.

On a personal note, I have accepted my son's challenge and signed up for a Baltimore 10-Miler. This wonderful running event takes place at Druid Hill Park on June 1st and will be the very first time Denis and I will compete together. I encourage every runner to sign up or come cheer us on. I especially will need some support to keep up with younger runners.

And lastly, I would like to thank all of you who have already renewed their membership, became new members or donated money to CSHA for the year 2024. Your generous support is what keeps the CSHA going and ensures that our Czech and Slovak community stays active and strong as ever.

Se srdečným pozdravem,



Petr Justin - CSHA president

CSHA Board of Directors Bios - Newly Elected Members

Rob Hořel

Rob Hořel is a native of Athens, Ohio and currently resides in Towson, MD with his family. Rob's degrees are in microbiology, and he has worked in federal and academic labs, but he has also worked in retail management and IT, most recently at Aberdeen Proving Ground. Now retired, he spends time between Maryland and Ohio. He enjoys woodworking, homesteading chores like carpentry, wood splitting and stacking walls; and academically he is interested in languages, history, genealogy, and defense policy and technology. He is of Czech extraction on his father's side.

Dave Mitchell

Dave Mitchell is a native of Ellicott City, Maryland, where he lives with his wife, Ali. He is a 2010 graduate of Davidson College (B.A., Economics) and received an MBA from Georgetown University in 2019. He currently works as a Transformation Program Manager for the VMware software division of Broadcom. Dave's lifelong passion for history drove him to uncover his own family's past, which in turn led to the discovery of his Slovak heritage through his maternal grandparents, both of whom were children of immigrants from eastern Slovakia (near Levoča and Stará Ľubovňa, among other places) who settled outside of Pittsburgh.

Barbara Vann

A recently (2020) retired sociologist Barbara Vann taught at Loyola University for 33 years. She first visited the Czech republic in 2002 and fell in love with all things czech. She attended the summer program in Dobruška in 2004 and spent the next year in the Czech Republic on sabbatical. Several years later she began directing a summer study abroad program there through Loyola. She directed the program for ten years (with the help of Margaret Supik!). During this time she also conducted research on people's memories of the Velvet Revolution.

Francis (Fran) Vojík

My name is Fran Vojík and I live in Surfside Beach, South Carolina. My great-grandfather and his family emigrated to the U.S. in the 1880's from a small village in southern Bohemia and settled in the Little Bohemia section of East Baltimore. My grandfather, a tailor by trade, bought a home on Ashland Ave., one block from St. Wenceslaus church. There, he worked in his tailor shop and raised his family. Their lives revolved around St. Wenceslaus and the Sokol club. I am named after my grandfather and great-grandfather.

By joining the CSHA Board, I want to help support and maintain the history, language, and traditions of the Czech and Slovak communities in Maryland.

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it was only a matter of time until the StB would be informed, and immediate action taken against the builder. The machine would be confiscated, and the builder sent to prison. So along with the ownership of this nice new engine came several questions: Where to find a secret space for building a flying machine, who can help me with this project, and what kind of aircraft should I build around this engine? My qualifications for the project included my holding a Czechoslovak pilot's license and a master's degree in Aeronautical Engineering.

My friend Carl was a former Aero club member and pilot, and he had some experience with gyrocopters. Next to his house in Unhošť was a one car garage, the ideal place for my project. Carl was not a friend of the communist regime, but he was not open about that. When I asked Carl for help, he was very enthusiastic about my idea and we decided to build a small, one-seater gyrocopter.

The difference between a helicopter and a gyrocopter is that the helicopter has an engine-powered top rotor which holds it aloft. The gyrocopter rotor is without any power from the engine, but an additional propeller pushes it forward. Consequently, the gyrocopter needs only a short runway for take-off and landing. Most important, though, a gyrocopter is small and can be built in a small garage with closed doors away from public view. 1968-69, the Prague Spring political movement, had offered a short window of time when building and flying home-built aircraft in Czechoslovakia was possible. After the Soviet and Warsaw Pact military invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, this was strictly forbidden. I knew that from this short 1968-69 era some home-built gyrocopters and gliders were hidden in various barns and basements. I had a friend in Brno and in his basement was a complete, disassembled gyrocopter glider (without engine).



Vojtech Vala with his gyrocopter

My next trip to Brno ended with me making a deal with my friend and I became the owner of a gyrocopter glider KD-67 "Ideal." KD stands for Kunovský and Drdla, two professional aircraft designers from Kunovice. The glider was disassembled and stored in a big garbage bag. Two blades of a wooden main rotor were packed in a wooden crate. I shipped all this, my new treasure, to Unhošť by train. Because I had to reconstruct the main rotor attachment point, the whole project took 6 months.

Since the additional weight of an engine changed the center of gravity, that needed to be recalculated, and a new rotor attachment point had to be fabricated, installed, and tested. Fuel and oil tanks had to be installed as well. An instrument panel was built, and engine control was installed. A new push propeller was hand fabricated in a nearby wood shop, then balanced and installed on the engine. An engine mount was also designed, fabricated, and installed. When everything was assembled, the gyrocopter without its rotor, was hung and balanced with the pilot in his seat. Finally, the top rotor was installed. Everything was double checked, and the first test run of the engine was completed successfully and the engine ran OK! I made several test flights; everything was working as it should and I pronounced our gyrocopter airworthy. This was in the Fall of 1977.

While we were working in Carl's garage, we had a bit of a shock one day. A police officer suddenly appeared in the open garage door asking, "Guys what are you building?" Carl's answer was surprising: "It will be a gyrocopter and it will be flying, idiot... you will see!" He lived two blocks from Carl's house, he was Carl's good friend from childhood, and Carl evidently trusted him. When our gyro was ready for a test flight, our policeman assisted us in moving our machine from the garage to a grass strip nearby. A regime policeman helped to move our illegal gyro for flying tests! Everybody was happy. There was no report to the StB.

Now all I had to do was to find a good place, near the western border, for take-off, move the gyrocopter there, and fly to the West. I chose Highway D-1 near the small city of Moravský Ján in Slovakia. The distance between the highway, which was still under construction, and the border with Austria was about 3.5 miles, a minimum 5-minute flight and I would be across the Morava River and over Austrian territory. One month before my flight I walked the ground between Moravský Ján and the Austrian border. I did not see anything that might interfere with my planned flight. My cousin František, with his personal car and attached trailer, helped me with moving the gyrocopter from Unhošť to my take-off place on Highway D-1

Everything was prepared and my "D" day was set for October 28, 1977. Coincidentally, it was the Czechoslovak Republic anniversary holiday. Only one element was not under my control -- weather. That night the whole country was

blanketed with very dense fog and our trip required 8 hours instead of the normal 4. When I arrived at my take-off spot on Highway D-1 at 6 AM, I started regularly checking the fog status over the area. I checked every hour up to 10 AM. The fog was slowly moving and the visibility at 10.30 was about half a mile; I decided to go. That was my big mistake. An hour and a half later the fog disappeared, and the rest of the day was clear and sunny.

I took-off from Highway D-1 in a northern direction, climbing to an elevation of 300 meters above ground. When I saw that I was above the fog and clouds, I made a 90° left turn to the West. I checked my watches and continued a direct flight to the West for at least 5 minutes. I was looking to see if there was some terrain under me, some hole in clouds or fog, where I could possibly see the border, the Morava River. Unfortunately, the fog and clouds were so dense and impenetrable I could see nothing. After another 5 minutes of flight, I tried to descend and try to see something, anything, of the terrain below me. My altimeter showed my elevation as close to zero and I still did not see anything. One option was to fly deeper into Austrian territory, but clouds and fog covered the horizon and at this critical moment I was not sure if I could make it safely deeper into Austria. A gyrocopter has no possibility of landing vertically like a helicopter, it needs a forward speed of at least 70 miles per hour. To land at that speed without any visibility of terrain is a suicidal mission. I tried at least three times to descend as low as possible, but again I was unable to see the ground. In such a moment of panic, I decided to abort my flight. I made a 180° turn, and I flew back over Slovakia where I could safely land and save my life.

I landed in a field and tried to abandon everything, run away from the gyrocopter, and disappear from the scene as soon as possible.

Immediately after landing, I saw that some people were running towards me from a nearby field. I did not know that one of them was a Border Patrol Volunteer and he was able to give some signal to the real Border Patrol for my arrest. Border Patrol soldiers, in military vehicles, with machine guns and service dogs, arrived very soon and I was arrested. My dark fate was sealed. I mentally, in this moment, resigned myself to whatever must happen next.

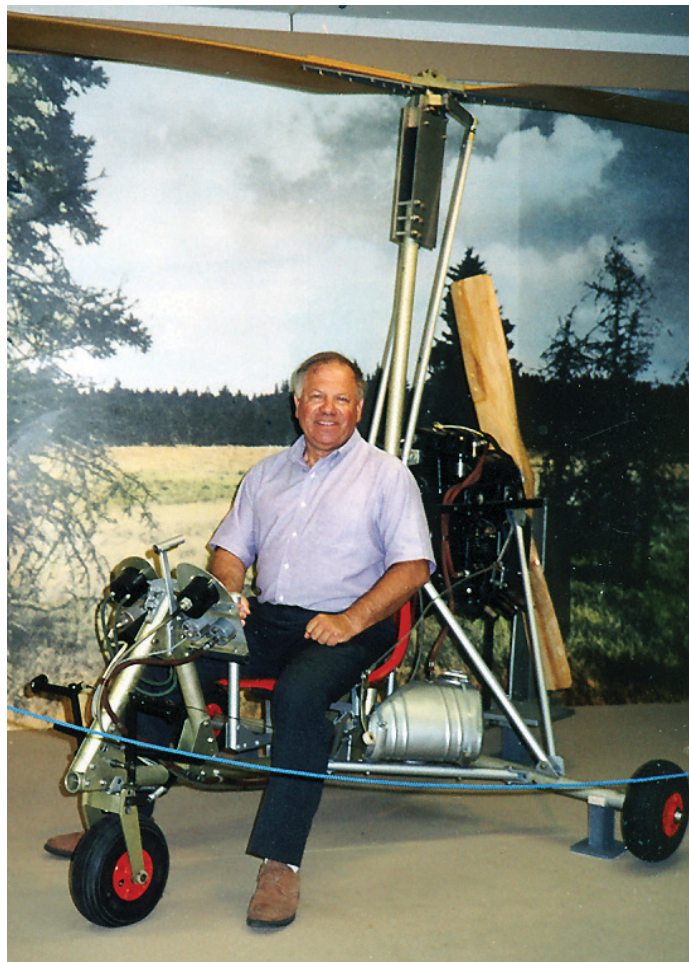
The High Military Court in Příbram sentenced me to 13 years in the third category, the most restricted and harsh prison. My charges of illegal border crossing carried penalties of up to 15 years or death, but the military prosecutor did not ask for the death penalty. The reason for the severity of my sentence was that I held what we call in the US Top-Secret Clearance. The abbreviation in Czech was PTZD = Přísně tajné zvláštní důležitosti! (strictly secret utmost importance)

I was released from prison on December 18, 1986, after

almost 10 years behind bars. My parole time was 7 years. I had lost 10 years of my life. I knew that now I had to escape to the West because I had already paid dearly for it.

It took me another 3 years to plan and execute my next attempt to flee my country. It happened on August 8, 1989, and this time it was successful. And it was just 3 months before the Velvet Revolution! After a long, long journey, I ended up in Holland and in December 1990, after a year and a half of waiting for my U.S. immigration visas, I entered the U.S. to begin my new life.

I donated my gyrocopter, which had been preserved by the StB as evidence of my crimes, to the Aviation Museum in Prague, Kbely, where it is on display and piloted by a mannequin whom I like to call Stuffed Vala.



Author with his gyrocopter in Aviation Museum Prague-Kbely

Vojtech J. Vala is a member of CSHA, living in Maryland since 1990 with his wife Milada. He holds a Master's degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the Military Academy in Brno, Czech Republic, today's University of Defense. Mr. Vala is now retired, but still active as a pilot, an aircraft mechanic and FAA aircraft inspector.

Somewhere There is Still a Sun

There are things in our lives that must not be forgotten. We should always remember certain things, share them with others and learn from them, so that history does not repeat itself and so no child will ever experience another Holocaust.

CSHA had the privilege of speaking with Mr. Michael Gruenbaum during our virtual General Meeting on January 22, 2023. He gave us a presentation about his memories of surviving the Holocaust as one of few children from his Terezin group. He is one of only 3 of his group of about 80 who have survived until this year. His book illustrates

through the eyes of a 9-year-old boy what happened to him and a few surviving members of his family.

During our discussion with Mr. Gruenbaum, we learned about his life after WWII, his career, and admirable accomplishments here in the USA. He also spoke of why he decided to dedicate all his documentation to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. Sadly Michael Gruenbaum passed 2 months after our meeting on March 13, 2023 at age 92. Apparently, he was still teaching a class on Zoom the day before.

Somewhere There Is Still a Sun is a book for everyone. It can, and maybe should be, read by everyone over the age of twelve. Narrated like a young boy's diary, Michael Gruenbaum's book offers readers an extraordinary perspective on life in Prague at the time of the Nazi invasion and in particular on life as it ensued in the Terezin transit camp where the Nazis confined most of the Jewish population of the city.

On March 15, 1939, eight-year-old Misha watches from the window of his family's apartment in Holešovice as the Nazi army goose-steps through the streets. He watches the glint of their bayonets, the flashes of red from the Nazi flags and the couple across the street teetering hand-in-hand on the edge of their balcony. As an eight-year-old, he doesn't really understand what is going on. He's even being allowed to eat cookies while standing out on the balcony! And then they jump; Misha can't believe his eyes, he wants to ask his mother about it, but he can't believe that he just saw the couple jump and the Nazis march past their bodies splayed out on the pavement.

From here we follow the family's excruciating path from their life of privilege in Prague to a tiny ghetto apartment, and then to Terezin, where eighty boys barely survive living in one room and working ten hours a day. Here families are separated, cut off from the world outside, and in constant danger of disease or running afoul of their Nazi guards.

Misha's and his sister Marietta's survival is a testament to inherent human goodness and to the extraordinary strength and resourcefulness of their mother who more than once managed to save them from transport to the East, a euphemism for Auschwitz-Birkenau.

When Terezin is finally liberated Misha's mother writes her first letter to a relative living abroad:



A poster, created by Mr. Gruenbaum's grandson for his grandpa's 90th birthday, features some of the covers of foreign editions of *Somewhere There is Still a Sun*.

This is my first letter in which the threatening, indiscreet eyes of the censors do not know my thoughts... We ourselves were saved by a miracle...

We do not yet know how the future will shape up for us. None of our old friends are alive anymore. We do not know where we are going to live. Nothing!

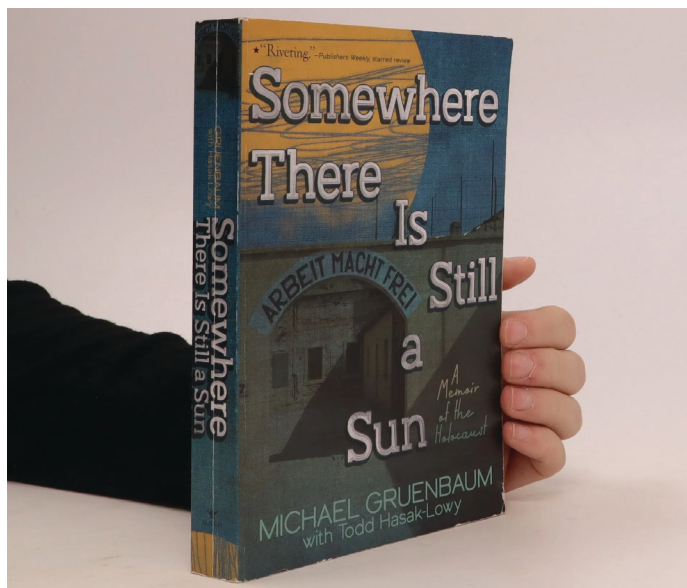
But somewhere in the world there is still a sun...

This book is not a pleasurable read, but it is a fascinating one. It raises many questions in the involved reader's mind, more questions than answers.

The book, published by Simon and Schuster, has already sold more than 80,000 copies in the USA and has been translated into 19 languages. The Czech edition, *Někde ještě svítí slunce*, can be purchased directly from the publisher in Prague by writing to: Petr Karas, petr.karas@p3k.cz.

There is also an earlier book written by Mr. Gruenbaum's late wife Thelma: *Nesarim: Child Survivors of Terezin* is published by Vallentine Mitchell in the UK.

Mr. Gruenbaum has been selected to receive the prestigious 2023 award from the Terezin Music Foundation in Boston, which followed two years after another notable Czech-American, Madeleine Albright, received hers!



Somewhere There is Still a Sun book cover

Czech and Slovak Recipe Corner:

by Dana Havlik

Homemade Cottage Cheese Filling (Domáci tvarohová náplň)

Many Czech and Slovak sweets are made with sweet cheese filling. However, the store-bought cottage cheese is not the best substitute for the *tvaroh* our grandmas used when baking traditional Slavic pastries such as *koláče*, *buchty* or *tvarohové knedlíky* (cheese filled dumplings).

INGREDIENTS:

Ingredients:

32 oz Greek yogurt
32 oz sour cream
8 oz cream cheese
1-1.5 cup of sugar
2 eggs
1tbs lemon zest (grate 1 lemon)
vanilla sugar or ½ teaspoon of
vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS:

If we do not have fresh unprocessed milk directly from a dairy to follow the original old-style cottage cheese recipe, there is an easy way to make great cheese filling by mixing plain or vanilla flavored Greek yogurt, sour cream, and cream cheese. This mix is then strained through a cheesecloth for several hours or overnight. Then it is sweetened and flavored with sugar, lemon zest, vanilla sugar, or vanilla extract. To make it thicker and more aromatic, we can add vanilla pudding powder.



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SPRING FESTIVAL Announcement

The Czech and Slovak Heritage Association invites you to the 3rd SPRING FESTIVAL. The event will take place on Sunday, April 21, 2024 from 12 noon to 5 p.m.

The CSHA will provide live music (Orchester Praževica), delicious food, pastries, beer, soft drinks and coffee. The program also includes activities for children, Face painting, games, etc. The admission is \$5 for Members, \$10 for Non-

members and is Free for children. You can renew your annual membership or become a new member for only \$25 per household at the event.

The event's location has ample outside seating, a large banquet hall, and free parking. The address is Maryland State Game & Fish Protective Association, 8735 Honeygo Blvd, Perry Hall, MD 21128.

Hope to see you all there.



The Czech and Slovak Heritage Association

Sdružení Čechů a Slováků pro Uchování Národních Odkazů

Združenie Čechov a Slovákov pre Zachovanie Národných Odkazov

INVITES YOU TO THE

SPRING FESTIVAL



Delicious food, pastries, coffee, beer, soft drinks

Music by live folk band - Orchester Praževica

Kids crafts & games

SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 2024

12 noon to 5 p.m.

The MD State Game & Fish Protective Assoc

8735 Honeygo Blvd, Perry Hall, MD 21128

Admission: Members \$5, Non-members \$10, Children Free

For more information visit our website www.cshamaryland.org or email us at info@cshamaryland.org

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