

What We Saw in Prague
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For many centuries Prague was the cultural center of the Slavic nations included in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Czechoslovakia came into existence as an independent state in 1918, at the end of World War I. Its independence last until 1938 when it was dismembered according to the Munich Pact, and then occupied by Hitler's army. The origins of the Czech people contributed to the victory of the Soviet and American Armies in 1944-45. After World War II, Czechoslovakia was left in the orbit of the USSR. The Soviets equipped and trained the new Czechoslovak army, the Communist Party came to rule, private industry was nationalized, and purges were carried out. In the late 1960's the Czech Communist Party began to liberalize its policies which caused concern for the USSR and led to a crisis in 1968.

The four days I spent in Prague—Aug. 18 to Aug. 22, 1968 – made us witness a grim moment in modern history. Scores of Czechs I had never met before, who helped us on our way, asked us to tell people about the tragic events of those days. I am writing now in gratitude to these unknown friends and out of admiration for the heroic people of Czechoslovakia.

Forty three years ago I graduated from a Russian high school in Czechoslovakia. At that time I spoke Czech fluently; I can still read the language easily and understand about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a radio broadcast. My wife speaks German and was able to hold long conversations with the Czechs.

I was sent to Prague by the Polytechnical School of the Montreal University to attend an International Geological Congress. My assignment was to arrange for an exchange of scientific publications with scientists from the USSR. I had often acted at international gatherings as interpreter for my Russian colleagues and our relations were always friendly – perhaps because I avoided touching on political matters.

As long as things were peaceful in Prague, our work went on profitably and peacefully, Soviet geologists had prepared interesting exhibits and I learned a lot from them. But it all ended when the Soviet troops entered Prague. The Russian scientists were completely dumfounded – they seemed to shrivel and shrink, took off their badges, with their names and nationality, avoided us, and talked in low voices even to each other. I sat down near one of them and asked him whether he had received any instructions from their Embassy. “Nothing...” he answered. “I don't know anything...” “Do you think the Congress will continue its work?” “How can I know? That will depend from what they decide up above. We're just mere scientists.” But this conversation, of course, came later. I am jumping ahead.

While we were still on the train from Vienna to Prague, we noticed some interesting details. In Austria there were many tiny fields and meadows, very carefully cultivated, thickly dotted with pedigreed cattle. In Czechoslovakia the very large potato,

beet, and wheat fields had lots of weeds and no cattle. We were told later that agriculture in Czechoslovakia is organized in "collective farms." All the train attendants on Czech trains, and the customs and passport officials were very friendly and pleasant. However, in Prague, we had to wait for an hour and a half for a taxi, and the representative of the Geological Congress sent to meet us could do nothing about it.

In the city there was quite a lot of traffic, mainly small private cars. The stores were full, and prices about the same or higher than in Canada, but the displays seemed unimaginative and dull. We learned that all the shops, all the restaurants are run by the government. When my wife left a dress at the cleaners, she noticed that the receipt had to be made in five copies...the people in the street were dressed comfortably but plainly, -- most men wore working clothes and we saw very few women that could be called well dressed.

We had time for several interesting conversations before the big events took place. One of the secretaries at the Congress talked to my wife, asking her about life in Canada. She said rather wistfully that we were lucky to have left the world of socialism, adding, however, that for the last few months there has been no such oppression as before. "People can say what they think," she said, "but there is still less freedom and less well being than before World War II."

Another time we talked to a young workman, who addressed us in excellent English. When he learned of our Russian origin, he switched to Russian, which is now taught in Czech schools. "I learned English in concentration camp" he said, "I spent ten years there. Most of the inmates were well educated Czechs and camp was worth a University for me." "But why were you interned?" "Opened my big mouth too much." "Well, then, why do you open it again? Aren't you afraid of being arrested?" "No, we have freedom now; they don't arrest you for just speaking!" Poor fellow! Three hours later Soviet tanks rolled into Prague. I wonder what happened to him?

Another Canadian, speaking to a fellow Czech scientist, asked him whether he was happy. "Oh yes, I am happy now," the Czech answered. "I spent five years in prison, ten in a concentration camp, now I am free, and I can enjoy the work I love. Of course, I am happy!"

On August 21st, at 6 A.M., we woke up to the sound of a large crowd moving down the street, waving Czech flags and shouting. "What a strange time for a demonstration!" I thought, but in half an hour a few heavy tanks rumbled down the street, then came more and more tanks and military trucks with soldiers and machine guns. They had not distinctive signs or emblems, just numbers. After watching carefully the huge trucks careening down the street, I recognized at last a Russian word, meaning "Fuel" on a large can on a truck. Bits of greenery, branches, leaves, were still sticking to some of the tanks. They must have stood camouflaged somewhere, waiting for their orders.

Some twenty minutes after the arrival of the tanks, the sidewalks were crowded with Czechs carrying Czech flags and shouting "Dubcek and Svoboda!" Weaving their

way right between the Soviet tanks and trucks, small private cars sped along full of young men with Czech flags and carrying slogans "Occupants go Home!"

The tanks stopped in front of our hotel. They surrounded the building of the Czech communist paper *Rude Pravo* across the street and directed their guns at it. Soldiers holding sub-machine guns rushed into the building. It looked as if this was the end of the newspaper. Suddenly, just half an hour later, and right under the nose of the tanks, a group of young men leaped out of the doors and began distributing a "special edition" of the paper calling on all citizens to resist and boycott the occupants. Another half-hour went by and the sounds of machine-gun fire came from the next street. A few tanks dashed off in that direction.

The Czechs continued to parade along the sidewalks, starting arguments with soviet soldiers. By ten o'clock thousands of leaflets were being distributed to the occupying forces. Some of our geologists were standing at the door of our hotel. Passers-by recognized their badges and stooped to speak to them. They asked us to tell the people abroad about the violation of their country and their freedom. I remember one young man who spoke English. He was quite fearless in his bitter denunciations. At last I said: "Take care, someone might denounce you." "I'm not sacred," he replied. "There are no traitors among the Czechs. You'll see, the Soviets will try to form a government of yes-men, but they'll be unable to do so; they won't find anyone among the 14 million Czechs." Events proved that he was right.

We learned from these conversations that some of the Soviet soldiers did not realize that they had occupied Czechoslovakia; they thought they were being transferred from Eastern Germany to Poland. The poor fellows had a hard time of it. After driving all night, they spent the entire day on our street, with no food and no drink. Restaurants refused to serve them; food stores "had no change" when they tried to buy something. They sat in their tanks and trucks, gloomy, yawning, holding on tightly to their sub-machine guns, with Czechs milling all around, waving flags and yelling rhythmically "DUBCIK! SVOBODA!"

In the lobby of our hotel I saw a TV set. To my astonishment the program was broadcast by the "underground" TV network organized by the Czech Radio and TV Service under the very nose of the occupants. Such "underground" radio and TV broadcasts continued until the Czech President Svoboda returned from Moscow and asked them to stop. Soviet armed forces were doing all they could to stop the "underground" programs. Very often, in the middle of a broadcast, the speaker would announce: "We are being traced and are stopping. Listen in an hour, we'll transmit from elsewhere." The broadcasts described scenes of violence and gave news of the Presidents Svoboda and Dubcek.

At 1 PM for a full minute all factories blew their whistles, all the cars, engines and boards blew their horns to protest against the occupation. The noise was deafening. The Soviet occupying forces announced a curfew, but they could not get the announcement printed. All printings shops were empty of workers. There was much

shooting at night. All over Czechoslovakia there were some 75 people killed and several hundred wounded.

I must admit that the idea of staying on in occupied Prague did not appeal to me. On Tuesday morning, we saw an announcement posted on the billboard in the hotel lobby saying that a train would be leaving for France from the suburban station Smihov. My wife, I and two other Canadian delegates with their wives decided to try and make it. There were no taxis, so we left most of our luggage at the hotel and boarded a streetcar which was supposed to go to Smihov. Our optimism was premature; after a few blocks the car turned back, for the street was blocked with tanks. We attempted to make it on foot. Passers-by guided us, helped us, and carried our suitcases. At least one woman, insisting that it was impossible to reach Smihov on foot, stopped two private cars and spoke to the drivers. We were told to get in and set off. On the way I noticed that one of the drivers gave some written instructions to the policemen on the street corner and the latter immediately hid it in his pocket.

By the time we reached Smihov station, the train for France had left, but we were able to board a slow train that would take us half-way towards the West German frontier. Just as we boarded it, the general strike began and for a full hour everything stopped except the shrill whistles of factories and fire alarms. I wondered how the Soviet soldiers were feeling!

As soon as the hour was over, the train left. All along the way we saw signs, flags, slogans: “long Live Svoboda and Dubcek!” “Occupants Go Home!” “1939 – SS; 1968 – USSR!” The women train attendant was particularly upset because the day happened to be her 50th birthday. “What a present! What a present!” she kept on saying.

As our train was approaching its destination – Pilsen, the train attendant told us that another train would be leaving at the same time in the direction of West Germany, though not quite reaching it. She picked up our suitcases and led us over the tracks to put us on the train just as it was leaving. Again we listened to the same conversations, full of bitterness and despair; again we watched the flags and slogans. At a crossroads was parked a line of Soviet trucks. The young men and boys in our train hung out of the windows, shouted, threatened them with their fists.

The final stop was within 8 miles of the Western German frontier. A single taxi was shuttling the waiting passengers to the point of control. Finally it was again a private car that gave us a ride. The Czech officials at the frontier merely glanced at our passports and let us through. Across the road were stationed several Soviet trucks with armed soldiers, but they did not interfere with the work of the Czech officials.