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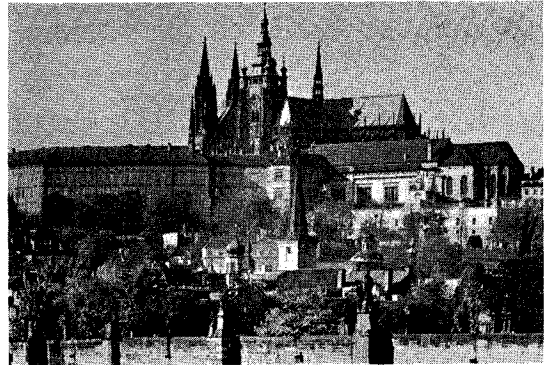
AS-10
Views of Prague

Birčaninova 28b
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
April 5, 1963

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Prague today depends on who sees it. To the random tourist, it is the baroque city par excellence, with its castle, palaces, cathedrals and stone bridges relatively unscarred since the Thirty Years War. To a historian of nationalism, it is the place where (long before Sarajevo) the Hapsburg



THE CASTLE

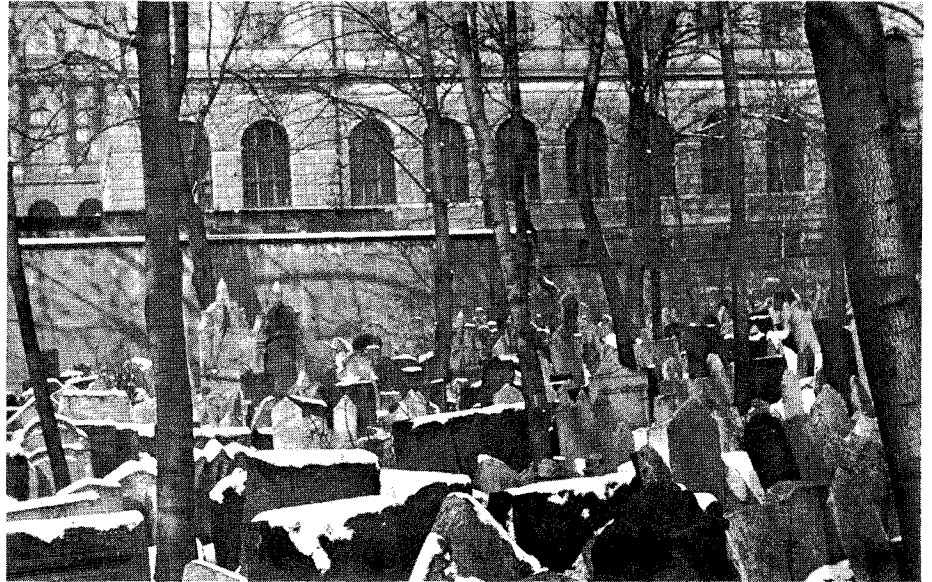
system broke down in the conflict between German and Slav. To an African delegate returning homeward from Peking and Moscow, it is still the showplace of Communism, where authoritarian party rule and implacable nationalism are combined with universal literacy and traditional skills in glassware, jewelry, ceramics and furnishings as well as precision instruments and machine tools. To an emigrant returning after fifteen or twenty-five years, the shock is how the city has run down. To a Hungarian or Polish "revisionist," Prague is a stronghold of the "conservatism" which stifles his own efforts toward greater freedom. And, to a Western diplomat, Prague is twice a symbol of humiliating defeat -- 1938, 1948 -- yet undeniably part of Europe, the city of Huss and Wallenstein, the Golem and Don Giovanni, Kafka and Thomas Masaryk.

To an American who has spent most of the year in youthful, extroverted, masculine Belgrade, Prague presents the impression of a subtle, inward old dowager -- a beauty once, and a prize, but clearly now of failing powers, living less on hope than on habit. The city is unbelievably dark at night, more than half its light standards, even downtown, turned off as a result of power shortage. By day one sees all too well the uncleared windows, peeling plaster and undressed stone; the rusting water pipes, overburdened old trolleys, patient queues in butcher shops and cafeterias; women's legs in unbecoming cotton and lisle, men too often in drab, ill-hanging coats of pre-war style. One sees few children: the Czech birthrate is now the lowest in Europe, having fallen by nearly a third since 1955. On the farms, it is said, the average age is 52.



WENCESLAS SQUARE

It is more than a year now since the regime of President Antonin Novotny first admitted that Czechoslovakia was in deep economic difficulties. (Novotny is 58, a Communist for forty years, First Secretary since 1953, and President -- following the Khrushchev lead in assuming both top jobs -- since 1957.) How deep the economic troubles go is difficult to tell, for the official statistics are baldly incomplete and so unreliable that there have been open demands for scrapping indices wholesale. Yet the worst may still lie ahead. The Five Year Plan for 1961-65 was abandoned in mid-term, and a stop-gap plan was adopted for 1963 which prescribed only "about a 1 per cent" increase in industrial output. The accent was to be on regrouping, modernization, completion of already-started projects. Yet the severity of the winter has already dashed any hope of fulfilling even this plan: On March 28, in an address at Ostrava, Novotny admitted that the production shortfalls in industry already had caused losses which amounted to a billion crowns (roughly \$140 million at the official rate of exchange).



THE OLD JEWISH CEMETERY

The most serious difficulties, however, are in agriculture. By official statistics, farm output, relatively stagnant between 1957 and 1961, dropped by more than 7 per cent in 1962. Although for some time Czechoslovakia has been importing a tenth of its food, Prague experienced severe shortages -- particularly of meat -- through most of last summer. The meat shortage was relieved only when farmers, pressed by a shortage of fodder, began early slaughtering. That is not likely to improve this year's farm outlook. Nor did the heavy snows which blanketed this winter's wheat and other crops. The Communists hope to overcome the stagnation by the use of more tractors and fertilizers, as well as bureaucracy (new "People's Control" organs); but Czech agriculture is already the seventh most intensive in Europe, and there remains a problem of manpower. Since 1948, the ranks of Czech farmers have been reduced by more than a million -- nearly half -- and the recent troubles have doubtless accelerated the flight to the cities. The able-bodied on the farms, I was told, are mostly women; and women also already hold more than 40 per cent of urban jobs. So that, in both city and village, an expansion of production can no longer be achieved (as during the "building of socialism" in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere) simply by expanding the work force.

Three points must be made which distinguish Czechoslovakia's economic troubles from those of other Communist countries:

1. This was never a backward nation. In 1914, Bohemia and Moravia alone were responsible for more than half the industrial output of the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire. Living standards in the inter-war republic were as high as those of France, higher than in many parts of Germany. And the Nazis, despite their atrocities, considerably expanded Czechoslovakia's industrial base.

2. Czechoslovakia, next to the Soviet Union, has played the largest part in the Communist program of aid to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Some 40 per cent of its economic dealings with the non-Communist world have been with the underdeveloped countries -- largely on credit, although it is impossible to learn precisely how much the Czechs have given away because of misleading statistics. (For example, the Czechs claimed positive trade balances with Egypt until 1961 -- which no one believed -- then stopped giving figures altogether.) There are many who think that Czech domestic difficulties stem from 1960, when the Mikoyan-Castro meeting and the independence of more than a dozen African states led to a vast expansion of Communist aid commitments. Officials now admit that the program has been somewhat curtailed.

3. Czechoslovakia, like Britain, is a trading and processing nation; it imports raw materials, sells manufactured goods. More than three-fourths of its dealings, however, are within the Soviet bloc, where prices are based on an arbitrary average of previous years (it is guessed, though nobody will tell, that the base years are the early or mid-Fifties). Czechoslovakia loses, Russia (which supplies her vital iron ore and much else) gains by this system, because on the world market raw material prices have been falling, industrial prices rising. There are many indications that the price structure remains a source of conflict between Russia and its East European allies, and particularly Czechoslovakia: The most obvious indication is that, after more than three years of resolutions and meetings of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), the Communist countries have been unable to establish a system of multilateral clearing. Nor are they likely to do so soon, in view of Russia's own economic slowdown.

It would be tempting to say, in Marxist fashion, that these economic difficulties have been responsible for the modest cultural ferment of the past year or so -- except that it is not quite true. The ferment may be properly dated to the 22nd Congress of the Soviet Communist party in October 1961, and it gained impetus from the new wave of "liberalization" in Russia following the Cuban crisis and Marshal Tito's visit to Moscow. Perhaps the most dispiriting aspect of the ferment in Czechoslovakia is that it was so largely based on Soviet sources: reprinting of Ehrenburg, Nekrasov, Yevtushenko, etc., denunciation of Stalin and Beria (rather than their Czech counterparts), and so on. High Noon became the first Western film to be shown in Czechoslovakia since 1945, only after several such

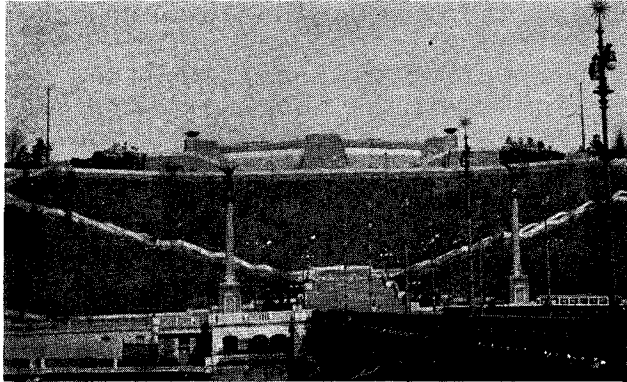


KAFKA'S BIRTHPLACE

had been shown and approved in the U.S.S.R. The name of Franz Kafka suddenly began to appear in Czech literary journals only after Jean Paul Sartre had mentioned it approvingly at a World Peace Congress in Moscow. (There is still no memorial to Kafka in the city, except perhaps the spirit of the city itself. His birthplace, which I located only after inquiries which led me from the Foreign Ministry through the Culture Ministry to the Writers Union, is to be marked with a plaque "later this year.") And, of course, the great Stalin monument overlooking the Vltava (Moldau) was not removed until last fall -- nearly a year after the "splendid Georgian" had been reburied in Moscow, six years after Budapest had torn down its Stalin statue. With characteristic caution, the Czechs have not altered the bronze friezes on the Lenin Museum, which picture not only Stalin but V. M. Molotov and Marshal K. M. Voroshilov (members of the 1957 anti-party group) at Lenin's right hand.

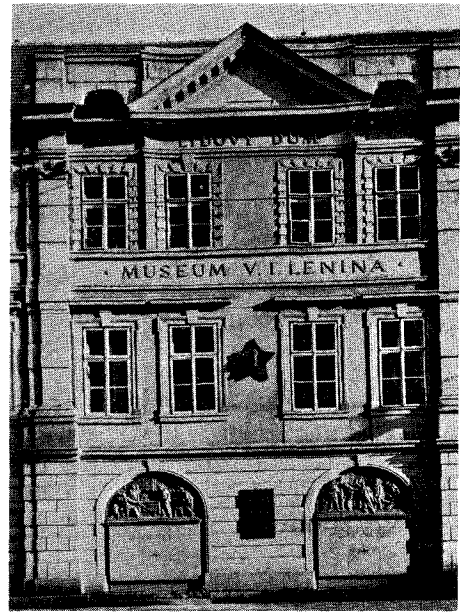
It would be unfair to say that the Czech ferment was entirely an echo of Moscow events. One economist attacked the "cult of the plan" as a danger equal to the "cult of personality," and an academician went so far as to say that "the dictatorship of the proletariat means the rule of the working class and not just of its Party" -- a tune which recalls the music of Budapest, 1956. Nevertheless, once N.S. Khrushchev had turned against the liberal Soviet writers, it was generally expected that a Czech party crackdown would soon follow. True to form, President Novotny at Ostrava declared: "To criticize everything, make a fad of it, criticize Socialist society-- that we shall not permit.... Nobody must touch our Communist party, its program, our socialist system. These must remain sacred for everybody."

One can see at least three groups of reasons for the Czechs' caution in de-Stalinization and their general emotional dependence on the Soviet Union. (The Soviet presence -- bookstores, branch offices, concessions, etc. -- is far more tangible in Prague than in Budapest.) First is the character of the Czechoslovak Communist party, which alone among the East European parties fought its inter-war battles in a liberal democracy rather than a retrograde dictatorship. I think it may be safely assumed that the Czech CP had less than its share of passionate idealists, more than its share of time-servers, bureaucrats and cranks -- all categories more responsive to a Moscow lead. Before the war, as R. V. Burks shows (The Dynamics of Communism in Eastern Europe, Princeton, 1961), the Communists' chief appeal was on national grounds -- to the Slovaks and to ethnic minorities as such as the Carpatho-Ruthenians and Magyars. This, too, makes for a tradition of "internationalism."



THE BASE AND STAIRS OF THE
STALIN MONUMENT (above) --

THE LENIN MUSEUM (right)



Second, de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia necessarily involves a review of the December 1952 trial of Rudolf Slansky, Bedrich Geminder, Vladimir Clementis and others -- a trial which from one point of view was the last of the "Titoist" purges, but from another perspective was the curtain-raiser for the anti-Semitic "doctors' plot" affair in Moscow and the great Soviet purge which (according to Khrushchev) Stalin's death prevented. It appears that most of the defendants who were not condemned to death at this trial and associated "administrative" actions have been quietly released since 1956; but Slansky and the main defendants were killed, and still await "rehabilitation." The affair has already been reviewed four times-- in 1953, 1956, 1961 and last winter following December's 12th Czech party congress. The latest report is due this month, but few believe that it will produce a complete exoneration of the defendants and indictment of those culpable for their fate. For one thing, Novotny (as a member of the party presidium and secretariat in 1952) and most of his leading associates bear a measure of responsibility, and have already taken the position that everyone in the party at the time shared that responsibility. Furthermore, the Slansky case seems bound up with the mysterious rise and fall of Rudolf Barak, former Minister of Interior, arrested first last spring for attempting to seize power, then "tried" and jailed for embezzlement; at the December party congress, Novotny said that Barak's guilt consisted in misrepresenting facts which he had obtained as chairman of a commission reviewing the "cult" era. Finally, if Boris I. Nicolaevsky is correct that the Slansky trial and doctors' affair were aimed primarily at Beria and Malenkov -- by a faction in which N.S. Khrushchev was prominent -- Novotny's self-interest is also his master's.

The third reason for Czech "conservatism" and dependence on Moscow is, I think, the most basic and important of all: It is simple Czech nationalism, which for geographic and historic reasons

differs considerably from those of other East European states. Hungarian nationalism, for example, first developed as a "shield of Christianity" against the Mongols and Turks, and later took on the aspect of opposition both to the Austrian Germans and to the Slavs: in other words, multiple enemies. Polish nationalism, too, inevitably waged a two-front war, against Germans and Russians, as did the Serbs against Hapsburg and Turk. The Czechs are unique in that their nationalism has only one enemy: the Germans. And, moreover, the enemy was not only external but internal. For Prague, Brno (Brünn) and Bratislava (Pressburg) were German cities until well into the nineteenth century; and in expelling some three million Germans after World War II the Czechs rid Bohemia-Moravia of more than a fourth of its population.

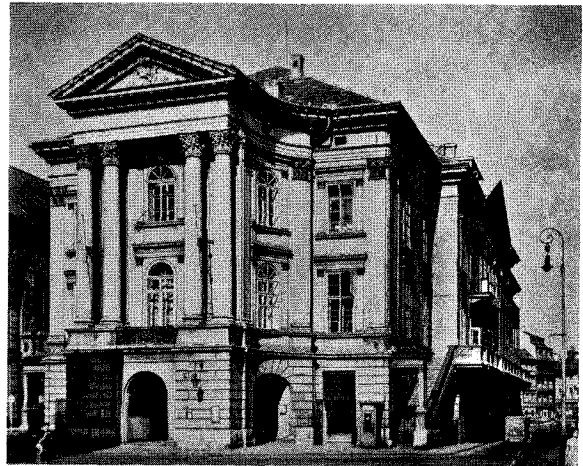
The Communist party, in this sense at least, fully assumed the mantle of Czech nationalism. Its leaders were most prominent in the expulsion of the Germans and the sometimes brutal means by which this was effected. Its followers moved quickest into the places that the Germans had vacated, and the party reaped its reward in the free election of 1946 -- in which Communist strength was greatest in the former German districts.

Today, Czechoslovakia is the only nation in Europe surrounded by three German states (the Federal Republic, the D.D.R. and Austria); and the Communists not only perpetuate the memory of past injustices but lose no opportunity to publicize "revanchist" and expellee manifestations in present-day West Germany. Surprisingly enough, this effort at heightening anti-German feeling in Czechoslovakia is apparently abetted by the East Germans: Their cultural center in Prague, when I was there, had an exhibition commemorating the Nazi occupation of the city twenty-four years ago.

In the struggle against Germans, Germany and Germanism, Czech nationalism can have only one defender: Russia. The patron saint of that nationalism in the nineteenth century, the historian Palacky, was a leader of pan-Slavism as well. Masaryk, who was not a nationalist and who was repelled by Bolshevism, attempted to secure his country's future by alliance with the West; but this alternative was effectively destroyed by the men of Munich, and the lesson was underscored a decade later when the West, in possession of an atomic monopoly, permitted the Communists to seize power in a Czechoslovakia where there was not a single Soviet soldier. The circumstances of 1938 and 1948 may be argued over endlessly, but the fact is that so long as Czech and German cannot make peace -- and the fault for this lies not only on the Czech side -- Czechoslovakia's future is inextricably tied to the power and will of the Soviet Union. For this reason, its Communist leaders will follow Moscow in everything, no matter what their own inclinations. Although in abstract theory it might be thought that the Czech Stalinoids might sympathize with the anti-Khrushchevian theses emanating from Peking, in fact Novotny was the first of the Communist leaders in power to drop the circumlocutions about "Albania" and attack China by name. Moreover, there are observers in Prague today who believe that, while the Communist

party could never win a free election in Czechoslovakia, a free plebiscite would overwhelmingly endorse military alliance with the Soviet Union. If this is so, it testifies not only to the bitter lessons of recent history but to the ambiguity of Western policy toward Germany and the similar ambiguity of the Adenauer Government toward the East.

There is another sense, too, in which Czech nationalism appears to differ from those of other East European states, and that is in its ability to assimilate the past. Where, say, the Yugoslavs proudly exhibit, as a sign of their cosmopolitanism, the traces of Turkish or Venetian influence, the Czechs feel obliged to suppress or apologize for the centuries in which Bohemia was part of the Hapsburg domain. One can understand a hostile attitude toward the nineteenth century, in which the dynasty acquired such an overbearing German cast; but in the days of Maria Theresa and her sons, and before then, the Hapsburg power was supranational, multilingual and catholic in all senses of the word. The Magyars have been quite capable of sorting out the Hapsburg heritage; the Czechs have not.



THE TYL THEATER

This was brought home to me at a pair of opera performances I managed to attend during my stay in Prague. The first was of Verdi's Don Carlos, which is a fierce attack on the most chilling of the Hapsburgs, Philip II of Spain, on his imperialist adventures in Flanders, and on the Inquisition which was his inspiration and support (at least according to Schiller, on whose drama the libretto was based). This could have been expected, on ideological grounds, to be splendid, and it was. Not only the costumes and settings were of an exciting order of authenticity, but the liturgical music and religious ceremonial which figure so largely in the opera were given full dramatic effect. The compelling and terrible nature of the Counter-Reformation could not have been more vividly rendered.

The second performance, to which I had looked forward with even greater anticipation, was of Mozart's Don Giovanni, for I was seeing it in the Tyl Theater (formerly Estates Theater) in which it was first performed, with the composer conducting, in 1787. What is more, the production I was seeing was a new one, specially mounted last fall for the 175th anniversary of that original performance. Only the theater itself -- a lovely baroque, with brightly enameled cherubs decorating the box-fronts -- fulfilled my expectations. I had been prepared for the scrapping of da Ponte's expressive Italian libretto in favor of a Czech translation, although nationalist tradition might have made this one exception. And I was resigned, once I saw the black-and-white, rohrshach-blotted curtain, to the pros-

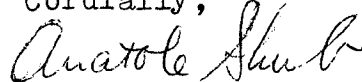
pect of not seeing a conscientious attempt to recreate the décor of the original performance; although the theater, with the two side-galleries flanking the stage (permitting the "three orchestras" of the first act finale), was eminently suitable for such an attempt. Indeed, I envisioned, before the curtain rose, the possibility of a dramatic "modern" production, sweeping away baroque trappings in order to render more starkly the eternal drama of the Don. Whatever else that drama is (and it is both comedy and tragedy, theological and humanistic), it is not a period piece; and nationalist considerations are completely irrelevant to its universal character.

The current Prague production, however, announces its provincial bias from the start, combining "modernistic" wrought-iron backdrops with vaguely nineteenth-century gowns for the leading ladies. This is especially self-defeating in the case of Donna Elvira, who left a nunnery for the Don; one might have expected as an incidental benefit of the Czech anti-clerical state that Elvira might have been costumed accordingly, with dramatic effects on her two first-act arias. But it soon becomes apparent that the Prague producers are not very interested in Elvira, even though she is the female pivot of the opera; nor do they care much for Donna Anna, her father, or her consort -- in short, for any of the aristocratic people of the drama. The Don himself is made two-dimensional, robbed both of his sardonic humor and Promethean quality of rebel. (At the risk of tedious exegesis, I must note that the Don's exultant humanist cry-- "Vivan le femmine! Viva il buon vino! Sostegno e gloria d'umanità!"-- is sung from the very rear of the stage, and is hardly heard because of Leporello's too-loud comments up front.)

Thus, although the essential drama of Don Giovanni is that of its aristocrats (the Greeks would have made them kings or gods), the Prague production brings the three peasant characters -- at least two of whom were designed mainly for comic relief -- into the very center of the drama. This results in all sorts of distortions, such as turning the cruel, tense trio at the beginning of the second act into a farce, in which the valet Leporello becomes the protagonist rather than a mere instrument. One could point out similar travesties at other points, all exalting the "gravediggers" at the expense of "Hamlet" and the "ghost." To top it off, the three peasant characters (and Leporello is an Italian if ever da Ponte wrote one) are costumed, and play, as Czechs!

The net result is that someone seeing this opera for the first time might well conclude that, whatever other sins or pretensions may have been ascribed to the Don by Kierkegaard, Shaw or other Western commentators, the real cause of his fall was his maltreatment of the virtuous Bohemian common folk. Dr. Benes -- perhaps; Don Giovanni -- never!

Cordially,



Anatole Shub