

DBP-1

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Mr. Peter B. Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Prague, Czechoslovakia
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Dear Peter,

About two weeks ago, I was able to move out of my friend Pavel's apartment in Čimice (a housing development of prefab high-rises in northern Prague) and into what I hope will be my long-term address in the student dormitory, Kajetánka. About a half-hour's walk to the west of the castle, Hradčany, it is much closer than Čimice to the city center. I'm thus spared from some of the time travelling on punctual but often very crowded busses and trams.

Getting settled required about three trips to the Center for Foreign Relations of the Ministry of Education, two trips to the Commercial Bank, two trips to the office for foreign students at Charles University, two visits to the housing authorities at Kajetánka, and three trips to police headquarters on the other side of town (actually four trips, because I went mistakenly on a Wednesday afternoon when they are closed) where I received and returned my application for a long-term stay, i.e., a four-page questionnaire, a short autobiography, six photos, and a 100 Kčs (Czechoslovak crown) duty stamp. (Actually, then, it was my fifth trip to the police, because having wrongly assumed one purchased one's stamp from the police, I had to leave, find a post office, and return with my stamp). While officials everywhere have been pleasant enough, I somehow feel that a bit of coordination could have saved a lot of unforeseen running to and fro.

My first letter to you is of all and sundry: a survey of Czech magazines, with a focus on young people's endeavours, translated parts of a recent Czech interview with film maker Miloš Forman, a description of a few rock music events I've been at, and a superb theatrical fair. My next letter will be about conversations with some of these performers.

My previous ignorance of the print media here is just one example of the blurry picture I'm gradually clearing up. There are more magazines and journals published here in Czech (let alone in Slovak) than I had heard of or had imagined. To give you an idea of the diversity, I'm presenting you with a list of only the general-interest and cultural magazines, along with

Derek Paton, a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs,
is studying the arts and culture of Czechoslovakia.

their ages, format, size, and price -- as a graphic point of reference for you, a mug of beer (half a litre) in a pub costs about 5 Kcs. Svět v obrazech [The World in Pictures] is a weekly that was established in 1945. It might have been modelled on Life magazine, although it looks more like the weekend magazine of an American newspaper. It covers politics, art, and nature, among other things, mostly by way of color and black & white photographs. In terms of advertising it had, for example, in its August 23, 1989, issue a quarter-page ad for Supraphone records and a full-page ad for office equipment, especially computers. It costs 3.5 Kcs. Similar in format (but, I was told, not as good in content) is Květy [Flowers]. It is a weekly that for 5 Kcs is about sixty-four pages long. It has two crossword puzzles, the television listings, a serialized novel, and the last two pages are advertisements. Rudé právo [Red Law], the Czechoslovak Communist Party's daily newspaper, is the publisher. 100 + 1 zahraniční zajímavost [100 + 1 Foreign Affairs] roughly resembles Time in appearance. It is a bimonthly whose approximately sixty-five pages carry articles only from the foreign press, e.g., the Washington Post, Moscow Literary Gazette, International Herald Tribune, and Stern. On its last two pages it runs advertisements (e.g., for camping equipment or the soon-to-open Jan Kodeš Tennis Club).

There are at least four film magazines: Záběr [Shot/Take] is a bimonthly in tabloid format and has been in existence for twenty-two years. At 1.20 Kcs, it is eighteen pages and carries criticism of new films and a compilation of various critics' point-ratings. Filmový přehled [Film Survey] is a small-format monthly, of forty-eight newsprint pages; it costs 2 Kcs. Kino [Cinema], which is a larger format, focuses on the personalities of the film industry, whereas Film a doba [Film and its Era] is an in-depth monthly for connoisseurs, which has been published for twenty-five years; it is about fifty-seven pages and costs 6 Kcs. Dramatické umění is, as its title says, the magazine of the dramatic arts; it costs 23 Kcs and last year had a run of 6,000 copies and 10,000 this year. For music, there is the monthly Hudební rozhledy [Musical Review], which costs 6 Kcs, and the quarterly Hudební věda [Musicology], ninety-two pages at 13 Kcs a copy. Popular music is covered in Melodie and Gramorevue.

There is a small, tabloid shaped bimonthly, Architekt, which is a mere eight pages, with black & white photos and illustrations; it costs 2 Kcs. Ateliér is only two years old, and has color as well as black & white photographs. It is eight pages in tabloid format, and while it is for the plastic arts, it seems to be aimed at a popular audience. For art in general, the Institute of the Theory and History of Art at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences publishes Umění six times a year; each issue is about 289 pages and costs 25 Kcs. In a similar vein is estetika, which just recently published some correspondence between Thomas Mann and Karel Čapek (which is something that would have a wider audience, I would have thought, than receives this rather specialized journal).

Mladý svět [Young World] has about thirty-two large-sized pages that are usually black and white. It costs 2 Kčs, and carries generally lively articles with the emphasis, obviously, on young people. It has jokes and good quality cartoons (for example the August issue had cartoons by the very talented Vladimír Renčín). Published by the Central Committee of the Socialist Youth Organization at Mladá fronta, it is in its thirty-first year. The main women's magazine, Vlasta, is a weekly that costs 2 Kčs. I was told that it can occasionally be interesting. It usually carries stories such as the excellent woman worker, advice for women, recipes, a serialized novel, and a crossword about women. Naší přírodou [Our nature] is a monthly in the shape of Time, about thirty-seven pages long. It's got color as well as black & white photos. Český svaz ochranců přírody [The Czech Union of Conservationists] is the publisher and they have apparently published some very sharp and critical articles warning against the destruction of the natural environment in Czechoslovakia. Praha is a monthly dedicated solely to news about Prague, its history and, for example, what is being or will be renovated. It costs 2 Kčs, is the size of Time (but even glossier), and carries translations of its articles in Russian, French, German, and English. It has, it seems to me, a comparatively large run of 160,000 per issue. Dikobraz [Porcupine] is, in its own words, the "satirical and humour weekly." It has been in existence forty-five years and costs 2 Kčs. It is sixteen pages of cartoons by various Czech artists, and has a quarterly with the same title, which is about sixty-six pages, costs 10 Kčs, and sometimes has one theme for a whole issue.

Czech literature is represented by at least three journals. Literární měsíčník [Literary monthly] is about 161 pages, is published by the Union of Czech Writers, and costs 10 Kčs. I have yet to hear anyone praise it. In newspaper format are Tvorba (which can be translated as production, creation, activity, or performance). It is the "weekly for literature, politics, and art." First published in 1928, it is eighteen pages in tabloid form with black & white art photographs and drawings. Rudé právo is the publisher and it costs 3 Kčs. Very similar in format is Kmen (its meanings include stem, trunk, tribe, people, species). It is the weekly of the Union of Czech Writers and costs 2.5 Kčs. The way one learns when new books go on sale is through Nové knihy [New Books], an eight-page weekly that one can buy for 50 hellers (i.e., half a crown) on Wednesday; people line up at the bookstores on Thursday to buy the book(s) they have selected the week before. A popular book, e.g., the letters of the Czech comic writer and performer Jan Werich, can mean a three-hour wait, and if one doesn't wait on the first day, one probably won't see the book in the store again. So, at 50 hellers, the little newspaper is a valuable guide. Světová literatura [World Literature] is the "review of foreign literature." It is published every two months, is thirty-four years old and costs 14 Kčs. The Union of Soviet Writers also publishes a monthly in Czech about Soviet literature; it is quite a glossy production with color plates.

Owing to my interest in young people and new endeavours, three new magazines, each for different reasons, particularly grabbed my attention. Student Life, "The Cultural Magazine of the International Union of Students" is a big (10 x 14 inches), brand new production (published only in English) with a glossy, color cover and four glossy, color center pages. Its editorial board consists of a Pole, a Puerto Rican, and a Czech; a Czech and a Pole are the technical editors; and there is a Pole on layout as well as a Pole, a Czech and two Britons who translate and revise. On the reverse side of the front cover is a full-page, color ad for "A new Australian film. Contradictions. A film by David Knaus. A War in Nicaragua 'Made in the USA'." The back cover is a full-page advertisement for Polish Airlines. In his editorial, Josef Skála, President of the IUS, explains that the idea for their magazine "had already begun maturing in Havana. More than a year ago." The general tone is a rather Gorbachevian call for new thinking and openness (though not in those words): "STUDENT LIFE wants to be something unique. Not a mouthpiece, but a round table. A Hyde Park, if you will, but not the kind where just a few loitering tourists are addressed. It should be a chance for genuine communication, the first truly international student magazine open to anyone who cares for it." Skála writes that Student Life would like to "have pages sparkling with controversy. Nothing and no one will be spared. And I don't think we should thereafter stop greeting each other. We would like to experience a different exchange of opinions. One that's not aimed at playing tricks on anyone." Does this mean that its sponsors and advertisers, for example Polish Airlines, should the opportunity arise, could become the issue on a page "sparkling with controversy?" Student Life, in its first issue, ran articles on the Eighteenth World Congress of Philosophy, held in Brighton, UK.; Skateboarding; "Gender and Sex" -- a report from the Turku International Student Week in Finland; "Drugs Mean Death: Drugs and Students"; Students in the Streets of El Salvador; a discussion with young Dutch painters: "Be Open"; "When I Was a Student" by Mr. Pierluigi Vagliani, Director of the Youth Division of UNESCO; an interview with the East German figureskater Katarina Witt; an article on the International Student Press Seminar held in Sofia, Bulgaria, in late 1988; a short article about the Czechoslovak student expedition to the hospital founded by Dr. Albert Schweitzer, in Lamaréné, Gabon; and, finally, names and addresses of students wishing to correspond with other students.

Situace '89, "The student bulletin of the philosophy faculty of Charles University," is an absolutely home-made looking production. With a staff of about ten students, a print run of 500, thirty-six pages, and the disclaimer "solely for internal use," it stands in complete contrast, it seems, to the look of Student Life. Its spring issue had an essay "The Capability of Selfdefence"; a survey, "What opinion do you have of the establishment of the student bulletin"; "News about the student forum at the philosophy faculty "; film and book reviews; a discussion, "Prague's Stromovká [park] is still threatened"; and about twelve other pieces. Apparently, Situace '89 has not met with widespread approval and its life expectancy,

at least for the magazine in its present form, does not look promising.

Partly by luck and partly by inclination, I've managed to plug into the rock music scene most easily. One friend of mine from two years ago helps put out a relatively new magazine (eight issues, so far), Rocknoviny [Rocknewspaper], and I've had the chance to meet two of the five editors. Despite or perhaps on account of its very homemade appearance, Rocknoviny is popular. As the "informant of the rock section of the cultural committee of the District Committee of the Socialist Youth Organization of Prague District 10" (as it declares under its title), it is distributed free of charge to Socialist Youth Movement (SSM) members and to interested concert goers. It is five by eight inches in size, with a black & white photocopy cover. Its twenty pages of text are typewritten with handwritten titles, and it's printed on low-grade newsprint. The phrase "intended for internal use" gives the editors a certain independence with regard to the magazines format and content. Rocknoviny offers the lyrics from the songs of various Czech bands, a schedule of upcoming performances, interviews with musicians, reviews of concerts, and the date and location of an auction of musical and recording equipment. Issue number 7 ran an advertisement on its back cover for the Pink Floyd concert in Stuttgart, West Germany. The editors are enthusiastic and open to the wide range of styles that go under the heading "rock".

A little bit reluctantly I accepted an invitation to go to Zahradní město, a rather remote quarter of Prague in the south-east, to hear heavy metal-- not my favorite of styles. I also did not expect that a Czech heavy metal band from Brno could offer any great improvement on that style. When we entered the hall in which Barel Rock was to play and we saw about twenty rows of about eight chairs each, it became even harder to imagine my first Czech heavy metal concert. While the house lights were still on, the sound of music became increasingly louder (though hardly heavy metal's decibels), and then, before the stage, appeared six men, all with beards and Grcucho-Marx glasses with the moustaches and large plastic noses. Their instruments were an accordian, two violins, guitar, bassoon and flute. At first, I supposed that a Czech audience is very tolerant and has widely eclectic tastes. But, as it turned out, this was Barel Rock. My host was disappointed because he doesn't like folk, but at least the superb musicianship, very humorous lyrics and between-song banter kept him amused. By contrast, I was dazzled. Barel Rock has a wide range of musical styles and each member of the band was extremely competent on a number of instruments. The bassoon was passed around among three members, guitars among almost all, and switching over to the violin presented no obstacle for at least two of the members. Much of Barel Rock's humor is a send up of various musical styles, but only rarely did they become campy, for example, in their parody of a heavy metal band (although that genre of music in itself tends towards camp). They performed a "condensed" version of Dvořak's opera Rusalka "for these fast times in which we live," i.e., it was a few minutes long. Once

they started singing, however, they performed with absolute respect for the composition. It was the first time I'd seen something from opera performed in a folk-music setting, and it worked perfectly. After the concert, I spoke with the band's leader, Dr. Jan Boril. He is a veterinarian by profession, as are some of the other band members. Others, I heard, are butchers. Dr. Boril's main interest is classical music, especially Bohuslav Martinu, which helps explain the musical maturity of Barel Rock. Dr. Boril invited me to his home in Moravia, so in October I'll head eastward and get the full story on Barel Rock (I leave the pun to you, Peter). I'll also send you translations of their excellent lyrics.

In a spirit similar to Barel Rock, and so far the most inspiring event of my stay, was the Divadelní pout [Theatrical fair]. It took place on Strelecký ostrov [Shooting Island]. On the night of their last performance, the weather was damp and the sky overcast. Although the main performances didn't start until 8:00 pm, there was a small band with an accordion, saxophones, snare drum, and a contra bass that was held by the bassist on one end and an assistant on the other. The band wandered around and stopped at various spots on the fair ground by the many stages set up for the acting companies. Shortly before tickets went on sale at 7:00 pm, the band played Auld Lang Syne while walking out of the grounds and shaking hands with the audience. At eight o'clock, when we re-entered the fair grounds, all the performers were lined up on both sides of the gate and thus formed an aisle down which we walked.

The spectators, almost entirely young Czechs (smartly dressed and in that sense indistinguishable from their peers in Western European) moved from stage to stage depending on how much they liked a performance. There were only two or three performances going on at any one time. My favorite group was "Tudu," which was made up of about a dozen members, probably in their twenties. They had five saxophonists whose repertoire alternated mostly between Latin American music and American gospel songs. Their performance was a depiction of Genesis, for which they suspended an actress from a branch about twelve feet above the ground. She was an angel and two actors below flapped her wings by prodding them with bamboo poles. God, in a long white beard and straw hat, gave us rain (using a watering can, a funnel, and a sprinkler in the shape of a coat hanger), and He gave us light with little candles. The angel read poetry and the troupe down in front led the audience in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" (both in English), and a Czech blues song that the audience seemed to know well. At about 11:00 pm, the crowd followed one actor to a corner of the fair ground where he made an emotional closing speech in which he hoped for future and even better theatrical fairs and a climate in which to perform. Then he and the musicians led the audience to the gates. I scrambled around after them in the mounting rain and on increasingly muddy ground, trying to get names and addresses for a future meeting. The performers still had to pack up their props and costumes. I'll have more news on the fair and on the other actors in my next letters.

I eventually had to accept tickets to a heavy metal band

and it, too, was in a remote quarter of Prague. Brian & Motorband began playing at 6:00 pm. The audience was larger than any I'd yet seen here, although by American standards still relatively small, albeit Brian & Motorband are not a big-name act. The crowd, perhaps because it was only shortly after 6:00, sat almost motionless as Brian and his heavy rockers thrashed out their music on the stage. The band consists of five young men in Converse All-star basketball shoes (or the local equivalent) and loudly colored knee-length shorts ("beach jammies", I think they're called in America). The lead singer and guitarist spent lots of time thrusting their heads forward and shaking their medium long manes at the crowd on the floor, which started as three boys pumping closed fists into the air above them. By the time we left -- fifteen minutes later -- the crowd on the dance floor had increased to about a dozen, and Brian hadn't taken a moment's break between songs. A combination of my boredom with his steady (and precisely in unison rhythm), and a desire to save my eardrums for future performances sent me out the door perhaps a bit prematurely.

Another rock concert I attended was on Slovanský ostrov [Slavonic Island] on the Vltava right near the National Theater. I'd already heard the music coming from there, because I have friends who live not far away and they are treated to the music gratis as it echoes off the buildings and fine old baroque church opposite their apartment. This concert, a triple bill, also outdoors, began at 6:00 pm. The first band was strongly inspired, or so it sounded, by the British band Joy Division. The combination of intentionally dreary vocals, hypnotically repetitive drums and guitars, and the remaining daylight robbed them of a greater share of the audience's attention. But, I was told, the audience (which included a large number of young men in leather jackets, some of which had on the back, in English, "Exploited" or "Anarchy") had really come to see and hear Saint Vincent. Vincent is a hulking fellow, over six feet tall, with a shaved head, an apparently good nature, and a certificate that he is mentally disturbed. His performance, for which the audience crowded the stage, was divided into two parts. Spray, a band from Bratislava, played a very competent, aggressive, and loud sort of rock-a-billy. Vincent's performance consisted of some friendly banter, which had the audience grinning in anticipation, and then the most animal-like howling into the microphone, which drove the audience wild. Although in many ways the audience, it seemed, looked on it as a kind of freak show, they seemed to be entirely supportive of Vincent and not at all mocking. Strangely, he managed to bring out people's affection. On the other hand, the howling began to sound like an unending Japanese sci-fi film and I left Vincent in the middle of his second act. We haven't yet made a date to chat, but apparently he's also a painter.

Lastly, here are parts of a Czech interview with Miloš Forman, which appeared in Svět v obrazech on August 23, 1989. Its mere appearance and some of the discussion seem to hint at a certain change in attitude towards Forman's work and perhaps

other Czechoslovak artists. The journalist, from Svět v obrazech conducted the interview in New York, which, I was told, was also out of the ordinary. The interview, "Valmont podle Forman" [Valmont according to Forman] began by emphasizing Forman's latest film, Valmont, his version of Dangerous Liaisons. The following excerpts are the most interesting.

Svět v obrazech: "I only hope that we won't have to wait as long as we did for Hair or in vain as in the case of One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, Taking Off, or Ragtime."

Forman: "It's strange. In the Soviet Union they show Amadeus, Ragtime, and Cuckoo. But not Hair. And in Czechoslovakia on the other hand, only Hair. And Amadeus. I don't understand it."

The Fireman's Ball [Hoří, má panenko, (1968)] has returned to the our cinemas and I think that it's almost more successful than Hair. Several films are connected to their times, others aren't. When Amadeus premiered at the Alfa [cinema in Prague] it was packed with people." [...] "And how come "Cuckoo" made such an impact [compared to Hair]? (in 1975 it got 5 Oscars)".

"Cuckoo" made a fantastic impact. But not only here [New York], everywhere. Now it's enormously successful in the Soviet Union. I was at the Moscow festival last year and they wanted to take me to the screening. At first I thought that they're taking me to some kind of meeting of dissidents. Secret. Suddenly I look around and we're in a stadium in Luzhniki, where they play hockey! Fifteen thousand people were watching it, I'd never experienced that! And the members of the audience reacted exactly like here. I had the feeling that I was sitting in the midst of fifteen thousand Americans. They understood everything, each allusion."

"People, you see, are clever."

"People, when they get together, they're clever, ... When you take one hundred people, you probably wouldn't spend even five minutes with any one of them individually, because one after another they would begin to bore you, but when they sit down in the movie theater, they're smarter than you. They react sooner, they comprehend sooner, they're excellent. But there's another side to the picture. I remember still from Czechoslovakia at the artists' council [umělecké rady]. Twenty of the greatest intellectuals, writers, theoreticians sit there and when they have to deliver the verdict for which they've tried to reach an agreement, then it's as if a five-year old boy had written it. When people get together as perceivers, then they're fantastically smart, but when they get together as thinkers, as an 'organ', then it's a complete disaster!"

"How did you discover One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, a little book which was actually the embryo of your success?"

"That is a very strange story. In 1965 or 1966, Kirk Douglas was in Prague. And they were throwing some kind of party for him, I was invited, they were showing him then, I think, Loves of a Blonde [Lásky jedné plavovlásky]. And at the party he said

to me that he'd send me a little book, wouldn't I like to film it in America. I said, of course. He left and the book never came. So I said to myself, obviously a typical blabbermouth. About ten years later a package comes to me and there's the book. From Michael Douglas, son of Kirk Douglas, wouldn't I read it through and, conceivably, make it into a film. So I read it through [the editor noted the Czech translation by J. Koránk] and liked it a lot and I began to make preparations. And, by coincidence, I got together with Kirk Douglas in Los Angeles. He looks at me and says: You're real bums, you Czechs. Do you remember that time in Prague when I told you about that book ... And I say, well yeah and what? Well, what? I sent it to you and you never even said boo. I explained to him that I never got anything. Maybe, as it was flying over the border, some crow pecked it up."

The final words of the interview let us in on a secret that there is a book being prepared about Forman, but the article doesn't let us know where or by whom.

As I hope you can tell there's a lot to see and read here. Friends point out at least one event every day and they pick up momentum. I look forward to writing to you in greater detail about some lesser known but excellent artists. In the meantime, I leave you with some cartoons by Vladimír Rencín, which appeared in Mladý svět (September 9, 1989).

All the best,

Jack

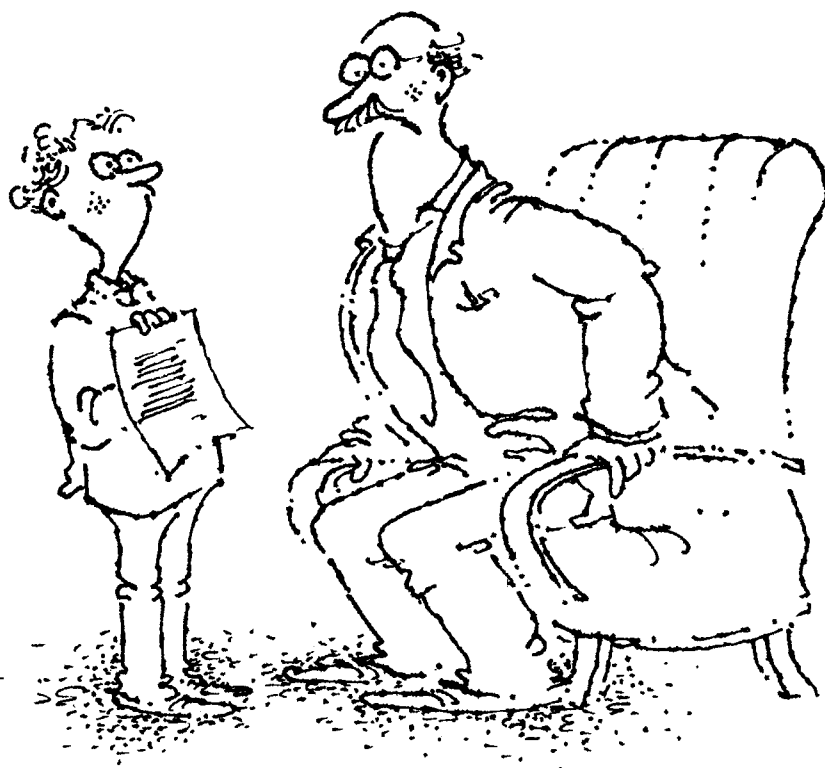


The five [worst mark in school] isn't my fault. Before I went to the washroom, Masaryk was shooting at the workers and when I'd returned, he was Daddy.



"Pukavec [one of Rencín's stock characters]
is an idiot!!"

Mind you don't sign that sort of declaration!



Ty NEBUDEŠ UZAVÍRAT SOCIALISTICKÉ ZÁVAZKY, ŽE SE
BUDEŠ UČIT, TY SE BUDEŠ UČIT!

VLADIMIR RENCIN

You're not going to undertake a socialist pledge that you're
going to learn. You are going to learn!



VLADIMIR RENCIN

SAMÉ ČTYŘKY, Z RUŠTINY JEDNIČKA. NENÍ V TOM NĚJAKÁ PROVOKACE?

Nothing but fours, but a first in Russian.
Isn't there some kind of provocation there?

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