INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DBP-13

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Dear Peter,

This year, like last year, I spent Christmas with my relatives in Pilsen. Travelling by express train from Prague, I was there in a couple of hours. Shortly after I walked in the door of his housing-project apartment, my 84-year-old great-uncle Ludvík asked me, "So, what about the Persian Gulf?" It wasn't the most appropriate Christmas topic, but it became, and remained, one of the most prevalent topics of discussion in Czechoslovakia for the next couple of months. My great-aunt Vlasta immediately prepared lunch for me -- a big plate of lentils with a fried egg. While I ate, Ludvík stayed in the dining room and we chatted. My great-uncle, as I wrote to you last year, spent much of his thirties from 1942 until the end of the war in the ghetto Theresienstadt and doing forced labor for the Germans. His forties were spent in the Communists' prisons. This is probably one of the main sources of his always cool, if not pessimistic, attitude towards the current political and economic situation. There were some embarrassing silences while we sat together, and it was a welcome relief when Vlasta came in now and then to see if there was anything we wanted. When their loquacious daughter Jana arrived in the late afternoon, no one had to worry about silences anymore.

That evening when we sat down to dinner, Ludvík looked at his watch and said, "Six o'clock. In another hour the rest of Pilsen will be starting their dinners. Our family always ate Christmas dinner an hour ahead of everyone else in town, since Father was a doctor and wanted to be finished eating when the calls began to come in -- calls for him to go and pull fish bones out of Pilsners' throats." I wasn't talking much for just that reason and concentrated on every mouthful of carp, the traditional Czech Christmas dish. Ludvík, who was eating a Wiener schnitzel instead of fish (since he doesn't see too well anymore) was able to talk. "And then there

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were the Christmases during the First World War when Father was at the front. Those were sad Christmases. And the Christmases in the concentration camp, of course." "During the Christmas of '45," Vlasta chipped in, "we spent most of our time running for the cover of the air-raid shelters in Pilsen. The bombing was awful, but we were cheering for the Americans and we understood why they were doing it."

Already last Christmas, Ludvík, Vlasta, and Jana were expecting hard times, but their spirits were buoyed up by the post-November euphoria and the December 29 election of Václav Havel. I had visited Jana a few times in the course of last year and listened to her fears about price rises, about secret police still at her work place, and about the possibility of her being laid off. At times her anxieties went well beyond the bounds of reason and well beyond the fears held by my other Czech friends. At the Christmas table this year, therefore, I wasn't surprised to hear her say "We had better enjoy this. It will be our last decent Christmas -- thanks to Klaus." That was only the first of many of her comments about Finance Minister Václav Klaus and how he was making life financially miserable or impossible for Czechs.

After dinner we went to the next room, where they had an evergreen tree about two-feet high, which Vlasta had managed to put together from a few little pine boughs. The result was quite lovely, certainly much more appealing than the sickly, skinny, and expensive trees that are sold here. In contradiction to the continuing complaints about Klaus and the belt-tightening economic policies, the gifts that Jana, Vlasta, and Ludvík gave each other, though modest, were in fact even a little better than last year's presents.

After the giving of gifts, the television was switched on and Vlasta and Jana came into the living room with coffee and a tray laden with a variety of little cookies. Baking the cookies is a major part of Czechs' pre-Christmas preparations. Czechs -- usually only the women -- spend hours making little rum balls, crescents with vanilla-sugar, "bear's paws," and other intricate delicacies. What's a treat to my palate, however, is, as many friends have told me, something for which many Czechs have lost their appetite after practically being force-fed them or eating them only so as not to offend their relatives, the bakers. Television is also a major part of the holiday. Until last year, when the midnight mass was first broadcast, Christmas television specials were devoid of any religious aspects. Instead, a show such as the Soviet Christmas tale, "Děda mráz" (literally, Old Man Frost, who is like Santa Claus) dominated the airwaves. This year a British animated film was shown, dubbed into Czech. I sat in the room, which was lit only by the TV, and Ludvík snoozed in his armchair. Vlasta and Jana finished washing the dishes in their tiny kitchen and then came out for a TV show on Czech traditional Christmas songs.

The following week, Prague was overflowing with thousands of young Christians who came for mass prayer sessions at Letní plány (where the demonstrations were held in December 1989 and where the Pope led his outdoor mass). They also came to have a good time in Prague. Where so many guests were

going to live, however, had not been worked out. There were some last-minute appeals on television asking people to offer visitors their floors to sleep on.

I spent New Year's Eve (here it's called *Silvestr*) with some Belgian friends at my home in the housing project Nové Barrandov, far to the west of downtown Prague. This is one of the newest housing projects in the country, and apparently it's a slight improvement on the previous model *paneláky* (prefab apartment buildings), which litter the Czechoslovak landscape and which the present town planners claim must continue to be built for the next year or so. Nové Barrandov, like other *paneláky*, consists of dozens of grey and brown, uniform, concrete, seven-story apartment blocks. Each block has 21 apartments, served by one elevator, which has a blue sheet-metal door and a brown sheet-metal interior, reminiscent of an old Mechano set, the children's toy. There are sockets for three light bulbs, but in my building two are empty.

Each of these apartment blocks is incorporated into some larger configuration that can run the length of a whole street. The streets are the parking lots for thousands of Czech Škodas, which are all in primary colors and differ mostly by the style of the year they were produced or by how dirty they are. Here and there, a Volvo or an Audi or even a Mercedes breaks the monotony. (There were, by the way, posters around town with the Volkswagen and Škoda logos and a message from the two auto manufactures, now partners, wishing us happy holidays.)

On every corner of Nové Barrandov is a small shelter made of wide-diameter piping and a corrugated steel roof. This covers two garbage bins. Tenants carry their garbage down to these dumpsters in little white plastic buckets that they empty out and bring back home. Plastic bags are too valuable.

From the inside, the apartments aren't too bad. You can, however, hear the neighbors clearly through the holes in the wall for the radiator pipes, as well as through the vents in the bathroom and above the toilet. These days this is at most only an occasional annoyance or, as when I first heard voices in my bathroom, a strange surprise. In the days of Communist rule, however, when suspicion and fear were widespread, and one wanted to play the BBC, Radio Free Europe, or the Voice of America without the neighbors knowing, this lack of acoustic privacy was not only annoying but could also be very unsettling. On the plus side, there is almost always hot water and electricity in this apartment, although if the water is shut off or the power goes down or the front-door buzzer doesn't buzz, there isn't much one can do except put in a request to the housing authorities and then wait -- and wait. From October when I moved in, until well after Christmas, the main buzzer -- seven stories down -- was out of order. Since I have no telephone (and for the foreseeable future there are no telephone lines available), and since the tenants (wisely) want the front door kept locked most of the day, waiting for visitors was no pleasure and spontaneous calls are still practically out of the question. Perhaps the biggest plus is

that the windows are large (about 1.5 yards by 2.5) and can be opened wide from the top or the side.

After my Belgian friends and I had eaten our New Year's Eve dinner and chatted for a couple of hours, they had to leave to get the last bus for the long ride back to the subway station. It was shortly before midnight when we reached the bus stop at Chaplin Square -- all streets in Nové Barrandov have a name connected in some way to the film industry; my street is named for Jean Gabin. Within a few minutes, the relative calm and quiet was penetrated by a series of explosions.

1991 had arrived. People came out onto their balconies and were setting off fireworks. Chaplin Square is actually just a concrete underpass, and the sounds of exploding cherry bombs (the Czechs call them "petards") echoed and re-echoed off the concrete walls and columns. During the half-hour we waited, bottles were flung at least three times from the overpass and landed a few yards from us. Above the opposite wall of the underpass, we could see people in facing apartment buildings on each side of a park area firing "petards", flares, and rockets at each other -- none of these fireworks, however, had the range to reach the opposite building. Some rockets headed in our direction but died out in mid-air. On all sides, billows of smoke rose off the sidewalk and the strips of "lawn" in front of buildings, and then it dissipated in the temperate evening breeze. A favorite piece of fireworks was a stream of fire that the many tenants casually let cascade over the railings of their balconies. I kept thinking that urban warfare must look like this, and I was reconfirmed in my suspicion that I don't have the least bit of nerve for combat.

I spent New Year's Day in a completely different atmosphere. Only a ten-minute walk from the housing project is Prokopské údoly (Prokop Valley). This is a conservation area and a favorite location for Barrandov Studios when they're filming cowboy movies. The main road follows a little stream and there are footpaths leading in other directions. One path leads by quarry pits where there's swimming in summer. The path soon rejoins a main road, which leads to what was once a small town but is now the remains of a run-down community incorporated into the greater City of Prague. I soon heard the clip-clop of horse's hooves and then saw a Czech on horseback dressed as a cowboy. There was, however, no film crew in sight.

On January 3, 1991 former ICWA Fellow Warren Unna came for a visit. The next day I met him and his friend Nan McEvoy for lunch. After lunch, we tried to get a cab in front of Nan's hotel. The first cabby I approached, who was at that moment letting the doorman help his passengers unload their baggage, curtly and without explanation refused to take us. We waited for at least fifteen minutes while an employee of the hotel stood out on the main street trying to flag down a cab for us.

Finally, we got one to take us to the UMPRUM Museum of applied arts. Nan had an appointment there with a very friendly and informative curator of the

museum, Dr. Zdeněk Kirschner. He gave us a quick tour through the museum and an exhibition of one of the best Czech contemporary photographers, Josef Koudelka. The building is lovely, with carved woodwork and plaster walls and ceilings full of ornamentation such as little caryatids. The museum's collection, mostly of the decorative arts such as furniture, glass, porcelain, and clothing, is small (tiny, compared to the Metropolitan in New York), but in some ways this is an advantage for the visitor because it's manageable. Nan, however, was disappointed with the small quantity of Czech-made objects.

Back outside, Warren and Nan were once again able to experience the local taxi drivers. Not long after Warren had successfully hailed one of the scarce cabs and we climbed in, Warren -- now attuned to their custom of not turning on the meter -- asked the driver to switch it on. The driver, however, doggedly refused and offered the justification "tomorrow, prices going up." Warren asked him how much was the fare to the hotel. The driver, hearing the name Palace, of course stated an outlandish sum, and Warren decided that we'd get out and travel by subway instead. Back at Nan's hotel, -- said to be the best in Prague -- Warren tried to get tickets for the opera or ballet. At first the young women behind the counter at the hotel ticket office said, "All sold out." "This is no place for an A-type personality," grumbled Warren, and I agreed, although I don't know what type I am. Perhaps the woman noticed Warren's subtle anger, because in a couple of minutes she offered him tickets for the "Best of Mozart." The tickets were three times more expensive than tickets for the National Theater in Prague, and I'd never heard of the production or the troupe performing.

The "Best of Mozart", a collection of Mozart arias sung in modern settings, was performed in one of the first post-Velvet-Revolution private café-cabarets, which is located right on the Vltava River near the Charles Bridge and has a spectacular view of the Castle. It turned out to be a very professional performance and quite inventive. I was relieved that Warren didn't get to see only the "Worst of Prague."

One Crisis after Another

In the week before the UN deadline for Saddam Hussein to get his army out of Kuwait, Czechs were talking increasingly about the developing crisis. My roommate's father managed to give me his views on the matter, saying that he was well-acquainted with the Arab mind, because he had read the novels of Karel May, a well-known Czech writer of cowboy and Indian stories for pre-teens and teenagers, but he sometimes wrote about the Arab world, too. Almost all the Czechs I know, had little doubt about who was in the right in the imminent conflict. They, probably more than citizens of most other countries, are apt to see a parallel between Hussein's and Hitler's style of international relations, and the Munich-1938 example was evoked often and credibly here. On the other hand, it was not their country that was going into a major confrontation with a massive army.

Czechs can also sympathize with citizens of the Baltic states. "How do you like your Nobel-prize laureate, Gorbachev?" one friend asked me, after the Soviet military intervention in Lithuania. The intervention evoked a rather large demonstration in front of the Soviet Union's embassy here. From the window of Civic Forum's downtown office, I saw the procession after it made its way down from the embassy (in a large palace in the Prague district of Bubeneč) and was heading down the pedestrian zone of the street Příkopy towards Wenceslas Square. A Lithuanian-Czechoslovak Association has been formed, and the weekly Respekt, which has very good coverage of international relations, especially European ones, has been covering the Baltic states quite well and always making obvious their support for them. Dagmar and I obviously thought about ICWA Fellow, Ina Navazelskis, right in the middle of it. I tried to phone Ina a few times from Civic Forum, but the lines to Lithuania were badly tied up.

In the middle of one of the quickly approaching peaks in the predominant international crisis, i.e., in the Persian Gulf, Civic Forum held a special congress on 12 and 13 January, which voted to transform the Civic Forum movement into a party. The story is interesting a demands more attention, so I'll save it for one of the next letters. For now, suffice it to say that in the middle of all the confusion in their country and abroad (large and small-scale privatization; price rises; Slovak nationalism; Moravian nationalism; rampant crime; no job security; Hussein; Islamic fundamentalism; possible terrorist attacks; burgeoning chaos in the Soviet Union; the possibility of a flood of millions of Soviet refuges into Czechoslovakia; Czech right-wing agitation to rid the government of all Communists, including 1968ers such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Dienstbier, Prosecutor General Rychetský, and Prime Minister Pithart; the impending opening of secret-police files on all people holding a job in public life -- and all of this being reported and delivered in a never-before-seen flood of information of various degrees of reliability) the Czech public couldn't figure out what was happening with Civic Forum, the number-one political force in the Czech Republic. It was easiest (and erroneous) to interpret as a pure struggle for power between Klaus and the pro-reform groups versus "the rest." Many people are disgusted by the inner-party conflict, and time will soon tell if the two halves -- the Civic Movement and the Civic Democratic Party -- will be ablé to be effective political forces.

The Good Soldier Švejk Faces Hussein?

Monday, the day after the Civic Forum congress, there was a demonstration against the Iraqis' invasion of Kuwait. It was to take place in front of the Iraqi Embassy in the Prague district of Bubeneč. My friends Silvia Marinovová, Lucie Mertová, her two young daughters (Rebeka and Sara) and I went to join the crowd in front of the Iraqi Embassy. Czechs had not exactly turned out in droves for this event. In fact, the demonstration consisted of about 40 people. One high-school class formed the bulk of the tiny gathering. It was a freezing cold afternoon. Four Prague policemen supervised the demonstration. A couple of officers had their hands in their

pockets and rocked on their heels or on the curb by the embassy's front entrance, muttering to each other and chuckling. Some students waved cardboard Kuwaiti flags.

There didn't seem to be any embassy people in the windows. Only Saddam Hussein holding a little child in his arms looked down on us from a huge photograph on the facade of the old villa that served as the embassy. Many of the demonstrators were grinning and giggling in nervous anticipation or out of embarrassment. A petition was passed around for signatures. A leader of the tiny demonstration rang the door bell and waited for someone to come out of the embassy. After a few minutes, two embassy officials emerged. They took the petition and re-entered the embassy. After another short while, the two Iraqi officials returned with their response: Kuwait is Iraqi territory, and Iraqi soldiers have every right to be there. After about 45 minutes in the icy winds the crowd dispersed. I went home that night mistakenly expecting the attack to come at 6:OO the next morning (Prague time). Gloomy and eerie thoughts went through my mind. I then felt a bit ridiculous when I learned that apocalypse was in fact set for the next day.

The week before, I had made an appointment to see a friend of mine, Jana Pilátová and her twin daughters, Marie and Anna. After the end of Communist government in November 1989, Jana taught at DAMU (the drama school) and now teaches at Charles University. Marie is in her first year at Charles University and Anna is finishing her degree there. During dinner, we were acutely aware that the impending deadline for Hussein was now only a few hours away. (I now had friends to set me straight on the time). Jana was sounding quite apocalyptic, which put me in the opposite mood, although her fear of terrorist attacks was probably well founded, since such acts are easy to carry out. We watched the 7:30 news in which Havel gave a short speech to praise and encourage the approximately 200 Czechoslovak soldiers already in Saudi Arabia. Havel said that Czechoslovakia's own decision to send troops to the Gulf was a clear sign of its new status as an independent state. The same news program ended with an inane interview with a journalist who, still dressed in army fatigues, had just returned from Saudi Arabia. His commentary lasted much longer than Havel's short speech, and to our great disbelief he was egged on by the evening's news reader who continued to ask him questions. Czechoslovak TV still has a lot to learn. The question is from whom?

Czechs Meet CNN

Before the revolution, it was still possible to buy satellite dishes here. In western Bohemia and even in some parts of Prague it was even possible to get West German television stations with an ordinary roof-top antenna. In those days, in areas north of Prague some of the better movies could be seen from Polish television, albeit the picture was fuzzy and the language wasn't familiar to Czechs. Ever since last spring Czechoslovak Television's two channels have been supplement by OK3, which has been providing Russian, French, German, and, above all, the English-

language broadcasts of CNN. When the Gulf War finally started, Czechs were being informed by CNN's almost round-the-clock coverage.

Before the war in the Gulf, CNN's style, let alone it's content, was strikingly different from Czechoslovak TV's. Now, the relatively uninitiated Czechoslovak audience was (and still is) watching "up-to-the-minute coverage" and news-readers who tend to give a very dramatic delivery. CNN at one point had so predominated the airwaves that not only was their news on OK3, but it was also being simultaneously translated into Czech on one of the other two channels. CNN was even a source of news on the radio here, because the BBC World Service -- whose high-quality news can now be heard here, loud and clear on the FM dial, 24 hours a day -- was quoting CNN.

My friends had varied reactions to this new element in the Czech mass media. Some couldn't understand the quickly spoken English in various regional accents. Jan Burian, a songwriter and journalist, thought it was great that Czechoslovakia was finally out of the information vacuum. Vladimír Merta, a songwriter and now also a journalist of sorts, on the other hand, thought it was "war as porno-rock-n-roll-video." Jarda Borecký, the director of the computer section at Civic Forum, finds CNN's reporting to be too much talk and too little substance, though he quite likes the debates of "Crossfire"; Václav Žák, a leading member of Civic Forum's Liberal Club and deputy in the Czech parliament told me, "All I can say is that I think it's marvelous that one guy can start a TV station and get his programs shown all over the world." One of the best Czech papers, Respekt, ran articles praising CNN, and the Civic Forum's weekly Forum, has just run a full-page interview with Jan Urban, a spokesman of Civic Forum who left politics to pursue a career in journalism at the daily Lidové noviny. Urban praises CNN and American journalism in general.

The vast majority of Czechs, according to the main Czech opinion pollers, support the anti-Iraq Coalition and the Bush Administration. As I mentioned before, from the Czech point of view the parallels one can make with the 1938 Munich scenario seem very valid. While all my friends here were sensitive to the fact that civilians would be, and were being, killed, they were also very wary of Saddam Hussein, did not for one minute take him at his word, and believe that it is necessary and right to get rid of him.

Civic Forum went into a state of alert and stepped up their security -- with very good reason, since Havel and the government have made their opposition to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait perfectly clear and since Czechoslovakia has troops in Saudia Arabia. For a while, I was a bit nervous to go to the Forum's main office, and when I was here on the weekends, alone but for the men at the front desk, I wondered if it would my last weekend. That, thankfully, didn't turn out to be the case.

All the best, Derek

Received in Hanover 3/18/91