

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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International Student Day

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

Now, it is finally possible for me to agree with the friends at home who tell me, "you're living in Czechoslovakia in interesting times." Until the afternoon of Friday, 17 November, it seemed, however, that most Praguers were never going to voice in public a single word of disapproval with the current regime, at least not outside that hotbed of political debate, the local pub. Public demonstrations on 28 October, the seventy-first anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic, saw a turnout of about ten-thousand people on Prague's largest square, Václavské náměstí. There was much milling about but very little energy that day. The government had taken over the square two days earlier for the swearing in ceremony (and its rehearsal) of new army recruits, and hence removed yet another occasion to voice mass disapproval. It had never occurred to me that the Czechs would commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Germans' killing of the student, Jan Opletal. When, a few days before 19 November, I saw the SSM (Socialist Youth Organization) poster urging students to come to a demonstration on the seventeenth, I dismissed it as an officially organized event with which the régime had co-opted the death of Opletal for its own ends. When student friends, however, urged me to go, I trusted their judgment and set off to the Albert Steps at the medical school of Charles University. The following is a detailed report of how events looked to me that day.

This is the part of the university that truly feels like a campus. Surrounded by nineteenth-century faculty buildings, we streamed down the steps and blended into the massive crowd assembled below. Young people were standing in every nook and cranny, on walls, and some even in the

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

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bushes. Despite this being an SSM-organized demonstration, or rather because it was officially sanctioned, students turned out in droves. Many had large banners that fluttered above the crowds: "Students of the World Unite", "Europe without Political Prisoners", "Demisi Dinosaurů" [Resignation of the dinosaurs], "Who Else If Not We, When Else If Not Now", and "The Soviet Union -- Finally Our Model." The guest speakers were not clearly audible through the public address system. The first speaker was a survivor of a German concentration camp and had been a fellow student of Opletal. He was well received because he spoke passionately and sincerely and said he hoped for a truly democratic future. The SSM representative, however, was booed, whistled, and hissed at, so much that he had to stop, abandon his professional speaker's voice and ask the crowd for five minutes of cooperation. Then he resumed his mechanical tone, and hurriedly uttered the hackneyed promises with which most people here are so fed up.

After about an hour of listening to speeches, the crowd followed an SSM spokesman's suggestion that we proceed to Vyšehrad (the cemetery where many Czech national figures are buried). The autumn sky had grown darker, and a few gigantic shadows of people with Czechoslovak flags flickered along the walls of the faculty buildings. People in medical coats had been gazing down from open windows and cameras were clicking all around. Foreign journalists were asking in English, "What did he say, what did he say?" Our section of the crowd moved about twenty-yards and came to a standstill. There were a few old people nearby who mingled in with the students, and they were grinning broadly out of pure joy. A small group immediately behind me began to sing songs of Voskovec and Werich from the 1920s and 1930s, and by now spontaneous chanting had gained momentum: "Long live Charter" [Charter 77, the unofficial human rights organization], "Long live Havel!" (the banned playwright and one of the founders of Charter 77 -- he generally receives the most enthusiastic applause), "Long Live Ruml!" "Release Ruml!", (Jiří Ruml, the human rights activist and editor of Lidové noviny [The People's Newspaper]), or the rhyming chant, "Lidové noviny do každé rodiny!" [The People's Newspaper to every family]. Playing on the Communists' slogan which is posted all over Czechoslovakia, "With the Soviet Union for All Time and Never Any Other Way," they chanted "It's Already the End of 'All Time'!" They voiced their opinion on (the then) General Secretary Miloš Jakeš with "Jakeše do koše!" [Jakeš into the basket], and to make their views understood as to his possibly preordained successor (former Communist Party boss for Prague) the comparatively young but nevertheless hard-line Miroslav Štěpán, they chanted "Štěpán to the shovel!" (i.e., to work), which was followed by the chant "Too bad for the shovel!" or "Waste of a shovel!" People began to light candles and waited for the procession really to move.

Once in motion, I found it easier to get an idea of the

vastness of the assembled group which seemed to be growing all the time. "Czechs come with us!" followed quickly by "And Slovaks, too!" (which rhymes) were chanted to the people on the sidewalk and up in the windows of their homes, some of whom were lighting candles and waving. "Masaryk on the hundred crown note" the crowd chanted, referring to the new hundred-crown note which bears the likeness of the Czech Stalinist and post-1948 leader, Klement Gottwald, which is being defaced, e.g., with "Murderer", and which retail stores, the post office, and the banks then refuse to accept. The procession, referring to Jakeš's speech to a Pilsen regional Communist Party meeting (recorded and, in response to popular demand, broadcast repeatedly by Radio Free Europe) in which he said "we Communists are not alone" (nejsme jako kůl v plotě" -- literally, "like a fence post"), chanted "nechceme kůl v plotě" ("we don't want a fence post").

As the procession descended along a road into Vyšehrad, a walled-in area, I had second thoughts because it crossed my mind that it would be a perfect place for the police to seal us in. I was soon encouraged, however, by the masses of people standing on the slopes and lawns on either side of the road, who held candles and banners and cheered. The atmosphere was completely festive and peaceful. There wasn't even the normal pushing one finds in a line-up or a crowd at an American sporting event or rock concert. The assembled demonstrators held up the index and middle fingers of their right hands and sang a disjointed but nevertheless moving rendition of the national anthem which is a combination of the melancholy "Kde domov můj?" [Where is my home?] for Bohemia and Moravia, followed immediately by the almost Russian sounding melody of the rousing second part, for Slovakia, "It's lightening above the Tatras":

Where is my home? Where is my home?
 The waters murmur along the meadows,
 The pine groves whisper along the rocks,
 In the orchards shine the blossom of spring
 It's an earthly paradise to look upon
 And this is the beautiful land,
 The Czech land, my home, my home.
 Above the Tatras it's lightening,
 It's thundering wildly [sung 2x].
 We are stopping, brothers,
 Look at where they, the Slovaks, lost their lives [2x].

My friends and I had moved up the grassy slope by one of the thousand-year old rotundas. Down below, above the heads of the crowd, flowers were being passed towards the front to lay on the monument along with the candles that demonstrators had been carrying. It was a wave of human hands and flowers all illuminated by street-lights from beyond the gates of Vyšehrad and from candles and TV-crew lights. The crowd waited for directions, then moved to

descend in the direction of the Vltava's embankment but were called back by others in the crowd. Some people were nervously anticipating police action, and at one point we heard, "Make a run for it! Make a run for it!", but it was only a false alarm. As difficult as it was to tell if there was any leadership and therefore to receive clear directions, the crowd relied on word of mouth, as many people shouted out the message that we'd meet again on 10 December (the forty-first anniversary of Czechoslovakia's signing the UN's International Convention on Human Rights).

Some of the assembled prepared to leave, saying that it had been a wonderful, successful evening and that they looked forward to 10 December. As we filed out of Vyšehrad, about thirty abreast and incalculably long, I asked my friends why they didn't want to follow the part of the procession that aimed for Václavské náměstí. "We want to leave the police waiting on the square in vain," they replied with less than watertight logic. The descending procession left candles and flowers on walls and small monuments. We walked downhill along the old castle walls for another five minutes and were soon on streets lined with pubs and stores. People watched from the sidewalk and from pub windows as the procession, shouting "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!", "He can't speak Czech!" (a phrase drawn from Věra Chytilová's film, The Jester and the Queen, which may refer to Jakeš's prowess as a public speaker, or to the continuing Russian military presence, or to those Czechs who don't seek a truly democratic Czechoslovakia), "We want free elections!", "We want a new government!", and "The end of 'all times'!", moved across the intersection of Vyšehradská, Plavecká, and Botičká. I wondered what the people thought who were gazing out through pub windows, but people were not yet so open, and we now anticipated the need to leave the demonstration.

The procession had slowed down almost to a halt. We heard whistling, jeering, and, repeatedly, "Let us through!" At that point, my uneasy Czech friends said, "Let's turn back. There's going to be a thrashing." We backtracked the few yards down Vyšehradská and walked with a small group down a street parallel to the demonstrators. When we emerged on Trojická, we saw the white-helmeted riot police with their German shepherds and long, white batons. We four decided it would be safe to pass behind the police and continue homeward. On the last stretch of Vyšehradská we passed seven yellow police vans (nick-named "zelený anton" [green anthony], a term from Habsburg times) and one empty public transport bus, which were idling in a line against the sidewalk. At Karlovo náměstí, my American friend and I parted with our two Czech companions who were definitely going home. I wanted to visit an older friend who lives nearby. As we were saying our farewells, the whole column of police vehicles drove by and turned down Resslova, where they parked and waited. We walked by, as nonchalantly as possible, and looked in at the young policemen's faces that

were steaming up the grilled windows through which they looked out at the Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius, where the parachutists who assassinated Reinhard Heydrich made their last stand. We turned north and then, to our surprise, heard the demonstrators, who had been let through and were now walking, parallel to us, up the embankment. We ran to my friend's apartment to tell her to come have a look.

The friend gave us some cake while she quickly got dressed and gave my student friend an extra sweater because she was obviously chilled to the bone. When we got in the elevator to descend, a neighbour from the building, also curious, joined us. Once outside we flowed effortlessly into the procession, where a joyful, triumphant feeling was prevailing. As we approached the National Theater, we could see its employees waving from the window. Coming up along side it, my Czech friend pointed up to a window, where a famous Czech actor, still in his stage makeup for Brückner's The Death of Danton, was grinning and waving to the procession. As we turned the corner and looked into the café Slavia, we could see the staff serving and looking out through the big picture windows, while a customer or two, apparently indifferent to the massive procession outside, sipped cappuccino. On Národní třída, some demonstrators entered the now immobilized and nearly empty tram cars through the front doors and leaving by the back of each car. I was swept up by the exuberance of the whole procession, but my Czech friend, well experienced in Czech demonstrations, said, "Don't lose your head, something awful could still happen." She looked ahead, hoping to turn right, down Mikulandská, and get away from the procession, but we couldn't reach that street so we reversed course. Although she hadn't seen anything, my Czech friend had made the correct choice: as we turned down, Voršilská, the first cross street we came to, we already saw the white helmets of the police who were lining up below. Since we were no longer part of the main crowd, we decided to walk directly by them. They had cordoned off both Voršilská, north and south, and Ostrovní heading east but reserved their major forces for the procession up on Národní třída which they had now sealed off between Voršilská and Spalená. My friend, under her breath, cursed them for claiming that they wanted the demonstrators to disperse but, at the same time, sealing them in. Rather than return home and despite the fact that my friend was without her identification papers, we reversed course once again and walked eastward on Ostrovní, parallel to Národní třída. We came out of a small passageway onto Národní třída, and looking back westward, we saw the first and weaker police cordon of half a dozen policemen. The police vans were lined up facing in the direction of Václavské náměstí. The police had poured out of them and had headed back on foot to meet the approaching demonstrators. Large clusters of people, standing on benches, trash cans, and the concrete walls of flowerbeds, looked on at the major police cordon that had now sealed in the procession. The crowd seemed to want to differentiate itself from the

demonstrators, but, nevertheless, most sang the national anthem with them, as well as "We shall overcome", and former President Tomáš Masaryk's favorite song, (which not only has symbolic significance but also embodies part of his philosophy), "Ach synků, synků":

Ah my little son, my little son, if you're home [sung 2x],
Daddy is asking, did you plough [2x].
I ploughed, ploughed, but little [2x],
The plough-dolly broke on me [2x].
When it breaks on you, go get it fixed [2x],
Learn, my little son, how to manage things [2x].

We on the sidelines applauded the end of each song and, therefore, the trapped demonstrators. Although we made a dash for it twice, they were only false alarms (during which a camera or two bounced along the ground and ended up in pieces). It seemed to be a standoff: the police would simply wait until the demonstrators would get so cold that they'd have to leave. We listened in on an argument, at the smaller police cordon, between the dapper but thick-headed concierge of the Maj department store as he defended Communism and the régime against all opponents. "I'm a Czech teacher," a slightly drunk man accosted him, "so speak Czech!" We got bored with this dialogue of the deaf, and the cold became too much to bear so we left for home. Retracing our steps along Ostrovní, we now saw people straggling away from Národní třída. Some were clutching their ears or faces. A few were sobbing. No one whom we saw was dripping blood, so we couldn't tell whether they were just holding their ears because of the cold and sobbing because of defeat. We saw two policemen holding the arms of one man behind his back and walking him away. We passed by a group of police who were now at ease, some had removed their helmets and were smoking cigarettes. Our friend muttered sarcastically that it's scandalous to smoke on duty and that during the First Republic such liberties were never permitted. We returned to her house to drink hot tea and recuperate. The following morning when we heard the BBC World Service call the previous night's police action "a bloody backlash," we wondered whether this was only colorful journalistic language. It was only later that Saturday that we heard of the possible death of one student, Martin Šmíd, and learned from students some of the details of the savage police behaviour that here is called a massacre.

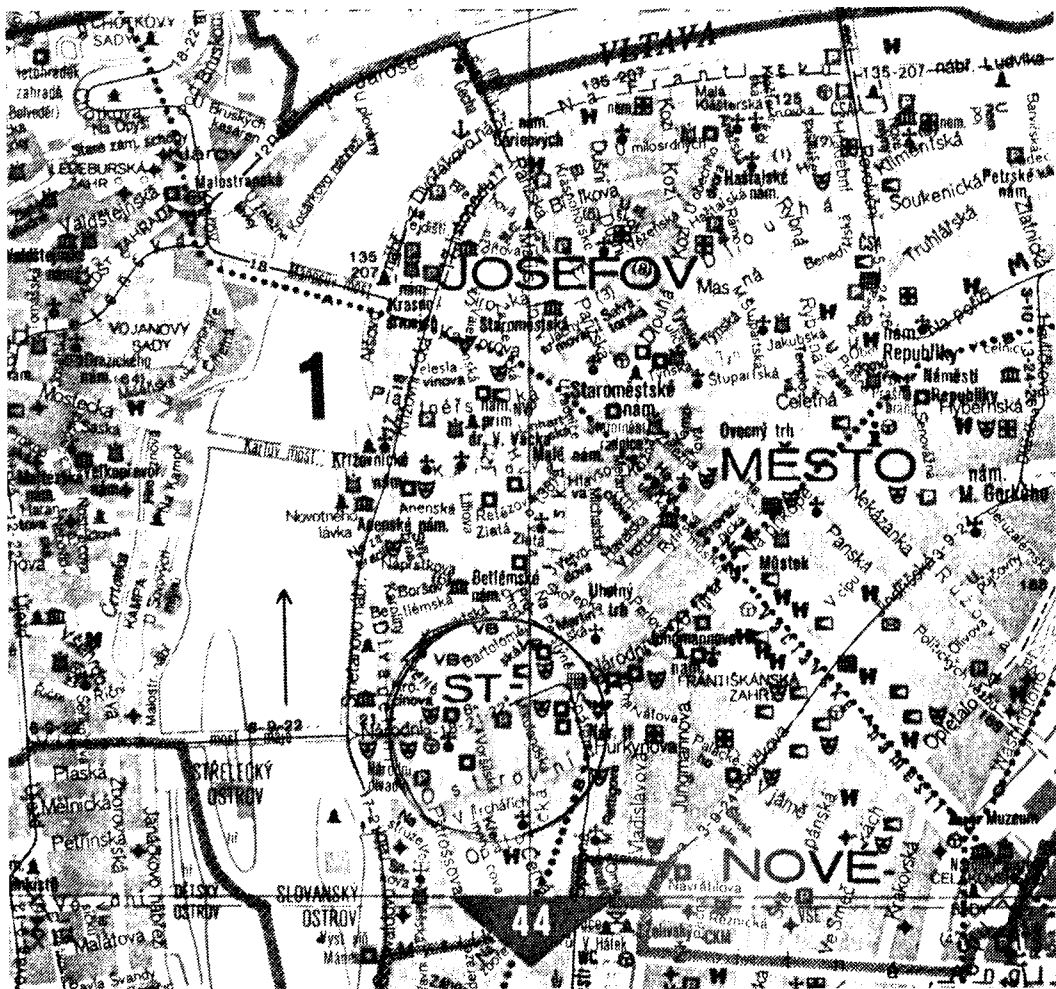
Since that day, you in the West have apparently been getting good news coverage of what has since happened. For people in Czechoslovakia, the flood of declarations from all circles and the gradually swelling wave of defections of the various institutions of the Czechoslovak news media from the government's monopolistic control to an open electronic forum has swamped us with up-to-date resolutions, as well as oppositionists' and hard-line Communists' speeches. People were still turning out in the hundreds of thousands, day

after day, and despite fatigue, freezing temperatures, and the common cold. My next letter will follow in a couple of days with a description of the demonstrations and events following 17 November, and of the Czechoslovaks' euphoria and cautious awareness that the Communists still have a powerful hold on the country. It is very probable that a secret policeman has been in my room, leaving my books and papers rearranged, perhaps even as an intentional reminder to be careful. Back in September, 7 December had been set as the day I am to return to the police headquarters to get my residency permit extended. I'm curious how they'll be treating foreign students now.

Yours,

OREK

Map of the area around Národní třída
(circled areas are referred to in text)



Map of the area around Vyšehrad:
(circled areas are referred to in text)

