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Revolution, Euphoria, and Suicide

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Dear Peter,

It has been a month since the massive demonstration on 17 November 1989. Except for the short lull on 18 November, when a crowd of two thousand gathered on Národní třída to protest the police retaliation of the previous night, events have gained momentum at a dizzying pace. I participated in every demonstration from the eighteenth on and was able to watch the character of each one change over the following days. On Sunday, 19 November, I heard a Radio Free Europe broadcast which stated that a student, Martin Šmid, had been killed in Friday's demonstration. The BBC World Service said that a student allegedly had been killed. That same day we heard through friends that there would be a demonstration on Letná (the largest open space in Prague, twenty minutes from the center of town) at 2:00 p.m. When we reached the granite-covered site where the world's largest statue of Stalin had once stood, we met only a few other people in search of the demonstration. We wandered down the steps, over the Svatopluch Čech Bridge, and then towards Příkopy and Wenceslas Square. We arrived at the same time as the first contingents of demonstrators. The atmosphere was different than at Friday's demonstration. A man in a group carrying a banner shouted "Murderers!" several times with earnest anger. Many shoppers and people out for a walk, especially elderly people, kept their distance. Without the cover of night and the anonymity it provides, people seemed reluctant to get too close. I strolled down the Square with my friends in the direction of the statue of St. Wenceslas on his horse. When we looked behind us, the Square seemed to be filling up with people like water into a basin. There were many more older people than there had been on Friday night, and many wore the Czechoslovak tricolor (white, red, and blue) on their lapels. They looked concerned and indignant: police killing students was the

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

last straw. The several loudspeakers set high on the lamp-posts of Wenceslas Square weakly croaked out the warning that the demonstrators were reacting to untrue foreign broadcasts by the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe and decent people who wished to dissociate themselves from this action should do so immediately. The invisible spokesman claimed in a solemn tone that no student named Martin Šmid had been beaten on Friday. A man in a small group which had stopped to listen turned to us and replied to the announcement sarcastically, "So, fine. No one was killed; I guess that means everything is all right now and we can go home!" Back at Mústek the crowd came to a halt and listened very quietly as someone gave a short speech. He announced that the demonstration would resume at 4:00 p.m. "by the horse." The crowd chanted this piece of news so that it would be clear, then it sang the national anthem, during which everyone held his right hand in the V-sign. (This originated in the Second World War as a symbol for "Věrní zůstaneme" [We remain faithful], but it also has the connotation of Churchill's V for victory and now even for "vytrvalost" [perseverance]). The crowd dispersed for a short recuperation period. In the automat Koruna, for example, business had never been better. It resembled an emergency relief center or a field canteen. By 3:40, people were already streaming out of the Koruna and back up Wenceslas Square. Reluctant or nervous people lingered behind. I wanted to hear the public speakers at the St. Wenceslas statue. This turned out to be quite pointless, since the well-known demands that they were making were nearly inaudible there. In the meantime, people in the crowd pointed towards the roof tops and shouted "Hanba! Hanba!" (For shame!) at men whom they suspected were secret police. The crowd soon reversed course and moved at a moderate pace back down towards Mústek. Among the many chants were "Dejte šaškům rolničky!" (Give the fools their caps and bells!) which was accompanied by the tinkling of keys by nearly everyone in the procession. Passing by the offices of the newspapers Svobodné slova and Práce, the procession chanted "Write the truth!" I accidentally met a painter friend of mine, who the week before had told me that he simply doesn't have the courage to join any demonstration and risk getting beaten by police truncheons. He said that he had watched the demonstrations in January of this year and had literally shaken with fear as the police were bashing the young demonstrators. Nevertheless, there he was now in the thick of it and not showing the slightest sign of fear. As the procession passed his apartment, we dashed upstairs to get a candle and matches; some of his neighbours obviously had the same idea. We then joined the procession again five minutes later. It was just beginning to get dark. The procession stopped in front of the National Theater and chanted "Long Live the Actors!", "We Thank You!", because the actors were the first organized group to declare their support for the students, who were now on strike. "Long Live the Students!" chanted the crowd. Fifteen minutes later, where Národní třída intersects with the road along the embankment, the crowd became confused as

to whether it should go to Hradčany via the First of May Bridge. or to the Charles Bridge. Another fifteen minutes were wasted wandering back and forth at the crossroads. The riot police in the meantime were, therefore, given ample time to assemble at the other end of the First of May Bridge. They then split the procession: one part had managed to cross the bridge, but the rest were blocked and they chanted "Murderers! Murderers!" and "We don't kill our children!" About three-quarters of an hour later, the demonstrators headed back towards the city center.

In the week of demonstrations which followed, the opposition to the régime became increasingly organized and better equipped for sound. On Monday the students tried to cross the Manes Bridge which leads directly from the Faculty of Philosophy to Malá strana. Riot police had blocked off the Malá strana end, but the students continued to push their way onto the bridge. We could even see armored cars behind the police, and it was the most tense situation so far. The crowd turned around and headed for the Old Town Square. Students were climbing all over the Jan Hus statue and had adorned it with flags, posters, leaflets, and candles. The next day was very tense: there were rumors of tanks amassing outside the city, and on Národní třída students were handing out leaflets that warned of planned provocation. People continued to place candles, flowers, poems, and pictures of saints at several spots along the street where students had been beaten. The whole day seemed to be centered around the demonstration planned for 4:00 p.m. The directors of Svobodné slova had given over their balcony to spokesmen for the opposition; the sound was now superb and it seemed that something new was finally being said. We watched Jakeš's speech on television that evening as he tried to pretend that nothing out of the ordinary was happening. The Minister of Education made an imbecilic speech, saying that the place for children is not in the streets. On the twenty-second, I went to Czechoslovak Radio's main building with a friend to see if the rumors of its occupation by the police were true. Sure enough there were StB (State Security) men in the lobby, and my friend was unable to reach his colleague by the in-house phone. Day after day, we went along with an increasing number of people to Wenceslas Square. The demonstrations ended peacefully, more or less at the time a spokesman on the balcony of Svobodné slova called the demonstration/ meeting to an end. On Friday, the day Dubček arrived, I was without my usual friends. The crowd was huge, the sound system was unfortunately full of buzzing and echoes, and Dubček was boring. I left early for home to try to shake off my cold. When I awoke from my nap that evening, I learned the news of the resignation of Jakeš and others from at least one of their leading functions.

I watched most of Saturday's huge gathering at Letná on television. Besides showing solidarity to one another, the

three-quarters of a million people who were there showed, with the help of television, the rest of the country that there is mass discontent with the régime in Czechoslovakia. The most substantial speech of the entire revolution so far was made by Miloš Zeman, a member of the Forecasting Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (apparently many people find him more charismatic than his better known and perhaps more political colleague, Valter Komárek). Zeman's speech broke the news of the bad state of Czechoslovakia to the broadest audience yet. The facts may be vague on occasion, but on the whole they are damning:

Facts about the Current Situation in ČSSR

1. As concerns the proportion of adults out of the entire adult population who have attended an institute of higher learning, ČSSR is in forty-ninth place in the world. The intelligentsia represents only six percent of the entire population. In this respect we are immediately behind Nepal where the intelligentsia represents 6.7 percent. In other countries this number is far greater; for example, in the USSR it's eight percent, in East Germany it's thirteen percent, in the USA it's thirty-nine percent, and in Canada it's forty percent.

2. In terms of the proportion of national income spent on education, we have, in the past twenty years, slid from twenty-second to seventy-second place in the world.

Sources for these first two facts: UNESCO Statistical Yearbook; and an article by Jaroslav Kalous in Mladá fronta [a Czech daily], November 1988.

3. ČSSR holds first place as regards pollution of the natural environment in Europe. On one square kilometer fall twenty-five tons of debris per year. By comparison, this factor is 0.6 tons per year in Sweden. Source: ČTK [Czechoslovak Press Agency].

4. The proportion of contaminated zones on the entire territory of our state is thirty-two percent!!! This high percentage has no parallel in any European state.

Source: Rudolf Hegenbart, leader of the Defense and Security Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in an interview with the editorial board of Izvestia [USSR], July 1989.

5. The dynamism of the entire development of Czechoslovakia is on the level of Algeria and Peru, and far below the level of Portugal. Source: Ůrkovič, a member of the Central Committee of the KDD in the Slovak daily Slovenská pravda, June 1989.

6. As concerns the mortality rate of twenty-eight European states, Czechoslovakia holds second place in mortality of the adult population, first place in mortality of adult men, and first place in deaths from cancer.

Source: Institute for Social Medicine.

7. During the last forty years, in the recalculataion of Gross Social Product per capita, ČSSR fell from tenth to fortieth place in the world. Source: Agentura APN, Novosti, April 1989.

What is a possible program?

1. Political democracy, not merely democratization.
2. A market economy, not merely economic reform.
3. The support of local initiatives, especially pressure on independent candidates for them to formulate their programs independently, by which means we can verify their competency.
4. The courage to initiate unpopular measures extending beyond the horizons of particular initiatives, in particular extended retraining and social programs on account of the temporary reduction in the standard of living, programs for the protection of the environment, and a health-service program.

Zeman previously presented this information in the article "Forecasting and Restructuring [i.e., perestroika]" Technický magazín, August 1989.

On Sunday at Letná, besides the more familiar Civic Forum spokesmen, we heard Prime Minister Adamec, who was nearly booed off the podium for, among other reasons, recommending that the general strike (planned for the next day) be only a few minutes long. We also heard an StB man try to convince the crowd that not all his colleagues are sadistic, violent, and immoral. The weather was bitter cold, and people were leaving well before the end of two hours. The general strike was also an impressive sight. The weather had warmed up considerably. The usual humor was also present. When part of the crowd caught sight of chimney sweeps on the top balcony of Dům obuvy [The House of Shoes] they chanted "Chimney sweeps to the Castle!" and the sweeps responded waving their brooms and a Czechoslovak flag. I was with a small publishing house, and some of its members were already carrying on a conversation about the possibility of publishing previously banned authors.

At the end of the week, I took the four-and-a-half hour train ride to Ostrava, "the Iron Heart of Czechoslovakia." It has a population of 350,000 and produces twenty percent of the country's GNP. It is a sooty, crumbling, smoggy, and depressing place, with Communist slogans and symbols all over. We looked for, and eventually found, the local Civic Forum, but by comparison to Prague, it seemed that Ostrava had never heard of any opposition to the Communist Party, let alone Civic Forum. On Friday night, I went to the Jiří Myron Theater. It was only half full but nevertheless very interesting. Many of the speakers from the audience who got a chance to talk were Communists or workers. They expressed fear as well as confusion about how to challenge the powers that be. I also learned the startling fact that a nurse who works overtime -- when called in -- receives six crowns per hour, i.e., the equivalent of one half-liter of beer in a pub! Civic Forum's support had grown by late for the next week, but when I left on Saturday, the chances for democracy in that neck of the woods (what's left of them) looked slim.

The following weekend I went to some small towns north-east of Prague. In Poděbrad, a spa town where the castle of Jiří z Poděbrady is located, we spoke with Civic Forum organizers who were very satisfied with the turnout they had received. The most moving moment, however, was a chat with the caretaker of the castle, a man in his mid-seventies. He almost burst into tears a couple of times; he was so happy that things had finally taken a turn for the better and that "the young people will finally learn about Masaryk and the wonderful democracy he had created."

The people with whom I was staying, on the other hand, were quite happy but remained skeptical and not willing to participate in their local Civic Forum. The grandmother, in her eighty-two years, had only been to Prague twice, and she remained very pessimistic about the intentions of the non-Communist movement. We watched President Gustáv Husák's farewell address. It was a peculiar sight: an old man whose eyes seemed to be crossing, either because of the distortion of his glasses' lenses, ^{or} because he might have had a stroke. He spoke in a quiet and modest voice, and the camera seemed to be moving all over the place, perhaps to avoid Husák's trembling hands. We then watched the Georgian film Repentance, with Czech subtitles.

It was interesting to watch the media during the revolution, as one by one, day after day, its various members joined the opposition to the Communist régime. Svobodné slova [Freedom of Speech], the organ of the long ago co-opted Socialist Party, was the first of the official newspapers to join the opposition. It became a very hot item on the streets of Prague. At the same time, however, police were blocking its distribution, so that Svobodné slova's delivery men ending up trying to get it directly in the hands of citizens. Lidové demokracie [People's Democracy] soon followed suit. Mladá fronta [Youth Front], which in early November had published an objective account of the demonstrations on 28 October alongside a Party-line article, also joined in. Thus, along with Rudé právo [Red Right], the organ of the Party, Práce [Work], and the fluffy Večerní Praha [Evening Prague] continued to print lies. The Independent Press Center established itself in the early days of the revolution and they advertise themselves with handsome posters all over the city. In cooperation with the East European Information Agency, they publish the four-page Informační servis which so far has almost thirty issues. Its editorial board consists of Michal Blazek, Jan Brabec, Marie Divišová, Zuzana Dienstbierová, Jan Hrabina, Ivan Lamper, Tereza Pokorná, Jan Ruml (who, along with his father Jirí, is an editor of Lidové noviny, the semi-underground paper), Jaroslav Spurný, Miroslav Šimáček, Petruška Šustrová, Jáchym Topol (son of the until recently banned playwright, and with Lamper the editor of Revolver revue), and Martin Weiss. For a while they were working out of Galerie mladých with one photocopier, one telephone, and a couple of personal computers. Two young women

sat at the foot of the gallery's long staircase that was laden with back issues of Informační servis and handed out copies. A small box for contributions was at their side. Civic Forum is also now publishing its own tiny information bulletin inForum which so far has only a couple of issues.

It took a bit longer for the electronic media to come over to the anti-régime side. On the twenty-first, the crowd chanted at the mobile studio of Czechoslovak Television "Live Broadcast! Live Broadcast!" A day or so later, exhausted-looking TV announcers read one new statement after another handed to them by a steady stream of new guests. They read reports from around the world, for example, an article by Pavel Tigrid, who since 1948 has been living in Paris and has been publishing Svědectví [Testimony], a forum for exiled and banned Czech and Slovak writers. My Czech friend watching the broadcast said, "Well, I never thought I'd live to see the day when they'd read Tigrid on our television!" It took several days to reach this point however; during the first part of the week, we were fed the occasional news item, and each radio station avoided the news by playing its own type of music -- one station was mundane classical, another mundane rock 'n' roll, and another mundane pop. By the evening of Sunday the twenty-sixth, a television employee was able to tell us honestly that a very recent poll showed that half of Czechoslovak listeners were tuned to Czechoslovak radio and television as compared with half who preferred foreign broadcasts. For Czechoslovak mass media, this was a quantum leap in the size of its audience. The local media can now report faster and in better detail than its competitors. Mladý svět [World of Youth], a weekly, remained relatively silent on the revolution during the first week, but issue number fifty-one devotes its entire copy to day-by-day coverage of the events from 17 to 27 November. Its cover is a strikingly beautiful shot of Wenceslas Square at night, bespeckled with people and banners, and with the illuminated National Theater in the background. In the lower right-hand corner of the photo is a vertical stripe which is a path cleared for an ambulance (something that happened with ease several times per demonstration). Právo lidu [Rights of the People], the organ of the Social Democrats, published its first issue on 13 December. It contains a petition first published in June 1968 for the renewal of the Social Democrat Party. Among the signatories were Dr. Václav Černý (literary critic, long-time active opponent of totalitarianism, and author of a four-part memoir published by Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto), Václav Havel, Josef Kemr (the main non-Communist leader among actors in this revolution), Dr. Anna Masaryková (a granddaughter of Tomas M. and an art historian), Jaroslav Seifert (Nobel-prize winning poet), and Josef Škvorecký (author and, with his wife Zdena, coowner of Sixty-Eight Publishers). Many more newspapers and magazines inevitably will come into being in the next few weeks.

A major factor in this revolution is the role that high

technology has played, especially video and film. Solid proof of this is the crowds of people who gather all day long in front of the video monitors set up in the windows of the building where the theater Laterna Magica has its home and which, for a while, was the head office of Civic Forum. A couple of hundred yards away, another crowd gathers by the back window of the Aurora Club which was the former home of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Society (all that remains is a portrait of a bemedalled Brezhnev which now bears the caption, "What are you gawking at?"). On the other side of the building, by the entrance to Civic Forum, two television sets also attract a crowd that blocks half of 28 October Street. The E.F. Burian Theater and the Manes Gallery were two of the first places to show a well-produced video of the police action on 17 November and interviews with victims of the brutality. For Westerners the style of production -- quite slick with dramatic music and deep-toned narration -- seems out of place. It dramatizes what only yesterday was reality. As a young director from Cambridge, touring with A Midsummer Night's Dream, said, "These videos are odd, because they create a distance between the events and the viewer." One Czech friend, however, disagrees: "We've never seen anything like this before. For years, television was bland and deceiving. Now, to have the latest news be truthful and show it right on the street, well...!" The revolution is superbly captured in a new short film which is shown before the major feature in at least one Prague cinema. It is a mixture of footage of police violence, a bird's eye view of a jam-packed Wenceslas Square, and closeups of Miroslav Štěpán addressing the workers at the ČKD factory and being met by hoots and whistles. Of course, photocopiers, sound systems, telephones (even if Czechoslovak ones), and a FAX machine also help. In this respect, the West was a bit slow and a bit stingy with its aid.

If this revolution has anything, it's got flair. New posters in color and black & white appear daily. They have humor and good graphics: "Disband the People's Militia!" it says above the silhouette of a Militia man with oversized boots; "General Strike, 27 November 1989, 12:00 - 14:00" emblazoned on a background entirely covered with a flying Czechoslovak flag; "We Support" printed in stencil-style type above a large O.F. (Civic Forum) that appears to be handpainted in broad strokes, the 'O' filled with the seal of the students of Charles University, a figure of St. Wenceslas on his horse; there were also a few handpainted posters of a blond woman framed by a television screen: "Tune in to the latest comedy: 'How to form a Government' directed by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia." "Back to Europe," says another poster of a map of West European states in broad, blue outline and raised high above the main plain of the poster, while a red ladder leans on the map's left-hand side. "The End of One-Party Rule!" was one of the first to appear; it has each word

above the other.

Later there appeared buttons which in English said "Havel for President!" (A small spelling error, an accent on the 'a', was attributed to the Hungarian manufacturer). These soon became highly coveted items. Prague is now plastered with three different Havel posters: a black and white Havel in an army jacket, a small 8 x 10 Havel in a navy blue courderoy jacket and a tie, which says "HAVEL NA HRAD [H. to the Castle, i.e., the office of the President], and a Havel -- who looks like he just woke up -- in a sweater with a Civic Forum button; the poster carries the words "Truth and Love Must Prevail over ^{Lies} and Hate". A streetcar today was plastered from stem to stern with Havel posters and someone with a megaphone was on board reading Havel's essays to people outside.

Most recently there appeared a lovely large black and white poster with the National Museum in the background, the square packed with demonstrators, and a coloured Czechoslovak flag carried by St. Wenceslas on horseback. Shop windows which only a couple of weeks ago carried Gorbachev's or Jakeš's picture, or some uninspired poster of a comet with the slogan "Restructuring [i.e., perestroika] is the Continuation of the Revolution by Other Means", now carry Havel's face and "We support Civic Forum." The corridors of the Metro (subway system), which formerly looked like a bare marble mausoleum under flourescent lights, are now plastered with the statements of various organizations and enterprises, the testimonials of victims of the police brutality, campaign posters (mostly of Havel, as some of the graffiti points out), warnings, such as, "We Haven't Won Yet!" "Don't Be Lulled to Sleep!", "Beware of Provocation!", "Only Designated Students are Permitted to Remove Flyers." There are advertisements for a new publishing firm which is soliciting new material, there are quotes from the Bible, there are evangelical slogans e.g., "Christ is Coming Again." The Christian Democratic Party has posters, and there are the more conventional but timely posters e.g., "The Bolsheviks are Not Asleep -- They're Preparing a referendum." The subway cars are also full of flyers. Some are printed by hand, some typed, and others printed by word processor. The State Insurance Company made it known in this way that it would cover all costs of medical treatment required as a result of injuries sustained during the demonstration on 17 November.

Another chant, "Neumí český! Neumí český!" ["He can't speak Czech!"] seems to mean both Jakeš's disdain for his own people whom he ruled, as well as a reference to his public-speaking prowess (e.g. saying "boilers" when he meant "broilers", i.e., roasting chickens, or at the same conference running through four different prepositions until he found the right one). The expression "Neumí český" was also frequently repeated in the play, and later Vera Chytilová's film, Sašek a královna [The Jester and the Queen]. This

theme has been taken one step further: A poster outside the main door of Civic Forum plays on the devices that Czechs use to memorize the paradigm of noun declension in their language:

Umíš český?

Can you speak Czech?

První pád Jakeš.

First case (or "fall") Jakeš.

2. pád bez Stěpána.

Second case without Stěpán.

3. pád k Demokracii.

Third case to Democracy.

4. pád Co? Pravdu!

Forth case What? [We want] Truth!

5. pádem voláme Svobodné volby!

Fifth case we call "Free Elections!"

6. pád o více stranách.

Sixth case concerns more parties.

7. pád Společně s lidem.

Seventh case Together with the people.

As I write this on 16 December, the euphoria of the first weeks of the revolution is gradually waning, in the sense that people are not willing to throw aside all their other chores and responsibilities to be part of a demonstration. I have noticed in some people, however, a kind of bragging, for example, about their part in setting up a local Civic Forum, or the letter that they wrote to recall a director or "elected" representative. Some people are very certain about what "we" Czechs collectively want. In this respect the restitution of property is a sensitive topic. I have mentioned on occasion a very recent article in the London Times, which reports that many expropriated aristocrats are watching events here with a great deal of interest, especially with an eye to getting back their mansions and castles. One young Czech friend didn't like that at all. "Those places ought to remain accessible to ordinary Czechs." Another friend, who never used to talk like a Socialist, nevertheless, in reponse to the article, barked out, "We want social democracy! We don't want a return to capitalism!" Although restitution of property would not necessarily mean either making public parklands private, or a return to capitalism (whatever that term means today), it is a topic which, once it becomes a real issue in the probably not-too-distant future, will be highly inflammatory.

People are also returning to their day-to-day work. A young coat-check man who grumbled about Communism before the revolution, now grumbles that nothing has changed and that his life is still the same. A student friend who had been very politically active for a couple of years, answered my question about what she would do after things settle down by saying that she would like to teach elementary school. Although she had been active in university journalism she felt that too many people would now be rushing to publish their own little magazines without much attention to quality. She also told me that many people involved in the student strike would eventually be in positions of influence and that they could help her get ahead but that she found

that particularly distasteful, as it was too much like the old system they have been trying to break up. When we reached the Metro, she sighed, "Oh well. No more conspiracies. No more dissidents. Life will be different now."

Life for a few people certainly has taken a turn for the worse. On Wednesday morning, Jiří Petr, director of the Institute for the Czech Language and an author of a book on Marxism-Leninism in the study of language, committed suicide. "He was a real bastard," said a student who knew him. "He was in charge of the firing of a lot of good professors from the faculty after 1969. He was also in charge of persecuting people who signed the petition 'Several Sentences'." When one of Petr's colleagues heard the news, he said, "It's no longer the 'Velvet Revolution'." Another student told me that in the student Strike Committee room at the College of Natural Sciences at Charles University there is a row of xeroxed portraits of faculty members. One already has a diagonal stroke through it. "We call this the Faculty's suicide wall," said the student. While this solution may be perceived as either a tragedy or an appropriate and deserved end, or even as an act of cowardice, it also carries with it the danger of creating martyrs for the Communists. Despite Civic Forum's positive and optimistic stance, there is still a lot of tension that needs to be carefully defused.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

All the best,

Derek

Received in Hanover 12/21/89