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Body and Soul

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Dear Peter,

In this letter, I'm sending you a report on a discussion I had with the leader of the new Czech version of one of the West's most conspicuous fringe elements, the Hare Krishna devotees. Their story, told to me by their president, Mr. Roman Vlk, not only illustrates the harassment that local nonconformists faced before 17 November 1989, but it also shows that not all people here are satisfied only with the fact that they no longer have the police breathing down their necks; some are now yearning to be part of a collective other than the newly democratic state or nation. The second part of the letter is based on conversations I had with my friend, Dr. Martin Hřebiček, one of the main pediatricians at the Center for Inherited Metabolic Diseases in Prague. His story is an example of the tribulations of a small medical institution as well as some of the greater problems of the entire Czechoslovak socialist medical system, which is now facing the possibility of change. Also, to make sure there are no wasted pages, I'm tagging on my impressions of the Joan Baez concert in Prague.

Hare Krishna in Havelland

Since the election of Václav Havel to the presidency, Wenceslas Square has sometimes been a carnival (and sometimes a paved beach with volleyball players). For months, brass bands of six to a dozen musicians were blasting out traditional

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Czech tunes. My friend Jarda Borecký, who runs the computer section of Civic Forum, had to put up with them directly outside his window and says that the steady four-four beat and repetitious melody and harmony is more irritating than rock 'n' roll. There have also been troupes of cabaret clowns and mimes playing on the north end of the square at Příkopy and Můstek. Their talents were used to initiate a new magazine, Reflex, which promised a lot but ending up looking like a sordid version of Life with a hodge-podge of contents, e.g., a cover story on Havel with a center-page spread of sexual intercourse whose title posed the question "Is it Art or Porno?". Their promotional stunt included a staged leap off the ČKD building at Můstek. When the real stuntman leapt from the ledge of the roof, after much musical fanfare, posturing on the ledge, and bellowing through megaphones at street level, he leapt on to the roof garden while his team threw an identically dressed dummy off the roof. The troupe below sent a rescue team of two firemen in old-fashioned uniform jackets and shorts with a stretcher to pick up the dummy. An excellent twenties-style jazz band played swing and a bit further down Příkopy a rock 'n' roll trio was singing Beatles' songs, American Top 40 hits, and even the Star Spangled Banner. They sang and played so well that I thought they were British or American. However, they settled in for the first night of what now seems to be a never-ending gig with an unchanging repertoire. A few yards away a piano was hauled out onto the square. It remained for a few days, while several people played for a ring of spectators. Then came the piano's planned, ritual destruction with sledge hammers. Perhaps most irritating for the residents -- and they have lodged a general complaint that resulted in a time limit on the nightly festivities -- is the acoustic trio whose saxophonist has one smash hit that he won't let us forget. Now and then, a lone gypsy plays guitar and with a beautiful voice sings fragmented versions of vaguely familiar songs. One can only be grateful, however, for the general revival of life here that would never occurred a year ago.

In mid April, I was in Civic Forum and the chants and bell ringing of Hare Krishna made their way up to the forth floor window. Down below, four adults and one small child had stopped under the arches of the Matice česká building on Můstek. This building, once the home of the most important association of the Czech National Awakening of the nineteenth century, was now feeling the karmic vibrations of "Hare Krishna, Hare Hare," etc., etc. As I was laughing out loud at the Krishnas debut onto this absurd stage of unusual and hitherto rarely seen things here in Czechoslovakia, Jarda asked me who they were. He then soberly suggested to me that it was nothing to be mocked. "Who knows," he said, "maybe they've got the right idea. Is it really better to run around worrying about computers, elections and the rest of the modern world?" By the time that I'd decided it was worthwhile to do an

interview with them they were half way down the pedestrian zone of Příkopy and were attracting a few curious, as well as a few disdainful, glances. I ran up behind the last devotee in the tiny procession. He was passing out Krishna literature in Czech, and I asked him if he'd like to be interviewed. As we exchanged telephone numbers, I learned from his business card of shiny gold foil with black lettering that he was Roman Vlk, President of the local Krishna temple. I asked him for some of their pamphlets and told him he could call me at Civic Forum where I'd be working on the forth floor.

Back at Civic Forum, I had just got into a debate with Jarda about whether the Krishna approach to society is the right one. I was emphatically stating that retiring from society and encouraging others to drop out only created a vacuum for less benevolent and tolerant forces, when Mr. Vlk, in his pink robes, baggy wool pullover, and leather sneakers, popped his head in the door. "Ahoj!" Thus, to my surprise, we were going to conduct the interview immediately and in Civic Forum. Jarda, despite having hitchhiked to Japan and having seen a lot of the world (especially for someone from a country with state-imposed travel restrictions) was seeing a Krishna devotee for the first time. He lingered nearby, curious to hear what Roman would say. Vojtěch Sedlaček, the main representative of Civic Forum, also popped in and began in his typically gregarious manner to engage Roman in conversation. Vojtěch spied a piece of my poppy-seed cake on the table and asked me if he could help himself. "Or," he asked Roman, hesitating over the cake, "is this not o.k. to eat, I mean according to the rules?" Vojtěch, a devote Catholic, was only using this as a prelude to a debate with Roman. After a short and rather amicable discussion on the Krishnas' approach to food and without too much further provocation, Vojtěch departed with his theatrical "Sympaťácí! Čau!" (slang for Friends! Ciao!)

The first thing I had to ask Mr. Vlk about was his name: since it means "wolf," it doesn't seem like the most appropriate name for someone who is, as Christians say, the shepherd of his flock. "Oh, no problem," he assured me. "This is only my earthly name! I'll be given another name soon, which is my real, spiritual name." So, now for the obvious question: How did a Czech with very little access to Hare Krishna literature, let alone seeing them jumping up and down on his city's streets and sidewalks, join the faith?

His answer was like that of the typical Krishna devotee in the West. "Until 1983, I was a hippie -- alcohol, women, and rock 'n' roll." He was also into mysticism, telepathy and magic. Why did he use drugs for so many years? "I was

looking for a meaning to life. Political circumstances forced me to it." That is not a typical Western response, I don't think, but it is an all-purpose excuse here. "I used to sit at home, smoke marijuana, and drink wine. I stayed in school only so I wouldn't have to work." Then a friend, Turiya Prabu, lent him the book of Krishna philosophy, Goddess of Fortune.

Turiya (that's his spiritual, not his Czech, name) is the principal translator of all the Krishna literature from English (not Hindu) to Czech. He emigrated to Sweden and joined an Ashram from where he translated the Baghavad Gita and sent copies to Czechoslovakia. Turiya's efforts to export Krishna met, of course, with local resistance on the official level, and he had great difficulties with the State Security (StB) -- especially, when he tried to return to his native land for personal appearances. When Turiya 'lectured', the building in which the devotees gathered would sometimes be surrounded by StB men, but, says Roman Vlk with a wide grin, "Turiya always escaped! One time he even got over the border five minutes before they began searching for him."

In 1988, Roman met Turiya in Budapest at a camp where Krishna devotees gathered in tents and discussed the writings of the movement's founder, Shirla Prabuhpada. Next they bought a cottage in Czechoslovakia where they held lectures, chanted "Hare Krishna" and watched videos. They were surprised that the Krishna publications sometimes actually made it over the border since the Czechoslovak authorities had an embargo on them. Many were indeed smuggled in.

Turiya sent Roman the advice that he not hang out with girls and that he abstain from alcohol. At that time, according to Roman, there were only three devotees in the whole Republic. They had to go through house searches, and the StB in the town of Mladá Boleslav and in Prague threatened them with beatings. Roman, like dissidents of other persuasions, hid all his forbidden literature from StB searches, of which he experienced about ten, usually conducted by two or three "estebáks" (slang for StB man) at the same time. Once he was taken away in handcuffs. When the estebácí (plural) interrogated him, he cited the penal code and refused to talk. His two interrogators couldn't agree on whether Roman was obliged by law to talk, so he remained silent, and they let him go.

By 1988, there were seven devotees living in a town called Chrudim. They bought a big dilapidated house in Ústí nad Orlicí, and five devotees moved in. They also turned the house into their temple, and one year later, thirty people were coming there to worship Krishna. The local estebák in Chrudim wasn't too bad a guy

though and left them alone, but his boss, it was said, wanted to give them all a good beating.

The revolution, of course, has changed everything for the Hare Krishnas. At first, Roman and his fellow Krishnas didn't even know that the revolution had started. Three days after the 17 of November, when they finally turned on the television and saw the demonstrations, they were out on Můstek street with the rest of Prague's citizens. "We got a letter from Sweden, which said it was our duty [-- doesn't this sounds like someone from the Cominform talking?] to go to Prague and sing Hare Krishna, which we did and had hundreds of people all around us singing. Undercover cops, wearing OF (Civic Forum) buttons and Czechoslovak tricolors, took photographs of us. We stayed here for a week and then returned to Ústí nad Orlicí.

Turiya had actually been in Prague as early as 28 October, Czechoslovak Independence Day. "Turiya came with a car full of books. We were supposed to meet him on Wenceslas Square, but we completely forgot that it was Independence Day." (This slip is forgivable if one recalls that for Roman's generation Czechoslovak Independence Day, after many years of being ignored, only became a state holiday again in 1988). "There was an unusually large amount of people all over the square, so we were in ecstasy when we met our friends. When the revolution came in November, we tried to get a visa for Turiya. We called Richard Sacher (Minister of the Interior) and the President for help!"

Roman and his devotee friends moved with Turiya and the latter's ten-year-old son (also a devotee) into a little apartment in Prague. At the time of our interview their main problem was finding a larger place to live, because six people, no matter how transcendental, in one five-by-four meter room is a bit tight. They do not, however, have any money. Also, at the time of this interview, there were about thirty convinced believers and about 1,000 people who simply like to go to Krishna meetings listen to the music and eat their food.

How does Roman see the position of Hare Krishna in a new, pluralist Czechoslovak society? He says he is in favor of everyone choosing his own religion, and any other religion is fine by him if it propagates the same values as his. "We promote the idea that one should love God, serve God, and love all people." His aim is "to live a simple life with a high level of thinking." "As long as we live by the rules -- no drugs, no meat, no extramarital sex, no gambling -- it won't be an absurd life. With love and devotion, we live a brighter, livelier life, not only in body, but

also in mind." As for other Czechs and Hare Krishna, Roman says, "We can only offer. We don't force anyone." Some Czechs, when they first saw Roman and his fellow devotees, called them "demons." Roman says these are the same people as the orthodox Christians who prayed that Václav Havel would throw out the Dalai Lama. As for Václav Havel, "We accept him because he promotes love and peace."

In a country where civil society had been practically wiped out but now has the possibility of being reborn, Hare Krishnas might seem like they are ignoring a newly granted opportunity to participate in society. But the option to drop out is, after all, also a component of a democratic, pluralistic society. I asked Roman if he wants to be a part of, or separate from, society and if he'll vote in the June elections. "It is our obligation to participate in public life. The question is how. Prostitution versus founding a hospital? We would like to help the state in any way possible," and cited the help he and the Hare Krishnas gave in support of the relief for Armenian earthquake victims. "We didn't give money, but instead we sent people to the USSR." Roman, at the time of the interview, had certain reservations about the new developments in Czech society. "I'm a bit anxious that in the new atmosphere the coin doesn't merely get turned around ... with striptease, pornography, drugs and business." As for the elections, "If I know what the person running stands for, and I like it, I'll vote for him. If I don't find anyone I like, I won't vote." Roman, by the way, claims to have some knowledge of politics and even has written a little book on the subject; maybe he'll make it to parliament or the presidency one day. The exact way in which the Hare Krishnas would participate in society is not yet clear. They would like to open a vegetarian restaurant (that could only improve the local restaurant scene, I think, especially for people who like the occasional fresh vegetable when they dine out) and maybe start organic farming somewhere in the country. Again, the main problem is money.

As we were wrapping up the discussion, Roman asked me where our chat would appear in print. "Do you think anyone who will be reading your article would want to send us some money?" I shrugged and said I couldn't be sure. It reminded me of the newsboy's chant I'd heard not long before on the street: "Freedom! Democracy! Three Crowns!"

The Center for Inherited Metabolic Diseases

You wouldn't have guessed that Martin Hřebiček, who is twenty-nine years of age, a very good novice painter, well-versed in English literature (especially Anthony Burgess and Graham Greene), and a fan of punk and new-wave music, is

a pediatrician -- he manages to make it to the concerts even after putting in a typically exhausting eleven-hour day at the Center for Inherited Metabolic Diseases. One evening in our English class, at Martin's suggestion, we used a letter he had written to a US institution (similar to his own) to ask for help, primarily financial. We used the letter as the basis for a discussion on possible reactions to his request in the USA and for a discussion on Czech attitudes to philanthropy. I suggested to the students that Martin and the Center would stand a better chance of getting some help from American institutions -- which themselves are often in financial straits -- if the letter were to state that the Czechs would also be contributing to fund the Center and thus possibly interest the Americans in matching each Czech contribution with an appropriate sum or, alternatively, exchange personnel or information. This led to a discussion on the possibilities of a Czech philanthropic campaign for the Center.

Most of the dozen students were skeptical about the success of such a campaign. They told me that Czechs were suspicious of people or institutions asking for money, that Czechs aren't generous anyway, and that right now they're feeling insecure about their own personal futures, especially as concerns finances. Martin added that the Ontological Clinic in Prague was able to get a lot of support just after the revolution, partly because they were the first to try to raise money privately and partly because many people feel that they themselves are potential cancer patients. Inherited metabolical disease, on the other hand, is more obscure and very few people feel personally threatened by it. In addition, affected people are often ashamed of these diseases because they are inherited and thus seem to reflect some personal flaw. The big campaign drive that we dreamed up, with free advertising supplied by the art school students and the mass media, ended up dying an early death by the end of the class. I had heard many depressing things about the state of the Center (lab ventilators that don't efficiently remove toxic fumes, long hours, insufficient funds for medication, and staff that's reluctant to help), and I told Martin that I wanted to learn more about it.

At the end of May, I met with Martin and his colleague Viktor Kožich, the thirty-year old doctor and biochemist who actually runs the Center. In the course of our discussion, they provided me with an informative snapshot of the state of Czechoslovak socialist medicine on the threshold of genuine change for the first time.

Their center, which is both for the diagnosis and treatment of inherited metabolic diseases (IMDs), is in the Prague Polyclinic on Karlovo náměstí [Charles

Square]. It was established in 1989, shortly before the November revolution, but in fact it has been functioning since the end of 1969 as part of the biochemistry clinic. Its founder, Dr. Josef Hyánek, now in his mid-fifties, began to investigate IMDs in the Czechoslovak population when his tests of all patients in the psychiatric hospitals revealed that several dozen patients had phenal keytone urea (PKU), which is a metabolic disease resulting from the absence of some amino acids necessary for the proper metabolization of proteins. If a baby with PKU doesn't die soon after birth, there is a strong chance that it will suffer mental retardation. If the disease is properly diagnosed, the baby can be provided with the necessary diet, which can save its life and prevent mental defects.

The Center investigates between 2,500 and 3,000 patients per year from all across the country. Some samples have already been screened in district labs, so this number that the Center sees is only a part of the patients in all of Czechoslovakia. The Center gets a clinical report, and, according to the signs and symptoms, they decide what tests to do. "We do forty different tests and can thus identify several hundred types of metabolites. If a test is positive, we invite the patient to the children's hospital, which is very close to the Center. If the case is treatable, we start treatment and follow it up with a biochemical method. If, for example, he can't metabolize phenoanalyne, we give him a special diet low in phenoanalyne." Over the last four years, the Center has diagnosed 160 cases of IMD. "There is a close relationship between the number of investigative methods we use and the number of diagnosed cases," says Viktor. Martin adds that Viktor was responsible for introducing many new methods of diagnosis that have led to a rapid increase in the number of discovered cases. From 1986 to 1989, twice as many special investigations were performed and three times more cases were detected. "Our lab specializes in cases at the metabolic level. We measure the level of metabolites but are unable to measure the activity of the enzymes. We don't have the equipment or the substrates for the enzyme essays," Viktor explains. This means that detection is still not very thorough. "We are now able to detect 100 new cases out of every year's newborns. In Holland, with a population roughly as big as ours, they have about 250 new patients every year."

Martin and Viktor work hard and are dedicated, but they are horribly hindered by lack of funds. If there hadn't been the changes starting on 17 November, I wouldn't have been surprised if all their fine personal qualities would one day give way to indifference and sloth.

The Center's resources are based on hard and soft (i.e., East bloc) currency funds. Their hard currency budget -- the one that really counts when they are pressed to find medication, which is very often -- amounts to $2,000 to $3,000 per year. This money comes from the State Committee for Scientific and Technical Development in the form of a research grant. The budgetary problems have been slightly alleviated by the senior head of the Center, Dr. Hyánek. "IMDs are a hobby for Dr. Hyánek," Martin told me. Also, because of his Communist Party ties, Dr. Hyánek was able skillfully to divert a lot of otherwise hard-to-obtain financial resources from his department to the Center for Inherited Metabolic Diseases. This maneuvering increased the hard-currency fund, however, only by about another $1,000 and was spent on spare parts and chemicals. New equipment is needed and expensive: a spectrometer, for example, costs 100,000 crowns, equipment for enzyme analysis costs 100,000, and they could easily spend 10,000 crowns on more spare parts and chemicals. For comparison, they mentioned their British colleague in Birmingham, England, who spends 5,000 pounds sterling on substrates alone (i.e., only a part of all the chemicals needed for the tests).

Dr. Hyánek's indirect way of working was one of the only possible methods to surmount the plethora of problems confronting doctors in a planned control economy. One of the main problems in the Czechoslovak medical system was that hospitals were unable to budget their own money as they saw fit. Of the 30 hospitals (including psychiatric) in Prague alone, not one has legal subjectivity. They are all under the Institute of National Health [Ústav národního zdraví] at the National Committee of Prague (the main organ of municipal government). The five-year plan of each hospital had to have the approval of the Prague National Committee. This centralization created rigid and inefficient controls. "Up till now everything was planned literally down to the last diaper for five years (or in rare instances, for one year) in advance," said Martin. Doctors who cared about their patients got around the problem of shortages of necessary drugs and equipment by developing personal contacts to trade material and also by requesting an amount of material that was actually necessary for longer periods of time, since their order would be arbitrarily cut or take inordinately long to deliver if they worked by the book. Sometimes it happened, however, that drugs ordered months ago were no longer needed because the methods of treatment had changed in the meantime. Not only medication but also medical literature is scarce. Up to eighty percent of the necessary journals are available in Prague medical libraries, but there may be only one or two copies in the entire city. Outside Prague the situation is much worse. "I'm sure there are not more than five copies of the American Journal of Pediatrics in the whole of Czechoslovakia," says Viktor.

The doctors wages are not good and the hours are long. Immediately after graduating, Viktor said, he was making 1,700 crowns per month gross salary and the net was about 1,350 crowns. Now, five years later, he grosses 3,400 crowns and nets 2,500 crowns. (These pay increases, by the way, are not automatic). They should be working 42.5 hours per week, but Viktor believes that if they counted the hours it could in fact be a sixty-hour week. Martin thinks it would be even longer. "In Czechoslovakia, if you're a doctor, you have to do a lot of administration work; you spend hours typing reports, you have no secretary, no librarian." I asked Martin and Viktor about bribes from patients or patients' parents for better or quicker medical care. This was very prevalent, they explained to me with amused embarrassment. "Since everyone assumes you're taking graft, it's better just to take it," says Martin who has certainly not made himself rich in the process -- he still lives with his parents and grandmother in one three-room apartment, although he is in the process of painting and plastering a one-room apartment of his own. "Often it would happen that while routinely emptying out the pockets of my lab coat first thing in the morning, I'd find a couple of hundred crown notes!" This amount, by the way, could buy, for example, four gramophone records or three dinners. "I didn't know exactly how or when they got there. One time I figured it out and went to return the money. It was from the grandfather of one of the children we're treating, but he refused to take it back." "The parents really believe they'll get better treatment if they pay extra," added Viktor. "As for the alcohol," says Martin again smilingly, slightly embarrassed, "the bottles that we get from the patients' parents end up circulating around the Center from one doctor to another without anyone drinking them. Eventually someone, I for example, decide to keep one."

In what way does the Czechoslovak medical system need to improve most? "It needs to serve people," Martin tells me in a matter-of-fact tone. "At the moment, people beg for help. When you go to see a general practitioner, he's not interested in your health. He's not forced to be interested in your health. He's not interested in you as a patient but as a statistic. This attitude has to be changed." And in material ways? "Medicare and equipment; it's a constant, daily problem. We can't prescribe the medicine we need to prescribe." Martin adds to Viktor's comment that he can't even get his own allergy medication. "To get drugs in a planned economy is a first come first served affair." So, if the supplier runs out, there are no further negotiations with him.

The second major problem is that nurses are paid even worse than doctors. This leads to a high turnover in nursing staff and general grumbling and reluctance in the clinic. Technicians earn a gross of 1,600-1,700 crowns per month of which they

take home 1,300-1,400 crowns. Even the oldest and most experienced technicians (working in the rooms with the toxic gases, for example) gross 2,800 crowns (i.e., almost the Czechoslovak average wage of 3,000 crowns per month) and net 2,200 crowns. (An apartment in a prefab low-rise housing project in northern Prague costs 550 crowns per month. Food is also expensive). In addition, "since very few people will do the job of orderly, those positions are usually filled by people with criminal histories or from poor backgrounds. The job has low social status and low salaries. The medical system, therefore, needs to pay people in these three positions better," Martin and Victor tell me.

"The current situation in our lab is not very good," says Martin. "Interpersonal relations are not very good. There are some conflicts between the technicians and the university-educated people and between the chemists and the physicians." Part of the problem seems to be that the chemists, unlike the doctors, see the patient as an object for analysis, whereas the doctors, at least Martin and Viktor, take responsibility for the patient. Viktor adds that he knows many chemists in the West who <u>are</u> interested in both the results and the patients. Martin continues with an example: "Once, Viktor offered our analysts the possibility to see our patients. He took them to the intensive care unit. At the obstetrics department, the analysts were offered the chance to see the newborns and to try to imagine the position the physician is in while he is anxiously waiting for the results of a test. The analysts refused to see the babies." "I can't understand it," sighs Viktor, "especially in the case of one analyst, a devout Catholic, a very religious man. I expected great altruism, but I didn't see it."

If money is one of the problems, where should new funds come from? Martin believes that when the hospital has its own budget, it will be able to divide money according to local needs. "Insurance, too," says Viktor. "And this is connected to the next problem, namely, that the overall organization of the Czechoslovak health care system is very bad. A minimum of one third of all patients are hospitalized to be diagnosed but not to be treated. Hospitalization is much longer than necessary, partly because there are longer time gaps between each investigation. Beds are very expensive. In the past, hospitals were forced to keep patients: the longer they kept them, the more money they got, since they were paid by the meter. We call this "obložnost" [officialese for the number of beds in use as a percent of all beds]. Hospitals were checked by the government -- a bad government -- on the basis of this "obložnost." That is, every hospital should keep all its beds occupied; the more patients in bed and the longer they stayed, the better. Sometimes patients were found just to fill the beds according to the central plan. It's expensive and it's easy to

follow, whereas the quality of health care is hard to follow." This all followed from being forced to meet the norms of the plan. "If you didn't stick to the plan, you got less money for your next budget and less drugs. You were thus forced to admit patients even if it wasn't necessary. It was a funny situation on the one hand, on the other hand it wasn't funny at all." Martin and Viktor once asked about the ethics of this sort of policy. "'Here?' said the head of the department in Vinohrady, a district in Prague, and began to laugh. 'You're not serious? We could lose our jobs, if the plan's not filled!' It was horrible."

I also asked Martin and Viktor about the quality of medical school in Czechoslovakia. Viktor pointed out that the first problem is one of attitude, i.e., the teacher's attitude to the students (there were 350 medical students in Viktor's graduating year). "'Students are lazy. They don't want to learn, and we must fight with them.'" This is Viktor's paraphrasing of the teachers. "This year, I'm a teacher for the first time, and I hear the professors talking." "The general attitude of the working class," says Viktor, "is 'They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work.' The attitude of the students is 'They pretend to teach us and we pretend to work.' Well, maybe I'm exaggerating a bit."

Another problem was curriculum. When Martin (like Viktor) studied medicine at Charles University in Prague (he graduated in 1986) not only did he have to pass an exam in his specialty (pediatrics), but also in "social medicine" (e.g., organization of health care, social aspects of medicine). There were also additional, more obnoxious obstacles on the road to graduation that a medical student in the West does not have to face: every medical student, like every student, had to pass exams in Marxism-Leninism. This was divided into four year's worth of courses: Political-Economy (not the bourgeois Western kind), Marxist-Leninist philosophy (some students call it 'mafia' from marxistická filosofie), Scientific Communism, and History of the Working Class Movement. This consumed 3 hours per week, for four years, including seminars and lectures. Most students considered the courses a big waste of time, although every now and then there were some "real prodigies," says Martin, "very ambitious people." The work it took to learn the largely repetitious information by rote diminished as the years went on. "The first year, I studied 2 weeks, the next year 3 days, and the last year several hours." In his fifth year of medical school, he had to pass an exam in Marxist Aesthetics and in his sixth, and final, year he had to write the state exams in Marxism-Leninism. Whether you passed or not depended on the professor who was doing the examining. "A bad examiner could throw you out, and you had to wait between six months and a year to write the exam again. In 1988, Martin passed the first (medical) stage, his State Qualifying Exam, but had to study

Marxism-Leninism again. Thus, while Western medical schools were preparing their students for competition, here in the old East bloc they were preparing their students for Communism. This was Martin's last forced-feeding of Marxism-Leninism. Later, he was able politely to avoid answering an acquaintance's request to join the Party, and he even managed to drop out of the SSM, Socialist Youth Movement, which every university student is automatically a member of.

Besides abolishing the requisite courses in 'ma-fia', did the revolution change anything in medical school, for instance, at the Department of Pediatrics where Viktor teaches? At the end of May, when I met with Viktor and Martin, no professors had left, but the children's hospital had got a new director and new deans.

Now that there are possibilities to end the isolation of the Czechoslovak medical profession, I was curious what kind of contacts they would like to develop and what kind of help they wish for. "If you're hungry," says Viktor, "there's no point in someone giving you a trout. It's more useful to teach you how to catch fish. So I think what's important for us is to be given some fishes in the short term, but in the long term it's more useful to be taught how to fish." Viktor and Martin believe that it's necessary for one or two university-educated lab chemists plus one or two doctors to go abroad for six months to one year, if this were made affordable.

The Netherlands has been one source of cooperation with the Center in Prague. Dr. Hyánek has many close contacts there. The Dutch center provided fish for the patients' special diets and performed tests on Czechoslovak patients that the Center could not do. In the last three years, three or four Dutch doctors have come to Prague for short stays and offered advice on organizing the lab and interpreting tests. "Our Center is very close to the Dutch model," says Viktor. Apparently, there was some resistance to such collaboration from the Czechoslovak government, "but we managed."

My final question was why these two doctors opted for pediatrics. "It's more optimistic than geriatrics. Old people are bound to die after all. If you help a sick child, you expect it to live a full life. It's a bigger achievement if you can do something for it," said Martin. Viktor wanted to add something to his colleague's views. "Sometimes this aspect, the future of the patient, can be very hard. For example, if during delivery the patient doesn't want to resuscitate, I always worry what the lack of oxygen means for the future of the patient. Originally, I started with internal medicine but ended up in the biochemistry lab and through this lab ended

up in the Center. Newborns are so helpless. If I see a newborn, I want to protect it. I want to do something for the child."

Joan Baez

At the beginning of June, Joan Baez performed in Bratislava, one year and six months after the authorities there had turned the microphones off on her because she spoke out in favor of the human rights organization Charter 77 and sang "We Shall Overcome" with the Slovak singer-songwriter Ivan Hoffman. She came to Prague this year after playing in Bratislava. I spoke with my friend the singer-songwriter Vladimír Merta, who had been with Baez in Bratislava in 1989. He said that Joan Baez's management was disappointed with this year's turnout and didn't expect a full house for the Prague date. I rounded up six friends -- Americans, Czechs and one Belgian -- and when we got to the Sports Hall it was nearly impossible to find a seat on this first-come-first-served basis. I had also naively and wrongly expected that bully-bouncer-ushers were a thing of the past. Another incongruity of the evening was the OF happy face on the wall to the left side of the stage and the illuminated Pragoconcert sign on the right hand side. Pragoconcert is the booking and promotion agency owned and operated largely by the StB secret policemen. Merta was disappointed that Civic Forum chose to deal with this relic of the old order, especially when his company, Saffron, was prepared to handle the Baez concert. Merta also wanted Joan Baez to support President Havel and Civic Forum more explicitly than she or her management was prepared to do.

When Havel arrived the houselights went up and the crowd -- now a full house -- gave him a rousing welcome as he made his way up to his seat in the stands. The opening act was a joint performance of Merta, Michael Prokop (soon to be a member of parliament) and his band Framus 5, as well as the group C & K Vocal (something like Manhattan Transfer), whose leader, Ladislav Kantor, was then Havel's secretary and is now head of the President's Secretariat. This was followed by Marta Kubišová's lovely performance of the song "Ring-o-Ding". Although it the Czech performers were doing their best, the performances did not sound brilliant.

When Baez came on stage, the atmosphere changed completely. The sound was now strong and it sparkled -- her sound crew had not wanted to share their technical equipment with the opening act. Her opening song was "Forever Young" by Bob Dylan, whose hopeful and encouraging lyrics Baez could easily have intended as a prayer or best wishes for the students, dissidents, and democrats of Czechoslovakia. She sang her excellent new composition "China" about the students' brave stand and the cruel repression on Tianamen Square last year. She was lively and open with her

audience. The photographers were able to do their job for the first few minutes of the concert and then, for the benefit of the audience and herself, Baez politely but firmly told them that they'd had enough time to shoot and now it was time for them to go. Baez introduced each song in slow and clear English, which at times made her sound like a kindergarten teacher. At least most of the listeners understood her -- until she sang the Polish song.

The audience (especially because it was Czech) was probably willing to overlook her merging the two nations, Czech and Slovak, when she said "I don't know any Czechoslovakian songs," but when she offered a Polish number almost like a Slavonic substitute, she was met with a comparatively cool reaction (much like the local reception of Zbigniew Brzezinski's suggestion of a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation). "Czechoslovakians and Poles have quite a bit in common. I sing this song to my friend Lech Walesa and he likes it. Next time I come, I'll sing a Czechoslovakian song." (Will there be a Czechoslovakia, in the form of one state, next time she comes?) The Polish song was quite lovely and I don't think Joan Baez really intended it as a reference to the now defunct (if ever existent) Slavonic brotherhood. It was only part of her internationalism; hence, we got a Spanish song from Chile and a German version of "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" Thankfully, she didn't launch into any Russian songs.

The highlight of the evening was when Baez sang "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and stepped out from behind the microphone. Alone in the spotlight, she walked out to the edge of the stage and improvised on the old gospel song: "Coming for to carry me -- you (she swept her hand out gracefully towards the audience) -- him (she swept her hand in President Havel's direction) -- ho-o-o-o-ome." Despite the fact that I was at the concert more out of curiosity than out of a strong desire to see Joan Baez, and despite her apparently not being well informed about the situation in this country, despite the fact that her music is not current or innovative, despite the fact that she could embarrass a dedicated ecologist with her pseudo-reggae ditty about saving the whales etc. ("Rainbow Warrior"), I was still very taken with her performance. Her wonderful voice, sincerity, and strong stage presence, balance out all the excesses and short comings. One other minus: the super quality of the technical side of the production made the Czech and Slovak musicians seem inferior by comparison. Baez partially compensated for that by joining her hosts in one song, but the end result still left some of us marvelling a bit too much at US know-how and professionalism and implicitly bemoaning the rather sad state of the local music scene.

Not long after Baez's visit, the British protest singer Billy Bragg arrived in Czechoslovakia. He preaches internationalism too, but his is based on Communism. He may sincerely believe in it, but it's also a major element of his marketing hype. One of his album covers, which Merta brought back from his days playing with him, is in the style of a Chinese socialist-realist painting of some sage-like leader heroically pointing out the true path to avid youth. A small black inscription on the bottom has a worker above the words CAPITALISM IS KILLING MUSIC! PAY ONLY 6.99! Bragg had the nerve (or the gall) to sing the Internationale to the audience in the town of Olomouc in Moravia. He may have been supported by the British and American tourists down in front of the stage, but the Czech audience booed this gesture. They later received a mild rebuke in Merta's Tvorba article (4 July 1990) for this "intolerant" reaction to their leftist guest musician.

My next letter will describe my trip to Bulgaria in August and then I'll get back to you with a description of the preelection atmosphere in Prague during the past (and probably by then up-coming November) political campaigns. Until then

All the best

Ozek

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