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CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S RETURN TO EUROPE: A ROCKY ROAD

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Dear Peter and friends:

Post-Velvet Revolution Czechoslovakia has embarked on what its leaders and promotional posters happily call the Return to Europe. It appears the journey will not be a smooth one.

"It's going to take 15, 20 years to fix the damage they've done," said Jaroslav Kloubek, taking another drag from his cigarette and maneuvering his Skoda compact around a pothole. The just-fixed brakes of the Czech-made automobile squeaked loudly.

The 33-year-old plumber eyed the fume-spewing rows of cars and buses all around us, a traffic jam at midday Friday as Prague residents fled the city for their weekend cottages. The pollution stung the eyes. No catalytic converters here. I smelled coal burning somewhere, a familiar smell. In winter it can be overpowering.

The "they" Kloubek blames for his country's troubles are the Communists, whose 41 years in power wreaked havoc on Czechoslovakia's economy, environment and spirit. This Big Brother domination finally ended last fall, wiped away with a velvet cloth when thousands of Czechoslovaks peacefully took to the streets to say, "Enough."

A lot has changed. To a visitor remembering the Czechoslovakia that was - a repressed, sad, closed society - the changes are dramatic.

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In Prague, books by political figures and writers who until recently were banned and/or imprisoned are prominently displayed in state-owned bookstores. Next to stands selling melons are tables offering new editions of the works of emigre authors. No need for faded samizdat anymore.

Conspicuous too is the absence of once-omnipresent Soviet flags and haughty socialist slogans that praised the value of work, state and party. Prague, albeit dirty and dusty and in disrepair, is back to its Golden City self - a treasure-trove for lovers of art, history and architecture.

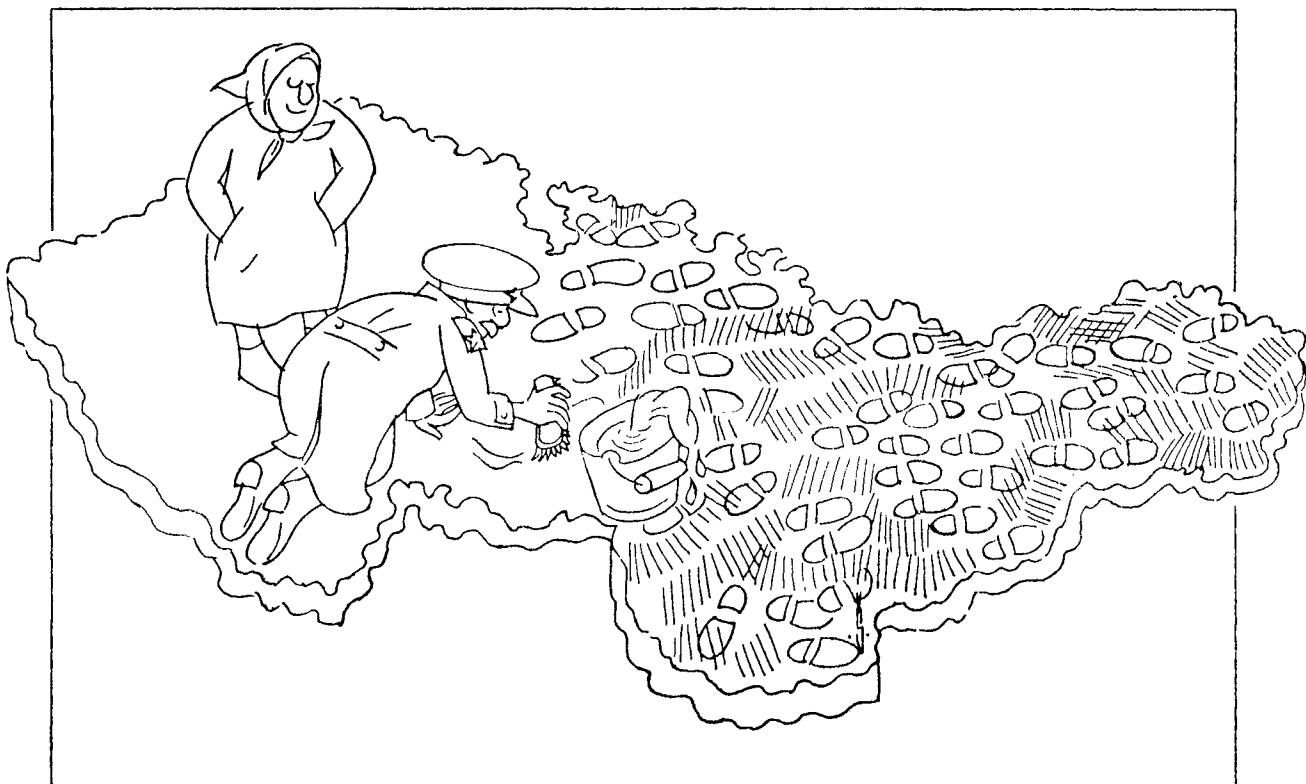
Tourists clutching backpacks and maps sit on the cobblestones of Old Town Prague and watch the street musicians and puppeteers. On Charles Bridge, young people speaking a cornucopia of languages lean on the statues of saints and sing songs in Czech and English. On a recent balmy Friday, with the Vltava River swans napping below under a nearly full moon, a teen-ager played Pink Floyd's rebel rock anthem, "The Wall." On a cello. The street-tough lyrics - "We don't need no education, we don't need no thought control" - brought a lump to one's throat when softly sung by young voices, on this 500-year-old bridge, in post-revolution Prague.

Last year's Velvet Revolution, with students, actors and dissident writers playing the lead roles, captivated even the most cynical of observers as it toppled a totalitarian regime and elected an often-jailed playwright as its president.

Remnants of this Cinderella story still are easy to spot. A living memorial to the revolution and to the struggle for freedom sits on St. Wenceslaus Square, the center of modern Prague and the site of several anti-government protests. There, near the base of a majestic statue of Bohemia's patron saint on his horse, tourists snap pictures of an island of jars filled with flowers and Czechoslovak flags, surrounding photos of martyrs such as Jan Palach (the 21-year-old student who immolated himself in January 1969 to protest the 1968 Soviet invasion). The display is ringed by a foot-high wall of melted wax from hundreds of candles lit by the people of Prague as a constant show of support during the tense days and weeks of the revolution.

Wide-eyed visitors still peek expectantly into the nearby headquarters of Civic Forum, the umbrella group of activists led by dissident-cum President Vaclav Havel that mobilized the nation last fall and captured the majority of seats in Parliament this spring. Campaign posters, many featuring Havel's picture, still hang all over the country.

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-Cartoon by Vaclav Svenna,  
SKRT magazine, June 1990

Havel remains a powerful symbol for the Czechoslovakian people, and most hesitate to criticize him. They still sport Havel buttons and hang pictures of him in homes, offices, cars, buses and shop windows. But Havel-mania has abated. Some say they are weary of his idealism and wish for more direction, pragmatism and action. They are not happy that many Civic Forum members are former Communists. The post-revolution doldrums also have brought higher prices, more crime and a government still in search of an identity and the ability to work as a team.

People like Kloubek, who drove me through Prague to show me an apartment next to one just burglarized (The victims' door, which had been ripped open with a crowbar, was standing in the hall off its hinges. The new door had a sign on it saying, "Retirees. We have nothing left."), are pragmatic about the state of their republic. But others are starting to grumble and even despair. Some even wax nostalgic about life under the Communists, saying life was better then.

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Hardly anyone mentions the basic freedoms the revolution has brought: People are free of the secret police. They can travel. They can go just about anywhere in Europe without a visa. They have access to newspapers and magazines from all over the world. They even have the Cable News Network.

The removal of the sinister security blanket of totalitarianism means people now worry about job security, about making ends meet, and about whether they have it in them to make the transition to a market economy. That task seems so daunting it sometimes overwhelms.

Many say it's possible the Communists will try to return to power, during the next elections or even before. They say they could capitalize on people's confusion and disillusionment and the hardships that will accompany economic reform.

"We're going to have very difficult economic problems," predicted Ludek Miller, a 29-year-old computer programmer. "I'm afraid because the government is elected for two years, and in two years the benefits of economic reform won't be felt yet."

"They are acting constructively so far," government sociologist Lubomir Brokl said of the "new," post-revolutionary Communist Party. "But they are setting up to take advantage of the havoc and say, 'It wasn't so bad with us. So you didn't travel. Where do you want to go? You don't speak French anyway.'"

Brokl, who in February returned to the job he and about 30 others lost at the Sociological Institute at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences after the Soviet takeover in 1968, said if the Communists tried to take over again there would be civil war. "It was my children's generation that overthrew them. And they would fight."

Right now civil war is just something discussed over afternoon coffee at summer cottages. Most of the country, including its new Parliament, is on vacation. Many people virtually move to their summer homes, coming to the city only to collect mail and buy supplies. Apartment houses take the opportunity to shut off hot water. Many offices either don't answer their phones at all or are staffed only in the morning.

Many of those who are at work report that morale and productivity are no higher than before the revolution. In fact, some say people work even less, because of the uncertainty of the times.

In shops one still is greeted, more often than not, with disinterest or rudeness. Looking for basic consumer goods continues to be a tiring, time-consuming game of chance.

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Most eating establishments turn away walk-ins, saying they are booked solid with reservations even though they will remain half-empty. When I went with a friend to Prague's Greek restaurant recently, I was greeted by a rope across the door at 8 p.m. As soon as the surly waiter manning the rope spotted us, he shook his head to indicate there was no possibility of getting in. We were admitted when we quickly said we indeed had a reservation. The waiter then served only us and two other couples the entire evening. The rest of the room sat unused, place settings perfectly in place, a framed photo of Havel looking on.

The Czechoslovaks like to say, "We have forgotten how to work." Indeed, the Communist-controlled years did breed disincentive to work. Extra effort and productivity were not only not rewarded, they were discouraged.

It appears Czechoslovaks will endure the familiar routine of long lines, shortages of basic consumer goods and a "service" sector that seems to not understand the meaning of the word until the laws governing private enterprise change, until entrepreneurship is rewarded and the security of people's jobs is tied to performance. Today, would-be entrepreneurs still face mind-boggling bureaucracy, shortages of materials, shop and office space, and a nonconvertible currency. Foreign businesspeople who make forays into Czechoslovakia often leave in frustration, without any contract in hand.

It is possible that some people hoped, even believed, the revolution somehow would transform Czechoslovakia overnight into a prosperous, Western-style democracy. Instead, this month they had their first taste of what it will take to rebuild their country.

The first visible step toward economic reform came on Monday, July 9, with a major overhaul of food prices. An estimated 30,000 prices were affected. Virtually all went up, some by as much as 100 percent. The price changes were designed to eliminate an annual subsidy of about 27 billion Czechoslovak crowns, which resulted in abnormally low prices for some items and did not reflect true costs.

The government is funneling the subsidy amount back to the people, in monthly payments of 140 crowns for each of the country's 15 million inhabitants. The government has said the payments should spur responsible spending. Officials also note that the money is a mini-windfall for families with several children. That perhaps is to make up for the fact that the price of infant formula has doubled - the most criticized price hike because it hits young families.

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Many Czechoslovaks dismiss any discussion of the 140 crown payment with an impatient wave of the hand. They call it a slap in the face, saying it is absurdly low (140 crowns amounts to about five hours' wages for the average person), although of course the government did not have to pay them anything.

Food and the food price increase have remained a hot topic of conversation for nearly a month now.

"The Czechs will put up with a lot, but they love their food," said one portly man in his late 30s. "When you mess with that, there's trouble."

Czechoslovaks do have a love affair with food, for cultural reasons and because they have had few other diversions. After the Soviet invasion of 1968, when the country's standard of living remained relatively high, it was said food in their stomachs was the people's reward for their silence and acquiescence.

The week before the price increase, people began stocking up. They bought butter - price for .25 kilogram rising from 10 crowns to 16.80 crowns - by the case. Sugar - up from 7.30 crowns to 10 crowns a kilo - disappeared from store shelves. By July 9 many shelves were bare.

The shelves have been restocked. Some food items remain in short supply, but when compared to other East European countries in flux, Czechoslovaks eat well. (In fact, economists give Czechoslovakia a better chance than most of its neighbors of making a relatively smooth transition to a market economy. But people here don't often think in relative terms or like to compare themselves to Romanians, Bulgarians or Poles.)

Czechoslovak consumers did not have as much warning about the next blow to their pocketbooks. On Tuesday, July 17, federal Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus and Economics Minister Vladimir Dlouhy announced that as of 12:01 a.m. Thursday, July 19, gas prices would go up by 50 percent, to 12 crowns and 13.50 crowns a liter. The chief reason was a drop in imports of crude oil from the Soviet Union and the expectation of further problems there, coupled with trouble with domestic production.

Czechoslovaks planning vacations to Austria or Germany, or just to their country houses, began lining up at the gas pumps before dawn on Wednesday to beat the price increase and make sure they could fill their tanks.

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At mid-afternoon on Thursday, the first day of higher prices, 70 cars snaked around the corner at the Benzina station in Prague 2. The young man at the head of the line said he'd waited an hour, but the line had been shorter then. Some of the people behind him were slumped over their steering wheels, napping. Children hung out of car windows, bored.

"It's not the government's fault," said 71-year-old Natasa Kasalova as she sat about 40 cars back, reading a newspaper beside her 80-year-old husband, Miroslav. "We believe in the government. We agree with the price increases, with the outlook that it will get better."

Her husband, a lawyer who speaks six languages and was part of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences presidium until 1968, has a retirement income of less than 2,000 crowns a month. But the couple said they are not worried.

"So, we'll eat meat once a week," Mrs. Kasalova said brightly.

Czech Prime Minister Petr Pithart later expressed disappointment at the long lines and assured people the country had enough gas. He noted that in the West, "time is money," and said that although he understood Czechoslovaks have their reasons for doing things, it was a pity their time still "wasn't worth anything."

He might also have taken a look at Parliament when making the statement. The new Parliament, elected in June, took the next several weeks to pick a new name for the country, spent a great deal of time grandstanding, and then voted itself monthly salaries of 16,000 crowns before recessing for the summer.

The representatives' monthly salaries amount to about half the annual salary of the average person in this country - not exactly leading by example if they want the country to tighten its collective belt in the months to come as Czechoslovakia moves toward a convertible currency and other economic reform.

I wondered what the students who were on the front lines of the revolution think now. I found out that most of them, too, are on vacation, or studying or working abroad. And, understandably, power struggles and ideological differences have split their ranks.

Martin Vacek, who is on the editorial staff of the independent student paper, Studentske Listy (a product of the revolution and affiliated with the independent daily Lidove Noviny), predicts that student activism will revive in the fall. But he doesn't know to what extent.

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"Now everyone talks about waiting three hours in line for gas, said the 23-year-old, who wants to be a journalist after he graduates from Charles University in Prague.

He worried that people would not be able to afford newspapers (now, usually at 1 crown per issue, quite inexpensive for the typical wage of 20 crowns an hour) as prices of newsprint, and everything else, go up.

"I mean, if they have to choose between an extra slice of salami and a newspaper, which will they choose?"

Vacek also worried that people will read more publications like the new crop of soft-porn magazines, and less substance. And he worried they would read less because other media and other activities will compete for their attention.

I realized with a start that some of his initial concerns were the same ones Western journalists struggle with every day. I tried to be encouraging: Of course people will continue to read. Yes, they probably will read less, and read different things. But at least they can choose.

After Vacek and I said goodbye, I headed for a department store a few blocks away in my continuing, Quixotic search for a shower curtain rod. I bumped into a line of a good 200 people - the longest line I'd seen yet in a country known for its lines. I followed it around a corner. It stopped at the front door of a bookstore. When I asked, the people told me they were waiting to buy a book (Black Barons, a parody of the military that had been banned since the 1960s).

A book. I smiled and walked away, thinking of Martin Vacek.

All the best,



Dagmar

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