

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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`IT CHANGED AMERICA - IT WILL CHANGE US TOO`*

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Dear Peter and friends:

*Promotional slogan of Playboy magazine, Czechoslovak edition

The story goes, according to Playboy magazine, that 27-year-old Hugh Hefner started the magazine that "changed America" at his kitchen table in the Windy City in December 1953. He had \$600 of his own plus about \$5,000 more from investors. We know what happened next. Playboy Enterprises grew to be a powerful publishing empire, and the man who does business in his pajamas became a major influence on American culture. Today, the Playboy bunny -- the trademark as well as the image of the young woman in the white-tailed costume -- is known throughout the world.

Webster's defines the term "playboy" as "(Colloq.) a man, especially a man of means, who is given to pleasure-seeking, sexual promiscuity, etc." To me, the word conjures up a feeling of nostalgia, sort of like fuzzy dice or Mood Rings. It's been years since Gloria Steinem's scathing I-Was-A-Playboy-Bunny expose of the Playboy culture. The Playboy Clubs have closed. I don't know anyone who reads the magazine anymore. But apparently at least 5.1 million people worldwide still do, according to Haresh Shah, director of Playboy International Publishing. Shah provided this information while in Prague recently to introduce Playboy's Czechoslovak edition. As of this month, the Czech-language Playboy becomes the second East European edition of the magazine. Hungary had the first, in November 1989. Besides the U.S. Playboy, you can find local versions in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Holland, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Germany, Greece, Spain, Taiwan and Turkey.

Dagmar Obereigner is an Institute fellow studying political and social change in Eastern Europe, with a focus on Czechoslovakia.

Shah said Playboy has been approached by interested businessmen from the Soviet Union too. But he said the magazine probably will not enter the Soviet market until that country's politics and economy stabilize.

The Czech deal is a licensing agreement, with Playboy Enterprises providing no financial investment, according to Shah. Playboy does have strict standards for the magazines' content, which, I found out later, haven't been that easily met in Czechoslovakia.

I headed for the Playboy-launching news conference after deciding it fit into the "strange but true sociological developments" category. When I arrived at the upscale Diplomat Hotel I got into the long line of journalists, the purpose of which I thought was credentials-checking. My mistake. This is where we got our copies of the magazine and our souvenir Playboy pens.

We then met Shah and the top staffers of the Czechoslovak edition. Also on hand was Christy Thom, an American playmate who appears in the first issue, and Miss May Šárka Lukešová, Czechoslovakia's first Playmate. Wearing mini-mini skirts, the two young women basked in the glow of flashbulbs and answered questions like what they think of each other: (Christy: "She's a lovely girl. She's very sweet and she's very smart and we get along very well." Šárka: "She's very nice, very bright.")

Shah said Hefner, not satisfied with the "macho" and sportsmen's magazines on the market in the '50s, aimed for a magazine "which reflected all the things that a young urban man strives for and liked to have in his life. ... It basically becomes an extension of the reader who reads the magazine, and it becomes a true friend which visits you once every month. And it is my hope that coming to Czechoslovakia that Playboy magazine will reflect these basic values and basic concepts that Hefner had back in 1953, and that it will become a true friend of young men that live in Czechoslovakia."

Hefner, in a letter to the readers on page 3 of the first Czechoslovak issue, says the word Czechoslovakia conjures up to him "Smetana and Dvořák, Kafka and Kundera, the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution, Thomas Garrigue Masaryk and Václav Havel." He compares the years of repression here with the time during which he started Playboy - the era of conservatism, President Eisenhower and Sen. Joseph McCarthy. He says he hopes this new Playboy will capture the "free spirit of the new Czechoslovakia."

The news conference was followed by a lavish evening gala at which luminaries from the worlds of entertainment and politics, including federal finance minister and free-market advocate Václav Klaus, mingled with Bunnies imported from Munich.

The Czechoslovak Playboy looks almost the same as its American counterpart, the quality due in part to an Austrian printing company and the strict licensing rules. It sells for 99 Czechoslovak crowns, about \$3 or three hours' wages. It's the



Playboy's first issue, featuring centerfold Šárka Lukešová (the headline reads, "The prettiest girls are in Moravia"). Below, the first cover, a bejeweled bunny created by artist Miloslav Hlaváček.

most expensive Czechoslovak magazine. Its publisher, Vladimír Tichý of VIPress Czechoslovakia (a Czech corporation that competed with about 10 other Prague firms for the deal with Playboy), calls it the "Rolls Royce of magazines," with a price corresponding to that level of quality. He notes that its expenses, including printing and licensing fees, are paid in hard currency. Monthly expenses are estimated at 2.5 to 3 million crowns.

Apparently, people have the money to buy it. Jaroslav Matějka, editor in chief of the Czechoslovak edition, reports that the first issue -- 65,000 copies were printed -- has sold out.

The first copy I spotted in public was on the dashboard of





Jaroslav Matějka, editor in chief of Czechoslovak Playboy.

a cab. The vehicle, filthy and reeking of cigarette smoke, was decorated with nude photos of young women, much to the shock of the female American friend riding with me. Yelling over the incredibly loud cassette player, I asked the driver what he thought of Playboy. He said he hadn't looked at it yet. As for the cost, he basically said that those who can afford it can afford it. I acknowledged that he had a point, and tried not to touch anything as I got out.

Playboy is gambling that enough people have the money and taste to support the magazine in Czechoslovakia. Matějka says he envisions the typical reader as a male with at least a high school education, 25 to 40 years old, and "not burdened by prejudices." The person is healthy and ambitious, "willing to sacrifice everything for his work ... but at the same time able to enjoy life."

Telling the reader about the finer things in life calls for good writers, artists and photographers. Finding them hasn't been easy, Matějka says. He's aiming for a 50-50 mix of locally produced material and reprints from the American Playboy edition. But many of the best potential contributors have shied away from working with him. Matějka blames that on ignorance caused by the censorship of the past. People who haven't seen Playboy assume it is just some kind of an erotic publication. But as more and more

people see the product, they are more receptive to seeing their work in it, Matějka said.

Most of the Czechoslovaks I asked didn't have an opinion about Playboy, and they didn't know some people -- notably American women -- think it is demeaning to women. But I got negative and dismissive reactions from people in Prague journalism/publishing circles, who said Playboy's editorial staff is full of former Communists who'd worked in positions of power during the totalitarian years.

I have tried not to judge people or to engage in witch hunts, but this could be a bit ironic: People who made a living pushing the official Communist morality now pushing Playboy?

I fished out a pair of high heels and a skirt from my closet (I don't know - call it a tactical move) and headed for Playboy's offices. They're on the top floor in the Lucerna building (which President Havel's architect grandfather designed), prime real estate on Wenceslas Square.

The headquarters are behind a locked door. Matějka buzzed me in and directed me to his office. The magazine, after being housed in a basement and other temporary quarters, had just moved in, so the freshly painted walls still were mostly bare. Above Matějka's desk hung three brightly colored drawings, done by his 5-year-old daughter. A poster of Buster Keaton ("For when things are at their worst," Matějka jokes) was the only other wall decor.

I found Matějka to be accessible and professional. And no matter what my personal opinion is of Playboy, I have to be impressed that it hit the stands with only a few minor mistakes.

I asked him about the background of the staff. He said that of the real editorial staff -- the writers and graphic artists and such -- only a "negligible percentage" were former Communist operators.

I asked in particular about General Manager Ivan Chocholouš, who'd been an official in the Union of Socialist Youth -- the past regime's official youth organization. Matejka confirmed that and then said, "On the other hand, Mr. Chocholouš, colleague Chocholouš, he's a very capable person. I think that today is a time when the abilities and quality of each person are the deciding factors."

I asked him whether there are cases on his staff of people "switching coats" as they say here, meaning conveniently jumping from one allegiance or ideology to another. "I wouldn't talk about switching coats but rather about removing coats," he said. "We all feel that we can breathe easier and that we can talk about things that we couldn't talk about before. Of course we have major disagreements about various things, but they are professional disagreements, never ideological ones."

We discussed the magazine a bit more, then Matejka returned to the previous, touchy subject. "We understand this as a new chance. We're starting something and care about something. Which means that who did or didn't do what before -- maybe this will surprise you -- that doesn't interest me much. I'm interested in what the person knows or doesn't know how to do.

"It also has to do with the fact that there aren't that many capable journalists and capable people here. And on top of that, everyone was born somewhere and was raised in a certain way. This society functioned for 40 years, and it's not possible to think that suddenly there will appear new people or people who've been installed here from somewhere.

"We all lived here, and everyone lived through something. Everyone has certain personal experiences. Everyone came to his own knowledge in some way. So categorical condemnations, or even evaluating, would be a bit misleading."

Matejka, 35, is married and has two young daughters (the other is 1). He says his wife initially was upset at people's reactions to the magazine. Again, he says, it was a case of people not familiar with it putting it in the "girlie" category. Now even the neighbors know Playboy is much more than that. "So she's breathing a bit easier."

Part of the reason for the "girlie" reputation is that even if people saw a copy of Playboy smuggled in during the Communist years, most didn't read English so they naturally focused on the photos, Matejka said.

In general, the Communist years were ones of "Puritanism and a false morality that was cultivated in this society," he said. "On one hand magazines like Playboy and others were refused and on the other representatives of the former regime basically imported them in." Pornographic videotapes were brought in too and discussed in private, but no one spoke up against this hypocrisy, Matejka said. "The society that was here, it was a society with two faces: It said one thing but thought another. That applies to erotica and all similar things."

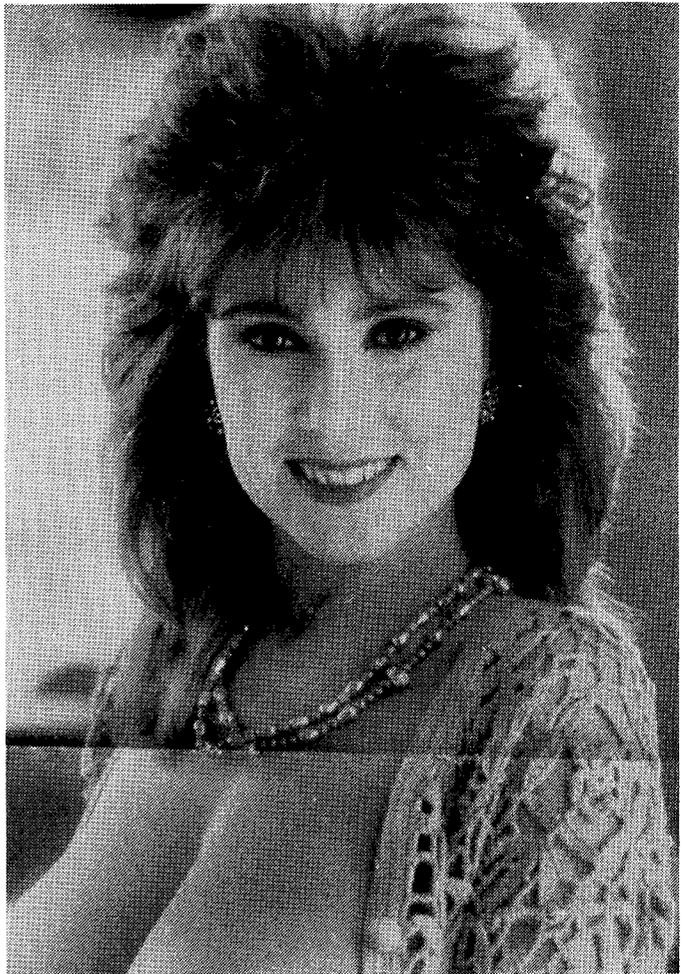
Matejka told me he was a member of the Communist Party until November 1989. He says he's in no hurry to join another. He is a graduate of the Charles University Journalism Faculty -- he said he studied journalism because he wanted to write about sports. (Matejka says he was a good soccer player and might have wound up a professional if it wasn't for injuries.) From 1982 to 1987 he covered sports and a variety of other beats for Květy (a magazine of feature articles aimed mostly at women). After a stint at two other publications, he was offered the chance to work at Playboy. Its "super quality" was what attracted him to it the most, he said. It's clear there's journalistic pride there. When I call him on another day and ask what's new, he's excited about the possibility of obtaining an exclusive interview with a prominent

The centerfold: Šárka Lukešová, 21 years old. Until she was 18, she lived in Nový Jičín, a community of about 17,000 in northern Moravia. She now lives in Prague, is a model and studies ethnography at Charles University.

"Turn-ons: when I do well on exams; people who are close to me."

"Turn-offs: envy and public transportation."

Šárka was flown to Chicago for the photo session, done by Playboy's Pompeo Posar. A Playboy documentary about the trip was shown on Czechoslovak television.



musician. I get the feeling he wants to show people that there's real journalism going on at Czechoslovak Playboy.

My visit to Playboy showed me that as with everything else here, the "big picture" is made up of lots of very different pieces. Matějka mentioned some of them: prejudices, morals, hypocrisy, big business, starting over, trying to maneuver in a changing society and a new world.

Then there are the photos, the ones of nude women, the ones that make some people uncomfortable. They bring up the complex issues of pornography, censorship, sexism, a society's view of women in general -- issues that merit more attention another time.

Matějka calls Playboy's nudes its "icing on the cake." Centerfold Šárka Lukešová told reporters she doesn't see anything wrong with posing nude, though she acknowledged that some people may not approve. (Matějka told me some people in her hometown did give her a hard time.)

Šárka received 100,000 crowns (about \$3,000) for her work. Not many women have contacted Playboy about following in her

footsteps, though, Matějka said.

I asked him how he would feel if his daughter -- the one who drew the smiling suns and flowers displayed on his office wall -- came to him when she was older and told him she wanted to be a Playboy centerfold. He first joked that officially, he should say it would be a great idea.

"Unofficially, I haven't decided whether it's right. It's her experience, her choice. ... But truly, I'm not convinced one way or the other."

All the best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Dagmar".

Dagmar