

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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'TANKS ARE ROLLING OUT, THE STONES ARE ROLLING IN'

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Dear Peter and friends:

This August 21, for the first time, Czechoslovakia could properly commemorate one of the blackest periods of its history - the 1968 Soviet-led invasion that snuffed out a brief period of reforms and installed a hard-line Communist government.

In Prague, the day featured poignant remembrances and speeches. There was also a different kind of commemoration, made possible by Czechoslovakia's post-Velvet Revolution freedom: A group of students took the opportunity to plan a surprise cultural "invasion" - a six-day theater festival with plays by authors ranging from Ionesco to Sheakspeare. The festival would start on Aug. 21 with a day of street performances, art exhibits and satire related to '68 in downtown Prague. This "invasion" would be announced on television the night before by three jesters, and early the next morning actors in medieval costumes would take to the Metro to tell people about it.

I was briefed ahead of time by organizer Jakub Spalek, a recent graduate of the Prague Academy of Theater Arts:

"At 10 p.m. on the 20th we'll interrupt Czech television with the announcement that we're entering the capital and taking over certain areas," he said. "At 5 a.m. on the 21st, we'll move into the subway. Music and our invasion message will play over the public address system."

We sat on the hardwood floor of an Academy gallery, among

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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.



Soviet "soldiers" in paper tanks greet tourists on Prague's historic Charles Bridge.

unframed canvases of modern art that would be shown during "COD '90" - Civil Defense with Theater."

Spalek organized COD as part of KASPAR (jester), an independent group of about 20 students and friends of the Prague Academy of Theater Arts. KASPAR received some government funding for the festival and important support from Civic Forum, the umbrella organization that remains the country's most popular political group.

The diminutive Spalek, a knitted jester's cap on his head, was tired, running on adrenaline. He'd begun working 20-hour days, realizing that if the event was a success it could make a name for both him and KASPAR. But he said he knew it wouldn't be perfect. It couldn't be. This young entrepreneur had become acquainted with the basic stumbling blocks still built into the system in Czechoslovakia.

"Not even the phone works here," he said. And people let him

down. They could not be counted on to work as well or as much as he envisioned. "They're not used to it. I can't even get mad."

Spalek had already received complaint calls about his seemingly flippant treatment of a solemn day. He was born in May of 1968. He said he knows full well what this anniversary means to people. But he said it's time to move on.

"For a lot of people it's a catastrophic day. That's fine. But for us it's a beautiful day. We want to see for ourselves what we can do with this day, with this freedom.

"It doesn't occur to anyone that yes, this is a historic day, but not as a step backward but a step forward."

He twirled the ends of his fool's cap as he talked. His friends had made it for him. It looked like some kind of art-and-crafts octopus. But I realized that I'd become used to it, and in this setting, under these circumstances, his wearing it now seemed perfectly natural.

I got up early on the 21st to watch the "invasion." Shortly before 7 a.m. my street was cold, gray and quiet, a drizzle threatening to turn into rain. Two people stood outside the grocery store, waiting for it to open. The silence was broken only by the rumble of a tram. On board, no one talked about what day it was, but the newspapers the people read reminded them with front-page stories.

I'd been in Czechoslovakia for the 1968 invasion, and my head was filled with thoughts of it as I made my way over to the Old Town subway station. Inside, a fair maiden in a velvet dress, a jester with a banner made of terry cloth and a squire greeted the sleepy commuters and told them about "COD '90." For the most part, smiles replaced the looks of surprise on people's faces as they stepped off the escalators. One man, however, was not amused.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said to the group. No explanation satisfied him. He did not want to tell me why he was angry, or what he thought of this display. "Since a certain time, I don't express my opinion." But as he walked away, disgusted, he turned to me and said, "In a word, it's anarchy and 'blazinec' here." (Blazinec is a wonderful colloquialism that means both insane asylum and a state of insanity and confusion.)

The flag bearer understood. "For some people this looks like a game, and it's not a time for playing," said Jan Fantys, a 23-year-old acting student who's come from Paris to take part in the festival and concurrent workshops.

His family left Czechoslovakia shortly after he was born, in 1968. "My parents kept telling me about Czechoslovakia," Fantys said in a French-accented but good Czech, which his parents taught him as he grew up. "I looked at Czechoslovakia as a country far away, but close in my heart."



People warm up with bowls of "invasion goulash," served with slices of rye bread by a wise-cracking, Russian-speaking comrade.

He said he came to Prague hoping to develop a "new language" of theater and more international cooperation in the theater community. He also offered some thoughts on the state of the republic:

"We learned a lot of things during the time of the Russians," he said. "Now we have to learn differently. And if we're making a new world we have to work."

He was quick to add that what he was saying "may be politically naive. I'm an outsider. I'm not criticizing the Czechs. I just want to tell them something. The world you create can be beautiful. But you have to work at it."

I joined him and his friends as they rode the subway to Wenceslaus Square in the center of the city, where they and about two dozen other people in costume performed for press and passers-by.

A woman dressed as a Czechoslovak flag had a noose around her neck, held by a woman wearing an army helmet and speaking Russian. A contingent of human Soviet "tanks" - two men in army

uniforms with tanks built out of paper around their middles - prompted hearty laughter. The group shuffled up the square, looking perplexed, much like the real thing when Soviets arrived 22 years ago and did not know where they were or why. They fired a gun. Out came a burst of confetti.

I looked around and spotted a man in work clothes and two women watching from a few yards away. From their ages and their serious expressions, I guessed that they might have stood in this same spot during the 1968 invasion. They did not need much encouragement to tell me about it. The words poured out. The man said he remembered the day as if it were yesterday. Early that morning, people already knew what was happening, alerted by friends who'd listened to short-wave radios overnight. He said they were stocking up on food and gasoline and preparing for anything - even war.

"We cried here," recalled one of the women. She would identify herself only as Vilma. She was 30 then, and had arrived at work on the square shortly before 6 a.m. "People were crying. There were tanks all over. And we saw a bloody flag right away. Students were carrying it up and down. Someone had already been shot."

She said the invasion "threw us back 40 years. If it hadn't happened we'd be way ahead of countries like Austria now."

Vilma remembers the Prague Spring as a time when people truly worked together to help the country. "There was such elan then. It was the most beautiful time of my life."

Silently, we watched the merry band of "invaders" skip off, marching down the long square toward Charles Bridge. In the afternoon, President Vaclav Havel gave the nation a much-needed pep talk when he delivered a speech from the balcony of Civic Forum headquarters.

During this long, dry summer, people's behavior and complaints made it seem as if November's revolution had never happened. One heard over and over - on the streets and in the press - that several months after democracy was established, no real social, political or economic change is apparent, except maybe for the worse. Laws have not been revamped; shortages of consumer goods still abound (we saw on the news this week how people literally camp out in their cars at a building materials yard, waiting in line just in case a shipment of bricks comes in); the immense, absurd bureaucracy remains in place; the old guard still manages factories and offices. Letters to the editor speak about corruption and people trying to steal as much as possible before economic reform takes away the cookie jar.

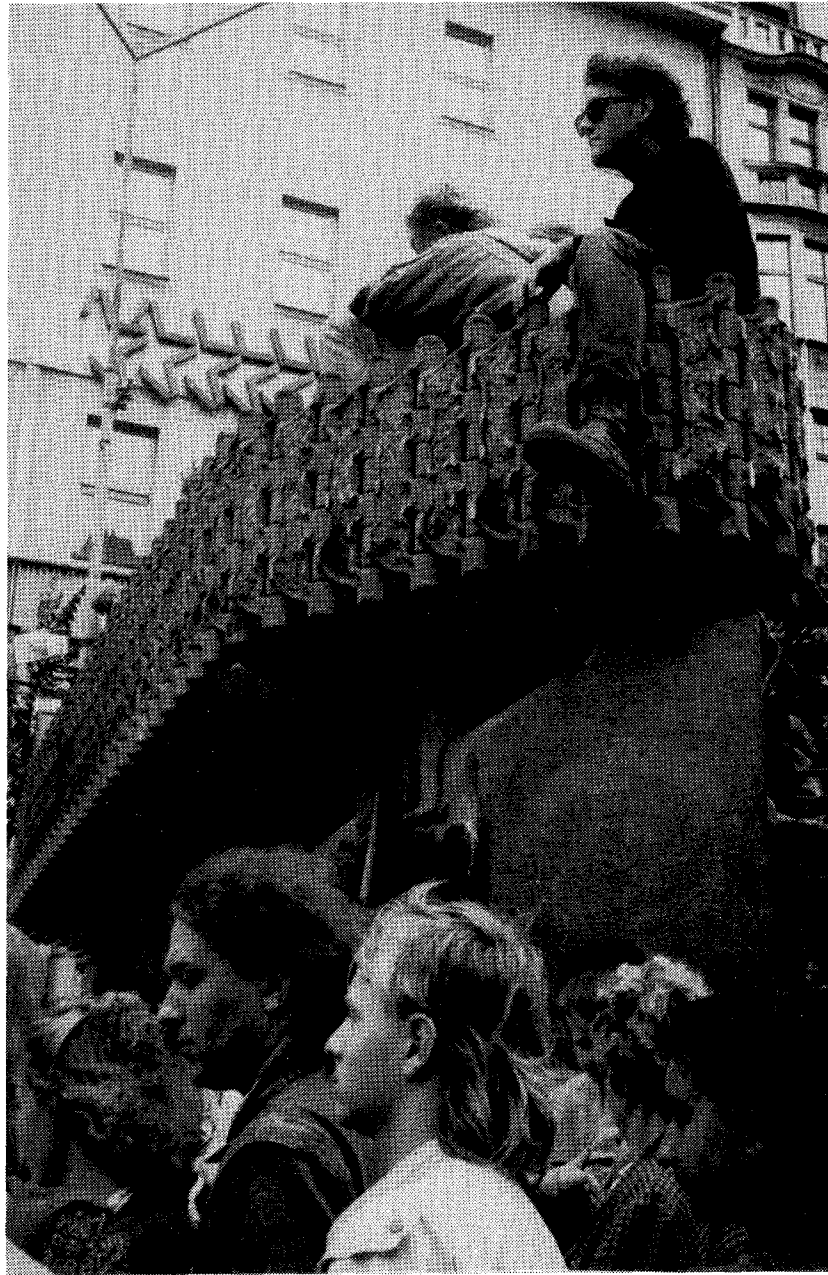
Havel did not mince words when discussing these issues. The crowd cheered his remarks about "the tentacles of invisible mafia" trying to make off with property and capital; of restaurants that are "dangerous jungles" of rudeness and bad service. He urged



Wenceslaus Square, morning of Aug. 21, 1990.

Czechoslovaks to again reach for the "spirit of unity and desire for change" that gave them so much power last November.

"Today no one is threatening us," he said. "Today it's up to only us to determine what kind of country we'll live in. We can't blame anything or anyone anymore. ... We have lost 20 years, and we can't afford to lose even one more day."



A tank turned onto its side makes a convenient perch for people-watching on Wenceslaus Square.

About 100,000 people crowded into the lower half of Wenceslaus Square to hear Havel speak. And at least for a day, the spirit of November returned.

Although packed in so tightly they could barely move, people smiled at one another and lifted one another's children on their shoulders so the little ones could see. They gave up their spots to people behind them, so everyone could have a turn and catch a glimpse of their beloved president. They shouted, "Long live



A woman places flowers onto a living memorial to freedom's heroes and martyrs. A picture of student Jan Palach, who died on Jan. 19, 1969, after setting himself on fire to protest the Soviet invasion, is in the foreground. Photo at right: Lighting candles on Wenceslaus Square.

Havel," and "Long live Dubcek" (Parliament Chairman Alexander Dubcek, who also spoke. He was one of the reform architects in 1968, and his is the name most associated with that era).

As they did in November, the crowds lit candles and laid hundreds of flowers on the statue of St. Wenceslaus and a nearby living memorial to freedom and its heroes. Havel and Dubcek themselves carried over large bouquets.

People also climbed onto a Czechoslovak tank symbolically turned onto its side at the foot of the square. The tank had been set up overnight, with official permission. It covered with peace signs and other graffiti, flowers stuck in its barrel.

Also on hand was Yelena Bonner, widow of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, and a group of Soviet citizens who protested against

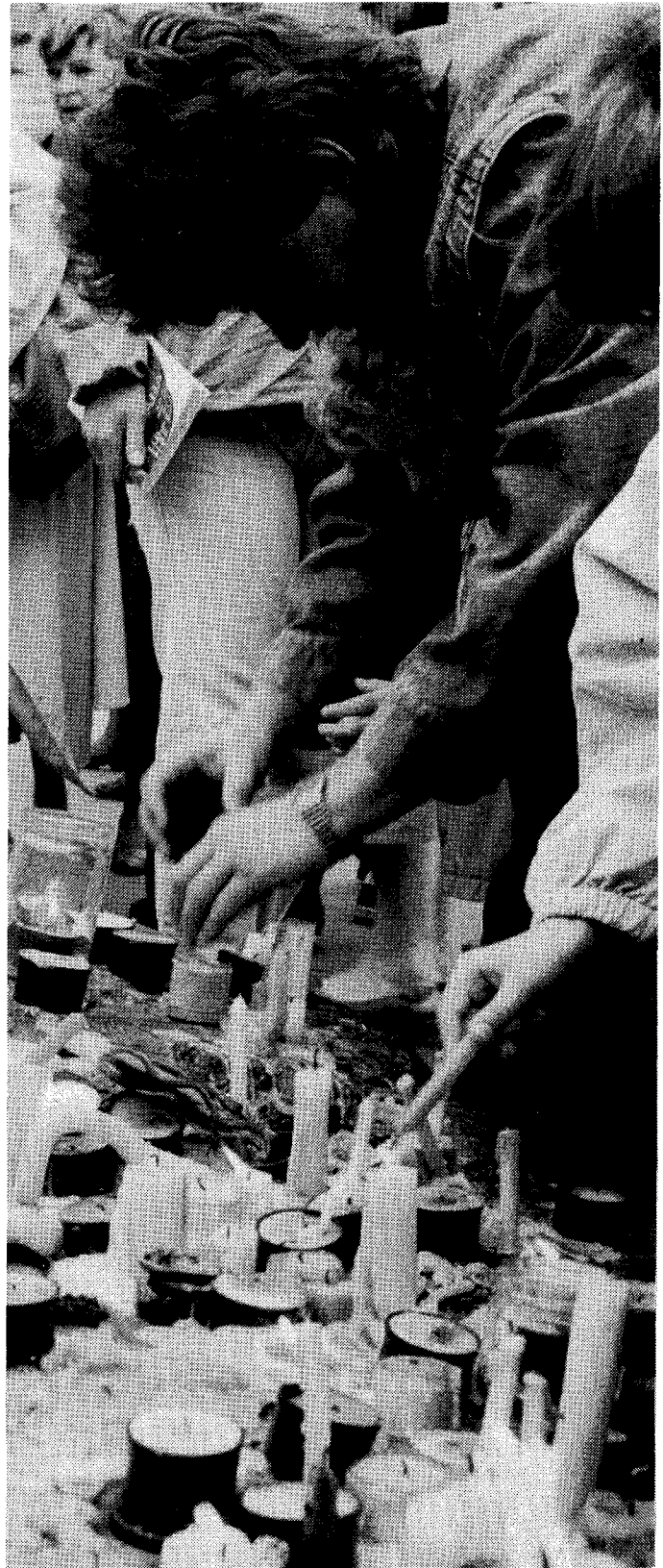
the invasion of Czechoslovakia in Moscow's Red Square on Aug. 25, 1968. For four minutes. They were then arrested and two of them judged insane. A young student was classified as being there by mistake. She was released, merely thrown out of school. Three others were imprisoned, and two were sent into internal exile, according to protester Larisa Bogorazova.

(The visiting Soviets received honorary Prague citizenships. At the same time, the honorary citizenships of Stalin, former Czechoslovak Communist leader Klement Gottwald and former, post-Prague Spring President Gustav Husak were revoked.)

Bonner told reporters she felt guilt and shame for the Soviet Union about the invasion. She also had some words for the "new" Czechoslovakia:

"You have an enormous advantage. You've elected a free Parliament, government and president. No one from the outside can dictate anything to you anymore. If you drown them in your own passivity, impatience or small-mindedness, you don't deserve anything else than if something even worse than communism, which you've had here, came next."

Strong words, but there have been lots of strong words of reprimand and



warning by prominent people and voices in the press this summer in response to people dropping their revolutionary zeal, or showing themselves to be racists, criminals, anti-Semites, and in the case of some vocal Slovaks, separatists.

But people not used to having any power cannot be expected to turn into Western-style go-getters overnight. Forty-plus years of living one way cannot be erased quickly. And ugly elements of a society will surface when they have the opportunity, especially after being kept under cover for years. One hopes Czechoslovakia's problems can be lessened with strong leadership, reason, and a sense - as Havel recommends - of personal responsibility.

A note about Slovak nationalism: So far, both the Czech and Slovak governments say they are committed to remaining in the Czechoslovak federation. It's being said that the movement to establish a separate Slovak state receives support from the Slovak National Congress in the United States and Canada, mainly people who were part of the Slovak Nazi protectorate state during World War II and have no handle on what Slovaks here want today. Another theory is that other "outside forces" (read: Soviets) have an interest in keeping Czechoslovakia unstable.

A referendum to decide whether to break up the federation is not being considered right now. Officials say they don't see enough support on the part of either the Czechs or Slovaks to warrant such a costly and time-consuming move. But it does not appear that this issue will die down, and it probably will interfere with Parliament's work this fall.

More on parliamentary salaries: People remain irritated at their amount (Parliament wound up agreeing on 13,000 crowns a month in salary and expense allowances, not 16,000 as I previously reported), but Havel defends the expenditure, saying these people need to be paid adequately so they are not tempted to be swayed by outside financial interests. (Maybe they are cut from a different cloth than other politicians. Otherwise, I don't see a healthy salary as adequate protection against corruption. ...)

One other event that shook people out of their summer doldrums was an Aug. 18 Rolling Stones concert in Prague.

The Stones are probably the most well-known and most popular rock group in the world. The group has been together for more than a quarter of a century but had never before been able to perform in Czechoslovakia. The Prague show - with about 110,000 tickets sold - wound up being the biggest of the Stones' summer European tour. And it was the biggest concert ever held in Czechoslovakia.

The flurry of activity that preceded the concert was unprecedented.

The concert site was the mammoth Strahov Stadium, called the largest stadium in the world. (It holds about a quarter of a

million people.) Its only purpose until now was to hold a Spartakiada - a massive, choreographed exhibition of the nation's physical education talent - every five years. Between Spartakiadas the field would turn into a mass of weeds and rubble.

When the Stones advance staff arrived they found that the facility did not even have adequate lighting. But in a country where people wait for years for a phone, electricity and phones were installed in days. In a country where building materials are scarce to non-existent, enough lumber arrived for a quarter-mile-long barricade that split the stadium in half. (It's so large only half of it was needed for the show, even for 110,000 spectators.)

The Stones staff noted that it helped to have the concert endorsed by the office of President Havel, which made some key phone calls to keep things moving along. The show was billed as a benefit, with proceeds to go to a charity for handicapped children headed by Havel's wife, Olga.

The Urban Jungle tour came with a contingent of about 300 workers. About 300 more were hired locally, including me. I signed up to work as a translator, to get a first-hand view of how Czechoslovaks would put on a concert of this magnitude.

During concert preparations, the non-Czech staff dined on food imported from Germany (thanks to this I was able to taste delicacies such as a banana and peanut butter for the first time in months).

The evening of the concert I was the hostess (read: waitress) in the band's dressing room. We managed to make the open-air area look cozy, complete with Persian-type rugs, a television and a stereo. For those of you interested in such things, the Stones brought their own caterers. All of the food items, including the ice, came in trucks from England. The dressing room was stocked with such staples as Belgian chocolates and Beck's beer. Coffee and tea was made only with mineral water. There was a workout room and a ping-pong table.

A show like this also meant Czechoslovaks had their first shot of slick Western promotion. Local youths were hired to plaster bright-colored Rolling Stones posters all over Prague. The posters featured the slogan, "Tanks are rolling out, the Stones are rolling in," marking the Aug. 21 invasion anniversary and the fact that after last fall's revolution the Soviet troops began leaving.

Yellow-and-purple Urban Jungle banners flew from many of the ornate facades in Old Town. Concert tickets, available in several European countries, were sold in several Prague locations from bright yellow trailers with "Urban Jungle" greenery painted on. The Stones' trademark logo of lips with tongue stuck out was displayed on a hill overlooking the city center, where a huge

statue of Stalin once stood. The Stones even made a promotional spot, speaking in heavily accented Czech, on state-run television.

The ticket price, although lower than usual for the group, was still high for most Czechoslovaks. At 250 crowns, it represents about a day and a half's wages for the average person.

Prague architect Irena Patkova, 42, picked up three - for herself, her husband and their 15-year-old daughter. Because of the cost the family spent several days trying to decide whether to go, then finally decided the show would be "such a super experience that it will be worth it."

For Western tourists who happened to be in Prague, the tickets were a steal at about \$10 (official exchange rate). In ticket lines in Prague it was difficult at times to find Czechs. But they were out in force during show, undeterred by sporadic showers, waving Czechoslovak flags and clapping to the music.

Havel, a big fan of rock music, attended the concert and showed the Stones around Hradcany Castle, the seat of government. He remained enthused about the show a week later, wearing an Urban Jungle T-shirt to his weekly radio show. He praised the orderly behavior of the audience, saying he took it as a signal that Czechoslovaks are a civilized, cultured people.

His remarks were made as a counterpoint to several recent incidents of racism, including Czechoslovaks protesting the presence of Romanian refugees and the transit camps that have been opened for them.

So much for the spirit of November.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Dagmar', written in dark ink.

Dagmar

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