

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DO-4

Pod Drinopolem 5  
169 00 Praha 6  
Czechoslovakia  
Tel: 356 465

Oct. 31, 1990

EDUCATION: CZECHOSLOVAKIA HAS A LOT TO LEARN

Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 W. Wheelock St.  
Hanover, N.H. 03755

Dear Peter and friends:

This month I began an examination of the state of schooling in Czechoslovakia. I have started out with a look at secondary education, and my first stop was a gymnasium in Prague. (As of this fall, the word "gymnasium" in Czechoslovakia again means a secondary school with the chief aim of preparing students for higher education.)

---

Jiří Ružička comes to work in a bright blue polo shirt, casual black pants, white socks and crepe-soled shoes. His hair reaches past his collar, and his upper lip sports a generous mustache. As he ambles through the halls, he says "good day" to everyone, including the kitchen staff and the woman mopping the stairs. Students smile shyly when they say hello. Their faces show that this is a man they respect, not fear.

Ružička has been a physical education teacher for the past dozen years. He still teaches p.e. (or gym, depending on your frame of reference), and Czech language and literature. But this year he's also the new principal of Jan Kepler Gymnasium.

The gymnasium was built on a historic piece of land in central Prague. This was where Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe lived in a Renaissance-style house with his family from 1599 until his death in 1601. As a memorial plaque at the school entrance points out,

---

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

Brahe, who was court astronomer to Emperor Rudolf II, conducted observations in the house with German astronomer Johannes Kepler, for whom the school is named. (Jan is the Czech translation of Johannes.)

Kepler succeeded Brahe as court astronomer, and he formulated his laws on the motion of planets on the basis of Brahe's observations. A large statue of the two men stands on the side of the school. The figures look toward Hradčany Castle, the Czechoslovak seat of government, which is just a few blocks away.

In the school courtyard is a small, grassy plot with a path that forms a rectangle. That's the outline of the Brahe home, whose remains are buried below. The remains were discovered when this school, an example of the sturdy, Functionalist style of architecture, was under construction.

The building was completed in 1932. Today, the soot-colored facade is peeling, some of the basement windows are broken and the plumbing and steam heating system are in critical need of replacement. Ružička says virtually everything needs to be fixed. The major renovation will come when the school can move into an adjoining building that is being renovated now.

After decades of neglect, the school's - and the country's - whole approach to education also needs major work. The end of Communist rule last fall enabled the new democratic government to start reforms that promise to be a complete overhaul of the school system. But it appears that project, now under way, won't be as easy as putting in new pipes and windows.

The 42-year-old Ružička, who started his new job in July, says society is still a bit "saturated" with the thinking of the Communist era, when an education didn't mean much: "Intellectual" was a dirty word. For getting into school or for getting ahead, who you knew and who your parents were was more important than what you knew. University graduates made less money than uneducated people. And teaching often was a job of last resort.

"I hope today we're going in the direction where education will have its place in this society," Ružička told me. "But right now, I think students don't grasp that. Right now they think we're a coercive institution, that we're forcing them to learn. It's not only a battle with administration, the effort to convince someone about something, but it's also a battle with teachers, with students to get them to view education as vitally important. Without this we can't get anywhere."

Ružička has taken on the task of coping with the legacy of a Communist government that, among other crippling policies, abolished the gymnasium's primary mission - preparing young people for college.

School and government officials have been working for months to

change that. Over the spring and summer, educators contributed suggestions to the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Physical Education for new teaching plans for gymnasias. The plans, which went into effect Sept. 1, list new required and elective subjects for the schools, and the number of hours each is to be taught. Curricula, outlines for how each subject is to be taught, so far have been completed only for first-year students.

A Czech Education Ministry brochure on a new School Law, which covers both the Czech and Slovak republics and went into effect on June 1, acknowledges that changes in education will be a task "demanding organizationally, economically and in its content" and calls for long-term cooperation with experts and the public.

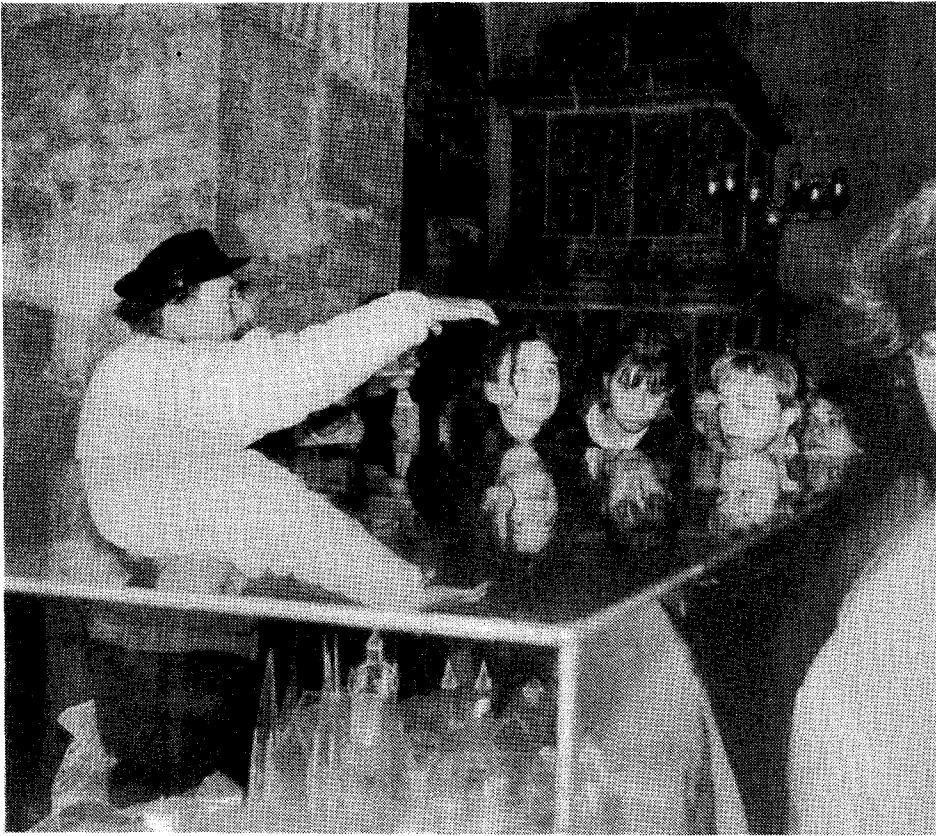
The brochure calls for a school system based on "the principles of patriotism, humanity and democracy." Such words in an official document still surprise me. They're a far cry from the days when such a document would preach love and respect for the Communist Party, the working class and the Soviet Union. It's important that change comes on this level, word by word, step by step. And it's coming on every level - from the content of textbooks to the hierarchy of the school system.

A proposed "Law on State Management and Self-Government of Education," covering elementary and secondary schools, is expected to be passed by Parliament soon. The law probably will call for overall supervision by agencies of the Czech and Slovak Ministries of Education (Each republic has its own ministry. There is no federal one.) and for some county involvement. Until now, schools and their employees have been controlled by the Ministry of the Interior. Schools also will become legally independent units, so they will be able to conduct activities such as entering into contracts.

The provisions of the School Law in effect since June include reducing mandatory education from 10 years to nine, and at the same time converting elementary schools from eight- to nine-year institutions. This is supposed to eliminate the inefficiency of having students who do not want to go on in their schooling spend two years in a secondary school. On the other hand, under this new system, students who continue on in their education will spend an extra year in school. Most secondary schools will remain four-year institutions. Eight-year gymnasias also are being created. Students enter such a gymnasium in the sixth grade.

The law also enables the creation of religious and private schools, and, in the interest of uninterrupted study, forbids student work "brigades" on school time as of Jan. 1, 1991. Until now, secondary-school students would spend two to three weeks at harvest time picking hops or potatoes, for pay, instead of attending school.

The law describes gymnasias as schools that offer a general, well-rounded education and prepare students for higher education. That



*Teacher Miloš Polák describes to students a model showing the growth of Hradčany Castle during a tour that is part of a "History of Prague" seminar offered at Jan Kepler Gymnasium. Polák says that because Prague families tend to spend weekends at their country homes, Prague children often know little about their city's treasures.*

has not been the case for at least a decade. Gymnasias just are beginning to recover from a forced period of acting the part of a "half-technical" type of school. The Communist government deemed a university education unimportant for the major part of the population. And it wanted to encourage people to contribute to the growth of industry. Gymnasium curricula therefore were changed to resemble those of secondary technical schools. Such schools prepare students for work directly after graduation, in technical or skilled fields such as agriculture, electronics, mining or construction.

Every gymnasium student had to major in a "technical subject." By their third and fourth years, students were spending a fifth of their time on those subjects, Ružička said.

"It got to the point where someone would be taking let's say electronics, and in the fourth year would be devoting six hours a week to it. And he knew he wasn't going to study that. He wanted

to study maybe medicine or he wanted to study English and German at the Faculty of Arts. And he had to go to this electronics class six hours a week, and learn it all and prepare for graduation in it."

University-bound students subjected to this type of "half-baked, half-technical school," as one administrator called it, were worse-prepared for higher education as a result. It also was discovered that even the gymnasium students who did want to get a job in the technical subjects they studied were ill-prepared for employment; certainly much less than those who attended a true technical school.

Karel Zdeněk, deputy director of the general education division of the Czech Ministry of Education, calls that failed policy "trying to chase two hares at the same time."

Even after officials figured out it wasn't working well, the hare chasing continued. "It was the political ruling of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, so it had to be done," Zdeněk said.

Mandatory technical subjects were one of the first things to be abolished after the Velvet Revolution. This year, gymnasias again offer a general, college-preparatory course of study for incoming freshmen. They can focus on one of three areas: general, humanities, or natural sciences. Students in their second, third or fourth years have slightly different options as they finish up courses of study predating reforms, but they too have more choices. Juniors and seniors for the first time have electives - courses of their own choosing that are included in their total hours of classes each week. At Jan Kepler Gymnasium, they can pick from subjects such as English and German conversation, art history, applied chemistry and biotechnology. There's even a seminar on the History of Prague, which features field trips to museums and Hradčany Castle. Right now the teaching plan allows a maximum of three electives (and that's for seniors), but officials say they hope that number will go up.

Gymnasias also are being "demilitarized." Military school recruitment has been stopped. Defense education also has been abolished, which means students no longer learn or practice skills such as putting on a gas mask. A third-year field trip, during which students worked on skills such as first aid, air-gun shooting and topography, has been replaced by "a week in nature" emphasizing sport and tourism.

Students also have a week-long field trip in their freshman year - a ski outing partially subsidized by the government. This comparative luxury is a carry-over from the Communist administration. It has been suggested to me that even the Communists - not known for their environmentalism - realized that children needed a break from the polluted air they breathe most of the time.

Another change is that students again can study art - it's required the first two years at gymnasia - and music, which were phased out during the "half-technical" era. Music is one of "non-mandatory," or free, subjects students can choose on top of their 30 hours of classes.

Not all schools, especially those in small towns with a small number of students and teachers, will be able to offer a wide variety of elective or free courses. But any flexibility is an improvement over the past.

It's too early to tell how well the reform is working. To someone like Ružička, who often would like the bureaucracy to move faster and for doors to open more quickly, the pace can get frustrating. But he remains committed. And between his administrative duties, he tries to visit classrooms and take part in field trips.

Ružička says he had no aspirations to become principal of the 600 students at Jan Kepler Gymnasium. But several things about the education system before last November bothered him and other educators. "So after November we got to work. As soon as we could we got to work, so we could remedy what we didn't like."

At various meetings and negotiations, Ružička represented a group of secondary school teachers aligned with Civic Forum. His Jan Kepler co-workers eventually approached him about the possibility of his becoming the principal. Every secondary school principal was being asked to resign, and an open application process for hiring his or her replacement followed.

"I thought it over for a long time," Ružička explained while sitting in an armchair in his office, where a collection of plants perks up the 1950s-era, standard-issue furnishings. "I liked going to class and being in contact with students. I didn't want to be an administrator."

But then even teachers from other schools began approaching him. He decided if he would be principal anywhere, he wanted to do it at the school he knew best.

"So I thought about why I wanted to teach. I wanted to teach because I wanted to give the children something. And I want to in some way influence them and give them a sense of direction. Well, so then I said to myself, if I'm principal I can give a sense of direction to the teachers too, so they give the children as much as possible and so this school would benefit the students as much as possible. That's how I did it in one class - now I can try to do it for the whole school."

A secretary sticks her head into Ružička's office to say the kitchen staff has noticed that Ružička hasn't been down to the cafeteria to lunch. The staff has offered to bring up lunch for him and his visitor.

We decide to go down to the cafeteria to get it. The friendly

woman serving us "segedin," a gravy with meat and sauerkraut served with dumplings, asks me how many dumplings I want. I say two. She offers three, saying it's how many the girls usually eat. The dumplings are made of a dough made of bread, flour, milk and eggs that's formed into loaves. The loaves - 3 to 4 inches in diameter - are boiled and cut into inch-thick slices. I ask the woman how many dumplings the boys eat. She says she's seen them put away up to 20.

Růžicka (he has four dumplings) and I eat our segedin, bus our floral-print trays and then take a mini-tour of the school. He proudly shows me a terrace that was opened after he became principal. Students and staff can come here for some air and sunshine. Flowers line the walls, and there still are some tomatoes growing. I'm pleasantly surprised at such initiative. It may seem like a simple idea, but unfortunately, this kind of human touch and personal investment still is rare in this country.

We visit the computer room, where the school has two IBM-compatible desktop computers for teaching programming. Růžicka looks forward to the day when each of the six students in a programming class can have his or her (although it's mostly his) computer to work on instead of waiting to take turns.

We peek into a language class watching a video about Australia. Czech gymnasium students must study two languages. Russian no longer has to be one of them, however. They can also study English, German or French (new this year).

Language teachers are in short supply. In smaller cities, some students started school this year without them. Jan Kepler Gymnasium was fortunate to find two young Canadian women, in Czechoslovakia to play professional basketball, to help teach English. Only one has teaching experience, but Czechoslovak schools are grateful to have access to native English speakers. Formerly, students of English often went for years without hearing it spoken by a native.

With the exception of language teachers, Růžicka says, Prague schools generally have had a good supply of teachers. They can afford to pick and choose. Overall, Růžicka says, he is satisfied with the quality of his teachers. He does not think any of them are hard-liners who will not be able to teach without a Communist twist. In general, Education Ministry officials and others say such secondary school teachers have left the profession.

Teachers - and I will write more about them next time - say they do not think they will have too much trouble learning to teach in new ways. Růžicka plans to work with his teachers on more creative, interactive methods of teaching. And this spring, many teachers attended special lectures organized by the Education Ministry for those needing to fill any gaps in their knowledge about subjects such as the work of dissident or emigre writers, or the history of World War II or the democratic First Republic.

One thing affecting the teachers' work is the lack of textbooks. That probably is the most dramatic and annoying problem in Czechoslovak schools right now. Most books tainted by the political and ideological distortions of the past have been thrown out. Those that contain usable material remain in use - teachers skip inaccurate parts and fill in parts left out. Some books have been donated by other countries, but they have tended to be old, and of course they are written in a foreign language.

A teacher of a senior civic education course that used to consist of Marxist-Leninist philosophy but now covers philosophy in general told me she doesn't have time for much more than giving the students a theoretical base of knowledge in philosophy. She'd like to give them the opportunity to read and think about a particular philosopher's writings. But she has to read those writings out loud as her students scramble to take notes, because there are no philosophy textbooks. She says that causes her "the greatest pain. They don't even have the opportunity to become lost in thought over something," the kind of reflection reading a book would allow.

The Education Ministry says some new textbooks should be available next year, but privately, people familiar with the publishing industry doubt that can be accomplished. The books have to be written and printed on outmoded printing presses. Paper is expensive and is to become even more so. And paper suppliers have threatened to charge hard currency for it.

Some magazines for young people have offered to print maps and other educational materials, either as part of the publications or as supplements. Jan Obdržálek, press spokesman for the Czech Education Ministry, credits "economic pressure" with that offer of help. Magazine management is afraid that as costs rise and publications have to raise prices in a worsening economy, people will stop buying them, he explains. And if that happens, the magazines probably would go out of business. Having some educational content would help them avoid such a fate.

Another interim measure is photocopying. Photocopy machines across the country are busy duplicating materials for teachers and students of every level, including universities. Jan Kepler Gymnasium received its new photocopy machine the week I was there.

New textbooks are among many changes students tell me they want. They also call for a less directive style of teaching. They say they want more of a two-way street rather than the teacher dictating information for memorization. This probably is a universal wish of high school students tired of sitting and listening to a teacher talk. But Czechoslovak students probably have more reason to be tired than most other students.

They also say they are unhappy about having to study subjects they don't care about. Part of this could be the "technical subject" major. But, like many high school students everywhere,



they don't like having to take subjects such as physics and chemistry. An excessively high workload is another complaint - too much information to memorize, too little comprehension as a result. And a class of seniors I talked to unanimously said it felt unprepared for going to a university. They blamed the teaching methods but also acknowledged that they had not cared about education so they probably were lazy as a result. Indeed, society did not give them much reason to care.

Růžička says the system of being force-fed information was in a way a comfortable arrangement. "If you don't have to decide about anything, then you don't have to be responsible either." It became a way of reacting to life in general. But, as he notes, students were the catalysts for the Velvet Revolution. Růžička ran into several current and former students during the demonstration last Nov. 17 that turned bloody and spelled the beginning of the end of Communist rule. He fled with them through a narrow alley formed by police, who beat people at random as they walked through. Neither Růžička nor his students were hurt, although he says police savagely beat a girl in front of him and another behind him.

With the support of teachers and administrators, Jan Kepler students joined in the subsequent, week-long strike led by university students. Prominent actors and activists visited the school, which was featured in Czech and foreign media. Jan Kepler students and professors also traveled outside of Prague to deliver accurate information to other communities.

Such students have minds of their own, Růžička said. He likes to think good teachers have something to do with that. But he acknowledges that 40 years of "comfortable" conformity have left their mark.

As I leafed through the Jan Kepler Gymnasium student magazine, an interview with Ruzicka caught my eye. He was recalling a conversation he had with an art teacher as she put up the results of her students' first try at painting with watercolors.

"I liked some of the pictures, and I told her so," Růžička said. "And the teacher said, 'The poor things. They keep asking whether they can use this color, whether next to that color they can put another one, whether they can. ...'"

"Why not! Why not see how pink looks next to green, why not try that, which we're not used to, why should everyone always repeat something and confirm truths that have been confirmed a hundred times?"

Why indeed.

All the best,

Dagmar



**TEACHING PLAN FOR FOUR-YEAR GYMNASIA, BY AREA OF STUDY**  
**Effective Sept. 1, 1990, for incoming freshmen**

		HUMANITIES_NATURAL SCIENCES__GENERAL											
SUBJECT	Year:	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Hours per week													
Czech language and literature		4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Foreign language		3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Foreign language		4	4	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3
Latin		-	-	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Civics		-	2	2	2	-	1	2	2	-	-	2	2
History		2	2	2	2	2	2	2	-	2	2	2	-
Geography		2	2	2	-	2	2	-	2	-	2	2	2
Mathematics		3	3	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	3
Physics		2	2	2	2	3	3	4	2	3	3	2	2
Chemistry		2	2	2	-	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	2
Biology		2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	2
Computer technology (Introduction)		2	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
Art		2	2	-	-	2	2	-	-	2	2	-	-
Physical education*		2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Elective		-	-	2	2	-	-	2	2	-	2	2	2
Elective		-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2	-	-	2	2
Elective		-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2

(Weekly total of hours = 30)

\* Schools have a problem finding adequate gymnasium space. If they can secure adequate facilities they are to raise the hours in this subject to 3, which would raise the weekly total of teaching hours to 31.

Source: Ministry of Education, Youth and Physical Education, Czech Republic

The following are excerpts from essays on "The Quality of Education in Czechoslovakia and How It Should Be Improved," written by a class of students of English at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague. I include their opinions here because most of them are just out of high school, so their memories of gymnasias are fresh:

---

"... Our education still is based on memory. If you have good memory you usually are among the best students. When you take your examinations, teachers want to hear your passive knowledge in many cases, not its practical application. ... On the other hand, there are a lot of lazy students who prefer memorization without using their own brain.

"... Students have little choice of subjects. This means they have many redundant, compulsory subjects. Let's imagine I am a student of a gymnasium. I want to study at a university and become a teacher of Czech language and literature. I do very well in these subjects and in subjects close to them (other languages, history), but I haven't time enough to increase my knowledge, to read books, etc. I must sit at home like a madman and learn subjects such as math, chemistry and physics, not to be marked an ordinary pupil. I understand I should know what H<sub>2</sub>O is, but what about cyklohektanoperhydrofenantren?" ...  
-Eva Cífková, 21

---

"There are many problems with education in our country. The basic one, I think, is lack of money. But if we take away all the aspects that concern this - I mean the technical facilities for schools (computers, TV, video) we need, especially for languages, salaries for teachers, etc., we must say that education of children depends very much on how they are taught. ... I appreciate, for example, the American style of teaching - discussions with teachers, calling them by their names, the effort toward friendship and democracy. And teachers must be real professionals so they have real authority. What's more, they want students to have their own opinions, to persuade them with discussion, not with definition. I'm sure your system of education tries not only to educate people but also to teach them to think. This is the big difference between your system of education and ours."

"What to do with it? It's not that easy. Everything depends on people, on new teachers. We have to improve the education of future teachers, to teach them to be democratic - mainly in their relationship with students. They should be not only good pedagogues, but specialists too, so they can inspire children in their subject."  
-Simona Hadašová, 18

---

"In 1986, when I started to study in Czechoslovakia in a high school in Prague, the reform had the task of preparing students not only for studying at a university, but also to prepare for work those who would not go on in their education. Students had more technical subjects, and fewer humanities courses. But these professional subjects were not professional enough to prepare them to start working immediately after graduation. And those who wanted to study at the universities were not prepared enough for future education. I can see it now from my own experience in subjects such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, political science, communication and many others. I have to start from the very beginning. And it's very hard. ...

"...Czechoslovak education today may be on its way to reaching real quality. Time will tell. It'll take a lot of good will, patience, practice and learning - not only by students, but also by professors."

-Marina Culic (Yugoslavian origin), 18

Received in Hanover 11/20/90