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GENERATION '68/'89

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*"Your rose-colored glasses have fallen off.
They were already broken anyway."**

Dear Peter and friends:

Getting to know Czechoslovakia is like getting to know a person who's slow to trust and open up. You have the feeling this person has been through a great deal, but only little by little do you begin to find out exactly what.

Just from my daily contacts with people, I can't help but see that they remain very much affected by the Communist past. They talk about it a lot. They use it as an excuse for various personal shortcomings as well as their societal problems. I wonder exactly what kind of damage has been done their psyches. I wonder how long it will take them to recover.

One major legacy of the socialist decades is people's lack of self-confidence -- even the lack of a proper sense of self. This problem is affecting the development of democracy here. I think how well and how quickly people cope with it will be the key to Czechoslovakia's future.

This damage to the self touches several generations. Even teenagers tell me they carry some warped notions of "collectivization" within themselves. They don't know whether they can exorcise them. They have hopes and plans for the future but are not sure they can pull them off.

Of course, we'll never know exactly what kind of damage has been done.

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

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.

*"We're playing at love
 We're playing at being people
 We're monitoring attendance
 There's no time for feelings
 There's no time for holidays
 There's no time for you
 Time is spent
 Only on arguments
 We're losing any idea
 of where this is leading us
 Maybe it appeals to you
 Well, it doesn't to me."**

And every person, and his or her ability and to cope, is different. It's easy to generalize about what "they" feel and how "they" think. (In fact, "they" do it all the time.) I think the best way to learn about this is to talk to individuals and treat each person's words as an independent example.

But overviews can be helpful, so I consulted a recent study by the Institute of Sociology at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague. The study, "From Apathy to Revolutionary Spirit: Selected Problems of the Social Development of Czechoslovak Youth," shows that life under the socialist regime altered relationships within the family, giving the family unit a great deal of political and moral power and importance.

The family didn't escape unscathed, however. It had to bend and yield to survive, and it became weakened by the pressure of surviving under socialism. And Czechoslovakia's new democracy is further testing its resilience. The transition to a market economy has brought unemployment, higher prices and uncertainty about the future, problems that eat away at people's confidence and strain their relationships. Psychologists report major increases in patient visits since the 1989 revolution.

The youth study examines the phenomenon I have dubbed Generation '68/'89 -- today's young adults and their parents. Several interesting comparisons can be made between the two groups: The young adults were born in or around 1969 and lived for two decades under Soviet occupation, under a repressive socialist government. In 1989 they were able to mobilize and lead the revolution to end socialist rule. Today, they have hope for a fresh start.

Their parents too spent 20 years under socialist rule, then thought they had a fresh start. That was in 1968, when they were the age their children are today. Their hopes, however, were dashed with the Soviet invasion. Czechoslovak society then entered a dark period of "normalization." It's unclear how much hope the parents have left for their own futures now. However, many of them did manage to pass on their democratic ideas and independent thoughts from '68 to their children, according to the study.

The children of those people lived a sort of "double life." Their parents taught them that the political system they lived under was corrupt. They taught them that schoolbooks and the media were full of lies. But they also taught them to keep this information to themselves. To cope with such painful disparities, the parents and children withdrew into their private lives, the study says. They isolated themselves from the society at large, focusing on family and close friends, doing work around the house and spending weekends gardening and relaxing at their country cottages.

"In the '70s and '80s, the family served an exceptionally important function -- a place of transfer of many general ideas, values and norms that were restored for a short period of time and around the year 1968 but then were destroyed again by the development of a 'normalization' policy and practice of 'real socialism,'" the study says.

Young people were estranged from "work and power," according to the study, written by Academy sociologists Hana Navarová and Aleš Kabátek. Expectations connected to one's job were not met in the 1970s and '80s, the authors say. There was little satisfaction from work results and work relationships. Innovation and performance were not rewarded. There was little reason to be interested in management positions if one was not a Communist Party member or sympathizer.

Young people saw little chance of material success from their jobs. Instead, they sought help from their parents, the "shadow" or "second" economy (sometimes legal but more often illegal ways of making money and enjoying material success), got work abroad or emigrated.

By the end of the '80s young people turned away from one of the main themes of socialism -- that of the leading role of the working class, the study says. "More than half of the young people (including young workers) were convinced that workers had not been the stratum of society that was or ever would be its leading force."

Young people also turned away from social and political activism. There was a brief period, after Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power, when young people believed in a renaissance of social involvement -- more than half, according to data from 1987. But the slow development of perestroika in the Soviet Union and its "cosmetic" version of it in Czechoslovakia put an end in many to the belief that socialism could be reformed, the study says.

Young people did become involved in unofficial social events and organizations. They expressed their disillusionment with the "system" through music and theater, which -- despite censorship, harassment and bans -- the authorities could not completely eliminate.

*"Just glass walls, silence like a scream
 Otherwise no changes, everything is just habit
 We can be sure it's bad. ...
 So we keep riding with expired tickets
 We've come to realize that we know nothing
 Maybe we dreamed it
 Who knows."**

When it came time for the revolution in November 1989, the students were joined in the streets by their parents -- the "youth" from 1968. This confirmed that parents had passed on "prohibited" values and ideals, Navarová and Kabátek say, while paralyzing "the false ideology spread by educational, cultural, political and other official institutions and organizations."


The authors hold out hope that today's young adults can respond to political changes without being shackled to the past. But they note that, "We cannot assume that they were unaffected by the totalitarian restructuring climate of the '80s, when they were adolescents." They also wonder about the parents, who are more "materially and spiritually impoverished." Will they feel their lives have been wasted, that it's too late for them to change or prosper?

Both generations will feel stress related to changes in the economy, which also will begin to alter their relationships, the study says. "The family has been and will continue to be preoccupied mostly with its material problems. This has an impact on many other areas, such as child rearing and internal family relations."

The authors predict that Czechoslovakia's housing shortage will become even more acute under a market economy. Currently, only a fifth of young newlyweds start their married lives in their own homes, it says. As prices rise, even fewer of them will be able to afford housing. And aid from parents and grandparents may dwindle. About 40 percent of young families now enjoy this kind of help, the study says.

The parents will face unfamiliar phenomena including more demanding criteria for work performance, competition, unemployment, and the need for retraining, the study says. And people who start their own businesses will have to make the various self-sacrifices that such new investments require.

I'll continue getting to know my troubled friend. Sometimes the best friendships are the ones that take time.

All the best, 

* Excerpts, loosely translated by me, from songs by the Czech rock group Hudba Praha (Music Prague), which began in the early 1980s as the punk/new wave-influenced band Jasná Páka. The name change came after Jasná Páka was banned from playing in public.