

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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

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MISS MANNERS, WHERE ARE YOU?

Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 W. Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter and friends:

"I've claimed several times in the past that a society is a complicated and mysterious creature, and that it's extremely careless to always believe the face it's showing at a given moment. And even more so, to consider it the only one and the right one.

October 1918 transpired similarly to November 17, 1989. In 1968 we peacefully defied the Soviet occupation. From time to time, during such extreme historic moments, our society is able to mobilize in itself a kind of tradition of humanity, tolerance, decency. But that is only one of the potential things slumbering inside it. Even if the envy and suspicion and attacks and putting one's personal interests first frustrates and annoys us, it's a phase we must go through. One upheaval in a key historical moment, when everything is at stake and people are capable of being united, does not in one day remove a 40-year act of destruction."

-Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel, speaking about his country in Mladý Svět magazine, May 1990. My translation.

Spring has brought a lot of visitors from home, and it's been interesting to see their reactions to today's Prague. I never tire of showing the magical, mystical side of this unique city. I point out the centuries-old art and architecture and proudly lead people along the narrow, cobblestoned streets. I'm equally pleased to point out the signs of post-Communist change: the first private shops, well-stocked and clean; a privately owned

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

restaurant, featuring a healthy menu and a helpful staff; a wide selection of foreign books and newspapers for sale.

The visitors leave enchanted, contented. I've been wondering though whether I'm not being a good-enough tour guide, because unfortunately, this picture of Prague is a bit of a distortion. Maybe I should send the next visitors to one of the bare-shelved, state-owned food stores. Maybe I should introduce them to the state service sector by assigning them the task of finding a shirt in a certain size and color, taking a taxi, or trying to get information over the phone.

Some of these unpleasantries are understandable, as President Havel mentions above. But one thing disturbs me deeply, especially because it continues to occur with such intensity and frequency: People treat other people, especially those perceived as weaker, quite badly. I'm not even talking about cheating and theft. I know crime goes up during uncertain, volatile times. I'm talking about just plain abuse of one's fellow citizens, ranging from passive-aggressive behavior to rage. And from what I see and what others tell me, people's dark sides seem to just be growing darker and darker.

I could understand people being angry at the system, at those in charge. But I cannot make excuses for meanness seemingly just for the sake of it. This is even more of a letdown given the reputation Czechs (I'll contain my criticism to them, because I haven't spent much time in Slovakia yet) have of being cultured, civilized people. During the demonstrations in November 1989, foreign journalists enthusiastically wrote about "The Polite Revolution" -- how people here didn't forget their manners even in crowds of thousands of people.

I know things won't change overnight. I never deluded myself that people would continue to be as good to one another as they were during the euphoric days in late '89. I know that for 40-plus years people felt powerless, that human relations grew warped. People turned on one another. But it seems chilling that even today, when there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel, the bulk of people's energies continue to be focused on this kind of destructive behavior. Does the past justify an office clerk yelling at an elderly person who doesn't move along in line fast enough? Does it justify cab drivers ignoring a Czech frantically trying to find a ride for his critically ill mother because they're waiting for a more lucrative fare, i.e., a foreigner who won't know the difference when they leave the meter off and charge twice as much as they should?

Those on the receiving end of the psychological blows have grown resigned and passive over time. Their manner tends to be meek, even apologetic. ("Don't be angry but would it be possible for you to get me another size?" "Excuse me, could I please pay you for this item?") They tell me they are used to this way of life. They try to make jokes about it. But I see them get hurt, disappointed and frustrated over and over again. The needless

negativity they encounter all too often is one reason they come home exhausted at the end of the day.

Of course, even if one does gather the strength to fight back, for the most part there still is nowhere to turn. No one cares; no one is accountable. A state-owned business doesn't care if it has your patronage. I never see any eagle-eyed manager making sure the help is helpful. No one jumps to answer phones; there's no sense of urgency; work is fitted in around coffee breaks and personal shopping outings. Yes, things are changing. Yes, eventually inept people will be out of work. But for now, they seem to feel no sense of fear about that. Or if they do, they take that fear out on the rest of us.

Some recent examples: A Czech friend was buying fresh mushrooms from a street vendor. The price was 60 crowns a kilo. The scale showed exactly a quarter kilo, but the clerk asked for 16 crowns. My friend told her it wasn't a matter of the extra crown, but noted that the scale clearly showed a quarter kilo. "Well, 15.20 then," the clerk snapped. The friend paid the money. He'd stood in line; he needed the mushrooms. He spent the rest of the day regretting that he didn't tell her that he'd buy his mushrooms elsewhere.

I also had a shopping adventure a few weeks ago. I wanted to buy a bunch of tiny white blossoms tied together with a string from an elderly woman in an outdoor market. I was excited -- I remembered that these flowers were symbolic of the coming of spring. I'd forgotten their name though. When I reached the head of the line and was paying for the flowers, I asked the woman what they were called. She ignored the question and began shouting the price. "I know the price," I told her calmly. "I just wanted to know the name of the flower." She repeated the price a few more times and then yelled the name of the flower, saying that of course everyone knows it. I took the flowers and left, even though I didn't want them anymore.

Another time, I walked into a cafe to try to get a table for four people. There were only two tables for two available, but I noticed a woman sitting alone at a table for four. I went up and asked her whether she'd be kind enough to switch tables for us. (This is in a country where seating arrangements are informal -- and you often are joined at your table by strangers who will ask if they can sit in your empty seats). At that moment the waitress flew into the room and began shouting at me, saying how dare I approach her customer, that that's her job, and that I have some nerve coming in with my coat on (I hadn't taken it off and hung it up because I of course wasn't sure I was staying). The poor woman who'd agreed to move to another table tried to tell the waitress there was no problem, but she would have none of it. She angrily moved the customer's coffee to a table for two while continuing to berate me. She was so rude that I was too appalled to argue with her. I walked out, telling her I would never come back. "Fine, I don't care," was her response.

(I should have gone through the motions of asking for the manager or at least written down this waitress' name. I of course thought of several swell courses of action, afterwards.)

Such experiences do leave their mark. A prominent Czech cameraman who works with film director Milos Forman and has lived both here and in the United States was asked in the press to compare the international film festival in Karlovy Vary (a Bohemian spa town also known as Karlsbad) with others he's attended. What he remembered most was not the films or the charming town but the way one festival hostess treated a visiting director. The cameraman had asked the hostess, whose job it was to welcome the guests, for a cup of coffee for the director, who'd just flown in. The woman said that wasn't possible. The cameraman explained that the traveler was tired. "Well, I'm tired too," the young woman replied. The cameraman's niece, who lives in Germany, then ran off to look for coffee. She came back with some about two minutes later.

A Czech newspaper columnist recounted an incident in which a young woman aboard a crowded bus got her purse stuck in the door. The driver stopped halfway to the next stop. He got out and manually opened the door. "The young woman gratefully smiled," the journalist wrote. "But the driver grabbed the bag, ripped it from the woman and put it far away on the sidewalk. 'Well, get out,' he said to her. 'Me, but why?' she gently protested. 'Are you getting out of not? You're holding everybody up!'" The young woman was left standing on the sidewalk as the driver got back in and drove off.

"From the pit of my stomach a feeling of shame spread throughout my body," the columnist wrote. He noted that the young woman probably had her mood ruined for a while, and she got home a little late. But the driver had to be "sad and hopeless" to behave the way he did. The author thinks of similar incidents he's experienced: "... Suppressed bitterness, internal stress overflows and a person hurts others so he doesn't hurt himself. It would be an interesting subject of study for a psychologist, if rudeness, disrespect and unwillingness were not the norm of behavior in Czechoslovakia."

The writer wants to stop the film and rewrite the screenplay. The driver would open the door, with a smile hand the purse back to the young woman and say something about her beautiful eyes. End of incident, end of stress. But unfortunately, for now, such happy endings occur mostly in writers' imaginations.

I think it all comes down to a lack of self-respect and respect for others. Developing both is the key to Czechoslovakia becoming a truly healthy, civilized country. Otherwise, all reforms will be mere window dressing.

All the best,

Dagmar 

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