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A FEW THOUGHTS ON WOMEN ... AND MEN

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Dear Peter and friends:

During a recent lecture I attended, the rumpled art historian had just finished saying "the sons of the Czech nation" were buried in Prague's Vyšehrad cemetery when a female voice behind me added, just loud enough for me to hear, "and daughters."

It took a moment for my startled brain to register the comment, then a smile spread wide across my face. It was a happy moment, a little ray of hope when I was feeling frustrated and confused in my quest to figure out what it means to be female in this society.

The quest started as soon as I arrived here. One of the most vivid memories I have from those first days in June 1990 is from a party. One of the guests was a famous Czech journalist I'd met in the United States. He was there with his wife, an equally famous Czech actress. I was awestruck at how she doted on him, jumping up to get him food and repeatedly asking him whether he needed anything. This was an otherwise "modern" couple, two attractive, well-to-do professionals, both my age.

No, this was not America, where my friends were couples who shared tasks without worrying who was "supposed" to do what. But what were the differences between the two worlds? Are the women here subservient, the men boorish? Living here, and often being mistaken for a "real" Czech woman, I'd say in general the answer is no. And in general, women are not subjected to the insidious discrimination and sexism American women have been struggling with for decades. There are problems, though, some with far-reaching consequences.

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The initial conclusion most feminist-thinking Western women make about this society is something like sexist, paternalistic, with traditional gender roles.

It's not that simple. I see women doing the shopping, taking care of the kids, cooking the meals, cleaning house. But I also see women going to work every day, often to demanding jobs with important professional and social networks. I see women in effect in charge of households. I see women with the luxury of staying home with their children for years, thanks to an extremely liberal maternity-leave policy. I see women's fatigue and stress, but also their strength and good humor.

As for men, I see them wheeling baby carriages around. They can take paternity leave if they want, and some do. The men I know seem to have no problem having women as business partners or bosses. As I write this, a man is washing the windows in the apartment house across the street.

So it isn't that simple. As I will try to explain below, this isn't the land of white men in suits wielding all the power, a place where housewives are waiting to rise up and wage a battle of the sexes. There is a different set of variables here. Both women and men were oppressed by a system that forced them into roles that are different from what we know in the West.

But at least in the economic sphere, there are clear inequities between women and men. Some thanks to the culture, most products of the socialist past. For every story of a woman not being afraid to ask for equal pay for equal work, as the law provides, I hear several stories of women too afraid to ask. Or worse, thinking they don't have the right to ask. Men make more money because it's expected they'll need it for their family. Even if they happen to be single and childless.

I will look into the economic aspects of this issue in greater detail next time. They are the most tangible. There are some statistics to work with. And economic factors are ones people here respond to the most readily, regardless of their feelings about feminism.

One fact should not be taken lightly: Feminism is a dirty word in Czechoslovakia. (To a much greater degree than in, for example, the increasingly feminism-paranoid United States.) Most women and men here perceive the term as pejorative at best. They will tell you feminists are hysterical, extremist, frustrated man-haters. Rational discussions about feminism are not easy.

When I asked a group of college students what they thought about feminism, I was startled by one woman's reaction. Usually shy and quiet, this 19-year-old instantly turned red and nearly burst into angry tears. She then launched into an attack on the Western feminists who'd come to her university. She said she resents their lecturing to Czech women about how wretched their lives are.

Czechoslovaks also will tell you they are allergic to movements of any kind, thanks to decades of forced mass-participation activities under socialism. And the association they usually make when they hear "women's group" is the former Czechoslovak Union of Women, a Communist Party mouthpiece. For two decades, its chairwoman was a fixture on the Party's Central Committee. And her successor is best remembered for her praise of the police beating of students during the Nov. 17, 1989, demonstration in Prague.

Even supporters of feminism hesitate to separate women's issues from men's. One female lawyer told me she thinks of feminism as "an effort to assert oneself at the expense of men."

But even if women don't want to discuss "feminism," they are starting to focus on women's issues. Women are being hit hard by the country's economic transformation. There's talk of the "feminization of poverty." More women than men are losing their jobs, and they have a harder time than men finding new ones. They are starting to form small, informal groups to help with issues such as single parenthood, business skills and employment retraining.

In the press, the typical reaction to American feminism is scorn and dismissal. WE don't need this, the writers -- usually women -- will say proudly. We're just fine the way we are, thank you.

In fact, women here will tell you that they're "too emancipated," thanks to Communism.

"Emancipation was making people conform to a model that was determined ahead of time," says sociologist Jiřina Siklová. This energetic woman, known for her outspokenness and dissident past,* houses the first gender studies program in the country in her living room. It's affiliated with Charles University in Prague but lacks classroom space. Thanks to a Western grant, her large apartment houses a reference library with important feminist literature and serves as a sort of salon for women's gatherings. Most of the women who come in are Westerners, but Siklová hopes that will change.

(*Siklová, 56, spent a year -- "only a year," she says -- in prison for helping smuggle truckloads of dissident literature in and out of the country in the 1970s. She counts some of the country's top politicians among her friends, including Czech Prime Minister Petr Pithart. He's coming over for strudel that Friday, she confirms as we look through her datebook.)

"I believe that our women are more emancipated than women in the West," she says. But she calls it "emancipation against our will," so that it isn't perceived as real.

Because socialism needed a large workforce in the 1950s, everyone worked. Women without jobs were considered "parasites." State day

care, run by "professionals," was promoted as the ideal, modern way to raise children. When the need for workers was not as great later, maternity leaves were lengthened to balance things out, Šiklová says.

Women were not pampered under socialism. "The "peak of emancipation was a woman riding around on a tractor or combine, just like a man," Šiklová says.

The price was lots of health problems. "We had female combine operators, crane operators, miners, tractor drivers -- we sang songs about it," she says. "Those women were actually test rabbits. That period ended, and those women now don't realize what they are, just like no one here realizes what they are."

Besides ideological reasons for working, there were economic ones. It was difficult to make ends meet with one paycheck. It still is. More than 90 percent of working-age women hold jobs outside the home, according to the federal Department of Labor. They make up 47 percent of the workforce.

Most of those jobs are not great. And very few women are in high management. But a paycheck and an identity outside the home have had an effect.

"When I'm asked what socialism gave to women, I say, probably what World War I gave them," Šiklová says. "Women, when men went to war, realized that they knew how to plow, sow, harvest the crops, take care of the children. Socialism did the same with women. It's absolutely ingrained in them, but at the same time they say, 'Leave us alone, we don't want it, we're not interested in it, we'd be happy if we could stay home and cut the lawn, dress up, put on makeup.'

"That's the discrepancy that I think Western feminists don't comprehend. They stay on the verbal level, and our women on that level say, 'Get out of here with that, we're not interested. We already had that here.' But in reality our women will realize how deeply emancipated they are only at the moment" when they lose their jobs and economic times are hard. "Only then will they realize how it bothers them that they don't have their own salary, for example, or they're dependent on the men. Today they state it as a wonderful thing."

I personally don't think "emancipation" is only economics-related. But Šiklová places no importance on things such as a Czech woman automatically jumping up to get the salt if her man doesn't find it on the table. She thinks American women make themselves feel good and try to prove their emancipation with "silly things" like not getting that salt. ...

Even if feminism will never succeed here under that name, people -- often men -- are beginning to urge that it be at least studied.



JDÁ NA TU TISKOVKU O NEPOVĚDNOSTI ŽEN. . .

"I'm here for the press conference on the inequality of women..."

Popular political cartoonist Vladimír Jiránek has a knack for capturing the essence of Czech people with a few strokes of his pen. I think there are several messages in this cartoon. Notice especially how he sees the male journalist.

The latest issue of the literary journal "Iniciály" is devoted to feminism. Its forward says that "if somewhere in Bohemia feminism happens to become a topic of discussion, common reactions include sneers and trivializing jokes, which often radiate absolute ignorance." Even people who try to be open-minded manifest at least "doubts, disbelief or suspicion."

The journal includes translations of highlights of feminist thought by famous names such as Kate Millet, Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan.

Even those sympathetic to feminism's goals will say that in the past, Czechoslovaks didn't have the opportunity to think about women's rights. How could they, when they had no rights for anybody? When it was illegal to even discuss, never mind work for, human rights? Šiklová ponders this too, and then says that of course women's rights really is part of human rights. Not some kind of next step.

Then there are those who say, "What about the men?" Philosopher Hana Havelková, who works at the European Centre for Human Rights

Education in Prague and specializes in women's issues, stresses that "the system oppressed everyone." In fact, she says, "most of the time men had it much worse than women."

Men were very emasculated by the Communist system, she and others tell me. Because of this, a woman didn't mind her husband throwing a little bit of his weight around at home, thinking, "I support my husband in his patriarchy because it's the only bit of dignity he has left."

Women point out that while they stood in line for food, their husbands were hunting for auto parts or building supplies. Goods and services were expensive and scarce to non-existent. Men were jacks-of-all-trades, spending evenings and weekends doing chores such as home improvements and car repairs.

That era is ending. Goods and services are more widely available, and men don't get sand kicked in their face by the Communists anymore (most of the time, anyway).

What now? Many young people still follow the Communism-era pattern of marrying young and having children early. In the past, such unions were formed when young couples had very bleak options for the future. Both partners often wound up feeling trapped. The young men escaped to their hobbies, outside chores and friends, while the women stayed home with the children. Often, women found maternity leave to be more like a prison sentence. They couldn't wait to go back to work, any kind of work.

But today, many young people plan advanced studies, travel, work abroad, real careers. When someone like Jiří Remr, a 19-year-old sociology student at Charles University in Prague and the only male in my English class last semester, foolhardily suggested that "women should do the household and men earn money," he was quickly put in his place by his female classmates. They couldn't imagine not working. One did say women are responsible for child care. "Because I am a woman, I have to take care of the children. Motherhood -- the woman always has to do more than the man."

Another young woman said she hopes her husband would cook "because I cannot cook, absolutely. The other things I think we should divide equally."

A 19-year-old journalism student told me she wants children, but later. She wants to work in television. She doesn't plan on any rigid role separation in her home. "I want a husband who wouldn't find it hard to pick up that vacuum and help me vacuum, and if I don't come home, to make dinner."

Not just college students have this point of view. I've seen such teamwork among all kinds of young couples.

All of the female college students I've spoken to plan to work after graduation. They don't think they'll have any problems getting the jobs they want. Whether reality proves them wrong

isn't certain. Will the advent of a market economy mean women will have to go through all the growing pains we went through in the United States? Some people say women here are in the same position U.S. women were in the pre-feminist 1960s. I hope not. So far, I have seen lots of young women hitting the ground running, not afraid to ask for what they want, such as raises and promotions.

Other women, though, are struggling. For years they kept quiet, accepting the rules. A friend of mine, in her mid-30s, recalled that when she was hired for her first journalism job, she received the minimum starting salary. A young man starting with her received more. When she asked why, she was told he needed it for his family. He didn't have one, while my friend already did. She didn't say or do anything more. She didn't want to make trouble.

Today, this woman is the editor of a successful home decorating magazine. She says she knows the male editor of a similar magazine is making more than she is, but she still doesn't feel comfortable speaking up.

She thinks women like her have it worse today than under socialism. "They're exhausted," she said. Before, she could never hope to be editor of anything. She wasn't politically correct. Now she's twice as busy. But when she thinks about it, she admits it isn't all bad. Sometimes, when she does particularly great work, she feels proud.

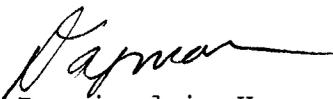
She says women like her can hold high-powered meetings and publish magazines, but then they have to pick up the kids after school, do the shopping and cook dinner.

Her situation is considered better than average. She does all the cooking, but her long-time boyfriend, who lives with her and her two boys, helps with the cleaning and the kids. He says lots of men, particularly those of his father's generation, haven't made the transition to helping at home. They are the ones packing the pubs after work. They arrive home just in time for dinner. And they expect a hot meal on the table, no matter what their spouse had going on that day.

This is something couples will have to work out for themselves. But now they can determine how they want to live, without the inadequacies and destructive forces of socialism hampering their lives.

Women need time to figure out "who they really are," Šiklová says. "They need to become acquainted with what it means to be a woman."

All the best,



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