

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE UNKNOWN

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Dear Peter and friends:

For most Americans, this time of year is an opportunity to evaluate our accomplishments and make plans for new ones. Our frenzy of holiday card scribbling and gift buying is followed by a period of calm, even relief that the year is over. Nothing more can be packed into it. We vow to do better starting Jan. 1. We make New Year's resolutions. We buy new datebooks, the pages blank and full of promise.

Czechoslovaks view the blank pages more with apprehension than hope. For them, the end of 1989 meant the end of a year of testing the post-Communist waters. Like it or not, the country was going to have to take the plunge into the unknown come Jan. 1, 1991. Major changes would include the end of most price controls and the beginning of having to have hard currency for deals with Czechoslovakia's major and now unstable trade partner, the Soviet Union.

People tried to prepare for the unknown by grabbing as much as they could from the system they knew. They began withdrawing their savings from banks and spending their money. Many store shelves were empty weeks before Christmas. One newspaper photo showed two clerks in the carpet department of a store leaning on the counter and chatting -- not an unusual sight, but this time they were somewhat justified because they had nothing to sell.

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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.

Those who didn't think to stock up on hosiery during the fall found "No socks" signs in clothing stores. And an egg shortage (apparently because too many were exported) caused a minor panic in the land where baking of cukroví, special holiday cookies, is synonymous with Christmas. Most people did manage to get eggs though, and once again neighbors could try to outdo one another in terms of quantity and number of varieties baked. For those of you not familiar with cukroví, each is a miniature work of art. The cookies are made of rich, buttery dough, usually either vanilla or chocolate flavored. They are decorated with coconut, almonds or walnuts. Shapes range from crescents to birds to circles made into sandwiches filled with jam.

There was plenty of carp -- the traditional Christmas fish -- to go around. The week before Christmas, large, water-filled barrels were stationed on sidewalks outside of meat stores, and butchers in bloody aprons scooped out the plump fish with nets. People lined up in the snow to buy a live carp (I have childhood memories of the Christmas carp swimming in our bathtub) or had one killed and cut up on the spot.

So while Soviets collected food donations and Albanians fled to freedom, Czechoslovaks had a relatively calm Christmas season. Talk around dinner tables did center on the unknown though -- what would come after Jan. 1?

I traveled to Bonn over the holidays to visit a friend. I was eager to find out how the former East Germans were coping, and how their experience compared with the Czechoslovaks.

On the train I met a West German opera producer who lived in a small town not too far from the Czech border. He was returning from a visit to longtime friends in Prague. He had taken them 50 eggs as a Christmas gift.

We began talking about the German unification. The opera producer recalled that when East Germans gained the right to travel freely, West Germans were asked to provide housing for the new tourists. He and his wife agreed and soon played host to an East German family. The man told me with some embarrassment that even though they have a nine-room house it's certainly no mansion and hard to keep clean with three dogs around. When the East German family came in, they walked through the house as if it were a museum.

They treasured each thing offered to them. "I have never seen anyone peel a banana or orange that way," slowly and precisely, each orange section examined and savored, the man recalled.

At one point, the young son looked out the window at the shiny cars driving by and said, "This is freedom."

"To him, shiny cars meant freedom," my new friend mused. We sat in awkward silence for a while, realizing that although he and these people were Germans, they were from different worlds. We

looked out the window at the wintry landscape. At the border, he jumped up. He pointed out the former checkpoints and the dead lake, which had been electrified to discourage people from trying to swim across to the West. He said he and his wife toured the area when the borders were opened, classical music blaring from their car windows in celebration.

I arrived in Bonn at midnight. I didn't get my first real look at my friend's airy, new apartment until the morning. I began walking through it, enjoying the large windows, white walls and clean, contemporary design. A CD player. A dishwasher. A reunion with objects that used to be familiar, things I used to take for granted. I suddenly stopped and remembered the East German family. I realized I probably was feeling a bit like them. Wistfulness and embarrassment that I was one of the "have nots."

I felt a second wave of embarrassment over being affected so much by material things -- or the lack of them. But looking back, I don't think it was the material factor that made me feel strange. I had been affected more than I'd realized by being surrounded by negativity, complaining and passivity in Czechoslovakia. By the dirt, the inefficiency and the seeming lack of caring about one's environment and quality of life. I yearned to see more self-confidence, optimism -- that can-do, Western way of thinking. We take it for granted in the United States. It's kind of our trademark. And now that I don't find it around me very often I realize it was contagious, just as Czechoslovak gloom is hard to fight off when it's all around you.

The people I met in Germany told me they thought the East Germans were absorbed into West German society too quickly. It took *me* two days to feel Western again, and I'm a Westerner. I am not trying to compare my slight culture shock with that of people who lived under Communism for four decades. But I often wonder exactly what happened to people's psyches, and how they can recover.

Last fall, I talked to an elderly neighbor of mine after he'd come back from his first trip to West Germany. He said he was in shock. He of course couldn't afford to buy anything there -- even a Coke in hard currency is a major expenditure to a Czech tourist (a 2 DM Coke costs the average Czech the equivalent of two hours' wages). But he expected that. What he didn't expect was a society that functioned so well and looked so good, so rich, so thriving. "These people lost the war," he said. He noted that he fought in that war and worked hard all his life. And he has nothing to show for it other than living in a devastated country on a meager retirement income. "I'm never going anywhere again," he pronounced.

Thanks to Communist travel restrictions, most people didn't know much about what the West looked like. One couple in their 30s, from a small Bohemian town, told me they had saved money and struggled with red tape for years to be able to take a trip to

Paris. They finally went, during the summer of 1989. They too came home in shock after seeing the difference between East and West. "We sat home all summer depressed," they recalled. "Luckily, the revolution came," they said, now able to laugh about the past.

It's going to be a tough year in Czechoslovakia. Some people are making plans to start businesses. How-to articles for entrepreneurs appear regularly in the press. But I think most people are just hoping to hang on. Economic reform is still quite rough around the edges. As promised, prices were freed (which means most went up) on Jan. 1. People are trying to understand the concept of different stores having different prices for the same item. Many also don't understand that they, as consumers, will help control those prices. (Consumers don't have too many choices yet, however, besides choosing not to buy if the price is too high. Most shops still are state-owned and only a few private businesses have opened to offer competition.)

Czechoslovak Finance Minister Václav Klaus predicts 300,000 to 400,000 people will be unemployed in this country during 1991 (he had no good estimates for 1990 for comparison), and that inflation will hit about 30 percent (compared with the 10 percent estimate for the year just ended). Klaus finds these numbers acceptable, but they're hard to absorb for people who, for one thing, never had to think about unemployment before.

"It will get better." That's what I keep telling people, and that's what I think most of them believe. I keep hoping for a little more optimism though. Maybe a smile from a passerby. Not too much of that going around, but I did find a letter to the editor of a Prague newspaper that stood out:

"I'm a university graduate who never could work in the field she studied. I'm now a teacher, a mother of four children on my own. As I'm finding out from various statistics, we're living and always have lived on the edge of poverty. Despite that we're interested in the world, and the Communist regime didn't succeed in depriving us of our joy in living. Today's pessimists won't succeed either.

"This is our world and our life (and since last November it's even better than before), and we won't let others make it unpleasant. We don't need a Favorit [the best Czechoslovak car] or a video (we'd rather have books and theater), and if the coming years bring problems -- well, intelligence supposedly means being able to deal with them."

The letter was written by a Věra Scheirichová. Here's hoping there are lots more Věra Scheirichová's out there.

All the best,


Dagmar