

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Feb. 28, 1991

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

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Dear Peter and friends:

My work this month was hampered by a persistent flu. Most of the Westerners I know here have been suffering from chronic fatigue, colds as well as this hardy flu, which can linger for weeks. When Czechs get it, they often stay home from work for a week or longer. They shake their heads in disbelief when we Americans get out of bed after a day or two, well or not, because we're not used to being sick and away from work that long.

The Czechs blame fatigue and headaches -- they get them too -- on winter air pollution. To combat their "blahs," they drink cup after cup of strong coffee -- Turkish style, with grounds on the bottom. Sociologist Hana Navarova', who co-authored the generational study I wrote about last month, gulped down four cups the day we got together to discuss her research paper, "Lives of Young Families in Czechoslovakia."

Navarova', who speaks excellent English and specializes in women's issues, stands out in a society where "feminist" is a negative term, and equal rights are a myth created by the country's socialist past. With humor and uncommon assertiveness, she rises to the challenges of living here.

Married and with a 12-year-old daughter, she puts in long hours at the Institute of Sociology at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague. She says she didn't get ahead there during the Communist regime because she was one of few Institute workers

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

not in the party. She says she sometimes regrets not emigrating after 1968, for professional reasons. She wistfully talks about former colleagues who are now successful sociologists in the West. She wants to conduct research in gender studies but is not sure how much interest there will be in this field, new in Czechoslovakia, now that the federal government has tightened its belt and the Institute of Sociology is operating with very limited funds.

Navarová and I often talk about the psychological effects of life under socialism, particularly on those who were born into it. I mentioned in my last newsletter that the family served a very important function in the '70s and '80s, as people shut themselves off from society and its ills. But the family itself became ill, as Navarová's "Lives of Young Families" shows while examining how Czechoslovaks start out their adult lives.

The age when people first marry is about five years lower in Czechoslovakia than in Western Europe, Navarová says -- 21.5 for women and 24 for men.

Navarová says Czechoslovak society pressures young people to get married. According to her study, young people have been marrying for reasons having little to do with love. They have had few other opportunities for self-realization. Marriage was supposed to help fill the gaps left by the inability to excel at work or in other areas of one's life. This unrealistic expectation of marriage can be linked to the fact that almost one-third of marriages end in divorce.

Pregnancy is the most frequent reason for marriage -- 45 percent of the brides were pregnant in 1988. "A second, and perhaps the most significant reason for marriage is economic necessity, linked especially to solving housing and financial problems and to material security of young people," the study says. "Another reason is the wish to become independent, although true independence is nearly impossible to attain."

Navarová says marriage is a dominant model of behavior in Czechoslovak society in general. "Young people are expected to mature, finish their education, start a family and work." And, in a society where most people do just that, unmarried adults are seen as "deviant, inferior or strange."

Navarová found that young people view their lives as being worse than those of their parents. Their biggest complaint is lack of leisure time, because too much time is spent just trying to secure basic family needs (e.g., the hunt for consumer goods, the lack of time-saving products and services, the need for holding multiple jobs). Navarová notes that this is a result of what until now was a non-functioning economic and social system.

The economy will go through some rough times for a while. But the level of services already has begun to improve. And young people now have real choices about what to do with their futures. In

addition, the quality and availability of birth control products is improving, which could have a major effect on the rate of and reasons for marriages.

I've been polling the college students I know, and none expressed a particularly strong interest in getting married right away. They have plans to study, travel and work, possibly abroad.

But Navarova says that by the time the young women I talked to are 22-23, even they will panic and will want to get married. I do see letters in the advice column of Mlady Svet (Young World, a weekly magazine) in which women in their early to mid-20s despair over not being in a serious relationship. And those who are seem content with stereotypical male and female roles.

Navarova says that although much has changed politically and economically in Czechoslovakia since the 1989 revolution, change is occurring "slowly and often with substantial delay" in areas of human life such as this one.

We'll find out in a few years whether today's young women and men will exercise options besides early marriage. Whether Navarova's theory about it holds true or not, I think it's safe to say that democracy will bring about changes in the family in Czechoslovakia. And I think they will be changes for the better.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Dagmar".

Dagmar

Received in Hanover 3/21/91