

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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KATKA

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Dear Peter and friends:

I tracked down Kateřína Vomlelova after I happened to read a paper she wrote for her English class at Charles University in Prague. In it, she mused about the similarities and differences between her generation and that of her parents -- a subject that I am interested in and that I've written to you about. She wondered whether her generation too would be "pursued by feelings of something ... not finished, of something done the wrong way." She pointed out that pivotal events in recent Czechoslovak history came in 20-year cycles. "Our parents could reproach our grandparents with the events of 1948 [the Communists' rise to power] as the greatest fault of their lives. We could reproach our parents with the events of 1968 [the failure of the Prague Spring reforms] as the greatest fault of our parents' lives. What will our children consider the greatest fault of our lives?"

We didn't arrive at answers to these questions. But over the course of several conversations, Kateřína did share with me her thoughts about how Czechoslovakia's political past has affected her life, how she's living in the new democracy, and how she sees the future. Hers is the story of one life, one person who was born in 1968, "five months before the day which turned the tide of our history," and grew up in an ailing socialist country under Soviet occupation.

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Kateřina blames the past for a lot. She says Czechoslovakia's political system limited her education and development and stifled her self-confidence. She says it even played a part in her parents' divorce in 1989, which became final 10 days before the Nov. 17 protest that started what is known as the Velvet Revolution.

Both of Kateřina's parents were members of the Communist Party at the time of the 1968 Soviet invasion. Her father was ejected from the Party for his opposition to the subsequent occupation. Her mother kept a lower profile and remained a member until after the political changes in 1989.

Although her parents of course say their divorce was a complicated matter, Kateřina thinks her questioning of why her parents weren't doing more to fight the system probably had a strong effect on at least her father. "He began to have the feeling that he has to do something and even if he didn't do anything he at least felt that he was somehow important and maybe then he couldn't easily get over how my mother lived, where she worked [the Czech Ministry of Environment] and her membership in the Party and so on."

Kateřina says her mother told her she kept her Party membership for economic reasons -- she needed it to get ahead at work. She was not a particularly active member. But the fact that she was a member bothered Kateřina too. "I could never do it."

In addition to this disparity in her family, Kateřina lived an intellectual double life. She grew up discussing politics at home and having access to banned literature. "From the time I was little I had these two girlfriends in Slovakia who were raised in a similar way. We really, on weekends when our parents left for the country home, were able to spend from Friday to Sunday reading all these magazines and had very heated discussions about them. When I look back on it now it seems funny to me ... that these 12- or 14-year-old young ladies should occupy themselves with such problems. But we really took it very seriously and had very weighty discussions about it."

A typical evening at home was "that we turned on the Voice of America and we talked about the situation. ... We played cards during it and made fun because Voice of America was a bit overdone at times."

Like a typical child, she had been a member of the Pioneer socialist youth group in elementary school. But by the time she was in high school she had a reputation among her classmates as "some kind of dissident, which in Slovakia meant a lot. I wasn't doing anything at all then, I wasn't in contact with anyone. But my points of view surprised them a lot."

Because she was well-informed, Kateřina knew when her teachers taught things in school that were not true. But she kept quiet,



because her parents taught her "to keep my mouth closed. Because they took it pragmatically somehow, like, if you're going to study, then you can't afford to do this. ... I don't know. Maybe even they wanted to have peace in their own way."

Because she saw the same kind of behavior in her peers, she didn't think they were capable of affecting major political change. She still rejects the notion that the 1989 revolution was the work of students and says it could not have happened without the groundwork laid by the dissident movement.

"For example, I knew a lot of things from history that I read at home. I knew how it really was. ... I maybe nervously banged on the desk and kept moving around in my seat and made rude faces at the instructor, but I wasn't able to say anything to him, and the same goes for everybody else. We were an utterly apathetic herd."

Although she comes off as possessing a quiet dignity and strength, she insists she lacks self-confidence. "Maybe I don't come off that way, but I'm a very non-confident person. Someone can very easily hurt my feelings, put me down somehow, and I'm not able to react to it."

She says she wasn't always this way. She blames the school she was forced to attend because of her father's political problems. To be able to attend a university at all, she had to choose a field in which one's political background wasn't so important. She picked mathematics, in which she had no particular interest. A top student until then, she found herself being "average, that terrible, gray average, sometimes even below average." Katerina, who says she until then had been quite "arrogant and outspoken," stopped speaking up in class.

She had one year to go in the five-year program of study at Charles University's mathematical-physical faculty when the Communist government fell in 1989. She was one of those beaten by police during the demonstration on Nov. 17 that shocked the country into action.

Accompanied by her father, Katerina had been participating in anti-government protests for years. Initially, she was afraid it would get her thrown out of school. By 1989 she was so disenchanted that she didn't care. She only was afraid of being beaten, but she knew her father would try to protect her.

She was active in the revolutionary activity that followed Nov. 17, already having many contacts in the dissident community. After that she took her first trip abroad, invited to England because of her involvement in a peace organization. She then crammed for entrance exams and applied to the newly founded Faculty of Social Sciences. She is now a first-year sociology student there. She still doesn't raise her hand to offer answers to questions, even if she knows the material well. She acknowledges that she is now studying what she wants, so she should feel more secure, but she says, "it's pretty deeply rooted in me now. You know, I of course will get over it, I hope I do, but right now I [only] have the first semester behind me and it's still too deeply rooted in me."

She says her younger classmates are more assertive and "more arrogant, which I think is very good."

Katerina, Katka to her friends and family, was born in Ostrava, Moravia, in 1968. After the first grade, in 1974, she moved with her parents, both lawyers, and older sister to Banska Bystrica, a city of about 80,000 in Slovakia. Her father, Jiri, calls the move a temporary "emigration." He says he was persecuted less in that city for his political views and ouster from the party, because it was not home turf. The family moved back to Prague in 1976, after Katka finished high school.

"I think it was a great experience for me," she said of living in all three major parts of the country -- Moravia, Slovakia and Bohemia. "I think I'm capable of being a Slovak for a while and taking those conditions like a Slovak, then for a while like a Czech again, and somehow find a reasonable compromise. But lately Slovakia [with its surge of nationalism/separatism] is surprising me a little too much. So I don't know anymore. Last Friday we had

our give-year high school reunion and I didn't go basically because I was a little scared." She said she didn't want to risk arguments or disagreements caused by today's tensions between Czechs and Slovaks. She'll be glad to get together with her former classmates again "when this is solved."

Katka celebrated her 23rd birthday this month with a party in the sparsely furnished apartment she shares with several friends, including her boyfriend, Bohdan. We listened and danced to Western rock music, ate egg salad on rye and drank Moravian wine siphoned from a keg in the bathtub.

One party guest, a sociology student who has received a scholarship to attend the New School of Social Research in New York in the fall, told me she thinks Czechoslovaks are generally disenchanted and pessimistic today and think life was better before the political and economic reforms. She herself didn't strike me as too enthusiastic. She, who is about to get a free education at a top school, dismissed my comments about the fact that young people now have freedom and unprecedented opportunities with a bored, arrogant air. No, they don't realize it, she said. Their standard of living has dropped, and they don't see why that had to happen.

Not all students feel this way, of course. Kateřina, for one. She thinks things will get better, "but it will take quite a long time." Her own standard of living has gone down. The 900 crowns a month [about \$32] -- 200 of which goes for rent and phone -- she receives from her parents to live doesn't go as far since prices began rising last July.

"It used to be normal for me that when I went to the store I didn't check the price tags but bought what I wanted. Or going to a bar. I didn't have to deny myself that because I couldn't afford it."

She doesn't go to bars much anymore. "And when I shop, I shop cheaply. Like I don't buy butter and such things at all, because I tell myself it's expensive and I can't afford it. But somehow I'm able to come to terms with it. I'm not one of those "grumbling," is the English word for it. ... I'm able to make light of it. I don't take it like, my God, these are my awful problems."

One current problem is that she and Bohdan will have to find a new place to live soon. The friend who is renting the apartment they are in now is giving it up as part of a trade. "But this isn't just my problem. It's a general problem of my generation, and it's a very weighty problem that won't be solvable soon," Kateřina noted.

As I have said before, housing is a problem for people of any age here, but especially for young people. My Czech friends who have apartments had searched and waited for them for years. One woman, a teacher, lived in a university dorm for five years.

Kateřina says this social reality also is part of the damage done by socialism. "I'm still unable to stand on my own two feet. I think that outside [a word Czechoslovaks often use to refer to being abroad] at 23, lots of people exist independently; even if they're studying they're able to make money. They're able to have their own apartment and be economically independent of their families. I haven't had that opportunity here. It's laughable at 23 years old. ... It isn't just a financial matter; the apartment doesn't exist for me, as it doesn't for lots of other people.

"And because of this I remain very dependent on my parents, and that skews a bit my relations with them. If I existed like an independent, mature person and got together with them only because I wanted to get together with them and not because I want money from them or to eat at their house or something like that, then that's something completely different."

She says part-time work is very difficult to get now but hopes that situation will improve as more private businesses such as restaurants and shops open.

Another casualty of socialism Kateřina lists is general life experience. "I think that outside, people my age are much more experienced, independent -- simply with fewer problems." She offers a criticism often repeated about Czechoslovaks -- that they are too serious. "I think that our generation isn't able to have a good time." She recalled that during a recent party with guests from Holland, "the Dutch right away started to dance, have a good time, have fun ... while the Czechs sat around the table and kept trying to solve some problems."

She says her birthday party was the first time in the year and a half she'd lived in her apartment -- and there were a lot of parties -- that people danced and had fun at all. During a typical evening, people "glued themselves to the floor and over a bottle they all complained. They constantly tried to solve some problems, and not just their own personal problems but they went so far in their philosophical debates as to try to solve the problems of the entire republic, of all mankind even, and they took it like these are terrible things that are burdens to them. ... It's normal outside to turn off on Friday and rest and go have fun somewhere, but I think that's pretty difficult here for us."

She also says that under the Communists she missed terribly the ability to travel out of the country. She had unsuccessfully applied for permission several times. Since 1989, she has been abroad three times, her way financed by others. She says she'll wait until she can afford to travel on her own in the style she wants before she takes another trip.

"I can't stand how Czechs are known throughout Europe -- with their sleeping bags in the park and their lunch meat. ... For me right now it's enough that I have the possibility. I know that if I wanted to, I could go. That gratifies me, that gives me peace



of mind."

She is referring to the fact that when busloads of Czechoslovaks descend on major tourist destinations in other countries, the people seldom -- much to the merchants' dismay -- spend any money. They don't even go to coffee shops. They sit outside and eat the hard-boiled eggs and sandwiches they brought from home because to buy locally is prohibitively expensive for them.

She also says she misses the "cleaner [purer] look" people abroad seem to have. "It seems to me that on the street they are far nicer ... looser somehow, really freer inside than here. Here it seems stupid to me to go see someone when I'm in the mood because I'll tell myself that he'll think I want something from him. Here, everyone was useful to someone for some reason. So that those relationships aren't completely clean."

Kateřina, who says she realizes the quality of Czechoslovak education is low, says she might want to study abroad at some point. She's a bit scared of the United States, because it's so far away and would make trips home difficult. She does want to visit though, "to get a taste of the lifestyle there."

She says she thinks of the past less and less as she becomes absorbed in her studies. But it pops up during certain moments, such as when she makes telephone calls. She kept company with a well-known dissident in the months before the revolution and became used to their conversations being listened to, she says.

"I really don't like to make phone calls. I keep having the feeling that someone is listening. I constantly watch myself. For example I don't talk about people [on the phone] a great deal, because I still have the feeling that someone has to be hearing it."

She says she doesn't know what she'll do after she finishes her studies. She insists she hasn't lost her ambition but no longer feels "I have to do something important."

She hopes for a future in which "I wouldn't have to be interested in politics; so there would be people I can trust in public life; so people in government would be able to handle solving problems."

She also hopes there will be an end to standing in lines, unpleasant service, lack of consumer goods and inadequate medical care and education. She hopes there will be better access to birth control and more awareness of it so young people won't have to get married because of unplanned pregnancy.

She hopes someday people will "like to work. That probably will never happen," she said with a smile, "but at least I'd like it if this were inside most people. ..."

"I also hope our children would be happy, carefree and healthily arrogant. That they wouldn't be scared rabbits like us. That a child will be raised from the start like a human being."

All the best,



Dagmar

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