

# The Expatriot

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THE EXPATRIOT

## June 27, 1995

**Every Journey Begins with Buying a Ticket** I came to Prague not really knowing what to expect, nor with the same level of enthusiasm that is usual for me when embarking on a journey to a new place. I had heard, numerous times, that Prague was a beautiful city, something of a sister to Paris in this regard. I had heard, too, that it was filled with young Americans attracted not only by the city's charm, but also by a low cost (but relatively high standard) of living together with an energetic, burgeoning economy.

But, having come to mistrust pictures in guide booklets and travel magazines, which show you useless images of discrete sites shorn of their real context, I had no clear image in my head of what the city might actually look like. I believe that a city must be spatially grasped with the eyes, ears and feet to be really appreciated. Neither maps nor photographs can do this for you; they don't even come close. Only moving through the streets can give you the dynamic sense of such a large and complex space. As a consequence, I had no real expectations about what effect Prague might have on me, except perhaps that I expected it to be interesting. I neither expected to enjoy it immensely, nor did I expect to be miserable there.

This surprising indifference on my part caused me to waver for several weeks on my decision as to whether or not to travel to

Prague. I fretted about my money situation, I even wondered if I really felt like doing that much travelling. On the other hand, I reasoned, there was nothing much happening for me in Bordeaux, especially since I had relinquished the stance that I was looking for work. And I didn't know when I'd return to Europe again after this trip was over, and when I finally did, would there be a remarkable historical circumstance—the rapid transformation of a communist economy into what appeared to be a vigorous capitalist one—available for me to observe it firsthand? Would the philosophical contradictions and practical difficulties that this process, I supposed, engenders ever again be available concretely, to stare an onlooker in the face? How might an energetic and burgeoning economy manifest itself to the casual visitor?

I thought it was unlikely that these circumstances would be easily available to me again, and that thought, combined with wanting to see my friend John again, led me to the bus station to buy my round trip ticket. I decided, arbitrarily, to schedule my return for three weeks after my arrival in Prague. I was soon to find that this was not nearly enough time.

## May 10, 1995

**Art as a Topic for Discussion** Previous to my decision to travel to Prague, I had been invited to present my band's music at a class in electronic music composition which met at a *conservatoire* next to the *École des Beaux Arts*. It was the idea of a member of the class, and friend of Philippe's, to invite me after having listened to our recordings at the Café Grand Phylloxera last April (see no. 4). That friend's name is Bernard<sub>2</sub>. (I will use the subscript <sub>2</sub> to distinguish him from the Bernard mentioned in no. 2, p. 1931, who hereinafter will be designated, should he appear again in this text, as Bernard<sub>1</sub>.) It happened that my presentation was scheduled for a few days before my departure for Prague.

Obviously, this entailed my introducing and leading a discussion in French. The thought of this made me very nervous. I wanted Philippe there to help me in case I got stuck and so I asked him to accompany me, and he graciously agreed. Presenting my work in this way is always a little nerve-wracking for me anyway, but the prospect of doing it all in French only made my feelings of dread decidedly more intense. By the day of the presentation, I was really beginning to feel the pressure. I wasn't sure if my audience would really understand our work, because the words in it are all in English, so for at least some of them, their only basis for appreciating what I was to present was on a purely musical level. I could only hope that this would be enough to hold their interest.

**I Act as a Translator** By one form of reckoning, I should have been more confident about it. I know our music is good and, even if people don't "like" it, they can usually at least respect that it's got some level of sophistication and is sufficiently unusual to be considered "interesting." In addition, it happened that a few days before the presentation, Philippe had taken me and Samuel to see the *Grotte Pair-Non Pair* (The Even-Odd Grotto), not far from Bordeaux. This was a neatly preserved, rather small cave where ancient Europeans had dwelt. There, they left behind images of the animals that they knew as rough engravings on the rock walls. The tour guide's English was extremely limited, and some of the visitors in our group knew no French, so I somehow got volunteered to bucket-brigade the explanations over to the poor monoglots. It wasn't difficult for me to understand the guide, and I reiterated her explanations in English with little trouble. Afterward, in thanks for my efforts, she gave me a postcard of one of the more spectacular rock carvings from the gift shop. As a confidence-builder, this experience should have counted as a success.

Anyway, on the day of the presentation, I didn't feel particularly confident; I was decidedly nauseated, as a matter of fact. After brief

introductions and some normal classroom preliminaries, I took my place at the head of the classroom. I humbly started with a very brief outline of what some of our ideas are, and a little bit of background on the group, and then I ducked for cover by playing a ten-minute sample of our work. It seemed clear that I needed to jump-start the discussion after this, so I tried to explain the political and social slant of the texts that we had put to music. One person got the impression from my explanation that the music was some sort of *pre-text* for making a “political statement.”

I was a little offended at this, I must admit, and made an extra strong effort to summon up the French necessary to explain that our music and the texts are inseparable from one another and that, for us, one makes little sense without the other. If my French audience, not understanding the texts, still relates to the work without comprehending the textual content of it, I went on, then they are really appreciating what amounted to a “different” work than does the Anglophone listener hearing the same piece. The class seemed to accept this explanation.

**I Get Grilled a Little** Then the professor, who had been writing down the main points of my explanations as I’d made them, pulled out his notebook and began going down a checklist, like this: “Tape recorders as a musical instrument, I agree; plagiarism, I don’t agree; political content, I sort of agree...” etc. It slightly seemed as if he were more interested in the discussion as a technical exercise than he was with the work I presented. Or maybe he felt like he needed to erect a rigid academic framework around what I was conducting as a relatively informal discussion among people who share a common interest.

I went through these points with him and refined my explanations of them as best I could, when all of a sudden I realized that other people were joining in, and really engaging with the topics that I had so haltingly put before them. The discussion had taken on

a life of its own, without my needing to further animate it. That was quite a relief. The remainder of the two hours went by more or less smoothly, alternating between my work samples and discussions about them.

## May 12, 1995

**The Poetry of the Route** I boarded the bus at the station on *rue Charles Domercq* opposite the *Gare St.-Jean* at ten in the morning. Bordeaux being a terminus of this particular bus route, there were only four other passengers on the bus with me, which I was entirely comfortable with. However, I supposed that we would add more passengers at each stop we made, in Poitiers, Tours and Paris, and this supposition was later proved correct.

The bus drivers were Czech. They seemed to speak very little French. When I handed one of them my ticket, he shook his head, went *tsk, tsk, tsk*, scratched out where was written the address of our arrival point in Prague, and wrote in a different address. I was annoyed, because I had made arrangements with John to be met at the stop that the bus driver had crossed out, which was where the woman who sold me the ticket two weeks previously had told me we would be arriving. I would have to find a pay phone en route and make a phone call, and hope to find someone at home. I said nothing to the bus driver—it wasn't his fault and I doubted his comprehension anyway—and took my seat.

An hour out of the city, rolling along through a sunny day in the vineyards, I started to feel hungry. I wisely had made myself three big ham and cheese sandwiches and assembled these, together with a liter of water, some chocolate, three apples, and two small bottles of tomato juice, into a grocery bag before I left. I had assumed that the restaurants we were scheduled to stop at on the bus line would be expensive. I pulled out one of my sandwiches. I had made them the previous afternoon and put them in the refrigerator. A peculiar

thing about French bread is that, just before it actually becomes stale, the moisture from the inside migrates to the dry outer crust through some process of capillary action or osmosis perhaps, in an attempt to equalize the humidity uniformly throughout the substance. This can make the bread very chewy. Sometimes when you bite into such a crust, any sandwich contents it may contain, rather than being incised by tooth pressure, actually slip out, as if one were trying to cut a lemon in half with scissors.

As I gnawed and gripped my sandwich with both hands, coercing it to contain its unruly contents, I noticed that the vineyards were gradually giving way to other forms of agriculture: corn, oats, broomstraw, mustard. I noticed, in the unfenced fields, a decided lack of commitment to contour plowing.

**Bein' from Bordeaux Blues** At one point, a woman on the bus stopped to chat with me on her way to the bathroom. By this time, I was feeling a lot more relaxed about my French. It was as if there were some sort of tangible leap in my skill level, having endured what felt something like a trial by fire in Bernard<sub>2</sub>'s class. Something in my head felt like it snapped and I found myself noticeably more comfortable and confident chatting in French, and more willing to say to myself, "*Yes. I speak French.*"

I asked the woman if she were from Bordeaux. Yes, she admitted, almost as if she were ashamed of it. I changed the subject. I told her a few things about myself. She seemed surprised that I would stay in Bordeaux as a visitor for as long as I have; to her the city was quite ugly. She told me how wonderful Prague was, how she went there often, and how good it was to get away from Bordeaux. She said the word "Bordeaux" with an intonation entirely appropriate for use with the phrase "stinking armpit." Suddenly, noticing after ten minutes that I was struggling to eat a difficult sandwich, she sang, "*Bon appétit,*" and continued on to the bathroom.

A little later, a man a row ahead of me struck up a conversation.

He had caught my attention earlier because, in spite of the prominent nonverbal “no smoking” symbols decaled onto every other window pane, he was lighting up every half hour or so. It went unnoticed (or un-responded-to) by the bus drivers until we were halfway to Paris. At some point one of the drivers (the one not then driving) came back to talk to the man with this ultimatum: “*Parizh-Prak: No tsigaret! Oké?*” and the guy agreed. In our brief conversation, I asked him, too, if he were from Bordeaux. “Yes,” he admitted, “but nobody’s perfect.”

**Women Made of Stone** We drove over plains, we passed through forests riven with cloistered tree-lined valleys harboring postcard cottages. We stopped in Poitiers, then in Tours to pick up more passengers. In Tours, we pulled up opposite to a large, very impressive train station that was that strange mix of late neoclassical and pre-modernist riveted iron work. Evidently from the late 19th century, the structure had the approximate shape of two very large quonset-huts or half culverts resting side by side, with the main entrances to the station opening up from a flat facade placed at one end. Each of the arching ends of these glass and steel-frame extended archways was abutted on the left and right by massive brick pilasters, surmounted by huge marble women in neoclassical robes. They were seated on stone thrones well above the archways themselves, looking down, as if they were surveying all the travellers who moved across an immense plaza to enter the station. Each woman was an allegorical figure representing a neighboring French city. I seem to remember that Bordeaux’s stone woman had a somewhat sour look on her face.

Later, outside of Paris, in heavy rush-hour traffic, a car rear-ended our bus. I felt the subtlest of jolts, like running over a small branch on smooth pavement in a normal-sized vehicle. The usual French response when something bad happens is, “*C’est pas vrai,*” (=“It isn’t true.”) I heard five or six people say it as we pulled off to the



side of the freeway. The bus was unscathed, but the car looked totaled. Nobody was hurt. We sat alongside the busy freeway for half an hour until the police came and investigated. They were well-groomed and looked like movie stars. The traffic was even heavier by the time we got going again and we could only move slowly.

The bus took on a lot of passengers in Paris. The money-making leg of this route is clearly Paris to Prague. I managed to maintain two seats for myself without engaging in any overtly antisocial acts, so I was able to sleep satisfactorily on the bus. It was night by this time and so I can't comment on the scenery. I don't remember anything after Strasbourg, near the French-German border, and while I dozed, we crossed Germany at its narrowest point, the thick pine forests of Bavaria slipping by and gradually giving way to fields covered with yellow flowers, stands of white birch, and onion domes on the villages' church spires. I thought of my friend Florian's warning that there would be yodeling on the bus when we drove through Bavaria, but that threat never materialized. He was probably thinking about the local buses, anyway.

**Czechpoint at the Crossing** We crossed the border into the Czech Republic at roughly 7:00 AM. The bus drivers had a list of all the nationalities on board, and the customs people seemed satisfied that the bus drivers had seen all of our passports already. Except for one African guy who had to get off the bus for some official customs proceeding. I had no idea what that was about. For another few hours or so, the winding road that passes through the Bohemian border mountains led us up and down through numerous small villages, not so closely spaced as they are in France, but just as finely articulated in terms of their character. Each village had an onion-domed church, an attribute that signalled to me that I was clearly and pleasingly *somewhere else*. I really love the feeling of being *somewhere else*, and this was the most intensely I'd felt it in a long time.

As we neared Prague, we passed through a wasteland of con-

crete tenement homes which, I was later told by my friend John, are called “bricolocs,” in a playfully disparaging reference to their modular construction and perfunctory conception. They are strikingly featureless (to coin a constructive contradiction): sheets of concrete standing upright for outer walls perforated with a regular grid of square windows. There were hundreds of these buildings, each four or five stories high. I was relieved to soon discover that this gray Stalinist tract was at least limited more or less to the edges of the city.

**How the Heck Did I Get Myself Into This** As if to harmonize with the features of these drab housing units, the clouds were steadily growing thicker, so that by the time we reached the Želivského metro stop, our destination within Prague, it was decidedly raining. John was a bit late in showing up to meet me, so I had a few minutes to thoroughly relish the flavor of being in a strange, formerly communist, rainy gray city, lacking any single piece of useful information about it, and not knowing what I would do should John *not* show up, as I did not have his home address nor the address of anyone he knew in Prague. I had his phone number, but my repeated attempts to dial it from France seemed to lead to nothing but the conclusion that it was out of order. I had Lucie’s (his girlfriend’s) work number, but it was Saturday, and she would not be in the office again until Monday. Frightening absurdities can run through your mind when you’ve been on a bus for 24 hours nonstop, but before this fledgling psychological catastrophe got out of hand, I saw John flailing the air at me from across the street.

He whisked me and my luggage away to his room on Mexická (Mexico Street), which is in the Vršovice district of Prague, east of the city center. He rents one room of an apartment owned by an elderly Czech couple by the names of Libuše and Yaroslav. They’ve barely seen fit to provide their tenant with his own space. The room John rents is, of course, furnished. But apparently Libuše is a com-

pulsive hoarder, and sees no problem with storing what she's hoarded in the lodger's room. I think in general they like to try to treat John as one of the family, and for him this has its advantages, and it has its disadvantages.

I barely had time to take off my jacket and sit down before Libuše greeted me warmly and placed before me a glass of hot coffee. It was Czech-style coffee, which they call “turecká” (=“Turkish”). I had had Turkish coffee before, but this was a bit of a shock. The grounds were not only *in* the beverage, they were floating on top in a kind of yellowish foam. Czech coffee is made by grinding the coffee finely, putting a few spoonfuls in the bottom of a glass, and then dousing it with boiling water. At first, the grounds—which are super-extracted by the hot water—float to the top. After an explanation from John, I learned that a few good stirs with a spoon dismisses them to the bottom of the cup, and that this procedure can actually make a damn fine cup of coffee. It is important, however, to relinquish the habit of downing the whole cup.

## May 14, 1995

**Prague** Prague is a candidate for the most visually striking and uniquely pleasant city I have ever visited. It is at once monumental and intimate, refined and playful, gloriously elevated yet, when it needs to be, down-to-earth. Its looming spires are decked out with little sub-spires sprouting off of them, like crystals growing in a chamber. These, together with its light Baroque and Renaissance architecture, its massive statues and monuments, its myriad historical markers, and its well-kept colorful public squares, all work together to make it a city I have come to feel so attached to that it takes little persuasion for me to think of it as mine.

In addition, the leftover physical manifestations of the communists' building agendas serve, in an odd way, only to enhance the environmental play and visual character of the city. It may be true

that nowhere is the stylistic hollowness of communist-era architecture more evident than when it is plopped down, insensitively to urban context, right next to an utterly soulful Baroque church. The contrast is occasionally too much for the heart to bear; but it certainly creates a dramatic impression of the radical shifts that history takes!

It's difficult to believe that the communist city planners and bureaucrats, upon the completion of their projects, didn't despair of what they had wrought, feeling therefore no other possible choice than to give up architecture for good. But then again, at least one public artist did. Commissioned (or coerced) by the state to provide Prague with a monumental head of Stalin, he did so. And monumental it was. The finished work was large enough, I am told, for there to have been an annual rock-climbing event on Stalin's face (that this was tolerated by the communist authorities is, in itself, amazing). Apparently the artist was so distraught at the aesthetic horror he'd committed that he killed himself shortly after its unveiling.

**A Holy Roman** The city, too, bears the indelible stamp of a Holy Roman Emperor, one Charles IV, who moved his capital city to Prague in the 14th century upon taking power. He is known to have been keen on astronomy and science. In accord with this belief system, he laid the first stone in one of Prague's best known landmarks, the Charles Bridge (Karlův Most), at 5:31 on the morning of the 7th of September in 1357, mathematically a unique instant in history, for its digits form the following numerical palindrome (ignoring my punctuation):

*1 3 5 7 / 9 / 7 @ 5 : 3 1*

This cosmic gesture must have resulted in some sort of aesthetic energy charge from up above, for the Karlův Most is an amazing and beautiful thing. Not only is it a very useful pedestrian conduit over the Vltava River, linking the two halves of historic Prague, it's also

an open-air sculpture gallery. Some thirty Baroque sculptures evenly spaced along the bridge's supports look down on passersby, in various poses, with varying expressions of agony and ecstasy carved onto their faces. Their stone is blackened from airborne soot which comes from the coal the Czechs continue to burn in winter to heat their homes. Far from making them ugly, this serves as a backdrop to heighten the sense of accent given by the many gold-metal accoutrements the figures bear, such as crowns, halos, swords, crucifixes, and so on. The deep black and the bright gold really make for a striking combination.

If the sun strikes the gold just right, it looks simply other-worldly and ethereal, as if your eyes can't quite focus on it. On the other hand, under normal light, there are circumstances where the artifice is laid a bit too bare, and one detects a certain measure of absurdity. Take for example statues of saints which decorate the facades of many of Prague's churches. Since they are saints, they all sport halos. But halos in Prague tend to be of a different artistic conception than perhaps elsewhere. Rather than being luminous discs floating above the head, Prague's artists have conceived them as a point source of light emanating just above the crest of the cranium. To render this as a solid object, they have chosen a form which resembles nothing so much to modern eyes as a kind of fan blade. To my eyes, it seems as if the saints of Prague wear golden propeller-beanies.

**Stalinist Formaldehyde** Prague boasts a remarkable assemblage of Baroque and Rococo exteriors and interiors. (My mother will be pleased to know that I spent a lot of time in churches.) I found myself wondering if these remarkable buildings, which seem so well preserved, might have been treated much differently had the Czechs been under the influence of capitalism for the last forty years. Now that tourism is such a booming business and these things are attractions (read: resources to be exploited), it makes good sense to preserve them. But in the past, not all such treasures have everywhere

been so protected. I had to ask myself, is part of the reason these are in such good shape because communism's iron control fist unwittingly protected them from being overly touristed? This is a threat that seems very real today when you walk shoulder to shoulder with thousands of strangers the entire length of Karlova street, which links Karlův Most and Staroměstské Náměstí, two heavily trampled tourist havens. In this sense, I suppose, communism might be equated with a kind of social formaldehyde.

But obviously, I in no way regret the Czech's liberation from the communist yoke. And the Czechs seem to be adapting to capitalism with a vengeance. Currently Prague is undergoing renovation at a remarkable rate. From what I can gather, it is far ahead of any other post-communist nation in terms of integrating its systems and citizenry into the economy of western Europe.

Today Prague seems almost like any other western European city, streets bustling with traffic, shops bursting with goods, sidewalks teeming with foreign visitors. Everywhere the smoke-stained but ornate stone building façades are being freshly painted with pastel colors and white accents. Many of the churches and the Art Deco City Hall are sheathed in scaffolding, as if preparing these old buildings for a new debutante ball. In fact, they rather are. Several recent Hollywood films have been shot in Prague, including *Mission: Impossible* and *Immortal Beloved*. I'm sure this is lucrative for the city, and I'm sure they're eager to have more films shot here.

What follows is offered up as a case in point of the kind of energy being put into updating Prague's infrastructure. In the space of three days, I saw workmen come and tear up the cobblestones on Bulharská (next to Mexická), dig a trench the length of the street to a depth of about one meter, remove an old set of sewer pipes, and replace them with brand spanking new ones. The sight of workmen and piles of cobblestones is a very commonplace one in Prague these days. Everywhere there are electrical cables an inch thick coming up out of the sidewalks, waiting for their new connections. It's en-

couraging that, after they're done tearing up the street and making repairs, they're finishing the job by replacing the cobbles, rather than smoothing their work over with asphalt.

**Prague the Hot Spot** As a by-product of the transition from one economy to another, Prague has become a colony for American youth, like Amsterdam was in the 60s, a backpacker's paradise. It is easy to understand why. Its cultural attractiveness, coupled with an incredibly low cost of living, as well as a wide variety and availability of western consumer goods, have turned it into a hot spot.

There is little evident deprivation to be felt in Prague of the kind one hears about in Bucharest or Sofia or Kiev or probably even Moscow. Many commonplace supermarket luxury items (like chocolate and ice cream) are half the price they are in the U.S., and a third of that in France. Food in general is shockingly cheap to western sensibilities; extravagant restaurant meals can be had for four dollars, normal (and very filling) ones can be had for two. The shops don't have precisely the same variety of goods you find in France or the U.S., but there really is plenty to choose from, from what I could tell. Some of the Czech-made items, in particular the bread and the yogurt, are among the best I have ever tasted.

It should be pointed out that the Czech perception of what to us are very low prices are often, to them, very high. The disparity of perception is brought about by a different level of wages. Czechs earn a lot less than western Europeans, so therefore they have less buying power. In an effort, no doubt, to address this, and to take advantage of the tourist's perception that everything is *so darn cheap*, some establishments have a two-tier pricing system. Czechs pay one price, and foreigners pay another, higher, price for the same goods and services. Fortunately, we were always in the company of Lucie, a native Czech, who could buy tickets for us at Czech prices. In certain restaurants, she knew that if we sat upstairs, we'd get charged the tourist price, and so she led us downstairs.

**Communist Vestiges** Not every vestige of Stalinism has yet been shooshed out the door. Some remain, and with mixed results. Many stores are not structured around the self-service concept. At these establishments, you enter, wait in line (usually they are not long lines) and when your turn comes, you tell the counter person what you want. They retrieve the items one by one from the shelves behind the counter and assemble your order. I suppose they keep it like this because they are comfortable with it, and maybe they continue to justify it by saying it makes shoplifting close to impossible. But it is an example of an ossified attitude that occasionally makes life here seem downright impractical.

I continually had the sense of foreboding that this set of circumstances cannot last much longer. The Czechs are steadily revaluing their currency to western levels, and as they do so, the cost of consumer goods will have to increase, hopefully along with the natives' ability to purchase them. I will therefore conjecture that, since the other former Soviet-bloc states are several years behind Prague in economic westernization, the hot spot town will move farther east. Prague is in the process of reclaiming its well-deserved status as a major European center. As Prague succeeds in doing this, it will inevitably drive those looking for a hot deal to other stomping grounds. One can only stand back and applaud Prague's success.

Besides, there are no doubt dozens of interesting European cities further east, underdeveloped and awaiting their chance. Budapest is an excellent example; Bucharest, Sofia, Kiev, Krakow, Minsk, Riga, Tallinn—all might be good candidates, too. (A pity in this regard that the former Yugoslavia is such a troubled area, for Sarajevo, Split, or Belgrade might be added to this list.) All that's really required is a little architectural beauty, low rent and cheap comestibles, and employers able to wink at your not having a work permit.

**My Friend John** Like myself, my friend John is in a holding pattern, trying to decide what to do with his life. He came to Prague in es-



sence, I guess, to prove that he could do it, that is, live in Europe on an extended basis. He waits tables in a blatantly opportunist bar and restaurant that exists to do little more than siphon off money from American tourists. Situated at the eastern end of Karlův Most, “Mad Johnny’s” (as I have come to call it, in reference to its manager, a fat offensive American businessman named Johnny) is as if transplanted from any shopping mall in the States. A completely American establishment, from the menu to the service to the clientele, I am offended by its very existence. It is a blight on the face of Prague. John agrees with me, but he’s gotta eat.

One of the reasons John has stayed as long as he has clearly is his relationship with Lucie. She really is something; good company, good at getting the show on the road, fun to travel with. She works in a real estate office, so she’s levelheaded. Interestingly, she had managed to leave Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution took place, and was living in California, not sure if she would ever return to Prague. But when the revolution came, she decided to rejoin her homeland and take part in its new future.

## May 23, 1995

**Weekend Journeys** My friend John was so excited about my visit that he planned my schedule until it was almost full to bursting; then with a little encouragement from me, it broke. For every weekend of my visit, he had made a plan for us to go out of Prague and see some other Czech attraction, usually not too far off. No small encouragement came from the fact that the ticket prices for travel within the Czech Republic all seemed well within reach of my budget, so it seemed a shame not to take advantage of the travel opportunities that this offered.

One sunny weekend, we made the journey to Český Krumlov. On a Friday afternoon, John, Lucie and I boarded a Czech bus that was crammed far beyond capacity. Fortunately we had made seat

reservations, because the driver did not stop selling tickets even when it was evident that all the seats had been taken. Consequently, the aisle was really quite full of people who had to stand up during their three-hour-long journey. Without much surprise, I noted that there was no toilet on the bus, and that the only stops along the route were in major towns where we let five people off and seemed to let ten more on. Apparently, many of these people were going just as far as České Budějovice (home of the Koh-I-Noor company, as well as the ancestral home of Budweiser beer), which is only a few kilometers outside of Český Krumlov. In České Budějovice, most of the aisle-standers got off, but they were immediately replaced with a new group of aisle-standers to make the remaining half-hour journey to our destination.

Český Krumlov (Krümmelau in German) is deep in the south of Bohemia, not far from the Austrian border. En route, I noted that the Czech countryside, although not stupendous, was pretty, with tidy little fields of yellow flowers and green grain, rolling hills and, further toward the south, small mountains bristling with little stands of white birch trees. I seemed to notice that there were more steel-frame power pylons in this countryside than anywhere else I've ever been. I got the sense that these huge structures, which netted the countryside with high-tension power lines, were Soviet designs, for to me they had a decidedly Constructivist flavor, like giant Naum Gabo corner reliefs. I have no theory as to why there might be more power lines here than anywhere else, but this is what I observed.

Český Krumlov sits upon a small mountain around the base of which is wrapped, almost to a complete circle, a bend in the Vltava River. It attracts a lot of tourists because of its picturesque setting and well-preserved period architecture. Most shops seem to carry camera equipment, film, and the ubiquitous Bohemian crystal. The main attraction of Český Krumlov is a large castle complex built by the Rosenbergs, an aristocratic family based in the region, in the 15th through 18th centuries. The Rosenberg shield is featured promi-

nently in the architectural decor of many of the churches and private buildings in Český Krumlov, suggesting that the family basically owned the town as well as the castle.

The complex's centerpiece, for me at least, was a huge brightly painted campanile which overlooked the city. It rather resembled a Barnum & Bailey rendition of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, without the lean, of course. Each story of the campanile was a columned gallery, like those of Pisa. On top were stiff bronze flags on flag poles, all pointing the same direction. We climbed as high as they'd let us for the view and watched the storks circling the tower, and watched the Vltava flow around us.

The castle itself was inhabited by members of the Rosenbergs up until 1947, when the Communists took power in Czechoslovakia. They lived in opulence, lavishing more money than taste on their interior decor. Even so, many of the furnishings were stunning in their elaborate finishes and surface treatments. There were rooms with amazingly detailed sculptural ceiling designs, and miraculous parquet inlay floors. Hallways were draped with tapestries and rows of huge oil paintings. They had a large carriage covered entirely with gold leaf. This place can be toured for a modest fee, and all of the furnishings they hold are the original ones, lavish by any standards, and indecent to any reasonable standard.

**Dining Out** Tired and hungry from a day of wandering aimlessly but fruitfully through the grounds and gardens of the Rosenberg complex and the town itself, we entered a *hospoda*, or tavern, fairly late, to get a bite to eat. It was completely packed with beer drinkers and Saturday night rough housers, so, as is acceptable and customary in this part of the world, we joined the only table left that would fit the three of us, where there were already two young men seated. One of them, whom I will call Roger, because I simply can't remember his real name (except that it had two syllables and began with an "r"), spoke English as it turned out, and we got to talking.

I suppose I should explain something about how things work in Czech restaurants, so that the allusion I make a little later on will be set up and properly humorous. When one places an order in a Czech restaurant or *hospoda*, the waiter pulls out a blank slip of paper and makes marks on it to show what you had. Beer, the standard Czech beverage of choice, is customarily represented by simple tick marks at the bottom of this slip. This paper is left on your table, usually under a salt cellar or ashtray, so that you can add to your order at any time from any waiter who happens to pass; they just add more marks to your slip. When it comes time to pay, the bill is then added up in front of you, to give you an opportunity to check the addition.

When we sat down at Roger's table, his slip of paper already had a complete picket fence of tick marks at the bottom. And Czech beers are big—at least half a liter. So I reasoned that he might be a little drunk. Anyway, we talked for a time, no big deal. Then this German tourist came in and, since ours was the nearest table to the door, started asking us for directions of some sort. He neither greeted us, nor did he bother to ask if we spoke any German. None of us could understand him. We gave blank looks to him and each other, but still he persisted. I tried to say, "We don't speak German," in German (I know a sentence or two) but it came out as something he obviously didn't understand.

Finally, simply to shut the guy up and get on with our conversation, Roger offered him the international gesture of strong contempt by holding up the back of his extended middle finger in the German's face and said, loudly, "We don't speak German, so fuck off." After the chastised German ducked out of the room in frustration, Roger confided to us, "I hate fucking Germans."

**Czenglish** I quickly found that it is best to avoid Libuše and Yaroslav as much as possible, in spite of the fact that they were always very nice and well-intentioned. Libuše, a spry petite sixty-something, is in particular prone to launching into a half-hour diatribe at the drop

of a hat on any topic (not that that is necessarily bad if the speaker has the proper style and attitude) but her English was so abysmal that I felt lucky if I grasped the general subject of her lectures, in the end deciding to waste no effort trying to comprehend the impossibly muddled particulars. She speaks an idiosyncratic pidgin English, which is actually about 45% German, assuming I suppose that English and German are related, so we'll understand, right? Once, to shut her up, Yaroslav came into the room, put his hand on her shoulder and announced, "My wife is great speaker of Prague."

Inadept Czechs have a particular way of bungling English, which an English-teacher friend of John's named Katherine likes to call "Czenglish." A simple example is "Want you coffee?" which is easy enough for us to understand, and when we hear it, we let it slide, but it clearly illustrates one of the structural problems the Czechophone mind has with English. Czech is a much more complex language than English, with declension of nouns like Russian. This complexity is due in part to the fact that Czech has preserved some of the more ancient features of Old Slavic that Russian, through its evolution, has jettisoned.

I was interested to hear Czech people using the word "fajn," which is pronounced just like our word "fine," in fact *is* our word fine, having been borrowed, and meaning, "Fine, all right, *d'accord*, okay." Yaroslav, who has had several strokes and can barely walk, resembles no one so much as the author character in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, with his black woolly-bear eyebrows, snow-white mane of hair, and slightly mad, slightly stunned look on his face. Upon hearing that we would be visiting Český Krumlov, he enthusiastically burst out with, "Český Krumlov is fajn!" Upon our return, he asked me how it was, and I, not intending to satirize him, naturally said that it was "fine."

**Second Language Syndrome** One odd thing I noticed was my compulsion to answer in French to questions posed to me by Czechs in

restaurants and other public situations. Time and again, I had to consciously resist the urge to say “*merci*” when I meant “*dekuju*,” or “*au revoir*” when I wanted to say “*na shledanou*.” I stammered a lot. I compared this experience with that of Katherine’s. She also speaks French, and said that she had had the same experience upon coming here. We dubbed this the “Second Language Syndrome,” which is where, in mine and Katherine’s cases, the control bits in the brain are set to “French” for “language: other,” and so when “language: other” is called for, French is what comes out. I gradually grew out of this habit.

Whenever I could, I attempted to learn the day to day phrases in Czech, so I could say the niceties like, “hello” (“*ahoj*”), please, (“*prosím*”), etc., just to make my day go a little bit smoother. Lucie and John taught me most of these things. At first, she said, my pronunciation sounded too Russian, and it was true. I was applying what I know of Russian phonology to the pronunciation of these phrases, hoping that it would be correct. It wasn’t of course. Czech intonation patterns are much different, and their use of “softened” consonants, which Russian uses frequently, is much more limited. In addition, Czech has long and short variants of each vowel. Russian lacks this subtlety.

One thing I struggled with, because it fascinated me so, was the Czech phoneme represented by the character “ř.” This is not an easy sound to make. To describe it as a rolled /r/ mixed together with a /ž/ sound (like the second “g” in “garage”) gets you close, but not quite there. It’s not so much a trill mixed with a fricative as it is a trill that is *also* a fricative. It’s hard for me to imagine how such a sound evolved into a language, because it seems so wilfully ornate. I tried to say it whenever I saw it. Someone would hand me a menu, and I’d attempt “řizek, řizek, řizek.” We’d visit a historic site and I’d say “Přemysl, Přemysl, Přemysl.” We’d walk past a concert hall and I’d say, “Dvořák, Dvořák, Dvořák.” Finally, before I left Prague, Lucie told me that my /ř/s were starting to sound pretty good.

## May 29, 1995

**Another Train Ride** The following weekend, after Český Krumlov, we were already on the go again; only this time a bigger adventure was proposed: a visit to Budapest. Our journey would take the form of an eight-hour-long train ride through the night, with the practical hope that we could get some sleep on it. This time, we would be accompanied by a friend of John's named Philip. Unfortunately, the compartments of the Český Drahy (Czech Lines) are more spartan than any train compartments I've seen before, and clearly were not made with sleeping as a consideration. In addition, the air on the train was very bad, to the extent that, an hour after we left the station, my nose and eyes were suffering terribly. This only made it more impossible for me to get comfortable.

I spent part of the night standing in the corridor outside our compartment, with the window next to me wide open, trying to get some fresh air. I found myself listening intently to the powerful sound of the wind being sliced by our train's forward thrust through the night. It was an incredibly loud sound, and yet very rich and inviting in the same way loud symphonic music sometimes is. Each telephone pole we passed modulated the air current, and thus the sound, as it crashed by; providing a slow rhythmic counterpoint to the urgent rattle and roar of the wheels on the tracks. Variations in the proximity of passing buildings, trees, and other trains created pleasing sonic shifts that served as melody. It was music the theme of which was simply movement; the subtext having something vaguely to do with the 20th century.

In spite of my discomfort in train compartment, I did manage to get some sleep. It was just dawn when we made a stop in Bratislava, the capital of the Slovak Republic. I remember blearily seeing the name "Bratislava" on display board written in a slightly funky off-key letter form with evident Slavic influence. I also noticed lots of

men in green uniforms standing around on the barely illuminated platform. It felt something like a scene from *Schindler's List*, the foreign dinginess of the setting and the early hour creating an interesting sense of drama.

Oddly, the Slovaks and the Hungarians have been the only nationalities so far to be the least bit interested in my passport. Everywhere else on this trip (and I am referring to my entire visit to Europe, including Amsterdam, Spain and France), the official doing the checking has waved me on when he sees that I have an American passport. At the border crossings between the Czech and Slovak Republics, and again between Slovakia and Hungary, however, a customs official from the country you're departing goes to every compartment on the train with a box hung around his neck with leather straps. When you hand him your passport, he flips open the top of the box, which gives him access to his rubber stamps. It simultaneously forms a little table for him to stamp firmly against. He does so with a firm, practiced jerk of the wrist and forearm, and then he is off. Right behind him follows the official from the country you are currently entering, and he repeats the procedure.

I think it is very interesting to note that, up until the point when I crossed the Czech and Slovak border on my way to Budapest, not a single European official had any record whatsoever of the fact that I was on the continent. Now that the Slovaks know, maybe I should be careful.

**That's All for Now** I realize this leaves us at an awkward, suspenseful, moment, but I saw so much of interest on this trip that I don't want to compress it all into one issue. So I'll continue with the rest of my Prague trip, including my visits to Budapest, Berlin, and Olomouc, in the next issue. **XP**

**THE EXPATRIOT**

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