

EASTERN EYES: HOW I LEARNED FIRST-HAND ABOUT THE REALITIES OF SOCIALISM

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1951 propaganda poster depicting Joseph Stalin and the first Czech communist president Klement Gottwald

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More than a Tourist...

Soon after the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, I completed a six-month stint living and working behind the old Iron Curtain. During the fall of 1990 and winter of 1991, I was the first Western employee of a nuclear power plant project in southern Bohemia, my job being to teach English to the engineers and technicians there in expectation of a possible buyout by Westinghouse.

I went to Czechoslovakia because I wanted to find out, first-hand, what it was like to live under socialism (the Czechs did not call their system communism but socialism; I came to appreciate their accuracy of language). I knew that by arriving in Czechoslovakia so soon after the revolution, I would be able to experience the imprint of forty-five years of totalitarian socialism, even though the dictatorship had been eradicated forever. This “plan” worked better than I had hoped. Indeed, I became so painfully aware of the true horror of socialism that it took me quite some time to feel ready to write about the experience.

I wanted to learn more than a casual tourist would, and I did so with a vengeance by living and working in what was then still in essence a socialist society. I resided in socialist housing, the kind that makes Harlem housing projects look sturdy by comparison. I ate socialist meals in a company mess hall - grub that, to be honest, was not much worse than the dorm food served up at universities everywhere. I inhaled socialist air filled with the acrid smoke of burning coal. I watched socialist television, read socialist newspapers, even flirted with socialist women.

‘Socialist Women’

Correction: to be precise, there were no women in socialist Czechoslovakia. It took me a while to come to this paradoxical conclusion, but the evidence of my senses revealed only girls and mothers. Czech men would often ask me: “What do you think of our Czech girls?” And I would invariably reply: “Well, they’re fine, but I like women.” The girls were all very nice, mind you, but they were, well, girlish. And I discovered why: because of the chronic shortage of housing (given complete state control of housing and full nationalization of the construction industry), there were

really only two ways for a girl to gain a coveted apartment: (1) find a job guaranteeing state housing (usually in a “company town” whose population was up to 90% female); or (2) find a mate who’d found a job guaranteeing state housing. The result was some strange matches, both to spouses and to companies. But that was the socialist way.

Feminism, in case you’re wondering, never seems to have made its appearance in socialist society. Men and women were supposed to have been equal under socialism. Unfortunately, some were more equal than others. Women were, of course, expected to add their labor to society (“Those who do not work, shall not eat”, said Lenin), and it seemed to me that just about every woman who wasn’t either very old or with child was in the work force. The catch was that women performed all the traditional “women’s chores” at home, too. It made for a busy day, but thankfully no one was really expected to do much work on the job, so there was no problem taking time off to shop. Besides, the socialist workday ran from 6:30 AM to 3:30 PM, which left plenty of time after work for housework in home sweet housing project, or what the Czechs affectionately called a *králíkárna* - literally, a rabbit warren.

‘Private Property’ Czech-Style and the Destruction of the Economy...

Lest I give the wrong impression, I should note that there was an ever-so-slight amount of private property allowed under Czech socialism, but the emphasis is on the word slight. Even the kiosks selling newspapers and cigarettes - which in New York, London, and other Western cities are hallmarks of small, private enterprise - were state-owned under socialism. However, many houses did remain in private hands, especially in the countryside. This granted people the opportunity to tend a small garden and to produce a supply of fruits and vegetables not available from the socialist collectives.

These private plots also afforded the chance to build what people everywhere covet: their own home. In Czechoslovakia, if you had a relative with a private house then you could theoretically build a new house that shared the same plot of land. It was difficult, but not impossible. The only problem was, you had to

build it yourself. Thus many of my Czech friends knew how to build a house from the ground up. At the time I was in Czechoslovakia, there were special difficulties, however, in that it was virtually impossible to find bricks (the main ingredients of a Czech house). The only solution was to manufacture your own bricks! My only thought about this was: what a tremendous waste of time and energy! When you have to manufacture your own bricks in order to build your own house, you are living in a society that has no effective division of labor. This total breakdown of a civilized economy was just one more sign to me that human time and energy - human life - are valued not at all under socialism.

The amazing thing about Czechoslovakia is that it was once a wealthy country. Czechoslovakia was no Russia or China, backward at the time of communism's takeover and backward today. Czechoslovakia (especially the Czech portion) was industrially advanced and materially well-off, even as late as the Communist putsch of 1948. The Czechs were much more advanced than their neighbors in Austria, for example. After 45 years of socialism, however, the fortunes had changed and it was the Czechs who were backward compared to the Austrians (a fact brought home to my Czech friends by the expensive cars of Austrian tourists on the roads of Czechoslovakia). The terrible swift suddenness with which this reversal took place testifies to the sheer destructive power of socialism. Unwittingly, the Czechs proved that it doesn't take long to destroy the physical and human capital of an advanced nation - and they have the scars to show for it.

Those scars were clear to me in my friends' hunger for material goods. They would continually ask me: How much does a car cost in America? How much for a bottle of beer? How much for a TV? In response to these repeated barrages, I computed what their purchasing power was. I asked myself: how long would it take an American worker to earn enough money to buy a car, versus the same figure for a Czech worker (and similarly for other items)? I came to the conclusion that the standard of living in the United States was at least five or six times better than that in Czechoslovakia. For example, the average American must work 32 weeks or so to earn enough to buy a car. A Czech worker had to slave away for five or six years. And even if you did own a car in Czechoslovakia, there wasn't much you could do with it: during the time I lived there, gasoline cost the work-equivalent of \$50 a gallon. So much for a Sunday drive in the country.

Furthermore, my calculations took into account only the quantity of goods, not their quality. In my experi-

ence there was only one Czech product that was clearly superior to the American equivalent, and that was beer (one Communist leader of Czechoslovakia is famous for having pronounced: "Beer is our bread!"). I happened to live in a town the German name of which is Budweis, home of the original Budweiser beer (Anheuser-Busch appropriated use of the trademark in the Western Hemisphere). Czech Budweiser is far superior to American Budweiser, but the superiority of Czech products pretty much ended there. Examples abound, but my favorites were the paper products; I fondly recall writing pads made of what felt like (but wasn't) recycled paper and especially the toilet paper, which gained added value because it could be used for fine sanding jobs around the *králikárna*. Service, too, remained of the standard socialist variety, which is why my Czech friends held a tremendous fascination for private shops, even to the point of knowing the exact order in which the new private shops in town had opened.

Another remnant of socialism was an unshakable belief in the "just price", a curious relic which one would have thought went out with the Middle Ages. I remember clearly the day when prices for some basic foodstuffs were liberated. There was especial controversy over eggs, I recall. Shoppers were shocked, not at the fact that there was a price increase - that would have been accepted under the old system if it had been decreed by the government - but at the inexplicable: that there were different prices for eggs at different locations around town. How in the world could a dozen eggs cost 1.09 in one store and 1.06 just down the street? People shook their heads, dumbfounded.

But the damage caused by socialism ran deeper than the price of eggs. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, many cried the litany of destruction in Eastern Europe. Those who visited there invariably remarked on its unrelieved grayness: very few buildings in the East looked as if they had been painted or maintained since World War Two, and when you did stumble upon a recently-renovated building it seemed strangely out of place, a magical glimpse into another world.

Long-held traditions of craftsmanship were forgotten, and all knowledge of how to function in a market economy vanished. For instance, many of my colleagues no longer knew how to work. My friends informed me that young people always worked hard for the first few years - until they realized the futility of production.

...and the Environment...

Socialism destroyed the environment, too. Northern Bohemia, for example, was and is perhaps the most

ecologically blighted region on this earth. Even in my town in the relatively pristine region near the Austrian border, you didn't just see the coal smoke hanging in the air - you smelled it, breathed it, tasted it, felt it in your hair and clothes. Throughout Czechoslovakia, the air and water became so polluted that many women had trouble bringing pregnancies to term. My students would disappear for three weeks at a time, bedridden with nothing more serious than the common cold. Indeed, it seems that whole populations in the Eastern Bloc went through life in a state essentially of malnourishment.

...and the Soul

But the hunger that I found most disturbing was not of the body but of the soul. The two are not unrelated, of course. The twentieth-century Chinese intellectual Hu Shih once said that it is the West that is spiritually superior to the East, not the other way about, precisely because Western capitalism satisfies the material needs of the individual. The socialist state cared nothing for the life of the individual, and this was driven home in innumerable ways. Yet the overall effect was not merely physical - it was a deeply spiritual degradation.

It is difficult to put that degradation into words. To me, the most striking sign of it was what I called "Eastern eyes". I could see and feel the resignation, the defeat, the despair, in the eyes of people I knew. It was an all-too-rare occurrence to come upon a person with some spark of life in his or her eyes (the only exceptions were the children, who had yet to have the life beaten out of them). If it is true that the eyes are windows onto the soul, then the Czech soul under socialism went through life all but dead.

The spiritual destruction suffered by people in the East was further evident to me in the two emotions that seemed to color their entire existence: envy and guilt. The envy that I saw directed at those who were successful amazed and disturbed me. Again and again, I ran into the belief that "only crooks and communists can possibly succeed" (from which it followed that anyone who succeeded must have been one or the other). In fact, one did not even need to be successful in order to be the object of resentment. One friend of mine, who spoke good English, was interested in working abroad and had applied for jobs in England and Saudi Arabia. Though at the time he had not in fact obtained such a position, he was nevertheless bitterly resented by his co-workers, for he possessed ambition and desired a better life for himself. In other words, the simple fact of *wanting* to be successful was considered by many to be a sin - and not a minor one, either. The experience made me realize for the first

time just how deeply embedded is envy in the radical egalitarianism of socialism.

Yet deeper even than the envy was the guilt. The Czech people I knew felt an ineffable regret over what had happened to their country - or, as they expressed it, what they had allowed to happen to their country: namely, over forty years of socialism. Of course, these people were not truly to blame, as the communist system was in large measure forced on them by the "fraternal assistance" of the great Soviet bear. Despite the futility of the questions, they asked themselves over and over: How could we have put up with this degradation? How could we have allowed this to happen? How could we have accepted such inhumanity for so long? Yet they did these things, and they felt, all of them, an ineradicable sense of guilt and shame over it.

All of them, that is, except those who fought openly against the old system, dissidents such as Vaclav Havel and a very few others, who risked their lives by signing Charter 77 and demanding that human rights be respected in Czechoslovakia. These very few remained pure and were therefore respected and revered for their uncommon courage - the kind of courage that should never have to be displayed. Yet those few who remained morally pure were at the same time envied and hated, for the simple fact that they *did* remain pure. Their inviolate purity shone an unbearable light on the self-perceived evil of those who did not fight the system but instead lived with it, gave into it, accepted it.

During the time I was in Czechoslovakia, the vilest epithet one Czech could hurl at another was *jsi stára struktura*: "you are old structure". It meant: you sold out to socialism, you were an active part of the collectivist power structure, you abetted the destruction of our lives and our country. It was reserved for the most diehard communists, and in all my time in Czechoslovakia I never heard it addressed directly at any person (except in jest between good friends), as it was too horrible a thing to accuse of someone face-to-face. Yet, soon before I was to leave Czechoslovakia, I was speaking with a friend about the terrible burden of guilt that Czech people felt over their acceptance of the old system, and he said to me quietly in explanation: "You know, each one of us has a little bit of the *stára struktura* deep in his heart, and it will remain there for the rest of our lives." That, to me, is the most damning indictment of socialism.



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