

*In 1947, the British National Union of Students (NUS), then an apolitical organisation concerned only with student welfare, was proposed as a member of the International Union of Students (not everyone was in favour, and indeed both Liverpool and Manchester universities voted against). As an upshot of this, the young Derek Slater was sent to the Prague Youth Festival as an observer, after accepting an invitation to spend a year working for the IUS in its "press and information" department. Derek had just graduated, and felt it an opportunity not to be missed. He visited the IUS secretariat in Prague, returned home after the festival had finished, and flew back to Czechoslovakia in September 1947.*

## The Closing of the Curtain

### 1

Immediately after the Second World War, the opposing ideologies of "democratic" and "totalitarian" government were tidily arranged on either side of the Oder-Nesse line. It became commonplace to describe the countries to the east as "satellites" of the Soviet Union, and to infer that, in the power struggle that would inevitably follow, they – including the soon-to-be-formed German Democratic Republic – would form part of what Reagan called the "evil empire" that was hell-bent on conquering the rest of the world and bringing an end to civilisation as we know it.

With hindsight, this would seem to be a fear bordering on hysteria; while the USSR was no doubt determined to safeguard its future by surrounding itself with compatible and sympathetic systems of government, the notion that a country which had lost upwards of 20 million soldiers in the murderous battles of WWII would even contemplate military action against the West was manifestly absurd. More to the point, not all of the eastern states involved were complaisant adherents to the Kremlin; Hungary, and to a lesser extent Romania, showed worrying signs of independence, while Yugoslavia under Marshal Tito maintained an even-handedness, in trade and in diplomacy, with both sides of the Iron Curtain.

In this context, Czechoslovakia acquired almost symbolic status. Sacrificed by the appeasers in 1938, when Hitler was allowed to seize the western province of Sudetenland, it was occupied by the German forces later that year; its universities were closed in November, 1939, and many of the students were sent to work in labour camps in Germany. The Czechs put up a strong resistance to the Nazi occupation, and many of them were summarily executed, or sent to concentration camps. However, the first administration set up after the war was not a one-party dictatorship, but a coalition of four major parties, democratically elected. To western observers, Czechoslovakia shone like a good deed in a malign world – the brave little country, sacrificed by the pusillanimous Chamberlain, now proudly asserting its right to follow the path of representative government.

In 1946 the newly-formed International Union of Students was permitted to set up its headquarters in Prague. Many student groups in the West, and in the USA, regarded it as a hard-left organisation, a mouthpiece for Soviet propaganda; others were inclined to give it the benefit of the doubt. Those of us who worked in it (and who were not communists) took the

perhaps naive view that, since its members were nominated by student unions throughout the world, it was perfectly possible for all shades of political opinion to be represented. In theory, one of its main functions was to publish an international student magazine, in four languages, to generate information and provoke discussion on matters of importance; in practice, much of its work was campaigning on behalf of students who were suffering various forms of oppression from dictatorial regimes in, for example, Greece, Spain and Indonesia. Its activities were certainly, in the broadest sense, political, and – like most openly anti-fascist organisations – inclined to be left-wing; but it was allowed complete freedom by the Czech authorities, who provided the premises, paid 50% of our salaries, and gave us free access to Prague radio station, from where we were able to transmit short-wave bulletins all over the world.

In the hot, dry summer of 1947, Prague hosted the first post-war *International Youth Festival*, an impressive showcase of student art, music, dance and theatre. There were no Americans; the British, perhaps suspicious of an event staged in eastern Europe, were there mainly to watch; but there were significant contributions from France, Scandinavia, the eastern Mediterranean, and India. Prague is a beautiful city, virtually undamaged by marauding armies, and under the blazing sun there was a heady sense of freedom – simultaneously, it seemed, from war or from colonial rule. Solutions to previously intractable problems of ethnicity, economic survival, and territorial intransigence seemed absurdly simple; posters showing smiling Arabs and Jews rejoicing in the liberation of the Holy Land, cartoons depicting Muslims and Hindus united in dethroning the British Raj seem, with hindsight, tragically and absurdly unreal. However, in the context of a world recently liberated from the megalomania of Hitler and Mussolini, the impossible dream of international peace and reconciliation held no hint of the nightmares to come.

Prague as a showcase was wonderful; Prague as a workplace, in the autumn and winter which followed, was a different matter. The summer drought had left its mark; milk and fresh fruit were not to be found, and our ration cards were issued every month, their meagre offerings reflecting the worsening situation. The only decent meal I remember having was courtesy of the Russian Embassy, which celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution by producing the biggest banquet I had ever seen. It was small comfort; by November the weather turned cold and wet, and in early

## 2

December the snow came. It stayed for eight weeks, glittering with the reflected light of a thousand Christmas lanterns; the river Vltava froze, and the temperature fell to –30 C.

The uneasy coalition, which was set up after the war to oversee the redevelopment of the country, was dominated – numerically, at least – by the Communist Party, which had 40% of the popular vote. Many of the larger

industries had been taken into state control, but an ingenious system of state-sponsored private firms – *narodni sprava* – was introduced, to encourage competition and to prevent the nationalised industries from establishing a monopoly. Students, I suppose, are inevitably cocooned from the realities of every-day living, but we tried as best we could to understand what was going on. Every day a digest, in English, of the main news reports from the four party broadsheets appeared on my desk; every visit to the cinema included a newsreel praising the Soviet Union for its generosity in contributing vital supplies to the near-starving Czech people; and every concert ended with the playing of both the Czech and the Slovak national anthems, in a desperate attempt to heal the rift between the two provinces. (The occupying German army had used the mainly agricultural resources of Slovakia as a “bread-basket” for their far-flung troops, and this had aroused in the occupied and abused Czechs a whiff of resentment, and a suspicion – possibly justified – of collaboration.)

In February 1948, a single party – a deal struck by the Communists and the Social Democrats – took over the reins of government. The People’s Party and the Catholic Party resigned. There were student demonstrations on the steps leading up to Hradcany, but they were quickly dealt with. As far as I know, nobody was killed or seriously injured, and there were few arrests. There were no Russian tanks on the streets of Prague. For a couple of days I had to present my credentials to an armed guard before I could get into my office, but within a week he had disappeared. Life carried on much as usual; but now the English digest of the morning newspapers no longer arrived on my desk. I still received the newspapers from around the world, and I remember vividly an article in the *New York Herald Tribune*. The headline read ‘Reds Grab Control in Czechoslovakia’. There followed a lengthy report, and it concluded – with an arrogance we have since grown accustomed to – with these words: “There was nothing the United States could do about it.”

It was difficult for a foreign student, working in an international organisation, to gauge the effect of this “palace revolution” on the lives of ordinary people. My personal freedom was never inhibited, and I was allowed to write what I pleased, and go where I wanted, and no attempt was made to censor my broadcasts. I travelled to England in April, 1948, to speak at a NUS conference, and we became a nine-day wonder with the English press, firstly because we had “escaped” from behind the Iron Curtain, and secondly because we were mad enough to want to go back. As the months passed, and the new government began to exercise stricter control over the economic and social life of the country, it became obvious that we were in a privileged position: the government wanted the IUS to remain in Prague as an earnest of its benign intentions towards the international student community.

For many Czechs - students and others - there must have been an uneasy feeling that the freedoms many of them had fought so hard to preserve were once more under threat. A couple of weeks after the collapse of the coalition, Jan Masaryk, foreign minister and darling of the student

population, fell to his death from a window in the Cernin Palace. Son of T.G. Masaryk, founding father of the Czech Republic, he was a respected and admired public figure. Not everyone believed the explanation of his death – that he had committed suicide; and those who did believe it wondered what had driven him to such despair. Twelve of us – students, one from each of twelve different countries – walked behind his coffin through the streets of Prague, past thousands and thousands of people, many of them openly weeping. But there was no rebellion; most seemed to accept the change of regime with a kind of numbed resignation.

In the weeks that followed the February coup, I became aware that a number of my university friends had managed to cross into Germany. On the somewhat transparent pretext of tracking down former collaborators, and those who had practised irregular financial dealing during the war and after, the new regime closed the country's western borders. A month or so later they relented, and offered "exit permits" to all who wanted to leave, provided they did not have a criminal record, were not facing charges, and were not leaving behind any bad debts. These were not passports; those who took advantage of the offer would, inevitably, become refugees.

### 3

In May 1948, as the date of the elections approached, the Czech government issued a single list of candidates. A few disillusioned British and American academics decided, in view of what was clearly a *fait accompli*, to go home. The country had slipped, quietly and without much fuss, into the enemy camp, and they had had enough. It had been an unobtrusive revolution, but it had been completely successful. And it had taken no tanks on the street to do it. That would have to wait until 1968.