

TITLE: Prague—Notes on a trip
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ROLE: Unwitting witness to “Prague Spring”
NOTES:

20 AUGUST

The flight from Geneva to Prague was a delight—the day clear and the snow-capped Alps giving way to rich rolling farmland. The descent into Prague brought us into an elegantly modern terminal—spacious, open, modern, not unlike the airport in Geneva. A physician and driver from the Institute met the plane and with a minimum of formalities, we departed for Karlovy Vara, 100 Kms. distant. The route bypassed Prague completely and wound through the Czech countryside. Compared to Switzerland or neighboring areas of West Germany, the villages are drab, the houses frequently in partial disrepair, and traffic on the road minimal save for not infrequent dilapidated trucks and occasional farm wagons. The people, however, appeared remarkably well and colorfully dressed & industrious. The land appeared most fertile; a not inconsiderable amount of mechanical equipment was in use. Abruptly, some 5 to 10 Kms. from Karlovy Vara, the hills begin and suddenly one descends into a magnificent, baroque resort which is built over a large number of adjoining hills. It was dusk as I arrived. There was an easy, relaxed middle class elegance with small groups strolling about, many carrying the special type of container one used for drinking mineral water from the numerous springs. In the cool evening air, most wore topcoats over business suits—few children were in evidence. The atmosphere was relaxed, almost languid.

Discussions in the evening focused on the Russian crisis. The stories were many. Some were exuberant, others relieved; all were relaxed and confident “they had won”. There was the story of the workers who had petitioned Moscow to save their country and socialism. The number was said to be perhaps 80 of several thousand. On learning of this, there was a demand by other workers that these 80 be fired and suppliers to the firm threatened to cut off supplies unless this action was taken. Whether true or not the tenor of the story appeared to be the tenor of the feeling of those with whom we talked. The people were solidly united. Dubček was a national hero to Czech and Slovak alike—freedom of the press, abolishment of the secret police, encouragement of dissent were but a few of his noted accomplishments—above all was the sense that the future for Czechoslovakia was at last dawning. As one stated it:

“You can’t appreciate what it is like to lose 30 years of your life—they have stolen this from me”. Clearly implied was the thought that after 30 years, life was beginning.

21 AUGUST

For reasons I didn't know, I awoke about 6.00, considered getting up to take an early walk but then went back to sleep. As I had no alarm, I asked Alex Langmuir to wake me at 7.00. Sharply at 7.00, there was a rap on the door. I opened it to be told by two of those from the Institute that the Russians had occupied the country. My inane response was simply—"this is a joke". A second glance at their faces and I knew they were serious. Russian tanks had early that morning moved through Karlovy Vara and were positioned around the town. Planes had been flying overhead in the early morning.

We convened immediately in the office of the conference—some of the senior WHO Geneva staff arriving rather later and still under the apprehension that it was a joke. A free radio in Prague broadcast the news and urged people to remain calm, and informed them that it was futile to demonstrate. On the square opposite the hotel, people were gathered in knots listening to the broadcast. Shortwave transmission from the BBC provided little additional information except that troops from Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria were involved. Fragments of news filtered in that Dubček and others had been meeting from early in the morning hours and had asked the Russians to withdraw. It was determined that a bus with gasoline was at our disposal and that the border was not more than 40 Kms. distant. The thought of making a dash for it was considered and discarded—not only were the roads closed, but it was felt that without "safe conduct" from some competent authority, it would be most hazardous. It was decided to continue with the course—all parties to participate actively to try to put some focus on the discussions. Breakfast was a tense affair and sad—two of the waitresses appearing with puffy, red-rimmed eyes. The Czechs were stunned, depressed and bitterly angry.

Towards 10, the course was interrupted by a chanting group of perhaps 100-150 teenagers bearing large Czech flags and shouting "Dubček-Svoboda" and "Russians go home"—crude banners were being carried. Amazingly, two from the Institute arrived from Prague and noted that the roads had been terribly torn up by tanks—several times they had had to stop to show identification cards—to our friends the Russians—yet, they added bitterly

Radio Prague continued to broadcast until midmorning and went off the air—Radio Pilsen continued to broadcast. Further news came in—the Central Committee meeting was under siege by Russian tanks, one (later four) tanks were said to have been burned, several had been killed and 25 or more wounded. The course continued—the Czechs, overcome with emotion, declined to present as scheduled. The senior staff consulted frequently and monitored the BBC and Voice of America—the former was excellent—the latter provided little information and actually devoted more time to the Democratic Convention plans and Eisenhower's heart attack than to this, clearly one of the most tragic events in the past 30 years. Out on the square, people continued to stand together in small groups listening to news broadcasts but all was overtly quiet, grim. The group of marchers returned—now perhaps treble in number with larger flags and more banners. On two occasions, I returned to the office to find one of our Czech confrères openly weeping. The UN Representative in Prague was contacted, names of participants given and a request made that Dr. Candau be cabled (cables never left as we later learned). I talked with the American embassy on a priority call to obtain advice—the voice on the other end was obviously frantic, could say nothing except to stay put but wanted no information regarding names or locations of Americans explaining simply that there were thousands in the country and the Voice of America would advise further. The Danish embassy advised that all proceed directly to the Austrian

border some 300 Kms. distant as this was said to be still open. We elected to stay put—the course continued with Alex and Cockburn doing their valiant best to focus on the subjects at hand. It was decided that the money and travelers' cheques on hand for payment of expenses should be split up among senior staff so that should we depart suddenly, we would have this for purposes of bribes, etc. in getting the various participants out.

As the afternoon wore on, more news came in—U Thant was to visit Prague on the following day and was insisting on coming—support for Czechoslovakia from Roumania, Yugoslavia, and the Communist parties in Italy, France and the U.K. was announced. Arrival of troops at the Prague airport and by parachute was recorded—as one Czech noted, “our friends—and they have to treat us this way”. That parachutists were used seemed, for some reason, to irritate him particularly. The town remained, if anything, more quiet than usual and business proceeded—mail, garbage, milk delivery—two painters worked diligently on the painting of the hotel. We speculated on the future events and felt that after 5 to 7 days, enough would have been consolidated by the Russians to at least enable us to leave. We settled in—the programme was replanned and we all gave thought to what additionally we might present and discuss.

Radio Pilsen ceased broadcasting but an “illegal” station continued using some sort of transmitter near Pilsen. The hotels in Karlovy Vara were emptying rapidly—East German cars appeared the earliest to go. Groups in trucks and motorcyclists periodically raced down the street honking loudly, bearing large Czech flags and were applauded by pedestrians.

By evening, tables were set up on numerous street corners and petitions were being signed—a printed handbill appears on windows and other spots all over town—in Czech and Russian—addressed to USSR troops and officers and asking that they leave. In general, however, there was little activity and except for a somewhat more sombre mood of the populace and groups gathered here and there intently listening to the radio, the scene did not appear significantly different than the night before.

22 AUGUST

I awoke somewhat earlier than usual to a light overcast day and went directly to the office to see what might have occurred the night before. I felt it was likely that Russian troops would unrest the town either that evening or the next. The square was much as the day before except for Czech flags at half mast all around the square—many draped in black bunting. Posters had appeared here and there with the general theme “Dubček—Svoboda” or “USSR go home” or “1939-1968”. The office was empty except for a single Czech physician. We chatted about various topics—clearly he was depressed and fearful regarding reinstatement of the secret police. He felt his own safety to be particularly doubtful. There was little news except that 250,000 troops were said to be in the country and more were coming. At breakfast, it was learned that there were 4 on the Central Committee who were brought into the meeting of the Central Committee at gunpoint and were said to be willing to play ball with the Russians. There appeared to be somewhat more turmoil in Prague but how much was not clear.

The morning was mine on smallpox—the discussion was active and it was decided to extend the question period until after coffee. Before breaking, however, Dr. Roelsgaard come in with the announcement that everyone should pack at once—that the bus would be leaving for the frontier. The senior Czech physician had been in touch with the mayor who ascertained that the nearest border was

still in Czech hands and that we could proceed through the roadblocks. Efforts to reach embassies had been in vain. A general strike was due to begin at noon, or 1 or 2 to last for five minutes or 1 hour or several days. Information was conflicting. It was rumored that a meeting of the Central Committee was to be convened in Karlovy Vary on the following day. The Central Committee had announced somehow or other that Czechoslovakia would continue to pursue its own course and asked the Russians to leave. General disturbances were increasing. In the square across from the hotel and in the streets, all was ominously quiet. There was tension in the air as before a thunderstorm—I have never experienced anything quite like it. Many people now wore red, white and blue strips of cloth on their lapels, a few children came along the street bearing Russian flags with a swastika painted on them; vastly more banners and posters were in evidence. The “Hotel Moscuva” of the night before, was now the “Grand Hotel”. Virtually every car and truck seen bore a Czech flag. More tables were set up for petitions. At noon, the national anthem was played through loud speakers—as far as one could see, everyone was stiffly drawn to attention. The tears came to my eyes as I looked down on these lonely determined people, the banners above them at half mast and reflected on what was ahead.

About 1, the bus arrived and we set off in convoy, each of the vehicles bearing a red cross in the windshield and Dr Roelsgaard’s car a large painted-that-morning WHO banner across the front. A Czech vehicle with the senior Czech physician led the way followed by Roelsgaard, Radovanovic in his car and the bus. Banners and signs were everywhere in evidence—streets and walls were painted, all proclaiming “Dubček—Svoboda”, “USSR go home”, “1939-1968” and the like. Groups of people gathered everywhere on the way waved at the procession—none smiled. A few kilometres from town were Russian troops—few in number—a couple of troop carriers only but shortly up the road, a crowd gathered where a tank had crashed through a bridge and was lying in a stream bed. The troops looked awfully young. A convoy of an armoured personnel carrier, two tank trucks and a motorcyclist trio was passed on route. These troops also looked very young and sort of bored—grim. Flags were at half mast everywhere.

A pause at a checkpoint and approved to go on—a lengthy delay at the Czech border while passports were dutifully inspected, money exchanged, etc. as though nothing had happened. An armoured Soviet gun carrier was drawn up at one side and two armed Soviet soldiers leaned against the railing and watched expressionless. Our bus turned back and we were picked up by one sent from the German side. A 2 Km journey to the German immigration across the carefully ploughed barbed wire strip, the sentry posts mounted high above and at the other end, a waiting crowd of perhaps 100-150 persons—just watching but interspersed German military obviously keeping an eye on things and well-equipped for rapid communication. At the German post, we were told to call Cook’s, that a bus had been arranged to take us to Nürnberg, hotel accommodation was booked and all further arrangements had been made for the group. We paused 15 Kms further to eat and we immediately called Geneva only to learn that fully 15 minutes before, WHO had called staff families to notify that we were safely out.

Need I add the free world looked good to all—clearly, however, it can never be the same. I wish I could say that I am pleased to be out—relieved, perhaps—but hardly happy. One has the feeling that in some way we should do something to help—not run away—but what?