

8. Prague 1969

In the summer of 1968, before I was due to start my BSc degree course at the University of East Anglia, I wanted a travel adventure, and discovered a student work camp in Italy, in a hill village in the Lazio region south of Rome. The village itself was remote, and life had hardly changed since the 1930s. The camp was a revelation after my sheltered schooldays in Bournemouth (not unlike Tommy's as I describe in *The Hammond Perception*). I met teenagers from Italy, France, Belgium, USA – and some of them were... GIRLS!! But the most interesting were a trio of students from Prague. In those days the Iron Curtain prevented ordinary citizens from visiting the West – until an unassuming gently smiling man called Alexander Dubcek found himself as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (the ČSSR. I'm afraid I won't be putting all the many accents on Czech words). His Prague Spring – Socialism with a Human Face – saw liberal reforms, including the possibility of an exit visa, provided you could lay your hands on sufficient hard currency for your trip.

Everyone was in awe of these exotic creatures, but I was particularly fascinated, having been receiving propaganda magazines (*Czechoslovak Life*) from Radio Prague through my short-wave listening hobby. I found that Czechs have a very similar character and sense of humour to the English, and we got on well. When the camp was ending, they said, "You must come and visit us next summer, and see the exciting developments in our country."

And so I did. But of course the social and political developments had come to a sudden halt shortly after they returned home, with the August 25th invasion of the country by Warsaw Pact armies. But I wasn't going to let an invasion stop me. So I travelled to the Czechoslovak Embassy in London, a brutalist concrete pile at Notting Hill Gate, and filled in the four-part visa application (the first part kept at the Embassy, one taken at the border, the third a currency exchange record, and this and the final part surrendered on leaving).

After rolling through the ever more deserted and bucolic green Bavarian countryside, the train stopped at Schirnding station for a cursory check of passports by bored Bundesgrenzpolizei in their bucolic green uniforms. Then the excitement of crossing the Iron Curtain itself: the train crawling along a deep railway cutting with watchtowers looming over us. The train halted in a decrepit goods yard while border guards worked their way through the carriages, checking under seats, examining luggage, stamping passports and exchanging my travellers cheques for crumpled notes featuring heroic peasants, steel workers – and border guards. I've described this in *The Hammond Conjecture*, when Hugh passes through the German Zone on his way to Paris (the city divided in his alternative world as Berlin was in ours).

I stayed in a student Hall of Residence on Strahov hill, with a fantastic view over the city. The next morning I bought my tram tickets and set off to explore. We are always told that Prague under communism was a grey forbidding city of crumbling buildings. Not true: a refreshing absence of advertisements (except for theatres and concerts), but there were bright red propaganda hoardings and slogans (*'Together with the Soviet Union for All Time!'*) hiding the crumbling buildings, and the streets were lined with flags (always Czechoslovak and Soviet together). No graffiti (with which the city is plagued today). The only evidence of the 1968 invasion were the badly-patched bullet-holes on the columns of the National Museum.

There seemed to be army officers in olive-green uniforms everywhere, but I learned that the ones with red cap bands were police. Not called police, though; their cars were clapped-out white Ladas identified by thick black lettering painted on the doors: VB (for Verejne Bezpecnost, or Public Security, as distinct from StB, the secret police). I still feel slight apprehension on seeing a can of Victoria Bitter.

But more pressingly: food and drink. All outlets were state-owned, and fell into four price groups, from 1st (international restaurants) to 4th (stand-up canteens called *jidelny*, and spit-and-sawdust pubs). Within each price group the prices were the same: a half-litre of beer was 1.70 crowns (about 5p) in every 4th class establishment; you can guess which class I frequented. The biggest *jidelna* was Koruna, on the corner at the bottom of Wenceslas Square, where Desigual is now. I loved queueing for beer and watching the barman keep up a constant throughput of glasses in various stages of foam-settling. The menu was on boards above the counters, and all in Czech, so incomprehensible to the few tourists. The Party was keen to protect the populace from Western influences; pop groups must have Czech names, and only sing in Czech (or Slovak). I remember first seeing a counter labelled '*studene jidlo*', and assuming it meant 'student meals'. After three days of eating open sandwiches (*chlebicky*) and jellied meat I discovered that '*studene*' meant 'cold'.

One evening I was walking through the Old Town, the sclerotic heart of the city. It's now a tourist Mecca, but back then it was largely deserted, a dilapidated quarter of medieval tenements on the verge of collapse shored up with scaffolding, long-closed shops and blocked-off passageways. Then I came upon a window with golden light diffusing from inside, and sounds of conversation. The door indicated it was a 4th class pub, so I went in. This, it turned out, was U Zlateho Tygra, and it became a favourite haunt. It was strictly for locals, who were suspicious if a lone Western visitor should wander in. One evening, at the end of a fascinating and now forgotten conversation with my neighbour at the long table, he apologised that he had initially assumed I was an StB agent provocateur. Now the pub finds itself on the main tourist avenue,

but staff fend off Westerners by socialist-era levels of rudeness (see Tripadvisor reviews).

This visit was the start of a life-long love of the country now known as Czechia. I returned many times, notably in 1975 to get married. But that's another story.