Prague

Michael Flynn, William H. Laird Professor of Linguistics and the Liberal Arts, emeritus

This is the story of a trip I made to Prague, Czechoslovakia, the 21st through the 24th of May, 1982. It was originally written in June, 1982, and lightly edited for this version in February, 2025. Everything that I report here is true to the best of my recollection (in 1982). For reasons that will become obvious, some inessential details have been altered, and some names have been changed. The Czech names are drawn from the life and work of Franz Kafka, who was born in Prague July 3, 1883.

Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic on December 31, 1992. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czechoslovakia

Prague

In the summer of 1981, I was a fellow at the Institute for the Philosophy of Psychology in Seattle, Washington. If I remember correctly, there were about forty of us there, thirty-odd "students", all of whom had their Ph.D.s and some of whom were quite distinguished, and eight "faculty" who gave seminars on various topics. On the last night of this six-week institute, there was a big party for all the farewell-saying, the inevitable philosophy talk, some flirting, and lots of drinking. About halfway through, one of the faculty, a well-known and affable philosopher named Dan Dennett, who I had come to like and admire very much, said he wanted to have a word with me.

During that summer, I thought I was just coming into my own as a professional academic. My Ph.D. was only a few months old, but I was already gathering a reputation, small as it was, that I was quite proud of. I was the only fellow at the institute who was a linguist, the rest were all philosophers and psychologists. I had won a Fulbright Fellowship and would leave in September for a year as a visiting scholar at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in The Netherlands. It seems as if things were beginning to open up. I hoped that Dan was about to suggest some new opportunity for me.

This turned out to be true, but not in the way I had anticipated. Dan said that, since I would be in Europe for the coming academic year, I might be interested in taking part in a rather special project. He then told me about an organization called the Jan Hus Society. If I agreed, this group might be able to arrange for me to visit Prague, Czechoslovakia to give a lecture or two on some topic or other in linguistics or philosophy. He himself had done this not long before, and remembered it fondly as an exciting and moving experience. Before he let me decide, he explained a little more about the Society and what it does, enumerated the risks I would be taking, and told me to think it over a bit. I was pleased and flattered, especially since he indicated that they don't ask just anybody.

Since shortly after the second world war, Czechoslovakia has been in the Soviet sphere of influence. As early as 1946, Hoover had placed it, prematurely, behind the "Iron Curtain". The Czechs themselves, however, were always a little uncomfortable with this American neglect. With the Soviet Union to her east, and West Germany and Austria to her west, Czechoslovakia at one time nourished the vain hope of being a bridge between the two worlds. This ambition sputtered and

flared from time to time, but was pretty thoroughly extinguished when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968.

When the tanks rolled through the streets of Prague, a substantial alteration of Czech society was underway. Among other things, the great university at Prague became essentially a wing of the government. There was a purge of the faculty, and many others left voluntarily, feeling that it was impossible to work under conditions that compromised their integrity to such a degree. For example, as one of these people would later tell me, all promotions, hirings, dismissals, admissions, and graduations were totally dependent on the political affiliations of the candidate. Sometime after the initial turmoil had subsided, a sort of underground university was started, consisting of several groups of people who would meet in private to discuss subjects they were interested in. This is contrary to the government's wishes and, of course, without its support. This is an understatement. Some of these people had signed Charter 77, essentially a document of protest against the deprivation of civil liberties, which made them subject to various sorts of harassment.

The Jan Hus Society was started by Western academics to help their colleagues in Prague. Its members work without material compensation, and sometimes at great personal expense, to aid in the preservation of a modicum of free intellectual discourse in Czechoslovakia. They arrange visits by Western scholars and provide books and articles which are otherwise unavailable, as well as some financial support.

The risks I would be taking were sizable compared to what I was used to, but miniscule when viewed from a broader perspective. Nothing, or at least almost nothing of what I would be doing was actually illegal, but the authorities do keep up a constant pressure on the Prague seminars, breaking them up from time to time and making a few arrests in the process. One easy way to arrest a foreigner is to plant drugs on him or her or to "find" drugs in a bag while it is being searched. The worst case, Dan explained, was this: I would be arrested for drug possession and held in custody for probably not longer than 24 hours. I might be interrogated, perhaps roughly but not brutally. I would be put on an airplane to the place I came from, with a special stamp in my passport which would prevent me from entering any other East-bloc country.

I had never been asked to put up any money (the trip would be at my own expense) or risk personal injury for principles that I regard as fundamental. Now, for the first time really, I was being asked to put something on the line, to make a small gesture in protest against a tragically common situation: a population's loss of the freedom to read about whatever they wish and talk about it with whomever they are inclined. There was also a hint of international intrigue, and, as I've mentioned, I was flattered to have been asked. There was never really any doubt in my mind that I would volunteer. Dan said he would write to the appropriate people, and that, if it could be arranged, I'd probably hear something in the fall.

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Several months later I was living in The Netherlands, and preliminary arrangements had been made to go to Prague in the spring. When I returned from a visit to the States over the Christmas holiday, there was a letter from Dan which informed me that Jacque Derrida, a world renowned French literary critic had been arrested in Prague (drug possession). He was detained for about 24 hours until the French foreign minister flew to Prague to get him out. Dan jokingly wondered whether Alexander Haig [the American Secretary of State at the time] would have done the same for us.
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Shortly thereafter I got a letter from the Jan Hus program organizer saying that because of Derrida's arrest and the tension in Poland, it had been decided to postpone visits to Prague for a few months, Could I go later in the spring? I wrote back that mid-May would be fine with me.

In the meantime, I had been invited to give a series of lectures in England. I would be traveling to Sussex, London, Coventry, and Newcastle. I realized that this would give me the opportunity to speak with someone from the Jan Hus Society face to face, something I was very eager to do. Since the program organizer would be out of the country at the time I would be there, I arranged to visit another member of the executive committee, a woman named Kathy Wilkes who teaches philosophy at Oxford.

My last lecture was at Newcastle on a Friday afternoon. Saturday morning I caught an early train to Oxford and arrived in time to have lunch with Kathy. She is a veteran of several trips to Prague, and my conversation with her was quite illuminating. She reminded me that I would need to get a visa, and told me that on the application I should write "tourist" as the purpose of my visit, and "to be determined" as the place where I would stay. She also told me that it was required that I register with the police within 48 hours of my arrival. If I stayed at a hotel, this would be no problem, as the hotel would do it for me. But there was a very good chance that I wouldn't be able to find a room. In that case, she gave me the name and address of a friend of hers named Julie Löwy, who would likely be pleased to put me up. If that were to happen, Kathy suggested that I ought not to bother registering. The police station is closed from Saturday noon until Monday morning, and since I would be arriving on a Friday and leaving on a Monday, I could say that I didn't have time. Besides, the less we dealt with the police, the better.

All of this information was very valuable, but I think the most important part of my conversation with her was just to see her attitude and hear her tone of voice. It had all seemed so cloak-and-dagger until then. Although it is a serious topic, and she was taking it quite seriously, she spoke about it light-heartedly, and with a sparkle and enthusiasm that was infectious.

One of the peculiarities of her experience is that she was arrested in Prague *twice*. This ought to be impossible, since once you get arrested you are not supposed to be able to go back. I don't remember the exact words of her explanation, but it was something like this: "Oh, do you know what happened? Very unfortunate, really. My passport accidentally caught fire after I got back the first time. Burnt to a crisp. Had to apply for a new one, which was convenient since I'd also been thinking about shortening my name. When I got it back – you know what? – they had neglected to note that I was prohibited from going to East-bloc countries. So I went back and got arrested again."

In a humorous way, she told me the story of her being followed through the streets of Prague, of how the Czech police were so uncivil, and of how she insisted on going to the duty-free shop when they escorted her to the airport. She also told me very nice things about the people there, and recommended that I don't forget that I would likely enjoy myself. She also suggested that I bring in cigarettes, scotch, and a small gift for Julie's children.

She also explained to me that the people in Prague did not yet know that I was coming. They presume that their phones are tapped, so calling to tell them about it is unwise. Letters, of course, are out of the question. A system has been devised though, to enable the people in England to give those in Prague some advance warning. Sometime during the week before I would arrive, someone

would call and talk about the weather or something for a few minutes. That means: someone is coming on the following weekend.

A few weeks later, I went to the Czechoslovakian embassy in The Hague and got my visa, and also made my plane reservations. Shortly thereafter, the people in England phoned to ask me if I would lecture on the work of a philosopher named H.P. Grice. At first I objected. Though I had read some of Grice's work while I was a graduate student, I wasn't really familiar with it. I didn't have much time to prepare, and during those weeks I was preoccupied with trying to find a job for the following year. But they said, "Please" and I said, "Okay, I'll do the best I can."

A few days before I was to leave I received a package with books (all on philosophy, mostly by or about Hegel), a letter in a sealed plain envelope with nothing written on it, 300 English pounds (about $550) which I was to change into West German deutschmarks and bring in with me, and a list of messages, requests, and inquiries. The letter was for Gregor Samsa, the man who was the organizer in Prague for the seminar I was to address. I was told to carry it in my inside jacket pocket and that it contained nothing intimidating. One third of the money was for Gregor, two thirds for translation costs. The messages and such I was to bury in my appointment book, and later give them to Gregor. I scattered them around on various dates and put the key on my birthday. One of things he and I were to do was to choose code names for four people in Prague.

Another item in the package was a xeroxed copy of a personal ad which had appeared in *The New York Review of Books*:

> Tall, attractive, people-oriented woman in her early 40s seeks warm, intelligent man interested in a relationship which includes a "zest for living" and optimism. NYR Box 8784.

This was my identification for Gregor.

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I left Amsterdam on Friday, May 21st at about 11:00 am, and arrived at the Prague airport an hour and a half later. In many ways, the atmosphere there reminded me of my earlier trip through East Germany and into East Berlin, though I suppose it was bound to. There were lots of soldiers standing around, some of them with weapons and one or two with healthy-looking German shepherds at their side. This, I gather, is common practice at East-West contact points. Most of the soldiers were quite young, I'd say early twenties of so, but one of them was older. When I saw him I thought of an old TV show from my childhood, Sargent Preston of the Yukon and his dog King.

Though the airport building was only about a hundred feet from where the plane was parked, we were loaded into a bus for the trip. Immediately inside the building, passports were checked. This examination was quite cursory. The soldiers were joking with each other, and didn't seem to be paying close attention to what they were doing. I think they were looking for the visa and that tell-tale stamp, saying that the bearer is unfit to enter an East-bloc country, and a quick flip through the passport was all that was required for this purpose.

As in every East-bloc country (I guess), one is required to exchange a certain amount of Western currency at the border, the amount depending on how long one intends to stay. For example, when I went into East Berlin, I was required to change 25 West German deutschmarks for East German
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marks at a one to one exchange rate. Because the kind of visa I had would not permit me to remain in East Berlin overnight, the issue of how long I intended to stay did not arise. There are several reasons for this obligatory exchange. In Berlin, it is used as a control on the number of people from the West who visit the East, since to have to exchange a lot of currency is a disincentive. East German marks, like Czechoslovakian crowns, are worthless in the West. There wouldn't be any point in bringing these currencies out with you, even if it were legal to do so, which it is not. So you have to spend whatever you exchange. Another reason for the exchange is that East-bloc countries need Western currency to buy things from the West, and Western tourists provide a nice opportunity to get it. The exchange rate at the border is always artificially advantageous to the country. For example, I mentioned that the rate at the border is 1:1, but inside East Berlin, on the black market, it is more like 4:1. Like their government, East Berliners are eager to get Western currencies, and for the same reason. There are some items one simply cannot buy with East German marks, such as certain kinds of clothing. [added 2025: we found a very similar situation when we went to China is 1982-83.]

There are even places in East Berlin that did not accept East German currency. When my friend Angelique Dietz [2025: we later married and are still married] and I were there, we naturally needed to spend 25 marks each. We found a nice restaurant, but discovered to our surprise that they would not accept East German currency. Western currency, deutschmarks, dollars, Dutch guilders, Japanese yen, all okay, but no local currency!

At any rate, once inside the airport lobby, I went to the window to exchange the minimum amount for a three-day visit, which was a little more than a hundred Dutch guilders (about $40) for 400 crowns. The guilder and the West German deutschmark are about 1:1, so the airport rate was about four crowns for each guilder or deutschmark.

The next thing to do was to get through immigration control. Like almost everywhere in my experience, the official here was quite nasty. I don't know if immigration officers are trained to be rude, that is, if they are rude for some institutional reason, or if it's just that they enjoy the power they have. This man could have easily made my life rather unpleasant for a little while if he had chosen to do so. But I think he was only interested in making sure that I had a proper visa, didn't have one of those nasty little stamps, and that I had exchanged the proper amount of money. He appeared to find my papers repulsive, but he waved me through.

The last hurdle at the airport was to pick up my bags and get through customs. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the customs officials were mostly young women, not the uniformed male soldiers I had come to expect. When I entered the little booth for luggage inspection, I tried out a smile on her but she wasn't going for it. She asked me sternly what I was doing in Prague, how long I would stay, and was I bringing in any gifts. At this last question, I brightened up and said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am." I unzipped my bag and started awkwardly to pull out the set of Lego building blocks I had bought for the children. I then got the first gesture of friendliness I've gotten from any customs official anywhere. She smiled and said, "That's not necessary. Have a nice time in Prague."

I breathed a sigh of relief as I walked out into the outer lobby. I now had to find my way to a hotel in Prague, but this, I figured, would be fun. I went up to the information booth and inquired. (I have to say I was quite impressed with the level of English I encountered almost everywhere. Communication was almost never a problem.) A young woman told me that I had no chance of getting a room. Every one in town was occupied, though I wondered how she knew this. Standard

procedure? But she did direct me to the bus for downtown. I decided to head down there, get a beer somewhere, and figure out what to do. I had been told by Kathy that I might be able to bribe a hotel clerk with West German currency if I needed to.

The bus wasn't exactly the nicest one that I'd ever been on, but the airport seemed like it was about twenty miles from Prague, and the ride cost 1 crown, i.e. about ten cents.

When I finally got to a stop that looked like it was in the center of town, I got out and looked for a tavern. I would later learn that these places are absolutely essential parts of Czech society. Once I found one, I went in and ordered a beer, which turns out to be a very easy thing to do even if you don't speak the waiter's language.

The beer in Czechoslovakia is excellent, and a source of national pride, as I was to experience later. Pilsner beer was invented in Plzeň (Pilsen), and I later learned that Czechoslovakia has the highest per capita beer consumption on Earth, which did not surprise me. There is a town called České Budějovice where they have been brewing beer since the 13th century. It is also widely known by its German name, Budweis, and the beer they make there is called Budweiser. At the duty-free shop on my way out, I was able to get a six pack of Budweiser Budwar for my brother, who then worked for Anheuser-Busch.

Staying on the beer topic for a moment, in some places, especially some locals I later saw, you don't need to order a beer. The waiter comes out with a tray full of huge glasses, I'd say each one held a bit more than a pint, and looks around. If you don't have a beer in front of you, or if you glass is empty, he'll give you one. He won't ask you if you want one or anything, he'll just give you one. In fact, someone later advised me that if you want to stop drinking, the best way is to leave a little beer in the bottom of your glass. That's the signal to the waiter that you're done. Another attractive feature of Czech beer is that it is very cheap. A normal (huge) glass costs 2 crowns (twenty cents).

I decided to go over to Julie's first to get some advice on how to proceed. Since someone had told me I should be careful about taking cabs, I figured I'd better try to walk or take public transportation. I had Julie's address, but I could not find it on the map. So, hmm, I decided to take a cab anyway. This turned out to be interesting, since the driver did not know English. I felt a little nervous about trusting him. He could have taken me anywhere. But he did indicate that he knew the place where I wanted to go, and insisted that I get in. I thought for a bit, and then said, "Okay, let's go."

We shortly got caught in a traffic jam, and it became a little uncomfortable sitting there in silence. It turned out that he did know some English words, and he also had a Czech-English dictionary. Our little chat went something like this (to be read as if you're talking to someone long distance who can't hear very well):

Cabdriver (smiling): You English?
Flynn (smiling): No, American
C: Like it?
F: Yes.
C: Nice country, America.
F: Prague is pretty, too.
C: What?

F: I say, Prague is pretty, too. Looks nice. Beautiful old buildings.
C: Yes, old. (consulting dictionary) Where you born?
F: Chicago. It's in the center.
C: Where is that? New York, San Francisco, Chicago? (pronounce CHI-CHI-GO)
F: Yes, CHI-CHI-GO
C: Good. (consulting dictionary again) Student?
F: Yes. (Even though this wasn't really true, it was simple and he probably didn't really want to know.)
C (smiling): Good.

The traffic picked up a little bit, but he was still going through the dictionary as we went.

C (pointing to "or" in the dictionary): See?

I really didn't know what he was pointing to. But I said, "Yes"

C: er?
F: or
C: or
F: Yes
C: Good

We didn't talk anymore, but he was busy in the dictionary the whole rest of the time. I could see that he was preparing to say something to me, and naturally I wondered what it would be. I pondered this as he searched for the words. Your money or your life, perhaps. Or, don't scream or I'll shoot. When we finally got to the place I wanted to go – I was in fact a little surprised to get there – he got out of the car, helped me with his bags, and said, "Two dollars or forty crowns." I had no US money, so I gave him forty crowns, which probably disappointed him a bit since the dollars would have been a bit more valuable.

I walked up a couple of flights of stairs until I saw a door with "Löwy" on it. Since Julie wasn't expecting me at all, I was somewhat hesitant, but I knocked on the door. When it opened there was a pretty young woman standing there with bib overalls on. She looked at me, and I said, "I'm a friend of Kathy Wilkes."

Without the slightest hesitation, she opened the door and said, "Come on in!"

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Julie speaks perfect English. Though she was born in Czechoslovakia, she has spent time in England and now teaches English in Prague. She took me into her kitchen where I met her rather shy daughter Elli, a five-year old with stunning blue eyes, and a student of Julie's named Max, who looks after Julie's children from time to time. We sat down and quickly got some arrangements out of the way. I was welcome to spend the weekend there, because any friend of Kathy's was a friend of hers. Since it would be difficult getting into a hotel, I gratefully accepted her offer. If anything unpleasant were to happen with the authorities, I could give her name and address, but the story would be that she knew nothing of what I was actually doing there. I was staying there only because of our mutual
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friend Kathy. She also said that she could direct me to Gregor at about five o'clock with no problem. And tomorrow, if I liked, she and her family would take me to see Prague Castle.

With this finished, I got out my gifts, and we sat down to celebrate my arrival with a bit of scotch. Since Max was studying English, he could understand me if I spoke slowly enough, but he was quite shy about speaking English and spoke only Czech, which was then translated by Julie. After some time, she had some errands to run, and Max volunteered to escort me to Gregor's personally, and take me on a little tour of Prague along the way. Before we left, Julie asked me to call her if I would be with Gregor until after midnight. She has this habit, she said, of worrying about foreigners.

The first surprise after Max and I got outside was that his English was actually pretty good. It was at good enough for us to have a conversation using it to some extent, and he was very eager to talk with me. He apologized for not having spoken English earlier. He explained that the presence of his teacher makes him a little nervous.

Like most other cities, Prague has the attractive and the ugly, the new and the decaying. Like East Berlin, it reminded me of some cities in the industrial Midwest of the USA. It has very old buildings, some of which are fascinating, while others are crumbling. There were two things I notice right away. One of them was the rather strange feel the city has, as if it is unreal. I had the same feeling in East Berlin. It took me awhile then to realize what brought this on: there are no billboards or signs urging one to buy this or that. I guess in socialist countries there is no point in advertising. Also, in marked contrast to, say, Amsterdam, there is no graffiti either. The other thing, and Prague in my experience is unique in this respect, is the number of buildings that had scaffolding in front. I would say, roughly, one building in five. One might get this impression that there is a lot of construction going on, but that's not correct. I was later told that about three scaffolds go up for every one that comes down. Their main purpose is to protect the people who are walking underneath buildings that are literally falling apart. Someone calculated that at the current rate, every building in Prague will have a network of pipes in front of it by the late 1990s.

Other things in the city are beautiful and impressive. The subway for one. It looks brand new, and is clean, quiet, and inexpensive. The only thing odd about it is that the platforms are under watch by a person via cameras. As in most subway stations, there is a line on the floor about a yard in front of the tracks. One time while I was waiting for a train, I stepped over the line to look down the tracks to see whether or not one was coming. There was suddenly an angry announcement on the loudspeaker. Since it was in Czech, I didn't know it was intended for me, but it was. Someone gently grabbed me by the arm and led me away from the edge, pointing to the line and the camera, shaking their head sympathetically. As long as you stay clear of the line, you can ride all over the city for a dime.

Max and I walked around some, he pointing out items of interest and gamely trying to tell me a story about each one. We walked over the famous Charles Bridge, which Max told me was the oldest, still-in-use bridge in the world. [2025: construction was started by Charles IV himself in 1357, and finished in 1402.] At intervals of about twenty-five feet there are very large stone statues of various saints and kings important to Czech history. We stopped in front of one of them, and Max told me about an incident he had witnessed there. On an anniversary of an important event, some old women came to put flowers at the base of this statue. Then some soldiers came along and threw the flowers into the river. Max heard one of the women ask one of the soldiers why they did it, to which the reply was, "It is none of your concern."

As we walked, we were becoming friends. Max showed me his identity card, which he is required to carry at all times. It contains about all the information that would appear on a birth certificate, plus a driver's license, a draft card, and an abbreviated curriculum vitae. He told me about his brother who was a soldier. Well, actually, he was now in jail. Like most Czech young men, he explained, his brother had dreaded going into the army. Max himself had managed to get an elaborate medical dispensation. One day while on guard duty, his brother was overpowered by some attacker. They sent him to the brig. His sentence was two years, and he still had eighteen months to serve in the army after that. Max was agitated as he told me this. He seemed angry, frustrated, but at the same time resigned to it. "The important thing," he said, "about life here is that you must not be noticed."

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It was soon time for us to go to Gregor's. As we walked up to the house (a four story apartment building with a scaffolding in front), Max offered to wait for me. I told him that I had no idea how long I might be, so though I was grateful for his kindness, perhaps he'd better leave me on my own. But he insisted. We finally agreed to meet in a tavern about two blocks from Gregor's house.

My instructions were to go to the top floor of the building and look for a door that said "Samsa" on it. When I knocked on it, I heard some movement inside. The door opened and I saw a pleasant-looking bearded man of about forty, rather tall, with green-blue eyes and a tentative smile. I handed him the personal ad and said, "I've been asked to give this to you."

His smile broadened. "Come in, please," he said. I was introduced to his wife Ottla, and then was given a beer as we chatted about my trip, my accommodations, Prague, and my talk which was to be on Sunday evening. I told him that I had some things for him, to which he replied, "Good."

We both became rather businesslike. As I handed him the books, he nodded. I gave him the letter, he read it, and said, "I'll have a reply for you on Sunday." When I gave him the envelope with the money, he looked inside and said, simply, flatly, "Fine."

When I told him that I also had some messages, he interrupted me to say that he preferred that we discuss this later. Perhaps we could go for a walk. My first thought was that he believed the room was bugged, but then I realized this was unlikely. I would be giving my talk in that very room in a couple of days. Later it dawned on me that he didn't want to talk about it there because of Ottla. The less she knows, the safer she is.

Shortly we left to go on our walk. When we emerged from the building, there was Max, sitting on a bench across the street. I explained to Gregor who he was, and he went over to speak with him. The tavern where we intended to meet was closed. I'm not sure how long Max would have waited, but I got the sense that it would be as long as it took. The two of them agreed that Max would follow behind us until Gregor and I finished our business.

As we walked, I looked under January 6 in my appointment book, which directed me to November 1, December 23, etc. Gregor took notes, and I noted his replies. We would decide the code names on Sunday. After an hour or so, we shook hands and parted. Max walked up, "Success?" he asked. "Yes, I replied, and offered to take him to dinner.
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We went off in search of a "typical" Prague restaurant. It took us quite a while to find one, since they have the practice there of renting out entire restaurants for an evening, consequently closing it to the rest of the public. We finally found one where we could get a table. I can't say the food was all that great, but I was hungry.

As we sat there, a group of soldiers came in with their girlfriends. Up until then, I had always been apprehensive at the sight of those faceless uniforms, but now there was no need to fear. The last thing they wanted was to know that I was there. They were off-duty, and their minds were on beer and flirting. As they sat talking and laughing I had a good look at them. They were young, eighteen or twenty or so, and some had pimples and some evidence of an emerging mustache. Max told me that each soldier is issued a meter tape measure when he's inducted. It's common practice that, when he has a hundred days left to serve, he begins cutting off a centimeter each day.

After we ate and drank a bottle of wine, Max escorted me back to Julie's. There I met her husband Hermann and we all had a scotch, before I settled in to sleep on their couch in the living room.

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In contrast to the previous day, the next morning was bright and sunny. I woke up around ten and stumbled into the kitchen. The whole family was there, Julie, Hermann, little Ellie, and now Franz, Julie and Hermann's seven year old son. As Franz looked me over, he had the appearance of a child who has just been given a new toy, but couldn't figure out what it was. He scratched his blond head as his blue eyes framed with very thick glasses noted my uncombed hair and two-day beard. A curious but rather impish smile formed as he must have said to himself, "I'm not sure what we have here, but it might be fun."

While I waited for coffee, Franz already had some questions for me. He and his little sister, now hiding behind her mother, could both understand English, since Julie spoke it to them all the time. But, like Max, they were very shy is speaking it. Franz directed his questions to his mother in Czech, who would then translate them for me. I replied in clear, careful, English. This interview was brief, just long enough for Franz to get some preliminary information, and for me to become quite charmed by him.

We planned to go to Prague Castle that day, but as I had mentioned to Julie and Hermann the night before, I wanted a few hours to prepare my talk for the following night. So I returned with my coffee to the living room to work a bit. We would eat about noon and the set off.

As I wrestled with Grice, the children would peek into the room from time to time and giggle. I would look up and smile, and then their mother would shout for them to leave me alone, which would make them scamper back to their room. A few minutes later they would reappear, and it would happen all over again. After an hour or so, Franz came into the room to show me a little airplane he had built out of the Lego set I had brought them.

About noon I put my work aside and went back into the kitchen where preparations were underway for dinner. (As in Germany and Belgium, the main meal is eaten at midday.) Hermann suggested we

have a scotch. Noon is a bit on the early side for me, but I figured what the hell. After all, I was on holiday for the rest of the day, and it would have been a bit awkward for me to refuse.

As we were preparing to sit down, the children were instructed to go and wash up, especially Franz who had just been outside experimenting with ways one could combine dirt with various substances one can find around. Like all little boys, he was aware of the dangers of using too much water on one's hands and face, and was accordingly judicious in its application. His mother, however, didn't quite see it this way, and he was told to return and try again, which he did after the appropriate complaints had been filed.

Dinner was delicious: chicken, potatoes, and vegetables, followed by Czech wine and American cigarettes. When we were nearly finished there was suddenly a crisp knock on the door. Everyone immediately stopped talking and we all looked at each other for a moment. I was silently rehearsing my story. When we all looked ready, Hermann got up and went to the door. They were there to get someone alright, but the "they" turned out to be Franz's little friends who apparently needed some help with the next concoction.

Relieved, we had another glass of wine and headed for the living room to watch some TV. This was fascinating. There was an American movie on, about Martin Luther King. In the part that I saw, King and his colleagues were marching through a Southern town during the early days of the civil rights movement. They were being heckled and spat upon by the assembled white folk. These latter were obviously making very nasty remarks to the marchers, but I didn't know exactly what they were saying since the film was dubbed into Czech. In the next scene, there was Martin Luther King discussing J. Edgar Hoover in Czech with another black man. A few minutes later, Bobby Kennedy was speaking perfect Czech in the White House. The movie ended just as it appeared that King was in big trouble. To be continued next week. Next came the news, which was mostly about the Falkland Islands crisis, which were of course referred to as the Malvinas.

[Added in 2025, from *Wikipedia* (accessed March 11, 2025):

> The islands are believed to have been uninhabited prior to European discovery in the 17th century. Controversy exists over the Falklands' discovery and subsequent colonization by Europeans. At various times, the islands have had French, British, Spanish, and Argentine settlements. Britain reasserted its rule in 1833, but Argentina maintains its claim to the islands. In April 1982, Argentine military forces invaded the islands. British administration was restored two months later at the end of the Falklands War. In a 2013 sovereignty referendum, almost all Falklanders voted in favour of remaining a UK overseas territory. The territory's sovereignty status is part of an ongoing dispute between Argentina and the UK.

The Malvinas is the Spanish name for the islands, indicating Czechoslovakia's endorsement of the Argentinian claim.]

After the news there was a program about a famous Czech filmmaker. Although I couldn't understand a word of it, I watched with astonishment. They showed a short clip from one of his films, which I instantly knew I had seen before! I thought it over and finally realized where. When I was a child in Chicago, I used to watch "Garfield Goose and Friends", a goofy little afternoon show for kids, with Garfield Goose the Third, King of the United States (a puppet) and his friend Fat

Frazier Thomas (a human). They showed cartoons, and usually a serialized film of some sort. One of these films was called "Journey to the Beginning of Time", a story of three young boys who set off on a boat trip and find, as they go down the river, they go further back in time. It was not an animated film, and it all looked so real. I remember loving it. Now, twenty years or more later, I was watching a film in Prague about the man who made that movie. They showed the extremely clever ways he achieved the special effects. I mentioned my memory to Julie, who said, "Yes, 'Journey to the Beginning of Time' would be the translation of the title of that film. That was a great one, huh."

As we watched, I became better acquainted with Franz and Elli. They showed me their pet hamster. Franz was particularly fascinated by a silver pocket watch my parents had given to me when I got my Ph.D. "Keep an eye on him," Julie said. "He no doubt wants to take it apart and put it back together.

At one point Franz went off and got his Rubik's cube, that very popular and challenging puzzle. Dan Dennett had had one in Seattle, and I remember him telling me with pride that, though it had taken him awhile, he was finally getting the hang of it. Franz offered his cube to me, but I told him that I had tried it only once, found it very difficult, and didn't know how to work it. He mixed it up thoroughly, and said something to his mother. She looked at her watch and said, "Okay, go!" Franz feverishly started rearranging the cube as I watched. Julie told me that he was demonstrating how well he could do it. "Showing off," she said.

Elli then offered me the hamster. I set it on the sofa and it ran back and forth between us, climbing part way up my arm, changing its mind, scurrying back to Elli's lap, and returning to me again. Julie remarked that Elli had discovered boys not long ago, and that her eyes, if used properly, could be very useful in dealing with them. She speculated that her daughter was coming down with a "C-R-U-S-H" on me.

Suddenly Franz cried "Ja!" He stood there with the perfectly arranged cube in his hand, staring at his mother with a look a great anticipation. She said, "Four minutes and ten seconds." I could hardly believe it. This puzzle is *hard*, and this little kid really knew what he was doing.

As I said, quite sincerely, "Franz! That's wonderful!" he started to cry. At first I feared I had said the wrong thing, or that somehow my expression was taken as patronizing and indicated disrespect, when in fact I had intended quite the opposite.

"Cut it out, Franz," Julie said gently. Then she explained that he was trying to impress me, and thought his time was very slow. "If he doesn't do it in under three minutes," she said to me, "he's disappointed. Don't be such a baby."

Sometime later we were ready to head off to Prague Castle. It is a very old complex of buildings, newly renovate, which sits on one of the hills the surround the city. It is the residence of the president and the repository of the crown jewels as well as other treasures of Czech history.

As we were getting ready to leave, Franz, quite spontaneously, had an idea. He must have figured it this way: "This guy is an American, who doesn't speak a word of Czech. We have a long way to go, part of it via the subway. The subway is a big, complicated, scary place, or at least it must seem so to him. What if he were to get separated from us? Suppose he got lost. This would be a great tragedy. I must not let this happen."

Franz took it upon himself to take care of me. As we left the house, he explained his plan to his mother, who thought it was a good idea. As we approached the subway, Franz took my hand. He guided me down the escalator, and then to a machine that would give change for the two crown coin he had obtained from his mother. He then wordlessly but clearly instructed me on how to insert the coin he had given me into the slot on the turnstile, and when to walk through. Proudly retaking my hand, he led me to the train. At one point we needed to change trains. This was tricky, but Franz handled it with precision and grace. At one of the stations, I mistakenly thought we were supposed to get out, and started heading for the door. I was gently but firmly pulled back. "No," he said in English, "the next one."

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When we arrived at the castle, Franz figured that I was safe, and turned me loose so that he could concentrate better on the ice cream cone his father had just bought for him. It was while walking around the grounds that I had my most emotional moments of the entire trip. My mind was on Franz. Here was a very bright, perhaps brilliant little boy. But he was that, a little boy. He played in the mud, disliked washing, and knew nothing about the political barriers that separate him from me and my world. In fact, he could not care less about that. His kindness and generosity were guileless. He expected no reward for the help he gave me. I was only a person, a little strange perhaps, a stranger, but I was a person. The responsibility he took for my welfare was as natural to him as his curiosity.

In a few years, I thought, he will learn many things. Mathematics, perhaps, and physics. But he will also learn, if things continue as they are now, the suffocating system under which he lives. He will go into the army. He will learn that staying in line is more important than thinking. Will he get the chance to develop and grow? What will it cost him in terms of his living conditions, his peace of mind, his intellectual integrity?

We must fight this system, at least in its current manifestation. But then I thought of the present American government, the self-styled defenders of the free world. I believe the Reagan administration is failing us because it is filled nearly completely with men who are greedy for power and fame, short-sighted, unable to deal with complexity, and who lack the courage to face the facts and their history squarely.

Most of the foreign policy positions are tragically counterproductive and awkwardly executed. Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, in their book on American foreign policy after the Second World War,[1] write about Czechoslovakia in the late forties:

> The relentless American determination to force the world to choose sides, and to aid only those ready to echo its policy, inevitably forced Czechoslovakia to choose the only side it could, given the geopolitical realities of the situation. The result was the end of the Czech parliamentary system. As Trygve Lie observed in his memoir: "[T]here are times when I wonder – in the light of hindsight – whether the West does not now and then suffer pangs of conscience when reviewing the fate of that country."

[1] Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power*. Harper and Row, 1972, p. 397.
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It seems clear that not only are there no pangs of conscience, but that this mistake – at least it is a mistake from the perspective of the principles these officials say they embrace – is repeated today with depressing frequency.

While Reagan, Haig, and Weinberger try to impose a double standard on the Soviet Union (we can fund and support totalitarian states, but you cannot) the administration also proposes programs that widen the gap between the rich and the poor, and decimate the educational system, our investment in our children's future. History tells us that these things always lead to violence, bloodshed, and misery. The weakness of America grows.

Nothing I have seen since my trip to Prague has changed my mind at all about this, though there are a few, very small, and mostly I fear illusory encouraging signs. As I write today [in 1982], Alexander Haig has just resigned. How the "strong men" who remain, Weinberger and Clark, will deal with the ever increasing weakness of the Soviet Union, I do not know. I am not optimistic.

We deserved this, of course. Everyone knew of Mr. Reagan's shallowness during the campaign, when his advisors would not let him meet with the press. They knew he could not be trusted. I have been deeply troubled and astonished by the lack of thought some friends of mine put into the political decisions they have chosen to make. The general motto seems to be: If it makes me a little money here, soon, I'm for it. Don't talk to me about my well-being ten or fifteen years from now, of that of my children, or that of people elsewhere in the world, or for that matter elsewhere in my city.

I could go on in some detail about my thoughts along these lines. The preceding brief synopsis is a little misleading. But that is not my purpose here. Suffice it to say, I became very troubled. I wanted freedom to be restored in Czechoslovakia so badly, in part so that Franz could grow as much as he can without fear. But the country in the best position to help the Czechoslovakian people do this, my country, the United States, lacks the strength of character to really try. We rely on slogans and glittering, misleading generalizations.

The family and I came to a part of the castle that overlooked the city. Below me I say cozy little red-roofed houses, stately magnificent towers, and beyond, green wooded hills. From this height, Prague is a breathtaking sight. As I looked out, I was so angry and frustrated that, in spite of myself, tears began to form in my eyes. I don't know if my hosts noticed this. If they did, perhaps they thought it was induced by the beauty that lie before me.

On the way back to the city, I had a special treat in store for me. We visited a house the Franz Kafka had lived in. It is now a souvenir shop of sorts. The house itself is extremely small, I'd say altogether it is about as big as a medium-sized American living room. It embodies one of the paradoxes of Czech society. On the outside of the house, there is a small plaque which says that Kafka lived there. But this is for the tourists. All of Kafka's books are banned in Czechoslovakia. Naturally, there are no books by Kafka or pictures of him for sale inside. I went in, and of course, had to buy something. I settled for a drawing of the Charles Bridge as it looked in the 19th century, the bridge with all the statues the Max and I had walked across.

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The next day began much as the one before: coffee and feverish preparations for my talk that evening. In the afternoon, Julie and her family took me to see the Karlstein Castle, which was
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established in the mid-14th century by Charles IV, who was King of Bohemia and the Holy Roman Empire. It is a strange and eerie feeling to walk around in a place that is so old. For me, it was made stranger still by the suspicion that we were being followed. I first notice this guy about halfway through our tour. He was about thirty-five, dressed in plain clothes, and was distinguished from all of the others by being all by himself. Our eyes met a few times, and when they did, he quickly returned to studying whatever painting or exhibit he was standing in front of. I told myself it was just paranoia, and that I shouldn't jump to any hasty conclusions. Near the end of our tour, after our guide discharged us, we could wander around a bit. There was a fork in the path, and I went one way watching, so cleverly I thought, to see what he would do. He went the other way. I never saw him again.

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I was shortly thereafter delivered to Gregor. Julie and I made plans to meet the following morning to say our goodbyes. She said she would help me do a little shopping that I wanted to do. I shook hands with Hermann and then with Franz, saying that I hoped to see them again one of these days. I leaned over and gave Elli a little kiss on the cheek. She turned crimson.

Gregor was happy that I made it safe and sound. It was about 4:00, and my talk wouldn't begin until 8:00 so we had plenty of time. He suggested that we head down to a local and have a few beers while we talked.

We sat down in the tavern and after a while the waiter wordlessly brought us two enormous beers. We decided on the code names: John, Paul, George, and Ringo. After all the business had been taken care of, we sat and chatted for about an hour or so as the waiter silently refilled our glasses. I asked Gregor about his circumstances, how he supported his family after he left the university. He told me his wife had a regular job, and they had given him a job cleaning houses one day a week. The apartment they lived in was clean, but rather small. Except for its cleanliness, it reminded me of apartments I had lived in during my first year or two of teaching. It was plain they watched their budget very carefully. Without support from the West, Gregor explained, they would have a very hard time of it indeed. After about three beers worth of conversation, we decided to leave a little bit in the bottom of our glasses and head back.

Gregor had to go out for a while, so I was to have dinner with his wife Ottla and his two sons, who had come home while we were away. Then I could go into his study, where I would sleep that night, to collect my thoughts. His two sons, I would say about 6 and 8, were a couple of the best-looking kids I have seen in my life. Blond hair, blue eyes, full of smiles, energetic, but very polite. Like Franz and Elli, they were very curious about me. They spoke no English, so during dinner they would stare at me, smile, then look at each other, then laugh. Ottla asked me what I had seen of Prague. I told her of my trip through the city with Max, and tried to describe the tower he had taken me to, since I didn't know its name. As I did so, I was gesturing with my hands, and while saying that the tower was very high, I stretched my arm above my head. The boys thought this was hysterical. They immediately raised their hands, too, giggling wildly. Every two minutes or so, for the rest of the dinner, they would raise their hands and look at me with wide-eyed anticipation. Then I'd raise my hand, and we'd all laugh. When dinner was over, and it was time for me to head for the study and for them to go to bed, instead of saying goodnight to them, I just raised my hand. They raised back.
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In the study, I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect from the group I was meeting. The room was small, but cozy and comforting, and crammed with books. After a while, Gregor came to announce that some people were here, but the turnout was low. He was greatly apologetic, and explained that I was the first visitor in quite some time, and that it was difficult to get the group together after so long a hiatus. He hoped I didn't mind. I didn't. The plan was for me to talk for about an hour and then see what happens.

What happened turned out to be one of the special experiences of my life. There were only five of us there, Gregor, Ottla, two "students", both of whom were older than I am, and me. I had, in the end, prepared reasonably well. I felt like I knew what I was talking about. But that wasn't what made it so special. The special thing was this: Here were five people, gathered in a living room, to talk about some properties of the human mind. None of us had to be there, either to make money, a reputation, or anything else. We were all taking some risk (mine, I think, was the least) to do so. To me, in perhaps exaggerated retrospect, it was magical. We exchanged opinions and even argued a bit until just before midnight. It seemed to me like five minutes. The purity of such an evening is rare and precious.

It took me awhile to settle down after it was over. I sat in the study, examined the books there, and thought. But I slept soundly. I had, after all, had a big day. In the morning after coffee, I was escorted by Gregor to the center of town where I was to meet Julie. Our parting was simple. We shook hands, expressed the hope that we would see each other again, and said goodbye.

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Julie showed up with Max, as they had just finished one of their lessons. Our goal was very simple. I had gotten into the habit of collecting a coffee cup or beer glass from every place that I visited. In most cities, this would be no problem, as any tacky souvenir shop would likely have the perfect thing. But in Prague, there were very few souvenir shops, and they didn't appear to have what I was looking for. So we were going to search the city until we found something and besides, this would be a good chance for me to see more of Prague.

We set off and before too long Julie had the idea of going to a local brewery. They've been brewing beer there more or less continuously since 1499, and they had a little tavern where people could sit down and sample the product. And it turned out they had some glasses for sale. They weren't exactly the prettiest ones I had ever seen, but I chose what I thought was the least unattractive one, which had a picture of the old clock in front of the brewery painted on it. But the woman selling told me, through Julie, that is was a package deal. I had to buy one of the ugly ones as well. Okay.

Even though it was only 11:00, we decided that it would be a worthwhile experience for me to taste the beer they were making on the premises, it having such a distinctive flavor and long tradition and all. So we went into the tavern which was doing a rather brisk business for that time of day. As we sat there, I counted how much Czech money I had left, since I wanted to take Julie and Max out for lunch. I realized that I was going to be about 40 crowns short. Luckily, I had brought in some West German deutschmarks of my own, which I was going to use to bribe a hotel keeper if I needed to. I told Julie and Max of my plan to exchange some money, and asked if either of them were interested in getting some deutschmarks at the 4 to 1 airport rate. I took out a 10 DM note. They discussed it in Czech. Julie then told me to give the bill to Max (recall that he doesn't speak English when she is around), and that he'd be back in a minute. He shortly returned, and handed me a 100 crown note.
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Julie explained that most of the time, the black market ran about 12 or 13 to 1, but 10 to 1 was not so bad when you are dealing with strangers in a brewery.

We headed off and had lunch. Soon Julie had to leave. She was hoping to get permission to go to England next year. Perhaps we would see each other there. I was welcome to return to Prague and stay with her family again anytime, and she hoped I would.

I had an hour or two before I had to get my bus to the airport, so Max and I went on a tour of the old Jewish section. We stopped in a small museum they had there. As I expected, it was primarily about WWII. What I remember most vividly about it was the children's drawings that were on display. There were two sections of them. One consisted of rather ordinary pictures that children draw in school. Houses, dogs, sunshine, out-of-proportion bright flowers, moms and dads, and the like. The name of the artist appeared below most of them, with dates of birth and death. 1929-1943, 1932-1944, 1931-1943, and so it went.

The other section had drawings made during what we now call the Holocaust. The smooth edges are gone and the colors subdued. The subjects change to soldiers, fences, out-of-proportion faces. You can feel these children trying to make sense of the mysterious and frightening changes in their lives.

Outside the museum, there is a Jewish cemetery dating back to the 15th century. It is crowded with gravestones which lie only a few inches from each other, the graves beneath them in some places four of five levels down. Kafka is buried there. As Max and I strolled around he asked me why there was often a little stone placed on top of a grave marker. Luckily I knew, since Julie had mentioned it to me the day before. In Christian circles, on brings flowers to gravesites to honor the dead. Here, and I guess elsewhere in Jewish cemeteries, one brings stones. As we walked around, we came upon a large black grave marker with a few stones on top of it. Someone had used one of these stones as a sort of piece of chalk and had drawn a five-pointed star – the symbol of the Soviet Union – on top of the marker. When Max saw it, he rubbed it out with his hand. He began, "I don't know why…" But he didn't finish the sentence.

It was soon time for me to catch the bus to the airport. Just before I got on it, I turned to Max to say goodbye. It is difficult to know what to say in such circumstances. We shook hands. He wished me luck in finding a job at a university, said he hoped I have a safe journey back to Holland, and that someday I would return to Prague. I told him that I hoped that someday I could extend the same hospitality to him in my home as he had done to me in his. He gave me a wry smile, shrugged his shoulders and glanced to the sky. "Goodbye," he said.

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In the bus I prepared myself for going through the security check. I was carrying some mail, which was frowned upon. I hadn't registered with the police, and I knew the Derrida had been arrested at the airport on the way out. But I arrived at the perfect moment, just in front of several busloads of people, most of whom, it appeared, were on their way to Moscow for a holiday. When I joined the line to go through, it was very short, but in no time there were fifty or sixty people behind me. As I entered the booth, I saw the security guard, a young soldier, glance behind me where he saw people waiting as far as he could see. They would keep him busy for hours if he didn't keep this line moving. I saw the chagrin on his face before he turned sternly to me and examined my passport. "Have any Czech money?" he asked in English, as he eyed my suitcase.
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"Let's see," I said as innocently as I could. "Four crowns."

"That doesn't matter. Go on through." I suppressed my urge to give him a big hug.

I checked my bag and then there remained one more hurdle: the last passport check at emigration control. There was a very large middle-aged woman in front of me who was having a hard time with the official. But she wasn't going to take any grief from this guy. I couldn't tell if they were speaking Czech or Russian, but it sounded like the conversation went something like this:

Officer: You don't have stamp number 327.
Lady: I don't need stamp 327. I'm just going to Moscow.
Officer: You need stamp 327.
Lady: Look, mac, I've got stamps 62, 95, and 411. I'm dripping with stamps and permission slips. If you don't let me through here, I'm going to cause a scene. You won't like it. Your boss won't like it. Neither will these dozens of people standing behind me in the goddam line. (Here she gestures to me.) I mean it.

She was serious and a little upset. He was serious, too, but he looked like he felt a migraine coming on. He shoved her papers back at her, and said something which sounded like "Get the hell out of here, fatso. I hope you choke on the vodka."

Now it was my turn. I handed my passport to him with the politest of smiles. So deferential, the very personification of cooperation. He didn't seem to notice. With hardly a glance at me, in what must have been a kind of catharsis, he pounded my passport as if it were the woman's nose. I walked through the turnstile, feeling I had just shed a heavy burden. I had made it.

In the duty-free shop I was pleasantly surprised to find Budweiser for sale. Mind you, this wasn't the King of Beers of St. Louis, Missouri, but rather maybe something of an ancestor. My brother Tom is a loyal employee of the Anheuser Busch Corporation, I was happy to pick up a six pack for him. I then headed straight to the bar, ordered a "Bud", and sat down to try to collect my thoughts. My mind went first to my family, not too different really from the families I had just visited. My friends in America, Holland, and now Czechoslovakia. The gaps between governments and citizens. The Czech soldiers, stern and fearsome by day, youthful beer-drinking lovers by night, counting the days until they don't have to wear their uniforms anymore. The grandeur of Prague hidden behind relentless scaffolding, its long and complicated history, its proud but worried people.

On the plane, I glanced out the window at the soldiers who stood there with their rifles watching the engines heat up.

Europeans, in my experience, tend to divide Americans into two groups. First, there are the ones who come to Europe in conscious awareness that it is not an older section of the United States. These folks tend to be quiet, polite, appreciative of kindnesses. They make an effort to blend in, learn a bit of the local language perhaps, are reasonably patient and don't often complain. They are not interesting, in the sense that they don't make for good stories. One rarely hears Europeans talk about them.

The other more noticeable kind, the "ugly" kind, tends to assume that everyone speaks English or ought to, and that Europeans are here to give directions to Americans to points of interest, or explain why it is so hard to get a good, dry martini on the rocks. They make little or no attempt to understand the culture they are in, and seem intent only on a getting a few photographs to show to the neighbors back home. This sort of tourist is rare, but I myself have seen a few in Amsterdam on trams or in restaurants. It would be easy to get the mistaken impression that Europeans think it is typical. The loud and rude ones coincide with the impression of Americans one gets from television and government, and the other more common sort of are hardly worth noticing, much less talking about.

A couple of these "ugly" ones sat down behind me on the plane. The woman turned to her husband and snapped, "Look at those soldiers! They're guarding the plane, but the wish they were on it!"

She may have been right about that in some respects. But she said it with a gloating, I'm-better-than-you tone. There was not a hint of compassion, of understanding what she was looking at. It was as if having the good fortune of being born in the West somehow made one a superior person, more courageous, or more honorable.

I enjoy a political discussion, but I had no trouble stifling the absurd impulse to turn and engage this woman. I had other, more complicated, emotions to attend to.

Amsterdam, June 28, 1982