

PRAGUE'S FESTIVAL OF CHANGE

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At first the numbers were modest and Praguites hardly noticed the odd Trabant or Wartburg with GDR plates parked raffishly about the city centre. Eventually, however, as the mellow days of October passed, it became increasingly and irritatingly obvious that these GDR cars, filling all the parking spaces, legal and illegal, in the Mala Strana and even as far afield as Mickiewiczova Ulice, where the Canadian Embassy is located, had been hurriedly abandoned. Young East German families, finding their September escape route to the West through Hungary denied them by the closing of the Czech-Hungarian border were prepared now to leave behind their most cherished possession, their car, and leap the high walls of the West German Embassy in Prague in what, to many seemed to be, a doomed bid for freedom. Nevertheless, what began as a trickle soon developed into a flood, and by mid-October, Prague was littered with abandoned cars. Inevitably, the critical day arrived when the magnificent baroque Lobkowitz Palace, which is the West German Embassy, could not hold another person. Negotiations took place, what had to be done was done, and miraculously, one dark mouldering night they poured forth in their thousands through the ancient cobbled streets, cheering, victorious and exhausted, to waiting buses which took them to the trains for the West. We watched them pass and knew this was a turning point in European history.

November came, and Prague settled into its habitual melancholic state. Only the tourists stared as the huge trailer trucks hauled away the GDR cars. Certainly, if one read only the local papers and watched only Czech television, it could be imagined that here they were unaware of the revolution in Berlin and the shattering of the Wall.

But of course, people did know, and somehow the idea grew into inevitability that November was to be Czechoslovakia's month too. Events were sparked by a brief, but bloody, street skirmish between a few hundred students and the riot police on November 17th. The nastiness over Our Revolution unfolded evening after evening against the backdrop of the magnificent Wenceslas Square, almost as if it had been scripted and choreographed for a Cecil B. De Mille film. Perhaps this is not surprising, as many of the early protagonists came from the theatre or from the Catholic Church, which is also adept at theatrical presentations.

First, you must picture Wenceslas Square, which is not a Square but a one-half kilometre long, wide boulevard, rising gently towards one end where the immense dark statue of Czechoslovakia's patron Saint Wenceslas sits astride his horse and steps forth down the Square. Behind him rises the gilded Neo-classical dome of the National Museum, always floodlit at night for the tourists. As in 1968, the statue quickly became a shrine, covered with posters, lit with candles, arrayed with flowers, hung with flags, and tended day and night by young acolytes. Here it is important to remember that under the communists, the display of the Czech tricolour flag was forbidden, except in certain carefully controlled situations when it always had to be accompanied by the Red Flag. During this November week, flags sprouted everywhere, on people's hats, on dogs' collars, in shop windows and flying from the fronts of vans and buses. It was delirious and delicious fun. Each evening's events began at 4:30 p.m., so that no one had to miss work...and they came in by the thousands. By day two, microphones were available, by day three, a 2nd-storey balcony accommodated the speakers... and by day four, you could, if you wished, stay at home, and watch it all on television. One felt that the powers that be were conspiring with Obcanské Forum (Civic Forum) and were determined to make the demonstrations a success and a good show. How else to explain that throughout the week the National Museum continued to be floodlit, and was draped with a gigantic flag. With its balustraded balconies and staircases packed with jubilant,