

LETTER FROM PRAGUE BY VĚRA MURRAY



On the Palace Square, gazing past the guards at the main building, I had the strangest feeling. I certainly had not been used to looking kindly on the place which houses the offices of the president.

When I was young, and whenever I visited Czechoslovakia during the past twenty years, I would feel contempt, helplessness, even fear when I'd look at that palace. Now, for the first time there was not hatred, but admiration for the man in the president's home. I could scarcely believe it. With me on the square, dozens of people stared up at the building. Citizens of Prague, people from the countryside, foreign tourists speaking Czech, I'm sure we were all thinking the same thing: we have an awfully long way to go in this country of ours.

It's ironic, but human nature seems to have an easier time adapting to repression than learning about democracy from scratch. In the same way, nationalizing a free economy is a simple matter compared to privatizing all the industries and services of an economy that has been state run for decades. This is the kind of challenge that Czechs, like all Eastern Europeans, are beginning to encounter. The freedom which was so longed for and which has seemingly dropped from the sky, brings problems quite unimaginable to people who take it for granted that they can join any political party they choose, send their children to university, open a business, buy stocks or shares, or simply write a stiff letter of protest to the editor of their newspaper. It's hardly surprising, then, that two short weeks after the election of Vaclav Havel, and only two months after the beginning of Czechoslovakia's "quiet revolution," I was standing there in Prague feeling both satisfaction and extreme anxiety.

How to organize the first free elections, planned for next June? In a society, closed for forty years,

where any attempt to be different was nipped in the bud, the natural reaction has been to be as different and distinctive as possible – so thirty-six political parties have sprung up in the past two months. How to deal with such a range of opinion? How to encourage democracy without falling into a pattern of electing weak coalition governments that change every

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few months? All along, the greatest fear of the revolution's leaders has been the kind of chaos which would, before or after the elections, give the State Security forces an excuse to "re-establish order." No one really knows the extent and structure of this repressive body, upon which the communist regime depended – not even the Minister of the Interior. In 1968, during the Prague Spring, Pavel, a communist reformer who headed the State Security apparatus for a few months, never was able to find out anything about the way it was run. Last November, the members of the State Security just vanished overnight – lock, stock and files. They have everything to lose and nothing to gain with the new regime.

How to deal with the communists? In a few factories and schools, "outraged citizens" have begun to get even. Calling themselves the Civic Forum – a movement gathering in all the opposition forces around Havel during the early days of the revolution – they get involved in the running of a factory on the grounds that the director is

an old Stalinist, and they decide which school teachers should stay or go. Although it's a far cry from the quick and nasty justice we saw in Romania, the people around Havel are horrified by it. On the whole this is a very pragmatic people, with little tendency to get carried away – not always an advantage, however, as the history of Czechoslovakia since World War II shows.

Those who were responsible for the bloody repression of 17 November must be brought to justice, of course, and the most corrupt members of the communist party apparatus must be punished. But the idea of a witch hunt is repul-

sive even to those who, like Havel, owe their present glory to the years they spent in prison. Furthermore, in a country where for the last forty years any advancement depended on membership in the single political party, many people became members only in order to get on with their work. Twice, after 1948 and after 1968, Czechoslovakia suffered a brain drain; intellectuals either left altogether or ended up as janitors and night watchmen. The country cannot now afford to banish specialists whose only fault is being communist. In most cases it would be impossible to replace them.

Unlike in Hungary and even East Germany, Czechoslovakia's entire economy was taken over by the state after 1948 – from the huge Skoda factories to the neighbourhood cobbler, from the grandest hotel at the Karlsbad spa to the smallest village pub, not to mention the steel mills of northern Bohemia. The new regime aims to re-establish a market economy, and on this everyone agrees. Shoemakers will own their shops, and family restaurants will open again. But after forty years of be-

ing directed by the state, of all initiative being crushed by the state, people will not get back into the entrepreneurial spirit overnight, ready to take financial risks, or even prepared to work overtime.

At the moment nobody serious has the kind of money needed to purchase the country's medium-sized businesses, let alone the giant heavy industries. Nobody that is, except the sons of some communist *apparatchiks*, and maybe a few blackmarketeers and foreigners.

Will there be a lot of unemployment? And what about the standard of living? The people of Czechoslovakia are used to more comfortable lives than their Eastern Bloc neighbours, thanks to the huge subsidies paid to farmers, and retail prices kept artificially low – but it won't be possible to keep on cheating like this. As for the magnificent forests, once the pride of the country, most of them are dead or dying from acid rain, and half of the potable water is contaminated. Can this environmental catastrophe be reversed?

A sense of humour and a talent to improvise are two qualities which have survived in Czech society even after decades of communism, and despite widespread cynicism and disillusionment. However, the late-night discussions in Prague in which I took part were unusually serious. Making fun of Soviet occupiers or laughing at the stupidity of Jakes, the former communist party secretary, was not only easier, it was also a way of surviving. "We have this terrible feeling of responsibility," a close friend of Havel's told me, "for such a long time all we did was say how bad things were. Now in the middle of this economic gloom it's up to us to do better." □

Věra Murray was born in Czechoslovakia, left the country in 1968 and is currently the Moscow correspondent for the Quebec magazine L'Actualité.

Translation by Eva Bild