

Triumph of Czechoslovakia's revolution

Prague celebrates its freedom in the New Year: an eyewitness report by Laurent Murawiec.

"The slogan 'better Red than dead' does not irritate me as an expression of surrender to the Soviet Union, but it terrifies me as an expression of the renunciation by Western people of any claim to a meaningful life and of their acceptance of impersonal power as such. For what the slogan really says is that nothing is worth giving one's life for." Thus spoke, in the year 1984, Vaclav Havel, who was elected the President of the Czechoslovak Republic on Dec. 29, 1989. Those words symbolize the moral integrity and intellectual strength of the revolution which swept away 40 years of colonial communist power within two short weeks.

A retired worker, met in the street, explained in broken German: "We've had 40 years of communism, and it was all bad. We'll never have it again. Havel is our man, he is our President. He could have gone into exile, emigrated. But he stayed with us, he chose to fight here, whatever the cost to him." And from the handful of intellectuals who signed the Charter 77 document, which established the existence of an opposition to the Russians' colonial puppets in 1977, grew a movement that has now taken power. After the students and the actors of Prague initiated the movement, in mid-November, it was a matter of days before workers joined, and with them, virtually the entire nation.

Havel's election by a vote of Parliament "opened a new era in our history," a professor said, and Havel, the playwright, lost no time in making it concrete: For his first trip abroad, he chose Berlin and Munich, and manifested the independence of the new power by saying, "Europe need have no fear of a democratic Germany. It can be as large as it wants," flying in the face of those who try to slow down the Eastern European freedom fighters.

On New Year's Eve, 150,000 inhabitants of Prague had gathered on Wenceslas Square for a most unusual celebration, that of their freedom. While each of them had a bottle of champagne, and many were joyously drunken, they were not there to "have a good time," but to shed tears of joy after the decades of oppression. They chanted: "*Ať žij Havel!*" ("Long live Havel!") An inscription painted on a wall, on the square, proudly proclaimed: "It's all over—Czechs are free!" They sang "We Shall Overcome," in Czech and in English. The national anthem was sung, and the "Prayer for the Fatherland" was sung by a popular singer: Public performance of her songs had been banned for 20 years, as well as her song. A beautiful Renaissance song was played on the loudspeakers,

and people informed me that the words had been changed: "It is an anti-Bolshevik song," they said. Humor was not missing, as people reported that "we had a great time looking at the face of our parliamentarians on television" the week before, when those Communist deputies elected the long-ostracized Alexander Dubcek to the position of Speaker of the Parliament, thus closing the parenthesis opened by the Aug. 21, 1968 military invasion by Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces. "I see this as a moral vindication for the hundreds of thousands of active participants in the Prague Spring," Dubcek said. His own election was highly symbolic: Rather than giving him much political power, it was the state making amends.

On New Year's day, state television aired a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which fitted marvelously with a city of Prague covered with the national colors, those hundreds of thousands of flags alongside as many portraits of Vaclav Havel, the President who was in jail as recently as May 1989.

'Spiritual crossroad of Europe'

In his inaugural speech, on Jan. 1, Havel minced no words: "Our state should never again be an appendage or a poor relative of anyone else," he said—no appendage to the Soviet Union, and no poor relative of anyone in the West, especially not those who betrayed Czechoslovakia in 1938 with the Munich agreements made with Hitler, who condoned the Communist coup d'état in 1948, and remained passive in 1968 when the Soviet tanks rolled in. "We are a small country, yet at one time, we were the spiritual crossroad of Europe. Is there a reason why we cannot become one once again?"

I see every reason why that should be so. The ancient nation of Bohemia, Christianized in the ninth century, was indeed the intellectual capital of Europe. It is there that in the 14th century the Bohemian King, Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor, established the Universitas Carolina, the first German-speaking university in Europe. It is there that the Italian poet Petrarca went, in the same century, to launch the great language project from which modern German—and modern Czech—emerged. Prague was the center of the movement that did so much to establish the national identity of the Czechs, that of Magister Jan Hus the reformer, burned at the stake in 1415 at the Council of Constance. Prague, perhaps

the most beautiful city in Europe, was the melting-pot where an exceptional culture was conceived, "by a collaboration and a confluence of Czechs, Jews, and Germans," as the Czechs proudly say. It was the city of Mozart, Dvorak, and Smetana.

It is not that the Czechs and the Slovaks had an easy way, as a small nation squeezed between competing empires. In 1620, the army of the Czech Protestants was savaged by the troops of the Catholic Hapsburg Emperor at the Battle of the White Mountain, and Bohemia disappeared for three centuries as an independent entity. The Czech tongue was banned, considered only a language for coachmen, domestics, and serfs. A foreign power occupied the land, and stole it from its owners—just as the Nazis did later, and shortly thereafter, their Russian accomplices in crime. As late as 1900, the Czech deputies at the Imperial Diet in Vienna had to mount a major fight for Czech to be allowed as a teaching language at Prague University!

The heritage of Masaryk

Then appeared on the stage a statesman who towers above most other figures of the 20th century, Thomas Masaryk (1850-1937)—philosopher, professor, deputy, founder and first President of the Czechoslovak Republic, and the acknowledged inspiration for millions of his fellow citizens today. In numbers, his portraits are only second to Havel's in the windows and on the walls throughout the country. Born to a blacksmith and a domestic in Slovakia, trained himself as a smith, Masaryk succeeded by hard work and genius in going through university, and becoming a professor, and soon, the rallying point for Czech and Slovak patriots suffering under the inane bureaucratic yoke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. No man was more feared by the Vienna Hofburg, the seat of the imperial government, than this forthright, fearless fighter who became the focal point for all Slavs oppressed inside and outside the decaying Hapsburg Empire. At the same time, as shown by his insightful 1913 book *The Spirit of Russia*, Masaryk the intellectual had few peers.

When World War I broke out, Masaryk determined his war aims: that there should emerge from it a free, sovereign Czechoslovakia, an idea that was by no means self-evident. When he arrived in Paris, and later in London and Chicago, his Allied interlocutors did not even know that there was such a thing as a Czech nation! Masaryk convinced, used, and outwitted those Allied leaders who had no time for such fanciful notions as national sovereignty, being fully committed to some form of world-federalist order, in the mold of the 1815 Congress of Vienna, or later the Yalta agreements. He also outfoxed Lenin, and shaped the 50,000-strong Czech Legion he had raised into a considerable force: By 1916, Czechoslovakia had an army, without having a state yet.

When Masaryk returned to Prague, in 1918, it was in triumph, as President-elect of the republic. Typically, he refused to ride in the horse-driven imperial carriage—his



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**V novém roce
ve svobodné zemi
se svobodným národem
do svobodných voleb**

Studenti VŠ Plzeň

This poster distributed recently in Prague reads, "For the new year/For a free land/For a free Nation/For free elections—The Students of Pilsen."

critique of "conservatives" was always their neglect of and contempt for workers. That is why his republic remained a democracy through the 1920s and '30s, while all neighboring countries became dictatorships. It needed the collusion of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Neville Chamberlain, Edouard Daladier, and Josef Stalin to destroy it, two years after Masaryk's death.

The Czech and Slovak armed resistance to the Nazis during the war deserves to be cited as an example. Still, Messrs. Churchill and Roosevelt sold them out to Stalin at Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam. There was no room for a sovereign Czechoslovakia in the superpowers' condominium. For a strong, prosperous Czechoslovakia, which had been the industrial heartland of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the "spiritual crossroad of Europe," was a powerful pole of attraction for all Slavic nations otherwise treated as cattle by the great powers. Masaryk's scheme of a Slavic Federation excluding Russia was a potent idea, the realization of which might have stopped the collapse of Europe in World War II. This is equally true of the 1938, 1948, and 1968 disasters.

Vaclav Havel's father was a friend of Thomas Masaryk, and young Havel grew up steeped in Masaryk's ideas. History is made of such ironies, the underground life and progress of ideas that the powers that be cannot control.

The way ahead

That is probably what President Havel was referring to in his inaugural speech, when he said, "We have to discover the full truth of our recent history." He pointed out that 40 years of Communist mismanagement had left industry and the economy, and the environment, in a disastrous state. But, "the worst thing is that we live in a contaminated moral environment . . . because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. We became used to the totalitarian system and thus helped to perpetuate it." He added that the Communists had considered "people as little more than rivets in a thrashing, smoking machine which had no obvious purpose." "People, the government had returned to you," he paraphrased Masaryk. "I assume that you did not propose me for this office so that I too would lie to you. The best government in the world, the best Parliament and the best President cannot achieve much on their own. Freedom and democracy call for the participation and therefore the responsibility of us all."

Those who lived through 1968 and the hideous years that followed, where any sign of courage or virtue or talent was a sure ticket to be ostracized, harassed, and persecuted, and where hundreds of thousands lost their jobs, their rights, and their freedom—those people, while euphoric, know that the way ahead is not going to be simple. In mid-January, the Czech government will start negotiations with the Soviets, on the evacuation of the 75,000 Soviet occupation troops. Moscow is prepared to exact a heavy price for any concession in this direction.

At no time during the days I spent there did I see a portrait of Gorbachov, or did anyone mention his name. In 1986, the Russian leader had come to Prague, and the whole country was ready to welcome him as a liberator. Had he said one word to condemn, or merely regret, the 1968 invasion and its consequences, the trick would have been done. But Gorbachov backed up the old leadership, the evil old men who had purged and jailed a whole people. All he did was to kick upstairs the loathed Gustav Husak from secretary general of the Party to the presidency, and replace him with the hated secret police thug Milos Jakes. Czechoslovakia was then lost for Gorbymania, and for good.

For sure, the secret police still exists. But it has lost power, since people have lost their fear. It has no one to report to, no one who would act. Similarly with the party functionaries, who are more of an inertial burden than any active force: Once the purges of normalization "freed" the Communist Party of anyone with an ounce of competence, talent, or courage, only the careerists, the opportunists, and the thugs were left.

Those now in government spent the last 20 years in jail, in lowly menial jobs, in internal exile. They devoted much of those terrible years to thinking. While they have been catapulted into government much faster than their wildest dreams would have hinted, they have not arrived unprepared.

Typical is the case of Vice Prime Minister Valtr Komarek, an economist and member of the Academy of Sciences. Some two years ago, Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec, enough of an opportunist to be a Communist, but enough of a pragmatist to perceive that the economy was entering a deep crisis, asked Komarek to regroup the 1968 economists in an Institute of Prevision that would work on a diagnosis of the past decades of economic life, and issue proposals. The study Komarek and his collaborators delivered was a devastating indictment of Communist rule; it was not published at the time. The proposals were circulated, and inspire the present government.

This also explains the words of the new finance minister, Vaclav Klaus, at the end of December: "We will not fall into the trap of the International Monetary Fund, as Poland did." Only a small minority in government circles advocates a "shock treatment" similar to that prescribed for Poland by Harvard monetarist Jeffrey Sachs and his IMF cohorts.

For decades, the economy has been looted by the Soviets. In 1968, ten crowns were needed to buy one ruble. As a result of the Soviet occupation, the parity was raised to 18:1 one year later—"overnight, we had to almost double our exports to the U.S.S.R.," an economist explained. In the last few years, Russia bought 90 billion crowns worth of Czech industrial goods on loans extended by the Czech Treasury. They have never been reimbursed, and Prague cannot buy anything worth anything in the U.S.S.R. The railway system is on the brink of disaster; the roads, while better than in other ex-"socialist" countries, need a lot of work; the telecommunications system is outdated and inefficient. The entire sector of residential buildings is in urgent need of huge investment, being in long-standing, complete disrepair. There is no acute shortage of food, but living standards are low: An average worker earns 2,500 crowns per month (1 crown=10 cents, at the official rate, but 2.5 cents on the more realistic black market rate). And he needs two months of wages to purchase a poor-quality refrigerator.

The true Europe

The Civic Forum now in power with Havel and his collaborators, has power: The powers of the presidency are vast, including being the commander-in-chief of the Army. The Communist Party is a reviled relic. Much will depend on the West's ability to understand that we must help Czechoslovakia, like we must help Poland and East Germany. For Europe, a sovereign and prosperous Czechoslovakia is a necessity, and a decisive power in the middle of the continent, as Masaryk had seen it. The beauty of Prague, the extraordinary, truly impressive depth and passion of the national sentiment of Czechs and Slovaks, certainly demonstrate how absurd and illegitimate the postwar division of Europe has been, in the bastard continent cut and patched by the arbitrary will of the Yalta powers. There is no "Eastern" Europe, there is Europe, and it only ends where Great Russia begins.