

Eight *plus* one *is* 9

Jack Mullin has lived most of his life in Ayrshire, working for the Butlin family and the Rank Organization. In 1971-72, he moved to Prague, where he married a Czech, Libuše, worked for a time in a local engineering factory and then at the British Embassy. He has been retired for 21 years.

The significance of the number 8 at Czech historical events and wondering if it was fate or just coincidence has often been a topic of conversation in my home.

Well, what about my historical events? My father was the third born of 9 children, my mother was the third born of 9 and I also was the third born of 9. I met Líba, my wife in Britain during the Dubček era. We became engaged on August 29th 1968 and we married in 1969. Our age difference is 9 years. Our first house was number 9. Our second dwelling where we still live is number 19. My parking place at work was always number 19. My age at the time of writing is 9×9 . I was always plus one digit ahead of Czechoslovakia until in 1989, a man named Václav Havel put an end to that. Nine... the mystic number in mathematics.

As a young man, I'd meet my friends in bright coffee bars, those lively spots where you'd hear the relentless chatter of the Italian staff, the snap-fizz of coke bottles being opened, tinkling of glasses, the merry giggling of the girls and the juke-box blaring out the latest pop music. In the exhilarating '60s, life was lived in glorious Technicolor.

However, in Christmas week 1968, I sat with my new fiancée in the Cafe Slavia, a ferment of intrigue and the meeting place for poets, writers and covert political thinkers. Under wafts of blue cigarette smoke, groups

of men, caps pulled down, collars pulled up, huddled around beer laden tables hatching plots or talking a little treason. Well, that's how my naive gaze perceived the scene. I felt as if I'd been parachuted behind enemy lines.

The Cafe Slavia was a remarkable example of Art Deco. I could look across Národní třída at the National Theatre or over the Vltava to Prague Castle and the Charles Bridge, barely visible in the dusk. The few streetlights were dim and the weak table lighting made the interior of the cafe even more captivating.

Amazingly visas were being granted, considering the drama of the invasion but I supposed the establishment wished to project an air of normality to the outside world. We married the following year and I worked and lived in Prague for some time unknowingly building a treasure store of memories of Czechoslovakia.

During the Communist regime the buildings were dismal and sooty. Some streets were mud-covered and I was horrified once to watch women working on road gangs, dumping boxfuls of tarmac on the road to be compacted by a hand-operated roller. Yet there was no street litter or graffiti-covered walls. The shops' interiors were dreary and their slogan-covered windows were miniaturisations of the massive political hoardings that occupied many street corners.

Men were usually soberly dressed but socially, they might wear clothing that one could see was expensive while ladies appeared in home-made dresses skilfully crafted in the latest Western fashion. Schoolchildren were always dressed in bright outfits. There was no obvious lack of cash, only the lack of what to buy so when I started to receive 25 per cent of my salary in Tuzex currency, things improved in our household and we became regulars at the Tuzex shop in Pařížská.

I simply wallowed in the culture, strolling open-mouthed around the city, sometimes with workmates but mostly with my wife, ever finding something new... like the green-painted Russian TU34 World War II tank, a centrepiece on the so-called "Tank Square" or the dreadful sight of the bullet-ridden facade and the ceilings of the National Museum that overlooked the mounted statue of St Wenceslas, which in turn faced down the Square aptly named after him. How amusing it was to see cars filling up at an ancient petrol pump on the pavement in Náměstí Míru or a man jumping onto a heaving tram carrying a live carp in a bucket of water.

Public transport was terrific I thought. Buses, trams and trolley buses had the city well covered though the timetables were seldom adhered to. It was an education travelling on them. When a man came onto a tram



carrying an armchair, nobody turned a hair; in Britain it would have made the national news.

Líba's parents were a remarkable couple. The father was a hard-working sculptor who was forced to spend the war years in Berlin. He tackled any domestic job including installing our staircase, a bathroom and three upstairs bedrooms with dormer windows. There was no possibility of obtaining a builder's estimate as we British do. I often felt inadequate beside him.

Sometimes in the city centre we'd go for a beer to 'U Pinkasů' just off Jungmannova, a grand pub with tasty food, noted for its roller towel in the 'gents' that was changed once daily and which you used at your own risk. Líba and her mother were never amused at these outings.

The mother was a miracle worker. She had a use for everything, whether a piece of string, bits of cloth or lengths of wood. If I threw away an old shirt, it re-appeared as a tea towel. Nothing was discarded. If anything was needed, she had it. Spending the war years under the Nazis and thirty under the Communists had taught her how to survive. Our cellar was stuffed with over 400 jars of pickled fruit and vegetables, mostly from our own garden. Her ancient Singer sewing machine was seldom idle.

I had three good workmates during my year in Prague; Viktor, Alois and Mirek. We always headed for our favourite pubs after work; 'U Kocoura' at the bottom of Nerudova, 'U Háku' off Pařížská and 'U Tří Zlatých Trojek' by Malostranské náměstí. They were good days.

Czechs are sporty people and the five-yearly Spartakiáda at the Strahov stadium is testament to that. They worship the countryside and at weekends Prague seemed so quiet because many families owned holiday chalets which they built themselves. God knows how they carried the building materials in those prehistoric cars on those rutted roads, so unlike those in Britain.

During the Communist era, there were no dole queues. You worked or starved. Strikes were outlawed. One thing was sure, poor or not, you had to be content with your lot. Elderly people were resigned to this but the youth and progressives had other ideas...

There were however, cultural rewards. Concert halls and theatres were freely available and seats were cheap. Líba introduced me to the operas *Madame Butterfly*, *Hubička* and *Čarostřelec*. I was mesmerised.

In 1972 Líba and I moved to Britain before our daughter's birth. From then on her parents were allowed to travel to Britain for holidays which they did quite often. They especially enjoyed the Scottish culture and the father's discovery of our local fishing fleet was for him, a wonderland, as was the historic Edinburgh.

During subsequent visits to Prague, I had to report to the police station in Bartolomějská to have my passport and visa examined. My everlasting memory of that chilling place was the padded doors in the passage where you waited an eternity to be interviewed.

At last, in autumn 1989, there was an unexplainably animated mood in the city. An atmosphere of change was in the air. In late November, we sat at home listening in astonishment to the news from Prague that the Communists had been peacefully overthrown and democracy had returned in the form of "The Velvet Revolution". The name Václav Havel was the main subject of every worldwide news agency. A program was beamed via the BBC from the Cafe Slavia. We stared

incredibly at the table where we sat 21 years previously but this time the scene was vibrant and dynamic.

Our next visit to Prague was unforgettable, especially for Líba and our daughter who had obtained the job as official interpreter to the Czech team taking part in the 1990 Special Paralympic Games to be held in Glasgow. After the games, President Havel's airliner arrived at Prestwick Airport to take the team home and my daughter and Líba were invited to travel with them. Upon arrival in Prague, they were interviewed by reporters on Czech TV. Me, I travelled scheduled flight. Our local newspapers were delighted to print the story upon their return.

A new era began and amazingly everyone was speaking English, shops were privately

rageous laughter, smell the sweat and see Mirek constantly glancing at his watch, afraid to be late home. There was nothing left but memories. Someone had turned on a tap and let all the magic run out. Suddenly I hated the brash new Prague with its bright lights and its graffiti-covered walls.

Now in 2019, Líba and I are due to celebrate our Golden Wedding anniversary, I can think over the fifty years and marvel at the changes in Czechia; freedom of speech and worship, the roads, bridges and tunnels that magically appeared (I have re-named my Scottish hometown "Pothole-on-Sea"), and practically all of Prague has been re-roofed, blocks of flats re-clad and homes modernised. Folks are driving new cars, joining sports clubs, riding expensive cycles. The



owned, folk wore colourful clothing and old Škodas, Trabants, and wartime German vehicles were slowly replaced by new. The Czechs separated from Slovakia in 1993, joined NATO in 1999 and after the Millennium, in the year 2004, the Czech Republic joined the European Union. The winds of change raced across the land at hurricane speed.

Fast forward to 2015. Líba's parents had passed away in the intervening years and we now owned the family home. The wonderfully modern Prague Metro has a station close to our house and travel to the city is so much easier. We come now for longer periods but the past keeps getting in the way so I decided to visit my old haunts.

I went first to 'U Kocoura' to find it exactly as in 1971, noisy, non-smoking but full of strangers, then over Charles Bridge to the Old Town Square and along Pařížská. The Tuzex shop was long gone and round the corner 'U Háku' was now an Asian bistro, empty of atmosphere and diners. That only left that boisterous 'U Tří Zlatých Trojek' but inside, I was confronted by groups of neat empty tables covered with white linen with artificial flowers in silver vases but devoid of diners. For a moment, I could hear Viktor's and Alois's raucous banter and out-

youngsters are clad and shod in Nike and Adidas except when wearing clothing from Zara where girls buy clothing by the armful in preparation for Ibiza etc. The knitting needles and wool, sewing box and Singer sewing machines have been consigned to history.

It is evident to me that Czechia has spent its time well as a member of the European Union and in the modernisation of its government. Czechia will never forget the invasion of the Third Reich and the savagery of Lidice or the tragedy of Jan Palach following the Soviet invasion and its part in the Battle of Vienna against the Ottoman Empire. It is easy to understand why it is jealously guarding its borders against any other invader.

A few days before I wrote this piece, Líba and I spent some time in the Yalta hotel, built in the Sixties to conceal the huge secret bunker beneath its innocuous walls. Her father laid the marble floors and steps of the beautiful staircase in the atrium. She likes to go there for a little weep.

However, it was way back in 1990, that what made me truly believe that the old days were actually gone was the day I photographed my daughter standing before that product of the Communist One-Party state... the iconic Trabant.