Czechoslovakia 1970

Czechoslovakia 1970 was an entry in the BCSA's 2021 writing competition. It is part of a longer memoir by Howard Temperley. He was born in Sunderland, educated at the Newcastle Royal Grammar School (1941-51), Magdalen College, Oxford (1953-56) and Yale University (1956-60), and was Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia (1980-97).

It was an offer we could hardly refuse: a cottage in the mountains of Bohemia for us to occupy free of charge for as long as we chose. Two years earlier we had befriended a group of Czech students left stranded by the 1968 Russian invasion. No thought of repayment had crossed our minds. But shared experiences led to new friendships and now, out of the blue, came this offer, and with it a proposal that Helenka, one of the students we had taken in, stay with us as nursemaid and general help.

So it was that one morning in July 1970, with baby Rebecca strapped to the back seat, Rachel and I set out in our blue VW Beetle to drive to a country about which we knew virtually nothing. The plan was to spend three weeks at the cottage, enjoy a final week in Prague and then drive home.

Notably absent from the two brochures sent to us prior to our departure was any account of the nation's troubled origins. One, printed on glossy paper and lavishly illustrated, was from its "Tourist Ministry". Did we want to ski, hunt bears, enjoy a relaxing sauna, dine in style, then we had chosen wisely. Whatever our wishes, the Ministry would ensure they were satisfied. The other, closely printed on cheaper paper, listed the many things we were required or forbidden to do. They included registering with the police, not staying longer than our visas permitted and, above all, not engaging in any unauthorised currency transactions.

The checkpoint conveyed a similar mixed message. It was the northernmost of the three entry points and I could only assume the least used, for we had some difficulty finding it. Constructed of giant concrete cubes, it looked decidedly menacing. As we approached, however, an attempt was being made to soften this impression, for at that very moment men could be seen busily engaged in painting the west-facing sides of the blocks in gay colours and stencilling them with "WELCOME," "WILKOMEN" "BIENVENUE" and equivalent greetings in many languages.

Although all part of the same German plain, the landscape beyond the checkpoint was very different from the one we had left. On the German side of the border the roads had been smooth, the streets well-lit, the inns prospering. Displays in shop windows suggested Germans were now better off than the British. On the Czech side, by contrast, we were abruptly back in the 1930s, or rather in a decrepit version of them, for the roads were potholed and seemingly not a lick of paint had been applied to anything since the Wehrmacht had sallied forth on Hitler's great crusade.

Time and again we would come across scenes at once strange and yet eerily familiar, bringing back memories of the rural poverty of Britain the 1930s. One confronted us as we emerged from the checkpoint. A pond had overflowed and a troop of ducks had taken possession of the road.

At Teplice we were greeted by Dr Jindra Sik and taken up to his cottage. Helenka had arrived the previous day and made up beds. My oldest daughter Alison, who joined us for part of our stay, remembers a "Hansel and Gretel sort of cottage" and going out with Helenka to pick peas in the fields nearby. For all of us, it was as happy a time as we could remember.

My principal memory is of looking down on a giant plain stretching as far as the eye could see. For millennia it must have been a forest, absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere. Now the reverse was happening. The trees had gone and in their place were giant chimneys from which, as from upturned water faucets, there flowed smooth columns of yellowish smoke reaching high into the upper atmosphere to form an over-arching canopy. The effect was most dramatic at dawn and dusk when the sun's rays illuminated the canopy from beneath, transforming the whole into a thing of beauty, a phantom cathedral created by the ant-like toil of men labouring deep under the earth.

We saw a lot of the Russians as their camps were all around, but as they travelled in armoured convoys, we had no individual dealings with them. The Czech border guards were another matter. They took to dropping in on us nightly, not because they were suspicious of our activities – Dr Sik, had cleared that with their superiors – but to get away from the mosquitoes and flirt with Helenka.

They patrolled the forest, each with a rifle and a dog, to stop Czechs escaping into East Germany and thence, via Berlin, to the West. Dr Sik had advised us to offer a shot of whisky to the first who came, which we duly did. Perhaps we did the same the following night, but after that it was cups of tea and eventually nothing at all. But that did not stop them coming. Every night, just as it was getting dark, there would be that knock and after tethering his dog – always a German shepherd – in one would come, prop his rifle against the wall, scratch his crotch and armpits and look around expectantly.

Sometimes we would attempt conversation. I recall our laughing at the consternation of one who had spotted some British coins we'd left lying about. Was the head that of the Queen? I said it was, and why didn't he take one to show his family? At that he slapped down the coin and drew back his chair. Whisky and tea were all very well, but money could get you into trouble.

Dr Sik was continually attentive to our needs. He spoke excellent English and took us out on various expeditions, including one to Lidice, the village erased after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. His relatives had mostly perished in the extermination camps. He attributed his own survival to his having been used for medical experiments, of what kind he did not say, and I did not enquire. There was, he told us, evidence of camp survivors aging and dying prematurely, a theory not supported by his natural ebullience.

The failure of theory to conform to reality was better exemplified by his son. A product of the Czech educational system he ought to have been the new "socialist man" the system was supposed to produce. What I most clearly remember, however, was his telling me of having discovered the revolutionary ideas of Adam Smith. Bored by the orthodox Marxism of his schooling, he found the idea of a free, self-regulating market irresistible.

I cannot recall the eyes of any right-wing advocate of capitalism, or religious convert for that matter, sparkling as much as his as he described to me how an entrepreneur, starting out with a new product – coffee cups were the example he chose – could begin, first working on his own and then gradually, with the assistance of "friends," build up a viable enterprise. No government intervention would be required. The idea was simple and natural. It was also democratic in that its success depended on customer choice rather than government decree.

Above all, it was his discovery, a thing of beauty plucked by him from the polluted air of that Marxist shambles. So here he was, heir to two centuries of aspiration, bloodshed, and spilled ink expressing ideas that he might well have lifted verbatim from Poor Richard's Almanack.

He and Benjamin Franklin would have got along fine, for he was intelligent and Czechoslovakia plainly in need of just such ideas. Rather than using the manufacture of coffee mugs to illustrate his theory, however, he need have looked no further than to the home allotments we visited to buy fruit and vegetables. Admirable in the abstract,

the notion of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need," when applied to the land gave way to "what belongs to everybody belongs to nobody."

The authorities' attempt to remedy the situation by lengthening the workday and restricting the size of the garden plots had merely sharpened the contrast between what the communal workers accomplished in their spare time and the desertified fields around.

Our week in Prague – in the event it turned out to be more than ten days – was a disaster. Our troubles began even before we got there, Rebecca having picked up some form of gastroenteritis at a local paddling pool. Her condition worsened so dramatically on the drive south that Helenka insisted we take her straight to Prague children's hospital.

It was in a wing of Prague Castle, and it was there that she and Rachel were destined to spend the remainder of our holiday. Czech parents we were told were not allowed to visit as children were said to find it "unsettling." I recall driving daily over a drawbridge and ascending a twisting stone stairway offering glimpses into long wards lined with rows of beds occupied by silent Czech children.

Sometimes, even in the courtyard, I would hear a single child's voice raised in protest and find, on reaching the top of the the stairs, that it came from what was arguably the most privileged child in the hospital.

Alison and Helenka having departed, these visits became the central pivot around which my daily routine revolved. The rest of my time I spent queuing at the police station, the tourist head offices, and the bank, none of which would assist without the prior consent of the other two.

I'm told Prague is once more a thriving metropolis. The one I knew was a sorry sight, its buildings dilapidated, its streets potholed, its stores empty. Sidewalks were roofed over with railway sleepers to protect pedestrians from falling masonry. Although the Russians had temporarily pulled back, it still had the look of a city under siege.

That its decrepitude might be interpreted as evidence of Czech defiance was an idea that had not occurred to me until I heard it argued by the daughter of my Prague hosts. In her view it was the patriotic duty of Czechs to sabotage the economic system. One of her responsibilities as secretary of a Czech trade union was to supply her Moscow counterpart with economic data.

For more than a year she had contrived not to do so while making it appear that the fault was his. "This poor little Russian," she crowed, "he is afraid he will lose his job." Remembering Lidice and the bullet-sprayed walls of Wenceslas Square, it made more sense than attempting direct action. What was the alternative? Slave away as if nothing had happened? Look on the bright side?

Although Czechs were not supposed to have foreign bank accounts, many did. My Prague hosts happily provided me with cash enough to settle our hospital bill in return for an equivalent amount, in sterling, into their British account. So, by the time we left we had flagrantly broken all the rules we had been warned against breaking, not out of choice but because the system offered no alternative.

Fortunately, it was also too inefficient to have noticed.

Back in England, I posted the letters and cheques I'd been given to smuggle out, and life resumed its normal course. Nevertheless, there remained one last surprise in store. It came in the form of a cheque large enough to cover the entire cost of the vacation with money left over. My insurers had simply converted the amount I'd paid the hospital in black market Crowns into pounds sterling at the rate set by the Czechoslovak government. Of all the oddities associated with our 1970 trip, this last was surely the oddest. How many vacationers have returned home to find that their foreign holiday has made them richer?

● The image on page 4 was taken in 1970 and shows the reunion at the cottage in Czechoslovakia with three of the students to whom Howard Temperley had given refuge in 1968. L to r: Alison, the three students, Helenka, Rebecca and Rachel.