

# A Cambridge poet plays basketball in a Moravian wine cellar

Vyhrajeme, klucii!

1991, and the world was in flux. I'd taken a job teaching English Literature at Charles University's pedagogical faculty to fill a year before I went to graduate school in the US. My mind was aflame with the work of Miroslav Holub, Milan Kundera and Václav Havel – yet, despite immersing myself in the country's literature, delights such as “pivo i párek”, “vepřo, knedlo, zelo” and other icons of the Czech experience remained mysterious to me.

My life outside teaching was not lonely: colleagues welcomed me with mountains of treats and kindness, and I'd been invited to teach English at Hradec Králové's “Monday Night English Club”, an institution which carries on to this day. That invitation led, in turn, to cook-out parties at country houses, family meals at my friends' homes – and a place on one of the local basketball teams, attempting to play a game in which I was almost completely inexperienced.



My Mannschaft basket consisted of Jirka, one of the members of the aforesaid “Monday Night English Club”, and his friends, among whom were Petr, a welding process engineer with a thick beard and a vicious way with vulgarity (“ty seš vůl!”); Ivan, a kindly, prematurely balding butcher, and Luboš, a large, heavy-set man whose love of eating saw him nicknamed “Langoš” after the doughy, cheesy Hungarian treat.

A few Thursday night basketball sessions later, it was casually mentioned that the team would be departing the next weekend for a friendly tournament in Moravia, and would I like to go along as a substitute? The invitation surprised me, not least because I considered my strengths to lie more in writing poems than playing sports.

In short, I sucked at basketball. But it didn't matter – I wanted to see the country, and a trip to play basketball sounded like a great way to do it. As an added incentive, the guys made it clear a trip to the local wine cellar was included. And they mentioned the local nurses' academy would be sending a party along to support our team, something that did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm – or that of my fellow players.

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Thirty years ago, the Czech Republic was newly liberated from the shackles of socialism – but had yet to realise the disappointments of

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capitalism and the “American” dream. Fresh paint and new signage over old store fronts: it seemed as if every other shop were shouting JE TU PRO VAS or MÁME NABÍDKY! Each month brought a new craze: personal trainers, gyms and discos, diet plans, second- or third-hand luxury cars from Germany. Even the backdrop of seventeenth and eighteenth century architecture, neglected for the past 50 years, began to reassert itself as the blocks of socialist-realist “dva plus jedna” apartments that studded the landscape began to fade.

I reflected on these changes as our ČSAD bus pulled out of Hradec Králové and made its way over to Moravia. It's hard to overstate how nervous and inexperienced I was at that time in my life. I never considered that basketball was the last thing on my fellow player's minds – drinking (wine and beer) and the nurses (for humanity's favourite activity) were their real focus.

When we got to the gymnázium where our first match was sched-



uled, I began to understand where my team-mates' true interests lay. To start with, Ivan and Luboš had been swigging maly piv' on the bus – not excessively, I have to record. Then the nurses' bus arrived a few minutes after ours to be greeted with more cheering than the arrival of our hosts, who walked out of the school's sports hall fully changed, ready to do battle.

Once in our club gear – “Sokol Hradec Králové” – it became clear that our opponents didn't see this match as quite the social occasion we did. Though they were all over 35 – a stipulation of the tournament, except for me – they seemed fitter and more skilful than us. However, the role of guts and determination, so often sung of by poets and musicians down the centuries, was about to make its impression.

The first quarter of the game consisted of us getting outclassed, out-run and out-pointed. If memory serves, we were around twenty points down after the first fifteen minutes. In the second period, we managed to reduce the deficit to about ten points, thanks in part to complacency from our opponents, on the one hand – and our sheer animal pride on the other. Jirka, his close-cropped hair running with sweat, played like a demon in the third period, exhorting his team-mates and scolding Ivan and Luboš for even thinking about beer before the game.

I still hadn't been brought on as a substitute at this point, but I didn't care. Winning clearly mattered to the guys, and I wasn't going to help them do that. Though as we joined battle properly, the scent of beer-tainted sweat pouring off Ivan and Luboš as they ran, I sensed we



might be in with a chance. Darting runs, audacious throws at the hoop from half-way: my team gave it everything. So much so that, at the start of the fourth period, we were just a few points behind. A few points from bragging rights with the nurses (who'd missed the game to go shopping in Ostrava), and a memorable night's drinking.

One minute left to the end of the game. They'd scored five baskets this quarter, we'd scored five, plus a three-pointer from outside the D. So we were just one point down with a minute left. Pouring with sweat, Jirka – our unofficial captain – looked at me on the bench. Inwardly, I pleaded with him not to sub me with so much at stake. Outwardly, I got up off the bench and made a few movements to show I was ready if he needed me.

And he did: with a minute left and a point in it, I was brought off the bench and told to play guard. At least that was a defensive position, so I wouldn't be called on to score – or so I thought. We got the ball below our own net. Luboš was in possession. He passed to Ivan, who passed to Jirka. I went running up the wing. Jirka got entangled with two of their players in the middle of the court and noticed me making my run, so he lobbed the ball hopefully overhead in my direction.

It's at this point I should tell you that I could not dribble the ball to save my life. So when I caught the ball out of mid-air, impressing myself with that alone, I had two choices – look for a pass, or shoot for glory. Thirty seconds left: I threw technique to the wind, and aimed the damn ball at the hoop. Not a slow, arching shot – a bullet just above the rim. It bounced once, twice – and dropped outside the net, falling down to ignominy.

But Jirka had covered the distance from the middle of the court by then, and was first to the rebound. He pushed the ball back up and in, we were one point up with twenty seconds to go – and we held on for the win.



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Later, in the Stoletá Hospoda, which we visited with our opponents after the game, my hit-and-hope pass was transformed by my overly-kind team-mates into a work of genius. How I must have known Jirka would make the distance. How marvellous my aim had been (it hadn't) – and the skill I'd shown in instinctively knowing to go for the shot. I was presented to paní Fišerová, the proprietor of the Stoletá, as the game's hero. Conscious of the good business the two teams were bringing to her establishment, of the maly čárky representing beer after beer and sausage after sausage that were appearing on our tally-sheets, paní Fišerová produced a bottle of vodka on the house. As the youngest, and the hero of the game (according to my friends), I was to drink first.

Paní Fišerová poured me a good treble. "Bůmbej, mladej!" she exhorted, her aging features cracking into a wide grin. I drank the entire glass in one go, ice and fire exploding in my throat, the vodka burning its way down to join the four beers I'd already consumed. And that was before the night began in earnest...

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The rest of the evening blurred: the scent of cool white wines straight from the barrel. The candles used to light the wine cellar shimmering

gold through our glasses. Our team around a long table with nurses between us, the table heavy with caraway seed loaves, smažený sýr and tlačenka. That sounded like the English word "placenta" to me – a misunderstanding that made the walls shake with our laughter when I first voiced it. My first and final shot at the hoop was re-enacted using a houska as a ball and a water-jug as the hoop. I remember singing folk songs arm-in-arm with the nurses, not knowing a word; bawling out "už je tam!" when Ivan came back from the toilets and hit his head, four-fifths boozed, against the low ceiling. One thing I don't remember – exactly how we got home to the Youth Hostel where we were staying that night.

## II –The Hangover (Kocovina na Maximum!)

Waking up in our hostel to see six grown men in various states of inebriation, reaching in their sports bags for cool bottles of "štirka" – weak beer at four per cent proof – is stamped in my memory. As is the married Jirka's insistence that I "must not tell it at home, Jimmy" when I walked in to the kitchen to find him engaged with one of the nurses, industriously working off a hangover by sharing a special form of exercise.

If the night before had been an underground trip to heaven, then the journey home was some overland version of hell. First, our ČSAD bus got a flat tyre, the driver's refrain of "omluvim se" while we waited for assistance something I can still hear today. Another thing I can still see is Luboš drinking all the juices from a two-litre jar of okurky, claiming it was a great hangover cure. Then he belched volumingly and yelled, "Jdeme na oběd!" Accordingly, we took a break for lunch at some roadside hospoda.



During lunch, I found Ivan with his head slumped against the wall of the gents' toilets, reciting the Lord's Prayer in Czech even as he tried to relieve some of the previous night's excess into a urinal. Things got worse when Luboš, with nothing more than a murmured "mužu?" attempted to thief Petr's bramborák off his plate, receiving a fork in the back of his hand for his pains.

Looking back at my brief basketball career, I can at least say that it taught me to swear fluently in Czech. I also learned how to play the game a bit, and became a connoisseur of Czech beer. Not to mention vodka. And "zelená", that notorious green spirit known to drinkers across the Czech and Slovak lands. More than that – much more – I became steeped in the culture of that "small country far away about which we know nothing", to use Chamberlain's infamous expression.

Imbibing all things Bohemian, I learned to love a country and its people in that year, its food and songs. I experienced a way of life that was slipping away even then, and has since been replaced by cosmopolitanism and faith in a wider Europe. While I'm a believer in progress of all kinds, I will always cherish my memories of drinking and singing around fires while the párký roasted; memories of empty weekend streets amid the stunning, blackened majesties of Austro-Hungarian architecture; and of almost scoring the winning points on a day – and a night – that will live with me for the rest of my life.

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