

The Prague Experience: An Axe for the Frozen Sea

—Tim Came

At its heart, the Prague Field School represents a change of landscape, from one familiar, often taken for granted, and in at least some respects comfortable, to a richer and more complex world of experience. It is, to borrow an image from Franz Kafka, the kind of book that we should read, which is able to “wake us up with a blow on the head,” and act as “the axe for the frozen sea inside us.”¹ I could not hope in these pages to detail my Prague experience. Instead I will offer glimpses of a few encounters that served as axes for this frozen sea of things taken for granted. These powerful encounters served to awaken me to the artificial or constructed nature of how we as people relate to each other and the world around us in particular contexts. They pointed out that the way things are may be neither the best nor the only way. While these encounters affected me, they may speak differently to others or even not at all. After all, it is the first-hand nature of the encounter that gives such experiences their power. Nevertheless, it is my hope that relating these encounters will raise questions and encourage others to seek out such challenging ‘texts’.

As part of my preparation to go to Prague I read a few short works by Kafka. The *Metamorphosis*, in which the traveling salesman Gregor Samsa awakens to find that he has transformed into a giant insect, seemed to resonate with how many relate to certain illnesses. Gregor remains hidden away in his room, almost without exception, from the time of his metamorphosis until his death. While his family takes care of him, even they fear him and come



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to distance themselves. I believe that we saw something similar with AIDS, though time and education seem to be

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making a difference. Such barriers appear to remain strong with certain illnesses however, mental ones in particular. Despite rising rates and an increasingly medicated population it remains something alien and frightening, even tied to a visceral fear of contagion, though on a rational level we know this to be unwarranted.

I visited a psychiatric clinic in Prague that showed a concerted attempt

to challenge these barriers. At the suggestion of a student from Prague, I attended Mezi Ploty, a cultural festival which translates into English as “inside the walls.” As the sun beat down rather mercilessly, tens of thousands of people wandered the grounds (though not the slightly run-down buildings) of Bohnice, the largest psychiatric hospital in the Czech Republic. I too wandered, taking in the festive atmosphere, the children, balloons, and jugglers. A variety of groups and individuals performed: I saw at least half-a-dozen bands, though there was also theatre and poetry, and a wide variety of people, especially young people. The organizers claim that it “helps break the taboos and prejudice against the field of psychiatry,” a field that they claim has been “very feared” and “misunderstood.”² They hope not only to break stereotypes about psychiatric problems and the people who have them, but by so doing, to break prejudices against seeking psychiatric help. While it remains to be seen how each will grow, this year’s Mezi Ploty, like those before it, planted the seeds of change in a field of thousands. Our class visited a site at Kladno in Bohemia, a former centre of steel production at which 18,000 people used to work in shifts around the

¹ Franz Kafka, “Selections From Letters to Friends,” trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston, in *The Basic Kafka*, ed. Erich Heller and Michael Kowal. New York: Washington Square, 1979.

² Information sheet compiled and translated from Czech primary sources by Pavlina Sachova.

clock, where machines had been in operation for more than a century, and where now almost all is silent. It is a powerful and complex place, but I believe that a central feature of what Kladno is, is the passing away of the vibrant social world of work that once existed there. Apart from a canteen and a few workers, it is a dead place now, and the death of its social world dramatically underscores its physical and environmental desolation. Its story was not unfamiliar; I had heard it before, not of Kladno, but those of many other tragedies brought in the wake of privatization across the post-communist world. The entrepreneur who bought the firm seized the opportunity to “tunnel,” stripping it of most of its assets and bankrupting it within a few years, sending the town into a depression from which it is still seeking to emerge. Kladno is more than a cruel lesson in political economy, though. It is an indictment of human avarice and of belief in unfettered property rights supporting the freedom to cast thousands out of work, should that present itself as a necessary condition for personal or corporate enrichment.

While we were in Prague, a national election campaign unfolded around us. As a political scientist, I could not resist plunging into the midst of it, seeing the rallies of Communists and Thatcherites (Civic Democratic Party leader Vaclav Klaus is quite possibly her biggest fan)³, of Democrats both Christian and Social. At each, amid the music, the balloons and posters, I saw the faces, far more than I could count, of people supporting—and at times questioning—their leaders, people whose lives would be dramatically affected by the outcome of the elections I had tended to treat as an interesting theoretical problem. By chance I came across a Communist

rally in Wenceslas Square, Prague's Champs Elysee, a few meters away from a small monument to the victims of Communism, perhaps even the spot at which Jan Palac lit himself on fire in protest of the policies of the day. Politics became real then, not an interesting puzzle or a paper topic, not even a fascinating system, though it may have been these things as well. I realized how much my focus on distant countries, my reliance on the computer screens and reams of paper through which I learn about these societies rendered me clinically detached from them, and from their people, who had, somewhere along

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the way, become abstract ciphers.

I came to the conclusion that many of us do this. On one level, the Western experience of the world has increasingly become a mediated one, with our world growing more distant even as it shrinks. Yet on another level, we as students and scholars often tend to draw lines between ourselves and our research, aggregating and abstracting those on its other side. Identifying with those on the other side of the window would compromise our objectivity, assuming that it left us in any condition to do such research at all. Yet,

on the other hand, the conversion of human subjects, or humans affected by our subjects, into abstractions has the potential to desensitize us and the studies that we produce to the real impact of the phenomena we study and the policies we recommend. Aware of both sides of this equation, we must each determine, according to the dictates of our consciences and the demands of our work, whether, and under what conditions, to make this pilgrimage. I only hope that more of us, knowing the implications, decide to do so.

The Prague experience, as an encounter with that which is foreign and its employment as an “axe for the frozen sea” is certainly not bound to Prague. As one powerful example, in St. Petersburg, I visited Kresty prison, a place that I had seen before through literature. I had encountered it in “Requiem 1935–1940,” perhaps the greatest poem ever written by Anna Akhmatova, herself one of the greatest Russian poets. In the portion presented “Instead of a Preface,” she recounts seventeen months spent in line outside the prison. When one of the other women discovered who Akhmatova was, she was asked if she could describe the experience that they shared. At Akhmatova's affirmative reply, she writes of the other woman “[t]hen something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.”⁴ It was a powerful image, one that drove me on a cool July day amid faint drizzle to walk for a few hours to find the prison. At my hostel, someone had told me that crowds still stood outside the prison, trying to communicate, or at least catch a glimpse of loved ones inside. I had to see it, to silently pay my respects. And so I went.

Opposite the embankment, across a fairly busy street, Kresty stood, in spite

³ See for example Vaclav Klaus, “Transition—An Insider's View,” *Problems of Communism* 41 (January-April 1992): 74.

⁴ Anna Akhmatova, “Requiem 1935–1940” in *Poems of Akhmatova*, trans. and ed. Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward. New York: Mariner, 1973, 99.

of a century of encroaching age. It was a ghastly place of sharp, if rusting, barbed wire, broken windows, and red brick; still solid for all that it appeared to be crumbling. One could almost have thought it uninhabited; that it was something we'd moved beyond as a species, but for two reminders that it is not. The first were a few pieces of cloth, hanging here and there from windows, bits of cloth that silently proclaimed, "I am here," "it is I," and "look here." These seemed to cry out against being forgotten, by loved ones, by the social world outside. The second reminder was even more poignant. Not a crowd, whose numbers could perhaps have anaesthetized feelings, but one young woman who stood that dreary Sunday afternoon on the sidewalk across the road from the prison crying out, above the noise of traffic, the name of someone inside. Now and again she would stop, perhaps waiting for a reply, though I never heard one. Frustrated, she would pace and smoke, and then begin her cries again. Finally, she walked away, dejected. Somehow I knew that she'd be back again, as would those who stood on the embankment fishing as if neither she nor the prison were there.

In this age of victim impact statements we may tend to forget the impact of incarceration on those connected to the convict. I had. Having seen this side of the coin, I will not again. I cannot forget this scene of basic human tragedy, this bereavement that we impose upon those who have done nothing wrong. At the time I wondered what this man had done, if anything (as Akhmatova's poem illustrates, the prison has an unsavory history with regard to 'political' offences), and found that to a certain extent it did not matter. It was still tragic. And I wondered, can we justly take such considerations into account, but also can we not, and still be just?

I later discovered, shocked and appalled, that Kresty in its current incarnation is what the Russian prison system calls a 'Special Isolation Facility' or SIZO, which despite sounding like some form of isolated prison for hardened dangerous offenders means a facility for those awaiting trial.⁵ Its residents generally do so for at least several months, and often years.⁶ At first, this seemed fundamentally unjust, that such conditions, which the US Department of State describes as "extremely harsh and frequently life threatening"⁷ prevail in facilities dedicated to housing those not as yet determined to be guilty of anything. It is, but I realized that this distinction between the innocent and guilty can distract us from the simpler truth that inhuman conditions remain inhuman whether it is the 'innocent' or 'guilty' who are subjected to them.

I should point out that I am not advocating an end to incarceration, or claiming that there is some simple formula through which we can all live in peace and harmony. There are people at SFU qualified to comment on prisons, and I am not one of them. All that I am doing is relating one encounter, outside Prague but very much a part of my Prague experience, of that which wounds us and prods us to consider things that we had not before. For me, a visit to Kresty raised questions about how we employ mental constructs to condone, or if not to condone then to assuage the discomfort we feel at, the inhuman treatment of others.

In sum, I experienced 'Prague' both in the Czech Republic and elsewhere. Back in Vancouver, I discovered it once more, as the summer floods of the Vltava swept away our footprints and so much else. I found myself clinging to mental images of antediluvian Prague, pointedly

neglecting to seek out the images of the devastation. And it struck me just how quickly the ice, once disturbed, begins to form again. Prague, like any city, indeed any place touched by human narratives, is dynamic. We always rebuild, always renew, always write stories. And while nothing can ever be restored, for history happens and cannot be turned back, Prague endures; an ever-growing volume of these stories, so many axes for Kafka's frozen sea.

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⁵ US Department of State, *Russia: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* 2001. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Released March 2002, Section 1 c. Available online.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.