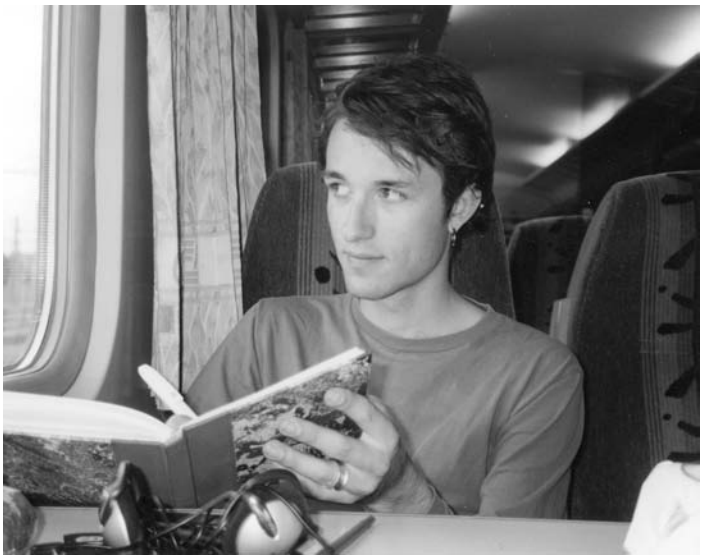
The Prague Field School and the Travel Study Award

—Jerry Zaslove

In 2002 The Institute for the Humanities provided two stipends to assist humanities students to attend the Prague Field School. The program is organized through the Office of International and Exchange Student Services and the Humanities Department. In this eighth year of the credit program with Charles University, twenty students were resident in Prague for eight weeks of in-depth study of Central European culture, art and society. The program includes courses in language, art history, film, literature and political science. In two short essays, Tim Came and Keir Niccol— SFU undergraduates and recipients of the stipends—reflect on aspects of their experience and their encounters with the contemporary European world and its legacies. Information about this program can be obtained through the Office of International and Exchange Student Services. Information about the Travel Study Award can be obtained through the Institute for the Humanities.

Jerry Zaslove and Prague Field School students at Rimov in Sumova —"Stations of the Cross"



Keir Niccol

Shades of Apprehension

—Keir Niccol

Driving away from the airport and down an unnamed highway, more like a byway, the bus veers around a corner into what I surmise to be a suburb. Rolling down the small road, I gape at the brown and tan stucco residences on either side, trying to glean as much as possible from these first few, crucial moments of fatigue-filtered, jet-lagged impression. Rounding the road's arc, I glance to my left and notice a single slender figure atop a pillar. The pillar's grey stone culminates in a same-coloured nymph, balancing in a moment of stride upon one nimble, slight leg. A ribbon, trapped against the motion of her chest, streams behind the figure's torso, her arms rising above to push the moment—of victory, celebration, emancipation. In fact, it is not at all clear that it is a she; the form of the androgynous body's willowy limbs plies the light air in a frozen moment of flight.

The pillar passes from view, vanishing beneath rising fingers of flora scattered in the yard around the statue. The bus continues its meandering introduction to Prague's streets, its welcome includes a shake shuddering up from thousands of cobblestones. Another corner, another trance-inducing vision atop the horizon—St. Vitus's Gothic spires prick the sky, tearing the heavens into a soot black and brown stone cascade of crockets, gargoyles, bowing and falling priests, kings and peasants, all spilling from its rent. The cathedral, surreal and stunning in sudden rearing stasis, seems to be slowly rotating upon a dais, aging aspects appearing in full, each in turn. A moment imbued with old time expires, a new excitement occurs, belying even St. Vitus's longevity. The building nears, then disappears, its four corners and sky-spearing spires are like pillars and pilings demanding eternity of their foundations.

There is a path in the woods. It twists and breaks, sometimes forgetting splintered twigs in its wake. A stone wall or bench mark distance. In the dark, it's more the filtering orange city glow that defines movement. The path staggers between concrete and broken stone dirt. To the left, walk two hundred forty metres. Looming black metal on stone; the path widens like a river skirting an obstinate boulder. The moment of passing the bulk lasts longer; it nearly appears but slowly, immense with uncertainty. Stepping back to perceive its whole, not stepping in water, I gaze in concentrated incomprehension. The trees' shadows play across a heavy beard and fierce eyebrows. There are men moving in the forest some distance away.

Further along, descend left, then right then left, a fence draws attention to a sprawling palace. There are large, abundantly foliaged trees standing like ponderous sentinels. Between still shafts lurks a chimera—four legs beneath a tilting chassis. Golden and eastern European, the car is a Trabant. Thousands of these were filled with refugees of Communism—people fleeing East Germany after the curtain fell on the era of 'Normalization'. Legs of emigration—automobiles only ancillary to what still was a massive, human exodus to a mythologized west.

Catching (up) on History

Assigning some term to these monuments would come later; varied descriptions of convictions gripped in frozen forms, the eras traversed by epochs elapsed—these and other matters meted upon marble, granite and copper. I did not at first know but would soon understand the defining qualities of the Art Nouveau style of painting, statuary, architecture and more. During the late nineteenth century heyday of the Czech National Revival, a general sense of prosperity and progress pervaded at least the more affluent classes of Bohemia, Moravia, and Europe at large. The post-Romantic ideal of capturing the essences of nature amidst the achievement of 'Man' infused this movement. Soft and waif-like human forms appeared like darkling visitations among the various other artful denizens of Prague.

The androgynous, non-aggressive, yet still celebrated Art Nouveau figures hearken to several enduring aspects of Czech culture. First, a consistent attention to convoluted and involved ornament: filigreed metal guardrails, spectral faces emerging from stones of many ages, building facades draped with spilling stone bouquets. The second, a refusal to engage in the aggressive symbols of domination, supremacy, and imperialism so characteristic of other major European centres. Instead, modestly proportioned structures culminate in a lowly undulating red roof vista. A hundred spires rise above the roofs of Prague, but never in a triumphal surge. The stewards of Bohemia have long borne a humble and beautiful creative urge.

As a monument, (St. Vitus) is less ambiguous in its intention to honour God than some of the more obscure and camouflaged aspects of Prague monuments. Yet details are inevitably elided as only portions of stories are told, and the great mass of history remains absent from tourist boroughs, fully satisfied with their iconic representations of a city's cultural memory.

St. Vitus Cathedral is as much and more to Prague than the ephemeral pillar angel. It is a different testament to the creativity of this small Slavic nation. Here, the weight of holy responsibility soaks the ancient stones. Angling down into the Mala Strana, Prague's 'Lesser Town', the Prazkyhrad palace forever descends from on high, at its centre the ancient heart, St. Vitus. This area of Prague has existed for over a millennium in some form or another. St. Vitus was built during many years of additions from the fourteenth century to the twentieth. As a monument, it is less ambiguous in its intention to honour God than some of the more obscure and camouflaged aspects of Prague monuments. Yet details are inevitably elided as only portions of stories are told, and the great mass of history remains absent from tourist boroughs, fully satisfied with their iconic representations of a city's cultural memory. Some systems of knowledge remain inherently arcane and allow us the Kafka-esque experience of the blindness of negotiating cultural remnants without explanation. The greatest historical legacies inevitably succumb to the future's reduced and fabricated vision of the past.

Visitation and Reprise

There are two places in Prague where I returned numerous times. One is central, the other relatively peripheral —peripheral in the sense of lying on the historical outskirts of the old and new towns, rather than miles from the Centrum. Both places endure as crucial sites of the tangible manifestation of the Czechs' cultural memory. One is frequented by thousands of visitors, the other is largely deserted. Both sites warrant a significant mention in any account of local history, yet only one is presented to foreigners as representative of the city. These two locations carry their own respective monuments, each containing a complex and contested story, ostensibly commemorating the same thing—the historical moment of the Hussites. Yet a profound difference exists between the two. The former was the site of two monuments, one that no longer remains, having been torn to the ground. The latter site contains one monument bearing at least two meanings merged in metal.

The first is Staromestske Namesti, the Old-Town Square, and the heart of Prague to many. The large plaza is bounded by some of the town's oldest

Photo by Eryn Holbrook

Statue on the Charles Bridge, Prague.

and most famous buildings—the Tyn Church and another small medieval building with vaulted windows and slanted façade, leaning upon the Kinsky Palace—near by is Franz Kafka's father's store, the town hall and its Orlej—the astronomical clock. Dominating the centre of the square is the Jan Hus monument, sculpted by Ladislav Saloun in 1915. It is an ovoid statue, with a number of figures in various postures, generally surrounding the tallest and most prominent figure of Jan Hus. The statue was erected to mark the 500th anniversary of the religious dissident's death at the stake in Konstanz. Hus was a religious reformer and Czech nationalist, and those surrounding him represent other persecuted Czech nationals, including those ruined during the Thirty Years' War two centuries later.

Across from Hus, falling directly beneath his gaze for three years, stood a 'Pillar of Our Lady'. Known as the Marian Column, the monument was erected in 1650 to commemorate the victory of the Hapsburgs' ejection of the Swedes at the end of the Thirty Years' War. However, in time it gathered other layers of meaning. By the end of the nineteenth century, many Czech nationalists perceived the pillar as a reminder of the stifling of Czech nationalist culture in the seventeenth century, and the continued domination of Hapsburg hegemony. In 1918, following the announcement of the collapse of Hapsburg domination in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a throng of Czechs took the square and toppled the column that had become a focal point of so much resentment.

Both figures in the square occupied immensely important places in Czech consciousness. Both still signify as contested and intricate symbols (the Marian Column does continue to resound in the minds of some, and its former base is still marked in the cobblestones of the square). However, the monuments' more potent signification has at times overwhelmed the subtler points for some. The apparent contrast of Hus, representing the struggle against foreign rule, and the Marian Column, standing as a victorious finger counting off centuries of rule, constituted a disagreeable juxtaposition for the likes of Franta Kysela-Sauer and Jan Hasek. In this instance, the major clash of significations could be resolved through the demolition of the offending element (whether the monument should have been destroyed and the importance of leaving 'offending' vestiges as a *memento mori* of past regimes is an altogether different discussion). Not all connotative contradictions are so easily resolved.

The Zizkov monument serves as my second place of intrigue. This site now sits outside the radius of frequent tourist and native visits, though not because it is very far from the Centrum. Nearly six hundred years ago, when the battle of Vitkov Hill—as the mound was then called—occurred, it was on the outskirts of the, then, much smaller Prague. Foreigners do not miss this location because of distance, although there is no easy way to access the hill from the direction of most tourist activity—only a walk up a steep hill with no real indication of what path to pursue. Likely, most foreigners do not reach this location because they are not directed here by the local Czechs, who themselves rarely visit it.

The reasons for the Czech aversion

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to the Zizkov monument are a result of changing historical perspectives and ideologies, as is the case in Old-Town Square. Atop one of Prague's prominent hills, a massive rider and steed loom before a stark, mausoleum-like building. Jan Zizka was the Hussite army general who fought against the encroaching Catholic Hapsburg forces and won against all odds at Vitkov Hill. Recognized later as a nationalist hero, the Zizkov (combining his name and that of the hill) monument was conceived during the time of the Czech First Republic, after 1918. It was to be erected before the Second World War but was delayed for various reasons. Not until the communist government was in power after 1948 did the monument, created by sculptor Bohumil Kafka years before, actually reach its current site.

The great irony of the monument is that, though the figure of Zizka is recognized in a similar way to Hus— defender of Czech national culture against an oppressive foreign hegemony —the Zizkov monument is not. When the massive equestrian figure rose on the

above Prague, it was accompanied by a number of aspects provided by the Communist regime. In fact, the entire place has the feel of a Communist cathedral, for in the conception of the site, a great deal was borrowed from the rich legacy of Prague architecture. For example, on the doors of many European cathedrals, panels of relief characters depict religious tales, or accounts of the building of the cathedral, or some pope's coronation. The 'Communist Cathedral' presents a history from the Hussites to the Communists in square reliefs on the great copper doors standing behind the equestrian statue. The limited view afforded a visitor indicates a simple historical progression from the Catholic-fighting Hussites, to the events of the twentieth century leading to the installation of the Czech Communists, with no account of the four hundred years in between. The Soviets had a habit of invoking a highly reduced, narrow view of history to legitimate their presence in Czechoslovakia. The building itself was initially proposed as a mausoleum for the remains of the Czech Republic's first president T.G. Masaryk. It was hijacked by Czech Communists, who instead interned the mummified remains of Communist leader Klement Gottwald (the first "workers' president"), no doubt a tip of the hat to Lenin.

In appropriating the figure of Zizka and constructing a monument covered with overtly Communist sentiment, the state created a highly conflicted cultural monument. Although the statue was originally conceived and assembled long before the arrival of the Red Army, its location was meant as a shrine to Communism. Many Czechs associate Zizkov with this later manifestation, rather than its original conception. Adding to the general convolution of sentiment is the overall size of the hilltop memorial. A sense of aggression and violent power exude from the site as Zizka sits astride his steed, bandage over one eye and mace raised above head, ready to charge Prague. Not far away stands the massive television tower, also erected by the Communists. This giant grey finger points heavenward in an absurd defiance of the rest of Prague's low-lying, almost rural landscape. This impression of a megalomaniacal urge to dominate the landscape, physical and mental, also resides within the Zizkov monument.

In the Old-Town Square, the Jan Hus monument and the Marion Column stared each other down for three years, a juxtaposition of Czech and Hapsburg supremacy. There it was possible to remove one of the vestiges. At Zizkov, the Czech and Soviet ideological pasts are imprinted into the same edifice. It is impossible to tear one down without the other.

The monuments of Old-Town Square and Zizkov ostensibly hearken back to moments of Czech nationalist potency. Yet their current import and the respect each receives are very different. Hus was the 'original' dissident, predating even Martin Luther in his work to reform the church, and holds a more powerful place in the Czech imagination. However, this is hardly enough to eclipse the importance of Zizka, who took up the cause two centuries later. Perhaps the answer is in the different way the two places bear the history of the cultures that have passed over Bohemia. In the Old-Town Square, the Jan Hus monument and the Marion Column stared each other down for three years, a juxtaposition of Czech and Hapsburg supremacy. There it was possible to remove one of the vestiges. At Zizkov, the Czech and Soviet ideological pasts are imprinted into the same edifice. It is impossible to tear one down without the other. There is irony in the current perception of the Zizka monument. Zizka was as committed to resisting Catholic hegemony as Jan Hus was, albeit following the by-then prescribed Hussite ideology, rather than pursuing a radically new reformation like Hus. Zizka was appropriated, along with the Hussites in general, for the purposes of legitimating Communist ideology. His figure became an icon of the dominant, oppressive ideology for the Czechs. This is exactly what Zizka's own idol, Hus, had tried to challenge and that he himself contended. The question still remains, however, whether it serves any positive end to destroy reminders of the past, even when they are painful.

Return and Reprise

Asked to reflect upon my time in Prague, I did not initially know how to respond. Then, insight developed, arranging a narrative of various refractions and angles of incidents to create a complete(r) story. Reflections of Prague means taking what was learned there and holding it up against what surrounds me here, in Vancouver. I am now treating the surrounding elements of sculpture, architecture, urban planning differently. Specific differences have been called to my attention in the ways 'we' and 'they' may view similar artifacts. In this particular moment, of course, it is 'we,' the Vancouverites, 'they', the Czechs.

Vancouver has its local monuments—the cenotaph at Victory Square, some invisible or appropriated totem poles. Then, there is the Grandview Park Obelisk, and down at around 70th and Oak, a nondescript park has pegged in its corner a small stone pyramid, solely to bear a placard revealing the place as the historical site of a 'midden'. Present at almost all of these and other monuments and statues in Vancouver, are plaques, placards, written treatises remarking upon the commemorative moment frozen in the bulk of stone an attentive observer stands at the foot of. The text may provide biographical information,

dates and times, or recount some long-since-invisible mark of a now-decimated society. How many of these monuments would make sense to me without their attendant text? How much do I understand of them anyway? Living always around them, local statues tend to blend into the urban scenery: while easy landmarks for meeting, they seldom sustain topics of conversation.

There are many, many more statues and monuments in Prague than Vancouver. Stumble down one corner, round a square or up and alley, there's bound to be some errant stone countenance peering after you. Public space abounds in a way never understood in modern urban Canada, and in every square is a central figure, fountain, or other forget-me-not. Next to the sheer abundance of ornate stonework, the most noticeable difference—perhaps aside from basic stylistic considerations—is the absence of edifying accompaniments. While there may be some epitaph scrawled (warning of the folly of abandonment, betrayal, and strife), nothing is provided of the knowledge necessary to comprehend the figures before one, their proximity and pose relative to one another, and all other possible historical, lyrical, or mystical considerations.

But the Czechs do not ignore their city, or its history. Rather than indicating a loss of knowledge, the absence of explicatory placards testifies to the higher general level of cultural memory common among the Czechs. The dearth of textual footnotes marks the expectation that position, form, content, and the stories of each monument will be known by those to whom the monuments should signify— namely, Czechs *qua* Czechs. The stone-still stolen moments of history laboriously erected in Prague were not conceived as drawing cards for the tourist set. Monuments bear immense import; hailing the ever-present population of the place they are immersed in, demanding that the mind return once again to that site of struggle, victory, loss, or advance. More powerful is the interpretation of a thing internalized by the viewer, rather than vaguely recalled or always confronted anew upon observing an educational placard.

Continuing Footprints

The city of Prague has been called a "shrine to complexity." Passing through the region once contained by the ancient city walls, a visitor encounters an overwhelming array of cultural stimuli. Embarking upon an understanding of a foreign culture is an immense undertaking alone. In a place such as Prague, the path to knowledge of a civilization's customs and creations winds and often forks. Choosing to pursue one avenue of cultural memory ultimately leads back to another intrigue briefly avoided. The journey is never dull, but frequently bewildering because of the sheer amount of historical weight that resides within each artifact, piece of architecture, or monument.

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When the residents of Prague walk out of the Centrum on Vitezna Ulice, over the Legii Bridge and into Mala Strana, they recognize several levels of signification in the recently installed "Memorial to the Victims of Communism" by Olbram Zoubek. The monument is located very close to a portion of the 'Hunger Wall', commissioned by Charles IV in the fourteenth century. (The King ordered the extensive town wall constructed during a time of poverty, when the extra work helped a legion of languishing labourers. The name derives from the necessity from which the wall arose, and the malaise it countered.) A large Soviet Star, prior to the fall of the Eastern Bloc, was set directly upon the site of the current monument. Nearby is the city hall, once surrounded by Russian tanks, emblematic of the Stalinistic Communism dominating the city and

Photo by Eryn Holbrook

A street in Prague.

nation. Zoubek has a style of sculpture widely recognized in the Czech Republic. The touches of Giacometti and Rodin can be felt in the disfigured cast of the memorial's five figures.

Zoubek began a rise to prominence as an adversary of the soon-to-be-toppled Soviet regime; his work signified the emergent force of a people in slow revolt. Ten years later, he takes commissions from banks and is counted by some as 'too popular' (mainly by the academics—always the ones to niggle over fine points). These and other questioned and questionable aspects of the sculpture are considered and are factored into the reality that not everyone who lived in Prague under Communism wants a statue commemorating the victims of Communism. For some, it dredges up old hurts, opens willfully buried wounds. And perhaps not everyone is convinced to the same degree that Communism is the Antichrist—after all, a quarter of Czech voters elected a Communist parliamentarian in the 2002 election.

All or some of these factors are known by Czechs and, with the exception of the first point, often experienced first hand. Internalization is not necessarily something that needs to be worked upon; living through some history is enough to generate sediment that will collect internally. The monument is merely a decorative stopper atop the past's decanter. Of course, virtually none of the tourists in this highly visited region of Prague know more than one or two of the palimpsest layers in any public edifice. Perhaps this leaves the statues open to more interpretation. Maybe even the Czechs never settle on only one interpretation of their own memories. This is not so different from the conflicted understanding of symbols that occurs in North American society. Except, perhaps, the lesson appears in stark contrast in Prague due to the marked difference of the Soviet and Hapsburg ideologies from the Czech. The loud discrepancies between political world views, next to the comparative invisibility of ideology in North America, allows for the appearance of clearer schisms and ruptures in meaning. It is appropriate that there be, for the Czechs, a greater awareness of the duplicity of history, of victory and the dominance of aggressor states and their ideologies. In Sabine's paintings in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* another level of meaning always emerges through the Czechs' stories of their statues.

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Keir Niccol and Tim Came