

Boredom on Earth

translated by Krystof Vosatka, edited by Robert Coalson

When the adolescent spirit reflects on questions of the world and humanity's place in it, it is impossible to ignore the ubiquitous paradoxes of being. There is no other word than "paradox" to describe fully the absurdity of an era that seems to have no place in history. This absurdity is apparent everywhere in the world, but perhaps no place illustrates it as perfectly as the Czech Republic.

The atmosphere is suffused with a disenchantment whose causes are so abstract that it is easier to pretend it does not exist. Perhaps this strange incompleteness is the result of a combination of many unavoidable circumstances that began afflicting the Czech nation after the communist establishment fell.

Feelings of disappointment and disillusionment characterize all post-revolutionary periods: there comes a bitter realization that our dreams of change were largely romanticized. Although this disappointment may have been necessary, one can still feel the nation's bitterness from after the euphoria wore off. As the united national resolve faded, the excitement of our common aim slowly began to sink under the burden of the task.

The realization that reincarnating a dignified society would take not months but decades left the nation with a long hangover. It is rather baffling, however, how quickly the peace and freedom we yearned for lost their luster. Liberty in all its manifestations entered everyday life with fanfare, but without us accepting the responsibilities it requires.

Those who earlier had been risking their careers, health, and lives struggling against the system assembled themselves into the hierarchy of a new, shiny, cellophane-wrapped establishment, and Czechoslovakia basked in the glimmer of the magic word "democracy." The illustrious courage of those who took upon themselves the task of building new social foundations was partially overshadowed by an immense collective guilt and an even greater feeling of injustice, wounds that take generations to heal.

The magnanimous decision to forgive instead of punish regrettably complicated the situation. Today we can judge that step as naive, but after lives spent being abused and humiliated, an overwhelming desire for compassion and moral purity had to prevail. We can only speculate about what succumbing to the thirst for revenge would have resulted in, but it surely would not have bolstered the country's fragile democracy and might have ended in a desperate civil war.

But the result is that festering lesions were hidden under colorful bandages and left to become infected, and the stench of injustice comes back with the wind. An uncomfortable question nags at us: weren't mercy and the offer of a clean slate perhaps too generous? It seems irrational that those who gladly beat up students holding flowers should be allowed to work in any public office. Vengeance undoubtedly feeds the fire of hate, but can we really cure a lack of character by forgetting and denying personal responsibility? Can this sort of "moral baptism" and universal pardon work, even in our atheistic, opportunistic Czech society?

These events, however, are not just fascinating in themselves, but also in the light of what happened next. It is impossible to hide a resigned smile over the "Czechness" of the transition. In the wake of revolutionary euphoria, the past was swiftly swept under the

carpet and collaborators and spineless opportunists of all kinds quickly changed their clothing: Destroy the evidence, join the mass demonstrations, and -- riding on the wave of elation -- quickly find a warm position in the new structure.

Furthermore, the unexpected upheaval left one specific group of people strangely without purpose: dissidents, many of whom had based their lives on fighting against the communist repression, were suddenly without an enemy. After decades of being demeaned and terrorized, their faces twinkled with the joy of the final fulfillment, but freedom and the new order also brought them a certain disorientation. The fall of the Soviet Union, in fact, meant the loss of a significant enemy for most of the world, and the unusual absence of global antagonism caught the generations brought up during the Cold War unprepared.

Defeating the oppressor left the Czech nation laid bare, alone before the hideous confirmation of what many feared to recognize: that this tyrant came to a large extent from within ourselves. Despite the bitterness, there was no other option than to accept capitalism and to begin building a small, ordinary republic as prosperity grew.

But as if on purpose, it emerged that even the glamorous democracy was not the paradise we imagined. Gradually, we began to realize that even the idealized United States of America is far from a meritocracy and a land of contented souls. The misery of the George W. Bush years increased the disappointment that came after our first bewitching encounter with the West. We once again installed the free market, but there were many burned fingers before the invisible hand started working as Adam Smith intended.

Then the paradox of the affluent society found us: the freedom and free market we fought for began to erode the acuteness of being, and reality started sliding toward a tasteless, materialistic stew. An inconvenient fact was unveiled: in peace and affluence, people tend to get lazy and instead of studying metaphysics they ponder whether to buy a new television or a coffeemaker. The dreams of the revolution are devoured by the machinery of consumption, which obscures all meaning apart from the infinite loop of work-shopping-television-work. This phenomenon was described by the Beat generation, which was terrified by the fact that material saturation and peace reduce the meaning of existence nearly to nothing. Even though Allen Ginsberg howled about it in the '50s, the experience of it is still unbelievable.

For a former country of the Soviet bloc, this realization is all the more traumatic because, after rejecting planned simplicity and focused oppression of the individual mind, it seems as if the nation merely moved under the umbrella of a new and equally ludicrous idea.

Living without an external enemy caused an odd reordering and relativization of values, and another paradox emerged: getting rid of censorship and making all literature available meant that reading was no longer a protest. Reading high-quality literature is now more an indicator of good taste than a symbolic proclamation of views.

Losing the aspect of forbidden fruit also logically contributed to the mixing of cultural nonsense with meaningful art: louder and more colorful things win, of course. As the age does not demand distinct opinions, most people are satisfied with a comfortable everyday coolness that does not insult nor inspire. Originality and individuality are not acclaimed. Amid the blind adoration of simplicity, we are not faced with substantial decisions. Therefore we occupy our minds with petty ones. Society is perhaps no more

rotten and no more beautiful than at any other time, but in the absence of an enemy, the striving for basic human virtue becomes as inane as the deeds of Don Quixote.

The despair of dreamers is increased by the fact that society doesn't work like a human organism: surviving an illness doesn't ensure future resistance. Memory should, of course, work as a sort of communal immunity, but it proved itself a shallow servant. How else can we explain that after centuries of submission and inoculation with the terror of two totalitarian regimes, Czechs are still not resistant to political demagoguery? And further, the political debate itself is reduced to hollow, vitriolic shouting. Our freely elected representatives also long ago exchanged quiet embezzlement for virtually open theft.

Most depressing of all, however, is that all of this happens amid the ostentatious apathy of the citizens, who distance themselves from their own voting decisions. A chronic atmosphere of boredom mocks all those who once had the courage to stand up and advocate justice and dignity. Drunk on freedom and with the cataract of materialism, we are indifferent. From all of the liberties we have acquired, we chose the least-demanding one: the freedom not to think. The words of a Czech underground poet come to mind: "Like bees, those little bastards, like bees, we come to feast on the blossom of the world."

In art, the reality of existence without an enemy manifests itself in a curious manner. This is perhaps because contemporary artists find themselves in an odd situation: if everything since the 1980s was labeled as postmodernism, they have to accept the label "post-postmodernism" and wait in an air of awkwardness for a more elegant solution. In addition, Czechs have been confronted with the task of revitalizing the cultural landscape, a difficult business indeed considering the 40 years of efforts to break or exile anyone who showed signs of intelligence or independent thinking. That is one of the reasons our language didn't go through a similar explosion of creativity as in the First Republic, when peace brought a burst of poetism and avant-garde expression.

It is incomprehensible that no eruption of artistic creativity (not counting an occasional great film or excellent theater production) followed from the collapse of communism. Outstanding music, literature, and drama are not the subjects of lively debate anymore -- neither in public as during the First Republic nor quietly as during the paranoia of communism. Such discussion takes place freely, but outside the attention of the majority as an elitist anachronism. Documentary films and books, for which these times offer fertile ground, pass through cinemas and bookshops largely unnoticed, augmenting the absurd atmosphere. How sad is the fact that in a time of peace and abundance, people crave not philosophy but laser hair removal. I want to ask in the fashion of François Villon "*Où sont les poètes d'antan?*" but the obvious answer strikes the mind with forlorn anguish: in a pain-free environment, they have little incentive to create.

The much-appraised ideals of peaceful civil disobedience, building on the writings of Henry David Thoreau, suggest that in a society where there is injustice, the only place for a righteous man is in jail. But what if society's crime is indifference? What if people lose the urge to ask and the need for childish curiosity? What if individual opinions cease to matter? Even I put on an intellectual facade full of disgust and hypocritically castigate the materialistic world order that I myself am a part of. I can hear Jack Kerouac's disapproval of how we in "negative, nightmare poses put down the society, giving our tired bookish, political or psychoanalytical reasons."

But how else can one express the sweet stink of beautiful life, except as a hypocrite? How else can one regret the fact that we have merely added freedom to the list of things we own and have forgotten to free the spirit? We have almost forgotten the pure joy of living that Kerouac described; building capitalism with a human face is enough to satisfy us.

We are stuffed with pink, fake cotton candy, sweet to the tongue yet gumming up all our senses; we have willfully chosen to live in the time of existential paradox. Have we shunned the Orwellian greyness of communism just so that we could -- dispassionately and without a spark in the eye -- mount the omnipotent beast of progress and, in the name of glorified simplicity, set out for Aldous Huxley's brave new world?