

MUNICH CAMPUS TOURS PROGRAM

Prague & the Velvet Revolution, November 1989

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In UMUC's overseas divisions, education took place not only in the classroom but also on UMUC-sponsored Study Tours (also known as Field Study Courses). Both the European and Asian Divisions offered these reasonably priced educational tours for college credit (usually one credit-hour) to anyone who wanted to sign up.

Beginning in the late 1950s, UMUC's Munich Campus also offered for-credit Study Tours and non-credit Cultural Tours on a wide range of subjects, from history and politics to music and art. Led by Munich Campus faculty who were knowledgeable about the places visited, students traveled to sites not only within Germany but also to England, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Balkans, as well as farther afield to Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and the Soviet Union.

Matthias Büttner, who established the Munich Campus tours program and headed it for nearly 30 years, was a highly educated and erudite German, who led many of the tours himself. After Büttner passed away in 1990, his assistant, Michael Dickinson, took over that position and ran the program at the Munich Campus until 1992 when the campus moved to Augsburg, where Dickinson remained head of the Cultural Activities and Study Tours Office until 1994.

Between 1983 and 1991, Tom Hudgins and I worked for both Büttner and Dickinson as escorts for eleven Munich Campus Cultural Tours to Czechoslovakia and one to Hungary. During that Cold War era, traveling on an officially sanctioned tour, with a group visa, was the easiest (and least expensive) way to visit the East Bloc countries. And as Americans with NATO Status-of-Forces stamps in our passports, we and the students also avoided the hassles, costs, and possible rejection involved in applying for visas ourselves.

Munich Campus Cultural Tours were also open to members of the U.S. military and civilian community who wanted to travel that way, too, including to the East Bloc countries. On the Cultural Tours that we escorted to Prague and Budapest, our groups often comprised people of many ages: Munich Campus students (and sometimes their parents, too), American soldiers and officers, teachers from the U.S. Department of Defense Dependent Schools system, staff from UMUC headquarters in Heidelberg and military-base Education Centers all over Europe, American diplomatic personnel, and journalists from *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper. One woman who worked at the Education Center at the U.S. base in Vicenza, Italy, drove to Munich every November to take the Cultural Tour to Prague. In Prague she always bought a case of Czech beer (not easily obtainable in Italy in the 1980s), then on the next year's tour to Prague she

returned the case of empty half-liter bottles in Prague and bought another full case to take back to Italy.

The Munich Campus's five-day tours to Prague every Thanksgiving holiday were especially popular. There were always two tour buses, one for the Study Tour and the other for the Cultural Tour. Both buses were usually full (45 people each), with a waiting list in case someone canceled.

The Study Tour—led by Munich Campus art professor Ervin Stawski and history professor Joseph Thaler—focused on the Secessionist (Art Nouveau, Jugendstil) period of art and architecture in Prague from the 1890s to World War I. The Cultural Tour, escorted by Tom and me, provided a more general introduction to Prague, with walking tours led by local English-speaking guides, trips to Prague Castle and major museums, tickets to musical and drama performances, and free time for personal sightseeing and shopping—although there was not much worth buying except Czech glassware, local folk art, and Soviet souvenirs. Tom and I also took small groups of adults on pub crawls to Prague's famous old beer taverns and shared candlelight dinners with them at our favorite restaurants.

En route from Munich to Prague, the two buses always stopped for lunch in the industrial city of Plzeň, usually at a nondescript, Soviet-style concrete-block hotel that could accommodate 90 people in a cold, cavernous dining room. The package-deal meal usually featured the same bland meat-and-potatoes food for everyone, although once we were served one of the best goulash soups I've ever eaten. Before and after lunch, during the long hours of riding on the buses, professors Stawski and Thaler gave lectures to the people on their Study Tour. Escorts on the Cultural Tours weren't expected to do much more than explain the rules of conduct for everyone on the tour, including how to act during border crossings (and make sure that no one got arrested there); pay the Czech tourist agency (always in cash, in dollars) for the whole tour as soon as we arrived in Prague; be on hand as a resource for any of the group who had questions or needed assistance; tip all the tour guides; and make sure everyone was back on the bus when it was time to depart on the last day of the tour.

But Tom and I always liked to provide a bonus for the people on our bus. Since two of my university degrees were in Soviet and East European fields—and since I'd taken several courses taught by a former high-ranking official in the pre-Communist government of Czechoslovakia—I gave a lecture about the history and government of that country in the 20th century. And as a professional food writer, I also gave everyone a handout listing Czech culinary specialties, with an English translation of Czech menu terms and a description of each dish.

In his role as an economics professor, Tom gave a lecture on the economic system under the Communist regime. And as an experienced beer drinker, he lectured on the history of beer brewing in Czechoslovakia, since Czech beer was world renowned. During the breaks between lectures on the bus, he also played tapes of music by famous Czech composers, such as Antonín Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* and the overture to Bedřich Smetana's opera, *The Bartered Bride*. And upon arriving in Prague, as we crossed one of the bridges over the mighty Vltava (Moldau) River, he always played "The Moldau," the second movement of Smetana's symphonic poem, *Má Vlast* (My Homeland), to usher us into the capital city.

Early on the Wednesday morning of November 22, 1989, our bus for that year's Thanksgiving-holiday Cultural Tour to Prague left the Munich Campus parking lot, along with another full busload of people on the separate art history Study Tour. Less than two weeks earlier, the Berlin Wall between East and West Germany had opened. A month before, the Communist government of Hungary had been voted out of office by that country's parliament. Political unrest was rapidly spreading to other parts of Central and Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia. In addition to Munich Campus students, our tour group included many U.S. military and civilian employees, all of whom had signed up for the trip before the East Bloc began to crumble. But despite the recent instability in Eastern Europe and uncertainty about what might happen in Prague, only two people decided at the last minute not to go.

When we arrived in Prague that evening, the Czechs with whom we talked were very uneasy about the political situation there. Glancing nervously around them as they spoke, they told us about the brutal police attack against peaceful demonstrators the previous Friday, the subsequent strike by university students, the protest demonstrations that had occurred each day in Prague, and the general strike planned for the following Monday. Those events had already been reported on television in Germany, but suddenly they seemed much more real to us as our tour bus briefly drove past the mass of people beginning to gather for that evening's demonstration in Wenceslas Square—a long, wide, rectangular boulevard in central Prague, lined on both sides with office buildings, hotels, and shops.

That evening, however, no one knew what might happen next. How long would the police refrain from using force once more against the demonstrators? Would the workers join the strike? Would the government decide that the protests had gone too far—and use that as an excuse for even greater, more violent repression?

Vladimir, our local Czech tour guide whom Tom and I had known for several years, met us at our hotel. He was visibly shaken. Instead of making his usual announcements to our group about concert tickets and special exhibits, he solemnly informed us that all concerts were canceled and all museums closed. The entire program for the tour had been canceled, too. Then he emphasized his most important advice to us: "Be careful—very careful. The secret police are everywhere. And if you see the riot police anywhere near a demonstration, get away—fast."

We counseled the members of our group to do whatever they wanted with all their free time during the next four days in Prague, but to be careful, always carry their passports with them, and if they got into any trouble, insist on contacting the American Embassy. We also advised them to check with us at the hotel every night, for news and updates about the current situation in Prague—since, in an era before cell phones, that was the only way we could all keep in touch and know that everyone was safe.

The next morning, camera in hand, I headed straight for Wenceslas Square. I had never seen anything in Prague like what I encountered there. The towering equestrian statue of Saint Wenceslas overlooking the square was covered with banners and posters: "Dialogue. Democracy. Freedom. No Violence." "Pluralism—Not Brutality." "Rude Pravo [the Communist

Party newspaper] Lies." "Forty Years of Lies." "General Strike." "End One-Party Rule."
"Resign!"



All the mass media—radio, television, newspapers, magazines—were still controlled by the government, or by political groups that supported the Communist regime. A few newspapers had printed statements admitting that the protestors might have some legitimate grievances, but even those newspapers were considered suspect by the student organizers and the people who sympathized with them. No one trusted the state-run media. Wall posters, handbills, flyers, and makeshift public-address systems were the main sources of uncensored news and opposition opinions.

Prague had quickly become a city of posters. Buildings, shop windows, and subway stations were plastered with typewritten announcements and mimeographed messages reporting the latest news. Alluding to the Communist government, a handwritten sign on the door of a fish restaurant cited an old Slavic proverb: "Fish Rot from the Head." In front of a drama theater, a poster announced "All the Theaters Are Closed. The Only One Still Open Is the Parliament." Students collected donations to purchase supplies of precious photocopy paper for posters and daily bulletins. In the window of a store specializing in Russian books, a television set showed Western news reports about the revolution taking place on the streets of the city. And shops did a brisk business selling red-white-and-blue Czechoslovak flags, a symbol of the nation's hopes.



Witty political cartoons taped onto walls contrasted with poignant shrines made of Czechoslovak flags and lighted candles, marking the places where citizens had been beaten by the police. "Two days ago you could still see the blood on the sidewalk," Dagmar, a Czech friend of ours, remarked sadly. A few yards in front of the Saint Wenceslas statue, a huge circle of candles formed a shrine at the spot where Jan Palach, a 21-year-old university student, had burned himself to death in 1969 to protest the 1968 Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. A continuous stream of people gently pushed forward to add more candles to the hundreds already burning in place, in memory of all the other people, too, who had lost their lives resisting the government during four decades of Communist rule.

I noticed that a few people were wearing red-white-and-blue ribbons pinned onto the left side of their coats, just over their hearts. That Thursday morning, such personal statements of opposition to the regime were courageous acts, still limited mainly to the younger generation. As I watched older people glance at those ribbons, I wondered what feelings they concealed between the masks of indifference they had worn in public for forty years.

While I was observing the events at Wenceslas Square, Tom was in another part of Prague at the office of the Czech travel agency that had arranged our trip. As the "bagman" for the Munich Campus Tours Office, Tom was carrying all the cash to pay for our tour group—\$3,000, all in 10- and 20-dollar denominations, stuffed inside a large money belt hidden under his shirt. While Tom was waiting for someone who had the authority to take all that money off his hands, a young Czech walked into the tourist agency wearing a red-white-and-blue political button with the words "*Milujeme svobodu*" (I love freedom) on it. Surprised that political buttons were already being produced, less than a week after the demonstrations had begun, Tom asked the Czech where he had gotten it. "I work in the film industry," the young man replied. "This week an older man at the studio called me into his office and gave the button to me. 'I wore this in 1968,' he said to me, 'Now it's your turn to wear it.'"

At lunch that day I met Tom for a Thanksgiving dinner of traditional Czech food at one of our favorite beer taverns. With me was Barbara Luedtke, who'd been my roommate in graduate school 20 years before. Now a professor herself, Barbara had flown from Boston to Munich to join us on that November tour to Prague. After lunch, she and I headed to Prague's Old Town Square to see what was happening there. As we walked down a narrow street in the center of the city, we came across a large procession going toward Wenceslas Square. Czechoslovak flags streamed over banners protesting censorship of the news.

Barbara and I quickly began taking pictures of the event. The marchers eyed us warily, and an uneasy murmur arose from the people in the front ranks: Were we with them or against them? The situation could have quickly turned ugly, but on an impulse I raised two fingers in the V-for-victory sign. The demonstrators cheered. One broke away from the group and ran over to give us tricolor ribbons to wear. I still treasure my ribbon as a special memento of those historic days in Prague.



During the next two days, stores sold out of tricolor ribbons, rickrack, and braided cord, and the V-for-victory sign was flashed more frequently as the resistance spread to all ages and classes of people. Children wore red-white-and-blue ski caps. Matrons carried tricolored shopping bags. Senior citizens on the subway surreptitiously raised their index and middle fingers and smiled at each other with their eyes.

The demonstration in Wenceslas Square on Thursday evening, November 23, was the largest anti-government protest that had ever been held in communist Czechoslovakia. Three hundred thousand people filled the huge space that had been the site of smaller demonstrations all week. Both Barbara and I had been in large protest demonstrations in the United States during the 1960s and '70s, so we knew what precautions to take in that big crowd. We positioned ourselves next to one of the few cars parked on the side of Wenceslas Square, which gave us space to breathe in the crush of the crowd, as well as something sturdy to crawl under if the riot police attacked or the people suddenly panicked.



We stood for three hours in that spot, listening to speeches, applauding, singing, and chanting slogans. The multitude in Wenceslas Square was the most peaceful, civilized, well-behaved group of demonstrators I had ever seen: grandmothers carrying shopping bags; workers in shabby clothes, waving paper flags; middle-age women wearing fur collars and fur hats, with tricolor ribbons on their lapels; fathers holding children on their shoulders and teaching the kids how to make the V-for-victory sign. If someone accidentally stepped on my toes, he immediately said, "Oh, please excuse me."

Standing next to us was a clean-cut-looking fellow with close-cropped hair, brand-new blue jeans, and shifty eyes that scrutinized the crowd. He seemed particularly interested in me, probably because I was taking pictures with an expensive Nikon fitted with a telephoto lens. But he quickly turned away whenever I aimed the camera toward him. Assuming him to be a plain-clothes policeman sent to snoop among the demonstrators, I turned to Barbara and said loudly, "Emember-ray ig-pay atin-lay?" "Es-yay," she replied, as I nodded toward the suspicious man next to me. Barbara immediately understood. During the rest of the demonstration she and I spoke nothing but Pig Latin to each other, completely confusing the undercover cop who focused his entire attention on us, apparently trying to figure out who we were and what we were doing there.

Throughout the demonstration, the mood of the crowd seemed expectant but wary. That same day the Czechoslovak defense minister had declared on national television that he would use any force necessary to defend communism against its enemies. Militia reinforcements, which has been trucked into Prague from other cities, were waiting in big gray vans parked on the side streets leading into the square, blocking all the ways out. Whenever a police or ambulance siren wailed in the distance, we all looked over our shoulders and wondered what would happen next.

Suddenly, from atop a tall building, someone fired a flare across the center of the square. Three hundred thousand people looked up, in unison, and an eerie silence engulfed the crowd. For a few tense moments, everyone thought the flare was the signal for the police to attack.

But no violence occurred. The police stayed inside their trucks on the side streets, and the protestors remained calm. Václav Havel and other opposition leaders spoke to the crowd through bullhorns and hastily hooked-up public address systems. The latest news bulletins, printed on small strips of paper, circulated among thousands of people who passed them from hand to hand.



Some of the printed messages urged the demonstrators to refrain from violence and told them not to panic if the police attacked—just to sit down quietly, en masse, in the square. A folk singer performed Bob Dylan's ballad, "Blowin' in the Wind." Tears filled my eyes when a woman with a beautiful soprano voice began to sing "We Shall Overcome"—in Czech—and thousands of other voices soon joined in.

No other Thanksgiving Day in my life could ever compare with that Thursday in Wenceslas Square.

Friday, November 24, was the turning point in the revolution. Word quickly spread that Alexander Dubček would speak at the demonstration that evening. Dubček was the former Czechoslovak communist leader whose attempts to "give socialism a human face" had helped bring about the political liberalization known as the "Prague Spring" of 1968. A popular national leader, Dubček had been deposed by communist hard-liners several months after the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August, 1968, and he had not played a role in national politics since that time. His return to Prague in a public forum was a strong symbol that the current communist regime was quickly losing power.

By early afternoon that Friday, Wenceslas Square had begun to fill with people. Groups of students carried large banners calling for "Freedom" and "Free Elections." The number of tricolor lapel ribbons had quadrupled since the day before. Rumors spread that more workers had

agreed to join the general strike on Monday. Cars and taxis, with huge Czechoslovak flags waving from their windows, inched through the milling crowd. The whole scene reminded me, ironically, of old black-and-white newsreels of the Russian Revolutions in 1917.



I found a place to stand in the dense throng near the Hotel Evropa, across the square from the balcony where Dubček would make his speech. After Dubček, Havel, and other opposition leaders had addressed the gathering of 400,000 people for two hours, the demonstration ended with the entire crowd singing the Czechoslovak national anthem. The week of increasingly larger demonstrations in Prague appeared to be a success. Peacefully, through civil disobedience against a repressive regime, the people of Czechoslovakia had shown their government that it no longer had even the tacit support of its citizens. Standing in Wenceslas Square that evening, I could feel the sense of expectancy and euphoria in the air.

Tom, Barbara, and I joined a Czech friend for dinner at a restaurant nearby. When the waiters saw our tricolor ribbons, they welcomed us with big smiles and V-for-victory signs. Later that evening, the headwaiter gleefully announced to all the diners that Communist Party Secretary Miloš Jakeš and the entire Politburo had resigned. Everyone applauded and cheered. Outside, people were popping champagne corks, honking their car horns, and dancing in the streets. Prague was more jubilant than it had been in decades.

As Americans, we take freedom of speech and freedom of assembly so much for granted that it's hard to imagine the effect that those protest demonstrations had on the citizens of Czechoslovakia. Martin, one of our Czech friends, was a medical doctor who had been born in Prague 36 years earlier and had earned his university degrees at Charles University there. In November 1989 he was working in a small town far from the capital, where information about

the demonstrations in Prague was strictly censored by the state-run media. Long before the uprising began, we had planned to meet Martin in Prague on that particular weekend. So, on Friday evening, he boarded a train for the overnight trip to the city.

After an unprecedented demonstration of more than half a million people at Prague's Letná parade ground that Saturday afternoon, we met Martin and some other friends for dinner that evening. Martin couldn't contain his excitement. "I've never seen anything like this in my life!" he exclaimed. "When I arrived at the train station this morning, students were handing out leaflets, posters were on all the walls, and everybody was in the streets!"

His words tumbled over each other. "Did you see the demonstration this afternoon? I could never imagine such a thing in my wildest dreams. Five hundred thousand people saying what they really think about our government. Saying it freely!"

Martin paused to catch his breath. "This isn't the Prague I was born in. This isn't the city I grew up in. These aren't the people I went to school with. I can't believe this is happening in my country! I feel like Alice in Wonderland!"

That Saturday night, I sat with Tom, Barbara, Martin, and five other Czech friends around a table at a restaurant in Prague's historic Mala Strana district. I had known most of the Czechs long enough and well enough to have been invited to their homes. In private, they had been very candid about their criticisms of the government, economy, and society in communist Czechoslovakia. In public, they had always avoided talking about even seemingly innocuous subjects, for fear of being overheard and reported to the police.

But the demonstrations in Prague that week had changed everything. A Czech professor arrived at the restaurant with the latest edition of a Prague newspaper, and everyone around our table joined in a loud discussion of the day's events. Another man at the table took out a portable radio, put on a pair of headphones, and began relaying the Voice of America's Czech news broadcast to the rest of the group. And Martin kept saying, "I can't believe we're really doing this. In a restaurant! In Prague!" A week earlier they could all have been arrested for speaking so openly.

With political discussions going on all around us, we debated which white wine to have with dinner. We narrowed the choices to two, but had trouble deciding between them. At last the nine of us reached agreement. But when the waiter came to take our order, he told us the wine we'd chosen was sold out. We would have to settle for the other one.

"Well, at least that makes the choice easier," I quipped. All the Czechs around the table fell silent, staring at me as if I had said something terribly wrong. After a long pause, Martin spoke up. "You think just like a communist!" he exclaimed. And everyone broke into laughter.

The next morning we attended a church service at the beautiful baroque Basilica of Saint James near the Old Town Square. The music for Sunday services there, performed by members of Prague's professional chamber music and opera ensembles, was always excellent. Usually there were only a handful of people in the congregation, though, most of them elderly women.

But that morning the church was packed with people of all ages, including young soldiers and high-ranking officers in their military uniforms.

The music for that first Sunday in Advent had been chosen by the church well before the historic events of 1989 began unfolding on the streets of Prague. But in the context and still uncertain outcome of the civil unrest that week, the selection of music seemed uncannily appropriate: Joseph Haydn's *Mass in Time of War*, written in 1796, referencing a troubled period in Austrian history when the country was mobilizing for a possible invasion by the French. Also known in German as the *Paukenmesse* because of its dramatic use of tympani, it's a very moving piece of music for soloists, choir, and orchestra. Whenever I hear it now, I think of those heady days in Prague when we witnessed the courage of ordinary people protesting against a repressive and corrupt government.

After church we joined up with the rest of the tour group for the return trip to Munich on our chartered bus. Vladimir, our trusted local guide, came on board to say goodbye to everyone. A middle-age couple was sitting in the front row of seats, across the aisle from Tom and me. The man quietly handed Vladimir his business card and said, "Let us know if there's anything your people need—photocopy paper, printer ink, help with printing announcements, anything..." When Vladimir read the business card, his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. The man on the front row was the U.S. Information Agency's director of Voice of America in Europe.

On the long bus ride back to Munich, everyone was excitedly swapping stories of the historic events they'd witnessed in Prague. As we always did on those tours, Tom and I had purchased at a Prague delicatessen dozens of traditional Czech appetizers known as *obložené chlebíčky*—small open-faced sandwiches spread with butter or mayonnaise and topped with slices of eggs, meats, cheeses, and vegetables—which we passed around to everyone on the bus. Other members of the tour group contributed bottles of Czech white wine, which also made the rounds. After the always time-consuming (and often intimidating) crossing of the heavily fortified Czech border—made even more uncertain that Sunday because of the upheaval occurring in Prague—we were finally greeted on the German side of the border with a big Christmas tree lighting up the winter darkness. And to welcome our group back to the West, Tom played a tape of Dvořák's *New World Symphony* on the bus's sound system.

Epilogue

That Munich Campus Cultural Tour had certainly been a once-in-a-lifetime learning experience for everyone in our group, as it was for all the people on the art history Study Tour that week, too. Some of them even signed up again for the Cultural Tour at Thanksgiving the following year, so they could see all the museums, concerts, and operas that had been closed or canceled during their previous visit to Prague.

On that Sunday in 1989 when our group departed Prague for the return trip to Munich, Tom and I had been reluctant to leave after witnessing so many remarkable events there, with the final outcome still unknown. During the next week at home in Germany, we watched the television news reports of the general strike throughout Czechoslovakia, the complete

capitulation of the Communist government, and the ultimate success of the non-violent, ten-day popular mass movement that soon came to be known as the "Velvet Revolution."

Three months later, Tom and I went back to Prague as escorts for another Munich Campus tour group during the Fasching (pre-Lenten Carnival) holiday period. We carried with us five identical photograph albums, each filled with copies of pictures that we had taken during those momentous days in November: photos of flag-waving demonstrators, hand-painted posters, and masses of people in Wenceslas Square. I had wrapped each photo album in pretty paper and tied the packages up with red, white, and blue ribbons.

Those gifts for our Czech friends were meant to be a small token of our own remembrances of the Velvet Revolution. Two of the younger Czech recipients seemed amused that we would bring them photographs of events that had occurred in their own country. But the middle-age people were visibly moved by our gesture. With tears in her eyes, one woman said to me, "We and our children were so busy with the revolution, we never even thought to take photographs, so we don't have any of our own. For us, this album you have given us will become a family heirloom. Someday we will pass it on to our grandchildren, to show them what happened here in 1989."

Dates and divisions of overseas service with UMUC:

European Division (1975-1978; 1981-1993)

Asian Division (1978-1979)

Munich Campus (1985, 1989-1992)

Augsburg Campus (1992-1993)

Russia Program (1993-1995)

Other: Writer of UMUC history books (1996-1997, 2007)