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Travels Through History

Past & Present in Prague and Central Bohemia

By Martin Votruba

While I was born and raised in Southern California, my parents migrated from, what was then, Czechoslovakia in the late 1960's – when Communism control intensified and they felt threatened. They left behind family members in Prague, and in a couple smaller outlying towns, and relocated to Los Angeles, California. Growing up, we only spoke Czech at home; my parents reasoned that I would learn and practice plenty of English at school. I have always been proud of my family roots and I am grateful to retain some of the language and culture.

In the early 1980s, while Czechoslovakia was still under communist control, my parents sent me there to visit some of the family they left behind. I spent about six weeks with aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents in and around Prague. Although I was young, I noticed a very stark difference between my surroundings in Southern California and Czechoslovakia. The buildings, homes, and even the dress of the citizens were comparatively drab in the old country. Grays, browns, and a few muted colors were the norm. I remember visiting Prague's most prominent town center, Wenceslas Square. Everything and everyone seemed gray and depressing, as if the overcast sky was the only palette of colors from which to choose. The stifling and oppressive influence of the communism influenced all aspects of everyday life.

I recall one specific experience where I stood in a long line with my relatives. We were in queue to purchase bananas. When we finally reached the front of the line, the merchant put four bananas on the table. I noticed that we had no choice in selecting the produce we wanted, nor the quantity, since when I asked for a fifth, as there were 5 of us, I was denied and told, "These are the four bananas you can buy. Take it or leave it." It was such a stark difference between my shopping experiences back home and what my relatives went through in their daily lives. I bid farewell to my relatives that remained in Czechoslovakia, returned to the comforts

and capitalism I was so used to. It was not until 30 years had passed that I had the opportunity to return.

In late 1989, Czechoslovakia experienced its “Velvet Revolution” where several decades of communist rule were cast off and replaced with a democratic government. Almost overnight significant changes began to be implemented. Many Czechs were quick to embrace capitalism, especially the youth and the urban population. Investors, both national and global, began seeking business opportunities; Old structures began to be remodeled, and the old drab gray of communism started to be replaced with a brightness not seen in half a century. Today, a visitor would experience a brighter, richer, and more importantly, a welcoming nation.

Besides shaking off their oppressive political governmental regime, a key educational requirement was changed. Instead of requiring “Russian” as a second language, schools began teaching English. An interesting observation in present day is that the older generations speak Czech and Russian, while the younger ones speak Czech and English. A traveler needing directions or assistance need only seek out the local youth if they do not speak the native language. Tours in English, as well as other languages, are common at most major attractions, both in and beyond Prague. I returned to the Czech Republic in the summer of 2014 with my wife and daughter. While this was to be their first visit, it was the second time I set foot in the country of my family’s roots. The transformation from the old country I remembered from a quarter of century ago to what I witnessed upon my return was breathtaking. Without a doubt, I would not have realized the difference had I not visited the old country so many years ago.



View of Charles Bridge, with Prague Castle in far right, Summer 2014, Photo by author.



View from Prague Castle, Charles Bridge is in far top left, Summer 2014, Photo by author.

Prague has been called the Heart of Europe and is arguably one of the most beautiful cities one can visit, and with good reason. It is a city rich in history and culture. For someone traveling to Europe, many would consider it a “must see.” While Prague is a wonderful travel experience for any tourist visiting Europe, to

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simply stopover in Prague for a few days and move on to the next European capital is to miss out on all the Czech Republic, and the many other wonderful experiences the nation, has to offer. There are several popular sites to see while in the capital: Prague Castle (“Prazsky hrad”), Charles Bridge, the astronomical clock (“Orloj”), Wenceslas Square, the Jewish synagogue and cemetery, and Vysehrad (which roughly translates to “tower castle”) are just a few.



Vysehrad, Summer 2014, Photo by author.



View from Vysehrad, Vltava River is on the right, Summer 2014, Photo by author.

The Czech Republic has embraced capitalistic values common in western society's cities and communities. For example, in the Flora district of Prague, next to a centuries old cemetery now stands a modern multi-level shopping center, complete with a multiplex movie theater, supermarket, and even a currency exchange kiosk.

Just a five-minute walk from the southeastern corner of Wenceslas Square is the main train station ("hlavni nadrazi") of Prague. Not only is the public transportation in the Czech Republic relatively simple to use, the systems are also user friendly. The staff at the ticket counter are multilingual and finding an English speaking employee at the train station is usually easy.

Beyond Prague

While the possibilities outside of Prague are many, here is just a small sample of the wonderful destinations for someone wishing to experience more of the Czech Republic beyond the capital. Each of these destinations are located in the Central Bohemian region, and can be visited as day trips from Prague.

Kolin is a smaller town east of Prague that is quite easy to reach. By either car or train (the Czech Republic's public transportation is very user friendly) the trip takes about 45 minutes.

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Either way gives the traveler a beautiful country view for most of the journey, however, for the first few minutes the train travels out of the capital, the view is...interesting...as the train speeds by graffiti adorned structures. My cousin explained that the locals find that it is easier to just leave the rebellious artists' works than to trouble with abatement. Perhaps it was decades of communistic oppression that both encouraged the artists and tempered the tolerance of others. This casual approach to life is the norm, my cousin continued. He described that the relaxed and accepting mentality helped people cope with the previous communistic occupation and generally makes life less stressful. I witnessed this mentality in both visits with my family, and encounters with other Czechs – from shopkeepers, to tour guides, to strangers on the street.



Kolin Town Square, Summer 2014, Photo by author.

When I visited as a young teenager, I remember exiting the Kolin train station and taking in the view of the city my father's side of the family called home. Across the street and to the right of the depot stood a three-story building that once belonged to my paternal grandparents. It was a tavern with a patio, four rooms for rent on the second floor, and living quarters above that. When my family fled occupied Czechoslovakia, they had to abandon the family home and business. The structure had fallen into disrepair

and was occupied by squatters for many years. It is fascinating to contemplate that if history had unfolded differently, I may now be serving beer and bratwurst instead of writing this piece.

Today, there stands a modern day supermarket owned by a Dutch corporation. A big box store with neon lights and bright “ON SALE!” signs has replaced the dilapidated structure what was my father’s childhood home and my grandparent’s business. My family’s old business is just one of many such changes that have occurred in the three decades since my last visit. Even this small town has been infused and rejuvenated with the country’s new-found republic and capitalistic sense of development. Where I once shopped with my aunt in small specialty shops, we instead stopped in a supermarket that would be almost indistinguishable from any seen in the U.S.



A previous water pumping station in Kolin, which is now being converted into a river side restaurant/bar complete with a boat dock, Summer of 2014, Photo by author.

Absent, are the Tuzex stores that were revered during Communistic occupation. These stores sold highly sought after imported goods, especially from the United States. Tuzex only accepted U.S. dollars or their own special currency that consumers were required to purchase for Czechoslovakian Crowns, at exorbitant rates. Yet the few times I visited one as a young teen, the stores were always busy. The Czechoslovakian people were

mesmerized by U.S. products. A few family members that I visited during my first stay has china cabinets that proudly displayed the empty containers of common U.S. products that were on every supermarket shelf back home. Packages that I remember seeing displayed included cereal and cigarette boxes, tea and coffee tins, and even gum and candy packages.

In contrast, during my last visit, many such imported products were now readily available in markets and convenience stores. While we stopped for fuel on one of our excursions, my cousin and I went into the gas station to pay. The candy, snacks, and drinks that were colorfully displayed were a mix of both local and U.S. products. The bilingual attendant cheerfully greeted us as English pop music played over the store's speakers.

Kutna Hora is an even smaller community than Kolin, located just a bit further south east. Kutna Hora's history is securely tied to the silver mines in the community. In the late 1200s, the silver produced by its mines accounted for about a third of the silver mined in Europe. By the early 1500s, the mine was said to be the deepest mine in the world at the time at a depth of about 500 meters. Besides Prague, Kutna Hora was the most important city in the area because of the wealth it generated. In 1995, it was added to the UNESCO list. With such a rich history, a visit is strongly recommended.

While the city is located off the beaten path, experiencing and getting around the city is relatively easy. Each of the few major tourist attractions are visitor friendly. Most sites have staff that speak English and they each have information and brochures available in several languages. Although the major attractions each require a nominal fee, there is a discounted bundle pass that is available at each of the locations. The pass is recommended if a visitor wishes to visit more than one location. Simply buy the pass at any of the grouped locations and use the pass when arriving at the others.

One of the memorable destinations in Kutna Hora is Kosnice. Translated to English, Kosnice roughly means "Of Bones." The name speaks directly to its most interesting and obvious quality – the interior is decorated with human remains. While a photograph can provide an idea of what to expect to the traveler considering a visit, a photo does not do justice to an in-person experience. The small and unique church provides a somber

look back into history and how the local community laid their deceased to rest.

The macabre décor of the church was orchestrated by near-blind monks that wanted to provide a respectful memorial to the deceased, both locals and victims of regional wars. An observant visitor can often see the fatal blows that brought down those that died by violence centuries ago. Skulls pierced by swords or cracked by bludgeoning weapons can be seen throughout the church – a grim reminder of the violence the area experienced hundreds of years in the past.



The author and his daughter in Kosnice, A family crest from human remains in the background, Photo by author's wife, Nina Votruba.

Santa Barbara Cathedral, also located in Kutna Hora, is likely the most captivating building in the community. Cathedrals may be common in most European cities, but finding such a majestic and historical structure that is not crowded and under a constant barrage of tourists is a welcome change of pace. Visiting Santa Barbara Cathedral in Kutna Hora is a peaceful and spiritual experience. Unlike Saint Vetus Cathedral in Prague, here, a visitor is allowed to stroll, touch and explore most of the grounds and structure. Small group tours are available and staff is friendly and accessible. A visitor not wishing to take a guided tour can stop on the second floor of the Cathedral to find historical information and interesting artifacts. In addition to the beautiful interior, a visitor

should also spend some time on the grounds outside. The serene gardens surrounding the Cathedral and Santa Barbara's flying buttresses are not to be missed.



Front view of Santa Barbara Cathedral. Photo by author.

Europe is rich in castles and fortified structures from the middle ages, and the Czech Republic is no exception. While public transportation generally not available to the fortified manor, if a car ride or tour can be arranged, it would be well worth the effort. Sternberg Castle (“Cesky Sternberk”) was originally built in the mid-13th century. However, some of the structure was destroyed by King Gorge’s army in 1467. It was later restored and expanded. As my family and I rode to the castle, my uncle jokingly remarked, “you’ve seen one castle, you’ve seen them all.” I don’t find that to be the case. Each magnificent structure has its own unique architecture and history. Sternberg Castle may not be the largest in the Czech Republic, but its commanding hill top presence (along with beautiful views), enchanting early gothic architecture, and captivating Baroque interiors make it a worthwhile excursion. Given that is not a major tourist destination means that tours tend to be smaller and more intimate. Information is available in English and, while small, there is a quaint shop that offers literature, gifts, and sundries.



Sternberg Castle, Summer 2014, Photo by author.



View from Sternberg Castle Tower, Summer 2014, Photo by author.

Another quaint bohemian town located about thirty miles east of Prague is Podebrady, which translates to English as “below the ford.” What makes this a worthwhile day trip destination is that it is considered a spa and health center for the nation. The most fascinating feature is the natural spring that provides the town with

iron rich water that is used for medicinal purposes. Furthermore, the natural spring produces both freshwater and naturally carbonated mineral waters.

The spring waters discovered in 1905 by Prince von Bulow led to the town's current status, however, Podedbrady's history goes back a few hundred years. A fortified manor stands guard by the river Elbe (Labe), which runs by the town. The structure, built in 1268, is relatively plain when compared to other ornate structures erected during the time period but has a commanding presence. The settlement originally sprung into being as a stopping pointy along a trade route that ran east from Prague, through Podedbrady, and continued on to Poland. The town was officially recognized in 1472, by King Jeri of Podedbrady. Compared to my first visit to this spa town, Podedbrady today is almost unrecognizable. In the 1980s the town was cold, quiet, and uninviting. Today the walkways are clean and bright and, at least during the summer season when I went, colorful flowers bloom all around. Shaded park benches under green trees offer a comfortable respite to both travelers and spa guests alike.

At the heart of the town is a beautiful park where locals, guests and patients can enjoy flowers and fountains while they bask in the warm sunlight. Adventurous travelers who make the effort to visit are able to sample the springs' waters free of charge. In the center of the park is a public building where water from both springs are available. While the taste is rather unique, the locals swear by its medical properties and the waters are primarily administered to patients with heart conditions.



Podebrady fountains, the public building with free mineral spring water is in the back left, Summer 2014, Photo by author.

Central Bohemia has greatly changed between my two visits. It is truly amazing what a quarter century and a change in government can do to reawaken a region and its people. With such a rich history and culture, it was inspiring to see both the country and people flourishing after years of stagnation under communistic governance. In my revisit to Prague and Central Bohemia, I saw a nation and people full of hope, newfound inspiration, and freedom. I encourage readers to consider visiting the country and experience the Czech Republic for themselves.

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Author Bio

Martin Votruba has been a high school teacher for over twelve years. In 2014, he decided to return to CSUSB and further his education by earning a Master of Arts in Social Sciences & Globalization with an emphasis in the causes of Salvadoran migrations to the United States. He plans to teach part-time at the junior college level while continuing his high school teaching career. He would like to thank Dr. Cherstin Lyon for her encouragement and support, and Chief Editor, Heather Garrett, for her invaluable input during the editing process. In addition, he would like to thank his wife, Nina Votruba, for her patience and support over the past few years.



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