

Imagining Bohemia

by Pamela Gerhardt

In 1993 Prague, it was the Sixties all over again.

In the late 1980s an entire generation of 20-something Americans read *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, or at least saw the movie, and fell in love with the idea of beautiful, erotic Czechs who communicated by way of gauzy, rhetorical questions. The American media only fed our obsession with all things Czech. Oh, how we admired their president and his Velvet Revolution, his secretary in Ziggy Stardust platform shoes, and a reception room painted like the cover of the Yellow Submarine album. We had seen pictures in *Musician* magazine of Lou Reed and Havel arm in arm, wearing black leather in cavernous Prague clubs. We had read stories by American journalists who visited Havel during the early months of the revolution and how they found aides and secretaries of the interior skateboarding through the castle hallways. *The New York Times Magazine* ran pictures of Czech women on the street, calling them "Prague Beauties."

In our fantasies, Czechs embodied all that we yearned for—love and natural good looks and rebellion and rock and roll—while American culture seemed preoccupied with everything corporate: shoulder pads, BMWs, baked brie, insider trading scandals. Here, actor Charlie Sheen and the tall actress from "Splash" made pasta and sushi on the big screen as their characters ruthlessly climbed to the top. There, women still weren't shaving their armpits.

In short, an entire generation of American kids who came of age during eight years of Reagan got a chance to do the sixties. Prague became our Haight-Ashbury. And so we went. In droves. By 1989, 20,000 Americans, a good portion of them just out of college, lived in Prague, and many more grabbed a backpack and went to visit.

I choose grad school while several former colleagues took off for the Home of Bohemia, the Paris of the East. By the time I got there, it was 1993, and although the expat thing was still in full force, the scene I found already felt vaguely inauthentic, played out, bordering on cliché.

The Americans I knew in Prague were hard to find. They were there and *not there*, and my brief journey to this ethereal city quickly took on the colors of Joan Didion's prose when she went to visit San Francisco in the cold, late spring of 1967 to hang out for a while with people who called themselves "hippies" and found children mostly void of ideology, explaining that they left home because their parents had made them take out the trash.

In Prague in 1993 nobody had a phone, much less the cellular variety, and no access to the Internet. Communications were sketchy. Messages were sent down the pipeline, word of mouth, like secret guerilla codes, even though the revolution had already been won.

My first day in town, I naively asked a receptionist at an accommodations office how I could find my American acquaintances. I even told her their names. Praha 1, the old town in central Prague, is small, and I had imagined the expats gathering nightly in a small bar, easily identifiable. At the time, Pilsener Urquell logos still graced the cafe umbrellas, rather than Coca-Cola, and the local, throat-burning Sparta cigarettes still dominated billboards rather than Marlboro. The receptionist shrugged. "Americans? There are so many. Try the embassy."

I knew some of them worked at the *Prague Post*, one of three American-friendly, English-language newspapers in a city of just one million people. The next morning, I found the cavernous hallways of the building that housed the paper's offices ringing with flat, American accents. But my acquaintances were somewhere else. "They moved around a lot," I was told. "Things were complicated." A woman wrote down my name. "I'll tell them if I see them," she said, tucking her note into her pocket, and I pictured roommates and lovers moving in and out of apartments, and fiancés back home in Akron leaving messages, dutifully scribbled down on pink squares of paper and gathering lint in the pockets of retro corduroy jackets.

Within only a few hours of arrival I found myself at the Thirsty Dawg, an expat favorite now closed. Young Americans lined the counters along the walls where you stood, English style, and took long pulls from your pilsener. We hooked up with a charming, elfish young man from Wales who complained about so many Americans. The previous night he had been to a bar called Radost. Of course, we had heard of it, where the internationally famous ex-pat literary readings unraveled on an irregular basis. "Tomorrow night they'll be staging one of their readings," he said. "You should go, if you want to find Americans. Myself, I'm wondering where the Czechs go."

The next night I went to the FX Cafe, a vegetarian restaurant above Radost. As it turned out, that night the reading was not held in Radost, as was usual, because someone was putting up lights down there for some kind of show. Instead, people gradually drifted into a smaller room next to the cafe that served bean burritos with avocados in a country famous for gristly meat and cabbage. This night, the readers were mostly American, from Des Moines, California, and New York. They read things they had written that day—existential griping about the way taxi drivers there rip you off and landlords charge too much rent. The place was packed with expats. We sat shoulder to shoulder and listened intently as an English girl read her story about her visit to the dentist that day. I kept waiting for the punch line. Last, a young man in worn dress slacks, apparently the only Czech in the room, stood up and read a short poem about the nature of his love for a woman. The crowd held its breath. A kind of melancholy suddenly gave meaning to the moment. But that might have been just his accented English.

During my visit, I was renting from Mrs. Hlouskova. In Prague in 1993, before the tourism industry kicked into high gear, the few hotel rooms catered mostly to wealthy tourists and international business people and went for more than \$300 a night, so most younger visitors literally rented a bedroom in the homes of the locals for about \$40 a night. I saw Mrs. Hlouskova only on the first day. She smiled warmly, spoke only Czech and German, and said, "Ah!" as she drew back the lace curtains and showed me the view of St. Vitus Cathedral outside the bedroom window where I would be sleeping. She slept on a thin couch in her dark living room, and when I got up each morning she was gone, having set out bread and jam and butter.

The rest of the week I fell in love with the medieval city and walked so much along its friendly cobblestone streets that I bruised the ball of my left foot. I never found my former colleagues, but on my final night I headed back to Ms. Hlouskova's apartment at 1 a.m. with a smile on my face. Just as I was about to open the door, I noticed three people buying sandwiches from a vendor near the curb. As I got closer, I recognized two of them: the Americans I had been looking for. We hugged, and they introduced the third, a young Czech woman. Someone suggested wine, and someone ran off to get a bottle. "Let's go to my apartment," said one of the Americans, and it turned out to be right across the street from where I had been staying the entire week. It turned out, also, that they had been the ones setting up lights at Radost when I had been upstairs.

She lived on the fifth floor, and as we approached her dark stairwell she whispered, "I'm not going to turn on the light, and don't talk while we go up. My neighbors hate Americans living here."

We tip-toed in the dark like teenagers sneaking in past curfew. Upstairs in the high-ceilinged apartment, it turned out she did have a phone, and it rang many times. Her Hungarian friend was coming over with his girlfriend, she announced. Someone lit some candles. Someone else lit a joint. The American woman saw her friends out the window and hurried out the door in a flurry of crepe and tights and jingly earrings. Back inside, she wanted to call her Czech boyfriend, Tomas, but did we think it was too late? Everyone ran out of cigarettes, and the American woman found some more. Another phone call. Tomas wasn't coming after all. He had to work in the morning.

There was much talk that night about rent, landlords, bad plumbing. There was much laughter about the silly locals, how they didn't understand advertising, how so many apartment buildings, including this one, still had communal toilets outside on the balcony, rather than inside apartments.

The Czech woman answered questions about growing up under communism and the recent split from Slovakia, and her English was heavily punctuated by the word, "like."

"My grannies," she said, "They don't, like, understand capitalism and advertising. Like, if you have to, like, beg someone to buy something it must not be very good." She had been to America the previous year and loved Venice Beach above all else.

A few hours later, the American woman turned on her Macintosh—just in from the U.S. She had had a lot of trouble at first getting the modem and the power to work. She rolled her mouse and clicked on "Aquatic Realm," the then-new and awe-inspiring After Dark Screen Saver featuring fish swimming across the screen.

"In the '60s," someone joked, "the hippies stared at real aquariums."

Pamela Gerhardt has written more than thirty articles for *The Washington Post* and has written for *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Houston Chronicle* and many other publications. She teaches argumentative writing and narrative nonfiction at The University of Maryland. One quarter Czech, she savors memories of her immigrant relatives: people who drank a lot of beer and called a sink a zink.