

PRAGUE 2009

Early each day the city is cleaned
The thick, perforated metal grills round the tree trunks are also cleaned regularly.
The flower baskets are watered and even the pavements are washed down.
'Compliments are well earned to the team of workers.'

In contrast, I have to ask the waiter serving in the Tram Wagon Coffee House to please wipe down the table before we sit.
The Tram is permanently anchored under the constant gaze of good King Wenceslaus astride his powerful horse on a massive plinth.
He is flanked by his grand-mother St. Ludmilla and St Agnes, the young princess who established the first convent in Prague.
Two Bishops: Voytech and Propov stand and bear witness to the massive changes that plagued this beleaguered country for centuries at the cross road of Europe.

Our waiter is sullen, I have to make him smile or risk the quality of our drinks.... !!!
We see hot cranberry juice 'Tepla Brusinky'.... if I change the Br to a P the word changes to Kisses. I order 3 WARM KISSES and the waiter melts.
I laugh with him and change the order to 3 coffees and only one warm kiss.
As he disappears we hear other staff laughing as they poke their heads round the corner to see who is causing the riot.

Calmness soon returns and we drink our coffee before setting off to explore the treasures of Golden Prague. We are old hands at this as this is now my sixth visit.

It is exactly 20years since the old regime collapsed and my family are now able to travel the country without risk of being arrested as spies.
People are too preoccupied with daily chores to bother with organizing any celebrations. This could have something to do with many of the old order still holding the reins of power. A black Bentley glides past...
"Mafia" snorts our waiter
"Russian mafia.. they lost us politically but now own us financially" he adds.

When Vaclav Havel became president he said 'I had to work with the people in office as it would take too many years to retrain a new civil service. I did not expect such an explosion of self interest and corruption to surface.'

He was naïve and the corruption is now entrenched at all levels from police driving fines to civil engineering contracts as 'consultants fees'

Within weeks of the collapse overseas funds flooded into the country and the 'family silver' was scavanged, just like in Russia, by 'investors' who were often of the old order.

Of necessity the Czechs have been political animals, but predominantly very circumspect in taking any action.

They make 'velvet' revolutions by shaking house keys in one hand and students showed open palms to armoured police lines.

It worked.

Unfortunately decades of deprivation, and overall State ownership has corrupted the morals of too many people at all levels. Life is only better for some.

Our first call is behind St Vitus Cathedral where we visit Bishop Skarvda S.J. and Sister Bibianna m.m.m.

Sitting together releases a flood of stories from their early days. He as a young seminarian in 1938 stranded in a bus traveling to Rome with other students.

Their meager possessions stored on the roof of the bus were stolen during the night while they slept. Hungry and poorly clothed they arrived at the Czech college in Rome. War broke out and soon after Communism divided Europe.

He did not return to Prague for 55yrs.

Sister Bibi completed her nursing studies in 1947 as a lay person. Under Nazi occupation she saw colleagues taken away by the Gestapo and knew of convents that successfully hid priests for long periods at a risk of death in concentration camps to all the nuns. Terezin was a familiar name to her. She left Prague 1949 after having secretly expressed an interest to join an Order of Medical Sisters. Arrangements were completed only days before the Iron Curtain was closed. She left Prague on the last flight before the country was sealed off from The West. Landing in Ireland she started her new life. She returned, still very fearful, in 1990 and continued her medical work.

One day while buying bread rolls at the bakery she handed over her money, and the shop assistant pointed to a basket of rolls telling Sister Bibi to take them. 'Aren't you going to give me a bag?' Sister Bibi asked.

The girl shrugged carelessly.

'Then give me back my money' Sister demanded.

The girl threw the money back onto the counter.

This attitude was the normal daily confrontations. Her nuns Habit

was a simplified style but even so it provoked nasty reactions.

At 87 she is sprightly, working full time at her nursing duties and her diary is full for the rest of the year including a trip to the UK Mother House.

After years of protracted legal battles St Vitus cathedral was returned to the Church authorities. Three months ago the Courts proclaimed St Vitus a national treasure that should belong to the State.

They chose to forget that Charles IV of Bohemia (Charlemaine) built it for the Church to serve the people, and as a tomb for the Kings and Queens of Bohemia. Good King Wenseslaus rests in simple casket at a side aisle.

Uniformed soldiers now stand within the aisles of the church.
The same soldiers that guard the president's Place.
He may well need guarding.

The following day was yet another reunion. Sister Rikardis was waiting with a bundle of photo albums '1938 school children celebrations'.

My mother was at the school at that time but quite impossible to pick out faces of her friends in the photos.

Dressed in national costumes several hundred little boys and girls danced and played folk instruments under the watchful gaze of nuns in medieval style Habits. The nuns of St Karel Boromeysky numbered 1500 in 1938. They were both a teaching and nursing Order with orphans housed within their normal residential schools.

Hitler's arrival required all the nuns of German or Austrian birth to return to those countries and 800 had to leave. The remaining nuns had to regroup and reduce several convents to minimum functioning.

Within ten years a second, and more brutal, occupation resulted in all the convents being confiscated. New Postullants were forbidden from joining the Order.

The Mother Superior was arrested and falsely imprisoned as a spy under the mistaken belief the other nuns would dissolve away into nothing. The remaining younger nuns were put into menial work at assorted factories.

State mental institutions, handicapped children's homes or old peoples homes were the destinations for older nuns.

A shortage of qualified State nurses soon resulted in the authorities realizing their society could not function without using these highly skilled and experienced nuns.

This compromised situation now brought groups of nuns back together again. Mother Superior advised her nuns to accept no payment from the state or they would be controlled by the State. In effect the nuns had to eat, they

refused to remove their Habits and the most meager salaries were handed to them by The State.

For the next 40 years the nuns held to their beliefs as best they could. Grouped in normal houses, with new recruits wearing civil clothes, they gave the outward appearance of just a boarding house with some of the rooms used by working nuns. In effect it was an undercover convent. Prayers and spiritual discussion were week-end activities.

State rules allowed the nuns an annual holiday. They left their work places and traveled to Neumann Hradiste their 9th century convent near the Polish border. It was the place where very old nuns had been sent by The State, when they were unable to work any longer. Left to die-off in retirement the effect was actually to create a centre of strength for all the nuns in the rest of the country.

The resident supervising (spy) State appointed guardian at the Convent had little interest in his job.

Every week-end he disappeared into the nearby town to enjoy activities more to his taste. This gave the nuns free run of the place and they organised programmes of sharing information, new Postulants took their vows, under-cover priests visited to take mass and give communion.

By the time the supervisor returned on Monday morning he was usually well inebriated and only looked for a peaceful sleep in his quarters.

We spent each evening at the Prague State Opera: La Boheme; Swan Lake; Madam Butterfly; Swan Lake again (Prima Ballerina from Moscow); Othello: Hours in the National Museum and walking the Old City streets, having meals with Czech friends and hearing their news.

Our touring trip through Bohemia for the next week became a revelation of contrasts. TABOR, is an unforgettable town where Hussites held out against the religious authorities trying to crush their new interpretation of The Bible in the 16th century. The heart of the town is almost unchanged from those days. It is enclosed by the ugly, rapidly constructed buildings of the 50's and 60's. Eyesores beyond description highlighting even more so the beauty of the buildings in the old town centre..

Families reclaimed the crumbling buildings under 'Restitution Rights' and returned to create homes, shops and pubs on a human scale that could show town planners the rapid secret to success.

Its residents were incredibly friendly and in no time at all we were invited to dancing classes, festivals and 'coffee at home'. It would have been lovely to stay longer but we had a schedule planned and had to keep going.

Cesky Budejovice has the largest square in Central Europe. Its importance developed as a salt trading centre on the major salt route. Its wealth is evident in its churches, public buildings, water mills and a world famous brewery of BUDVAR. The nectar was taken by a certain Otakar to the USA and Budweiser and Budvar have been involved in legal battle for decades.

We spent the night in a converted Benedictine monastery alongside an arm of the Vtava River. With over a meter thick walls and small windows it had not lost its medieval character. The nearby water mill had just completed refurbishment to another Hotel to cater for the influx of Austrian and German tourists.

After hunting out some old friends and exploring a lovely book shop that could now sell anything we set off to Chesky Krumlov.

Chesky Krumlov sits on sharp curve of the Vltava with even steeper cliffs rising above on which the most magical and complete medieval village as built. It lay in ruins for decades under communism. Where it as once the seat of Swartzenberg Dukes it then sunk into abandonment with trees growing through the roofs and its secrets lay silent until it was resurrected to some of its former glory.

Now a Unesco World Heritage site well over million visitor annually fill the steep, narrow streets. The main central Tower is visible for miles. Venetian Baroque, Persian influences are visible in its assorted levels and balconies.