

50 Years and Three Worlds

by Helena Novakova '72

Commotion woke us in the depth of the night – a chain reaction of calls “the Russians are here” rang through the night. The Warsaw Pact Armies (minus Romania) rolled in under the pretense of “liberating Czechoslovakia from Westernization”. It was August 20 to 21, 1968.

A crushing blow was delivered to our escalating hopes for liberty! Under the new first secretary Alexander Dubcek, the country had awoken from apathy and gloom under the Stalinist rulers to active involvement, resistance, freedom of speech, and action. One had to live it to believe it! From a grey shaded nation of people, who looked perpetually miserable, came a spirit of resolve and a desire to be free. The most beautiful spirit of my countrymen, which blossomed during this period of time called The Prague Spring of 1968, was being crushed that night in August 1968!

On the evening of August 25, 1968, the adults in my family decided that I should pack my suitcase and be ready to leave Pilsen the next morning to travel to the West. I had planned to take a year off to study abroad and had an exit visa in my passport. My brother Vladimir jumped at this opportunity and decided to join me.

As we were leaving our home the following morning, Russian tanks were parked in the streets below our windows. Young soldiers peeking out of the hatches were bewildered by the fists, angry faces, and words directed towards them. They had expected flowers and welcoming gratitude because they had been told that they were on a rescue mission. Instead of hugs they saw fury and also pity. Yes, some people felt sorry for these exhausted youngsters who had been tricked into believing a lie.

My uncle and my mother dropped us off at the train station in the most surreal way by keeping a distance from the platform to avoid possible suspicion of cooperation. We all passed the last moments before the train chugged off wondering when and if we would reunite again. Our eyes were glazed over with tears and anxiety, and the magnitude of the moment was squeezing our naked souls.

At the border crossing while passport control dealt with my papers, my brother, who did not have the exit visa, was escorted off the train. We did not even have a chance to hug and say good-bye. That was how I started my journey fifty years ago. I was then 21.

In the Nuremberg train station, American Red Cross workers asked English speaking travelers to help with processing the influx of refugees. I volunteered and met wonderful people from Oklahoma who appreciated my help and invited me to their home, full of love and open hearts. During those initial days in Germany I experienced the most difficult inner anxiety worrying about Vladimir. Did he try to cross the border through the mine fields on foot? Keeping busy helped me endure because lines of communication with Czechoslovakia were cut off and I had no way to find out what went on after I departed.

Three days later I said farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Cox, my new friends from Oklahoma from the American Red Cross, and took the train to my uncle's home in Augsburg, where I was to spend a couple of weeks before crossing the Channel to England for my "Year Abroad" working as an "au-pair" and studying English for a Cambridge Certificate at Barnett College. A huge boulder of relief fell from my shoulders when the bell rang at my uncle's and there stood two young Americans who had come from Pilsen with news from my family that my brother had returned home safely. These two students from Princeton University had been trapped in the events of Czechoslovakia while travelling and found shelter with my family the day I had left. Thus began my connection to the US.

After the year in England I decided to visit the US and my American friends before returning home. I arrived in the night of July 4th 1969 with \$18, my 2 Dunlop Maxplay tennis rackets, and a summer governess position waiting for me in Darien, Connecticut.

My story from that point forward is full of opportunities that I took advantage of. Some people tell me that I have been a creator of my opportunities, but I believe I was driven by survival instincts. Be it one or the other, I know I was eager to learn and experience and I had the FREEDOM to do it. I also sought adventure that helped me understand societies and cultures of the world, thus allowing me to sort things out now and put them in proper historical and cultural perspective. I appreciate and value every bit of my journey because it helped me become the person I am today. Sports and athleticism have kept me not only in physical condition but also became my mental therapy. I chose physical exertion to nourish me with enough adrenalin to overcome the lows during my life-journey and to give me ego-perks through achievements in competition. I found the American spirit inspiring but did not take anything for granted. I was aware when I was on the receiving end, and I gave back at every opportunity I had through inner-city programs, environmental, educational, cultural and social programs and events. I had not planned any of it but went with what fate threw in front of me. I made the best of what the world offered and have many people to thank for their kindness, guidance, and help.

When I recall these past five decades, I appreciate the fact that so many things that seemed a foggy blur I can now understand, sort out, agree or disagree with based on my experience and knowledge.

For instance, during the invasion of Czechoslovakia many of us wished that the US would have “stepped-in”. Only now have I absorbed enough facts and sentiment about that year of turmoil in US history - Martin Luther King’s and Robert Kennedy’s assassinations, the Civil-Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements; the youth culture – that I can better understand why rescuing the spirit and hope of the Prague Spring could not be higher on the America’s priority list. 1968 was not only the year that crushed the hopes of Prague Spring, but also “the year that shattered America”!

I am proud of my country not to have regressed into total apathy and submission after August 1968. The country revolted again via the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which finally freed them successfully from Russian oppression! It reinforces my belief that drastic change of government can succeed and last only if it comes from within. Foreign intervention alone cannot accomplish its desired end.

With my undergraduate and graduate degrees I chose to pursue a profession in education. After my initial wonderful teaching experience in California public schools, my then-husband (and ex-Peace Corp volunteer) and I decided to work for American schools overseas. Altogether we spent 10 eye-opening years in Latin countries, five years in Kenya, four years in Kuwait, and two years in the Philippines.

My initial introduction to South America was full of conflicting emotions. I was shocked by the poverty, but I was equally amazed by the spirit of people from all walks of life. They celebrated life to the fullest! Latin rhythms lightened the mood and inhibitions, and guarded manners got thrown by the wayside. There were always saints to adore and then celebrate during weekends in a whirl of Salsa, Marinera, Merenge, Samba, or Rumba. Most people were momentarily able to forget hardships and work for a while, enjoying music, family, and friendships. Their casual attitude towards the rules and their creative ways to achieve what they desired drove North Americans crazy. But in time, the North Americans discreetly used the same methods if they wanted to achieve their goals.

There were also hard times and heart aches in South America that earned our deep sympathy. Dictatorships were merciless, and it was not surprising that Che Guevara's *"If you tremble with indignation at every injustice, then you are a comrade of mine"* became quite popular, while Americans, who were believed to have installed the dictators, were not. Laden with back-packs we crisscrossed many parts of Peru, and later of Venezuela, on foot. Although the country was experiencing difficulties, we were fortunate that the ancient trails and ruins lost no magic or beauty. We enjoyed peace and serenity in those high elevations, as well as in the jungle or by the coastline. We wondered how the Incas and other civilizations like Chimu, ever accomplished building such awe inspiring structures.

Our year in Nicaragua was marked with constant reports of murder and bloodshed on the front pages of daily newspapers. As the civil war and chaos moved to Managua, we observed and lived through the most harrowing events of our international experience. Our school children were being kidnapped daily for ransom, and, shockingly, so was my school director husband, who was blamed for not closing the school during the General Strikes. Fortunately, he and all of the school children were released but one of our teachers was killed in a street skirmish by Somoza's National Guards. Soon thereafter many businesses and schools closed down, and in a rather dramatic exodus we were escorted to a private airport and evacuated. It is now almost 40 years later and the "rebel" side that won that conflict is inflicting the same atrocities on their citizenry for which they criticized the overthrown "junta". It boggles my mind seeing how people who profess noble intentions and draw sincere following, in turn become greedy and persecute the very people who helped them gain the power.

When I was growing up Africa was as a largely colonized continent. However, country by country began to stand up for its own rights and one by one achieved its independence. Many conflicts persist but for me living in Kenya after two years in chaotic post-Franco Spain, was a breath of fresh air. As a family, we enjoyed camping in the parks introducing our four-year old daughter, and later a newborn son, to the world of nature. Having the privilege of spending many times with the Maasai in the bush inspired unusual experiences that we would have otherwise never have had. So many in the so called "civilized" world look down upon primitive tribal societies, but we learned from them the skills that in our civilized haste are often overlooked, such as survival skills, respect for each other, structure of sharing duties as well as food, water and responsibilities. They have rules and boundaries that they abide by, but if a

stranger comes to them in good faith, they take care of him. If, however, a member of the tribe or an outsider is recognized for falsehood, treachery, lie, or theft he is quickly dealt with and punished.

The only time I was troubled about going to our next post was when we were heading to Kuwait. The US had just bombed Colonel Gaddafi and I worried about the repercussions and a possible wave of anti-Americanism. Conversely, our four years in the Middle East turned out to be safe and culturally enriching. We respected social and dress restrictions, but in private we were left alone to maintain our style of life. People in the streets and supermarkets were tickled by my children's blond hair; they touched their hair and bought them sweets. We had a wonderful atmosphere in our school. As a teacher, I also supported female public school Kuwaiti teachers and girls who were trying to change some constricting rules imposed on them with regard to physical education. It was yet another complex and different society to learn about and from.

Soon after our arrival Kuwait hosted an Arab summit. Rich palaces had been erected to accommodate each potentate and their large families. However, after a couple of weeks of sessions, they did not agree even on one proposal. I was astonished to learn how distrustful they were of each other and came to better understand the complexity of this part of the world.

On a personal level my time in Kuwait was heartfelt. As a child I enjoyed tales from the ancient times, including the Tales of One Thousand and One Nights. The beautifully illustrated books created dreamlike images in my memory depicting Arabia more as a fantasy land. Indeed, the Palaces and Museums I visited in Kuwait reflected much from the awe-inspiring splendor and beauty of the illustrations. Regrettably, much of the Museum valuables got looted during Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and not all have been returned.

During the years in Kuwait we witnessed flashes from across the Gulf from the Iranian forces' maneuvers, and people were visibly nervous about a possible conflict from Iran. Nobody expected the invasion from Iraq that took place just a few weeks after our departure in early August 1990.

My last overseas post took us to the Philippines, a conglomerate of many islands. Naturally, I could spend pages writing about the physical beauty, the Taal volcano inside a volcano, or the fabulous diving sites in the China Sea, but instead, I will point out the two things that astonished me the most. The first was the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial located in Fort Bonifacio. It honors the American and allied servicemen who died fighting the Japanese in World War II. The Cemetery offers repose to soldiers who lost their lives in the Pacific theater, which included the Philippines, New Guinea, and the Pacific islands. It is located on a prominent grassy green plateau, visible at a distance from the east, south and west, and displays the largest number of graves of any cemetery for U.S. personnel killed during the World War. I knew little about the Second World War in the Pacific and here I realized the tremendous involvement and loss of so many lives. In this incredibly serene and peaceful place I could feel the spirit rising over all those graves, a spirit of hope and yearning for “never again”. - The second thing that profoundly impressed me were the very emancipated women of the Philippines! They are strong, determined, and despite the fact that historically the society was primarily a male dominated culture, women now run the families, the businesses, and many government agencies. Compared to many other countries, Filipino women have gained and enjoy equal rights with men. They have become presidents, senators, congresswomen, and mayors.

Moving from country or continent to another country or continent always brought on a degree of “culture shock”. Some people suffered profoundly from this phenomenon and decided to return home, but we adjusted quite easily and enjoyed the experience of learning about the host country and its people, as well as meeting other expatriates from around the world. Returning back to the US after 21 years overseas presented some shocks as well, and impressed me in a variety of ways. We settled in Miami, Florida, a very cosmopolitan center that my children call the “city closest to the United States”. It is vibrant, colorful, and full of diverse sounds, smells and languages with a skyline developed and still developing along the shore, as well as a cultural hub with art galleries and theatre and concert halls. It also presents clashes of temperaments and tolerance levels. In yesterday’s Friday rush hour traffic, I saw people jump out of their cars with middle fingers pointing at each other, which is not uncommon, and thank God it was only the fingers! You either cry of frustration or you choose to laugh! My neighborhood, however, is as peaceful and friendly as an extended family. The climate, the soothing sea, beautiful flora, and the abundance of wonderful friends and cultural events make the unbearable moments in traffic disappear.

The biggest shock I felt upon returning to the US after a couple of decades elsewhere had to do mainly with education. I left a wonderful California public school system in 1975, and I returned to a weakening Florida public school system in 1996. Class sizes increased; teaching to tests rather than practical application of acquired knowledge became the required norm; parents with inexpert understanding were allowed to push forward what to teach, how to teach it and how to grade it! What I graded as a “C” performance in 1975 I was pressed to “gift” to a student as an “A” or the parent would sue the school! Respect for teachers and financial appreciation of the teaching profession have dropped. This country is considered a leading country of the world, but our educational system lags behind other countries and needs to be seriously revised and improved. I have more thoughts and opinions on the subject of education but leave them for another time.

For now I close my musings on the past 50 years with some thoughts about the three “worlds” where my life journey has taken me. My first “world” was 21 years growing up in Czechoslovakia. I loved my family, adored my brothers, and thoroughly enjoyed my entire childhood full of activities, intellectual stimulation within the walls of my home, sports, outdoor ventures, and many close friendships that last till this day. I observed my father’s inner misery under the oppressive communist regime. However, I was born in that regime and not knowing what real freedom felt like, I did not understand well the burden my parents and grandparents carried.

Only migrating to the West into my second “world”, helped me realize the meaning of true freedom and that was intoxicating!

Wandering out of comfortable stability of my second world into uncertain, foreign territory that became my third “world” was exhilarating - living among other peoples and cultures and sharing amazing experiences with fellow teachers and friends of the overseas school communities expanded the scope of knowledge about the world and the world cultures. The best of all has been sharing a large portion of the journey with my children, Niki and Saali, who will undoubtedly remember much of it. I could have never planned such a journey better and feel very fortunate how it has turned out!

My heart remains Czech, my spirit is American, and my soul wanders globally...

PS – My words above are, naturally, subjective. They express my personal experience and it is possible that others may have very different opinions and views of the events described. This is just a skeleton of the story, and one day I hope to add details describing some “jamesbondesque” events, eyebrow-raising episodes, and pulse-speeding endeavors.

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