

## **Czech Political History**

After World War I and the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the independent republic of Czechoslovakia was founded in 1918. This new country contained large German, Hungarian and Polish minorities. Although Czechoslovakia was a democratic and liberal state guaranteeing and also implementing cultural and language rights to its minorities (schools in German language areas were entirely German), the centralistic state did not grant its minorities territorial political autonomy, which resulted in discontent and strong support among the minorities to break away from Czechoslovakia. Hitler used the opportunity and, supported by Konrad Henlein's Sudeten German Party, gained the majority German speaking Sudetenland through the Munich Agreement. Poland occupied majority Polish speaking areas around Cesky Tesin, while Slovakia gained greater autonomy, with the state being renamed to "Czecho-Slovakia".

Eventually Slovakia broke further away in 1939 and the remaining Czech territory was occupied by Hitler who installed the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which was proclaimed part of the Reich and where the Protectorate President and Prime Minister were subordinate to the Nazi Reichsprotektor ("imperial protector"). Approximately 125 000 citizens, including 83 000 Jews, were killed, and hundreds of thousands of others were sent to prisons and concentration camps or forced labor.

Czechoslovak government-in-exile and its army which fought against the Nazis were acknowledged by Allies. From 1945 to 1948 the Sudetenland was cleansed of ethnic Germans (under the so-called Beneš decrees and the Treaty of Potsdam). About 3 million Germans, almost the entire German minority of pre-war Czechoslovakia, were expelled to Germany and Austria.

As a consequence, 15,000-30,000 (according to the official German-Czech Committee of Historians) Germans were killed or otherwise died. Only a few who had been active in the resistance or were required or allowed to stay, though many of them emigrated later due to the anti-German sentiment prevalent in post-war Czechoslovakia.

In 1948, a reconstituted Czechoslovakia fell within the Soviet sphere of influence and which resulted in a totalitarian regime. In 1968, an invasion by Warsaw Pact troops ended the efforts of the country's leaders to liberalize party rule and create "socialism with a human face" during what has become known as Prague Spring.

In 1989, Czechoslovakia regained its political independence through a peaceful "Velvet Revolution" which came on November 17 which was the anniversary of International Students Day. On January 1, 1993, the country peacefully split in two, creating the independent Czech and Slovak republics. The Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. . For more details and can also go to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velvet\\_Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velvet_Revolution)

## **Spiritual Landscape**

With the passing of two decades since the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia, the new era was full of promise for the unshackled church to proclaim the gospel freely and for evangelical missions to partner together with Czech Christians for that purpose. There were in fact many conversions in the early nineties, especially among the youth, but not to the extent that many had hoped.

Churches in the Czech Republic have come through four decades of marginalization and opposition. The church was considered obsolete in the minds of the majority under Communism, and anyone who wanted to get ahead in life avoided the local church. Despite the freedoms of the current democratic government, this is an attitude that largely persists. And as such, the churches themselves have had a very difficult time breaking away from the "fortress mentality" to actually consider their mission to the world.

As for Czech society on the whole, the Revolution certainly brought a great openness to everything the world had to offer, with the dictates of the past regime thrown aside. And though for some this has included a spiritual search, it has by not been widespread. And among those seeking spiritual meaning in life, there has been a turning to a variety of diverse ideologies as much as to the historic Christian message. Czech spirituality is often one which is "goulash" -- a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

Still the predominant push in society has been to acquire all that one can, this after decades of doing without. The drive to gain all that money can buy has gripped the hearts of many and become the central focus in life. This is especially evident in Prague with the proliferation of new supermarkets, malls, cinemas, department stores, and car dealers. The eyes of the country are clearly focused on materialism and getting ahead. There is also a great desire among many to travel after years of restrictions -- visa requirements for Czech citizen wanting to travel to the US were lifted in the fall of 2008.

A rich spiritual heritage is in fact a strong part of the Czech history and includes Jan Hus, a Czech reformer who inspired Martin Luther, and the Moravian Brethren, who in a period of 20 years accomplished more missionary work than the entire Protestant church in the 200 years preceding.

In spite of this rich heritage, the earlier forced domination of the Catholic church and the legacy of communism thinking during the last century, have produced a nation that is profoundly secular and quite skeptical of religion and the church. With 70% claiming to be atheists, some say it is the most atheistic nation on earth, with the highest percentage of people convinced that God does not even exist, although there is evidence to suggest that there is a growing trend towards a belief in "somethingism" -- belief in a higher being or at least something beyond oneself. The number of evangelical Christians is small, making up less than one half of 1% (less than 50,000) -- this in a country of 10.5 million people.

Several cults have made significant inroads over the years, particularly the Jehovah's Witnesses. They number close to 25,000, making them twice as large as the largest evangelical denomination. Starting with the very first lecture series in 1999, we have been able to minister to many Jehovah's Witnesses (or former) including some who are library patrons and come regularly.

Despite the spiritual apathy, God is slowly and patiently adding to His Kingdom in the Czech Republic. It is not uncommon for people to consider the claims of Christ thoughtfully over many years before coming to faith. Once a decision to follow Christ is made, it is genuine and life-changing. Thank you for your partnership in reaching out to share Christ -- the Light of the world, in an otherwise spiritually dark land.

This is a summary and brief update from an article entitled *The Czech Spiritual Landscape in the Post-Communist Era* that we wrote for the East-West Report, Vol. 6, No. 2 Spring 1998.  
<http://www.eastwestreport.org/articles/ew06205.htm>

## **Czech Values, Attitudes and Habits**

### Greeting

While Czechs generally do not greet or acknowledge strangers on the street, it is polite and expected to greet people you don't know when you walk into a small store, restaurant, waiting room, or small public space but one would not generally engage in conversation. For example, when entering a shop you would say *Dobrý den* to everybody in general and it is expected that people will respond in kind.

It can be quite normal to sit with strangers at a single table in a restaurant for hours and not exchange a word but it would be impolite not to say *Nashledanou* (Good bye) when you leave. If you want to sit down at a table with strangers, you have to ask for permission by saying *Je tu volno?* (Is it free?)

### Space

The Czech Republic, like most of Europe deals with limited geographic space. Building and housing design is influenced by these constrictions. The vast majority of the population (even in small towns) live in apartment block buildings called *panelaks*. This limited space influences a Czechs' perception of distances, and even a one-hour drive is a significant undertaking. On the other hand, Czechs like to travel both within the country and internationally.

However, the mobility of the Czech population in general is rather limited although that is changing with EU inclusion. Even in times of growing regional unemployment, people are reluctant to move. This is partly caused by the shortage of rent-controlled housing but is also linked to the strong attachment many people have to the place where they grew up. Additionally, family ties are close but often this is primarily a result of space limitations.

Czech personal space is also smaller but its boundary is firmer. This is especially obvious when compared with Americans who require larger personal space but are much more willing to let people into it. This difference influences much that is typical of Czech culture. For example, a person has fewer friends who are closer. Also, people generally do not smile or even initiate contact with strangers. Public displays of affection are common, however, because they are happening within that close personal space with much stronger boundaries. Making noise or accidental physical touching (as on public transportation) that disturbs other people around you is frowned upon. It may also explain the sometimes sharp contrast between dirty or somewhat shabby public spaces and almost religiously clean homes, or other private spaces.

### Time

The Czech concept of time one in which people are expected to be prompt (not early) and it is inappropriate to be more than 5 minutes late especially in business dealings. The Czech daily schedule begins and ends earlier -- public schools generally end at 1:30 pm.

### Status and Education

Czechs are by nature egalitarian and frown on status and its outward representation. Knowledge and ability are more worthy of respect. Importance is attached to education (not everyone qualifies to attend university) as obtaining an academic title is an important societal goal -- titles based on degrees earned are commonly attached to a person's name.

Also very important is the need to distinguish between formal and informal language and situations in choosing the appropriate forms of address. Formal and informal forms of address are used even with people of the same age. The elderly have certain prerogatives by virtue of their age, for example, younger people are expected to relinquish their seats on public transportation.

### Food, and Drinking and Eating Habits

While there is a movement towards more healthier eating, traditional Czech food tends to be rather heavy -- roast pork, cabbage and dumplings is one of the most (and delicious) popular meals. Soups are very common and are often served before the main course. For more information about traditional Czech dishes and recipes can visit <http://www.rampouch.com/cookingczech.html> or <http://www.recipehound.com/Recipes/czech.html>

Table etiquette is very important and it is considered a sign of bad upbringing not to use knife and fork in the continental manner. Courses of a meal are served in a strict order (soup, main course, salad, dessert) and many combinations of certain foods are not common. For example, chicken would not be served with anything except potatoes or fries. In keeping with the general European standard, consumption of alcohol (in moderation) even among Christians is considered normal. Czechs consume the most beer per capita in the world.

## Hygiene

"*Cistota pul zdraví*" ("Cleanliness is half your health") is a Czech proverb showing that cleanliness is important for Czechs especially the home environment. When entering a home, shoes must be taken off and slippers are to be worn. Changing clothes when coming from outside or different activities can also be quite common. Shoe coverings are also often used especially in nursery schools, hospitals and other places where cleanliness is deemed important. It is absolutely unacceptable to step with shoes, on something used for sitting, or putting feet up with shoes on. .

## General Attitude and Virtues

A sense of humor and an ability to take things less seriously are probably two of the most important qualities for most Czechs. Modesty in attitude is also a very important virtue so as to not appear better than someone else. For example, a proper response to a compliment is not to say thank you but offer a statement of disagreement. Czechs quite often underestimate themselves as it would be considered rude not to do it since Czechs rarely boast.

Czechs very often express that they are not content and so the "How are you?" question is generally more often answered with a more negative response, even if the state of the speaker is reasonably good.

## Family Values

Family ties are generally close but mostly because children still often live close to their parents even sometimes even after they marry because it is difficult to find affordable housing, although this pattern is changing. Another factor is the low mobility, although with the EU and other visa restrictions being lifted that is also quickly changing. However, it is still more of the exception for a Czech family to relocate because of a job opportunity as ties to family and culture remain strong.

## Meeting new people

It is more difficult to make new friends in the Czech culture. The most common way of meeting new people is by introduction by a mutual friend or one meets new people through work and social situations but deep friendships rarely result in a short time. Friendships often stem from childhood and school. Even then a friendship (i.e. not acquaintance) only forms after a considerable period of time -- sometimes years but then it will remain for a lifetime and the commitment to friendship is strong.

## Gender

Feminism has not gained wider popularity among Czech women, perhaps because it received negative publicity as a radical movement. Additionally, the Czech language, because of its structure, is not particularly sexist, and the situation of Czech women differs on the surface from that of American feminists of the 60s since women commonly work in a wide array of professions. Another important point is the reluctance of Czechs after the fall of communism to congregate in organizations.

However, the situation of women is far from ideal. They are still expected to fulfill their role as mothers and caretakers of their families and on those grounds it may be more difficult for them to enter into certain professions. The number of women in politics and top managerial positions is still rather limited -- although again that is gradually changing. On the other hand, women have traditionally worked in all levels of education and in research.

## Racial Issues

Czechs have for many years lived in an environment which is generally culturally and racially homogeneous, which has resulted in attitudes of latent racism. The Roma/Gypsy are the most significant racial and cultural minority and they are the target of most racist attacks -- although those with darker skin in general can also be targets. Statistically 45% of the population would be very suspicious and in many cases would prefer if gypsies did not live in their neighborhood. Czech racism is not necessarily philosophical (i.e. they do not believe that other races or nations are inherently better) but more a lack of contact, a high level of xenophobia (i.e. fear of the unknown) which has developed, sometimes resulting in racist violence.

For further information about understanding Czech culture we would also recommend *Culture Shock: Czech Republic* by Tim Nollen 2008 ed.

We would also recommend the site *My Czech Republic* (click on Bookshop) <http://www.myczechrepublic.com/books/czech-books-us.html> for other books about Czech history and culture as well translated works by various Czech authors.

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