

Chapter 19

Going Behind the Iron Curtain

I met František Bonuš, Czechoslovakian dance pedagogue, in Denmark in 1981. We immediately hit it off because we shared the same interest in folk dance as an important socio-cultural element which could not only express national values but also enhance and teach them. Czechoslovakia was at that time behind the iron curtain. František was a delightful, gregarious man and eager reach beyond the severe restrictions placed on his country by the Communists. Because of his stature as an internationally admired authority, he was at times allowed to leave his homeland. He was planning to visit the United States and I was eager to have him come to Berea College to share with us the European background of many of our dances. He gave us a polka workshop in August 1984, returned to do a waltz workshop in August 1986, and finally a quadrille workshop July 26 to August 2, 1987. On August 9, a week after the quadrille workshop, I left Berea with my Berea College Alumni Country Dancers for a visit to Germany and Prague which František arranged for us.



Berea College Alumni Country Dancers, 1986

We had a great week in the small West German village of Oberrosphe hosted by Die Burgwaldskälwer, a German dance troupe led by a lively woman, Renate Vigelahn. After a week giving a variety of 10 performances including the big one onstage at the Internationales Folklore Festival in Marburg, Renate accompanied us on the bus trip to Prague.



Oberrosphe girls arriving for a community dance program.

The Germans, at their check-point, looked at our passports, twenty-five in all, and then we entered no-man's land. There was a strip of freshly harrowed earth between the Germans and the Czech border for maybe 500 yards; no bushes no trees, just bare, soft soil which would easily show any footprints of anyone trying to escape. Beyond the clear strip was a serious barrier of barbed wire, then patrols of young men carrying machine guns, intimidating guard dogs, and some buildings at the check-point. Photographs were not allowed. There were no bathrooms.



Privy to nature

We were required to convert our dollars into Czech currency—a minimum of so much per person—and were told that it was illegal to use dollars to buy anything, especially forbidden to exchange money with anyone except at the state banks. The Communists did everything they could to insure that the Czech people had no means to escape. They were captives in their own country.

We arrived to a wonderful, musical welcome at the Students' House in Prague by the Beseda dance troupe. Members of the troupe, including František's son Jasan, Chef de l'ensemble, had prepared supper for us. The State would not permit homestays and we were given accommodations in the Sinkuleho College dormitory. The stern, old Communist woman in charge of the dorm took up our passports, visas, and group visa. I still have the permit/receipt.

Beseda provided us with breakfast on Friday morning and then took us on a tour of Prague Castle. Our guide and interpreter was Georgina Smejlová, lead dancer of Beseda. We had dinner in the wine parlor, Vikárka, in the Castle's dungeon and then a walk through the Lesser

Town, the Charles Bridge and then to the shopping district. We returned to the dormitory via the Metro and supper again prepared and provided by Beseda. I wondered about what such gracious attention cost them in money and time. That evening we were treated to Prague's bluegrass band, Blanket, and exchanged some dances. When we returned to the Dormitory, the "old bat" in charge demanded to see our passports. We told her that she already had them. She fussed at us but eventually let us in.

Saturday, after breakfast, we were bussed to the Smíchov assembly hall for exhibitions of our dance repertory and mutual dancing lessons. Lunch was at the restaurant Diana and then we made our way to the Cultural Ministry ballroom for our official performance. It was a private affair with selected guests. Beseda danced with the skill, precision, and joy in which they had



Beseda performing at Cultural Ministry Ballroom.

been trained by František. They even included one square dance, American style and asked us to critique it. We gave our program of Appalachian and English country dances.

After breakfast on Sunday, again prepared by Beseda, Jasan asked if we could clarify some questions he had about our dances and desired to video them. We were not permitted to dance in the College facilities so I suggested that we simply dance out in the street; it was Sunday morning and everyone must have been sleeping in. Jasan was willing to try dancing in the street although police could have arrested us. It was not likely that they would be around that early and, indeed, we had a fine time dancing out in the open.



Berea College Alumni Country Dancers dancing on the street on Sunday morning to allow Jasan to video some of our dances.

We then left by bus for a tour of the town of Telč and a Bohemian chateau. František and I were viewing a display of hunting trophies. There were hundreds of carefully arranged and mounted deer heads, pheasant tails, boar tusks, etc. Each item was meticulously identified by date it was killed, where it was killed, how it was killed, by whom it was killed, etc. It was obvious that the hunt was perhaps the most important pastime of the castle owner and that it took a large staff to indulge such a lifestyle.

František, knowing Czech and Austrian/Hungarian history, commented, “What was in this for the common people? It is this disparity that caused Archduke Franz Ferdinand to be assassinated and cause World War I.”

Comments such as these could be made in private but not in František’s apartment nor in the Student’s House at the College. In fact, when our troupe sang the white spiritual, Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley, after supper in the Student Hall one evening, Beseda members quietly got up and closed the windows. Religion was forbidden, churches were turned into museums or were closed and “under construction.” I took a photo of weeds growing uncontrolled in public and private places. No one seemed to care, but we knew that although Czech citizens seemed dispirited, they were seething underneath and waiting for the day of deliverance.

As we left on Monday morning, we expressed the hope that Beseda would be able to visit us in Kentucky so that we could repay them for their kind hospitality and generosity. They waved



Beseda waving goodbye as we departed for West Germany

goodbye with white handkerchiefs knowing that they would never see us again. It was heartbreaking; they were still captives in their own country—but we were free to leave.

I knew it was prudent to stop by the American Embassy on the way out. Two of our members planned to stay in Czechoslovakia for a few days—one to see an elderly uncle and the other to meet his girlfriend and do some sightseeing. The embassy advised us to have them check in at the police station to inform them of their plans. We dropped them off on the way out of town and didn't learn until we arrive back home that they were put in prison for the night before being let go.

When we got to the checkpoint, the officer made us all leave the bus while they searched it for stowaways. They took our passports and asked for the group visa. That had been kept by the “old bat.” (You can see why I have a grudge against her.) I had a copy but it did not have the imperative raised seal! As we waited while phone calls went back and forth to central offices and perhaps to our embassy, we watched as spears were thrust through truck cargoes leaving the country, again we assumed they were looking for stowaways. Finally, Renate pulled out 50 German marks and asked, “Is this the paper you are looking for?” They took it and we reloaded and soberly left, crossing the no-mans-land to the German checkpoint. The Germans checked out passports and we were on the road in free Germany. Daren started blowing bubbles and the troupe, not daring to admit how carefully they had had to conceal their true feelings, broke out in song, “God bless American, land that I love!”



Daron blew bubbles on the bus after we were on the road in West Germany and freedom.

Lewis Lamb, my Kentucky fiddler, was not singing. He was not yet at home in Kentucky. Instead he told himself, but I could hear him, he said, "I'll not go back there," and that was the last time he went on another overseas trip with us.

I was able to make arrangements for Die Burgwaldskälwer to come the United States for a tour in 1988 and the following year arrangements were made for Beseda to come. They were in the United States when the Velvet Revolution occurred and went home to a free country!