

TEARS IN PRAGUE

"Evo, Evo."

Someone was shaking me. It was still dark. I glanced at my watch. August 21, 5:35 a.m.

— "We are occupied today. Evo."

I could not comprehend why he woke me. Ales and his wife had already shown me most of Prague. With my map, I could manage by myself.

— "Evo, did you hear? We are occupied. By the Hungarians, the Germans, the Poles, the Bulgars and the Russians," he recited mechanically. In the darkness I saw the wet, shiny marks of tears at the corners of his eyes.

I went into the bedroom, to the radio. Two radio stations were still broadcasting independently. The voice of the announcer grew tremulous as he reported the seizure of both Praha L and LI. He read the official Soviet release: "The friendly allies of the Warsaw Pact have crossed the Czechoslovak borders in response to an urgent request for aid against counter-revolutionary elements in Czechoslovakia. This release is utterly false. We stand as one people, united in our homeland, united behind the Czech Socialist, Nationalist government. We urge you to remain calm. to avoid provocation. Go to your usual places of work, continue your usual routines..."

The piercing roar of planes flying over Prague drowned out the rest of the message. A woman continued the broadcast.

Radio

— "This is the only free radio station transmitting from Prague. The armed forces of the Warsaw Pact countries last night began to cross our national frontiers. The only possible answer to the force that comes against us is passive resistance... Explain to your nineteen- and twenty-year-olds that this is not the weakness of cowardice, but a fact — learnt with much suffering by their fathers. We repeat. Resume your daily routines, remain calm. We stand on our sovereign rights, behind the policies of Dubcek, Svoboda and Cernik. To the life of the Czech Socialist Republic!"

I had been in Prague five days, remarking with pleasure the absence of red stars and flags seen everywhere in Budapest and Belgrade. Instead, from the bridges spanning the Vltava and against the beautifully ornamented buildings, the Czech tricolor flapped freely. Everywhere people were discussing Dubcek.

— An honest, clean man at last.

— A man of the people. His boys too.

"Evo" is a Czech-born American student at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. She was in Prague when the Russians came and here she describes her experiences.

— Turned down the official residence.

— Sure, he rides the tram.

Tourists strolled unconcernedly in the Old City of Prague. Citizens were imbued with a certain pride, a new, freer manner of speaking. The threat of Russian intervention was over.

I looked out onto the cold, gray street. A long line of people were waiting quietly before the closed doors of a grocery store. They had been standing there three hours.

— The tramway has stopped running. There are tanks in the centre of town. A young couple carrying the Czech flag has been shot. Dead. I had better go down to buy gas.

Ales was expressionless. He was reliving an old story. Prague, 1938, Prague, 1948. He left. I listened.

— "When you stop hearing our voices and the microphone is taken over by unfamiliar ones, you will know, that the legal national broadcasts, representing the legal, national government of Czechoslovakia, have been silenced. While we still have the possibility to continue transmissions we ask you to remain calm. Know that this land is ours, that it can not be taken from us. Reason must prevail."

The short, explosive sounds of gunfire rapped clearly in the background. The Czech national hymn, Kde domov muj, where is my homeland, came strongly over the microphone. Suddenly the radio sputtered and died away. I took the keys and went downstairs.

Flag

Heads inclined from windows, figures emerged cautiously from doorways. Coming heavily down the boulevard were giant, ugly tanks, followed by truck-loads of soldiers, shouting in Russian. Here and there a motorscooter flitted between them, a large Czech flag waving behind the driver. A cart-load of Czechs passed. They were singing loudly. They were going to Prague castle, traditional symbol of Czech autonomy, now held by Russian tanks.

— "She will get us all into prison."

Ales had returned and hurried me inside. I turned on the radio resignedly. There had been scattered incidents in various parts of Prague. A group of citizens had barricaded themselves

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 28, 1968

THE JERUSALEM POST

on Vaclavsky boulevard, firing at oncoming tanks. The Czechoslovak Republic protested the violation of her territorial integrity. Pledges of support sent in to the station were read. They came from student groups, workers' groups, political leaders within the country and abroad.

"We ask you for your sakes, for the sake of the Czech Republic, remain calm. Throwing stones at tanks is useless. Useless and dangerous. Do not whistle or shout at the soldiers. Resist all provocation. We must find new ways of fighting. We will not capitulate. We support socialism but it must be a peoples' socialism. Again we ask you to avoid gathering in the streets..."

Gunfire

His voice was unsteady. A confused noise of gunfire mixed with voices came over the radio. The sounds of the street came in through the window. I looked down. People were still waiting at the grocers. At noon exactly, the torturous whines of sirens began, as had been announced by the radio. For two minutes, men women and children stood motionless in silent protest. The only other sound was the rumble of artillery not far away. The radio continued its broadcasts, in English, in German, in Polish, in Russian. Persistently.

— "Tovarich. Why are you here? Whom have you come to save? From what? Friends, there is no counter-revolution in the Czech Socialist Republic. There is no reason for your presence on our soil. The occupation of our land is a violation of international law, an infringement upon our rights as a sovereign nation."

I prepared lunch, listening to the bulletins. A German tourist had been shot while photographing a Russian soldier. Seven automobiles had been demolished when a line of tanks moved through a narrow street. An exchange of fire had set a bus ablaze in the center of Prague. The flames had spread and an entire block of buildings was now burning.

The day crawled painfully on, with the radio marking every hour of its life. 4:30. The telephone rang. My cousin asked me to come to their flat. It was in the very centre of Prague. I agreed quickly. It was agonizing to sit inside, guessing at the noise outside. I walked quickly down to the Vlatava. The water was absolutely still, reflecting the buildings, the monuments and my figure. Scrawled in large white letters, I saw inscriptions on the walls. "CCP, Go Home," "Es lebe Dubcek." I came to the Svermuv bridge. Four large tanks were blocking the passage of cars from one side to the other.

Tanks

My cousin appeared beside me.

"Ahoy. So how do you find our brothers? Sweet as sugar, no? Look what the apes are doing."

The soldiers manning the tanks moved back two metres to allow an automobile bearing a Red Cross flag passage. The driver was obliged to drive halfway onto the sidewalk in order to reach the other side. I wondered where their officers were. They seemed to be entirely without orders.

"They don't even know what they are supposed to do here, our friendly brothers. They were told they were going on manoeuvres and wound up here."

We reached his flat. Here too the sounds of shooting penetrated into the room.

"You must call the American Embassy. You have to get out. God knows what will happen in a week. Even in two days."

I protested violently. They had already arranged to take me to the train. A neighbour arrived to write a letter to his son who was on vacation in England. His hands shook as he wrote and handed me the envelope to mail as soon as I was outside the country. He had asked his son to remain in London. He would, most probably, never see him again. The shooting continued. I packed my suitcase. A special train was scheduled to leave at 9:55 the following morning.