

Dance Tour of the Czech Republic

by Roger W. Broseus

This is a longer version than the one that appeared in the printed newsletter.

Introduction

In October of 2010, my wife, Betty, and I traveled to the Czech Republic for a tour combining sightseeing and dancing. This recounting is of my personal impressions of the tour supplemented by historical information from tour leaders. The emphasis during the first part of the tour was sightseeing narrated by our tour leader, Jan Pumpr, who is part of a Czech organization named Dvorana* based in Prague. Our own David Millstone led dances. The tour concluded with the Jason Bonuš Country Dance Festival in Prague. There were sixteen dancers participating in the tour—fourteen from the United States and one each from Switzerland and Germany.

Logistics

Travelers were on their own until the tour started in Prague on October 8. While some travelers arrived on the morning of the first day of the tour, having traveled overnight from the USA, we arrived a day early to adjust to the six hour time difference between home and Prague and to see a few sights. We stayed a few days after the conclusion of the tour to experience more of Prague. Based on advice provided by David and Jan, we opted to take a bus from the airport, connecting with a subway to get to our hotel, which was arranged for us by Dvorana. Taking public transport in Prague is easy and inexpensive. Transfers can be made between modes of transport, including trams—an excellent way to get to tourist destinations in the city. Tram 22 is locally known as the tourist's tram—it passed close to our hotel and such sights as Prague Castle. Many Czechs speak English, especially members of younger generations, and were very helpful and polite (study of English is now required in Czech schools). Travel by foot: Contrary to what I've experienced in some cities in the US, pedestrians are not viewed as fair game. Czech drivers yield to pedestrians as they approach cross walks. Food: it is easy to find good meals, not to mention great beer, at reasonable prices in Prague and other cities. Weather: We experienced nice weather. Most days were sunny and warm, great for sight seeing. Nights were cool. Weather can be changeable in the Czech Republic during the fall, with temperatures usually between 10°C (50°F) and 20°C (68°F); showers are possible. A fall/spring jacket, with a sweater to layer up, was sufficient. Comfortable

shoes made walking tours more enjoyable as did shoes for dancing.

Background—It Started During the Communist Era, circa 1975**

For me, an integral part of the tour is the history of Dvorana and its founders—a story that both reflects the “folk process” and is inspiring in itself. The formative years for Dvorana overlapped with the time of the Russian occupation and dominance of life in Czechoslovakia. Those times predated the Velvet Revolution of 1989, in which the communist government was overthrown. As related by another traveler, during the era of communist control, people had few freedoms and little opportunity for self expression but folk activities were tolerated by the Russians.

Dvorana hosts were Jan Pumpr and its leader, Jitka Bonušová. Jitka's late husband, Jason Bonuš (after whom the Country Dance Festival is named), and his father, were key figures in bringing American dance to the Czech Republic. Jason's father, Frantisek Bonuš, came to the USA to teach Czech folk dances after having been invited by an American visitor to Bohemia in 1975. As related by Jitka, only a handful of people were allowed to realize the dream of going to the USA. With few exceptions, the communist government forbade travel outside of the socialist states. Frantisek could go and teach in the USA. His success led to invitations to teach at other camps where he encountered American teachers of country dances. Frantisek learned from them, took notes, and returned to the Czech Republic to teach dances he had learned; Jason joined him and they founded the first dance group. Their first ball took place in Prague in 1980. In Jitka's words, the ball “. . . was a big success. The people just went crazy.” Jitka further related that Jason's enthusiastic teaching of country dances led to the spread of the dance styles throughout Bohemia and new dance groups started to appear—“an “amazing time.”

In 1984, Frantisek brought in a videocassette illustrating clogging. To the excitement of her dancing students, Jitka started to teach clogging. A few years later, a young man joined her group and worked hard to learn to clog. That was Jan Pumpr (our Czech tour leader). He became an enthusiastic clogger and traveled to the USA on numerous occasions, visiting over thirty states to attend clogging events and for private study with American teachers. In the years that fol-

lowed, he led their clogging group and took clogging to new levels. During this period, many folk groups were formed for youth, including children. As time progressed, competitions were held that include American dance. After Jason's passing, Jan became Jitka's right hand in teaching teaching country dances, Czech folk dances and nineteenth century ballroom dancing.

During the Jason Bonuš Country Dance Festival, a Czech, old time style, string band played for us. The band, Stara Almara, led by Martin Zak, played during dances and for demonstrations by Dvorana dancers. Their traditional style harks back to the time of Jan Zeman who, in the "early days," played with a band named The Farmers. Jan Zeman related that people asked to be taught some dances for the music they had played. They started with the Virginia Reel and Whistling Rufus, but didn't know the names of dances, or the figures and had no original music to dance. Nevertheless, they liked them and danced them. Jan Pumpr and Martin Zak now collaborate on American dances in the Czech Republic.

The Tour

On the first day of the tour, Saturday, we boarded a comfortable bus owned and driven by Karel Hybl, a most accommodating gentleman. He drove in a relaxed and unhurried manner all through the trip and was obviously familiar with the back roads of Bohemia and Bavaria. Jan started narrating our trip as we left Prague, relating historical events such as the building of a stone bridge by intellectuals who were turned into laborers when the communists turned society upside down. Jan's command of history was amazing. He is self taught and his narration reflected a deep understanding of Czech history and culture gained through self study and research.

Our first destination was an open air museum village, showing how the Czech peoples lived in past times. That was followed by a visit to Jitka Bonusová's farm which she and Jason had renovated. It includes a barn with a dance studio. We partook of a typical Czech meal served outside by friends of Jitka dressed in folk costumes. We also had a Czech folk dance lesson in the barn and made Czech cookies which were baked for us to enjoy as dessert. What a warm welcome to the Czech Republic.

Over the ensuing days we toured in Bohemia and Moravia, south and southeast of Prague. At one point we could see the mountains forming the border between the Czech Republic and Austria. (Slovakia, which split off from the former Czechoslovakia in 1993, lies to the east.) Highlights of the tour included:

- Stays in local hotels and meals in restaurants serving a good variety of Czech foods. (Jan went to some lengths to vet quality of hotels and restaurants in advance.)

- Evening dances with locals at stops along the way during the week.

- A stay in picturesque Třeboň. On the morning of our departure from Třeboň, we were treated to a surprise side trip to local fish ponds to watch the harvesting of carp. Aquaculture is a big industry that goes back many years in the Czech Republic. Ponds are drained nearly dry and men move through the ponds, "herding" fish with nets to be harvested live and stored for sale for traditional Czech Christmas feasts. A large number of people turned out for the harvesting and there was a carnival atmosphere about the activities.

- A visit to the museum of Czech Emigration to America, featuring letters written home by Czech emigrants to the US. The rustic museum is in the town of Kojákovice.

- A medieval castle in the town of Nové Hrady.

- A visit to Bušek's Forge (Buškův Hamr) dating to 1780, still in working order.

- A tour of the Regent Brewery (Třeboň).

- An afternoon and evening in Český Krumlov.

The center of the village is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Narrow, winding streets lead to the town square, a beautiful castle and cathedral, a nice town park and shopping area. A stroll through nearby streets took us past homes and inns built in renovated, age old buildings. We ate by candlelight in The Gaol (a former jail). The visit to Český Krumlov was a major highlight of the visit to the Czech Republic.

- In the city of Zlin, we visited the Bata shoe factory museum. Zlin is a company town. At one time, the Bata enterprise included hide tanning/leather making for shoes, housing for employees—essentially a complete industrial town with an electricity generating plant, shipping facilities, a company airport, etc. Much of the enterprise and town was collectivized during the communist era. Nevertheless, Bata remains a large, international enterprise.

- We enjoyed a quick visit to a chateau and gardens in the villages of Kromeríž and Hostýn. Mystical powers were ascribed to Hostýn in pre-Christian times. Legend has it that locals found refuge in Hostýn during Tartar invasions in 1241.

- The Rosa Coli Convent in Doli Kounice, dating from the twelfth century. Nearby is an old synagogue and the "Jewish cemetery." All of the Jews disappeared from Doli Kounice during the Nazi occupation of Czech lands. The one known survivor lives in a nearby town so the synagogue is now more of a museum.

- One quick stop was at a memorial marking a spot on a hill top where Napoleon faced the Russian army—which strategically retreated. There was a commanding view of the battle field and its approaches from the memorial.

After touring areas outside of Prague from Saturday through Friday mornings, we returned to the city. We checked back into our hotel, the Baránek, and took a dinner cruise on the Vltava River which flows through the center of the city. On Saturday, a knowledgeable guide took us on a walking tour in the area around Prague Castle, which dates to the ninth century, and nearby areas. We passed by the US Embassy and had a nice lunch in the tourist area before returning to the Baránek via Tram 22.

The Jason Bonuš Country Dance Festival: The Dancing Highlight of the Tour

Dancing at the festival began on Friday evening and continued through midday on Sunday. We walked a few blocks from the Baránek to the site of the festival which was conducted in a large, multi-storied building which served as a sort of gymnasium/sports complex. Three halls were used for dancing, which included demonstrations of traditional and modern dances performed expertly by groups organized and trained by Dvorana's Jan and Jitka. Lively music was provided for some of these events by Martin Zak's string band, resplendent in blue overalls, straw hats, etc.

David and Jan expertly led dances with David calling both contra and English country dances. Jan assisted by providing some simultaneous translations into Czech. A large number of enthusiastic dancers participated in these events. Dancers listened attentively and learned new dances quickly and danced quite well with little delay due to differences in language. It was a real pleasure dancing with the Czechs. The locals came from all over the Czech Republic. The large halls, used for dancing during the day and evening, were transformed into makeshift sleeping quarters with locals ensconced in sleeping bags they had brought along.

After the Tour

The extra time we spent in Prague after the end of the organized tour was well worth it. And, by flying midweek to and from the Czech Republic, money saved on airfare subsidized much of the extra cost of the extended stay. We continued lodging at the conveniently located Baránek Hotel.

Prague is filled with culture, beautiful sights and artistic gems. Castles and churches, built or expanded during the heyday of the Hapsburg empire, grace "new city" which was built on ramparts overlooking the Vltava River and "old town" on the other side of the river. A popular sight is the Charles Bridge which was constructed beginning in 1357 under auspices of a favorite of the Czech peoples, King Charles IV. It connects the two sides of Prague and is now closed to vehicular traffic. A multitude of tourists on foot admired the statues that line its railings and took advantage of

shopping opportunities offered by vendors of souvenirs, drawings and paintings.

In the evenings there are classical music concerts in multiple locations around the city. We enjoyed a ride far away from central Prague on the "tourist tram" (No. 22), visiting the 7th century Břevnov monastery. On our return trip we stopped for a stroll through the Royal Gardens, which overlook the Prague Castle and the cathedral. There we were delighted to see raptors on perches in a small court yard, tended by their keepers. Betty got to hold an eagle on her arm. In the evenings we strolled through a shopping area at the center of Prague, a lively area on Wenceslas Square with many restaurants, shops, and a large bookstore.

In Closing

I hope that this recounting may serve in some small measure as to thank Jan, Jitka, David, and all of the others who made the tour possible. In addition to the fun dancing, I learned and will remember how folk dance brought light into the dark times of the communist era. Such activities have grown into a meaningful, participatory experience for the Czech people. We enjoyed the friendly, welcoming ways of the Czech peoples as well as the beauty of Prague and the scenic country side with its old towns going back to medieval times. We were enlightened by the historical/social perspective added by Jan Pumpr, who brought to life the changes and rebirth of the Czech Republic after the times of Nazi and Russian occupation.

* Dvorana organizes tours of the Czech Republic for visitors from abroad with a special focus on traditional culture. They also specialize in dance tours, have an extensive program of dance instruction, and make available authentic replicas of Czech dance costumes. <http://dvorana.cz>.

** The historical background on Dvorana is based on personal communications from David Millstone and Jitka Bonus (through David), to whom the author is grateful.

View particulars about the 2010 Country Dance Tour at <http://tinyurl.com/3ubmksx>. The tour has been conducted several times, most recently on a biennial basis biennially.