

PARIS MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE CHANNEL BEACH CRICKET PRAGUE  
 THE SECOND HALF OF 1935

Peter and I joined forces for our Matura trip. We were away about three weeks and I spent 1000 Koruny (the amount I spent per month in Prague) plus the return train fare. We set off from Vienna and travelled the same route to Zürich as I had taken 2 or 3 years earlier when I went to Vevey. We arrived in Zürich in the morning and Feri Roth, Peter's cousin, who studied there, was a welcoming host. We travelled the same evening to Paris, arriving next morning at the gare de l'Est. We found a room in a cheap hotel in the rue Jean-Jaques Rousseau. This is the dark narrow street starting near the Louvre and running into the rue de Louvre where Les Halles used to be (near the Centre Pompidou now). Armour had their representative office at number 15 rue de Louvre and later I often passed through the rue de Jean-Jaques Rousseau.

We "did" Paris thoroughly on foot. The Louvre, the Petit and Grand Palais, the Trocadero (since then pulled down and replaced by a museum facing the Eiffel tower), took the lift to the top of the Eiffel tower, saw Sacré Coeur, the Rodin museum which made a deep impression on me, the Sorbonne, the Jardin de Luxembourg, strolled up and down the Champs Elysées, looked at the Arc de Triomphe, Napoleon's Tomb, Notre Dame, the Sainte Chapelle with its paintings by Chavannes, Versailles - a very busy and glorious week. We had few hot meals but it was summer and we didn't need them. When we had one we never spent more than Fr. 5 per person. Mostly we picnicked on a bench or in the hotel room. We didn't want the hotel porter to know that we had our meals in the room and once on a wet day we hid our purchases underneath our macs, forgetting that a French loaf is longer than a short mac and that it gave the game away to an amused porter.

Our next step was Brussels which that summer celebrated 50 years of something important with a world exhibition called appropriately "Cinquantenaire". Later, in the 1960s they celebrated something else and called it "Centenaire" and I visited that exhibition several times.

Hotels were full and in any case expensive. We found a room behind a chemist's shop. The shop was dark, timber panelled and smelled as chemist's shops used to smell then. Our room also looked a bit gloomy and had heavy brown furniture. The chemist and his wife made us very welcome and gave us good breakfasts. Again we embarked on intensive and systematic sightseeing. The old town hall, Mannikin - Pis, the St. Gudule cathedral, the monument to

those killed in the last World War, the art-gallery and Waterloo where we spent a whole day. We saw the panorama of the famous battle and walked up the monument which has a statue of a lion on top. We also spent quite a bit of our time at the exhibition. There were pavilions from many nations and we liked the Czechoslovak one.

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After all that arduous sightseeing we deserved a good rest and we went to Blankenberghe. A year or two before, Mother, Anni and Jean had spent a holiday in near-by Le Zoute-Knocke and had told me how much they liked the coast. This was the second time that I saw the sea. The first time the Baltic, now the English Channel. It was hot and we lazed in the sun on the sandy beach and cooled ourselves bathing. A couple of girls, a little older than us, had placed themselves on the sand not far away. One had a most curious swimsuit covering her bony body. The whole of the suit's back was one enormous butterfly in blue and green. We heard them speak English which we understood only imperfectly. I have mentioned above that we took English lessons at the Berlitz school in Bratislava. Our teacher was Mr. Harry Freshwater. Tall, haggard, well-dressed in pinstripe, waistcoat and Eden hat, carrying a tightly rolled-up black umbrella, he was the epitome of an English gentleman. He had often told us about life in his home country. Some of the English customs he told us about appeared strange to us. For instance, he had told us, that a sister would never, but never enter the bedroom of her brother nor vice-versa. We now had a chance to meet two English girls, the first ones in our lives, which was too good an opportunity to miss.

Despite of our poor English we dared to talk to them. We were the first Czechoslovaks they had ever met, so our inquisitiveness was reciprocated. We learned that they were secretaries in London and had come with a WEA (Workers' Education Association; we never grasped what that organisation was) travel group. It was their first trip abroad and they were much puzzled by all these foreigners. Being active in the WEA, they were politically slightly to the left and quite well informed about Czechoslovakia, Hitler and Russia.

The next day we met them on the beach again and they suggested playing beach cricket. They had purchased a small rubber ball and they picked up some drift wood sticks. Two small ones were driven into the sand and a third and longer one was to be used to belabour that little red ball. Since we had never heard of cricket before, they explained patiently the rules of this National game. They were I think surprised to learn that foreigners didn't know about cricket. We played, however, as they bid us: hitting the

ball high, running forwards and backwards and all the rest, causing a certain amount of amusement to ourselves and I should assume to other English bathers. We now were on such terms that we dared to ask them to spend the evening with us. It was agreed to meet after supper. The air was warm, the sea lapped the sand gently, stars appeared in the sky - all good omens for a convivial evening. They wore their best clothes but never having seen English evening wear it appeared to us somewhat bizarre. They were talkative and jolly and as determined to have a good time as we were. We went to the posh casino near the beach. It is a large place with several facilities and there was a throng of holiday-makers. We went into the dance hall which had an excellent band, tables covered with fine linen and haughty waiters looking down on us. We ordered a half bottle of Veuve Cliquot champagne, the most expensive on the list - and we managed to spin it out for the whole evening. Again and again the waiters suggested that they should bring more bottles but the girls very gallantly refused, thus preserving our meagre funds. We danced the whole evening which was much less of an effort than to have to speak English.

We left the next day, having promised to write to each other. I met the girl with the butterfly swimsuit later in London. Once she and I went to a low-priced restaurant and she ordered salad. For me a salad was a side dish of lettuce and/or sliced cucumber and/or tomatoes with lemon etc. So I asked her "what with", meaning a meat course. She looked quite blank and insisted on ordering a ham salad. I remembered Freshwater and his account of the strange habits of the English. Once - I think for a birthday - she presented me with a green scarf with white little dots, which I still have - but I ceased seeing her soon after. I forget her name.

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Peter and I returned via Germany. We wanted to see what was going on with our own eyes. We felt rather uneasy the whole time but came to no grief. In Frankfurt-on-Main some large festivities were in progress. A sort of Hitler Youth Festival. Huge red banners with black swastikas were everywhere. In a big park were all sorts of exhibits and sideshows, lots of people and far more swastikas than we could stomach. The old town of Frankfurt was charming with its narrow streets, inns and small shops and the Gothic town hall called the Römer (?) near the Rhine. We saw the birthplace of Goethe, the meeting place of the first Federal Parliament in 1848 and the Jewish part from where the Rothschilds came. I am glad to have seen all this as the old town was totally destroyed in the War.

Our last part of the journey was by river. We had travelled by train to Passau and embarked on a Danube steamer. We were greatly relieved to have left Nazi Germany behind us - but I was to see it (h)rice again. The steamer had side paddles and we glided almost noiselessly down the river, which is narrower here than in Bratislava. Gentle hills, partly wooded, vineyards, fields, orchards, villages, church spires and the occasional ruined castle unfolded in a kaleidoscopic panorama. We tie up in Linz for the night. The next day we passed the convent school of St. Pölten, where Anni had spent some years and where we had visited her on several occasions. I am not sure now whether we disembarked in Vienna and took the train home but I rather think that we sailed right into Bratislava.

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The rest of the summer I spent on the farm. It was a long summer as the University term starts later than school. I cannot remember many details of these summer weeks; several summers spent on the farm run together in my memory. I had, however, passed my driving test soon after my 18th birthday and occasionally was allowed to drive Father's car.

### PRAGUE

At the beginning of October, Peter and I with our heavy luggage took the "Slovenská Strela" (Slovak Arrow) fast train to Prague, which took about 6 hours. Prague lies on both sides of the river Vltava. On the left side is the hill Hradčany on which the Presidential palace (previously Royal), Sv. Vit's (St. Vitus's) cathedral (on the spot of the original St. Wenceslas chapel), the Government offices (nearly all housed in baroque palaces of old noble families) and the Archbishop's palace are located. This side is called Malá Strana (Small Side). There are some old inns, little picturesque squares, foreign embassies (also mostly in old palaces and houses) and steep steps leading up to the top of the hill. Here also is the Alchemists' Street. Its low houses are terraced and all the lofts are said to have communicating doors. The story goes that when the king or any of his officials tried to find out what was cooking in the alchemists' crucibles, the alchemists fled from house to house, carrying their secrets with them.

There are several bridges crossing the river. The oldest is the Charles Bridge reserved then and now for pedestrians only. Baroque statues of saints are on both sides of the bridge including one of the much venerated Prague saint, St. Nepomuk. The bridge has a kink near its middle and tradi-

tion has it that its construction had been started from both ends and when it had advanced towards the centre it became apparent that the two sides were about a yard out of line.

On the right side of the river is the old town hall with its famous ornate clock; a tall Gothic tower, once defensive guardian and entrance point through the outer wall, now historic bottleneck for modern traffic; the old Jewish cemetery, home of the Golem legend; the National Opera; the Parliament House (used now on the rarest occasions by yesmen) and the unique Vaclavské náměstí (Wenceslas square), the hub of Prague traffic, business, shopping and entertainment. It is an amalgam of the Champs Elysées, but shorter, and the leafy Barcelona Ramblas, but wider. In the centre are tram lines flanked by wide traffic lanes and room for parking cars, then trees and finally wide pavements laid with c. 1 " square granite mosaic stones of various hues of grey into patterns. The square rises gently towards the equestrian statue of King Charles IV and behind this is the facade of the museum. See postcards 98 - 103 showing Prague at the time I was there. None of the views have altered a great deal.

Prague was a very lively city. Not only was it the seat of the Government but also the centre of banking, business, commerce, film-making, sports and cultural life. Already before the First World War Bohemia and Moravia were the home of heavy industry in the Monarchy. There are anthracite and coal mines, steel works (such as the Škoda plant in Pilsen which turns out locomotives, cars and lorries, tanks and guns), chemical works, textile mills, glass and other factories and breweries. Prague was the administrative centre of it all. Besides the National Opera there were other Czech theatres, as well as a permanent German theatre, and concert halls. It was the centre of book publishing and of the national papers and journals including the German language daily PRAGER TAGBLATT. The best Czech daily was the Lidové Noviny (People's paper) where amongst others Karel Čapek wrote. Most leading foreign newspapers were available from England, France, Germany, Russia, Austria etc. It had a long tradition of German literature and was the home of Kafka, Franz Werfel, Max Brod and others. The film industry was located in a suburb called Barandov.

The 500 years-old Charles University was split into a Czech and a German part, both autonomous and both conferring degrees. Each of these was split into two divisions again, for the humanities and for technology. The former conferred "Doktor" degrees, the latter "Engineer" degrees. An Engineer in Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany and several other countries in Central Europe has a different meaning from English usage and is a proper academic title.

It was conferred not only on mechanical, chemical, civil and electric engineering graduates but also on those who studied Agriculture, Architecture etc. Chemistry one could study either in the humanities University (theory in the main) or in the engineering University (for industrial chemistry or chemical engineering).

Apart from Peter who studied Medicine at the Czech University, Katka had come up to read Law. Franz Munk had arrived a year before us, also reading Law. Judy Preč read Medicine and her brother Andrew read Mechanical Engineering. When I came up he was already "going steady" with Edith. Leslie was in Prague for about a year and, I believe, was in business. There were 4 or 5 more from our crowd back home and we used to meet regularly.

Peter and I shared digs not far from Charles Square, where the Rectorate of the University was as well as some lecture rooms. Peter's anatomy and dissection theatres were a short walk from our digs. In my first year my lectures were nearly all at Charles Square. These were maths, physics and basic chemistry. The chemical engineering faculty was new and located in Dejvice, behind the Hradčany hill and a good half hour by tram. From my second year onwards all my lectures were out there and also the various laboratories. In the first year I often had lunch in the student "mensa" in town, meeting Andrew, Peter and Franz.

Peter and I changed digs several times and for a long time we stayed in Pštbošsova Street near the river. In the second year we moved to Dejvice on my request but it was not convenient for Peter and we felt rather cut off from city life and from our friends, so we moved back again. My last few weeks in Prague, from 15th December 1938 until my departure to London we lived in Vojtěšská 10 (but I was home for Christmas),

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Once matriculated on the basis of the Matura certificate one was issued with a student's identity card and the "Index". The former had a photo and was a passport entitling one to reduced tickets for cinemas, theatres, concerts, the railways and the airline. The index had a hard cover, about 3 1/2" wide and 5" long, with the spine on the long side. This showed at a glance one's progress throughout the 4 years at University. There were two terms a year called semesters, one from October to January, the other from February to June. At the beginning of every term the professors or their deputies of the subjects one had chosen to read, put their rubber stamps and signatures on the index. For certain subjects one was required to attend a minimum number of lectures and these were noted in the index. In other subjects there was no required minimum attendance but at the end of the term all professors had to stamp and sign again - and if for one reason or other they considered a student did not deserve the end-of-term signa-



98. Hradcany Hill, Cathedral, Charles Bridge over Vltava



PRAGA, Václavské náměstí.  
PRAGUE, Place Vendecias.  
PRAG, Wenzelsplatz.  
PRAGUE, Wenceslaus Square

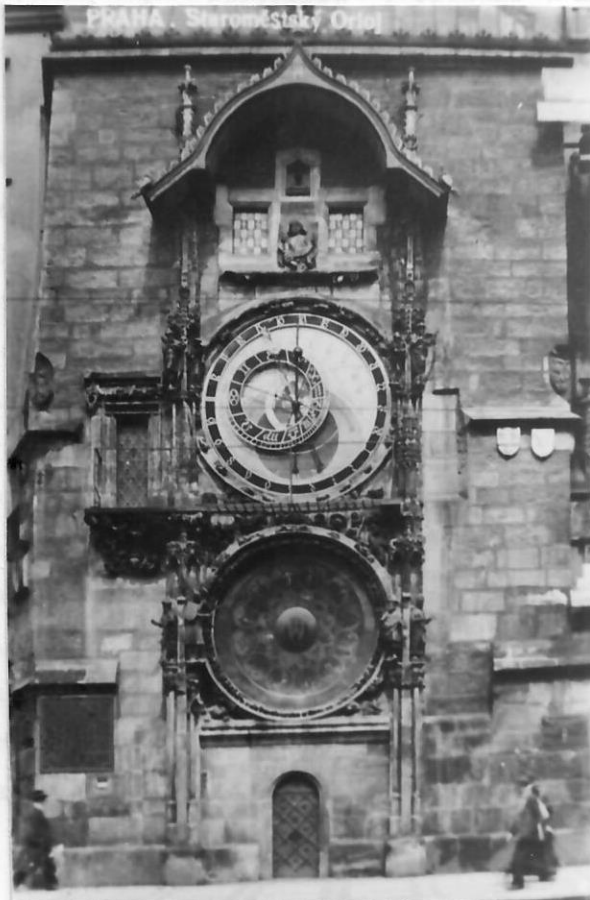
99. View from museum



100. Tower and Charles Bridge



101. Charles Bridge, detail



102. Tower of town hall on left  
with side view of clock;  
Tyn church in back. Kafka  
lived near there

103. Clock at bottom of town  
hall tower



ture, that student could be in trouble. Even stricter was the control of laboratory attendance. One had to work a minimum number of hours in each laboratory - inorganic, organic synthesis, chemical analysis, physical chemistry etc. - to obtain the coveted end-of-term signatures. In the humanities faculties the régime was much more relaxed. The tutorial system was unknown. Good professors attracted large audiences, even without compulsion imposed by the index. In the laboratories there was almost constant "supervision" from assistants and postgraduate students or "demonstrators".

My studies were in two parts of two years each. After the first two years one took the "First State" exam which entitled one to the "Cand. ing" (Engineer candidate). After the "Second State" exam one acquires the title of Engineer, equivalent to the Doktor at the humanities university.

The state exams were not taken at the end of the terms. At any time one could arrange with the professor to be examined in his subject. Some profs took one at any time and it was only necessary to make an appointment a few days before. Others posted on noticeboards 3 or 4 different weeks in a term in which they would examine. There was a points system for laboratory work. The partial exams also earned points - more points for the best pass grades than for a lower pass grade - and when one had earned the minimum required total points, one had passed the state exam, which was marked in the index. If one was ambitious one collected more than the minimum number of points needed. I did that with organic chemistry. At the end of the exam the prof told me "that was not sufficient". I thought I had failed. But then he added "for the top grade". So I sat the exam again and got the top grade.

One was sometimes the only candidate at an exam; there were rarely more than three taking the exam simultaneously. The profs had great latitude in conducting the exam and candidates got usually different papers. He gave one a choice of 2 or 3 subjects. Sitting in his study or personal laboratory one wrote for perhaps half an hour. Afterwards there was a more or less chatty interview, lasting anything from 10 minutes to half an hour.

Apart from the first term when I attended lectures only, my working days were arranged roughly as follows. There was a lecture at 8 or 8.30 am, perhaps another one at 9.30 am; the rest of the day was spent mainly in the labs with perhaps another lecture in the afternoon. There was no students' restaurant in Dejvice, but a near-by butcher sold sausages and ham and fresh brown rolls. The laboratory glassware and bunsen burners were used to make coffee or tea. This was our lunch.

Once an experiment was set up and the liquids in the glassware bubbled away for hours, there was time to study in the lab or to go round for chats

or discuss politics. We thus got to know each other pretty well, better than was common in the humanities universitties. Apart from 4 or 5 girls, all were men students. The young assistants and demonstrators who supervised us were important persons as they formed the link between us and the profs whom we saw only rarely. A good word from one of these supervisors into the ear of a prof could mean a lot when it came to the exam.

I left at about 4 - 4.30 pm. In winter it was dark by then. Sometimes I returned to our digs. Sometimes we had arranged to meet in one or other of several cafés frequented by students. They were all on or near Wenceslas Square. We almost lived in the cafés, which had an upper floor or another more or less separated area which was populated almost exclusively by students. We had our evening meals there, drank beer in the summer but mostly had several cups of coffee or tea during an evening. My close friends from home formed the nucleus of the students I met there, but there were others whose home was not Prague either. There were students from other provincial towns as well as from abroad. I did 90 % of my serious studying in cafés but there was also time to read 2 or 3 newspapers which were provided free, to talk politics and ogle any unattached girls. If tired of work one left one's clobber with a friend and strolled on the square for a breath of fresh air and bought next day's paper, which was available at around 11 pm. Work done, we repaired to one of the "automat buffets". A favourite was a "topinka". This is a large slice of brown bread fried in dripping with plenty of garlic and salt and almost too hot to hold with one's fingers.

Saturdays and Sundays we very rarely went to a café, partly because we were unwelcome guests on those days. We had brunch in our rooms or went to a little restaurant. Most weekends we went to the cinema or theatre. When we got to know some Prague students such as Anni nee Schluderpacher, we were occasionally invited to their homes. We also gave little parties in our digs; vodka was cheap and freely available on such occasions.

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I was determined to use my first term to "broaden my interests" and spent some of my time away from my faculty. Peter once smuggled me - dressed in a white coat - into the dissection room where there was an assortment of yellow, leathery corpses, many of which had already been partly cut up. He handed me scalpels and other instruments of the trade and instructed me what to do with them.

I also went to the German humanities university to attend lectures on Philosophy and History of Art. I borrowed books from its library and met students reading these subjects, I was interested in. All this rather delayed my taking the first state exam but because the system was so flexible,

I managed to catch up. In the fifth semester I was still taking exams for the first state exam but simultaneously worked for the second state exam.

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I enjoyed my first term in Prague except that I had great difficulty with the Czech language. It was particularly difficult to learn all the technical and chemical terms as in Czech there are specific Czech terms for everything instead of the Latin-based nomenclature used in English, French and to a large extent in German. For instance, oxygen is "kiselik" and nitrogen "dusik". I worked constantly with a dictionary. I had difficulties in following some of the lectures and in understanding at the exams, what was wanted of me. Most of the profs did speak German, but such was the political atmosphere that they hardly ever used it. One compensation I had was that nearly all the textbooks and chemical journals were in German such as the seminal organic chemistry book by Paul Karrer of Zürich. Sometimes I was asked by my non German-speaking colleagues to help them. By and large colleagues were understanding and we helped each other.

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There were only one or two Slovaks in my year, about half a dozen Yugoslavs and the same number of Bulgarians. They too had some language problems. All others were Czech. One of the Bulgarians I got better acquainted with. He had a little Menjou moustache, sleek black hair with a sharp parting, closely fitting suits and brown and white shoes; he looked like the English idea of a "spiv". He had more money than the rest of his compatriots and felt a cut above them. I also got to know the son of a rich Czech farmer who was very right wing, very different in attitude from my liberal, middle-of-the-road politics. He was violently anti-communist and seemed almost to prefer Hitler to Czech left-wingers. We had many discussions and I stayed with him on his parents' farm one weekend later on.

Many of the non Prague students - including most foreigners - stayed at "kolejs" (pronounced "coleys"). There was a large one in Dejvice. These hostels were heavily subsidised by the state. University fees were negligible for everyone, and those who could not afford private billets were in the kolejs. Several shared large dormitories, with rows of iron beds; there were wash and shower rooms, a restaurant, a reading room, table tennis and volley ball facilities, etc. There was a certain amount of horseplay and I often overheard some of the inmates of the kolej talk of the "sranda" which they had. This in Czech is a somewhat rude word and is best translated as a "spiffing time". One had to pass all the exams, otherwise one was

expelled from the kolej.

I was pleased with my first semester and very happy to come home for the Christmas vacations and to catch up with all that had happened in my absence to the family and many friends.

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This was the year when Beneš became President. Hodža became Prime Minister and Krofta, a professor of history, Foreign Secretary. There was no change in the direction of internal and external politics - but the German threat had increased.