TWENTYEIGHT

REFLECTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Once again I shall abandon trying to give an account by the calendar and resume that in chapter
I was 27 years old in 1944.
My English had improved; I did more responsible work at Bamag; I had been at the top of the polls at a SMH election and I had acquired a measure of self-confidence; that was presumably a sign of maturity.
As a teenager I had told myself that I should complete studies at 22, be well on the way in my career at 30, get married before 40 and be sufficiently well established at 50 to enter public life. That of course was before Czechoslovakia collapsed and before the outbreak of war; my election to Parliament in Czechoslovakia was then within the bounds of possibility.
The war had a delaying effect on the first part of my vision.
My work at Bamag was interesting and satisfying and provided me with just sufficient money to live on, but hardly sufficient to save. I worked conscientiously but not very hard and I had no great ambition to climb the ladder of success in the company. What promotions came, came on their own account. I didn't want to specialise and my ideal was to be a polymath.

The war deepened my interest in politics and I tried to read widely in economics,politics, history and the philosophy of history. My interest in philosophy varied like the ebb and flow of the tide but never disappeared. In 1945/46 I ran a well attended philosophy group at SMH. I saw Joan the second time in my life at one of the group's meetings. One of my "disciples" was Alasdair McIntyre who is now professor of philosophy.

There was another reason why I was not particularly ambitious to make a career at Bamag: it was by no means certain that I would stay on in England after the war. As victory for the Allies now looked certain in a year or two,so my hopes rose of returning and being re-united with my family and eventually taking over the farm. I did not try to detach myself emotionally from home nor could I, yet all the time the process of Anglicisation was transforming me. Living in a culture new to me, made me highly aware of differences in attitudes, traditions,manners, habits and customs. Compared with Bratislava with its different ethnic peoples, England was relativel uniform, had a common language and a common tradition which came

out particularly strongly under the stress of war. On the other hand there seemed mor social stratification than there was in the Bratislava of my childhood. This was reflected in the hierarchy of the nobility, the close-knit intellectual establishment which I got a glimpse of at SMH, and in the power of the established Church. In contrast there were the ignorant and poor farm workers whom I had got to know - and in between these extremes there were many classes and sub-classes.

Also new to me was the difference in the language of the rich, the educated and the rest. It took me a long time to learn all the finer points and nuances in all these languages. At home there were regional differences in all of the languages spoken but no class differences - except that intellectuals tended to use abstract terms frequently.

In England the upper classes were religious in the sense that its members went to Sunday service, observed the main feast days and that the clergy, particularly in the higher echelons was almost 100 % middle class. Manual workers were not church-goers. In Czechoslovakia it was the other way round. The churches were packed with peasants and workers and the middle class was seen only sporadically at church - despite of the fact that it is a sin for Roman Catholics not to go to church. The exception was the poorer Jewish community in which people attended the synagogue services. On special feast days the Jewish middleclass also attended these services. The catholic lower clergy in Czechoslovakia had a much lower status than the bishops and were not considered middle class. Though they attended Theological College for years and knew Hebrew, Latin and Greek, most of them came from the peasantry and did not aspire to the middle class in general.

Tradition in Britain is the matrix of life. In Czechoslovakia everything before 1918 was played down, and the personalities who lived before - whether Kings, Emperors, statesmen, writers, poets or others who had made a name for themselves - were judged by the various ethnic groups according to whether they were Czechs, Slovaks or members of some minority ethnic group and to avoid exacerbating nationalistic feelings, a veil of oblivion was allowed to fall over them all. By contrast, the educated British read biographies and autobiographies for preference and have a good knowledge of their past history, the great families, writers and others - and flock in their thousands to stately homes of which there are so many in a good state of preservation. Czechoslovakia is rich in (mainly Baroque) palaces and in ruined castles and though many are open to the public, no one bothers to learn who lived there and what happened in them.

Of course , Czechoslovakia was built on what there was before; of course society was the continuation of its history and the old institutions continued,albeit in a somewhat modified form; but the abolition of nobility, the disestablishment of the church, the introduction of a parliamentary democratic system, the distribution of land and a complete switch of the ruling establishment had affected society like a surgeon's scalpel. After all this surgery the patient had acquired a new personality. Looking back was not considered advisable.

There were some exceptions. One I have already mentioned, namely our deep appreciation of German literature, but this was naturally limited to those who had a German secondary education. Another was music which cut across all the ethnic groups and embraced German, Czech and other composers. The third was architecture, also shared by all ethnic groups. Czechoslovakia has some fine churches and other buildings mainly in the Gothic (perpendicular) and Baroque styles. The latter, which is not much appreciated in Britain, was the expression of Imperial power and culture at its height. Prague's Baroque palaces of the nobility on the Hradčany hill were not only monuments of conspicuous consumption but an opportunity for architectural detail and embellishment. The nobility who lived in these palaces fostered chamber music which was performed there, poetry and supported writers on many subjects from alchemy to astronomy, from natural sciences to history. The appreciation of old buildings has continued in Czechoslovakia to the present day and they are being renovated and relatively well maintained. Yet people liked to live in modern houses. I discovered that English people preferred to live in old houses and that they fetched higher prices than new houses of comparable size. I was equally astonished that central heating was virtually unknown here. External plumbing,so common here, I have never seen in Czechoslovakia. Yet another difference was that most houses in Britain showed the brickwork whereas in Czechoslovakia brick houses were plastered externally and painted. All these difference emphasized Britain's attachment to tradition.

British tradition makes for social and political stability but has the drawback that it perpetuates social stratification.

At first I couldn't quite understand the reasons for socialism in Britain. Even second class railway and Tube carriages had upholstered seats and up and down the country the majority of people lived in houses. Flats hardly existed until after the war. In Bratislava some 90 % of the people lived in flats - though not in the villages where everybody lived in family houses. The Empire provided plenty of cheap food, cotton,

wool, timber, jobs abroad and good incomes for many directly and indirectly. It was only after I became aware of the unequal distribution of worldly goods, the poor educational opportunities of the poorer classes and the social stratification, which all had debilitating effects, that I began to realise what British socialism was all about. I read Harold Laski, G.D.H. Cole, Robert Owen, Lansbury and others.I also read Herbert Read and Kropotkin on anarchism and went to anarchist and other meetings. I was surprised that hardly anyone knew about Marxism and Leninism and that a whole corpus of British socialist literature and tradition had grown up virtually untouched by what we knew as socialism and communism. Extreme forms of socialism were unpopular though there existed the International Socialist Party and the Communist Party who had one or two MPs but during the war they were more concerned in supporting the war after Russia had entered it than play at politics. The Communist Party were worried about Russia lest the Stalin régime might not survive the war.

Foreigners in England are struck by the way British people deal with each other in day-to-day intercourse whether atwork, in the Tube, in restaurants orat social gatherings. The British have an inexhaustible supply of small talk about the weather, gardening, cricket and football, family matters and, during the war, bomb experiences. The underlying factor is that people care about each other and want to establish contact in a way that cannot hurt. If someone has a grudge against someone else and threatens "I will give him a piece of my mind, don't you worry", deep down there is the conviction that the person who has perpetrated the offence is probably sorry to have done so and would not be averse to bringing the matter into the open,air it and resolve the matter amicably. This tolerance is part of British life which doesn't exist in Czechoslovakia and many another European country.

I had to learn to say in restaurants " I think I would like to have so and so please". If one were to address a waiter in Czechoslovakia in this way, he would probably reply " I don't care what you think and what you like or don't like;I could come back later and then tell me what you want".

Customs officials and policemen talk quietly and are helpful if asked for advice or information. In contrast, unless he was giving one road directions, a Czechoslovak policeman would start interrogating the questioner.

Democracy means different things in different countries. It is inbred

in the British to be tolerant and reasonably curtous and polite in daily social intercourse - despite the social stratification. The policeman is a servant of the public and not a symbol of state power - as he was in pre-war Czechoslovakia. Now it is much worse there. British people believe that one can trust the other person, whether the neighbour, colleague or shopkeeper. Before the law people in England are equal and therefore people feel truly free. True, since the last war there has been some deterioration in public "morale" but it is still better than it was in pre-war Czechoslovakia.

In England things are because they are - an echo of Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum". For instance the constitution has evolved with time and no one had to sit down and develop a philosophy and then write paragraph by paragraph a constitution. The law just developed and there is no need for a group of sages to devise a codex. This is the ultimate pragmatism, a form of philosophy that Britain has excelled in and still does.

Parliament here is very different from what it was in Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1938. Over there it sat only a few weeks a year, mainly to approve the national budget. Question time was unheard of and in any case - like in the USA - the Government was separated from the legislature and ministers did not sit in the House. Bills hardly ever originated in Parliament but were drawn up by the Government and sent to the House who rarely did more than vote for them. The Government took note of the wishes of the deputies in Parliament but more by caucus meetings out of the public eye and from pressure groups.

In Czechoslovakia everybody registerd his/her domicile with the police. Whenever I went up to Prague I had to go to the police and fill in a form. We also had identification cards. That is still the case in France and other Continental countries and of course in all the Communist countries. In Britain this would be considered an encroachment on personal liberty.

To get a passport in Czechoslovakia one had to get permission from the tax office. That was the cas in the USA too, but I believe is no longer necessary. It was even necessary to obtain from time to time a confirmation of one's Czechoslovak citizenship. British people are not aware of how blissfully relaxed officialdom is in this country.

Another aspect of social intercourse in England was a certain, if only assumed, shyness and even humility. That has changed now to a degree but is still to be encountered especially amongst older people. It certainly struck me then forcibly. At a party people used to bow and say "How do you do" and one was then introduced to one another. Names

were mumbled and Christian names rarely used at the first meeting. It would be unthinkable for someone to say "I am Lord . . ." or " I am Lady . . . " One never asked another person's occupation. One smiled at each other and resorted to small talk and only after this opening gambit did one turn to a conversation of more substance. In Czechoslovakia social habits were more relaxed except when meeting an older person or someone in authority, including teachers. It was quite usual to introduce oneself as " I am Doktor . . . " or " I am Engineer . . . "
I learned that even a most winning smile from a girl here was simply a social habit and meant nothing. To look into the eyes of a girl in the street here is just not done. In Bratislava - for instance on the corso - men and women looked into each others eyes even if they have never seen each other before.
In Czechoslovakia several people engaged in a conversation would all try to speak at once. One would also say everything one knew on the subject and try to impress the others with one's knowledge. I discovered that in England i) only one person was supposed to speak at a time and ii) it was considered overbearing and lacking in modesty to know too much about a subject. At work it was not the done thing to correct another person even if he/she was talking rubbish except in a rather roundabout way. Mock modesty was indicated in such cases. "Well, perhaps there is another way of looking at . . ." To be "clever" was a pejorative epithet. Jeno, who worked in a pickle factory in Whitechapel for a while as a labourer, was called a "college boy" whenever he did something wrong.
At SMH, after a lecture by some philosopher or other, I criticised the man aloud, without mincing words; this caused consternation, and Mary, in the chair, had to apologise afterwards to the lecturer for my strange manners. I learned to say " I appreciate Sir, your most interesting lecture, and I just wondered, if I may, whether you would be good enough to expand . . ."
Very gradually I adapted to English conditions - though I have still retained some of my original ways. Yet to a Continental my mannerisms are 99 % English now. As this transformation took place I started to think in English. After Joan and I got married this Anglicisation speeded up.

I had arrived at a "watershed". I still wanted to return to Czechoslovakia yet I realised that I was far gone in my transformation. I have never been called a "foreigner" or other epithet in England as a swear word. Quite to the contrary I was always treated with exemplary courtesy and people often addressed me as "doctor" as a sign of embarrassed esteem.

How would I get used again to life in Czechoslovakia after my return ? Certainly when I visited Czechoslovakia in 1946 for a few days most people (except the very few relatives and friends) treated me with remarkable rudeness.

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As a teenager I had read the story of Parsifal. This is part of the group of legends involving Tristram and Isolde, Arthur and the Round Table and the holy Grail. Parsifal is an uncouth and simple youth without much moral sense. He is selfish and shows no concern for other people. He is incapable of showing sympathy when sympathy is needed. As he grows up and matures his character changes and love cures him of his self-centredness. He becomes guardian of the Holy Grail as a symbolic reward for his conversion. This story had made a deep impression on me. To see into a fellow-creature's mind, particularly when troubled, appeared to me noble - providing it is not done just out of curiosity but in the hope of understanding and helping. Understanding - not always easy - is the first step. This leads to the second stage: sympathy. Helping is the third stage and usually the most difficult one.

I adopted two French adages as my mottoes: " Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner" and " Noblesse oblige " by which I mean "nobility" of mind and not an inherited rank. Like all mottoes, they are difficult to live up to. There are pitfalls, because one must not go as far as excuse and condone evil. But one should try to understand the other person's motivation and actions and in that light either forgive or condemn severely.