

AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN

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SEMINAR

AT

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My contribution to this series can only be to add a dash of pepper and salt to a dish which the historians among you will spend the rest of your professional lives trying to digest.

I have to start with a description of the part of the Cold War battlefield I found myself in towards the end of 1986. From this I will go on to describe the events I witnessed and some of the people I met during the collapse of Communism in Central Europe in 1989 and early 1990. Call it oral history if you think this gives my remarks greater academic respectability.

In the Spring of 1986 I was appointed Head of the British Delegation to the Review Meeting of the Helsinki Final Act which was to open in the Autumn in Vienna. I had no qualifications for the post and no relevant experience whatever. But, then, that never stopped Personnel Department and they do like their little jokes.

The Helsinki process may be as unfamiliar to you now as it was to me then. This is an enormous and complicated subject. If it ever fitted into any course on European politics or security or whatever at St Anthony's I would be glad to contribute. It is not my subject today but so relevant is it as background I must at least try to give you a thumbnail sketch. To those to whom it is new I say: try to prevent your eyes from glazing over. Any specialist here will know I am simplifying to the point of parody.

Undeterred I'd better begin. The Second World War was the only war affecting Europe that did not end in a peace treaty. The best that could be done was the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 which was devised with a great deal of difficulty over the years 1972 to 1975 to govern relations between states in a divided continent. Here in Oxford I should add that the present Principals of LMH and Green College played notable parts in the drafting.

There are many ironies about the Final Act. For starters it was not drafted in Helsinki at all, but in Geneva which has a better climate and is easier to get to. To be sure the work began in Dipoli a suburb of Helsinki and Dipoli veterans always have a special prestige in those circles to this day. The Final Act was also signed in Helsinki at a jamboree of the great and the good in 1975. But in terms of mental and physical effort it ought by rights to be called the Geneva Final Act.

Secondly, in the general perception these days it is always associated primarily with human rights.

In fact, the Act covers everything from military security and commercial exchanges to family visits and town twinning. These last two look rather peculiar until one realises that they were dear to German hearts as a means of promoting human contacts across the great divide. But in sum the Helsinki Final Act is a bit like "The News of the World": all human life is there. And as for Human Rights, all Helsinki does is to reaffirm, with a bit of padding, the two United Nations covenants on the subject which already had the force of international law. The only participant in Helsinki which had not accepted both was the United States, where the Senate had refused to ratify the Convention on Economic and Social Rights as too socialist.

Compliance was another matter and it was for this reason that the Act was initially more controversial in the West than in the East. Here is Mrs Thatcher, as she then was, in the House of Commons ten years later:-

*"There were very real fears that we in the West had accepted the division of Europe for all time, in return for a few scraps of paper which would never be honoured. People remained in prison or psychiatric hospitals simply for the "crime" of claiming their human rights"*

Etc. etc. The catalogue will be familiar to you. These fears were not unreasonable if one remembers that Helsinki began as a Soviet initiative and that Henry Kissinger thought it a price worth paying for the Berlin Agreement and the talks on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions. These enjoyed an idle and fruitless existence until they were dissolved at the end of the Vienna meeting I have yet to come to.

Appearances were, however, deceptive.

Built into the Act was the principle of Review whereby every three years or so all participants from the superpowers down to little Lichtenstein and San Marino met to consider "progress" in its implementation. To the West, this came down to an attempt to shame the Soviet Union and its allies into improving their deplorable human rights record.

Of course, we paid lip-service to the rest, even to the merits of town twinning. My negotiating brief covered the lot and I had a team under instructions to participate to the full in all the earnest discussions on each and every part - or "Baskets" as they are called. Helsinki legend has it that we owe this quaint but useful term to the present Principal of LMH, Sir Brian Fall. But Mrs Thatcher herself had written across the top of my brief "This meeting is about human rights and nothing else." We took our lead from this and for negotiating style we took as our

text some words of Sir Geoffrey Howe's opening speech in Vienna. "Frankness," he said, "may not always be welcome but it is seldom a barrier to greater understanding."

Vienna in consequence was hugely enjoyable for those of us whose usual working environment was the world of gentle hints and mild reproaches. It was thus no different from the two previous reviews although we never quite had the fisticuffs that marked the Madrid meeting three years before. Madrid started in the shadow of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; was suspended a year later while M. Cheysson, then French Foreign Minister was in mid-speech condemning martial law in Poland; was resumed with great difficulty after months of recess; and ended in the wake of the Korean Airlines disaster.

Vienna was not that bad but surprisingly when one considers that the Gorbachevean Revolution began within weeks of our starting, it was hard pounding all the way. This was mystifying and exasperating; but looking back I can now see that the Russians simply had to put up a smokescreen until Gorbachev was clear in his own mind and master in his own house. This took until July 1988. After that there was the difficult task of persuading the Soviet Union's more reactionary allies to fall in line. For the record Czechoslovakia was the second last, and East Germany the last to do so. Romania, scarcely by then an ally at all, was intransigent to the bitter end; but the very first act of Ceaucescu's successors was to announce that they accepted the Vienna Concluding Document after all.

But why, in the years of Brezhnevian night did the Soviet Union put up with all the aggro? I think because they interpreted the Act as implicitly recognising the post-war settlement of Europe and for this they were prepared to put up with the occasional - harmless as they saw it - wiggling on human rights. For the same reason many in the West saw no value in the Review procedure. But all were wrong. The post war settlement, as we now know, proved illusory and the human rights issue was far from harmless.

For what the Russians had no experience of was the power of a free press. In the global ideological battle they were engaged in, their own people - and people in countries they were trying to influence - were being periodically reminded by radio that Soviet leaders did not respect freedom of thought and information and the rest of it. Furthermore they did not honour international undertakings which they themselves had freely undertaken. So was it any wonder they were so mistrusted generally? The rulers had ideological answers which satisfied themselves but the common sense of the ruled saw these as specious and indeed mendacious. For these reasons while ordinary people in the West hardly knew there was a Helsinki process

at all it was taken deadly seriously by rulers and ruled in the East.

The rationale of Helsinki of course changed once Mr Gorbachev embarked on reform. As we battled on in Vienna we began to be conscious that the proceedings were actually helpful to him and his allies. Both reformers and reactionaries in Moscow were agreed on the desperate financial necessity of scaling down their forces in Europe. By making clear in Vienna that there was no possibility of a deal on conventional arms unless we got satisfaction on human rights the West was thus giving the reformers a hand in their struggle with Ligachev and Greschko and the rest.

Well, as you will know, we were eventually able to strike a satisfactory deal on both human rights and conventional arms. This was a feat an unkind British critic at the outset described as trying to go through a revolving door in both directions at once - so you will allow me a little modest satisfaction at our having accomplished this trick. Such at any rate was my part of the battlefield between 1986 and 1989. I can now return to my oral history.

I first began to sense something unusual in the air as early as September 1986 when I went to Moscow to get some measure of the opponents we were about to face in Vienna. The meetings themselves were nothing special, simply the usual diplomatic minuet that characterised our relations with the old Soviet Union. Some of the characters sitting round the table were more interesting though.

One was the young Andropov, as in Andropov. He was a timid alcoholic, victim I assumed of all the complexes common to the sons of famous fathers. Gorbachev owed his career to the father and wanted to give the son his chance in Vienna: but the attempt foundered at the preparatory meeting and he was replaced by the wholly more formidable Yuri Kashlev who was both a worthy adversary and an honourable colleague.

The second figure of historical interest round that table was Kondrashev of the KGB. He I looked on with some alarm knowing he had been expelled from Britain for running George Blake, the notorious spy. My terror would have been greater if I had known then that in 1946 he had been one of the interrogators of those surviving Hitler's bunker at the fall of Berlin. All of these, both men and women, had been systematically and savagely tortured before Stalin was satisfied that his fellow-criminal was well and truly dead.

Kondrashev revealed all this in a television programme here last year and I thought then, how

unlike our own dear Trevor-Roper. But Comrade Kondrashev had a certain silky charm and absolutely perfect idiomatic English. He was an old Helsinki hand but he too faded from the scene after the Preparatory Conference for reasons that are not entirely clear.

But no, it was not at the table but at the Bolshoi in the evening that I felt the first tremor of what was to come. It was Swan Lake - it always seems to be Swan Lake at the Bolshoi - and there I was with my opposite number and his wife, sophisticated, educated Muscovites both. He and I had discussed music and literature over lunch and here we were seeing the best that classical ballet has to offer. He must have been much moved for during the applause at the end when he could be sure that he could not be overheard he leaned over and murmured something for my ears only. Vienna was going to be rough, he said, very rough: but I was to remember that underneath it all "We all share the same values."

I often remembered his words afterwards in Vienna. I was convinced I had heard the voice of Gorbachev's natural constituency, those on whom he tried to build a freer and more intelligently ordered society. These were the people who had more to fear from the oriental tyranny that was Marxist-Leninism than ever we did. Indeed the incongruous thought occurred to me then that people like this were probably in favour of the Iron Curtain - always provided it was erected somewhere to the east of Moscow. Some Communist delegates in Vienna, the Hungarians and Poles in particular, also thought there was nothing wrong with an iron curtain either except the one they had was in the wrong place. And where was the right place? Anywhere to the east of them, of course.

This is worth thinking about as NATO grapples with the problem of trying to accommodate Central European states without isolating Russia.

But whatever their private feelings our Russian colleagues were professionals and Vienna was just as rough and tough as I had been promised. There were some lighter moments, however. To give you the flavour I will remember two tonight.

During the debate on radio-jamming, I much enjoyed recounting the troubles of the Soviet Ambassador in London who had complained to the press that our jamming was preventing him from hearing Radio Moscow as clearly as he would have liked. This caused us some consternation until we found that Radio Moscow couldn't get out because of his side's enthusiastic efforts to prevent the BBC from getting in. So, in pleading the BBC's cause in Vienna, I said, I was also speaking for this distinguished member of our profession denied the

latest in news and entertainment from home.

A few weeks later, the BBC ceased to be jammed, the second sign after the release of Sakharov, that the Gorbachevian revolution had begun. The reporting telegram from our Moscow Embassy quoted a Soviet official as having made an "obscure reference" to the comfort of their Ambassador in London. I smiled at this, comforted in turn by the confirmation that what had been said in Vienna, at least, had been heard loud and clear in Moscow.

We had our farcical moments too. The Cyprus delegate, for instance, proposed an additional provision to the Act to protect animal rights throughout the continent. This, she explained arose out of concern for her cats left behind in Nicosia. Her proposal ran and ran - nothing it seemed could withstand its inexorable progress even though on occasion it caused the proceedings to seize up altogether. In despair, we asked our High Commissioner there to see what he could do. This worked, for a kindly message eventually came from Nicosia assuring her all was well. Perhaps inevitably, her proposal was universally known as the cats' clause.

I thought I owed this high hall of learning this vital piece of information. I should add that no one in Vienna was against animal rights, whatever they may be. It was just that other organisations exist to consider what should be done. Scandinavian delegates were equally keen on the Environment - with a capital E - and cravenly, as the price of an agreement, we had to agree to spend the taxpayers' money on an utterly pointless environmental meeting under the Helsinki umbrella. We knew that there is no international body in existence that isn't spending the taxpayers' money in pious pursuit of Scandinavian dreams of a world as pure as Lapland but, then, that's Diplomacy.

At all events, looking back on Vienna one thing is clear. This is that we had inadvertently hit upon the Achilles heel of the whole oppressive system. I stress: inadvertently.

One of the West's concerns over many years had been the plight of Soviet Jews who had been denied the right to emigrate and those who had been prevented from returning to their homes when emigration had not proved a success. There were thousands of cases, many of them truly heart-rending. To meet the problem we had proposed that a formula should be included in the Vienna Document, taken from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This read:- "Everyone has the right to leave any country and return to his own."

To my certain knowledge, none of us ever considered the effect this could have on a divided

Germany. We could see that in principle it should - but by this time we were inured to Honecker's intransigence. Our motive was purely humanitarian, relating to Soviet Jewry. If adopted, we thought, it would at least give us some leverage in the worst cases in future. And, of course, we all knew the impact that the Jackson/ Vannick amendment had had on Jewish emigration in the past.

But it was this, the so-called freedom of movement clause in the Vienna document, that was to be the key to opening the gates.

There are worrying signs, or at least signs worrying to a diplomat, that the Russians were thinking a good deal further ahead than we were. One is the way they chose to tell us they were minded to accept the clause. This took place, in the classic Le Carré tradition, at a clandestine meeting - where else but on a park bench in the Burggarten? The meeting was between their two biggest bruisers and our two, one of whom I am proud to say being British. It was also one of those "what would you say if ...?" kinds of conversations which should have indicated to us that the Russians were not entirely easy in their own minds.

We in the western camp were so astonished at the message that we over-looked the method. I fear we rather dismissed it as just the sort of thing that would appeal to their tiny conspiratorial minds. With hindsight this may have been a misjudgment. They might have seen that the only way to overcome the opposition of some of their allies on a point of much more significance to them than to the Soviet Union was to present them with a *fait accompli*: they may have wanted some sort of reciprocal concession from us to sweeten the pill but, if so, I cannot now remember what. But the excessive secrecy also suggest now - it didn't then - that for the first time the Russians were getting serious about implementing what they agreed to. Another thing which might have alerted us to what was to come was the deal struck between Hungary and Austria in 1988 allowing their nationals free movement across their common border. That year, every Hungarian in creation it seemed flocked into central Vienna to celebrate their national day, the anniversary of their conversion to Communism. Their enthusiastic participation in the consumer society brought the traffic, the cars of the preoccupied delegates included, to a standstill.

In sum, one edge of the Iron Curtain was fraying before our very eyes just as we were negotiating freedom of movement across frontiers as part of the Vienna package. Someone may have put two and two together. I certainly didn't and I don't know anyone claiming that they did.

But I now have to divert again from personal reminiscence for a moment to describe what followed.

The Vienna meeting came to an end in January 1989. In June, East German tourists holidaying around Lake Balaton in Hungary saw the open frontier and made a bolt for it. The East German Government protested, calling the bilateral treaty of friendship in aid. The Hungarians refused to close the border rightly claiming among other things that, having been concluded later, the Vienna document superseded the Treaty of Friendship on this point.

The Czechoslovak authorities tried to give the East Germans a hand by closing their border with Hungary to the tourists; but this only diverted the flow into the West German Embassy in Prague - and to a lesser extent Warsaw. You will remember the scenes from the television news that summer. In the ensuing contest of wills between the two Germanies the East Germans blinked first and closed their only remaining borders, a bitter humiliation to the regime.

Honecker then made two mistakes. While agreeing that those in the West German Embassy in Prague could leave for West Germany, he insisted that they did not go direct but by train through East Germany. They could then be formally expelled and thus have their property confiscated as a deterrent to others. But the sight of the empty trains going south to pick them up turned what had until then been quite small demonstrations in Leipzig and Dresden in favour of - I think - Gorbachevean reform, into enormous affairs.

Honecker then compounded the error by trying to call in the military with orders to shoot the demonstrators. This proved too strong meat for the rest of the Politburo and Honecker had no alternative but to go. His successors simply had to reopen the borders as the price of civic peace. After that, the Berlin Wall had lost its point. After some confusion it fell in early November, a few days before things erupted in Czechoslovakia.

By this time I was in Prague and I can therefore resume my eye-witness account.

It still seems to me unlikely that the fall of the Wall, of itself, triggered off the Velvet Revolution. I say this because of the extraordinary indifference of the Praguers to the influx of near hysterical East Germans only weeks before.

During that episode, my wife and I took our afternoon walk in and around the Petrin Hill, many of you will know it, that dominates central Prague and runs down on one side to the German

Embassy. Every day, for weeks it seemed, we saw panic-stricken East Germans streaming down through the trees into the Embassy garden.

And the Praguers? There they were apparently oblivious to all the commotion. There were the couples strolling hand in hand in the gardens at the top. There were the couples at the next stage of life's journey pushing prams. There were the old people gossiping on the park benches, with kids playing everywhere. All, all, it seemed were simply not noticing. A Czech friend told me this was surely natural. It was an intra-German problem for them to solve. Besides, he added with a cynical smile, you know the Germans. One over the garden wall, everyone over the garden wall. More seriously he argued that there was no analogy with the Czechoslovak situation: neither the Czechs nor the Slovaks had brothers over the frontier -and powerful brothers at that. He was too polite to say that mere friends - or even allies - were no good. As you can guess, Munich has scarred the national psyche, I would say for ever.

After the fall of the Wall we could see that with the western frontiers to the north of them as they had always been to the south, Czechoslovakia would have to follow suit sooner or later. But that is not the same thing as saying that outright and fundamental revolution was inevitable. We thought this improbable as everyone else with an interest did - the West generally, the Russians, even the gallant band of dissidents themselves.

We had long been aware, of course, of the deep divisions between the reactionaries and the reformers in the Party: but this in a way was a distraction for all its observers. One concentrated rather on the alarmist speeches of Adamec, the reformist Prime Minister: unless we change, he was saying - and by implication in line with Gorbachev's reforms - we face economic stagnation and political isolation. I had known of the reactionaries' stubborn resistance to change from my days in Vienna when in desperation my Russian colleague had sometimes asked me whether there was anything we could do to help. I had to tell him that not only did we have no leverage but we had enough problems with our own side which were almost as intractable.

So divisions within the Czechoslovak Communist Party certainly. But with all the power at its disposal it hardly seemed credible that it could be toppled altogether. If change came at all, we argued, the only foreseeable outcome would be a takeover by the reformers, with Gorbachev's help, and prepared to work to the Gorbachevean agenda. I suppose we thought this probable at some time or other, but none of us would have placed a bet on when.

As it happens, a month or two before (August I think), I myself played a small and oblique part in the internal Party debate. This was at a dinner ostensibly arranged by the Prague School of Economics to discuss the prospects for attracting western investment.

The School knew, of course, that this was not a promising subject since the prospects were dim to the point of non-existence. They therefore dangled a little bait before us in the person of Lenart, the Presidium - or Politburo - member for the economy. Here, flatteringly, was a member of the Supreme Body Itself so anxious to hear our views at first hand that he had agreed to attend.

A few days before the dinner an emissary arrived at the Embassy - a unique occurrence - with a request. Some of those coming, he said, would appreciate it if I said something about human rights based on my Vienna experience. Would I oblige? My reward, it was hinted, would be the privilege of sitting next to Presidium Member Lenart himself. The thinking presumably went that every man has his price, so how could I resist?

I would have done it for less. There are times, as Gwendolyn says in *The Importance of being Earnest*, when speaking one's mind is more than a Duty: it is a Pleasure.

The organisers might have been aware that I had met Comrade Lenart before. Then he had argued that the lamentable state of his country was all our fault - Munich and all that. I said that this could scarcely be the whole truth. We had bombed Germany out of sight in the War and yet there was the Federal Republic, unquestionably the most prosperous country in Europe. Lenart had not liked this; but I have since wondered whether I had unknowingly expressed the doubts that he himself was beginning to feel about the whole Communist experiment. As John Stuart Mill says somewhere: the greatest tragedy that can befall a theory is for it to be put into practice because then its disadvantages become apparent.

I shall never know whether I had indeed made any impression on Lenart. Not being able to predict the future is only the second worst thing about diplomacy. The worst is not being able to reconstruct the past.

The dinner when it came was bizarre even by Communism's Potemkin standards. We all recognised the setting and the fare as Party institutional Class A plus - absolutely vault le voyage and something way beyond the pretensions, indeed the imagination, of the Prague School of Economics. More sinister was the presence of not one, but three, camera crews

filming everything from the cocktails to the brandy. Judging from past experience, we the Western Ambassadors assumed that this was not dissociated from the presence among us of General Lorenz, the Chief of the Secret Police himself, for in a police state no one is more curious or, for that matter, more nervous than the police. And, sure enough, there was I, a relatively junior Head of Mission, placed at table in the place of honour next to Praesidium Member Lenart. This is something all Ambassadors are sensitive to; and I heard gratifying murmurs of pain from my seniors seated lower.

It was not a privilege worth having for the great man had nothing noteworthy to say, indeed nothing at all for most of the evening. But when invited to say my piece I ventured the thought that the prospects for investment might improve if more attention could be paid, not so much to the investment climate, but to the image of the country more generally. Ask the man in the street in Britain what he associated with the word Prague and the reply was likely to be: Prague? isn't that where they beat students up in the street? As long as this was the case investors were unlikely to risk their reputations by venturing into such a market. The answer had to be to find ways and means of accommodating dissent.

All this was duly filmed and I suppose served some purpose somewhere in the works. (We had all been promised copies of the film but of course none ever turned up.) I fear I shocked some of my Western colleagues not used to the rough and tumble of Vienna. General Lorenz too was greatly put out. I heard from the emissary later that I had been - and I quote, both arrogant and condescending. I have often wondered whether from his prison cell after the Revolution he reflected that he should have listened with a more open mind.

What the evening had given the rest of us was proof positive that elements in the Party -perhaps even Lenart himself - had become desperate enough to seek the help of any outside agency, however improbable. Even so, I still think it was pretty cool of them to have chosen someone with a reputation of being so unkind about the whole lot of them in Vienna.

So here was a ruling Party both confused and divided. Alas facing them, across the vast mass of an apparently indifferent public, was a tiny band of dissidents to all appearances incapable of mounting a significant challenge. For all their courage and determination, they had so far been strikingly unsuccessful in persuading the population to come off the fence.

1988 had been the high water mark of their campaign, offering opportunities for demonstrations to mark the great anniversaries of the nation's history: the founding of the Republic in 1918; the Munich betrayal of 1938; the Communist take-over in 1948; the Prague Spring of 1968. There

was even a coda in January 1989 to mark the anniversary of the death of Jan Palach. This was the last time Vaclav Havel was arrested and imprisoned, something which did not deter him on release from organising yet another demonstration in August 1989 on the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of 1968.

But what impressed the outside observers was something the dissidents were all too aware of themselves. This was that the numbers attending these rallies never varied much above or below 5,000. There was much excitement about them in the foreign press and not a little brutality on the ground. But the rest of the population went about their daily concerns apparently unmoved. Round the edges of the demonstrations we saw people hurrying to the Metro stations or the tram stops, doing their late night shopping and queuing for the cinemas. The calm, as we now know, was deceptive but it had its uses. Lulled into a false sense of security, the Party had complacently allowed itself the luxury of internal division and disagreement when unity was essential for survival.

We thought there was just a chance that, with everything else that was going on in Eastern Europe, the Party might seek an accommodation with the dissidents along the lines I had argued for at that famous dinner. There were some unexpected people on the other side who were, apparently, of like mind.

I had a quiet lunch with Vaclav Havel just after he came out of prison that last time. He was looking dreadful, prison-pale and obviously still suffering from his ordeal. But he told me then that his very own case-officer, the person responsible for his arrest and interrogation, was now convinced that there would have to be a Round Table on the Polish model and that he fully expected Havel to be at it. I thought the interrogator was being pretty fanciful. I could see little analogy between a mass working class movement like Solidarity and a tiny group of middle class intellectuals in Prague and Bratislava. But guided by this wise officer's advice I did venture to suggest to London that Vaclav Havel would one day assume the mantle of Thomas Masaryk and become the Father of the nation himself. This happy guess helps me nowadays to offset painful memories of the many predictions I got wrong in the course of a long career. And, of course, I got the timing hopelessly wrong. It was only six months later that Havel became President.

But while mine is at best a patchy record, I can at least say we were not entirely unsighted on the evening of 17 November 1989 when a student demonstration started the Velvet Revolution off. The following is the story as we knew it then; but there may well have been cross-currents

unknown to us at the time.

That morning, the 17th of November, Jan Urban, a leading dissident, called on my deputy. He came with the news that there was to be a huge student demonstration that evening, something much bigger than anything the dissidents had ever been able to manage. His story was that the organisation of Communist students had sold the idea of an anti-fascist demonstration to the authorities to mark Opletal day. Opletal had been a university student in 1939 when the Germans marched in. He and others were arrested and shot on 17 November. The university traditionally took the day off in remembrance; but on this, the fiftieth anniversary - or so the students said - it was surely appropriate to do something a bit special.

The authorities were apparently delighted that their young had thought up something so original as a spontaneous anti-fascist demonstration. This, they thought, would be an antidote to the plague of anti-communist protests the dissidents had organised over the past year. Indeed, so pleased were they that they offered the University Chancellor as the keynote speaker, or possibly even Stepan, the thuggish Praesidium member for Youth. No, the students said, they thought it right to ask an old Professor now in retirement, who had actually known Opletal personally.

The authorities had not smelled a rat - Jan told us - nor had they yet woken up to the fact that, by agreement, not only the communist students but the entire student body - all forty thousand of them - had agreed to participate in an anti-government protest.

Needless to say, every able-bodied member of the Embassy was on the streets that afternoon - all that is except the frustrated Ambassador who was debarred ex-officio. The old professor spoke, disobligingly likening the situation in 1939 to that in 1989, with a captive people in thrall to a foreign ideology. The students, duly fired up, marched up the Visherad hill (familiar to music lovers from Smetana's *Ma Vlast* as sacred ground to the Czech nation).

There they sang their haunting national anthem, placed lighted candles all around the natural amphitheatre there, and marched down again in the general direction of Wenceslas Square. Along the quays next to the river they were joined by hordes of ordinary citizens on their way home from work. As they turned the corner by the National Theatre, there were usherettes at every window cheering and waving them on. The din was terrific, whistles, klaxons, football rattles, car horns. I was green with envy when I heard.

The students later claimed that their intention had been to disperse after another rally in front of the Faculty of Pharmacology where Opletal had been a student. I wouldn't have placed a bet on it. The Faculty is in Opletal Street which begins in Wenceslas Square about a hundred yards from the statue of the saint where the Republic was declared in 1918 and where Jan Palach set himself alight in 1969.

Nor were the authorities taking any chances either. By this time the riot police were drawn up about half way up the road leading from the national theatre to the square. There was then a stand-off during which most of the crowd dispersed. Those that remained proffered flowers to the riot police - we have a marvellous photograph of this at home - and were rewarded with a savage and wholly unnecessary beating up.

Anyone going to Prague should look out for a small monument on the exact spot where it all began. It is in the arcade on the right of the street a little higher up than the Theatre. Imagine, if you will, how we saw it the day after, covered in the most horrendous bloodstains. And not only there, I might add, but in every one of the little alleyways up and down the street. As the days of revolution unrolled the arcade became a place of pilgrimage with an ever lengthening line of candles and an ever increasing mound of flowers. This was the tribute of a people who had not the least expectation that their hour of liberation was so close at hand. The city had been outraged, particularly when a rumour swept Prague that one student, a certain Martin Schmidt had been rushed to hospital and had died at eleven o'clock that evening. Well, not quite everyone had been outraged. Long afterwards the riot police were still feeling aggrieved at being so misunderstood. They complained to some British visitors that they had only been upholding the law which after all was their job. And anyway, hadn't the CRS done far worse things during les evenements in Paris in 1968? I record this comment in fairness: but I shall never forget the blood stains.

I take it everyone is roughly familiar with what followed. My memories are now a confused jumble of indelible images, candles, pamphlets, wall posters, processions everywhere, crowds gathering to listen to the songs and the speeches in the bitter cold while the Communists met in gloomy conclave in plush and heated offices. Church bells rang, factory hooters hooted; there was excitement, gaiety, laughter everywhere.

There was a plot, of course. The aim of all this urban agitation was to arouse the working classes, whom the Communists thought of as their own constituency. The assumption, quite correct as it turned out, was that if there were a general strike, the Party would be so

disheartened that they would at least agree to share power, if not to cede it entirely. The method was pure theatre. In Communist times, Praguers flocked to the theatres nightly simply to listen to their beautifully expressive language unperverted by ideology. Every other source, all the media, schools, universities was polluted beyond all imagining by what was called Party Chinese. It is hardly surprising, therefore that theatre was the analogy that most easily came to mind. The demonstrations with the jangling keys and the candles and the sparklers were street theatre. Every proper theatre in the capital became a forum for the people, released at last to say in public what they had been bottling up for twenty years or more. The list of speakers outside one consisted entirely of writers, scientists and philosophers well known to the Embassy. This was mainly, not entirely but mainly, due to the British Council which had spent years quietly building bridges to the intellectual community despite the most enormous restraints.

And where was the Civic Forum itself formed but in a theatre? This appropriately enough, was known in those days as the *Laterna Magika*, and it served as the Revolution's headquarters until all was accomplished. And you don't need me to tell you that the hero of the hour was the country's leading dramatist, a man of the theatre to his fingertips.

So there was a plot and there was a method. What there wasn't was foresight. The dissident community, for one, was at least as unprepared for the dramatic outcome as the Communist Party. I can attest to this myself since, as it happened, my deputy and his wife who were leaving had their farewell dinner for their dissident friends on the very evening of November 17. All the talk round the table that night was of the prospects of success for the reformist wing of the Party - and remember this was when the candles were still burning on the *Visherad* just above the house and several of those present had children out on the streets. The proceedings incidentally were interrupted by our only resident English journalist (working for *The Independent*) who came in nursing a cut to the forehead administered by the riot police earlier that evening. I have seldom seen anyone so gleeful.

Now, as we were leaving, I offered a lift to anyone willing to squeeze in. Two couples took me up on the offer, wives sitting on their husband's knees. And as they got out and disappeared into their apartment blocks, I bet it no more occurred to them than it did to us that the next time I would see them, one of the husbands would be Foreign Minister and the other -our old friend Jan Urban - would be Secretary General of the Civic Forum, charged with fighting, and winning, the first free elections since 1946.

(Story of Dientsbier's presentation to the corps.)

Another wing of the forum was similarly unsighted. These were the economists associated with the Prognostics Institute, a think-tank feeding the heretical fruit of their research to the party reformists including the fiery Prime Minister himself. The institute led a precarious existence. At least once in 1989 it was threatened with closure only to be reprieved at the last moment. An institute it may have been but it is impossible to conceive of a more eclectic band of scholars.

Its head was Professor Komarek, formerly economic adviser to Che Guevara. I never quite grasped his intellectual position though he tried to explain it to me on several occasions in communist times; but whether the fault was mine or his I cannot say even now. My confusion was worse confounded when I called on him for the last time at the height of the revolution -or counter-revolution from his perspective I suppose. To get to his office, I had to step over the sleeping bodies of students resting between bouts of counter-revolutionary activities. He had given them permission to use his offices as their headquarters. He never explained why; and I never thought to ask.

The Prof's deputy was also a one-off. He, I guessed, was about thirty and he told me he owed his excellent English to his overseas tours with a pop group. He too described himself in those days as a Communist which never discouraged him from making brilliantly analytical speeches to visiting foreign businessmen openly deploring "socialist stagnation."

The Number Three was even more intriguing. When showing me out the first time I called he stopped on the stairs to denounce all Communism, reactionary or reformed. Take no notice of them upstairs, he said - or rather shouted for he was very worked up - Communism's only purpose is to make life easy for bureaucrats and businessmen. What had they done to deserve a quiet life? And the person who understood this best was "Your Mrs Thatcher."

Now I know our then Prime Minister was a controversial figure - nowhere more so than here in Oxford - but I was sufficiently intrigued by his independence of mind and reckless courage to arrange for him to air his views at the Foreign Office's own conference centre at Wilton Park. This non-too-subtle scheme foundered rather. Three days after the student demonstrations he told me over dinner that the government was unlikely to give him a passport. The day before, he had become a founder member of the Civic Forum. A couple of weeks later he telephoned to say that it was now certain he couldn't go. When I asked why, he diffidently replied that he was, er, being made Minister of Finance the next day. London, I said grandly, would understand.

At the same time, the former pop star was being made Minister for Industry. The Prof too was enjoying his moment of fame after airing his views on television. Some of his fans renamed the old Gottwald Metro Station after him. There was even some who saw him as Prime Minister, even President; but his star soon faded and we heard nothing of him or his Institute again. I imagine the Che Guevara connection didn't help - or maybe others eventually found his philosophical position as impenetrable as I did.

But whatever the Prognostics Institute was good at, it certainly wasn't good at prognosticating the end of Communism in Czechoslovakia.

The Church comes off rather better, having chosen the previous week-end to canonise the Blessed Agnes of Bohemia. Agnes had been kept waiting for a thousand years and the Czechs who are about as irreligious as the English were unnerved by this development. One of their oldest legends is that she would be so honoured when the nation was about to be delivered of its oppressors. So what, the Czechs asked, did the Church know that the rest of the world didn't? Wisely, the Pope has never said; but the Cardinal's celebratory mass for St Agnes at the height of the revolution was heart stopping.

Before I come to that I have to say how much we all enjoyed the dreadful Stepan's discomfiture just beforehand. He called on Cardinal Thomasek to try to persuade him that so emotive a service in the cathedral next to the Presidential Palace at such a time would not be conducive to civic calm. This, Stepan said, must surely be in the common interest. The mass, replied the Cardinal was being held to honour the Saint, not for the health of the Communist Party. Rude Pravo, the Party newspaper had tried the week before to suggest the good old cardinal, then nearly ninety, had lost his marbles so he was probably feeling a trifle peevisish.

The ceremony itself was straightforward enough, except for the presence of more television crews than I have ever seen before or since. The great moment came at the end when the Cardinal was tottering down the aisle towards the great west doors. There was the usual soft organ music playing. But then, the small choir at the side of the altar lifted their right hands in Churchill's V for Victory salute and began the National Anthem. Within two or three notes, the organ and then the entire congregation joined in. And not only them but all the vast crowds gathered in the courtyards around out into the Hradcany Square beyond. I defy anyone not to be moved by that.

But while mine is - with the possible exception of the Church a tale of political myopia it is also one of inspired opportunism and improvisation. There, with the ceiling falling in as it were, a whole new political order had to be created, however sketchily at first, and this in a matter of days. Tactics had to be devised to rouse a people who had been politically traumatised since 1948 - and even more so after 1968. A strategy had to be worked out, sometimes minute by minute, against a rattled, divided and confused Communist Party which presented a moving target at best. And yet all was splendidly accomplished by people with no experience of government or administration whatever.

To give you just one example of their beginner's luck, if the most striking. Well, who precisely do you want as President? the Communist negotiators asked. After a pause for reflection someone said, why not Vaclav? Another pause during which some thought: oh no, not Vaclav, he's only a writer. After that the decision was unanimous.

It is a decision the Czech nation has never had cause to regret. When he went out on the balcony after his inauguration to thank the people for their support, they all shouted back: no, no, we thank you. I never saw his standard floating above the castle without recalling the old Chinese proverb: happy the nation ruled by a virtuous prince.

But it is also a tale of brilliant organisation. My eye-witness account is necessarily confined to Prague because that is where I was at the time. The effort was nonetheless nationwide. Just as dramatic events were taking place in Bratislava and, indeed, after a shocked and rather anxious few days, throughout the country. The first to take up the cause were the universities and almost without exception in the English faculties. For with the language comes a system of civic and political values about which we ourselves are unnecessarily diffident these days. Whatever: after the revolution came a wave of anglophilia such as I would never have dreamed possible.

And as for the working classes on which the Communists pinned their waning hopes, we owe our French colleagues an account of the general strike in Pilsen, famous for its huge engineering works - and its beer. Ten minutes before it was due to begin, the local branch of the Civic Forum had no idea whether they had persuaded the workers to down tools or not. And yet when the hooters went at noon, the strike was 100% solid, as it was in most of the other industrial centres.

But I don't want to leave you with the impression that this was a one-dimensional plot. As the

speeches in the square made clear, there were many agendas, happily for the most part convergent.

The students were vital to the whole enterprise. Being too young to have been traumatised by 1968, and having nothing to lose, they were the only group in society that could have started the whole thing off. And because there is a despondent side to the Slav temperament, their genial derision expressed in a blizzard of posters, was essential simply because they made everyone laugh. At one stage they ran out of paper and appealed to us for help. Although no one could accuse the Embassy of impartiality, I thought this would be overstepping the mark. Thankfully someone could remember a private source in London that might help and a van was on its way across Europe within twenty four hours.

Students popped up everywhere. I was taking tea one afternoon with a lady when she interrupted the conversation with an apology. She simply had to tune in to watch her son on the box. She hadn't seen him for a week and just wanted to make sure he was all right. And there he was, with one or two others, plying the Minister of Defence and the Army Chief of Staff no less, with questions a newspaper the next day described as "arrows going to the heart of things". Eat your heart out, Jeremy, I thought, these kids are doing just as well from a standing start without any experience or training at all.

I cannot make up my mind whether, as many believe, the KGB was also working to an agenda of its own. Some including the BBC's John Simpson, believe theirs was the hidden hand behind the Communist students' cunning appeal to the authorities over Opletal day. Conspiracy theorists also see something sinister about the highly circumstantial rumour that was floated about the death of Martin Schmidt. This was clearly inflammatory: his girl friend was even quoted as saying she had seen him being wheeled into the hospital on a trolley. His own mother gave us a very different story. No, he was visiting relatives in the country. What? With every student in the capital about to go on the streets? Was he under orders to go missing? Was he in fact wheeled into the hospital to lend credence to the rumour? Or what? Who knows?

There are stories that all the KGB's top brass were in Prague at the time. But here we get onto the slippery ground of rumour and counter-rumour. I myself saw a huge Zill, or Ziss, or whatever those Russian limousines are called, outside the Prime Minister's office late one night. It was bedecked with the Czech flag and the Hammer and Sickle which doesn't suggest clandestinity. I assume now, as I did then, that the emissary, who was clearly a very big wig

indeed, had come to say that the Czech comrades were now on their own and there would be no fraternal assistance as there had been in 1968.

Certainly Gorbachev had no cause to cherish the reactionaries in Prague who had given him such a hard time during the Vienna meeting. I also thought it rather foolish for Jakes, the ultra-reactionary General Secretary, to accept Ligachev's invitation to visit Moscow in March 1989 when Ligachev and Gorbachev had locked horns over the future of the collective farms. (Czechoslovak collective farms were reasonably productive and presumably were held to prove that collectivisation was not all bad.) But whether all this had provoked Gorbachev to try to bring Jakes and his friends down I do not know. If the KGB were more actively involved all I can say is that they revealed an intimate knowledge of what made Czech students tick. In the end it scarcely matters since the reformist wing didn't win either. The entire sorry regime was brought down by the sheer weight of numbers. The people had simply had enough of oppression and evil and the sheer tedium of life under Marxist-Leninism.

And I suppose we shall have to wait for the release of the papers, or possibly a book of memoirs, to find out whether Vernon Walters, the American Ambassador in Bonn knew something we did not know. It is on the public record that he told Dan Rather of CBS in early November that he did not give the Czechoslovak regime more than another ten days or so. He was right, of course, but whether this was a lucky guess or not remains to be seen.

So my theme this afternoon has been the unpredictability of things, or if you like, the un-inevitability of history. I could go on all night about what happened to the cast of characters I have mentioned. Some lost, some won, some permanently, some for a time only. The Czechs gained more than the Slovaks. A new class of politicians, administrators and businessmen has emerged, many of whom took no, or minimal, part in the revolution and the place is unrecognizable after six short years.

For, apart from Vaclav Havel himself, the most conspicuous winner so far has been that free marketeer in the Prognostics Institute who went on to be Finance Minister. He is Vaclav Klaus, now Prime Minister of the Czech Republic and author of a burgeoning economic miracle beginning to bear comparison with Erhard's *wirtschaftswunder* in the fifties. [Note in April, 1999: this has not turned out to be the case, largely due to Klaus's inexperience of practical government.]

I end with history again as theatre. In the Spring of 1990 the new President went down to Pilsen for the anniversary of its liberation by Patton's Third Army in 1945. The Party had

chosen to forget the nation's debt to the Americans: before the Velvet Revolution I had by coincidence seen a map in a local primary school indicating that the town owed its liberation to the Red Army which, of course, scarcely got beyond Prague before the War was over. Now it was time for the truth to be told.

And yet the truth scarcely need telling at all. Part of the day's ceremonies was a most extraordinary parade. It could have been taken from an old war movie. There passing before us was a unit of the victorious army, their jeeps and trucks emblazoned with the famous white star. These had doubtless been war surplus and had been kept oiled and greased - and hidden away in barns and outhouses throughout the land since 1948. (By some curious trick of memory I now see the scene now in black and white, perhaps because taking the salute was Shirley Temple Black, my American colleague, older certainly but as photogenic as ever.) They were filled with what appeared to be GI's of the era. These were not Americans but Czechs wearing uniforms that had been carefully and lovingly preserved for forty years or more. Indeed so many wanted to take part that some uniforms had to be shared, one wearing the helmet, another the jacket and so on. I caught the sheepish smile of one of them and realised with a start that he was one of my very own Administration Officers. We had always assumed he worked for you-know-who. Perhaps so: but that is obviously not where his heart lay. The last memory I want to share with you is that of a lone Spitfire flying down a runway on a lovely June day in 1991. The occasion was the Czechoslovak Airforce's tribute to the veterans who fought with us in the War. (It was also, incidentally, my last official function in the Service.) The veterans' story had been a tragic one. There had been appalling losses during the War, particularly during the bomber offensive about which many of us have mixed views. The survivors were received as returning heroes in 1945: but all without any known exception, had suffered years of imprisonment as "spies" after 1948. Before the Revolution one of them had told me he had only got nine years when the usual tariff was fifteen. What, he wondered, had he done wrong to get off so lightly? But now here they all were on the podium of honour in June 1991 receiving the recognition that was their due from a vast crowd of their fellow-countrymen. All were wearing their old RAF uniforms, the one with "Czechoslovakia" at the shoulder. All of my generation will remember them well from the War.

And as the Spitfire flew down the runway in front of them, everyone of these gallant old men stood to attention and saluted. And it was then that I realised we had been forgiven for Munich long ago.