

CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1991



CHARLES GANNON © 2022

PREFACE

When I was a boy, I used to collect stamps from around the world. I was always fascinated by the names of the various far-flung countries that produced them (providing I could read the scripts, of course): *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Postaları*, *Magyar Posta*, *Posta Romana*, *Suomi*, *Poczta Polska* and so forth. The name of one country in particular interested me: *Československo* – probably because the pictures on its stamps looked rather interesting. I soon discovered that this country, Czechoslovakia, was more or less out of bounds as it was behind something called ‘The Iron Curtain’.

Much later I discovered that the country had been founded in 1918; that the Nazis had carved it up twenty years later, that the infamous Iron Curtain had enclosed it in 1948, and in 1968 the Warsaw Pact tanks trampled on the country’s dreams of ‘socialism with a human face’.

The Tiananmen Square massacre of July 1989 proved to have a profound effect on the communist world; in November of that year the Czechs and Slovaks managed to shrug off forty-one years of communist rule during the so-called ‘Velvet Revolution’ without a shot being fired, and shortly afterwards Václav Havel was proclaimed president.

Having read Milan Kundera’s book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and seen the film of the same name starring Daniel Day-Lewis (who I was later told had studied Czech in order to speak English with a Czech accent), I decided to travel to Czechoslovakia (as it was still called) in September, 1991. My aim was to stay in Prague, where I knew that there was plenty to see and do, and (if time allowed) to travel to Slovakia in order to see a little of that region.

Before I left, I tried my hand at learning a little of the Czech language, which proved to be quite tricky and difficult to pronounce. A West Slavic language, similar in many ways to Polish, it is written using the Roman alphabet and includes letters with accents that alter the sound of the vowels and consonants. Below is a list of the most commonly used letters that readers may not be acquainted with, along with their pronunciation.

A: *a* as in ‘awe’ – but never as in ‘at’. *Á* is pronounced as in ‘awe’, though it is longer.

C: *ts* as in ‘cats’.

Č: *ch* as in ‘church’.

E: *e* as in bed; *é*: the same, only longer.

Ě: *ye* as in ‘yet’.

G: *g* as in ‘good’ – never like *j* as in ‘general’.

H: guttural, as in Scots ‘loch’.

I: *ee* as in ‘weed’; *í*: the same, only longer.

J: *y* as in ‘yes’.

Ň: *ny* as in ‘onion’.

R: rolled.

Ř: *rz*; the correct pronunciation of ‘Dvořák’ is ‘*DVORZ-awk*’.

Š: *sh* as in ‘ship’.

Ú and Ů: *oo* as in ‘moon’.

W: *v* as in ‘van’.

Ý: *ee* as in ‘weed’.

Ž: *s* as in ‘leisure’.

Another peculiarity of Czech is the ‘hidden’ neutral vowel, pronounced *uh* (as in the American phrase ‘uh-oh!’). As it is never printed, it is very difficult to detect. Most people mispronounce the name of the river that flows through Prague, the Vltava, as ‘*vla-ta-va*’; the correct pronunciation is ‘*vul-taw-vaw*’. Brno is pronounced ‘*burr-no*’.

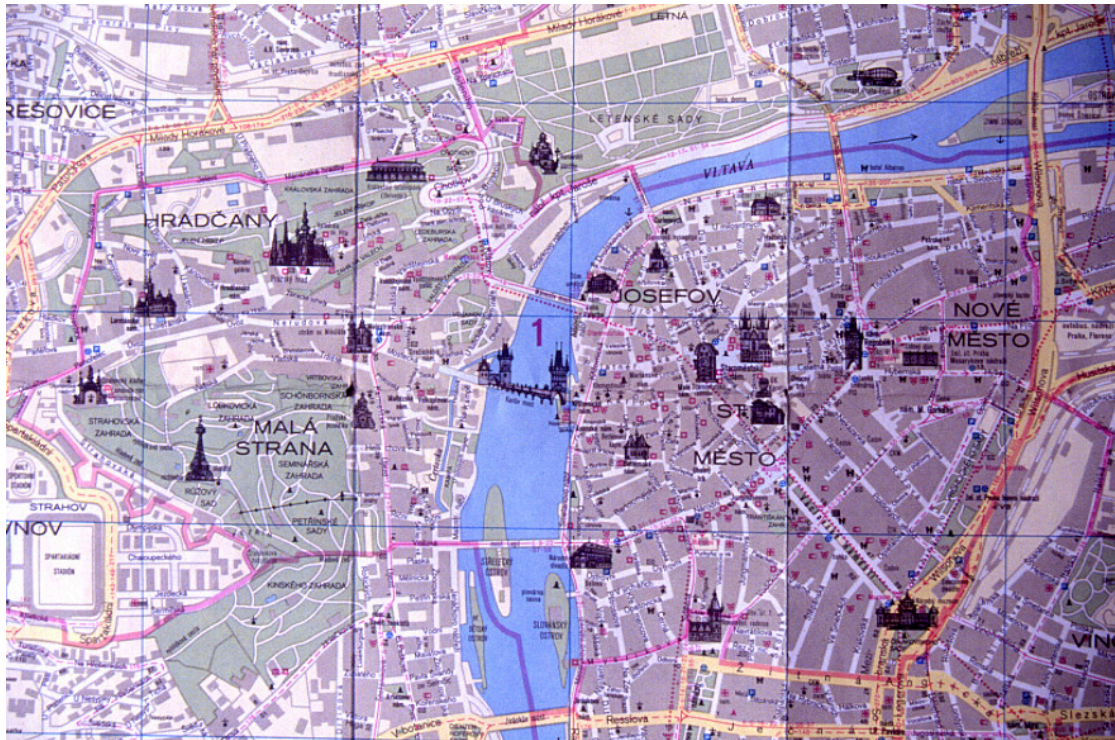
Unlike most European languages, the stress in Czech words is always on the *first* syllable – hence *Vltava* and *Brno*.

The currency in Czechoslovakia was the *koruna* (‘crown’), abbreviated to Kčs; at the time of writing (2022), the same currency is still in use in the Czech Republic. In 1991 there were about Kčs 44 to the Irish pound (IR£).

My thanks are due once again to Andrew Robinson, my proofreader.



PART ONE



PRAGUE

1 – PRAGUE

Thursday, 5 September, 1991

It was sunny and hot when I arrived in Prague; my journey had started in Dublin, via Heathrow. Here, in the airport, I found a bank and changed \$50 into Czech *koruny*. Although a long queue had formed for passport control, everything moved quickly and I soon entered the luggage collection area, where I found my rucksack placed neatly in a corner. Having been waved through the customs area, I went outside and looked for the number 119 bus that would bring me to the city centre. There was one nearby, but as it was not at its stop, the driver was not ready to leave. By the time I reached the stop, a bus was driving off. At this point an English lady and a Czech girl arrived; when I asked the girl where I could buy a ticket, she gave me two and would not accept any money.

A few minutes later, the first bus that I had seen moved forward to the stop and we hopped on board. Soon we were driving through the unremarkable but clean suburbs of Prague. The Czech girl told me that she was a pen friend of the lady, who had flown here for the very first time in a plane.

Soon we arrived at Dejvická, the last stop on the route. The girl directed me to a nearby metro station and I thanked her for her help. I wished the lady *bon voyage* and descended into the bowels of the earth on the escalator. Down at the station, all was clean and efficient. I bought a ticket and stepped on to a Line A train that was heading for the old town centre. As all the stops were announced over the loudspeakers (*‘příští stanice: Malostranská’* – ‘next stop: Malostranská’), everything was easy to follow. I got off at the Muzeum stop, close to the town centre, changed to Line C, headed northwards and got off at the next stop, Praha Hlavní Nádraží – the Prague Central Railway station. I made my way to the basement of the main train station and, as nobody approached me with an offer of accommodation, I went into an office and found a pleasant young lady who spoke English fluently. As she quickly found me a place where I could stay, I booked seven nights in a private room in the suburbs and paid her 175 Deutschmarks. The young lady gave me a key and some printed documents.

When I was about to leave, I was stopped by a German lad who was looking for a youth hostel. I showed him the information in my guide book but, as he realized that staying in a hostel was not very practical, he asked me for the details of the place where I would be staying. He fetched his friend and their two bicycles, and studied their map. While we were doing this, we were approached by a man and a woman who were offering accommodation. As they only spoke German, I acted as the interpreter – fortunately I knew enough of the language to understand what they were saying. As the price was favourable, the lads asked me if I would like to share the accommodation with them and make it even cheaper. I explained to the couple that I had already booked a room. The lady brought me back into the office to see if I could cancel my booking and have my money refunded; it turned out that I could,

though I would lose 25 Deutschmarks. As I was not prepared to do this, I apologized to them all and left.

I now returned to the metro station and asked about a two-day pass. I was directed to a nearby *tabák* or tobacco shop, where I asked the lady, in faltering Czech, if she spoke English. She knew enough to understand me and sold me a pass for 40 Kčs. I hopped on the next train on Line C heading southwards from the city centre and got off several stations later at Kačerov.

I now found myself in Krč (pronounced 'Kirch'): a very pleasant part of the suburbs overlooking the city. At first I could not get my bearings; I asked a few people in Czech for directions, but they could only give me a general idea of where I needed to go. I set off through quite an exclusive residential area, where I saw high-class cars parked here and there, and suddenly began to recognize the names of some of the streets on my map. Few people were about and the place had a pleasantly relaxed atmosphere. I was now very glad that I had not cancelled my reservation and joined the two German lads.

After a while I finally found the road where my accommodation was located (Nad piskovnou); the next step was to find the building (1477). This proved a little tricky as the residences did not seem to be numbered sequentially. However, I finally found the small apartment building. I tried the key in the door; it fitted, but the door would not open. Mystified, I rang the bell, but received no answer. I tried the key again, but I still could not open the door. All I could do was sit on the step and wait until somebody arrived. By now I was hot and tired. I rested for a while, watching the smartly dressed people and attractive young ladies passing by, then took out my diary and began to write it.



My room in Krč

I had not got very far with this when a young couple emerged from the building. They were Italian, but spoke some English. It turned out that I had not discovered the knack of opening the door; when the young man showed me how to do it, it turned out to be very easy! As there was nobody else in the apartment block, they brought me upstairs to the top storey and showed me the room that they concluded must be mine. It turned out to be a very pleasantly appointed study, with shelves full of interesting books, a desk, various pictures on the walls, and a single bed in a corner. As the windows looked out over the back of the building, it was very quiet.

Next door was a bathroom and, at the front of the building, a kitchen that we could all use. I thanked the young couple for their help; we shook hands and they left.

After they had gone, I peeped into some of the other rooms and satisfied myself that the room they had brought me to was the right one. I then organized my things, made myself a cup of tea in the kitchen, and had a shower. Feeling refreshed, I relaxed a little and went downstairs to give my receipt to a young boy, whom I had heard coming into the building. I then ambled out and made my way back to the metro station, where I found a shop and a small café. As I was feeling ravenously hungry by now and was uncertain as to where I might find a restaurant, I decided to eat here. I chose a large roll containing cheese and a small one containing ham; the two together cost just 16 Kčs (about 35p). I ate the rolls sitting beside a fountain and just watched life – and a few pretty girls – passing by. I was enchanted by the relaxed atmosphere of the place: there were no crowds and nobody was in any hurry.



Wenceslas Square

When I had finished eating, I looked for some fruit, but found nothing that appealed to me. Instead I went down to the metro and travelled back to the city centre, where I got out at the Muzeum stop and surfaced in the famous Wenceslas Square (Václavské náměstí). Amazingly, this too was quiet and not crowded. I walked past the great statue of King Wenceslas on his horse, and stopped to admire the familiar view of the long 'square' (really a boulevard), which was pedestrianized. I strolled along the right-hand side, looking at the shops and various restaurants.



Old Town Square



Astronomical clock, Old Town Square

At the end of the square, I turned down a narrow street and entered the Staré Město (Old Town), where I suddenly found myself in the well-known Staroměstské Náměstí (Old Town Square) with its fascinating and much-photographed astronomical clock on the side of a tower. As I arrived just a few minutes before nine o'clock, the throng of tourists and I were able to hear the bells chime and watch the automated figures moving. There was a wonderful atmosphere in the square; people sat at tables outside cafés, young people played music (including classical music), one or two artists were at work, and horses and carriages were waiting for custom. I ambled around to the fine church of Svatý Mikuláš (Saint Nicholas) and



Saint Nicholas church

found people entering it. Curious as to what might be happening, I went in and discovered that an organ recital was just starting. Although I was tired by now, I bought a ticket for 150 Kčs and sat down to enjoy the music. The church was quite

magnificent inside, with baroque decorations, and the organ sounded quite good. The recital lasted an hour and consisted of music by the Czech composer Černohorský, Bach, Franck and Mozart. Aleš Bárta, the organist, played it very well. Strangely there was no applause after the music had finished – the people just left silently. I found this rather unsettling.

Back at the astronomical clock, a young man was now playing music on a Spanish guitar, and in Wenceslas Square an impromptu concert of music by the Beatles for a captivated audience of young people was coming to an end. Thirsty, I bought myself a can of refreshingly cold *Staropramen* beer. As I ambled along the square sipping it, a rather persistent prostitute tried to tempt me to the pleasures of the flesh, but I managed to get shot of her by saying, '*jděte pryč!*' ('go away!') and 'I'm not interested'. I sat down at the top of the square, near the statue, where I finished the can of beer. After I had looked at a small shrine to the dead, I made my way back to the metro and set off once again for the suburbs.

Back in Kačerov I walked to my accommodation, where I wrote a little more of my diary and went to bed. My evening stroll had been a very pleasant introduction to the city.

Friday, 6 September

I woke and, as further sleep eluded me, I got up and finished writing the previous day's diary. After I had washed, I made myself a cup of tea and sorted out some of my luggage. When ready, I left and walked to the metro station, where I bought a filled bread roll, a banana and an orange. Munching the roll, I boarded a train and set off for the old town centre, where I got out at the Muzeum stop once again. Up in Wenceslas Square, I sat on a bench to eat the rest of my breakfast: the banana and the orange. I relaxed for a while, then took some photographs of my surroundings.

I then set off on foot and did a little bit of window shopping. At the far end of the square I bought postcards and stamps, and was set upon by people who wanted to change money. I found a lot of young people and street musicians in this part of the square; an elderly man was playing an accordion with great gusto. I turned right and walked along the street named *na Příkopě*, where I stopped to look at and listen to some colourfully-dressed South American Indians performing their native music, which was very lively. Finding a philatelic shop nearby, I went in and bought some nice stamps for a colleague of mine at work. I then wandered into a tourist office, where I made a note of an upcoming concert, and afterwards popped into a nearby information centre, where I bought a booklet about events during the month.

I then turned down *Celetná* street in search of a restaurant, for it was now time for some lunch. I found the so-called 'vegetarian' place mentioned in my guidebook and, noting that it offered cheap but basic food, went inside. Unfortunately, as the menu was all in Czech, I could make neither head nor tail of it. An English girl kindly gave me a few hints about what to choose, and then a Czech fellow offered to help. I chose a dish that promised to be good and he ordered it for me. Unfortunately they were no longer serving this particular dish and so I had to make do with a plate containing two frankfurters, soggy mashed potatoes topped with a knob of butter, and a helping of mixed vegetables. I paid very little for all this and the young man ordered a glass of lemonade for me at another counter.

We then sat down to eat and had an interesting conversation. The fellow, whose name was Slavek, apologized for his poor English, but began to loosen up after a little while. As he seemed to be a quiet sort of individual, was a bachelor and a hater of crowds, I had the feeling that he was enjoying talking to me and finding a new friend.



Old Town Square

When we had finished eating, he brought me to his office in an elegant building nearby in the Old Town Square, where he worked as a computer operator for an international journalism company. He introduced me to one of his colleagues, chatted with me and wrote out his name and telephone number. In return, I wrote down my name for him. After we had made an arrangement to meet tomorrow at 11 a.m. I left him and went out into the square, where I took some photographs of the astronomical clock, the square in general and the Church of Saint Nicholas. I then walked to the nearby metro station and travelled for just one stop, hopping out at Malostranská, where I caught a number 22 bus to the Hrad (Castle) on the hill overlooking the Vltava river, saving me a tough walk uphill.

I jumped off the bus at a stop north of the castle, crossed the Powder Bridge and entered the huge and imposing castle via the second courtyard. From here I made



Hrad entrance



Soldiers at the Hrad



View from the Hrad

my way to the first courtyard and then to the square outside, where I took some shots of the fine panoramic view looking down over the river and the city. I then photographed the square itself and the entrance to the Hrad; when the rather theatrically-dressed soldiers goose-stepped back and forth for the change of guard at four o'clock, I photographed them. My intention was to visit the St Vitus Cathedral, but I discovered that it was closed. I walked around the huge cathedral and found the red Basilica of svatý Jiří (Saint George), where I bought a ticket to an orchestral concert at 5.30 p.m. for 300 Kčs. I then wandered over to the Zlatá ulička (Golden Lane): an alley, full of tourists, which contained very picturesque and brightly coloured seventeenth-century cottages. I looked inside one of the tiny dwellings; Franz Kafka had stayed briefly in one of them during World War I.

I then entered the Convent of Saint George to see a little of the collection of Bohemian art before attending the concert. I left my bag in the cloakroom and bought a ticket. I started with the examples of very early religious art and spent some time looking at the various paintings. Although I was tired by now, I found it quite interesting. However, I had to break off my visit at about 5.15 p.m. and rush out of the place. I retrieved my bag and entered the very fine but very bare Romanesque basilica of Saint George, where I joined a small audience.



St Vitus Cathedral, the Basilica of St George, and the Golden Lane

The concert began with Mozart's Divertimento in F major, played by the Pragars Chamber Orchestra. They played well but unfortunately I dozed off several times. The second item was Bach's Concerto in E major for violin and orchestra, played by Lukas David. I did not care much for his playing; he was sharp in the first movement and he was inclined to rush ahead all the time. However, he played Schubert's Rondo in A major much better. After a short interval, the concert ended with Tchaikovsky's powerful and lyrical Serenade Op. 48, which the orchestra played excellently.



The Charles Bridge



I then left, dropped down into the Malá Strana district by the steep steps, passed under the famous bridge tower and crossed the equally famous Charles Bridge, which was lined with artists, musicians and various attractions. Although it was a real tourist trap, it felt wonderful to be here. I paused to admire the fine views of the

Vltava river, then continued along the narrow streets of the old quarter until I reached the Old Town Square. From here I made my way to the Saint Agnes Convent, though I got lost once or twice as I found the streets rather confusing in this part of the city. I arrived at the convent at five minutes past eight, just as the Panocha Quartet recital had started. I paid a mere 175 Kčs for a ticket and was conducted to a room where the members of the famous quartet were waiting. As the pianist Miroslav Langer was now performing some rather obscure music by Dvořák (four of his Waltzes, Op. 54), I was not too bothered about being a little late. A young lady spoke to me and offered me a seat. As soon as the audience began applauding, another man and I were admitted. The hall was spartan, though pleasant, and the local people who made up the small audience were well dressed. The pianist now performed a couple of Fantazias by Voříšek, and then the quartet came out and played Dvořák's familiar and lovely String Quartet No. 10 in E flat, Op. 51. This work made the effort that I had made to attend this concert worthwhile, for I enjoyed the music and the high standard of performance thoroughly. This certainly was no tourist concert!

During the interval I wandered around and bought a programme. In the second half of the concert we were treated to just one work: the monumental and very interesting Piano Quintet No. 2 in A major, Op. 81, by Dvořák. As I had never heard this fine music before, I was very interested to discover it for the first time. The recital had been very enjoyable indeed.

As I was now very hungry and in need of a proper meal, I walked to the Old Town Square and found an old-world *vinárna* (wine cellar) that offered good food and had a menu in English. For some unexplained reason I ended up with two starters: chicken soup and ham on toast with mushrooms. For the main dish I had pork, dumplings and sauerkraut: my first taste of traditional fare. It was good and very filling. I wrote some postcards, paid up, left and headed off homewards, catching the last metro train at midnight. Up in my room, I went to bed and fell asleep very quickly. It had been a pleasant and very rewarding day; this evening's concert had certainly been the highlight.

Saturday, 7 September

After a good shower this morning, I dressed warmly as it was cold and windy outside, then rushed off, without any breakfast, to catch the train to Wenceslas Square. As I had a little time to spare before meeting Slavek at eleven o'clock, I changed some money. I waited at the station in the cold for half an hour, but there was no sign of my new friend. As I was shivering and fed up, I left and found a café where I ate a slice of rye bread with a rather greasy but filling omelette plonked on top of it. In another café I drank some tea and ate an apple pastry. While I was eating it, I looked up and saw Slavek. He apologized for being late; his American aunt had had problems with her key in the door of her flat and a workman had to be found.

As soon as I had finished eating, we left and walked to a bookshop where Slavek had to do something. Afterwards we looked into a few shops and Slavek showed me a couple of cheap restaurants: rather grim places offering unappetizing stodgy and greasy food. We then walked up na Příkopě, where the South American Indians were once again performing their lively music (they must have been frozen!), then went

into a bookshop. Slavek found a good pocket dictionary for me, and I bought it for just 50 Kčs.

We walked the length of the street, then turned up Celetná. I was expecting that Slavek would stop at a restaurant for some lunch, but he did not. We pushed on instead across the Old Town Square and made our way to the Charles Bridge. As it was so dull today, the view of the bridge and the Hrad on top of the hill looked disappointing. We passed by the artists, musicians, puppeteers and souvenir sellers, walked under the bridge tower and began the ascent to the Hrad. However, as we were not far from the church that housed the famous statue of the Child of Prague, we made a little diversion to see it. The church of Panna Marie Vítězná was large and looked grim from the outside; inside it was dark and filled with scaffolding. High up over a side altar and in an illuminated glass case was the statue, dressed today in a white robe. It was interesting to see the statue in its original form and location.



The Child of Prague

We then retraced our steps a little to the rather dull and grimy Malostranská Náměstí and began the steep climb to the castle. It was tough going but, because it was by no means hot today, it was not too exhausting. Up at the top we entered the Hrad, passed the Saint Vitus Cathedral (locked once again on account of a rehearsal for this evening's concert) and entered the gallery attached to the Basilica of Saint George, where I had been on the previous day. We left our bags in the cloakroom and I paid for the two tickets. It turned out that Slavek had been here some years previously but now could not remember much of what he had seen then. Although he took his time about looking at the medieval church art, which I had already seen, I felt that he was only mildly interested in it.

Little by little we worked our way up towards Renaissance and Baroque art, which I found more varied and interesting. However, as we were both tired by now and as there was so much to be seen, our enthusiasm soon began to flag. A welcome

diversion was a small exhibition of some very early Chinese bronze artefacts. I was able to show Slavek on a map where I had been in China. He expressed his interest in Indian and Eastern philosophy and told me that he did yoga. He also seemed to be interested in spiritualism and mysticism. He later admitted that he did not know much about paintings; he told me that he respected Dvořák's music, though I felt that he was mostly interested in books.

We finally finished looking around the gallery and stumbled out, exhausted. We collected our bags and I followed him to his flat, which was just a short walk away, near the big square at Dejvice.

We walked up Kafkova street and entered a tall, grim apartment block, and went up several storeys in a lift. Slavek opened a door and brought me into his equally grim and spartan flat. The main room was a combination of kitchen, living room and bedroom; everything looked old, cheerless and outdated. He made some green tea, produced some rye bread and cheese, and sliced some raw vegetables. I accepted a cup of tea, a slice of the bread with some cheese and a topping of vegetables. He apologized for what he had to offer me.

After we had eaten and chatted for a while, he showed me his other room. It was quite large and contained an extensive library of books, some of which had been photocopied.

After I had looked at everything of interest, I left, having arranged to meet him at 7.30 on the following morning as we had decided to go to Nelahozeves, the village where Dvořák had been born, for a special celebration in honour of Dvořák. Slavek walked with me to the metro station; en route he pointed to the spot in a nearby square where a statue of Lenin had been removed.

Having said goodbye to him, I travelled to the Můstek stop and had a look for somewhere to eat, for I felt badly in need of a good meal. I peeped into a restaurant in the Old Town Square but, as it was too expensive, I ended up in the same *vinárna* where I had eaten on the previous evening. The waitress recognized me. This time I ordered a starter of sardines with onion and bread, a main dish of chicken breast with potato and side salad, and finished with a bowl of fruit and cream. I washed the meal down with some good Budvar beer (the original Budweiser).

While I relaxed after the meal over my beer and looked at some postcards that I had bought, the waitress asked me if two people could share my table. I was joined by a young American fellow and a French girl and we chatted together for a while; the American recognized my accent. We had a pleasant conversation and I finally paid up and left.

As I was tired by now, I had decided to go home and relax, but I noticed some people heading for the Church of Saint Nicholas for a concert. As I was there just before 8.30 p.m., when the concert was due to begin, I decided to go in. For 150 Kčs, I listened to a fairly good concert of music by Bach, Vivaldi, Handel, Telemann, Mozart, Dvořák, Černohorský, Tchaikovsky and Saint-Saëns performed by the Trio con Organo: Petr František, organ, Marie Petrová, soprano and Josef Kolář, cello. It lasted an hour and a half. When I left, I noticed that another concert for later this evening was now being advertised.

I then travelled back to my lodgings on the metro, where I wrote just a few words of my diary and collapsed into my bed, exhausted.

Sunday, 8 September

My alarm clock woke me at 6 a.m.; I rose, got myself ready quickly, breakfasted on tea, a banana and an orange, and left at ten to seven. I arrived at Wenceslas Square and was standing at the statue, waiting for Slavek, at 7.20. When he did not arrive by half past, I began to get anxious. He finally turned up fifteen minutes later and apologized. We walked quickly to the Prague Masaryk Station, which was not far away, and Slavek bought two return tickets to Nelahozeves, which only cost 16 Kčs each. I paid him 32 Kčs, which he reluctantly accepted.

We boarded a beautiful German train, which was being used for this special event; at 8.10 we slowly pulled out of the station and began our leisurely journey to a region north of Prague. To fill in the time, Slavek now told me about his experiences with spiritualism, which I found very hard to accept.

We arrived at the tiny village of Nelahozeves before nine o'clock and got off the train with a large crowd of people. It was only when Slavek bought a programme of the day's events that I realized that today was the 150th anniversary of Dvořák's birth and that this was the composer's birthplace. I recognized the house beside the post office, for I had recently seen a photograph of it in a biography of Dvořák at home.

By now a crowd of people were standing around a tiny church, where a Mass would be celebrated at 9.30. As Slavek was under the impression that President Havel would attend it, we waited outside with the people. However, it turned out that they were waiting only for the arrival of Archbishop Miloslav Vlk. He, some priests and altar boys walked past us slowly towards the side entrance of the church, where the archbishop blessed us. Inside the church could be glimpsed the lights and cameras of a local television station. As such a large number of people could not possibly squeeze inside, we had to content ourselves with listening to the Mass relayed over loudspeakers outside.

As we soon tired of this, we decided to visit the nearby *zámek* or château. This was quite an impressive building high up on a hill, with *sgraffito* decoration on the walls. I paid the small entrance fee for both of us, and we spent some time looking at the collection of paintings in the gallery. Much of what was on show was rather mediocre, but good to see as it was fairly representative of local art.

From the windows high above we could see the village square and, as far as we could make out, President Havel and his wife arriving. We finished our tour of the gallery and went down to the square to join the people who had gathered around a statue of Dvořák, where there was a cluster of microphones. Although the weather was very unsettled and cold, the sun shone briefly now and then. At eleven o'clock, President Havel appeared with the archbishop and was pounced on by the waiting photographers. A man then went to the microphones to welcome us all and introduced the president.

By now I was standing on a park bench and had an excellent view of the proceedings. From this vantage point I could see Mr Havel very clearly and was close enough to have taken a photograph of him – if only I had brought my camera. I was shocked to realize that I was also close enough to shoot him if I had brought a gun, and was astonished that he only had about three bodyguards who, at the moment, were not standing very close to him. He certainly was a man of the people; nobody had stopped all the adults and children who had been running up to him and taking

photographs. He now delivered a short speech in a rich, sonorous voice, and stepped down to general applause. The Chairman of the Antonín Dvořák Association then stood up and gave a speech about the famous composer. When he had finished, a choir sang some of Dvořák's choral music, which was very pleasant. At the end of all this, the President disappeared into the midst of the people and his colleagues followed him. They now went into Dvořák's house (which had been too crowded to visit earlier) and listened to a recital of some of his chamber music, which was relayed to us outside over loudspeakers.

Afterwards we wandered up the main street of the village in search of food. I was hungry by now but Slavek didn't want to eat; for some obscure reason it was his 'day of fast'. We found a stall and he ordered three slices of rye bread and a huge *klobása* or sausage served with a generous dollop of mustard, which I happily demolished. Slavek produced a thermos flask of nettle tea from his bag and we polished it off. It was pleasantly hot and refreshing.

Thus fortified, we returned to the church and had a look inside. It was small and pleasant – no doubt typical of many village churches here. Back at the house, a crowd had gathered to see Mr Havel leave as the recital was now over, and we waited with them. The people applauded when he emerged, but we were unable to see him from where we were standing.

After using a nearby loo and washroom, we wandered around until nearly one o'clock, when we bought tickets for this afternoon's concert at two. This was to be held outdoors in the courtyard of the château, but as it was obvious that it would soon rain, we helped ourselves to a couple of wooden seats and sat in the shelter of a nearby arcade. As our tickets entitled us to see more of the gallery, Slavek encouraged me to go in and have a look; he was obviously not interested in joining me.

Inside, I went up to the second floor and spent some time examining the collection of European art, which was not bad; it included a fine view of boats on the River Thames by Canaletto. I spent the best part of an hour here, then joined Slavek outdoors, where he had been shivering with the cold in his thin but smart suit. We then sat down to listen to the concert. The Suk Chamber Orchestra had been giving a sound balance for the television coverage when I had joined Slavek, and now the conductor, Josef Suk, appeared.

The concert started with Dvořák's lovely Serenade in E major, Op. 22, which the orchestra played beautifully but, as Slavek and I were tired, we both fell asleep during it. I managed to remain awake for the Nocturne in B flat major, Op. 40, which I had never heard before, and the Sextet in A major, Op. 48, which was quite good. Several times it rained heavily and the audience had to run for cover. It was unfortunate that the weather was so bad. At least we were safe and dry where we were sitting.

After the concert, we wandered down in the spitting rain to Dvořák's house and had a look inside. It was quite interesting; it contained some furniture of the period, Dvořák's rocking chair, and also his viola. I bought three postcards of the house and some special stamps that had been issued for the occasion.

As we still had a little time to spare, we walked over to the school but, as there was little of interest inside, we returned to the station and waited for our train.

There was an exhibition of railway memorabilia here and a video of a steam train journey, but we did bother to look at either of them.

The train pulled in at 4.35 p.m. and left five minutes later. Slavek and I fell asleep and woke just as we were approaching Prague. Slavek and I then went walking in search of a restaurant, and I was directed to the dreadful Koruna Automat or self-service eatery that a friend in Dublin had told me about. Slavek told me what was available and, to please him, I ordered a dish of chicken with rice and little salad of celery. Having made a vague plan to meet again sometime, Slavek left abruptly when I carried my food to a table.

I quickly ate the disgusting food, which had cost very little, then crossed over to a nearby bistro, where I ordered a vegetarian pizza, followed by ice cream with fruit. The pizza was not exactly like a traditional Italian pizza, but at least it was tasty. The ice cream and fruit were disappointing: the ice cream was chocolate flavoured (not at all to my liking) and three strawberries (the fruit) were buried in it. I chatted to two men sitting beside me: one Indian, the other Japanese. Their food looked very appetizing: both of them were eating salads.

I then left the place, bought some more postcards nearby and then walked up Wenceslas Square to the metro station. I hopped on to a crowded train and returned to my lodgings, where I relaxed for the rest of the evening and wrote my diary. I then wrote some postcards before going to bed at 11.30 p.m. Although the poor weather during the day had been a disappointment, I was thrilled to have had the privilege of being in Dvořák's home town on this special day, and to have seen the president of the country 'in the flesh'.