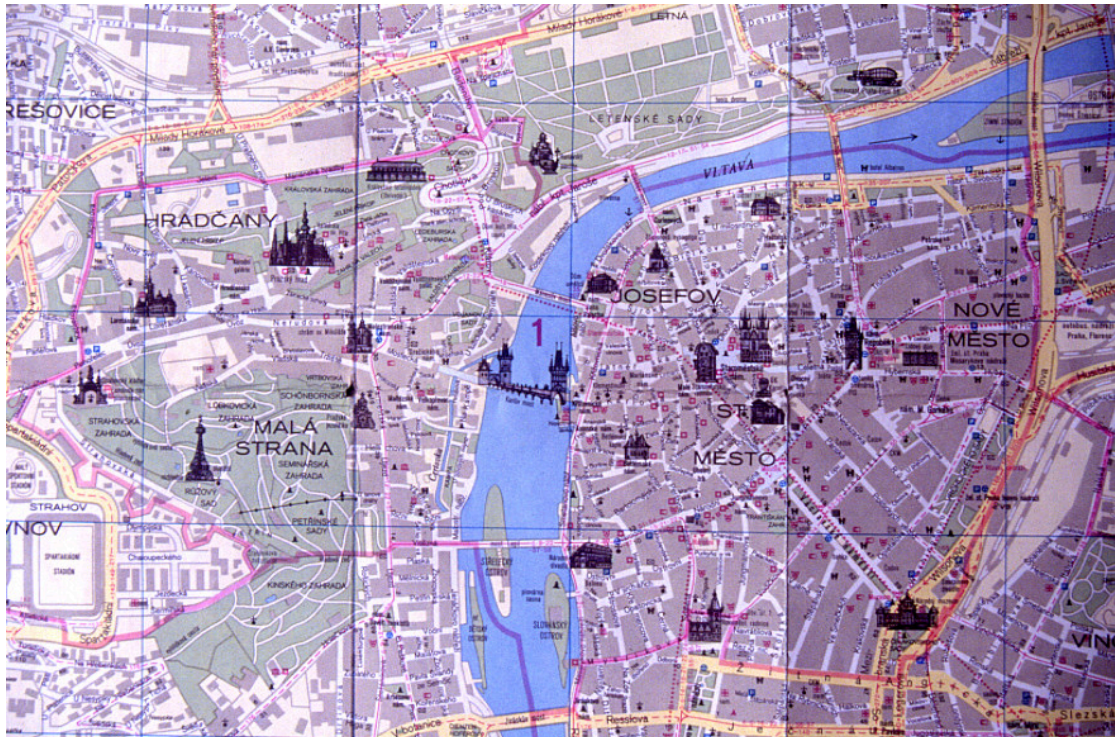




## PART THREE



## RETURN TO PRAGUE

## 5 – PRAGUE

Wednesday, 18 September continued

Having arrived in Prague, we made our way to the metro line and travelled to my place in Krč, where Karen and I went up to the double room that had been kept for us. Karen seemed to be quite happy about us sharing the very large double bed. As usual, Marcela (the owner of the apartment) was nowhere to be seen. We treated ourselves to welcome showers, cups of tea and some fruit that we had bought at the metro station up the road. We then returned to the city centre for a meal. We walked up Wenceslas Square to the Bistro, where we had a good main course served with a salad – something that seemed not to have been available in Slovakia. I chose the 'bio' pizza and we both finished with ice cream.

After the meal we walked back to the metro, returned to the apartment and settled down for the night. Karen fell asleep almost immediately, but I sat up writing my diary and reading before finally going to bed.

Thursday, 19 September

This morning both of us relaxed and did not get up until about nine o'clock. As it looked as though it would be a good day, I made tea and we breakfasted on a couple of oranges. We then left and walked to the metro station, where I bought a couple of tickets from a lady who had a good laugh at my poor Czech.

We travelled to the Muzeum stop and walked slowly along Wenceslas Square, window shopping. From here we went up a street and Karen checked the post at the American Express office, but there was nothing for her – she had been expecting a letter from her mother in Australia.

As we were now in the vicinity, we went to have a look at the church of St Mary-of-the-Snows (Panna Marie Sněžna), which was well hidden behind the other buildings. Its rich Baroque interior was very dark, but impressive.



*Na příkopě*

We then walked up Na příkopě and stopped at the Čedok office, where Karen changed some money. I had a look next door to see what concerts were on. We then walked to the Powder Bridge, which Kim climbed while I enquired about tickets for a concert of music by Mozart at the Valdštejn Palace this evening. Unfortunately, no more tickets were available.

We now ambled through some of the back streets off Celetná, past the Church of Saint Jacob (sv. Jakub), and arrived at Josefov, the Jewish quarter, which neither of us had explored. We were horrified to see such a great horde of tourists in the area. Miraculously, a lady handed us two free tickets: it appeared that somebody had ordered too many. We entered what used to be the High Synagogue and looked at a display of items pertaining to the Jewish faith, such as religious objects and textiles. An American man explained one or two things for us.



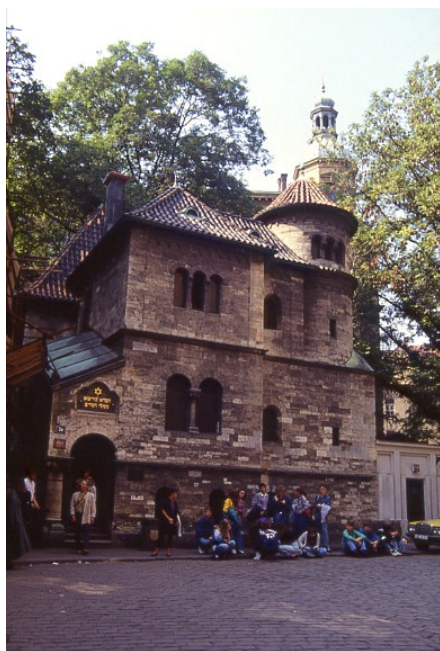
*The Old-New Synagogue, Jewish quarter*

As the lady who was looking after the Old-New Synagogue opposite was about to lock it up and have her lunch, Karen and I walked to the nearby Old Town Square, where we ate ham and salad rolls at an outdoor café. As they only served coffee, I bought a two-litre bottle of water in the square, a little of which I drank. I had to carry this in my backpack for the rest of the day!



*The Old Town Square*





*The Obřadní síň, the Jewish cemetery, and messages left on a tombstone*

When we had finished our lunch, we returned to the Jewish quarter and the Obřadní síň, a grim nineteenth-century house, where we saw a harrowing exhibition of children's drawings from the Jewish ghetto in Terezín, a town 40 kilometres northwest of Prague. After this we visited the overcrowded Old Jewish Cemetery. We had never seen so many tombstones crowded together. We found Rabbi Löw's grave, but not Franz Kafka's. Here we discovered messages that had been written on small pieces of paper, with stones placed on top of them to stop them from being blown away. We photographed a row of these on top of an important tombstone.

We then went into the Klaus Synagogue and there looked at an exhibition of grim modern paintings and more Jewish religious artefacts, including old printed books. It was all very interesting, but afterwards we had had enough and did not think it worthwhile paying for tickets to see the Old-New Synagogue.

Instead, we headed for the river Vltava, passing through the Old Town Square, and stopped at a small bakery to buy a couple of sweet buns. We crossed the river

via the Mánesův bridge, passing the fine Rudolfinum building; it was normally used for concerts but now it was undergoing reconstruction.

On the other side of the river, in Malá Strana, we walked to the Valdštejn Palace and found the gate into the gardens open. We went inside and found a large and pleasant garden containing fountains, which faced the impressive back of the building. As there was a café, we decided to sit down and relax, for Karen had several postcards to write. We ordered tea and after a while I went off to see if tickets for this evening's concert could be procured here. I found posters advertising the concert, but nobody could tell me anything about it. Disappointed, I rejoined Karen.



*The Church of Saint Nicholas*

After a while we left and walked around to the Church of Saint Nicholas, the inside of which neither of us had seen. We managed to get in without paying; we had a look at the vast interior, which was full of elaborate Baroque features.

We then headed for the Charles Bridge and the Klementium but, as we were still hoping to attend the concert in the Valdštejn Palace and probably did not have enough time, we simply pottered around Kampa Island, which Karen had not seen before. We returned to the Palace at about 4.30 to discover a man stapling a 'sold out' notice over the posters.

We now decided not to bother about going to a concert this evening but to have a good meal together. When we approached the Charles Bridge, Karen spotted some dolls for sale in a tourist shop. As they were very cheap, I bought two. We crossed the bridge, pausing to look at various artists' work, and slowly made our way to the Old Town Square. We headed for the reliable *vinárna*, where we had quite a good meal of chicken with ham, cheese, rice and vegetables. Afterwards we ordered a bowl of ice cream and strawberries, then tea and coffee.

We relaxed afterwards, made plans for the following day, then left for our lodgings, walking to the Muzeum station. Back at the apartment we had showers and began writing our diaries. Later, at about 9.30, Marcela invited us downstairs for a glass of wine, which she had promised us this morning. We joined her and her friend, a younger-looking man, and spent a long time chatting about many different

things. Although the man's English was not particularly good, he could understand us perfectly; Marcela, although she spoke English hesitantly, displayed a much better command of the language and had quite a wide vocabulary. We told them about ourselves, and they told us about themselves. It transpired that Karen and the man were both quite *au fait* with computers. We discussed Czechoslovakia and the communist system that they had had to endure, and talked about the countries that we had visited. I was quite surprised to discover that Marcela had travelled quite widely in Europe. It was obvious that they were impressed by our knowledge of their country, that we had read some of Milan Kundera's books, and that I could pronounce the author's name correctly!

I just sipped a couple of glasses of white wine, but the others quickly drank the contents of two bottles while we chatted. We finally left for bed shortly before 1 a.m. and said goodnight.

Friday, 20 September

I slept well during the night but woke up with a severe pain in my stomach that quickly turned into spasms. After I had visited the bathroom, I lay in bed writhing and groaning, then got up to take some tablets that I had brought with me. I felt dreadful. When Karen got up, I apologized to her and she left for some more sightseeing. She showed very little sympathy towards me!

Later I sat up in bed to write the previous day's diary, and eventually the pain began to ease off. Marcela came in with Karen's washing and I paid her for my share of the room as she was going off to work and I would not see her again. I thanked her for everything and she shook hands with me. After she had gone, I stayed in bed and finished writing my diary.

When the spasms eventually eased off, I began to feel a little better. I got up, made some tea, ate a banana, then had a refreshing shower. I dressed and, at about midday, walked to the shop at the metro station, where I bought a couple of small plain rolls. I then travelled into town, stopping at the usual station, Muzeum. I walked slowly down Wenceslas Square, munching my rolls. As I was looking out for some presents, I did some window shopping. At the bottom of the square I changed some money, then made my way to the nearby philatelic shop, where I bought some more sets of stamps. From here I walked up the street that led to the Tyl theatre and found another philatelic shop, where I spotted a nice set of stamps and a tee shirt that I thought might suit a friend of mine.

Later I made my way to the Old Town Square and the building that housed a 'Mozart and Prague' exhibition. I paid a small entrance fee and spent a short visit looking at a collection of engravings of Mozart and his contemporaries, and also some views of Prague as it was in their day. I found the latter very interesting.

I then ambled towards the Klementium (see photo on page 20, Chapter 2). I was not too surprised to discover that the only part open to the public was a hall, formerly a chapel, which housed an exhibition of Mozart memorabilia. I was more interested in the hall than the exhibition, but the latter turned out to be quite fascinating – especially some examples of the composer's music manuscripts. Afterwards I wandered around the building and found another entrance that appeared to be open to the public. On some display panels inside I was about able to

read about other rooms within the Klementium, but all of them were currently closed to the public.

Afterwards I returned to the Old Town Square and went into the town hall. I quickly discovered that the interior had been modernized and was uninteresting. I climbed to the top of the tower, which afforded a good view of the old town centre. By now the weather was dull and it was threatening to rain.

Back in the square I popped into the building where Slavek worked, but I was told that he was not there today. I changed more money and bought the set of stamps and tee shirt that I had seen earlier in the day. As it had begun to spit with rain, I now hurried to the Můstek metro station, where I caught a train to Muzeum, then changed to another one and returned to the apartment. By now I was feeling rather exhausted as my stomach was almost empty.

It was raining heavily when I reached Kačerov and, as I only had my umbrella for protection and was wearing sandals, I took off my socks for the short walk home. Back at the apartment, I went upstairs to our room and found a note from Karen. She had returned at 3.30 p.m., had left later to go to a concert, and wondered if I would be able to join her at the *vinárna* in the Old Town Square at about 8 p.m. for a meal if I felt well enough.

I lay down on the bed for a short rest, did a little packing, and later left for town, having dressed a little more formally and brought my raincoat as well as the umbrella. Just because I had done this, the weather began to improve! As I had plenty of time, I got out at Muzeum and took a gentle stroll down Wenceslas Square. By now the sky was blue, though it was beginning to get dark; the lights came on when I arrived in the Old Town Square. Because of the bad weather, it was devoid of street musicians. However, a rock group was tuning up and checking the sound balance of their amplified instruments. I watched and listened to them for a little while, then wandered over to the *vinárna* shortly before eight o'clock. Just as I did so, Karen stepped out of a new café next door. We went into the *vinárna*, which was quite crowded, waited for a little while, and then asked a middle-aged couple if we could join them. I could not make out what language they were speaking.

Because of the amount of people present, the waitress became quite confused and forgetful. We waited a long time for our drinks, and eventually the waitress brought the two main courses, having forgotten about a bowl of chicken soup that I had ordered. I reminded her and it arrived minutes later. Karen had not been given what she had ordered but, as it was a more expensive dish and the mistake was not hers, she was happy enough to eat it. Later we paid up and left.

We then wandered off to Wenceslas Square with the intention of splashing out on a hot drink at the Europa Hotel. However, as there was a 9 Kčs entrance charge and because they had no cakes on offer (which Karen wanted), we left and returned to the bottom of the square and entered a nice restaurant in which we had been before; it had a fine, ornate wooden ceiling. I ordered tea for myself, Karen ordered coffee, and we both had crêpes with fruit and cream. Karen also demolished a bag of salted almonds that had come with our drinks. The bill came to 138 Kčs – the price of a meal elsewhere!

Stuffed and happy, we strolled back to the Muzeum metro station and caught a train back to our place. In our room we sorted out our things and did some packing. I



eventually went to bed, intending to write my diary but, as I was so tired, I put it away and lay down for a night's sleep.

Saturday, 21 September

I woke early this morning but, as there was no hurry, I lay on in bed, dozing; Karen was in no hurry to get up either. It was a cheerless, foggy morning. Karen had decided to leave this evening and travel by train to Budapest. I got up later, had a good shower, dressed and made tea for us both. This and an orange served as a simple breakfast. Slowly the fog began to lift and the sun shone. Karen asked the young boy in the apartment to ring Marcela, as she wanted to tell her about her plans. I asked another boy about a pair of socks of mine that had gone missing, but he failed to find them.

We left the apartment at about eleven o'clock and I walked for the last time along Nad pískovnou to the Kačerov metro station. I bought three tickets from the lady who found my Czech so amusing, and we travelled together into town. Karen kindly took my backpack. We spotted an English girl with a copy of *The Rough Guide to Czechoslovakia* and brought her and a Dutch couple to the Můstek metro station. While I went into the Bistro for an early lunch, Kim went off with the others to find a bank, but returned shortly afterwards as the bank was closed. She had a drink with me while I ate a pizza, a salad, a crêpe containing fruit and cream, and drank a glass of mineral water. The meal cost 86 Kčs and just about used up my money.



*View of the Vltava river from the Charles Bridge*

As I still had about half an hour to kill, Karen and I wandered to the Old Town Square, which looked terrific in the bright sunshine and clear blue sky, and then followed the tourists to the Charles Bridge, where I took my last glimpse of the Hrad. As there were so many tourists on the bridge, we did not attempt to go near it. We turned back, looked into a few shops, and then made our way to the Staroměstská metro station. Karen popped into a chemist's shop to buy some paper tissues but, as she could not find any, I gave her an unused packet that I had in my bag.

We went down into the station and Karen travelled with me to Malostranská, where she got off in order to go to the Hrad. We kissed goodbye and thanked each



other for our company and tolerance. All in all, Karen had been quite an agreeable companion during our short time together.

I continued my journey in the train, got out at Dejvická and hopped on a number 119 bus for the airport. Although I arrived there ten minutes late, it did not matter at all. My luggage was checked through to Dublin, but I would have to check in again at Heathrow. Shortly afterwards I walked through the security and passport controls and found myself in the departure area. I killed time very effectively by writing my diary, bringing it bang up to date just as we were called to board the plane.

At about three o'clock we took off and soared up into the heavens, leaving beautiful Prague behind. Although I had very much enjoyed my stay and was sorry to leave this wonderful city, I was ready to return home by now. I thought that it would be nice to visit Prague some time again in the future, but did not think that it would be worthwhile journeying out into the countryside again, as so much of it seemed to be industrialized and ugly.