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It was my first evening on my own in the Czech Republic. I'd accumulated a handful of victories that day: finding an Internet café, finding and using an international calling card, and deciphering the public tramcar system. This evening's challenge was clear: obtain and consume dinner. A simple task for a carnivore well versed in a Slavic tongue. A daunting one, however, for a lactose-intolerant, vegetarian Anglophone in a foreign country whose cuisine boasts one meatless meal: "*Smažený Sýr*" or "Fried Cheese".

I decided to explore the options near my apartment. I lived off the beaten track (the one worn in with tourist's ergonomic sandals and sneakers) so English translation was sporadic and often erroneous. I chose a small tavern populated with a smattering of local flavor, speaking in hushed *háček*s over cool beer and shivering candlelight. I sat by myself at what looked like a mahogany picnic table and slowly relieved myself of my burdens: wool mittens, a fleece lined hat, a crocheted scarf, and a down coat. I removed my only artillery: a small book, provided during orientation, entitled "A Brief History of the Czech Nation". A waiter handed me a menu and sat down across from me. I stared at the unfamiliar coagulations of consonants. The waiter was still there, so I considered him an ally and proceeded to try his English.

"What is this?"

A series of gesticulations, butchered Czech and English words, and a lot of gestalt later I had concocted a feast of side orders and was anticipating, although not necessarily getting, asparagus, mushrooms, and broccoli. As I waited to learn the outcome of my pantomimed order, the waiter pointed at my book and motioned for me to pass it to him. He leafed through, recognizing pictures and proper nouns, and embarked upon my first Czech History lesson. He pointed out Alexander Dubček, the president of the communist party of Czechoslovakia whose democratic initiatives angered Soviet powers. He wrote '1968' in my notebook, the year of a period of political liberalization known as the Prague Spring. He pointed at the Plastic People of the Universe and Václav Havel, the revolutionary band and the quondam playwright turned post-communist President, respectively. He translated his complex emotions and eloquent opinions into simple qualitative judgments in self-conscious English. Antonín Novotný was bad. Charter 77 was good.

Despite the linguistic barrier, his voice and gestures were passionate, proud, and eager. His account of the history of the Czech Nation was intimate and personal. He spoke with pride, like a father describing the obstacles and successes of his only son.

The passion he felt for the history of the Czech Republic was so personal because it was the passion he felt for his own life. The history of the Czech Republic was so intimately intertwined with his own personal story. He lived through its occupation. He fought for its emancipation. Now, he and his fellow countrymen have the task of overseeing its maturation without losing sight of the past. I can recount the events of the American Revolution with pride for the bravery and achievement of our founding fathers, but I am detached from it. I was born into a free country. I enjoy liberties that my forefathers earned. No matter what qualms I have with the American democratic system, freedom has always been a premise in my life. The man across the table from me earned his freedom and his country.

My meal came, covered in cheese and butter of course, but I didn't care. I ate silently, absorbing everything I could from my plate, my surroundings, and my company. As I took out a purse full of crowns, I learned that my waiter and companion was actually the restaurateur. He declined my money, multiplying my debt to him.

The history of America is in museums that close after six and make you check your bag. The history of the Czech Republic was sitting right across from me, doodling numbers and dates in my notebook. That is what makes the Czech Republic such a unique and rewarding experience. It is a place where history is not diluted by time, filtered by bias, censored by partisanship, or anesthetized by dull textbook prose. Their history is still vibrantly alive. Their wounds have only recently formed delicate scars and their victories still beat and pulsate. It is a place where every man and woman is a Homeric historian. Their eyes witnessed history, their hands shaped history, and their bodies bear history as wrinkles and smile lines.