

We greeted Sunday morning somewhat hungry ... remember this is an apartment with a full kitchen but an empty refrigerator. By 9AM we all up and about and decided to go to City Center next door to get something to eat. When we reached the plaza it seemed as all of Prague was there. Tents and trucks and hordes of people were setting up a myriad of exhibitions as if a rock concert was to take place. In fact, there was to be a concert in the plaza that day and this was just a prelude. Ignoring the crowds we found our way to a small café, ordered croissants and coffee (right) and proceeded to plan out the day. Sonja, because of her age and her recent bypass surgery on her legs, could not join us on any of our adventures that day and suggested that we savor the city on our own. With maps and books in hand we felt we could adequately explore the city and Castle Hill on our own. Sonja and Dagmar would meet us by early evening at this same plaza and together we would take the underground followed by a brief walk to a local eatery on the Castle side of the city called Little Quarter. The name of the restaurant was "Sedmi Svabu" or "Seven Schwabes" (something to the effect of seven ethnics) where her family would meet us for a family meal --- Sonja's treat. Finishing our "breakfast" we hailed a cab of Sonja and headed off to see the sights of Prague.



Initially we decided to ignore City Center, Jewish Quarter and New Town with the throng of humanity, far too much confusion and activity. We skirted the plaza, wound our way down some side streets and headed for the Charles Bridge (Karlův Most) (right) – the gateway to the west side of the City and Prague Castle. No sooner did we approach the famous bridge than a sea of humanity mobbed us. This was a Sunday and the locals and tourists all seemed to descend of this most popular of sites. Tourists were everywhere – Italian, German and Japanese but few Americans. Nothing like the postcards where the bridge is devoid of people. We're on our way to the Little Quarter.



Little Quarter is the part of Prague least affected by recent history. Hardly any new building has taken place here since the late 18th century. The quarter is rich in splendid Baroque palaces and old houses with attractive signs. Founded in 1257, it is built on the slopes below the Castle hill with magnificent views across the river to the Old Town Hall. The center of the Little Quarter has always been Little Quarter Square, dominated by the Church of St. Nicholas. The Grand Prior's millwheel at Kampa Island still turns, pilgrims still kneel before the Holy Infant of Prague in the Church of Our Lady Victorious, and music rings out from churches and palaces as it did when Mozart stayed here. Until 1741, Charles Bridge was the only crossing over the Vltava River. It is 1,700 feet long and is built of sandstone blocks, rumored to be strengthened by mixing mortar with eggs. The bridge was commissioned by Charles IV in 1357 to replace the Judith Bridge. The bridge's original decoration was a simple cross. The first statue, of St. John Nepomuk, was added in 1683. Prague's most familiar monument, this bridge connects the Old Town with the Little Quarter. Although it is now pedestrianized (no motor vehicle traffic), at one time it could take four carriages abreast. Today, due to wear and tear, many of the statues on the bridge are copies; the originals are kept in the Lapidarium of the National Museum. On the Old Town side, the Gothic Old Town Bridge



Tower (above) is one of the finest buildings of its type in existence. Built at the end of the 14th century, it is a fitting ornament to the Charles Bridge and was also an integral part of the Old Town's fortifications. To walk the length of Charles Bridge is an experience – statues line each side of the bridge and the view of castle Hill beckons the visitor to keep up the pace. At the end of Charles Bridge are the Little Quarter Bridge Tower and the Judith Bridge Tower (right). Passing under its arched entryway one passes into history.



Today, on this brief sojourn we walk slowly through the narrow streets, pass St. Nicholas' Church and elect to bypass Prague Castle initially and head further up the hill to Strahov Monastery (left). Founded in 1410 by an austere religious order, the Premonstratensians, Strahov rivaled the seat of the Czech sovereign in size. Destroyed by fire in 1258, it was rebuilt in the Gothic style, with later Baroque additions. Its famous library is over 800 years old and despite being ransacked by many invading armies, is one of the finest in Bohemia. Strahov also escaped Joseph II's dissolution of

the monasteries by changing its library into a research institute. We explored its many courtyards and inside the church (the library would have taken too long) and finally decided to have lunch at an outdoor café just outside its Museum. Over a lunch of chicken and rice, wine and beer we savored an authentic Czech meal while at the same time admiring the elevated view of all of Prague (right). I got a kink in my neck just swinging my head from looking at my lunch plate to looking at the city vista spread out before us. We lingered here for quite a while. But eventually we had to move on and head for Prague Castle. By now the crowds were thinning out and we made our way down one sloped hill and up the cobblestoned road into Prague Castle.



The history of Prague begins with the Castle (right), founded in the 9th century by Prince Borivoj. Its commanding position high above the river Vltava soon made it the center of the lands ruled by the Premyslids. The buildings enclosed by the Castle walls included a palace, three churches and a monastery. In about 1320 a town called Hradcany was founded in part of the Castle's outer bailey. The Castle has been rebuilt many times, most notably in the reigns of Charles IV and Vladislav Jagiello. After a disastrous fire in 1541, the badly damaged buildings were rebuilt in Renaissance style and the castle enjoyed its cultural heyday under Rudolph II. Later Hapsburgs resided in Vienna, using the Castle only occasionally. Since 1918 it has been the seat of the president of the Republic. We enter the Castle through a guarded First Courtyard gate and then the Mathias Gate (1614) onto the Second Courtyard. From this vantage point we see the



buildings housing the seat of the Republic's government. Passing through another gate we finally enter the main courtyard and see St. Vitus's Cathedral. It is a most impressive Gothic cathedral (left). We explore its inner chapels and main altar and move on to see the other sights – St. George's Convent and St. George's Basilica. By now the hour is getting late and we still have to meet Sonja and Dagmar by the City Center. Taking leave of Prague Castle, knowing we would return the next day or two, we make our way down the hill, through the Little Quarter, past St. Nicholas Church and onto the Charles Bridge. But before we hit the bridge we stopped at a local store to pick up some "breakfast items", drinks and some Czech red wine. The prices were nominal, certainly lower than we expected. Our "funny money" bought us a lot. The walk back

was leisurely as we had ample time. By now we were not so much awed by the sights as much as we admired the laid-back Sunday atmosphere and the recognizable sights that surrounded us. We felt safe and comfortable walking the Bridge back to our apartment.

After a clean up from the day's busy wanderings we headed out to the plaza to meet Sonja and Dagmar again. In retelling our day's adventures both seemed pleased that our first day went off smoothly and that Prague exceeded all of our expectations. The only downside was the sheer number of tourists but then again it told us that we were not the only ones who appreciated a historical and a culturally rich city. I again exchanged US dollars for more "funny money" and the four of us headed for the underground for the short ride under the river to the Little Quarter side again. In purchasing our ticket we needed help (nothing in English). The wait was brief and before we knew it we were exiting the station on the other side of the river.

The walk to the restaurant was brisk and of some distance. This surprised us as Sonja had some difficulty walking. But we kept a steady but slow pace. We passed many embassies on the way to the restaurant and when we finally got there the look on Sonja's face was pure relief. (Maybe a taxi would have been better?) We entered a dimly lit subterranean dining room, found an empty table and awaited the rest of the family. We pored over the menu, ordered drinks and before long Dagmar's husband and Sonja's granddaughter (by Joseph her son) and her boyfriend arrived. The six of us exchanged the usual pleasantries and compulsory hugs



and settled in for an enjoyable evening. One thing that I neglected to mention is that Sonja speaks only Czech and German, with some Polish, Romanian and English. Dagmar only speaks Czech and German. The rest of the family speaks only Czech. So how did we communicate? Not easily but everyone seemed to understand the situation. Sonja was the main "interpreter" as she carried this monstrous (actually very thick) Czech-English pocket dictionary (left) that she referred to whenever she got stuck on a word or phrase. Her English was passable but adequate ... her Polish weak but OK but we all understood each other in spite of the fact that it took a few minutes of dictionary look-up and back-and-forth interpretation to get our messages across. This was not an uncomfortable situation, by any means. It was a pleasant, slow paced discussion that was intermingled with much laughter and humor (right). The beer and wine sure helped

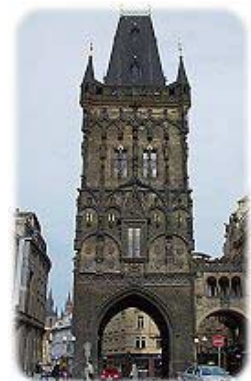


to ease the situation. Our meal (all Czech cuisine) and more Czech beer and wine were ordered and we settled in for the evening. In time the meals were consumed, the drinks all emptied and the hour was getting late. It was getting on to 11PM and tomorrow (Monday) was a workday. We said our goodbyes to the granddaughter and her friend and the five of us headed down the street to the car for the brief drive back to the apartment. Sonja was staying with us again this night. At the apartment building entrance we said some more goodbyes to Dagmar and husband and entered the dark and dingy hallway to the elevator, which would carry us up to the 3rd floor palatial pad (humor). Sleep came fast for us all.

Monday in Prague ... Sonja told us that she has to return to Jilcin that afternoon. Not wanting to miss an opportunity we spend virtually all morning talking about family things in general. Our conversation was held over a typical European breakfast of coffee, cold cuts, cheeses and yogurt. The conversation was labored as Sonja had to refer to her dictionary often ... but we managed to keep the conversation going for a couple of hours. Every so often Sonja would forget herself and revert to pure Czech but we politely steered her back to English and Polish. Before long it was time for Sonja to head for the bus station. Before we left we gave Sonja the promised money to pay for her expenses in joining us in Prague. She initially refused the money; our and hers temperament were clashing over this issue, but we prevailed and peace was restored as we left the apartment, hailed a cab and made our way to the Florenc bus station. After securing her ticket, saying our parting words and exchanging hugs, we left Sonja waiting for the bus (due in one hour). Her trip back home would be less than three hours. We were disappointed that Sonja could join us in Prague without her son Joseph. We paid for an apartment that sleeps six and Sonja only stayed two nights. Still, it was wonderful to see and meet her after all these years. Who know, time and circumstance allowing, we may see her again, in Jilcin this time, perhaps next year. We headed out into the city for another round of sightseeing ... it was 1:30PM.



We decided to walk from the Florenc bus station all the way to the Prague Castle area, a distance of 3 miles; along the way visiting all the sights we bypassed the previous day (Sunday). We navigated our way past the Municipal House (left) and the Powder Tower (right) next door and towards Old Town Hall. The Municipal House is Prague's most prominent Art Nouveau building, which stands on the site of the former Royal Court palace, the King's residence between 1383 and 1485. The mosaic on the façade is called "Homage to Prague". The Powder Tower, one of several on this site since the 11th century, formed one of the 13 entrances to the Old Town. It acquired its name when it was used to store gunpowder in the 17th century. It had little defensive value; its rich sculptural decoration was intended to add prestige to the adjacent Royal Court Building. Old Town Square preserves some of Prague's colorful history. On the north side the square is dominated by the white façade of the Baroque Church of St. Nicholas. The east side boasts two superb examples of the architecture of the times: the House at the Stone Bell and the Rococo Golz-Kinsky Palace. The Church of Our Lady before Tyn includes a solid gold effigy of the Virgin Mary; astronomer Tycho Brabe is buried here. The south side holds a colorful array of houses of Romanesque/Gothic origin, with unique house signs.



One of the most striking buildings in Prague is the Old Town Hall (left), established in 1338 after King John agreed to set up a town council. Over the centuries a number of old houses were knocked together as Old Town Hall expanded, and it now consists of a row of colorful Gothic and Renaissance buildings, most of which have been carefully restored after heavy damage inflicted by the Nazis in the 1945 Prague Uprising. The tower is 228 feet high and offers a spectacular view of the city. The Town Hall Clock (right) acquired its first clock at the beginning of the 15th century. In 1490, when it was rebuilt by a master clockmaker called Hanus, the councilors were so anxious to prevent him from recreating his masterpiece elsewhere, that they blinded the poor man. The mechanism of today was perfected between 1552 and 1572. The centerpiece of the show that draws a crowd of spectators every time the clock strikes the hour is the procession of the 12 Apostles (right). First the figure of Death, the skeleton on the right of the clock, gives a pull on the rope that he holds in his right hand. In his left hand is an hourglass, which he raises and inverts. Two windows then open and the clockwork Apostles (or to be precise 11 of the Apostles plus St. Paul) move slowly round, led by St. Paul. At the



end of this part of the display, a cockcrows and the clock chimes the hour. The other moving figures are a Turk, who shakes his head from side to side, Vanity, who

looks at himself in a mirror and Greed, adapted from the original medieval stereotype of a Jewish moneylender. After a show like this everything else seems to pale so we proceed on to Prague Castle.

Again we traverse Charles Bridge through the two towers (Old Town Bridge Tower and the Little Quarter Bridge Tower), navigate our way through Mostek Street and decide to finally see the inside of the Church of St. Nicholas. The Church of St. Nicholas divides and dominates the two sections of Little Quarter Square. Building began in 1703, and the last touches were put to the glorious frescoes nave in 1761. It is the acknowledged masterpiece of father-and-son architects Christoph and Kilian Dientzenhofer, Prague's greatest exponents of high Baroque, although neither lived to see its completion. The statues, frescoes and paintings inside the church are by leading artists of the day, and include "Crucifixion" of 1646 by Karel Skreta. Extensive renovation in the 1950s reversed the damage caused by 200 years of leaky cladding and condensation. Leaving this church we move on to explore Prague Castle again, which takes another 2 hours. This day the crowds are thinner and we get to see up close the treasures on display. After the Castle we feel it is time to explore the lesser sights on the west side of Prague.



We stroll over to visit the Observation Tower (left). The most conspicuous landmark in Petrin Park in Little Quarter is an imitation Eiffel Tower, built for the Jubilee Exhibition in 1891. The octagonal Petrin tower is only 200 feet tall, a quarter the height of the Eiffel Tower. The only way to the viewing platform is to climb up the 299 steps of its spiral staircase. We are rewarded by the views (right). After an hour of admiring the majestic views of Prague we descend the 299 steps, use of WC (water closet) facilities (cost is 5 cents) and head towards The Loreto.

Ever since its construction in 1626, the Loreto (right) has been an important place of pilgrimage. Katerina of Lobkowitz, a Czech aristocrat who was very keen to promote the legend of the Santa Casa of Loreto, commissioned it. The heart of the complex is a copy of the house believed to be the Virgin Mary's. The Santa Casa was enclosed by cloisters in 1661, and a Baroque façade 60 years later by Christoph and Kilian Dientzenhofer. The grandiose design and miraculous stories about the Loreto were part of Ferdinand II's campaign to recatholicize the Czechs. After another 90 minutes exploring this treasure we finally decided to call it a day and started to head back to the apartment in the Jewish Quarter. The walk back was even more leisurely now ...as we were totally at ease here in



Prague.

Purchasing more wine and breakfast items we made our way to City Center. By 6:30PM we were refreshed and renewed. We found a nice restaurant (as they all seemed to be), had an enjoyable Czech meal and, sated, started back to the apartment for the night. On the way back we decided, at the last moment, to attend one of the many concerts being held nightly at a variety of venues ... in churches, concert and music halls. I had a particular fondness for Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" and it was that concert, together with some Mozart and Bach selections, being played at a non-descript music hall that appealed to me. As tickets were less than \$5 each we bought the tickets, ambled our way to a second floor packed music hall and found two seats. The next 65 minutes was delightful and relaxing. The 6-piece chamber orchestra was masterful and adept. By 9:30PM the concert was over and we exited to a brisk night air and started for the Old Town Hall plaza. There we lingered with the many locals and tourists alike who took in the many architectural jewels being bathed in floodlights. By 10:30PM it was lights out. Another great day in Prague.



Tuesday came early ... breakfast was consumed and we again were faced with the decision of where to go and what to see. We tried again to visit the synagogues of the Jewish Quarter. Large crowds and long lines did not appeal to us so we decided to just walk the Jewish Quarter, Old Town and New Town. For the next four hours we just ambled our way past new as well as familiar landmarks. In time we came upon Wenceslas Square (left). Hotels and restaurants occupy many of the buildings around Wenceslas Square, which is dominated by the equestrian statue of St. Wenceslas and the National Museum behind it. Nearby are the State Opera, meticulously refurbished in the 1980s and the Former Federal assembly next to it. The national Museum, built in 1890 as a symbol of national prestige, is a grand building with its monumental staircase. The promenade of the Square is wall-to-wall people and we linger here only briefly for there are other sites we wish to visit.

Walking down the meandering side streets we eventually find ourselves in Charles Square in the southern part of New Town. Fortunately, the park in Charles Square offers a peaceful and welcome retreat. Many of the buildings around the Square belong to the Czech Technical University and the statues in the center represent writers and scientists, reflecting the academic environment. Across the street is the Jesuit College founded in the 17th century, which has been used as a hospital since the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773. Next on our stop were the Botanical Gardens, though part of the Charles University, was open to the public. We spend an enjoyable hour here admiring the flora in the many greenhouses. Cactuses were our favorites as they reminded us of New Mexico. Moving on, we spend 60 minutes walking over to Vysehrad (right). According to an ancient legend, Vysehrad was the first seat of Czech Royalty. It was from this spot that Princess Libuse is said to have prophesized the future glory of the city of Prague. However, archeological research indicates that the first castle on Vysehrad was not built until the 10th century. The fortress suffered a turbulent history and was rebuilt many times. Today, it is above all a peaceful place with parks and unrivaled views of the Vltava Valley and Prague. The fascinating cemetery is the last resting place of many famous Czech writers, actors, artists and musicians. By now, it is late afternoon and the walk back to the apartment is another 2 miles and 90 minutes. We elect to depart and say that our visit has been most rewarding. Back at the apartment we again clean up, go out for a bite to eat and catch another concert, this time at Church of St. Nicholas in the plaza next door. As tomorrow evening we leave by train for Krakow, we settle in early.



[Continued in Section 4](#)