

An American's Museum of Communism in Prague

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Being a private enterprise of American businessman Glenn Spicker is just one of the many poetic ironies of the first museum dedicated to the Communist era of Czechoslovakia. Having studied Soviet foreign policy at the University of Essex, Spicker fed his curiosity of life behind the Iron Curtain by settling down in Prague after the fall of Communism and finding success by opening up a jazz club, a bagel shop, and a bar. Filling a gap in the market, he worked with London-based Czech émigré filmmaker and exhibition curator Jan Kaplan to establish what is still the only museum in the country that deals solely with its Communist past. The current museum located in Prague's Republic Square (*Náměstí Republiky*) is the new version. The old museum used to be located beside a casino and a McDonald's along Prague's busy shopping street (*Na Příkopě*) and was populated with discarded objects worth a total of 28,000 USD bought from flea markets and junkshops. Presenting a rather cramped and inconspicuous exhibit of 100 artefacts collected during the 1990s, the old museum looked like a dusty cabinet of curiosities devised by Communist imaginaries of the West. The new museum, however, resembles a formal one spanning 1500 square meters and has 62 panels. The museum's narration now provides visitors both Czech and English texts and display captions. Incorporating photographs from the Archive of the Czech News Agency, the Security Services Archive, the Archive of the Association of Forced Military Camp Laborers, and the personal collections of leading Czech photographers, the museum also presents its visitors new me-

dia such as short video testimonies with English subtitles, short films, posters, as well as mock-ups of various spaces that showcase what life was like during that time.

The first encounter with the museum already sets the tone of the visit. As the museum's entrance begins with a flight of gray stairs, it already distances the visitors away from reality and begins their journey to the past. A black statue of Karl Marx standing below a huge three-dimensional red star hanging from the ceiling welcomes visitors at the top of the steps, where they enter the permanent exhibit. Just like the old museum, the new museum's exhibit also follows Kaplan's original »three-act tragedy« namely »The Dream«, »The Reality«, and »The Nightmare«. These three sections are differentiated on the museum map according to colour, blue, red, and grey respectively. The first act goes back to the foundation of Czechoslovakia, the beginnings of the Communist movement as well as the aftermath of the Second World War. The second act shows various aspects of so-called everyday life in Communist Czechoslovakia talking about themes such as nationalization, propaganda, and limited travel. The third act shows how the Communist regime abused power through political trials and labour camps.

The first act mainly has a white background with a black text creating a neutral starting point. This section of the museum is well-lit with the help of the building's high ceiling. The exhibit begins with the independence of the Czechoslovak Republic. The first panel has a huge photo of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk on the panel itself and a smaller one hanging on the wall. A quote by him is found on the panel which says, »So it would seem we already have democracy; now we just need some democrats.« From the beginning the exhibit already highlights the

democratic nature of Czechoslovakia and its relations with the West. As the narration continues, it uses words such as »bloomed« to describe the organic nature of democracy and even describes Czechoslovakia as »the last bastion of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe«.

To further support this, the exhibit depicts a close relationship between Czechoslovakia and the United States prior to the Communist regime in the country. It highlights the international relation theory that democratic nations help each other by citing examples such as the instrumental assistance from Woodrow Wilson and the USA for Czechoslovakia's independence from the Austrian Archduchy as well as the efforts of the United States to liberate Czechoslovakia from the Nazis. Moreover, the exhibit highlights the industrial advancement and the capitalistic inclinations of Czechoslovakia, particularly those of the Czech lands. The manner of describing Škoda Works as the European version of General Motors also shows how the museum's narrative caters to an American audience or one who has been greatly influenced by American culture.

As the text brings Czechoslovakia closer to the United States, democracy and capitalism, it distances it from Communism by highlighting it as a foreign element. The fact that the panel on the birth of Czechoslovakia came before the panel on the fathers of Communism, despite its chronological inconsistency, only enforces the thesis that communism is not intrinsic to the Czechoslovak nation.

The transition from the »Dream« to the »Reality« act is shown by a shift in colour as the text on the last panel of the first act is red (instead of black) while the background remains white. This could be interpreted as preparing the visitors to enter the next part of the exhibit. The

first panel of the second act has a red background marking its beginning but returns to white with red text in the consecutive panels. It could be inferred that there is not much difference between the two acts as the light from the high ceiling illuminates the two evenly. However, the text of the »Reality« act is riddled with the Czechoslovak's discontent with the Communist government. From the inclusion of sarcastic jokes people made about the Communist regime to tales of emigration and escape and descriptions of the prevalence of dissident and apolitical citizens, its textual narration portrays the incompatibility of Communism with the economic, social, and political fabric of the Czechoslovak nation.

Aside from presenting these sentiments through text, the museum also does so through video testimonies, which mimics techniques prevalent in Holocaust museums. The individuals interviewed shared personal stories in Czech with English subtitles inviting people to either read the English subtitles or listen to the Czech audio through the telephones attached to the wall beside each screen. Such an addition to the exhibit reminds visitors that their fellow human beings actually lived through the past that is presented in the museum. One of the individuals who provided testimonies is Josef Klimeš, an assistant sculptor of the Stalin Monument who had just gotten married when plans of building the Stalin Monument were made public. Klimeš claimed that they needed money after they had gotten married and »soon discovered the monument could be a source of income«. Moreover, he said that building the Stalin Monument was a wonderful opportunity for sculptors to learn new tricks – even if those in charge »thought it up as they were going along«. Here, in his last phrase, just like the textual narration of the museum, he dis-

tances himself from the Communist regime and presents the Czechoslovakian society at that time as apolitical. He said, »At the time, it was some kind of government resolution, so no one could really be bothered by it. No one cared. It was kind of fun.« Moreover, he also showed a vivid example of how the Czechoslovaks were in the dark when it came to the plans of the Communist regime as he described his involvement in the building of the monument. He said:

»For example, I worked on Michurin's knee. Well, it was one block. Two and a half by three meters. I had no idea what I was cutting. Just some kind of contoured mass. It was just a bit of a bend, and then there was another block. But someone else was working on that one.«

Aside from the use of colour, space, and light, the museum also activates the visitor's auditory senses in engaging with the exhibit. One of the more popular songs of that time, *Holky z naší školky* by Stanislav Hložek and Petr Kotvald, plays from a radio in a mock-up of a boy's bedroom in »The Reality« section of the exhibit. Its placement in the museum as well as the upbeat and rather catchy tune prompts a rather nostalgic mood of childhood or younger carefree days as visitors can see textbooks, a calculator, a globe, and a Rubik's cube on the same table where the radio is placed. Board games, ice hockey equipment, and other objects also encourage visitors to enter a more sentimental headspace. However, this song is muted when the visitors enter the third act.

The »Nightmare« section of the museum greets the visitors with three video testimonies from political refugee Monika Arkai and refugees Karel Hviždala and Michael Wellner Pospíšil. As the visitor continues to explore the third act,

the lighting becomes very minimal, and the ceiling is lower. The experience of the visitors really shifts as they navigate through narrower halls. Visitors hear a looped audio of dogs barking, men speaking in hushed voices, a telephone ringing, footsteps running, and a man panting. The panels of this act match the visual and auditory engagements of the visitor. One of the panels list the repressive apparatus of the Communist regime naming the national security corps, the justice system, the army, the border guards and the people's militia. Another one aims to describe the basic structure of the secret police. Enhancing the textual narrative of the exhibit, a life size mock-up of an investigator's office at the Vojna labour camp is mounted on one of the main walls. As the mock-up provides the visitors a perspective of the office from above, the visitor's imagination is further activated by mug shots of dissidents projected on the wall above it. Giving the visitors the impression that they are in the presence of the repressive apparatus, a mannequin dressed as a Soviet guard is also displayed in the middle of the exhibit along with barbed wire and torture objects. All of these elements create a very uncomfortable atmosphere, which only amplifies the relief when the exhibit opens up to a well-lit, airy, open space showcasing the events leading towards democracy such as perestroika, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolution.

After the three-part circuit of the exhibit, the visitor can find an East-West timeline that summarises and compares significant events that happened in Communist Czechoslovakia with those that happened in the »West«. What stands out is the number of American events that are used as examples of the West such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the founding of Microsoft. It also de-

scribes the 1964 Czech musical film, *The Hop-Pickers (Starci na chmelu)* as »a kind of forerunner of *Grease*«. These examples simply confirm how the museum mainly addresses an American audience. Moreover, the East-West timeline itself, and the comparison between the unveiling of the Stalin monument in Prague and the opening of Disneyland in 1955, further feeds the visitor's Cold War imaginaries.

While Spicker did state in an interview with *Newsweek* back in 2002 that he established the museum to remind the younger generation of their nation's communist past, the museum does cater to tourists and Western imaginaries of what life was like behind the Iron Curtain. Greater attention should be given to the museum as it expands its scope from solely being a tourist attraction to collaborating with government institutions. One example is the annual competition it hosts for secondary school and grammar school students under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports that invites students to come up with nine exhibition panels on the Communist past based on the competition's annual theme. As the museum slowly moves from being an entirely private enterprise toward collaborating with government institutions, it will be interesting to see how it will evolve through the years, especially as it competes with upcoming new museums that deal with the Communist past such as the Museum of the 20th Century Memory in Prague and a memorial museum in the former communist-era prison in the South-Moravian town of Uherské, which are expected to open in 2022 and 2028 respectively.

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