

CZECHOSLOVAK NEWSLETTER

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FOOD PRICE INCREASES

Federal Prime Minister Lubomír Štrougal announced that there would be general increases in the price of basic foods and certain other consumer commodities in Czechoslovakia with effect from January 30. The increases included a 100% rise in the price of rice, 30% in the price of cigarettes, 39% in the price of other tobacco products, 18% in the price of wines, 25% in the price of domestic vodka, an average rise of 27% in the price of meats and meat products (including 15% in the price of poultry, 26% in the price of saltwater fish, 14% in the price of freshwater fish and venison), 41% in the price of meat on the bone, and 17% in the price of smoked meats.

While the prices of certain lower grades of meats remained unchanged, prime meats went up more than the average. Some better cuts of meat went up from 35 to 60 crowns a kilogram (over 71%), others from 33 to 55 crowns a kilogram (67%). While the average price increase for processed meats was 17%, prime grades of ham went up from 70 to 100 crowns a kilogram (43%). Hard salami rose from 90 to 120 crowns a kilogram (33.3%). Štrougal's announcement was made in terms of crowns per unit, but made no mention of the percentage of increase.

[Per capita consumption of meat in Czechoslovakia is 85 kilograms (187.4 pounds) a year, and of fish, 6 kilograms (13.2 pounds) a year. Apart from a small increase in 1966, meat prices have remained stable since 1954 as a result of high subsidies amounting to some 40% of purchase prices.]

Some modest measures were taken to alleviate the impact of the price rises on the Czechoslovak public. Family allowances were raised by 40 crowns a month

for each child, and maternity allowances were put up 100 crowns a month. Allowances for the wives of conscripts with children under the age of three and for those who cannot be gainfully employed were also increased by 100 crowns a month. School meals, including those served in university, kindergarten and nursery cafeterias, and hospital meals remain unchanged, with the difference made up by the government. Old-age and disability pensions have been increased from 100 crowns a month for those at the lowest end of the scale to 30 crowns a month for those with pensions over 1,200 crowns. Meals in factory canteens have been raised by 45 heller (100 heller = 1 crown) against an anticipated real cost increase of 90 heller; the difference is to be covered by the management.

At a meeting of activists in the North Moravian coal fields of Ostrava to explain the price increases to the miners, Štrougal said: "Believe me, comrades, we did not take this step, unpopular as it certainly is, lightly. . . . We weighed all the political and economic pros and cons." He promised them "differentiated" wage adjustments "to promote the fulfillment of plans and to stabilize the economic situation in such areas as rail transportation, the machine-building industry, and certain branches of the building trades." "Nor," he added, "shall we overlook the health trends of some categories of miners, above all those who work underground." The wages of underground miners are to be increased by an average of 13.5% from April 1, and those of surface workers by 6.7%. This wage hike is linked to a 15-18% increase in productivity in deep mines, and a 10-12% increase in strip mines. The prime minister emphasized that miners would be the major beneficiaries of the improvements in wages, but coal output is not expected to rise significantly.

The government was forced to take these measures because imports of standard fuels (almost all from the Soviet Union) will be 2,600,000 metric tons less this year than in 1980, and will be 3,500,000 metric tons less in 1983. Another factor in the government's decision has been the perennial failure of Czechoslovak agriculture to produce enough. To keep up meat production, Czechoslovakia has been importing large amounts of feed grain, something it will be unable to continue as its exports go on declining and world prices go on rising.

The reaction of the Czechoslovak man in the street has been muted so far, but the situation is likely to become worse as it gets harder to keep up food supplies to retail stores even at the higher prices. Further price increases are to be expected in view of the generally deteriorating economic conditions throughout the Soviet-dominated world. Well aware of the political implications of this precarious situation, Štrougal told the activists' meeting: "Satisfaction of the material and cultural needs of the population depends above all on raising productivity and lowering production costs. . . . Prices must fulfill their economic function more effectively and have a positive impact on production, costs and personal consumption. Nor with this in mind must we overlook the fact that in a socialist society prices also have a social function." This Delphic statement was an oblique admission that the Soviet type of command economy has not worked, but this timid essay at approximating a "market economy" through price adjustments will hardly solve the country's growing problems.

(Based on articles in Rudé právo, January 27 and 30, and Pravda, January 30, 1982)

IS THERE CULTURAL FREEDOM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

"Conditions for creative freedom are guaranteed [in Czechoslovakia] to all artists who want to contribute to the development of culture," Miloslav Kaizer, director of arts of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture, assured Henry Kamm of The New York Times in an interview published in the newspaper on January 18, 1982. Asked to comment on Kaizer's interview, the émigré writer and publisher Josef Škvorecký confessed that he found it, "to put it mildly, surprising" that an official of a Marxist country should claim that decisions whether or not to publish are based on "strictly commercial considerations" rather than ideological grounds. "It has always been proclaimed by all communist regimes that, whereas in capitalist countries books are published for profit, in countries based on Marxist principles no commercial considerations enter the deliberations of socialist publishers, and books are published or rejected strictly on their artistic merits or lack of them. If Mr. Kaizer is right, this would indicate a sharp turnabout toward some sort of Marxist commercialism.

"But he seems to be contradicting himself: in the same conversation with Mr. Kamm he claims that 'our cultural life . . . is subsidized by the state.' It is not clear to me why a state should subsidize art if decisions about what should be published or produced are reached on a strictly commercial basis — unless, of course, such decisions are wrong, based on a wrong estimate of the commercial value of a product offered to the public.

"I suspect that the latter is true. Further on in the conversation Mr. Kaizer expressed his regret that 'Mr. [Milan] Kundera's recent novels' had been a 'disappointment' to him. The decision not to publish Mr. Kundera's novels (and none has been published in Czechoslovakia since 1970) was obviously founded on Mr. Kaizer's estimate of their commercial value. This is one case where I can prove Mr. Kaizer's estimate wrong: the publishing house of which my wife [the writer Zdena Salivarová] is the manager, 68 Publishers Corporation in Toronto, brought out all Mr. Kundera's post-1968 novels — Life Is Elsewhere, A Farewell Party, and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting — in Czech, the language in which they were written, and all three of them became by far the biggest bestsellers of my wife's publishing business. Moreover, they were also bestsellers in France and elsewhere, and Mr. Kundera in late 1981 won the prestigious Commonwealth Prize in New York.

"Since Mr. Kaizer further said that 'no command was given not to publish these writers,' whom he judges commercially uninteresting — and I am probably one of them because no book of mine has been published in Prague since 1969 — I want to offer my post-1968 novels to the Czechoslovak publishing houses. All of them sold very well indeed when they were sold by 68 Publishers Corporation, all of them were translated into many languages, and one in particular, The Tank Corps, became a bestseller not only in the original Czech but also in the Croatian translation in Yugoslavia, in the French translation in France, and in Denmark it was purchased by the local book-of-the-month club. It is a satirical novel in the manner of The Good Soldier Schweik, a book of increasing popularity among Czech readers, and that in itself is a guarantee that it will not be a flop when issued in Czechoslovakia and that, far from needing a state subsidy, it will make lots of money for

Committee for the Support of Charter 77 for his plays and essays, in particular his study Moc bezmocných (The Power of the Powerless), first published in Czech samizdat and then by Index of Cologne.

The United States senators and representatives serving on the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe of the US Congress have proposed Havel to the Nobel Institute in Stockholm as the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace. Their letter of recommendation also proposed as possible recipients Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Poland's Solidarity labor union, and Yuriy Orlov, the Russian physicist and member of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group.

Octogenarian Writer Suffers Heart Attack

Jaroslav Seifert, a leading Czech poet who celebrated his eightieth birthday last September, received numerous letters on the occasion from admirers, including brief notes of congratulations from President Gustáv Husák and Federal Prime Minister Lubomír Štrougal, but only after lengthy negotiation was he allowed to publish his thanks in the Czechoslovak press. On October 15 two State Security officers visited him to try to persuade him to sign a prepared note of acknowledgment to Husák and Štrougal, and to retract his signature from an earlier letter, thought to be an appeal to PEN International for help for imprisoned writers and journalists. Seifert refused their suasions and wrote another letter of his own, but because of his failing mental powers no longer recalls its contents. His condition has deteriorated rapidly since then, and on November 2 he suffered a cardiac arrest. He returned on November 21 to his home, where he continues to receive close medical care. (Informace o Chartě 77 [Charter 77 Information], December 1981)

Seifert began his literary career as an avant-garde poet in 1922. He fell foul of the communist authorities in the fifties, especially when he spoke out against censorship at the 1956 Czech Writers' Congress. During the Prague spring of 1968 he was elected chairman of the Union of Czech Writers, but resigned after the Warsaw Pact invasion. He signed Charter 77 and has had much verse published in samizdat. His memoirs, Všecky krásy světa (All the World's Beauties), were published in 1981 as a coedition of Index of Cologne and 68 Publishers of Toronto with the cooperation of the Charter 77 Fund of Stockholm.

Roman Catholic Samizdat

Official religious persecution has taken particular aim against underground publishing activities. Three Roman Catholic underground periodicals are now coming out in Bohemia and Moravia: the monthly Církevní informace (Church Information), which made its bow in 1980, the quarterly Teologické texty (Theological Texts), and Vzkříšení (Resurrection), a young people's monthly. All three maintain high standards and seek to break the state monopoly on "religious" publishing. The vitality of religious activity is indicated by the fact that more than 700 titles of Catholic works have been produced in the past few years, dealing with theological, liturgical and philosophical topics. The intensification of persecution appears intent on curbing this work.

THE CASE OF DR. JOZEF JABLONICKÝ

Dr. Jozef Jablonický, the Slovak historian, has been at loggerheads with Czechoslovakia's communist authorities for years (Czechoslovak Newsletter, Vol. V, No. 9/10 [September/October 1980], p. 5). Fired from the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, he has been detained for interrogation several times and subjected to other forms of harassment for his criticism of the regime's manipulation of the history of the Slovak national uprising during World War II.

In 1979, after being detained on a visit to Prague and forcibly returned to Bratislava, Jablonický dared to file suit against the National Security Administration in Prague. He won his case, the court awarding him 71 crowns for the cost of his return ticket to Bratislava plus 3% interest. Undaunted, he continued his historical research and in 1980 completed at least two studies on recent Slovak history.

Another indictment against him was dismissed for lack of evidence of his alleged collaboration with Pavel Černogurský, a former deputy to the parliament of the Nazi-sponsored "independent" state of Slovakia during World War II. Now he is under indictment yet again in connection with the detention of Czechoslovak human-rights activists in May 1981 (Czechoslovak Newsletter, Vol. VI, No. 5/6 [May/June 1980], p. 4). He is presently free pending trial on charges of damaging the interests of the Czechoslovak republic abroad (Article 12 of the Penal Code) and of offending and denigrating an organ of state or official social organization in the exercise of its jurisdiction (Article 154, paragraph 2, of the Penal Code). He faces imprisonment up to three years and confiscation of his property.

His real offense, however, is his refusal to acquiesce in the falsification of the history of the Slovak national uprising, which he has criticized abroad in Zborník o Slovenskom národnom povstaní (Miscellany on the Slovak National Uprising), Vol. II, published in Toronto in 1980 by Naše snahy. The same publisher is presently preparing a further collection of his studies of the regime's falsification of history, and has printed a number of his shorter essays in its bimonthly Naše snahy (Our Endeavors).

INTELLIGENCE AGENTS AT WORK

A series of articles and commentaries published in the Czech and Slovak press and broadcast over Czechoslovak radio and television have elicited a sharp protest from France. Under the title "Conversations from the Other Side," the series has contained conversations surreptitiously taped in the offices in Paris of the Czech émigré magazine Svědectví (Testimony). François Mitterrand, the president of France, has denounced the tapings as impermissible. Jan Pudlák, the Czechoslovak ambassador in Paris, was summoned to the Quai d'Orsay, where French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson delivered a note to Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Bohuslav Chňoupek demanding an explanation for the Prague regime's illegal activities on

French soil.

RETURN OF CZECHOSLOVAK GOLD STOLEN BY NAZIS

An agreement was signed in Prague on January 29 between the United States and British governments on the one side and the Czechoslovak government on the other for the return of 18.5 metric tons of gold looted from Czechoslovakia by the Germans during World War II and impounded by the Allies at the end of hostilities. The gold is deposited at Fort Knox in Kentucky and in the vaults of the Bank of England under Threadneedle Street in London. The agreement obliges the Czechoslovak government in turn to pay a total of \$81,500,000 to American citizens in compensation for property nationalized or confiscated by the communist government in 1948 and £24,000,000 sterling to British citizens for the same reason.

The agreement was received with mixed feelings by Czechs and Slovaks living in the West. They have questioned the wisdom of returning the gold to a government that is antidemocratic, flouts human rights, and fervently supports Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Poland, and elsewhere. The government in Prague, however, was not conceded most-favored-nation status, and there is no likelihood of it receiving it in the foreseeable future.

NEWS FROM NORMALIZED CZECHOSLOVAKIA

No Date Set for Dissidents' Trial

No date has yet been set for the political trial of Czechoslovak dissidents, some of whom have been illegally kept in custody now since May 1981 (Czechoslovak Newsletter, Vol. VI, No. 9 [September 1981], p. 1). Meanwhile the original indictment against former student leader Jiří Müller has had to be withdrawn for lack of evidence of his association with Jiřina Šiklová. It seems, however, that a new indictment against him is being prepared for his activities in connection with the publication of samizdat and his contacts with the Socialist International. For his part, Müller contends that neither matter constitutes a violation of Czechoslovak law.

Jiřina Šiklová and Eva Kantůrková, according to latest reports, are now being held in cells together with common prostitutes and women convicted of violent crime. Neither of them has received any mail since before Christmas. Jan Mlinárik is said to have been transferred to a prison in Trenčín, West Slovakia, where he will probably be arraigned before a military tribunal.

The continuing uncertainty about the date for the trials is thought due in

part to the vagueness of the accusations and the paucity of substantiating evidence, and in part to doubt about reaction abroad. Informed sources in Czechoslovakia believe Prague is waiting for instructions from Moscow so that the trials can be fit into the overall framework of Soviet foreign policy. They think that Moscow, despite events in Poland, wishes to keep up an appearance of a continuous detente. If harsh sentences are finally handed down, they are likely to be a trial balloon: a test of how far the regime can go with its repressive measures.

Two Priests Jailed in Slovakia

Štefan Javorský, a 57-year-old Salesian priest from Spišský Čvrtok, East Slovakia, was sentenced last September 17 to two years' imprisonment for "causing a disturbance" and "restriction of individual liberty" as a result of his efforts to resolve a marital dispute. He already spent two years in jail in 1975-1977.

Gabriel Povala, a 64-year-old Jesuit, was sentenced in Žilina, Central Slovakia, last November 11 to eight months' imprisonment for "obstructing state supervision of the church." He was charged with "recruiting to the Third Order of Carmelites" and thus attempting to revive a religious order that has been declared illegal.

Five Years of Charter 77

The Charter 77 movement issued a 2,200-word statement on January 7 in commemoration of its fifth anniversary asserting that it would continue with its activities in spite of persecution. (The original proclamation published in January 1977 was signed by 211 Czechoslovak citizens; more than 1,000 have now subscribed to it.) The anniversary statement reaffirmed that Charter 77 is "a free association of people with differing world views, beliefs and interests, bound together by their willingness to engage in the struggle for human rights, human dignity and creativeness in our society."

It was announced the same day that Charter spokesmen Bedřich Placák, Jaroslav Šabata and Václav Malý were being succeeded by Radim Palouš, Anna Marvanová and Ladislav Lis. Three other spokesmen are currently in jail: Václav Benda, Jiří Dienstbier and Rudolf Battěk.

An "Appeal to the Persecuted and a Note to Statesmen" signed by Palouš was published in the December issue of Informace o Chartě 77 (Charter 77 Information). The three-page document noted: "Since the birth of Charter 77 five years ago we have experienced harassment and suffering. . . . The brutality of the persecution of those who have signed the Charter has increased even though all the competent organs of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic have subscribed to the International Covenant on Human Rights and the Helsinki Agreement." The document then quoted the late Jan Patočka, a founder of the Charter who died of a heart attack after protracted police questioning: "There is a serious disease among us. We face a sick state that 'embraces' us in a convulsive grasp. The state has become a factory and a supplier of labor. . . . Everything is in service to the state and to

those who identify with it. . . . Common citizens are defenseless; they feel that something has gone awry and that nothing good can come if things do not change."

Masaryk Anniversary

A collection of papers edited by Milan Machovec, Petr Pithart and Josef Dubský has been prepared for publication in samizdat to mark the 130th anniversary of the birth of Tomáš G. Masaryk (1850-1937). The 757 typewritten pages contain studies, documents, and a bibliography by 30 authors.

A New Use for Slates

The old-fashioned slate used in years past by pupils in elementary schools has acquired a new lease on life. On the assumption that Big Brother is indeed listening, people now carry them and chalk messages on them to communicate rather than engage in conversation. As soon as it has been read, the slate is wiped clean. Shades of Alice in Wonderland and 1984!

DECLARATION OF THE PERMANENT CONFERENCE OF SLOVAK DEMOCRATIC EXILES

The Permanent Conference of Slovak Democratic Exiles, meeting in Toronto on February 13, issued a declaration from which the following excerpts are taken:

"The Polish crisis is the most dramatic happening in European and world history since World War II. With the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Czechoslovak liberalization of 1968 it is the third mass popular demonstration by the nations of Central and Eastern Europe against Soviet imperialism and its Marxist ideology. To judge by the reaction of the Western European governments, however, we believe that the free world is insufficiently aware of its historical significance. . . .

". . . We reject the idea that legitimate Soviet interests in the world power structure should prevail over the national aspirations of subjugated peoples, and we are convinced that world peace can never be maintained until conditions have been created for the nations of Central and Eastern Europe to be free and independent.

"Czechoslovakia is now ruled by the most despotic of regimes, totally subservient to the interests of Soviet imperialism. It makes no stand against Sovietization and is selling out the interests of our two peoples to world communism. . . .

"The nations of Central and Eastern Europe have but one common enemy — Soviet imperialism, against which they must make common cause."