

Crisis in Mideast As Felt in Prague

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By KAREL HUJER

PRAGUE — Arriving in Czechoslovakia at the height of the Middle Eastern crisis, I could make certain observations. In Prague, at this crossroad of Europe, the 11th century Jewish cemetery and synagogue stand as landmarks of ancient Jewish settlements. At the end of May, Czechoslovakia issued a series of six Israeli postage stamps. Included was the picturesque character, David Gans, a Prague 17th century astronomer, contemporary of Tycho Brahe. These stamps were not long in circulation, however. By pressure of collective action, emanating from Moscow, Czechoslovakia immediately broke diplomatic relations with Israel, so this philatelic congratulatory gesture was abruptly halted and the stamps withdrawn from circulation.

Czechoslovakia, past and present, bears a striking resemblance to Israel in its historical destiny. In the vicissitude of a changing political climate, like a grain between two millstones of various imperialistic campaigns, Czech people have never known real security. Their leaders have always dreamed of freedom based on spiritual values. It is indeed symptomatic that this music-loving people so impressed itself on the liberated Jewish state that Smetana's symphonic poem, *Vitava* (Moldau), named after the river flowing through Prague, has its echo in the national anthem of today's Israel.

As the turbulence in the Middle East continued, we attended a performance of Verdi's opera, *Nabucco*, at the Prague National Theatre, a superb structure and national shrine on the bank of the Moldau river. When true feeling cannot be otherwise expressed, extraordinary means, such as this Verdi opera based on a biblical theme, becomes a spontaneous channel of manifestation. This we will never forget. The particular scene was the chorus singing the Prayer for Freedom. Here Israelites are once again subjugated by invading Babylonians under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar. The scene introduces enslaved Jews singing their moving prayer for liberation. Thereupon, the public started an unending applause, with an encore given. This biblical subject created an atmosphere for a spontaneous expression of freedom. Of course it had multiple meaning. It was not only the freedom of Israel, but also the prayer for freedom of Czech people today, coupled with the fiasco of Soviet help to Egypt and Arabs. Such unexpected emergence of the long suppressed sentiment that permeated the nation and the people...

Verdi's opera *Nabucco* and its performance in Prague is of singular significance. During the Nazi occupation, of course it was prohibited. In fact, it did not reappear until 1957. At that time, however, Communist ideologists ordered the omission of the climactic Prayer for Freedom. But Italian Verdi custodians protested, and the opera was dropped. After some wrangling at the Prague Ministry of culture, Verdi's *Nabucco* was recently reintroduced. Its presentation during the Israeli incident was a unique moment for Czech people to express the prevailing sentiment under an anachronistic domination.

The following day we attended a Sunday church service and listened to a carefully prepared sermon being read. Preachers whose hands are tied must be sympathized with for they receive their meager bread from their pagan rulers. A graduating theologian's monthly salary is the equivalent of 25 U.S. dollars, very little, with prevailing prices high and salaries very low. While Communists may have changed their tactics, their attitude toward the spiritual life of their subjects remains unchanged. Marxism continues the same, yesterday and today.

Evidence of the Palestinian crisis is also observed in the symptomatic decrease of Western tourist traffic in Czechoslovakia. This was particularly striking in the world-famous spa, Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad), where at the beginning of the conflict top hotels lost their Western patrons through summary cancellations. Western visitors are badly needed for their "heavy" currency from the capitalist world. Russian guests either do not pay or bring along their undesirable Soviet rubles. With all their phrases and huge, boastful signs on numerous buildings about international goodwill and the people's socialist welfare, real humanitarianism is lacking in this dialectically contradictory rule. Despite all the loquacious glorification of workers and labor, never in this once thriving country was there such indifference toward labor and communal interests. The first concern of Communist rulers is to preserve their power, the welfare of "glorified" people is subsidiary. Communist masters and their slogans desperately need the warmth of human understanding, in the spirit of the great Czech writer, Karel Capek, who wrote in 1924: "I cannot be a Communist because I am on the side of poor people." Poverty which communism has ever more multiplied is only the dark reserve of their political strategy.