

Preface

FOR THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS, Prague — or Praha, as the Czechs call her — has drawn people in mysterious and powerful ways, and held them enchanted. Even in its bright, new post-Communist wardrobe, Prague is a city where visitors can still experience something of the ancient magnetism that charmed both commoners and kings over the centuries, and feel aftershocks of the upheavals that have made it a place like no other on earth. As Franz Kafka once remarked, and as thousands of travelers are now discovering, Prague is still “a little mother that has claws.” It is a city of stability in turmoil.

The turbulence of Prague is the turbulence of a troubled history flowing through a valley of high ideals and lofty aspirations. Enlightened emperors who might have ruled their domains from grander seats of power have chosen to place their thrones in Prague, and encouraged scholars, artists, and architects to come and raise the edifices of stone, images, and ideas on which the “city of a hundred spires” is built. Tyrants too, have held sway here, and perhaps because they felt threatened by the very lightness of the city in its good times, they created ponderous empires of darkness that sought to crush and enslave her spirit and her people. As a result, the city’s history has a unique rhythm, an ebb and flow of radiant optimism and dark despair, that brings to the spirit of Prague a black humor tempered with gentle irony, sentiment without

sentimentality, a sense of romance without romanticism, a skepticism without cynicism.

Prague is far more than the sum of its physical parts or its history. It is a city of the mind and the imagination, a city that exists as vividly in poetry and painting and music and legend as it does in brick and stone. But of all the arts that have shaped her, none has the antiquity, the roots, and the vigor of storytelling. Just as the physical city of Prague would be unimaginable without its unique topography, without its palaces, its churches, its parks, its streets, and its hostelries, so the Prague of the mind would be unimaginable without its storytellers and the tales they weave. It would be inconceivable without the work of Jan Neruda, who breathed literary life into a whole quarter of Prague, Malá Strana; or Franz Kafka, who sold insurance by day and beetled away at his true vocation by night, writing his strange, absurdist tales in German; or his contemporary Jaroslav Hašek, author of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, who led the life of a bon vivant and wrote his satirical sketches in the same city as Kafka, but in a parallel and largely separate community that lived and wrote in Czech; or Karel Čapek, the prophetic journalist, playwright, and novelist who introduced the world to robots; or Bohumil Hrabal, whose stories capture the extraordinary lives and voices of ordinary Czechs ruminating aloud over their beer. These storytellers embody Prague the way Dickens embodies London, Victor Hugo embodies Paris, or O. Henry embodies New York.

The stories in this anthology were written, roughly speaking, over the course of the past century. Some of them are classic tales by well-known authors, but more than half are by relatively unknown writers and, as far as I can determine,

appear here in English for the first time. To qualify, a story had first of all to tell an entertaining tale in which the city of Prague itself figured as a backdrop or a setting. The stories had to be about people — some real, some imaginary, some famous, some ordinary — whose lives are enmeshed in different ways in the life of the city. Some are autobiographical, some are clearly fiction, and some are blends of fact and fantasy. Others are pure legend, yet they reveal a deeper truth about the soul of the city than straight history could.

An old friend once told me that though he had lived his entire life in Prague, he had, in fact, been a citizen of seven different countries. The oldest writer in the collection, Jan Neruda, died over a century ago, when Prague was a provincial city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the youngest, Jáchym Topol, was barely three years old when the Soviet Army invaded the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1968. Over the period spanned by the stories in this book, Prague has been the jewel in the crown of a kingdom and an empire, a backwater town, the booming, industrial heart of a modern monarchy, the capital city of a new multi-national democracy, the dark, occupied center of a territory ruled, almost successively, by two oppressive totalitarian systems, the capital city of a new federal democracy, and finally, since January 1, 1993, the center of the Czech Republic of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Had my friend lived to see the fall of Communism, he could have added two more countries to his list.

I have also tried to give the reader a sample of the different cultures that have coexisted in Prague over the centuries, for though Prague is now the center of an almost exclusively Czech nation, it is far from being a purely Czech city. Since the Middle Ages, the Jewish and the German influences have

been as powerful as the Slavic. A collection of this sort, however, can only hint at the important contributions the constituent cultures made to the general culture of the city. Writers like Gustav Meyrink, who is German, Egon Erwin Kisch and Franz Kafka, who are German and Jewish, and Jiří Weil and Ota Pavel, who are Jewish and write in Czech, may give the reader some idea of the range of Prague writing.

Gathering material for this book has been rather like trying to pick the perfect bouquet from a large field filled with beautiful flowers. There is only so much you can gather at once, and what you end up bringing home depends on the season, the climate, and even the time of day. Had I attempted such a collection before the collapse of Communism in 1989, it might have been a gloomier and perhaps duller looking bouquet, and I might have tried harder to represent the courageous authors who attempted to make sense of the totalitarian experience at considerable risk to their freedom. As it is, it felt like a real luxury to be able to make my selections without a sense of duty to anyone but the reader.

I should point out that the best known Czech literary hero, the good soldier Švejk, is absent from this book, although his author is not. For years, Jaroslav Hašek's classic comic novel about the bumbling loyalist whose absurdly exaggerated sense of duty brings chaos to the Austrian army was the only work of Czech literature guaranteed to be available in English in every bookstore. Nor is there anything in the collection by one of the best-known Czech writers, Milan Kundera, because Kundera is not really a Prague author, having spent most of his life either in Brno, or in Paris. And one of the classic novels of the pre-1968 Communist era, *Summer in Prague*, by Zdena Salivarová, is so delightfully dense that

proved beyond my capacities to excerpt. My conscience is eased because most of what I have left out is still in print, and available in English to those whose appetites are whetted, but not satisfied, by the present collection.

In the months of hunting and gathering that have resulted in this volume, I have had many reliable and helpful guides. My thanks to Petr Pithart, Jaroslav Med, Viktor Stoilov, Jan Šulc, Dr. Miloslav Žilina, Jan Zelenka, Andrej and Olga Stankovič, Rob Wechsler, Josef Škvorecky, Zdena Salivarová, Zdeněk Urbánek, Eda Kriseová, Andrzej Jagodzinski and Katarzyna Borun-Jagodzinska, Richard Partington, George Brady, Anna Mozga, Marketa Goetz-Stankeiwicz, Elena Lappin, and Alison Gzowski. These people provided inspiration, advice, material support, and encouragement, sometimes all at once. I would like to give special thanks to my assistant Patricia Grant, who worked with me closely every step of the way.

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Paul Wilson

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