

The Czechs' Bouncing Tools

Worship

"The Czechs," says English kabbalist Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, "have always worshipped three things: women, food, and God – in that order."

Anyone who has made more than a passing acquaintance with the Czechs will surely recognise this to be a very accurate observation. As they grow older and wiser, however, the Czechs restructure their worship priorities in reverse order: food, women, and God.

Czech women, on the other hand, somehow miraculously manage to make their male chauvinist pigs believe that they worship one thing, and one thing alone: them. Which may explain why post-communist Prague has become the home of some thirty thousand young horny and affection-starved American males.

And let's face it, boys. Where else do you find a beautifully feminine, gentle, sexy and caring female with a university degree who takes you lovingly into her home, gives you breakfast in bed, irons your shirts, goes off to work smartly dressed, comes home to you cheerful and unaffected by stress, cooks you dinner, massages you from head to toe, bonks you blind, blows you back up for another round when you thought you were finished for a week, does not get tired, does not fake orgasm, keeps telling you how wonderful you are, and does not want to change you – and manages to be all that on an average income of 200 dollars a month?

Flexible history

It is often said that nations, their characteristics, temperaments, aspirations, and degrees of success or failure, are the result of their history. It is, in fact, the other way around. Most nations' histories consist part-

ly of legends and myths, partly of biased interpretation of some actually documented and some putative historical events, but mainly of a current consensus to view the collective past in a way which would assist in the creation of a particular model of the future. History has always been the result of people's decisions about actions to be taken. Those, in turn, are determined by the image people have of their past at the time they are deciding. Rewriting history to one's image in order to change one's future is a legitimate tool of national survival.

This is something of which the Czechs should be particularly well aware, having in one lifetime come to see and accept themselves variously as:

a) the economic backbone of the Austro-Hungarian Empire without whose protection, however, they would not have been able to survive (they did),

b) exemplary Western-style democrats of great strategic value to the great democracies of the West (ditched),

c) a bridge between East and West (walked over),

d) humanist socialists who would adapt Marxism to democratic European traditions (for a couple of years prior and a couple of hours following peaceful power hand-over to communists),

e) socialists with a human face (a large basketful of eggs thrown into it),

f) the most enterprising and westernised of the ex-communist nations (one side of the current post-communist image's coin), and

g) wishy-washy morally bent and corrupt artful dodgers (the other side of the current post-communist image's coin).

This book looks at some of the Czechs' historical myths and legends and the type of events they precipi-

tated. It tries to debunk some of the myths Czechs live by unconsciously or unwittingly as they approach the turn of the millennium. And it looks at other possible interpretations of the myths, which could produce different results. Just in case the Czechs should decide one day that different results are what they want.

At no point does the book pretend it is presenting an accurate or even reasonably approximate account of historical events. It contents itself with being as biased as every other view of Czech history has been so far and is ever likely to be.

The purpose of this particular bias is not to assist Czechs in creating a particular type of future. Nor is it to assist others in viewing the Czechs in a friendlier (or more hostile) manner than they would otherwise.

The single purpose of this book is to squeeze some drama and fun out of what has always been presented to the Czechs themselves as so dull and uninteresting that it comes as no surprise or embarrassment to them that they know less of their history than English businessmen and engineers who are trying to expiate for Munich by attempting to do straight and fair business with Czech companies and officials in competition with the shrewder and more knowing-whom-to-bribe Germans.

True, the dullness of their history may have been deliberately devised by various occupying powers, with a defined purpose: To obliterate the nation's self-respect and awareness of its political importance, spiritual and moral strength, military prowess, cultural achievement, economic skills, and sense of glory. But it cuts so deep into the Czech psyche that turning it around might take more than one generation of sustained material success, national *chutzpeh*, and an occasional friendly nudge from the established good and great. Whoever decides to do some of the friendly nudging will benefit severalfold, for Czechs like to go

out of their way to please those who have been good to them, and even those who they think might be.

The invincible consonant

An early health warning: If you think you can ever come to grips with a people who can converse without vowels, you have another think coming.

The bonk you had a few pages back is called *mrd*. Which is just one of about thirty words the Czechs have for love-making, depending on the way it is done, speed and duration, the attitude with which it is approached, state of mind, and depth of emotional involvement. A *mrd* would be a hearty down to earth, athletic rather than tender, with full abandon and lot of yelling, no-nonsense and let's-get-on-with-it approach, not worrying too much about emotional depth of involvement but mutually satisfying, ending in healthy fatigue and a good night's sleep. Another one would be *hrk*, which is a giggly friendly quickie with someone you are familiar enough with not to have to waste time on foreplay every time. A *drb* is an uninvolved, absent-minded, cynical and loveless act, taking no account of your partner's feelings, sort of rabbit-like. All other ways have some vowels, as an expression of something smoother, rounder, gentler, slower, longer, more thoughtful, or more delicious.

If you cannot tell one way from another, you are a *blb*, which is the most frequent Czech word for idiot. If you were not an idiot before but have just become one, the verb participle would be *zblbl*.

The male organ used for the *hrk* is a *brk*, and the jerky motion in which it is done is a *strk*. The finger used

for the foreplay with *prst*, and the breast it started on was *prs*.

If you were moved to ecstasy, your eyes could weep with a lot of *slz*, and you could be proud of yourself – or *hrd*.

The forest you did it in was a *brd*, and the pebbles on the beech were *drf*.

The gulp of beer you had afterwards was *hlt*, and if you have just gulped some, *zhltl* is what you have done in Czech. A very hearty *hlt* is a *glg*, and the belch which follows it is *krk*. *Krk* is also the throat down which you poured your beer, while *smrt* is the death you die if someone throttles you or gives you a *škrt*. The same *škrt* can also mean deletion or budget cut, if that's what you prefer.

If someone wants to resuscitate you by splashing some water over you, he would give you a *chrst*. And what the man who splashed the water into your face did was *vchrstl*.

Are you sure you still want to get to know these extra-terrestrials?

Bounce-back

The way nations behave is directly related to the way they view themselves and their history. Similarly, the way in which they are behaved towards is related to the way in which they and their history are viewed by their neighbours. That in turn depends on how they allow their neighbours to view them and treat them. No one with a modicum of historical awareness could have failed to notice the dramatic change in the psyche of the lethargic Brits following Churchill's "blood, sweat, and tears", or in the survival determination of

the Jews following the new State of Israel's proclamation "never again a Jew murdered with impunity for being a Jew".

In a nutshell – a nation is what a decisive majority of its members is determined to be. The absence of a clear determination to be anything clearly identifiable and worth defending, and the absence of historical myths which would give such determination the necessary psychological back-up, is a guaranteed recipe for a nation's demise from history, its absorption into another more determined neighbouring nation, and cultural and political, if not physical, annihilation.

The Czechs have been on the verge of it several times. The very fact they are still around today – after even the omniscient Karl Marx predicted their disappearance by the end of the nineteenth century – indicates a resilience, a bounce-back, pick-up, and dust-off power which seems to emerge out of nowhere to everyone's surprise each time it does.

Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich, when briefing his Prague gestapo chiefs, is quoted as warning them that while Poles and Yugoslavs were tough and stiff and easily broken by a strong enough force, the Czechs were spineless flexible twigs that bent down under pressure, only to lash back when least expected. Right he was, too, and off he went with the least expected lashback by a couple of London-run Czech paratroopers at a time when Czech resistance seemed pacified by an extra tin of sardines for a good day's work in their arms and ammunition factories.

In 1993, with Slovakia going its own proud if somewhat precarious way, the Czechs were given a unique opportunity – for the first time in over five centuries – to find out who they are and work out who they want to be – on their own. What they find out, and what they work out, will depend to a decisive

degree on which of their historical myths they decide to dig out, enlarge, pin up, and live by.

The milky goat

The lukewarm attitude most Czechs have to their own religion – insofar as they can be bothered to adhere to one – could explain why religious differences figure so low on the scale of the Czechs' prejudices. Far more interesting – and right at the top – is envy of anyone else's success.

No significant religiously motivated hostilities have turned Czech against Czech since the Thirty Year War. But deeply ingrained dislike and profound mistrust of anyone who has done even a notch better was no doubt the decisive factor that threw this otherwise profoundly democratic, humanist, individualist, and not readily hoodwinkable people into the communist embrace for two generations. It is what motivates another generation of fledgling capitalists to settle their business disputes through hired assassins dumping competitors into lakes with iron slabs chained to their necks. Or chopping them up and marinating them in brine-filled casks. To mention just two of the more sophisticated and increasingly popular well-documented business strategies.

All these are not much more than an ever so slightly amplified version of a traditional Czech joke, which goes like this:

A fairy-tale old magician appears to a Frenchman, an Englishman, and a Czech, with an offer to fulfill for each of them one secret wish. The Frenchman recalls recently meeting a most attractive woman engaged to a former schoolmate of his. His wish is to have her for just one night before she marries his schoolmate. The English-

man asks for a replica of Lord Brondesbury's ivory pipe, making sure His Lordship should retain his original for everyone to notice both. The Czech mentions a very healthy-looking and milk-rich goat owned by his next door neighbour. "You want one just like his?" asks the magician. "No, sir," replies the Czech, "I want his goat to drop dead."

Not even greed and envy can motivate Czechs to surrender to the evil forces of Mammon.

Flagellation

Few nations spend so much time and intellectual energy brooding on their national characteristics, purpose, role, destiny, meaning of existence, image, and self-image, as do the Czechs. Few nations brooding about their existence are so consistently wrong in their conclusions. And probably no nation in recorded history has viewed itself so much more harshly than it is viewed by others. To a detached but concerned observer, the Czechs' persistent self-reflection looks like self-flagellation. And yet, there are too many Czechs – mostly among intellectuals – who believe they have had nowhere near enough flogging yet.

Foremost among the national floggers are Czech journalists who have a particular flair for uncovering some obnoxious national vice or other behind every mistake or misdeed committed by just about anyone from government officials, parliament members, and representatives of all levels of officialdom, to members of opposition, ex-communists (repented or die-hard), ex-dissidents (promoted to officialdom or consigned to oblivion), ex-non-communist-non-dissidents, drivers, pedestrians, orchestra musicians, ex-theatre-goers tur-

ned television-gogglers, readers of a particular newspaper, non-readers of a particular newspaper, and – above all – other journalists. No wonder the Czech Prime Minister publicly reviles journalists as the most detestable breed of people ever to walk this planet.

“With people like us, behaving as we do, we cannot ever dream of being accepted by Europe, nor do we deserve to” – is a popular flog in the Czech intellectuals’ repertory, and the most likely one to be heeded when all other flogs have failed. By the time Europe decides to embrace the Czechs – which experts believe is likely to be seriously contemplated, as opposed to just blabbered about, around the year 2005 – the Czechs will have surely flogged themselves into being more European than the Europeans. Whether they can be expected to stop flogging themselves then is another matter, one Europe should seriously ponder before taking them in without first introducing some anti-self-flogging directives.

There is, however, a redeeming feature to Czech flagellation. Unlike the Poles – whose historic mission is to flog themselves for Europe, or the Russians – who flog themselves (and the odd neighbour or two) for mankind’s salvation, the Czechs do most of their flogging for the sheer hell of it.

Wisdom of inadequacy

The characteristics of every nation – be they home-spun or externally perceived – are always a mix of positive and negative features. The only exception are the Americans, who have no home-spun negative features whatsoever. Which explains why they are so deeply loved wherever they go.

What a home-spun image sees as positive may be seen as negative by outsiders, and vice versa. Nations may even be split into bellicose camps who regard the same feature as positive and negative respectively. Whatever other disagreements they might have, Czechs are remarkably united in regarding themselves as the most inadequate and undeserving lot on this planet one day, and exceptionally enlightened bearers of state-of-the-art wisdom to the world if only the world would care to listen on another day. This wonderful blend becomes more appreciable once we notice that the inadequate lot are always all Czechs except us, while the wisdom-bearers are always us rather than the other Czechs. Unless, of course, the other Czechs are inadequate wisdom-bearers and, as such, a national embarrassment no matter how popular they may be abroad.

The Czech intellectual elite has always had a recognisable tendency to elevate inadequacy to a national virtue, and even regard it as the nation’s specific strength with which “the adequate” can be outsmarted and overpowered – and if not that, then surely at least outnumbered.

This applies particularly during the rule of morally unacceptable regimes when – to quote a famous Czech comedy actor – “it is immoral to pursue a successful career under an immoral regime”. Since most Czechs have always regarded most of their governments as immoral, they tend to view as crooked anyone who succeeds at anything at just about any time.

One thing that does not seem to have occurred to the Czechs when trying to live up to the famous comedy actor’s adage was to ponder how he could have become a famous comedy actor without pursuing a successful career. But taking the micky out of nations is what comedy actors are here for. So, of course, are politicians, most of whom, if sincerely questioned, would admit

that deep down they really are frustrated comedians.

Czechs don't exert adequate effort to replace their immoral governments with ones that might be more moral because they believe that the alternative would be at least as bad and probably worse. The logic is that no morally clean politician can ever be adequate, for in order to gain adequate political experience and skills, he would have had to pursue a successful career under an immoral regime, and could therefore not be morally clean if he had found it appropriate to do so.

If a morally clean person does, by some stroke of luck, succeed to a position of power, he will be suspected of having made some immoral pact with the immoral, or at best, of being manipulated by the immoral into fooling the public that there might be something moral going on after all, and must therefore be quite thick – or at best inadequate (i.e. one of us) – yet another national embarrassment. Even if he is found to have been morally clean before he took office, he will have become unclean by the time the findings are completed.

The art of embarrassment

Embarrassment is one the Czechs' favourite arts. And masters of it they are, too. From early childhood – at home as well as at school – Czechs receive a thorough training from their elders in how to create embarrassing situations for others. This is done by persistent coaching from parents and teachers, which entails frequent repetition of a simple command: "Don't you dare make an asshole of yourself or your family (group, club, town, nation, etc.)".

This has taught Czechs something they have become very skilled at – image building. They take pains, and very often succeed, to present themselves to the

outside world in a much better light than they see themselves. This they do by not exactly lying about themselves, just being economical with the truth. Censoring the facts ever so slightly. Harmless, really. Underneath, nothing is ever as good as it looks packaged for foreign consumption. Giving his country (family, group, town, etc.) a bad image – i.e. embarrassing it – is the worst offence a Czech could commit in the eyes of his fellows.

Since making an asshole of himself – i.e. creating embarrassment – is part of any child's natural instinct and an inalienable right, Czech children soon learn the trick of making assholes of others and other families (other groups, other clubs, other towns, other nations, etc.), and get a lot of fun out of it.

Since they were not at the same time taught the skill of gracefully sailing out of an embarrassing situation someone else has brought them (being a landlocked nation), the only defence available to them is to drag the opponent into an even greater embarrassment. To which, of course, he can only respond by creating yet a greater embarrassment for them. The most remarkable display of the mastery of this art can be seen in Czech TV debates in which public figures participate not so much to discuss an idea and argue its worth – but to make the greatest possible assholes of their opponents.

Some Czech leading figures like to apply this technique even outside the country on innocent, untrained and unsuspecting audiences. Having clearly conveyed the unambiguous message, "You, sir/madam, are an asshole", to everyone who asked a question, they come back home surprised at how distorted the reports of their visit were, and how much less goodwill they had created than intended. It must surely be those god-damned asshole journalists again.

Other Czech public figures then wallow in the bliss

of seeing these Czech public figures making assholes of themselves abroad and being an embarrassment to the nation. And so the art of embarrassment flourishes.

How the Slovaks could have ever made any sense out of living with the Czechs is a mystery worth serious historical and psychological analysis. They probably need years of psychotherapy to recover. Even more mysterious – to the point of being a case for psychiatrists – is why Sudeten Germans, having for two generations been so blissfully free of the Czechs, should now want to return to live in their midst again. Plain nuts. Unless, of course, they are after the women, like everyone else.

Comfort

The Czechs love their comfort. So much so that their comfort considerations usually overrule such hollow concepts as ideology, idealism, heroism, honour, gallantry – and sometimes even less hollow ones like duty, loyalty, honesty, ethics, reliability. Which does not make them a dishonest, unethical, or unreliable people, without any sense of duty and loyalty. They can be very loyal, committed, and even deeply devoted to their comfort. Anyone demanding their loyalty would first have to guarantee them their comfort.

This was well understood by wartime Nazi occupation authorities who took great pains not to subject the Czechs to such harsh discomfort as they did the Poles, the Serbs, the Greeks, or the Russians. For this, the Czechs rewarded the Nazis by not making too much trouble for them.

This joke, which the Czechs don't like hearing too much, was probably made up by a Slovak:

A Czech and a Yugoslav meet after the war and discuss their war-time experiences.

"Whenever we saw a German in uniform, we'd cut his throat," says the Yugoslav matter-of-factly.

Replies the Czech:

"You know, we would have liked to do it too, but in our country, that was not allowed".

The Czechs' craving for comfort was best understood by the communist regime which made life for them dull and idiotic, but compared with the rest of the communist world, remarkably comfortable. There was hardly a family which had not built itself a second home in the country to escape to every weekend – starting at midday on Friday and ending at midday on Monday.

When the iron curtain crumbled and Czech "capitalist" expatriates visited their erstwhile homeland for the first time in many years, they could not hold their amazement at how much more comfortable their homeland friends were than they themselves in the affluent West. Not richer, but more comfortable. Enjoying more comfort at much lower cost and with much less effort. And taking it for granted, too. They still do – and are wondering now what exactly it is that anyone from the West can teach them that they are not better at – as far as creation of comfort is concerned. For it is the creation of comfort, isn't it, that is the sole purpose of any human endeavour? Surely? Well, isn't it?

The endlessly used Czech word for comfort – *pohoda* – means a great deal more than mere physical comfort. It also means hominess, coziness, harmony, self-satisfaction, easy-going relationships, rewarding and not too strenuous activity, pleasant overall atmosphere, absence of strife, effort or pain, an undisturbed pastoral idyll. It means a state of affairs which involves no need

to take risks or face challenges, be disturbed by new or unfamiliar things, have to deal with dangers or shortages.

This does not make Czechs a very adventurous people. It makes them an inventive and purposefully creative if sometimes irritatingly procrastinating lot, slowly but steadily and reliably working their way out of discomfort towards the greatest possible comfort that looks achievable, while eschewing any discomfort on the way. Thus, they may sometimes satisfy themselves with medium comfort if the achievement of a greater comfort involves – or even is perceived to involve – too much discomfort. The flagellants like to call this “wallowing in mediocrity”.

But it was to his beloved Czechs that Bruce Lockhart broadcast from London in 1948: “A country which prefers comfort and tranquility to freedom will lose its freedom and with it, ironically, its comfort and tranquility as well.”

As someone who tries to avoid physical pain at all cost, a Czech cannot easily be motivated to inflict physical pain even on his worst enemies. Slow, gradual, and hardly noticeable mental torture, frequently masked as comfort, is always considered the better option in his hierarchy of weapons.

Pohoda is also the state of mind in which Czechs like to do their work, provide a service, do a favour. If they are satisfied that what you are asking them to do can be done easily and without much risk of failure, they will tell you they can do it “*v pohodě*”. This means literally in comfort, though a more accurate translation would probably be the more colloquial “no sweat”.

The somewhat earthier Moravians with their more florid, kinesthetically and olfactorily opulent usage of the Czech language, would perform an easy task for

you not just in comfort, not even just standing on their heads, but with both hands in their arsehole.

More on them later.

Atheism and ideological indifference

An unstoppable flood of Czechs returning to the Catholic faith was expected by the Church and its devout believers after the collapse of communism. Naively, as it turned out. The nation was believed to be yearning for the Church's guiding hand following forty years of godless tyranny. Naively again. They were, after all, still believed to be at least seventy five percent Catholic, as they had been registered before communism took power and forced everyone who wanted to hang on to a decent job to declare himself officially “of no faith”. For the sake of comfort, most did. To those few who didn't, various degrees of discomfort were meted out – from no job promotion if they were professionally indispensable to landing in labour camps if they weren't, and every imaginable degree in between.

The Church's hopes went awry when all three avowedly Christian parties together failed to get even ten percent of the nation's vote in the first election, in spite of the plainly visible fact that none of the other parties declared themselves even knowledgeable, let alone supportive, of anything that might smack of religious values. A return of strayed sheep to the Church's flock failed to take place. The Czechs obviously did not feel convinced that organised religion was capable of, or even interested in, providing more comfort, and decided to do without ideologies altogether and be guided solely by the most humane of ethics – desire for their own comfort. For this, the post-communist government was perceived to provide the best framework. In every survey since then, Czechs have fi-

gured as statistically the least religious nation in Europe.

The reason for this could probably be found in their history, during which they were forced to switch ideological allegiances time and time again, always for the same single reason: to avoid discomfort. Czech ideological and religious history in a nutshell goes as follows:

1. Celts and pagans

Celtic Christianity of St. Patrick's mission from Ireland some time in the 6th century, among what was at the time probably still a fairly mixed population of Celts and Slav-speaking Moravians, with a smattering of some Germanic tribes. No record of St. Patrick's local liturgy or literature. No practicing survivors, though some may have emigrated to Ireland since. This meek religion tries to compete with the then popular Czech pagan rite of virile gods like Radegast (now a popular beer) who thunder down the mountain slopes to mate and make merry with the local oh ever-so-lovely maidens.

2. Slav Christians

Moravian Greco-Slav rite in the 9th century, with Slav liturgy and bits of Bible translations. Some texts and the alphabet extant for students of Slavonic studies. Practicing survivors pushed eastward to set up what is to become the Russian Orthodox Church, never quite relinquishing their right to return to their cradle, in tanks if need be.

3. Roman rite over Slav

Conversion to the Roman Catholic rite in the 10th century, largely carried out by neighbouring German missionaries at the invitation of Wenceslas, the legendary Prince (not King, for the Czechs were only a principality at the time), about whom it is still difficult to deci-

de whether he was an enlightened civiliser or a cowardly quisling.

4. Czech Protestantism

Outbreak of Czech national fervent Protestantism following the 1415 burning of popular Prague hippy preacher Jan Hus, who had the outrageous idea of letting his congregants read the Bible in their own language, and had himself provided some of the translation. One of the few great legends of Czech military prowess run by a brilliant strategist, the furious one-eyed south Bohemian squire Jan Žižka. His peasant armies defeat several crusades and keep chasing them all the way across Germany for fifteen years running, burning the odd cathedral or two in passing, and spreading the "wine for everyone, cheers" message to the local soon-to-become Lutherans. Under the banner of the chalice, the Hussites' multi-vocal rendering of "God's Warriors", top of the pops of the day (conveniently used by later Czech composers as an expression of patriotic mood calculated to move Czechs to tears), appeared to have the same effect on the invading crusaders as the Cockney war-stopper mono-testicled Hitler song must have had on the average German soldier's fighting spirit when the Brits marched in behind the bagpipes, singing: 'I'ler 'as only go' one ball, Goerin' s'go' two bu' very small, 'Imler 's go' somefin' simlar, and poor ol' Goeballs 'as no balls a' all.

5. Protestant tolerance

Religious toleration law under King George (Jiff) Po-debrad in the mid-1400s, legislating tolerance of Catholics by the then estimated 85% Protestant population, as second best to a failed attempt at establishing an outright Protestant kingdom. For his tolerance of a subversive Catholic minority, George is rewarded with the title of heretic by the Catholic Church. Crusa-

des move on the Czechs again, with active participation of the Hungarians who, having already taken the oh, ever-so-lovely women of Slovakia, are now after the oh, ever-so-lovely women of Moravia and Silesia, which they occupy for one year before being driven back again by Czech military prowess, only to re-occupy them again a few years later, while losing their own land to the Turks, almost causing Central Europe to be converted to Islam by fire and sword.

6. Enter the Habsburgs

Czech Kingdom – which still incorporates the whole of Silesia – confederates with Austria and Hungary in 1526 in a joint effort to drive the Turks out of central Europe. Austrian Habsburg kings promptly seize the opportunity to take the Czechs over by marrying onto their throne, thus becoming their hereditary kings. More Catholic pressure follows, as the Austrians slowly but steadily turn their erstwhile confederate partner into an Austrian-run province, with germanisation slowly creeping in.

7. Protestant defeat

Defeat of Protestants (mainly Czech but some Germans) by Catholic (international motley but some Czechs) armies at the White Mountain (Bílá Hora) in 1620. This triggers off thirty years of bloody warfare in which the population of the Czech kingdom is halved, its educated Protestant classes exiled – some all the way to England and America to become known as the Moravian Brethren. The remaining decimated and by now predominantly peasant population is promptly and comfortably re-catholicised.

8. Fast re-catholicisation

A brave attempt by Protestant Sweden, prompted by exiled Czech Protestants, to liberate the Czech king-

dom from Catholic rule and return power to the Protestants, meets with fierce resistance from the by now thoroughly catholicised Czechs who forgot their two centuries of glorious Protestantism in a few years. Sent packing and understandably peeved, the retreating Swedes set out to plunder and steal whatever they can on the way home, including the indigenous Czech word for physician – *lékař*, turned into *lekare*, for which they have failed to come up with their own indigenous alternative to this day.

9. Everyone is a Catholic

When bonfires of books start burning in Czech towns and villages, the comfort-loving country folk realise the Church is no joke. Not wanting to become fire fodder themselves, they settle into a cozy, comfortable, cuddly, homey, undisturbed soft and sweet version of bare-bummed little angels, baroque Catholicism which is as far removed from the Austro-German pomposity as the soft Portuguese baroque is from the harsh Spanish one. Underneath the surface of devout Catholicism simmers a folk revival of pagan gods in the form of fairies, mermaids, and gnomes in what becomes one of the richest fairy tale traditions in Europe. Humanising the devil into a chummy cuddly innocent harmless little man who can't even scare children, and carving funny little statues of him, is one of the Czechs' naughty cockasnooks at the Church, with which they just about get away short of being burned as satanists.

10. Language revival

By late 18th century, Czech – once a language of rich Renaissance literature and Bible translation – is almost dead and has to be painstakingly reconstructed by linguists and historians who now mostly speak and write better German than their own country dialects. It

takes two generations before quality literature is written in Czech again – though today's flagellants would say it still hasn't been. European Enlightenment loosens the Catholic grip and some Czechs begin to return to Protestantism, which they identify with the glory of the pre-Habsburg Czech kingdom. Many more discover a rich new world outside religion altogether, and socialism finds fertile soil in the Czech sod-the-establishment psyche.

11. Habsburgs go home

As the Habsburg empire collapses in a lost war, American-style democratic capitalism breaks loose on the Czechs and turns fledgling and ethnically fragile Czechoslovakia into the world's tenth most productive economy. Independent statehood, handed to the Czechs on a silver platter by allied powers, turns them overnight into civic democrats but ethnic autocrats trying to be efficient masters of a country in which they constitute only half of the population. The other half being Germans, Slovaks, Hungarians, Poles, Ruthenians, and of course the long-established and well-assimilated Jews, as well as the ever unassimilable Gypsies – the latter two proving the only loyal ones, suspecting all available alternatives to Czech rule to be worse, as indeed they turned out to be. Thus the Czechs squander a unique chance to become another – and probably richer – Switzerland. An eminent example of the Czech's weakness for taking on a bigger morsel than they can chew.

12. Independence lost again

With half of its population proving disloyal in a critical situation, and with its clumsy international diplomacy resulting in Rumania as its only loyal ally, Czechoslovakia disappears from the map. As they gained statehood without a fight, so without a fight the

Czechs lose it again. Three years later, a quarter of a million of them gather in Prague's Wenceslas Square *sieg-heiling* their loyalty to the Reich and demanding severe punishment for Heydrich's assassins and their sympathisers, while singing the Czech national anthem *Where Is My Home*.

13. We are Slavs after all

In the last days of the war, with Patton's army within an hour's drive from Prague, Czechs rise against the Nazis in the hope that Patton would be in town by midday and they would be home for grandma's dinner. Ike orders Patton to stay put and leave Prague for the Russians, who, however, can't be bothered to turn up, leaving the Czechs to stew in the astonishingly unprecedented discomfort of four days of fighting and a looming massacre, from which they are saved by the pro-Nazi renegade Russian Vlasov Army turning against their German masters on the last day of the war. By the time official liberation arrives in Russian tanks, every Czech has been an anti-Nazi fighter, a devout socialist, and lover of Russian songs all his life.

14. And socialists to boot

Within three years, whoever has not been able to prove his devout socialist and Russian-song-loving pedigree at least one generation back is in jail or forced labour, thinking himself lucky to be alive. The only exception are professional gestapo helpers, whose expertise is now needed to deal with all the above, and whose pedigrees are doctored accordingly.

15. But human, too, maybe

Another twenty years on, the erstwhile young enthusiastic persecutors of their less enthusiastic peers turn their middle-aged unwavering enthusiasm to the futile effort of plastering a sloppily designed phantom hu-

months later, they are flummoxed by the puzzle of how come their persecuted peers are not welcoming and backing them when they themselves are joining the ranks of the persecuted, following the arrival of true socialism's face in Russian tanks.

16. Velvet-proud

A further twenty five years on, five years after communist power structures "velvetly" collapse around the Czechs, not a single communist has been brought to account for the forty years of creeping and all-pervasive misery inflicted on the nation, and the nation's most popular politicians include erstwhile active communists turned devout free-marketeers and staunch democrats. Hard-working citizens resign themselves again to second-class status as they watch shrewd communist secret service agents change into ruthless capitalist bankers, investment fund chiefs, majority stake holders, property speculators and owners of some of the country's most precious assets with the power to bribe or threaten anyone at any time for whatever reason – *forever*.

And you expect the Czechs to retain a modicum of sanity while remaining loyal – to an *idea*?

Passing the buck

Disclaiming responsibility is another popular game, and most Czechs pass through their lives blaming just about everybody else for just about every one of their failures and disasters, personal as well as national. If they can't point their finger at anyone specific, they blame the weather, the government, the Party, interna-

ever "historical inevitability", of which they perceive themselves victims without choice.

It restores a bit of comfort in their uncomfortable lives. It comforts a Czech to know he has not been able to pursue a successful writer's career or complete his adult education course in the evenings because since the children were born, there has never been anywhere in the home to sit and think, let alone write. It comforts him to know that the 1946 free election voters who gave the communists 40% of the vote, and the paralysed democratic parties who did not resist the full-scale communist take-over two years later, are the ones responsible for every misery inflicted on him personally, including the fact that he has never had a good enough reason and motivation to learn English. It comforts even the staunch pro-Western Czech to understand that the nation's unfortunate post-war sympathy for the Soviet Union was, of course, the direct responsibility of the French and Brits who could no longer be trusted after their Munich betrayal.

It is fascinating to read a 1945 article by a French-educated Czech professor of Romanesque literatures commenting on the post-war re-launch of French cultural institutions in Prague, at a time when growing Soviet and communist influence was becoming very noticeable indeed.

"And they dare come back as if nothing had happened, as if they had nothing to apologise for. No – they will have to struggle hard to regain our betrayed sympathies."

Betrayed, victimised, persecuted, downtrodden, outnumbered, outgunned, outmaneuvered, left behind, misled, hoodwinked, stabbed in the back – anything would do in the place of responsibility. Taking responsibility could be too risky, too dangerous, too uncomfortable. One may even have to stand up and be coun-

ted. One may, heaven forbid, even have to fight – and get hurt.

“Nothing to do with me – I’m just a musician”, is the traditional Czech response to responsibility. No wonder Czechs call themselves a “nation of musicians”.

Better leave it all to “them”. The all-powerful “they” are always a good excuse for my failure, poverty, poor health, incompetence, lack of drive or skill, character defects, resignation to mediocrity. Whoever “they” are. Parents, teachers, peers, capitalists, communists, the police, the Party, the anonymous apparatus, the Russians, the French, the planet, the stars – or just an abstract “they” which no one bothers to identify any more.

It’s all their fault. Never mine. And survival becomes so much easier when you know that.

This Jewish joke, which comes from Czech Jewish anthologies, could not have been thought up anywhere else:

Moskovitz and Finkelstein run two groceries competing in the same street. One day, Moskovitz meets a young girl who used to come regularly to do the small family shopping, but hasn’t done so for some weeks.

“Good morning, young lady, and how come you’ve stopped shopping with me? Are my goods not good enough? Are they too expensive?”

“No, Mr Moskovitz, but they told us in school that you people killed Jesus.”

“Oh, no, Miss, not me – it was Finkelstein.”

The Czechs are suckers for a good slogan. Give them a good slogan, and they will queue up for you and teach their children diligently to do the same. Try to lead them without a slogan, and you are in for a great disappointment. Those who knew this ruled them with ease. Those who didn’t had a rough time.

But what is a good slogan to a Czech?

Truth Triumphs is one which has survived centuries and has been used successfully by every government, and most successfully by some of the craftiest liars among Czech rulers. It is associated with St. Wenceslas, but no one is quite sure who the genius was that made it up or when. It is claimed to have been popular with Czech kings, and it was a part of the presidential regalia in the enlightened times of Masaryk, through the German occupation, and during communist rule. It became more prominent again when it was hackneyed endlessly in Havel’s first presidential campaign in December 1989, in his dramatically innovative enlarged version *Truth and Love Shall Triumph over Lies and Hate*.

What is it about this slogan that can make Czechs so sentimental?

It is comforting. It soothes a Czech to know that whatever disaster he might be going through, truth will triumph. He knows that the truth is not triumphing right now, but that it will triumph eventually. Some day. It just has to. Because it does. St Wenceslas says so. Never mind what the truth is, as long as it triumphs. Never mind when it will actually triumph. Never mind how it will triumph. It will triumph by itself. On its own. No need to argue the truth out. No need to prove it. So whenever someone comes up and says that truth will triumph, this must be the time when it will. It ne-

ver does. And when it doesn't, it's nobody's fault. Its time just hasn't come yet. But it is soothing to know it will.

So again: what is a good slogan to a Czech?

Modern psychology divides people into several sensory types according to the prevailing sense with which they perceive the world. Every nation, of course, has people of all types, but on a collective consciousness level, one or another sense dominates.

To persuade the predominantly *auditory* English, it all has to *sound* right.

To the *visual* German, everything must *look* neat.

The *saporous* Italians must have everything presented in good *taste*.

Whatever does not sound right to the Englishman, *stinks* to the *olfactory* American.

Czechs are mainly *kinesthetic* – and things must *feel* good to them. Above all, things must make them feel good about themselves. You must give them a slogan they can touch, feel, get emotionally involved in, wrap themselves in and feel cuddled, supported, protected.

Give their socialism a human face. Wrap their revolution in velvet. Cushion the impact of market reform. That sort of thing.

Heaven forbid your slogan should mean anything or have some logic. The more absurd and meaningless it is, the better it works. It has to bypass reason and go straight for the gut, where it can plant its seed, take root, germinate, blossom in bright colours, and become a reality that no one questions because that's just the way things are. Above all, avoid slogans which suggest they must do something, make an effort, or go somewhere. However much Czechs love and admire America, *Per ardua ad astra* would not move them one inch.

Unless, that is, you can persuade them that *Work Ennobles*, as did the communists when they were sending former businessmen, company managers, lawyers, teachers and journalists to coal mines or road construction. The similarity with Auschwitz's *Arbeit Macht Frei* somehow escaped everybody at the time. So much did work ennoble everyone that *Work Be Praised* became the everyday greeting which successfully replaced Good Morning in large sections of the population.

Neither Profit, Nor Fame was the famous slogan of the patriotic revivalist sports organisation *Sokol* (Falcon) which became the paragon of Czech righteousness in the nineteenth century and carried through to the communist takeover in 1948, after which the organisation was banned as an enemy of the working people and its leaders sent to labour camps. Very comforting slogan indeed. It never occurred to anyone that if you followed it through logically, you would end up destitute and ignored. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with being either. But the slogan made both into a national virtue. That came to its logical conclusion as the nation did indeed become destitute and ignored. And wondered how come.

The Country's Well-being is another effective slogan which has been played on the Czechs in a variety of ways by every regime. *The Country's Well-being Be Our Highest Law* was the slogan of the Czech fascists after Munich and the occupied Protektorat's puppet government. *The Republic Is Ours* and *We Shall Not Give The Republic Away* were two of the popular slogans in the struggle against imperialism and its agents within.

Build Your Country and You Shall Strengthen Peace was a particularly good patriotic internationalist work-

ennobling peace-loving slogan which hung writ large on socialist construction sites and was chanted by enthusiastic masses along with *Forward Left, Not a Step Back*, as everybody was *Living Better, Living More Joyously* and marching *Towards Glittering Tomorrows*. Because, as the slogan coined by the first working-class president reminded everyone, *One Cannot Live in the Old Ways*. So they all tried to behave *progressively, comradely, working-classly, socialistly, marxistly* and *leninistly, internationalistly* but not, heaven forbid, *cosmopolitanly*.

Peace, of course, became another thing worth not only building and defending, but fighting for. *Fighting for Peace* was such an everyday natural thing to do that few people realised it was – as an unpublished poet kept reminding his friends – like “fucking for virginity”.

The mighty “we”, and the ever-important feeling of belonging is more fertile ground. *We Shall Remain Faithful* was the post-Munich slogan expressing loyalty to resigning President Beneš who had made the decision – against the will of the army and the people – to hand the Republic over to Hitler without a shot. *We Are With You, Be With Us* was the endlessly repeated slogan in the first week of the Soviet invasion while Dubček and Svoboda were signing a capitulation treaty.

Today, Czechs often ask themselves how such a well educated and kind-hearted nation could have fallen for such evil stupidity and keep it going for forty years. The answer is obvious. Like no one before, the communists had the Czechs stitched up with kinesthetic slogans bombarding all their senses from all sides. Left, right, and centre, morning, noon, and night.

It is now often claimed that Czechs have become allergic to slogans and cannot be fooled by them again.

Nonsense. They have only become allergic to certain type of slogans. The type of slogans which look like slogans, because they've seen them before. Forgetting that they fell for those slogans only because those slogans did not look like slogans then. They looked like what the majority of Czechs wanted to hear and feel at the time.

Make up a new slogan that catches their desires today and makes them feel good about themselves. They'll queue up for you again.

Marching into Europe. Aiming For Greater Prosperity. Creating Cash Flows.

And *Thinking Marketly* (oh, yes, and freemarketly at that).

The search for meaning

The Czechs have always been so puzzled by their survival as a distinct nation that they believe their existence and history must have a meaning or even purpose. Such notions may be totally incomprehensible to normal nations like the Brits, the French, or the Dutch who just get on with their national lives in the best way possible at a given time. But “national meaning” has always been a popular game east of the Rhine, where whatever one does is expected to be in some way or other subservient to an overall grand national design. Nationally meaningful, as it were.

The Germans see themselves, and themselves alone, as chosen to civilise and westernise their eastern neighbours, more efficiently than anyone else would – should anyone else ever bother – and would therefore regard anyone else's bothering as interference in their natural rightful historical purpose. The Catholic Poles are there to save Christian Europe from godless eastern barbarians, since no one else is in the position

to do it. Russians believe their mission is to give the soulless world true spirituality which only their deep souls possess.

The Czechs have no idea what the hell they are here for – except, perhaps, as musicians. But since they keep surviving as a nation with recognisable distinct culture and character traits, they believe they should go on racking their brains trying to find out why continued existence keeps afflicting them.

But before they can define their national meaning, they must, of course, first define the meaning of meaning:

“Meaning is at one time the main content, at another time the main supporting force, at yet another time a cutting edge idea, at other times the main or overriding national task, national mission or programme, or even quest for glory.”

Thus spoke leading Czech historians in 1928, presumably with straight faces, at a famous symposium “On the Meaning of Czech History”, which was recorded for posterity and from which the Czechs have not been able to recover. And went on:

“The essential thing is the assumption that in a nation’s history, one can trace a single underlying idea, a single trend, in other words a single ‘meaning’ as the creative element and carrying force, also assuming indirectly that all nations are carriers of ‘meanings’, presumably each of a different one.”

No kidding. But wait:

“The term ‘meaning’ is usually used as an opposite to the actual material of history, the word itself expresses the requirement of interpretation of actual historical events and their contexts, particularly value judgment, a definition of an ideological value or guideline of events. But occasionally it covers more: meaning is understood to be that which is, as it were, primary or

eternal in history, of which actual events are only an outward manifestation, the emphasis being on the understanding of the goal or purpose of developments, on its logical-teleological nature, and on the desire to bring down the last remaining curtain on the mystery of life.”

Wonderful stuff, and all verbatim. But you have seen nothing yet:

“The search for meaning in national history is an assignment to establish what our methodologies define as interpretation of history or philosophy of history, based on facts scientifically ascertained. The issue is essentially nothing other than knowledge of the main factors of historical developments and interpretation of contexts created by them. Whoever so wishes may regard this definition of the assignment as the first step towards the actual assignment defined by the broader sense of the word ‘meaning’, for which, however, empirical historical science is not adequately equipped and whose very possibility it views with skepticism, although the solution to the problem in the higher sense of the word would not be possible without the first step described previously.”

Having had it so clearly explained, and never wanting to appear stupid, every Czech makes sure other Czechs believe he understands clearly not only what being Czech means but even what the meaning of being Czech means, knowing that other Czechs will never dare ask him to define it lest they themselves appear ignorant.

Thus they all talk with deep understanding about various aspects of their everyday “czechness” (*českost*) or the more exalted “czechianity” (*češství*), of non-czechness, quasi-czechness, and anti-czechness. And even a delightfully derogatory petty-czechness called *čecháčekovství* which incorporates everything

every Czech hates about every other Czech and never sees in himself: cowardice, sycophancy, lack of self-esteem covered up by know-it-all and petty dictatorial habits, anxiety to make a good impression, and the cheap outsmarting and outmaneuvering skill for which they have created an ingenious linguistic gem *vyčáranost*. This wonderful word translates as the ability not just to take the piss out of someone but also to outpiss, bypiss, and overpiss.

But if you asked an educated Czech friend to give you a sincere outline of what he truly believes he and his nation are here for and what it is they have been so doggedly plodding on towards, he would probably conclude that the Czechs' national meaning is the same as their national desires and aspirations, such as these:

a) Like few nations around them, the Czechs have a deeply ingrained desire and an unwavering determination to better themselves – materially, intellectually, and culturally – whatever the circumstances, and through their own effort.

b) Unlike some other nations with similar determination, they prefer to go about it without encroaching on other nations, and even take pains to get out of other nations' way. This is so not because they would be exceptionally fair-minded, but because they sincerely regard war as a very stupid waste of time, and view everything to do with military matters with utter contempt.

c) Their aim is nothing less than being at the very top of the European league where they believe they belong and where they still vaguely recall having once been – economically, culturally, and in whatever other area of competition they may consider relevant at a given time.

d) Whenever they are left alone to get on with this determination, they go about it as methodically – if not

so rigidly – as the Germans (whom, incidentally, deep down, they regard as inferior in every respect except militarily, including their military approach to business conquest, as it appears to the Czechs these days).

e) They want the world to recognise them on their own merit, not as someone else's tandem.

f) They consider themselves – not the Germans – the natural rightful business leaders of Central and Eastern Europe which they recall they have always fed, clad, shod, housed, armed, machined, and ve-hicled.

g) To achieve these goals, they go out of their way to inform themselves about, seek and absorb voraciously everything and anything they can learn to that aim.

h) They are fast learners and tend to remember what they learn, for as long as it is usable, and sometimes long after it has become useless.

i) While highly adaptable to changing circumstances, they turn whatever they pilfer or whatever is flogged on them into something specifically and recognisably Czech – good or bad.

j) They have a unique knack for screwing up when it really matters.

Which is why they are where they are, not where they know they ought to be.

Interlude: The Other Tribe

The first thing one must know about the Moravians is that they regard the Bohemian Czechs as vastly inferior in everything other than beer-drinking. In fact, the only people whom the Moravians do not regard as inferior are the Tuscans, with whom they share a passion for and a pride in a meal well eaten and a bottle of wine well drunk.

Throughout the communist era, and against tremendous odds, through secret networks of country relatives and friends, Moravians fought like lions to preserve sporadic unofficial pockets of good living. With fine wine vintages distributed strictly among friends before they could reach state-run distribution. With culinary treats which included game and venison when Prague had to queue for pork sausages, and at least three types of fresh vegetables available throughout the year. This subversive stubbornness must surely be acknowledged as something close to a miracle by anyone who recalls the despair of having to resort to sauerkraut, sauerkraut, and sauerkraut as the only vegetables available in any form or shape in any Prague restaurant even three years after the fall of communism.

"This is old Moravia, sir," was the reply Moravian expatriates on their first return visit in the velvet revolution winter were getting from Moravian waiters proudly serving mixed salads of grated fresh carrots, white cabbage, red cabbage, kohlrabi, radicchio, and chicory, which Prague waiters would not have remembered having seen, heard, or imagined anyone would order, let alone eat.

If you speak Czech and want to be served decent wine in Prague, you would be well advised to cultivate a broad Moravian accent, just for the restaurants. This usually discourages waiters from arguing with you about the substandard wine they have served you, and makes them more likely to exchange it for a better bottle. They have to take your word for it, because they themselves can't tell the difference. And you can't blame them, they don't know any better. They have been kept in this dark ignorance deliberately by the Moravians who have always retained the best wines for themselves, leaving the poor Praguers what they them-

selves would not even cook a stew with, persuading them it was top quality. If your Prague waiter happens to be Moravian himself, he will not even dream of giving someone with your Moravian accent anything but the best Moravian wine he has, leaving the bad one to the Praguers.

Probably the most useful accent for this purpose would be the central Moravian regional accent of the ancient university town of Olomouc, which tends to have a strange mellowing and disarming effect on most Praguers who will soon start imitating it and have a lot of fun doing so.

Most Bohemian Czechs think of the Moravians as an appendage which has always belonged to them, and view them with amusement as a livelier and chummier wine-drinking version of their beer-drinking selves. More pastoral, less spoilt by greed and lust for power, more laid-back and fun-focused. Some Czechs even go as far as believing the Moravians to be more straightforward, reliable and honest. This, in turn, amuses the Moravians, who remember that they have bred some of the nation's finest hoodlums, including the first communist President and the last communist Prime Minister.

The Bohemians tend to forget this, and the Moravians do not remind them. What they do remind them of instead is that the four Czechs recognised even by the Bohemians as the nation's greatest achievers throughout history were all Moravians:

Komenský – Jan Amos, known worldwide as *Comenius*, one of Europe's late renaissance great Protestant philosophers and educators who went into Dutch exile after the defeat of Czech Protestant armies by Catholics in 1620.

Palacký – František, piously nicknamed "Father of the Nation", 19th century historian who re-created

Czech history as a science and was responsible almost single-handedly for restoring to Czechs their national identity and a modicum of self-respect.

Masaryk – Thomas Garrigue, statesman and philosopher, Czechoslovakia's first President from 1918 to 1935.

Bafa – Jan and Thomas, two generations of ingenious shoemakers who conquered the entire world within fifteen years of starting their business in the small Moravian town of Zlín, and lost their accent on the *t* when they moved their headquarters to Canada in 1939.

Recently added to the list of great Moravians must be:

Kundera – Milan, probably the most successful and best known Czech writer of all time, expatriate in France, singularly detested by domestic Czech intellectuals for reasons only they understand (or do they?).

Extended to Moravians who were German speakers, the fame list would include:

Mendel – Gregor, 19th century biologist, founder of genetics.

Freud – Sigmund, founder of psychoanalysis.

Husserl – Edmund, philosopher, founder of phenomenology.

Schindler – Oskar, saviour of 1,000 Jews from the Holocaust.

And to be fair to Moravians who found their fame in English-speaking countries, one would have to include:

Reisz – Karel, film director, emigrated to Britain in 1938 aged 12.

Stoppard – Tom, playwright, emigrated in 1939 aged 2 and arrived in Britain a few years later via Singapore and India.

Trump – Ivana, a model achiever.

True, there have been some achievers among the

Bohemian Czechs, but in an in-depth interview, most of those would admit to having had at least one Moravian grandparent.

N.B. Alberto Moravia was not Moravian.

The pastoral image the Czechs have of Moravia goes by the wayside once one discovers that statistically per capita, Moravia is about 25% more densely industrialised than Bohemia. Moravians just like to give the impression that they have been able to mitigate the environmental effect of industry and are living in cleaner air. This is, of course, an illusion which can be dispelled by one visit to the Ostrava region. As well as more industrialised – and thus more industrious, the Moravians believe themselves to be hardier, more persistent, more resilient, more determined, generally tougher, and sexier.

By official statistics, Moravians represent about one third of the population of the Czech Republic – approximately 3.5 million against 6.5 million Bohemians. Since most Moravians are registered in the population census as Czech by nationality (except for a few thousand jokers who registered their nationality as Moravian) – the population figures are based only on the actual population living in the two respective lands. Since half of the population of Prague is Moravian, or of Moravian parents, or of at least one Moravian parent, the true figures could be around 4.5 million against 5.5 million Bohemians.

Although Bohemian Czechs have always believed they were ruling the Moravians, the reality looks more like Moravians inconspicuously ruling the Bohemians. What makes it inconspicuous is the fact that all the ruling is done from the Bohemian capital. At the time of writing (winter 95/96), Moravians ruling the Czechs include the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Parliament, the Minister of Economy, and the Minister for

Business Competition. One might be tempted to note as not quite accidental that between them, they have relegated the Presidency (Bohemian) to token status devoid of political power. But that could be taking the Moravian conspiracy theory too far into the realm of fantasy.

Historically, the Moravians are the older of the two tribes, and were used to statehood long before the Czechs built their first house. Their first state was organised by a Frankish merchant Samo who, while on a business trip, rallied the Slav tribes of the region in 623 for a decisive battle against the invading Avars, and was elected their king. A few years later, Samo's Moravians defeated even the Franks who tried to incorporate them into their own expanding empire. Samo left 32 sons and 15 daughters, and it is likely that subsequent Moravian rulers were recruited from this lineage.

Some Moravian-based Slav kingdoms and principalities are mentioned in Roman sources throughout the following two centuries, until the establishment of the Moravian Empire in 830 AD. This was a state of unified Slav-speaking tribes settled around the Morava river. They were christianised in 831, made literate and economically organised, and a generation later linked with the Eastern Roman Empire by two Byzantine scholars who introduced the Greco-Slav rite, one Constantine, also known as Cyril (founder of the Cyrillic alphabet) and one Method (founder of methodology – sorry, kidding, but you could be fooled there, couldn't you).

At the height of its power under king Svatopluk around 880, the Moravian Empire incorporated the whole of Bohemia and Moravia as they are today, most of Slovakia, most of Austria, the western half of Hungary, Southern Poland including Krakow, the

whole of Silesia, and parts of today's eastern Germany around Meissen, Chemnitz, Bautzen, and Dresden – all of which are names of Slav origin. All those lands were then populated by Slav-speaking tribes with now extinct names like Vislani, Holasici, Glomaci, Militians, and by Lusatian Serbs, whose dialects at the time were probably close enough to the Moravian language to give them all a sense of ethnic unity, molded by the liturgical Slavonic.

The Moravian Empire, however, did not last a whole century before it was chopped up between invading Hungarians and defending Bohemian Czechs who, having salvaged half of Moravia, incorporated whatever was left of it into their own kingdom, leaving it a semi-autonomous status, with political power shifting to Prague. Moravians settled into leaving the illusion of power to the Bohemian Czechs while trying to civilise them and make them into a bearable and presentable people. After a millennium of this frequently frustrating endeavour, some Moravians think the Czechs are now almost getting there and worth the trouble, while others still believe all their effort has been a waste of time.