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**Majales:
The Abortive Student Revolt
In Czechoslovakia in 1956**

by

John P. C. Matthews

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Majales:

The Abortive Student Revolt in Czechoslovakia in 1956

For forty years it has been thought that the first significant eruption in the Soviet bloc following Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech at the February 1956 20th CPSU Congress¹ occurred in Poland. Riots in Poznan, Poland, in late June were followed four months later by open revolution in Hungary. Now newly available Cold War documents and the testimony of old men recounting the idealistic actions of their youth provide evidence that the earliest defiance came from students of Prague and Bratislava.² The events of April and May 1956 cast a new light on the Prague Spring of 1968 and Czechoslovakia's "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, despite the decades which separate these events.

Ironically, the facts of this confrontation are so little recognized that a time-worn, bitter joke about the Czechoslovaks is still part of historical folklore. In the midst of the Hungarian Revolution, an international witticism ran that "the Hungarians are behaving like Poles, the Poles are behaving like Czechs and the Czechs are behaving like swine."

This seemed apt at the time because the Czech regime managed to stifle news of the demonstrations and then twisted and distorted the reports that did leak out. Years of suppressing news gave the government the means to do this. The harassment of foreign reporters had driven all but a very few out of the country. A single *New York Times* report and a little-noticed Reuters dispatch reporting bold slogans about a free press and freedom to

¹ CIA Director Allen Dulles at the National Security Council meeting of March 22, 1956 described the news from Moscow concerning the Twentieth Party Congress as "dramatic." He asserted that "Khrushchev had 'deliberately sought to destroy Stalin'...(and he) argued that 'these events afforded the United States a great opportunity, both covertly and overtly, to exploit the situation to its advantage.' This was especially true in the case of the East European satellites where almost all of the party leaders were 'the creatures of Stalin.'" *Rhetoric and Reality: The Eisenhower Administration and Unrest in Eastern Europe*, unpublished dissertation by James David Marchio, Department of History, 1990, The American University, pp. 271-2.

² Many scholars, even in the former Czechoslovakia, believe that the revolt in 1956--such as it was--was led by Czechoslovak writers, whose Second Congress, meeting April 22 to 23, 1956, erupted on the third day into a spontaneous revolt against the organizations' leadership. But even this revolt, articulated by such writers as Hrubin and Seifert, took the form of demanding physical freedom for imprisoned Party writers and for free expression for poets and writers. It did not address, ad did the students, the problems of the country as a whole.

travel outside of Czechoslovakia was essentially all that reached the outside world for some time.

In addition, sporadic reports by Western diplomats often reached their home offices late. Furthermore, the State was able to take advantage of the good will and naiveté of the students. Lastly, the students' determination to keep their revolution peaceful and pure led them to refrain from informing Western embassies or reporters about what they were up to until it was too late.

The world's attention was focused on the major changes taking place in the Soviet Union, Khrushchev and Bulganin's surprise visit to England (their first to the West), the simmering crisis in Egypt, and the beginning of a presidential election year in the U.S.

What follows is the previously untold story of the abortive Czechoslovak student rebellion--still lacking in many details.³

Western diplomatic dispatches from the time mistakenly state that the first university student resolutions concerned only complaints about academia and their lives as students. The diplomats reported that only when the Ministry of Education refused to publicize their demands did the students expand their resolutions to political and cultural matters affecting the whole nation.⁴ However, the text of what was probably the very first student resolution (see Appendix A) proves that the students advanced bold recommendations for nearly every aspect of Czechoslovak society from the beginning. This initial resolution, which precipitated not just other resolutions, but student demonstrations all over Czechoslovakia, appears here in English for the first time. The document was copied by hand and typewriter and later versions of it were carried by motorcycle and even by airplane to universities all over Czechoslovakia.

³ This article is based in part upon documents turned up during four visits to Prague--two to Budapest and one in Bratislava, and from Foreign Office and State Department documents recently made available in London and Washington and other written sources from the time. Most importantly it is based on hours of interviews in Prague, Bratislava, and Princeton with seven of the movement's leaders, one of them being the prime mover and key author of probably the first of the many Czechoslovak student resolutions. Other than brief accounts in the Western and Czechoslovak press of the time, the author has been unable to find any comprehensive treatment of this student revolt. Even Professor Gordon Skilling's *East Europe After Stalin*, 1964, University of Toronto Press and *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, 1976, Princeton University Press, devote only a few paragraphs to the subject.

⁴ Foreign Service Dispatch no. 425, June 6, 1956, U.S. Embassy, Prague to State Department, 749.00 / 6-6-56, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

This is how events unfolded:

In early 1956 Stalin had been dead for three years and the considerable "thaw" that began in the Soviet Union had spilled over into the East European satellite states. Nikita Khrushchev appeared to be winning the struggle for Stalin's mantle, but he was by no means in full control. So at the long-awaited 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in late February 1956, Khrushchev codified a policy of "collective leadership." Then, on February 24, in an attempt to exorcise Stalin's ghost, Khrushchev had the Great Hall in the Kremlin cleared of all foreign guests and foreign party representatives. What he had to say was for Soviet ears only. For six hours he harangued the faithful about what a monster Stalin had been. Khrushchev started with the purge trials in 1934, recounting how Stalin had framed and murdered thousands of party stalwarts and Red Army officers. He continued describing in detail how he, Molotov and the whole politburo had been forced to perform to Stalin's every whim. Stalin, said Khrushchev, had managed to establish a "personality cult" and that it must never be allowed to happen again. All this about a man who was still worshipped as a god by Communists the world over, and whose body lay next to Lenin, in Lenin's tomb.

It was impossible to conceal the impact of these explosive revelations. The foreign comrades had to be told something, and they were told the truth, in outline, if not in detail. Khrushchev, regarding the speech as primarily a Soviet matter, decided that the foreign Communists could handle it as they thought best as long as they kept the information strictly within the Party and did not challenge the new Soviet line on "collective leadership."

Within weeks, however, the gist of the speech began to leak out to the Western press and attacks on the "cult of personality" began to appear in the satellite press.⁵ It was not to Stalin that these articles usually referred, but the local example of a "personality cult"--for among the many things which Stalin had cultivated in the satellites were clones of himself.

Not long before Stalin died there had been a series of show trials in Eastern Europe--remarkably similar to the Moscow show trials of the 1930s--in which the accused confessed to

⁵ "RFE and FEP (Free Europe Press) have not, in a long time, had a topic so suitable for prosecution of our mission, which is to engage the enemy on his own ground, search out his vulnerable places, and strike through them at the foundation of his being." From the RFE/FEP "Special Guidance No. 26: 20th Congress CPSU." March 24, 1956 (Sp-z). Stalin, Josef. Allen W. Dulles papers, Box 72, Mudd Library, Princeton University

a startlingly similar set of crimes involving "Trotskyism, Titoism, and Zionism." The biggest show trial by far had taken place in Czechoslovakia in late November 1952. There, Rudolph Slansky, the former Secretary General of the Czechoslovak Party; Vladimir Clementis, the former Foreign Minister; and twelve other prominent party officials, abjectly confessed to the above trinity as well as to being in the pay of Western, particularly American, intelligence services.

It was no accident that Slansky and ten others also persecuted were Jewish. A majority of the victims in other East European show trials and the Soviet doctors accused by Stalin two months later of plotting to kill him had also been Jewish. Slansky, Clementis and nine others were executed by hanging in Pankrac Prison in Prague on December 3, 1952; the three remaining were given life sentences. Only Stalin's death, on March 5, 1953, had saved the doctors from a similar fate.

The first news of Khrushchev's secret speech undoubtedly reached Czechoslovakia in March 1956 via Western radio: Radio Free Europe, BBC, Radio Diffusion Francaise, and others in their Czech and Slovak language broadcasts. These broadcasts, especially RFE's, were heavily jammed. Radio Belgrade, on the other hand, was less often blocked, and the Yugoslavs were particularly eager to spread what they had learned about the speech. Nevertheless, because the text of the speech had not yet reached the West (nor, presumably, the Yugoslav Communist Party), news of it, no matter how sensational, was necessarily vague. And this encouraged spokesmen for the Czechoslovak regime to brand all references to the speech as "slandorous capitalist lies."

On March 5, 1956 in the more important populations centers throughout Czechoslovakia, meetings of leading party cadres were held.⁶ Each was addressed by a member of the Communist Party Central Committee. These were a stolid lot, for not only had many of the intellectuals been purged or executed, but the Czechoslovak Party had a firm base in the country's highly industrialized proletariat going back to the inter-war years.

Excerpts of the party leader's speeches were carried in the press the following day, but whether through confusion or design, these accounts were not very enlightening. The

⁶ Confidential "S" Dispatch no. 48, March 14, 1956, British Embassy, Prague to Foreign Office, F0371/1221441 REF 7277, Public Record Office, London.

speeches echoed the main points of the Soviet 20th Party Congress and what was already known of the speech in the West. But most references to Czechoslovakia were to the effect that the revelations only concerned the Soviet Union and did not apply to conditions in the Czechoslovak Republic. The speeches were followed by discussions which in some cases were unusually frank. Most ordinary party members were taken completely by surprise and many were stunned and bewildered.⁷

Such turmoil was generated at these meetings that the Central Committee decided it had to meet to resolve the problems which had arisen. A two-day meeting was held on March 29 - 30. Later accounts of this meeting leaked to the press and the diplomatic community indicate that the crux of these discussions was what to do about the trial and execution of Rudolph Slansky and his colleagues.⁸ Should it be reopened, with the possibility of their being posthumously rehabilitated, or should a tight lid be kept on the matter? The Czechoslovak Party found itself in a bind. The Hungarian First Party Secretary, Matyas Rakosi, had just announced that the trial of Laszlo Rajk, the Hungarian analogue to Slansky, had been based upon a provocation and that he was being posthumously rehabilitated. In Poland everyone knew that the very-much-alive Wladislaw Gomulka was in the process of being rehabilitated.

The situation in these three national parties, however, was not the same. The Poles had just lost their First Secretary, Boleslaw Bierut, who had died on March 13 during a visit to Moscow. His replacement, Edward Ochab, was known to be more flexible.⁹ In Hungary, the Imre Nagy wing of the party was forcing Rakosi into a tactical retreat. No such split existed in the Czechoslovak party. They sensed the need to stick together. Rehabilitating Slansky would be opening a Pandora's box none of them was willing to face. But the opprobrium of their people, if and when they announced the decision not to re-open the Slansky trial, was something they were equally loathe to confront. Thus, they chose not to mention Slansky at all in the published text of the report by the Czechoslovak Communist Party Leader, Antonin Novotny.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Confidential "S" Dispatch no. 61, April 11, 1956, British Embassy, Prague to F.O., p. 4, F0371 / 122141, Ref 7277, Public Records Office, London

⁹ Priority dispatch no. 276, March 14, 1956, Sir William Hayter, British Embassy, Moscow to F.O., FO371 / 122588 Ref 7333, Public Records Office, London.

The otherwise astute British Ambassador, Sir George Pelham, missed the point when he reported to Whitehall a few days later:

The Central Committee's resolution and Mr. Novotny's report are not necessarily of great interest or significance. They bear the stamp of hesitation and mediocrity by which the present regime in Czechoslovakia has long distinguished itself; and the high principles which have now been restated are so hedged about with qualifications that it is not possible to predict any radical change.¹⁰

Radical change was exactly what the Czechoslovak Party was trying to avoid. And their apparently united determination to quash what Khrushchev had unleashed, soon bolstered by the upheaval in Poznan and later by the revolution in Hungary, turned out to be radical indeed.

The full report was, of course, not for public, but only for party consumption. It was printed up in a little blue booklet and used as a basis for carefully spreading the Khrushchev speech to the party faithful around the country. However watered-down the Novotny version may have been, it still came as a brutal shock to many Communists, particularly the true believers. Scandalous claims about Stalin that had long been labeled "slanders" and "bourgeois, capitalist nonsense," were now confirmed from the highest level of the Soviet hierarchy.

One such true believer was Ladislav Nemeč, a fourth-year chemistry student at Charles University. He was not a full Communist, but a candidate member, which he had been for four years. This was rather longer than the norm; both the Party and he had lingering doubts about one another. But he was nonetheless included in a secret Party meeting of about 300 students, faculty, and employees of the School of Mathematics and Physics (which included chemistry) in early April. This meeting was held in the School's main lecture hall and was attended by approximately one-tenth of its party members. Student party membership at the time was not more than 5%.¹¹

Nemeč had been a Marxist for almost as long as he could remember. It had defined him and made it possible for him to stand up to and even oppose his father. There had been many arguments, with the result that, while he was still living at home, there was a definite estrangement between them. Now everything his father had said about Stalin turned out to be

¹⁰ Confidential "S" Dispatch no. 61, April 11, 1996, British Embassy, Prague to F.O., p. 4, FO371/122141, Ref 7277, Public Records Office, London.

¹¹ Author's interview with Jiri Kopec, Geology Faculty, Charles University, Prague, March 5, 1996.

true. The Party had lied to him. What was worse, the Party, or at least the leadership, was now denying its own culpability in the trial and execution of Slansky and his fellow victims as well as avoiding the necessity of purging itself. He felt flushed with shame and anger. Something had to be done.¹²

As a fourth year student, Nemeč by now had some close friends among his fellow chemistry students, like Michael Heyrovsky, Stanislav Vavricka, Zdenek Dolejsek and Zdenek Herman. None were party members, though one later joined briefly before quitting in 1968. Nemeč told them what he had learned at the party meeting and they agreed with him that they could not just sit back and accept it. Revelations and reform were in the air, particularly in the news from Poland. Radio Free Europe's Czech and Slovak broadcasts could not be heard in Prague because of the heavy jamming by the regime, but many young Czechs had learned Polish, or could already understand some, and the Polish broadcasts of RFE, while jammed in Poland, nonetheless came in loud and clear in Prague.¹³

At first Nemeč, as chairman of the fourth-year chemistry students, called a couple of meetings only within that body. These gatherings were held in the Chemistry auditorium and consisted of only a few score students. But the word got out and soon the chemistry students from the other four classes showed up as the meetings continued. Someone suggested that the physicists and the mathematicians, since they were part of the same school, should also be included. The auditorium began to get crowded and the meetings a bit unwieldy. It was decided that an *ad hoc* steering committee was needed to draft a statement incorporating the most pressing matters which had been brought up at these meetings. Nemeč was chosen to head this group, which met several times in a small classroom, drafting not only the resolution, but planning the plenary meeting at which the resolution was to be discussed, amended, and approved.

The only legitimate way the students could accomplish this was if they did it under the auspices of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, an all-encompassing organization to which they all automatically belonged.

¹² Author's interview with Dr. Ladislav Nemeč, Princeton, NJ, April 13, 1996.

¹³ Author's interview with Professor Jan Havranek, Asst. Dir., Historic Archives, Charles University, Prague, March 6, 1996.

Unlike the charter of the Soviet Union's Union of Communist Youth, the charter of the Czechoslovak Youth Union (CSM) was thoroughly democratic. Since it was under the domination of the Communist Party, these democratic rules had seldom been observed by the organization's leadership. The steering committee decided from the outset that these democratic rules would be meticulously observed. Everyone at the plenary session was to have his or her say; no one was to be shouted down or harassed in any way. Nor was anyone to be excluded. In addition, Nemeč was determined *not* to notify any foreign embassies or foreign journalists. All their meetings had been open and they knew that the secret police were well informed of them. They did not want to risk the accusation that there had been any influence from abroad.¹⁴

Just as all previous meetings had been held openly, this plenary meeting was open to all and publicized throughout the academic community. Even the Minister of Education, František Kahuda, was invited--an invitation he ignored,--although it appears his decision not to attend was made at the last minute.

The meeting took place in the main lecture hall of the School of Chemistry at Albertov on the evening of April 26. "The hall was crowded to capacity and the air was electrified with a militant spirit," reported one eye-witness informant to the British Embassy some days later.¹⁵

"A resolution was passed in which the Minister of Education, Dr. Kahuda, was criticized for not having accepted an invitation to attend, nor having sent a deputy in his place." *Mlada Fronta*, the official Czech Communist youth newspaper, could not, without losing all credibility, ignore the meeting. It sent Ivo Kalvinský, whose report first appeared in the April 28 edition because the meeting lasted well into the early hours of April 27. Hedged as it was, his was the only eyewitness report ever to appear in print. It is worth quoting, therefore, at some length.

Kalvinský began by chiding his fellow Communist journalists as "newsmongers" who felt themselves so much "in the know" that they did not need to cover the meeting. And then he wrote: "I hope the newsmongers will not be angry with me--I did not witness any uproars.

¹⁴ Author's interview with Dr. Ladislav Nemeč.

¹⁵ Confidential "S" Dispatch no. 61, April 11, 1956, British Embassy, Prague to F.O., FO371/122141 Ref. 7277, Public Records Office, London.

Just the opposite--I was struck by the attentiveness with which the students listened to the proposal of a resolution which had been the result of several preceding discussions.

I was struck by the real interest with which the participants greeted every point of the resolution and, for that matter, every idea and formulation, and by the thoroughness and frankness with which they articulated their points of view. Ultimately, though, the most eloquent token of their real interest was the jammed auditorium and the fact that the meeting, which had been called for 7:00 p.m., ended long after midnight, and those who did not get seats...stood for almost the whole time in the gallery.

Kalvinsky concentrated his report on the resolution's criticism of the Ministry of Education. The resolution attacked compulsory attendance at courses on Marxism-Leninism, the excessive number of hours spent in the classroom, and the gross imbalance in each student's "plan of study." Kalvinsky even mentioned several of the 12 requests (in effect demands) made of the Ministry, adding that, naturally, these were talked about the most and the longest. (In fact, this was merely section 6 of a resolution covering 7 areas of public life.)

The reporter so watered down the other sections that it is best to turn to the words actually spoken.

The student who read the resolution was Nemeč's good friend, Michael Heyrovsky. He had been chosen for his strong voice and clear enunciation, but also for the fact that he had a prominent, respected father. Here are some of the words which rang out in that jam-packed auditorium:

We consider it necessary that all important measures in individual areas of our national and economic life be discussed in advance with...workers in the areas in question and that they be submitted for public discussion in the press...

Some shortcomings in our political and economic life have been caused by failure to observe in practice the principles of socialist democracy...all leading organs and those who work for them bear full responsibility to account for their work and be subject to full scrutiny and control from below...All citizens [should] be acquainted...with the means they will have to exercise this scrutiny and control over their representatives at the highest echelons and, when necessary, exercise the right to recall them...

We consider it necessary that all persons be suitable and truthfully informed upon request about the contents of their personnel files...

We ask that our press, radio and film reporting service inform the public much more promptly, more accurately and with more independence than heretofore...We [are] often forced to confront the paradox that we first learn about Party matters from bourgeois sources...the fear of bourgeois views...is totally unsubstantiated...

We do not understand the reason for jamming Western radio broadcasts or why this practice is necessary at all. [By the final version, three weeks later, this passage had become: We consider the jamming of foreign broadcasts (even in the case of such a station as "Radio Free Europe) to be beneath the dignity of our State...Regular and timely information about events in this country and the rest of the world would be the best weapon against unfriendly propaganda...]

On relations with the Soviet Union, Heyrovsky went on:

...mechanically adopting the Soviet experience has done great harm to our educational system and, in particular, to our economic system...An end must be made to mere copying of the USSR...Indiscriminate adoption of Soviet works of little value into our cultural life has...severely damaged the attitudes of some of our people toward the Soviet Union...Further harm has been done by playing the Soviet national anthem at the end of every broadcast day and the displaying of the Soviet flag at all occasions. We ask that the Soviet national anthem and Soviet flag be present only on occasions which directly involve the Soviet Union: e.g. the November 7 and May 9 celebrations.

Next came the unprecedented frontal challenge to the regime.

We do not consider correct the view of Mr. Novotny [that] "The Central Committee...decides and must decide the most important questions of the Party and state. Its decisions are binding..." The conclusion reflected in this statement does not express the principle that workers must be governed according to their own convictions and thereby distorts the real content and leading role of the Party...

We ask for a public review of the Slansky trial and other political trials. We ask for a guarantee of rightful political punishment for persons who tolerated illegal procedures during interrogations and for those who directly carried out these procedures. We maintain that it is necessary to publish materials...about what kind of measures will be taken to guarantee control of the legal apparatus so that such cases will not be repeated.

We ask for amnesty for convicted persons similar to the amnesty recently declared in the Polish People's Republic.¹⁶

Given the oppressive power of the regime, these were courageous words, a kind of student Declaration of Independence.

Hours of debate took place before the above words were agreed upon, as the reporter from *Mlada Fronta* testified.

Whoever thought that all views would be united and exactly in the spirit of the proposed resolution would have been severely mistaken. Almost every question drew the comments of scores of students, many standpoints were diametrically opposed and some students were downright wrong in their views. But, ultimately, the important thing was that the students of the Mathematics-Physics Departments cared only about eliminating the insufficiencies and mistakes in our life as soon as possible and that is what all honest people today care about...when I left the Albertov last at night, I thought a long time about one remark that got lost in all the things that were said during the discussion: "This time a lot of functionaries have come to our plenary session, but how many of them have we seen any other time? And how many of them really know anything about our needs and problems?" This remark ought to lead to some serious thought about how little the organs of the Czechoslovak Youth Movement know about the real life of college students...No wonder, then, that in the eyes of many students the Youth Movement had no great authority.¹⁷

¹⁶ Resolution adopted by the School Organization of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, School of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University, Prague, April 26, 1956. Translated by Professor Charles E. Townsend, Princeton University (See Appendix "A" for full text).

¹⁷" We Lift Our Visors," *Mlada Fronta*, April 28, 1956, translated by Professor Townsend.

Comrade Kalvinsky had reason to be impressed with the earnestness, thoroughness, and democratic character of that meeting. Forty years later its leaders and main authors of that resolutions spoke with emotion and pride when they recall that evening.

"We were so excited that the resolution was accepted unanimously by all the students," said Heyrovsky.¹⁸ "There were different interests we were trying truly to represent for one of the first times [since 1948]," said Nemeč.¹⁹ "We knew we were being watched by the secret police. So we were trying to be careful, because we really wanted to keep everything within this theoretically most democratic structure in the world...I was not given a mandate, but I still felt it was my duty to do something...I felt morally obligated because [the Slansky trial and execution] was such a horror."

Nemeč remembers one Communist student, Kadlec, having "great reservations about what we were doing...You know, we listened to him, but the fact was the majority of people did not share his opinions...it was one of the rare moments under the Communist regime where democracy for a brief, fleeting moment seemed to take hold. [Some] raised their objections, everybody listened to them and then, of course, there was the vote."

The leaders were gratified by the number of their own professors who attended. These, for the most part, were older, distinguished men who might never have attended a student-organized meeting had they been in the West. Nor were all of the outsiders who attended just Youth Union functionaries or secret police. At least one member of the Party Central Committee, Jan Zelenka, was there in his capacity as editor-in-chief of *Vecherni Praha* (*Evening Prague*). Zelenka was the son-in-law of Party Secretary Antonin Novotny and as such had a long career ahead of him. He eventually headed the national TV. He said he felt the resolution should stick to academic matters, but he raised no serious objections to the proceedings. Nor, however, did he print an accurate account of the meeting in his newspaper. The fact that such a man sat through the meeting to the end and observed the near unanimity in the final vote convinced Nemeč and his group that they were on the right track and that what they were doing was important.

¹⁸ Author's interview with Dr. Michael Heyrovsky, Institute of Physical Chemistry, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, March 5, 1996.

¹⁹ Author's interview with Dr. Ladislav Nemeč.

This naive euphoria carried them through the next few days. Now they bent all of their energies toward getting the resolution published. The favorable report of the meeting in *Mlada Fronta* certainly encouraged them. Since reproduction facilities such as mimeograph were forbidden them, fellow chemistry student Mila Prusikova and others had to re-type the resolution with as many carbons as possible. These were then dispatched by mail to publications, various ministries and party organizations.²⁰

They had not been able to get to see or talk to any party officials, but they were riding high when it came time for their mandatory participation in the May Day parade four days later. As usual, the different schools and classes of Charles University marched together by year. The route was always the same. The students assembled in a side street near the top of Wenceslas Square, marched down the Square to the big reviewing stand set up at Na Příkopě (or Mustek); there the marchers split, one group to the left, the next to the right to keep things moving along at a good clip.

"As students we tried to make the best of it," recalled Nemeč, "so we had some fun."

As we were marching down the square loudspeakers were blasting all kinds of nonsense like "With the Soviet Union forever!" or "Long Live the Friendship of the Workers and the Students!"...So we were chanting--I remember these slogans were quite funny, but completely harmless--things like "Long Live the Person in Charge of Official Enthusiasm!"

Most importantly we stopped--that was really unheard of, because the whole procession had to keep moving--in front of the podium and started to chant a slogan that really characterizes the period. I remember it because it was in rhyme. I did not invent it; it just came naturally as young people can do...the bottom line was: 'we don't want to rebel, we want discussion' and of course it rhymes in Czech. We were chanting this in front of President Zapotocky and Party Secretary Novotny. We naively and with good humor thought it was the proper thing because we could not get through to those people...we were not quite sure why...we just felt we were isolated from them.

"Novotny was smiling," recalls Heyrovsky,²¹ "he thought that we were praising the Party." On a scientific mission to China years later, Heyrovsky ran across his old professor of Marxism-Leninism who had marched with the students that day and who had soon thereafter disappeared from the university. Far from avoiding him the professor approached him and said, "Do you remember those glorious days?"

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Author's interview with Dr. Michael Heyrovsky.

"We did not want to start a revolution," said Heyrovsky. "We accepted the fact that the Party was in power and would be for a long time. We wanted to improve the regime, not oppose it."

But the regime thought otherwise. Every paragraph of that resolution contained a direct threat to their monopoly of power. No other mention of the students' meeting appeared in the press until eleven days later *Mlada Fronta* carried a second article which was unsigned and gave an inaccurate account of the resolution.

It was not until June 2, long after many other events had occurred, that a long analysis by Antonin Jelinek appeared in *Literarni Noviny*, a literary journal with a relatively small circulation. Jelinek at first appeared to be defending the students from the charge of "ingratitude" toward the "working class." He started by stating that the students' "mistakes in the ideological field" were no proof that they were products of "reactionary intentions." But he condescendingly said that a "lack of political experience and youthful zeal" had "at times succeeded in introducing into the resolutions, demands which were erroneous, misleading and provocative. It is necessary to pay attention to those demands which are arguable, but which could result in many fruitful solutions...it is not necessary to refute the exaggerated demands merely because Free Europe quotes them." Jelinek was careful not to say what *any* of these demands were, good or bad.²² In the meantime, not a single Ministry, party organ, or mass organization which had been sent a copy of the resolution ever acknowledged receiving it.

When nothing appeared after the *Mlada Fronta* account, the Nemeč group decided to publicize the resolution themselves by carrying it personally to other departments of the University and to other institutions of higher learning in Prague.

Heyrovsky remembers going in that first week of May with a few colleagues to the Medical School and getting a very cool reception there. "They were very careful about committing themselves to dangerous matters," he commented. "They were thinking [too] much of their careers."²³ But Zdenek Herman got a much more enthusiastic reception when he took it to the Technical University. Nemeč remembers giving it to his brother in the Academy of Arts and "he definitely showed it to others."²⁴

²² *News from Behind the Iron Curtain* (NFBIC)(Free Europe Committee, Inc.). November issue, 1956, p. 22.

²³ Author's interview with Dr. Michael Heyrovsky, March 14, 1996.

²⁴ Author's interview with Dr. Ladislav Nemeč.

Derivative resolutions began to appear. Students who lived in dormitories on the outskirts of Prague carried these resolutions by motorcycle to other dormitories and even to other cities. One member of the core group at the Mathematics and Physics School, Sasha Mangel, was a Slovak living in Prague. When he was unable to find anyone to carry it to Bratislava for him, he mailed four copies to colleagues in Komensky University, Bratislava, despite his fear that the post was controlled²⁵ In the Spring of 1957, on his first visit to Bratislava in over a year, Mangel was attacked vehemently by the chief of the Physics and Chemistry college for putting them all in such danger. The basis for the Bratislava resolutions, in fact, seems not to have been the Nemeč original, but one concerning strictly academic matters which came from Prague by airplane to students in the Mlada Garda dormitory. In the meantime, similar meetings and resolutions with parallel demands soon occurred in universities and colleges in such major towns as Brno, Ostrava, Plzen, Kosice, Banská Bystrica, and Nitra.²⁶

On May 4, a deputation of students in Prague called on the Minister of Education with their resolution. Whether this was the one from the Mathematics-Physics School or a derivative is not clear, for Nemeč was not a member of this delegation. And there is no particular reason why he should have been: the steering committee he had headed had dissolved itself after the successful plenary on the night of April 26. The resolution now belonged to the Youth Union and its regular officers. *Mlada Fronta's* account of the interview indicates that Dr. Kahuda temporized with them, promising serious consideration of their demands. Whether or not he also agreed to see that the resolution was published is not clear, but by the time the Majales²⁷ was held on May 20, most students in Prague believed he had made and reneged on such a promise.

Nemeč was still attending closed Party meetings. At the next, held only a day or so after the May Day parade, he learned that the Party was furious at the students' behavior. One top apparatchik called it "totally unacceptable." It was at this point that Nemeč realized that if

²⁵ Author's interview by phone with Dr. Sasa Mangel, Prague, June 12, 1996.

²⁶ Confidential "S" Dispatch no. 69, May 15, 1956, British Embassy, Prague to F.O., FO371/122141 Ref 7277, Public Records Office, London.

²⁷ A student carnival which for hundreds of years featured a parade through Prague at the beginning of May. The students dress up in costumes, carry symbols and slogans lampooning their studies, their professors and

the Party was making such a fuss over such relatively harmless behavior, a crack-down was surely coming. Seeing the handwriting on the wall and knowing how deeply implicated he was, he offered to "back off," so as to "stop all this nonsense." But during an intermission in the meeting he was approached by a young Party member who had never been active in these matters. "I don't like what I hear from you," she said. "You can not back off now. We are into it, and if you continue, if you pursue it, we will all be behind you." That did it. It was, as Nemeč later described it, "the turning point of my life." He decided not to "back off." From then on he redoubled his efforts to put pressure on the Party by spreading the resolution and urging its public discussion. Now there was no turning back.

While the regime continued to suppress the resolutions, it adopted an attitude of ostensible reasonableness which minimized the extent of the students' revolt. From the few references made in editorials, no one could guess that their complaints went beyond routine troubles of academia. *Vecherni Praha* on May 11 attempted to make up for Minister Kahuda's mistake in not attending the April 26 meeting by blending it, and his reception of the delegation on May 4 into one dateless (and fictional) meeting in which the Minister replied reasonably to 64 speakers in a seven-hour session attended by the Rector and Dean of Charles University.²⁸

From May 11 - 13, the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth held a plenary session in Prague during which all of the student's complaints about the organization surfaced as self-criticism. A resolution was adopted which not only upheld decisions reached at the Second Congress held the previous year, but which attacked the ministries of Manpower, Education, Culture, Foreign Affairs and Finance for shortcomings in the handling of young people. The resolution then went on to incorporate many of the demands of the original April 26 resolution.²⁹

Meanwhile, on May 12, a second meeting took place between Minister Kahuda and student representatives of the Youth Union from Prague II. This time university authorities

anything else they wish to barb with their wit. The populace of Prague and other university cities in Czechoslovakia where it takes place usually turn out in great numbers to observe it.

²⁸ Radio Free Europe (RFE) internal document "Student Demonstrations Interpretive," CNR/D-26, May 30, 1956, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

²⁹ Confidential "S" Dispatch, no. 69, May 15, 1956, British Embassy, Prague to F.O., FO371/122141, Public Records Office, London.

were also present and a new composite resolution, probably the one just adopted by the School of Pedagogic (see Appendix B), was handed Kahuda. In the verbal exchange which took place, the students' pent up feeling broke out into a hail of shouts. Kahunda told them that if they had behaved this way under the First Republic police would have dispersed them with clubs. Then the Rector of the Mathematics-Physics School ordered the students to disband and go home. Several students were reported to have roughed him up.³⁰

Close observers of Czechoslovakia--some Western embassy personnel and people in Radio Free Europe--were aware that there was great ferment among the students at this time, though they lacked detailed information. They knew, for instance, that the Majales, which had been forbidden since 1948, was being reinstated.³¹

The Slovak students in Bratislava were allowed to hold their Majales on May 12, closer to the traditional time. The Prague Majales was to be held a week later on May 19. Rumors of the raucous Majales in Bratislava brought the *New York Times* correspondent, Sydney Gruson, down from his base in Warsaw to observe the Prague Majales a week later. Gruson's colorful report of 5,000 students being applauded on their two-mile route through Prague emphasized that for all the lampooning, "no effort was made to turn the occasion into a huge anti-Communist demonstration as had been rumored in Prague."

Not only had the students in Bratislava advertised their Majales in the student newspaper, *Our University*, a bizarre student duo--"Mr. Carnivalist," dressed in a bear skin, and Prosecutor "Grand Papulos" ("Big Mouth"), wearing a mask with a gigantic mouth--had visited the outlying dormitories of the University for several weeks drumming up interest.³²

³⁰ Limited Official Use Telegram no. 528, May 22, 1956, U.S. Embassy to State Department, 49.00/5-2256, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

³¹ Ibid.

³² In February when Slovak students discovered that Defense Minister Alexej Cepicka planned to abolish military departments at universities and require students, upon graduation, be subject to two years of compulsory military service in place of a concentrated two-month training period during their study, 300 to 400 students had gathered in their pajamas in their dormitory cafeteria--later referred to as "the pajama rebellion." "During the stormy discussions the students hissed down Komensky University Secretary, Jaroslav Fill, as he threatened to report them to their personnel sections...Some participants called on their colleagues to go out into the streets to demonstrate, but they received no support from the rest. Finally the students approved a resolution demanding that the order be rescinded." From "The Pajama Rebellion--Slovak Students in the Year 1956," by Mgr. Juraj Marusiak in *Historicka Revue*, Cislo 8, Rocnik V., p. 19, translated by Professor Charles E. Townsend.

The idea for reinstating the Majales had come from the Party-controlled Czechoslovak Union of Youth (CSM). Nonetheless, it had to be approved by the highest level of the Party. Approval seems to have come when the full liberating force of Khrushchev's secret speech was just being felt and the consequences were not yet foreseen. The CSM's reasoning was twofold. First, they knew student discontent was reaching dangerous levels and needed to be vented before an explosion occurred.³³ Second, they hoped to recover the respect and control they had lost in recent years by organizing something they knew the students would enjoy.³⁴

So the Bratislava parade had the full cooperation of the city authorities and police. It followed almost exactly the route followed by the official May Day parade just twelve days earlier. The dense crowd of spectators lining the streets an hour before it began was even larger.³⁵ While the 6 p.m. starting time may seem dangerously late in the day (torchlight parades being volatile), in fact there is daylight well past 8 p.m. at that time of year and the weather was fine.

By six, hundreds of student participants with their costumes and placards were assembled in Hodza Square in front of Grassakovic Palace (then the Palace of Young Pioneers, today that of the President of the Slovak Republic). Lead by "Mr. Carnivalist," the bear, who was surrounded by bodyguards with chain whips, the procession crossed the wide Staromestska, proceeded down Postova Street and into the Square of the Slovak National Rising on to Sturova Street, right onto Jesenskeho past the National Theater and then left to the Danube river where it ended.

While the signs they carried were humorous, evoking laughter, gasps and even applause, the content behind them was not. Most referred to the scandalous conditions in which they lived and studied in or ridiculed the emphasis on Marxism to the detriment of

³³ An RFE Czech language five-page analysis of the CSM (Czechoslovak Youth Union) published internally as Item No. 8909 on September 27, 1956, points out that the student May festivals "were planned precisely by the lowest departmental CSM organizations. The planning of student demonstrations was more than the higher organs could handle and thus escaped their control. So the students did what they wanted while the few fanatics from the committee or the district were absolutely powerless. The May Festival was something that convincingly demonstrated the utterly embarrassing position and role of the CSM among students." Open Society Archives, Budapest.

³⁴ Author's interview with Mgr. Juraj Marusiak, Bratislava, June 13, 1996.

³⁵ "The Pajama Rebellion --Slovak Students in the Year 1956," Mgr. Juraj Marusiak, *Historicka Revue*, Cislo 8, Rocnik V., translated by Professor Townsend.

traditional academic disciplines. Several called attention to the Party's secret decree of two years mandatory army service after graduation.³⁶ A few were downright political such as the one clearly referring to Marxism: "The principle stands firm, but the house tumbles down."³⁷ At the front of the parade six students carried a black coffin with white lettering on each side reading "Academic Freedom." When their part of the procession reached the Danube embankment, whether by plan or sudden inspiration, the six rushed forward and heaved the coffin into the Danube amid roars of approval from their fellow students and other onlookers. Both American and Soviet soldiers were depicted. The Americans all carried Colt revolvers, the Soviets carried flasks of Pitralon shaving lotion and Eau-de-Cologne. From time to time the Soviet soldiers would roar out: "Eau-de-Cologne--Vodka! Pitralon--Vodka!" At the rear of the parade was a truck with chemistry students on it producing rose-colored fumes as they cried out: "Finally a little fresh air in Bratislava!"³⁸ Then, less than two hours from its start the carnival parade simply melted into the crowd and everyone went off to the pubs to celebrate tweaking the noses of those in power.

Early references to the event in the local press and radio took a tolerant view, saying it was "lots of fun," with "plenty of justified criticism," but disguising the bitterness of the students' complaints. Within a few days, however, the tone of the Slovak press changed radically and there were complaints that "a few malcontents" had "attempted to provoke students" into opposition to the Youth League, the University administration, the Party and government.³⁹

The reason for this change in tone was not so much the Majales as something which had occurred afterward and was spreading like wildfire.

Sunday, the day after the Majales, two Slovak student athletes from the Mlada Garda dormitory returned from Prague where they had been competing in some national student competition. They brought with them one of the student resolutions, from the School of Mechanical Engineering, which had been circulating in Prague. Unlike the Nemeč resolution,

³⁶ NFBIC, November 1956, p. 24.

³⁷ RFE item no. 6297/56 "Bratislava University Students Ridicule Regime in 'Majales' Parade," Open Society Archives, Budapest.

³⁸ Limited Official Use Telegram no. 425, June 6, 1956, U.S. Embassy, Prague to State Department, 479.00/6-1356, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

³⁹ NFBIC, November 1956, p. 22.

it concerned only academic matters. But it caused a sensation. The next afternoon, after classes and lectures were over, the students of Mlada Garda gathered in their dining room and elected two of their number, Ladislav Kliman and Mrna Volek, as their speakers. These two then conducted a meeting in which it was decided that they should adopt, with only minor changes, the Prague resolution as their own. Then, after it was typed up it was posted where all could see.⁴⁰

Though Mlada Garda dormitory is about three kilometers to the south from the center of town, it is on a main street with a tram. It wasn't long before word reached Suvorov dormitory, near the city center.

Jozef Jablonicky, who lived there, recalled that he had finished his evening meal and was upstairs brushing his teeth when a friend called out: "Jozef, Jozef, come quick! There's something big going on at Mlada Garda!" Jablonicky, who had been in his home village on Saturday and had missed the Majales everyone was talking about, was not about to miss out on this. With the taste of toothpaste still in his mouth he ran with his friend to catch a tram to Mlada Garda.

When they arrived they were immediately offered a copy of the resolution. Not stopping to read it there, they jumped on a return tram and devoured it together on their homeward journey.

As they reached the steps of the main foyer of the Suvorov dormitory they called out to everyone to see what they had. Within seconds a knot of students had gathered around them. Others called out to their friends and soon the foyer was jammed. "Let's go to the dining hall," someone called out and the crowd surged into the dining room, startling the few late diners. Soon the confusion was more than Jablonicky could endure. A big lad with a booming voice, he climbed up on a table and yelled "Shut up!" As the din subsided he announced: "Only if we speak one at a time will we get anything accomplished." "You be the speaker, Jozef!" shouted a friend. A chorus of voices called out, "Yes, Jablonicky, you run it."

"So I was elected there and then," said Jablonicky, "The meeting proceeded in an orderly fashion. We made a few changes to make it conform to the Faculty of Arts, but

⁴⁰ Author's interview with Mgr. Juraj Marusiak, Bratislava, June 13, 1996

otherwise it was the same as the Mlada Garda resolution. And it passed by hand vote unanimously. An hour earlier, as I was brushing my teeth, I could never have dreamed that this would happen. The State Security later said that it was all a well-planned conspiracy. But they were wrong. It was completely spontaneous."⁴¹

By the next day the resolution had reached the women's dormitory way off in Horský Park overlooking the northern sector of the city. There it met with even more impassioned acclaim and political sections were added, including a call for an opposition party.⁴² Meanwhile, a movement to collect signatures for a petition to force *Smena*, the Slovak counterpart to the Czech *Mlada Fronta*, to print the resolution, had gotten under way.

The Party, fully aware of what was going on, had not yet decided how to handle the situation. On May 16, one party member, the manager of the Mlada Garda dormitory, decided to take things into his own hands. He tore the student resolution off the bulletin board where it had been affixed two days earlier. That started an uproar among the students, some of whom took to the streets.⁴³

No students were more eager for street demonstrations than the young women of Horský Park, isolated as they were from the rest of the city. Jablonický, who had gone there to collect signatures, remembered attending a meeting there in which the issue of taking to the streets was being seriously debated. The Party, now concerned enough to ring both of these dormitories with motorized police, sent a delegation of "workers" to address this meeting. They accused the students of wanting to "liquidate socialism." "But they weren't workers," recalled Jablonický, "They were policemen dressed in workers' clothes."⁴⁴

The Party was terrified of street demonstrations. Karol Bacilek, First Secretary of the Slovak Party's Central Committee, was prepared to call in the Army. Novotný in Prague was said to be eager to close the universities. The situation was saved by three students from the Philosophical School, R. Olínský, F. Visvader, and M. Vrbican. Accompanied by two senior lecturers from the School, they insisted that only by direct negotiations with Bacilek could bloodshed be avoided. Bacilek agreed to receive them and spent much of May 16 negotiating

⁴¹ Author's interview with Professor Jozef Jablonický, Dir., Politological Institute, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, June 14, 1996.

⁴² RFE item no. 5742/56 p. 2 ref, *Kulturný Život*, May 26, 1956, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

⁴³ NFBIC, November 1956, p. 21.

with them. In the end Bacilek promised that all of their demands would be met and agreed to the publication of the student resolution in *Smena* the very next day. In exchange, the student spokesmen agreed to keep the students from taking to the streets. Only this news, delivered breathlessly by the delegation itself, persuaded the young women of Horsky Park not to take to the streets.⁴⁵

The next day, May 17, the full text of the resolution *did* appear on an inside page of *Smena* next to the text of the Party Politburo's resolution, which had been passed on April 16, but not made public until that day. Only weeks later when they returned to their homes in other parts of Slovakia did the students discover that Bacilek had tricked them; only the Bratislava edition had carried their resolution--all others carried only the Party resolution.

Pravda (Bratislava) complained on May 19 of the students' attitude of "ultimatum." The Party organ claimed that when the students read the Party's April 16 resolution on higher education they found it "broader than their own." This statement was utterly untrue, but the readers of *Pravda* could not check it since the student text was not carried. The article continued:

In the beginning [these elements]...were able to win the confidence of others by proclaiming justified demands. [However, the real aim was] to set the student resolutions against the document of the Central Committee...to misuse the student movement for obscure purposes. This is proved by their attempt to recruit female students at the Horsky Park dormitory for demonstrations under the pretext of having them sign the resolution of the Mlada Garda dormitory...A definite end must be put to the signing of resolutions with declarative solutions of problems. Discussions by students, teachers and university workers must be based on party documents on higher education.

On May 22, *Smena* complained that at many meetings organized by the Youth Union in Slovakia, the students, instead of discussing the Party resolution as they were supposed to, discussed instead the resolution prepared by the students of Mlada Garda dormitory.⁴⁶ The Communists did everything they could to convey the impression that the students were not speaking for all citizens, but were ungratefully agitating against the working class. "Compare,

⁴⁴ Author's interview with Professor J. Jablonicky.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, and author's interview with Mgr. Juraj Marusiak.

⁴⁶ According to RFE item no. 9173/56, during the first week of June 1956 the Slovak Ministry of Education arranged several meetings at student dormitories in Bratislava. Subsource participated in one of these meetings. Communist agitators attempted to explain how the freedom of students is to be understood in a State ruled by the proletariat, and to whom the students' demands are to be presented, i.e. to Communist or Communist sponsored organizations only. The Slovak Minister of Education, Ernest Sykora, while repeating the statements of the agitators, was booed by the students. Open Society Archives, Budapest.

friends of Mlada Garda," intoned the publication *Lud* on May 19th, "your own housing conditions with those of the workers...Be more modest, students, when voicing your demands..."

One account in the Slovak press deviated from the tone of condescension and recognized the legitimacy of the students' complaints even as it generally hewed to the Party line. The young writer Milan Ferko in an article published in *Kulturny Zivot* on May 26 wrote:

Why wasn't a thorough and open discussion on universities...developed in connection with the preparation of the [Party] resolution?...And...why was the publication of the resolution delayed a whole month? Would "democracy" have broken out among Youth Union members if they had known about the document and participated in the making of it?...[The student demonstration] is a clear example of how such a thing can be misused. Furthermore, if the Union and Party organizations constituted a [true] clearing ground for the exchange of views...would the students have resorted to an imported and forged Prague resolution? We must condemn the fact that certain people sent instructions by means of airplane between Bratislava and Prague [and] that motorcycle groups went from one dormitory to another...[But] it is necessary to condemn tendencies such as the giving of false

information to Bratislava factory workers [about the student demands]...or the practice of pitting the workers against the university students...instead of taking the [students resolutions and meetings] into consideration as a fact, instead of considering them an objective reality...and meeting the suggestions half way...we began to seek saboteurs, provocateurs and evil doers.

Back in Prague the pressure that Nemeč and his friends had tried to exert on the Party began to turn back on them.⁴⁷ Through an informant with access to the police, they knew the secret police were watching them closely. They began to weigh carefully what they should and should not do to avoid entrapment. Though by tradition it was the arts and humanities students who put on the Majales, Nemeč and his friends could have participated had they wanted to. They chose not to.

But it was not just Nemeč and his friends whom the Party was watching. At an emergency meeting of the Politburo of the Party's Central Committee on May 14th, brought on by the Bratislava Majales just two days earlier, the Minister of the Interior, A. S. Barak, gave an oral report on what he called "provocations" being prepared by the students for the Prague Majales. The resolution following his report called on the Part Secretary Novotny and

⁴⁷ Author's interview with Dr. Michael Heyrovsky, March 14, 1996.

Interior Minister Barak to follow the developing situation and, if need be, call another emergency meeting of the Politburo "to introduce the necessary measures."⁴⁸

A few days later, as things appeared to be getting out of hand in Bratislava, Novotny sent a delegation to the universities warning them not to start anything. Minister of Education Kahuda even notified the universities that they might soon be shut down.⁴⁹

Like the one in Bratislava, the Prague Majales had been scheduled for Saturday afternoon.⁵⁰ Fearful of what might happen if student protests mixed with proletarian drinking on Saturday night, the authorities prudently insisted it take place instead on Sunday at 1 p.m., when there would be fewer people in the streets. The original date and time had been carried by one of the daily newspapers, but word of mouth managed to inform most of this last minute change of date.

Sunday, May 20, began as a typical Spring day in Prague: cool and cloudless blue sky that did not start to gray over until noon, after which fragmented clouds let bursts of warm sunshine through to those on the right side of the street. It was still overcoat weather.

By one o'clock, hundreds of people had gathered along Narodni Boulevard near a street called Perstynne, for that, rather than the traditional Wenceslas Square, was where the authorities had given permission for it to start. This crowd, however, had not been informed of the regime's last minute change of plans. Within minutes there was a roar of motorcycles in the trafficless streets. Student riders shouted over their idling engines that the parade's starting point had been shifted to Old Town Square, about seven minutes away by foot.

Jiri Skopec and his colleagues, all dressed as monks, were among those who got word of the change only at the last minute. As they hurried through the narrow streets to the Old Town Square they were joined by a contingent of 30 to 40 students they didn't know. Skopec was a geology student at Charles University. He had not been to any meeting where resolutions were discussed, but knowing that his department's professors had no objection to the Majales, he had joined in the fun. He had his monk's cowl up, was wearing a false gray

⁴⁸ Central Archive of the Czechoslovak Party's Central Committee, Fond 02/2, Volume 102, Archive number 118, Item 30, Prague.

⁴⁹ Handwritten notes (presumably by person recording the meeting), Central Archive of the Czechoslovak Party's Central Committee, Fond 02/2, Volume 102, Archive number 118, Prague.

⁵⁰ Limited Official Use Telegram no. 528, May 22, 1956. U.S. Embassy, Prague to State Department, 749.00/5-2256, National Archives, College Park, MD.

beard and was carrying a sign, burned around the edges to depict age, which exhorted: "Let's go for the new educational reforms!"

"You realize," said Skopec, "that we had had about four serious educational reforms in less than eight years, and people were bored with it."⁵¹

For a Sunday afternoon, the streets and sidewalks of Prague were packed along the route of the march which went along Parizka Ulice, past the Law School on the Vltava embankment, across the bridge under the shadow of the giant Stalin Statue, then to the right along the embankment to Fucik Park. Police were out in force to keep the route clear at intersections, but the crowds on the sidewalks were self-disciplined and in no need of police control.

"But most important," said Michal Heyrovsky, who watched the Majales from in front of the Law School, "were the non-uniformed policemen who were in great numbers everywhere around. Many of them you could not identify because they were dressed like students." Some of the signs were just too offensive for these plainclothes policemen to stomach. "I remember several times they jumped out of the crowd from the pavement and took signs from the students." said Skopec. "But they did not take anybody with them," he added.⁵² What Skopec did not know was that many of these placards were quickly replaced by a brigade of students with sheets of blank cardboard and paint they had in anticipation of such confiscation.⁵³

The five thousand marchers did not flow along as a normal parade, but came in groups, performing and showing their slogans to particular parts of the crowd before moving on. Laughter and applause accompanied each group, more for some, of course, than others. One group near Skopec and his fellow monks was made up of a dozen scantily clothed Neanderthal men with clubs and sticks with which they performed various tricks. They surrounded a dinosaur or a dragon which walked on the legs of ten students struggling to hold it up. The apparatus was so heavy, in fact, that two platoons of spare legs (students) followed along to spell them. Two signs were pinned to the beast, one on each side, and it would laboriously turn around so all could see. One read, "This is for the student mensa." The other

⁵¹ Author's interview with Professor Jiri Skopec.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ RFE item 5721/56, June 7, 1956. Open Society Archives, Budapest.

read, "I have leathery skin as thick as the Minister of Education's," only "Minister" was abbreviated so that it could be taken for Ministry as well.

The parade was led by a King and Queen.⁵⁴ The King was "Marxism," which is masculine in Czech, and the Queen was "Russian Language," which is feminine in Czech: two things pervading Czech life of the time which people were sick of. Instead of just a sign on the theory and practice of Marxism, as in Bratislava, there were two signs leading two groups. The sign "The Theory," was followed by students dressed to the hilt in top hats, cutaways and fine silks; "The Practice" was followed by a motley group in rags and tatters. A dozen blindfolded and gagged young men and women represented the reporters and editors of the youth newspaper *Mlada Fronta*. Another group carried a sign saying "We want World Literature," followed by a group carrying a large bookshelf with fake bookfronts all marked "on the index." The Party's current line of making the "cult of the individual" a scapegoat for all ills was lampooned by three students walking in file. The first tall one carried a sign saying "Small Cult;" the next shorter student carried a poster saying "Smaller Cult;" the third and smallest carried "Tiny Cult."⁵⁵ Resentment of the government's coddling of North Korean students at their expense came out in a placard reading "Long Live the Korean Students!--but on their own Money!"⁵⁶

There were hundreds of signs and slogans carried that day, but only the most memorable were recalled by the thousands of onlookers. There had been some form of self-censorship so that nothing was too blatant. Of course, there were many 'in' jokes meant only for fellow students or citizens of Prague at that time. One was "Have no fear, Citizens of Prague, the students are still here!" Josef Holler, writing in *Mlada Fronta* six days later, asked, "What should the people of Prague be afraid of?"--missing or feigning to miss the point. The point was that the exact same sign had been carried in the Majales Prague had seen, in May 1948, shortly after the take-over of the country by the Communists. It underlined another slogan that read, "We students are young, but we remember a lot."

A few slogans jotted down by an observer for the U.S. Embassy were: "Long live the first and last Majales! (under Communism being understood). "Long live Minister Kahuda!

⁵⁴ Author's interview with Dr. Michael Heyrovsky, March 5, 1996.

⁵⁵ Sydney Gruson, *New York Times* dispatch from Prague, May 21, 1956.

⁵⁶ RFE item no. 7912/56, p. 2. Open Society Archives, Budapest.

April Fool!" "What Comenius (a seventeenth century Czech educator) designed, Kahuda bartered away!," "Tomorrow buy *Mlada Fronta*, there will be nothing in it!"⁵⁷ There was no mention of the Majales in the next day's edition.

Michal Heyrovsky remembered one placard which was ecologically before its time, "Save our forests! You can keep all your bureaucratic forms!" Perhaps the most daring referred indirectly, but unmistakably to the Slansky trials. It came in the form of four signs carried one after the other. The first sign was simply a question mark. The next read, "Which is better?" The third sign said, "to execute the little criminals and let the big ones go free?" and the fourth sign read, "Or execute the big criminals and let the little ones take their places?"⁵⁸ It would have taken four alert policemen to have stopped that one.

Not all the signs mocked the authorities. Placards carried by the law students were loyal to the regime. The Youth Union officers were only too aware of what most students were up to and they tried to counteract it where they could. But when their sign, which read, "We thank the working class for having an opportunity to attend the university," went by people thought it was meant ironically and cheered lustily.⁵⁹

And there were a few lone mavericks. Heyrovsky remembered one brave, possible crazy, Bulgarian carrying a sign in Czech which read, "Zhivkov. the Murderer of our Nation!" Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian First Party Secretary, continued in power until 1989.

The goal of the procession, Fucik Park, which had an open air theater, was to have been the scene of some dramatic skits in addition to those performed along the way. In fact, the CSM had managed to make it a separate event dubbed the "Students Carnival," to which entry was gained only by written invitation. This was not at all what the students had intended. Moreover, many of the invitations intended for the students had been sent to Party activists and secret police so that not only were many students turned away by the police, but the legitimate student activities in the Park were greatly curtailed.⁶⁰ The American Embassy reported extra police on duty on principal streets in unusually large numbers well into the

⁵⁷ NFBIC, November 1956, p. 24.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ RFE item no. 7912/56, p. 2. Open Society Archives, Budapest.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

evening and spoke of the students being "compelled to break up into groups" on their way to the park.⁶¹

There was a ruckus and some arrests in the park after dark in connection with a jazz band, but Skopec suspects that this was a police provocation so that something might appear in the papers saying that hooligans had participated in Majales.⁶²

Rumors of arrests certainly circulated among Western correspondents and Western Embassies. A dispatch from the first secretary of the American Embassy, Albert W. Sherer, Jr., reported to Washington on June 6:

It is...believed that the students planned to distribute an abbreviated version of the enclosed draft resolution among crowds who witnessed the Majales parade on May 20. It has been reliably reported that the students hoped to turn that parade into a demonstration in which factory youth would also participate...Although a few placards carried that day reflected the demands in the enclosed draft resolution, it was, on the whole, a mild affair. The Prime Minister made a flat statement in his press conference on May 24 that no students had been arrested as a result of the Majales demonstration. The Embassy is inclined to believe...either that the Prime Minister is misinformed...or that he did not speak the truth. It is believed that several students were picked up prior to the May 20 parade and immediately thereafter. These, however, were merely enthusiastic demonstrators and not the real organizers of what some students had hoped would turn out to be a mass protest meeting. It is believed that these latter were expelled from the university on May 20 and arrested on May 21-22. Since they were expelled prior to their arrest Siroky may be technically correct...There are persistent rumors that the ringleaders were found for the most part in the Faculties (Schools) of Law, Medicine and Mathematics at Charles University, and that approximately 30 of these are still under arrest.

The students hoped that the draft resolution would receive widespread publicity within the country, and it is said that they sent it to several diplomatic missions as well as to the newspapers in the hope that their demands would be widely known. If a copy of the draft resolution was in fact sent to the Embassy it was intercepted, as we have received the enclosed copy from another source.⁶³

By the fall, United Press was referring to 300 students across Czechoslovakia as having been arrested after the Majales.⁶⁴ Only when the police records of the Ministry of the Interior for the period are made public will we know the truth.

But Ladislav Nemeč, who was certainly the ringleader at the School of Mathematics and Physics, does not believe that *any* students were arrested. He was never arrested nor did

⁶¹ Limited Official Use Telegram no. 528, May 22, 1956, U.S. Embassy, Prague to State Department, 749.00/6-656. National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁶² Author's interview with Professor Jiri Skopec

⁶³ Limited Official Use Telegram no. 528, May 22, 1956, U.S. Embassy, Prague to State Department, 749.00/6-656. National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁶⁴ United Press dispatch datelined Vienna, September 28, 1956.

he ever hear of any student who was. He believes that the Party and secret police deliberately spread these rumors to induce fear in the populace as well as to mislead the West.

Certainly there was punishment, but it came in stages. For example, Nemeč and his fellow chemistry students had been scheduled to take part in a first-ever exchange which they themselves had arranged with East German chemistry students from the Technical University in Dresden. Nemeč and Heyrovsky's names simply disappeared from the list with no explanation given or needed. Minister Kahuda eventually called Nemeč's Dean and ordered him to expel Nemeč from all institutions of higher learning permanently.

But the Dean, like most faculty members of the time, fought to protect his student. After a protracted debate the Dean managed to reduce the punishment to one year's suspension from the University with the possibility of completing his studies and getting his degree later. The Party took care of the rest of his punishment: work in a factory to get him closer to the masses. This turned out not to be so bad. He managed to get a job related to his chemistry background and within a year had joined the management as an expert, while finishing his studies by attending night classes at the University.

In the fall he was expelled from the Party, but here again he was saved from arrest by Party member Liza Pacesova,⁶⁵ who argued that the only thing Nemeč had done was to break the Party's rule of secrecy in revealing to non-Party people something which had been said in a Party meeting. This deserved being expelled, but hardly arrest and imprisonment. The Party had built up a major case against him, but the unexpected remarks of this comrade took the wind out of their sails. They agreed to expel him on the strength of her extemporaneous motion.⁶⁶

Though he suffered minor privations, Heyrovsky was probably saved from real punishment by being the son of a famous father. Indeed, his father was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry three years later. Nemeč, while he still had access to the Party, found out that the older Heyrovsky had been accused at a hearing of the Central Committee of having started the whole thing and using his son and his son's student friends to spread his ideas. The

⁶⁵ Author's interview with Dr. Ladislav Nemeč and a letter from Dr. Michael Heyrovsky, June 26, 1996.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

elder Heyrovsky dismissed the accusation as poppycock. He was interested in his science "period," but he secretly approved of his son's activities.⁶⁷

As to reports of leaflets or shortened versions of the resolution being given out by the students to the crowds at the Majales, all the participants interviewed dismissed them as ludicrous. They may have been naive, but not so naive as to do something that provocative with all of those secret policemen around. No, they speculate, if any resolutions were handed out it was surely the work of the secret police's agent provocateurs.

And this fits in neatly with charges against the persons who *were* arrested and accused of having put the students up to their activities: Jaroslav Hajcek, a 57-year old former colonel; Bozena Plchova; and three others, all in their forties or fifties. Their arrest was announced in the Prague press on June 14. At their trial in September, handing out brief versions of the resolution during the Majales was precisely one of the charges of the prosecution. They were also accused of taking their lead from Radio Free Europe. But the most telling evidence of a regime-orchestrated plot were the light sentences meted out--these ranged from six months to three years.⁶⁸

By mid-June the students were thoroughly discouraged. Their resolution, particularly their composite resolution which had been handed to Minister Kahuda on May 12, had been completely ignored, then distorted and finally quashed. Soon they would be off doing their military service away from the cities.

Before that happened, however, the Party struck back at the Prague II (Charles University) section of the CSM, where it had all started. It was less a question of revenge than fear that these students might infect the international as well as Czechoslovak student movement with their ideas of freedom and democracy. The International Union of Students, the world Communist student organization with its headquarters in Prague, was due to hold its Fourth World Congress in Prague from August 26 to September 3.⁶⁹ The absence of delegates from the host city's Charles University would be difficult to explain unless, of

⁶⁷ Author's interviews with Dr. Ladislav Nemeč and Dr. Michael Heyrovsky.

⁶⁸ CETEKA (Czechoslovak Communist news wire service) 27, September 26, 1956, 19:15 hours transmission.

⁶⁹ According to RFE's item no/ 7057/56 of July 20, 1956, "The Ministry of Education and Culture, which controls the preparatory work for this Congress recently recalled nine of the 15 members of the students' committee which is working on the preparations, and the Ministry of the Interior replaced them with its 'trustees,'" Open Society Archive, Budapest.

course, no vehicle for such representation existed. Thus, the temporary liquidation of the Prague II section due to "administrative reorganization" was decreed.

A meeting of the Section was called at the main lecture hall of the Natural Sciences School in the first week of June. The Dean of this faculty, Miloslav Valouch, a loyal Communist, was given the task of explaining to a bitter, sullen crowd of students just why it was necessary to disband their particular section for technical, reorganizational reasons. He wanted to make it very clear that this had nothing whatsoever to do with the students' behavior in April and May. Before Dean Valouch had gotten far into his prepared remarks, a young female student, Vera Caslavská, stood up and conspicuously turned her back to the speaker. Once this gesture had been noted by all, she made her way out of her row, back to the stage, facing the people she was passing, in European fashion, until she could stalk out of the hall. Before the sound of her footsteps had faded, several other students followed her example. Soon it was scores. Not a word was spoken, only the sound of shuffling feet and the Valouch's voice droning on through his prepared text. By the time he finished and looked up, not a student was left in the hall.⁷⁰

Now only the last nail remained to be driven in.

This was accomplished by the Communist Party Conference from June 11-15. There Novotny made it unmistakably clear that the Party line of the Tenth Party Congress in 1954 was correct and needed no revision; that attacks on the Party as a result of the Soviet 20th Party Congress were wrong and should stop; that students must not alienate themselves from the people or misuse universities; that student manifestations were taken seriously by the regime as a threat and control measures would be imposed; that "intrigues and aggressive plans of imperialist circles" in the form of hostile foreign radio broadcasts and leaflet activities, the introduction of agents into Czechoslovakia for acts of sabotage and diversion, hardly less apparent than in Stalin's time, would continue to be opposed; that there would be *no* rehabilitation for Slansky, now accused of still further crimes so as to disassociate him from the connection with Tito, and that while the campaign to remove the worst police excesses

⁷⁰ Author's interview by telephone with Dr. Sasa Mangel, Prague, June 12, 1996.

would allegedly continue, "at present there are [were] no cases of the violation of socialist legality in investigation."⁷¹

Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Kopecky complained of "certain particularly tendentious demands contained in the resolutions passed by university students...Those university students who have allowed themselves to be led astray into resistance to lectures on Marxism-Leninism should understand that they have not fully understood their duty..." He then leaned on the old saw about the working class providing all the sums to maintain the universities and that students must realize that "conditions in this country have undergone a fundamental change..."

The bourgeoisie could admit of various free interpretations of 'academic liberties'...But we want our universities...to be a starting point for the diffusion of a maximum of learning to serve the requirements of the building of socialism...For this very reason the universities must be tied to our life and our [Communist] system as closely as possible.⁷²

Later in the month, Minister Kahuda put in a final word. He complained that the students who had demonstrated belonged to a "classless" ideology (i.e. people who did not understand the necessity for the class struggle). He wrote, "If we were to analyze the composition of the students who played a predominant part in the provocations, especially in the Majales celebrations, we find that...the most aggressive and incorrect expressions came from the students in the third year, who came to the universities at a time when we had relaxed requirements of class selection⁷³...It is our sincere desire to understand the errors which could have been committed in relation to misguided youth, and we shall be satisfied if we are not forced to use administrative solutions (i.e., firings and arrests) in individual cases. However, in ideological questions we shall take...an uncompromising stand..."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Limited Official Use Telegram no 576, June 17, 1996. U.S. Embassy, Prague to State Department, 749.00/6-1756, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁷² NFBIC, November 1956, p. 26.

⁷³ In fact, Kahuda himself had more recently relaxed requirements for entrance into the universities. RFE item no. 6145/56 published by the Czechoslovak Desk on June 22, 1956 states: "An acute shortage of academically trained technical personnel is being felt in Czechoslovakia, a well-informed recent refugee reports. Therefore in the autumn of 1955, the authorities quietly decided to authorize students previously fired from the universities for political reasons to re-enlist and continue their studies. Among the 'rehabilitated' were students who had been expelled after the 1948 coup d'etat and had even been temporarily arrested." Open Society Archives, Budapest.

⁷⁴ NFBIC, November 1996, p. 26.

Those beholden to the discipline of the Communist Party were incapable of seeing--or unwilling to see--reality as these bright, idealistic, naive students saw it. "We didn't intend to make any sort of organized resistance against the Communist regime," recalled Heyrovsky. "We just thought we should be...trying to improve conditions in this country. We wanted to say how we would like to do it...We were naive at that time. That is how the Communists easily suppressed our ambitions."⁷⁵ Indeed, with all the power of a police state and total control of the media, the regime had little difficulty in snuffing out this student rebellion and making it seem as though it had never happened.

And yet, those resolutions did not just vanish into thin air. True, except for the instance in Bratislava, they were never published. But they were read in dormitories, in party headquarters and in police stations all across the country and then filed away in secret files were some doubtless remain to this day. The Party studied them, not just to see where the students might be turned and exploited, but to see where the Party *had* to give way if they were to maintain power and a semblance of credibility. "The Soviet flag has been withdrawn since last week from its special place of honor alongside the Czechoslovak flag over public buildings in this capital . for the first time since the Communists assumed power in 1948," reported Sydney Gruson to the *New York Times* on June 4. As late as September, privately taken pictures of the Majales along with the student magazine for May with a mimeographed two-page supplement containing the main student demands was being clandestinely distributed all over Bohemia.⁷⁶ And there must have been tens of thousands of readers who secretly agreed with much of what these young people had dared to say.

Twelve years later, during the Prague Spring of 1968, Nemeč found himself elected to the chairmanship of the 10,000 member trade union, ROH (Revolutionary Trade Union Movement) of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. At a major meeting of this trade union, attended by about 1,000 delegates in June of that year, they were addressed by Party First Secretary, Alexander Dubček. "I am happy to say," wrote Nemeč in 1996, "that the sentence at the end of the second paragraph on the second page [of our resolution]...'will

⁷⁵ Author's interview with Dr. Michael Heyrovsky, March 5, 1956.

⁷⁶ RFE item no. 10135/56, p. 2. Open Society Archives, Budapest.

enthusiastically join!...was used almost verbatim by Dubcek...His was, of course, a naiveté on a much higher level."⁷⁷

Twenty-one years later, during the Velvet Revolution of November 1989--a revolution caused almost entirely by university students--there was no shortage of decency and naiveté. Indeed, there were remarkable resolutions. These students, too, were completely non-violent, their defiance of the police totally passive. But this time it was the brittle, brute force of a hollowed-out regime that cracked. The whole Czechoslovak nation, shocked at the Party/State's reliance on naked force, and disgusted at the senseless brutality, rose up and shrugged off a regime of four decades' duration in a matter of days.

It would be foolhardy to claim that the final overthrow of Communism in Czechoslovakia was a direct consequence of the student revolt of 1956. It would be equally foolhardy, however, to maintain that there was absolutely no connection. "We students may be young, but we remember a lot," read one of the placards in the 1956 Majales. They may not have remembered the specifics in 1989, but the traditions were well ingrained.

John P. C. Matthews

⁷⁷ Letter to the author from Dr. Ladislav Nemeč, May 12, 1996.

APPENDIX "A"

Faculty¹ of Mathematics and Physics at Charles University, Prague

Resolution adopted by the Faculty Organization of the Czechoslovak Youth Union

In recent days the Youth Union of our Faculty has been holding discussions on the results of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and of the March session of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. These discussions have been very lively and, thanks to the positive atmosphere generated by the participants, honest and full of constructive criticism. The spirit of the CPSU Party Congress has communicated itself to our own political life.

For a long time it has not been common for our Union to speak so openly about important political questions. This has been the result of incorrect methods of work against which the Party, by condemning the cult of personality and all its consequences, has begun a decisive struggle. Because open discussions were impossible for such a long time, a number of questions were treated that had only a remote connection with the CPSU 20th Congress and, accordingly, certain incorrect or poorly thought out ideas came to the fore.

The participants in the talks, however, consistently presented views whose goal was to remove shortcomings in our political and cultural life, taking advantage of the new opportunities provided by our new Popular Democratic organization.

To confront the most important questions, the Faculty Committee of the Youth Union on April 26, 1956 called a plenary meeting of the Youth Union for the entire faculty which summed up the views of the preceding individual discussions. The reason for the present letter is, on the one hand, to explain the views and needs of the Youth Union Faculty Organization and, on the other hand, to request answers to certain questions which we ourselves have not been able to answer in a satisfactory way.

1) We consider it necessary that all important measures in individual areas of our national and economic life be discussed in advance with workers, in particular, workers in the areas in question, and that they be submitted for public discussion in the press. Workers' suggestions should be included in any resulting decrees unless there is proper explanation of why they should not be.

Some of the shortcomings in our political and economic life have been caused by failure to observe in practice all of the principles of socialist democracy. We maintain that it is necessary in all cases to invoke as soon as possible the principle that all leading organs and those who work for them bear full responsibility to account for their work and be subject to full scrutiny and control from below. We consider it vital that all citizens be acquainted as thoroughly as possibly² with the means they will have to exercise this scrutiny and control

¹ The term "Faculty" here refers to students rather than teachers of a particular department.

² Possible, perhaps.

over their representatives at the highest echelons and, when necessary, exercise the right to recall them. We regard these measures as necessary to guarantee that past mistakes will not be repeated.

It is also necessary to improve the system of electing candidates to the National Committees and National Assembly, to ensure that candidates will not only have the capability to carry out their duties but also enjoy the confidence of their voters. We consider it necessary to begin to call as soon as possible regular meetings of voters with their representatives in the National Assembly. At these meetings workers could openly express their needs and suggestions for the work of the National Assembly and the government and the other state organs. These meetings would, however, become a mere formality if, as it happened frequently in the past, an incorrect criticism (not inciting lawbreaking) would lead to a punishment for the critic. We are convinced that, if Socialist Democratic principles are really observed; that is, if there is a real opportunity for discussion, criticism and presentation of views, all the working masses will enthusiastically join the efforts of the Party and the government of the National Front.

We ask for prompt publication of concrete directives regarding workers' personnel policy. We consider it necessary that all persons be suitably and truthfully informed upon request about the contents of their personnel files and any conclusions a personnel department has come to which are based on them.

We consider it necessary that in working to improve our Parliament the experience of the Polish parliament (Sejm) be taken into full account.

2) We ask that our press, radio and film reporting service inform the public much more promptly, more accurately and with more independence than heretofore. Compared to the Western press and those of the other People's Democratic countries our public was informed about the results of the 20th Congress of the CPSU very late. Certain essential facts in the speeches of the leading representatives of the international workers' movement were simply hushed up. We were thus often forced to confront the paradox that we first learn about Party matters from bourgeois sources.

We consider that the fear of bourgeois views which can, after all, be objectively rebutted in discussion, is totally unsubstantiated. Removal of this fear would also remove some of its undesirable consequences.

We consider it correct³ that foreign currency funds be released for the purchase of scholarly literature and journals from the West so that these publications can be purchased by both individual scholars and students specializing in a given field. We also consider the present

³ The Czech phrase (now probably outdated) meant something like 'we would like to see an increase in the foreign currency released . . . '

situation regarding translation of scholarly literature, and specifically textbooks from the West, to be wholly unacceptable.

In the area of ideological questions we do not consider it necessary to maintain a list of prohibited books, especially in such libraries as the University Library, the Main Library of the Academy of Sciences and libraries of ministries and individual educational institutions.

We also consider it essential to permit the study of Western newspapers and periodicals which represent major political currents.

We do not understand the reasons for jamming Western radio broadcasts or why this practice is necessary at all.

Information about partial successes of the capitalist states (fluctuations in unemployment, increases in production) are still often concealed. At the same time our own failures are also often hushed up, as the example of HUKO[a Slovak steel mill project] shows.

We consider it unnecessary that almost all statistical data are painstakingly concealed from the public. This situation will certainly be resolved by the decision to resume publication of the Statistical Yearbooks.

Given our peaceful coexistence with capitalist countries, we ask that travel to foreign countries be made possible other than through the Czechoslovak State Travel Agency. We urge special emphasis on exchange agreements, particularly those involving students, with minimalization⁴ of foreign currency difficulties.. We also consider it necessary that procedures for obtaining permission to travel abroad (which at present require filling-out 14 forms) be significantly simplified.

3) The practice of mechanically adopting the Soviet experience has done great harm to our educational system and, in particular, to our economic system. It is, of course, necessary, to learn from the USSR as the first socialist state in the world, but it must always be taken into account in what way a Soviet method or approach is better than ours and to apply it in a truly creative manner. Mere copying of the USSR without regard to the differing economic and cultural differences in our two countries should not continue.

Lack of observance of these principles has severely damaged the attitudes of some of our people toward the Soviet Union. The indiscriminate adoption of Soviet works of little value into our cultural life has had a similar effect. Further harm has been done by such "manifestations of love" as the playing of the Soviet national anthem at the end of every broadcast day and the displaying of the Soviet flag at all occasions. We ask that the Soviet national anthem and the Soviet flag be present only on occasions which directly involve the Soviet Union; e.g., the November 7th and May 9th celebrations.

⁴ perhaps 'which will eliminate the problems with foreign currencies'

In order to forestall the impression that we only learn from and never teach the USSR and that our relationship with them is not equal, it would be a good idea to demonstrate more often the ways in which the USSR learns from us.

It would [be] a suitable idea for our National Assembly to pass a law regarding the display of state flags, the playing of anthems and the use of state emblems.

4) We do not consider correct the view of Mr. Novotny in his report:

"The Central Committee as the collective organ of the Party between the congresses and the center of Party and state activity in our country decides and must decide the most important questions of the Party and state. Its decisions are binding both for the work of the Party as a whole and for state economic and social organs and organizations." The conclusion reflected in this statement does not express the principle that workers must be governed according to their own convictions and thereby distorts the real content and the leading role of the Party. We ask for an explanation of the role of the non-communist parties of the National Front. They presently seem to us to function in form only.

5) We ask for a public reviewer of the Slansky trial and other political trials. We ask for a guarantee of rightful punishment for persons who tolerated illegal procedures during interrogations for those who directly carried out these procedures. We maintain that it is necessary to publish materials about the actual conduct of the trials and the investigative procedures used, and at the same time about what kind of measures will be taken to guarantee control of the legal apparatus so that such cases will not be repeated.

We ask for amnesty for convicted persons similar to the amnesty recently declared in the Polish People's Republic.

6) University reforms were designed to prepare scholars for the needs of socialism through careful selection of students, better organization of the curriculum and improved economy of university management.

In many cases, however, the results of the reforms show that the productivity of the university student has gone down rather than risen. Let us mention some basic questions:

a) Compulsory attendance. In the past the only check on students was the quality of their performance. The present reform prescribes the way in which they are supposed to work. This constrains individuality in their work.

Most students learn much more from books and from distributed course surveys; listening to lectures which lack value is a waste of time for them. If attendance at lectures is compulsory, then the lecturer has a guaranteed audience, even though his lectures might be poor. Practice has shown that critiquing of lectures in itself rarely improves their quality —

whether the fault lies with the choice of material or with the capability of the lecturer. Experience shows that if lecturers are of high quality, students will attend their lectures.

We maintain that things must move in the direction of individual students using their own source materials. If these source materials were sufficient, study programs, particularly in the natural sciences, would be much more efficient.

b) Number of hours. We consider it unacceptable that under the present plan students in their early school years must spend about 36 hours a week in the classroom. How many hours a day do the reformers think a student has to work, given the fact that lectures are supposed to be only a framework and the student's main work lies in individual study?

c) Plan of study. We note a flagrant disproportion between basic, general courses and special courses. For instance, in the first year there are 16 hours of general courses and 18 hours of special courses. Marxism is studied for 4 hours a week for 8 semesters (6 hours a week in the first year). Russian is taught 2 hours a week for 4 semesters. even though students should already know it from secondary schools.

In contrast to this, for example, physical chemistry⁵, which is supposed to prepare graduates for research work in an area which combines physics and chemistry, offers students only 2 or 3 hours a week for 4 semesters.

We ask you to note the following requests:

- 1) We ask for an immediate review of the whole educational system.
- 2) We ask that this overall review of the organization of eleven-year schools and universities be publicly discussed in the press.
- 3) We believe that the introduction of eleven-year schools was a step backwards in our educational system.
- 4) We reject any action taken that presents teachers and students with a fait accompli.
- 5) We ask that the public be systematically informed, particularly by the press, about all plans and negotiations concerning school reform.
- 6) We ask that the review look back to the outstanding traditions of Czechoslovak education and take into account educational expertise worldwide.

⁵ I used to be a physical chemist . . .

7) We ask that the review be carried out by genuine experts and pedagogues who must be given the opportunity to learn about foreign educational systems through actual experience abroad, and not through the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Education.

8) We ask that those officials of the Ministry of Education who implemented the precipitous reforms of the past years be identified and called to account.

9) We ask that Russian courses be limited to 1 semester of scientific terminology and that similar courses in other world languages be established.

10) We ask that Marxism be taught in a way which promotes the development of the students' world views without their being burdened with historical details. We believe that six semesters of Marxism-Leninism is enough.

11) We ask that appropriate central organs support an effort to intensify international student contacts - the exchange of publications and reciprocal visits of our students and Western students. We consider it necessary to put an end to the notion and the practice that international contacts are conducted only by officials from the regional level and higher. We ask that the number of student exchanges with the USSR be increased and that study in Western countries be made possible for a specified number of students and, in particular, for young scholars in various fields.

12) With regard to the unsatisfactory state of military training at universities and the difficulties which this causes students, and in the interests of our national defense, we consider it essential that the question of the effective training of reserve officers be discussed at a special meeting with representatives of the Faculty of Military Science and, if need be, on a university wide scale with representatives of the Ministry of Defense.

7) To improve all of our political work and to increase participation and the interest of people in public life, the mass organizations must work somewhat differently as well. It is not right for them to guarantee fulfillment only of plans from above or to deal only with problems in their workplaces. They must give their members the opportunity to discuss all questions of our life, including foreign policy matters, to discuss everything openly and without fear of ill consequences from superiors. This improvement will come only when these organizations strive not only to win the confidence of the higher organs, but to see to it that their members can trust and rely on their elected organs. These organs must then defend their organizations, explain and endeavor to put through the views of the general rank-and-file, and to help the latter formulate its desires and requests.

Finally, one of the goals of our discussions and of this letter is that the Youth Union itself become such an organization as soon as possible.⁶

⁶ This 'Princeton' translation of the 1956 resolution was scanned, OCRed and reviewed by Ladislav Nemeč on 12 May, 1996.

About the Author

John P. C. Matthews recently retired from the presidency of his own company, East Europe Trade Associates, to conduct research on the year 1956 in Eastern Europe. In 1968 he helped to found the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and until 1981 was in charge of its East European operations. Prior to that he helped to administer international programs from 1964 to 1968 at Princeton University, from which he graduated in 1951. Three years as Director of Programs at the World Affairs Center of the Foreign Policy Association in New York City followed his ten years with the Free Europe Committee, which he served both in New York and in Munich. After four and a half years with Radio Free Europe (RFE) he joined Free Europe Press and eventually became head of European operations of that Branch of the Committee. Relevant articles include: "Renewal in Poland," *WORLDVIEW*, June 1981; "Hungary Remembered: 1956-1981," *WORLDVIEW*, Nov. 1981; and "RFE's Role in the Hungarian Revolution," *Budapest Sun*, Nov. 4-10, 1993. He is currently at work on a book about Eastern Europe in the Spring, Summer and early Fall of 1956.

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