

THE HESITANT WAY TO INDEPENDENCE

Jan Carnogursky

Slovakia was a part of the Kingdom of Hungary until 1918. It had no special position or regional identity there, in spite of the fact that it had been constantly inhabited by the Slovak people, who long ago had given their own name to this part of the Hungarian Kingdom: Slovakia. During the last century Slovakia was exposed to extreme Hungarian assimilationism. It was a British scholar, 'Scotus Viator', who became the most famous protector of Slovaks before the 1st World War. His book **Racial Problems in Hungary** helped Slovakia very much, and at least made its name a little better known to the international public.¹

*Born Bratislava 1944, educated at the Charles University, Prague, then at Comenius University in Bratislava. He was a Solicitor in Bratislava from 1971 onwards, until suspended from the legal profession for defending a Charter 77 member in 1981. He was pardoned in 1989. He became Deputy Premier of the Czechoslovak Government in 1989-90, then Premier of the Slovak Government from 1991 until June 1992. He is the author of **The Bratislava Letters**, a samizdat publication, and is now Leader of the KDH (Christian Democratic) Movement.*

¹ 'Scotus Viator', the 'Wandering Scot', was the early pen-name of Robert William Seton-Watson (1879 - 1951), and **Racial Problems in Hungary** was published in 1908. The previous year Seton-Watson had published **The Future of Austria-Hungary and the Attitude of the Great Powers**, and **Political Persecution in Hungary**. Later he devoted himself to the study of Central European and Balkan history at King's College London, and also occupied the Masaryk Chair of Central European History at London University. He went to Oxford in 1945 as Professor of Czechoslovak Studies. He worked in the Intelligence Services in both World Wars, and retired to Skye. He was an Honorary Citizen of the town of Turciensky Svätý Martin in Slovakia (associated with the history of the national movement). Other publications include **The Rise of Nationality in the Balkans** (1917), **The New Slovakia** (1924) and **Slovakia Then and Now** (1931).

Scottish Affairs

Among its neighbours the Czech nation was always closest to Slovakia. Last century the Czechs were in a similar position to the Slovaks. The Czech Kingdom had been made a part of Austria, and Germans and Austrians occupied a dominant position in the Czech lands. Before World War I the Czech and Slovak intellectuals had tried to organize and combine their forces. Common Czecho-Slovak legions were set up during the War, and after the War's end Czech and Slovak emigrants in the West got together in the cause of establishing a common independent state. Thanks to these joint efforts a Czecho-Slovak Republic was established in 1918.

TWO VIEWS OF THE REPUBLIC

But from that time onwards there were always two views of the Republic. The Czech position was the one which usually prevailed in political and world opinion - that is, the view that the Czechs and the Slovaks now formed one Czechoslovak people. But in Slovakia a quite different opinion was held - the view that Slovaks are a separate people, and that therefore Slovak political bodies had to go on pressing for a Slovak special status within the framework of Czechoslovakia.

The first break-up of Czechoslovakia on these grounds of national difference took place in March 1939. That division was realized under heavy pressure from Germany, which saw the split as being in its own interest. After World War II the pre-War situation in Central Europe was more or less restored. Indeed a restoration of the pre-War situation figured in the war-goals of the Allies - and in a sense the Slovaks actually assisted this restoration with their uprising against the Fascists in August 1944. The rebellion was very much influenced by these same Allied war-goals.

Thus a Czecho-Slovak Republic was revived after the end of the War. But a differential development of political models and goals also continued after the war, as between the Czech lands and Slovakia. Free democratic elections took place in Czechoslovakia in May 1946. Among the Czechs the Communist Party won; but in Slovakia it was the anti-Communist Democratic Party which prevailed. Then, with the establishment of the Eastern Communist Block, all such differential political development in the two parts of the state was abruptly stopped and frozen. However, whenever communist pressure weakened, the differences between Czechs and Slovaks surfaced again.

This was so especially in 1968, the Dubcek period when the formerly unitary Czechoslovak state was changed into a Czecho-Slovak Federation. In spite of

The Hesitant Way to Independence

this, the occupation of both countries by the Warsaw Pact armies once more froze up any really different developments. It was not until after the fall of Communism in 1989 that separate developments were allowed. And this time there was no supra-national authority to try and stop them.

CZECH-SLOVAK TENSIONS

What is the reason for this recurrent pattern of distinct political developments in the Czech lands and Slovakia? Some years ago I read an article in a foreign journal which claimed that Czech society is typically Central European, while Slovak society is more typically East-European. I must say I regard this observation as completely correct. Czech culture is richly structured and closely united with Western culture. Jaroslav Hacek, Karel Capek, and Milan Kundera are Western authors, and Czech movie producers are Western *auteurs*. Czech culture has a strong liberal accent and in that sense Czech attachment to the European Union will be understood there as quite natural.

Czech history is closely connected with West European history, and some Czech kings were also Holy Roman Emperors. Prague is a Gothic and Baroque city. The Czech economy is more advanced than the Slovak one, and in fact the industrial structure of the Czech lands is quite comparable with that of Western Europe. Hence the Czech economy has been able since 1989 to adapt quickly to the economic conditions of the European Union.

In contrast Slovak culture is more inward-looking than its Czech counterpart. It is less structured and has a less liberal accent. Ilya Ehrenburg in the 1930s and Sergei Chelemendik, a contemporary Russian writer who lives in Slovakia, have both declared that Slovaks are more like Russians. In comparison to Czech history, Slovak history is less replete with dramatic events. We did not have our own Kings, never mind our own Emperors. The Slovak economy is weaker, and its structure is in a sense artificial - tailored according to the needs of the late Eastern Block. There are too many large factories burdened with inflexible managements. Most of them have lost their markets and face either rapid conversion and restructuring, or collapse.

As for Slovak society and culture, their structure is closer to that of other Slav nations than the Czech lands. The ideal of Slav solidarity is quite important in Slovakia. On the other hand, we are part of the West as far as religion is concerned. Western religious inclination and Eastern socio-psychological inclination enable us to approach both sides with a degree of understanding, and to accept initiatives from both sides. So Slovakia is on

Scottish Affairs

good communicative terms with both West and East, and not only in a geographical sense.

One of the problems of the ex-Czechoslovakia was a lack of any mutual or shared vision of the future. This absence of vision was manifested, e.g. in the fact that there were only Czech or Slovak political parties, and no Federal ones. The Christian and Jewish churches had their own independent organizations in Slovakia and in the Czech lands. Inability to overcome this different development in the two nations was also rooted in the fact that the number of Czechs is about 10 millions, while the Slovaks are only about 5 millions - a ratio of 2 : 1. This ratio was simply never big enough to let the larger partner enforce its political will on the other.

This, together with the lack of common vision, meant that on the Slovak side there inevitably appeared throughout Czecho-Slovak history efforts or at least aspirations aimed at gaining more autonomy inside the old framework. On the Czech side such efforts brought equally recurrent criticisms about 'How much are the Czechs paying for the Slovaks?'. It was very difficult for the Czech political elite not to make concessions and adapt Czecho-Slovakia to the demands of the Slovak political elite. But then, it was equally difficult for them not to grumble about having done so - and to acknowledge popular Czech protests against such redistribution. The way out tended to be the 'principle' that each republic should only spend its own money - i.e. de facto financial independence (which of course made people feel they might as well be politically independent).

There were other negative factors affecting both countries too. There was fear of abandoning an internationally recognized state which seemed to provide at least an essential minimum security. There was a fear of losing many economic ties; and perhaps also an apprehension that independent existence might lead to the renewal of Hungarian claims in Slovakia and German claims in Bohemia and Moravia. Among the Czechs, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy has stirred up these more or less underground dreads with his recent declaration that the Czech lands will all be dominated by Germany again within a decade. This combination of absences and fears within the old state led to long-drawn-out negotiations between representatives of the two nations in 1990-92. But they were without positive result.

VELVET DIVORCE

The intolerable state of Czecho-Slovak relations was much clearer in Slovakia than it was in the Czech lands, where the main focus of attention

The Hesitant Way to Independence

was the West. At the beginning of 1990 I tried to formulate a common vision of the Czech-Slovak future with a thesis about two joint stars and chairs in Europe. The idea of 'returning to Europe' and participating in the European integration process was very popular at that time, and my idea was to keep Czecho-Slovakia together until it was admitted to the European Community while, at the same time, assuring the future position of both Czechs and Slovaks within the Community. I believed that this would preserve Czecho-Slovakia until entry time, while also preserving the eventual possibility of our separately recognized national identities at European level. The Slovaks of course had a special interest in this possibility. But developments over the last four years have showed that this was an over-academic idea which stood no chance of being realized. People in Slovakia regarded a perspective of Slovakian 'Independence-in-Europe' after ten or fifteen years as far too prolonged. And people in what is now the Czech Republic regarded the preservation of a common state only for ten or fifteen years as futile. For its part, the European Community was afraid that approval of entry with such qualifications, conceding quasi-independent status to the two parts of Czechoslovakia, would merely accelerate the disintegration of Czechoslovakia - and perhaps that of other Community countries as well.

Then came the elections of 1992, in which all the different underlying tendencies in Czech and Slovak society fully revealed themselves. The Right-centred party of Václav Klaus won in Bohemia-Moravia and the Left-nationalist party of Vladimír Mečiar won in Slovakia. Both politicians turned out to be agreed on dividing up Czechoslovakia.

The division was completed smoothly - in 'velvet' fashion - because, as I have already indicated, there were simply not sufficiently centrifugal or adhesive forces between the Czechs and the Slovaks. Actually there not even too many contradictions or quarrels either, rows which might have slowed down the disintegration. There were practically no disputable borders, and there are no ethnically mixed territories. It is quite true that, according to the opinion polls, supporters of the split had no majority in 1992 - neither before the elections nor after them. However, open opponents of the split were in an even smaller minority. The dominant attitude was one of indifference. Some organizations in both countries tried to organize protests against the split in Autumn 1992, but their meetings were poorly attended - only a few hundred turned out or, in the best case, between two and three thousand. Trade Union leaders raised the possibility in October 1992 of a general strike against the split, but the idea found no response among workers and was quickly abandoned.

Scottish Affairs

So Czechoslovakia broke up on 1st January 1993, since which time we have to speak only about Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The expected disadvantages of the split were immediately obvious and continue today. Slovak industry has lost many of its markets, and that artificial structure I mentioned before is also in evidence. The division has also created a new geopolitical situation in Central Europe. The political weight of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia has indeed increased, while Slovakia is fully occupied by all its economic, social and political problems. But as far as statehood is concerned the consciousness of its definitive character is deepening too. No important political force in Slovakia has the rebuilding of Czechoslovakia on its agenda. The independent position of Slovakia on the international scene has generally been accepted with satisfaction. Slovakia (and probably the Czech Republic too) are overcoming the teething problems connected with finding new stability. If they do find it soon, then I believe that, together with their other neighbours, they will be able to establish a much more stable constellation in Central Europe than 'Czechoslovakia' ever was.

February-March 1994