



Zsolt Csalog

What are the Czechs like?

"Like the champagne from the bottles in Prague, that's how the tears came rolling from my eyes! I'm tellin' ya, if a Czechoslovak had been within reach, I'd've licked his ass clean!" A tough-talking Magyar remembers the stirrings of neighbourly affection in '89.

Karesz says brandishing his mug of Riezlingszilváni wine: You listening?, he says. I just wanna say that the Czechs, in short, that the Czechs...

Can I say it like it is? Don't you think I know the sort of people they are? I know them inside and out. They're Slavs and Prague is their capital and they jibber in Czech and stuff themselves with knedliky. I know, 'cause I learned it when I was a kid, and also, I saw it with my own two eyes. But OTHERWISE?! I don't wanna say nothin' bad 'bout nobody 'cause I'm not like that, but why beat about the bush, they're not like us. They're different!

Take their habits, for instance. Hungarians, they got proper HUNGARIAN habits. But what have they got? I'd rather not even go into it.

I've been to Prague and saw with my own two eyes and what can I tell you? A miniature Budapest. Can I say it like it is? It's no big deal. It was a bonus trip from the plant. So why not? A freebee. But I wasn't impressed. A buncha churches. But I'm no church goer, so what was I supposed to do with all them churches? A side like in Buda, a side like in Pest, and between them a small imitation of a Danube, but so small, it brought tears to my eyes, I got so homesick! And them bridges! The Charles Bridge, lordee lord! An antique with nothin' modern about it. Nothin'! Back home we'd give it to the panhandler at the Ecseri. You put it next to the Elizabeth Bridge and you wouldn't believe your eyes! And if that weren't bad enough, for three days you couldn't get a decent plate of goulash anywhere, just slices of roll drenched in all sorts of sauce with a side of cabbage. And that's what they call food! Enough is enough, guys, let's head for home! But what really got my goat was the uvaga, uvaga, everywhere uvaga, blah-blah-blah, and you're supposed to know what they're talkin' about! Which is something I'll never understand. Why can't they speak proper HUNGARIAN and say, this here is a chair, this a table, and this here's a mug of beer, lordee lord! 'Cause, sure, the Germans speak German and the French speak French and not Hungarian, which is bad enough, but there ain't a lot we can do about that. But speakin' CZECH? What an idea!

At one time the Czechs used to come to the Balaton. Our socialist brothers soaked their fat Czech asses there. What do I care, let 'em, they haven't got an ocean or a Balaton, poor guys, I can buy that, I don't look my nose down on them or anything. But things got to the point where we didn't call the Balaton the Hungarian sea any more, we called it the Hungarian–Czechoslovak sea! And my wife, too, that's when she had the bright idea, okay, let's go down to Aliga for the week. So fine. Let's. I was hoping for some diversion. And what happened? I didn't have no piece of mind because of the Czechs, not for an instant. A huge bowl of chicken soup made of Czechs! I'm not sayin' there weren't a couple'a fine assed Czechoslovak women, but what use was that to me when they spoke Czech? You may not believe this, but I slept with my wife every night for a week! Which is as much as I got outta the Balaton, all because of the Czechs.

How 'bout another round? I'll have the Riezlingszilváni...

Or take their culture, though the less said the better. My wife dragged me to the movies. A Czech film, something about a beer brewery. Big deal! Still, I didn't say 'nothin', I was disciplined, I sat through it. And guess what the clincher was. The clincher was that the mother of the director, or the writer, or whatever, she takes a mug of beer and ceremoniously gulps it down in one go! And, buddy, I swear on my mother's grave, that mug was bigger than this here! Tell me the truth, was that supposed to impress me, or what? For one thing, a Magyar drinks WINE. I never thought much of beer myself. And another thing. We're talking about his MOTHER! My maternal aunt - are you with me, buddy? - she drank. I'll say it like it is, she was an alcoholic. It wouldn't have been the first time. On top of which, she drank pálinka. All the time! It's nothing to be ashamed of. Besides, the old gal, she's dead. I might as well be above board about this: Aunt Betsy drank like a skunk. But to BRAG about it? That's really too much. A Hungarian, if you ask me, doesn't trumpet a thing like that about. On the contrary. HE DENIES IT. Even on the gallows. What? You say my mother drinks? You're LYING, you piece of low shit! I'm gonna throw your innards to the dogs if you ever so much as mention my mother's name again! Get me?

Or for another thing, take their literature. 'Cause for your information, I ain't no boor, I know my letters! Or most of 'em anyhow. In short, I read now and then, besides of which, I'm curious: let's see what's going' on next door. There's that Svejik, for one. Their good soldier, or what have you. The one that waddles through the Great War, stepping into cat's shit with those two left feet of his. And that's the story. Okay, I ain't saying I didn't laugh. But that this should be their renowned national whatchamacallit that's supposed to make you gape in awe? Well, just try putting it next to Petöfi! "One thought only weighs on me, to die among pillows in ignominy! To arms, Magyar, your country beckons! Is it chains we want or freedom's ring" and the like. Compare that to Svejik. Lordee lord!

Which is what I'm trying to tell you. They're a different sort. DIFFERENT, not like us! Different feelings, different morals, a whole different level of quality!

And also, look at their history. Is that what you call history? They were always up in arms when they shouldn't of been, and when they should of been, they lay low as a snake in the grass. For instance, when we came into the area, they fled head over heels from our Chieftain Árpád. I'm not surprised! But next thing, they made the shit hit the fan every chance they got. It started with their John Huss, 'cause our Roman Catholic religion wasn't good enough for him.

Now I ask you. If it was good enough for us, why wasn't it good enough for them? Just askin'. King Matthias tried to occupy them, which would've been great, get 'em annexed to Hungary, lock, stock and barrel! Except the Turk appeared on the scene, and the Czechs had the last laugh. If only we'd won the Battle of Mohács, we'd have made those Czechs see the light, oh, good Lord in Heaven, it'd been a sight!

Then came the HABSBURGS, the Germans. And who gave the country its best soldiers even then? Their lives and blood? Well? Us or them? Or were the valiant Haidek hussars Czechs? Or have you ever heard of a Czechoslovak soldier? 'Cause I sure haven't! And then in forty-eight, when we stood up for freedom, fighting the Germans and fighting the Russians, shedding our blood, where were the Czechs? Laying low again. 'Cause they didn't want no Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, they wanted an Austro-Czech Monarchy. The very idea! With the Magyars coming in a weak third. But then we ended up as the dual monarchy anyway, and not them, ha-ha-ha!

Then there was the First World War and we had to go fight again. And what did the Czechs do? They lay low again. And why? 'Cause they wanted to lose the war. And why? So they could win it. And they did.

Of course, I won't deny it, our history depends on what happens to us. And I'm not gonna bring up how we lost nearly half the country because of the Treaty of Versailles, even if I still haven't gotten over it, and that's the truth. What I'm sayin' is when we had our revolution and the Republic of Councils, what, I ask you, were the Czechs doing? They stabbed us Hungarians in the back, that's what they were doing, 'cause that's the sort of people they are! And in the Soviet Union under Lenin, when them tens of thousands of Hungarian POWs were valiantly fighting for the dictatorship of the proletariat, who did we find ourselves up against once more? The Czechs, old buddy, the Czechs! 'Cause international socialism wasn't to their liking!

You get the picture? Or you want I should go on? So then, there came the other world war, the second, when the Hungarian soldiers fought so bravely to protect our thousand-year-old Versaille borders at the Don. We even got Kassa back from the Germans. And the Czechs, they were nowhere in sight again. They didn't even have an army. They let the Germans disarm them just so they wouldn't have to march to the front! The Slovaks, at least they made an effort, they even had fascism for a while, as a result of which they got Kassa back. Of course, soon they were also building socialism, like us, even if they didn't get much out of it neither...

Then came fifty-six, when this small Hungarian nation did so well by itself that the whole world applauded. And buddy, you remember what the Czechs had to say about it? What they had to say is, they send Kádár three wagons of rubber truncheons to have something to beat the Hungarians with! That's what the Czechoslovaks had to say in fifty-six. Three WAGONS of rubber sticks! I know, 'cause I was at the shunting yard at Rákosrendezö unloading all those first-class Czechoslovak truncheons from the wagons. I was hauling the crates with these two hands of mine, so I know!

Anyway, then came sixty-eight. What can I tell you, we were worried, what's gonna come out of this, and then what happened happened. Just as I thought. I was in the reserves and on August the twentieth I got called up. To arms, and on the double! So much for that, I thought, the Czechs can now also kiss their whatchamacallit with the human face good bye! There was a young boy from

Csepel with us, a scrawny toolmaker, and soon as he puts on his uniform, he flips. Says he's not going. He wasn't scared, that wasn't it, he just didn't want no part in this filth, as he called it. He was shaking from nerves all over!

You're a smart kid, kid, I says to him, so you're not coming? You'd rather volunteer for the firing squad? Look at your uniform, I says, you're a soldier ain't you? Well then? And also, I says, let me tell you somethin' else, kid. 'Cause it's not as simple as you think with that chicken brain of yours. 'Cause have you thought, I says to him, if we now go through this stupid nonsense like we're supposed to, we might easily get Kassa out of it! Or Érsekújvár at least. Have you thought of that, kid?

And you know what he said? He didn't. He just walked up to me and spit in my eye. He spit me in the eye!

Big deal. I wiped it off and didn't hurt the little squirt, I didn't break his bones. A man that's suffering from nerves, I wasn't about to hurt him. Besides, the others held me down. Then the boy from Csepel disappeared. He was taken to hospital. Or who knows...

And off we went. Lordee lord seein' all them Czechoslovaks blubbering like babes. Even the border guard, he was *crying*, his tears rolling down his cheeks! For crying out loud, I says, ain't he ashamed of himself?

My dear Czechoslovak brother, I says to him, are those TEARS I see? Tut-tut! And you a SOLDIER! Look. That's how it goes. So don't take it to heart. What's the use of crying?

'Cause I'm the type that hates crying. Especially when it's a man! I don't like it in women neither.

If for instance my wife starts up, listen, woman, you stop right now or I swipe you in the mugger! 'Cause I CAN'T TAKE IT! Which is generally enough to make her stop. But if it's a MAN starts crying, oooh, NO WAY! If you ask me, A HUNGARIAN MAN DOESN'T CRY! Not like the Czechs. Believe it or not, as we passed the villages, there they were, long lines of blubbering women and old folk and children and PEOPLE. God only knows, I would'a felt better if they had sniped at us from the attics. But no. They just cried...

But then nothin'came of Kassa, not even Érsekújvár, 'cause you know what the Ruskies are like. It's no use even talkin' about it.

Are you with me, buddy? You gonna pay for another round, yes? Riezlingszilváni, but no soda, God forbid. Straight up!

In short, Karesz says, in short all I wanted to get out of this whole thing is... God only knows, 'cause in the meantime...

Anyhow, that week I sat in front of the TV every single night, and I mean every single night. And kept switching from the small radio to the big radio, and the big radio to the small radio, from one channel to the other, hoping to hear something. I was so curious the whole week, without letup, wondering what the Czechs were botching up. Even my wife hated me, why can't you wait to find out from tomorrow's paper? Must you watch that stupid TV ALL THE TIME? She was fed up, and I don't blame her, and by Friday she ran out of patience. I come home from work on Friday, and she greets me with, listen,

she says, we're going to the movies. I got us two tickets!

Fine, I says, but I got other plans, go to the movies with the boy!

I can't, she says, 'cause the film's rated R!

Okay, I says, then take your ma! 'Cause I got somethin' else to do tonight!

'Cause there were a hundred thousand on the street by then, TWO hundred thousand, THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND, and the rubber sticks worn down to the handle, and then the head soldier says, the armed forced aren't gonna put up with this any longer, and... Lordee lord, I'm thinkin', what's gonna happen, another Peking?! They should stay home and not be idiots, and well, a man's throat dries out somethin' awful...

My wife Ani was making faces, of course. Will you just get goin', dear! And of course, I got stuck with the kid, I gave him somethin' to eat, put him to bed, and I headed for the TV...

Are you still listening, buddy? What am I amusin' you for, anyhow? Don't you care what I'm saying to you?

And then, oh, Lord! When I see them champagne bottles, and them pullin' out the corks, and the champagne spirting all over, on their hair, down to the asphalt, a million people shouting on Wenceslas Square, the corks popping... oh, lordee lord, goddamn, they did it, WE DID IT! And it got so hot in my chest, right here, my heart was on fire! Like the champagne from the bottles in Prague, that's how the tears came rolling from my eyes! I'm tellin' ya, if a Czechoslovak had been within reach, I'd've licked his ass clean! I ran at the TV like a demented man and showered the screen with my kisses, and with my stupid head I even pushed over my bottle, I didn't even grab for it, and the rug soaked it up, so who the fuck cares, let it drink, too, the kid crawled out of bed, too, naked, what's goin' on, dad, nothing, son, except, lordee lord, you're too young to understand, I'll explain some other time, go back to sleep, but no, come here, I wanna kiss you... And the tears continued rolling from my eyes in buckets, and I cried like a stupid kid! I'm not ashamed 'cause it felt good, and I'm not ashamed now neither in front of you, if you don't like it, ask for the manager! Shit, it was so beautiful, I'll never forget it long as I live, my dear, dear brothers, my little Czechoslovaks...

Hey, buddy, you gonna pay for another round? I hope you're not offended 'cause of what I... I can still stand, and I'm gonna be fine in a minute. Riezlingszilváni, straight up... Well then chin–chin, bottoms up, as the Czechs say!



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