

VISITING CZECHOSLAVAKIA

In 1967 there was a meeting of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) in Prague, Czechoslovakia. I attended as a member, and my guest for the meeting was Jim Ogle, son of Bill.

Although the Soviet Union had not yet actually invaded the country militarily, it dominated everything. I was enormously impressed to see what was happening in Prague. I saw churches fenced off from the public and most of them had their stained glass windows broken out. Many people wished to talk with us when we walked along the street, but they were obviously afraid to be seen to be doing so. For instance they approached at dusk, or at times when I was quite alone. They wanted to know about automobiles, and how much they cost us in the US. In truth they wanted to know anything at all about the “outside” world, so it was only then that I began to realize what political oppression could really be like.

The IAU meeting was affected in a variety of ways. First of all, restaurants were short of food, menus were really non-existent, and good meals were hard to come by. We tried many different ones, and only one Chinese restaurant seemed to be satisfactory. At the “banquet” meal for the IAU the Russians stood at the counter in front of the kitchen and handed the food out to their companions as it was available. By the time they had finished this carefully planned distribution system, there was very little food left for everyone else. The American astronomers I noted seemed to be more upset by all of this than the Europeans. It was a wonderful for a few of us to see the behavior of the political left among us when they encountered a world shaped by communists and socialists.

Our hotel had been opened just for the IAU meeting. Obviously it had been closed a long time before our arrival, but was adequate if a bit primitive. One night before we were returning to the hotel the entire city suffered a power black-out. Because of deep clouds the black-out was truly black. Upon

arriving at the hotel, we found there were two candles being used at the front desk, and they were needed there. Could we find ourselves to the room without help? We thought so.

As I remember, we were on the fourth floor, and counting floors worked just fine. But how exactly were the rooms numbered? We made our way along the walls by spreading both arms along them. When we came to a door, we tried our room key. That worked just fine, and upon entering our room we were able to stare out over a completely dark city. It was a memorable moment.

The fun occurred a few moments later. There was a small radio in the room that we had listened to from time to time. I turned it on, and it worked!

For the next few days we talked into the radio quite frequently, and specialized in long dissertations on the merits of living in a free country. I hope we were helpful.