

# **BORDERS UP!**

## **Eastern Europe through the bottom of a glass**

**by Vitali Vitaliev**

### **SAMPLE CHAPTER:**

## **4. PUB-CRAWLING IN PRAGUE**

Some countries take a perverse pride in their beer-drinking statistics. The Germans maintain that they consume 251 pints per head a year, the Danes 225 pints, whereas the British average intake is a modest 180. The indisputable leadership here, however, is claimed by the Czechs, each of whom (including new-born babies and octogenarians), allegedly, gulps down a staggering 283 pints, or 150 litres, of beer annually. And although Bavarians assert that their per capita average consumption is 350 litres, we have to take into account Australian visitors to the Bierfest, whose contribution to the overall Bavarian figure, as witnessed by myself, must be close to 90 per cent.

I was looking forward to my time in the Czech Republic not so much because of its beer-drinking records, but rather because former Czechoslovakia was the first ever foreign country I visited while still living in the Soviet Union. The impressions of that trip in 1986 could be best described as shopping shock. I was stunned by the abundance of goods in the shops, by the fact that beer was always on sale and could be acquired easily – almost without queuing. I remember bringing proudly back to Moscow such flagrantly Western souvenirs as chewing gum, chocolate Easter eggs and strawberry-flavoured milk powder. For months after the trip, I was a welcome guest in many a Moscow flat on the condition that I shared with the hosts my impressions of the Czechoslovakian paradise and some of the milk powder, too.

Interestingly, a couple of my London friends who visited communist Czechoslovakia at approximately the same time, from the other side of the Berlin Wall, were genuinely appalled by ‘near absence of everything’ (in their words), unsmiling people and never-ending queues. What better proof of Einstein’s theory of relativity?

An old Soviet joke makes the point even better than Einstein. An American and a Russian head off to Paris from their respective countries. By mistake, both end up in Prague (Warsaw, Budapest, East Berlin etc.), and both think that they have reached their destination.

Czechoslovakia had changed a lot since my last visit. After the KGB-inspired ‘velvet revolution’ of 1989, it was no longer communist; and after the ‘velvet divorce’ from Slovakia in 1993, it was no longer Czechoslovakia, but simply the Czech Republic.

If formerly I was advised not to speak Russian while in Prague (after the events of 1968, the locals were not exactly head over heels in love with Russians – and I didn’t blame them), now a

Prague-based Russian friend instructed me to speak exclusively Russian to taxi drivers as the best guarantee against being fleeced. ‘If you speak Russian, they will think that you are a member of the Russian mafia and will be afraid to charge you a fortune,’ he said. I did speak Russian to a glib taxi driver who picked me up at the station, but ended up being taken for a ride anyway. Having paid 350 crowns for a two-minute lift, I consoled myself that it was due to my total lack of resemblance to a Russian mafia gangster.

Post-communist Prague is a robber-city. Especially if you are a foreigner. They charge you 60 crowns (about \$2) for a glass of watery orange juice or for a cup of decent coffee with an ‘all-inclusive’ hotel breakfast (the coffee that *is* included tastes like bad orange juice). They charge you extra for washing your hands at a public toilet. They make foreigners pay up to ten times the locals’ fare for visiting the same tourist attractions. What’s worse, they try to camouflage this injustice in a rather clumsy way.

Fluent in Russian and Ukrainian, I had no problem reading Czech street signs. I wished I had. Walking in Prague’s Old Jewish Quarter, I spotted the following sign – in English and in Czech – near the entrance to the Old New Synagogue:

<b>The Old New Synagogue –</b>	<b>adults – 150 kc</b>
	<b>children – 100 kc</b>
<b>Staronova Synagoga –</b>	<b>dospeli – zdarma</b>
	<b>deti – zdarma</b>

As you have probably guessed, ‘*dospeli*’ means ‘adults’, and ‘*deti*’ means ‘children’. What you might not have guessed is that ‘*zdarma*’ means ‘free’.

In other instances, they would indicate the foreigners’ fare in figures (340 kc for ‘entrance to the Jewish Quarter’, say) and the locals’ fare in Czech letters: ‘*padesat kc*’ – fifty crowns for the same ‘entrance’. A simple, yet pretty nasty, ruse.

Yes, in the ten years since my last visit, Prague had become an exemplary capitalist city, where everything was on sale, including human flesh. Every newspaper kiosk prominently displayed a glossy pinkish brochure, enticingly entitled *Prague Sex Guide*, in three languages, featuring photos of naked women with languorous raunchy eyes, and brothels with names like Club Apollon (‘entrance includes a complimentary bottle of champagne’), Satanella (‘designed to look like a hospital room, contains a chair with stirrups, and all the necessary tools for fantasy clinic sex’) and Lotos Club (‘if you wish to indulge, there are plenty of beautiful girls to choose from – the one you pick will take you to a tastefully decorated private room, the best of which is a jungle-theme room with a particularly large whirlpool bath’). To be on the safe side of AIDS, the Sex Guide provided potential clients of Prague brothels with such useful tips as ‘A sore or chafed penis dramatically increases your risk of infection’ and ‘If you have any cuts on your fingers, don’t insert them into your partner.’ Nice and clear.

Don’t get me wrong. Prague is still breathtakingly beautiful, and the new spirit of Western commercialism has added some entrepreneurial buzz to its narrow cobbled streets, lined with old baroque houses and churches. Baroque architecture, by the way, strikes me as somewhat beer-inspired: this extensive ornamentation, this profusion of curved and interrupted lines, these heavy and solid – almost stout – facades, this beer-foam-like multitude of cupolas and turrets . . . And isn’t it true that the best examples of baroque can be found in beer-loving countries? Please correct me if I am wrong (which I probably am).

Let's get back to beer, as Australians say. As a reluctant beer-drinker, I made sure I memorised one very useful Czech expression, 'Uz nepiju' ('I don't drink any more') before starting my pub-crawl. Saying that I didn't like beer in a Prague pub would have been tantamount to confessing to being impotent in a brothel.

Of course, my starting point had to be U Fleku, Prague's oldest and most famous beer hall, which has been brewing its own dark and strong brand Flekovsky Lezak since 1499. I am not sure about 1499, but when I came to U Fleku in 1986 during my first foreign trip from the beerless Soviet Union, I was seriously worried that they would run out of beer before I had time to be served. I also remember that the pub was full of swinging and mug-wielding East Germans.

U Fleku was easy to find. An uninterrupted line of neatly parked tourist buses led me to its entrance from Karlovo Namesti. Just as ten years before, the place was bursting with tourists, mostly Germans, although this time there were streaks of Americans and Japanese among them. A musician, dressed in the military uniform of the times of Good Soldier Svejk, was playing an accordion in one of the cavernous rooms. Just as I had ten years ago, I went out into the beer garden. It was cold outside, and the long wooden benches were half empty. Only some cold-resistant Scandinavians and several legless Germans were there. I sat next to a drunken German sugar daddy snogging his blonde and red-eyed young girlfriend. She was massive – Brünnhilde-like – and had a thick bovine neck. They both stank of beer.

Somewhere from above there came a voice 'Pivo?' ('Beer?'). It was the waiter, and I suddenly realised why in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia they call waiters 'Pan Vrchny' ('Mister Upper'). U Fleku's Mr Upper, sporting a short-sleeved white shirt under a black vest, was towering above me holding an enormous tray with several dozen beer mugs on it. His question was rather a rhetorical one: why on earth would someone come to U Fleku, if he didn't want beer? To play snooker? To board a flight to Bratislava? Or to scribble away in a W. H. Smith recycled notebook, as I did?

Thump! A weighty mug with dark brown liquid landed on the table in front of me. It was followed by Mr Upper's dexterous hand which made one quick notch on a piece of paper, stuck under my coaster. Before I could say 'Dekuji!' ('Thanks!'), another Mr Upper's hand was stretching towards me with a shot of Becherovka liqueur. But I was well prepared for the trick. Gently pushing his hand away, I told him resolutely 'Ne!' ('No!'), as the Pub Etiquette section of the *Prague Post* newspaper advised.

'Perche?' Mr Upper asked in unexpected Italian.

'Because I don't want it!' I replied in English.

'But it is very good with beer,' the obstinate polyglot insisted.

'I don't think so. Take it away!'

The reason for Mr Upper's persistence was that they charged you 200 crowns (£5) for a shot, the price of a three-course meal (with beer) in a good Prague restaurant, whereas a 0.4 litre mug of beer at U Fleku was 'only' 39 crowns – by far the most expensive in the Czech Republic. Besides, contrary to Mr Upper's assurances, mixing the vomitingly sweet Becherovka with beer was like eating a pickled herring topped with raspberry jam. Ten years ago they didn't do this to unsuspecting tourists. Capitalism can sometimes be pushy.

I took a couple of sips from my mug and found the beer surprisingly pleasant. Its bitter-sweet taste reminded me of kvass, a drink of my Ukrainian childhood. Kvass is a mildly alcoholic (not stronger than yoghurt) drink made of yeast and black bread. It is the same dark brown and is – or used to be – sold by fat Ukrainian women from huge yellow tanks on every street corner. I

stopped drinking kvass when one day I saw a tank break into two and all its contents pour out on to the asphalt: the streams of brown kvass were swarming with white intestinal worms . . .

Meanwhile, my neighbours were busily gulping their Becherovkas, washing them down with beer. Several happy Mr Uppers were hovering above them like butterflies, and the rows of pencilled ‘notches’ on their beer slips were as thick as hedges in Devon. A group of German students at the next table tried half-heartedly to swing, but quickly gave up. The sugar daddy was quarrelling with his bovine-necked Brünnhilde, whose face was by now pretty bovine, too.

The famous U Fleku, which claims to be the oldest beer pub in the world, was clearly no longer a place where one could find much local colour.

Not far from U Fleku, in Kaprova Street, I spotted a small pub called U Mestkiy Knihovni (At a Local Bookshop). What an ingenious name! Imagine an angry wife questioning her wayward husband: ‘Where have you been all evening?’ ‘At a local bookshop,’ he answers meekly. In Finland, by the way, they have gone even farther in pacifying angry wives: they have pubs called At My In-Laws and At My Brother’s. The best pub name I have ever seen was in Scotland: The Why Not?

I didn’t venture into A Local Bookshop, but through the window I could discern several fat, red-faced men drinking beer. And not a single book!

My next destination was U Pravdu, which translated as The Truth. My guidebook promised a nice beer garden and a convivial Svejik atmosphere. The beer garden was closed (it was too cold to sit in it anyway), the pub was totally empty, and this was the whole truth about The Truth.

I was luckier at U Cerneho Vola (At a Black Ox), although the name of this pub near Prague Castle would have been an immediate give-away for a beer-loving husband.

The atmosphere inside the pub was warm and brotherly: under low, beamed ceilings, the patrons were sitting next to each other on long dark-wood benches. They were drinking Kozel (Goat) beer and chasing it with traditional ‘Pivni syr’, a strong, spicy goat cheese. The balance, as I soon discovered, was perfect: my mouth was set on fire after each bite of the heavily peppered cheese, and the only way to put the flames out was to wash them down with a good gulp of Kozel. The man next to me had six notches on his slip already, and was thirstily approaching his seventh. A large mug of beer cost just 8.40 crowns (about 20p) – a big difference from U Fleku.

Through a small leaded window, I could see the palatial Foreign Ministry building across the road. It was there, in the courtyard, that the dead body of the country’s democratically elected President Jan Masaryk was found beneath an open window on 10 March 1948. It was officially announced that he had killed himself by jumping to his death. Interestingly, the first doctor to arrive at the scene also committed suicide a fortnight later.

The death of Masaryk was the final episode in the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. Rather than a suicide, it was the last (so far) case of a centuries-old Czech political tradition of defenestration (from the Classical Latin ‘fenestra’ – window), which means chucking an undesirable politician out of a window and making it look as if he has taken his own life. The first defenestration, a collective one, was in 1419, when several over-zealous Prague town councillors were hurled out of their office windows by a group of bullish religious reformers. Since then there have been three more (including the famous one during the Thirty Years War – uncannily similar to that of 1419 – and, of course, Masaryk’s). In August 1996, the Czech news agency CTK reported that two Chinese men were tied up and thrown from the ninth floor of a block of flats in Prague, but both survived, which showed that the age-old defenestration tradition was very much alive.

Who is going to be the victim of the next great defenestration of Prague? It is hard to say, although when I was there many Czechs were inclined to believe it was likely to be Vaclav Havel, beer-loving former dissident, playwright and incumbent President of the Republic. Some time ago, he even won the honorary (if somewhat dubious) title of The-Most-Likely-to-be-Defenestrated Person in Prague.

After a mug of strong, pale Kozel, I started clearly seeing human bodies – in suits and ties – flying out, one by one, from the Foreign Ministry’s windows. I needed a cup of coffee.

‘What will happen if I order a coffee here?’ I asked my beer-swilling neighbour, who happened to speak some English.

‘They will think that you are an alcoholic,’ he replied, finishing off his tenth mug.

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