

MY PRAGUE—written by a former participant in the FIU Czech Study Abroad Pgm who returned the next year to Prague and wrote about her feelings

A Gothic footbridge made of stone spans the broad Vltava River, linking five ancient towns together into Prague, the hauntingly beautiful capital city of the Czech Republic. West of the bridge is the Old Town; to the east is Mala Strana (the Little Quarter), a collection of crooked cobbled streets between the river and the castle on the hill. Strolling across Charles Bridge at twilight, the "City of One Hundred Spires" looks distinctly unreal, as dreamlike and hallucinatory as any of the art it has inspired. This is Franz Kafka's city, after all. A town where nothing is quite as it appears. A town steeped in legends and alchemy, with a long, bizarre, rather tragic history. Where the past is tangible, crowding the present-day streets with ghosts and stories.

The apartment where I am staying is in Mala Strana, tucked between crumbling Baroque buildings, quiet parks and the bubbling Devil's Stream -- named, I am told, for a demon in the water, or else for a washerwoman's temper. I have come because of the Art Nouveau movement which blossomed here one hundred years before. With its roots deeply planted in Czech folklore, Art Nouveau architecture and design has turned Prague into a fantasist's dream: extravagantly adorned with sprites, undines, and the pensive heroes of myth and legend, standing draped over doorways, on turret towers, holding up the red-tile roofs. Stories surround me everywhere I look. Music, too, is a constant presence. The sound of Mozart on a solo violin follows me down a dusky alleyway. I glimpse the form of the young musician in a lit window on a floor above. The next block, I hear piano scales; and down the street, the strains of a string quartet from a small palace concert hall. The night air is crisp, cold, the last of autumn shading into winter.

The friends I am visiting here in Prague are involved in a world of magic themselves. William Todd-Jones is a Welsh puppeteer at work on a film of Pinocchio. The film crew, directed by Steve Barron, have made use of these old, unspoiled streets to recreate the timeless landscape of a classic children's story. Although ostensibly set in Italy, Carlo Collodi's tale of a wooden puppet who longs to be a real boy is a fitting one to bring to Prague -- and not just because of the economic climate that lures so many film productions here. This is a city filled with puppets: from the simplest wooden marionettes hawked by street vendors on Charles Bridge to the elaborate, fanciful figures found on display in posh art galleries. This ancient folk art/folk theater tradition still flourishes here in Eastern Europe in a way unimaginable in the West -- where puppetry, like fantasy itself, is deemed to be for children only.

Czech puppets often depict the figures from old Bohemian folktales, a rich oral storytelling tradition that dates back to the founding of this land. According to the history books the Czech tribe established itself in Bohemia sometime between the 5th and 8th centuries, following a vanished Celtic tribe, and one of Germanic peoples. The Premysls were the first ruling dynasty, founded by the Queen Libuse -- a romantic, half-legendary figure described by Cosmas of Prague (c. 1045-1125) as ". . . a wonderful woman among women, chaste in body, righteous in all her morals, second to none as a judge over the people, affable to all and even amiable, the pride and glory of the female sex, doing wise and manly deeds; but, as nobody is perfect, this so praise-worthy woman was, alas, a soothsayer. . . ."

When the men of her tribe grew disgruntled about being ruled by a woman, she fell into a trance, pointed toward the hills, and instructed them to follow her horse; it would lead them to the simple ploughman who was destined to be her husband. That ploughman was the first Premysls, a muscular and handsome young man according to the legends -- and to the many statues of the pair one finds in Prague today. Another legend attributes the founding of the city itself to Libuse's visions. In a trance she saw two golden olive trees and "a town, the glory of which will reach the stars." The spot described by the queen was found, and on it was a man building a doorsill for his cottage. The Czech word for doorsill is *prah*, giving Libuse's new town its name: Praha (Prague). The town was then erected on the hill where Prague Castle stands today.

The most famous Czech Art Nouveau artist was not an architect but a graphic designer: Alphonse Mucha, whose theater posters for the actress Sara Bernhardt catapulted him into sudden fame. In Paris between 1890 and 1910, his posters, prints, even jewelry designs, were ubiquitous in fashionable circles -- standing the test of time with their great popularity to this day. Although Mucha's distinctive work has come to exemplify the Art Nouveau style, he himself hated the term, insisting that art could never be "new" because it was eternal. A fiercely nationalistic man, literate, and prone to mystic leanings, Mucha himself was most proud of the work completed upon his return to Prague: the Slav Epic, comprised of twenty large panels in tempera and oil paint. Commissioned for Prague's Municipal Building, an Art Nouveau masterpiece itself, these gorgeous paintings illustrate Slav history and legend in rich detail. Mucha spent his later years in Prague, watching his dream of national independence turn to reality in 1918, when the Czechs paired with neighboring Slovakia to establish their own republic. Twenty years later that dream crumbled as Hitler's army rolled into the city. Mucha was one of the first of the nationalist intellectuals to be grilled by the Gestapo. Already in poor health, the artist died three months later, a broken man

The most famous of Prague's creative figures, of course, was the German-speaking Franz Kafka (1883-1924), whose brooding surrealist vision captured the darker flavor of the city where he lived for all but a few years of his life. The tormented man-turned-cockroach in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the bleak labyrinthine despair of his novel *The Castle* are now well known to generations of readers and philosophy students around the world. Kafka never lived to see any of the fame that would one day emblazon his name across his city's tourist maps and postcards. He died, surrounded by unpublished manuscripts, in a small flat over Old Town Square -- a place of Gothic towers and Baroque rooftops aptly described as the Brothers Grimm in stone, which Kafka considered "the most beautiful setting that has ever been seen on this earth."

In Czechoslovakia, as elsewhere in Europe, artists moved on to Cubism and Surrealism in the period between the two world wars. It is not surprising that a city with a history of alchemy and mysticism would become the second most active center of Surrealism after Paris. Karel Capek was a writer whose engaging work shows the influence of both movements -- combined with a love of Czech folklore, and a distrust of industrialized life. Often called "the Czech Kurt Vonnegut," he is best known for his novel *War of the Newts*, and for his science fiction play *R.U.R.*, a Broadway hit which gave the world the word robot (from the Czech *robota*, meaning: hard labor)

The extraordinary Prague art scene that existed between the two World Wars was all but stamped out when the new country fell to Hitler's armies. Intellectuals, many of them Jewish, fled or were exterminated. Out of ninety thousand people in the Old Jewish Quarter of Prague, eighty thousand were killed. The Old Jewish Quarter, an extravaganza of beautiful Art Nouveau architecture, had originally been established many centuries before as a walled medieval ghetto, often locked to segregate its inhabitants. The community had its own folktales, particularly those of the Golem and Rabbi Loew. Loew was a Talmudic scholar said to have lived in the 15th century -- a hero in various fairy tale exploits whose villain was usually Brother Thaddeus, a wicked cleric prone to pogroms and accusing Jews of killing Christian babies. The Golem comes from the mystical cabalist idea that each mortal contains within him a spark of the divine. In prayer, Loew was instructed to build a man out of mud, to walk around it several times, and then place the unknown name of God (the shem) in its mouth. The Golem thus created is a rather humorous, slapstick creature who nonetheless appears at times of crisis to save the Jews from danger. He did not, alas, make an appearance when Hitler's Gestapo came to town.

After the war, Czech arts fared no better under the strict Social Realist doctrine of Communism. In the Sixties, this seemed to loosen a bit; art and optimism swept Prague, culminating in the student revolt of Prague Spring in '68. Then Soviet tanks rolled into the city, and all Prague watched in horror as hundreds of unarmed people were shot, effectively crushing the resistance and the spirits of a whole generation. Another two decades of Communism passed before the Czech people revolted again. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Prague students confronted baton-wielding police on the streets of New Town. The televised confrontation, showing the brutality of the police against students armed only with candles and flowers, shook the Czech population to the core, and a million people took to the streets to demand the government's resignation. This extraordinary peaceful uprising, known as The Velvet Revolution, toppled the old Communist regime, and in less than two months playwright Vaclav Havel was elected to the presidency.

Since then, Czech and Slovakia have formed two separate nations. Prague has opened its doors to the West, and called home its many exiles. The city's beauty, mystique, and cheap rents have attracted a large English-speaking community, many of them writers, artists and filmmakers hoping to find, or recreate, the "cafe life" of Europe between the wars. At sidewalk cafes and in coffee bars one sees many young faces these days and hears many different languages spoken. Some Czechs are delighted with this new infusion of young energy, others are dismayed by the tourist invasion. But despite the crowds in Old Town Square and around the other tourist attractions, the real life of Prague goes in the back streets of the city -- in the casual and unmarked beer halls which one discovers only with the aid of Czech friends, in the art studios, theaters and jazz clubs tucked away on unlikely streets, where the Czechs exercise their hard-won right to gather, to argue, and to create. In recent years, Hollywood in particular has discovered the charms of Eastern Europe, with its economical labor pool and a wealth of exotic locations from castles to cities to countryside. My friend's film, *Pinocchio*, has been shot in Prague's back streets, on its rooftops, in a quarry, and in a small Czech village.

Prague is a place where the old and the new, the realistic and surrealistic, have come together in a singular manner -- in its arts, its streets, its politics, its way of life, and its stories. This capital city is contemporary, vital and full of promise for the future; yet ancient blood still stains the stones and ancient ghosts still haunt the

roads: the innocent women burned as witches, the religious martyrs thrown from the towers, the men and women executed for the wrong faith, the wrong name, the wrong ideas. I have never been in a place where so much history seems crowded together, packed into the few square miles overlooked by old Prague Castle.

On my last night in Prague, I pass through the city riding on the back of my friend's motorcycle, the sleek machine passing over the old cobblestones, slippery with rain. The old and the new flash past us as we speed across the river and down the streets of Mala Strana. The ghosts of the past are still whispering their tales: folk tales, fairy tale, history and legend. But I'm back in the modern world now. I'm moving too fast to listen.

There is no place in the world like Prague!