

# Lessons in Democracy: A Prague Education

By Erica Torre

*Ivana, a new teacher for the Anglo-American University in Prague, Czech Republic, was busy preparing for her first day of teaching. Ivana mulled over her selected teaching material for the day, reminding herself how important educational freedom was since her own childhood education never allowed for free learning and individual thinking. She admired the variety of resources that lay open in front of her, covering topics that had never been permitted in her school and she organized her lesson as students began to walk in the room and take seats. As the last student sat down, Ivana marveled at the cultural diversity within the classroom. When she had attended university, students were never permitted the opportunity of studying abroad. Ivana stood at the front of the room and smiled at how much revolutionary and innovative change she had witnessed in her short life. How different this from her own days as a student in school. She no longer had to restrict herself to the prepared book readings that had been assigned and did not worry about recalling the passionate lessons on Marxism taught and heavily enforced by her teachers. Gone was the red kerchief tied around her neck as a required part of her school dress code, and an ever present reminder of Communist allegiance.*

*A quick look at the clock on the wall jolted Ivana back from her own past to the students who eagerly sat before her. She brought her thoughts to a close and began to teach the day's lesson.*

“Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rests the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development.” Those words,

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spoken by former Secretary-General of the United Nations, reveal the catalyst behind the non-violent conversion of power, known as the Velvet Revolution, which occurred in what was once known as Czechoslovakia, the current -day Czech Republic. The educational system in Czechoslovakia also underwent transformational changes in 1989 immediately after the success of the Velvet Revolution (Ritter 2006). In order to appreciate the plight of contemporary education in the Czech Republic it is crucial to explore its history through a Communist Era and its democratization in 1990.

Prior to its Communist Era, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a rich history and tradition in higher education throughout all of Europe. The distinguished and widely respected Charles University was established in Prague in 1348. The government of Czechoslovakia, recognizing that a disproportionate ethnic diversity existed within the nation, instituted eight years of compulsory education for its youth and as an effort to raise national literacy, diligently addressed those ethnic disparities by educating each minority in their native language. The country also addressed the increasing need for technical skills in the industrial labor force by offering expanded vocational education and instruction. The people of Czechoslovakia, both wealthy and impoverished, responded to comprehensive educational opportunities within their country by boarding their children in towns and cities to gain access to both vocational and higher education.

Totalitarian rule came to Czechoslovakia, from the years 1948 to 1989, and Communist ideals pervaded the lives of citizens and dominated all aspects of Czech society. Political decisions were prescribed by the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia became part of the Eastern Bloc and a member of the Warsaw Pact.

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Censorship was extensive during this period and literature and media were not exempt from suppression. Literature that did not conform to communist ideas was prohibited; although illegal and unauthorized texts, called *samizdat*, were produced and distributed through underground publishing houses. The possession of any *samizdat* held severe consequences, but the risk of punishment did not prevent self-expression and creative production. Media was strictly and solely controlled by the government and served as the pawn and puppet for the Communist regime. Television portrayed Communist propaganda and many magazines and journals were closed during normalization purges.

Communist ideology permeated the politically-based education system as well. Students learned material in rote manner and were strongly encouraged not to discuss relevant or controversial issues or form individual opinions. Students were also required to study subjects foundational to communist principles, such as Marxism and Leninism. Access to higher education was permitted, but applicants were accepted only if they came from working class backgrounds, avowed support to and belief in the Communist authority and administration, and participated in youth organizations dedicated to Communist activity. Ilja Bernasova, a student during the Communist Era, reflected upon her experiences of being unable to continue to higher education after graduating high school with a degree in foreign trade because she refused to join the Communist Party and her parents were not members either (Bernasova 2013).

Czech citizens suffered under the severe conditions of communism, but on November 17, 1989, students in Prague, participating in International Students' Day, began a demonstration that brought police riot suppression against the single-party government. That protest was the first of several popular demonstrations with protestors growing to such large numbers that the entire top

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leadership of the Communist Party resigned. On November 28, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia announced it would surrender power and dismantle the single-party state. After the revolution in 1989, the Czechoslovakian parliament made the decision to split the nation into two states and democracy once again resounded (Year 1989 2013).

The democratization of education began in 1990 and has been undergoing its own evolution since that time. Today, education in the Czech Republic is free and compulsory system for all children from ages 6 through 15. There are four degrees: (1) preschools for ages two to five, (2) mandatory elementary for ages six to fifteen, (3) high schools, colleges and training colleges and (4) universities (Polisenska 2013). While parents do not have to pay for education, some of the preschools do require a cost for early attendance, but students attend the last year before their entrance to elementary school free of charge.

The structure of the elementary school is similar to our own system here in the United States. There are nine grades that are divided into two components. The first component is referred to as primary school and usually consists of grades 1-5. The second component, grades 6-9, is referred to as secondary school. In both rural and populous areas, both stages of school are usually offered in one location, but occasionally only one stage is offered and the older students must travel to a nearby location to complete their second stage (Polisenska 2013). Some elementary level buildings, called grammar schools or gymnasiums, are designated as university bound schools, where students who attend grades 6-13 are likely to attend a university after their grammar school completion.

The school year is also similar to our own. School in the Czech Republic generally begins on the first weekday of September and ends on the last weekday of June (Embassy of the

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Czech Republic, n.d.). The academic year is divided into two semesters, with the first semester running from September through January, and the second running from February through June. Students must take exams at the end of each semester and there is often a one-day break between semesters. School is suspended for certain holidays, one every May 8, being the celebration of the Day of Liberation from Nazism. There are also autumn holidays including one for Independence Day, one week spring holidays, one to two week Christmas or winter holidays, a Labour Day, three days of Easter celebration – Green Thursday, Big Friday, and Easter Monday. Students in the Czech Republic also enjoy a summer vacation, coinciding with our own summer vacation. Schools have the autonomy to announce their holiday and break schedule and those schedules may vary slightly from school to school (School Holidays Europe, n.d.).

Higher education in the Czech Republic consists of public universities, state police and state military universities, and private universities. There has been ongoing debate in the Czech Republic about paying fees for attending universities, but currently study at public universities is unlimited and free. Though education is free, parents with students in universities are expected to pay for textbooks, basic equipment, and food if their child eats in a school cafeteria. Health insurance is also a state-funded expense until the child is twenty-six years old. In the event that a student continues to pursue an education after age twenty-six, the state would not pay for health insurance coverage and would not be able to receive the student status distinction from social services.

Interestingly, the quality of education in public and state universities in the Czech Republic is held in much higher regard than an education received in a private university. Private university tuition ranges from \$2600 to \$13,000 per year depending on the type of study

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program a student selects to study, but private universities have been plagued by many scandals that cast doubt on both their quality and integrity (Polisenska, 2013).

The general educational system in the Czech Republic seeks inclusion for all students, including those who are mentally disabled or socially maladjusted. However, one minority segment of the Czech population, the Roma, often finds itself discriminated against. In most English speaking countries, the Roma would be commonly known as the Gypsies. The Roma that live within the Czech Republic may be one of five basic groups: Slovak Roma, Czech Roma, Hungarian Roma, Vlax Roma and Sinti, with most of the Roma in the Czech Republic today being Slovak Roma (Czech Radio, 2000).

The topic of the Roma proves to be both a sensitive and controversial subject for Czech citizens. Those in the media are more likely to acknowledge their presence and abilities, although the common Czech citizen may either refuse to speak of them or speak disparagingly about the ethnic group. The ethnic Roma children attend school less regularly and disproportionately attend special schools for students with mental or emotional disabilities, even though they may not possess those disabilities.

The Czech Republic may not have worked all of the difficulties in incorporating democracy in their educational system. Milada Polisenska, Provost of the Anglo-American University in Prague, refers to one concern she has for the future of education: "My main concern at this moment is how the Tertiary Education Act will be. The current is in force from 1998, which allowed the private universities to be established as accredited institutions. Since several years, the new Act is in preparation to respond to the new needs of the educational system. The work is not easy; there were already several ministers of education during this time.

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Now, again, we have a government in demise. The stipulations of the new Act will be very important.”

Additionally, journalist Iva Skochova, voiced her concerns over the new curriculum being taught in the Czech Republic. According to Iva, in previous times, fact-based knowledge was strictly taught to students and individual thinking was not encouraged. Now, individualized thinking has become more of a focus and in the beginning years of school, primarily in grades 1-9, there is less of a focus on this fact-based knowledge. Iva fears that this growth in individual thinking will lack a necessary and essentially imperative foundation. Iva emphasized that in order to be a problem solver, one must be in command of certain facts gained through education.

I was privileged to have spent two short weeks in the Czech Republic. While interviewing students, I was moved to hear and consider the impact that democracy had in their lives. For some it meant the freedom of traveling abroad to study in other countries; whether it was to receive brief insight into the life of another culture, or to study in another country whose education system allowed for more flexibility and variability. For others, it meant that creative expression was encouraged and valued and the mind was nourished with ideas and inspiration.

I discovered organizations like the Prague Freedom Foundation and Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty whose mission is to bring free media to countries, a foreign concept to those under authoritarian control. Many do not recognize the importance of free media or appreciate the possibilities and opportunities it presents. I was moved and motivated by the partnerships with universities in other countries that Anglo-American University is now able to make under the freedom that democracy affords.

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It was through my meetings with various individuals and organizations that I truly came to appreciate not only the great democratic system we have in the United States, but also the emergence and evolution of democracy in the Czech nation.

I had the opportunity to ask Ohio Senator Keith Faber, Senate President, a simple question: *Do you feel that democracy enhances or inhibits education of the individual?* Senator Faber's response illustrates exactly how fundamental the principles of democracy are to each individual. Senator Faber said, "The success of democracy and education go hand in hand. In order for democracy to thrive, you must have an educated populace. In a democratic education system, students have the ability to question freely when developing their critical thinking skills. It is in these critical thinking skills where our students become problem solvers and productive members of civil society. Not only have some of the greatest inventors and problem solvers come from a free and democratic American education system, but we have also created some of the finest civic institutions and organizations the world has ever known."

Our world must become more global, and through the development of more international partnerships and relationships we can create a globalized nation. The Czech Republic has endured a journey through the barren lands communism and found its emancipation in democracy where freedom of expression and liberty for the individual is cherished. Kofi Annan observed, "Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family." These are the lessons I, too, have learned.



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