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AN ALCOHOLIC NATION

[DOES THE CZECH REPUBLIC
HAVE A COLLECTIVE DRINKING
PROBLEM?]

The Good Soldier Švejk (The protagonist of Czech author Jaroslav Hašek's novel) once famously noted that any government that raises the price of beer is destined to collapse within one year. It is a superstition that even totalitarian governments dared not forget. Today's Czech authorities appear to be no different.

In November 2006, both the Czech Republic and Germany blocked the passage of a proposed 31% increase in the minimum EU duty on beer and spirits. This would have added 1 cent to the price of a half liter (17 fluid ounces) of beer. According to Vlastimil Tlustý, the current Czech Finance Minister speaking in Brussels at a press conference on 28th November 2006, "We Czechs believe that

beer is a part of food. We cannot agree that such a typical Czech product be put at a disadvantage." Such strong sentiments have deep roots in the Czech Republic. To what extent is alcohol a cultural symbol of the Czech people, and is such a state of affairs worrying – or even dangerous?

A Long History

When a foreigner thinks of the Czech Republic, it is likely that one of the first things to come to mind is beer – and for good reason. According to the UK-based Society for the Study of Addiction, in 2003, Czechs drank an average of 162 liters of beer per person, more than any other nation on earth. That's a bottle of beer for every man, woman, and child in the Czech lands every day. The only part

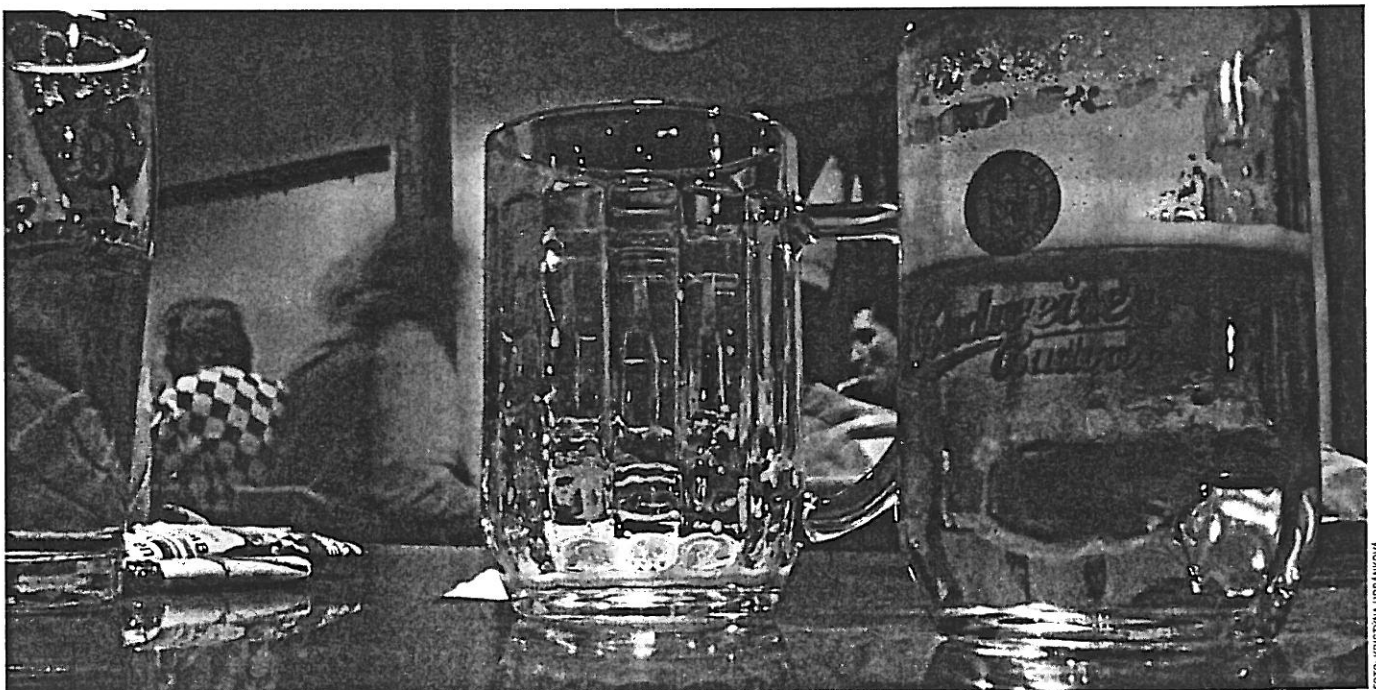
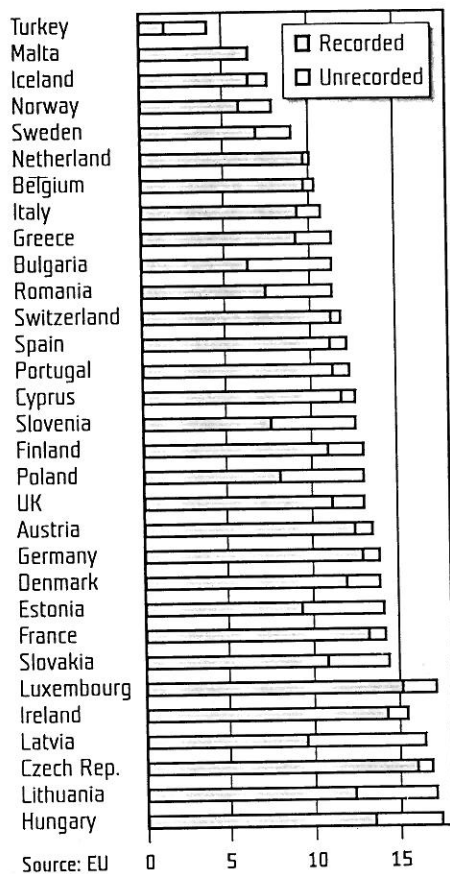


FOTO: KRISTYNA URBANKOVA

Adult alcohol consumption
(litres per year, per person 15+)



of the world that even competes with such beer consumption is neighboring Bavaria in Germany.

Such levels of consumption are by no means a recent trend. Beer has been part of Czech history for almost 1,000 years. Hops were first cultivated as early as 859 AD and exported in 903 AD. The first Czech brewery was built at Čerhenice in 1118AD. During the 13th century, the Pope revoked a ban on brewing beer – allegedly due to pressure from King Wenceslas II (King of Bohemia and Poland 1271-1305) – allowing the expansion of the industry. Indeed, Bohemian hops were so highly valued that Wenceslas ordered the death penalty for anyone caught exporting the cuttings to grow new plants. By the early 16th century, the beer industry contributed to as much as 87% of the total municipal income to city coffers. Budweis and Pilsner beers were born during this time period, and remain popular, globally recognized names to this day. During the nationalist awakening of the 19th century, the industry slowed for a while and then boomed again.

Nationalist Awakening and the Pub

According to sociologist and researcher Jiří Vinopal's paper *Beer Patriotism in the Czech Republic*, besides from beer, the pub itself was always a crucial part of Czech culture. He writes "The significance of beer and pubs in modern Czech society certainly originates from their long-lasting history. The depth of their relationship arises from their interconnection throughout the years of common development. We cannot focus on the history of the beer cult in the Czech lands without paying attention to the development of pubs." As early as the 14th and 15th centuries, the tavern was where people gathered to hear the news and stories of the day. The manuscript *Podkoní a žák* ("the Groom and the Scholar") written at the end of the 14th century notes, "*Ktož do krčmy chodí, častokrát se jemu někaké a k tomu noviny take*": "Who goes to the pub often learns various stories and news."

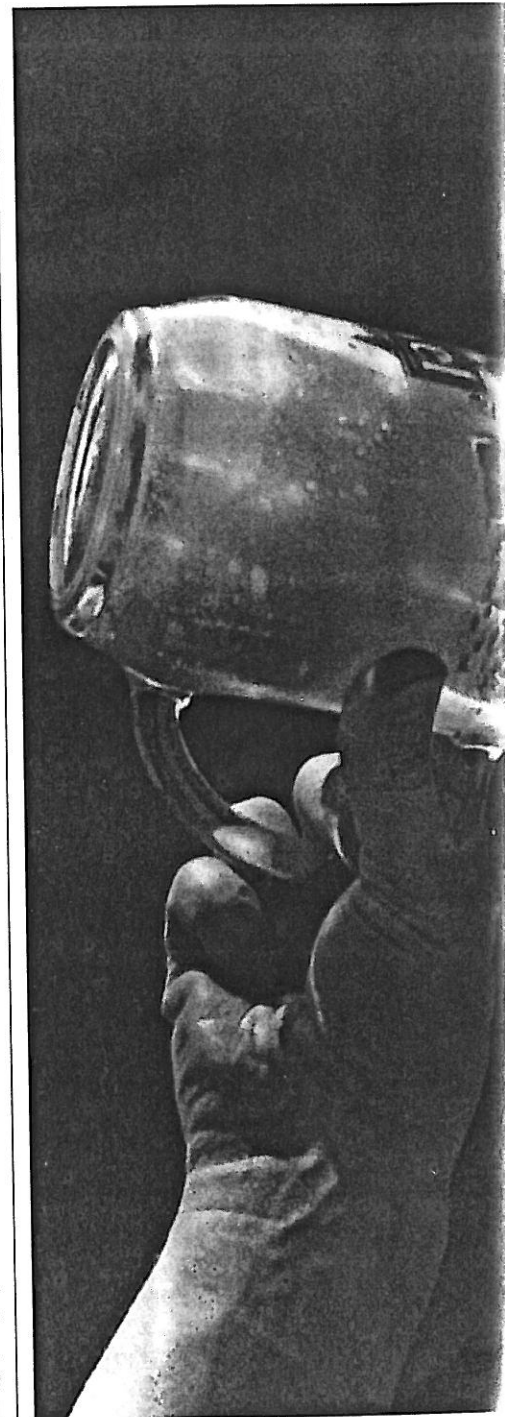
By the 19th century, the pub had become an essential part of the Czech national revival, with both nationalists and revivalists holding meetings at pubs across the country. An important reason for this was that the pub had become a key place where people could talk in Czech (the primary language in the Austrian Empire was German). Thus strong nationalistic sentiments became inextricably connected with beer, wine, *slivovice* (plum brandy) and many other beverages. Of all these, beer clearly remained the dominant drink of choice. A nineteenth-century patriotic songbook of the Czech gymnastic organisation Sokol contains this song by František Urbánek praising the Czech national drink:

"Our famous forefathers, good old Czechs, loved good beer... We are also Czechs, the grandsons of our famous grandfathers. We respect their deeds and honor their drinks. This way, we honor our grandfathers in graves. Let us drink beer, let us praise beer and show that we are their grandsons; that we too are Czechs!"

Drowning the Sorrow

Following the Communist takeover in 1948, alcohol assumed a very different role in Czech society. Once a symbol of national pride, alcohol soon became a tonic to drown out the economic and

spiritual malaise of a nation. Communist economic policies often effectively meant that people were paid to sit around doing nothing, which invariably translated into large numbers of productive people spending day after day in the pub, drinking heavily. To an extent, these policies also destroyed people's work ethic: with motivation irrelevant and good work essentially pointless, sitting in a pub became both a subconscious protest and a symptom of a failing system. One son of a pig herder who worked on the com-



munal farms during communist times explained his father's daily 10am shot of *slivovice* this way: "Well, I guess it is just a tradition. During communism work was not a serious thing, you had to do it but not well, so people drank all day. I guess this tradition has not died." Alcohol remained cheap, and in a regime where free speech was denied, the hopes of a nation were again (as with the nationalist movement) often condemned to futile chatter in pubs across the country. Meanwhile, the country's breweries suf-

fered from a lack of investment, and by the 1989 Velvet Revolution, many were in poor condition.

CULTURE OF SYMPTOM?

In today's post-communist environment, beer is still considered the drink of choice for many Czechs, who continue to consume it at increasingly higher levels. The pub has remained a key place for Czechs to gather after work. Even former President Václav Havel noted the significance of the beer and pub culture, stating in 1995, "I suppose that drinking beer in pubs is a good influence on the behavior of Czech society, because beer contains less alcohol than for example wine, vodka or whisky, and therefore people's political chat in pubs is less crazy." The political chat may be less crazy, but the other dangers involved in excessive drinking remain.

Unlike Britain, which has struggled with the problems of binge drinking (believed by many to be a reaction to licensing laws which, until recently, stipulated that public drinking must end at 11pm) the Czechs cannot be described as excessive binge drinkers. Rather, the sum total of alcohol consumption provides a worrying statistic for many health experts. A 2003 report by the Czech Statistical Office analyzing the Czech adult population's drinking habits noted that 33.4% of men and 14.1% of women consume 20 grams of alcohol daily and/or 75 grams at a single session in a month. Both are considered hazardous patterns of alcohol use. The situation may actually be considerably worse, as under-18's were not included in these figures. By some estimates, the Czech Republic has a high proportion of underage drinkers and attitudes to underage drinking remain extremely liberal in the Czech Republic: many parents take the view that if a fifteen-year-old gets seriously drunk several times, he or she will learn to drink responsibly thereafter. Whether or not this is a good strategy is debatable.

According to Luděk Kubicka of the Prague Psychiatric Center, the increase in the amount of pure alcohol consumed in the Czech Republic per year (from 4 liters in 1949 to 9 liters in 1989) continues to grow at an alarming rate. It currently stands at 11 liters per person per year. The World Health Organization considers an average per capita consumption

equivalent to 8 liters of pure alcohol per year to be a sign of a country with a dangerous level of alcohol consumption. It is well known that excessive alcohol consumption can lead to heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, liver dysfunction, and many other health problems, which are the leading causes of death in Czech Republic (and other nations as well). According to the Human Development Index, life expectancy in the Czech Republic is, on average, 3 years shorter than that elsewhere in the European Union. Not only do people live for a shorter amount of time, but medical expenses for treating the effects of excessive drinking are paid for by government-funded obligatory health insurance.

FEMALE DRINKING ON THE RISE

The post-communist consumerist society has brought about many changes in attitudes towards alcohol, particularly among women. Over the past ten years, severe alcoholism among women has grown faster than among men. According to the Prague Psychiatric Center, the number of women being treated for delirium tremens (fits caused by sudden abstinence from alcohol) has doubled since the mid-1990s, while the number of men suffering from the same symptoms has risen by a third. In a study entitled "*Prague Women's Drinking Before and After the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989; a Longitudinal Study*" by Czech researchers Luděk Kubicka, Ladislav Csémy and Jiří Kozeny, it was noted that "the proportion of heavier drinkers (with average daily consumption over 20g alcohol) increased from 7.2% to 14.0%." Most of this rise can be attributed to the increased amount of beer consumed per occasion, rather than an increase in the number of occasions.

However, although the figures for female alcohol consumption are rocketing, male levels of consumption have not changed significantly from the projected level. Also notable in this study was the greater tolerance of drunkenness. The findings suggest that women have been drinking more, and that they consider it acceptable to do so. Why this change in women? According to Dr. Václav Dvořák, the head physician for addiction treatment at Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital, "The shift in the 90s brought so many new responsibilities, and some

FOTO: KRISTYNA URBÁNKOVÁ

people found it difficult to cope. Under the communist regime, you could always find a way to blame personal failure on the system. That's no longer possible."

Doesn't everybody like to drink?

Many countries have problems with alcohol consumption. It is estimated that, Europe-wide, 15 million people regularly consume harmful levels of alcohol. There are around 195,000 alcohol-related deaths per year, and alcohol is responsible for a quarter of deaths amongst males aged 15-29. The Czech Republic lies somewhere between the EU average and the Russian example (where, according to a study by the Medical Council on Alcoholism, thousands of people die prematurely each year as a result excessive vodka consumption). According to heartstats.org, compared with Western Europe, Czechs' drinking habits are getting worse. Between 1992 and 2001, lev-

els of alcohol consumption fell in Italy, Germany and France by 20%, 15% and 13% respectively – yet in the Czech Republic, consumption increased.

Despite a blurred boundary between cultural and pathological drinking, certain attitudes do seem to be shifting, albeit gradually. To a foreigner, sober drivers in the Czech Republic seem bad at best: the country is also notorious for drunk driving. In the past, Czech police were often powerless to convict drunk drivers caught behind the wheel, and it took repeated infractions or a very serious accident, to bring offenders to court. In July 2006, a law was passed whereby anyone caught driving with a blood alcohol level above 0.8% concentration could be convicted and face harsh penalties. Under the new law, police officers can take away licenses on the spot for drunk driving – a stark contrast to previous regulations, under which drivers would receive a fine and walk away with license

in hand. The law has had a dramatic effect on fatalities, bringing them to their lowest level in over 35 years.

According to Luděk Kubicka (co-author of the aforementioned study), while 93% of Czechs regard beer as the national drink and 90% regard it as something to be proud of abroad, 67% think excessive beer drinking is a demerit of the inhabitants of the Czech Republic. Astonishingly, 63% of Czechs think that the national attitude towards beer is "excessive" – a fact that would have Švejka's character rolling in his grave. Beer may arguably form an integral and essential part of Czech culture, yet statistics show that Czechs may have to compromise this attitude in the future, as the social and health issues associated with it are reaching crisis point. ■

This article was written as part of the New Presence internship program with New York University, Prague

META o.s. - Sdružení pro příležitosti mladých migrantů je nevládní nezisková organizace, jejímž posláním je podporovat osobní rozvoj mladých cizinců, a to v oblasti vzdělávání, které považujeme za jednu z podmínek úspěšné integrace do společnosti. Svou činností chceme přispět k oboustranně přínosnému a bezkonfliktnímu soužití cizinců a většinové společnosti.

1. září 2006 zahájilo sdružení META činnost Poradenského a informačního centra pro mladé migranty (PIC).

Komu jsou služby centra určené?

cizincům

ve věku 15 až 30 let, pobývajícím dlouhodobě v Praze, bez rozdílu typu pobytu.

rodičům mladých cizinců,

kteří řeší problémy spojené se vzděláváním svého dítěte.

Nabízíme pomoc při:

- výběru a kontaktování školy
- přípravě na přijímací řízení
- uznání rovnocennosti dokladů o předchozím studiu
- seznamování se s prostředím školy, se studijními povinnostmi a jejich plněním
- řešení problémů spojených se samotným studiem
- řešení problémů s ubytováním, školním
- vyhledání vhodného doplňkového či rekvalifikačního kurzu
- zprostředkování a zabezpečení pomoci s hlídáním dětí po dobu účasti na kurzu

Jen dýně roste vleže.

Staňte se dobrovolníkem!

Připojte se k nám a pomozte nám podporovat mladé cizince při jejich vzdělávání!

META - Association for Opportunities for Young Migrants is a non-governmental non-profit organization. Its principal aim is to support the self development of young migrants, mostly in the field of education, which we consider to be one of the conditions necessary for their successful integration. Thus we want to contribute to mutually enriching co-existence between the immigrants and society at large. On September 1st 2006, META has opened a Counseling and Information Center for Young Migrants.

Who can use the service of our center?

foreigners between the ages of 15 and 30 years, living in Prague, with all kinds of visa.

parents of young foreigners who need to solve problems related to the education of their child.

We offer help with:

- choosing and contacting a suitable school
- preparation for entrance exams
- managing validation of certificates and documents from previous education
- orientation in the new school environment
- solving school difficulties
- solving difficulties associated with accommodation, scholarship
- finding an appropriate solution such as alternative forms of study, retraining schemes etc.
- managing day-care while parents attend classes/courses

**Only a pumpkin grows lying.
Become a volunteer!**

Join us to support young foreigners in their education!



Poradenské a informační centrum pro mladé migranty

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Tento projekt byl podpořen z prostředků Evropského sociálního fondu, státního rozpočtu ČR a rozpočtu hl. m. Prahy.

