
Gott, Karel



Take Tom Jones and mix him with Enrico Caruso, the Italian tenor-cum-castrato singer. Then add tons of pathetic love songs, faked sex appeal and musical kleptomania focusing on Western hits from the 1970s. Spice it up with a political flexibility rare even for **Central European** standards and a personal status close to that of the Pope. What do you get? Karel Gott. Czech pop music's most mega-super, long-lasting and brightest star.

As his very name (which is not faked!) indicates, Gott was predestined to become a god from his birth in 1939.

His unique career as a singer started in the early 1960s when Gott still was a pimply electrician's apprentice at Prague's ČKD engineering factory. After surprisingly winning several talent competitions, he made an astonishing breakthrough at the legendary Semafor Theatre in 1963. Virtually overnight, an unknown, 24-year-old electrician from Plzeň had become Czechoslovakia's leading pop star, who later also performed in some of Czech cinema's most popular films ever.

So far, so good – nobody has ever disputed Gott's talents or his hard work, and in the 1960s, he definitely deserved the people's admiration, which reached a peak during the Prague Spring's euphoria (see: **Communism**).

A bit more disputed, though, is his behaviour after Czechoslovakia was invaded, in 1968, and the **Russian**-backed Husák regime launched its neo-Stalinist *normalization*. Gott's first reaction was to emigrate, but after a few months in German exile, he returned to the mother country, where he energetically pursued his career further. After all, life went on for bus-drivers, plumbers and doctors, so why shouldn't it also go on for pop stars?

The price Gott paid for his success, however, was a very cosy relationship with the Bolsheviks. Too cosy, lots of critics would say. When the Husák regime, in 1977, launched its rabid attack on **Charter 77** in the

form of the infamous Anti-Charter petition that cried for the protection of “socialist law and order”, Karel Gott was the very man for the job of reading the proclamation when it was broadcast live on TV. As expected, Gott was soon thereafter awarded with the state title “National Artist”, the Communist equivalent of a knighthood from the Queen, and the official media presented photos of a pop star who smiled so sweetly at Comrade President that one almost got the impression that the two of them were registered partners.

There seems to have existed an unwritten contract between Karel Gott and the communist regime. Its essence can be described as follows: by churning out millions of records with “optimistic” and “positive” music, the pop star helped to cement the shameful lie that the neo-Stalinist comrades were normal rulers just as in any other normal country. The communists, for their part, could finally boast a pop star with the same reputation and calibre as those in the West, from where he, without any inhibitions, “borrowed” many of his biggest hits.

Thanks to this pragmatic symbiosis, Karel Gott managed to defend his position as the very icon of Czechoslovak pop culture for an incredible period of 30 years. Not that people seemed to mind. In a society as stagnant as Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s, time went so slowly that one could get the impression that it almost had stopped.

The truly amazing thing, however, is that Karel Gott managed to survive the **Velvet Revolution**. More than that, on Wenceslas Square in November 1989, thousands of Czechs heard him sing the National anthem together with artists who had been banned for almost 20 years. Karel the collaboratorist had suddenly been transformed into Karel the convinced democrat! Those who found this miracle a bit too stiff were quickly silenced. The new democratic leaders were also eager to use the pop-star's popularity to promote national unity and, not to be forgotten, their own political goals.

So, instead of applying for retirement together with his Bolshevik protectors, Karel Gott is still, 40 years after his breakthrough, the unrivalled king of Czech pop music.

True, neither dyed hair, an imposing number of face-lifts, nor an army of young mistresses can hide the fact that the Maestro, Elvis Presley's junior by only four years, is getting older. And even though his repertoire has been slightly refreshed (his former *svazácko-vekslácké hity* – tunes that were politically correct enough to please the regime, but rough enough to please the baddies from the black money market – have been replaced by a Tom Jones-like sound), music critics still accuse him of degenerating common people's taste.

Yet no show at the immensely popular **TV Nova**, no gala-concert or national **beauty contest** is imaginable without Karel Gott's participation. Otherwise serious newspapers present interviews with him every other week, and the pop star is happy to demonstrate his newly-discovered talents as painter and political commentator ("Jews and freemasons are ruling the world").

Logically, when Maestro Gott some years ago, after an especially cruel critic had compared him to "a zombie who causes acute depression to innocent radio listeners", decided to stop performing in protest, the situation was considered so grave that the Minister of Culture himself went to console the deeply insulted star.

Could this have happened in another country? Hardly. Both Tom Jones and Julio Iglesias have, admittedly, accomplished a kind of comeback, but neither of them would be voted their countries' most popular singer, as Gott is almost every year. Old stars such as Uriah Heep or Alla Pugachova are still worshipped by fans in their home countries, but most people consider them to be marginal acts or living fossils. So what's the explanation for Karel Gott's indestructible popularity?

Clever marketing undoubtedly plays an important role. Take, for instance, Maestro Karel's habit of kicking out a blond, 19-year-old mistress a couple of weeks before his latest CD is to be launched. Usually, the media instantly swallow the bait, with the result that the often-negative reviews of his mediocre music are completely drowned in the bombastic gossip about his sexual escapades. What's more, it's no secret that Gott is



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closely connected to the small group of people who have run the Czech music business for the last 35 years (he has himself been called the "Gott-father"). As any other local businessman, Gott takes the advantage of a combination of lowbrow media and an un-transparent business climate (see: **Balkans; Personal Connections**).

The ultimate explanation, however, of the Czechs' worshipping of Gott might lie in the tendency to prefer the familiar and safe to the unknown and challenging (see: **National Identity; Ocean, Absence of**). This goes double at times when the nation is experiencing large and far-reaching changes. However provincial and musically outdated, Karel Gott has become one of the few fixed and unalterable points the common Czech can cling to in a crazy world.

Besides that, during the communist regime, he made the same humiliating compromises as most other people, but he has still sold more than

30 million records and CD's during his 40-year career. Can a former electrician in any other country beat that?

Havel, Václav



As is customary for internationally famous and admired persons hailed from smaller countries, Václav Havel arouses far more controversy at home than abroad.

True, most Czechs will agree that he was uncommonly brave during the communist era, and they were proud that their president was received with fanfares and standing ovations all over the world during the 13 turbulent years that followed the **Velvet Revolution**. Yet there are plenty of people who simply can't hide the fact that they are overjoyed that he has finally left the Prague Castle.

Czechs can be sorted into roughly four groups, according to their views on the ex-president.

Probably the largest and definitely the least vocal group is comprised of all those ordinary people who deeply respect Havel and don't question anything he has ever done or said (a majority of them are women, in whom the physically extremely clumsy Havel apparently aroused a strong maternal instinct). Here, of course, you also find liberals and **Charter 77** fellows who share the former president's political views on human rights, consideration for the environment and the importance of non-materialistic values. Havel's opponents often use the sarcastic nickname "Brotherhood of Love and Truth" when speaking about this group.

Then there is a closely related group of Havel-fans, many of them artists, actors or people working in the culture sector, who basically agree with him but don't hesitate to criticise him for various shortcomings.

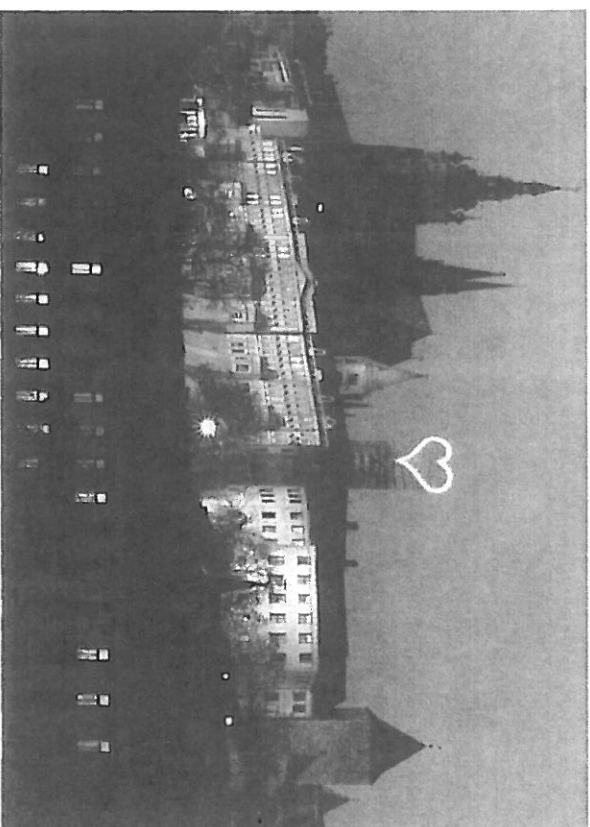


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Some of his former friends got childishly offended when their old pal "Vašek" didn't have time to see them any longer, while others (once again, mainly women) were outraged that he married his mistress, the actress Dagmar Veškrnová (17 years his junior) less than one year after his first wife, the widely admired Olga Havlová, died from cancer in 1997. Another frequent complaint from Havel-fans is that "he could have done more" to prevent the break-up of Czechoslovakia. However, exactly what he should have done when both the Czech and the **Slovak** leadership had decided to divorce is not that clear.

The Havel-bashers can also be divided into two major groups (those in between don't seem to exist).

The less important group consists of quite ordinary people who just are fed up with what they perceive as "Havel's constant moralizing" against consumerism, cheap architecture and widespread atheism. "A person who was born into wealth and has inherited millions hasn't any right to criticize us," their mantra goes. Havel's amnesty of thousands of

Yet Franz Josef has left one tradition that still characterizes the Czechs' daily life. One of Franz Josef's allegedly numerous virtues was his great diligence. Thus, in all the 68 years he ruled, the Emperor went to bed early (okay, often with his mistress), and – even more importantly – woke up and started working at an almost ungodly early hour.

Some pundits claim that the real reason was not diligence, but rather the Emperor's long-lasting problems with insomnia. Be this as it may, the consequence was inevitable: when Franz Josef was busily working at six o'clock in the morning, his staff and administration were also busily working at six o'clock. And when state bureaucrats all over the empire jumped out of bed before the sun rose, private industry, trade and transport couldn't be far behind. In short: the Austro-Hungarian empire must have been hell for all of us late sleepers.

Almost a century after Franz Josef was promoted to eternity, this awful tradition is still frightfully alive and kicking in the Czech Republic. In most hospitals, for instance, patients are woken up at six o'clock, even if the doctor's visit is scheduled only at nine. In schools, lessons start at eight o'clock, while at the universities, lectures might begin even earlier. Also, in many Czech factories, production starts at least one hour earlier than is common in Western and Northern Europe. The government of Vladimír Špidla, which was installed in 2002, took this perversion so literally that it started some of its meetings at six o'clock in the morning!

To be fair, this tradition certainly doesn't represent a serious problem, but it affects one, not insignificant, layer of the Czech society: **beer drinkers**. To give the millions of Czechs who spend the evening in a local *hospoda* a chance to sober up before work starts at six o'clock the next morning, most pubs mercifully close at ten o'clock in the evening – i.e., at a time when people in other parts of Europe have just started the evening.

So, next time you are being kicked out of your local *hospoda* just in the middle of a spirited discussion about everything from football to quantum physics, don't blame it on the poor innkeeper, but on His Imperial Highness Franz Josef!

Fridays



As you might have already noticed, the Czech Republic is not an Islamic country (see: **Religion**), and, therefore, Fridays should be an ordinary working day when business goes on as usual. However, anyone who has tried to sort out a problem at a public office in this country on a Friday afternoon has probably discovered that this day is not an ordinary day at all.

After noon on Friday, most Czech public offices tend to work with even bigger delays and troubles than earlier in the week. This, of course, is not a Czech speciality – public officials all over the Western world count down to the weekend. There are, however, few countries where the countdown is performed with greater fervency and matter of course than in the Czech Republic.

If you think this is a legacy of the former communist era, you're right. During the former regime, it was commonly acknowledged that those who didn't steal from their (state) employer stole from their families. In practise, this meant that everyone felt entitled to "borrow" bricks, machines, spare parts or whatever his or her company produced, for private use (by the way, how could this be deemed stealing, when everything belonged to the state, which equalled the people?) Subsequently, those who worked in public offices could, without greater pangs of conscience, snatch pens and pencils – but most of all time.

The private sector, which emerged after the **Velvet Revolution**, has put a more or less effective stop to this deep-rooted tradition. But the public sector, to put it mildly, has not been as successful. Czech state **bureaucracy** is almost as over-grown as it was under the communists. Symptomatically, some years ago, an elderly fellow was discovered in a dusty room at the Ministry of Interior, and nobody knew that he had been vegetating in the office for several decades.

When **Václav Klaus'** government started its fight against **bureaucracy** in the middle of the 1990s, its first step was to establish a committee



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(which, after all, doesn't seem all that illogical in the country of **Franz Kafka**). And still, the army of bureaucrats have lousy wages compared to the private sector, so who can blame them for compensating for a miserable salary by cutting out early on Fridays?

What's more, the Czechs have quite a good reason for starting the weekend early: Outside Scandinavia, there's probably no other European nation with more cottage- and cabin-owners than the Czech Republic. Some estimates suggest that there are 1.2 million of these holiday houses (see: **Munich Agreement**) and that every other Czech family has access to a second home in the countryside. During the communists, it was not uncommon for people to live out a kind of "inner exile" at their cabins, which were their private property. Therefore, all the physical efforts, money and time spent on maintenance were not wasted, because people were investing it in their own property.

Since the Czechs' passionate love of their country houses hasn't weakened much after the fall of **communism**, a **foreigner** is advised to take one necessary precaution: if you need to sort out an urgent matter in a public office, pray to God it's not Friday afternoon.

♦♦♦ Germans

„Fate has left us to clash and to co-operate with the Germans.” This is how František Palacký, the founder of history as a scientific discipline in **Bohemia** and one of the spiritual leaders of the nineteenth century Czech national revival once characterized the Czechs' relations with their great Western neighbour.

However contradictory and ambivalent this may sound, it's actually a very apt description. On the one hand, the Germans have played a totally irreplaceable part in the cultural and economic development of the Czech nation. On the other, no other country has caused the Czechs greater trauma.

Take a look at a map of **Central Europe**, and you'll immediately understand what Palacký had in mind. Today, the Czech Republic's border with Germany accounts for about 800 kilometres of its 2,300 kilometres of borders. But when you also remember that most of Polish Silesia until 1945 was a part of Germany (Prussia before 1918), and then recall that the Czechs' southern neighbours, the **Austrians**, also belong to the Germanic culture, you realize that the Czechs have formed a Slavonic wedge in German territory for almost a millennium.

As some Czech cynics prefer to depict the situation: “We are like the birds that sit in the crocodile's open jaws!” However wild this parallel might occur to you, it pinpoints some significant differences between the two nations.

Firstly, while the Germans are Central Europe's largest ethnic group and by far its largest economy, one of the basic ingredients in the Czechs' **national identity** is their self-perception as one of the continent's smaller nations. To use Biblical terms, this is a story about a David who for one thousand years has been living next door to Goliath, and who, at times, has problems with curbing his feeling of inferiority.

Sandals and Socks



If you see a photo from the most recent EU summit and wonder which of the politicians is the Czech representative, here's a clue: go for the guy who has paired his business suit with sandals and white socks.

This is, of course, a slight exaggeration (and maybe also a bad joke), but the fact is that the Czechs, partly because of the 41 years of communist isolation (see: **Ocean, Absence of**), and partly because they have made such a fetish out of *pohodlí* (comfort) have developed a dress code with a few rather extravagant components.

Probably the most widespread and frequent of these extravagances is Czech men's long-lasting love affair with the aforementioned sandals. As soon as you can sniff the vapour of spring in the air and the thermometer climbs to a few degrees above zero, practically any Czech male is capable of putting on sandals. And even more intriguing – the sandals are almost always combined with socks, preferably white.

A **foreigner** might argue that the weather is either so hot that you wear sandals on bare feet, or it's so cold that you wear socks and normal shoes. But that's not the Czech way of reasoning. The most die-hard sandal freaks will keep both sandals and socks on their feet nearly until Christmas, and for hordes of puzzled foreigners, the sandals have been elevated to a place alongside **beer** as the very icon of Czech culture.

It's hard to give a satisfactory explanation of Czech sandal frenzy. Perhaps it has political reasons – just as the Iranian Ayatollahs urge men not to wear Western neckties, the Bolsheviks discreetly filled stores with sandals because they represented the proletarian antipode of capitalist patent-leather shoes. Or maybe it's just an uncompromising war against foot sweat: although Czech men usually don't seem to mind sweat from other parts of the body. In any case, a foreigner should be prepared for the fact that the average Czech man regards sandals as completely ordinary shoes and may wear them on practically any occasion.

A special division within the Czech sandal army is formed by the *otužilci* (literally “hardy fellows”). These are often young and always very tough men who have hardened themselves (or at least pretend they have) against cold weather, and therefore wear nothing more than sandals, shorts and a t-shirt all year round.

The roots of the *otužilec* tradition go back to the nineteenth century **Sokol** movement, which promoted the ancient ideals of a sound (and patriotic Czech) soul in a sound body, and it was wholeheartedly endorsed by the Bolsheviks, who regarded the *otužilci* as Czech followers of the crazy **Russian** tradition of ice bathing. In the 1970s and 1980s the movement found a very visible “face” in František Venclovský, the first Czech swimmer to cross the English Channel. Notwithstanding all his toughening up, Venclovský unfortunately didn't get to be very old, but his fellow *otužilci* are still walking around in the middle of winter dressed in bermudas without attracting the slightest attention.

As one might expect, Czech women are far more clothes-conscious than men, and many of them miraculously managed to be fashionable even during the super-dull communist era (see: **Golden Hands**). Yet local streets and squares still offer a view now rare in Western Europe: hordes of women mincing along dressed in miniskirts so short and ultra-tight that they might be confused with bikinis. And just as white socks are the obligatory accessories to men's sandals, the mini-skirts are usually complemented with a half-transparent blouse, bleached hair, and black pumps.

“Aha! The Czech edition of Husler has just held an audition nearby,” a confused foreigner might think. But that reaction is strongly determined by the Western perception of **feminism**. In a Czech context, it's not only fully accepted that women show off their physical qualities, they are almost expected to do so! To be considered an object of men's (or women's, for that sake) sexual interest is not, as Western political correctness dictates, humiliating or discriminating, but downright desirable.

Thus, the super-sexy, mini-skirted ladies are ordinary women (well, at least most of them) on their way to ordinary jobs. True, not all of them are exceedingly tasteful, but there are certainly far worse elements of the

communist era's pop culture (see: **Gott, Karel**) that still are alive and kicking.

Some Czech peculiarities apply to both genders. One of them is the importance of wearing nightclothes. If you are to spend a night at somebody's house or cottage (see: **Fridays**) and don't want to give the impression that you are either an uncivilized primitive or a sexual deviant, be sure to bring pyjamas or a nightgown. During the weekend, when people are relaxing at home, both men and women often wear tracksuits. This is not because they are working out, but because the tracksuits make it more comfortable to drink beer and eat chips in front of the telly. They are also obligatory for inmates in Czech prisons.

Footwear represents the ultimate super-dangerous pitfall for a foreigner. If you visit a block of flats, you will often see several pairs of shoes lined up outside each flat. Contrary to Moslems, who are driven by religious considerations, the Czechs only take practical precautions not to smear their **Balkan**-inspired wall-to-wall carpets with all the niceties that flood local streets (see: **Dogs**). According to the sex researcher Radim Uzel, some men also take advantage of the fact that there is an alleged correspondence between shoe size and the length of the penis, and therefore place shoes twice their actual size outside, just to impress their female neighbours.

No matter what you think about the shoe/sexual organ link, if you are invited to a Czech home and your hosts urge you not to take off your sneakers, they are almost certainly expressing courtesy to their guest (see: **Communication**) and expecting you to say something like "Oh, that's alright", and then leave your shoes by the doorstep. If you don't, and march into their flat with your shoes on, you'll risk eternal damnation. Most Czech households have extra pairs of slippers, which guests are supposed to put on their feet during the visit.

And finally, when you travel by public transportation, go shopping, or just visit a restaurant, you may get a very palpable sniff of human bodies. Or, to put it plainly: many people, regardless of their gender, are proud to smell of sweat. Lots of those who don't smell are happy to

put up with the odour, and deodorants are still widely perceived as the privilege of **homosexuals** or social climbers. However, if you complain about the smell, you'll only make a fool of yourself. This leaves you with two options: either pretend not to notice the stench, or start smelling yourself!

◆ Scepticism

One of the main features of the alleged "Czech national character", which many people in this country are firmly convinced exists (see: **Golden Hands; National Identity**) is a strong inclination towards scepticism. For instance, when polls only months before the EU enlargement in May 2004 suggested that the Czechs were the least enthusiastic of all new member states, nobody was too surprised. "Jesus Christ, what else could you expect from Europe's biggest sceptics?" common wisdom calmly commented.

To assign certain personal character traits to an entire nation of 10.3 million individuals is certainly rubbish. And if the Czechs are so thoroughly sceptical, how is it that they are among the **world's** most fervent buyers of overpriced junk from tele-shops? If the word scepticism, however, is interpreted as somewhat cautious behaviour combined with doubt about the truth of noble ideals (see: **Religion**), then the number of Czech sceptics may really be higher than the Western European average.

Those who revel in the myth of Czech scepticism usually explain its existence by pointing to the country's turbulent history. From the disastrous **Battle of White Mountain** in 1620 to the **Munich Agreement** in 1938 to the Soviet invasion two decades later, radical changes have tended to be for the worse. Add forty years of **communism**, when people had very limited possibilities to influence their own lives, and you