



INVASION PRAGUE 1968 – Commentary by Josef Koudelka

Personally I think...there are lots of things that happen by chance, by accident... I wasn't taking photos of Prague 68 to get published. I never thought of publishing them... I wasn't a reporter...

Telephone rang; I got woken up. I think it must have been two in the morning.. I didn't want to believe... She says to me: "Josef...the Russians are here!" The first time, I hung up. I thought it was a joke. The third time, she says to me: "Josef...listen, I'm not kidding. Open the window." I opened the window and listened to the... off and on, maybe every two minutes, planes going over...

The Russians landed at the Prague airport but they were coming in from different borders too. They landed at the airport at two in the morning. Their aim was to take over the most important buildings in the town and arrest the government people, arrest the Communist party chiefs. They had already stopped the Czech radio for the night...but it started to work again early in the morning, asking people not to fight Russians, try to explain to them that it was all a mistake and a big misunderstanding. You know, at one moment people were saying : "But...they're coming...but then they will leave...because they'll see that there's no counter-revolution. If only Russians found armed people against them...but how can an army fight with people who have no weapons? That's not easy."

Personally I think I had incredible luck, being there straight away, at the beginning. And so I took advantage of the confusion. People were surprised, the soldiers were surprised.

The soldiers thought people were going to be happy that the Russians had arrived...that they had come to help the Czechs, to fight the counter-revolution...but there was no counter-revolution, no arms, there was only a crowd of young people, old ladies and old men who hated them...There was someone ... I think he was on his knees in front of an armoured car.

He said, "I'm a Communist, like you, why are you here?"

It was very emotional...

Of course I talked with the Russians...I made friends there... it was weird. I felt no hatred towards them. They were young men like me. I knew they weren't responsible for this. For me it was a tragedy. Tragedy was that I lived under the same system as they did, and what happened to them could happen to me one day. I, too, might find myself in an armoured vehicle somewhere in Budapest or Warsaw.

If things had been normal, I would have invited them to have a beer with me. And people were sorry for them because...the guys had nothing to eat, afterwards. It was a mixture of things... It was everything. It was all mixed up. You could get yourself killed, but it was a big party as well.

How many times did I cross Wenceslas Square in Russian a tank... Yes... But of course, afterwards, people told me: "I saw you, I thought you were going to be killed any minute..."

I wasn't thinking about that at the time...

Obviously I took advantage ... It was great! For a photographer it was great! Everywhere you turned, everywhere you looked, there was something going on...

Of course, later, it got complicated with the Russians... Because they smashed the camera, they fired from behind. But, as for photos, it was just so easy. Wherever you looked there was a picture. I have... two photos which I consider my best photos...one next to the other on my contact sheet. Maybe it was a few seconds...maybe it was a few minutes... it has never happened again in my life.

What happened was so powerful that it was bigger than me. I think most people who were there felt this way. There were no Czech collaborators, but even so ... Everything had been planned ahead of time by the Russians. They had people's addresses, government people, important people from the Czech Communist party...they had cars and they went out looking for people to arrest. Someone said we'll wipe out all the addresses, and the names of their streets... It was signposted...Moscow...1800 kilometres...something like that...

Years later, I was in Russia, I walked into a village and someone said to me: "Oh, there's

someone here who was in Czechoslovakia...he went there to liberate you..."

I go see the guy...

He says to me, "Yeah, I was there in 68 to help you to liberate you!"

I say, "Liberation 68? Your father liberated us when he was there in 1945, not you."

And I say, "I was there, but it was different. I saw people get killed."

He says to me, "No, nobody got killed. There was a counter-revolution..."

I had with me a little paperback I had published with the editor Robert Delpire in France.

I showed them and I said, "Okay, these are my photos; I was there..."

Spring 1968 was a period of cultural explosion, it was... literature...it was theatre...it was film... If I look back, with detachment, at what happened in Czechoslovakia in 68... the main driving force was freedom... freedom, freedom, that was the vital thing...

In 1989 it was freedom too, but it was also consumerism and that's what makes the difference.

When Russians entered Czechoslovakia, there were seven people in Moscow who went to Red Square and demonstrated. They stayed there for three minutes before the police came.

For me, these people had real courage, the only ones out of 200 million Russians ...

They knew that the only way for them to get out of Red Square was to go to prison. Some of them spent six years in the camps in Siberia.

There was a woman who said: "The only time I ever felt free was during those three minutes on the Red Square..."

That week in August 68 in Prague was heroic. But everything that happened during the twenty years afterwards was a moral massacre...

When I got back to Czechoslovakia in 1990, the older generation preferred not to remember and the children were interested in the future not in the past.

INVASION PRAGUE 1968 continues at the Gallery of Photography, Meeting House Square, Temple Bar, Dublin 2, Ireland until July 26 2009. Admission free.

For further information, please contact the Gallery on info@galleryofphotography.ie by phone to 01-6714654 or visit www.galleryofphotography.ie