

TIME IS MONEY



Steven Fisher

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Steve Fisher
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In 1991, Steve Fisher returned to Prague, joining 30,000 americans, as a permanent emigree. He and his Czech wife, Jitka have a two year old son, Pavel, and are expecting a daughter next year. Born and raised in Albany, NY, educated in Boston, having worked in Miami on "Miami Vice" and New York City in radio, TV and film, Fisher packed three suitcases and a duffel bag and first moved to Prague in 1989, to seek a new life and perhaps, a new way of living. What follows is his story of the first nine months of that adventure. To support himself, Fisher hired out as a teacher, to Czech citizens wishing to learn or improve their English language skills. He did this in classrooms and on a private, on-to-one basis.

We begin, at the end.

Chapter One: The Beginning of the End

All that remained for me now were the goodbyes and farewells. My last night in Prague was on a Wednesday, and I invited as many of my students and friends as possible — those who weren't away on their summer holidays — to a party in my flat. Altogether I had invited perhaps eighty or ninety people, expecting at least half of them to be unavailable, but less than an hour after the party began my living room, kitchen and entryway were already jammed with people packed shoulder-to-shoulder, barely able to raise their glasses.

I saw Helena pushing her way through the crowd trying to get to me. When at last she reached my side, she planted a kiss on my cheek. "My daughter wanted to come with me to say goodbye to you," she said, "but she was..."

"Too shy?" I asked.

"Yes. She was afraid of so many people she doesn't know."

"Please tell her I was sorry she couldn't come," I said. "And thank you for being here."

"Paul, I am sorry, but I can't stay," Helena apologized with a sad smile. "I only wanted to see you before you go, to thank you for your lessons, and to wish you all the best in America."

"It's hard for me to leave, Helena," I said.

"I think so," she replied. "I can see it in your face. Maybe you will come back to Prague again."

"I don't know," I told her.

Helena laid her hand on my arm and looked at me sympathetically. "Don't be afraid if you have to come back here," she said. "Everyone will be happy if you do."

"Thank you," I told her. "I'll be fine."

"So," she said, giving me a hug. "Goodbye." She backed away, then turned, excusing herself to those with whom she collided on her way out.

The evening passed in a blur I can hardly remember now, dimmed even further by my own increasing consumption of alcohol as the night went on. I tried to talk with each person there, but the density of the crowd made it hard to maneuver from one conversation to another. To some students, I managed only to wave hello from across the room, then say goodbye as they left, with clasped hands and affectionate looks.

Karel and Karla, my former landlords, were among those I was able to have at least a few words with, and as briefly as we spoke it was actually one of the best conversations we had ever had, my Czech having vastly improved since the days when I had lived with them. It excited us all to be able to speak so comfortably together for the first time. As they left the party, Karel hugged me for a very long time and, when finally he let go, there was a tear on his cheek.

How odd all this emotion seemed. Nine months earlier I and the rest of the people around me this night had all been strangers. It was a short time, really, to know someone, and yet I felt closer to some of these students that I had to most of the people I had ever known in my life. They seemed to care so much about what had occurred between us and about what would happen to me now. What was the reason for such a deep bond in so brief a time?

I imagined that it was just part of the emotions of the times. Czech people were still riding the euphoria of freedom, yet at the same time still haunted by the tragedy of the past. Every new day, it still seemed like a miracle that the nightmare of what had once been was no longer. Now the future was a blank page, as exciting and scary as that was for everyone. My arrival in their lives had coincided with their new sense of hope, of celebration, of discovering for the first time the world which had lain outside unseen for so long.

Perhaps they also saw me as a symbol of where they were headed, a glimpse of their future as a more "western" nation. If so, their greatest appreciation of me may simply have been that they had found in me nothing to fear. And now I was a part of their past as well, a symbol of the joy they had already come to possess in their own lives in this yet brief new free existence.

By night's end, I had bid adieu to them all — to Daniel and his family; to my school's director, Milena, and the other teachers who had come to say goodbye; to Dr. Pavlina Manesová and her savior of a husband, Franta; to Clarice, subject of my first prophetic dream; to my student Jaroslav, who had taught me how to dance; to shy Suzana and Jan the young Taurus, and to all the rest of my students from my Sazavská class, from the VNG factory, from the agriculture department, from the radio communications center, from the State Opera, and from my private lessons, who had come to wish me well.



Chapter Two: The End of the Beginning

"Today, I want to tell you that I will not be continuing to teach this class, and that, as of your next lesson, you will have a new teacher. He is sitting right here next to me. His name is Paul Hunter, and I would like him just to introduce himself to you and to say a few words right now."

The woman speaking was named Elaine, and the class of hers which I was taking over was with a group of administrative employees at a state-owned factory, known by its initials as VNG. It's hardly necessary to say that the factory was "state owned", as nearly all enterprises, large and small, in Czechoslovakia in 1991 were still — as they had been during the days of communism — owned by the state. Everything from the corner grocery store to the pubs, the restaurants, the shoe stores, even the corner newspaper stands remained the property of the government, meaning that the vast majority of people continued to be state workers. It reminded me a little of Albany.

I wasn't sure exactly what the initials VNG stood for, nor what role the factory had played in the great scheme of Czechoslovakia's former worker-state. Elaine hadn't seemed to know either as she led me through its stark entranceway and down a flight of stairs to the basement, where the English lessons were held in a large assembly room filled with folding tables and chairs.

"I think they make machine parts," Elaine had said as she guided me past a wall lined with framed certificates that seemed to commemorate years in which the factory had received some award from the state, perhaps for a clean safety record or for surpassing its annual production quota. "You know, nuts and bolts and screws, and long pieces of metal, and levers, and...well, all kinds of stuff," she continued. "But I'm not too sure. Maybe you can ask them about it. That would be a good subject for some English conversation."

"Our teachers keep leaving," Elaine had told me before the lesson began. "There's more money to be made in private teaching, or working as an English-language consultant for Czech companies. These poor students keep getting stuck with new teachers who they don't know and who don't know them. It's a pity, really."

It obviously wasn't enough of a pity in Elaine's mind, however. The reason that she was quitting the VNG class, and the rest of her classes as well, was that she herself had gotten a job as an English language consultant at a big Prague law firm. Elaine's reasons for coming to Prague had been that she couldn't hack Stanford Law School and had decided to take a year off to "think things out" in Europe. Now, she had made up her mind to go back and finish her degree, so she figured this law firm job would look good on her resume.

I, meanwhile, was hoping that I would never again do another thing in my life that would look good on my resume. Elaine was still chasing the American Dream, while I was running away from the American Nightmare. Perhaps it was partly due to the difference in our ages. I was soon to be thirty-six, while Elaine, I guessed, was still in her early twenties. A lot can change in your perceptions about "success" during all those years. At least, it had in mine.

"In America, we have an expression," Elaine told the class, after I had introduced myself and sat back down. "We say, 'Time is money.'" As she spoke, she wrote the words "TIME IS MONEY" on a large easel pad at the front of the room, then underlined each word and drew a circle around them.

I cringed, thinking about why I had left America to come to Prague. It hadn't been because time was money. Just the opposite, in fact, I thought, as I studied the students' faces, curious about their reactions to what Elaine had said. They all stared straight ahead. None of them even blinked.

"Time IS money," Elaine repeated, then asked the class, "Can anyone here tell me what they think that means?"

The students considered the question. Some of them leaned forward, looking at the blackboard, their movements suggesting that they were examining the statement more closely, but I suspected that they were just trying to look interested. A couple of the students turned and whispered something to each other. One of the women looked at the words, then copied them dutifully into her notebook. No one, however, spoke.

"Well," Elaine said, finally. "Let me give you an example. Today, I spent an hour-and-a-half waiting in lines at the post office. First, I waited in a line to send a letter to America. Then, I waited in a second line to pick up a package that had been sent to me. Finally, I stood in a third line to pay my telephone bill. And at every window, the clerks were so slow. Now, that's just not efficient. If this country is going to succeed, the people here need to learn that time is money. Now do you understand what I mean?"

I continued to cringe. Okay, I thought, perhaps public servants in Czechoslovakia were a bit lax. Hey, who wouldn't be lax when he got the same pitiful one hundred dollars a month state salary as everybody else, whether he worked hard or not? But where did this girl get off, I wondered, lecturing these people about their society as if she were a messenger from the Land of Perfection? Hadn't she ever been to a government office in America — where a simple visit to the Department of Motor Vehicles could necessitate taking an entire day off from work? Where lines for the passport office in New York started forming on the street at six a.m., waiting for the doors to open at nine?

Elaine began to analyze their handwriting, based on what she had read, for example that tiny letters were a sign of an introvert and large letters of an extrovert. She didn't use such complicated adjectives, of course. She used words like "aggressive", "bold", "creative", and "conservative", as well as ones which described the shape of their writing, such as "curved", "straight", "round" and "slanted".

It was an interesting lesson and a fun way to introduce new words, I thought. It made me change my mind a bit about Elaine. She seemed to be a good teacher. Perhaps she had just had a bad day at the post office.

"That was a nice lesson," I told her later, as we left the factory and headed for a bus stop nearby. "I hope I can be as good a teacher as you seem to be."

"I'm sure you can, Paul," Elaine said, sympathetically. "Just use the textbook. There are plenty of good ideas in it."

The day after my arrival, when I had reported to the school's offices for my teaching assignments, I had been given a copy of the textbook they were using. It was called *The Cambridge English Course*. I hadn't had a chance to study it yet but knew that I had better take a look at it soon. The next day I would actually begin teaching my first class. It was to be ninety minutes long. What in the world was I going to say?



Chapter Three: Beginning to Begin

That question weighed on my mind all the way home. Yes, I had found a “home”, and it had not been as difficult as I had feared. The previous day, when I had reported to the school’s headquarters, the director, a kind woman named Milena Horáková, had shown me a list of Czech families who were offering rooms and apartments...sorry, flats...to visiting foreign teachers.

With the help of Mrs. Horáková’s young assistant, Mirek, I had made an appointment to visit one of the families, a young couple who were offering a room for rent. As soon as Mirek and I arrived at the couple’s flat, it was love at first sight for me. The flat was located in a charming section of town called Vinohrady (“The Vineyards”), a formerly upper-class residential neighborhood, built around the turn of this century. Vinohrady was as close to my image of the classic European neighborhood as I could have wished for — a maze of brick and cobblestone streets, lined with stately brownstones in various stages of romantic decay, and a tiny park in the middle of a sloping square, one block from the flat I was now looking at.

The street where the flat was located even had a charming name, though in Czech it was virtually unpronounceable for me. It was called Na Kozacce. Mirek pronounced it Nah Koh-zahtch-tseh, and, try as I could, I was unable to repeat it after him. I had to laugh at the prospect of being unable to say the name of the street I lived on.

“It means ‘On the Boot’,” Mirek explained, and it was easy to see why. The street was only two blocks long, one long and one short, with a sharp bend where they met.

As for the couple who were renting the room, I took an instant liking to them both — a tall, thin, bearded man nearly my own age, named Karel, and his short, rotund wife, Karla. That was cute all by itself, the way they were shaped like opposites, with the two of them having the same name, in the male and female versions. They were enthusiastic and effusive as they welcomed me into their home to show me the room they had for rent. We seemed to hit it off right from the start.

Finally, there was the room itself, and upon seeing it I was immediately convinced that I wanted to live there. It was simple but idyllic. The only furniture was a single bed, a dresser, a rocking chair, a small sofa, and a coffee table. But that was all I needed. An oriental throw rug in the center of the floor added just the right touch of old-world charm. Best of all was a set of French windows which overlooked the garden behind the building.

“How much do they want?” I asked Mirek, who translated the question for Karel. Karel smiled and shrugged his shoulders, then looked at Karla, who said a number in Czech.

“Twelve hundred crowns a month,” Mirek translated for me.

Twelve hundred crowns. I had to calculate that. At thirty crowns to the dollar, that’s...forty dollars...a month!

“I’ll take it!” I told Mirek, who translated for Karel and Karla.

“Good,” Karel said, in English it seemed, though he might have been using the German gut.

“Do you speak English?” I asked him.

Karel smiled apologetically. “Only...little.”

While Mirek translated, Karel and Karla showed me around the rest of the flat. There wasn’t much more to see, however. All that remained was a bathroom, a kitchen, and another bedroom. It all looked fine, though they didn’t show me the other bedroom. Its door was closed.

“Her mother is sleeping in there now,” Mirek explained to me after Karla told him why they couldn’t show it to me.

“Oh,” I said, then wondered about that. “Does her mother live here, too?” I asked.

Mirek consulted with Karla, then said to me, “Yes. This is her room.”

"I see," I said, though I was a bit confused. "And where do they sleep?"

Again Mirek consulted with them, then replied, "They're sleeping in the kitchen."

"In the kitchen?" I asked.

"Yes," Mirek said. "The room you're renting was their bedroom, but they'd like to make some money from renting that room, so they will sleep in the kitchen."

It was troubling to think about. Even if they were going to profit from my staying there, it felt like being an intruder, living in their bedroom while they slept...on what? The kitchen floor? For forty dollars a month?

My concern must have shown on my face because Karel looked at me, smiled and said, "Is okay," then took me by the arm back into the kitchen and showed me how the sofa in their kitchen opened up into a bed. "Is okay," he repeated waving his hand to show me how spacious their kitchen was. "No problem," he said, with a smile. And so it was agreed. That evening, with Mirek's help, I brought my suitcases from the train station to my new home, then took Mirek out to dinner to thank him for his help.

It was a beautiful fall evening, and now that I finally had a home of my own the city suddenly took on a new appearance as I began to appreciate Prague for its own unique beauty.

Mirek led me up the street from the flat to a boulevard at the top of a steep hill.

"This is your tram stop," he told me. A "tram", I soon learned, was a streetcar, what they used to call in Boston a "trolley", and Prague's tram cars very much resembled the old trolleys I used to ride up Commonwealth Avenue during my days at Boston University.

"Your tram is the number four or the number twenty-two," Mirek explained. "And your station is called 'Jana Masaryka'. It's named for Jan Masaryk, the son of our first president. Do you know about him?"

"I don't really know anything about this country, I'm afraid," I told Mirek apologetically.

"Your first president was George Washington, right?" Mirek said with a smile.

"That's right," I replied. "In fact, he was the one who told me to come to Prague." Mirek looked at me, cocked his head, and said, "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"That's okay," I laughed. "Neither do I."

Mirek grinned, probably trying to cover his confusion, while I smiled, trying to cover my embarrassment at not knowing a single thing about the history of the country in which I was now a guest, as opposed to this young man, probably only half my age, who was able to name my country's first president. It was clear that I had a lot to learn.



Chapter Four: Approaching the Middle

"Now that we know a little about each other," I told my students at VNG during that first lesson, "I want to talk about something that Elaine said last time."

I walked to the easel pad and wrote the words "TIME IS MONEY", then underlined them and drew a circle around them, as Elaine had done. I stood there for a moment and looked at what I had written, then turned and faced the class.

"Any comments?" I asked them.

The students looked at me, then at each other. One or two whispered something to the person next to them, but no one answered. I turned back to the pad, reached up with the felt marker and drew a large "X" through the words, then faced the students again.

"Time is not money," I said, raising my voice. "Time...is a gift." I looked around to be sure they knew the word "gift". When it seemed that they did, I continued, speaking slowly and carefully. "Time...is a gift that someone gave to you...and what you choose to do with it...is the most important decision you will make in your life. Do you understand me?"

Most of the students nodded. Those that didn't asked their neighbors for a translation, then looked back at me and also nodded.

Pavel, the advanced student, raised his hand. "Do many people in America believe that time is money?" he asked.

I thought about that for a moment. What generalizations can you really make about a nation of two hundred million people?

"I don't know," I said finally. "I hope not. Some do. I don't. That's all I can say."

The student whose name was Ivan smiled and sat forward. "I think you are not a typical American," he said.

I hardly noticed his correct use of the indefinite article. I should have congratulated him on that, but I was more concerned with the content of his comment than the grammar.

"I don't know that either," I smiled back. "It's a big country. I don't know that there is a typical American."

"Either?" asked the student named Ivana. "What is 'either'?"

I laughed. What a game this was going to be! A mix of Password and Charades. What did "either" mean? I had to think about that.

"It's like...also," I said, finally. "I don't know that also. But we say 'either' with a negative." That seemed to be a correct explanation, but I was struggling.

Ivana paused, then smiled. "I don't think you are typical American, either," she said.

I was charmed. I began to love teaching English on my very first day.

We had started with introductions. There were eight students that day — four men and four women — Ivan, Pavel, Petr, Radek, Petra, Ivana, Olga and Jitka. That last name was particularly strange for me. It was pronounced "Yit-ka" (the letter "j" being pronounced like "y"). Jitka. What a sad sounding name, I thought. She was a pretty sad looking creature, too, and was the one who had constantly written everything down in her notebook when Elaine had spoken to them.

"And what is your job, Jitka?" I asked her, when it was her turn to tell me her profession.

"Job?" she asked the student next to her. "Nerozumím." ("I don't understand.") The other student didn't seem to know the word "job" either.

"Your work," I said. "What do you do here?"

Jitka absorbed my words, but still wasn't sure what I meant. Another student whispered to her in Czech.

"Oh," Jitka said. "I am...I don't know in English...stenopista."

Stenopista. I repeated it to myself, but that didn't help. Finally, the most advanced student in the class, Pavel, said, "She is stenographer."

Ahhh, that explained the compulsive note taking, I thought.

"She is a stenographer," I said.

"Yes," Pavel nodded. "Sorry. She is a stenographer."

Articles. A, an, the. I had already had several conversations with Czech people, and they always seemed to forget the articles when they spoke English. I wondered why.

The answer was simple, I soon learned. Unlike English, Spanish, French, Italian, and so forth, the Czech language doesn't have any articles. They don't use them.

"Give me apple, please." "I met nice woman today." That's Czech. Oh, they do have equivalents of this, that, these and those, when they want to be specific. But otherwise they don't need articles. And, after considering it for a while, I started to ask myself why in the world the English language bothered to have them, either.

"Book is on table." That's clear enough, isn't it? No wasted words. According to English textbooks, the article "a" simply means "one". But if there were more than one, we'd say "books", so "a book" does seem rather redundant, doesn't it?

"Articles...this is problem for me," Pavel said, after I had corrected him.

I laughed. "This is a problem for you," I said. "A big problem and an obstacle to the success of your English studies."

"Ugh," Pavel moaned, with a smile.

I was immediately overwhelmed with sympathy for the people seated around me. I realized that it would be my job to help them learn not only which nouns used "a" and which "an", or when to use "the" instead, but also which nouns couldn't use "a" or "an". Those are called "uncountable nouns" like happiness or money. (Money is uncountable? Well, as a noun, it is.)

I had never thought about any of this before, not in my entire life. I didn't even remember being taught it in school. Do you? Could you explain the rules for when to use "a" and when to use "the"? I couldn't, and I was supposed to be these people's bloody English teacher! I suddenly felt like the most unqualified person in the world for the job I had been assigned to do.

"Will you teach us about articles?" Pavel asked me.

"I will," I sighed. "I will try. But I must study English, too."

The students all laughed. Suddenly, I thought, Gee, they aren't such a somber group as they were two days before....or should that be "as somber a group"? Or "so somber a group"? My God.

And so I hit the books, determined to become the best English teacher I could as quickly as possible. And the more I learned about English grammar, the more sympathetic I became to my students whose task it was going to be to learn it.

In Czech, for example, it's easy to ask a question. "Chcete jít" means "You want to go." If you want to make it a question, just raise your voice at the end. "Chcete jít?" But, in English, you need to remember Do you and Does he and Are you and Is he and Did you and Have you and Has he and Were you and Was he and Will you, and every other possible question tense variation. Yikes!

English tenses. That was a big problem, I soon learned. How to explain the difference between I work and I am working in the present, between I will work and I am going to work and I will be working in the future, and — in the past, oh my God! I worked and I was working, I have worked and I have been working, I had worked and I had been working. There were rules, I was sure. But what were they?



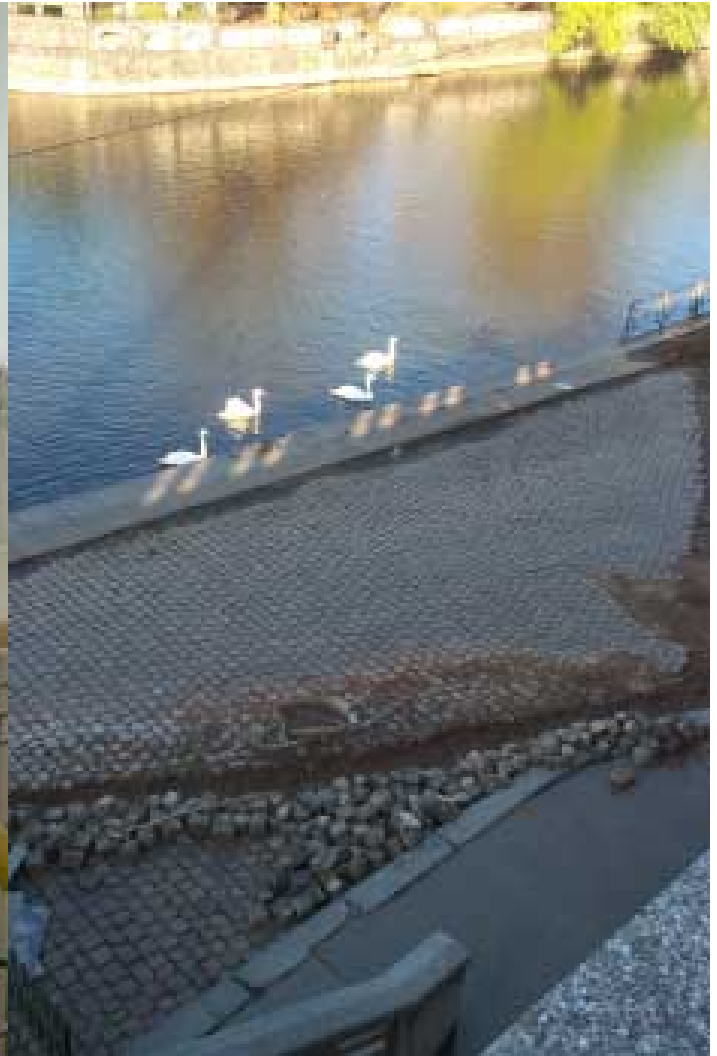
In Czech every verb has only three tenses — past, present and future. In English, my students were convinced, there seemed to be hundreds of tenses. After reading up on the subject, I tried to reassure them that there were also only three. The rest of those variations, I told them, were called “modalities”. This didn’t seem to reassure them very much, however.

“If I go to school, I will study English,” was a sentence that confused the hell out of them. Both actions are in the future, but only one of them uses the future tense. Why? In Czech, in the same sentence, both verbs use the future tense. That certainly sounded more sensible to me.

“I’m sorry,” I would tell them. “It’s just a special rule in English with that construction.”

“You have a lot of special rules, I think,” Pavel kidded me later in the semester.

“Well,” I replied. “We’re a rich country. We can afford them.”



Chapter Five: Right in the Middle

"Tell me about you," I said, looking around at their smiling faces. I walked toward Zuzana in the front row. "Are you...shy?" I asked her.

"What means 'shy'?" she asked me.

I held up my hands and hid my face behind them, peeking through my fingers with a look of trepidation, and turning my body away from the group.

"Plachá?" Zuzana asked her neighbor, who was busy looking up "shy" in her dictionary and who then nodded to Zuzana that her guess of the Czech equivalent had been correct. Zuzana smiled and paused, looking around at the rest of the class and seeing that everyone was staring at her, waiting for her answer. Being the focus of everyone's attention made her blush, and realizing that, she laughed.

"Yes, I am...shy, I think," she said.

"And you?" I said, turning quickly and startling the girl with the dictionary next to Zuzana, whose name was Monika. She scrunched her shoulders together, and dropped her head nervously, then lifted her eyes just enough to see me.

"I am very shy," she said softly, almost whispering.

"Good!" I said, wheeling around and clapping my hands. "Very good!" I ran down one of the aisles toward a young boy at the far end of the room. His eyes widened as he saw me coming, even more startled than Monika had been. Apparently he had never seen a teacher run the length of a classroom before.

"What is your name?" I asked upon reaching him. "I don't remember."

"Uh...Jan," the boy said.

"Jan, are you...brave?"

"What?" he gasped, searching around the room to see if anyone knew the word, but no one seemed to.

This time I looked in my own pocket dictionary for the Czech word, found it, then tried, with some success, to pronounce it.

"Statečný," I said.

"And in English?" he asked.

"Brave," I replied, running back to the board and writing the word for the class to copy into their notebooks.

"Am I...brave?" Jan asked.

"Yes," I said. "Are you?"

"I think...that...no," he stammered.

"I don't think so," I corrected him.

"I...don't...think...so," Jan repeated, writing the proper response in his notebook.

I think that no. What Jan had said was a literal translation of what they say in Czech: "Já myslím e ne". And the opposite: "Já myslím e ano", or "I think that yes".

"Jan," I said. "What is your astrology sign?"

"Sign?" Jan asked.

"Astrologické znamení," another student whispered to him.

"Oh," Jan said, "I am...I don't know in English." He asked another student, then said, "I am...bull."

"Ahhh," I smiled. "You are Taurus! So, you are a hard worker?"

Jan smiled. "Yes. I think yes."

"I think so," I corrected him again. "And...do you have a bad temper?"

"What is 'temper'?" he asked.

"Are you angry sometimes?"

Jan thought for a second. "Yes," he grinned. "Sometimes."

"Very angry?"

"Maybe...yes," he laughed, as did some of the other students.

"Do you...break things?" I asked, then grabbed a pencil from my desk, made an angry grimace, exclaimed "Arrrggghh", and snapped the pencil in half.

Jan laughed more, but then shook his head. "Not...not so much," he smiled.

"Okay," I said, then covered my eyes with one hand, extended my other hand, pointing with one finger, and swirled around in a circle. When I stopped and uncovered my eyes, my finger was aimed at a lovely young girl. She looked worried, but smiled.

"What is your astrology sign?" I asked her.

"I am..." she began, but also didn't know the English word, so held up both hands like a balancing scale.

"Libra!" I said. "Are you...an artist?"

Her eyes brightened. "I am...dancer," she said.

"I am a dancer," I corrected her.

"You?" she asked, in amazement.

I laughed. "No, no. You...are...a...dancer."

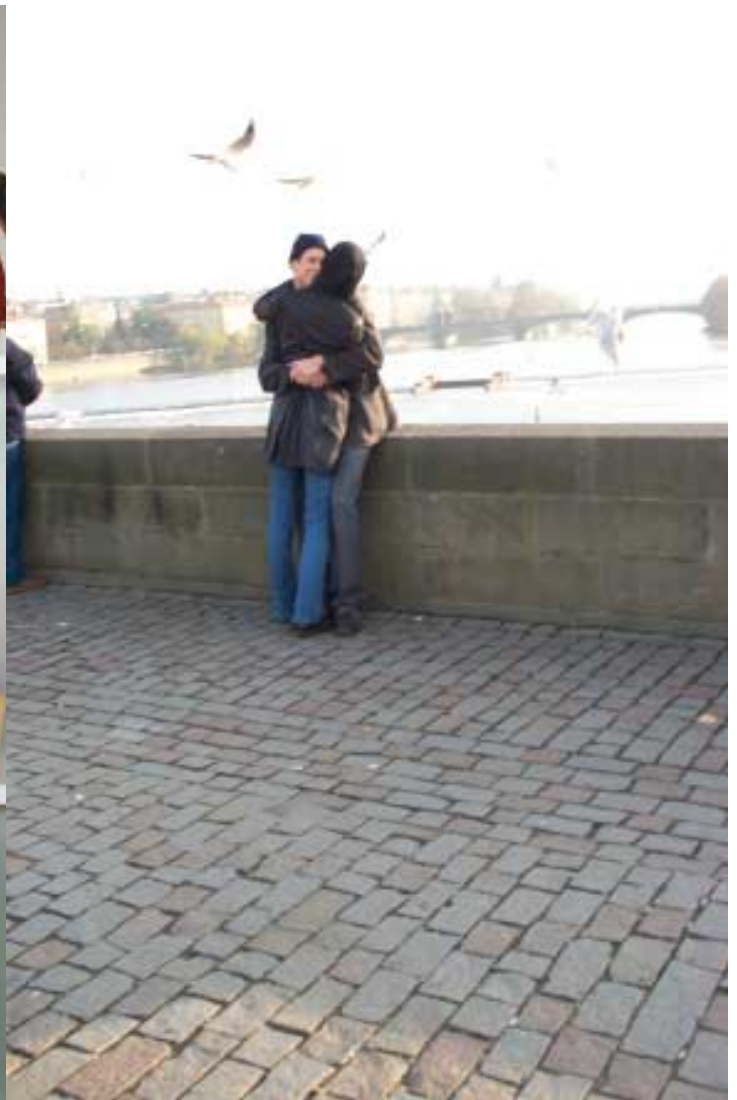
"Oh," she smiled, bowing her head as if in shame of having misunderstood me.

"No," I said. "It's okay. So, tell me. Can you make a decision?"

"I don't understand," she said.

I tried again. "Can you...decide things?" I imitated her earlier action of weighing with her hands. "This...or...that?" I turned and started to walk one way. "Here?" I said, then turning back suddenly, "Or...there? Can you...decide?"

Another student translated the word "decide" for her, then she laughed.



"No," she said. "I can't decide nothing."

"About anything," I told her.

"I can't decide about anything," she corrected herself.

"That's what they say about Libra," I told her. "It's very hard for them to decide." I made my hands like scales again. "Because they see both sides."

"What about me?" a young man asked, raising his hand. "I am lion."

And so, on and on, for each student who asked, I told them what I knew about his or her sign, until suddenly I looked at my watch and realized it was already ten minutes past the scheduled end of the lesson. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's ten past seven. I wasn't watching the time."

"It's okay," said shy Zuzana in the front row. "I would stay longer."

It was a wonderful thing to hear. As worried as I had been about my first lesson in this "real" classroom, the time had flown and everyone seemed disappointed that it was over.

"Thank you," said a woman, whose name I couldn't remember, as she walked by me on her way out.

"See you," said another.

"Next week," said young Jan, the Taurus, with a big smile.

"It was nice lesson," the Libra dancer.

I wished that I could remember all their names. But that would come, in time, and with it a feeling like none I had ever known. I was a teacher now. It was the beginning of what was about to be the most wonderful time in my life, more than I could possibly have imagined, and, in the end, exceeding not only my expectations but even my dreams.

Chapter Six: Moving towards the End

Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans, the saying goes.

By the second week of November, I had seventeen private students coming to my home each week, in addition to my sixteen hours of regular classes, plus six hours a week teaching at an institute where social planners were trying to devise a new healthcare system to replace the existing communist-era program of fully socialized medicine.

I continued to grow enormously fond of my students, especially those in my private lessons whom I was able to get to know quickly and well, since the essence of private language teaching turned out to be merely conversation, and the richest minefield for conversation was finding out about each other's lives. Most of my private students already knew my story of adulterous love lost and still hoped for. I wasn't embarrassed to tell the tale, and it answered well and truthfully the first question most Czech people asked when we first met, i.e., "Why did you come here?"

I don't think it's a question most foreigners in America are often asked. America is, after all, the land of foreigners, built by immigrants of one kind or another since its earliest days. Americans assume upon meeting a foreigner that they've come to the U.S. for the obvious reasons: opportunity, freedom, or simply because everyone wants to come to America, right?

But Czech people were naturally intrigued, and I expect occasionally suspicious about why anyone in his right mind would have left "the good life" in America to live in a part of the world that millions had tried, over the years, to escape from.

"I was in love with a married woman and couldn't take it anymore. I needed to get away from it," was all I had to say, and the person would nod, Okay, that makes sense. I suppose I shocked some of them with my honesty, but in those cases where it seemed that way, it had actually been part of my reason for doing so. I could see the ever-so-slight twitch in the faces of those who had expected a more conventional answer, such as, "Oh, I heard Prague was beautiful," or, simply, "For an adventure."

But the wonderful thing which I had discovered at some point in my life, even before I began making English conversation professionally, was that by sharing an intimate secret about your life you immediately knock down the wall of decorum and shame that separates strangers from each other.

To put it more simply, if you want to know someone else's secret, tell them one of your own. Not only did it make my students (most of them, anyway) more comfortable; in some cases it made them feel almost duty-bound to tell me something highly personal about themselves. Not that that's something most people don't want to do. Quite honestly, I find that people are anxious to tell you about the darkest chapters in their lives, once they trust you enough not to judge them. And suddenly these people knew that I was hardly going to judge them, having already admitted my own inability to live another day in the same country as the married woman I could not love.

Each day, it seemed, one student or another revealed to me some tragedy in their past, and their confiding in me their deepest suffering only further endeared each and every one of them to me.

Dr. Pavlina Manesová was a pediatrician who came to my home each Wednesday afternoon and whose lessons I looked forward to as if she were an old friend, even in early November when she had only been studying with me for three weeks.

Pavlina was a beautiful older woman, somewhere in her late forties, with a sensitive face, straight blonde hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, and a serious demeanor which could not, however, hide the joy which she seemed to take in our lessons, as much if not more so than I. Pavlina was a Leo, like Isabella, and perhaps that explained the natural affinity we felt for each other almost from the moment she first sat on my sofa, facing me in my rocking chair, across the coffee table on which she had laid out some English-language medical articles she wanted to read with my help.

Though I had never been involved with someone so many years older than myself, there was, I believe, a physical attraction between us as well as a personal one. I was still in love with Isabella, but my loneliness, anger and fear that our relationship was never to be had began to erode my resistance to the allures of a beautiful, bright, kind and willing woman.

But that, fortunately, was not the case with Dr. Pavlina Manesová, for she fit all of the above descriptions, except the last. Pavlina was happily married, with three children from a previous marriage and a lovely young daughter from her current one.

It was that first marriage which had been the source of Pavlina's own personal tragedy, and it was a story she shared with me much earlier than many of my other students revealed theirs. It was also a story that again, raised to my eyes the spectre of life under communism and what evil it had wrought for so many people.

Pavlina and her first husband had been students when they married, and neither had had any desire to join the communist party, which they both equally despised. After university her husband landed a position as an assistant manager in the state's main export office, but his lack of party membership prevented him from rising any higher within the organization.

As their children were born, and the financial demands of parenthood began to put a strain on their existence, Pavlina's husband approached her with the idea of his joining the party, merely for appearance's sake.

"I told him not to do it," Pavlina told me, "that it wasn't worth it, and that he should try to find a different job, someplace where it might not be necessary."

But her husband had, in fact, already decided.

"'It's no big thing,' he told me," Pavlina continued. "He said he would just join the party, and go to an occasional meeting. 'But nothing's going to change,' he said, 'except my chances to make some more money for us.'"

Things did change, however. Slowly, Pavlina's husband began to alter his opinion about the party. His attendance at party meetings and events evolved from "occasional" to weekly and finally frequent, after he was not only promoted but was given an entirely new job in a totally different department at a much higher salary.

"I had no idea what his new job was," Pavlina said, and as she told me this part of the story she lowered her voice ever so slightly, as if she had suddenly been cast back into the days when being overheard could be a risk.

"One day," she went on, "a neighbor of mine, a very nice man named Franta who lived across the hall from us, stopped by for a visit. He and I had become friends. We used to pass each other in the hallway often, and once when my husband was working late I had asked him if he could fix a pipe under our sink which had come loose. He was very handy.

"Franta was something of a dissident," Pavlina continued, "though he had managed to stay out of jail somehow. He hadn't signed the Charter*, but he was involved in samizdat**, though of course I didn't know that at the time. Still, my husband knew that I had started a friendship with Franta, and one day he told me that I should 'stay away from that guy', that the police were watching him, and that he was 'trouble'. 'How do you know the police are watching him?' I asked my husband. 'I just know, that's all,' he told me, 'so keep your distance.'

"Anyway," Pavlina continued, "One day Franta came over for a visit. My husband was at another one of those idiotic party meetings, so I invited Franta in. We started talking, and then Franta suddenly asked me, 'What does your husband do, by the way?' I laughed. I was so embarrassed because I wasn't exactly sure what he did. He had said that he had been moved into another foreign affairs department, but he never talked about his work. When I told this to Franta, he looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Your husband works for the StB.'"

The StB. The Statní Bezpecnost. It was the Czech internal security service, or, to use a more frightening term, the "secret police". The Czech version of the Gestapo.

"I couldn't believe it!" Pavlina said, but as tragic a turn as the story now took, this part of it she told with a laugh. "I was such an idiot. I knew he was different than when I had married him. He wasn't the same person. I could see it. But I never imagined... Robert...an StB agent! He was spying on dissidents. He was reporting on the very kind of people he himself used to be!"

"I waited a few days," Pavlina said, "But finally I asked my husband if it was true. He was very angry. 'Who told you that?' he said. 'Never mind,' I told him. 'Is it true?' 'What if it is?' he asked me. 'What are you going to do about it? Leave me?'"

"But that's what I did," Pavlina said, and in her voice I could hear the same determination she must have felt when she had made her move with the children out of their apartment and into her parents home in a village in southern Moravia.

* Charter '77, the famous petition protesting government repression, circulated and signed by Czech dissidents in 1977 (hence the name).

** Writers' works, banned by the communist government, which were secretly photocopied and passed from person to person.

"And that was the beginning of hell for me," Pavlina sighed. "He wouldn't give a me a divorce. And he used every power of his position to make life miserable for me. My parents' house was watched. We were followed. I couldn't get a job. Every hospital and clinic within a hundred kilometers turned me down after checking me out and getting a call from someone, somewhere, that I was a 'dangerous' person. I finally got a job in a pharmacy in a village nearby. Don't ask me how. They didn't check up on me, and the manager was a nice old woman who knew a relative of mine.

"But my husband didn't stop. He had those people of his following me, and after three months the manager of the pharmacy was fired, and so was I. I felt terrible for her. It was my fault that she lost her job. She had only tried to help me."

"And how did you meet your second husband?" I asked her.

Pavlina smiled. "I had already met him before I left Robert," she said. "I just didn't know it yet. A few months after I moved in with my parents, there was a knock at our door. My mother opened it, and then said, 'Pavlina, there's a man here to see you.' When I went to the door, there he was, standing with a bouquet of flowers."

"He", of course, was Franta, Pavlina's former Prague neighbor.

"Wasn't he worried about the police watching you?" I asked.

"It was why he came when he did," Pavlina explained. "And why he waited so long. I didn't even know we were being watched. It was Franta who told us about it. Friends of his were watching the agents who were watching us. And, when the agents in our village went to Prague for a couple of days for a meeting, that's when Franta finally came to see us."

After that day, Franta and Pavlina saw each other only when it seemed safe, to avoid stirring Pavlina's husband's wrath and to spare Pavlina's family and friends any further persecution. Their long-distance love lasted three years, before Pavlina's husband finally gave up and divorced her. Of their three children, Pavlina's son went to live with his father. Her two daughters stayed with her, and when the dust of the divorce had settled Pavlina returned to Prague, moving in with Franta who had fortunately found a new apartment in a district of the city far removed from Pavlina's ex. Three months later they were married. A year later, in 1985, Pavlina's and Franta's own daughter, Kristina, was born.

"It's a very romantic story," I said, when Pavlina had finished. I could see in her smile that she thought so, too.

"Franta told me that he had fallen in love with me the very first time we passed each other in the hall," said Pavlina, and her Leo pride was never more in evidence to me than at that moment. "If he hadn't loved me, I don't suppose he would have trusted me enough to ask me if I knew what my husband's real job was. It was a big risk for him. And he waited so long to be with me. Without him, I don't know if I would have survived all that time. I always knew that he was there for me."

Again, there were tears in my eyes! I had never gotten as "misty" so often in my life as I did in this country, among these people who somehow seemed closer to their emotions than anyone I had ever known before.

Something in me was changing as well. The wounds of great love lost and of loneliness in a faraway place, the sense that my life had been almost destroyed but was now being offered a chance of renewal, here, in this unfamiliar place — all of that had, perhaps, served to open my heart.

Thus did my own emotions now become closer to the surface. And, in letting go of a certain distance which had somehow always existed in my old life between my thoughts and my heart, Prague became for me a place to love and to be loved.



Chapter Seven: Nearing the End

I wasn't comfortable talking about America. Honestly, I hadn't even thought about America for almost two months, with my dream that morning being the only exception. That and a few minutes of a news broadcast I had seen one day. Czech television broadcast an hour of CNN every weekday, and I had walked into the kitchen one morning when Karla had it on. They were showing George Bush, giving a speech at some meeting of the Young Farmers of America.

It had been strange to see Bush after what seemed like such a long time. He looked cartoon-like, speaking with that monotonous whine of artificial sincerity, as he told the young farmers, "We're counting on you to come up with attractive new agricultural products...to outfox our competition..."

What a terrible expression that was. Outfox. It sounded so sinister.

"And I believe," he continued, "that if the Soviet Union had had an organization of young people like the YFA, they wouldn't have the agricultural problems they have today."

I couldn't watch anymore, and had to walk out of the room to get away from it. It was so...nationalistic, and so sickeningly triumphant. Outfox our competition. I hadn't expressed to Daniel what it was about competition that really sickened me, why it was that I had come to tire of human interaction in which someone had to "lose" in order for the other to "win".

America is about selling, and that is the "bottom line" (to use one of the single worst expressions of the twentieth century's finale). I had read a statistic somewhere that Americans, on average, were exposed to more than 1,000 sales messages each day. "Are you still using ordinary soap?" a television commercial once asked me. At the time, my subconscious probably registered the shame and envy intended by the question's creators. Alas, I was, and therefore, clearly, destined to fail in my competitions — whatever they might be — with users of extra-ordinary soap.

At the dawn of my thirty-seventh year, however, not only was I still using ordinary soap, I was now washing my uncompetitive skin with a soap so ordinary that it was sold in a plain white wrapper with no apparent name, save for the Czech word *mýdlo* (soap) in large black letters. A bar cost two crowns, about six cents. That was extraordinary enough for me.

And, on this fourteenth of December, something very traditional and familiar was also wonderfully missing from my life. It would still be a few days before I would realize what it was, but ultimately it dawned on me. There was no Christmas advertising anywhere in Prague! No Santa Clauses beckoned me to purchase a new cordless electric razor. No snowmen hailed me from the windows of department stores, holding in their arms signs proclaiming SALE. And the entire month of December would soon pass without a single heart-warming television message that, The people of Seven-Eleven wish you a very, Merry Christmas. Imagine that!

Daniel seemed satisfied by our conversation. As I left, he shook my hand vigorously in his huge grasp, smiled, and said, "I enjoyed our talk. I was only afraid before that you might be a fan of our former system."

"I'm not a fan of any system, Daniel," I said. "I'm still looking for one that I'll like."

"We don't have one here, yet, I'm afraid," he laughed.

"That suits me just fine," I told him, before bidding him goodbye.

And it did. It all suited me just beautifully, as I ambled home, elevated by Daniel's wine, up the hills of Vinohrady, across Italian Street to Belgian Street, past the exquisite Vinohrady Theater ornamented with huge sculptures of winged angels, through the Square of Peace with its tranquil circular garden and lovely twin-spired stone church, then along French Street, its tiny shops all closed and shuttered for the weekend, finally turning down the brick lane at the top of the hill which led down to my little home "on the boot".

It was all...so perfect.



Chapter Eight: A Return to the End

After months of overcast darkness Prague was now lit by soft sunshine, and the coal-smoked air of winter was washed fresh with April rain. As the days lengthened I was awoken early each morning by the sun, which remained in the sky until eight at night. My evening classes no longer finished in the dark, and my students seemed brighter and more alive than ever in classrooms bathed with natural golden light and fresh air from outside.

All of them had made so much progress. As I sat at my desk in each class, reading a book while the students took their mid-term examinations, I looked out over them and felt great pride in their accomplishment and in my own as well, for I believed that, after a rough start and much study, I had actually become a rather good English teacher.

Of course there was still a ways to go. I could see the looks of despair on some students' faces as they reached question number ten of the Level One exam: Put the words in the right order: "open office what does post time the?" Followed by question eleven: Put in the correct form: "Everybody (work/works) too hard." "Most people (like/likes) ice cream."

You can see how difficult it might be to understand why "everybody" uses the singular while "most people" uses the plural. How about this: "I went to America (to learn/for learning) English." Easy for you and me, but for my first-time English speakers it was a complicated mess.

It was often interesting, the ways in which Czech was more complicated than English and the ways in which it was simpler. Take the verb *studovat* (to study) for example, one of many Czech words that are very close to English. The past tense, "He studied", is simply, "On *studoval*." Just change the last t to an l. Easy. A snap. This was the rule for all Czech verbs ending in *ovat*.

Now compare that with English past tenses. Okay, "study-studied" was relatively simple. But "go-went-gone"? "Sing-sang-sung"? Okay. And "ring-rang-rung". But not "bring-brang-brung"! Why? And, why "grow-grew-grown" and "know-knew-known", but "flow-flowed-flowed"?

In the back of my students' textbooks was a list of a hundred of these "irregular" English verbs which they needed to learn. And that list was only a sample! I would drill them in these verbs as an exercise, for five minutes at the end of each class, for practice, but also for fun.

"Drink!" I would call out, pointing at someone to answer.

"Drank...drunk?" he or she would reply.

"Yes! Next," pointing at another, "Sink!"

"Sank...sunk?"

"Good!" I said, then to another, "Think!"

"Um...thank...thunk?"

"Hah!" I exclaimed. "You would think so, but, of course, no! Think-thought-thought. Like, bring-brought-brought."

My students nodded at this.

"So..." I continued. "What is the present tense of fought?"

"Fink?" a student asked.

"Uh...no," I said.

"Fing?"

I laughed. "It's fight! I know. It's crazy. Who invented this language? Drunken English people, maybe. I don't know." I called to another student, "Jan, try this. The past tense of make."

"Made?" he said quickly.

"Good. And take?"

"Hmmm," he paused. "It isn't tade, is it?" he asked with a smile.

"No," I nodded. "It's took. I'm sorry. You just have to sit down and learn all of these lousy verbs. Fall-fell, but call-called. Write-wrote, but bite-bit. There's no sense to it, not that I can find. How these same people managed to create the largest colonial empire the world has ever known, I have no idea."

But in the end it was wonderful how much of this crazy English language of ours my students were able to learn. As I corrected their examinations that spring, I was impressed by their success. It was a great thrill for me, particularly with those beginners who had barely been able to make a sentence when our lessons had begun. They could truly communicate with me now, and for the first time were able to tell me things about themselves — their thoughts, their feelings — which before they had been incapable of expressing. As the English language became less of a stranger to them, so too did I, and my beginners were finally able to join the rest of my students as being my friends as well as my pupils.

Those English lessons of mine. I was sorry to see them end, as nearly all of them soon did. A few private students, Julia included, continued with me all the way up to my departure, but already by the end of June my SPUSA classes were finished. The final lessons had been the dearest of them all, most of them spent not in the classroom but in some nearby pub where we all simply talked and reflected on the experience of learning together. Many of my students asked me about my departure.

"I will never learn English if you go," said Monika from my Sazavská class. "The next teacher, he will be not like you."

"No, Monika," I said. "Probably not. He may actually be qualified to teach English."

"I think you will come back to Prague," said Jan, the Taurus. "You are already like Czech man."

"Like a Czech man," I corrected him. "Jan, promise me you'll try to use articles, even though I won't be here to appreciate it."

"I need the good teacher, like you, to speak more better," Jan replied.

"Right," I said. "And I'm sure you'll find one. The more better one."



Steve Fischer, author, and son Pavel. Letenske Sady, Prague, 08.11.01. All photographs: JP. Galligan, Prague, 11/2001

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