

## Foreign report

### Psychiatry as seen in Prague: Spring 1992

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In the Department of Psychiatry at the Medical School of Charles University Prague is a treasured book for visitors, kept in security. It was signed by Hack Tuke on 16 October 1853 and commends the head of the department for his co-operation and consideration to the visitor. On 19 May 1854 Charcot signed the book as Chef de clinique médicale, Charité de Paris.

There were no signatories from the West in the years of communism but in 1990, Hugh Freeman, Editor of *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, recorded his pride at signing the same book as such illustrious predecessors.

Since the velvet revolution of 1989 the borders of Prague are open and a stream of tourists now visits this most elegant and civilised of cities; its spirit and



*Old Town Square, Prague.*

glorious fabric undestroyed by annexation, war and rigid communist control. The Prague spring now commemorates not just the spirit of 1968 or the touching memorial of flowers, typed names and photographs constantly renewed in Wenceslas Square, for those who fought against repression before and after the tanks entered Prague in 1968. Now, the Prague spring is a festival of music, theatre and dance enhanced by the blossoming of street cafes, non-existent during communism, and the enjoyment of the young, who sit around the statue of Jan Huss in Old Town Square just as do our tourists in Piccadilly; the Prague visitors, however, can rejoice in the lack of traffic in their old town.

It is easier for us to visit Prague than for the Czechs to return the compliment; the exchange rate is favourable to the former and in Czechoslovakia a senior doctor earns a salary comparable with that of a worker in the Skoda factory. Each can earn a living but it is as yet difficult for academics to travel to conferences beyond the borders of their country.

There are two main universities in Prague and in Bratislava. There are 5,000,000 Slovaks and twice that number of Czechs; of the latter one quarter are Moravians. There are five medical schools within the Republic.

Like all Czechs and Slovaks, psychiatrists in Prague are aware of the Nationalist forces which have split their country (a "velvet divorce") at a time when their wish is for a coherent system of medical education.

The existing pattern of psychiatric training is further at risk of fragmentation as the health service undergoes, rapid, superimposed change similar to that which has occurred in the United Kingdom. The Czech Republic including Bohemia, of which Prague is the capital, has used a restrictive monetary and fiscal policy to facilitate the development of a market economy. In this, their former Finance Minister and present Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus has looked to Thatcherite Britain as it was in 1989.

A "large privatisation" scheme following the "small privatisation" of shops and restaurants (many of which have been restored to their pre-communism owners) is involving all citizens in the purchasing of shares. Although the recent election here delayed and confused financial reform, money will be lost and made by Czech citizens as they embark on the free market. Concurrently, health ministers are now of the opinion that all hospitals other than those retained by university and state should be privatised. Advice has been sought from the USA regarding insurance and the British model is being studied. Concerns are that insurance companies will not pay for social care and that there

is no system for social security. As in Britain, psychiatrists are troubled in particular about the care of the elderly and those with severe psychiatric illness who lack family support. There is need also for a coherent policy on the recruitment and career structure of doctors and nurses. There are concerns too about the range of treatments available, not for lack of knowledge but, for example, because anti-psychotic drugs must be manufactured within the Eastern bloc if the cost is to be met.

With regard to training, it is feared that privatisation and dissolution of the former Czechoslovakian Republic may disconnect and diminish opportunities. Currently study leave for the attestation, specialist post-doctoral qualification taken five years after the first degree, is facilitated only by two weeks study leave. Access to journals is improving but many Czechs and Slovaks must, handicapped by lack of communication with the West, work hard to improve English language skills ignored since 1969. It is ironic, therefore, that financial restraints and fragmentation of the hospital service may hinder the establishment of a European dialogue to which the newly formed republics have much to contribute.

Currently there are two relevant societies. The first, available since 1968, is an equivalent to the British Medical Association, open to all doctors, providing a forum for evaluation of contracts and terms of service. For psychiatrists the Purkyně Society, an equivalent of the Royal Society of Medicine, provides an academic forum whose costs are kept within reach of all, including trainees, who are eligible to join. The society is based in Prague but has members throughout the former Republic, publishing a journal entitled *Czechoslovak Psychiatry*. Its Committee is elected by all psychiatrists.

Currently under debate is the formation of a society which may be analogous to a federation of Royal Colleges in the United Kingdom in that it will have specialist sections including one for psychiatry which will include within their remit the maintenance, knowledge and evaluation of academic training within each specialty.

Within the last two years, besides the stream of tourists, many specialist connections with Prague have been established. Exiles are returning, for example, to the Czechoslovak State Ballet where, in the Prague spring of 1992, works choreographed by exiles of 1968, now triumphantly returned and welcomed, were staged to acclaim.

The time is right for a dialogue with the psychiatrists of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia. Prague and Bratislava are appropriate venues for new ventures in European psychiatry.