

## When the walls fell down

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### *From a personal letter*

... Vienna is deluged with Czechs—300,000 came to Austria last week. For forty years they have lived in a state of siege—no fresh vegetables, no soap, no paint or textiles or safety-pins or toilet paper. And they come here and are overwhelmed. Everything they need is here. And things they had forgotten existed. And things they never *knew* existed. Things.

They have a refreshing kind of diffidence, one can even say dignity, toward all this. In contrast to the Hungarians, who went mad with lust—there wasn't a colour TV to be had, and every few feet one encountered two Hungarians with a TV slung between them in a box. But the Hungarians had, somehow, money. The Czechs have none. They just look.

A few days ago I went to my bank. There was a long line of Czechs waiting to change money. An elderly man in front of me shoved a bundle of Czech notes to the cashier—it must have been two inches thick. He received in exchange a 100 schilling note (a little over £5.00). He was utterly dismayed. Then he carried the banknote over to his wife and the two of them stared at it. Her eyes filled with tears. It was awful, and you could see from their faces that they had lived through very hard and disappointing times in any case. I went over to them and gave the man a 500-schilling note. 'Please take this and use it to enjoy your visit to Vienna,' I said. 'Merry Christmas.' I ran out of the bank, feeling very ashamed somehow.

The next day, as I was crossing the street, a bus full of Czechs pulled up at the lights—and there was the old couple in the bus. They didn't see me, but I saw that they both looked very happy. That was nice! And everyone has a 'Czech' story, of inviting whole families for breakfast or, like me, giving them money. Suddenly the Viennese have become very benevolent—not at all a Viennese quality!

And how is this going to affect all of us—a Europe once again whole and free? Free for what? Colour TV and MacDonaldis? But the Czechs really don't seem to have consumer madness. Perhaps they will be able to take the best from both ideologies and create something new and clean and strong. Let's hope. Something we could all live by and with. ...

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