

## Prague Spring of 2020



*By AFoCR  
Director  
Peter Bisek  
Prague,  
May 2020*

I wish I were roaming the countryside on my motorcycle right now! The spring is so beautiful this year in the Czech Republic! Just perfect for riding on the twisting and nearly empty country roads, enjoying the vistas of the hills, woods, and picturesque villages. It is nothing like spring on Long Island, which is typically so short that the trees and grass have only a few weeks to get green and forsythias to show off their yellows along the Grand Central Parkway before the hot and humid days of the summer months.

A fragrant scent of lilac (*Syringa spp.*) fills the air at the beginning of every May in Prague. I recall that very same aroma – and the smiling faces of just liberated Czechs – at the end of WWII, exactly 75 years ago. That fragrance is here again in 2020 but very few faces are smiling as the nasty Covid-19 is everywhere.

The Coronavirus pandemic came quickly to the Czech Republic about six weeks ago. It surprised us and caught us unprepared, but we stood up to it. Our government immediately imposed restrictions as draconian as our hard-earned common sense allowed. Subconsciously, perhaps, we knew what our parents and grandparents had to live through, and that we will prevail in the same way as they did despite the many catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We knew that this was going to be difficult, but not the end of the world.

We quickly adjusted. We stayed home from work, closed shops, schools, theatres and stadiums, washed our hands and faces, and sanitized. No unnecessary travel, no vacations, no mass gatherings. We didn't gripe about not having enough face masks; we made our own. Now, it seems that the tired men-in-power who did so well at first are returning to their old habit of splicing leadership with politics. We, however, as confused as we may be with the ever-changing orders from above, are getting back into the groove of gradually returning to work and drinking beer with our like-minded compatriots, thanks to our centuries-hardened Western Slav mindset.

Eugene Deitch, the American illustrator, animator, comics artist, and film director, who had lived in Prague since 1958 and passed away on April 16 at the age of 95, wrote: "Czechs, simply, were and are masters of survival."

Yes, we know that it will not be easy to return to our former lifestyle. Many of us are facing new and unexpected hardships, losing our jobs, and even businesses. We know that we will have to adjust to a post-coronavirus reality with its tough challenges, but also with new opportunities. And, perhaps, to appreciate the comfortable life we lead, while not forgetting those less fortunate.

## AFoCR Celebrates 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Apollo 13



*The late AFoCR  
Chairman Fred Malek,  
AFoCR Advisor James  
Lovell, with former  
President George H.W.  
Bush at Gala Award  
Dinner Honoring Lovell  
in Houston 11/12/08  
(photo by Lillis Werder)*

"Houston, we've had a problem." These immortal words were uttered by AFoCR Advisor and former astronaut Jim Lovell 50 years ago after an explosion in the Apollo 13 spacecraft he commanded. His mission was expected to be the third manned lunar landing, but was preempted by the accident which disabled many of Apollo 13's life support systems and made the landing impossible. More importantly, the failure of many of the spacecraft's vital systems placed the lives of Commander Jim Lovell, Command Module Pilot Jack Swigert, and Lunar Module Pilot Fred Haise in serious peril. Only through the Herculean efforts and ingenuity of NASA's Mission Control and by Lovell's calm direction of the crew was it possible to enable the return of the capsule to Earth. Later, the explosion was attributed to a faulty component in one of the rocket's oxygen tanks. Upon this spectacular recovery, Lovell and his crew were awarded the prestigious Presidential Medal of Freedom. This riveting story was recreated in Ron Howard's Oscar winning film *Apollo 13*, featuring Tom Hanks portraying Lovell, and a cast of other stars based on Lovell's book *Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13*. A web site called *Apollo 13 in Real Time*, the creation of Ben Feist, a contractor at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, is providing transcripts, video footage, and audio recordings from the mission posted at the times they occurred 50 years ago, including every word spoken by the astronauts on the mission. We at AFoCR celebrate the anniversary of this historic event and express congratulations to our colleague.



*Crew of Apollo 13  
(1 to r) Jim Lovell,  
Jack Swigert, and  
Fred Haise  
(photo by  
universetoday.com)*

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## Letter from

## AFoCR President Tom Dine



*AFoCR President  
Tom Dine at  
Gibian Freedom  
Lecture, 11/15/19*

The geopolitical world has changed greatly in the first five months of 2020, and changes will continue. The invisible Covid-19 pandemic is straining political and socio-economic threads that tie modern nation-states together. The biggest crisis currently facing democracy comes from the exploitation of the pandemic by autocrats, who thrust for power and the closing of open societies.

In this context, let us consider the Visegrad states (V4) of Central Europe -- the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, we have seen the growth of autocracy in Poland and Hungary and anxiety-driven fears of lethal illness in all four countries.

Governments around the globe along with public and private health systems were not prepared to deal with Covid-19, even in the most powerful countries. Under these conditions, will the pandemic foment international disunity? Will elected rulers use weakening health and economic conditions to seize and abuse more emergency and police powers to the detriment of individual freedoms and competing political parties? Will the pandemic fracture Europe's economic union and thus political union? Will a new equilibrium in regional, continental, and global affairs emerge from this disease-laden disorder?

Of the V4, the Czech Republic is a leading example of socio-political resilience and cohesion. It was one of the first countries in the world to recognize the dangers of the Covid-19 virus. In March, the Czech government shut down all non-essential businesses, imposed severe restrictions on public gatherings, closed its borders, and prohibited its citizens to travel abroad, while the other three V4 countries only highly recommended these measures. Displaying public discipline, 10.6 million Czechs quickly adopted the now famous physical distancing and hand-washing regimen.

What especially set the Czech Republic apart, however, was the requirement that everyone outside their residences had to wear at all times a face mask covering the nose and mouth. This obligation — "I protect you, you protect me" — triggered the nation's entrepreneurial spirit. "The nation transformed itself almost overnight into a giant factory churning out homemade masks," reported Steve Kashkett, an American living in Prague, in "USA Today" (April 4). "MASKS4ALL" signs appeared throughout the country.

Democracy has prevailed in the Czech Republic. Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš didn't follow the authoritarian scenario of Hungary and Poland. The public hasn't challenged Health Minister Adam Vojtěch for imposing explicit rules and standards. As of early May 2020, only 8,000 or so Czechs out of 10.6 million people have been diagnosed with Covid-19, with 250 deaths. Babiš has received praise in Europe for his government's effectiveness. As of late May, fewer than 9,000 cases have been recorded with just over 300 deaths.

Disciplined Czech governmental capabilities during this health crisis have also been displayed in combating disinformation from Moscow and other places, exposing an effort by Russian

espionage agents to poison the mayor of Prague, combating the subtleties of pernicious e-government, and protecting critical infrastructure and public services. The Czechs have not lost sight of their need for national security.

The Covid-19 crisis hit Slovakia during the time of a parliamentary election, but public health worries did not hinder the Slovaks in exercising their democratic rights of voting. Indeed, in an electoral upset, a new anti-corruption group led by Igor Matovič received the most votes and assumed coalition power in Bratislava. With a population of 5.5 million people, the smallest in the V4, Slovakia's coronavirus response has been to slow down its spread significantly. Indeed, in a classic photograph, President Zuzana Čaputová and the Matovič cabinet stand side-by-side outside the parliament building wearing white face masks and white gloves. In addition to holding off the pandemic, the victory of clean government over disillusionment and corruption was a winner. Slovakia has the best record of dealing with the Covid-19 virus among the V4.

Poland's President Andrzej Duda, leader of the dominant Law and Justice Party, imposed some of the earliest and toughest measures in the V4 to prevent the spread of the virus, with some success. As of May 1st, the nation of 38 million had recorded 13,105 cases of Covid-19, mostly in the Masovian Province, with 650 deaths, all of whom were already suffering from preexisting conditions. Yet, recent events suggest that the principal interest of the populist president, as of his counterpart in Hungary, was not protecting Poles from illness, but consolidating his personal power and that of his party at the expense of the country's fragile democracy. Even before the pandemic hit, the Law and Justice government was abusing power by curtailing civil liberties and the rule of law. In 2020, Poland is less free than it was in 2019, and the prospects for 2021 aren't good.

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, once a fervent democrat, is now the self-proclaimed champion of "illiberalism" and strongman rule. Although Hungary is a member of the European Union and NATO, Orbán has shifted Hungary to authoritarianism with a democratic facade. He denies this. Recklessly, as the pandemic hit Hungary hard, he grabbed expanded emergency powers in late March. The Hungarian parliament, controlled by Orbán's party, canceled all elections, suspended its own ability to legislate, and gave him the right to rule by decree for the indefinite future. None of these powers is needed to fight Covid-19 or to fix problems inside Hungary's hospitals. They simply will enable the government push through measures, such as edicts for museum construction and prohibitions for transgender people to legally change their sexual orientations. None of these are remotely relevant to the pandemic. In the context of the pandemic, Orbán no longer maintains the illusion of democracy.

Relatively speaking, Covid-19 is being dealt with adequately by the Visegrad Four, although the health systems of all four countries wait anxiously for an adequate testing system and a proven vaccine. None of the V4 countries, revitalized since the fall of communism, have split apart. But, in Hungary and Poland democracy is diminishing at a speed greater than before the pandemic arrived. Political and economic divisions within the European Union have emerged. The V4 countries need to work together on coronavirus concerns as well as democratic practices and principles.

Thomas A. Dine  
President, AFoCR

## Czech Art in the Time of Pandemic

By Louise Beer



*Examples of artwork  
(l to r) Blue Goddess  
by artist Blanka  
Adensomavá, and  
Poem of Landscape  
by Zbyněk Havlín.*

As we face the uncertainty ahead due to COVID-19, it has become clear to me that art plays an important role in our lives. The recent events have forced us to spend more time alone in our homes, appreciating the art hanging on our walls. Some people even dream about items they would like to have one day.

My life with art started a long time ago. I remember buying my first piece of art in my mid-twenties, and 35 years later I take joy and satisfaction in my collection. It started piece by piece – once a year, I treated myself to something that caught my attention. I would follow my intuition that it was the right one for me. I am particularly thankful to a gallery owner in Montreal who let me pay in installments. The item I chose was expensive for me at the time, but I felt a strong connection with it.

I urge you to take the time to admire the work of art that you have at home. Or perhaps you could imagine a work you would like in a particular space. For me, a home can be a refuge, a cocoon, a peaceful haven where one can feel safe and at peace. I have always been lucky to be surrounded by lovely art, wherever I have lived. Having art at home should be something to lift your spirits and your morale.

So many people are intimidated by contemporary art and often express their lack of knowledge or understanding about it. I always share the same advice: if you are attracted to a piece of art and you like how it makes you feel, don't ask any other questions. Just get it. There is too much complication about art interpretation. One should connect with a work of art; its colour, its composition, its movement and the overall feeling of the work should speak to you.

When I opened **PragArtworks Gallery** last year, I decided to represent local Czech art that I felt a connection to. This was also reinforced by the relationships I had built with highly varied Czech contemporary artists. I am happy to represent well known and established artists such as Pavel Roučka, Václav Bláha and Milan Chabera, as well as developing artists and young art school graduates.

As an art lover and supporter, I cannot help but think of our local artists, who have been deeply affected by this difficult situation. Many have shared sad stories of upcoming exhibitions delayed indefinitely, new gallery openings cancelled, and the complete loss of possible income this year. I cannot help but wonder how to turn it around and give hope to an upcoming artist who will not have many guarantees for the rest of the year.

A possible positive outcome of this situation is that isolation can offer an opportunity for creativity and innovation, providing opportunities for many to reinvent themselves. I know the artists at PragArtworks are working hard at their studios and taking advantage of this time to create and innovate.

At PragArtworks, our job is to connect the public with the art and artists of our time and place. Although our gallery is presently closed until the COVID 19 situation resolves, we will continue our mission online. PragArtworks is a showcase for several Czech contemporary artists whose work I most admire. My website was

created so that art lovers might easily view the most exciting contemporary Czech artists.

There has never been a better time to acquire a piece of art and surround yourself with something beautiful in your home, whether it be a poster, a painted canvas, a glasswork, or a sculpture. So, my advice during these days of isolation is to go online, do virtual museum tours, explore art galleries, and dream a little about what you can put on that white wall of yours to raise your spirits!

### Czechs Lauded for Response to Coronavirus Spread By Miloslav Rechcigl, Jr.

Based on results, the Czech Republic apparently has the best record in the way it responded to the coronavirus, at least in Europe. As of April 22, the Czech Republic had just 7,132 cases nationwide (666 confirmed cases per million people). By comparison, the U.S. had 2,564 confirmed cases per million people (nearly four times the Czech rate).

There have been only 208 deaths in the Czech Republic (19 per million people), less than one-seventh of the U.S. rate (144 per million). In actual numbers, as of April 22, 698 people have died from COVID in the state of Maryland, compared to 208 in the Czech Republic.

The Czechs did it with decisive action. On March 12, as the U.S., Europe, and the rest of the world were struggling to respond to the rapidly spreading pandemic, the Czech government announced a state of emergency. It closed all schools nationwide, then ordered all restaurants and bars, as well as most stores, to close their doors. Only grocery stores, drug stores, and supermarkets that sell food were allowed to stay open. And with those stores, the government urged citizens to remain two meters (6.6 feet) apart from each other and wear gloves while shopping. The government also decreed a designated shopping period for senior citizens (early mornings), to minimize their chance of catching the virus.

In mid-March, the rules were tightened further. All residents were ordered to shelter in place, meaning they could leave their homes only to shop for essential supplies or go for a walk in nature, and they were required to wear face masks at all times when they were out of doors.

By establishing such strict quarantine rules, and imposing them so early in the pandemic's development, the Czechs stood apart from most other European countries, and especially from the U.S. More than one month later, the Czech response has produced encouraging results. The curve of new cases of coronavirus grew far slower in the Czech Republic than in other European states or the U.S.

It appears that the strict face mask requirement has played an important role in the Czechs' success. Whereas U.S. authorities, like CDC, initially downplayed the value of face masks, the Czechs made masks mandatory almost immediately after declaring a state of emergency. By late March, it was becoming clear that masks are indeed a beneficial tool in controlling the virus' spread. In fact, on March 28, *The Washington Post* published an article explaining the growing evidence about face masks' value, citing the Czech Republic as a model, and lauding the nation's citizens for "an extraordinary mobilization by nearly the whole population" to sew and distribute home-made face-masks. "Within three days, there were enough masks for everyone in the country," the story noted, "and most people were wearing them. This was an entirely grassroots community effort." On April 6, *USA Today*, also printed an article lauding the Czech response. Its title, "Coronavirus: Czech Republic imposed a face mask requirement and the US should too."

(Based on Dick Mendel's article in *CSHA Hlas*, Spring / Jaro 2020 issue.)

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