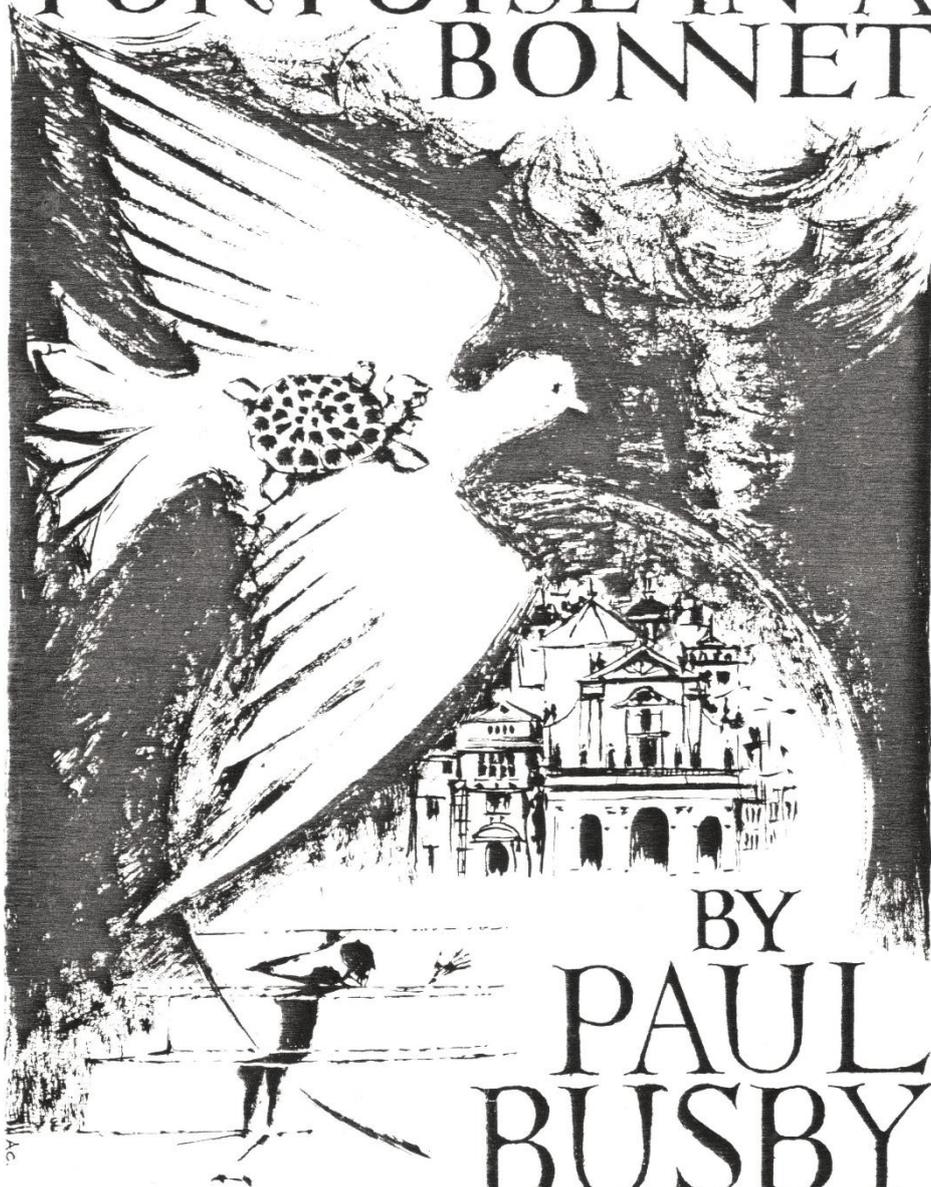


TORTOISE IN A BONNET



BY
PAUL
BUSBY

TORTOISE IN A BONNET

A breath-by-breath, eye-blinking,

heart-beating, step-by-step account of

The World Assembly for Peace and Life, against Nuclear War,
held in Prague in June 1983

by

Paul Gordon Busby

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PREFACE WRITTEN IN 2020

I wrote this book in 1983 after I returned from the World Assembly. It was never published, but one copy was given to the Lewes Peace Library in Westgate Chapel in Lewes; another did the rounds of people in my village, in particular being shown to people who had contributed in one way or another to my trip.

So much has changed in the world since then. Czechoslovakia, along with most other former communist countries in Europe, is now a Western-style democracy. Tourists regularly visit these destinations, something which was almost unheard of and unimaginable when I wrote this book. Citizens of these countries have not only visited this country, but also worked here and settled in this country, although this is no longer possible for some people since Britain left the European Union.

The peace movement, which was huge back in the 1980s is now a shadow of its former self and other things have taken its place, primarily, the climate crisis.

Yet nuclear weapons have not gone away. British submarines equipped with nuclear weapons still patrol the seas as if nothing has changed. In the minds of many of our politicians, nothing has. Wars have not ceased, although the likelihood of countries in the European Union getting involved in armed conflicts with each other is now unthinkable.

Refugees from current war zones, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq now flee to Europe for shelter and all too often they are not welcomed, as if they themselves are potential enemies.

I do believe that the lessons from the past can still teach us a thing or two. As people who want peace (and there are very few who don't) we have taken our eye off the ball for too long and need to combat those who profit by stirring up hatred amongst different people.

That is why I am now publishing this book. I do admit that I have sometimes come across as being rather naïve at the time and maybe did not pay enough attention to the problems or failings of "Eastern European" countries, as we used to call them. But I was also hopeful that given enough good-will by everyone the situation would improve. There is also the danger of stressing the negative side too much which merely serves to reinforce the stereotyped image of such countries and plays into the hands of the war-mongers.

We now have to ensure that people the world over no longer face the threat of war or other threats which can lead to war, as well as doing what we can to put an end to wars which are currently being waged. In short, we all need to cooperate in tackling the real issues which threaten us all, the world over.

ORIGINAL PREFACE

It is probable that most of us know more about the social life of ants than about life in a socialist country; learn more about seventeenth century England than about twentieth century Czechoslovakia; and think more about being left alone in peace than about co-existing with others in peace.

This book will not change this state of affairs overnight. But hopefully, it will whet people's appetites enough for them to carry on from where it leaves off.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Cover picture by Anne Clark.

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A TWINKLE IN THE EYE

I have always been one of life's most shy and retiring creatures – a wallflower by birth, dormouse by habit, and hermit by inclination. The sort of person who might receive a winter coat for a Christmas present, but for fear that anyone might realise that it's new, only pluck up enough courage to wear it in the height of the following summer. Irrational, perhaps, but who isn't in one way or another?

What on earth, then, was I doing amongst complete strangers on a plane bound for Prague with a two and a half foot long, brown and golden tortoise in a white bonnet cradled between my knees? I hasten to add that I don't make a habit of taking toys with me wherever I go. Neither do I have any deep psychological cravings to be a tortoise myself, although the desire to retire into my shell away from the outside world at times is something that we have in common. No, the answer is that I was indulging in my very favourite pastime – worrying.

What if the customs officials rip the tortoise to bits looking for hidden caches of drugs, diamonds or dynamite, as the reporter on the local newspaper had suggested might happen, somewhat too gleefully for my liking? Thereagain, what if Czechoslovakia was literally crawling with tortoises, no doubt all in white frilly bonnets, and the authorities were doing their utmost to get rid of them? After all, they can get through an awful lot of lettuces if you let them. Alternatively, say no-one had ever seen one before? Goodness knows what they might do with it – use it as a football, shoot at it on a rifle range, put it on the fire to burn. More likely, both of us would be locked away in some isolated psychiatric hospital for a long intensive period of re-education.

Then there was the nagging question of whether or not I should have bought some kind of airline ticket for it. You have to for some animals, I believe, and it was taking up quite a bit of room – my cramped legs assured me of that. Why, oh why hadn't I checked up beforehand, instead of smuggling it on board with my hand-luggage. The clerk of the village council had said most definitely it would need a ticket, and possibly even a passport and visa too. Being a council official, there's no question that she must have been right!

My troubled thoughts were interrupted as a full passenger list fell into my lap. The names of doctors, scientists, clergymen, housewives, journalists, lawyers, union officials and politicians and their respective organisations stared up at me. And there, amongst them all was my own name, and the organisation I was representing – a village peace group in the Home Counties, sandwiched rather incongruously between the NUM and the UCATT.

I noticed with a whiff of true patriotism that the names beside these acronyms both began with the initials GB – an appropriate reminder that we were all part of the British delegation, heading for the

same destination, with the same objective in mind – to do something for Peace. And for this worthy cause, the tortoise also had an important part to play.

It was during a social evening at a pub in the nearest big town that I first read about something called ‘The World Assembly for Peace and Life, against Nuclear War’ to be held in Prague in June 1983. I must admit that I was more struck by the photograph of the city than the wording on the leaflet I had picked up out of curiosity. I hadn’t had a holiday for three years and was beginning to suffer from the chronic effects of that little-known disease ‘Away-sickness’,

Fellow sufferers will recognise the symptoms easily: a far-away look in the eyes as you gloat over the advertisements in the Sunday supplements; the pounding of the heart as you watch the contestants line up in the Miss World competition; and the temporary paralysis of the legs as you passed the windows of travel agencies.

I was already at the stage of finding myself singing ‘Wonderful, Wonderful Copenhagen’ in every key, followed by a rousing but croaky rendition of ‘Tulips for Amsterdam’ upon awakening each morning.

The more I thought about going to Prague, well, the more I thought about it, and thought...until all the tiny pockets of resistance had been overcome, and I eagerly sent off for more information, having already decided that if I could go, I would.

Granted it would cost more money than I cared to think about - £165, all told – but that only boils down to around 100 chocolate bars (the standard measurement used by the Ministry of Defence), and I am rather partial to chocolate...

I couldn’t really go without my wife, I thought. But that matter was soon settled: I couldn’t go with my wife, and someone from our group, indeed, someone from amongst all the groups in our county ought to go. Yet no-one else I was aware about had expressed an interest in going.

But what would people think if I paid a visit to a Communist country? To be perfectly honest, I didn’t lose much sleep over this point. Business-men are always popping over behind the Iron Curtain, and no-one views them at all suspiciously. So why should it be any different with me? Peaceful relations between countries could actually boost the amount of trade between East and West and vice versa. In that respect then, I was helping to promote a suitable climate for increasing international trade, and few can quibble about that.

As for being put off by the sort of stories we hear about Eastern Europe, I regarded my trip instead as a bit of a challenge. So much bad news seems to emanate from these countries in the press that I wondered if anything good ever happened there. How can people manage to exist under such dreadful conditions? The only real way to find out was to go and see. I’d finally convinced myself.

It wasn’t hard persuading the other members of my group that it would be a good idea to send someone to the World Assembly. And as I was ‘available’, and willing to pay the costs myself, I was readily accepted as our official nominee.

I count myself lucky to belong to a very broad and open-minded peace group. What unites us is the belief that Peace is more than something you merely pay lip-service to. So what we do, we do in the grand style, involving as much of the rest of the community as possible. And this, our latest project, presented us with a perfect opportunity to do precisely that.

PREPARATIONS

About a month before the start of the World Assembly, I heard that my application had been successful. To put it mildly, I was overjoyed. My first reaction was to rush off to the nearest library and take out a well-known guide-book on Eastern Europe which I practically memorized in the first day. By the time I'd finished reading it, I had already revised all my preconceptions about these countries. If ever there's a single book which is capable of changing people's attitudes, this must be the one. My praise of it was only exceeded by the cost of the fine I had to pay for returning it late. This was not the only book I borrowed from the library. My experience of visiting foreign countries and not being able to make myself understood also prompted me to find a Czech language tutor. And, full of determination, I resolved to learn to speak Czech as fluently as possible within the time available.

Unfortunately, though, resolve is not always enough, even with the aid of a tape recorder, a very understanding cat, and a patient, but increasingly-neglected wife. I was willing enough to contort my face into weird shapes, saying things like: "Strc prst skrz krk", which means "Put the finger through the neck". (I'm still not sure whether this is meant as an insult or as a piece of first aid!)

However, when it came to committing to memory the various declensions of words, I knew I'd bitten off more than I could chew. There are simply dozens of different endings which can apply to masculine or feminine nouns. That alone is enough to put you off sex for life! The same applies to neuter nouns, adjectives, pronouns and verbs. It is not altogether surprising therefore that my brain took what could only be described as industrial action and refused point blank to function any more. In desperation, I chose the lazy way out and decided to end every word with the sound 'y'. It worries me not to think what I might have said if I'd known what I'd said. As I stated earlier, I really do take my worrying very seriously indeed.

In going through the book, my attention was caught by three particular sentences which, I felt, I ought to try and remember, since they could stand me in good stead for conducting a sensible conversation with any Czechoslovakians I might meet. In translation, according to the book, the sentences are as follows:

"Good morning. How old is your wife?" A rather friendly and considerate remark this, which would be certain to provoke an interesting response.

Next, a really original opening gambit which might help to break the ice at a party: "Excuse me, can I ask you to do me for a favour?" The advantage of this one is that the answer might only be a single word, which would be easy to look up afterwards, provided it's in the dictionary.

Finally, a statement which might be directed at any of us, so just as well to recognise it in advance: "Father is against such night entertainments!" Presumably, this would refer to things like parades after dark. But it has been suggested that it might very well be the East European version of that old

favourite: “Not tonight, darling, I’ve got a headache.” Jamborees in the wee small hours can have this effect upon some people, I gather.

It is somewhat disappointing to report that during my entire stay in Czechoslovakia, none of these sentences came in useful to me at all. However, my studies were not entirely in vain. I so mastered the expression “S’Bohem”, meaning “Goodbye”, that on one occasion I was actually mistaken for one of them, and promptly ignored while all the attention was lavished upon the unmistakable foreign guests. The moral to that story seems to be that a little learning is, if not a dangerous thing, certainly a bit of a handicap under such circumstances.

There were two other preparations that we made for my visit which were concerned more with reaching out to other people than in fortifying my own comfort. Although I was to represent our peace group first and foremost, I did feel conscious of the fact that my name would be inextricably linked with the name of the village. Like it or not, I would be seen as a sort of unofficial ambassador, so that it seemed a wise thing to do to widen the circle of involvement, in a gesture which would link people together in the East and West.

One way we set out to achieve this was to delve into the heritage of the village itself to see what it had to offer. We needed to look no further than the village sign. There, seen and known by all, is a portrait of a tortoise, not just any old tortoise, but one of the most famous ones that ever lived. I refer to none other than Timothy, who once resided in the grounds of a country house in the very heart of the village.

Devotees of natural history will recognise this creature as the tortoise which belonged to the aunt of Gilbert White, the celebrated eighteenth-century naturalist and author. On the death of his aunt, Gilbert White took Timothy back home with him to Selbourne, and his remains, the tortoise that is, are now kept in the British Museum.

The idea of taking a replica tortoise with me was thus kindled. It could be sent as a present from the children of our village to the patients in a children’s hospital in Prague, we thought. Everyone loves children and everyone feels sorry for sick children. So what better way could there be to cement the bonds between people, and to build up feelings of common interest and affection between members of the present and future generations.

With great luck, I discovered that a toy-maker lived just a short distance away from me. On being told the requirements we had in mind, he too was fired with enthusiasm and produced a beautiful, cuddly soft toy in next to no time. The finishing touch, most definitely the ‘*pièce de résistance*’ was to dress him up in a dainty bonnet inscribed with the word TIM. This abbreviation seemed better than the full name, since ‘Timothy’ could prove to be quite a mouthful for non-English-speaking children to pronounce. It was either that of the Czech version of the name, Bohuslav, which somehow did not strike us as being entirely appropriate.

The next thing to consider was how to pay for this toy. We hit upon two ideas. One was to design a special badge depicting TIM and incorporating the word 'Peace' and the name of the village. Several hundred of these badges were produced in a range of pastel colours to provide people with a choice, or hopefully, to entice them to buy a whole set. Some of these badges could be sold here to cover costs, and the remaining hundred or so could be taken to Czechoslovakia to give away.

The other way was to run a Guess-the-weight-of-the-tortoise competition at a local fete. It must have been one of the last rainy days before the long dry spell that followed. Being without a tent, we had to improvise some form of shelter. This, we accomplished by parking two estate cars at right angles to one another, opening up the doors of the boots, and hanging a strip of polythene over the top.

In theory, the fete should have provided a marvellous opportunity to expose the animal to the public eye for the first time to allow us to launch the initiative in a big way. In practice, the tortoise was more exposed to the elements than to the public. To keep him well away from the king-size drips and gushing streams which periodically descended upon us, we put him the boot of one of the cars, where he sat looking extremely dejected, and not really very cuddlesome at all.

Now the fete was taking place on the Saturday before the General Election, and during the course of the day, most of the candidates paid us a visit, in some cases more by chance than by design. So it was with the former M.P. and his large entourage. As the party suddenly came upon us from the direction of the army stall directly to our rear, obviously wondering who exactly we were, one of the young men spotted the forlorn-looking animal sitting next to a big notice which said: "Guess his weight and in a prize".

"Look, Tim," said the fellow, turning to the election candidate. "They've named a tortoise after you!"

I did my best to explain that the one wearing the bonnet was the village emblem. Which political party he favoured, I hadn't a clue; probably the one with the tastiest rosettes...

It might be purely coincidental but the extra publicity we gave to TIM could have rubbed off on the candidate. He was elected a short time later with a large majority.

The tortoise and the badges were not the only ideas we had in which to link our two communities together. Someone suggested compiling a scrap-book, or 'Friendship Book' as it came to be known, from our village to the people of Prague. This soon developed into a real community enterprise.

To start if off, some pictures of village landmarks and a few goodwill messages were scattered around inside, contributed by members of our group. These examples, we thought, would show other people what they could do without having to go into long explanations about the purpose of the book.

It worked a treat. As word got round, the book grew and grew and grew; going from one person to another, form one organisation to the next. The calendar that we use to note down our engagements

soon became an appointments diary for the Friendship Book, and it's quite possible that we missed certain appointments as a result.

Each time it came back to 'home-base', as it were, there was a mad rush to see the latest entries. And during the last week especially, life became extremely hectic as people who had already contributed to the book wished to see it again to find out how it was coming along.

By the time it was in a completed state – the very evening before I had to leave – there were well over sixty goodwill messages, fifty photographs and postcards, and a large number of leaflets, booklets, and paper and cloth badges, swelling out the pages. Altogether, the contents showed a very vivid picture of village life in twentieth-century Britain. Even so, limitations of time did not make it possible to approach every one of the societies in the village.

Nevertheless, together with the tortoise, the book had been in constant circulation, and had been displayed at a school, a surgery, a pensioners' tea-party, a home for the elderly, a parish council meeting, a church, a Quaker meeting, a bible-study meeting, a public house, an animal welfare centre and a well-known opera house nearby.

The messages revealed a profound yearning for peace and friendship with people in other countries. Many of them were very moving indeed. To me, it clearly showed that in people's hearts, there is certainly not the feeling of animosity towards the populations of Eastern European countries as parts of the media suggest there is, or should be.

The popularity of the Friendship Book delighted us, but also took us by surprise. If we had known beforehand just how successful it was to prove, we would have attempted to make several copies of it: one to send to Prague, one for the village archives, one for each contributor, and one for anyone else who might have wanted one. I'm sure it would have been a best-seller here in no time. But after all, the book was designed as a gift to others, and we couldn't lose sight of that fact.

It is in this ability to give to others without expecting anything in return that the real secret of peace most probably lies. But all the same, it would still be jolly nice to receive such a book from somewhere else.

SATURDAY: EASTWARD BOUND

Finally, the time came for me to depart. Early on the Saturday morning I caught a train to London, carrying a suitcase, a raincoat (all Englishmen carry a raincoat abroad), and a tortoise.

The lack of space on the overhead rack meant that the tortoise had to ride beside me, with my coat wrapped firmly around him and with just his head poking up out of the little bundle. Meanwhile I tried to gaze nonchalantly out of the window, studying the passing scenery rather intently.

Being British, the other passengers completely ignored the scene, and even when the train filled up, no-one asked me to move the obstacle. Perhaps, seeing something in a white hat and a raincoat, they were under the impression that it was a little girl. Nonetheless, I was a little surprised not to have been accused by anyone of trying to stifle a child on such a hot summer's day. Anyway, this disguise gave me a perfect excuse not to have to cuddle the tortoise on my lap – at least, not until I changed on to the Underground for the journey to Heathrow. In fact, the only look of surprise I witnessed the whole trip was on the face of a female security official when the tortoise emerged on the conveyor belt from out of the X-ray machine at the airport. In amongst all the flight bags and other hand luggage he suddenly appeared, stretched out like a little kiddie, zooming down the slide in a playground. Funny, but I swear I detected a big grin on his face as the woman's eyebrows shot up in astonishment!

The flight over to Prague by the Czech national airline was quite pleasant but uneventful. There was no bump as we crossed over the Iron Curtain, and no change of any description in the way that we were treated on one side to the other. Had I thought about it, though, I would have realised that one moment I could have been blown to bits by a missile with a red star on it, and a split second later by a missile with a white or possibly a blue star on it. There's one situation in which colour-blindness would not matter much to anyone!

On arrival, we had our first inkling of our metamorphosis from woolly-hatted, woolly-minded trouble-makers, layabouts and misfits to nothing less than V.I.P.s, first class. Coloured flags lined the top of the airport building, and alongside attached to the wall, was a huge placard which read: SVĚTOVÉ SHROMÁŽDĚNÍ ZA MÍR A ŽIVOT, PROTI JADERNÉ VÁLCE (World Assembly for Peace and Life, against Nuclear war). On both sides of the placard stood crowds of people, frantically waving their arms in the air.

It was only when we reached the terminal building after a lengthy walk across the tarmac when I turned around to comment to someone about this unexpected welcome, that I saw in the distance an Aeroflot jet, currently being boarded by a long stream of people. No doubt their friends and relatives

were there to see them off, rather than to see us arrive. But my disappointment was only short-lived; there was far too much to take in to dwell on such matters.

The airport lounge, for instance, was very modern-looking, the chairs appeared quite comfortable, the décor rather plush, and I could even see an airport cinema through an open doorway. Surely, we must have landed in Austria or Switzerland by mistake? But no, there were signs everywhere saying PRAHA 83. This was Prague alright, and this was certainly the right year.

As soon as we entered the lounge, we were given cooling drinks while our passports were taken away from us to be processed. We then passed through several inspection checks and ended up in the main foyer. Here, we found that our suitcases were already being taken outside to be loaded up on special buses which would take us to the hotel.

What about the Customs, I wondered, expecting to have had to face a bit of an ordeal, regardless of whether there was anything to declare or not. My expectations were unfulfilled, and when I examined my suitcase later, it was still locked. It would seem that the authorities must have taken us all on trust – quite something when you consider the potential risks involved in allowing such an influx of foreigners into the country.

A short bus-ride took us to the Hotel International, a four-star, twelve-storey, older style of building in the north of the city. Registration was the first priority. But this was handled in a very efficient manner by the friendly and courteous hotel staff, who assigned us rooms, issued us with meal coupons, and presented us with a leather attaché case each. Inside, was a note pad and biro, and a T-shirt, tie and sun-hat, all bearing the emblem of the World Assembly – a dove with outstretched wing upon a global background.

After registration, we adjourned upstairs to our rooms. Actually, each door opened on to a suite of rooms, comprising of a small vestibule, a double and single bedroom, and a bathroom,

I shared the double bedroom with, aptly enough, a member of the Co-operative Society, who amused me no end with his accounts of visits to other socialist countries. I valued his company very highly.

The room itself consisted of two beds, furnished with continental quilts, fitted cupboards and wardrobes, a cocktail cabinet, a large modern radio, a couple of armchairs and a table, and a writing-table with a big mirror. All of these fittings were quite new. But there was also a flash-back to the elegance of bygone days in the form of two bedside lamps which resembled miniature chandeliers. Even though they would jingle away for ages if you accidentally brushed against them (and it was impossible to get into bed without doing so), I did appreciate this additional touch of, dare I say, ‘class’.

The bathroom was equally-well supplied with all imaginable requirements, such as shower hats, hair shampoo, toothpaste and deodorant, in addition to the standard items. I don’t know whether, in the interests of uniformity, we should all have come out smelling the same from different parts of our

anatomies. But in view of the hot and sultry weather we experienced there, I can understand the hotel's concern about the welfare of its guests, and the sort of impressions they might make upon other guests, without the benefit of such toiletries.

A really nice gesture, I thought, was a letter awaiting us in our room from Čedok, the Czechoslovakian Travel Agency, wishing us every success in the deliberations of the World Assembly. It was this attention to detail which added so much to our enjoyment, and illustrates the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of the Czechoslovak people.

Right outside the hotel was one of the terminals of the tramway system, and since all public transport was free to delegates, a tram ride seemed a good way to catch an opening glimpse of the city. Along with a colleague from the neighbouring county to mine, I boarded a tram and went off into the unknown.

It was a pity that the sky was not overcast, since it made many of the buildings along the route appear rather grey and sombre-looking. But unbeknown to us, we had chosen a journey which took us into the industrial suburbs instead of towards the city centre. However, the dullness was more than compensated for by the colourful little flags which flew from every building and the large placards on public buildings declaring in big letters messages such as International Cooperation, Peaceful co-existence Between Nations, and A World Without War.

In the windows of shops and flats, not just the odd one or two but in practically all of them were pictures of doves; posters of various, often quite beautiful, designs; children's paintings; and photographs of demonstrations for peace throughout the world.

In particular, one event which was very prominently displayed was the Nordic Women's Peace March which took place in 1982. This march travelled through several Eastern European countries, splitting into two sections which followed different routes for part of the journey, before coming together again for a final rally in Vienna. People from over thirty nationalities participated, including hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens, Czechoslovakians and Hungarians.

Clearly visible in these photographs was the banner carried by the women, which proclaimed: NO TO NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN EUROPE, EAST AND WEST. Mention was made of this historic march many times during the Assembly by representatives from the Peace Committees of Communist countries. Many references to it can also be found in the literature that they put out. Undoubtedly, it created a very deep impression upon people and opened the doors to East-West co-operation within the peace movement.

Much as I enjoyed the privilege of being able to use public transport systems without having to pay, I did feel a twinge of guilt about it, and chose instead to walk whenever I could. Nevertheless, it was good to know that our free rides were not doing the exchequer out of too much hard cash, since the fare for any distance in Prague by tram, bus, or Metro is only one crown (about 6p). At that price it's a wonder that anyone should want to travel anywhere by taxi, but they do.

At the far terminus, we swapped trams and arrived back at the hotel in time for dinner – Hungarian Goulash and the ubiquitous sliced dumplings, with cucumber and tomato salad, which stuck to the ribs admirably.

To let our meal go down and as not to waste any of our valuable time in Prague, we followed coffee with a gentle stroll up the road to get to know our bearings better.

The Hotel International faces on to a broad boulevard with two set of tramlines running up the centre. The ground floors of the tenement buildings near the hotel are divided up into flats, but further up the road they are used to house a number of small shops.

Almost a quarter of a mile from the hotel, I would guess, the avenue runs into a very large roundabout (yet officially called a ‘Square’) with a central island covered over in grass. In places, beds of flowers, mainly roses, add bright splashes of colour to the surroundings.

Beneath the roundabout is the newly-built Leninova Station on the recently-opened Metro line. The entrance to the station is framed by marble walls – no graffiti in sight! Likewise, the trains themselves are unblemished, spotless and free of litter. On the station walls there are no hoardings covered in advertisements, as there are on the London Underground. Instead, enormous sheets of what appear to be egg cartons coat the walls, but presumably they are made of something a good deal more substantial. I am not sure whether they have any practical use – I wouldn’t have thought that good acoustics are a major concern in the building of public transport facilities. But I may be wrong. Didn’t I see somewhere on another day a notice about a jazz club which meets in a Metro station? This must be the only place in the world where trains click their couplings and stomp their wheels in time to the music.

Advertisements do exist in other places, even if the railway stations are bereft of them. I was amazed to see a long line of billboards completely plastered in posters across the road from the subway entrance. Closer inspection revealed that the posters were all advertising various cultural and sports events of every imaginable kind. By now, it was no longer a surprise to see a few about the World Peace Assembly. Political pundits in Britain may be interested to learn that they were all blue in colour...

I also noticed a display board in a shop window containing postcards describing things for sale – cars, bikes, furniture, hi-fi systems and other items. Anyone is allowed to own anything which does not exploit others, I was told later. This being the case, then you’re obviously allowed to sell unwanted things too. Strange, but I had no inkling that in a centralised economy in a Socialist State, you could pick up a cheap second-hand Škoda by ringing someone’s private telephone number. My view of the world, largely manufactured in Fleet Street where national newspapers are produced, was already crumbling into tiny pieces around me.

The time was now fast approaching ten o'clock, and at this time of night what I certainly did not expect to see was a newly-married couple, still in wedding attire, walking along the road with some of the guests.

"Let's wish them well," nudged my companion as he made a bee-line towards them.

He smiled as they looked up. "I hope you'll be very happy together."

"Um...srdecny pozdrav," I attempted to say, wishing that my first utterances in Czech didn't have to be quite such a mouthful.

"You're English?" said the bride, without even a hint of a blush at this unexpected interruption to their connubial wonderings. "I visited Canterbury not so long ago – very nice city." (If only the Archbishop had been with us to hear that.)

"We hope that the World Assembly is very successful, and that many positive things will come out of it," added another of the wedding party. And on such a mutual exchange of good-wishes, we took off on our separate ways.

As we walked back to the hotel, the 'hostinec' were just closing, and a few youngsters, rather the worse for wear, were being propped up as they made their exits. At least in one respect, I mused, there's no mistaking the strong similarity between Czechoslovakia and Britain – they both close the bars far too early!

SUNDAY: DAY OF REST?

The next day I set aside purely for sight-seeing. Clutching a map firmly in my grasp, I retraced my footsteps of the previous night up to the roundabout and continued in the same general direction until I reached the castle.

Hradčany Castle dominates the centre of Prague from almost any angle since it stands up on a piece of high land overlooking the river Vltava. Appearing to be more of an elongated type of country house of Georgian or Regency design than a castle in the sense that we think of them in Britain, it just shows how deceptive initial looks can often be. For the façade dates from the most recent period of construction, while behind this, stands the accumulation of many centuries of continuous growth. Besides serving as the residence of the country's President, and a venue for many important meetings, it performs another useful function in that being such an easily recognizable landmark, it is invaluable for people like me who find difficulty in reading maps.

Parties of tourists were being shown around the courtyards by numerous guides, and smidgens of different languages wafted through the air like a dawn chorus on a sleepless morning. In spite of the incomprehensible chatter, I had a feeling that I was hearing the same question being asked in a multitude of different ways: "How much does it cost to pay the window-cleaner?"

Whatever the answer, it would certainly be money well-earned. Not that this information would have particularly interested any visiting Catholics, however, since it was out of one of these windows that two Habsburg officials were thrown by Protestant townspeople in 1618. This deed triggered off the last big religious conflict in Europe – the Thirty Years War – which devastated much of the continent. Ironically, it was also responsible for the erection of many of the distinctive Baroque-styled palaces and churches in Prague that were funded by the spoils of war which had accrued to many Catholic aristocrats.

Through a short alleyway and under an arch and I suddenly found myself up against a blank wall barely a few feet away. Well, not exactly blank...As I craned my neck back to peer up at the lofty structure in front of me, my eyes caught sight of the most elaborate filigree stonework higher up, and higher still, several long tapering spires and a tower, crowned by the tallest spire of them all. This, the magnificent cathedral of St Vitus, rises head and shoulders above the castle which completely surrounds it, a permanent reminder of the historical struggles between religious and secular power throughout the ages.

The fourteenth-century, Gothic-styled cathedral belongs to a previous period of intensive building to the Baroque era, and reflects the vast accumulation of wealth which had come to Prague during the reign of the extravagant king, Charles I or Bohemia or Charles IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, as he later became. Yet the great affluence of the nobility, the German merchants and many of the clergy was in sharp contrast to the growing numbers of the poor who also resided in the city. This fact had

not gone unnoticed by a certain Jan Hus, a priest himself, whose calls for social and religious reform led to his being burned as a heretic by the church authorities in 1415. His fate so angered his friends that they stormed the City Hall in the New Town district of the city and hurled the magistrates out of a window. Clearly this sort of behaviour was to prove habit-forming. Hereafter until the second incident of its kind, Prague was ruled by Protestants, trade plummeted with the expulsion of the German merchants, and the first great phase of constructing imposing edifices came to an abrupt end.

Today, the preservation of the buildings and the memory of Jan Hus and his followers both form part of the cultural legacy of Czechoslovakia. Time has an odd way of crystallising past antagonisms and rendering them as equal partners in the list of tourist attractions.

I joined the constant stream of tourists passing through the heavy wooden doors at the entrance to the cathedral and stood aghast, marvelling at the splendour of everything around me. What really transfixed my attention the most were the stained-glass windows, all intact I was happy to see, and each one containing a tremendous wealth of detail and being based around a particular dominant blend of colours.

While I was thus absorbed, the deep tones of the organ disturbed the relative silence, and I looked around to see that a service was about to begin. The vergers shepherded the sightseers outside to the best of their ability as the opening chants of a mass instantly transformed the atmosphere, thus demonstrating that it is still very much a living church, not just a priceless collection of religious artifacts.

Rather reluctant to go, but fearing that I would be out of my depth in many ways, I lingered for a long while near the entrance doors, and then paused to study the noticeboard outside. Each week, six or seven services are held in the cathedral. People are quite at liberty to come to these services which are often well-attended, so I was told later. Compared to countries like Poland or East Germany, however, the church in Czechoslovakia is not nearly as influential. But by no means is it a godless state as we are often led to believe in the West.

From the cathedral, I walked down a steep lane, stopping for a while at one outstanding vantage-point to take in the spectacular view of the city which it offered. I was not alone. Several artists and a sculptor were hard at work, seemingly oblivious to the clusters of admirers gathered around them.

The city appears almost unreal from such a position. There below, lie hundreds of miniature buildings like old-fashioned dolls houses, all different, but each one perfectly symmetrical in shape and design. Little dormer windows stand at regular intervals along the brown and dark red roofs like tiny sentry-boxes, temporarily vacated. Here and there, the domes of various churches show up as blue-tinted circles amidst the complex pattern of squares and rectangles around them. And patches of trees add a pleasing touch of green to the overall picture.

The whole townscape seems far too delightful for mere mortals to have devised. It could surely be the handywork of some child-like giant who very carefully and lovingly placed each building next to another in order to create the most telling effect. And then became disgruntled when he got to the newer buildings and stomped off in a huff to find something else to do.

Perhaps he stamped his feet down more heavily than he intended. Cracks in the delicate plaster-work falling masonry and subsidence are well in evidence. Centuries-old grime on the walls and modern-day pollution also bespeak the aging process. But the wrinkles have not escaped the attention of the proud citizens of this most beautiful city. The sight of scaffolding around this or that building reveals the enormous amount of restoration work that is going on, involving around 1,700 different structures in the three square-mile historical core of the city alone. What a formidable task that must be!

Yet the preservation of the city's oldy-worldly character is not limited to large-scale building works. Other charming features have been retained and adapted to cope with present demands. Cobbled streets are meticulously re-laid after road repairs; the wrought-iron gas lamps now glow with the aid of electricity; and modern tram-cars, not that much changed from earlier models, still shuffle along the old tram lines, forcing everything in their paths to move out of the way...quick!

There is another aspect of the city which is not rooted in any functional use, but without which, the very personality of the place would not come alive in the way that it does. I refer to the plethora of statues. Everywhere you look there are statues; in the parks, along the road-sides, in all the squares. The most famous one is probably the memorial to Jan Hus, which stands in the Old Town Square. But most carol-singers would no doubt opt instead for the St Wenceslas Monument, appropriately enough in St Wenceslas Square. Even the buildings seem to require the odd statue or two as an essential part of the fixtures. It may not be too far out to say that Prague is a city inhabited by over a million living people, and about the same number of stone effigies of the dead, or so it appears.

Possibly one of the most inspiring collections of statues anywhere is found on, of all things, a bridge – the Charles Bridge or Karlův Most, which like several other bridges, spans the busy Vltava River that flows through the heart of the city.

“Prosím,” I said to a traffic policeman in my best law-abiding Czech. “Kde ye Karlův Most?”

“Die erste Strasse links,” came back the reply, and for good measure, he waved his arm in the direction of the first street on the left. In a region boarded mainly by German-speaking neighbours, and one of the favourite meccas of East German holiday-makers, I suppose such misunderstandings are easily made. All the same, I decided that the next time I tried to speak Czech, I'd at least do it with a strong English accent.

The Charles Bridge is festooned on both sides by groups of saintly figures and sculptures depicting events in the life of Jesus Christ. There are in total about twenty-six of these statues which were mainly erected by craftsmen in the early eighteenth century. More of an aisle than a bridge, you

could be forgiven for thinking you were in a church. Such an error would indeed have brought a wry smile to the face of St Jan Nepomuk, a fourteenth-century priest. Following a disagreement with the king over a political matter, he was thrown off the bridge in a sack. His statue now stands upon this very same bridge which the monarch had been responsible for building and which bears his name.

Crossing over this six hundred-year old bridge, I entered the Old Town proper, and continued with my unhurried exploration of the streets of Prague. It had been a long time since I'd enjoyed a spell of sight-seeing, and by jingo, I was going to make a good job of it now.

If there's one thing that such activities as mooching-around and gazing-about do better than anything else I know, it is to give rise to the most tremendous pangs of hunger within a very short period of time. Very soon, the dainty little angels on the buildings began to resemble succulent chipolatas, and the intricate plasterwork on the facades looked like delicious piped-icing on a cake.

My growing obsession with food eventually led me into a beer-house in one of the backstreets, which had an illegibly-scrawled menu scribbled up on a stand outside. Inside, a stocky barman in a white coat and downward-drooping moustache was filling jugs of beer. He appeared to be the only waiter around, so I raised my hand to attract his attention. Over to me he came and plonked down a beer, moving on to the next thirsty customer before I could utter a word.

While I was contemplating what one has to do to order a meal, a large group of workmen entered and sat down at my table, thereby wedging me in beside the wall. I tried to summon up enough Dutch courage to say something, and racked my brain for the elusive word for 'menu', or anything else that would do. But on both accounts failed. Rather than make a fool of myself by imitating a cow or a pig or a chicken or even a fish, I silently paid up and left.

The other restaurants I came across were now closing, and in any case, I didn't want to go through the same experience again. I made do, instead, with a hot dog, purchased from an open shop window, and consumed it, as they say, with relish.

So often on television we see pictures of people queuing up along the pavements in Eastern European cities, the impression being that everyone over there is starving. Well, perhaps there is at times a shortage of certain commodities in some of these countries. Or perhaps a few foreign tourists with the same scruples as mine may have missed out on a meal. But it's much more likely that the queues of people we see (in Czechoslovakia at any rate) are waiting patiently in line to get themselves a frankfurter, a hot doughnut, a fruit ice cream or a big bag of strawberries.

Regrettably, my own encounter with these other delicacies had to wait for another time. For at long last, with aching legs and stomach only partly assuaged by a single sausage, I made up my mind to call it a day and set off for the hotel.

It was while I was browsing through a shop on my way back that I heard a voice say: "Zo, you are Eenglish, huh?"

Obviously, the man had glanced at my badge. I nodded.

“I vas in Eengland in ze var. You know ze night train to Glasgow?” he asked, with a sparkle in his eye.

“Indeed,” I replied, not wanting to fuss over the precise details of railway timetables.

He invited me to a nearby bar for a drink. And, eager to know what went on on the night train to Glasgow in the 1940s, and what goes on in the streets of Prague in the 1980s, I accepted his invitation.

When we arrived at the bar, a large glass of neat vodka appeared in front of me, as if by magic. A pal of his had bought it for me. Beside the vodka stood a glass of beer which my new-found acquaintance had ordered also for me. I ought really to reciprocate, I thought, when, not without some difficulty, I had downed the drinks. I therefore offered to buy the next round, fully intending to leave myself out of it. But before I could ‘get them in’, another beer appeared in the place of my empty glass. Goodness knows who had ordered this one – another pal of his, most likely.

I stared at it for a while, pondering whether I could politely bequeath it to my drinking partner, when all at once he turned to me and said: “Ve are not free like you in Eengland.”

The way he said “free” closely resembled the contours of the moustache on the previous barman I’d met. My ears pricked up, hoping I was going to hear the genuine ‘lowdown’. Just then, someone else joined us – a man dressed in jeans and T-shirt, some kind of factory worker, I dare say.

“My frien’ here – he vants to buy us a drink,” said the first man and up came another round. We discussed matters such as the Falklands War, an event which the others found hard to comprehend, and the recent General Election, which similarly puzzled them.

My feeble attempts in trying to explain both occurrences merely served to confuse them further, and in due course the newcomer left us to it. As soon as he was out of ear-shot, my chum leaned towards me and said in my ear: “He is not my frien’ at all...he is an agent.”

Wondering whether I had given away the secrets of Saatchi and Saatchi – the advertising agency used by the government - or whether my drinking-partner had been placed under suspicion for praising, albeit in an indirect way, the merits of an imperialist railway system, I thought it high time to make my departure.

As I wandered up the swaying road, I meditated upon matters. Was the second man an agent? On the other hand, maybe the first man was the real agent and was trying to win my confidence over. Thereagain, perhaps they were both agents! After reaching such a conclusion, each person I passed by – tourists with cameras, old women with shopping bags, little children playing hide-and-seek – all of them I now saw as dangerous ‘agents provocateurs’.

It’s funny how nature often takes things into its own hands at times like this. Here I was, totally neurotic and absolutely lost in a strange city – you could say full of confusion amongst other things – when what should I happen to come across but a park, separated from the road by a line of very parched-looking trees. It was like seeing an oasis in the desert, only in reverse. Finding the

corresponding point marked on the map, I uttered a sigh of relief and pointed myself in the general direction of the hotel.

It was late afternoon when I arrived back, but not feeling at all inclined to wait around for dinner, I put myself to bed immediately. Amongst visions of being deported the next day, and expecting to hear a heavy knock on the door at any moment, I drifted off to sleep and slept soundly until the next morning.

MONDAY: A CURE FOR ALL ILLS

The sight of a large tortoise in a bonnet, sitting in an armchair staring at you, is not the best way to wake up with a hangover. But there's nothing like a guilty conscience to strengthen one's resolve to do what one has to do.

The hotel staff very kindly telephoned for a car to take me to the children's hospital, and when I showed them the tortoise, there was an instantaneous chorus of "oohs" and "aaahs".

"Nothing like this has ever happened before," someone said in astonishment. I could very well believe that, as my face turned scarlet.

When we got to the hospital, the driver refused to accept any money from me. Driving off, he wished me the best of luck and left me to consider my next move.

The hospital complex appeared to consist of two main blocks and various other buildings, set in a valley amongst the woods. It was only built a few years ago, and work is now progressing on the construction of another block for geriatric patients.

I went straight up to the Enquiries Desk on the ground floor and bumbled out my story. The porter beckoned me to follow him, and we set off along the spacious corridors from one room to the next. At each one, he asked if anyone spoke English. "Ne" was the almost inevitable reply, but try that room further along. Thus, by a number of stages in ascending order, we finally reached a door near the top of the building.

A most charming man greeted me warmly and invited me into his comfortable office. I placed the tortoise down in the armchair beside me and showed the administrator a letter I'd written beforehand explaining everything. Then I presented him with a card signed by many of our local doctors and nurses, carrying a message for "peace and good wishes to all children everywhere."

His eye ran from the letter to the card to the tortoise and back again. For a moment, he just sat there with a broad smile on his face, utterly speechless as it all sank in. Then, in perfect English, he thanked me profusely and rang for a colleague of his to come and join us.

While we were waiting for him, we had an interesting conversation. He told me of his great love of history, particularly of the Tudor period in England. A visit he had once made to York had impressed him very much. Since I have never been to York myself, I was most interested to hear about it.

Very kindly, his secretary made me a cup of coffee. Czechoslovakians drink a lot of black Turkish coffee, which, when you get used to it, is quite refreshing. I certainly found that cup of coffee most welcome, and I said so.

"If you tell my secretary that it was nice cup of coffee, she would be very pleased indeed," I was told. It is good to know that the state of British-Czechoslovakian diplomatic relations was markedly improved as a result of our meeting.

Soon, a man arrived who was introduced to me as the ‘Father’ of Czechoslovakian Paediatrics – an equally charming man who also spoke impeccable English. He took me along to his office where I was suitably kitted out in a white coat, with polythene bags over my shoes, and off to the children’s wards we went. The doctor was by now carrying the tortoise, much to the stifled amusement of some of the nurses we met en route. Fortunately, this was not a maternity wing, or it might have given a new mother quite a shock!

The reaction of the children in the dining area was a treat to behold. The ever-so fatherly doctor took the toy tortoise around from table to table where the children were sitting, eating their midday meal. He let them all pat it or stroke it, and asked them what it was. Needless to say, they all came up with the right answer, even though such creatures are not commonly found in that country, especially ones that look like that.

After this, I was shown a classroom where long-stay patients can catch up on their education, and a room where nursing mothers can stay with their babies. Accommodation for two or three children per room seemed to be the norm, at least in this part of the hospital. In the babies’ section, the rooms are separated from each other and from the central corridor by glass partitions, so that nursing staff can easily keep a watchful eye upon their charges. The rooms for older children are more private and more personalized, and I saw a wall in one of the rooms decorated with drawings which had been done by the occupants in question. In a hospital which can cater for well over 700 patients, touches like this must mean a lot to them.

We finished off our tour by leaving the tortoise in the classroom, where one day, the children may learn about such animals in lessons on Natural History. Perhaps too, they may think affectionally of the children in my own village. I’m sure Gilbert White would have approved of both of those things.

Hospital transport was laid on to take me into the city centre where I could do a spot more sightseeing. My first stop was to pay a call on the hot dog vendor and the other stalls which I now discovered for some essential sustenance. Then, sufficiently fortified, I spent much of the afternoon visiting churches and jotting down prayers I found framed on the walls. Should I ever come across St Nicholas or his Benefactor, I’d like to thank them personally for remembering me so diligently.

After dinner that evening, I joined the party going to the concert of Bohemian music in the grounds of the Wallenstein Palace. This was the first of the many cultural events laid on free for delegates to the World Assembly.

The benches in this beautiful garden faced a magnificent flood-lit building. Colourful murals on the ceiling were visible through the open archways between tall white pillars, the whole scene reflected in the still waters of the fountains around us. A small band – violinist, double bass player, flautist and oboist stood to one side of the central archway, accompanying a troop of amateur dancers and singers dressed in traditional costumes.

The first half of the programme consisted of the songs and dances of mediaeval paupers. Then, after the interval, there was a display of Bohemian sixteenth-century folk dances, representing an evening of revelry in a typical village.

To sit in the warmth of the evening with the fresh aroma of plants in the air following a heavy rain shower, and to watch this very colourful spectacle was an experience I shall treasure for a long while. To judge from the applause, others felt the same way. As an encore, one of the male singers performed an unaccompanied version of a popular modern song which soon had members of the audience joining in and clapping their hands in rhythm. Somehow, it seemed to fit the spirit of the occasion perfectly. For a moment, the modern world and the mediaeval world were at one, and all of us were miraculously transformed into sixteenth-century merry-makers.

It would be amiss of me not to quote the last paragraph of the programme notes:

“We wish you a pleasant evening,” it stated, “and hope that your impressions from the performance, by which we would like to thank you for all you are doing also for our life in peace, will not be spoilt by the language barrier.”

No language was ever clearer than that of the joy, enthusiasm and vitality which flowed from the performers that evening.

TUESDAY: TOGETHERNESS

The following day was what we'd all been waiting for – the opening of the World Assembly. A bus shuttle service took everyone from their respective hotels to the Palace of Culture. When we emerged from the underground carpark beneath the building, we found ourselves amongst a very festive crowd eagerly awaiting our arrival. 'Umpah' bands were playing, banners were being paraded up and down, and children and adults stood shoulder to shoulder all the way up to the main entrance, cheering as we passed them by.

The building is quite fantastic. Completed only fairly recently, it occupies a huge area with extensively laid-out grounds to the front. The wide expanse of glass windows on each of the five main floors presents you with sweeping views over the city from almost any point. A large range of facilities are incorporated: a number of restaurants, snack bars and public bars; a post office where the commemorative postmark of the World Assembly was being franked upon outgoing mail; a photograph and poster stand; a souvenir shop; information tables dotted liberally round and about; nearly two and a half thousand rooms of varying sizes; and spacious foyers, alleyways, and a large balcony, all of which were thronging with people much of the time.

Exhibitions from peace movements around the world were just about everywhere. The most memorable to me were photographs of Hiroshima taken a short time after the bomb had exploded on August 6th 1945. One in particular I find hard to forget. It merely consists of a shadow cast up on a row of steps – all that remains of a once-living human being. This, more than any of the horrific pictures beside it, very vividly portrays the inconceivable power of just one atomic bomb. Today, 50,000 bombs later, it would do everyone good to gaze at length upon that picture.

There were other exhibitions too – photographs of demonstrations, peace camps and festivals; surrealistic paintings; cartoons of black comedy; maps of the world, grotesquely distorted by the weight of armaments; and a wide assortment of films and videos from different countries – all in all, a veritable museum of peace culture.

The show-case of the Palace of Culture is without question the Congress Hall, an enormous room which can seat over 3,000 people in plush chairs, each equipped with an earpiece through which simultaneous translations of speeches into six languages could be heard, these being Czech, Russian, English, French, German and Spanish. Incidentally, when other languages were occasionally used by speakers – Japanese or Arabic, for example – they were translated by someone into one of these six languages, and then into all of them by the usual process. I couldn't help but marvel at the linguistic ability of the young translators, many of whom were equally fluent in three or four languages. Without them, there could not have been a congress like this in the first place.

Entering the Hall, we found blocks of seats had been assigned to delegations from different countries. Although the British delegates were placed near the rear, this was not to our disadvantage, owing to the superb acoustics of the room, and the steeply-inclined floor which facilitated good

visibility. From our position, the sheer scale of the hall and the huge numbers of those present could be appreciated. What a sight!

As ten o'clock approached, the long rows of seats gradually began to fill with people of all shapes, sizes and ages. Many of them wore national dress – Africans in long, flowing gowns, Indians in kurtas and saris, Afghans in turbans and waist-coats, and Greek and Russian Orthodox priests in their cassocks and characteristic pillar-box hats.

The seven rows of seats which made up the presidium on the platform were now also filling up with such distinguished figures as the two deputy Secretary-Generals of the United Nations Organisation, the European Regional Director of the World Health Organisation (WHO), a leading figure from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and many other honoured dignitaries and personalities.

Altogether, some 3,625 delegates and observers from 132 countries, representing 1,843 national organisations, trade unions, peace, women's and youth organisations, political parties and churches attended the Assembly, although some arrived late and were not present at the opening ceremony. The participants also included representatives from 108 international, non-governmental organisations and 11 from United Nations agencies.

In addition, 411 foreign journalists, 18 TV and film companies and 402 accredited Czechoslovak journalists were there to cover the proceedings. Or that's what they should have been there for. However, the objectives of the media from most Western countries seemed to be slanted more towards finding ways to discredit the conference than in reporting what really went on. But more of that later.

Shortly after ten, the signature tune of the Assembly, Beethoven's setting of the Ode to Joy, rang out. A few words by the Chairman of the Czech Preparatory Committee closed with what, it was claimed, could be a modern translation of Frederick Schiller's poem which had inspired this marvellous music: "Millions of people, Unite in the struggle for Peace and Life, against the danger of nuclear war."

Immediately he stopped speaking, a folk group on stage began the song "We shall overcome", first in English and then in all the other languages. By the last verse, everyone in the hall was singing, with the different words expressing exactly the same meaning.

As the opening strains of the song filled the hall, the doors burst open and hundreds of children made their way down the aisles and across the platform to stand amongst the delegates. In front of the walls of the Presidium a row of older Czechoslovakian children in traditional clothes held up little placards showing the dove and globe emblem of the Assembly, mirroring the larger version of it which almost filled the wall behind them.

There was nothing in the slightest bit regimented about the way the children flooded into the hall. They were completely natural, many of them smiling or laughing with no attempt whatsoever to try and keep step. They no longer remained Czechoslovakian children, or children from Eastern or

Central Europe. They were purely and simply the world's children, and thus, each of us, as human beings, had a perfect right to call them our own.

As the music ended, they stopped moving. Children from Lidice, the village that has been rebuilt after being totally obliterated by the Nazis in 1942 in an act of utter vengeance, solemnly placed roses from the village on to the stage. Lidice is a haunting reminder to everyone in Czechoslovakia, and to many others elsewhere who can recall the event, of the horror, the suffering and the absolute futility of war.

“What is war, my child?” a voice said.

“War is a world without trees, without flowers. War is the end of all life...”

And so it went on, this stylised conversation between parents and their son and daughter, chiselling away the resistance of even the most hardened souls in the audience. But at this gathering, there were very few of those indeed.

I know for a fact that nearly all of the British delegates (and probably most of those from other countries too) were almost moved to tears by these onslaughts upon our senses – this emotional mixture of symbolism, art and truth. Call it sentimentality, perhaps, but surely one is allowed to be sentimental about the stark choice between life and death!

Just at the point when we couldn't take any more, the oration stopped and the children turned around and made their way out, handing paper doves to people as they left.

After the clapping had died down, Gustáv Husák, the Czechoslovak President took the rostrum. He spoke of urgent global problems which had to be solved by international cooperation. Prospects for peaceful co-existence between nations, however, were being hindered by the build-up of armaments. He denounced NATO countries for embarking on a new round of the arms race by their decision to deploy new medium-range missiles in Europe (cruise and Pershing II missiles). Should this occur, he said, the Socialist countries would face up to the increased threat with measures that would create an effective counter-balance.”

Typically, this statement which accords with the principle of maintaining a balance in the number of nuclear weapons between East and West (albeit one of the dynamics of the arms race itself) won the attention of the Western media, whereas everything else he said was ignored or played down. Thus, he continued by actually rejecting the stockpiling of new weapons and strongly arguing the case for immediate moves towards disarmament to be carried out on a step-by-step basis.

He concluded: “All of us are inhabitants of this planet of ours, for thousands of years tilled and cultivated by man's skilful hands, a planet capable of providing bread and happiness for all people. It is necessary to save it from impending catastrophe. It is our fervent wish and endeavour too, that our children, grandchildren, the future generations may live, work and enjoy themselves on Earth in peace.

Following Dr Husák's speech, Ramesh Chandra, President of the World Peace Council, got up to speak.

"Our Assembly says; There shall not be any missiles anywhere in the world. We stand to end all nuclear weapons," he said. "If the little child asks me – 50 million in the second war? How many in the third war? I will say the truth for I will not fool my children. There is no third war, my child, there is only the last war in which all of us would be destroyed... This Assembly seeks to make sure that there shall be peace and life, to make sure that the roses bloom in Lidice and all over the world, and this danger which is there before us is ended."

Amidst loud applause, he sat down and Edith Ballantyne, the Secretary-General of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, addressed the floor. She spoke about the work of the International Preparatory Committee, of which she was the overall convenor, and announced that the Steering Group for the Assembly would consist of one or more representatives from each country. People from many political backgrounds ideologies and religious beliefs had come together. "And the most important task ahead of us is to save this globe from being destroyed." It was definitely not a good day for any ostriches amongst us. But it's very difficult to find an ostrich in a room packed full of doves.

So, the first plenary session came to an end, and we all made our separate ways to our allotted restaurants.

The handling of this mammoth task, that is, how to feed over three and a half thousand people in one building, was carried off with typical Czechoslovak efficiency and ingenuity. Each person was given a booklet of meal coupons, the colour of which corresponded with the different restaurants in the Palace of Culture. On taking a seat, you merely tore off the coupon for the meal in question, and wrote on the back of it the number of the main course that you wanted on the menu. Hot soup was already on the tables in big platters for you to help yourself to when you sat down. Service was quick, thanks to the proliferation of waiters and waitresses. Yet only rarely did a mistake occur.

Another of the benefits of this system was that you could suit yourself where you wanted to sit and conversations over the meal table were often stimulating and an ideal way to build up contacts. I'm not sure how many marriages will result from passing water along the table, but plenty of twinning arrangements may owe their origins to a shared slice of salami. It was midway through a beef-steak that I rediscovered Vietnam, with a most congenial man from Hanoi as my guide; whilst waiting for a pork roast that I tried to sum up the average British person's view of events in the Middle East to a pleasant but concerned member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation; and while reaching for the condiments that I was told my a bevy of Indian lawyers how much they had enjoyed the film 'Gandhi'.

The hard-working translators and other staff also ate in the same restaurants as us. From such close encounters, I learned a lot about the Czechoslovak personality and about their own particular foibles.

I remember one day being joined by a translator and a group of Spaniards, which developed into what could be called a 'three-cornered chat'. As it happened, the newcomers to my table got served first. Before the Czechoslovakian translator would even pick up her knife and fork, she leaned towards me and said most apologetically: "We feel very embarrassed. You were here first, but we have been given our meal before you." Such consideration for others goes a long way in my book.

Sometimes we heard a few grumbles too. Scratch a Czechoslovakian on the surface and you find an Englishman or woman, underneath. In most instances, the cause of the complaints boiled down to one thing: red tape. It's either too long, as in England; or too wide, as in Czechoslovakia. It may even be significant that people felt able to voice their opinions to us. Too often, we tend to think of the populations of Communist countries as silently and passively suffering under a harsh, repressive system. That certainly is how we are induced to think about the situation over there. However, the day when any regime can completely muzzle all the inhabitants of a country will be the first one in history. Criticism may not be as open and direct as it is in this country, but that does not mean to say that it does not exist. Failing that, there are always ways to play the system, wherever you live.

During the lunch-time breaks was also an ideal opportunity to examine some of the mountains of free literature. Delegates from just about every country had brought along books, leaflets and newsletters, which were stacked up on tables in the alleyways for anyone to take. Such an offer could not go unheeded.

There was a chance too to enjoy some of the entertainment provided for us. On this, the first day of the session, there were bands on the terrace outside, while troops of pretty girls with exceptionally long legs were going through their dance routines, watched mainly by men with exceptionally big eyes.

On another day, an all-girl saxophone band from a place called Luhačovice played in the main foyer, switching from Moravian folk music one moment to 'In the mood' the next. What Glen Miller would have thought about it, I don't know, but I expect he would have been tickled pink. I was. The versatility and proficiency of these 45 young musicians, whose ages ranged from 7 to 19, was really something, and few people could resist tapping their feet along with the beat. Again, it demonstrated how the universality of music can cross over all national and ideological barriers.

There was also a very special and unique attraction which was to be found in the entrance hall on the second floor. Here in a vase on a little table all by itself stood a beautiful white rose – the first bloom of a completely new variety cultivated specifically for the World Assembly. Beside the vase, a sign read: "I am the delegate of the planet Earth. My name is PAX. My voice: In the name of peace and life, against nuclear war."

So new and so rare it still was that the original plan to make up a bouquet of roses, each one dedicated to a particular region of the world where people do not currently live in peace, had to be

called off. Instead, a single fresh rose was sent to the Assembly everyday so as to produce finally just a small but very lovely bouquet.

“Look at this rose,” a leaflet exhorted passers-by. “See: it is full of life, like us. Like us, it needs warmth, well-being, pure water and non-polluted air. That is only natural. For it is the fruit of a noble idea of man.” Would that all of man’s ideas could be so noble!

Suitably refreshed in mind and body, we located the rooms for the different workshops. There were eleven such ‘Dialogues’ in all, covering various facets of peace and disarmament concerning the danger of nuclear war, the role of the United Nations Organisation, the economic, social, psychological, and ethical aspects of the arms race, the special circumstances of Non-aligned countries, the connections between disarmament and development, peace education, and so on and so forth.

I chose one called: ‘The Exchange of Experiences and Ideas of Peace Movements in Support of Disarmament’. As I entered the room (one of the first to do so) my mind was bubbling over with what I was going to say – the tremendous things we’d done; the tremendous things we were now doing; and not forgetting, well...you’ve guessed! Nearly four hundred other people followed me into the room. Who’d have guessed there’d have been so many people interested in what I had to say!

We all sat down at the three long rows of tables, stuck an ear-piece into an ear, and tuned in. One of the convenors at the top table outlined the first of the three sub-topics of the meeting: the successes and obstacles of the peace movement today. And a short address by an official of the Czechoslovak Peace Committee signalled that play was about to begin. Remember, we were told, anything goes, but don’t hog the mike for more than five minutes each.

Guyana kicked off with support for a Zone of Peace in the Caribbean. The mike was quickly passed to Cyprus with news of a 20-kilmetre march in Akotiri. Vietnam followed through, but found the going tough against misinformation about the situation in Indo-China. Just then, the USA surged forward with the growing involvement of manual workers in the jobs and disarmament issue. Up came the USSR on the left side with an unexpected burst of news. Fifty million people had demonstrated for peace in the Soviet Union last October.

A quick pass to West Germany, where most of the population is against deploying new missiles. And over to India, which ran straight into the old problem of people’s apathy. However, word that a grand total of two million had taken part in marches in New Delhi and elsewhere the year before brought a nearly audible cheer from the others.

Sudan, a veteran player with a peace movement dating back to the 1950s demonstrated it was still very much in the running. Then, the mike was passed to a sprightly youngster, Grenada, which, despite showing great promise with a 5,000-strong Peace Council, was faced with some pretty determined opposition from the outside...

Out to Spain, which came hard up against the media, and back again to the USA. A bit of ground was lost as the anti-Communist smear immobilised people in the States. But suddenly Sweden was there, racing ahead with a report of the Nordic Women's Peace March through Eastern Europe in 1982. Nevertheless, the women were tackled by some critics on the far right – just one of the penalties for going forward on people's blind side.

An appeal by Sweden for the Czechoslovakian organisation Charter 77 to be present brought forward a swift response from the English chair-woman. A spokesman for Charter 77 had told her the previous evening that it was not really a peace group, but was primarily concerned with human rights.

So, off again, and Romania immediately took the initiative. With surprise news of large marches in Bucharest, the speaker paused and took a deep breath. Could this be it? "Romania will never join the arms race!" Yes! This really was it...the goal of all peace groups for the whole world.

A fast pace indeed. My fingers ached with the frantic scribbling in trying to note everything down. A temporary pause for a malfunctioning microphone allowed me to glance up for a second. All over the windows (we were on the ground-floor, I should reassure you) children were busy painting animals, birds, flowers and the odd spaceman or two. Quite clearly, they were having the time of their lives.

Seeing the children revelling about outside, giving us their own versions of reality, was like a mental prod. This is what we're doing it all for, said a little voice inside. The long evenings spent foot-slogging around delivering leaflets of attending eternal meetings, the miserable hours wasted finding out about the latest weapons to inflict 'bigger and better' deaths upon the world's peoples, the convivial marches, the solitary letter-writing, and the verbal and occasional physical assaults – all so that children everywhere can grow up in safety to paint a giraffe with two heads.

I resumed scribbling in earnest. Hours later, I had added pages and pages of barely legible script to my notebook, and still not said anything myself. Maybe tomorrow, I thought as the room emptied. Definitely tomorrow.

In the meantime, we were about to give the Czechoslovakians justification for boasting at any future conferences about a certain 'manifestation', what we would call a demonstration or rally, that took place in Prague in the summer of 1983. Hurling ourselves on buses, we were whisked off to the embankment beside the Vltava River for the start of the march. From here, we set off down a long straight road towards the Old Town Square.

Crowds of eagerly-awaiting people milled around us, their faces full of excitement and warmth, but not without a touch of curiosity too. We did not pass by empty-handed. Many of the delegates gave out leaflets and newsletters, designed for home consumption, but still appropriate here in a different way. I, myself, handed out countless numbers of our badges to youngsters, noticing the flicker of absolute confusion in their expression as they attempted to figure out the connection between tortoises and nuclear disarmament. But apart from the hordes of children scratching their

heads in puzzlement, well, a few anyway, it was a truly joyous and colourful occasion - the sort of event which makes you beam with pleasure without even realising it.

The marchers and onlookers came together in the square under the reflective gaze of Jan Hus. Across from him, a high platform with wooden sides had been erected. Many of us British delegates ended up beside this structure which gave us a good view of the people on the platform above, especially the underside of their chins.

Among the celebrities were several dark-suited, grim-faced men, probably security officials. Others were undoubtedly intermingled in the vast crowd. However, what struck us as being strange was that we did not see a single policeman, although some may have been present somewhere else. What was absent then was the sensation you often get in West European demonstrations: the feeling that owing to the vast numbers of policemen everywhere, you are regarded as some form of dangerous criminal against whom the law-abiding members of the public need to be protected.

One of the first to speak was Lord Fenner Brockway, for long, loved and admired by people throughout the world.

“I’m glad to see one English banner out there,” he began. “It says: MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR.”

Applause filled the square. His words were translated into Czech. Even louder applause echoed around us.

Other speakers included the Mayor of Prague, a prominent Australian, and the celebrated Soviet astronaut Tereshkova, who is now the President of the Soviet Women’s Committee and a high-ranking politician.

But the speech which earned him the most applause of all was that delivered by an American black mayor.

“The United States should embrace the Soviet Union,” he proclaimed. There were no dissenters.

It was the sort of massive, good-natured, uplifting rally which tends to be described in our news bulletins by a mere five words: “There have been no arrests.” If you listen carefully, you can almost hear a four-letter word that wants to come after it: “PITY”.

Successful though it was, the rally was not totally without incident. At one point during the speeches, a West German girl produced some round stickers from out of her bag with the words ‘Charter 77’ printed on them. These she proceeded to stick on to the walls of the platform in an action witnessed by no more than a handful of people who were there. They were soon taken down again, but not before a British television camera had filmed the episode. So, a peaceful demonstration of 200,000 people in Czechoslovakia is not considered newsworthy enough to bother about. But at the whisper of a spot of confrontation, the vultures gather round to record it for posterity. Magnify this example of biased reporting many times over, and is it any wonder that the British public has a very jaundiced view of Eastern Europe.

In contrast, the entire rally was shown on Czechoslovak television that evening. Not a single word was omitted from any of the speeches. And from the eye of the camera we were able to take in much better the immensity of the gathering. The publicity stunt was not shown though and I suppose the television coverage could therefore be accused of turning a blind eye towards it. But in fairness, the Czechoslovakian media was there to report on the rally itself, and accordingly, the cameras had been set up well in advance to do full justice to it. It's even possible that the cameramen missed this very minor incident or chose deliberately to ignore it in order to concentrate fully upon the important line-up of speakers. How would the public in this country like it if a stunt by Quebec separatists was shown on people's television screens during the Royal Wedding or some other dignified State ceremony?

What does seem highly suspect is the coincidence of the British television crew being in such a convenient position to film what went on, in the same way that they just happened to be present at a private birthday party of one of the members of Charter 77. It does begin to suggest that incidents of this sort were staged mainly for the benefit of the Western media. But surely, you may ask, the perpetrators must have realised that incidents of this kind would have been interpreted as being provocative by the authorities and therefore likely to lead to a tough response? I don't know, but what is certain is that the outcome merely helped to reinforce the stereotype image of repression in Eastern Europe in the minds of the Western public and gave the cold war-mongers a bean-feast.

I should add that these comments are in no way meant as a slur upon the organisation Charter 77 itself. My intention is solely to point out that such bodies can sometimes be manipulated by others to suit their own ends.

Later that evening, the BBC World Service reported that a spontaneous peace demonstration by young people had taken place in Prague that night. There was no mention of the enormous rally earlier on. Similarly, an article in the 'Guardian' newspaper on the Thursday (June 23rd) stated that there had been a "parade of Czech youths chanting "We want freedom" and other slogans before police broke up the march, arresting and beating some marchers." Again, the rally was ignored.

Next morning, we were informed about what had happened by an eye-witness, one of our own delegation. He had been present at the rock music concert in the square after the speeches had finished. When the concert was over, at about 1am, some youngsters who had been drinking heavily made their departure by trampling over the municipal rose beds and causing quite a rumpus in the streets. According to 'Rude Pravo', a Czechoslovak national newspaper, "several hooligans had to be taken to the anti-alcoholic out-patient clinic, and from there they were all released the same day".

It is worth wondering just how differently a mob of 'dissident heroes' would have been treated in a similar disturbance in Cheltenham, for instance?

WEDNESDAY: SOUNDS INTERESTING

Wednesday, the second day of the conference, saw the continuation of the different workshops. The word 'Dialogue' implies an exchange of viewpoint. But owing to the sheer scale of the exercise, and the wish of each participant to enlighten everyone else about his or her own country's peace movement, the net result was more like a series of monologues than a real discussion between 400 people (a 'quadracentalogue', I suppose in technical terms).

Mind you, it was very informative learning about the different priorities in other countries. In the Pacific, it is primarily opposition to nuclear weapon tests which is uniting people; in South East Asia, the present or proposed deployment of nuclear weapons in the Philippines, South Korea, Japan and elsewhere. The increasing numbers of military bases in Africa and Central America are a major concern of the countries in those regions; whereas in the USA, the MX missile is possibly the main focus of attention.

It is no surprise that the predominant issue in Europe is the planned deployment of 572 land-based cruise and Pershing II missiles. These two new highly-accurate weapons will provoke a Soviet response, as President Husák indicated, which will have a dangerous impact upon other regions of the world. What is even more alarming, but has not received so much publicity, is that many existing American ships and planes are also being equipped with several thousand air- and sea-launched cruise missiles, which the Soviet Union will seek to 'balance' with new weapons of its own. It is in Europe, however, where the two military blocs menacingly face each other in a continent already burgeoning with nuclear weapons, that many see the latest additions to these arsenals as posing the main danger to world peace at the present time.

It can be seen then that there was much to talk about, even though to a stranger to such matters, the discussion must have seemed very disjointed and lacking direction. Yet despite this, threads of arguments did surface occasionally.

The question of whether both superpowers should share equal blame for the arms race was mentioned at various times. Speakers rested their case upon three bits of evidence; 1) the fact that the USA had been the first to use nuclear weapons and has threatened to use them on over thirty different occasions since then; 2) the fact that the development of new types of nuclear weapons has in nearly all cases originated in the USA; 3) the fact that the USA (and Britain too) has consistently voted against practically all recent disarmament proposals at the United Nations. It is not altogether unexpected then that most people considered the United States as being the more guilty party.

However, the other nuclear powers (the USSR, Britain, France, China, India, Israel, South Africa and others in the process of acquiring nuclear weapons) did not get let off the hook either. All nuclear weapons, regardless of who possesses them, were condemned as being both immoral and illegal, and

there was unanimous support for a freeze on nuclear weapons as a first step towards their reduction and eventual elimination.

Another theme which arose time and time again related to what these days might be called the 'internationalisation' of the peace movement, i.e. the wish of peace movements in different countries to coordinate their efforts, to support international peace activities, to build up links between towns and groups, and to create nuclear-free zones, particularly straddling the East-West divide, as in the Balkans, the Nordic countries and Baltic states, and in the countries of Central Europe.

This support for a global, rather than a purely national or regional outlook, dominated other Dialogues too, especially the one on the role of the United Nations in promoting world peace. There was, for instance, the proposal to impose economic sanctions against countries which do not comply with the U.N. Resolutions and decisions on disarmament. Other proposals concerned the drafting of a Universal Peace Charter; an international referendum on disarmament; and the most radical of all, the setting-up of a People's Assembly – a non-governmental body subsidiary to the U.N. General Assembly – to consider world problems, including disarmament. The Dialogues which concentrated upon the Third World countries' view of the arms race also reminded people that we live in a potentially explosive global village. Local wars in the present trouble-spots could so easily escalate into a world war involving nuclear weapons, on account of the backing provided to one side or the other by the superpowers and their allies. Delegates at these workshops, amazingly some from countries actually at war with one another, called for the peaceful settlement of disputes, and an end to present hostilities in the Middle East and elsewhere. Intervention in Third World countries was strongly condemned, particularly by the USA in Central America, and by South Africa in its neighbouring states. Many proposals to curb the arms trade and to switch funds from military spending to development projects were discussed. In fact, one clear lesson that came out of all the Dialogues was the recognition that world disarmament and development are two sides of the same coin. Peace can only be achieved by pursuing both of these issues.

If some of the above seems rather anti-American in tone, then it bears thinking about, rather than straightaway dismissing it as being somehow unbalanced. Every one of the 132 countries that had sent delegates (the vast bulk of the membership of the United Nations Organisation) viewed the situation in the world in this manner, none more so than the Americans themselves.

"The Reagan administration is turning the USA into a colony," remarked an American professor at one meeting.

The American delegates, representing the opinions of a majority of the population on many issues (as opposed to the strategic designs of the Pentagon) were dynamic and inspiring speakers who won the admiration of everyone present. It is a sad reflection upon the land which claims to be the leader of the Free World that the American delegation had to fly from Montreal, Canada, because the scheduled flight from New York was cancelled with just a week's notice. What's more, each delegate

received a letter from Mr Lawrence Eagleburger, the U.S. Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, telling them that their attendance at the World Assembly “was not in the interests of the USA”.

It would be wrong to conclude from this that communist countries were not criticised too at the conference. The thorny issue of human rights was mentioned many times and frequent appeals were made to allow citizens in these countries to criticise their own governments without risk of being harassed or detained. But it was also recognised that many countries in the West do not have a clean bill of health in this respect either, South Africa being a prime example. Yet instead of targeting up to 25,000 nuclear weapons against that country, the USA is actually assisting the Government in Pretoria to manufacture such weapons for itself through the involvement of US-owned multinational companies. Strange world we live in!

The whole day, therefore, was devoted to words, none of the mine, incidentally. And what better way to clear the head than to attend a grand cultural spectacular in the evening. The stage floor of the Congress Hall was lit from beneath to illuminate the outline of a world map. This horizontal projection of the globe was reflected in two large mirrors each side of an equally large screen. A full-sized symphony orchestra was seated in front of the stage and was augmented by an organ and special sound effects at times during the performance.

The presentation opened with an extended fanfare by a group of trumpeters on stage, heralding the celebration of ‘life’. While panoramic views of the countryside appeared on the screen, dancers performed graceful movements under soft lighting, accompanied by lilting, cheerful music. Variations on this theme of life followed – film sequences of festivities, of traditional village customs, and of outstanding achievements attained by human beings, culminating in film of a space-walk, with a view of planet Earth in the background. Then, suddenly, the harsh red swirling lights, the convoluted agonising movement of the dancers, and, to the sound of jagged dissonances, we see the sights of war – war as it really is, not what it pretends to be courtesy of Hollywood, but war, synonymous with death.

The dying comes to an unresolved end and we are again back in the land of the living. A virtuoso solo violin performance, a 1920s piece of slapstick comedy, the skylines of New York, Moscow, and other great cities, and all of a sudden, it’s back to the visions of buildings collapsing, raging firestorms, and destruction for the sake of destruction.

The alternation of these two contrasting moods continues. Then, the music and dancing cease, and a spotlight picks out a solitary figure – a Vietnamese woman in nurses’ uniform to our right. She describes the malformed babies born to women suffering from the effects of chemical weapons during the war in Indo-China. Pictures of the infants, many of them with their internal organs located on the outside of their bodies, are shown on the screen. They are almost too hideous, too grotesque to even

look at, but somehow, your eyes refuse to be drawn away, held there in utter disbelief. Imagine, just imagine being told that you have given birth to a creature like that.

Her words, delivered in a calm, matter-of-fact voice are followed by those of two Japanese men directly opposite her. The high-pitched, very emotional tones of their voices combine with the horrific shots of Hiroshima in the direct aftermath of the bomb to produce a sense of urgency which is directed at the current state of the world. A pendulum on the screen ticking unrelentlessly to and fro reinforces the impact of their words.

A countdown begins. As the hand reaches zero, a nuclear explosion occurs and within seconds, the familiar mushroom fills the screen. Suddenly, it freezes. And then, the cloud slowly begins to deflate, the hand of the stopwatch now turning in the reverse direction. Nuclear war can be prevented. A huge choir assembles on the stage and the room reverberates to the sound of a big fitting climax to the evening's performance. War has finally been vanquished from the face of the Earth.

The final chords were greeted by a long, standing ovation, and then virtual silence as people shuffled their way towards the exits, rendered speechless by what they had experienced. Once again, it illustrated the fantastic powers of imagination, the incredibly high standard of the arts, and the precision and professionalism that exist in Czechoslovakia culture today.

A short meeting to hear and approve the final report of our Dialogue and to make any amendments thought necessary brought the evening to a close. So high up in the clouds was I by the sights and sounds I'd just lived through that when I got off the Metro at Leninova Station, I walked for a long way up the wrong street without even noticing it. Well, it's not every night that you can be present at the concert hall, the ballet, the opera, the cinema and a public meeting all at the same time!



Tim the tortoise meets Peekaboo the cat



Palace of Culture, Prague



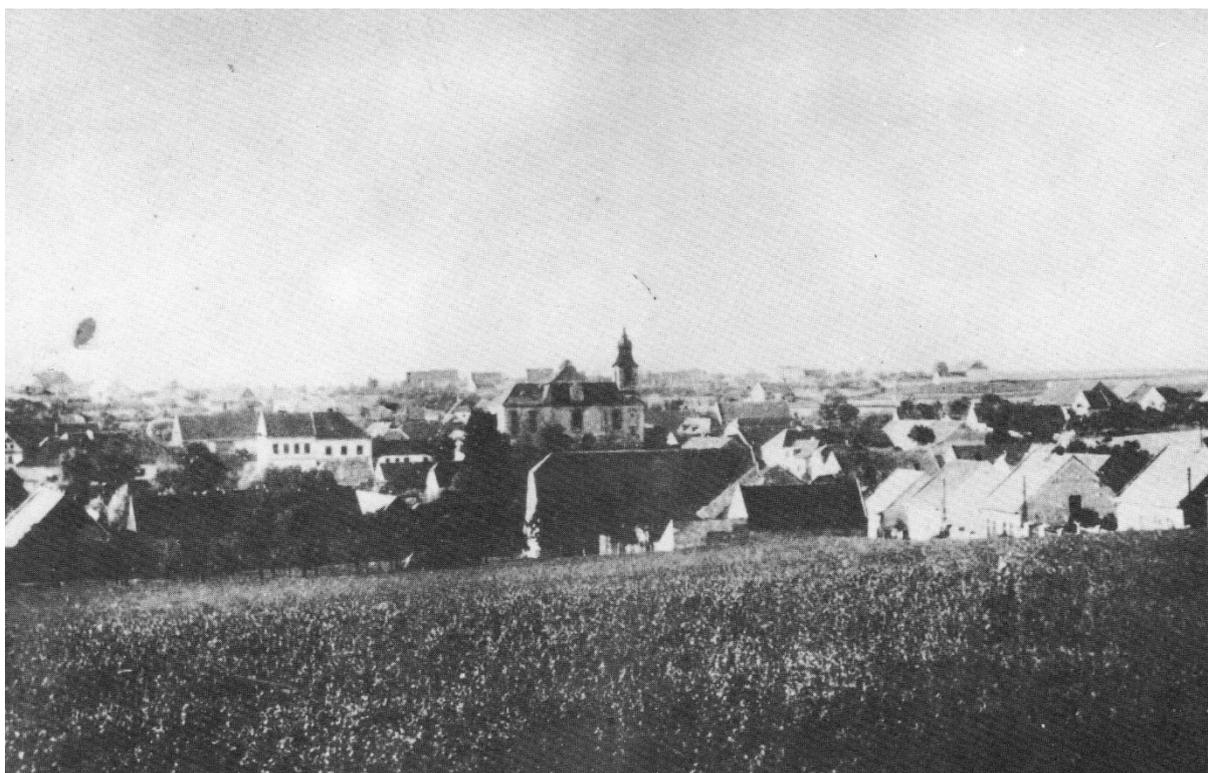
THE DELEGATES AT THE OPENING
CEREMONY



The children at the opening ceremony



The demonstration in Prague



Lidice as it once was (above)
And after it was destroyed (below)





Children's paintings on the windows

MESSAGE OF DR. BILLY GRAHAM TO THE MEETING OF RELIGIOUS CIRCLES AT THE WORLD
ASSEMBLY FOR PEACE AND LIFE, AGAINST NUCLEAR WAR

PRAGUE, JUNE 21-26, 1983

“The 1983 World Peace Conference meeting in Prague is convening at a time of danger and uncertainty in our world. The threat of nuclear catastrophe hangs over the entire human race, due to man’s rebellion against God, and all men of good will – both religious and non-religious – must work together to urge the leaders and peoples of all nations to bring about a greater measure of security and peace.

I have been interested to learn of your meetings, and am especially pleased that for the first time in the history of your movement a special effort was made to assure that a large number of delegates from various religious backgrounds will have an opportunity to participate fully in your discussions.

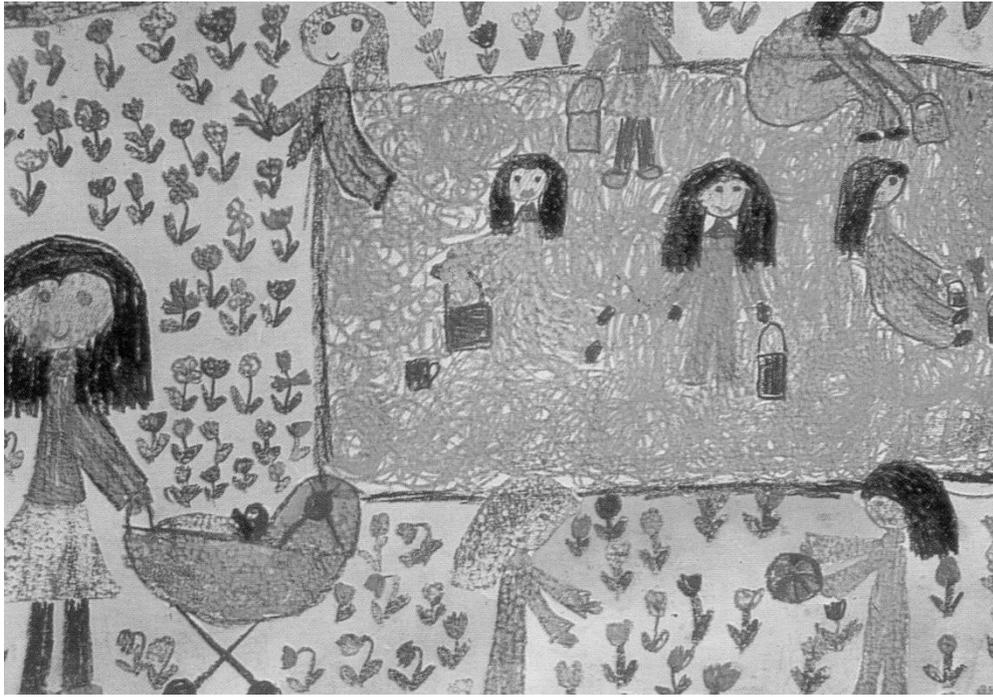
People who have religious convictions represent a very large portion of the human race. As a Christian I deeply believe that God is the author of life, and has demonstrated his concern for us by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile us to God and bring peace to our hearts and lives. Although full reconciliation can only be achieved at the foot of the Cross, I also am convinced that it is God’s will for us to act as peacemakers in our world, for God’s will is life and not death.

The present international situation is critical, due to the mindless escalation of the nuclear arms race. No nation, large or small, is totally exempt from blame for this situation, and every nation – large and small alike – must cooperate in new ways if peace is to be achieved. We must pray that the nations of the world will begin to move beyond the concept of nuclear deterrence and that a measure of trust will replace the suspicion which all too often poisons relations between nations of differing ideologies.

May God give you wisdom and guidance as you consider this vital subject during your meetings. May the leaders of all nations be encouraged to turn from all policies which endanger peace in our world, and may your gathering serve to advance the cause of reconciliation and peace among men and nations.

Dr Billy Graham”

Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 17, 1983



Some children's pictures sent to the
World Assembly
(originals in colour)



THURSDAY: DAY BREAK

I read afterwards that on Thursday afternoon, the Youth and Student Peace Village at the University College was formally opened. At the opening ceremony, a representative of the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of Youth, on behalf of the country's boys and girls, presented a symbolic key to the 'Mayor', or more accurately, the 'Mayoress' of the Village, a Swedish girl. One of the first things that the residents had done was to organise a referendum, and the result of this was made known at the ceremony when it was announced that by a unanimous decision the Village was to be declared a Nuclear-Free Zone.

The Youth and Student Peace Village, which was administered by an International Village Council, accommodated over 700 young people from 82 countries. In addition to holding meetings on the problems of peace and war, and especially on the contribution which young people's organisations could make to the world-wide peace movement, a full and varied programme of cultural and sporting events also took place. Activities included musical and dramatic presentations, film shows, a friendship cruise down the river, and a mile-long Peace Race. Information about all that was going on was printed in a newspaper – The Daily Mirror – which was produced by the participants and published daily.

It needs hardly be mentioned but the fact that there was such a village at all pays tribute to the tremendous concern of the world's youth for peace. The future may indeed be in safe hands, provided the up-and-coming generation is given a real opportunity to change matters before it's too late.

I say that I read about all this afterwards with good reason, since for the rest of us, Thursday was a day off, a break away from the deliberations of the World Assembly.

Through a tremendous feat of planning, the Czechoslovak Peace Committee had arranged for us – that is, 3,000 delegates and observers – to visit a grand total of 68 different parts of the country. By this means, practically the whole of Czechoslovakia as far to the East as Bratislava, nearly 200 miles from Prague, was directly involved in playing host to the country's foreign guests. The response of people everywhere clearly suggested that it was considered a great honour for them to meet the international parties of delegates. To us, it was just as great an honour to be given the chance to meet so many nice people and to be treated with so much kindness and generosity.

The outing I chose to go on was a visit to the town of Louny and its environs. The coach party included representatives from Britain, Namibia, Botswana, Bulgaria, Egypt and various other countries, plus a guide of Czechoslovak-North Korean parentage – quite a mixed bag in itself.

As we travelled through the suburbs of Prague, we passed many new blocks of flats and neighbourhood shopping centres, intermingled with streets of older houses. This gives the impression of being a bit of a hodgepodge. But it has the advantage in that the suburbs do not stretch on for miles

and miles as they do in the urban sprawl that surrounds many of our big cities. What the actual inhabitants think about living in these flats, I was not able to discover. I gather that a persistent problem has been the acute demand for decent living accommodation, especially by young married couples. The construction of new flats (over a million and a half between 1965 and 1980) and the demolition of hundreds of thousands of substandard ones is therefore an attempt to get to grips with this problem. Whether this solution will give rise to other troubles of a social nature, as the experience of Western countries has often shown, is something which will need careful scrutiny. On the other hand, maybe some of the familiar problems associated with living in blocks of flats that are encountered in our country are a reflection of much wider issues than just living conditions. Simple direct comparisons are not always useful or valid.

In a short time, we were in the countryside, travelling past the occasional patches of woodland and brilliant red clusters of poppies scattered here and there amidst the large open fields. Tall conical-shaped haystacks beside the road awaited collection. They have had to wait a long time, as I'm sure that all the farm labourers within miles were getting spruced up, ready to meet one of the coach parties.

The road to Louny took us through villages with gardens and roadside verges blooming with roses, but little else in the way of flowers. It would appear, in this area anyway, that the villages all seem to possess some manufacturing concern or other. Yet in spite of this, they retain their separate identities, rather than becoming primarily industrial sites, mere cogs in the economic process.

On public buildings, big placards held slogans in support of world peace like the ones I'd seen in Prague. It produced a heart-warming feeling like you get at Christmas when cards arrive from people you've not heard from in a long while.

Some time later, we came within sight of Louny. This town is about thirty miles North-West of Prague (as the Czechoslovak crow flies) and lies on the banks of the River Ohře. It is situated, as geography text books would say, upon a fertile plain between two ranges of hills, much to the delight of those intrepid souls who enjoy a spot of hang-gliding.

A number of different industries are undertaken here, including carpet-making, battery-production, engineering, brewing, and the processing of agricultural goods. Pollution is a major problem. I know this is so, as I was told later by a singer in all honesty that 'Smoke gets in your eyes'. It also gets on buildings. Nevertheless, it does not seem to detract much from the great charm and character of the old centre of town, surrounded by its Mediaeval town wall. I have read that Czechoslovakia is very conscious of the quality of the environment, and is introducing measures to reduce the amount of waste particles entering the atmosphere. Part of the programme involves replacing coal-fired power stations with nuclear reactors. From my own point of view, I have to admit that I would probably prefer a bit of smoke than anything which might accidentally or otherwise come out of a nuclear power station. But that's another matter, in more senses than one.

On arrival in Louny, we were received by a collection of the local dignitaries at the entrance to the town hall where we were presented with a red carnation each and given a glass of orange juice to quench our thirst. Inside, the mayor officially welcomed us and with great pride proceeded to extol the not-inconsiderable virtues of his town to us. After the speech, or rather two speeches – one in Czech followed by the translation, at intervals, into English – we (unofficially) discovered the virtues of the civic loo and signed the visitors' book, kept in another room, I should add.

We were then taken to the war memorial. Just outside the town walls, there stands the statue of a Russian soldier, head bent in sorrow, flag unfurled, held in his hands across his body. A few feet away, two stone plaques commemorate the spots where people had been killed by the Nazis. The look of total anguish on the face of this soldier, unarmed, without even a helmet on, is all that is needed to signify the terrible hardships which the Czechoslovak people had to endure under German occupation during the last war. More than that, the absolute grief in his expression speaks volumes of the blood that is spilt and the pains that are borne as a result of the barbaric nature of modern warfare. Every town should have such a statue. We laid our flowers at his feet and quietly left.

Crossing the road, we walked down a long grassy lane and our spirits instantly revived as we passed by a playing field in front of a small infant's school. Some of the kiddies were playing in the sandpits, or splashing about in a make-shift pool; others were shading themselves under brightly-coloured parasols or pushing dollies about in prams. On seeing us, they waved and ran up to the fence to say hello. Now I'm not the sort of man who hangs around children's playgrounds as a rule! But this was an exception since I was kept busy for quite some time shaking hands, or rather, fingers with them. If I had brought any sweeties with me, I'd have been well away...well away to the local 'nick', I expect, if I'd made a habit of it!

At the end of the lane was an 'old folks' home', one of three in Louny of varying sizes which can take a total of 300 residents. We were told that the three homes provide a range of services, including shopping, laundry, cleaning and cooked meals, according to the state of health and abilities of the residents. People have a room to themselves, with their own bathroom, toilet and kitchen, and may keep their own furniture if they so wish. There is also a communal room if they want to be with others. The services are provided by social workers and volunteers. In the District in which Louny is situated, there are 38 full-time and 60 volunteer social workers, who are members of the Czechoslovak Red Cross or the Women's Union. Permanent health care is also provided on the premises.

The cost of prescriptions and medical services in general, for the prevention and cure of diseases is free for all citizens. The District has been allocated about £6 million for this purpose, much of this sum being spent on hospitals – including three in Louny – and in the employment of 250 doctors and 1,300 other health workers. But it was added, this can only be achieved so long as we have peace. This statement we were to hear again and again during our visit.

The bus-ride to the next venue – the sports hall – should have given us time to digest these facts and figures. But within minutes we had disembarked again and were being shown around this smart, new, wood-panelled sports complex. The building is used for all ball games and one was actually in progress while we were there. It closely resembled basket-ball, but with soccer goal-posts replacing the baskets. Whatever it was, it was an extremely fast game and demanded much precision, fitness and stamina – qualities which are deemed important enough for the town to spend the money on building such a splendidly-equipped hall. Along with many hundreds of other centres, it is additionally used as a national sports facility.

Such information was provided for us by the (voluntary) chairman of the sports hall – a surprisingly robust, jolly man who did not strike us as the epitome of physical fitness. But he informed us on being questioned about this point, in a round-about sort of way, that he is also the director of the local brewers, which might explain his particular physique. A man who obviously loves his job!

It was water, rather than beer, which came after this on the agenda; or, to be more precise, the highly-renowned mineral waters issuing forth from a spring a short distance away. The spring is housed in a lattice-brick building, almost like a three-sided string vest in appearance. The other side, wide open to the elements, revealed a panoramic view over Louny, dominated by the tower and three pyramid-shaped spires on the roof of the church, and set amongst fields of golden stubble with the rounded volcanic hills in the background – a very pleasant landscape, to be sure.

The mineral waters of the 58 spas in Czechoslovakia are very much used for therapeutic purposes, attracting a total of nearly half a million patients a year, of which only a tiny fraction is obliged to pay anything for the treatment as such. For the majority of patients – mostly ordinary workers and pensioners – a visit to a spa is the form of treatment recommended by doctors for certain ailments, the cost being covered by a general sickness insurance scheme.

Karlovy Vary, formerly Carlsbad, less than forty miles away from Louny, is by far the largest spa sanatorium in the country, with various facilities catering for up to 80,000 patients every year. In contrast to this, the artesian spring we were now observing was nothing more than a continuously-flowing stand-pipe, the water disappearing down a drain again immediately after it had surfaced. This is not to say that the spring is not used at all. Even while we were standing around inside the pavilion, a man came in, filled up an old bucket, and carried it away with him. This is obviously what is meant by ‘taking the waters’.

Our education continued with a visit to a ‘nine-year’ school for children aged 6-15. A warm welcome awaited us. As soon as we set foot inside the school grounds, we were given roses by some of the pupils, while the remainder of the children lined both sides of the path to the road.

My training in going walk-about and giving royal waves was by this time well underway. The problem, as any member of the Royal Family will tell you, is in attempting to cover a distance of, say,

50 yards in anything less than 50 minutes. The proper solution, I gather, is NOT to shake hands with every child in turn, and most definitely, NOT to discuss the weather, politics and religion with each one in passing. I understand now why the Duke of Edinburgh keeps his hands clasped firmly behind his back. But even the Duke may have had difficulty in keeping to this rule if confronted with this situation. You see, it takes a lot of confidence to hold a very prickly rose stem behind you without causing a serious mishap. So if you've got both hands in front, you might just as well succumb.

On reaching the entrance door, we were taken on a guided tour of this modern school. The walls of many of the classrooms were covered in pictures of trees, animals, and other aspects of nature, and vases of flowers stood on many of the tables and shelves.

Amenities include a laboratory, a sick bay, a swimming pool, and a room set aside for children to stay in to wait for their parents in the evening. Besides their normal lessons, children take part in table games, participate in the youth club and play ice hockey. The class-size is around 24 and is split into two for science lessons in the laboratory and for physical exercises.

The headmaster told us that the first thing that children are taught about in Czechoslovakian schools is Peace and Cooperation. They also learn about what constitutes good manners. Maybe it was imagining things, but children that I met everywhere did seem very unaggressive, yet full of self-confidence.

Going back along the school path to the bus afterwards, I forgot all about the Duke and shook hands in rapid succession. Had I been more fluent in Czech, I'm sure I'd have learned everything there is to know about the weather, politics and religion in that country. As it was, we merely established together that it was indeed a "good day" and left it at that. Never let it be said that this report lacks the human touch.

This strenuous piece of exercise was all a bit too much for me, and so I was glad that the next stop was for a meal – soup, salad, chicken, cake and wine. The sight of this appetizing-looking food must have been quite daunting to the Egyptians at our table, who, being Muslims, were fasting during the month of Ramadan. But for the rest of us, it was just the job.

Food is not an expensive item in Czechoslovakia, and people do appear to eat well. A lot of meat and starchy foods are consumed and, as a result, many people put on weight in middle-age. However, I saw very few tubby youngsters. Must be all that physical training they do!

Almost directly opposite the restaurant was the sixteenth century church we had seen earlier on, which we were shown around after finishing our meal. The church is currently being renovated with funds provided by the State, since it is classified as an historical building of the first grade.

The lengths to which Czechoslovakians go towards preserving their cultural heritage is phenomenal. Delegates on a different outing told us they had visited another old church in the town of Most, near the East German border. To clear the path for a development scheme, the whole church had been put on rollers and moved to a new site 800 metres away.

British people who worry about the decline of religion in Socialist countries need have little fear about the position of the church in the lives of people, even if, as an institution, it has also been put on rollers and wheeled away from the centre of political life. Services are still held, as mentioned earlier, so that the decline of the church is only applicable in the physical sense, and even this is being rectified at considerable expense to the State.

In truth, I should also point out that although people are usually free to attend services (a country which pays the salaries of 28 bishops and 4,800 clergymen, with another 600 students at six theological colleges could save itself a lot of money if this were not the case), it should also be acknowledged that any religious practices which might violate the law of the land would not be tolerated. However, such a restraint on illegal activities is not the same as religious persecution across the board. Nevertheless, this is not to condone persecution, religious or political, where and when it does occur, and not just in Communist countries. Nor is it to support those who seize upon allegations of the persecution of Christians in Eastern Europe (true or false) as a lame excuse for maintaining or increasing the numbers of nuclear weapons deployed by the West – a familiar sentiment in certain church circles. If this is what religion is all about, it's time we found out who, or what, is actually being worshipped!

A basic tenet of Christian living is surely that of cooperation. So it was extremely appropriate that the next place we called at was a cooperative farm a few miles from Louny in the village of Hřivice. A crowd was gathered there ready to present us (once again!) with flowers. Also in celebration of an old Slavonic custom, we were given a slice of rye bread each, cut there and then from an enormous round loaf.

Following this, we were taken into a community centre and sat down at long tables to be told some facts about the farm. Out of 2,500 hectares of land in total, 2,100 hectares are devoted to arable, 300 hectares to hop fields, and 100 hectares to miscellaneous uses. Farm equipment includes 13 harvest machines, 78 tractors and 2 buses. In addition, 740 dairy cows are kept...

At this point, the translator confused matters by telling us how many lambs the cows had given birth to. Could this be a novel way of manufacturing woolly milk jugs? Anyway, he soon gathered momentum again.

The cooperative has 539 members and 359 full-time workers. Anyone over 18 who wishes to work can enlist. Wages, in cash and produce, relate to the overall profitability of the cooperative and the type of work done. A tractor-driver, for instance, earns about £125 a month, low by some standards but compensated for by bonuses, free health care, low rent (about one tenth of one's income), and few deductions from his pay packet.

The plan for the cooperative farm's production is determined by the State and the cooperative must pay the State a proportional amount of its income. However, such matters are not inflexible. Some hard bargaining goes on between the State and the farm's management, which is in the hands of an

elected steering group. The steering group is in turn influenced by the comments and criticisms of other members of the cooperative. A democratic structure therefore exists, but contrasts with the style of agricultural marketing in 'free enterprise' countries.

The lesson over, we ventured out to see the hop fields for ourselves. The vines are planted and harvested by children in working-groups – child labour, in the literal sense of the word. But if the enthusiastic recollections of our Czechoslovak guide are anything to go by, a welcome break away from school routine shut up in classrooms.

The hop vines climb very rapidly along thin wire supports to a height of about 18 metres. After being harvested, the cut vines are taken to special barns where they are hung on overhead moving cables and thereafter, the rest of the processing is completed by machinery.

A trip to one of the barns to see where this is carried out was then followed by a visit to an exceptionally clean and tidy repair shed where all the vehicles are maintained. The Bulgarian chap in our midst clambered up into the cab of a tractor and played with the levers. It looked great fun and I really fancied having a go too. But whereas his interest might have led to some future orders, mine would almost certainly have produced some rather drastic disorders. Ah well, vive la difference!

Before returning to the community -centre we called in at a house owned by the cooperative farm in which the family of an agricultural technician lives. His wife, who was on an extended period of maternity leave for two years, didn't bat an eyelid as forty foreigners invaded her home. I very much suspect there was much spitting and polishing done earlier that day!

An estate agent could not have wished for a more sought-after property on the books. The particulars are as follows:

LOUNGE: wall-to-wall carpeting, fitted cupboards, modern three-piece suite, TV, music-centre, huge plant-stand, French windows leading to veranda with ranch-style fencing.

BATHROOM: bath, wash-stand and toilet suite, automatic washing-machine (presumably for clothes).

MAIN BEDROOM: walnut-veneered wardrobe, double bed with modern headboard.

ALSO: spare bedroom, kitchen with all mod cons, and space in loft for one or two additional rooms if required

BUILT-IN GARAGE

BACK GARDEN: terraced, but of larger than average size for new properties in Britain, incorporating hen coop with sitting tenants.

PROBABLE PRICE (if on the market): £12,000 or thereabouts (a similar house in Prague would most likely cost double this amount.)

The really stunning thing about the house was that it took only 48 hours to erect!

Just how typical is this house of others, I pondered? Is it a show-case or a normal lived-in family abode?

Well, even supposing it was selected to be shown to us because of its good upkeep, national figures indicate that for most of the population, the standard of living is quite high and rising fast. Thus, 87% of households had a refrigerator, 83% a washing-machine, and 85% a television in 1980. There were bathrooms or showers in 80% of houses and central or floor-heating systems in 57% of them, the rest having gas, electric, or solid-fuel heating. Although only 38% of households owned a car, this is offset by the cheap public transport costs and the frequency of services even in rural areas. But to my mind, the most interesting statistic concerns weekend cottages in the country. One in ten families as a whole, and one in four in Prague has one of these. Now surely, they can't all be stockbrokers?

Standard of living, however, is not measured solely in terms of the number of Škodas on the road, or the number of families glued to soap operas on the telly. In the American guide book on Eastern Europe that I read, it states that the average Czechoslovakian goes to the theatre 12 times a year and 17 times a year to the cinema. Moreover, a total of 90-100 million books is published per annum. This works out that the average family of four buys approximately 25 new books a year. On the other hand, I suppose it could mean that one extremely literate, pale, red-eyed, and very stiff person has an absolutely enormous library!

Back at the farm centre, it was tea-time. Tables were already laid and we were soon dished up with frankfurters and rolls, followed by mouth-watering tarts, topped with strawberries and poppyseed, giant buns, and a choice of red or white wine.

In between chews, we were given the chance to ask questions and inevitably the question of peace-work came up. "The policy of the political party," it was stated, "is to defend the peace movement. The District, Regional and Czech and Slovak Peace Councils make it their business to see that peace information is given to young people."

As evidence of the concern for peace in the country, it was pointed out that about £4 million was collected in Czechoslovakia for the World Assembly. Each member of the cooperative farm donated a day's pay to the Peace Fund.

"Was it obligatory?" someone asked.

A burst of laughter from the fifty or so workers present met this question.

"The initiative came from the cow-house brigade," came the reply, "and no pressure was put upon people to contribute." It reminded me of people's different motives for giving to street collections in this country. Some give willingly; some as a matter of course; while others do so because they think it's expected of them by other people.

Question-time came to an end, and before we could get up, we were each handed a gift-wrapped parcel containing, we found out later, a set of tumblers for the women and glass dishes for the men – an appropriate gift since Bohemia is well-known for its glass-making. Clasp our parcels tightly,

we bade our farewells to the cooperative farm-workers who accompanied us outside to our waiting bus, and waved goodbye as we drove off as if we were all members of the same family.

A short drive took us to our final destination in Louny, the climax to all that had come before: the brewery. On the steps outside, the now-familiar pattern of being greeted by yet another selection of local dignitaries was repeated for the last time. Inside the club-room, a six-piece band was playing polkas and waltzes behind a small dance floor. Rows of tables formed a U-shape around the floor, facing the band.

The top table at the centre of this U was soon occupied by the chairman and chairwoman of this, that and the other, alongside our old friend, the jovial director of the brewery. The rest of those present then sat down at the remaining tables, so that we found ourselves sitting next to such distinguished guests as the District Chairman of the Soviet-Czechoslovakian Friendship Society, the District Chairwoman of the Czechoslovakian Red Cross, and an exact Nikita Khrushchev look-alike – the District Chairman of the Army Liaison Board.

After yet more speeches of welcome, we helped ourselves to food and were provided with a constant supply of beer by the barman. Meanwhile, the dancing had begun – the man from Botswana with the woman from Bulgaria, the Egyptian with the waitress, and there, with a big smile all over his face, the Mayor, with anyone who'd oblige. To the amazement of our guide, one of our party who had been struggling around the aid of a walking stick all day immediately took to the floor, finding a buxom lady a much better proposition for getting about (albeit in three-four time) than his stick had been.

Interspersed with the dancing were speeches. The brewery, we were told, produces 2 million hectare-litres per year. Each person in Louny drinks 210 litres per year. What is left over is drunk in other parts of the country or exported.

An appropriate toast came after each speech: "Pivo za Mir" – "Beer for Peace". More dancing ensued, and then the chief fireman of the District who had slipped out sometime earlier reappeared in all his glory – full regalia, plus a chest full of medals.

"That's pretty," I told him (granted my Czech vocabulary was still somewhat limited).

He stared at me. Had I got the right word? I tried to make amends.

"You know – pretty, beautiful..."

I don't think he was too upset. Anyway, within a short time, his jacket was open and he was out on the dance floor enjoying himself. So was I. After all, a social occasion is meant to be precisely that.

The evening in the brewery finished with everyone linking arms and singing "Auld Lang Syne". We were given carrier bags full of yet more presents (souvenirs of Louny), fondly wished goodbye and were left to collapse on the coach after a long, exhausting, but most enlightening and enjoyable day's outing.

FRIDAY: BIRDS OF A FEATHER

The Assembly resumed on Friday with the start of the Special Interest group meetings – trade unionists, educationalists, physicians, writers and artists, parliamentarians, councillors, religious circles, lawyers, scientists, journalists, sportsmen and women, military veterans, cosmonauts, businessmen, women and others.

The Women's Centre, a permanent fixture of the Assembly, was said by the participants to be the most vibrant part of the whole congress. Ideas came thick and fast. The importance of peace education was stressed by many, particularly to dispel the Cold War atmosphere generated by the manipulators of public opinion. Cold War is a form of violence in itself, which prepares us for Hot War, it was agreed. The effect of the arms race in depriving people of social services, jobs, health care, education and food, was mentioned. There were even calls for unilateral disarmament on the part of the Soviet Union as a demonstration of moral superiority. So far, this demand has not been taken up...

A suggestion for setting up women's international houses for peace in each country was supported by an offer from the International YWCA of possibility providing a peace room in their various centres. Closer cooperation between women in different countries was emphasized and more personal exchanges and visits were planned.

These are but some of the many ideas that came out of the Women's Centre. The details were recounted to me by others and taken from their report as I did not personally attend. Instead, I chose to participate in the Writers and Artists' workshop.

On the table in front of each chair was a carrier bag. Inside were postcards addressed to the delegates from children on which they had written short messages of peace. The front of the cards carried printed pictures of everyday life, painted by Czechoslovakian children of different ages. Of all the things I brought back to England, it is these postcards which I value most highly. Each one expresses creativity in its purest and most spontaneous form.

These postcards were not the only correspondence that was sent to the World Assembly. A total of 220 thousand letters and messages arrived. Many representatives of international organisations, heads of governments and other national and regional bodies sent their greetings, including those from Javier Perez de Cuellar – Secretary-General of the UN; Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow – Secretary-General of UNESCO; and Imre Hollai, President of the 37th Session of the UN General Assembly. The most touching messages, however, came from ordinary people. This is the one I like best:
“Dear Aunts and Uncles,

I, Janko Sarek, a pupil of the second year of the elementary school in Haligovoie, want peace. I am sending you all my very warmest wishes and I want all the children in the world to be able to live in peace. I am writing for my little sister Andrejka, my Daddy and my Mummy.”

Another nice one came from a ball-bearing factory. It reads:

“We want to live for work in peace, we want to educate our children and the young generation for a life without wars. We are convinced that such a peaceful life is also the fervent wish of American youngsters and of young people all over the world.”

Or take this one from someone who actually experienced war:

“I spent five years being happy. Then the war came. A mine went off. I cannot hear. I beg you on behalf of all children – safeguard peace!”

The messages may not be great literature in the conventional sense but no-one can deny that they express a depth of feeling which is absent from a great many hefty tomes which have pride of place in many libraries.

Perhaps, this sheds light upon the whole purpose of holding an Artists and Writers’ workshop. Its philosophy could be summarized in just a few words: culture should be a living form, and a form for living.

To open the session, the Czechoslovakian chairman offered some suggestions for building bridges between countries which had come out of the meetings of the international preparatory committee. He spoke of international exhibitions on anti-war themes, international theatre festivals, and peace meetings of writers and artists. It was encouraging to learn that such ideas were not just theoretical – they were actually being put into practice already as some of the delegates went on to explain.

For example, an American informed us that he was in the process of preparing an exhibition of works from international artists to tour Europe and North America.

Many participants at the workshop also mentioned the organisation known as PAND (Performing Artists for Nuclear Disarmament). Founded by the well-known singer Harry Belafonte. It has three objectives: a nuclear freeze by all countries, followed by a conventional-weapons freeze; the adoption of a no-first use policy by the nuclear powers; and the channelling of money from military to social uses.

Quite a number of concerts have been put on by PAND in different countries. In Austria and Finland, tours of cities and towns by all manner of artists had been highly successful. In 1982, a Finnish peace train called at 14 different cities on a 10-day tour. Over 300 artists took part, nearly all of them donating their services to the cause, and putting on more than a thousand events in concert halls, schools, workplaces and elsewhere.

Can you imagine the next time you’re waiting around on Victoria Station hearing the station announcer say: “The train now standing at platform 3 is the 9:15 cultural express, calling at Glyndebourne; the Chichester Festival; the St Ives studios; the Royal Shakespeare Theatre; the Eisteddfod; the Manchester Playhouse; the Edinburgh Festival; the Tate Gallery; and the Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Club...? Well, one day, that, or the equivalent of that might be a reality.

Another interesting idea put forward at this meeting concerned the compilation of a dictionary of peace and culture in as many languages as possible. Hopefully, it would not be written by the artists themselves, otherwise it would be likely to run into many, many volumes. Even the report of this special interest group reads a bit like an epic poem, or the start of a great Victorian novel. It is hard to imagine any other of the meetings conjuring up such prose as this:

“We should leave this Assembly with a bridge between us that does not end, like the Pont D’Avignon, in the middle of the river, but joins people to people and nation to nation and culture to culture in this life and death struggle to save mankind.”

But it would be unfair to single out this report alone for reflecting the occupations of those involved. To some extent, all the reports do. The physicians’ report, for instance, is a concise diagnosis of the problem, with a suitable course of treatment prescribed to cure the ill and prevent future infections. Fortunately for the rest of us, the prescription was typed, not handwritten. The religious circles report, which might not go down at all well in some of the more established circles, would nevertheless make one of the best sermons that has ever been preached. As for the Parliamentarians, no Act was ever defined in more specific and detailed terms with 14 different sub-clauses listed. If only their comprehensive report had become passed as binding international law, we might now be living in a far safer world.

The reports, of course, are no substitute for the real thing. But sometimes, the real thing becomes a little taxing. I’m afraid that here I must make a rather personal confession – I like my sleep. The culmination of happenings so far began to hit me after I returned to the artists’ meeting from a pleasantly-filling lunch that afternoon. Sometime later, I found myself still holding my biro poised for action, rather than attacking the pages of my notebook like a blue tornado, which had been the case up until then.

As my eyelids drooped, not even the sight of a Grecian figure – at least 40-24-36 – could revive me. In desperation to keep myself alert, I tried twisting my switch around to other numbers on the box to hear the contributions in the other languages. If only we could carry these marvellous devices around with us permanently, it would save a lot of misunderstandings abroad. But then, we would not have such a good excuse for shouting at foreigners, or in performing strange, often indelicate mimes which usually convey an altogether different meaning from that intended.

Perhaps too, the continuous snippets of news from various countries begins to pall after a while and produce mental indigestion. Don’t get me wrong. It’s fascinating to know what’s going on to further the cause of peace in such places as Minches, Fair Isle, Dogger Bank or even German Bight. But a bit more emphasis upon how we could all work together and less on what some of us have already done would have been more stimulating. Possibly another week would have allowed people to get things out of their systems, and provide an array of ideas for further discussion. But who could stand the pace?

I gave up trying after a while. The sound of a broad Scottish accent being translated into a broad Russian one drove me downstairs to seek out a coffee and, as it happened, a chat about women's lib with a Danish woman on the balcony. The mixture of black coffee, feminism and fresh air revived me in no time, and I returned to my place invigorated, and suddenly terribly interested in the Greek classics.

That evening, after a trip of exploration to the nightclub on the twelfth floor of the hotel, and a hasty trip down again when I discovered the admittance charge, I retired to my room – a little later than anticipated, thanks to getting completely lost in the uncharted territory of the other hotel corridors. So it's true. You can never find a policeman to ask when you need one, even in Czechoslovakia!

SATURDAY: GEMS

Back at the Palace of Culture the next day I sat in on the meeting of Educationalists, where the topic of the morning was entitled: “Teaching the interdependence of disarmament, human rights, fundamental freedom, social and economic development, and information” – a little beyond ‘O’ level standard I should think!

The introduction by an Indian professor started off:

“One of the battles today is the battle for people’s minds waged with textbooks, the media and so on. The educational structure is such that peace is the first casualty.”

A fellow Indian developed the theme:

“History which has glorified aggression and warriors needs to be rewritten. Instead, we need to glorify peace-workers.” It was presumably a history lesson, with implications for the future.

One past event which interested me a great deal concerned a festival in Sofia, Bulgaria, not so long ago, in which 850 children from all over the world had taken part. The Festival involved singing, dancing, painting, and other artistic pursuits. Another such event would take place in 1985 under the title “Banner of Peace” to mark the U.N. Year of the Young People.

This workshop came up with a great many practical proposals, including an international newsletter for teachers, an annual Peace Week in schools, and a follow-on conference next year (1984). It looks like there will be a lot of homework for some people to do.

That afternoon, we had to make a choice between two important meetings. On the one hand, there was a Solidarity meeting at which Yasar Arafat made a surprise appearance, ‘hot-foot’ from Syria.

The other was one of a number of small group get-togethers which took a variety of forms. For instance, the Americans and Poles had a meeting with each other, as did the Americans, British, French, Russians and Afghans on another occasion. The American and Russian delegates also had lunch together one day – I’m reliably informed that it did not consist of caviar and French fries, washed down with vodka and coke. To top it all, the Australians and Vietnamese had planned to spend the longest time in each other’s company. They were going to travel home together via Moscow.

It will come as no surprise to anyone, therefore, to know that the British delegation had a meeting with none other than the Argentinians that afternoon. With the aid of not one, not two, not even three translators, but half a room-full of English-Spanish speakers of varying degrees of proficiency, we found that all of us wanted to talk about just one thing: peace and reconciliation. We were told some extremely interesting things at that meeting about the involvement of the USA with the Argentinian government prior to the invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas; also, about plans for the installation of nuclear weapons in the islands to insure that the resources of Antarctica are reserved for Western

multinational companies. Diplomacy with nuclear weaponry is the name of the game, increasingly so now – a state of affairs which can only spell disaster sooner or later.

To get back to more cheerful matters, after dinner that evening, I had a very special engagement. Whereas nearly everybody else was going to one of the concerts laid on for the delegates, I had been invited to attend a cocktail party given by the Union of Czechoslovak Composers. To me, such a Union was quite mind-boggling, conjuring up visions of picket lines standing around sheets of bare manuscript paper. Was it, perchance, industrial action that caused Schubert to write an unfinished symphony? Could ANDANTE really mean ‘Go Slow’ – an attempt to persuade performers to stay longer in the bar?

I was intrigued, yet nonetheless felt highly honoured to be invited. I had written on one of the forms when we registered that I was a musician, which indeed I was at one time and still am, but now only in an amateur capacity. I expect that is why I received the invitation which, I noted with a degree of smugness, had added the title ‘Sir’ to my name. Could I possibly have been knighted for my services to my country’s fox-trotting fraternity without even realising it?

There were only about five of us delegates going to the cocktail party, yet they had laid on a large coach to take us there. Up front sat two interpreters. A few minutes before the various coaches were due to leave for their different destinations, one of these interpreters, a young lady with long brown hair and a doll-like face, asked if anyone spoke French, or could everyone understand English.

I could see that she did not want to go to the trouble of rushing about to find the other coaches only to pose the same question again. So I said in my elementary schoolboy French: “If I speak French, will you stay?” It was only a joke, the sort which any elementary schoolboy would make. With a jolt, the coach began to move forward. She promptly sat down again, and I turned my attention towards the passing scenery outside.

When we arrived at a somewhat obscure building in the suburbs a little time later, we were cordially greeted at the entrance door by our hosts and taken upstairs to a small, cosy room, almost totally swallowed up by a large round table. Subdued lighting further enhanced the intimate atmosphere.

We sat down, and as our very dignified host began to introduce each of the assembled musicians, singers, composers and other celebrities in turn, all of them splendidly turned out in evening dress, I heard a soft, husky voice whispering sweet French nothings in my ear. To be honest, they were not entirely nothings. I could pick up the odd word now and again, recalled from my long-lost memory. But this shock to my system completely took me aback. At the same time, the other members of our party were being given an English translation by the other interpreter, but I was unable to hear any of that.

For some moments I luxuriated in this sensuous experience, as any hot- or even warm-blooded British male would have done, until the thought suddenly struck me – what if our host asks me a question? Amazingly, my memory of French vocabulary came flooding back in no time at all.

“It’s alright for you to speak English,” whispered the translator when the introductions came to a halt. However, that did not stop her from translating everything that was said into French for me. I felt like one of those little boxes I’d played around with the previous day.

After we’d been told something about the Union of Czechoslovak Composers, we were treated to a suite of sixteenth-century music, played for us by two men on clarinet and bassoon and a lady on the lead instrument – oboe. As space was limited, they had to sit on the small landing outside. But despite being ‘banished’ from the room, they performed the suite in a very expert manner, and very soothing the music was too.

When it was over, our wine glasses were filled and we were told to help ourselves from the buffet.

“My husband’s into Genesis,” the translator told me as I consumed a gherkin. I had no idea what had provoked this revelation about her spouse’s bible-reading studies, but tried to look interested anyway.

“He doesn’t like having to play all the corny stuff – he just wants to play like the drummer in Genesis – that’s his favourite group.”

Now I fully understood. After years of churning out “Hands, Knees and Bumps a-daisy” night after night at holiday camps, and accompanying umpteen Louis Armstrong imitations of both sexes, I knew precisely what she meant. Another similarity between East and West had been unearthed.

We signed the Visitor’s Book and then sat down to another piece of music played by the wind trio, who, by the sound of it, had managed to steer clear of the cucumber salad, with delightful results.

This last recital seemed to signify that it was time for others to do their party pieces. A rather large exiled Paraguayan squeezed his way over to a piano in the corner, and announcing that he was not really a good pianist, demonstrated the fact. Unfortunately, the missing element in his own composition (a tango) was any semblance of rhythm.

Our hosts sat in polite silence for a while, and then, one by one added the missing ingredients with the odd clap which soon cascaded into some pretty vigorous clapping. The Paraguayan’s place at the piano was then taken by a Columbian who sang in a fine rounded tenor voice, full of Latin bravura as he launched into a more up-tempo rumba. The room was now utterly transformed from the sophisticated drawing-room concert party to an out and out South American fiesta. Everyone clapped loudly in a mixture of different rhythms, there were long whistles, and raucous cries of “Olé”.

As soon as the cheering had died down for the Columbian’s song our attention was caught by the bassoon player, now with dishevelled hair, minus his jacket, and with his white bow-tie hanging on for dear life from one side of his open collar. Standing in the doorway, he held what looked like a portable barrel-organ in his arms. He put on a serious expression – that of a sensitive artist deeply engrossed in his work – and started turning the handle. Out came the pink-plonk-plink of a simple

little tune, repeating itself every few bars. Speeding up at times, then slowing down, and sometimes pausing altogether to emphasize the nuances, he made out that he was a highly accomplished performer, giving a passionate rendition of some Romantic concerto. He finished off this hilarious send-up with a chorus standing on one leg.

The wine flowed even sweeter.

“Speech!” said the Columbian in Spanish pointing at me.

I thought for a moment, a tremendous achievement under the circumstances, and said: “If all the peoples of East and West Europe, Africa, Asia, North and South America, everywhere, could be here in this room tonight, there would be world peace instantly.”

Our host immediately took me up on this.

“There is no East or West Europe,” he said in a moment of seriousness. “There is just one Europe. Europe is a jewel that we must all cherish.”

No truer words have ever been spoken. We must do whatsoever we can to cherish this, our precious jewel.

A musician from Denmark then explained that twenty years ago he had been put into prison for a week for going on a march against apartheid. While in prison. He wrote a song which is now sung at all the peace marches in his country. He handed us some music with the lyrics written in Danish. Together, our Czechoslovakian host, the French translator, and I shared the music between us. And with the other Czechoslovakians, the Paraguayan, the Columbian, the West German, and the Dane at the piano, we sung in unison the universal lyrics to every song that has ever been written – “la, la, la, la, la...” Unwittingly, we had sung the last verse of the song.

There could be no better way to end a marvellous evening. But before we left, there was still one more surprise. Each of us was handed a bag containing a couple of records and a thick book entitled “Music in Bratislava” – a city renowned for its rich musical tradition. All I had to offer in exchange were a few tortoise badges. Hopefully, the message of peace on the badges and the promise I made to keep in touch will go some way towards expressing my appreciation, my appreciation above all for making me cease to think of an East and a West Europe, but instead, regarding the whole continent as one, united but diversified.

Maybe, as the man said, all of us will learn one day to cherish this our precious jewel. Maybe...

SUNDAY: DIFFERENT ADDRESSES

The last day of the Assembly was devoted to a day-long plenary session in the Congress Hall. In the morning, there was to be a summary of the final reports of the different workshops, that is, the Dialogues and the Special Interest Group meetings. At least, that was the plan.

With good intentions, I took my seat and listened attentively. However, since most of the raconteurs insisted upon reading out the reports of their meetings in full, I soon decided that the time could be more profitably spent outside of the room with the rest of the shirkers.

I did not miss out on anything since all the reports were typed and laid out on the tables in the foyer – an impressive achievement considering the number of delegates, the number of different meetings, and the various languages involved. The backroom boys and girls who worked throughout the night in preparing them certainly deserve my praise.

Around each of the tables was something that closely resembled a rugby scrum. Not too many casualties as far as I could see. But having seen the jostling that went on, I would recommend that the saying “All’s fair in love and war” be shortened by two words.

I spent the rest of the morning chasing around trying to augment my collection of contact addresses to bring back for people here. A small criticism, but I do wish that the name-tags we all had to wear could have identified a person’s country in a more striking manner. There was simply no way of reading where people came from without giving them an unexpected hug in a desperate attempt to read the small typed labels. Although I was often tempted, you can’t do this to everyone without risking a (peaceful) slap on the face.

A slightly more respectable way of finding out was to lurk behind groups of people to try and identify what language they were chatting away in.

Finally, when all else failed, there was no alternative but to hound people down, pouncing on them as they passed by and even attempting to trip them up so that you could catch their utterances as they went down. Let me see now: a few strategically-place brief-cases here, across this main passage-way; a jolt on the fire-alarm; and pencil at the ready...Hmm. Maybe it would be easier just to ask people outright.

I eventually did manage to collect the addresses of some of the delegates from Eastern Europe, but it was not at all easy trying to spot them. It’s a strange thing but most of them look exactly like Americans. To complicate matters further, most of the Americans look just like Russians. I wonder if world leaders have caught on to this yet!

After lunch, the closing ceremony took place. The Final Appeal for disarmament, international cooperation and peaceful co-existence was read out. There were some fine speeches. And then, we linked hands as Beethoven’s Ode to Joy once more filled the Hall, packed with peoples of all colours,

all races, and nearly all nationalities. It was another very moving moment which words alone cannot portray,

We enjoyed a rare treat that evening. All of the delegates had been invited to a reception in the castle put on by President Husák. It was an occasion on which to dress up and people certainly did that, the colours of the gowns adding sparkle to the already glittering décor. White marble statues, elegant chandeliers, and ornate ceilings create a sense of grandeur which reflects the rich, cultural heritage of this city. Mountains of food – salad dishes, slices of different kinds of meat, and bread rolls – were piled high upon the long tables, while forests of wine and champagne glasses stood alongside.

Time passed quickly amongst these spectacular surroundings, so quickly in fact that some of us missed the bus back to the hotel. Along with a colleague, I set off in search of the nearest Metro station. Seeing the elegant old buildings bathed in spotlights which accentuate the lines and highlight the texture of the elaborately-decorated walls was an added bonus to the evening's activities.

Even late at night the streets are a-bustle with crowds of people enjoying a night out. It is a lively yet refined city, unspoiled by the unsavoury qualities of many of the cities in the West – the brash commercialisation of everything, the graffiti, the litter, the vandalism, the fleshpots. Perhaps some might call it unexciting or prudish; others would immediately fall for the city in a big way like I did. I'm really glad that I missed that bus.

MONDAY: IMAGES

My last full day in Prague was spent in drinking in the atmosphere, taking mental photographs and storing impressions deep inside me in case I never get to go there again. It was also a day to unwind, and I occupied most of my time merely sitting on benches in the Old Town Square and ambling through some of the many beautiful parks, observing everything and everyone.

The women, at least the younger ones, possess excellent poise and take great pride in their appearance. The combination of good bone structure, dark soulful eyes, fresh complexion, and skilful use of make-up gives many of them an almost aristocratic look. Several of us commented upon this, including a clergyman, so I suppose this observation could be said to have the church's blessing. In short, the women struck me as being very 'feminine', and not ashamed of it either.

The men, I noticed, were generally kempt and well turned-out, but to tell the truth I did not pay as much heed to them as to the women.

As for the children, I've already mentioned them many times before. Suffice to say that on this sunny morning, I was captivated by a couple of identical, blond-haired twins, no more than three years of age, and dressed in tartan overalls. Watching them playing amongst the flowers I was reminded of the slogan of this year's children's art competition, organised as it has been since 1969 by the Czechoslovak Peace Council. The motto, dedicated to the World Assembly, could not be simpler or more direct: "People, fight for peace – children will help you." I feel not that in many ways they already have.

That evening, the British delegates had a farewell get-together with some of the leading members of the Czechoslovak Peace Committee. It was a suitable occasion to express our thanks to them for all the trouble they had gone to in looking after us. To show our appreciation, several people presented them with gifts. I chose this moment to present the Friendship Book from my home village to the Chairman to arrange for it to be exhibited to the inhabitants of Prague. The goodwill which I'm sure it will help to create should make it easier to arrange further contacts between our two countries. By so doing, the myths which have poisoned the minds of people for far too long will at last be shed.

The officials departed in due course and we were left to consider our immediate position. We had been to a peace conference in an Eastern European country which would be viewed with suspicion and down-right hostility by certain people in our own country. Incredible as it might seem, but there are some in the West who believe that we must avoid all contact with people who live in Communist countries. Those of us who believe in an open dialogue and in learning all we can about what life is really like in these countries in order to promote peace and friendship between peoples, refute this type of head-in-the-sand mentality completely. What it amounts to is nothing less than a denial of universal human rights, particularly the freedom to speak and assemble with other peoples.

However, in considering our situation, we had to be prepared to face a hostile press when we got home, especially in view of the way that the media had ‘covered’ the Assembly. A statement was consequently drawn up and signed, and we agreed amongst ourselves to spread the word about what really went on in Prague. I hope this account contributes to this objective. At least, if it makes people more aware of other parts of the world, and prompts them to question what they are told in future, it will have been worthwhile. It may not provide many of the right answers, nor does it claim to. But it does perhaps show that you cannot view the world solely in black and white terms. Any attempt to do so is not only misguided, it is taking the first step towards oblivion.

TUESDAY: PAST, PRESENT AND THE FUTURE...

There's not much more to add. The following morning, we hung around the hotel until it was time for our buses to take us to the airport. And we said our last goodbyes to our exceptionally patient and extremely helpful guides.

It meant an awful lot to me to see one of them with tears in her eyes. It had not been a one-way process. They had grown as fond of us as we had of them, of that I am convinced. The image of the British as being very cold and haughty had taken a battering. But it was not just the helpers. In leaving so many of the friends I had made, Czechoslovakians and others, I felt a strong wrench, made worse by the sad realisation that many of them were my country's 'stated' enemies, with all that that entails.

In today's climate of international tension and with the increasing threat of nuclear war hanging over us, Oscar Wilde might have summed it up like this:

"It's perfectly respectable to fall in love with one person; distinctly embarrassing to fall in love with two; but to fall in love with the whole world is an absolute tragedy."

Yet for ten full days we proved that we can all live happily together if we really want to. Our task now is to see that not just a little under four thousand, nor even four million people, but that four thousand million men and women – approximately the population of the world – can do it too. And do it they must!

Meanwhile, I look forward to being invited to a reception for all peace workers at Buckingham Palace. See you there...Oh, I nearly forgot – the invitation reads; "PS. Bring your own tortoise."

