

MARY MATZ

RANDOM THOUGHTS
AND WILD
IMAGININGS

A Peek Inside the Diary
of an American Ex-Pat
Living in the Czech Republic

Bridge

RANDOM THOUGHTS AND WILD IMAGININGS

A PEEK INSIDE THE DIARY OF AN
AMERICAN EX-PAT
LIVING IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION: ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Matz has always been accused by her mother of having a wild imagination. During a recent trip to the US (Mary has lived in Prague since 1995), while Mary was out, her mother cleaned out Mary's suitcase and found this diary.

Did she... ? Of course she read it! Now Mrs Matz would like you to take a look at it too and decide if she's right - does Mary have a wild imagination?

But read it quickly... before Mary gets back... and don't say anything... just keep smiling and pretend everything's normal...

SPEAKING CZECH

The Czech language is really difficult to learn. And like all speakers of a foreign language, I'm always a little unsure of myself when I have to speak Czech to a Czech person. When I came here in 1995, many people had never spoken to an American before. Many had never traveled outside the Czech Republic. So they had no idea how difficult Czech really is.

But gradually that started to change. These days, most Czechs are very patient with native English speakers who murder their language as they try to speak. Most Czechs have tried to learn at least a little English themselves, and now they see how difficult it can be.

So it's interesting to see the reactions of Czech people when I try to speak their language today, more than 15 years later.

Take the question of "ty" versus "vy" for example. In my early Czech language classes we were told that we must never, ever use "ty" when speaking to someone we don't know as well as we know our own family.

I've found out that it isn't true. Most of the time I use "ty" because the people I speak most with are my close friends and we all use "ty". When I suddenly realize that I've said "ty" to a shop assistant, for example, I immediately apologize and repeat what I've tried to say, this time using "vy".

But it doesn't matter. Most people just wave their hands and make a face that says, "Don't worry, it's OK; it's not important."

I like that, because it makes me feel the way my own language makes me feel as an American – that everybody is equal. In English, everybody is "ty". Even though we call some people by their first names, and others "Mr..." or "Mrs..." we still think of them all as indistinguished¹ "you".

But sometimes the Czech person has a different reaction. They get a tiny little smile on their face, their eyes soften and twinkle², and they listen to my Czech really, really carefully. They look very pleased, even a little dreamy.

It's not because my Czech is so good, I've found out.

It's because my Czech sounds exactly the same as the Czech of their own little children when they were first learning to speak, and the people enjoy reliving³ this memory through my child-like ability to speak this language.

(Sigh.)

1 **indistinguished** – not specified

2 **to twinkle** – to shine, to be bright

3 **to relive** – to clearly remember something that happened in the past

Random Note #2a

SPEAKING CZECH Part 2

I think one reason foreigners don't pronounce the Czech "ř" very clearly is – well, we can do it perfectly well, we just don't want to. It's because we're afraid we're going to spit⁴ all over whomever we're talking to.

I think that's the same reason Czechs don't pronounce the English "th" very well, either.

We're all just too polite to speak!



4 **to spit** – to force out the contents of the mouth (plivat)

And it would be nice if Czechs were a little more generous with their vowels. The first time I saw the word "čtvrtek", I couldn't believe it. Five consonants in a row!

Where are we – Wales?

Which reminds me: Why do Czechs hide the letter "ch" after the letter "h" in dictionaries? You could say it has a somewhat similar sound to "hhh" – but then I could say that the first letter there is clearly a "c", which comes well before "h" in a dictionary. And after all, we don't pronounce a dictionary, we read it, so it should be in alphabetical order.

I do think it's cute⁵, though, when business names in vertical signs have the "ch" going crosswise, like

O
B
CH
O
D

It looks like they're trying to play Scrabble.

5 **cute** – pleasant, attractive

Random Note # 62

CZECH NOSES

I hadn't been in the Czech Republic very long when I noticed an amazing thing: Many Czech people have the most *fantastic noses!*

These noses are like big isosceles triangles⁶, flesh mainsails⁷ on the human ships of the land-locked⁸ Czech Navy, proud ice cutters slicing through an invisible sea.

And I think I know how Czechs get this beautiful nose.

It's from reading Czech children's books.

One of the first books I got in the Czech Republic was the vowel-impaired⁹ Václav Čtvrtek's *The Story of the Bird (named) Klabizřák*. The little bird in the pictures also had this amazing Czech nose! And then I noticed



- 6 **isosceles triangle** – a triangle with two sides of equal length
7 **mainsail** – a large sail (a piece of cloth that catches the wind and helps a ship to move)
8 **land-locked** – having no sea coast
9 **vowel-impaired** – lacking vowels (in his surname)

that some other Czech illustrators draw birds in a similar way. So young Czech children who read these books start to grow these noses as they grow up!

To prove my theory about Czech illustrators, I have drawn a Czech bird in a tuxedo¹⁰, with a beautiful Czech nose.

Random Note #4

GOOGLE TRANSLATE

I guess there will always be a need for human translators. This is clear thanks to computer translation devices, such as Google Translate, among others. The poor little things try very hard, but sometimes their answers are just silly.

For example, one translator completely ignores the “ne-” prefix on all negative Czech verbs. I guess it just wants everything to be positive.

It often translates “she” as “he” or “it”.

And if there happens to be a person's name in the translation, look out¹¹! A computer translator can give you really funny answers. For example, the Czech mezzo-soprano named Michaela Kapustová is translated as Michael Cabbage.

- 10 **tuxedo** – a man's jacket worn at formal social events
11 **look out** – be careful

SOCIAL ART

Lately I've noticed something very interesting on the metro: people are starting to do things to the advertising stickers placed on the inside of the metro doors. And I think that those advertisements and the changes people make to them are going to be the next graffiti.

Graffiti became very popular in the 1960s, and when I was living in New York City in the 1970s, sometimes I saw graffiti on a subway car¹⁵. Back then, to write graffiti nobody used spray paint. Instead, you had to scratch into the surface of the metal with something very sharp, like a key or a knife.

Some of the graffiti said "Book you." Actually, this started out as a very rude graffiti, and then a passenger who thought it was too rude carefully used a key to scratch¹⁶ some extra lines into the letters. They changed the first letter of the first word, "f", into a "b", and the "u" into the first "o", and the original "c" into the second "o", to change the original word into "book", so it wouldn't be so offensive.

Today in Prague, it seems there's a lot less spray-painted graffiti in the metros, and instead there are lots more advertising stickers. Some of them are quite ugly and old, plastered at

Once I was explaining to someone that round jars¹² take up too much space on a shelf, and square jars are better. The computer showed that:

a square jar is translated as Náměstí Jar

I was trying to speak about a musician offering violin lessons for English-speakers, and the computer helpfully suggested that:

English-speakers is translated as angličtinu-reproduktory

The computer also is quite patriotic, saying that:

stavte se na dobré kafe is translated as the state is good coffee kafe

And finally, the computer translator takes a humble¹³ attitude¹⁴:

Jen tak, abyste věděli, že něco ještě dělám is translated as Just so you know something that I do not

12 **jar** – a glass container

13 **humble** – not proud, not believing that you are important (skromný)

14 **attitude** – an opinion about sth, or a way of behaving that is caused by this (postoj)

15 **subway car** – part of an underground train

16 **to scratch** – to cut with sth sharp



crooked angles¹⁷ or partly torn off. They usually advertise an event (typically a rock concert or a party in a club) that happened many months ago.

17 **plastered at crooked angles** – stuck (to the door) not straight

Some doors have so many stickers, one on top of the next, that it looks like the newest form of that old information source, the newspaper.

Reading them is a way to see what's going on at certain places: rock clubs, summer music festivals. And also to see what people are worried about: losing weight, finding work, etc.

Right now, probably some sociologist is studying these stickers to see what they can show us about society in the early 21st century.

In places where there are many stickers on top of each other, parts of some have been ripped off¹⁸. But you can still read some of the letters from a sticker underneath¹⁹. Archeologists have a name for something similar to this, a *palimpsest*. Palimpsests were created mainly from ancient times through the Middle Ages, when important documents were written on wax tablets²⁰ or animal hides²¹. When the information was old and something more important needed to be recorded, the writer melted²² the wax or scraped off²³ part of the hide and wrote on the new surface. But often you could still read the letters from the original document, too.

18 **ripped off** – torn off

19 **underneath** – under

20 **wax tablet** – a thin piece of wood covered with a layer of wax (the substance candles are made of)

21 **hide** – animal skin

22 **to melt** – to turn into liquid state

23 **to scrape off** – to remove



On the left: A palimpsest. The old letters are from the 6th century; the newer ones, from the 10th or 11th century.

On the right: A 21st century palimpsest on a metro door.

There's another reason I like to study these stickers. In my family, we grew up playing word games. We loved crossword puzzles, and we often spent Sunday afternoons playing Scrabble or Hangman²⁴ or trying to make new words from one long one.

24 **Hangman** – a game in which one player thinks about a word and the other player tries to guess the word by suggesting letters (šibenice)

And now I've started playing word games with the advertising stickers on the metro. I guess I'm just getting tired of seeing how messy they look, plus sometimes I'm bored during my journey.

So instead of diving for a seat²⁵, I stand in the doorway and wait for the doors to close. Then I examine the stickers carefully, and by the time the train starts moving, I have chosen one and started picking at it with my fingernail. Slowly and carefully I try to peel off²⁶ some letters and leave other parts of the sticker untouched, to make new words. It's not so easy, because most of the words are in Czech and I try to make the new words in English. Like this:

Example 1: A sticker has a large, empty, oval ring at the top with the message NOVÝ AUTODROM right below it. I carefully peel away V, Ý, D, R, O and M so the empty ring is still there, and below it the new message reads

NO AUTO

Example 2: An ugly new sticker says EROTIC MASSAGE. I carefully peel away the letters E, R, A, G, and E so the remaining part spells

OTIC MASS

(otic is a word that means the ear; mass is a large, dense amount of something; so otic mass = ear wax, the yellowish substance inside people's ears)

25 **diving for a seat** – running (through crowds) to take a seat

26 **to peel off** – to remove

“Treat yourself to a new horizon of pleasure,” this sticker says. But probably customers being massaged with someone’s ear wax is not exactly what the owner of this massage parlor²⁷ has in mind!

My best idea so far is for the sticker that says MÁTE LEPŠÍ NÁPAD NA REKLAMU? It would take a lot of work to finish this one, though. I would have to cheat a little bit, using a knife or key just like the graffiti artists did 40 years ago, to turn the second P into B. And my message would use the letter K instead of the correct letter, C. But I would tear away the M, the whole word “lepší”, the N, the P, A, D, the whole word “na”, and the R, E, U, and final ? – so the message would then read

ATE A BAD KLAM

It makes me giggle²⁸ to think of someone announcing they ate a bad piece of clam²⁹.

Maybe some people would think I’m crazy for doing this. But I have a good reason. It’s on the sticker that says WWW.KONECCELULITIDY.CZ. After I’m finished with it, it explains:

I TIDY.CZ
(I’m tidying the Czech Republic)

²⁷ **parlor** – a shop which provides a certain type of service (e.g. massage)

²⁸ **to giggle** – to laugh quietly

²⁹ **clam** – a kind of a sea creature (mušle)

ORIGINS OF SPECIES: BORDER CONTROL

I know the perfect way to tell if people are American or Czech. (This could be handy at border crossings³⁰!)

Just show them this picture:



If white chickens come from white eggs, what kind of chickens come from Czech Easter eggs?

If they say: *Ha-ha-ha, that’s cute!* it means they’re Americans. But if they say:

How can this be right? It is nonsense. I’ve never seen a white chick. Yellow ones come from white eggs. Or from brown eggs.

³⁰ **border crossing** – a place on the border between two states where people can cross from one state to the other

They don't have designs. Although the chicks can turn white later. But they can also turn brown, or red, or a combination of colors. For example, many chickens in Africa have feathers of many different colors. And in Asia, too. I'm not sure about South America. And anyway, Easter eggs do not contain chicks at all; either they are hollow, or they contain the material we can eat, which will not grow into a chick, so how can...

it means they're Czechs.

(See Wild Imaginings #34 and #34a, Czech Brains)

Random Note #44

COWS AND OXEN

I think many native speakers are surprised that Czechs think calling someone an ox³¹ or a cow is so rude. It's nothing special in English - after all, both are just animals. In English we can call someone a dog (a bad person), a pussy-cat (someone soft-hearted), a cold fish (unemotional), a rat (a very dishonest person), a pig (a selfish person or one who eats too much), and many others - including a dumb ox (a very stupid person) or a cow (a crude - rough and impolite - woman).

It seems in both cultures, Czech and American, calling someone these animal names isn't as popular as it used to be. I used to hear

young guys calling each other that name all the time. But I think it's being replaced by rude, new words which aren't as innocent (to a native English-speaker).

Unfortunately, in both cultures, the language we use to express our anger is becoming stronger and more rude.

Random Note #45

HAMBURGERS

And speaking of the ox, it's interesting to watch the changing reaction of many Czechs to that great American institution, the hamburger.

Supposedly, the simple little ground beef³² sandwich was actually invented in Germany (in Hamburg?). It took someone of Czech ancestry, Ray Kroc, to turn it into the international standard for fast food.

And it seems that the British love to promote the stereotype of Americans as fat people who eat all



31 **ox** - a male cow which cannot have young ones

32 **ground beef** - meat from cows which has been cut up into very small pieces



as obese – seriously fat. Not only is this unhealthy now; doctors also say if you're obese as a teenager, you'll probably also have weight and health problems as an adult – that is, for the rest of your life.

So it appears that many Czechs have gotten over their first hesitation and now have welcomed the hamburger into the family.

In defense of my national food and drink, though, I would like to point out that you can't simply blame McDonald's for a nation's obesity.

I suspect that sweets and chips from Britain, chocolate from Italy and Switzerland, cheese and pastry from France, and too much rich Czech beer and fried cheese with French fries may also have a hand in the problem.

Random Note #414

CALENDARS

Czech wall calendars drive me crazy.

Usually, they show a big, beautiful picture for each month – well, that's fine. But then the tiny numbers for each day of the month, 1 through 30 or 31, are in a stream³⁵ across the bottom, and there's no way to know what day of the week each one is.

US calendars all start with Sunday as the first day of the week. Some of my Czech friends say, "But on the seventh day He rested!"

³⁵ **stream** – continuous line

their food – hamburgers – with both hands, for all three meals a day.

So it's not surprising that many Czechs were a little skeptical about embracing³³ McDonald's when that international food company first came to the Czech Republic.

But now things may have gotten a little out of hand³⁴ when it comes to eating certain foods with your hands.

The latest reports show that 1/3 of Czech teenage boys (ages 13–18) and 1/4 of Czech teenage girls of the same age are classified

³³ **to embrace** – to accept

³⁴ **out of hand** – out of control

meaning that God took Sunday off, so the first day of the work week is Monday.

But I've heard some Americans say, "But you should start your week with God!"

That's why the pretty Czech calendars are so awful for Americans: The stream of numbers doesn't show the days of the week; only every seventh day is in color. How do I know if that means it's a Sunday? Or a Monday? Or a holiday?

Usually, American calendars show the days of the month in boxes, neatly³⁶ arranged in rows and columns, so you can always see at a glance the dates of all the Tuesdays, for example, just by looking down a column. Or you can see immediately that the 25th is on a Friday, just by looking in the row. And there's plenty of space in each box to write down important meetings or birthdays.

Czech calendars are beautiful. But if I want to survive daily life in the Czech Republic, I need a calendar that works. I have a Czech calendar for the pictures. But because I like to show up for meetings on the correct day, I also ask my mom to send me an American calendar every year for Christmas.

Sometimes she buys me a Calvin and Hobbes or Garfield one. The advantage of these calendars, of course, is that they have a big cartoon on the page above the boxes.

Sometimes she sends me a calendar from her pharmacy or insurance office, so I can read about the latest headache pills

or why I need to buy life insurance. The advantage of these calendars, of course, is that they are free.

WILD IMAGININGS #56

HEROES

Every country has its heroes and the Czech Republic is no exception. That's why almost every native English speaker coming to the Czech Republic who wants to know about Czech heroes ends up buying two books they never read.

The books are *The Good Soldier Švejk* by Jaroslav Hašek, and anything written by Václav Havel.

We buy these books because somehow we've all been told that these two - I mean Švejk and Havel - are symbols of typical Czech heroes, and if we want to understand the Czech Republic, we have to read these books.

Most of us do truly want to understand the Czech Republic. If only it could be done by simply reading two books! But that's kind of a silly idea. Nonetheless, we slog³⁷ our way through page after page of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, waiting for something really funny to happen (we're told by Czechs that it's hilarious³⁸), or at least to be able to understand what's really happening in the plot.

37 **to slog** – to move (read) with difficulty

38 **hilarious** – very funny

36 **neatly** – in a tidy way

And then we trudge³⁹ along with Mr Havel, trying desperately to keep up with his complicated thoughts and follow at least one of his long, complicated sentences.

Then we quietly close both books and take them to the used book store, hoping they'll buy our copies and put them on their shelves along with the 17 other copies from the disgruntled⁴⁰ ex-pats⁴¹ who re-sold their books before us.

Now, it's clear that Mr Havel is probably going to become a historical figure, a national hero honored possibly right alongside T. G. Masaryk. And that's great.

It's not so clear, though, why Švejk – a lazy, slow, fat, seemingly stupid soldier we're told was some kind of anti-hero long ago – should be up there with them.

It's not an image that people outside the Czech Republic truly understand; it's not a flattering⁴² picture, even as a joke, for anyone, especially the hard-working, clever, golden-handed Czechs. Every few weeks you can read in the international news about how Czechs are doing their best, about a promising new discovery that a Czech scientist has made. Or about how this small country is famous all over the world for its glass or beer or athletes. Even its other hero, Krtek, made the news when he became an astronaut.

39 **to trudge** – to move (read) slowly

40 **disgruntled** – annoyed, unhappy, disappointed

41 **ex-pat (expatriate)** – sb who does not live in their own country

42 **flattering** – making sth look good



So I would like to suggest that Good Soldier Švejk finally goes back home, stretches out⁴³, and spends the rest of his days fast and forever asleep under a tree in his garden. Thank you; now please leave.

In his place I suggest that the Czech Republic officially elect a new national symbol: Jára Cimrman. He's inventive, clever, quick, golden-handed, and most of all, very, very funny – in a way that everyone can understand and enjoy. (And he was unofficially voted “the greatest Czech” in a poll a few years ago.)

It would be a charming role model for a nation with a sly⁴⁴, funny, creative sense of humor.

43 **to stretch out** – to lie with your legs and arms spread out in a relaxed way

44 **sly** – cunning (potutelný, prohnáný)

CZECH BRAINS

I would like to look inside a Czech brain sometime. I'm sure it must be "wired" differently⁴⁵ from an American one.

Czechs and Americans look at reality a little differently. I think inside the American brain there are only random letters of the alphabet; inside the Czech brain, only random numbers.

That explains why Americans speak in metaphors or "loosely", and Czechs are so literal, obsessed with facts.

For example, once I was telling a Czech person about some trees. I made the fatal mistake of calling a spruce⁴⁶ a pine⁴⁷.

The Czech person was completely flustered and interrupted my story*. "But it *wasn't* a pine!" he exclaimed, "It must have been a - a - I can't think of the word in English. But it *wasn't* a pine!"

I continued with my story, and the Czech person said, "What is that word for the tree? It wasn't a pine. It had to be a... uh..."

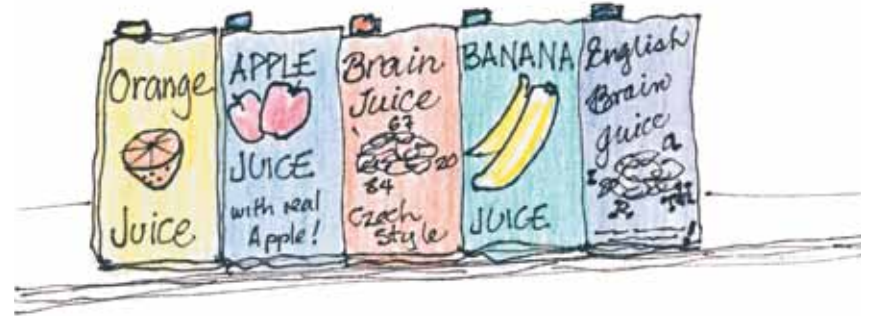
I tried to finish the story, but the Czech person was still searching through his mental catalogue of conifers⁴⁸.

45 "wired" differently – working differently (as if the "wires" inside were connected in a different way)

46 spruce – an evergreen tree with needles (smrk)

47 pine – an evergreen tree with needles (borovice)

48 conifers – trees with needles



"Oh, for Pete's sake!"* * I exclaimed. "It was a Christmas tree! A Christmas tree! Now can I please finish my story??"

Or, take the word "go" as an example. In English we can say "I go to the theatre..." because *theatre* (not school, grocery store, or cemetery) is the important point. In the Czech language, though, if you run on Czech brain juice* * * you must classify how you get there – on foot [jít] or by some sort of moving vehicle [jet]. Oddly enough⁴⁹, it doesn't matter, though, whether the vehicle has hooves⁵⁰, wings, or wheels.

Recently I was discussing a Maturita practice test item with one of the *Bridge* editors. We had worked very hard for days, and some weekends, and it was getting late. We still had another exercise to create. Finally I had finished it, using a text about a place where the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Great Southern

49 oddly enough – strangely; it is surprising that

50 hoof (plural: hooves) – the hard part on the bottom of the feet of animals such as horses

Ocean meet. The original text (by a very famous author) said “It looks as if three oceans were colliding with each other.”

And what did the *Bridge* editor say? “How can you say three oceans collide, when only two are oceans and the third is a bay?” This nearly drove me right out of my letter-lovin’ * * * * mind⁵¹. Who cares? The point is not at all about the scientific definition of bodies of water, but rather, about the beauty of nature. And we were almost past our deadline to get the test finished.

About a day later I was talking to another *Bridge* editor, who was trying to remember the English word for an insect that feeds on blood. She explained that the insect she was thinking of wasn’t a tick⁵², it was another one. “This one is black, too, but – oh, by the way, ticks are not actually black, they’re dark green,” she said as if it mattered. I thought that that was really interesting, but I doubt I’ll need to remember that the next time I have to quickly remove one of the little monsters * * * * * from my skin.

Maybe some day we’ll be able to transfuse brain juice as easily as we transfuse blood, and Czech and English speakers can help each other out by trading half a number brain for half a letter brain.

Then we’ll all be geniuses!

* Remember to tell Czech readers that the word “story” isn’t only something made up. The word in English is also used when

51 **nearly drove me out of my... mind** – nearly drove me crazy

52 **tick** – a small creature which attaches itself to another animal and sucks its bloody (klíště)

telling about someone’s life, an event, an opinion, a reason; and it can be a newspaper article, novel, film, etc.

* * No, I wasn’t talking to someone named Pete. “Oh, for Pete’s sake!” is an idiom used to express frustration. Sometimes it’s “Oh, for Christ’s sake!” but many religious people find this offensive.

* * * Remember to tell Czech readers that “brain juice” is an example of an English-speaking person using language “loosely,” using a metaphor.

* * * * Remember to tell Czech readers that you know a mind can’t “love letters”, but that this is a pun on the American phrase, “are you out of your ever-lovin’ mind?” to say “are you crazy?!”

* * * * * Remember to tell Czech readers that you know that ticks technically are not monsters.

CZECH BRAINS PART 2

And another brain-and-language difference that drives most native English-speakers crazy: Diopters and fevers.

“Uggghhh, I have to start wearing glasses,” you say.

Immediately the Czech person skips right over⁵³ the strongly-felt emotion you’ve just expressed, ignoring your obvious plea⁵⁴ for sympathy, and gets right to the most important point: “Oooh, how many diopters have you got?”

“Di-what-ers?” you ask.

“I’ve got +2!” they immediately announce, proudly.

Only Czechs care about the number of diopters as if they are gold coins. English speakers don’t even know what they are. To us, the point is: Glasses? Or no glasses?



The same thing happens with fevers. “I had to go to the hospital last week because I had a fever,” a Czech person will say proudly. “42!!”

An American has no idea what this means. To Americans, “42” (degrees Fahrenheit) is nearly the temperature at which water freezes. So how can this be a fever?

And why be proud of it?

We don’t usually tell people (outside our own family) the precise number that was on our thermometer. We just say, “I had to go to the hospital because I had a very high fever.”

So if a Czech person reports their fever with a number, we shake our heads sadly and say, “Oh. Dear.”

We still don’t know exactly what it means, though.

Random Note #6

STARS

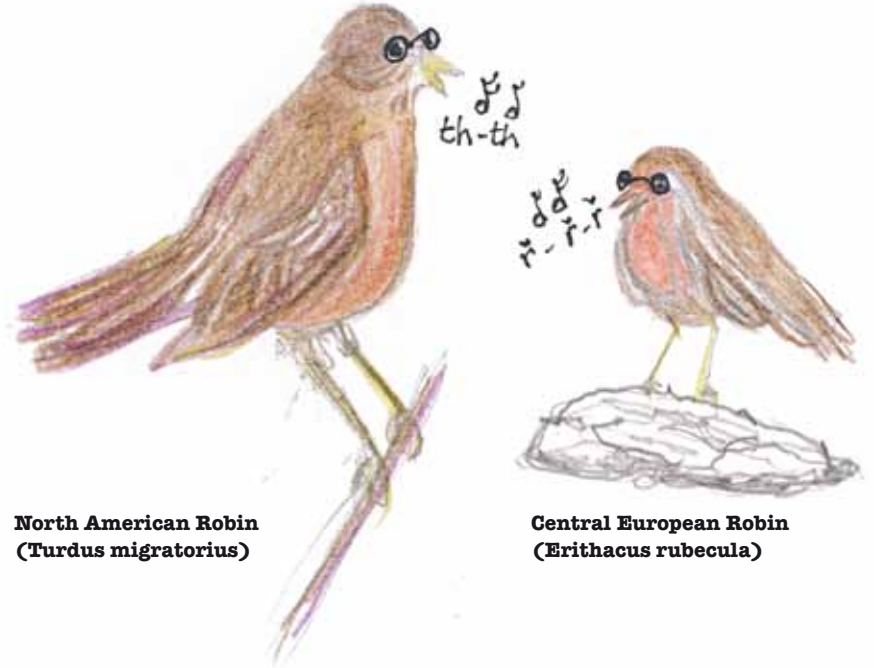
One night I went to the metro to go home, after seeing the premiere performance of the State Opera Ballet’s *Don Quixote*. And walking to a platform, I saw a big man struggling to carry an armload⁵⁵ of roses and tulips, and a large plastic shopping bag stuffed with more flowers. They had all been given to him, to roaring applause, in the State Opera House just a few minutes

53 **skips right over** – ignores

54 **plea** – an urgent and emotional request

55 **armload** – so much of something that your arms are fully occupied with it

SPOT THE DIFFERENCES



North American Robin
(*Turdus migratorius*)

Central European Robin
(*Erithacus rubecula*)

earlier. The man was Josef Jelínek, who designed the gorgeous⁵⁶ sets and costumes for this show.

I like the fact that you can see an international-award-winning star like Mr Jelínek in the metro. (He won the Czech Lion, and has designed the costumes for more than 800 shows.) In the past I've also enjoyed seeing famous Czech choreographer Pavel Šmok waiting for tram 17, and actress Eva Holubová on tram 16 (she was chatting with a little girl on her knee).

Ordinary people, going about their business, using ordinary energy to do every-day things, and saving their extraordinary energy for when they go to work.

It seems in the US, stars and their entourages⁵⁷, producers, designers, and artists all must travel by limousine. They expect to see a noisy crowd of screaming fans gathered around them. And there should always be the pop of paparazzis' cameras, too.

I deeply hope that all Czech artists, of every type (not just the top pop stars), will someday have enough income to afford a limo. And never the egos to want to use one.

⁵⁶ **gorgeous** – very beautiful

⁵⁷ **entourage** – the group of people who work for and travel with an important or famous person

DOORS

There are cultural differences even in doors. At least, in the way we think about doors.

In the US, most doorknobs⁵⁸ are round, and they all turn. Some ex-pats even refer to America as “the land of round doorknobs”.

We miss them. The doorknobs, I mean; not the ex-pats, they’re already here.

Anyway, who would ever believe you could miss doorknobs when you live in a foreign country? But we do.

I don’t mind the long, flat door handles on many doors in the Czech Republic. The only bad thing is that I often catch my sleeve on them. But the doorknobs here that are round are really treacherous⁵⁹. They look like American doorknobs. But they don’t turn.

That means that you’re locked out of every door with a round doorknob in the Czech Republic. And it’s so easy to lock yourself out of your own door! How many of us ex-pats have closed a door, then turned back to it and tried to turn the doorknob, only to find that it doesn’t move and we can’t get back in again?

And worse, how many of us have pulled the round doorknob to close the door, unconsciously⁶⁰ expecting that if our fingers get too close to the edge of the door, we can turn the doorknob away from it? But it doesn’t turn, and our fingers get caught between the doorknob and the frame of the door. Ouch!!!

Another cultural difference is what people do with doors. Here in Prague, many people very politely pull a door closed behind them.

Unfortunately, they don’t look first to see if anyone else is also trying to get in.

Many times as a Czech person is entering a shop and pulling the door closed behind them, I try to pull the door open again so I can get in too. The Czech person ahead of me can feel that the door isn’t closing. In fact, it’s resisting. *But the Czech person never turns around to see if anyone is behind them and that’s the reason the door won’t close!* They just pull the door even harder!

Finally, they turn around. They’re always very surprised. “Oh!” they say.

As if it’s more surprising that another person might want to get in, rather than the fact that a door which just seconds before opened smoothly could now mysteriously refuse to close.

58 **doorknob** – a round doorhandle

59 **treacherous** – dangerous

60 **unconsciously** – automatically

DOORS PART 2

And another thing about doors. In the US, you have two choices on what you can do with a door: push or pull.

As if the Czech language wasn't confusing enough already, there are too many choices for what you can do with a Czech door. "Tlačit" makes sense, but it's rarely seen on a door. More common is "Sem," which makes no sense at all, when you think about it. (Neither does "Tam".)

There's another choice, "Táhnout", which my funny friend Google Translate [see Random Note #4] says means "Drag". Really? That's generally what a door does, isn't it? What we want to know is *which way*.

The variation "K sobě" is confusingly too close to what it says over the stage at the National Theatre, also something about "sobě".

I don't think that it's an exit, though.

DOORS PART 3

As funny as Czechs are about closing doors, they're even funnier about opening them. Especially bathroom doors. I mean the doors inside a public bathroom, right in front of the toilet.

Even when I was a very young girl, my mother taught me to always knock on the bathroom door. In our house, the bathroom door was always left open when the little room was not in use. And when we were using the little room, we not only closed the door, we always locked it, too. So the fact that the door was closed was a pretty good clue by itself that someone was in there. Even so, we were taught that we needed the triple protection of a knock, too.

Not so in the Czech Republic. I can't speak for men, having no experience with men's bathrooms, but the women here are fierce⁶¹ when it comes to breaking through a closed bathroom door. First of all, they assume that behind every closed door in a public bathroom there's an available toilet just waiting for them. It's only a matter of picking which of the many available ones to use. And then they yank the door wide open with a flourish⁶².

The Czech ladies never, ever knock first. So if they feel some resistance when they try to open the door, they never suspect that there's a good reason for it (like that I'm in there, pulling it

61 **fierce** – violent

62 **yank... with a flourish** – pull with one strong movement

shut with both hands, since Czech bathrooms rarely have locks). They only pull even harder on their side of the door.

Once I was in this situation, and the Czech lady pulled on the door so hard, you could see through the crack⁶³ between the door and the door frame. That didn't stop her. She kept on pulling.

Finally I shouted "Knock, please!"

I heard a surprised mumble⁶⁴ as she walked to the next door and started tugging⁶⁵ again.

Random Note #18

ROOFS

I like to draw, even though I'm not very good at it. That doesn't matter; drawing is a totally natural, human activity which everybody has a right to do (like making music). That's why caves don't have windows – there's more room for walls so you can draw.

When I first came to the Czech Republic I was entranced⁶⁶, like everyone else, with the beautiful architecture. And I wanted to draw it.

- 63 **crack** – narrow space
- 64 **mumble** – quiet speaking
- 65 **to tug** – to pull
- 66 **entranced** – amazed

But I just could not understand how to draw the charming roof tiles⁶⁷, especially the old, curved⁶⁸ ones on Baroque buildings. I tried and tried, and I just couldn't get the tiles right.

I think it's because I've never really seen them up close; I've only seen them from far below, down on the street.

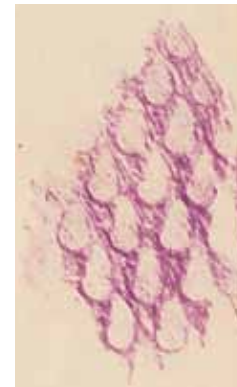
In America, mostly our roofs are made of flat strips of thick gray roofing "paper" covered with asphalt, like icing on a cake. These can also be topped with asphalt shingles – small flat pieces, kind of like the folding parts at the top of a cardboard box.

Then I got an idea. I tried to rub the side of a pencil on various surfaces, to try to make a pattern like the Czech roof tiles. I tried fabric, carpet, bits of wood, the side of a radiator – nothing made the pattern that would show me how to draw roof tiles.

Finally one day I found the perfect thing: a cheese grater⁶⁹! The pattern looked like this:

And somehow that helped me understand how to draw Czech roof tiles.

Lessons sometimes come from strange places. But they are everywhere, if you just are patient enough to look for them.



- 67 **roof tiles** – thin pieces of baked clay used for covering roofs (tašky)
- 68 **curved** – wavy
- 69 **cheese grater** – a metal device with holes surrounded by sharp edges used to cut cheese into small pieces

CZECH CHAIRS

One day I was walking down the street in the Prague Dejvická neighborhood and I saw something so shocking, I stopped right in mid-step. I stared and stared.

There in the gutter⁷⁰ was a chair.

Not just any chair. This one had a wood seat and back, curved to fit a body. The wood was the color of butterscotch ice-cream topping⁷¹, almost yellow.

Connecting the wooden parts were gray metal tubes forming four legs.

Why was I so shocked? Because I just couldn't understand how the exact chair I sat on in my sixth-grade class in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1962 could still be in existence.

And what on earth was it doing here, in the Czech Republic?

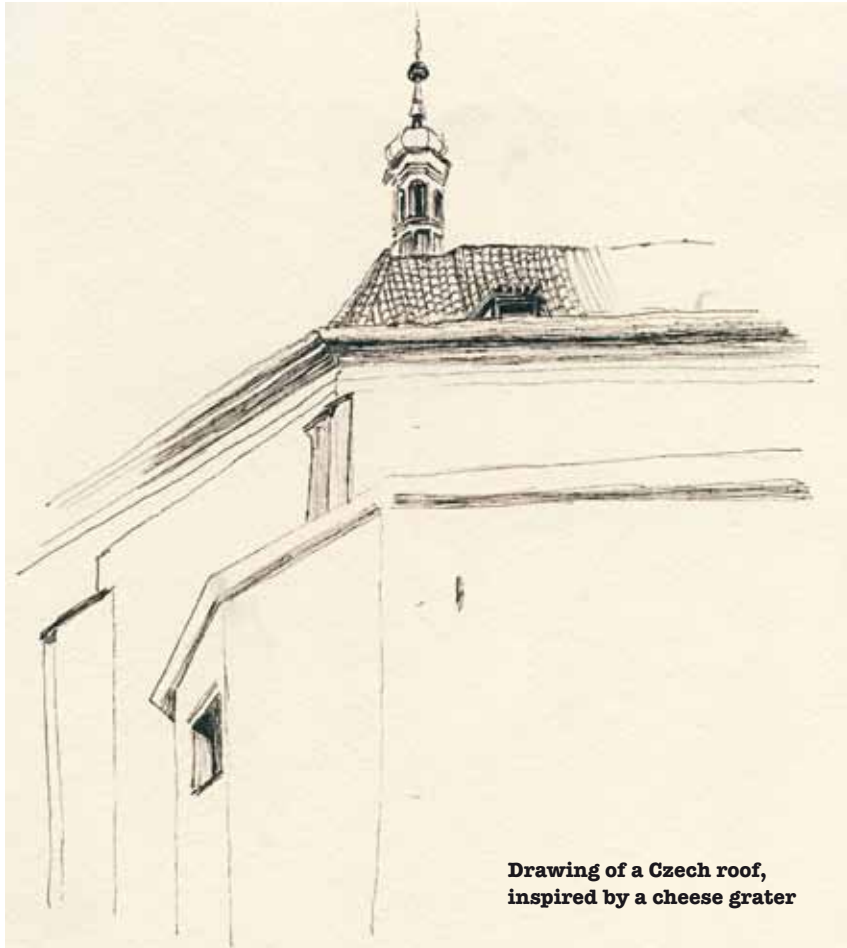
These burning questions sent me directly to the library to find out the answers.

I couldn't find any.

I could only find that these chairs were manufactured in Czechoslovakia as a kind of standard, basic chair. I have no idea how they (or maybe their similar cousins) emigrated to

70 **gutter** – the edge of a road where rain flows away

71 **butterscotch ice-cream topping** – a light-brown sweet food made by boiling butter and sugar together, which can be poured over ice-cream



**Drawing of a Czech roof,
inspired by a cheese grater**

my classroom in the USA
50 years ago.

Or maybe two chair
designers, on opposite sides of
an ocean, dreamed up the same
chair design at exactly
the same time?

Anyway, after that I started
seeing these chairs everywhere
in Prague.

Mostly they were sitting
in the gutter between parked
cars. Sometimes they looked
like they were waiting for
the bus. Sometimes they looked
abandoned⁷² and sad, like they
were waiting and waiting for their owners to finally return and let
them come back home.

But always when I saw one, it was somewhere outside in
a public space, like on a sidewalk or on the parking (the little strip
of grass between the street and sidewalk). Always there was only
one; no one was sitting on it; there weren't any others with it; and
always it was the same style:

Curved yellow wooden seat and back; curved gray metal legs.



The Basic Czech Chair
(*Sittus migratorius*)

I began to wonder if there
actually was only one of these
chairs in the whole city of Prague,
and I was seeing the same one again
and again. Or -

- Maybe somebody moved it
around the city each night as
part of some strange Czech
tradition - for good luck or
something.
- Maybe it was some kind of game,
like a strange Czech version of
Musical Chairs, the game where you change places and run for
the last empty chair.
- Maybe it's the Czech way to get rid of something unwanted,
like dumping⁷³ kittens, but the chair was always trying to find
the way back to its home.

So I decided I should start taking notes on the phenomenon.
Every time I saw this chair, I grubbed around⁷⁴ in my backpack
for a pencil and a scrap⁷⁵ of paper. (I didn't own a camera then,
so I had to make little drawings, using whatever I had close at
hand.) Even if I was in a hurry, I tried to stop and make a sketch
of my discoveries.



73 **to dump** - to throw away

74 **to grub around** - to dig in and search for sth

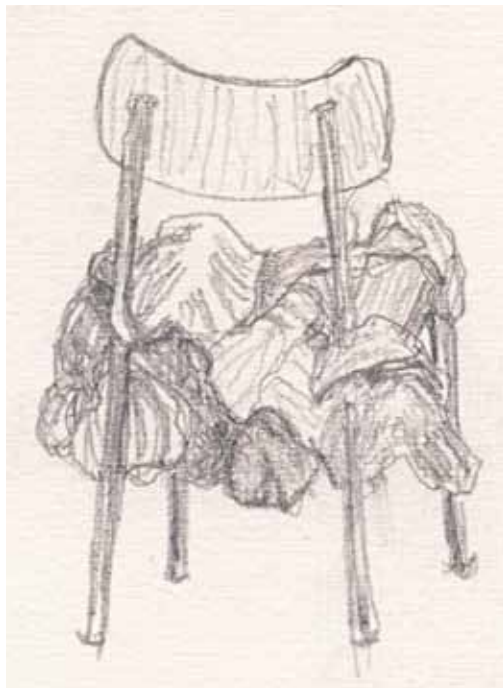
75 **scrap** - a small irregular piece

72 **abandoned** - deserted, no longer cared for

For example, here it is, resting in the gutter near Hybernská Street in the center of Prague on a warm, sunny day. Obviously it had become overheated while waiting for its owner to come and take it back home, because the chair had taken off its old nylon ski jacket and was holding it on its lap.

Then it seemed that for a long time I didn't see the chair any more, and I kind of forgot about it. I went about my daily routine, teaching English, writing for *Bridge*, and trying very, very hard to learn to speak Czech.

And suddenly one day - whoaaa! - on Charles University's Albertov campus near the Botanical Garden, almost surrounded by tall grass and wild bushes, what a shock! *Two* of the chairs, in the wild!



I crept up⁷⁶ silently to get a closer look. I was afraid they were asleep or dead (you see, their legs are straight up in the air) because they didn't move. But that was lucky for me, because I had more time to sketch them on a scrap of paper I found in my bag.

So now I was sure that there was more than one of these chairs in the Czech Republic. Maybe that pair I found in the bushes were the parents of all the chairs, and this couple was just asleep in the double bed of the desk.

⁷⁶ to creep up – to get closer without being seen

It gave me great hope that I would find more chairs as I continued my hikes, walks, and travels around the city. And I was right.

One day at the end of the school year I was walking in Chodov, a suburb on the south side of Prague, and I saw this marvelous sight in the garbage dumpster⁷⁷, right in front of the Donovalská Elementary School. (Unfortunately, I had only this purple crayon and a ratty⁷⁸ piece of paper.)



So now I knew that the Czech chair had parents; and in fact there wasn't just one chair, there was at least a whole classroom (if not a whole grade) of chairs. Sadly, these had all been abandoned in this big dumpster.

But these answers then only created more questions about the Czech chairs.

77 **garbage dumpster** – a large bin (container) where people put waste

78 **ratty** – torn, tattered

For example:

- Exactly *why* were all these chairs in the bin?
 - Had they jumped in there voluntarily⁷⁹? Were they being punished? Or were they dead?
 - Had they just graduated (it was, after all, the end of the school year) and were they just waiting for the truck to pull them to their new secondary school?
 - Would they wait until after dark to jump out of the bin and scatter around the city, each one finding a good gutter or parking to wait on?
 - *And why was I the only one noticing these things?* (Or is the topic of the mysterious chairs not a proper one to speak about? Are the Czechs keeping some big secret about the chairs?? After all, they invented *the golem* and *the robot!*)
- I was beginning to suspect that only one Czech person could logically explain all this:

Jára Cimrman.

While I was waiting for Mr Cimrman to answer my repeated emails on the topic, I came across one final piece of evidence regarding the life cycle of the Czech chair. My final sketch contains violence and may be upsetting to younger viewers:



79 **voluntarily** – willingly, without being forced to



Yes, sadly, I found the twisted, broken mortal remains⁸⁰ of an elderly chair partially hidden under a small tree in Chodov.

(May it rest in peace.)

But this just brings up⁸¹ even more questions about the Czech chairs!

- Did this one voluntarily crawl off⁸² to the nearest tree, to return to its “roots” and die of natural causes?
- Or was it beaten and left there to die?
- Or was it cruelly murdered somewhere else and just dumped there?
- Was it homeless and unloved? Did it wait forever? Did no one ever come to look for it and take it back home where it belonged?

Until Mr Cimrman gets back to me and answers my questions, I guess we’ll never know.

The End

80 **mortal remains** – remaining pieces of a dead body

81 **brings up** – makes you think of

82 **to crawl off** – to move slowly away (usually on one’s hands and knees)

EPITLOGUE

The other day I was walking in a tall-grass field near the Botanical Garden again, and I saw the most wonderful sight! Well, it was a strange and wonderful sight: Two elderly⁸³ people were sitting in the sun with handkerchiefs⁸⁴ on their heads, and they were sitting on – *the chairs!*

Actually, the man was sitting on an old padded⁸⁵ office chair, right there in the middle of the grass. But the woman next to him was sitting on one of *the* chairs. It had a broken back and a partly-broken leg. But clearly, both chairs had been put there to stay all the time – they weren't waiting for the bus or for someone to come and take them away. They were there just so this tired, retired, quiet couple could often come and sit with them in the sun on a nice day.

I have to admit until I came to the Czech Republic I had never ever seen a grown adult put a flat, opened handkerchief on their head and sit in the sun. The first time I did see it, I thought it meant they were having a stroke⁸⁶. And it still seems kind of silly to me to think that a single layer of thin cotton fabric⁸⁷ can be good protection against the burning UV rays of a 5,500 degree sun, especially since, if it's too hot, you can just simply move!

83 **elderly** – old

84 **handkerchief** – a square piece of cloth usually used for cleaning the nose

85 **padded** – covered by a layer of soft material

86 **stroke** – a sudden change in the blood supply to a part of the brain, which can cause a loss of the ability to move (mozková mrtvice)

87 **fabric** – cloth



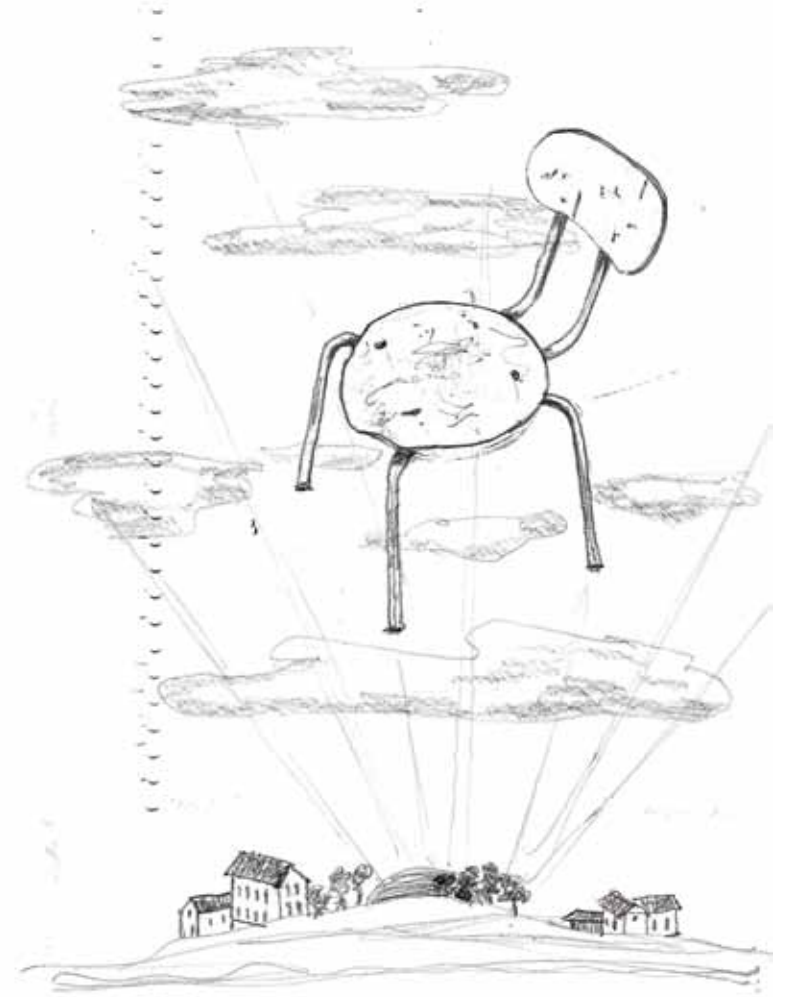
But never mind. The people looked nice, and happy, and they seemed to love sitting on those chairs. And the chairs didn't seem to mind it a bit.

It just shows that everything ends well in the Czech Republic.

FINAL EPILOGUE

What do you think? Mary's mother would like to know if you agree with some of Mary's ideas and observations about the cultural differences between Czechs and Americans. Are some of her ideas accurate⁸⁸? Inaccurate? Or just plain crazy? Should she be worried?

(And what's the real story about those chairs?)



88 **accurate** – correct

American Mary Matz taught English at Charles University and has been a contributing writer to *Bridge Magazine* nearly from its beginning. You may recognize her voice on Maturita practice exam recordings (“Which train will the boy take?”). She is also the owner / editor of *Opus Osm*, the free, online magazine in authentic English, about Czech classical music, opera, and ballet. (www.opusosm.com).

Previous Bridge books by Mary Matz:

The Adventures of Mark Twain

(2011, online only)

Discovering America

(2003, paper only)

Growing Up American

(2002, paper only)

For Fraus publishers:

Life and Culture in the USA

(2008, hard cover only)