When exactly were you there?

We flew into Prague directly from Australia (except for frequent refuelling stops and an overnight stay and change of airline in Singapore) in July 1968, stayed a few days in a student hostel (Slovensky Dom?) on a hill overlooking the city, toured the city and visited other parts of the country, and then left for a youth festival in Sofia, Bulgaria. We returned to Prague after the festival and remained there until about five days after the Russian invasion, which occurred on 21 August, I believe.

Who were you there with?

I was with Brian Laver (then my husband) and my two daughters, Sidonie and Tempe. They both had their birthdays while we were there, Sidonie turning 4 and Tempe turning 2. I was a couple of months pregnant.

How old were you at the time?

22.

What stage of your life were you at at the time?

Well, I didn't order my life very neatly. I married and had my first child at 18 and began an Arts course part-time at Qld Uni the following year, majoring in philosophy, history and sociology. But I didn't have any clear life plan. I was immersed in the politics of the time, particularly in the peace movement, though by 1968 I had developed an interest in (what I now see as) a variety of utopianism that we called libertarian socialism.

Why were you over there? What was the background to the trip?

Brian, who had had trouble finding work (he was notorious enough to be blacklisted by most employers) was given a job as a research assistant with the Trades and Labour

Council and was offered a trip to Europe to attend an international youth festival in Sofia and visit Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. My mother offered to pay my fare so that I could accompany him. When I became unexpectedly pregnant not long before we were due to leave, we weighed our options and decided that we'd be fools to pass up such an opportunity simply because of this unforeseen development. Our plan was to stay on in Moscow after other members of our contingent had left for home and have the baby there. As the USSR was known to be rather backward in matters concerning "feminine hygiene", much of our luggage consisted of a dozen or so packets of disposable sanitary pads, without which I couldn't imagine surviving the post-parturition period. The weightiest item of our luggage, however, was a suitcase full of books, which travelled all around the world with us, only to be ransacked — and many confiscated— by Australian Customs.

Because we expected to be wintering in Moscow, we bought sheepskin airmen's jackets and fur-lined boots from an army disposal store, and to minimise the weight of our luggage we wore all this gear throughout the flight. Our plane touched down first at Mt Isa, then Darwin and then Singapore, and with each touchdown we sweltered a little more. This was before Lee Kuan Yu sanitised Singapore, and I remember that distinctive smell of Asia hitting us with the heat of the equatorial night — an exotic reek of open drains, wok-cooking, spices, durian, incense and kerosene lamps.

We were farewelled with a banner held aloft by our revolutionary comrades, jokes about not getting caught up in a Russian invasion (Dubcek, the Czechoslovak prime minister, had been defying Brezhnev's orders to toe the Stalinist line) and, in those days before passengers were fed into the plane through a tube, a last-minute dash across the tarmac by my friend and sister-in-law, Pamela, who was late arriving and who would be dead only three years later.

We arrived in Prague in the grey dawn, the children frantic with fatigue, and were shuttled to what I think was called Slovensky Dom (*dom* meaning "house"), a student hostel built in the dreary postwar Stalinist style, with the fairytale spires of Old Prague

rising through the morning haze below us. Because it was the university's summer holiday period, there was no hot water and no food to be had at the hostel. So, after an exhausted sleep on two narrow beds, two per bed, we made our way down to the city to find provisions. I'm sure arrangements must have been made to feed us all (the Australian contingent of festival-goers), but I can't remember how they did so in Prague. My memory is of hunger.

This — finding food — became my obsession. I was suffering from morning sickness, and visions of malted milkshakes danced in my head. The children demanded cornflakes. All we could find in the poorly stocked shops were the occasional tomato, bottles of unrefrigerated milk curdling on the shelves, salami, anonymous cheeses, coffee, pastries and dark chocolate. Our total ignorance of the Czech language compounded our difficulties, but I soon learnt the word *mleko* ("milk").

It's interesting how food — or the lack of it — is the first thing that springs to mind when I remember those days. It did, I know, loom large. But this account entirely misses the mood of exhilaration that gripped us both as we descended the hill and entered the cobbled streets of that beautiful city. The ornate Charles Bridge spanning the River Vltava with its flotillas of white swans, the trams rocking through the streets, the stone steps, arches, mediaeval churches, statues, gargoyles. And the diesel fumes trapped in the maze of narrow streets. It was many years before I could catch a whiff of diesel fumes without a pang of nostalgia.

During our days there we were taken on tours to see the sights of the city and, further afield, mediaeval castles, a mountain resort and the cities of Pilzen and Bratislava.

What was your attitude towards the political situation there at the time?

We were enchanted. We'd arrived slap-bang in the middle of the Prague Spring. The idea of "socialism with a human face" had seized the popular imagination, and it seemed that all of Prague's citizenry were in the street, discussing, arguing, declaiming, reading

poetry, handing out literature, playing music, dancing, painting, drawing, clowning, street-theatring. The revolutionary possibilities swept us off our feet. The Prague Spring represented resistance to Stalinist oppression as well as to capitalism and western imperialism, reclaiming the revolution for the people, workers' self-management — these were *our* ideals! And here they were being taken up and acted on deep in the Soviet bloc.

What was the atmosphere like?

Heavily polluted. (I've got a literal mind.) But yes, it was the most exciting and joyful place we had ever been. Everyone was riding high on their own daring — their willingness to think unthinkable thoughts, say unsayable things, and thumb their noses at the frowning Brezhnev. We didn't want to leave.

What happened when you were there?

Well, as I mentioned earlier, we were there only briefly at first, and then returned. Our train trip to Bulgaria, passing through Austria and Hungary — the train painted with revolutionary slogans (*MARX IS ALIVE IN PRAHA*; *LENIN MUST RETURN TO THE FINLAND STATION*), Brian and others dashing up and down the platform whenever we stopped to add another slogan, the festival, the nonstop beat of African drums and people dancing in the street at night, the compulsory rectal examination bent over the dining-room table in our rooms to guard against dysentery, our first taste of yoghurt, the delectable fruit, almost missing our rendezvous with my parents, the children getting mildly sick (rubella, as it turned out) and being rushed to hospital, sirens wailing — all this is a story in itself.

After the festival, we returned to Prague, again by train. The train was delayed for some hours well outside Prague. Night had fallen, and there was a distant storm in the direction of the city, lightning playing on the horizon. I recall a sense of foreboding, though it was probably the effect of a long day and too little food. We arrived at about midnight and

were fed a hearty roast dinner in the dining-room of a genteel hotel. I covered myself in glory by vomiting prodigiously all over the thick red carpet.

The other people in our contingent continued on to Moscow, but Brian and I, and the children, stayed. We found ourselves a room in another student hostel, this time in the heart of the city. In the days that followed, Brian made contact with various student and trade union leaders, and I searched for food. We had very little money.

What exactly did you experience during the time you spent there? What did you witness?

One night my sleep was troubled by the sound of aircraft, a great many of them, flying low. At one point I got up and looked out the window and saw in the sky planes with gravid bellies, clearly carrying heavy cargo. I was woken early that morning by a grinding, clanking din in the street below, rather like the noise of the trucks that these days empty our wheelie bins, except that it went on and on and did not cease.

“Come and look at this, Brian,” I said. He joined me at the window and we watched an endless stream of tanks passing below us, their guns trained on the buildings on either side of the narrow street. Young — oh so young! — men with fresh, boyish faces (do I really remember or am I inventing those pink cheeks?) peered out, looking twitchy, anxious. Scared.

“Must be a national emergency,” Brian said. At this stage we simply could not conceive that the USSR and its satellites could have occupied Prague. We were soon set right.

Alarmed fellow-residents made what had happened clear enough to us, despite our linguistic deficiencies. Brian, unable to sit still, left to find his fellow revolutionaries. I spent the morning keeping the children close to me, watching the TV in the common room, trying to read the expressions of solemn-faced announcers and interpret sinister-looking arrows inching their way inexorably across the map of Czechoslovakia.

Eventually I could stand it no longer. I packed up the kids and set out in search of Brian. I headed for the Trades Hall, where I thought I would either find him or get word of his whereabouts.

It's interesting how our brains tend to normalise the abnormal. During my scamper with the children through the streets, dodging tanks, I heard frequent loud reports, which, although by now I understood that Prague was occupied by hostile troops, I explained to myself as the sounds of construction work, of bolts being shot into place. In fact, of course, they were gunshots.

I don't remember where or how I found Brian, but at some point we were together again, having packed up all our gear, and were trekking way across the city to the apartment of a generous interpreter and her parents, who insisted that we stay with them. I recall the shocking sight of the streets churned up by the treads of the tanks, the cars and trams rammed and pushed aside like so much junk, the fear, the sound of gunfire, sometimes near, sometimes far. I remember eyeing each doorway, sizing it up as a prospective shield should the firing get too close.

The family we stayed with were infinitely kind. We (Ivanka, her parents and I) spent the days queuing for food and burning all the household's English-language books in the big ceramic heating stove. Brian and I had run out of money and had no means of getting any, so Ivanka's family fed and housed us out of their own pockets. Ivanka's parents shook their heads at me and made it clear that if they were me they wouldn't let Brian go out. But Brian, of course, could not be restrained. He would come back with shining eyes and tales of secret meetings, and resounding resolutions, and guns being trained on him as he crossed the Charles Bridge. I, meanwhile, made a pact with the god I didn't believe in that if we all got out of this alive, I would never complain about anything ever again.

The first morning after the invasion, we went downstairs to find a fellow up on his mate's shoulders, taking down the street sign. This was done, apparently spontaneously, all over

the country, the aim being to bamboozle the enemy. Every surface wore a painted slogan, calling for freedom and bidding the troops to go home. During the long hours we spent queuing for food, we were snowed with leaflets, none of which I could read, of course, but whose message was clear. The mood of defiant solidarity was similar, I imagine, to the spirit in Britain during the blitz. Enormous crowds gathered in Wenceslas Square, demanding the withdrawal of the troops and the continuation of the process of liberalisation, and an alliance of workers and students (in which Brian was involved) erected barricades and drew up plans for an organised resistance. Faced by the overwhelming might of the Warsaw Pact forces, these plans came to nothing.

Not many people actually died during the invasion — about 30, if I remember rightly [in fact it was 108, with about 500 wounded, Wikipedia tells me], including, it was rumoured, some suicides among the troops, baffled and shamed by the role they were forced to play. Dubcek tried for a while to negotiate with the invaders, but he and the rest of the country's leaders were summoned to Moscow, where they were forced to sign a document giving official approval to the invasion. Dubcek soon lost his position, the president, Svoboda, was replaced by a puppet of Moscow, and the long Prague Winter began.

I wonder now about our poor little kids. We must have taken with us a handful of storybooks and a small teddybear or two, I suppose, but it can't have been easy for them. I remember them dashing up and down vast, echoing corridors in draughty buildings, and climbing incessantly over knees in buses and trains. The Czech people seemed to love children, though, and were very kind to them wherever we went. In our first days there, we bought Tempe a pair of lovely little red boots (very cheap, by Australian standards), and she wore them everywhere.

What were the dominant images you took from the experience?

I recall, particularly, the fresh-faced bewilderment of the invading troops, the battered cars and trams, the torn-up roads, the pair of young men, one on the other's shoulders, taking down the street sign, the warmth, kindness and sorrow in the faces of the people.

I recall, also, the despair I felt when we heard, some days after the invasion, that the last train for Paris had already left and the borders were closed.

How did it affect you afterwards?

I developed a passion for the ordinary. Well, to be truthful, I think I've always had a longing for a quiet life. But I do remember feeling a kind of radiant joy when, in London, while we were staying in a tiny, crowded bedsit, I was able to perform the everyday domestic tasks of cooking a meal and washing up.

I soon forgot my pact with god, of course, and reverted to my habitual discontents. That's not *altogether* true. I think I retained an awareness that life is a precarious business and we must be grateful for the peace and freedoms that have been bequeathed to us. But I was not able use the Prague experience to rise above the usual miseries of life.

Politically? I maintained an interest in social justice and environmentalism but gradually became disenchanted with ideological answers to the problems that beset us. Now I would like to see my grandchildren embrace the Enlightenment values, illuminated — or clarified, rather, since those values are already aglow! — by an understanding of evolution.

What happened in your life directly after you left?

We left with a busload of Finnish geologists — to my great relief. The day and night before we left we spent hiding the resistance literature everywhere we could think of — sewn into the linings of our anoraks (the kids' as well as Brian's and mine), stuffed into our boots, folded into the tin of baby powder, slipped inside Tempe's nappy. We were

asked to smuggle out some film, so we sewed it inside a wig, which I wore for the journey.

Ivanka and her parents farewelled us with embraces and tears, and pressed some cash into our hands so that we could buy food on the way. We heard some years later that Ivanka had escaped to the West with her boyfriend, an Olympic rower.

We were held up for hours on the German border. It was a time of great anxiety for us, as we feared that we'd be searched and our contraband discovered. The kids were tired, hungry and terribly bored. Tempe developed diarrhoea, I remember, and the leaflets that we'd secreted in her nappy were ruined.

In the end we passed through without being searched, and sometime during the night we reached the Munich airport, where we intended to sleep. We'd run out of money and were very hungry. The kids refused to settle down to sleep in the airport chairs — unsurprisingly, since the lights were glaring and the chairs not made for sleeping. Eventually Brian phoned the British Embassy. A big black shiny car fetched us and took us to a luxury hotel, where we were fed, showered and (gloriously!) bedded down. The next morning we were taken to the airport and put on board a plane to Heathrow. That's where our dream run ended. Coming through customs, Brian was marched off and interrogated by MI5 (or 6?) for hours while the kids and I waited, having no idea what was happening. He was eventually released and told his story on BBC TV.

Then followed a hard time of searching for accommodation, moving from place to place, squeezing into tiny flats with friends or political associates. Having abandoned our plan to go to Russia, we'd decided to stay in London, where, it was hoped, Brian would land a job. Vain hope. There was a very pleasant interlude when we stayed with my parents in a Tolpuddle cottage in Dorset and saw a little of Hardy country and the coast. But the rest of our time in England was pretty grim. (Of course there was a mood of wild excitement among the politicos we — and especially Brian — met. The Paris events had left them euphoric and they were fervently planning the next phase of the Revolution.) Moneyless

and homeless, we jumped at the opportunity to take a cheap cabin aboard the *Shota Rustivelli*, a Russian ship on its maiden voyage around the world. And that's another story.

When we sailed into Sydney Harbour on a sparkling summer morning, I thought it was the most beautiful place on earth.

. . .

It was a momentous year, 1968 — the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Prague Spring and its crushing defeat, student and in some cases worker uprisings throughout the West — and we believed that the world would never be the same again. In a way it wasn't, of course; but in another — deeper — way, it was. The reversals that the "progressive" cause has suffered since the sixties and seventies have set us sternly back on our heels. People, generally, still live their daily lives bothered by petty venalities; only occasionally are they willing to be roused by the exigencies of history to broad, human solidarity and miraculous heroism.