

## **Americanisms: Pointers On Cultural Sensitivity**

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- 1) Representative misperceptions that some Czechs and Slovaks have regarding Americans
  - a) All Americans are rich, just like the people on Beverly Hills 90210 are.
  - b) Americans must be just like Germans. (All people from western nations are similar.)
  - c) All Americans are hyper-friendly.
  - d) Americans must know everyone who lives in the United States, including my aunt in Milwaukee.
  - e) All Americans always eat hamburgers and hot dogs.
  
- 2) Tips designed to enable Americans visiting the Czech church to minimize cultural dissonances
  - a) Language
    - i) We sometimes expect English-speaking Czechs to be familiar with idiomatic phrases like “a piggy-back question” or “a bolt out of the blue.” It is best to try to avoid such figures of speech when conversing with non-native speakers.
    - ii) If a phrase spoken by a non-native speaker seems to be inappropriately negative, consider the possibility that the speaker has a different sense of the phrase than we customarily have. (For example, the phrase “you must not answer the phone” sounds prohibitive to us, but may actually be a literal rendering of the Czech expression, which means “you do not need to answer the phone.”)
  
  - b) Habits, Customs, and Traditions
    - i) You may need to exercise care when admiring your Czech host’s possessions. Many hosts may feel that an appreciated object must be given to the international guest.
    - ii) When dining out, take care to refrain from evaluating food, service, and method of payment according to American practices.
    - iii) Also, do not try to manifest your generosity by over-tipping. Rounding the cost of the meal up to the next multiple of ten is typically considered sufficient. For example, payment for a meal costing 114 crowns would become 120 crowns with the tip added.
    - iv) When possible, do not leave large amounts of uneaten food on your plate, and remember to remove your shoes beside of the door when you enter a home.
    - v) It is considered to be in good taste to take a small gift of chocolates, flowers, or similar token of appreciation when you visit a private home.

- c) Cultural Insensitivity – Two painful examples:
- i) A group whose younger members chose not to reciprocate the hospitality – nor take advantage of the insight – offered by a church leader who had been asked to take them on a tour of reformation sites because they ‘had already been to the Old Town Square the night before.’
  - ii) A sermon preached by a pastor from America who assumed that Czech Christians have a tradition of covered dish dinners like we have in the United States, and who then used an illustration about “grey mouse soup” being served in a neighborhood café during a blizzard. This Eucharistic “legend,” which was designed to symbolize the unifying and sustaining power of the Lord’s Supper, would have been difficult for an American congregation to grasp and was virtually incomprehensible to the Czech congregation. Check out your presentation with your translator or some other Czech person if you have doubts about its appropriateness.
- d) Do not assume that American customs are known and understood. Two examples:
- i) An American host, who wanted to know about Czech funeral customs, phrased her questions in terms of American practices, which were unknown to the Czech visitor. Thus, the Czech person was hard-pressed to respond.
  - ii) One Sunday morning, a young Czech friend was in tears, so I (Joyce) reached out to put my arm around her shoulder, as I might have done with a parishioner in the USA. As she drew back, I sensed that I had initiated a type of contact that would have been understood in the United States, but was inappropriate in this context.
- e) Be aware that organizations, which appear to be similar, do not always have the same structures or serve the same purposes in the Czech Republic. Two examples:
- i) In the United States, we tend to think of the YMCA in terms of physical exercise, special interest groups, short-term educational or recreational activities, and self-improvement workshops, while in the Czech Republic, the YMCA has a long history of having an “academic” component. Thus, it has tended to provide a forum for wrestling with difficult socio-political issues.
  - ii) Church youth groups in the Czech Republic share some characteristics with comparable groups in the United States. However, they also have some features that are unique to the cultural and social milieu in which they have arisen. The same is true of other local church structures and groups. (It may be worth noting that although women are quite involved in ECCB congregations, an organization similar to Presbyterian Women does not exist in our partner denomination.)

- f) Refrain from describing their Church to Czech people without listening to their own self-descriptions. Two examples:
  - i) Sometimes, Americans who have heard about the secular nature of Czech society seek to console Czech Christians by saying things like: "I am sorry that the church is dead here. That must be very difficult for you." Such statements surprise Czech church-people who are part of vital congregations.
  - ii) Sometimes, Americans assume that we know what the Czech Church should be and do, without taking its long heritage and present forms into account. It may be instructive to consider the response of one church leader to such an approach: "Thank you for your advice about how to reach people outside of the church, but we must find ways of outreach that fit our culture and traditions."
  
- g) Avoid interpreting Czech people's descriptions of church practices or political situations in terms of your own local church's traditions or our nation's issues.
  - i) In strange surroundings, it is natural to look for something familiar. However, we should guard against saying (either to ourselves or aloud), "that's just the way it is back home." Quickly drawing that conclusion short-circuits the listening process and prevents us from hearing how things really are with our hosts.
  - ii) On other occasions, visitors expand on a perceived parallel between Czech and American societies in ways which divert the conversation away from the Czech situation and focus it on how things are in United States. Of course, there is a place for cross-cultural analyses, but the Czech host should never be made to feel as if he is on the outside, listening in on a discussion of American issues.
  
- h) Finally, try to curb the tendency to assume that American practices are superior, educationally, spiritually, in terms of life-style, and so forth. Two examples:
  - i) One visiting couple asked their host: "Is there a Marks and Spencer store here? And what about a place where we can get some crystal and jewelry? We want to buy a lot of things to help the Czech economy." In exasperation, the Czech host replied: "If you really want to help our economy, maybe you can buy a tractor."
  - ii) The Czech university system is very different from the American one, but the professors in the Czech Republic are every bit as engaged in research, writing, publishing, and seeking to engage their students as professors in the United States are. Thus, inquiries about sending American professors to the Czech Republic should be complemented by invitations for Czech professors to teach in this country.