

...BRIDGES... Number 5, 2009: "Palm Sunday in Hradčanské Náměstí"

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As I left the demonstration on behalf of the Walking Together Center that was held in front of the Prague City Hall in February, I told one of my officemates that I had never participated in a public protest before. She seemed to be quite surprised by that confession, as well she might, in this country where peaceful demonstrations resulted in freedom in 1989 and continue to be an effective way of expressing dissatisfaction. Of course, during my high school years, I had also looked forward to being part of such events when I got to college, but before that time arrived, the Vietnam War had ended and related protests had ceased. Nevertheless, when reviewing the past few years, I realize that both the ecumenical gathering in memory of Holocaust victims – which took place concurrently with a neo-Nazi onslaught on "Crystal Night" in 2007 – and the procession with white umbrellas on behalf of political prisoners in Cuba – which I described in BRIDGES 4 – may actually have been protests of a sort. Thus, since my "public statement resume" has grown a bit in recent years, I did not have any trouble deciding to get up early on Palm Sunday, so that I could go to Hradčanské náměstí to hear President Obama's first public speech in Europe. Indeed, as soon as a Czech friend asked, "have you ever seen your president with your own eyes," I realized that this was a truly unique opportunity that I would not be likely to have in the United States.

On Saturday night, I felt as if a great adventure about to unfold, as I searched the Internet for details regarding the President's appearance. That feeling persisted the next morning as I walked to a tram stop located about twenty minutes from my apartment. The streets seemed strangely deserted, and when I arrived at the tram stop, there were only a few people waiting. But as the minutes passed, more and more folks arrived, carrying cameras, bottles of water, and information related to Obama's appearance. As we waited, the shared sense of anticipation was almost palpable. Thus, when a policeman told us that no more trams would be coming, we all crossed the street and walked toward the square as quickly as we could. As we marched along, I thought of my congregation in Prague 6, where people would soon be gathering for worship. There, the pastors sometimes recall the Palm Sunday parade in a dramatic way. Was the impromptu group that I had joined doing something similar? In light of the "messianic" persona that President Obama sometimes seems to project, I wondered how many people in the crowd had come in search of new hope for our conflicted world.

Entry to the square was controlled, but efficient. However, since some people had showed up at 6:00 a.m., my "early" arrival did not enable me to see much, except for an American flag flying outside of Prague Castle and sharpshooters keeping watch over the crowd from atop the Archbishop's Palace. A woman with a British accent said that she was

going to try to find some "higher ground." However, I did not join her quest because I think that I was there to experience the crowd, as much as to see the President. Thus, as "warm-up" musical groups performed, I enjoyed the banter that was going on around me. Some people were joking about what Obama's first words might be, while others remembered the days when no American President would have been permitted to speak in that square. Still other folks speculated that the speech was late in starting because the members of the collapsed Czech government could not decide who should actually join Obama on the stage.

A healthy sort of realism was evident that morning. This crowd was not going to blindly shout "Hosanna!" Yet, there was also an exuberant sense of expectation, which was well-demonstrated by a middle-aged Czech woman with sparkling eyes whose husband kept trying to lift her up so that she could catch a glimpse of the festivities. There was hope in that Palm Sunday crowd, and hope in Obama's opening words, which suggested that Czech history has a lot to reveal about how ordinary citizens can transform repressive regimes. The President's words were sincere, and his statements about the necessity of achieving nuclear disarmament were important. However, the fact that so many people dared to come to the Castle looking for hope remains the most powerful aspect of that morning for me. As long as that quest is not extinguished, there IS hope for our world!