

## ...BRIDGES... Number 5, 2006: Through Others' Eyes

on behalf of the ECCB's American Working Group & the PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network by Joyce Michael

Earlier this year, I had occasion to take a new look at both Czech society and my own culture through the eyes of my English students. Perhaps you will find my remembrances of those conversations to be intriguing.

As one of my colleagues at the Protestant Theological Faculty wrestled with a book which analyzes the Holocaust, he suggested that the Nazi atrocities were not really as unique as the author of that book maintained. He spoke at length about the great toll which the American slave trade had exacted on African tribes. That was also a type of systematic genocide perpetrated by a Christian populace over a long period of time, he observed. I instinctively suggested that there may have been major differences between the Nazi movement and the practices of the slave traders. Yet, even as I spoke, I found myself challenged to face and acknowledge an indefensibly dark chapter of my nation's history. I am grateful to my friend for challenging me to recall the deaths of hundreds of thousands of black people at the hands of businessmen who thoughtlessly embarked on a reprehensible way of turning a profit.

If that examination of my country's ambiguous past was saddening, I was surprised by another colleague's conclusion that an inherent respect for other individuals is evident in the courtesy that most American drivers extend to one another on the highway. This church leader perceives that there is a notable difference between the politeness shown by motorists in the United States and the aggressive driving practices that are often apparent in the Czech Republic. When I mentioned the phenomenon of "road rage" that has surfaced on American highways in recent years, he nodded knowingly. However, he and another member of the class, who had driven from Florida to Boston the previous summer, concluded that the majority of drivers in the United States exhibit a spirit of graciousness that tends to be absent in their country, where there is an alarming number of fatal automobile accidents each year. It was fascinating to imagine that driving practices in the USA might reflect a unique level of respect for the dignity and worth of each person. Yet, after recalling that young Czech mothers are able to safely leave their babies in carriages parked outside of neighborhood shops while

they run in to purchase fruit, vegetables, or baked goods, I suggested that an equally unique level of trust and respect may characterize social interactions in the Czech Republic.

Later in the same conversation, another person declared that Czech waiters and cashiers need to be more responsive and responsible when interacting with customers. After I indicated that across the years, it has seemed to me that many workers have become more relaxed and interactive, my friend recounted an upsetting incident in which a waiter had been singularly unresponsive to a large group of church guests. Even after a spilled drink had stained one person's clothes, no apologies were extended and no reimbursement was offered. This incident left a bad "taste" in the customers' memories, which seemed to be contrary to the pleasant remembrances that my friend had of the service extended to her at various points during her travels in America.

As I consider these conversations, I am surprised at how differently my friends and I perceive our own and each other's societies. Perhaps we are more able to see positive aspects of a culture that we are entering with uncluttered vision, and maybe we tend to be more alert to the negative features of our own surroundings. Nevertheless, we may all benefit from looking at our own societies through the eyes of the other. Thus, we may be able to appreciate graceful traditions which have become so routinized that we forget to notice them. Likewise, we may recognize blemishes that we have completely pushed out of consciousness. Thus, a new, more balanced view of our own culture and that of the other may simultaneously emerge!

**If you would like to participate in a real "cross-cultural exchange," save the dates of September 21-22, 2006, and make plans to attend the first meeting of the Czech Mission Network that will be held in Erlanger Kentucky. Watch the Czech Mission Network News for more details!**