

...BRIDGES... Number 9, 2007: "Taking a Stand"

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

A few years ago, as I sat in a coffee shop overlooking Wenceslas Square, I mentally began to write a letter extolling the picture-postcard of international harmony that I saw below. Hare Krishnas were moving rhythmically up the street, as a contingent of Japanese tourists mingled with Czech residents and multi-national groups. Thinking of Iraq, Darfur, and other troubled spots, I wished that people from such regions could catch a vision of this more gracious way. That image has remained intact, so I was surprised when our landlady decided not to accompany John and me to a benefit concert on behalf of the Diaconal Center for disabled children and youth that is located in the Stodůlky section of Prague. She said, "I would be afraid to go. The church is near the Jewish Quarter, and the Neo-Nazis are coming there for Crystal Night. There will be hundreds of police with tear gas and water cannons, and who knows what will happen." Later, John said, "I am inclined to go to the concert to show that I will not be intimidated by threats and hatred." "Yes," I replied, "and before the concert, I would like to attend the ecumenical gathering in the Old Town Square that will recall the night in 1938 when the Nazis burned so many houses and synagogues. I think that we must be there."

The decision had been made, and despite our landlady's repeated warnings, I was not worried. I could not imagine that anything could break the peace of "my" city. Yet, early on Saturday afternoon, I was less sure. Walking to a store in our neighborhood, we passed four young men whose clothes told us who they were. Then, we boarded the metro with other boys wearing the same tell-tale shirts. Standing inches away from that little group, I felt a sense of disdain that only grew as we passed riot-clothed police, armored cars, bands of young men in black, and other people wearing the yellow star that was used to identify Jews when they were rounded up by the Nazis decades ago. "Something might actually happen," I concluded. Yet, at the edge of the Square, the presence of three young men holding shields bearing the word "Jude" seemed to speak a resounding "no" to the neo-Nazis.

A surprisingly large crowd had gathered in front of the Hus Memorial, where prayers and speeches were not only offered by clergy, politicians, and advocacy groups, but also by elderly concentration camp survivors, one of whom was wearing a trademark black-and-white-striped prison uniform. It was hard to hear – we were far from the stage and a police helicopter kept circling overhead. Yet, a somber reading of the names of all of the concentration camps did not escape my ears, and I heard occasional words like "honor," "suffering," "responsibility," "victims," and "unfortunately," followed by references to the neo-Nazis. Finally, a member of the Jewish community concluded his remarks by playing a shofar, which was often used to sound a call to battle, but could also be an invitation to celebration. Turning from left to

right, he blew into that ancient instrument and breathed a blessing over the entire crowd.

A sense of peace prevailed as we walked to the church, where another large group had assembled to support the Diaconia and hear a celebrated choir. Yet, although the singers' harmonies were rich and full, I sensed that there were menacing sounds beyond the church's substantial walls. "Was that a flare?" I wondered as I looked at the chancel window. My suspicions were soon confirmed, as one composition ended and a steady wail of sirens sounded. For several minutes, we sat in suspense. Then the concert resumed, and an aura of peace permeated the room. .

After greeting several friends, we found ourselves on quiet streets, peopled by concert-goers, couples, dog owners – and lines of police and vehicles, blocking all entrance to the Jewish quarter. I wanted to conclude that the neo-Nazis had vanished into the night. I wanted to believe that the gracious example represented by the faithful people who had filled the Square and the church had carried the day. I wanted to hope that harmony had won out over sirens, and that the God of love and Prince of Peace had prevailed in Prague on Saturday, November 10, 2007.

However, the television news revealed that the neo-Nazis had marched – not in the Jewish Quarter as planned – but on streets near our office. We saw confiscated weapons, hooded neo-Nazis, running police, and chaotic streets, which proved that the threat had been real; its perpetrators had not just faded away. Thus, the blessing that was breathed in the Old Town and the peace that we took with us from the church must purposely be cultivated by every one of us.