

...BRIDGES... Number 7, 2008: "Centrum"

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

Across the centuries, the Czech lands have sometimes been described as the crossroads – and consequently, the bridge -- between Eastern and Western Europe. In fact, there is a cherished piece of ancient tapestry, which depicts Europe as a human body whose heart is Bohemia. I am happy to say that during August, I had several delightful encounters with the bridging role that the Czech Republic is continuing to play at this point in time.

On August 1, I had the pleasure of meeting with key members of the largest Presbyterian Church in Egypt. When Victor Makari learned of this couple's plans to come to the Czech Republic for vacation, he put us in touch with each other. You see, Victor has a keen appreciation for the value that contacts between Christians from the Middle East and Central Europe may have. Thus, I was honored to be able to tell those two medical professionals a bit about the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and to hear of the inspiring work that they are carrying out on behalf of Egyptian Christians. "Mrs. Dr. El-Gamal" is quite involved with a very large Sunday School program and a smaller group of young people. In addition, she is writing a daily bible study in Arabic that is designed to bring biblical stories to life for Egyptian children. Both she and her husband frequently travel to conduct training sessions for an international evangelization program. "Mr. Dr. El-Gamal" heads the board of the Evangelical Hospital in Cairo, and spends his "spare" time translating books by renowned Christian authors. Not surprisingly, I left our conversation impressed by these folks' tireless commitment to these acts of service and enriched by new insight into the discipline of translating.

Just days before this, I had expressed interest in greeting the three PC(USA) representatives to the ECCB's annual international youth conference when they arrived in the Czech Republic. Imagine my delight when the ECCB's youth pastor, Filip Keller, invited me to join those folks and Pavel, the host for the Prague portion of the conference, for dinner. Just a few moments of conversation revealed that the American youth had come prepared to enter wholeheartedly into the adventures that awaited them. In spite of their long journey, they chose traditional Czech cuisine, and asked questions that were culturally-aware and quite appropriate. Their thoughtful and articulate reflections on issues that are currently impacting the United States led me to conclude that this trio would be excellent contributors to the youth conference. I am grateful to Betty McGinnis for fielding such a lively and informed delegation.

Likewise, I was pleasantly surprised a few days

later when Jan Dus stopped by my office to introduce me to Jeremy and Jamie Ault. This young couple had recently arrived to continue the outreach work that Kati Salmons had begun on behalf of Jan's congregation in 2006. It was exciting to see the lively forms that PC(USA)/ECCB relations are taking in 2008.

However, for me, the most significant international experience of the summer was provided by the Congress of the International Bonhoeffer Society, which was held on the beautiful campus of the Czech Agricultural University in late July. I had become interested in that opportunity when I was asked to translate the devotional reflections that representatives of the Czech Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women had prepared for that event. Thus, I felt privileged to be able to attend that challenging congress. Cultural and linguistic realities faded into the background as top scholars from all over the world met to consider the significance of Bonhoeffer's legacy for a global community that is caught in the paradoxical throes of secularism and fundamentalism. Professor Jürgen Moltmann and Dr. Martin Marty were just two of the august presenters who contributed to this event, which challenged its participants to grapple with demanding texts and to embrace Bonhoeffer's profoundly life-affirming vision. Although I was disappointed that there was only a handful of Czech participants, I found the conference to be invigorating, as it called church, academy, and society alike to more responsible – and more faithful – patterns of embracing both the delights and sufferings of our world. I had a strong sense that the spirit of reform, which is the legacy of Jan Hus, J.A. Comenius, T. G. Masaryk, Alexander Dubček, and Vaclav Havel (to name just a few of the great Czech "reformers") was being reborn at this unique crossroads where oppression has never dampened the human quest to stand in solidarity with others who are experiencing persecution. May the world continue to listen to those voices from the crossroads of Central Europe that are calling us to cultivate justice in the mist of tyranny and to celebrate the fullness of life in the midst of scarcity and uncertainty.