

## Evolving Our Perspectives – About the Czech Republic

By Hans E. Naumann, P.E.



The multi-storied monolithic reinforced concrete modular-styled military barracks are still visible. As are the shells of now quiet massive hulks of coking ovens and steel mills. My “westernized” mind set took both in with a mixture of smugness and strangely,

comfort. The smugness (tinged with a mild case of arrogance) instilled by the clearly outdated (by western standards) of the barracks and blackened mills. The comfort grown from the observation that the various media may have, in fact, gotten things right in their reports about the chilling effects on the lifestyles of the country under the umbrella of the former **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)**.



Making the best of its location as a historic traffic hub of its neighbors, “The Czech Republic” is shaping its future by switching focus from being the “Steel Heart” of the Region to a country thriving on a diversity of industries and services.

After all, Czechoslovakia (as it was known before it “broke up” in 1993 into “The Slovak Republic” (Slovakia) and “The Czech Republic”), held a post World War II position as one of the primary coal mining and steel-making centers of the former USSR. All of those social, environmental and economic impacts that went along with that emphasis became deeply carved into physical body as well as psyche of that country.



Although traffic sweeps in and out of trendy Ostrava over modern multi-lane super highways, inner-city trolleys and commuter trains still dominate as a means of daily transport.

But “*Now*” is year 2006, and the immediacy of the fast-paced modern world in the Czech Republic quickly changes smugness and comfort to anxious twinges fueled by excitement. The detailed bag screenings and meticulous pat-downs at the airport security gates show that the **United States of America (USA)**’s 9/11 has not escaped this country. Airport waiting lounges, packed largely by stylishly-dressed passengers, present an upward mobile society. The high-speed, multi-lane highways, complete with English/Czech signs, paint the global influence of the progressive unification of the European economic community. The name plates of Honda, Toyota, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Volvo and Audi, to name a few, flash by on the

highways, and herald an international involvement. If you are lucky, the characteristic throaty rumble of a fully-accessorized rider on an equally decked-out Harley Davidson motorcycle, will cap your day.



Ostrava’s Leos Janacek Airport Terminal took on many modern conveniences in early 2006. This international facility is capable of handling jumbo jets.

My hurried country profile research had not prepared me for all of this, and the contents of my 1950’s to late 1960’s geography classes were now getting in the way of clear thought. I had just completed the last leg of my trip from Praha (Prague) to Ostrava, collected my bags, and walked out of the baggage claim area to be greeted by Ms. Kristýna Pajurková, Secretary for the Director of Environmental Reclamation of **Ostravsko-karvinske doly (OKD)**.



The Palác Electra’s roomy efficiency apartments are uncluttered and functional.

In a stylish pair of slacks and blouse, and with an efficiency and authority which explained her high rank at a very young age at OKD, Kristýna ushered me to a waiting car where our driver, a trimly built with very “hip” jeans-clad young man (complete with surfer-styled beaded choker) waited for us. We left the relatively modern Ostrava International airport at Mošnov and drove 20km into the heart of Ostrava to check into a sparsely furnished but well laid out second floor efficiency apartment (complete with kitchen). It would be my home for the next week or so while I addressed my assignment with OKD.

Ostrava lies in the Moravian-Silesian region of the Czech Republic. That region’s significance dates back to prehistoric times. Complex ores, natural gas, limestone, granite, gravel-sands, and other natural resources are found in the region.



The prehistoric heritage site known as Landek Hill has evidence that ancient man had been using coal there more than 3 million years ago. As events would have it, abundant energy from coal initiated the development of other industrial branches including metallurgy, the chemicals industry, and mechanical engineering; the region has been one of the Czech Republic’s pivot industrial localities. In fact, as a result of the government’s emphasis on that business, the Moravian-Silesian region became synonymous with the “steel heart of the republic.” Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the unraveling of its many intertwining alliances with its neighboring nations (including The Czech Republic), the region faced stiff international competition for its products. After the fall of Czech Communism in 1989 (so named the “Velvet Revolution,” because of its relative lack of conflict), the region responded to these external pressures with an intelligent diversification plan and ecological protection initiatives. Today heavy industry is progressively being replaced by light industry and services. Foreign investors have played a major role in this restructuring process, enjoying the extensive infrastructure and strong labor pool offered by the region.



Moravia-Silesia Districts



Symbol of the Moravian-Silesian Region

OKD represents one of such foreign investments. Carved out of former state holdings, OKD’s principal activity is the production of coke and utility coal. In 2001, OKD extracted 13 million tonnes of coal. OKD satisfies 20% of the Czech Republic coal demand. It also ships coal to Austria, Poland, Slovakia, and Germany. OKD employs approximately 28,900 individuals. OKD contracted **Marshall Miller & Associates, Inc., (MM&A)** to conduct a comprehensive review of its geological, mining, marketing, and environmental programs. Thus, my presence in Ostrava was specifically to review OKD’s environmental permitting issues. Although the particulars of the results of that assignment are privy to OKD, the general factors that follow might be of interest to the reader.

Ostrava (pop. 327,000) is an industrial city in the Ostrava-Karvina coal basin located between North Moravia and Silesia, near the Polish border. It was founded in 1267, but it did not expand until 1782 when the local coal mining tradition began. Today, although Ostrava continues to be the Czech Republic's leading centre of coal mining and metallurgy (Vitkovické Ironworks) as well as the seat of the Mining University, all coal mining within the city limits has been stopped and the steel mills have been substantially reduced in scope.



City of Ostrava at night



Abandoned but carefully preserved coal mine headframes, symbols of the former "steel heart" of the region, dot the Ostrava skyline.

Sensitive and proud of its heritage, the city took steps to memorialize the historical importance of those industries by well-preserved coal mine head frames, museums, and antique shops. A walk or drive through Ostrava and its surrounding communities will show that its society is strongly heritage-driven, but maintaining its heritage does not include preserving the traditionally adverse environmental profiles of its mines and mills. Through a series of local, national, and international initiatives, these facilities now appear to blend into the surroundings. Their environmental impacts are controlled through both voluntary and regulatory actions while maintaining the benefits those industries can still offer through wages and employee benefit packages.

Sensitivity to heritage, a pervasive emphasis on healthy living, and a palpable aversion to recurrences of prior poor environmental practices mean stiff resistance from both NGOs (non-government organizations) as well as the strongly empowered regulatory agencies to those who would propose actions whose results imply non-conformance to those principles. Sustaining this astonishing combination of citizen empowerment and overall green-thinking is the decision-making power granted by the new constitution to local governments (provinces, cities, prefectures). Not surprisingly, the nation's departure from Communism in 1989 has fueled the expansion of "rule-by-law," and the inevitable development of a very capable cadre of practicing attorneys as well as well-appointed courts.



Young adults in Ostrava easily adopt trendy clothes and have developed a friendly and casual attitude.



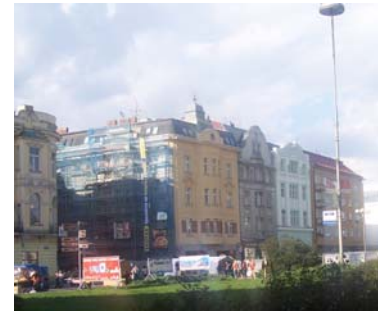
Czechs are typically reserved and private. This straight talk from the skate board shop offers a sharp modern contrast. (*Oberlick, Overbay, seen left-to-right*)

Ostrava clearly displays the tensions underpinning this "old-young" nation. Heritage drives its pride and appreciation of the contributions of its ancestors. Youth, on the other hand, demands sharing in the benefits of the increasing global economy. Thus, modern casually-dressed young adults populate the ancient city streets and frequent modern discount stores housed in rehabilitated historical buildings. The whir, click-clacks, and dingling bells of the street trolleys emphasize the common-sense blending of the past and present. On the other hand, an Ostrava skate-boarding shop, complete with genre logos, make the results of this effort jarring as well as humorous at the same time.



Ancient wood (log) columns and rafters get exposed during a restoration project. Strict compliance with restoration and historic site preservation codes make for a strange blend of modern conveniences and old structure systems.

This respect for structures of historical significance and their rehabilitation to fit modern needs can take extraordinary lengths. Where warranted and deemed acceptable by the city authorities, an entire building can be torn down, provided the replacement blends with the traditional flavor of the neighborhood. Otherwise, interiors are often stripped away, exposing ancient hand-hewn beams and brick veneers. These are preserved and stabilized so that they can be



Entire building facades are faithfully restored. Here a discount store is in the process of an extensive restoration effort.

integrated with modern heating/ventilation systems, code-compliant water/sewer services, thick insulation blankets, and eco-friendly interior finishes.

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of the Czech people is their discipline and respect for the law. Discipline includes an appreciation for healthy living and a hefty dose of European body-consciousness. Modest eating habits, combined with hiking, biking, walking, hockey, soccer, tennis and skiing play major daily roles. There is no visible military presence in Ostrava. Thus, the suggestion that a big-brother is watching is not warranted. The well-

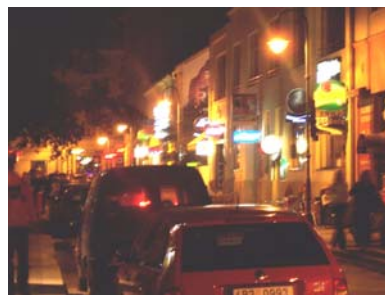


Pedestrians have the Right-of-Way at all crosswalks. By stepping off the curb, any citizen can bring both lanes of traffic to a dead stop.

equipped police force is modest by western standards. Yet, in spite of this apparent lack of enforcement, an honor system controls dispensing and collecting tokens for the ubiquitous trolleys. EVERYONE honors the vehicle and bicycle parking codes. ALL traffic comes to a halt when a pedestrian steps onto a designated cross-walk. All of the foregoing, notwithstanding, the Czechs also appreciate common sense precautions. Thus, three sets of locked doors had to be accessed before I could reach my apartment. Hall and stairway lights “time-out” (making for a brisk walk between light switches to avoid pitch

blackness). Exits and fire escapes are clearly marked. Bicycles are routinely chained to their street-side racks; and cars are locked almost by reflex action.

Last but not least, albeit still guarded, the friendliness of the Czech, is refreshing. Store clerks show a respectful constraint. The in-your-face eye contact of other nationalities is still missing, but greetings are nevertheless returned with friendliness. A Friday evening’s stroll along Ostrava’s traffic-free Stodolni Street is an enchanting experience of outdoor grills, jazz music, art, and above all, just plain relaxing fun. Stodolni



Stodolni Street in the historic part of Ostrava has become famous for its weekend carnival-styled atmosphere. Street vendors serve up grilled meats and vegetables to passersby. Pubs and restaurants stand ready to slake thirst with tall glasses of locally brewed beers.

Street is becoming more and more popular. It is a long street in the centre of Ostrava full of bars and clubs...you can find more than 70 of them there. Here also concerts and music festivals take place.

Not surprisingly, the Czech Republic’s position as a continental cross-roads as well as its healthy pro-active government, draws a polyglot mixture of immigrants and visitors. Along with that come introduced lifestyles that include a startling mix of sleek cars, modern supermarkets, North American **McDonald’s**, as well as English and Irish Pubs.

The second language appears to be English, mute testimony of Britain’s overwhelming influence on world matters. Fragments of German, Spanish, and Polish speech can be frequently heard during a stroll along the quaint downtown Ostrava Streets.



Other Factoids of likely interest to any visitor to the Moravian-Silesian Region of the Czech Republic are listed below:



International restaurants lie within walking distance of each other in Ostrava. The MacDonal’d’s and Nashville Restaurant would make any North American feel at home.

**Credit Rating:** In February 2005, the CRA Rating Agency, which is the only affiliate of Moody’s Investors Services in Central Europe, completed the evaluation of the Moravian-Silesian Region and awarded the following rating:

- Long-term international rating ..... **A-**
- Long-term local rating ..... **czAa**
- Outlook ..... **Stable**
- Short-term rating ..... **czP-1**

**Geographic Parameters:**

- Area ..... 5,445 km<sup>2</sup> ( sq. miles)
- Number of Inhabitants .....1,255,910
- Population Density .....230 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> ( per acre)
- Regional Capital, Ostrava, Population .... 313,088 inhabitants

The Moravian-Silesian Region is bounded by the Hruby Jesenik and Nizky Jesenik mountains to the north and the Beskydy Mountains to the south. The Ostrava-Karvina basin is one of the more notable lowlands. The Region’s most important waterway is the Oder River.

**Credits:**

*Hans Naumann, the principal author of this article is a Senior Vice President stationed at MM&A’s Lexington, Kentucky, office. A German immigrant with roots through birth in the Republic of Haiti, West Indies, Hans’s interests include international affairs and the influence of the mining industry on social and economic welfare of the world.*

*Joe Overbay, is a senior mining engineer, stationed at MM&A’s corporate headquarters in picturesque Bluefield, Virginia. Joe has the enviable ability to mix high technical expertise, interest, with a photographer’s artistic eye. On assignment in the Czech Republic, his images have played a major role in the assembly of this article.*

*George Oberlick is a consummate and well-respected mining engineer and former mine operator with a wide range of interests in the extractive industry. George blends a deep sensitivity of labor/management issues with the blunt reality that mining is a tough, dangerous business that simply will not go away. His prime objective is to make it safe and beneficial. George contributed social and technical comments to this paper.*

**Data Sources and References:**

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