

TASTE AND TRANSFORMATION: ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS WITH FOOD IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Ben Passmore, Southern Methodist University and Susan Racine Passmore, Independent Scholar

© 2003 Ben Passmore and Susan Racine Passmore All Rights Reserved

The copyright for individual articles in both the print and online version of the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* is retained by the individual authors. They reserve all rights other than those stated here. Please contact the managing editor for details on contacting these authors. Permission is granted for reproducing these articles for scholarly and classroom use as long as only the cost of reproduction is charged to the students. Commercial reproduction of these articles requires the permission of the authors.

Food is important to Czechs. Of course, food is important to us all but since we have been doing fieldwork in the Czech Republic, we have come to see the profundity of the Czech love of food. Indeed, we have had a hard time avoiding the topic even though our ethnographic interest in the region lies elsewhere. Food is life. It is happiness. It is comfort, perhaps for us all. When Czechs traditionally fast on Christmas Eve (*Štědrý Den*) they do so in the hope of earning good luck in the upcoming year. Such impeding luck is signaled by a vision of a golden pig. Food is health, promise, and potential.

For Czechs, food is something else as well. When Baloun, a character in Jaroslav Hašek's beloved and anarchistic novel "The Good Soldier Švejk," whiles away his time in the Austrian army during World War I by dreaming of his ever fattening pig back at home, it is a statement of the value of home and hearth. It also reflects what Holy (1996) has called the "little Czech man" (*malý český člověk*) tradition (For a detailed discussion of this concept see Holy 1996). This little tradition is drawn in opposition to the Great Tradition – in this case, the war and the political interests of the ruling class. Baloun is not concerned with the future of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His is the little tradition of pigs, home and garden.

'Oh, that was a pig,' he said with enthusiasm, squeezing Švejk's hand when they parted. 'I raised it on nothing but potatoes and was amazed myself how well it put on weight. I soaked the hams in brine and, I tell you a nicely roasted piece of pork, taken out the brine and served with cabbage and potato dumplings and sprinkled with cracklings, is the finest treat you can have. And then a lot of beer afterwards. A chap's so satisfied. And the war's taken all that away from us.' (Hašek 1973: 416-17)

For another example in a very different time, the communist period, one only need turn to the work of the Czech author Bohumil Hrabal. Hrabal devotes an entire chapter in his, "Cutting it Short" (*Postřižiny*) – a vivid recounting of tales of a simpler and more joyful time in village life – to a lovingly rendered account of food preparation and consumption. The tale begins with a pig slaughtering that thrusts the hero into an extended orgy of gluttony.

I lay in the feather quilt, and before I fell asleep, I stretched out a hand and touched a shoulder, then I fingered a joint and went dozing off with my fingers on a virginal tenderloin, and dreamed of eating a whole pig. Towards morning I woke, I had such a thirst, I went barefoot to fetch a bottle of beer, pulled off the stopper and drank greedily, then I lit the lamp, and holding it in my fingers, I went from one bit of pork to the next, unable to restrain myself from lighting the primus and slicing off two lovely lean schnitzels from the leg. I beat them out thin, salted and peppered them and cooked them in butter in eight minutes flat, all that time, which seemed to an eternity, my mouth was watering, that was what I needed, to eat practically the whole of the two legs, in simple unbreaded schnitzels sprinkled with lemon juice...and now I laid those schnitzels on a plate and ate them greedily, as always I got my nightdress spattered, just as I always spatter my blouse with juice or gravy, because when I eat, I don't just eat, I guzzle. (Hrabal 1993: 22-23)

Hrabal wrote "Cutting it Short" and its companion "The Little Town Where Time Stood Still," (*Městečko, kde se zastavil čas*) during a time in which Czech life little resembled that of the carefree and picturesque existence he depicted. Indeed, reading these stories today, one could easily miss the subtle satire and the reason why these stories were not published in

their entirety until after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. As Josef Škvorecký observes, Hrabal's work revealed an earlier, happier pre-communist period in Czech history and thus, undermined the archetypes of official political messages.

Into this thoroughly fictitious world of wishful thinking came – as a ray of light – Hrabal's stories, peopled by unmistakable proletarians who were not necessarily always likeable, by unmistakable middle-class characters - though not necessarily unlikeable - and by "atypical" intellectuals who discussed E.A. Poe or Jackson Pollock in a tavern over a mug of beer. Gone was the determinism, gone was the lifelessness of the cardboard world of the once mandatory "method." Hrabal's colorful folks were triumphantly alive, they displayed the politically incorrect classlessness of raconteurism, they lived in a universe lighted by fireworks of imagination. (Škvorecký 1993: x)

Indeed, just as Švejk and his compatriots display an opposition to the Great Tradition with their love of village and pig, Hrabal's depictions of desire are underlined with a dissatisfaction with communism. Food, in addition to symbolizing life, health, luck and the little Czech tradition, is also understood as representative of freedom and, at times, resistance. During the communist period, consumption and consumer goods, defining needs and fulfilling them were charged political issues. Thus goods, especially food, became objects of considerable desire. As Verdery notes, "Capitalism...repeatedly renders desire concrete and specific, and offers specific – if ever-changing – goods to satisfy it. Socialism, in contrast, aroused desire without focalizing it, and kept it alive by deprivation" (1997: 28).

In communist Russia, Humphrey (1995) notes how bread came to represent something almost sacred. The remnants of this period in the Czech Republic are often seen today. One need only linger a moment or two by a bin of carrots or shelf of fresh meat in the market to see a dramatic upsurge of desire. Shortly, a crowd will form and pushing might rapidly ensue even before anyone really knows what the "object of desire" is in full.

Thus, food connects Czechs to their past, to their integrity as a people and serves as a barometer of well being – physically, politically

and socially. This is true both in the past and at the present as the nation is on the edge of EU membership. The following vignettes describe a handful of ethnographic moments that illustrate this point. They communicate something of the Czech past, present and future through food. In short, they illustrate something of the taste of transformation.

Televising Desire

The television program "*Žena za Pultem*" (Woman Behind the Counter) was an immense success in its day. During its initial run in the 1970's, it commonly drew upwards of 80% of the television audience. The lead character, Anna, was a communist ideal of cooperation and apoliticality. The actress who played her, Jirina Svorcova, was an outspoken and well-known communist. She remains so to the present, never having renounced the allegiance that brought her past stardom as have many others. It is on this that the controversy of the recent rebroadcast of the series on a Czech commercial network hinged.

A Czech university colleague, here, asked seriously what we thought would happen when the program aired. He asked in such a tone that it was clear that the program carried a significant emotional weight. We, and a large audience of Czechs, tuned in to see the long-awaited program. After the first episode, the controversy was something of a mystery. How could a routine drama of this sort be so powerful for so many? Subsequent episodes brought into focus an unexpected answer.

Žena za pultem is set in a grocery store in mid 1970's Prague and it is a window into those times, if a distorted one. Lighting on the streets is dim, those with bourgeois affectations are ridiculed, and the store is so overstaffed as to approach absurdity. What is not a reflection of the period, are the mountains and varieties of food available. It is in this that the emotional appeal of the program lies.

Food is displayed through each episode in a feast of fetishistic imagery. Once one has noted these displays, an episode seems more akin to the titillating "sexual education" films of the U.S. 1940's and 50's than the serious, but lighthearted, serial it claims to be. In the Czech program, the fresh-faced girl behind the butcher

counter seems only able to speak to other characters as she nibbles ham from her right hand and dangles fat links of sausages from her left. The opening credits show us well-stocked shelves full of food, and courteous and efficient staff delivering it into the hands of smiling customers. In each scene, in the store, actors compete (usually unsuccessfully) with long lingering shots of food displayed, sliced, and handled.

Despite fears of some sort of communist groundswell after the airing of *Žena*, the country remained quiet. Pornographic images of food apparently having lost some of the power they had when the program first aired. Indeed, the food environment to which it refers seems in some way as distant as Victorian images of women's ankles which would have once aroused such feeling. The result is then a picture of the times as some would have had it. A time in which a customer would receive a scolding for asking for thinly sliced cheese, an abundance shared without nonsensical individualism and demand. A time in which desire sated could be found side by side with communist ideals.

Lucie's Bananas

Lucie, our friend and research assistant, loves to talk. In a country where few seem to, and fewer still wish to talk more than absolutely required, this is a good thing to find. On no subject is she more likely to wax rhapsodic than on that of bananas. Her discourse on bananas began around the Christmas season. The subject had turned to consumption and the holiday. Susan had wanted to know what it was that fired the consumer imagination of young Czechs now that everything is available, if not affordable. Lucie pondered the question very briefly and answered, "food, all sorts of different food, and bananas, especially bananas."

She recounted how as a young girl, she and her mother had stood for hours outside of their local store in the hope of bananas. This became something of a Christmas ritual each year, as the holiday was the only time when bananas were likely to be available at all. With luck - and she said they were usually lucky - they were able to acquire a kilogram of bright green Cuban bananas each year. She would look

forward to this all year, and ration her fruit over the holiday season.

She also recounted her amazement as bananas became generally available during the 1990's. She spoke happily of the size, color, and quality of the newly available fruit. For her, no thing so much represents the material promise of the future than the easy availability of bananas. Lucie has since spoken with us about many other issues, but it takes only a half glass of wine or a walk past a *potraviny* with bananas displayed in the window to return her to the subject.

Capitalism vs. the Home Cooked Meal (Ben Gets Grilled)

During the course of our study in the Czech Republic, a question was repeatedly asked of me by informants, "Can American women cook?" My interlocutors were usually women, although from such diverse positions as textile factory workers, engineers, and city officials. My answers would return to the women I know personally and invariably, my wife. They were often skeptical of my claims that Susan and I are highly competent cooks.

"Did you know that Czech women are versatile?" asked one informant. "And much better cooks than American women," she added to the general agreement of those present. The ability to prepare good traditional Czech food is a subject which few of my female informants chose to avoid. At one field site, a small toy factory, the women who work in the "cutting" room insist on knowing my favorite Czech foods. They surprise me the next day with *řizek* (schnitzel), bread, peppers and cake. We then talk about food. They speak with pride of their skills and the importance of cooking for successful marriages. As we talk further, it begins slowly to occur to me that they are not interested in my wife or even in all the American women I know. They are interested in the archetype of the American woman, as seen on TV. Can a woman be so pampered, rich and beautiful and keep a home as well? A note of concern enters the conversation, which helps me to understand why they do not want to believe that Susan can cook.

Male informants are more sanguine. One going so far as to tell his wife, Marta, during an otherwise pleasant meal with two surprised anthropologists, that it really matters very little to him whether or not she prepares good meals for him. She countered that it matters *very much* to his mother. She added, after a deeply uncomfortable silence, that her misguided husband is so anxious to leap into a world of cheap, fast and prepared foods (now increasingly available) that he forgets how others may see the roles of wife and mother. The lengthening work day and week leave women with less time for cooking while those of the older generation (as some part of Marta herself) appeal to the value of a home-cooked meal as an essential part of well being. She could see that things were changing and was not optimistic for the future. She felt trapped between what she and others saw as her obligation and its increasing societal devaluation indicated by her husband's attitude. Marta suspected that although her obligation had not disappeared, its value had diminished. Well-cooked meals are no longer appreciated and, by extension, neither are the women preparing them.

Cooking European (Union) Style

In the course of our research, we have heard a great deal about the European Union. The Czech Republic is scheduled to enter the union in 2004. From colleagues in the economics faculty at Masaryk University, it has been tales of economic prosperity and of the Czech Republic becoming the next Ireland (a noted EU success story). From textile workers and machinists, who make up the majority of our informants, the picture is less rosy. Many fear economic and political chaos, but often fail in attempts to articulate any specifics except in one area – food. The EU, it has been explained to us, will outlaw Czech national dishes. *Gulaš* (goulash), beer and the annual pig feast are particularly endangered in these machinations.

A good *gulaš*, most will tell you, is an aged *gulaš*. One should prepare the dish and then store it for several days to achieve the best taste. This, the widely circulated rumor went, would violate EU food safety standards and spell the end of the distinctly

Czech dish (Hungarian versions notwithstanding). Far from being a question isolated to the poorest or least educated elements of Czech society, the rumor was discussed and viewed with distress even among the elite entrepreneurs of Prague. As one informant, the wife of a very wealthy Prague businessman told us, her husband did not plan to support expansion of the EU at the price of Czech cuisine. She, an EU proponent, was happily bringing him an article from an international news magazine which attempted to dispel such fears.

Beer is another similarly affected product and one could not choose a more important one to Czechs. Fears (again of food safety regulations) that the processes used in brewing Czech beer will not pass Brussels muster are routinely spoken of with genuine anger. Rising beer prices are also widely expected, and have led to nightly news stories in which pensioners opine for the good old days when they could enjoy their retirement over a cold Pilsner Urquell. The situation has become serious enough that Česká Televize's European Union promotion programs have spent significant time trying to reassure everyone that beer and *gulaš* will indeed remain on the menu.

The annual pig slaughter and feast is another matter. This event, which involves the public slaughter of an animal in many villages, is followed by a feast of sausage, pork and a myriad of decidedly, un-vegetarian delicacies. It is an event of such significance traditionally that the month in which it occurs, *Prosinec* (December), in Czech is derived from the phrase "to stick a pig." This, again rumor has it, will violate EU regulations on the slaughter of animals. As one informant put it, "We will just do it in secret, as we did with the Nazis." This is hardly the image that the EU would like to find in a candidate country. The connection of these traditional foods and feasts to the survival of Czech culture is a potent one and such fears are symbolic of deeper fears of many Czechs.

Conclusion

Like the narratives of Hrabal and Hašek, each of the ethnographic vignettes above includes seeds of the symbolic power of Czech food. The television show, *Žena za pultem*, co-opts the potency of food to create a fictional

marriage of abundance and communist ideals in stark contrast to real life of the time. Such dreams of abundance are fulfilled for Lucie through capitalism's promise in the form of bananas. Her love and desire for a better future has become focused in fruit. Capitalism, though, has not realized its promise for some as it, like communism, threatens the well being of being well fed. For Czech women, the capitalist offer of domestic leisure may actually threaten the position within the family enjoyed by their mothers and grandmothers and undermines the value of hearth and home. Finally, this history of food becomes a fear of the future. Will the advent of the European Union bring further domination from a distant power for Czechs and their food?

Food for Czechs has been a historical creative disengagement from the unsettling and overpowering movement of great forces. In food, Czechs find contentment where it can be plainly seen, fondled and consumed in comfortable private and semi-private spheres of social life. Outside of these sphere there is little hope of controlling the forces that have shaped Czech history, that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Nazi occupation, Soviet domination. Now, however undeservingly, the European Union represents a further potential threat. Food has remained an area distinctly Czech in the face of great change and remains a keystone for the maintenance of Czech culture as the nations passes into a new European future.

References cited

- Hasek, Jaroslav, 1973, *The Good Soldier Švejk*. London: Penguin.
- Holy, Ladislav, 1996, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and Post Communist Social Transformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Hrabal, Bohumil, 1993, *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still*. London: Abacus.
- Humphrey, Caroline, 1995, *Creating a Culture of Disillusionment: Consumption in Moscow, a Chronicle of Changing Times*. In *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local*. Daniel Miller, ed. London: Routledge. 43-68.
- Škvorecký, Josef, 1993, *Introduction*. *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still*, Bohumil Hrabal. London: Abacus.

Verdery, Katherine, 1997, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.