

## Conference briefing

### The 6th Prague International Conference on Child Development and Personality Formative Processes\*

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When the 6th Prague International Conference was announced in September 1989, the organisers can have had little idea that within two months the communist regime in Czechoslovakia would collapse and the Berlin wall be breached. The conference was postponed until August 1991. That week the failed Soviet coup led to the disbandment of the USSR as such. It was an exciting time to visit Prague. It was a disconcerting time too, I was still not sure whether my contribution was meant to be a poster or a paper. Writing received no response, fax machines were unavailable, phoning at first resulted in repeated *Sprechen Sie Deutsch?* but eventually in an assurance that my accommodation had been booked. . . . So I arrived at Rusyne airport with a paper and a poster, having ascertained during the journey that delegates to two other unrelated conferences in Prague had had similar experiences!

I discovered that I was the only psychiatrist present among clinical and educational psychologists, educationalists and philosophers. It was refreshing and stimulating. My two free days prior to the opening of the conference had highlighted the pervasive political reminders of Czechoslovakia's recent past interspersed among the mediaeval and baroque architecture: images of the crushing of the Prague Spring; the headquarters of Civic Forum; the Stalinist era Hotel International. The opening conference session echoed the political theme: "This is the first really free conference"; "research was subject to ideological presumptions before"; "we have had half a century of misrule by the communists". We heard that the constrained social system had

meant that experiments were conducted in "very unnatural surroundings"; these would now stand as historic and unique accounts of that period. We heard of the difficulties of acquiring the social skills and attitudes to initiate changes, when a generation of Czechs have been passive, necessarily, to survive. We were asked to listen, offer help and advice, collaborate in joint research projects, but especially to engage in dialogue.

Dialogue was difficult. English was the conference language, but many East Europeans speak better German. Typically, we English spoke English only. Live translation facilities were sadly lacking, or at least, copies of the proffered papers. No timing of papers led to extended and overlapping sessions and more frustration. The USA chairman of my section gave a good example of how chairmanship can keep speakers to time. Communication problems aside, the range of papers was wide, and the educational and sociological range even wider. None of the papers made me rethink my working practice, although some gave me new frameworks for old ideas. In particular, the different attitudes to day care for preschoolers and educational practices between countries was interesting. It was also salutary to find UK and USA delegates looking with a little envy at the new beginnings possible in eastern Europe, and the widespread political, ecological and cultural awareness in Prague. Most enjoyable and instructive though was meeting Czechs and hearing about work and research under communist rule – and how much that has changed in the last 21 months.

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