

Letter from Prague - Czechs and stereotypes

[2008-06-29] By Dominik Jůn

Recently, a couple of friends visiting from England opened up a Pandora's Box when they asked a seemingly innocent question. "What is the stereotypical image of Brits in the Czech Republic?" I sighed, knowing that this was a tricky subject. Stereotypes are obviously an inherently prejudiced way of making generalizations, usually negative, about certain groups of people. Yet, political correctness aside, and taken with a pinch of humour and self-deprecation, it is hard to say that at least a grain of truth can't be found in many of them. So, being deliberately provocative, I said "The image is of mindless shaven-headed thugs able to do little more than get drunk and roam the streets shouting 'woah!!'" There, I said it. My British friends laughed – "Is it really that bad?" one of them asked? "Like it or not, that is the stereotype among many here." I replied.



Wanting to balance things out, I then jokingly asked – “So what is the stereotype of Czechs in Britain?” Obviously I was among friends, and that means that so long as you can poke fun at yourself in equal measure, this kind of conversation is more jocular than anything else. One of them replied “Potatoes. Weird rituals to do with potatoes, barn dances, and the top story in the day's news – ‘A man has lost his potato!’” The implication was of a backward country, in which nothing ever really happens. I laughed – of course I did – I do think that so many people are quick to take offence these days, rather than comfortably explore such subjects.

In fact, stereotypes are quite common in Prague. The reason is that the centre of the city is filled with tourists 365 days a year. Thus, perceptions – false and crude or not, are created by the locals. Italians – all wearing designer shades, and dressed identically, Americans, naively wandering around in baseball caps and shorts, in awe of any building older than 100 years. Japanese, snapping away with their latest modern gadgets, Russians, desperate to look as wealthy and high-class as possible and of course Czechs, quietly grumbling against this foreign invasion. Of course, and I must say it again, these characterizations are false generalizations, and many would find them deeply offensive. But the simple fact is that deep inside each of us, such thoughts do occasionally manifest themselves. Of course, these stereotypes occasionally take on

an even darker and more reprehensible dimension – the African drug dealer on Wenceslas square, the Ukrainian crooks, the Vietnamese who will sell you a pair of fake brand-labelled shoes that fall apart within days. This is where stereotypes take on a deeply racist and xenophobic character – unfortunately, that too can be found in the Czech Republic and everywhere across the globe.

It is curious how a simple innocent question “What is the stereotypical image of Brits in the Czech Republic?” can lead down a path that ends up exploring issues such as racism and xenophobia. The Czech lands were largely insulated from foreigners for decades during communist rule. This has meant that the habits, traits and idiosyncrasies of foreigners have a particular fascination, and even fear, for many Czechs. But, more importantly, I continue to believe that discussing such issues and even finding humour in them, is far better than simply labelling them taboo and pretending they do not exist.