BERLIN, BOHEMIA AND BUDAPEST BY BICYCLE

1989 was a year of revolution in Europe, paralleled only by 1789, 1848 and 1917. At the end of 1989 the invitation to a conference in Budapest the following August stimulated the idea of a trip by bicycle across what we then thought of as Eastern Europe, but which was already reforming itself mentally and politically as Central Europe, as a resurrected *Mitteleuropa*. The focal point of change in Eastern Europe was indubitably Berlin: where better to start?

Central Europe began on the train from Hoek van Holland, watching haute bourgeois Holland and West Germany slip by from the windows of the old-fashioned, starched linen table-clothed *Mitropa* dining car of the East German *Deutsches Reichsbahn*. Already we were in a new Europe as returning East Germans smoked dark cheroots and talked of first visits to the West: 'the English were much nicer than we had been taught to expect. It is difficult for us, we have to change our views about you and the Second World War.'

The transformation of Berlin was unbelievable to those who had visited when the ever-dominant Wall appeared at every turning, and crossing took an hour or more in the bowels of the Friedrichstrasse *U-bahn* station. Now half of Europe packed every hotel, and gravitated to the Brandenburg Gate to stroll nonchalantly across areas of no-man's land where months earlier only rabbits had walked. With characteristic humour the Berliners literally capitalised on their new fortune; pieces of *die Mauer* were sold in plastic bags, and postcards conjoined a January 1989 newspaper headline in which Erich Honecker proclaimed that the Wall would stand for a hundred years with pictures of the Wall being demolished just ten months later. Berliners themselves still seemed hardly able to comprehend what had happened, talking of 'before', and describing excited 'phone calls at 2 a.m: 'the Wall is open'. East Berlin had lost its previous cold austerity, and now felt like a historical time-warp: the city that time had passed by, devoid of the vulgarity and glitz of West Berlin, but seeming, as *Vopos* strolled around in the sun, and the Prussian soldiers outside the memorial goose-stepped for the tourist cameras, to be more of a 'DDR theme park' than the capital of a once ruthless régime. Art students occupying a derelict East Berlin cinema recognised the forthcoming struggles within Eastern Europe with a huge banner proclaiming *'Freiheit macht arbeit'*, a reversal of the chilling slogan we later saw over the gate of the concentration camp at Theresienstadt, *'Arbeit macht frei'* ('Work makes one free'). Here was the last act of the historical process that had started on that same street on *Kristellnacht* in 1938 with the burning of the (still gutted) Berlin synagogue.

Our route took us south from Berlin to Meissen and Dresden, and then followed the Elbe through the Ore mountains into Czechoslovakia and most of the way to Prague. Thence we crossed the Bohemian-Moravian highlands to Brno, followed the Morava river to Bratislava, traversed the flat flood plain of the Danube, entering Hungary at Komaron, and finally arrived in Budapest. We cycled 1,003 kms in 7 whole days, 4 half days and 3 rest days, averaging 111.3 kms (SD 11.8 kms) on a full day, a higher rate than on our previous trip from Paris to Rome [1] and more than we would have liked, but our conference deadline gave little room for manoeuvre. Cycling was a joy in East Germany, with its considerate drivers and near empty roads, and it was pleasant in Czechoslovakia; Hungary was more redolent of the West

in its disdain for two-wheeled transport, and Budapest is a city that all cyclists should avoid — it is rightly called 'the Paris of the East', its drivers emulating their French namesakes. Knowing that East German towns were typically cobbled (and had tram tracks to add further complications), our preparations had included strapping plentiful spare spokes to our stays; in the end we needed none of them, and our only technical problems were six punctures.

Bicycle shops were rare, difficult to find and poorly stocked. In Prague we needed new water bottles, ours having been stolen. The large sports shop did not sell bikes and no-one spoke English or German. Fortunately the British Council office was next door. Sitting inside was an elderly myopic gentleman systematically sifting through a pile of old copies of the British Medical Journal. The assistant was exceptionally helpful, and gave us a note in Czech asking the address of a bike shop; back at the sports shop it produced laughs all round and the desired address. But needless to say that shop didn't have any water bottles (or much else); so we bought plastic bottles full of distilled water for car batteries, poured away the tasteless water and used the bottles.

Tourist facilities were everywhere limited, with hotels and restaurants often scarce. One night in East Germany the only hotel in a small town was full and so we camped wild in the pine woods, gaining a frisson of excitement from finding ourselves next to a Soviet air-base, knowing that a year earlier discovery would probably have led to charges of spying. In Prague the tourist infrastructure simply could not cope with the numbers so that hotel rooms were fully booked by 11 a.m., and restaurants all had long queues outside; one night, after queueing for an hour and a half, and drinking beer inside for another hour, we were just told 'There is no food left'.

The revolutions in Eastern Europe all happened over a very brief period; the subsequent economic changes are occurring more slowly in ways peculiar to each country. East Germany can only be described as undergoing a capitalist revolution. Shops are flooded with West German goods and advertisers are exploiting new territories. Sadly, but predictably, the cigarette advertisers moved fastest, most streets in East Berlin being dominated by red and white Marlboro cafe table umbrellas. Advertisements exploited the 'New Germany' theme: Peter Stuyvesant proclaimed 'Come together', the specially named brand of West cigarettes suggested 'Test The West', while Kim cigarettes were 'For the New Woman'; and all were in English. The dynamism of the free market was unexpectedly shown by West Berlin stall-holders trading Red Army insignia and *Vopo* uniforms, while in a small East German market town Soviet squaddies were spending their newly acquired Deutschmarks on jackets with US Army badges.

If East Germany had retained only the 'materialism' in 'dialectical materialism' then in Czechoslovakia the emphasis was entirely on 'dialectic'. Ideological change predominated, particularly after the loss of censorship, and newspaper sellers and booksellers did brisk business, selling previously unavailable *samizdat*. An intellectual revolution, led by a playwright, had become a truly popular revolution, with even chambermaids pinning up posters of Vàclav Havel on their walls. The scale of necessary change was daunting in an economy in which 98% had been centrally run; there were queues to enter food shops, and fresh fruit and vegetables were largely absent, in comparison with the more liberal Hungary, in which supermarkets were well stocked and fresh produce was readily available. Hungary indeed showed few signs of a centrally run economy — but then, as Timothy Garton Ash says, in one of the two books [2, 3] we found most instructive. 'Marxist-Leninist ideology in Hungary [was] as obviously wax as the face of Lenin in the mausoleum in Red Square' [2].

Throughout the Eastern bloc all is change and flux. In Prague there is an air of intellectual liberation, as if events have simply restarted where they left off back in August 1968; posters of John Lennon were everywhere on sale, and The Rolling Stones were playing live, advertised with the slogan 'The tanks are rolling out, The Stones are rolling in'. In the small Albatross cinema we watched *Velvet Revolution*, about the events of November '89, in which the final scene showed the Staromèstkè Nam, the old town square, ringed with water cannons and riot police, where now a group of adolescent Beatle look-alikes lovingly re-created the early songs of their idols.

In East Germany, where ideology and political thought have foundered along the route to *Anschluss* with West Germany, there is a growing sense of betrayal, loss and engulfment: 'You know, not everything was bad about the DDR; we did many things well.' Small rearguard actions try to retain some sense of a separate society, a different tradition and a genuine merger of equals, seen in tiny details such as disks on cars saying 'BRDDR'. But society has changed dramatically and the new rules are not clear. Friends in Dresden were on the waiting list for a Trabant car for 14 years, and ought now to be near the top: 'But now there is no list.'

The journey opened our minds to a far larger Europe than the narrow post-war conception of the European Community, and revealed our limited knowledge of Central Europe's traditions, history, culture and contributions in so many areas — as we were reminded when we visited the graves of Mendel in Brno, Semmelweiss in Budapest, and Brecht and Hegel in East Berlin. The media's grim image of Eastern Europe was not fulfilled: we didn't see vast smoky industrial complexes or forests devastated by acid rain, but instead found unspoilt countryside and abundant wild-life. As Londoners we envied cities without litter but with excellent, uncrowded public transport, and we admired a wealth of public art, particularly sculpture and ceramics, with little of the crude Socialist Realism so beloved of the stereotypes.

References:

[1] Lockwood, D. N. J. and McManus, I. C., The Bicycle Path to Rome. *British Medical Journal* 1989; 299: 1588–1589.

[2] Ash, T. G. *The uses of adversity: Essays on the fate of Central Europe*, Cambridge: Granta Books, 1989.

[3] Ash, T. G. *We the people: the revolution of '89 witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*. Cambridge: Granta Books, 1990.

Chris McManns and
Diana Lockwood

NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of the Gazette will be published on 3rd October 1991. Please note the following copy dates:

Manuscipts (typed)	**8th July**
Artwork/photographs	**16th August**