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The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Czech Republic

Stop that train!

I did the one thing I could not afford to do. I slept through Pardubice.

The moment I opened my eyes, I knew I had lost the battle. Maybe it was ten minutes that I nodded off, maybe it was thirty; I didn’t know and it didn’t matter. I had fallen asleep and would suffer for it. After holding up admirably during a week of reckless shoestring winter travel through Lithuania and Poland, I collapsed inches from the finish line. With my friend Alex no longer by my side to make me laugh and punch me awake—we’d parted ways that morning at the Czech-Polish border—I was no match for that most cunning, innocent, and patient of temptresses, sleep.

In collapsing briefly into her bosom, I had traded my kingdom for a nap. For awaiting me on the newly built cement campus of Pardubice University was my girlfriend Barbora and her warm bunk bed. All I had to do was make it to the Pardubice main station while conscious, then stay upright during the long snowy stretch to the dormitory, a twelve-story *panelak* originally built to house Vietnamese “guest workers” in the 1970s. On the seventh floor of that building was a weary traveler’s paradise: hot shower, sweet tea, warm bodies, loving murmurs. Then, I’d fall like cobalt into a coma-sleep for a day, maybe two, before returning to Prague and resuming my happy life as a marginally employed expatriate.

That was the plan anyway. I was no doubt dreaming of some variation on these ecstasies when I snapped awake to train station noises and the terrifying sight of a blue-and-white sign declaring my presence in Kolín, midway between Pardubice and Prague. Why terrifying? Because I had no money; not even a heller in the lint. I had pulled out of Prague for Vilnius the week before with less than $40 in my wallet. By the time we began the journey home, it was more than gone, and I had borrowed from Alex to buy my ticket to Pardubice and no further.

But Alex was not with me in Kolín to offer one last pinch from his own meager purse. He was snoring on the express train to Prague. My only option was to backtrack east, holding an invalid train ticket. This was not a happy prospect, for in the Czech Republic, there is nothing more useless than an invalid train ticket. You might as well hand them yesterday’s newspaper dripping with bat dung.

Heavy with this knowledge, I crossed the platform and boarded the eastbound train sitting idle on the opposite track. With my brain generating the necessary adrenaline, the rationalizations came quick. It was only a few stops, I thought. And it was nearing Christmas, a season supposedly rich with tiny miracles. Perhaps an avuncular Czech ticket-checker would show rare mercy and understanding. It was snowing outside, after all, and cold. On a freezing December day such as this, even the grimmest, most committed Czech Railways enforcer might

just look the other way, if only this once, and allow a scruffy young foreigner free passage to Pardubice.

The train had been rolling past the fallow winter fields of eastern Bohemia for no more than a minute or two when a middle-aged woman in crisp navy blue uniform entered my car and, as predicted, demanded to see my ticket. I obliged. She immediately registered the dated information, also as predicted. Eyes hard, she pointed to the ticket and said that it was no good. I would have to pay my way to Pardubice, she explained. And pay it now.

I quickly mobilized my toddler's Czech and attempted to explain my tragic plight. But she just shook her head; she was not having it at all. *Ne*, *ne*, *ne*. Her disdain visibly increased with every mangled case, every fumble of the past tense of "to sleep" that accompanied my frenzied pantomime. As she grew visibly less interested in my excuses, it occurred to me that despite my thick American accent, she probably thought I was Ukrainian. If so, I was unbuttered black toast. If there is one thing worse than being caught without a ticket on a Czech train, it is being caught without a ticket on a Czech train while being Ukrainian.

One last time she demanded the cost of the trip. And one last time I tried to explain that I didn't have any money, that I had slept past my stop, that my girlfriend was waiting for me, that I would happily pay a fine later in Pardubice, or in Prague, like when you get caught on the tram without a ticket and get a citation, but not now. *Prosím*, lady, *prosím*…

In the midst of this last bit of desperate, ungrammatical pleading, she turned and walked through the sliding doors of the car. Had she given up? Was she getting the police? A few seconds later, the train began to slow. There was no screeching steel, but brakes were being applied. Soon the train was completely still. The woman reappeared, grabbed me by the shoulder, led me to the side door at the back of the car, opened it, and pushed me out onto the gravel around the tracks. Before I could turn around, the train began rolling forward, away from and without me, toward Pardubice.

I suppose the filmic thing to do would have been to watch the train until it disappeared behind the wooded bend, standing there in reflective silence as the snow fluttered down from the late-afternoon sky. But it was cold, and I was in no mood to appreciate the bleak beauty of the situation. Who throws somebody off a train in the freezing cold for a buck-fifty? *What is wrong with these people!* (I didn't know it at the time, but that was the declarative question I would spend much of the next six years trying to answer.) Determined not to stand there and be watched like some grazing antelope by the other curious passengers—none of whom had offered to help me, by the way, though several had overheard and understood my situation—I turned and walked toward the small cluster of houses a hundred yards or so away. Next to them was a road that led over and down a hill, where it merged with a two-lane highway. There were no cars in sight.

I had never hitchhiked in the Czech Republic. It was my first year in the country and I had barely left Prague. The two times I had driven with Czechs outside the city, I was surprised to see evenly spaced clusters of young soldiers and students standing at the city limits, worn and faded cardboard signs in hand: Kladno, Plzeň, Budějovice. Like most Americans my age, I associated hitchhiking with milk carton announcements for missing children and that unsettling law-enforcement phrase, "Dead, or worse." But Czech highways appeared stuck in a sullen, militarized, and acid-free version of California's Route 1, circa 1967. These kids, including many solitary young girls, were all hitching as if it were a perfectly safe, socially acceptable alternative to buses and trains. Which it was (and is).

Hitchhiking is a proud tradition in the Czech Republic, as it is throughout the former Eastern Bloc. Travel through Western Europe—where it sometimes seems as if picking up strangers is against EU law—and most of the young hitchers you meet will be Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians. It is famously easier to travel east of the former Berlin Wall by thumb than west of

it. This is simply because individual car ownership was rare under Communism. And until recently, military service was obligatory and often required soldiers to be stationed far from their homes. Together with university students, many thumbed rides back and forth. Unlike in Western countries, hitching was and remains a question of money and practical need—not thrills.

And unlike in Western countries, hitchhiking had explicit state support. In the 1960s, the Czech Communist regime even organized a competition to encourage drivers to pick up hitchhikers. Riders were given special coupons worth 50, 100, 500 kilometers that they presented to drivers according to the length of the ride. Those car owners who collected the most coupons won prizes. The contest wasn't very popular and was stopped within a year, but hitching remained common, a normal part of driving and traveling in a crime-free, socialist culture.

All of which helped explain the very short amount of time I spent by the side of that highway fifty kilometers or so west of the old industrial town of Pardubice, birthplace of the plastic explosive Semtex and center for Nazi chemical production during World War II. The first car to approach heading east was a modern-looking, seaweed-green Škoda—what else?—which immediately pulled over to the side of the road, just ahead of me. The fiftyish professional man behind the wheel barely turned to look at me when I entered the car and began thanking him. In English that was about as good as my Czech, he said he was going past Pardubice, but would be happy to take the exit into the city center and bring me to the university. After that, little was said.

When I finally arrived at the dormitory it was dark. Barbora was studying in bed, just as I had imagined her. After scolding me for making her worry, she laughed at my story and asked me, not for the last time, how I could be so stupid. As planned, I slept straight through the next day and most of the following one, too. As usual during those years, I had nowhere special to be.

Alexander Zaitchik lived in Prague between 1997 and 2003. He currently lives in New York, where he is the editor of New York Press*.*