

The Murray-Smiths in Prague

BY PHILLIP DEARY

This photograph, taken in September 2001, is of Dimitrov College, at No.6 Terronská Street, Bubeneč, an outer suburb of Prague. Stephen and Nita Murray-Smith lived here for nearly two years from June 1949 to April 1951. They had left Melbourne for Europe in March 1948 and, initially, stayed in London where they transferred their membership of the Australian Communist Party to the British Communist Party. In April 1949 Stephen, as a Eureka Youth League delegate, attended the first World Peace Congress held in Paris and, later, the Budapest Youth Festival.¹ The featureless apartment block in which they lived was named in honour of Georgi Dimitrov. The flags have gone but his name 'J. Dimitrova' is still visible in the photograph. Dimitrov helped form the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1919, achieved international prominence during the Reichstag Fire trial in 1933, was general-secretary of the Comintern from 1934 until its dissolution in 1943 and premier of Bulgaria from 1946 until his death in 1949. In a small square nearby, close to Vítězné náměstí, is a large concrete base, now empty, which once supported that ubiquitous signature of the Cold War - a large statue of Joseph Stalin.

Whilst in Prague the Murray-Smiths were part of a small community of left-wing Australians living in or travelling through Prague. They included Beth and Ken Gott, Bernard Smith, Ian and Margot Milner, Kurt and Blanche Mertz, Jack Hutson, Max Nicholson, Noel Ebbels and Ian Turner. And thanks to a regular stream of letters, principally from Amirah Turner, the Murray-Smiths were kept abreast of events in Australia during those tumultuous two years: the coal strike, the Royal Commission into Communism, the controversy over *Power Without Glory* and the attempt to ban the Communist Party. Stephen obtained employment with the Telepress News Agency and was responsible for news on the Asia-Pacific region. He also wrote several articles on Czechoslovakia for the Australian communist press. He clearly found Czechoslovakia congenial, describing it as a 'confident, happy country, where everything is on the upgrade'.² Not quite everything: still present were the odious remnants of the Czech middle class. 'Decadent aspects of W. European civilization have penetrated far into Czech life, and Prague is still a surprisingly bourgeois city. The bourgeoisie still exists, and is openly reactionary.... [but] the overwhelming impression is one of confidence in the government and particularly in the leadership of the Communist Party. The security of the state rests on this.'³

Consistent with the ideological framework and doctrinal rigidity common to most loyal communists during this period of high Stalinism and Cold War tension, Murray-Smith wrote from Prague a long article entitled 'A New Era for Tibet' for a communist periodical. Today, the Chinese occupation of Tibet is the source of moral and political anguish. Then, it was reason for celebration:

Today soldiers of the Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army are scaling the passes and traversing the plateaux of Tibet. The chorus of imprecations from the press of the

capitalist world has not shaken the determination of the Chinese Government to conclude the liberation of the people of Tibet from their age-old backwardness and suffering. Reports from Peking tell us of the glad reception of the liberation forces by the oppressed serfs of this backward land...It is clear that imperialist intrigues are aimed at "proving" the right of the reactionary Lhasa clique to rule Tibet and to open it up for exploitation by the imperialists. The Chinese Government recognises and denounces these transparent plans...⁴

In October 1950 the Murray-Smiths received a letter from a friend in Australia: 'When do you come home?...[A] few people are sceptical (critical) about your being away so long...Hope to see you shortly anyway'.⁵ They stayed in Prague for another six months, eventually returning home on 28 May 1951. Stephen continued to work for Telepress News Agency and sent articles to Prague on Korean war, the Malayan Emergency and Japan. However, he had to harangue them constantly to receive payment: 'I find it difficult to imagine why an organisation of the nature of Telepress apparently has such little consideration for its employees'.⁶ It owed him the considerable sum of £404. Only later did he discover the reason for this dereliction: Telepress had been shut down by – a casualty of the notorious and ferocious 'show trial' of Czech communist leader, Rudolf Slansky, in 1952.⁷ But in late 1951, six months after his return to Australia, Murray-Smith's enthusiasm for Czechoslovakia was undiluted: he eulogised its economic order during a lecturing tour of Northern Queensland and he wrote, rather wistfully, perhaps: 'Looking back at them, our two years in Czechoslovakia seem like two years lived in the future'.⁸ It seems clear that, notwithstanding the drabness of Dimitrov College, pictured here, those two years in Prague were, for the Murray-Smiths, a formative and significant political experience.

ENDNOTES

¹ National Archives of Australia A6119, 68, folio123.

² Stephen Murray-Smith papers, State Library of Victoria (SLV), ms 8272, Box 280/1-1

³ Murray-Smith to KD Gott, 11 June 1949, Gott papers, SLV, ms 13047, Box 3764/1.

⁴ *World News and Views*, Vol.30, No.46, 18 November 1950, pp.548-9.

⁵ Letter to Stephen and Nita Murray-Smith from Ken [Tolhurst?], 9 October 1950, Murray-Smith papers, VSL ms Box 274/2-1

⁶ Correspondence, 3 April 1952, Murray-Smith papers, SLV ms 8272, Box 280/2-1.

⁷ See Willie Thompson, *The Communist Movement since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 45. In a letter to Harold Levine's *Voice* (29 March 1953), Murray-Smith publicly defended the trials of Slansky, Rajk and Kostov in, respectively, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria. Murray-Smith papers, SLV ms 2386, Box 274/3-2.

⁸ Correspondence, 13 November 1951, Murray-Smith papers, VSL ms 8272, Box 280/1-1. It would have been characteristic, however, for Stephen to then hold, but very privately, certain misgivings about aspects of the political system of these countries.