

[ photography ]

## Czech Lens

Different Yet Similar Exhibits Capture Prague's Past, Present

by Stephanie M. Kanowitz

**T**wo new exhibits in Washington depict the Czech Republic in very divergent ways: everyday, 21st-century peace and a hostile takeover by the Soviets and their allies in 1968.

Subtlety and nostalgia define Michael Borek's photographs in the "Wide Asleep" exhibit at the Czech Embassy. Less subtle are the 74 images in "Invasion 68: Prague, Photographs by Josef Koudelka" on display at the American University's Katzen Arts Center, which chronicle the events of 1968, when Soviet tanks rolled in to quash a political reform movement known as the Prague Spring.

Together, the two displays form a striking picture of Czech life — past and present — just as the country prepares to take the mantle of the rotating European Union presidency in January for the first time ever.

The EU presidency stands as a major achievement for a country that just 30 years ago found itself under the iron grip of the Soviet Union. At the time, Josef Koudelka himself was just 30 years old. He had recently left an engineering career to become a full-time photographer when Soviet tanks invaded Prague the night of Aug. 21, 1968.

In response, Koudelka took to the streets and took out his camera, snapping dramatic



"Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 1968," left, is part of the "Invasion 68: Prague, Photographs by Josef Koudelka" show at the Katzen Arts Center, while "Canadian" by Michael Borek is on display in "Wide Asleep" at the Czech Embassy.

packed with Soviet soldiers. Another haunting photo shows a child sitting alone on a curb, a target drawn on his back.

The dark images stand in stark contrast to the dream-like pictures produced by Czech-American photographer Michael Borek, who turns his lens on the present day for the exhibition at the Czech Embassy. Although some of Borek's images are described as playful, such as a balloon flying over Prague, many of his images are reminiscent of the empty sadness pervasive in Koudelka's work.

"Many people tell me that my pictures are actually dark," Borek said. "Maybe they are dark visually, but really I actually feel that to me they are exploring something under the surface and I don't feel that they are dark."

At first blush, Borek's gray-dominated "Last Train to Prague" looks like a lovely pattern of raindrops on a windowpane. Then a ghostly face emerges, eyes looking heavenward, serene and contemplative yet strangely disturbing.

"I'm trying to do something that is on the verge between day and night and having that feeling of day and night or things that are kind of contradic-

black-and-white images documenting the turmoil. He smuggled the photos out of the country, and they ended up at New York's Magnum Photos, which released them in 1969 under the name "PP" for "Prague photographer" to protect Koudelka from reprisals back home. PP won the Robert Capa Award despite his anonymity, and in 1984, Koudelka publicly accepted credit for the photographs, most of which he took in Prague during the first seven days of the invasion.

"I think it's really fascinating that he wasn't a photo-journalist, per se. He was working with theater and he was also, I think, doing work with gypsies," said Jack Rasmussen, director and curator of the American University Museum, which is hosting the exhibit in collaboration with the Aperture Foundation and Magnum Photos. "And then this great, important event occurred, and he was able to shoot it and smuggle it out of the country under an assumed name."

Koudelka strikes at the heart of the invasion with his simple yet powerful imagery. "Warsaw Pact Tanks Invade Prague" evokes the fear of that brief but consequential showdown, depicting a soldier waving his gun while standing atop an imposing tank that rolls forward, its menacing, massive canon protruding out.

In another photo, a man's arm juts into the frame from the left, the time purposefully noted on his wristwatch in the foreground against an eerily deserted street smeared with tread marks from the tanks.

"I think these are so much stronger than a lot of the documentary work that is overtly documentary," noted Rasmussen.

Indeed, Koudelka masterfully captured the Cold War-era struggle, from the pained faces to the mutilated dead bodies. A particularly engaging photo portrays a woman cradling her head, a look of sheer anguish on her face as she walks just ahead a truck

### Invasion 68: Prague

through Dec. 28  
American University Museum  
at the Katzen Arts Center  
4400 Massachusetts Ave., NW.  
For more information, call (202) 885-1300  
or visit [www.american.edu/museum](http://www.american.edu/museum).

### Wide Asleep

through Dec. 15  
Czech Embassy  
3900 Spring of Freedom St., NW  
For more information, call (202) 274-9105  
or visit [www.mzv.cz/washington](http://www.mzv.cz/washington).

tory of one another — your subconsciousness, your consciousness. That's why I selected the title "Wide Asleep," Borek explained.

Borek moved to the United States in 1992. Today, he is a freelance interpreter who recently assisted President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during their visit to his hometown of Prague. In his downtime, he pursues his passion for photography.

The 23 images in "Wide Asleep" were taken in both the Czech Republic and the United States, focusing largely on aging architectural structures while also paying homage to the surrealist artists Borek admires.

The images do trend dark, but Borek has an eye for interesting juxtapositions, such as the intersections of lines in "Bow," a photo he took in Albuquerque, N.M., in which the sharp angles of a steel semi-trailer truck melt into the curves of an abandoned bowling alley's dome.

"Wonder Bread," a shot Borek took in D.C., is one of the most colorful juxtapositions in the show. It depicts a dilapidated brick building brightened by cheery signs for "Wonder Bread" and "Hostess Cakes."

"I think I am just attracted to certain scenes that feel there is more than what meets the eye," Borek said, "that something is maybe a little creepy, a little dreamy, hopefully a little poetic."

Borek also sees similarities between the United States and his homeland — differences not everyone might recognize. "When I show my pictures to people here in the U.S., they tell me, 'Oh, this is the typical Eastern European gloom.' And then I show pictures to Czech people and they say, 'Oh, this is typical American optimism,' and I'm like, 'Come on, these are the same pictures.'"

Stephanie M. Kanowitz is a freelance writer in Arlington, Va.