

## A Christmas in Prague

There I was at four years old, stark naked, clinging for dear life to the wall above the tepid bathtub. Yes, I put myself in this position. No, it still terrified me. Below my gangly feet a carp swam lazily around the porcelain. As much as I wish I could deny it, the whole event was captured on 9 millimeter film then later transferred to DVD.

How did I end up there? I need to back up a bit.

You see, I lived in Prague for six years of my early childhood. My parents were missionaries, so we moved there in '94. In fact, this was a new era for the Czech Republic itself, which had been newly released from its former chains of communism.

So why the carp? Well, that's a Czech Christmas tradition. I remember hobbling along the cobblestone marketplace alongside my dad, mom, and two younger sisters. A man with a long net fished out a live carp from a blue tub twice my height and flopped it into a bag.

In the traditional fashion, we took it to our upstairs apartment and plunked the fish into our bathtub. For several days we threw toys at it and watched it circle about. Finally, I gathered the courage to get in the tub with said bottom-feeder. This promptly escalated into me clinging to the edge of the wall for dear life while making the excuse that the water was "Too Cold!"

Shortly afterwards, my father took me outside. He handed me a hammer and, beaming with pride, I happily bonked the carp with it. It ended up on our dinner plate that Christmas Eve. Mom didn't like the taste.

Christmas was a special time in our home. Yes, we decorated Christmas trees. Our tastebuds sang with the familiar sweet mint of candy canes and the warmth of rich hot cocoa. The CD player serenaded us to the tune of 'Sleigh Ride' by Amy Grant, Tchaikovsky's 'Nutcracker', and 'Deck the Halls' by Mannheim Steamroller.

But there were definitely unique traits to a Christmas in Prague. Instead of jolly St. Nick accompanied by flying reindeer and a few elves, the Czech version had a more diverse cast of characters. Mikuláš (Saint Nicholas) wore a colorful robe and held a shepherd's crook. The

Angel (Anděl) by his side flitted about in a foil halo, and if you sang a carol he would give you a tasty treat. Čert, the last character, was an impish devil. He would run up and snicker and hand you a piece of coal. I agreed with my mother; he was decidedly creepy.

I recently remembered a song I heard around Christmas time in Prague that goes like this:

*Půjdem spolu do Betléma,  
dujdaj, dujdaj, dujdaj dá!*

I never learned what this meant, so I looked it up on Google translate, which in English reads:

*Let's go to Bethlehem together,  
Dummy, dummy, dummy, dummy!*

When I double checked with my parents (they still know Czech), they said it was probably an onomatopoeia for the sound of a flute, not 'dummy'.

Prague had the best of four seasons, which meant white Christmases with crunchy snow under our boots and a permanent oozing of boogers from our frozen snozes. Tandem sled rides and tasting falling snowflakes made the season that much sweeter.

I liked opening gifts (what child doesn't?) even better because we opened our gifts on Christmas Eve, according to the Czech way. We brought this tradition back to the states with us, and only slightly pitied the poor souls who had to wait till Christmas morning.

I grew increasingly impatient around this time, because we had to wait as our father read through the obligatory Christmas story, invariably from Luke Chapter 2. Then? Those 5 minutes felt like they took forever.

Now? Looking back, I appreciate it more. Doesn't a forever gift outlast anything wrapped in pretty paper? It's a gift that's special for boys and girls, moms and dads in every corner of the world.

As I write this, my son is now the same age I was for those special Christmases in Prague. Nostalgia floods my heart with warm memories and unique eccentricities. My wife and I will carry on the tradition of opening presents on Christmas Eve. Yes, I will read the Christmas story from Luke. I think I'll try to make gingerbread this year. Something extra special for our kids to look back and remember.