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When Prague Spring Gave Way to Winter

By Philip Gefter
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Andrew Henderson/The New York Times
The photographer Josef Koudelka at his “Invasion 68: Prague” exhibition at Aperture Gallery.

IN early 1968 Josef Koudelka decided to give up his job as an aeronautical engineer and devote himself full time to photography. It was a luminous moment in Czechoslovakia: the political reformist Alexander Dubcek had just come to power and lifted some of the Soviet-bloc-style restrictions on political freedom. The country teemed with excitement as the government ended press censorship and broached democratic reforms.

“It was a fantastic period to live through,” Mr. Koudelka, who grew up in the Czech town of Valchov, said in a recent interview in Manhattan. “In a country where nothing was possible, everything was possible.”

It didn't last long. On Aug. 21 of that year the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies invaded the country, and that brief period of freedom known as Prague Spring came to an end. As tanks rolled through the capital, Mr. Koudelka stayed on the move, photographing Russian soldiers interacting with local residents, followed by protests and increasing violence.

Those vivid black-and-white pictures are now considered classic examples of photojournalism, not only as documentation of an important event but because of his proximity to his subjects, which brings the viewer smack into the middle of the action. Four decades after Mr. Koudelka's achievement those photographs are now on view at two Manhattan galleries, Aperture and Pace/MacGill, in a collaboration titled "Invasion 68: Prague," with an accompanying book published by Aperture.

At 70 Mr. Koudelka is regarded as among the most influential photojournalists, a longstanding member of the Magnum agency who has been honored with a lengthy list of grants and awards. During much of that time he lived by choice as a vagabond, mostly in Europe, continuing to photograph the subjects that interest him.

Today he is spry and expressive, with long wispy hair that conjures the Gypsies he photographed in Romania in his early years and whom he continues to admire; he speaks fluent English in his native accent, albeit with lingering concern that his command is insufficient to make his points.

Still, in the interview, he was emphatically clear about what Prague Spring had meant to him. "My father brought me up to tell the truth — and to tell the truth meant to tell him what I think," he said.

But as an adult living in a Soviet-bloc country, "I could never say what I thought — until that period," he said. Once the political climate changed under Dubcek, he added: "I felt that I could say everything that I wanted. I didn't have to be afraid."

During the Prague Spring, Mr. Koudelka mostly photographed the Gypsies in Romania and actors in the Czech theater. That changed when the Soviet tanks rolled in.

Around 3 a.m. on the day of the invasion, Mr. Koudelka recounted, he was awakened by a phone call from a friend who told him that Russians troops were on the way. He thought she was drunk, so he hung up on her.

Only after her third call did he hear the planes flying overhead. By dawn Mr. Koudelka was out in the street with his Exakta camera loaded with cinema film that he cut from the end of exposed movie reels. That type of film may account for the etched graphic depth of the grain in his pictures.

At first, it didn't occur to him that Prague was in danger. Before the censors shut down the Czech radio broadcasts, announcers "were telling us to explain to our friends" — the Soviets, that is — "that we can solve the problem," he said.

“For me there was no hate for the Russian soldiers,” he said. “They were more like me, the same age, maybe a little younger. I felt sorry for them because I knew they were not guilty. The Russian politicians were guilty.”

Many of the soldiers did not even know what country they were in, he added. “Some thought they were in Germany,” he said. One photograph taken barely at arm’s length depicts a young Russian with a gun on his lap with its barrel aimed at the sky while a young Czech shows him a local newspaper announcing the invasion.

Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

Things got worse as the soldiers opened fire on protesters, and the radio broadcasts were taken over by occupiers. “As I was photographing and I saw people dead on the street, I could hear the radio in Czechoslovakia saying that everyone was happy in Prague that the Russians had arrived,” he said. With the help of Anna Farova, a friend and a photo historian, and Eugene Ostroff, who was then a photography curator at the Smithsonian Institution, Mr. Koudelka’s pictures were smuggled out of Prague soon after the invasion and sent to Elliott Erwitt, a Magnum photographer in New York who helped get them published both in the United States and abroad.

In 1969 Mr. Koudelka traveled to London with a theater group from Czechoslovakia. Standing outside the Aldwych Theater with the actors one day while they perused The Sunday Times of London, he was startled to see some of his own photographs. “I was

surprised, but I couldn't say to them they were mine," he said. They were credited only to "Prague Photographer."

Mr. Koudelka contacted Mr. Erwitt, who helped him with his request to gain asylum in London. That year he won the Robert Capa Gold Medal from the Overseas Press Club anonymously for his pictures.

To protect his parents, who remained in Czechoslovakia, his pictures were credited to "Prague Photographer" for 15 years. Only after the death of his father did he take credit for the pictures; they were first exhibited under his name at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1984.

Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

"I didn't do these pictures to get published," Mr. Koudelka said. He had simply gone out that first morning to take pictures of what was happening in his city. He had never seen Life or Paris Match or any other picture magazine. "I knew nothing about photojournalism," he said, adding that he is still surprised that they have become such a standard for photojournalists.

Today the pictures correct his memory about the details of the invasion. "Everything in the pictures really happened," Mr. Koudelka said. "It was raining, but I don't remember it was raining. I go back to look at my pictures, and people had umbrellas."

During various trips to Russia in recent years he has met soldiers who were in Prague in 1968. When they insist that no people were killed there, he said, he pulls out his pictures of dead bodies on the streets to correct them.

Mr. Koudelka sees the resistance to the Soviet troops as a rare moment of bravery for Czechoslovakia, followed by 20 years of silence and fear that he considers a moral disaster. He said he wanted his book of photographs published as a reminder of that bravery, even though Soviet domination is years past, and Czechoslovakia split in 1993 into two countries that are now acclimated to Western-style democracy.

“The Czech people were occupied and should not forget,” he said.

While he has been lauded for the courage it took to photograph during the occupation, Mr. Koudelka finds the praise misdirected. “The courageous here were the Russians who went to Red Square to demonstrate against the Prague invasion,” he said, adding, “Prison was the only way out of Red Square.” (Eight protesters were jailed after unfurling protest banners in Moscow after the invasion.)

Three of the demonstrators received medals for their heroism from Vaclav Havel, the Czech dissident and playwright turned president. Recently Mr. Koudelka sought them out and gave each one a copy of his book. “They cried,” he said. “I’m very happy about that. They had the courage. I didn’t have the courage.”