

Prague 2000: The People's Battle

Boris Kagarlitsky

From a memorandum to participants in the meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund:

- Do not wear your Annual Meetings ID badge in public.
- Be prepared to display your Annual Meetings ID badge at police checkpoints or when entering the Prague Conference Centre (PCC), and wear it at all times in the PCC and at official Annual Meetings events.
- Do not take taxis on the street - ask the hotel or restaurant to call one for you.
- Avoid demonstration sites - leave in the opposite direction if one is encountered.
- Do not engage in debates with demonstrators - take leaflets or brochures without comment.
- If obstructed by demonstrators, do not try to force your way through, seek help from the nearest police officer.
- You are advised not to display jewelry, or wear ostentatious clothing such as furs.

In general, only a total idiot would rush with fists clenched into a hostile crowd, or wear fur in Prague in September. But it seems that officials of the International Monetary Fund and their spouses cannot get by without such recommendations.

September 20. Ordinary Prague citizens have been issued with instructions that recall warnings of a nuclear attack. The police have put leaflets in people's letter-boxes appealing to everyone not to go out onto the street, and if possible, to leave the city altogether for the period of the summit. School holidays have been extended. Meanwhile, radical left groups have attached posters to the walls of buildings, calling on Prague residents to come into the streets, and in this way to express their disagreement with the people who are "violating our social rights and freedoms." One poster that I found on a wall three days before the demonstrations began called on people to protest against police violence, although the police had not yet beaten or arrested anyone.

The truth is that in Prague, an opponent of the IMF and a critic of capitalism who decides to join in the demonstrations faces an unexpected problem - there are too many demonstrations and other actions. Each group has come up with its own initiative. Left intellectuals have refused to go to communist meetings, and non-government organizations have vied with one another. The anti-fascists for the most part have held independent actions, without informing anyone else. The humanists have been unwilling to collaborate with anyone either.

September 21. The more established non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are conducting their seminars under the aegis of the group Bankwatch, which as its name indicates, monitors the actions of the international banks. Some of the participants in these deliberations are turning up in ties. People constantly stress their professionalism, and call for discussions with the heads of the IMF and the World Bank. More radical groups have united around the

Initiative Against Economic Globalisation (INPEG). Here the atmosphere is quite different, with men in torn jeans and women with tattoos. Each group regards the other ironically.

Nevertheless, they stress: we have common goals, and we are not going to quarrel. There are reports that in response to the actions of the left and of the "informals", a demonstration has been called by the ultra-right. Quite spontaneously, a new dominant idea is beginning to take hold of the left-wing youth, an idea formulated in the simple slogan, "Beat up the skinheads!"

Putting this into practice would not be particularly hard, considering the huge numerical superiority of the left, strengthened by reinforcements in the form of German anarchists, for whom the week would be wasted if there were no fights with fascists. Fortunately, the police have kept the demonstrations of the left and of the nationalists far enough apart to avoid street fighting. A few fascists have nevertheless been beaten up.

September 22, morning. It is raining. At a tram stop five people are standing beneath a shelter, but for some reason, under umbrellas as well. I come closer; there is no shelter, only the framework. But they are still standing under it, as though it will protect them from the rain; this is what you are supposed to do. Writers have often noted that Czechs will not cross the street against a red light even if the street is absolutely empty.

A trip around Prague is like trying to guess the answers to a series of riddles. Ever since 1968 the Czechs are said to have set out deliberately to fool Russians, but I don't believe it. To Russian ears, Czech pronunciation really does sound like indistinct mumbling. At best you'll understand nothing, and at worst you'll get the name completely wrong. I ask people to spell things out letter by letter; otherwise the words come together quite wrongly. This is the objective problem - the subjective one is that the Czechs themselves constantly get mixed up. The map of Prague that was prepared especially for the participants in the IMF meeting contains gross errors; the names in the index of streets do not coincide with what you find on the map. Could it be that the participants in the meeting are also regarded here as occupiers?

Prague has an excellent metro, but a fiendishly complex network of tram lines. I have been making constant trips between my hostel and the Hotel Standart, which the oppositionists have been using as their headquarters. At first I followed the advice of Prague residents and used a route on which I had to change trams twice. Then I discovered that there was a direct tram route, one that the locals had forgotten about. It's not surprising; the routes are like a web woven by a mad spider.

About the hostel. The bathroom and toilet are at the end of the corridor, but the room is clean and spacious. The walls are painted white. The corridor is also white, decorated every metre-and-a-half with red fire extinguishers. There is no sign on the building, and it is completely invisible from the street; the only entrance is through a bikers' pub. Fortunately, the bikers are friendly, and they showed me the way.

On September 22 we are received by World Bank director James Wolfensohn. He gives an impression of sincerity, and for some reason reminds me of Gorbachev. The same goodwill, the same desire for dialogue, and the same helplessness when it comes to the practical question of carrying out reforms.

Even his nickname - Wolfie - is similar. A wonderful man, no doubt, with whom to go to the opera or dine in a restaurant.

Wolfie reassures the representatives of civil society, and tries to justify himself. As proof of the changed character of the bank, he cites what seems to him to be a very convincing figure. Earlier, the bank had two employees working on the problems of civil society, and now there are several dozen. New departments and new posts have been created.

In the representatives of civil society, the news of a massive growth in the bureaucracy fails for some reason to arouse the expected enthusiasm. "Give us a chance," Wolfensohn repeats. I begin to feel sorry for him.

Everyday political life is terribly like that in Moscow in the late 1980s. Informal organisations, perestroika.... The same stormy meetings, the queues for the microphone, the cacophony of demands behind which lies a general discontent, understood and formulated in different ways, with the way life is organised. And the same helpless promises from the authorities, who already understand that carrying on as before is impossible, but who cannot manage anything new. To judge from everything, the international financial institutions are just as unreformed as the Soviet bureaucracy. And just like the Soviet party system when it felt the challenge of the times and of society, they are trying somehow or other to reform themselves. Everyone knows how perestroika ended in the Soviet Union. It is quite possible that for the IMF and the World Bank, the consequences of reform will be just as dismal. And even fewer people will regret this than mourn for the USSR.

September 23, 9 a.m. I am travelling across the city by tram. At 11 o'clock president Havel is to lead a discussion in the castle between participants in the movement and the heads of the IMF. The city is still almost empty. But sometimes groups of young people are to be seen on the streets, their appearance leaving not the slightest doubt as to why they are here. T-shirts with pictures of Che Guevara, and threadbare jeans. Closer to the centre of town, little herds of confused tourists are visible. Making their way through the streets are cavalcades of Audi cars, protected by police cars with flashing lights; inside the Audis are the conference delegates. Meanwhile, the police are taking up their positions. Helicopters circle over the city. Blue uniforms are everywhere. On the flanks of many of the uniforms I notice sickeningly familiar canvas bags containing gas-masks, the same as used to be given to us in school during elementary military training exercises. The gas-masks have evidently not been used since 1989. The thought strikes me: they are firing off "cherry" gas. It feels as though a war is about to break out.

The sun has emerged, the embellishments on the medieval spires have begun to shine, and the Charles Bridge lies revealed in all its loveliness. Prague during these days is so beautiful you feel like crying.

I ask a middle-aged policeman the way. He starts speaking Russian cheerfully enough, but immediately apologises. He doesn't know a short route to the castle. He and the other police standing there have been brought in from Moravia. Police have been brought from the whole country, and the armed forces have been put on alert.

I am now in the castle. There is an unexpected call on my mobile phone; my wife in Moscow is worried. I explain that there is no reason to be concerned. In my pocket I have a card identifying me as a participant in the meeting of the IMF and the World Bank, together with an invitation from Havel. On the cover of my passport the police have stuck a special hologram affirming my loyalty. None

of this strikes her as especially convincing. " They don't hit you in the passport, they hit you in the face."

The meeting with Havel recalls the last talks before the outbreak of armed hostilities. The sides are still meeting for negotiations, although the troops are already taking up their positions.

We go up to the castle. There are numerous stops for document checks, and for checks with metal detectors. Soldiers of the presidential guard are in booths, standing just as in London, only their bearing isn't as erect, their uniforms don't fit especially well, and to judge by everything, they're not particularly well fed. In a medieval hall built for ball games, about a hundred representatives of NGOs are assembling, together with a similar number of functionaries of international financial organizations. And television cameras, television cameras....

Now Havel arrives. In front of the podium, a small military band has appeared. Guards in red uniforms start playing something like the overture to a Viennese operetta, but an unshaven saxophonist strikes up as well. For several minutes the theme of power and the theme of discontent alternate, but then the guards and the dissident saxophonist begin to play in unison, and all the instruments merge into an optimistic coda. This is evidently meant to reflect Havel's idea of the reconciliation of the authorities and the dissidents.

The reconciliation does not happen.

The first address is from Katarina Lizhkova, speaking in the name of the demonstrators gathering on the streets. A striking young woman from Brno, she speaks impeccable English. " There will not be any dialogue. You talk about dialogue, but the police have already prepared water cannon and tear gas. Thousands of people have been illegally held up at the border, and here in Prague thousands more are being subjected to police persecution simply because they want to exercise their legal right to protest. But we will not stop until the antidemocratic institutions of the financial oligarchy are abolished." The left side of the hall applauds, while the right maintains a gloomy silence.

Walden Bello, the movement's most popular ideologue, takes the microphone. " The international financial institutions are a danger. They aren't answerable to anyone. Don't believe what they say. They talk of fighting against corruption, but they supported Yeltsin in Russia! They talk about democracy, but they gave money to the dictator Suharto in Indonesia."

" Now that you've lost your authority, you start talking about social justice. But the words and the deeds part company. If you want changes, then cancel the debts of Russia, cancel the debts of Indonesia. You've made your loans conditional on policies that have brought these countries to ruin and collapse. The programs that are being implemented under the dictates of the IMF almost invariably fail. What right do you now have to demand this money back?" The leftists applaud, while the rightists keep silent.

Trevor Manuel, a one-time communist and revolutionary, and now South African finance minister, objects to Bello: " Without the international financial institutions, things would be even worse for poor countries." The right-wingers applaud. Someone among the leftists mutters: " Traitor!"

In the hall the atmosphere of confrontation is even stronger than on the street. Encountering a hostile audience, Wolfie has become completely self-effacing. Crushed, he hangs his head, again trying to justify himself. By contrast, new IMF director Köhler holds

forth aggressively. " I have spoken with Third World leaders, and they have had a mass of questions, but no-one has demanded that the fund be dissolved. On the contrary, they want to work with us!" " You mean they want to thieve together," mutters the British journalist Alex Callinicos, who is sitting next to me.

George Soros takes the stand, and unexpectedly, begins to expound the general positions of Marxism on the nature of the capitalist system. Then, unexpectedly, he declares:

" So long as the rules are as they are, we are going to play by these rules. You should not expect anything else from us financiers. I don't want to lose."

He finishes up with an appeal for reform of the system, while there is still time.

Bello once again flings himself on Köhler. " Why are you unwilling to reorganise the administration of the IMF? The structure is completely undemocratic. Where are your promised reforms?" Köhler replies that the fund is making efforts, and is improving its work.

" That's not a reply," Bello shouts. " I asked a concrete question. You are simply not willing to reorganise the system of administration! So what is there for us to discuss with you?"

Havel thanks all the participants in the dialogue.

The two sides go their separate ways, extremely dissatisfied with one another.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the first demonstrations begin. We go to look at the communists. There are not especially many people, and the speeches are dull. Surrounding the platform is a solid bank of grey heads.

Further along, young Trotskyists, anarchists, Greeks and Kurds are gathering and talking. I discover two American students from Madison. A year and a half ago I delivered a lecture to them. What are they doing at a communist meeting? " This is a warm-up. Like a bad rock group before a good concert. You have to start with something." The season, I realise, has just opened.

September 24, 2 p.m. A seminar on problems of globalisation, conducted by the Initiative Against Economic Globalisation (INPEG). The hall is full of a polyglot crowd. The only ones missing are Russians - no " suspicious elements" have been granted visas. The average age in the auditorium is about 25. Someone has come with a baby. People laugh, applaud, come out to the microphone and make wordy declarations. The chairperson grows nervous. " Let's have fewer declarations and more discussion. We have to show the gentlemen from the establishment an example of real democracy!"

A small group of young women from Latvia have come, and sit in a corner on the floor. They chew gum, speaking a mixture of Russian and Latvian, and enthusiastically applaud the speeches on the tyranny of the transnational corporations. Various Americans arrive late; they are coming directly from the airport, some with rucksacks and bags. They exchange remarks - who was allowed in, who was taken from the plane. It turns out that the FBI gave the Czech authorities " blacklists" of citizens of its own country who, it recommended, should not be allowed to get to Prague.

The word nevyezdnye - in Soviet times, people denied the right to travel abroad - flashes through my head.

A report arrives that a further thousand or so people have been held up at the border by the Czech authorities. Walden Bello interrupts his speech; he is backed up by the Englishman Alex Callinicos: " Eleven years ago in Prague, the people came out onto

the streets demanding freedom of movement, and at that time President Havel was on our side. Now his police are illegally closing the border!"

It is announced that a spontaneous demonstration against the illegal actions of the police is under way at the interior ministry. But the protesters are few, about two hundred at most. The chairperson of the meeting appeals to everyone who has nothing else to do to join the picket line. With a clatter of chairs, people from the back rows get up and head for the exit. Fortunately, I have already delivered my speech.

On the border, it is obvious, total confusion reigns. Some people are being held up, while whole columns of others are getting through without the slightest hindrance. The border guards are searching each car thoroughly, rummaging in suitcases and leafing through printed material.

Queues have appeared, and the honest burgers have got stuck in them. Meanwhile, the demonstrations are continuing. Today about two thousand people form a living chain in support of Jubilee 2000, a movement demanding the writing off of the debts of the Third World and the former communist countries. A similar number of people gather for a meeting of the Humanist Alliance. The main events, however, are expected on Tuesday, when a protest march is due to take place. Reports come through that the march has been partially banned. Some districts of the city are closed to the demonstrators. Lawyers for the protesters argue that the ban is illegal. But this is no longer the main thing. The general mood has taken on a definite shape; we know that we will go there anyway, and that no-one will stop us.

Walden Bello is like Lenin in October. Since the demonstrations in Seattle, he has been transformed from an academic into a real leader. Now he is on the platform. "Everything is decided on the streets! All available resources must be mobilised. We need living strength, you understand, everything depends on living strength! We need bodies!"

"Living strength" continues to arrive. Everywhere there are groups of young people, speaking in every imaginable language from Hungarian to Basque. The language of international communication is, of course, the same as among the bankers - English. Alongside the Lidensky Bridge is the Convergence Centre, the organisational headquarters for the march and the workshop where placards and effigies are made. Here as well, instruction sessions are held, maps of Prague are distributed, and suggestions are made as to where people should go in order to find places to stay. This is important, since the youth hostels are full to bursting. People are told how to give first aid to the wounded, and what to do if they are affected by tear gas. When the work ends, an improvised concert begins. Along with the activists, rock groups are arriving, and street theatre troupes from throughout Europe. Elsewhere, a "Festival of Resistance" is also underway. Here about a dozen groups from the Czech Republic, Holland, Britain and Italy are playing.

Dusk has already fallen, and people are still coming, in jeans and carrying rucksacks. Some are carrying placards. A group of young Germans are seated directly on the grass next to the tram stop, and are discussing something. The Swedes have already held an instruction session. There were several hundred of them, and they were discussing how to act in the case of a clash with police, how to act if arrested, and where to phone in Stockholm, since every third one of them has a mobile telephone. One woman is returning to Sweden; on

Tuesday she will have to spend the whole day at home by the telephone.

The tension is growing. The feeling is like before a battle. Everyone is waiting for reinforcements. News reaches the "Standart" and the Convergence Centre; three hundred Austrians are already on the way, and will arrive tomorrow. It is unclear where the Hungarians are; they are expected any minute. The Slovaks have already arrived, but fewer of them than were expected. The Spaniards and Greeks are due to come on special trains.

The advance guard of the Italian contingent appears on the Charles Bridge. More than a thousand of them have come. Four people were not admitted. The rest sat at the border for several hours, demanding that their comrades be admitted, before deciding in the end to carry on to Prague. Now the most active of them, a hundred or so people, are sitting directly on the Charles Bridge, singing Bandiera Rossa and partisan songs from the Second World War. On the bridge, activists of the protest movement are mingling with people in respectable suits who have come for the IMF meeting. Everyone wants to feast their eyes on Prague.

September 25. I drink my morning coffee on Wenceslas Square. Whatever happens, you have to take delight in Prague. Unfortunately, I am not allowed to finish my coffee. My mobile phone sounds. It is Lee Sustar, an American radical journalist, who has been detained in the airport. He has refused to fly back, and now he is sitting in the border control zone, interned for the second day. In an hour's time he will hold a press conference. For the sake of old friendship, he is very anxious for me to come. I make my way to the airport. A small group of activists has already gathered, with placards reading "Freedom for Lee Sustar!" and "Defend Journalists' Rights!" A huge American named Ahmet speaks with Lee by telephone, and repeats his statements for those who have assembled. The journalists record everything in detail. There are representatives of Czech publications, Associated Press, and Greek television; in addition, some Britons whom I do not know. Instead of asking questions, Mark Steele of the London "Independent" joins the demonstrators. He and Callinicos call for the formation of a "Defence Committee for the Rights of Journalists".

In the Standart, meanwhile, the seminars and discussions are continuing. The World Bank and the IMF are also holding their meetings in the Congress Centre. The two sides, of course, are behaving quite differently; the officials of the World Bank are still trying to justify themselves, meeting with representatives of the non-government organisations, promising to investigate matters and to put them in order. The IMF ignores the protests. Larry Summers, the US treasury chief, has already warned the heads of the World Bank that he will not permit any serious concessions to the developing countries or to critics of the system.

.By Monday evening, around 8000 activists from various countries are in Prague. Most of the Czechs are coming from Brno; they appear at the last moment. The police are preparing to meet the demonstrators on the bridge that leads to Visegrad, where the Conference Centre is located. In the neighbourhoods nearby, residents are being asked to remove their cars from the streets. The ambulances and hospitals are preparing to receive casualties. The schools have already been shut for a week. In all, 11,000 police and riot troops have been mobilised. Around 12 - 15,000 demonstrators are expected.

In the Convergence Centre, a battle plan is worked out. When the demonstrators approach the bridge, they will split into three columns. One will go onto the bridge, while the two others will try to outflank the police on the sides. One of the Britons observes that for such a manoeuvre, you cannot do without cavalry.

The column going onto the bridge is not supposed to get into a fight with the police; its job is only to stand and chant slogans. The Italians advance; this decision does not suit them. " We're going to force our way across the bridge," they declare. " We're not here to pay compliments to the police." The Italians were not in Seattle, and they want to show what they are capable of. A few French people of the older generation share their experience, explaining how in Paris in 1968 they built barricades. There is just one question: in those days demonstrators had cobblestones to use for these purposes, but what are you supposed to do with asphalt?

The leaders of the groups are given maps of the city with the traffic routes marked on them. On the reverse side, a brief plan of action is printed in several languages. The proposal is that irrespective of the outcome of the fight at Visegrad, in the evening the protesters will blockade the opera, where the bankers and bureaucrats will be assembling. First the protesters will try to stop them getting into the hall, and if they do get in, then not to let them out again until morning. Other groups go to the expensive hotels where the delegates have installed themselves, and will keep up a barrage of noise the whole night. Around a dozen rock groups and bands will take part in the action.

Sleepless nights are nothing new for the protesters. I see Martin Brabec, one of the ideologues of INPEG. He looks totally exhausted, but happy. " Martin, do you ever sleep?" " About three hours a night."

There is to be a meeting at 9 o'clock. After the meeting, at 11 o'clock, the march on Visegrad will begin.

From a leaflet issued by INPEG:

Around the world hundreds of thousands of people will unite for global justice in protest of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In Prague, at the site of their annual meetings, we will come together with the spirit of carnival of mass creative action and collectively challenge the legitimacy of these economic institutions that perpetuate corporate globalization and greed.... Bring whistles, shakers and things to rattle. We'll drown them out in a cacophony against capital.

Tuesday, September 26

8 a.m. At the entrance to the metro there are police patrols. Over the radio comes the announcement that Visegrad metro station is closed.

8.30 a.m. I have breakfast with Petr Uhl, an old friend from the dissident movement of the 1980s. Petr himself is not going to the demonstration, but his daughter has already set off for Peace Square, where the participants are assembling. His apartment in the centre of Prague is like the yard of an inn. Staying with him have been members

of the French movement ATTAC, which calls for new rules for international finance and for the defence of debtor countries. Last night Petr was host to a group of German teenagers - their hair green, and with rings not only in their ears and noses, but in their lips as well. Catherine Samary, who teaches economics in Paris, laments: " In one night, these kids ate everything in the fridge!"

9 a.m. We are on Peace Square. The area where the protesters are gathering in front of a church is like a Tower of Babel. About ten thousand people are speaking all the languages of Europe at once. Turks, Greeks, Kurds, Spaniards and Basques are standing next to one another. A huge balloon, symbolising the IMF, rolls over the crowd, and everyone can push it. Among the crowd are comic effigies and revolutionary placards. From time to time new columns arrive, often accompanied by small bands or musical groups. Here there are Scandinavians, and behind them, Britons and Spaniards. In the back rows are a dozen Dutch people in white coats painted with pictures of a huge tomato - the symbol of the Socialist Party. Trade union activists from northern Europe carry their banners, looking like the icons carried in old-time church processions. The Italian column, with its banners unfurled, surges onto the square. Heading the column is a minibus, and behind it are members of the " Ya Basta" movement, which has already distinguished itself by breaking up several international gatherings. The Italians have a menacing air. All of them are wearing helmets, are carrying shields, and are dressed in white coats of the type worn by chemical clean-up squads. Some are wearing home-made body armour of fibreglass or cardboard. And of course, there are protective masks, in some cases even real gas-masks. The people on the square applaud them.

11.00 a.m. The action gets under way. On the plan, the three columns are marked in different colours - blue, yellow and pink. The strangest of the columns is the pink one. Here there are very few political placards, and party banners or ideological symbols are totally absent. Many participants are dressed in pink, and have even painted their faces pink. In place of banners, there are pink balloons. In the middle of the column is a pink cardboard tank, with flowers sticking out of its make-believe guns.

On the recommendations of the police, the shops and cafes along the route to be taken by the column are closed. I recall a line from the poet Blok: " Fasten the shutters, now there is going to be looting!" For a while I march with the pink column, but then I decide to join the yellow column, which has the menacing-looking Italians at its head. In the yellow column are around three hundred Hungarians, French, Americans and Turks. From time to time someone encounters a friend, and rushes to embrace them. We swap stories with Hungarian friends, and hear the latest news from New York. Here there are more journalists than anywhere else. They are following the Italians, not concealing the fact that they are hoping to see and to photograph clashes with the police. I have other motives; I prefer the yellow column because here it is obviously safer. No surprises are expected, and no-one will attack us until the approach to the bridge. In the two other columns it is still not clear what might happen.

The final turning before the bridge. The column stops. From a loudspeaker on the Italian minibus, there are orders and instructions; the main thing is not to do anything without

coordinating it with the organisers. The orders are given in Italian, then repeated in English, Spanish, Czech and French. Drums begin beating. A group of people in blue protective jackets appears, wearing armbands with the red cross. Many demonstrators don gasmasks. Someone communicates with the other columns over a mobile phone, trying to work out what is happening with them. We approach the bridge.

The bridge has been blockaded by the police in highly effective fashion. Behind metal barriers stands a front rank of police, all in body armour, with shields and clubs. The most modern equipment has been got ready especially for this encounter, to the order of American specialists. The feeling arises that what we are faced with is perhaps a troop of medieval samurai warriors, perhaps several dozen Darth Vaders out of Star Wars.

Behind the backs of the first rank of police, there are armoured personnel carriers! The bridge is totally blocked, but to judge from everything, not even armoured vehicles seemed to the police commanders to be enough. Behind the APCs, along the whole length of the bridge, police cars, trucks and minibuses are parked bumper-to-bumper. There is no possibility of getting through here, but neither are the police going to attack.

On the bridge, the police feel confident, but who knows what might happen if they have to fight these fearsome Italians on the streets? Both sides push and shove one another a little with their shields, but do not shift from their positions. An order to disperse immediately is read out to the demonstrators in Czech and English, but no-one moves. The police try shooting off a little tear gas, but this does not make the slightest impression on the protesters, and the gas quickly dissipates. From behind the backs of the Italians, young Czechs taunt the police, reminding them that not even the Communists used APCs against unarmed demonstrators. Instructions come from the minibus: everyone who does not have a gasmask is to go to the rear of the column, but not to leave the vicinity. If there is a clash, it is important for the front ranks to have a rear guard.

The standoff continues. The journalists are getting bored. Behind the column, the demonstrators have set up a field kitchen, where they give a bowl of soup and an apple to all who want them. Everyone can decide for themselves whether to pay or not. I pay 20 kronas, but the soup isn't worth that much....

14.20 a.m. The standoff at the bridge continues as before. The demonstrators are bored, and the police in their armour are getting hot in the sunshine. Meanwhile, a real battle is under way further north. It seems that someone from the "blue" column has started throwing rocks at the police. Other people speak of a truck being driven at full speed into a crowd of demonstrators. They also speak of police provocateurs (next day I am to see with my own eyes how four of them, still dressed like anarchists, return to the building that houses the police headquarters). One way or another, a real battle has broken out. Shots can be heard occasionally, through the screeching of sirens and the clattering of helicopters. From time to time, ambulances drive past. There are wounded on both sides. The police are using tear gas, and from time to time are firing their weapons simply in order to frighten people. The demonstrators are building barricades, have burnt several cars, and are throwing stones. The Poles and Germans throw themselves into the fight with particular fury. A number of anarchists prepare Molotov cocktails. Later, it will emerge that they even manage to set fire to a police

APC, but that the flames are promptly extinguished. The police drive the "blues" out of one street, but regrouping, they immediately appear on another.

The "yellow" column does not move. Several young Englishmen approach me; from the look of it, they are students. They complain that they are wasting their time here. Obviously, they too would rather be fighting the police. For some reason I recall a phrase from War and Peace: "Prince Andrey's regiment was in reserve."

I attach myself to a group of French protesters; here, the people are older, and the conversations are more interesting. Olga, an ATTAC staff member, explains to me that she has never joined a political party, and that ATTAC is something quite different - a real movement, radical but not sectarian. Two more French people from a "contact group" appear unexpectedly. The "pink" column has managed to reach the Congress Centre along a side street, and has blocked the exits, but there are not enough people, and reinforcements are urgently needed. The French group move off, and I follow them.

It has been discovered that the police barriers are not so difficult to break through. We go down under the bridge by footpaths, cross a street - and there we are at the Congress Centre! The police observe with amazement how our detachment has appeared behind their barricades. A helicopter flies above.

The exits from the Congress Centre are blockaded by groups of a few dozen people. They sit directly on the pavement, singing and chanting slogans. Street theatre troupes perform in the "no man's land" between the police and demonstrators. Here there are French, Israelis, and a mixed group from Eastern Europe. People exchange news. It turns out that a Belarussian detachment has formed here spontaneously. The Belarussian students doing courses in Prague have turned out for the demonstrations to a man and woman.

The Czechs sing some doleful song, and along the police barriers the French stretch out ribbons like those that are used to mark danger zones on a building site. The police are no longer blockading the demonstrators; rather, they are themselves blockaded. A number of bankers in dark suits, who have gathered to the accompaniment of shouts and whistles, pass through to the Congress Centre. One of the organisers of the column, a huge young Austrian with long hair, comes running up. He shouts: "Why did you let them through? Have you forgotten why we're here?" Now, men in expensive suits are no longer allowed through. Journalists in jeans pass through without impediment, as does an ambulance. So too do several local residents whose doors are beyond the police barrier. From beyond the barriers, another group of men in ties and expensive suits appears. The demonstrators link arms and block their path. The police start beating demonstrators, and a melee breaks out. The crowd screams: "Shame!" "Down with the IMF!" The bankers run back in fright. A few minutes later some very important gentleman emerges from the Conference Centre. A number of police immediately rush to clear a way for him with their clubs. The police have almost broken through, but at that moment, from around the corner there appears a new group of demonstrators. They are singing something as they march, and have raised pink balloons. Despite the group's thoroughly peaceful appearance, the police hide behind their shields, and begin retreating. The banker flees. Singing all the while, the demonstrators carry on marching.

4.30 p.m. A column of around a thousand people marches around the hill, following exactly the same route as a French group shortly before. Once again there are shouts, the beating of drums, and singing. At the end of the column, a group of very youthful Britons in ski masks is assembled around their banner - a smiling green skull on a black background. We are already next to the bridge. Where the police had earlier drawn up their lines, overturned barriers are lying. The police are retreating up the path toward the Congress Centre. These are ordinary police, without helmets, shields or armour. They are clearly not anxious for a fight.

Pursuing the police, the demonstrators charge up the hill. Everything recalls the storming of a medieval castle. The police on the hill draw up their ranks and throw themselves into the attack, but from down below comes a hail of stones. These are from the Britons. The police turn and run. With shouts of "Hurrah!" and "Down with the IMF!" , several dozen people rush onward and upward. They have now reached the gallery on the ground floor of the Congress Centre. Others, forming ranks, begin moving up the path that by this time has been cleared of the enemy. Over the building, as a sign of victory, soars a pink balloon. A placard reading "Stop the IMF!" is attached to the balcony of the Congress Centre. To help the assault force, reinforcements - Italians, Britons and Dutch - come down from the direction of the bridge. To block the way of police vehicles, they build a barricade of overturned rubbish containers and police barriers. There is the sound of drums, whistles and rattles. Beneath the walls of the Congress Centre, young women in pink gas-masks are dancing. The upper balconies are full of people watching the assault, some in horror and others in curiosity.

I realise that the battle has been won.

The Congress Centre is not taken by storm today, but this has not been part of the plans of the demonstrators. The riot police who rush to the scene clear the balcony and the entrances to the building, and then release tear gas. The gas disperses quickly, without causing much harm to the attackers, but a certain amount of it drifts up and penetrates the building of the Congress Centre, causing discomfort to the delegates and officials. After this, the demonstrators retreat in organised fashion to nearby streets, and continue the siege.

By five o'clock, the spirit of the defenders has been broken once and for all. The blockade has succeeded. For two and a half hours not a single car, and not a single bus, has been able to leave the besieged building. The police have had to evacuate particularly important people by helicopter. The rest, after somehow or other managing to break out of the building, reach their hotels by evening, using public transport. Half of the stations of the Prague metro, however, are not working. The delegates to the summit try to force their way onto crowded trams, elbowing Prague residents aside. The residents hit back. Wolfensohn too is forced to travel by metro, evidently for the first time in his life.

On the tactical level, the battle went brilliantly. The American instructors who trained the Czech police were expecting a repeat of Seattle, where the demonstrators first blockaded the hotels, and then tried to march along the main street in a single large crowd. The organisers of the Prague protest decided to do everything differently, and although the police undoubtedly knew of the plans of action, they could not understand them. In Seattle, the demonstrators had tried to stop the delegates from getting into the

conference hall. In Prague, they did not let the delegates out, and this proved even more effective. Secondly, the demonstrators, in the best traditions of the military arts, carried out the tactical manoeuvre of dispersing their forces. While the main brunt of the special police attacks was diverted onto the " blues" , and while the " yellows" blocked the bridge and disrupted traffic movements, the " pinks" were able to make it through to the building by breaking up into small detachments. Once there, they regrouped, and the circle was closed. Each column had its own national and political peculiarities. The people who were mainly looking for a fight finished up in the " blue" column. In the " yellow" column were the most disciplined and organised elements; this was where most of the members of left political groups were to be found. The Italians looked extremely threatening, but when they clashed with police, would break off the engagement relatively quickly. On the bridge, however, they made the necessary impression on the enemy.

What happened at the bridge was not a pointless waste of time. To use military terminology, this was a " demonstration" . The APCs, the trucks, large numbers of police cars, and riot squad units were kept here as though paralysed. By five o'clock the " yellow" column had marched off in a body to the opera house, but the police themselves could no longer unblock the bridge, which remained closed to traffic. The " pinks" seemed the most inoffensive and even absurd, but behind this absurdity were cunning and persistence. It was no accident that the dominant forces here were the Czechs and British. It was they who decided what the day's outcome would be.

6 p.m. The opera house. Several thousand people surround the Opera on all sides, blocking the entrances. There are no police anywhere, and groups of demonstrators roam about the centre of the city unhindered. On many streets, traffic is closed off. The demonstrators stop a Mercedes full of " new Russians" , whom they have taken for conference delegates. At first, they want to overturn the car, but on hearing that the owners are " mere businessmen" , they leave them be.

At the Opera, an impromptu meeting is under way. Speakers are addressing the crowd over a megaphone, in several languages. Sometimes there is translation, sometimes not. " The Prague Spring of 1968 was the beginning of the end for Soviet totalitarianism. Prague in 2000 is the beginning of the end for the dictatorship of the international financial oligarchy!" The crowd chants a new slogan: " Prague, Seattle, continue the battle!"

It is announced that the operatic performance scheduled for the summit delegates has been cancelled. The crowd applauds, and one of the speakers suggests organising " our own alternative opera" . The Britons and Americans break into " We shall Overcome!" On the balcony of the opera house, the Austrian Erich Probsting appears. " Today Prague has belonged to us. We have won a victory over global capitalism. We have united people from Eastern and Western Europe, people from north and south. We are forcing them to respect our rights. We want to decide our fate for ourselves! Tomorrow we shall go out onto the streets again, to show that the struggle is continuing!"

10.30 p.m. Wenceslas Square. While we are sitting in a pizza shop discussing the day's events, a new fight breaks out a few dozen metres away. A group of Germans and Poles are sacking a McDonalds outlet. These restaurants are favourite targets of all the protest actions; the McDonalds corporation does not recognise trade unions as

a matter of principle, and finances right-wingers in American elections. Anticipating trouble, the managers of the restaurant have put safety glass in the windows, but this merely excites the young radicals further. As rams, they use police barriers. When we go out onto the square, there is no longer a McDonalds. The windows are broken, and the sign has been smashed. Over the square hangs the sharp smell of tear gas. People are having their photographs taken against a backdrop of shattered glass.

Police and demonstrators mingle chaotically on the square. No-one understands anything, or controls anything. A bus appears, full of participants in the summit. Its safety-glass windows have been cracked by stones, and the windscreen is smeared with something white. The faces of the passengers look terrified. The crowd hisses and whoops. Police appear in body armour, with dogs. The dogs are extremely savage, so savage that they start attacking one another. They are taken away.

By the end of the day, the police are starting to behave far more viciously, not only against people who are using violence, but also against peaceful demonstrators. The blockade on the Congress Centre has somehow been broken, and many of the protesters have been beaten and arrested. The total number of those detained is more than 400; of these, about a hundred are foreigners, and the rest Czechs. More than 60 people have been injured on both sides. The Convergence Centre has been seized by the police. Before the demonstration began, the participants were given a map with the telephone number of a lawyer who could be called in case of arrest, as well as the telephone numbers of the fire and ambulance services. The law notwithstanding, the detainees have not been given the right to contact a lawyer. The Czechs are having a particularly bad time. The foreigners, as a rule, are being deported from the country within a few hours. The other detainees are being taken to Plzen, where they are beaten, are denied anything to eat or drink, and are prevented from sleeping.

10.30 p.m. The press centre of the INPEG. Work is going ahead on collecting information. The press centre's telephone line was cut off several days ago, but mobile phones are still working. While we are making our inquiries about the day's events, an uproar resounds from the entrance. With a crash, a metal grille closes in front of the door. The neo-nazis are attacking the press centre. I realise to my horror that the building does not have an emergency exit. The attack, however, is beaten off. The episode has lasted no more than three or four minutes.

11 p.m. The Charles Bridge. Several dozen weary young people have gathered beneath the statues, and are eating ice cream. Several of them have torn clothes and bruised faces. All are indescribably happy.

September 27. The events of the previous day have provoked differences within the movement. Many American intellectuals are shocked by what has happened. Chelsea, the American press-secretary of INPEG, is almost crying. "We aren't violent people, we're peaceful, all this is terrible." The German press-secretary Stefan takes a quite different attitude: the violence was inevitable. The police tactics were all aimed at ruling out any possibility of a successful non-violent action. Those who wanted violence most of all

were the press. " If there hadn't been barricades and broken windows, they wouldn't have shown anything at all. The police intended to disperse us from the very first. In West Berlin, clashes like this are commonplace. So what's all the discussion about?"

The demonstrations are continuing in various places, and from time to time they are broken up. The main demand is for the release of the detainees, but the number in custody is constantly growing. On Peace Square, most of those who have assembled are Czechs and Germans. Riot police are dragging a young Czech activist along the ground. The crowd screams, " Fascists!"

6 p.m. Young people are walking about the Old Place with placards declaring: " I am an activist too - arrest me!" A jazz band is playing beneath the medieval clock, and the crowd chants, " The IMF must go!" Demonstrators go onto the Charles Bridge. On the other side of the bridge, police in body armour are drawn up. " There's a McDonalds there, and they're scared we're going to storm it," explains an Australian journalist working for an environmental organisation.

People question one another on the details of what happened on the previous day, who marched in which column. Maksim, a Ukrainian television journalist, tries to obtain an interview from the young Portuguese woman who we thought at first was British because of her impeccable London accent. She and a few friends bought tickets to Prague just three days ago, setting off, as she puts it, " to war" . She laments that there are almost no Portuguese present. " We're so unorganised!" Maksim suggests that she repeat this on camera, but she refuses and makes off, declaring, " I hate the television!"

10.30 p.m. A bar in Old Place. I drink beer with Maksim, one of his colleagues, and a number of activists from Germany. The Ukrainians have just completed a direct broadcast in which Maksim was asked to comment on a rumour that the IMF meeting would be cut short. We phone colleagues from the BBC, who confirm it. Yes, the summit will end a day ahead of schedule, and there will be no concluding press conference. The reasons are not announced. The triumphant closing ceremony has been cancelled; in the press release something vague is said to the effect that all the speeches by the participants have been unexpectedly short. There are also some general comments about the uprising in Prague.

We order another round of beer. At the neighbouring tables, British and Dutch protesters shout with joy and embrace one another.

" What the hell," says one of the German women. " It turned out to be so easy!"