

Intersections of the
Global and the Local
in Slovak Immigrant
Communities
in Britain

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By

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To my beloved wife Tünde

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INTRODUCTION

The years between 1989 and 2004 were a remarkable period in which political and economic systems were transformed, seemingly impenetrable borders disappeared overnight, and east and west found themselves closer to each other than either would have predicted just a few years earlier. Another phenomenon which accompanied these impressive transformations was a strengthening of east-west migration within the Old World. The United Kingdom became the preferred destination of Accession 8¹ immigrants because this EU member state was one of the few that accepted new EU citizens without almost any restrictions. Additionally, there is a long history of anglophile leanings in Eastern Europe, with many Eastern Europeans harbouring romantic images and positive attitudes towards Britain. It soon became evident that the potential numbers of Accession 8 immigrants arriving in Britain had been greatly underestimated by the then Labour government. An official report produced by the Research Development and Statistics Directorate of the Home Office had stated that around 13,000 newcomers from the new EU member states would arrive in the UK annually (Dustmann et al. 2003, 8). Public discourse concerning immigration showed a predominance of negative viewpoints, but some writers, for instance the journalist Philippe Legrain in his work *Immigrants, Your Country Needs Them* (2006), emphasised that immigration has a positive influence on economic growth, is culturally enriching, and makes a generally positive contribution to the development of the target country. This view, however, was the exception rather than the rule, and there is little doubt that the issue of immigration has become a source of considerable tension in British society, especially in the wake of the financial crisis that struck the western world in 2007 and 2008. The British tabloid press in particular regularly discusses events in relation to Accession 8 migration, and immigration has always served as a provocative subject for political debate. The British Conservative Party addressed immigration as a political and social issue in their 2010 election campaign. Later the issue of immigration was used as one of the major arguments in the Brexit referendum campaign,

¹ A8 or Accession 8 countries are the eight Eastern European countries which joined the European Union in May 2004.

controls represented by the New Labour governments have stoked controversies and provoked considerable social debate. In the second half of the twentieth century, British society had come to define itself as open and multicultural, but it has found itself in more of a schizophrenic position when faced with both the positive and negative consequences of immigration, whether from Accession 8 countries or from further afield. Many politicians in the mainstream of the Labour Party perceive the issue as a true predicament, since the results of the 2010 parliamentary elections and, more especially, the 2016 Brexit referendum appear to suggest that the public are rejecting the European idea of the free movement of labour.

This work aims to clarify the immigration, integration, and assimilation processes that influence the success or failure of Slovak immigrants to integrate and find a place in the United Kingdom. Three main topics are closely examined: class, ethnicity, and religion. Since the development of the first state organised school systems at the end of the 19th century, it has been a generally accepted view that schools are able to serve as integrators. Based on this tradition, generations of politicians have anticipated that the British system of education provides a suitable environment for immigrant children and fosters their successful integration. In an effort to achieve this goal, the British system of education has undergone constant adjustments to meet the changing requirements.

The British school system has always been defined within the framework of social class. Since the emergence of the first public education system in the nineteenth century and the work of the Hegelian elite at Balliol College, Oxford (Gordon and White 1979), class aspects have greatly influenced the structure, content, and objectives of education in Britain. Although, considerable efforts have been made in educational policies to soften the impact of social stratification on educational outcomes, class-based division in schooling is still apparent, at least, in the unique case of British public schools. Although fee-paying schools represent only a small fraction of the school system in the United Kingdom, approximately seven per cent (Hensher 2012), their impact is nonetheless significant as they dominate the market of elite education (Social Mobility Commission 2019). It would therefore be worthwhile examining whether it is possible for children from immigrant backgrounds to enter any of these highly selective schools.

Since 1948, ethnicity has become an important topic for discussion in the field of education policy too. The rising numbers of students from different ethnic origins prompted reforms in the country's education system and led to a series of changes aimed at fostering a smoother integration process for such children.

A further issue investigated in this work is the place and role of religion in the United Kingdom, its connection and influence on the British education system and its impact on Slovak children at British schools. The fact that almost all British educational institutions provide religious education raises the question of the extent to which this practice contributes to or hinders integration. Taking into consideration the fact that the dominant religion in Slovakia, according to the 2021 census, is Roman Catholicism (3 million)¹, it is clear that religion and religious education itself can be an important issue in a society that is historically protestant and secularised. Active religious practice can contribute to diaspora-formation processes that may slow down integration and be a source of conflict between immigrants and the indigenous population.

This book is organized into seven chapters which discuss questions of class, religion and ethnicity through the lens of Slovak immigration. The basic intention is to map the processes that enhance or hamper the integration of Slovak immigrants into the UK. By comparing the British and Slovak traditions in these fields we will attempt to illuminate some key aspects that can determine the success or failure of integration among Slovaks in the UK.

In addition to the analysis of statistical data, this work also uses findings from a small-scale research project conducted among Slovaks who have decided to settle permanently in the UK. Data collected through questionnaires and clarified via structured interviews can shed light on the processes which Slovak immigrants face on their way to becoming British citizens.

Chapter One – The Branded Land offers an insight in the mindset that characterized Slovaks in the 1980s and 1990s and their general attitude towards the UK as a land of opportunities. The chapter also provides a quick overview of Slovak immigration in the 20th century and its unique characteristics and tries to shed light on the impact of the painful processes that characterized the country's transformation from a communist state to a free-market economy.

¹ Available at: <https://www.scitanie.sk/>

Chapter Two – You Rang, M’Lord? concentrates on class and analyses the manifestation of this concept in both the UK and Slovakia. The aim of this chapter is to outline the different understandings of the concept of class in a post-communist society and in the UK. A comprehensive overview of the evolution of the concept of class is made here to illuminate how class-belonging has influenced educational opportunities in the UK and how it affects Slovak immigrants.

Chapter Three – People of a ‘*Certain Kind*’ looks at race and ethnicity and analyses the diaspora-formation processes which are observable in the case of Slovak communities permanently living in the UK.

Chapter Four – Work (Learn) Your Way Up investigates the chances of Slovak children to integrate successfully into the British school system and offers an insight of its evolution into a more open, diverse, and inclusive system that is designed to help integration rather than enforce assimilation.

Chapter Five – Believe It or Not depicts religion and the characteristics of British and Slovak religious traditions. This chapter compares British and Slovak religious history and investigates the impact of religion on educational outcomes.

Chapter Six – Put It Down on Paper is an effort to collect and analyse legislation which has influenced the development of the British education system with regards to class, religion, and ethnicity.

Chapter Seven – What the Data Shows and What the People Say provides the reader with the results of a small-scale research project that was aimed at mapping Slovak immigrant attitudes towards the questions of integration into the UK and their views on the questions of class, religion, and ethnicity with regards to education.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BRANDED LAND

The mass migration to the United Kingdom of citizens from Central and Eastern European states—also known as the Accession 8 countries which gained European Union membership in 2004—has been the subject of several excellent studies. Academics such as (Black et al. 2010) or (Fábián 2007) almost univocally emphasize economic reasons as the primary pull factor in motivating immigration. While the argumentation of these authors is seamless and absolutely correct, it seems to ignore one factor which goes beyond the simple disparity in incomes between the United Kingdom and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Although history has left its scars on the face of the region in the form of outdated infrastructure, bad roads, dysfunctional economies, and broken promises of a better future, this inheritance has not changed the fact that ordinary Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, and Poles had a generally positive opinion about the Anglo-Saxon world and looked up at the United Kingdom and the United States as role models long before 2004. Naturally, these opinions were not based on real experiences but were motivated by the influence of pop culture products which reached Central and Eastern Europe sporadically in the 1970s and in greater intensity in the 1980s. Rock and Roll music, Hollywood productions and posters of pop icons constituted the foundations of these impressions and conveyed the underlying message to the wider world that these countries are great places. The USA and the UK became synonyms for high quality, popular culture, and technical development. Consumer products from these countries were few and far between in the 1970s and still scarce in the 1980s due to embargos. The few items which could be obtained legally were available in Czechoslovakia only in specialised Tuzex¹ shops, exchanged for vouchers which could be purchased in banks for foreign currency (Tuzex a jeho historie n.d.). Tuzex goods were of incomparably higher quality—and of much higher price—than domestic products, and this

¹ Tuzex (tuzemský export) was the name of a state-owned network of shops that offered consumer goods imported from capitalist countries and domestic products that were intended for export to western markets. The network functioned between 1957 and 1992.

undeniably contributed to the fact that, by the end of the 1980s, Czechs and Slovaks associated high quality and luxury products with developed western countries.

Regardless of the dramatic changes which had seemed inconceivable for average citizens in Central and Eastern European countries before 1989, the United Kingdom seemed an attractive, safe and pleasant place to live and work in the 1990s. A major contribution to the intensification of emigration from the Accession 8 countries in this period was the growing discontent among their citizens with public affairs in their countries and an accumulating bitterness and disappointment with their newly elected democratic governments which most saw as being incapable of managing the transition from a socialist planned economy to a capitalistic free market. Political turmoil and constant struggles between the new political parties—many of which represented extreme ideologies—left the populace exhausted, fostered an unprecedented growth in corruption and organized crime with visible connections to political circles and the new elites, and created a toxic environment in which civic initiatives and honest entrepreneurship became virtually impossible. The slogan, which was inherited from the last decades of the communist regime, “if you don’t steal, you are stealing from your own family” acquired new perspectives in the “Wild East” of the early post-communist period. These experiences combined with growing unemployment rates, regional inequalities, and the intensification of social and ethnic tensions reinforced the conviction of many people that trying their luck abroad might be a viable solution.

Emigration was by no means an unknown phenomenon for Slovaks prior to the accession of this small Central European country to the European Union in 2004. The movement of rural populations to urbanized areas had been a significant factor throughout the nation’s history and had kept Slovakia’s growth rate relatively low. International migration was no less significant as is illustrated by the fact that approximately half a million of Slovaks had emigrated to the United States before the beginning of World War I (Frank 1996). Following the Communist coup in February 1948, the Third Czechoslovak Republic established in May 1945, ceased to exist and the country became a satellite state of the Soviet Union. For a short period of time, these political changes triggered an intense wave of emigration but strict border controls—a long segment of the western borderline of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was an integral part of the Iron Curtain—made movement towards the west practically impossible and incredibly hazardous. Internal migration between the Czech and Slovak regions of the republic, however, was still significant. Emigration to western European

countries remained illegal and punishable by state authorities until the fall of the communist regimes, but around half a million Czechoslovak citizens managed to escape to the west between 1948 and 1989 (Drbohlav et al., 2009). The numbers of Czechoslovak citizens fleeing to the west reached a second peak between 1968 and 1972 when the Soviet-led armed forces of the Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czechoslovakia and brought the Czechoslovak reform movement known as “the Prague Spring” to an end (Minarechová 2018). Illegal emigration had serious consequences not only for those who emigrated, including the confiscation of their property by the state, but also for their families and relatives who themselves faced persecution by the state authorities. The revolutions of 1989 brought about the fall of the communist regimes in Central Eastern European countries, and border controls were relaxed. “Despite some worries in the West, the opening of the borders was not followed by any massive westward migration” (Szczepanikova 2013, 1).

Slovakia became an independent state in January 1993, but because the decision to dissolve the Czech and Slovak federation was never confirmed by a popular referendum either part of the former republic, sentiments for the once prosperous state of Czechoslovakia remained strong among the Slovak population. The Czech Republic became the primary target country for Slovak emigrant workers, and a large number of Slovak students continued their studies there. The primary pull factor was economic opportunity, underpinned by linguistic and cultural compatibility. Unlike the newly independent Slovakia, the Czech Republic was an industrially advanced country which had managed its transformation from planned to market economy with relative ease, attracting foreign investment and capital which created job opportunities which exceeded the capacity of the domestic workforce and resulted in labour shortages (Smith 1998). Slovakia’s economy suffered a sharp decline in 1993 which, despite the positive economic trend and recovery between 1994 and 1998, resulted in relatively high unemployment rates of around 14% (Lamdany et al. 1998). Economic uncertainty was further burdened by political scandals, high levels of corruption and the strengthening of organized crime affecting even the highest political circles, thereby creating a situation in which many decided to seek out better opportunities abroad—primarily in the Czech Republic. The western countries, however, remained relatively unaffected by Slovak immigration in this period.

After their success in the 1998 elections, the new reformist government of Mikuláš Dzurinda began restructuring the Slovak economy, consolidating its banking system, revitalizing its markets, and making the first diplomatic

steps to gain accession to the European Union, with the latter goal being achieved on the country's accession to the EU on 1 May 2004. The fifteen years between 1989 and 2004 had produced a generation of young and flexible people who had had the opportunity to study and acquire western languages—primarily English—and who would have the courage to try their luck farther away from the safety of their homeland. This new generation of Slovaks would become the first visitors to the western lands and apply their newly developed language skills in real-life conditions. Many of them chose the United Kingdom as their destination for a series of reasons.

There was a general lack of reliable information about real life in the United Kingdom among citizens of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and Slovakia was no exception. The majority of the young people of Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1980, had romantic images about the island country, a mixture of pop culture products and their experiences from English language studies. The music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the image of the Union Jack, Sir Sean Connery in the role of James Bond, books such as Adrian Mole's Secret Diary, photos of the famous sights of London and the impressive buildings of the Oxford and Cambridge universities, tabloid gossip about the Royal Family, Benny Hill, Mr. Bean, Monty Python, and many other cultural touchstones contributed to the development of a generally positive image which was strengthened by the opportunity to study the language in the cultural centres run by the British Council and at expanded departments in Slovak universities. The primary motivation for the new generation to visit the country was not the aim of finding jobs that paid well, but rather to soak up the atmosphere of Britain and compare it with the romantic image that they had built up in their minds. That generation did not primarily perceive Britain as a place which offered economic opportunity, but instead as a land which was unique, free, full of positive energy and culturally enriching. The country's class differences, racism, xenophobia, postcolonial supremacy, political bigotry, and other messy realities were not on the shopping list. We—I include myself here, as I belong among the X generation—were not interested in the tragic consequences of religious conflicts in Northern Ireland, nor in the strikes against the Thatcher governments. We did not look at the poverty-stricken districts of Sheffield or Nottingham, nor did we fully understand what lay behind the resistance to poll tax. We wanted to visit the United Kingdom regardless of the fact that the exchange rate between the British Pound Sterling and the Slovak Crown was around 47 Slovak Korunas to one British Pound Sterling on 6 May 1994 when the Channel Tunnel was opened; by way of illustration, the average monthly pay in Slovakia in this period was around 6,300 Slovak Korunas (£134). With our fresh diplomas in our

pockets, we hoped to see, smell, taste and embrace Britain simply because we loved almost everything it represented for us: freedom, quality, stability, tradition, and adventure.

The statistics that discuss the pull and push factors in British immigration largely ignore this element. They list economic opportunity as the main priority and completely seem to ignore the cultural pull factor. Britain—together with other English-speaking countries—had come to be seen as a brand for many Eastern Europeans: a must-see destination not primarily because of the salaries it offered for the hard-working and educated, but because of the cultural experience it promised.

When Slovakia became member of the European Union in 2004, the free movement of people which was to be guaranteed by the European Treaties was only truly a reality in relation to the United Kingdom, the only EU country that allowed genuinely unrestricted movement of Central and Eastern European citizens to its territory. The following years saw a dramatic increase in the numbers of new immigrants from Eastern European countries partly because of the transition restrictions which other EU countries such as France or Germany had implemented. The United Kingdom became a primary target country for hundreds of thousands of EU-borne immigrants among whom Slovaks constituted a population of around 62,000 in 2013 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). Though this number is relatively low in comparison with the numbers of Polish or Romanian migrants whose numbers have quickly reached a million, it is still significant when we consider that the United Kingdom was only the second most popular destination after the Czech Republic. Over time, many Slovaks decided to settle permanently in the United Kingdom. The higher standards of living, the opportunities for progress and the decent financial remuneration all contributed to their decision, together with the British membership in the European Union. This trend has had serious implications for the Slovak economy where labour shortages remain a persistent problem in many sectors, especially in the manufacturing industry.

Over the past decade, demographics in Europe have been characterized by a significant rise in migration, with the United Kingdom among the most attractive destinations. Slovakia has been one of the contributors to the new wave of immigration to the island country, and the high proportion of migrants relative to its native population makes the country an interesting case study for investigating the success or otherwise of the integration process of Slovak immigrants. Since the accession of Slovakia together with

the three other Visegrád countries to the European Union in May 2004, the problems resulting from the flow of Eastern European workers to the United Kingdom have been occupying the attention of leading analysts, journalists, politicians, and sociologists both in Britain and abroad. It is already evident that the Labour government of the time had greatly underestimated the challenge which the newer waves of immigrants from Eastern Europe might pose for Britain. The British social and welfare system together with the education system had to adapt quickly to ensure the integration of several hundreds of thousands of people arriving from the Accession 8 countries. The surprising figures of the Worker Registration Scheme, National Insurance Number statistics, and Labour Force Survey statistics provoked overreactions and the image of the Eastern European immigrant was soon depicted negatively in the tabloid press (Legrain 2006). Mass immigration elicited a chain of mixed reactions in the United Kingdom and sparked social debates investigating the contradictory aspects of the phenomenon. As the new immigrant communities appeared, grew stronger, and gradually became more visible in British cities, some elements of the native society started to voice their concerns. Immigration has been a consistent aspect of political and social debates in the United Kingdom since the end of World War II, and the massive new wave of Accession 8 immigrants into British society started to generate similar dissatisfaction (Világi et al. 2008). The pre-existing anti-immigrant sentiment provoked and strengthened by worries connected with the domestic economic and social struggles of the UK created a distinctly hostile social environment for the latest group of immigrants. The significant rise in the total number of immigrants naturally provoked fierce debate in the UK and generated opinions both in favour of and against immigration. Not coincidentally, the British tabloid press provided the most conspicuous forum for the debate, mixing facts with sensationalism to produce pseudo-scientific analyses that have exaggerated the scope of the phenomenon. One of the most active speakers in connection with the immigration issue was Sir Andrew Green representing MigrationWatch.uk. Critics of uncontrolled immigration emphasized the high costs and the low economic benefits of the process. According to a study by the Accession Monitoring Report covering the period between May 2004 and June 2007, immigrants from Accession 8 countries contributed to the economic growth of the UK by 0.5% in 2005 and by 1% in 2006 (Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, HM Revenue & Customs, Department for Communities and Local Governments, 2006). Over time, some groups of Eastern European immigrants, most notably the Polish, have formed coherent and visible communities in the UK. If the size of a group achieves a critical level, these communities can start functioning

as a diaspora and become more resistant to the cultural influence of the prevailing society. When considering the characteristics of the Eastern European immigrant communities, the newly formed diaspora can be primarily classified as a labour diaspora according to the typology developed by Cohen (2008). The majority of Slovak immigrants are young, highly mobile people who are primarily characterized by cyclic migration patterns, and it is thus almost impossible to trace them using the available statistical databases. The Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs insists that the migration of its nationals to Western Europe is for the most part strictly labour-oriented and temporary in nature. According to the Slovak Foreign Policy Association survey, 59% of Slovak migrant respondents said they planned to stay in the UK for less than three months, with only 8% stating that they foresaw staying longer than two years (Világi, et al. 2008). This 8% constituted approximately 5,000 to 6,000 people in objective numbers in 2008. Given that the population of the United Kingdom is roughly 63 million according to the 2011 census, this number would be almost invisible and the communities—if they can be said to exist—would be largely hidden from external observers. On this basis, it is therefore difficult to speak unequivocally about the existence of a Slovak diaspora in the UK. Statistics show that the majority of immigrant workers are young, independent, and relatively well-educated people alongside a smaller, but more heterogeneous group of immigrant families. While the former group is dominantly comprised of people whose primary intention is not to settle permanently in the target country, the latter group is a considerably more static configuration; once the members of a family have decided to move, their decision is usually well grounded, established and finite. While the economic pull factor is dominant in the decision-making process of migrant Slovaks, social push factors are equally observable among the permanent immigrants. The ever-present economic motif may be dominant in both groups; however, in most cases this is generally not sufficient when making the decision to settle permanently. For a relatively large number of Slovak citizens, most notably members of the Romani communities, economic factors are not the exclusive motivating factor in choosing to migrate. Romani communities in Slovakia are confronted with discriminatory factors which can play an important role in their decision to move to the United Kingdom. Some studies (Guy 2003) have pointed out aspects of discrimination as push factors in connection with Slovak and Czech Romani asylum seekers since 2000. Data show that in the Slovak Romani migrant population whole families can subsequently join their male members who have moved first in search of suitable employment. Between 1997 and 2005, approximately 12,000 to 15,000 Romani people left Central and Eastern Europe. The first

asylum seekers were Slovak and Czech Romani, followed by Polish, Bulgarian, and Romanian groups, applying to the European Union (particularly in the UK), Switzerland, Norway, and Canada. Statistically, Central Eastern European immigrants—whether Romani or otherwise—were overwhelmingly offered semi-skilled or unskilled work (Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, HM Revenue & Customs, Department for Communities and Local Governments 2006). It was not unusual to find young, educated people with university degrees employed in low paid, unskilled work positions. Consequently, most Accession 8 immigrants who chose to settle in their adopted country would automatically become members of the lower classes as understood according to Warner's (1973) model. The average annual income of Accession 8 immigrants was just half that of the native workforce in 2009¹. This disparity had an enormous influence on the choice of education facilities for immigrants' children. Although welfare policies introduced by different UK governments have aimed at softening class diversification and supporting social mobility in British society, the first generation of immigrants have not benefited from these steps.

Experts on diaspora consider religion to be a very powerful cohesive force. Since the majority of Slovaks, over 68.9%, are Catholics (Matejčíková and Gemerská 2010). Catholicism may fulfil an important role in preserving national identity, and there is at least one active Catholic pastoral centre in London focused on serving the needs of Slovak immigrants. Baumann (2004, 170-188) distinguishes between different historical phases in the formation of diaspora structures but in each phase, religious ritual, belief, and organization serve as significant markers in negotiating the community's position in relation to the native society. The integration and social mobility of immigrants can be supported by suitable education policies which take into consideration the traditions of newcomers. By analysing the development of acts and laws that have been produced since World War II, an interesting correlation between the two fields of religious education in the UK and the integration of immigrant communities can be identified. From around the 1970s onwards, the two fields seem to converge and partially concentrate on two aspects of one and the same problem. While education acts and immigration acts before the 1960s tended to concentrate on assimilation, a new aspect appeared in British social policy after 1970—multiculturalism—a concept originating in the USA. In order to promote multicultural education in schools, governments passed legislation for education and secured the legal right to education for different ethnic groups. The Race

¹ Available at: <http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/> [Accessed: 12 May 2009]

Relations Act (1976) made it unlawful to discriminate against a person either directly or indirectly in the field of education on the grounds of race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) places a general duty on public bodies including local government and schools to promote racial equality and harmony. The two Acts form the legal basis for multicultural education in the UK. The acceptance or rejection of integration by immigrants varies according to the primary intention of the immigrants. People searching for temporary work opportunities often define themselves as guest workers and are likely to remain in this category. This group is aware of the fact that not all of their needs—notably those of a cultural nature—can be met in a foreign community. Permanent immigrants, on the other hand, will sooner or later face the question of integration and the dilemma of assimilation despite the fact that our modern, globalized world offers a range of possibilities for maintaining cultural continuity with the homeland and reducing cultural erosion. Among the most significant sources of cultural life are the communication facilities offered by the Internet, satellite TV and radio broadcasts. Through these means, immigrant communities can evolve, and cultural institutions can emerge, such as the weekend language schools established by the London Slovak community which offer Slovak language courses for children from mixed or immigrant families, thereby helping to maintain and develop the Slovak language and national identity. The question of whether Slovak communities already function as a visible diaspora in the UK cannot be fully and satisfactorily answered by examining only the sheer number of immigrants registered in different UK statistics. Slovak groups have already developed several characteristic marks of diasporic existence with a relatively stable social network maintaining physical and virtual connections with the homeland with certain marks of institutionalization and the active use of media.

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CHAPTER TWO

YOU RANG, M'LORD?

The discovery of the continuing existence of perceivable separations based on social class and distinctive class markers in British society was likely a surprising experience for many Central and Eastern European visitors in the 1990s. Czechoslovakia had long had the reputation of being a classless society, a myth which was widely supported by the centralized and state-controlled media of the communist state. This widely held but largely false idea was believed to be true by the majority of Czechoslovak citizens, primarily among skilled and unskilled workers, officials working in industry, agricultural workers or by those working in the lower levels of services or culture sector who together constituted roughly 75% of the total working population in 1967 (Londák et al. 2017). The Slovak public had very little information about the former nobility or the haute bourgeoisie which had fled from the country in the wake of the two World Wars and the remnants of which had been actively persecuted by the authorities of totalitarian states throughout Central and Eastern Europe due to the potential threat they posed as a counterrevolutionary force. The upper class was represented by the Communist Party elites who were embedded in the one-party system to differing degrees. Of course, the prestige of certain occupations, such as the medical or legal professionals, remained high, but the difference between the factory worker and the plastic surgeon was not expressed through their financial remuneration, since the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic maintained centrally regulated salary charts which were designed to provide generally comparable financial means to all categories of employees. The consequence of this system was the emergence of an egalitarian model with no dramatic differences between Czechoslovak people.

Location, a factor which has always had a serious impact on people's lives in the western world, also played a secondary role for the majority of Slovaks, since the unified and centrally controlled social security system including healthcare and education had visibly reduced the differences between the city and the country in the 1970s. Naturally, the urban lifestyle with its easy access to services and cultural facilities offered distinct

advantages, but schools, libraries and healthcare facilities were not beyond the reach of the rural population either. Prestige and social status were therefore manifested primarily in cultural capital, i.e., access to information, social networks, membership in labour unions and the Communist Party, and personal interactions with influential members of these hierarchies in decision-making positions.

Social stratification was markedly different in the United Kingdom, a state in which the aristocracy has retained a political function through the political system of the constitutional monarchy, and which has maintained a separation between different social classes. The issues of social inequality and the social division of groups of people according to their occupation and income, social status, residency, educational and entertainment preferences have often been debated but the reality of their existence in the UK has never been questioned. The existence of wealthy upper and upper-middle classes with their expensive public schools, club memberships and closed societies was beyond the experience of the average Czech or Slovak in the 1980s and was never even considered when thinking about the United Kingdom. Any knowledge about the divergent lives of the upper, middle, and working classes was limited, superficial and distorted by the press and pop culture which depicted the British bourgeoisie in unrealistic contexts. When combined with the official anti-western propaganda produced and disseminated by the state-controlled press, this discourse left the first Czechs and Slovaks arriving in the UK in the 1980s unprepared for the British reality.

The effort to make Czechoslovakia as homogenous a society as possible in terms of social class was manifested in the availability of comparably high-quality education across the country, controlled but nonetheless equal access to information, services and healthcare, and a relatively good and reliable public transportation system to mention just a few. The average Slovak citizen considered these amenities as commonplace and expected little or no difference across Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. The dense network of schools, public libraries, and community cultural centres (which were accessible even in small and isolated villages) enabled the population to educate themselves and spend their free time in a cultured and cultivated way. Reading books and taking subscriptions to two or three newspapers and magazines were normal even in working class families and achieving higher levels of education—predominantly secondary level with a school-leaving exam called a *maturita*—was not unique in the 1980s. Universities, however, were not engaged in mass education but rather concentrated on reproducing the educated work force required by the industrial and service

sectors. Additionally, access to education was available almost universally but not equally; children from families with negative records—for instance those which were religiously active, reactionary or descendants of the pre-war wealthy bourgeoisie—were actively discriminated against and marginalized.

Britain in the 1970s and 1980s was a completely different world. Generations X and Y had grown up in a neo-liberal society, the flagship project of the three consecutive Thatcher governments between 1979 and 1990. This was an age of cost-cutting, privatisation, surging unemployment and social unrest in the United Kingdom. Market principles were introduced into the public sector and government policy, and education was no exception (Jones 2016). In practice, these changes offered absolute freedom of choice of application for students and their parents, and an education market regulated only by the concepts of minimum standards, minimum curriculum, and free competition. Instead of levelling in schools, conservatives wanted to see the return of competition and excellence. As Keith Joseph, Education Secretary between 1981 and 1986, underlined, “Our key perception was *differentiation* [...] I decided, when I took office in 1981, to go for *quality* not *quantity*.” (Knight 1990, 152).

Decisions about education, however, have always been largely determined and delimited by social status and class. Ball (2006) has proven that parental choices of school and education are considerably different in working class families than in middle class households, distinguishing between working class “locals” and middle class “cosmopolitans” in underlying the fact that locality of a school, or rather its accessibility, is a key determinant in working class parental choices, whereas quality and perspective long-term benefits dominate middle class decision making. Neo-liberal policies are therefore always more beneficial for families with higher cultural capital, while working class choices and decisions are largely made out of necessity. This reproduces class stratification and maintains existing social hierarchies by simultaneously inhibiting social mobility for children from working class families. When higher education is not a real option, attitudes towards education and choice of school are determined by necessity. Thus, the chances and choices of the children of Generations X and Y in the United Kingdom were greatly determined by the social status of the family into which they were born. The elite public schools which all but guaranteed a high-quality education or the selective grammar schools were not real options for the majority of working-class children who harboured no plans for further education.

As a result, the world views of Generations X and Y in Britain and in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic were determined by substantially different social circumstances. The general attitude of Slovaks towards education was much the same as the beliefs of the British middle class. Working or studying in the United Kingdom was seen as an opportunity to learn the lingua franca of international business, science and commerce which would be of great advantage in finding better jobs both in Slovakia and abroad. For this reason, many college-aged students sought work opportunities in the United Kingdom from as early as the 1990s. Undergraduates from Central and Eastern European countries were willing to work as seasonal agricultural workers, found jobs in bars, restaurants and other low-paid services, or became au-pairs with the aim of learning the language or improving their English language skills, but always with the intention of returning to their homelands in the future and using their newly acquired knowledge and skills at home. Their choices contributed greatly to the development of the false view held by many in Britain that these first Eastern European arrivals were poor immigrants willing to accept low wages in low-prestige job positions and led to them being automatically classified as coming from and belonging in the working class or even below the working class in the UK. Many of these young workers, however, came from middle class and upper middle-class families in Slovak urban regions and were undergraduates of relatively good universities in Central Europe or fresh graduates with MA or BA degrees. This trend was predominant between 1989 and 2004, and it was only after Slovakia's accession to the European Union that the situation changed; due to the freedom of movement offered by EU membership and the liberal migration policy of the then Labour Government, masses of Central Europeans arrived in the island country within a relatively short period of time.

Patterns of immigration from Slovakia to the United Kingdom changed rapidly after 2004. Like many other Central and Eastern European countries, Slovakia was undergoing a painful process of social transformation including the introduction of a market economy. The political and social reforms implemented in this period lacked any sensitivity to existing conditions and were characterized with uncontrolled privatisation, predatory capitalism, and political turmoil. The separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993 added further impetus to the migratory trends. Due to the historic connections between the two nations, Germany would have joined the Czech Republic and Austria as a natural choice for many Slovaks who were seeking work abroad, but Germany had introduced restrictive measures to control immigration from Central and Eastern European countries prior to the accession of Slovakia to the European

Union. Together with Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, Slovakia gained accession to the European Union on 1 May 2004 which, in theory, granted the right for the citizens of all of these countries to work in any other EU member state without restriction. This prompted fears in many EU member states, including Germany, that a massive and uncontrollable wave of new migration would flow from the Central European region, and in response to these fears the German government introduced restrictive measures across their labour market which would apply until 2006 with the possibility to extend this period until the end of 2010. The only possibility for Slovaks who sought work in Germany was participation in the restricted labour programs which permitted temporary residence of between three months and two years. This restrictive attitude was a further contribution to the increased migration towards the United Kingdom.

Post-2004 migration, however, was different from the earlier trends in terms of creating opportunities for various social groups who sought employment abroad. The fifteen years between 1989 and 2004 had created a new, English-speaking generation in Slovakia and these young people were more mobile than their parents had ever been. Slovaks constituted the second largest group of post-2004 immigrants with 78,830 registrations in the Workers Registration System (WRS) between 2005 and 2006 (Pollard, Latorre and Sriskandarajah 2008). Migration has never been a one-way process, and many Slovaks returned to their homeland or chose a kind of hybrid commuter lifestyle in which they split their time between Britain and their homeland. It is nonetheless evident that movement between Slovakia and Britain has remained significant since 2004. One reason for the greater mobility between Slovakia and the United Kingdom may be the relatively rigid social hierarchy which characterizes Britain. Slovak parents quickly learn that social mobility in Britain is very limited and that the process of improving a family's social status can take several generations, if at all. When these families' experiences are confronted with open or latent rejection by the majority community, they often choose to return to Slovakia. Few of them are left unaware of the restrictive characteristics of British social traditions, and they soon come to understand that class still plays an important factor in integration and acceptance in the UK.

Social class, its dynamics, and characteristics in modern complex societies have been occupying theorists for centuries. Questions concerning social stratification and the division of social groups were already provoking discussion in classical times. As early as 300 BCE, Plato made several attempts to describe an ideal state where social division was considered as a natural and exclusive way of life in his *Dialogues* (Reeve 2012), but it was

only the turn of the 19th and 20th century that theorists began to apply scientific approach to investigate the characteristics of class and its manifestations in social structures. By publishing the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in London in 1848, Karl Marx triggered a new era in describing class dynamics. He saw human society as a structure in which social classes were in an antagonistic relationship. By introducing the notions of the proletariat—the masses of people who own only their working power—and the bourgeoisie—the owners of capital and the main consumers of the related culture which exploits the masses of workers—Marx described a system in which revolution was unavoidable. While Marx's understanding of the concept of class remained hugely influential throughout the twentieth century, the impact and manifestation of social stratification in modern societies needs a more comprehensive theory which goes beyond the limitations of purely economic concepts. A sophisticated criticism of the classical Marxist definition of class is presented by Rhonda F. Levine when she declares that “Marx himself [...] offers no systematic analysis of the concept of class, and generations of scholars since Marx have yet to arrive at a consensus of the various aspects of the concept of class” (2006, 3). Since constantly evolving factors determine the sociological understanding of the concept of class, including actual historical environments, different analytical approaches, and developments in the social sciences, it is almost impossible to produce a comprehensive and totalizing definition of the notion. Levine's definition of class as “social inequality” is elegant, but further investigation is needed to determine whether social inequality is the result of social stratification or whether social stratification causes social inequality. A comparative analysis of different theorists' views might produce a usable definition which would, however, still be burdened with overlaps. While Levine, for instance, emphasizes that “class, whether it refers to those who share similar experiences, and social networks, or to a position in the social structure, is an important variable in understanding how resources are distributed and who has access to them” (2006, 2), the Marxist interpretation defines classes exclusively in terms of their relation to production and ownership. In the Marxist concept, the presence of conflict (a perpetual motif) prevails and can only be resolved through a revolutionary transformation of the society, but the historical development of modern societies does not appear to follow this model. It therefore seems feasible that class is not the result of some unfair arrangement of life, but rather a “by-product” of social evolution that has come into existence due to the complexity of human societies and which might contribute to the cohesion of certain groups rather than exclusion of others. While Marx concentrates on the individual's relationship to production, Weber (1978)