

# VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

## In the window of the White House

On Christmas Eve, 1981, in the window of the White House in Washington, D.C., U.S.A., there burned a single white candle. It was a symbol.

That candle flame, burning steadily throughout the night, symbolized this nation's sympathy, empathy, unity in spirit with the people of the nation of Poland who, on the eve of the year's holiest day, had lost their dream of liberty.

That candle flame, gleaming into the darkness and casting its small pure light, symbolized the love for and dedication to freedom and independence that are shared by all Americans as well as by all the Poles who so enthusiastically embraced Solidarity.

Among the hundreds of interviews that have been broadcast to Americans from people coming out of Poland, one stands out from all the rest: a Polish sociologist described the imposition of martial law in her country as "something that many of us knew might come, but not TODAY, not THIS day, not this BEAUTIFUL SUNDAY..." and she spoke not only for Poles in Poland but for people who love liberty everywhere.

Unless we are both blind and deaf, and unless we are incredibly stupid (and perhaps we are), we cannot pretend the threat to liberty does not exist in all places and at all times. There is no guarantee that liberty shall be a quality of life that Americans, or any other people, shall enjoy forever.

In the past 25 years, we have witnessed three graphic and heart-tearing examples of how simply the torch of liberty can be snatched from the hands of freedom-lovers and its flame extinguished in a few short weeks.

It was at the end of October, 1956, in the city of Budapest, Hungary, that after a nationwide revolt against the Communist regime, a multiparty cabinet was formed, the country withdrew from the Warsaw Pact, and the world expected to see the first of the Communist-bloc nations break free of Soviet control. The revolution appeared to have triumphed; Moscow was promising to withdraw its occupation forces.

Then, on the night of November 3rd, Soviet armor and troops encircled Budapest; on the following day, an all-out attack was launched. The new government appealed to the West and to the United Nations for help. None came. After several days of bloody fighting, liberty died in Hungary. Over 200,000 Hungarians fled their homeland. Tens of thousands of Hungarians who had fought for their freedom were shipped to Russia. Few were heard from ever again.

The first glittering flame of liberty flared up in a Communist-controlled country after the Second World War had ended. In 1947 in Czechoslovakia, it shone briefly but flickered out with a Soviet-directed coup d'etat in February, 1948. Under threat of Soviet invasion, the democratic government in Prague surrendered to the Communist minority. Subjection of Czechoslovakia shocked the free world, is generally seen as the start of the Cold War, and eventually led to the formation of NATO. Communist countries countered with the Warsaw Pact; once again there was a stand-off.

Why did no one make the vital moves to keep the flame of liberty alive?

All of Europe was war-torn and war-weary; shell-shocked cities would carry visible scars of bombings and blastings for another decade; farms, fields, and forests had been soaked in blood. More war was unthinkable.

The only nations in the world with power enough left to conduct warfare were the Soviet Union and the United States of America. The Soviets rattled sabers on its own borders, invaded its neighbors at will, and stamped out dissent with impunity, partly because 3,000 miles of Atlantic ocean separated America from Europe. The United States, too, was only beginning to return to peacetime normalcy. Although none of our cities had been destroyed and none of our countryside ravaged, the lives of all Americans had been touched and, in many instances, shattered by the so-recent war. Few Americans supported any ideas of more armed conflict. America felt perfectly safe

... the only nation in the world with nuclear bombs at our command, America seemed invincible. Leaders of the United States read the pulse of the people and found little support for a crusade to help keep freedom alive for the Czechs and the Slovaks of Bohemia. Liberty's flame flickered and died, flickered and died, flickered and died again and again, over the next twenty years, in Czechoslovakia.

In 1968 it sparked once more, and this time burned with a clear and glorious light under the leadership of Alexander Dubcek; liberalization was rapid and strongly supported by Czechoslovakians. There were confrontations and negotiations with the Communists. There was hope that, this time, liberty might survive.

August found Soviet, East German, Polish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian troops, led by Soviet tanks supported by massive air power, invading and occupying Czechoslovakia. April, 1969, saw Dubcek ousted, liberal programs ended, and persecution of supporters of the liberal reform regime completed. Liberty in Czechoslovakia died this time, and was buried.

The Polish sociologist who spoke of the Communist's most recent crushing blow to freedom spoke for millions of Europeans, alive and dead, when she said that repression of Solidarity was "something we knew might come." She also speaks for us. And she speaks to us.

Liberty. Freedom. Independence. Call it what you will. It is a condition enjoyed by a small minority of the six billion souls inhabiting this planet. It is not necessarily the natural condition of humanity. Many Americans, because they've never known the yoke of totalitarianism, think their liberty is inviolable. They are mistaken.

Asked what this country can do to help the Polish people, government spokesmen hem and haw, and propose various sanctions. But the fact is: short of war, we can do nothing at all. And, apparently, Liberty is not worth fighting for.

Assuredly, war, full-scaled war, nuclear war, is unthinkable. What, then, is the alternative? Czechoslovakia has twice, since WWII, shown the world what alternatives there are. Hungary, since 1956, stands as another example. Poland, as of December, 1981, is the most recent victim of the "disease," Love-of-Liberty.

Will the flickering flame of freedom gradually be snuffed to a final and total darkness? Will liberty be crushed utterly? Will this cherished privilege be ground under the heel of subjection in country after country, city after city, town after town, heart after heart, until it burns no more, anywhere on this earth?

And, if not, what will keep it alive? When will there be enough oppression to cause all free men to rise up in unison to help defend Liberty? When will Americans recognize that it is not only the freedoms of the Hungarians, the Czechoslovakians, and the Poles which are being destroyed: It is our own that are being eroded as well.

On Christmas Even in the United States of America, in the windows of millions of homes, there burned a single white candle. It was a symbol.

When our turn comes to fight for Liberty, will there be any fight left among the Czechs, the Hungarians, or the Poles?