

# Risk-taking, profit-making take hold in Czechoslovakia

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(Editor's note: Jeff Lilley, 27, was a reporter at The News-Sun for a year in 1986-1987. He recently received his master's degree in Soviet Studies from Johns Hopkins Nitz School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. This summer he traveled to Poland and Czechoslovakia. Fluent in Russian, he plans to relocate to Moscow soon.)

By JEFF LILLEY  
(Fifth in a series)

Near a busy intersection in downtown Prague, Libor Zeman hawks his merchandise to tourists from all over the world. Business is brisk, and there's a quick turnover of merchandise.

"The best customers are the Italians, then the Americans and then the Japanese," he said between sales pitches. "But, you know, the Americans are really the best because they don't argue. They just buy the whole uniform."

Libor and his two partners sell Soviet military merchandise — hats, belts, boots, coats — from virtually every branch of the Soviet armed forces. They buy the merchandise from Soviet soldiers who

sell their uniforms to earn extra money. The irony of Libor's operation — making a profit selling uniforms of the Soviet occupation forces — is just a fact of life for Libor. More important to him is that by selling military merchandise he can make enough money to travel to South America.

Libor's business is just one example of the new entrepreneurial spirit in Prague. Risk-taking and profit-making are taking hold in post-communist Czechoslovakia.

Like successful businessmen in other countries, Libor, 22, has a good sense of his revenues and costs. On every hat sold, he realizes a \$14 profit. To his consternation, a good portion of the business' earnings go to the city for leasing the space at the busy intersection. As an entrepreneur, he complains about government involvement.

"We pay 60,000 crowns a month (about \$2,000) to the city for rent. But, normally, rent for such a space is 10,000 crowns a month. They charge us more because we have so much to sell and because we sell it

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**CZECH CAPITALISTS** — Libor Zeman and his two partners are Czech entrepreneurs. They do a brisk business selling Soviet military uniforms at a street corner in Prague. (Photo by Jeff Lilley)

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## RISK-TAKING, PROFIT-MAKING

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quickly," he said. Nevertheless, business is good, and Libor is already planning his next trip. He traveled in South America last year and wants to return. "I speak some Spanish, and I am interested in the rain forest," he said.

Another location where good business sense is on display is, of all places, the public bathroom in the subway station.

Putrid air engulfs a visitor to the metro station bathroom below Prague's main street. To the right are the urinals or, more appropriate-

ly, troughs — unclean, unsanitary and unsightly. To the left, through an open doorway, are the stalls — an oasis of cleanliness.

The bathroom stalls are monitored by a young man, who sits reading a magazine, with mop, pail and scrub brush by his side. A sign above his head reads: USE OF THE TOILET COSTS — 2 KROWNS. After payment (about 6 cents), the visitor gets a handful of toilet paper and the chance to use a spotless stall. Like clockwork, after the toilet is flushed, the janitor jumps up, opens the stall door, mops the floor and scrubs the toilet clean. He

then returns to his reading, alert to the entrance of the next customer.

In post-communist Czechoslovakia, truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. With a playwright elected president and a window washer appointed defense minister, this janitor, if he reads the right stuff, may well be the next minister of health. If not, he will still have learned some simple, yet profitable lessons on how to satisfy customers.

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