

My November from behind the Iron Curtain

Oľga Pietruchová

In 1989 I lived abroad and that may be why my perspective on November events is different from what is usually presented in the media. I perceived the fall of socialism in Slovakia in the context of what was happening in neighboring countries. From the point of view of a person living in what was then Western Germany and watching mostly German news I perceived the November events as a direct outcome of Gorbachev's perestroika, its openness towards the West and his friendly relationship with Helmut Kohl. What would have happened if these two men hadn't had trusted each other? What would have happened if the leader of the USSR had been someone like Brezhnev or Putin? We don't know, but we can imagine it on the basis of history. However, one thing is sure – just like in the year 1968 Czechoslovakia did not have a chance to become the only country to break through the *Iron Curtain* and liberate itself from the grip of the block of "friendly" socialist countries, the events of the Fall of 1989 were also part of unstoppable developments.

When I arrived to Bratislava in the middle of November I perceived the events in the streets as a natural part of what was going on in whole Eastern Europe and of unexpectedly haste downfall of socialism. Still, I was captivated by the euphoria sparkling from the crowd of young people in the SNP Square.¹ I remember I was standing somewhere in the back near the hospital protecting my growing belly with my elbows (I was six months pregnant). The atmosphere of collective realization of power was fantastic – later I experienced such atmosphere only once again in Washington D.C. during the march for women's rights – and it was not possible to escape it.

But I also remember how I was struck by the fact that just a few steps from the revolutionary square an ordinary day was going on and people with plastic shopping bags in their hands staring at the ground seemed like they weren't noticing what was going on...or they were afraid to notice and to hope...or they didn't care. To me it was one of the strongest feelings I had experienced until then – that sharp contrast between the euphoria of young people and apathy of their parents. The Revolution seemed to me to be a generational matter; as if the generation of adult people who had been raised in socialism fell into some lethargy and not even the jingling of keys² could not wake them up. I felt like shaking them and shouting out: *people, don't you see what's going on?*

¹ Square of the Slovak National Uprising - one of the main and largest square in the center of Bratislava (Translator's note).

² During anti-communist demonstrations people would jingle their keys as a sign of their protest against the regime, the phrase became one of the metaphors expressing the essence and spirit of the November Revolution (Translator's note).

We celebrated the news about resignation of the communist government with my parents in Lučenec. At the end of November we were leaving Slovakia which was already a different country then when we had arrived. Or at least that's what I thought then...Today I have the feeling that the number of those who are apathetic is even higher and even among the youth. Although people have all possibilities and all freedoms, although the shopping bags are more colorful and fuller, the apathy and indifference about the public matters is the same.

Translated by **Eva Riečanská**

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