

Czechoslovakia 1968

By Robert M. Fresco

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“Czechoslovakia 1968” almost died at birth – censored out of existence by its very own parent, the United States Information Agency.

It all began when the Soviet Union decided to end the “Czech Spring,” and the tanks came suddenly rolling in. The Czechs responded by filming their own “rape”: every studio and television camera in the country captured what was taking place. The results were quickly boiled down to some two hours of raw footage, and 35mm fine grains were smuggled out to the world by sympathetic diplomats.

My late partner, Denis Sanders and I were summoned to get on a plane post haste to view this amazing footage. It was amazing, and we advised the USIA to stop projecting it, throw it in a closet and treasure the key until someone decided what to do next.

Months passed, we heard nothing, and we assumed the whole thing was a “ho-hum.”

Then the phone rang once more. Oh yes, we do want a film, and we want it in time to be shown worldwide on the first anniversary of the Soviet invasion – in less than ten weeks’ time!

Luckily, I had written an impressionistic outline “just in case,” and that became our guide. Then the fun began.

We asked for the key, the treasured key, and...Key? What Key? No key. Closet? What closet? There were even denials that the film had ever existed or been received. An entire week passed before the key “magically” reappeared from an anonymous desk drawer, and the precious film resurfaced.

By now, we had exactly six-and-a-half weeks to deliver the negative in time for sufficient prints to be struck. In addition to the smuggled footage, we needed a substantial amount of other material, both stills and stock, and the USSR’s own Sovfoto Agency became my favorite source. I told them with a straight face that we were making an educational



A frame enlargement of a tank rolling amidst a crowd of citizens gathered in the streets of Prague during the “Czech Spring.”

film – and I believe I kept my word.

The music was still being written as I flew back to Washington for the rough cut...and found myself confronted by a covey of grim-faced, middle-aged “suits” wearing a uniform frown. Bruce Herschensohn, the executive overseeing documentaries, whispered that these were the USIA’s senior policy makers, career bureaucrats with zero understanding of – or liking for – the film medium.

They proved it in the screening room.

Since our film was to be shown in some one hundred or so countries, Denis and I decided our sole “language” would be music. For the rough cut, we had improvised wildly, laying in whatever tracks we could find. One of our better strokes was the Red Army Chorus singing “It’s a Long Long Way to Tipperary” over scenes of the Czech populace marching angrily through the streets of Prague. The irony was implicit, the pulse was perfect, and we loved it.

Not so the “suits.”

They reacted like the ancient Sanhedrin being served pork. The lack of wall-to-wall narration was already bad enough, but the Red Army Chorus really turned the trick. They unanimously voted right then and there to cancel the project. Our film’s emotionality had worked too well. They were literally un-nerved, and they explained that they feared anti-American riots would erupt around

the globe. They wanted nothing to do with it, they were not to be moved, and off they marched. It was very quiet in that screening room.

Finally, Bruce Herschensohn put his hand on my shoulder, congratulated me for what Denis and I had done, and vowed that he would resign if the decision was not reversed.

It obviously was. Frank Shakespeare, the newly-appointed director of the USIA, saw the finished product, loved it, and "Czechoslovakia 1968" had a life. Oh, by the way: we didn't quite succeed in making the film without a word. There was one. Actually, it was sung. Svoboda. Freedom.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Robert M. Fresco, who won an Academy Award for "Czechoslovakia 1968," began his career as a writer of horror pictures. He was also known for the public television documentary "Trial: The City and County of Denver vs. Lauren R. Watson," widely described as the first complete account of a trial to be shown on American television. Fresco taught film, television and communications at Columbia University, Hofstra University, Colorado College and elsewhere. He passed away in 2014 at the age of 83.