

A Soviet-Era Mind-Set at the Market



Illustration by Melinda Josie

We were enjoying a late-morning cup of coffee in one of the outdoor cafes of Banska Bystrica, preparing to head home, when my mother suggested that we buy some berries. In Slovakia, strawberries are a summer treat, and my mother was excited to buy them for my kids. I didn't have the heart to tell her that in California, where I live, we eat berries year round.

It had been 13 years since I left my native country, but I still return once a year. Each time, I note how much more Western my hometown has become. Communism ended in 1989, with the fall of the Soviet empire, when I was 10, but the changes were slow at first. The bookstore that never changed its window display was no longer limited to selling titles approved by the government. A statue of the Virgin Mary, forbidden under

communism, went up in the central square. Restaurants and cafes, once a rarity, began to appear in the brick-and-cobblestone downtown. Now every time I return to my picturesque hometown, with its pastel brick houses and 16th-century clock tower, another childhood landmark has disappeared. The old movie theater, which never sold popcorn because eating was forbidden during the shows, has been replaced by a multiplex cinema.

So it surprised me, last year, when my mother and I entered the fruit-and-vegetable shop near the center square: The items were behind the counter. Although privately owned, the shop was set up like an old Soviet-style store, where you wait in line and ask an attendant for what you need. As in the old days, a line of people stretched to the door. There were two attendants, older women with the same short haircut that European women of a certain age tend to favor. One would grab the blueberries or cabbages, and the other would ring them up. There was no greeting when a customer approached, just an impatient bark: "Next in line."

Most customers were older women, but at the front of the line was a college-age woman. Tall and thin with long hair, she was the legendary Slovak beauty — the type many in the line once resembled. After receiving her order, the woman looked in her bag. She pulled out an onion: “This onion isn’t good.”

Until then, we had all been holding private conversations. Now we were silent, waiting for the tirade we knew was coming.

“What do you mean, it’s not good?” the first shopkeeper demanded.

With the practiced indifference of youth, the woman replied: “It’s rotten.”

The first shop attendant turned to the second, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. “Can you hear what she is saying? She says it’s rotten!”

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The second shopkeeper responded just as loudly: “This is ridiculous.”

No one else made a sound. I felt as if I should say something — tell the shopkeepers that this is not how you treat people. But instead, I stood there. It was as though the whole old life, how it used to be, just clicked in my brain and kept me from doing anything.

From childhood, I was taught never to question anyone in authority, from teachers and doctors to shopkeepers. Now I was 6 years old again, in a panic that I forgot the assignment of taking a toothbrush to school. The teacher yelled at me, and I listened in silence; we all did. I remember that on one of the few occasions that we ate out, my mom forced herself to eat a sundae topped with spoiled whipped cream because she didn’t want to tell the waiter. But this woman was too young to know any of this. She had been raised with choices, exposed to a different life through television and travel.

“I’m not taking the onion,” she said.

“Then don’t take it,” the first shop attendant said.

“There is nothing wrong with this onion,” the second one chimed in. “It’s perfectly fine.”

The woman rolled her eyes and walked out. As soon as she was gone, the second shopkeeper held up the onion and announced for all to hear: “The girl has never seen an onion in her life. Look at it. You just peel off a couple of layers, and it is all fine.”

We could all see that the onion was bad; the outer layers were moldy and brown. Still, no

one said anything. One woman nodded as if in agreement. My mother and I just exchanged looks.

Each time we passed that shop during the rest of the trip, I refused to go in. I felt ashamed for not speaking up. I knew that in America, others would have supported me for saying something. But in Slovakia, for all the changes, I knew that I couldn't count on people to stand with me, that for those who experienced communism, there is still an underlying fear we cannot shake.