



Cincinnati on the Vltava

by Jon Newberry

Prague

Having spent the better part of the last twenty years—better, that is, than the parts I spent somewhere else—at Waldeck's Bar in Cincinnati, Ohio, I had good reason to suppose myself immune to common barroom irritants like dirty glasses, ambient smoke, and willful disregard for restroom sanitation. Then last fall I moved to Prague and started hanging out in Czech beer halls.

My wife and I live in a middle-class neighborhood called Kobylisy, about three miles due north of downtown on a hill overlooking the Vltava River winding through the city. The beer halls in Kobylisy offer quite a contrast to neighborhood saloons in the United States. The smoke from Czech cigarettes is acrid enough to etch your eyeballs, and thick enough to make actually buying your own entirely optional.

Glasses and mugs are washed, if you can call it that, in a large sink that's built into the standard-issue, stainless-steel service bar. The procedure consists of submerging them in the water, and—if time permits—swishing them around a little. At the U Cihelny bar down the street from my apartment, I've watched them wash half-liter mugs a dozen at a time, six in each hand, twirling them through the wash basin like a wheel. Then they're pulled out and drained on the bar-top. In most cases, the dishwasher is still rolling down the sides of the glass when the bartender flips it over and begins filling it again.

Still, it's often said that the only thing in Czechoslovakia that the Communists didn't ruin is the beer. Pilsner's Pilsner Urquell, the birthplace of modern lager beer, is still regarded as a symbol of Czech brewing excellence. Budvar, which owns the rights to the Budweiser trademark in the Czech and Slovak lands, may have stooped to making a "Budweiser Light," but turning over con-

trol to Anheuser-Busch is quite another matter. Czech beer halls, meanwhile, freed from state ownership and securely back in the hands of private citizens, are flourishing. Never mind the less-than-Western quality of the accoutrements: the beer is cold, 25 cents a half-liter, and still arguably the best in the world, Budweiser Light notwithstanding.

One of our favorite hangouts is Hostinec U Soucku, a friendly working-class joint that's run by a guy named Leon and his wife. I once tried handing my empty mug to Leon, motioning for him to refill it for me, on the theory that if I reduced the number of different glasses I came into contact with, I'd minimize my chances of swallowing something that could kill me. That tactic had always succeeded fairly well at Waldeck's, but it doesn't work with Czech beer, which has a thick head on it that takes a minute or two to subside. Bartenders have to fill a glass with foam ahead of time, let it settle a bit, then repeat the procedure two or three times until they get a glass that's about 80 percent beer. When I handed my mug to Leon and motioned for him to fill it up again, he did, but then he set it down to let the foam settle and handed me another full mug that was sitting there ready to go.

U Soucku is a fairly typical Czech beer hall. There's a front room that contains the bar, with room near the entrance for stand-up drinkers and people who want to listen to Leon's wisecracks; bare tables surrounded by benches and chairs; yellowed plaster walls; fluorescent ceiling lights; a slot machine; and posters touting the Velkepopovicky beer that U Soucku serves on tap. Out back is a wood-paneled dining room with smaller tables and a poster for Pilsner Urquell, which the bar doesn't even carry. The kitchen is further back, and the food is worth going home to avoid. The front room is generally favored by drinkers, while the inner room is more

dining-oriented, favored by couples and the better-dressed. The distinction is fuzzy, however, and you're free to sit wherever you can find a seat. Leon smiles more at the diners but cracks more jokes in the front room.

Leon, too, tries to talk to us in German even though we keep telling him we're Americans, and has never tried to overcharge us or slip in a "cover charge" on our tab. When we first started going into U Soucku, I was still suffering pangs of homesickness and imagined that Leon might be a kind of Czech version of Marty Waldeck, the recently deceased owner and chief instigator at Waldeck's Bar. Leon always wears a white butcher's coat on the job, similar to the apron that Waldeck used to wear when he ran a butcher shop in the front of his bar. My wife and I began referring to U Soucku as "Waldeck's."

A few weeks after we started frequenting the place, I observed one of the regulars order a double shot of Jägermeister and tell Leon to have one himself. Leon poured two. They raised a toast to each other's health, and the old guy tossed back his in a gulp. Leon meanwhile took a little sip of his glass, smiled and nodded his head in appreciation, set the rest of it down on a shelf behind the bar, and returned to tapping beers.

The incident ended all but the most superficial comparison in my mind between Leon and Marty Waldeck. I'd often seen Waldeck down two fifths of whiskey with a couple dozen beer chasers in the course of a day's work, and in twenty years I never saw him sip anything. The only time I ever saw Waldeck shy away from a drink was when he bet Dennis Keegan \$20 that he could polish off any bottle behind the bar—Keegan's choice—in two hours. Keegan slapped \$20 on the bar and pointed to a 16-ounce bottle of Red Hot sauce. □

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Friends of Bill

by James Bowman

Well, I *said* I wanted movies to eschew fantasy and present us with characters and situations of immediate relevance to our own lives. And then along came *Falling Down* by Joel Schumacher, a self-conscious attempt to present us with Everyman amidst the frustrations of our highly complex, highly frustrating post-industrial society. Michael Douglas plays a man named Bill (oddly called D-FENS, after his vanity license plate, in the credits) who has lost his job, his wife, and his child, and, one day, proceeds to lose his self-control. Caught in a traffic jam in Los Angeles, he finally snaps, abandons his car, and announces that he is “going home” on foot—even though he no longer has a home to go to.

Thereafter he meets representatives of various of the dark forces that haunt our nightmares about modern urban living, and a lot of the petty annoyances—overpriced soft-drinks, foreign shopkeepers, snotty waitresses, bad food, etc.—that on our increasingly frequent bad days seem to push us beyond endurance. Bill is having the ultimate in bad days and, having been pushed beyond endurance, bops each of these insults to his emotional tranquility right on the nose, taking a baseball bat to the price-gouging Korean shopkeeper, for example, or shooting up a Whammyburger restaurant where he finds himself three minutes too late for breakfast.

Talk about relevance! But although such stuff may give us a cheap cathartic high, in the end it is just more fantasy. What’s more, it is fascist fantasy. Those middle-class blues getting you down? Reach for your revolver and squeeze off a few rounds at foreigners or rich people

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or government bureaucrats or young punks or whatever minority you have decided to blame for causing all your problems. That Schumacher is aware of the political implications of his film is shown by the fact that he introduces into it a Nazi sympathizer (Frederic Forrest), with whom Bill has the following dialogue:

NAZI (*having shown Bill an empty container of Zyklon B from the death camps*): We're just alike, you and I.

BILL (*in disgust*): We are not the same. I am an American and you are a sick a--hole.

Phew! That’s all right then. He’s not a Nazi because he *says* he’s not. In fact, the only person in the film whose death we know is directly attributable to Bill is the Nazi. Doesn’t that demonstrate his bona fides?

No, it doesn’t. But a lot of people must have wanted to believe it does. Caryn James, the *New York Times* critic, to her credit sees Bill as the fascist he is, but then jumps to a conclusion exactly 180 degrees wrong: “Hollywood may have voted for Bill Clinton, but ‘Falling Down’ masterfully exploits conservative sentiments,” she opines. It is “the last big Bush-era movie, custom-made for the rabidly conservative Rush Limbaugh crowd that sees social blight as proof that America is lost in a liberal wilderness.” Such a truly wacky statement shows that not only can she not have listened to Rush Limbaugh, she cannot even have listened to the movie—or its screenwriter, Ebbe Roe Smith, as quoted in her own newspaper a couple of weeks before.

In a piece in the same “Arts and Leisure” section of the *Sunday Times* on February 21, Aljean Harmetz quotes

Smith as saying that Bill, his hero, is “someone who bought the American dream, and it’s blown up in his face. He’s a guy who believed the unspoken promise of America that if you worked hard and were white and a man, you were safe.” Unspoken indeed! Who ever thought that the American dream was about making the world safe for white men? Only the left, of course, whose alternative American dream is the perennial fantasy of making the world safe for everybody—or everybody but individualists and entrepreneurs.

That leftward bias is equally plain in the movie: the evil Nazi is associated with anti-gay, anti-feminist, and anti-environmentalist views, just in case anti-Semitism by itself is not enough to distinguish him from Bill. The latter, by contrast, gives voice to more acceptable socialist views by calling, for example, for country clubs to be taken away from the rich and opened to picnicking families. There is even a sneer at anti-Communism when Bill’s old mother, a spaced out weirdo who collects tiny figurines, describes her son’s job (which she has never realized he’s lost) as “building important things to protect us from the Communists”—as if only a ditzzy old broad like that could ever have believed we *needed* protection from the Communists. It is typical of the film’s self-contradiction, its pacifistic, leftist fascism, that it should attempt to milk our sympathy for Bill as a victim of cutbacks in the defense industry at the same time that it suggests there need have been no defense industry in the first place.

In fact, Bill is the perfect Clinton Democrat, which may be the reason for both his first name and the filmmakers’ pretense that he doesn’t have one. He is the embodiment of all that moaning and groaning about a middle-class