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That Mushroom Cloud? They're Just Svejking Around

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Nothing really happened at all here, initially, anyway. Ladislav Sticha, the tall spokesman for Czech Television, told me that the show's audience was "miniature" — presumably he meant small in number. Only a few people, among them perplexed hikers checking the weather before setting out for a Sunday stroll, called or sent e-mail messages to inquire.

But then Czech Television broadcast Ztohoven's handiwork hour after hour on its numerous news programs, and the video soon landed on YouTube. By the next day all Europe knew about it.

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"It's not that we would not have supported this kind of art, if they had come to us," Mr. Sticha added, somewhat abashed that, because Czech Television filed a complaint for breach of property, the affair ended up in court.

Hardly anyone here seems to want Ztohoven to receive more than a legal slap on the wrist, if that. Neither have fellow artists protested the trial in the streets, nor made a freedom of speech issue out of it. A literary weekly even mildly took Ztohoven to task for being a little too hungry for media attention.

On the other hand, the National Gallery in Prague last month awarded the group a prize. Milan Knizak, the National Gallery's white-haired, pony-tailed director, himself an artist and one-time Czech Actionist, explained that the award was not a statement about the court case but given for the "directness" of "Media Reality."

Back in the 1960s, Mr. Knizak added, he contrived to send hundreds of packages to a randomly chosen apartment building in Prague: "clothes, furniture, live fish, tickets to the movie theater."

"No art was present" in that action, he went on. "It meant a change in the everyday life of everyday people. It didn't take place in a gallery or museum, it just happened. Like love. You don't reason why. It just is."

Ztohoven's work has a larger context, in other words. It belongs to a history of Czech literary and artistic mystification and sly, deadpan humor that is the expression of a small, underdog nation dominated for generations by outsiders, one after another. "The Good Soldier Svejk," by Jaroslav Hasek, the famous Czech novel that is the masterpiece of this genre, tells of an idiot Candide, a hopeless orderly whose humanity throws into contrast a decaying empire.

"The Czech hero was no longer the nobleman but the poor, simple creature," Mr. Knizak said about "Svejk," "not Don Quixote but Sancho Panza."

The book, it seems, even gave rise to a droll verb: "Because of the past, Austria, communism, fascism, someone always stepping on our necks, we have had no choice except to Svejk around," Roman Tyc said about the general Czech psyche.

From Svejk's example derived the fictional Jara da Cimrman, a kind of kitsch anti-Svejk, concocted by a group of writers and actors partly as a protest against authority during the

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communist era. In a country that claims no towering inventors or explorers, Cimrman became the quintessential Czech hero, a Zelig who trekked to the North Pole but missed it by several yards, who advised Chekhov, but failed to get credit. ("Two sisters?" he asked the Russian. "Isn't that too few?")

"It's the difference between us and the Soviets," Ladislav Smoljak, one of Cimrman's creators, said one recent morning in his apartment, where an imitation [Vermeer](#) hung on the wall. "The oppression under which we lived was mostly mild so our reaction has been mild too. Mystification is a part of it."

"Mystification is too strong a word," Mr. Knizak, the gallery director, responded. "It's more nebulous: important and unimportant at once, not aggressive, light, distant, not black humored. Czechs don't start revolutions in the streets. We settle things over beer in pubs."

Which, as it happened, was where Jiri Rak held forth the other night. A specialist in Czech smallness and a historian of culture, he summed up Ztohoven's larger meaning in a neighborhood bar. "When people make fun of something, they are making themselves free of it," he said. "That's the condition of the small nation. It's a defense for everyone today in the globalized world.

"I think the goal of Czech mystification is to show us that we live in a world continually mystifying us — the politicians, the advertisers." He paused over his Pilsner, then raised the glass. "Thank God for Ztohoven."

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