

Reminiscences of Slusovice

My career at Slusovice

In summer 1988 I was taken on as a member of the *Slusovice Cooperative Farm*¹. In those times this agro-combine was at the top of its popularity. Some journalists and writers depicted it as an establishment of future. However there were also some critical remarks appearing in the public media; one protest song of that time sounded:

*There are three states in our republic:
Bohemia, Slovakia and Slusovice.*

Personal computers were very rare in those times, even at research institutes and universities; however Slusovice Cooperative Farm (SCF) produced their own model of PC. In this line they got ahead of large electronic works TESLA.

For serial production of computers, some special (one-purpose) integrated circuits were needed. By coincidence, it was my former colleague at TESLA Piešťany, Eugen Okénka, who presented a project for semiconductor chip production at SCF. Eugen worked in the field of IC mask design and he had no experience in chip production. He recommended me as a production engineer, which was my job at TESLA Piešťany in the years 1980-1984².

At SCF the basic production unit was an *enterprise* (or workshop) with about 100 workers, led by the *director*. The enterprises of the same branch constituted a *division*, led by a vice-chairman. Our enterprise belonged to the *ELECTRONICS* division. Enterprises were allocated over the whole farm's area, which made demands on transport. On the other hand, it was optimum as regards to psychology of work; the work within human "ant hills" is stressing.

In our enterprise electronic circuits for PCs were developed; the production was located at a workshop. The enterprise was situated in a provisional wooden building with dark corridors. One had to walk carefully so as not to step in a hole. The noise and dust from the neighboring four-lane High Street³ reached one's ears there. Various types of vehicles – cars, vans, tractors, excavators, etc. were continuously driving in all the four lanes. In one of the rooms I mentioned there were several flow-boxes, delivered there by Eugen; this equipment is used for work in "dust free" conditions⁴. It took me a long time to persuade my new colleagues that Eugen's project was nonsense; a production of semiconductor devices would need quite different conditions and much higher investment. As a result, I saved SCF pointless investments but my job was dropped. I could continue to work there, but it made no sense – in these conditions, without the possibility of manufacturing necessary equipment, I was unable to come to any result. So I agreed to join the PC workshop, where I did more or less routine work – I had to fix the computer mother-board as a model for the automatic assembly line.

I did this kind of work for the first time in my life. My younger colleague was more skillful and he passed the time playing the popular computer game "Tetris". However, he had to pay for this: somebody had mentioned him playing and he was transferred to production of yoghurts. When a component type ran out, one had to find a substitute. In addition to this work I tried to study, and I also translated the "Encyclopedia of MS DOS" in Czech as a part-time job. Later on I found my translation in a handbook.

¹ Its full name sounded *Standard Farming Cooperative Agro-combine Slusovice* (JZD Agrokombinát Slušovice). In the following text we shall use the abbreviation SCF.

² Confer *Handful of Memoirs* at: www.technologie-kvalita.cz/honza

³ The Street was called "Gorbačovka" as it was supposed that Michail Gorbačov would come here for visit; however it was his orthodox opponent Lichačov who visited Slusovice (Slušovice)

⁴ Semiconductor devices are produced in „clean rooms“, i.e. in dust-free conditions.

The PCs produced at Slusovice worked quite well, but they occasionally “froze”, i.e. they stopped reacting. There was a group of young ambitious workers at the workshop, who found a principal fault in the computer circuitry which caused the “freezing”. The strict rule of SCF came into force: *The incompetent must go away*. My former colleagues, who had developed computers, became overnight sellers and the director started to work at another enterprise as an ordinary worker. In fact, I was lucky to have avoided such a shame.

In February I was transferred to the Foreign Trade Division and I passed an in-service course on business. The new-trained businessmen worked in one room, equipped with one telephone only. There were about ten of us. Our task was to whip up any products that could be exported. Despite all my effort I was not able to negotiate any contract. A few months later, when SCF lost their virtual foreign-trade monopoly, this activity became pointless. It also put an end to the boom of selling the PCs made of imported components. There was only one enterprise in the computer branch that continued to prosper – it was SOFTWARE enterprise, which cooperated with foreign firms.

I used the chairman’s offer to take a “leave for enterprising” – with the possibility of returning within one year. However I was called to the newly built head-office building a month later and I was asked to leave the farm. The chairman obviously changed his mind. I didn’t protest; I didn’t want to be a burden on anybody. I found myself without any income, but the members of Civic Forum (see later) helped me a little. SCF was finally (before the splitting of Czechoslovakia) registered in Slovakia as “MOVA Bratislava”, after Czech authorities refused its registration.

The Cooperative Democracy

In SCF corporate culture was observed. *The worker must feel well at his workplace to reach optimum performance*. For this reason, the esthetical standard at individual enterprises was regularly evaluated and the directors were appraised accordingly. Workers were wearing a uniform. Even decorum and deference was a part of working relations. I met the chairman, Mr. Čuba several times at the door and he always let me go first. On the other hand, the worker was absolutely dependent on his chief. If he turned out to be a failure, he was transferred to another workplace. As there was a kind of tenure within the farm, he couldn’t be kicked out, but he could be sent to muck out, or sweep the footpath. There were no grievance procedures here.

At the beginning I stayed at the housing facilities at Deštná. We were accommodated in wooden lodges, six people in each cabin. The accommodation itself was quite good; however a problem lay in the warden of the facility, who pointlessly harassed the guests, imposed arbitrary fines on them etc. There was no other housing facility in SCF and there were very few opportunities to find private accommodation. Two of my friends, a couple, found no other way out than emigration. I was lucky to find provisory accommodation at Mr. Mika’s in an arbor without electricity. Nevertheless, I wanted to prove the noted democracy in this cooperative farm, so I wrote a grievance concerning the conditions at the facility Deštná. I was called for debate, to the competent vice-chairman, but he palmed me off. So I addressed the chairman of the local Communist Party organization. He was a young charmer and he expressed some understanding. Still, he sincerely said to me that there is nobody ready to help in this problem.

My landlord, Mr. Mika, once told me a funny story related to the origin of the cooperative. He used to work as a personal driver of the chairman. Mr. Čuba was going to sow some fields with corn, but it was not permitted by the district authorities. So he ordered his driver to invite the responsible official to a pub and get him drunken, and push a sheet of paper under his hands with the statement that he agreed with sowing the corn. The official signed it and Mr. Čuba had an alibi in case anybody would question his farming methods.

I experienced another funny story myself. As I stayed in an arbor without any comfort⁵, I often stayed longer at my workplace. Once I took my viola d'amore with me and after the others left the building, I started to practice a little. After a while the bell rang and when I opened the door, I saw a policeman with a helper – a special constable⁶. It was August 20th and they made a search to see whether anybody had duplicated political proclamations for 21st anniversary of Soviet invasion⁷. The policeman did the inspection, while the special constable started to interrogate me concerning my music; he probably suspected me of some plot. Finally the policeman had to take him out.

The philosophy of SCF was universal application of the *market principle*: the cooperative member had to work hard during the shift and amuse himself after the work. There were various attractions for this purpose: a football stadium with a professional team⁸, a banked racecourse⁹, café in an airplane, restaurant in a “barrel”, swimming pool in the hotel “SLUSOVICE”¹⁰ and a pony riding course at this hotel. There were no facilities for active relaxation or recreational sport¹¹. This deficit was partly covered by the local parish priest, who led a singing choir, and organized dancing courses for youth. With the support of the chairman, he organized a festive *First Holy Communion* for about 2000 people and a pilgrimage for *Agnes of Bohemia*, who should have soon been canonized. In contrast, at the above mentioned housing facilities Deštná, there were white-painted curbs around smooth lawns (nobody was allowed step them on), but there was no volleyball playground. Playing music after 10pm was fined.

The *Educational Centre* was another pride of SCF. I attended English lessons there, the classes were free. Our lector was diligent, but I had the feeling that I would rather unlearn the language. She corrected me unnecessarily and I was losing self-confidence. Two years later, when I started to teach English myself at a grammar school, I tried to avoid this fault.

Once I parked my bicycle at the parking place in front of the Centre, but there was a man standing there, who told me: ‘*Your bicycle is nice, but you cannot park it here; Comrade Lenárt¹² is coming to visit*’. My bicycle could presumably harm his impression; only cars were permitted for him to see.

I also used the opportunity to attend a lecture of the famous healer Jiří Janča, the author of many books on alternative medicine. His lecture looked much like a magician’s performance. He was telling various stories on healing and all the time he addressed a lady who sat at his side. There were obviously his helpers among the audience who helped to create the atmosphere. The spectrum of his healing methods was extremely wide: it reached from taking aspirin or quack remedies to transference of thoughts at distance.

In the area of SCF an intensive construction was permanently going on. There was also a group of heavy mechanisms – excavators, bulldozers etc. that did the landscaping. After they finished work,

⁵ No water, no electricity

⁶ Pomocná stráž VB.

⁷ There were large demonstrations in Prague on August 21, 1969, the 1st anniversary of the invasion. Several people were killed by the police. Since then regular inspections of copiers had been introduced.

⁸ A joke of that time: “*Do you know when we shall be the world champions in football?*” – “*Not until Slusovice play the premiere league*”.

⁹ First banked racecourse in Czechoslovakia

¹⁰ The hotel was situated at Všemina, about 5km away from Slusovice (Slušovice)

¹¹ Similar situation is now in Prague – there are no beaches for relaxation, but expensive water-parks appeared. No public service – everything must bring money. The only exception are the new-built cycle paths.

¹² Jozef Lenárt was one of “longest serving” communist leaders; in 60s he was the premier minister, in 70s Leading Secretary.

there were usually layers of earth lying on the road; if it started raining, the passing cars distributed the mud widely around. It brought me once into an unusual situation. One evening I went swimming in the hotel “Slusovice” pool (see above). I rode there on a bicycle. When I was leaving the hotel, it was already dark. On the main road I rode into a layer of mud; the wheels began to glide, the dynamo stopped and I was in total darkness.

I walked in the mud, sometimes trying to ride. The 5km distance took me about two hours.

The General Meeting, Work, Social Care

According to SCF statutes, the General Meeting was its highest authority. As there were about 7000 members in the SCF, they couldn't fit into the largest existing hall at *Zádveřice Motorest*, which had room for about 2000 people. For this reason, there were always 3 sectional meetings one after another.

The meeting evoked a ceremony, formal dress was needed. The directors of individual enterprises appeared first speaking about their plans for the near future; each of them spoke exactly for 10 minutes. Then the chairman appeared and spoke about the plans for the whole of the cooperative farm. At the end, people were invited for discussion, but nobody dared speak. During the meeting dinner was served.

After I took part at the General Meeting for the first time, I wrote a letter to Mr. Čuba; I explained him that one is not able to react in discussion after so much new information. So I am writing him subsequently. I proposed to establish playgrounds, so that people can do sports after work. My colleagues told me that the chairman was looking for me at my workplace while I was absent; a vice-chairman discussed my letter with me instead. He agreed with me in principle, but he said that it is quite impossible to speak on this theme with the chairman¹³.

In contrast to the state enterprises where I had worked before, creative technical work was valued in SCF. The qualified workers had free working times. Mr. Čuba was obviously aware of the fact that a worker who feels free and works in an esthetical environment creates the highest value. One of my colleagues told me that he often works at night; when a sudden flash of thought comes to him, he gets into his car and drives to work. In the electronics and computer division, there worked mostly young people in a friendly atmosphere.

SCF provided holidays to attractive destinations abroad for those, who had worked there for 2 or more years. The pensioners who had worked in the farm since its origin enjoyed various benefits; they paid e.g. 2Kčs (about 5 cents) for dinner.

Retail trade and tourism were other important fields of business. There were crowds of visitors coming to Slusovice, eager to see that “wonder” with one's own eyes. They could see a film on the farm's history and they were guided through selected enterprises. One of the attractions was the supermarket KVATRO. People were mainly buying milk in cartons and yoghurt, which was a delicacy. For cooperative members there was a special shop with exclusive imported products.

There were also prominent foreign visitors coming here. We were once called to mow the grass along the main road on account of Mr. Lichačov, the conservative opponent of Michal Gorbačov. Another visitor came from Spain – the founder of the cooperatives there whose members lived in a

¹³ Mr. Čuba was a “large man”. If somebody told him that this isn't good for his health, he replied: “I will buy health myself”.

brotherly community, without excessive social differences. He didn't like the system at Slusovice, which was based on performance.

The times of revolution

When I entered SCF, it was probably at the top of its popularity. Its activities reached as far as Soviet Union, where similar agro-complexes were established, or to Vietnam. Also the old project of the channel connecting three rivers – *Elbe-Oder-Danube* was revamped.

Nevertheless it seemed to me that the farm had started to corrode from inside – there were cases of sloppiness and favoritism, some kind of aristocracy appeared. According to eyewitnesses, it was the father of the chairman, who used to be a moral authority within the farm; after his death some moral decline took place. SCF was also exposed to attacks of various dogs in the manger – there were a lot of legal actions brought against F. Čuba. However, with the help of his lawyers, his backers and leaders within the Communist Party, he always justified himself.

In the summer of 1989 an *Open Communist Party Meeting*¹⁴ took place at Motorest Zádveřice. According to habit, most cooperative members came by car and had formal dress on. I rode on a bicycle, so I came a little late and in a sweat-stained T-shirt. At the very beginning a dinner was served – escalope with potato salad. All the people sat at the rear tables and nobody was sitting in the front. The chairperson said that dinner wouldn't be served until people take the front seats; however he resigned later on. The main theme was the future of SCF.

There were already political changes going on in the neighboring countries and it influenced foreign trade. Mr. Čuba proclaimed that both the contemporary political systems – socialism *and capitalism* – are roughly equivalent and our cooperative farm need not fear the expected transition to capitalism. Mr. Čuba could dare say that – he was member of the Central Committee of Communist Party!

Once, about that time, I met a group of bikers on the road, followed by police motorcycles. They were celebrating the 40th anniversary of renaming the town of Zlín to Gottwaldov¹⁵; ironically, the original name was turned back to the town within half a year.

The life at SCF was very intensive so I couldn't follow the politics. Sometimes I visited a sauna at Zlín. Once I met my colleagues there and they indicated to me that something would happen. There was a meeting taking place at the square next to the town hall. It was illuminated with candles and the speakers were using a loud-hailer. One of the speakers was Miroslav Zikmund, the famous explorer and writer. Next day the meeting was repeated, as it was already illuminated and provided loudspeakers. In our workshop some students appeared, who projected us a video about the events in Prague.

In this situation, Mr. Čuba sent a message to cooperative members asking them not to do any political actions, as they were "*amateurs in politics*" – he would defend their interests himself. However, some of the cooperative members didn't obey him and they established a local Civic Forum and started to publish their Newsletter¹⁶.

At the beginning, Civic Forum was quite loyal to the chairman. However, there was a meeting taking place at Zádveřice, where mostly actors of Zlín Theatre spoke and the chairman wasn't properly respected. Mr. Čuba then decided to form a company of his own. He called it MORAGRO

¹⁴ Veřejná schůze KSČ

¹⁵ In 1949 the town was named after Klement Gottwald, the 1st communist president of Czechoslovakia

¹⁶ Zpravodaj OF

and he hid there the communist leaders who had been helping him. Naturally, it caused displeasure among *CIVIC FORUM*¹⁷.

I joined Civic Forum later on, when the highest revolutionary euphoria was over. I wrote several articles for the Newsletter and once I was called to the farm's head office to explain. The number of activists decreased to about 10.

Since December 1989 the border to Austria was open and I used this situation for visiting Vienna. I went there with my friend, Dr. Marie Bobková¹⁸, who had many friends there.

In March I visited Vienna with a colleague from the Civic Forum and I spoke to an official at the Chamber of Commerce. He asked me about the political situation in our country and gave me a list of firms in the electronics branch. I tried to offer the TESLA electronic components list, but with no success.

In spring 1990 elections of the executive board took place and the Civic Forum delegated its candidates. There also was a meeting of its supporters at Slusovice. However, the result wasn't very good; the candidates of CF obtained about 30% of voices only. After the elections the Civic Forum fell silent, the Newsletter was stopped. Later on, an activist appeared who organized various protests, e.g. blocking the road. A group of activists visited President Havel at the Prague Castle. In his speech the statement about "*filaments of Slusovice*" later on appeared.

At that time I already lived in Prague. I met the delegation of my former friends without knowing anything about their mission. I turned to Slusovice (Slušovice) 2 years later. I stayed there at Mr. Mika's, but in his house, not in the cabin. The agro-complex had fallen into a number of small firms. I searched for the members of the former Civic Forum, but I didn't find any of them.

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Edited by Dr. J.E.Gault

¹⁷ Such a practice was later on called "tunneling" and became a current way of getting around the law

¹⁸ Marie worked in a laboratory of molecular genetics at Slusovice called "Agrogen". They even organized an international conference, during which Marie, who was at the same time an excellent pianist, played for amusement of participants