JZD SLUŠOVICE:
CZECHOSLOVAKIA’S COMMUNIST
WONDERLAND OR ANOTHER “POTEMKIN
VILLAGE”?

An NCEEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

In the 1980s, the Slušovice Agricultural Cooperative Farm in Czechoslovakia became known as the “Slušovice miracle.” It produced bumper crops, biochemicals, electronics, and the first computers. It offered shops with goods unavailable elsewhere. Thousands flocked to Slušovice to enjoy its racetrack, stay in its deluxe hotel (the largest in the country), and have a coffee at the Pegas café inside a grounded jumbo jet. While workers at other agricultural cooperatives plotted their escape, the waiting list to work at Slušovice was long. Gorbachev, Soviet leader and perestroika-champion, sent his advisors there to learn how things could be done. František Čuba, the mastermind behind Slušovice, claimed this “miracle” was the result of his innovative work philosophies, which he called the “entrepreneurial system.” But while Czechoslovakia and the Western media were having a love affair with Slušovice throughout the 1980s, within two years of the Velvet Revolution, Slušovice had turned into a ghost town. It became the whipping post for everything that was wrong with communism, and Čuba was brought up on charges of economic crimes. He was found innocent, but Slušovice was gone. The question remains: was this a wonderland or another “Potemkin village”?
Introduction

A few years ago a communist-era video clip resurfaced on the Internet. It featured Czech singer and comedian Ivan Mládek, and his band of misfits, perform their 1978 song, Jožin z bažin (“Joe from the Swamps”). The clip became such a hit, particularly among young Poles, that it prompted Mládek and his rather aged band members to tour Poland. Jožin z bažin merchandise followed, as did its own Wikipedia page. The words in Ivan Mládek’s communist-era comedic number have been interpreted in various ways, including the possibility that the song references František Čuba and his notorious Slušovice Farm Cooperative—a showcase of economic innovation in the otherwise static era of the 1970s and 1980s. The first stanza of Jožin z bažin goes: “I’m driving in a Škoda 100 to camp in Orava/ Because I’m in a hurry, I risk crossing Moravia/ A monster prowls around there, it comes out of the swamp/ It mainly eats people from Prague, and it’s called Joe.” One purpose of the following paper is to begin to unravel this rather obscure song lyric.

Still, more readily understood references to what was popularly called the “Slušovice miracle” and routinely accused of being a “state within a state” were not uncommon in post-1968 Czechoslovakia. There were frequent jokes, tinged with awe and fascination, such as the one reported by a German journalist: “Two friends—as the latest Prague joke goes—meet at Wenceslas Square. ‘It’s fantastic! A Czechoslovak submarine was just spotted off the shores of the Norwegian coast,’ says one quietly. ‘No, don’t say,’ the other replies with amazement. ‘We have a submarine? Why? Only in
JZD Slušovice?!”¹ There was also the very public song, Slušovice Romance, which might be considered the cooperative’s semi-official anthem.² It included in its many stanzas some of the following: “On vacation cruises, as summer begins, they’re offering exclusive trips around the world. Tahiti and wet T-shirt contests, and a line-up of other fabulous things, to which they warmly invite Slušovice./ The heart of every drinker will delight in Pravá, six year old Slušovice whiskey. I hear they’re already preparing brandy exports. You’ve got no chance against the “Made in Slušovice” label./ Slušovice has the most beautiful girls in the world, as they can confirm in Nice. Although admittedly after the beauty contest was over, there was talk of bribing the judges by some so-called Slušovice or other.” The song was proudly sung as a sort of amusing wink-and-a-nudge during the popular television variety show, Jedeme dál, that was broadcast live from Slušovice in 1987—a strange mix of folksy bravado and out-of-place Prague celebrities.³ Yet the more one learns about Slušovice, the more it becomes clear how revelatory these pop culture references really were.

Frantisek Čuba

Frantisek Čuba—referred to by Ivan Mládek as the monster from Moravia, intent on swallowing up Prague people—was still in his twenties when in 1963, he took over the JZD Slušovice (JZD was the acronym denoting a collective farm), then teetering on bankruptcy. Slušovice, located in southern Moravia, 190 miles from Prague, is right

² “Slušovická romance,” by Paleček and Janík.
outside of the town of Gottwaldov (earlier—and today again—known as Zlin). Unlike many other Party officials, Čuba actually knew something about agriculture and its demands; his father had played a central role in local collectivization, and was himself the head of a neighboring cooperative farm. Moreover, since Čuba was from this area of southern Moravia, he understood something about the land and its history—an area known for its poverty and lack of opportunity, where children had traditionally been forced to abandon the land and seek jobs elsewhere, most often in the cities or else abroad.

One of the first things Čuba did upon taking over the Slušovice cooperative was to expropriate the JZD’s only moped.4 He rode it—with binoculars hanging around his neck—patrolling the cooperative, checking on his employees and their compliance with the three golden rules that he implemented: first, anyone who did not show up on time for work received no work or pay for the day; second, alcohol consumption was not permitted during work hours and any violation led to the imposition of fines (workers hid their flasks in the manure for that was the only place that Čuba did no go digging5); third, whoever wanted to leave Slušovice could do so without the standard fines or penalties, but would never be permitted back.6

During Christmas 1963, only a few months into his job, Čuba announced to the Slušovice employees that they would not be receiving their holiday bonuses for the simple reason that they did not deserve them. Many quit on the spot, others did not show up for work. As Čuba has told the story, he spent his New Year’s Eve putting away the

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livestock for the night, with only the farm’s gatekeeper there to help him. It was then that he realized he had failed to motivate his employees. He consequently made a decision that would become crucial to the Slušovice story: his rules were to be supplemented with four pillars of worker motivation, of which “self-realization” was to play an important role, particularly for the more skilled workers. But for everyone, regardless of their position, he linked salaries directly to performance, and performance was made dependent on the individual worker. The harder you worked, the more money you made. Čuba would later call this the “entrepreneurial system.”

In 1964, newspapers were already writing about Slušovice and wondering if it had not become too “capitalistic.” But a few years later, the cooperative was fully in step with the Prague Spring, where such tweaks on the communist model were being championed. When the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion brought all such innovation to a halt, Slušovice was not immune to the fallout. The shock of that invasion hit Slušovice full force. On August 26th, 1968, less than a week after it, Slušovice members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party sent a letter to both the Prague Central Committee and the USSR Embassy stating that they wanted Alexandr Dubček, as well as the other members of the government who had been kidnapped and taken to Moscow, to be released, and the hardliners Alois Indra and Vasil Bil’ak to be expelled. Two days

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7 For more on the crucial concept of “self-realization” as deployed by post-1968 Czechoslovak official rhetoric, see my book, The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the Prague Spring (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010). In response to the inevitable comparisons with Bat’a, Čuba would later claim that Bat’a used fear as the primary motivator for his workers, whereas he did not.


10 SOAZ, Zlín: fond JZD AK Slušovice; Sign. MNV Slušovice, 1945-76; 26 August 1968 (letter).
later, the Local National Committee publicly declared that while they would support normalization, as now mandated, normalizing life meant first and foremost getting rid of the Soviet soldiers occupying (and destroying—as a consequent damages list attests) the area.\footnote{SOAZ, Zlín: fond JZD AK Slušovice; Sign. MNV Slušovice, 1945-76; 28 August 1968; “Prohlášení MNV.”} Čuba’s friend, Miroslav Zajíc, a regional and later Prague-based party secretary, ensured Čuba’s name was scratched off of the list of those who were to pay for their enthusiastic embrace of Prague Spring changes.\footnote{R. Sedláček: František Čuba: slušovický zázrak. (Česká televize, 1999)} This same man would later warn and prep Čuba for surprise Party inspections of Slušovice, many of them initiated by President Gustav Husák, who felt such animosity toward the cooperative that (it was said) his morning papers were marked in red wherever there was mention of Slušovice.\footnote{As told by Čuba. See Milan Ligiber, “Slušovice by dnes vydělávaly 150 miliard, tvrdí Čuba. Užívá si důchodu,” in idnes.z (October 28th, 2010): \url{http://zpravy.idnes.cz/slusovice-by-dnes-vydelavaly-150-miliard-tvrdi-cuba-uziva-si-duchodu-1f2/domaci.aspx?c=A101027_1473377_domaci_kot} [accessed April 10, 2014]}

The So-Called “Slušovice Miracle”

During the 1970s, as Czechoslovak agricultural cooperatives were forced to link up, creating ever larger JZDs, Slušovice grew significantly. Yet many of these new members absorbed into JZD Slušovice left, unable or unwilling to keep pace with the demands which included not only Čuba’s golden rules but also—as the dissident Petr Uhl noted disapprovingly in the underground newspaper, Lidové noviny—in many cases a 10 hour workday.\footnote{Petr Uhl, “Mýtus Slušovice,” \textit{Lidové noviny}, March 1988: 22.} To keep control of the growing enterprise, a Central Dispatch was put in place to coordinate the vast operation. It was one of the many things that made Slušovice stand out—responding to problems with innovative technologies. The Central
Dispatch was equipped with modern communication technologies that included, according to one report, “automatic dial telephones, answering machines, CB radios, a visual monitoring system (cameras move[d] along cables in the fields), and sound as well as video recorders.”

Differentiated salaries continued unabated and were not so in name only; the variations in pay were quite extreme. For example, in 1987, a tractorist’s salary, depending on his performance, could be anywhere between 2,290 to 5,185 crowns. Moreover, punitive measures were also differentiated, which meant that if an employee drank a beer during work hours, he was fined 500 crowns, and if his manager concealed it, then he himself was fined 1,000 crowns. This synthesis between the Orwellian (non-manual workers were given IQ and specially-designed psychological tests as part of the hiring process) and the entrepreneurial produced unique results, and by 1989 the cooperative had approximately 7,000 employee-members more than willing to undergo the constant and very public work evaluations in return for the benefits reaped.

“Sidelines”

What boosted salaries and increased consumption for Slušovice employees was the JZD’s shift from a mere agricultural cooperative, however big, to what was known as an Agrokombinat. In 1979, the Secret Police noted that Čuba had put in a request for a new type of business status, which would change the JZD Slušovice to the JZD AK

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15 Open Society Archives, Budapest (from hereon OSA): RFE Czechoslovak SR/1; 7 January 1986: “Not All is Rotten in the State of Czechoslovakia;” p. 46.
17 OSA, Budapest: JZD Slusovice, New Experience of Socialism; 18 May 1987; Japanese Embassy in Prague; Economic Researcher; Syuichi Ikemoto: 19.
18 OSA, Budapest: B-Wire; “Slusovice Scandal: Prague Seeks Extradition” (August 2, 1991)
Slušovice. In some ways, the request was merely cosmetic (indeed, the informant’s report replays an overheard conversation in which Čuba insists that what they are producing, while not legal yet, will be by the time it matters, because by then the new status will have come through due to good friends in high places): 19 Čuba, having recognized that labor was too often wasted due to agriculture’s seasonal schedule, wanted to harness that time and labor for other economic projects, and thus the Slušovice sidelines began to include biochemicals (an outgrowth of their cattle breeding, and related advanced veterinary techniques such as embryo transfer 20 ), electronics, and computers, with each factory awarded autonomy and each factory director given accountability. One of these factory workshops at Slušovice was producing, in 1985, 1,000 IBM-compatible computers per year with plans to significantly increase its output to meet the growing demand. 21 In typical fashion, the famous Slušovice computer was officially called the TNS, which actually stood for “That System of Ours [Our Way of Doing Things].”

The AgroKombinat’s expansion was astonishing throughout the 1980s, reaching past Czechoslovakia’s borders and even into Asia, where Slušovice was hired to rebuild a major hotel in Ho Chi Minh City. 22 But most importantly, whatever the domestic market did not have or else had of poor quality—which certainly left for a wide open field of possibilities—Čuba was ready to produce. By 1988, barely 10% of Slušovice’s profits

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19 ABS, Prague: Gottwaldov a Slušovice; RC_26769_BR_dil_2_0237-0239; 26 April 1979; “Snaha o vytvoření nové hospodářsko-právní formace družstva ze strany JZD – Slušovice.”


22 ABS, Prague: Gottwaldov a Slušovice; RC_26769_BR_dil_2_cast_2_0633; 3 January 1989; “Zájem o proniknutí JZD AK Slušovice do přímého obchodního styku s firmami z USA, Hongkongu, Sinaporu a Japonska.”

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were based on agriculture, and there was no one in Czechoslovakia who had not heard of the place where miracles happened.

**Slušovice’s Cornucopia**

The leap from being a mere socialist citizen to a Slušovice citizen was significant, particularly in terms of the quality of life and the quantity of available goods and services. Within the Slušovice bubble, unlike outside of it, there were no hurdles to acquire housing or gain access to kindergartens: the JZD built for its members single-family houses with gardens and modern apartment buildings, as well as fully-stocked shops. Children were taken care of—so parents could have the energy for work—from beginning to end, with well-run nurseries and, later, even summer exchange programs with West German children. The idea behind this was for Slušovice children (always understood as future Slušovice employees) to feel comfortable in an increasingly globalized world, and in particular to learn not to be awed by German production and might. The Secret Police (StB), who were always monitoring Slušovice, certainly were irked by the JZD’s reimagining of the typical Red Pioneer children’s summer camp as an exchange program with the West, and with Slušovice kids returning each summer’s end loaded down with music cassettes, audio devices and electronics, which—mysteriously—always managed to be overlooked by the customs officials.

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26 ABS, Prague: Gottwaldov a Slušovice; RC_26769_BR_dil_2_0629-0631; submitted 9 October 1981 (based on a meeting with an informant on 21 September 1981); “Informace o pobytu NSR dětí v JZD Slušovice.” In a different report, the StB (and then the local Communist Party organs who were informed by them) became quite upset that the adult chaperone for the West German children’s stay at Slušovice was appalled by the organized activities that included handling...
Perhaps more remarkably still, their parents were travelling to the West as well, traversing the Iron Curtain, as much if not more than their children. Agrotour, one of four service agencies devoted to making life easier and more pleasant for JZD members, took care of their travel needs, both for leisure and business (Čuba required managers to travel at least once a year for conferences, work internships, and other business). As for vacation travel, Agrotour quite simply listed its destinations and prices in the JZD newspaper, called (aptly) “Our Way [Path].” A 1989 published interview with Agrotour gave readers a heads up on what would be on offer that year: a shopping trip to West German department stores in February, Vienna for various opportunities to check out trade fairs, the Greek Islands later in the summer, and perhaps a chance to explore the Middle East.27 But even back in 1977, before the formation of Agrotour, when the cooperative was simply working with the state travel agency in Prague, members could travel to Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Greece.28 Prices were discounted for JZD employees, families were open to join them (in 1989, Agrotour was actually planning to open up the trips to non-JZD members), and, perhaps best of all, Agrotour took care of procuring all the necessary documents and stamps that, outside of Slušovice, even for those lucky enough to be offered a chance to go abroad, represented a second full-time job.

This farm empire further had its own clinic, ambulance, doctors, dentists, and a system of care for the retired.29 Bona fide Slušovice retirees could eat a hot lunch at the numerous cafeterias and canteens for two crowns only, paid nothing for domestic weapons. In turn, the StB was appalled by her bringing the game Risk (whose purpose was “to defeat the Red Army”) to Slušovice and, as they suspected, leaving it there.

29 RFE Czechoslovak SR/1; 7 January 1986: 47-8.

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vacation trips, 20% of the price for going abroad, and were awarded cash presents for their birthdays. Saturday grocery deliveries to the front door—something that seems a rather recent invention—were available to everyone for a small fee. Massages and saunas were on offer at the Slušovice Hotel for employees and their families. Workers who were entitled to physical therapy and rehabilitation because of their physically strenuous work were sent off for a week to one of the various recreational centers the JZD owned, where all expenses were paid and during which time their salaries continued to be paid out.\(^\text{30}\)

Most of these exceptional services were either the result of innovative ways to get the most out of their workers or else responses to the ineptitude of the Communist Party. When requests that the local party organs ensure neighboring supermarkets be stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables went unheeded, Slušovice simply set up its own supermarket in the neighboring town of Gottwaldov.\(^\text{31}\) The project was titled “Akce Zelenina 77” [Project Vegetables ‘77]—its very name strangely reminiscent of the concurrent Charter 77 in Prague. Even the Soviet press was intrigued. In 1982, one article described the “House of Vegetables” as where one finds “potatoes, cabbage, beans and peas, onions and garlic, different sorts of fruits and frozen vegetables. Everything is precisely weighed, wrapped up and wonderfully prepared for the customer. The homemaker doesn’t have to waste time cleaning the vegetables and taking the scraps out to the garbage.” It continues: “In the shopping district, there is a wide assortment of canned vegetables, fruits and meats with the label, ‘Made in the Slušovice JZD’. There

\(^{30}\) Vácha, \textit{Jak řídí Slušovice}: 110-117.

are also many flowers [on sale].” 32 4,000 customers visited this shopping district daily, and there were even more smaller shopping outlets scattered in the area. 33 The House of Vegetables (where even a salad bar was on offer at its restaurant) was followed by the House of Groceries and the House of Shoes. When Slušovice employees were finding store shelves bare at the end of the workday—because so many non-JZD members had passed through with their net shopping bags—the cooperative built another grocery store, named Kvatro, which opened later in the afternoon and stayed open well into the late evening.

A Socialist “Disneyland”

The Slušovice agricultural cooperative in Southern Moravia became a model of socialist success to which busloads of ordinary Czechs and Slovaks flocked, sightseeing the “state within a state.” These domestic tourists traveled to Slušovice to hear about the new cowsheds that had been built in just three months and, as The Financial Times reported, “how a team of Slušovice workers were sent to Prague for a construction contract which needed to be done properly and in a hurry.” 34 But more so than the cowsheds, the real enticement for weekend visitors was the well-stocked shops in the area. 35 Slušovice’s resort hotel, considered to be among the most comfortable in the country, was also open to them. 36 The JZD further built a racetrack, with a stable of 170 horses; and, in the spirit of the cooperative’s output numbers, they of course went on to

33 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
win many a race.\textsuperscript{37} The earlier mentioned anthem, the Slušovice Romance, includes a stanza which warned that, “Slusovice horses are bred with longer right legs to speed them around corners.”

Perhaps most spectacular among Slušovice’s entertainment projects was Čuba’s decision to purchase a grounded jumbo jet and convert it into the Pegas café and play area for Slušovice citizens and weekend visitors alike. The jet, for which a four-lane road into Slušovice had to be built, and Czechoslovakia’s highways closed off as it was dragged to its destination, took on the status of spectacle at a time when few spectacles, good or bad, defined the times. As someone who grew up in the 1970s in southern Moravia recalls, Sundays meant going shopping in Slušovice, and a good report card was rewarded with lunch at the Pegas café inside the jumbo jet.\textsuperscript{38} Certainly, contemporary photographs show jam-packed weekends at the farm.

While thousands upon thousands of Czechoslovak citizens traipsed through Slušovice to view this miracle of socialist enterprise, foreigners were no less interested. It became the responsibility of the Secret Police to keep track of them, tail them, and report on them—all using a network of informants planted at Slušovice. In part, the job of documenting all this was overwhelming not only because of the sheer number of interested foreign medias and delegations but because, as the StB lamented, Slušovice did not even bother to alert the relevant party organs beforehand and obtain permission for these visits; an issue, they wrote, that would not have been a problem at other agricultural

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} Lidové noviny (Friday supplement); 3 February 2012; Tomás Pospěch, “Zázrak jménem Slušovice”: 12-15.
\end{itemize}
cooperatives where foreign visitors were rare. But hardly a day passed without an official or unofficial group of foreigners—usually from the West or representing the West—showing up at the JZD.

The StB was thus privy to one bizarre incident when a Norwegian television crew refused to believe that Slušovice was real—that it was indeed the ultimate Potemkin village—and in fact adamantly rejected invitations to step into the administrative building (where these tours inevitably began with a meet and greet with Čuba, an instructional video about the JZD Agrokombinat, a tour of the cooperative, followed by dinner—with Čuba and others—at the Renata restaurant inside the Derby Recreational Center beside the racetrack). They were only willing to continue once they had called Prague to verify that this was not some hoax.

Mikhail Gorbachev, during his visit to Czechoslovakia in 1987, was expected to visit Slušovice (as had every other visiting dignitary by then), particularly since he was championing the sort of work that Čuba was doing. But rumor had it that to avoid conflict with the more conservative members of Czechoslovakia’s Central Committee, he opted out at the last minute, and instead toured another JZD. Another Moscow representative was sent in his place to enthuse publicly about his visit to Slušovice. A

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39 ABS, Prague: Gottwaldov a Slušovice; RC_26769_BR_dil_2_0397: 3 January 1980; “JZD Slušovice – situace na úseku povolování styku s VC a jejich hlášení na OZS.”
40 ABS, Prague: Gottwaldov a Slušovice; RC_26769_BR_dil_2_0143: 28 April 1978; “Norsky televizní stab.”

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year later, in 1988, a U.S. Congressional delegation visited, and in turn Slušovice’s directors spent two weeks in Texas inspecting the state’s large farms and cattle ranches.

### Production and Consumption as Subversion

One might well assume that in the glow of fashionable perestroika, JZD AK Slušovice would have been finally and wholeheartedly embraced by the Czechoslovak Communist Party and the Prague government. Certainly, if one looks at the Czech newspapers, television and radio during the last two years of communism, Čuba was everywhere: discussing, debating, explaining (to say he could be didactic would be an understatement), and generally proselytizing his “entrepreneurial system.” There was talk of the “Slušovice system” leading the way through into the next decade of state socialism. Čuba knew he was on to something, and glowed in the adulation of Gorbachev and his program of perestroika. Entertaining an American reporter in 1987, Čuba drove him around in a BMW convertible (gone were the days of the moped) and declared that, “We are the wave of the future.”

In line with his general style, when speaking to a Bulgarian paper in 1989 (a year which saw an astounding expansion by the JZD into a wide array of industries), he said: “Tell them back home that we’ll take several trainloads of tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, garlic and we’ll exchange them for computers and other technology. We are greatly interested in investing in Bulgaria, same as in the Ukraine or on Malta. Harvesting times are different everywhere and such cooperation would be

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42 ABS, Prague: Gottwaldov a Slušovice; RC_26769_BR_dil_2_cast_2_0621; 17 November 1988; “Delegace zemědelského výboru směnovny reprezentantu USA – návštěva v JZD Slušovice.” (The StB duly noted the presence of a “black man” in the U.S. delegation.)


mutually beneficial. But I have the feeling that with your accustomed habits, not particularly accurate system, and with your lax work ethic, you probably won’t pull this off. It would have to run without a hitch.”45 Čuba did not hesitate to make such pronouncements, in part because by then the JZD had in some shape or form expanded into Canada, France, Italy, Vietnam and, of course, Austria and West Germany.

Yet despite this seeming symbiosis between perestroika and the “Slušovice system,” the Czechoslovak government was not amused. As one repeat visitor told a New York Times reporter in 1988, “I recall being told that maybe a third of what they [Slušovice] did Prague found exemplary, a third tolerable, and a third outright subversive.”46 Indeed, this resoundingly successful experiment in initiative-driven socialism was at first applauded by the regime, but as the cooperative increasingly turned to producing things that they found unavailable on the Czechoslovak market, or else inadequate, Slušovice began to lose favor with the government and was accused in the press of overstepping the boundaries of Czechoslovakia’s socialist economic laws and central planning.47 President Husák, who remained a foe, and even more so the Minister of Interior Jaromír Obžina, became obsessed with catching Čuba out. But Čuba, with the help of his well-placed friend, Zajiíc, as well as a coterie of lawyers, was able to come out unscathed from each inspection. Even a team from the Institute of Marxism-Leninism was brought in to assess matters, but ended up giving Slušovice an ideological “clean bill of health.”48

47 For example, Tribuna, no. 41, 15 October 1986 and Tribuna, no. 43, 29 October 1986.
So why did the regime object to Slušovice even as it symbolically offered up the JZD as evidence of the communist system’s remaining potential? First, as some might recall, the town of Zlín, to which Slušovice was attached, had been Bat’a-town. This was the site of Czechoslovakia’s most successful interwar capitalistic enterprise, nicknamed “little America” during its time, and which, exactly like Slušovice, was not merely a shoe factory town but a town entirely built around and by the Bat’a shoe giant. Here too, the worker had been taken care of as both producer and consumer, and while Čuba claimed that he had not in fact been inspired by the Bat’a model, and that he had only sought to learn about it after the incessant questions about the link between him and Bat’a, anyone coming from this part of Czechoslovakia could hardly be immune to the Bat’a ways and influences. Indeed, Miloš Jakeš, who became the Czechoslovak leader in 1987, with Husák retaining the role of president, was a champion of Čuba and Slušovice. His stand is all the more surprising considering Jakeš was by no means a political renegade. He did, however, have personal connections with Slušovice: he had lived there in the 1950s, even played on their football team for a short while, and was a good friend of Čuba’s father. In other words, this was a case of Prague versus a regional but otherwise historically famous and infamous competing “center”—Bat’a’s Zlín, and now Čuba’s Slušovice.

Second, even Charter 77 had found its way into the JZD through one of its employees, a computer technician named Stanislav Devátý. A signatory of Charter 77, Devátý did not seem to have any problems at Slušovice until 1988 when he was picked as one of the Charter’s spokespersons. The public nature of this position became too much for Slušovice and Čuba to tolerate. The directorship of the JZD began to pressure Devátý
to leave the cooperative voluntarily, and warned him that if he did not do so, they would create the sort of unpleasant circumstances that would make him change his mind. Still refusing to go, he was ordered to transfer to their subsidiary in Propad, but he also refused to go there, upon which he was expelled from the JZD for having broken their rules. 49 What followed was a court trial between Devátý and Slušovice, Devátý’s imprisonment for other infractions conjured up by state security, Devátý’s hunger strikes while in prison, a slur campaign against him in the Czechoslovak press, and much publicity of his case in the West. 50 Neither the regime, nor Čuba, were particularly pleased about this. Čuba was said to have told Devátý that he was firing him directly on the orders of Jakeš.

Lastly, the problem over Devátý, and possibly Čuba’s consequent irritation with him, was that it brought into the open something that Čuba preferred to hide. In his bid to expand, to become the mega-economic enterprise he envisioned, Čuba sought not brawn but brains. In the aftermath of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, much of the latter had been purged from their jobs for not possessing sufficient Party loyalty. But, because of their skills, Čuba had invited many of the purged and blacklisted to join his JZD: it was estimated that at least 100 management level positions at Slušovice were occupied by the regime’s purge victims. Čuba’s actions were motivated less by any moral imperatives (he always claimed he was apolitical, and had turned down the job of Agricultural Minister more than once during communism) than by shrewd business calculations. When Ivan Mládek sang of the monster who prowls in Moravia, and mainly

50 OSA, Budapest: Charta Infoch, 1989, no. 15: “Stanislav Devátý ve vazbě a další informace o jeho činnosti”: 10.

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eats up people from Prague, that might certainly have been an allusion to Čuba and his insatiable appetite for Prague’s purged.

**Potemkin Village?**

If the story were to stop here, one can imagine a future after 1989, after the Velvet Revolution, when Slušovice, unshackled from communist-era economic rules, would rush ahead, leaning on the enormous head start into capitalism that it already had. But quite the opposite happened. Within two years, Slušovice had become a ghost town. Its previous grandeur—however pale in comparison to what was on offer on the other side of the Iron Curtain—has since vanished, suffocated by the long grass that now grows in and around its former racetrack and entertainment venues. The jumbo jet Pegas café is long gone.

The love affair with Slušovice that Czechoslovakia experienced in the late 1980s just as quickly turned into a sour divorce. For many, Slušovice had been communism at its best—as it could, potentially, be (especially if the Prague Spring had come to fruition); after 1989 Slušovice became the bogeyman, the whipping post, representing the very worst of what communism had had to offer. Václav Havel (some would say too much influenced by his friend, Stanislav Devátý; others, too ignorant of agriculture) led the charge. Throughout 1990, in various speeches, he knocked the JZD, but it was his August 21st, 1990, speech on the occasion of the 22nd anniversary of the Soviet-led invasion, that represented the nail in the coffin. Overlooking Wenceslas Square, Havel called for a second revolution that would “break the remaining totalitarian structures;” he singled out Slušovice as the place where the “invisible mafia,” hides, “whose veins
imperceptibly run through our entire food industries.” The next day Čuba stepped down from his post of the still existing but already renamed and significantly reduced JZD.

What followed then were serious questions about how the “Slušovice miracle” could even have come to be. In the 1980s there had been loud whispers (loud enough for most ordinary people to hear) that Čuba’s success was built on his long list of contacts and friends (oiled by gifts of the special “made in Slušovice” whiskey—as the Slušovice Romance song noted—for just that purpose): a list of friends which included Miloš Jakeš, as mentioned earlier, but also Lubomír Štrougal, another important Central Committee member, although one with a much more progressive agenda than Jakeš. Now, in 1990, the claim was being made very publicly that the playing field had been even less even: that Slušovice had been given special status as an experimental enterprise, and with it had come distinct advantages, such as increased amounts of Western currency for trading, and the direct help of the StB, who passed on to Slušovice the results of its economic espionage.

Čuba has denied all this vehemently, claiming the JZD never had special privileges. In interviews, he has explained that these foreign trade agreements were there to be had if one was willing to get past the red tape that the government threw in one’s way: to combat it, he had set up a full-time team whose sole job was to go from one ministry to another, from one office to another, collecting the necessary signatures and stamps. As for that four lane highway, which facilitated the way for more visitors to come to the Slušovice “Disneyland,” the 17th of November Commission, set up after the Velvet Revolution, charged that the JZD had embezzled the 100 million crowns given to JZD Slušovice: Czechoslovakia’s Communist Wonderland or Another “Potemkin Village”?  

51 FBIS: 1990: “President Havel’s 21 Aug Speech Criticized”
it by the state to build the highway. Čuba repeatedly explained that in fact the regional authorities had taken 40 million of that, the district 60 million, and so the JZD had ended up building it with its own money.\(^{52}\) As for those delegations, whose visits filled up pages of informants’ reports to the StB, Čuba was quick to point out that not once did the JZD receive any monetary compensation for putting up these (often government-invited) guests. A general criminal investigation into the cooperative followed—more thorough than any of the inspections carried out under communism—and while both Čuba and the former JZD were accused of various economic crimes, none of them stuck.

To complicate this yet more, there is the question of archives, of documents that might begin to untangle the tangled “veins” of which Havel spoke in 1990. For anyone used to working on the 1970s and 1980s, finding materials that offer up any real information is always a challenge: but in the case of JZD AK Slušovice, simply finding materials, regardless of their usefulness, is the real challenge. The Prague National Archives possess a noticeable lack of anything but the most banal and administrative documents on Slušovice. The regional archive in Zlín lost its critical documents in the 1980s when a water pipe burst: in one of the surviving files, there is a photograph of a truck, its doors open, revealing fat, bloated folders of papers tossed on top of one another, like retrieved carcasses. In the 1990s, the Zlín archivists sent one request after another to Čuba asking him to hand over documents long overdue. They are still waiting. According to the archivists, even as head of Slušovice, not being one for Prague-mandated rules, Čuba never sent copies of documents to Prague, as was required: which probably explains their absence in the National Archives.

Was Slušovice for real then or not? What can one make of this remarkable story of economic success, of an island existing within the swell of normalization-era incompetence and backwardness? The one archive that Čuba could not influence was the archive of the Secret Police, which is not to say that Čuba could not influence the StB itself (there are many suspicions on this front too) but that ultimately these documents—with all their flaws and caveats—could not be as readily burned, flooded, or vanished. In a 1983 document, the StB refers to the special status awarded to the JZD the year before, and wonders how this new status might in fact add to the influence of those purged from the Party whom Čuba had welcomed in.53 A 1987 Secret Police report goes further, outlining exceptions granted to this JZD by the regional party organs as early as 1977.54

That Čuba might not then be telling the whole truth is not particularly astonishing; what is far more interesting is the version of Slušovice these former Security files reveal. It was indeed a place of ingenuity, of breaking rules, of keeping employees happy, of wining and dining foreign business and political visitors; but most of all it was a place of tremendous—if crafty, and often illegal—innovation. Slušovice offered a space in which this could be practiced, even if it meant breaking rules and laws that were seen by Čuba and his management team as obstacles first and foremost, as something to get around, as something to create entire departments to learn to bypass. The semi-official anthem, Slušovice Romance, thus tells the tale more accurately than one might imagine at first: “If it goes on like this, the last business deal Slušovice will make is to sell us back our gasoline…For Christmas, Slušovice has prepared a generous present for the republic:

54 ABS, Prague: Gottwaldov a Slušovice; RC_26769_BR_dil_2_cast_2_0269; 2 March 1987; “ROZBOR: Situace v JZD Agrokombinát Slušovice.”
they will give people a chunk of their Swiss bank account, and from Prague to Slušovice there’ll be one long line….I end the song, for what more is there to say, except that Slušovice is most certainly an earthly paradise. I’d bet my right arm that in his grave, old Bat’a is quietly giggling.”