Fellow Travelers on the Road to Consumer Society

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Abstract: The invasive arrival of consumerist options in Eastern Europe after the collapse of socialist economies of shortage in 1989-90 has affected many aspects of people's lives, including their values, identities, economic (and consumption) strategies, and family relations. In the Czech Republic, seniors habituated to socialist life ways particularly struggle with adjusting to new and unfamiliar norms. The demand conditioned under socialism for intergenerational solidarity within the family, in the form of pooling resources and providing in-kind assistance, has gradually disappeared, while time-honored efforts by seniors to remain helpful to their offspring are encountered with lukewarm response or even open disapproval, often leading to or exacerbating intergenerational conflict. Ironically, among seniors, relief from frustrations over the erosion of family ties is sought within the realm of capitalist consumerism. Older Czechs find a degree of purpose and agency in sales tours (předváděčky[1]), which serve not only as a site of capitalist consumption, but just as importantly as a platform for redefining identity and group. This study of seniors' shopping ideas and practices and their offsprings' response to them illustrates profound shifts in postsocialist consumption culture. It further sheds light on qualitative changes in late life in a structurally altered society and provides insight into newly emerging trends for this demographic group, among them the eclipse of intergenerational family relations by newly formed ties of friendship and support within peer cohorts.

Keywords: post-socialism, consumerism, seniors, generational conflict, economy of gratitude

Introduction

"What are you up to tomorrow, Granma?" – "I go for a *předváděčka* with Beck," replies my eighty-one-year-old grandmother with a sparkle of excitement in her eyes, which she hides in a flash on noticing my curious glance. During the ten or more years since she started participating in sales tours, my grandmother and her fellow seniors have learnt to mask their shopping-traveling adventures in order to avoid sneers, deprecation, and the reproach of their families. "I wouldn't go, but Horáčková[2] has already signed us up," she tells me. "You know, she never went anywhere when her husband was still alive, so now she tries to catch up…" My grandmother's rushed explanation sounds more like an excuse than an act of altruism towards her unfortunate acquaintance. Back then, in April 2007, she and her neighbor, both of whom had been widows for years, were setting out for another sales tour, their second that month. And so were hundreds of other seniors all around the country who were embarking on these quite peculiar tours combining recreation and shopping.[3]

Camouflaging their participation in otherwise much-appreciated sales tours is a defensive response by seniors to frequent confrontations with their offspring who deem *předváděčky* manipulative, obsolete, and wasteful.[4] Because they almost exclusively target seniors, sales tours instigate considerable familial conflict that highlights a pronounced generational lag in the adaptation to the emerging habits of mind of consumer capitalism. Although relatively insignificant in larger economic terms, the tensions generated by sales tours bring to light a number of transitional social processes occurring in the postsocialist Czech Republic. Thus, while the bulk of younger Czechs have become avid consumers, seniors have had a more difficult transition, and examining their attitudes and responses to the new market provides a unique opportunity for considering the social and cultural costs and consequences of the

headlong rush to consumer capitalism. The underlying assumption here is that retired people who spent most, if not all, of their productive lives under state socialism, have retained many old habits and only grudgingly let them go. Czech public discourse largely ignores seniors, partially because they represent the reverse side to the success story associated with building 'market democracy'. But seniors' attitudes and practices related to shopping present a golden (and quickly disappearing) opportunity to identify and examine past mentalities and the social-change processes by which these evolve.

The consumer choices and meanings which different age groups attach to them would not be such an issue were it not for the way in which present generational divisions contradict symbiotic 'consumption' – or, perhaps better said, 'survival' - strategies inherited from generation to generation during the era of state socialism (Kornai 1980, Wedel 1992). Of course, the new generational dissonance in consumption preferences could be serenely tolerated by the actors involved provided that each family member shopped for themselves and limited their generosity towards their family members to cash or gift certificates. But family dilemmas develop because seniors, in compliance with their sense of intergenerational solidarity born of economic conditions of market shortages, direct their savings and shopping choices towards their offspring who only lukewarmly accept or outright reject these unwanted manifestations of generosity. Adopting Arlie Hochschild's concept of an "economy of gratitude," in particular her notion of "gift misgiving" and "gift misreceiving" (2003), we can observe in the intergenerational clashes over sales tours comparable tensions over the meaning of exchanges in changing economic circumstances. The disappearing model of elders supporting and providing for younger members of their families is particularly tough on seniors who are deprived of the role they had expected to play in the later years of their lives, along with a more general loss in socioeconomic status.[5] Yet, even though seniors in postsocialist countries are often viewed as unfortunate 'transformation losers' (Kornai 2006, Večerník 1994), their affinity in the Czech Republic for sales tours suggests their ability to adapt to new societal conditions. Sales tours bring together the strange bedfellows of pleasure and humiliation, immense expenditures and free-riding, cooperation and cunning. While old habits might occasionally cause them to feel guilty for *enjoying* rather than *laboring* in their leisure, seniors' embrace of this new lifestyle can be interpreted as a way to reconnect with the majority society. When the direct marketing industry formulaically designs sales tours for seniors on the premise that this demographic group represents an exploitable survival of the 'socialist customer' and when media outlets preach about the victimization of seniors by the direct marketing industry, both sides vastly oversimplify the phenomenon of sales tours and underestimate the agency and resourcefulness of today's elderly.

Method

The sales tours I observed typically involve daylong bus excursions to nearby tourist destinations. Organized by retail companies, these tours require their participants to spend a significant part of their time listening to marketing pitches and product demonstrations. For an ethnographer, these tours serve as an ideal venue for studying one relatively marginal but revealing area in which the old habits of socialism (embodied in the actions of seniors) collide with new market practices of capitalism (represented both by the salesmen who pitch their products to the seniors and the children and grandchildren waiting back at home to rebuke their elders for the purchases they have made). The intimacy of sales tours, especially lengthy bus

rides with participants, provided invaluable insights into seniors' ideas about consumption, as well as their more general thoughts on relations with their offspring, and many other themes. While I have heard many references to "the old times" and treated them as relevant information, conclusions presented here are not dependent on seniors' memories, which can selectively romanticize past times.

I participated in six such events in several locations around the country, as well as several product demonstrations before this period of concentrated research. I also analyzed contents of leaflets, correspondence, and other documentation mailed by retailers in the sales tours industry to their potential clients to get a better sense of what assortment of goods and marketing strategies these companies use. Websites where Internet users debate their experience with sales tours were also useful sources, even though comments appearing on these sites could not be controlled for any socio-demographic characteristics.[6] Additionally, I conducted fourteen in-depth interviews with people living in different parts of the Czech Republic who participated in sales tours and had several dozen conversations with middle-aged and young people whose relatives have engaged in sales tours.

Sales Tours

Sales tours evolved from formerly home-based or locally organized product demonstrations that were popular among many Czechs in the early 1990s, a period of pioneering and often primitive forms of retail marketing. As younger cohorts abandoned direct sales for a more competitive or simply broader assortment of retail options found in department stores, 'big box' stores, specialty boutiques, and shopping malls, direct marketers were compelled to reorient their businesses and focused their attention on potentially more promising (because more malleable) customers for whom they coined the formula of sales tours. Seniors are most often invited to participate in 'free-of-charge' or low-fee bus trips through leaflets that appear in their mailboxes. Comfortable buses bring groups of seniors from different parts of the country together to a selected destination where, typically in an old-fashioned local restaurant or pub, participants – usually numbering between seventy and a hundred and fifty - spend the bulk of their time sitting through product demonstrations, which culminate in strong-armed efforts by sales personnel to sell the featured goods.

Sales tours are explicitly targeted at retired people. They take place during workdays and virtually all participants are over 60. Arguably, isolation from other family members mitigates the moderating influence that family members might exert. Much of the featured assortment, which has barely changed over the years, is typically imported from (though not necessarily manufactured in) *Western* countries. The items most often offered for sale are *household appliances* that can be potentially used by all household members, including dish sets, induction hotplates, kitchen or barbecue utensils, vacuum cleaners, multifunctional steam irons, and the like. Multiple products target elderly customers by promoting *health-enhancing qualities*, including massaging mattresses that are supposed to ease back pain and "anti-electro-smoke" comforters, which, at least according to one informant, are able to reduce the parlous effect of electric waves on the human body. Retailers typically celebrated health-advancing effects as an added value to otherwise practical merchandise. Sometimes, however, when sales do not go as smoothly as desired salespersons ratchet up their sales pitches. In one typical exhortation I witnessed, the salesperson, extolling the benefits of a €3,000 vacuum cleaner, accused his audience of saving money at the expense of the health of their loved ones: "I don't know about

you, ladies and gentlemen, but I wouldn't regret spending any amount of money for this water-filter vacuum cleaner if it might help my three-year-old daughter's asthma."[7]

It became apparent from my conversations with seniors that they value technologies less for comfort, design, or the number of functions an appliance can perform, than for their cost savings. In their discussions, economy rather than environmental concerns are at issue, and ironically, they are often prepared to pay excessive sums for appliances that promise these long-term savings, even if they would be unlikely to amortize the high initial cost over their remaining lifetimes. It is thus astounding to see penurious seniors willing to pay 10,000 Czech crowns (CZK, €1 equaled CZK 28) for a hollow-fiber comforter, CZK 30-40,000 for a set of dishes, or CZK 90,000 (€3,200!) for a Rainbow water-filter vacuum cleaner. Most shockingly, many of these extravagant acquisitions, once purchased, are never or only sporadically used, on the assumption that anything so expensive should be kept "good as new". In other instances I heard about, purchases are set aside because elderly buyers cannot decipher the attached instructions once the product is at home, and the purchaser is embarrassed to ask for help from younger relatives who are also likely to be critical that the product was bought in the first place. Sometimes seniors purchase products for others, but for a variety of reasons I will discuss later, these goods fail to arrive at their intended destination.

After the official marketing and sales part of the program, customers are offered a free or subsidized lunch, followed by entertainment that might range from a brass band concert to visiting a medieval castle or zoo, going on a boat trip, or attending a garden show. The incorporated cultural events are intended to increase the attractiveness of the trip. A similar function can be attributed to the gifts that are distributed to every participant at the end of product demonstrations, regardless of whether a person purchased anything. These 'tokens' are presented as "an expression of the company's respect for its valued customers," in the words of one salesman, but appear to be intended to induce sufficient guilt in seniors that they will make purchases. In line with the logic of direct sales, gifts reinforce advertisements and are expected to spread positive word of mouth.

In general, the gifts handed out by sales tour personnel are usually low-quality knives, cheap travel irons, do-it-yourself knitting kits, washing detergents, salamis, and bottles of inexpensive (but foreign!) table wine. Amusingly, when waiting in a line for my gift, earned by dint of attending a sales tour, I noticed that veteran participants dryly assumed that the gifts about to be distributed would be of marginal value. Regardless, everyone invariably lined up to receive their bottles of sour wine, soon-to-be-broken alarm clocks, or the fourth mixer for their kitchens. Having a consumer *habitus* cultivated under state socialism, seniors eagerly accept whatever gifts are offered on the assumption that there is always someone in the family who might make use of them, there is always a Christmas or birthday coming up, or there is always someone who might need to be paid 'in-kind' for some service rendered or gift received (so why not with a spare mixer then?).

Old and New Ways of Consuming

The success of sales tours, which is linked to their continued popularity among seniors, depends on the ability of the marketers to adapt this particular capitalist business to the *habitus* of socialist consumerism that the seniors perpetuate. In that respect, examining the choices in the assortment of products and their marketing and recognizing the receptiveness to the products and marketing pitches by seniors provide a useful lens for examining the survival and transformation

of consumer strategies developed under socialism. Offering previously unknown and in former socialist countries widely 'fetishized' Western goods[8] - for which, as Gurdon and his colleagues put it, consumers had "no experiences but high expectations" (1999:5) – was an obvious way for companies, many of which are branches of Western corporations, to tap into the Eastern European market. Featuring products of *collective consumption* that benefit the whole family rather than satisfying individual consumption desires reflects a marketing appeal based on older patterns of consumption that emphasized the survival and success of the group over the enjoyment and pleasure of the individual. Limited financial resources and, even more profoundly, restricted consumer supply compelled people prior to 1989 to seek long-lasting commodities. In this sense, seniors' favoring *the durable* over the fashionable might not relate so much to the frugality of the elderly[9] as to deeply rooted routines developed in times when buying a color television or washing machine, those longstanding symbols of status and achievement, was for a family the event of a decade.[10] While savvy consumers might view planned obsolescence as a welcome rationale for upgrading their material possessions (Schor 1998), for seniors in postsocialist Czech Republic value is still associated with infrangibility.

The entire 'shopping' atmosphere of *předváděčky*, which is an event to be experienced *en masse* rather than individually and in stripped-down environment, seems to mesh with seniors' comfort level cultivated in the past. In line with the socialist logic of "less luxury but available to all", modest stores and their organization created an environment where customers were never by themselves. Unlike today's huge supermarkets which produce individualized and lonely shoppers, unpretentious and spare socialist department stores and, even more commonly, undersized street stores dominated by a counter, behind which a shop assistant served queued clients, resulted in the cultivation of shopping as a collective endeavor and social event. Not only were people buying the same products due to the lack of choice, but waiting in a line or encountering other customers at a shelf in a crowded store supported a shopping culture of sharing space, in which people socialized, exchanged information and gossip, and consulted on the (un)availability of different goods. While shared deprivation could produce positive experiences for consumers in terms of collective solidarity, it was also the case that consumers would sometimes engage in bitter competition for the limited goods available and suffered frequent rude encounters with store employees who were not encouraged to affect a friendly front with their customers (Merkel 1998).

Providing "free travel" exploits the pattern whereby customers, habituated under socialism to paying for goods, were unwilling to pay for services. In this sense, it is more useful to consider seniors' old expenditure habits rather than measure their actual financial situation in order to understand the seeming absurdity of seniors' being drawn by the prospect of free travel to participate in sales tours, during which they will be forced to listen to interminable sales pitches and sometimes coerced into spending the equivalent of hundreds, and occasionally even thousands, of euros. The popularity of sales tours over regular tours is due to the assumption of participants that they will not have to disburse money for the trip they are taking, which thereby keeps intact, at least in a nominal sense, their habitual disdain for paying a fee for service. During the era of state socialism, basic commercial services were deficient or, in some cases, non-existent on the official market, and individuals compensated for the paucity of such services as auto repair, hairdressing, and home plumbing mostly through self-help or exchange with neighbors and acquaintances (Pawlik 1992, Berdahl 1999, Haukenes and Pine 2003). As a result, goods and services were treated as features of entirely segregated spheres, with only the former properly commoditized and attainable on the official market, while the latter were generally and

preferentially exchanged rather than purchased**,** and often took on value as a means of demonstrating the personal talent of the individual skilled at accomplishing all manner of tasks while expending little or no cash (Berdahl 1999, Haukanes and Pine 2003).[11]

As a leisure time activity and segment of the service sector, travel had a distinctive position in the state socialist setting. Privately, travels were sought-after by a (mostly urban) population as a means of social and physical escape, but prior to 1989 options and destinations of travel were controlled and extremely limited. Consequently, in order to desert their clogged block apartments and gain some release from the pent-up resentments at their lack of civil freedoms, city dwellers set off every available weekend and vacation for their own, their relatives', or their friends' rural bungalows and country houses, known as *chata'*s and *chalupa*'s[12]. Typically reachable within a 30-60 minute drive, these 'getaways' represented the dominant mode of private travel,[13] since the high cost and limited availability of gas, inadequate accommodations, and closed borders stifled other forms of individually initiated travel.[14]

To the extent that people took other, more ambitious trips, they usually favored collectivized state-sponsored "theme" vacations (overseen by state enterprises through union organizations, the most important of which was ROH,[15] and often dispensed as a reward for achievement in the workforce) over commercial tourism due to their low cost (Williams and Baláž 2000). In order to join heavily subsidized ROH trips which often took them to attractive destinations, participants were willing to tolerate the propaganda that was invariably part of such trips or that provided the ostensible organizing framework for particular trips (e.g., sightseeing excursions whose theme might be the "glories of communist architecture" or visiting factories in a partner foreign city). In the atmosphere of those times, when practical jokes constituted a form of passive resistance to the regime, participants turned the propaganda tour or vacation stays into a caricature, as the cinema of the period sometimes managed to reveal.[16] In this light, current sales tours can be understood as a capitalist re-invention of socialist era tours in a number of senses. In both the prior socialist and contemporary capitalist contexts, tourists, under the pretext of receiving a 'free' reward, are required to pay for their reward by enduring hours of indoctrination. Likewise, tourists on both socialist leisure and capitalist sales tours often had to accept without complaint humiliating treatment at the hands of their 'guides.' Finally, in both situations, participants, as will be discussed below, find quiet ways to sabotage, or at least deflect, the programmatic aspirations of the tour leaders, whether they are related to instilling communist precepts or making sales.

Intergenerational Conflict over Consumption

While sales tours provide a window into some of the ways that older Czechs preserve the socialist *habitus* of consumption under the new conditions of market capitalism, these half-shopping-half-entertainment excursions also delineate points of tension and confusion at the very core of Czech society – the family unit itself. In analyzing these contemporary social strains, it is critical to acknowledge that what happens *around* sales tours is as perplexing and anthropologically meaningful as what happens *on* them. While the decision to go on a sales tour ostensibly indicates a senior's personal and independent action, its 'consequences' often affect others. Simple conversations between family members about the value and legitimacy of sales tours can turn into arguments over priorities and responsibilities within the family, but even more intense conflicts arise when seniors return from trips after having made unexpected purchases that might seem extravagant and wasteful to other family members.

In making sense of the intergenerational disagreements associated with sales tours, it is important to emphasize the novelty that post-retirement travel represents in Czech society. Travel after retirement was uncommon, not only because of financial and health concerns (Williams and Baláž 2000), but also because seniors were enmeshed in the ongoing web of family life through the variety of services they provided, including cooking, the home-production of clothing, house repair, babysitting for grandchildren, and vegetable gardening[17]. Strong *intergenerational solidarity*, regardless whether voluntarily embraced or involuntarily suffered by seniors, was an indispensable advantage in an economy of shortage and was at the center of a set of socially expected and unquestioned moral obligations binding seniors and their offspring (Kornai 1980, Verdery 1996, Haukanes and Pine 2003, Smith and Stenning 2006).

The times and family dynamics, however, have changed. As I demonstrated elsewhere (Rulíková 1998), Czech families' economic and social strategies dramatically shifted after the advent of the free market. With the immediate influx of goods of many kinds, it became more reasonable and desirable to engage in cash-generating activities, e.g., moonlighting, working overtime, taking second jobs, or starting one's own business. The epicenter of economic activity for most families was pushed from domestic production to the public labor market, with a consequent erosion of shared family time and ties.

While practical expressions of family support remain rather strong within Czech families, expectations of material and emotional support from home are in decline, especially among the youngest generation. According to findings from an extensive quantitative research study on intergenerational solidarity in the Czech Republic, the youngest cohorts operate increasingly as autonomous individuals who "... demarcate their private life independently from their family" (Možný *et al*. 2004: 21). Longitudinal demographic and sociological data further testify to increased individualization and diversification in the intimate lives of the young (Tomášek 2006, Možný 2008). Most significantly, for the youngest cohorts, new lifestyle opportunities – pursuit of career, international travel, and a seemingly inexhaustible variety of entertainment and individualized consumption options – provide attractive alternatives to family life, and many young adults are choosing – as in the West – to postpone starting families of their own or even foregoing marriage and raising children altogether (Chaloupková and Šalamounová 2007). While productive cohorts were compelled to adapt quickly to the new social and economic order following the collapse of the socialist order, seniors have sailed the wild waters of transition at a different, slower pace. Shut out from their traditional role as active and productive family contributors (perhaps with the exception of babysitting), seniors often feel left behind and left out.[18]

Seniors responded by shifting the cultural imperative of assisting their offspring from providing more common labor, time and home produced objects to providing purchased goods. Thus, where retired women had previously knitted sweaters or plucked feathers in order to make comforters for their daughters' and granddaughters' dowry, they set off on sales tours with the intention of purchasing sets of knives, dishes, or anti-allergic blankets with the same aim of building their offspring's dowries or helping them with purchases they might not otherwise, according to the seniors, be able to afford. Indeed, the vast majority of my informants confessed that they shop primarily for their children or grandchildren. As one informant noted, "I buy only for my children. I don't need such fancy dishes. I am happy with the set I have. And it's been with me since my wedding!"

Whereas the general shift from providing labor, production and care to acquiring commodities can be interpreted in terms of 'cooling intimacy' (Illouz 2007) or 'purchasing

intimacy' (Zelizer 2005) in the sense that it represents an intrusion of commodity relations within the family unit, it can also be seen as an example of seniors' perhaps futile attempt to retain their traditional resourceful role while recognizing new ways in which it can be demonstrated. The tendency of seniors to use sales trips as an opportunity to purchase goods for their offspring is in accord with Miller's theory of shopping (1998) which outlines a practice whereby initial sacrifice (denial of immediate wants and needs to save for a future purchase) followed by extravagant gift-giving expresses the giver's care and concern for the receiver. In the case of elderly people, Miller additionally argues that shopping for the younger generation is undertaken without thought to reciprocal return and is intended as "a devotional gift to the future", which also legitimizes the past (1998:102). Miller indirectly takes issue with the perspective of scholars like Illouz (2007) and Zelizer (2005) who see shopping as increasingly a solitary pursuit of hedonistic enjoyment and personal gain of late capitalist societies. The argument presented here is that while senior sales trip shopping has the "sacrificial" quality discussed by Miller, their orientation is under attack and increasingly unsustainable given the more individualistic and self-interested approach to consumption evident in younger cohorts. Thus, the habit of seniors of making unasked-for purchases for absent family members collides with the consumption choices of younger generations who, as 'beneficiaries', disapprove of or look down on the "practical" product choices of their (grand)parents, and prize making their own individual decisions on purchases in accordance with personal style and brand loyalties that have been gradually developed and polished since the fall of socialism. As one woman in her mid-forties noted in an oft-encountered refrain:

> We are so unhappy with our mother! She never tells [us] anything, goes on those trips, and then comes back with all that junk which she is so excited about. I told her we don't want it. You know you can buy the comforters in any specialized store these days, and for much cheaper. But she says that it is not the same quality. I don't know what to do with her. I would like her to spend her pension money on herself, enjoy life. But no, no, no…

The aftertaste of disagreement between relatives over sales tour purchases is especially bitter for the beneficiaries given the steady pauperization of seniors. In the context of the general changing balance of purchasing power between the younger and older generations, it is both awkward and guilt-inducing in the younger generation to see seniors, currently the poorest social group in the country, keep buying overpriced goods for their professionally active and for the most part better-off younger family members. The problem is exacerbated by a communication gap as increasingly seniors seem to have only a vague understanding of the financial condition of their relatives.

Aware of their elders' efforts to help, beneficiaries find themselves at an impasse: on the one side, they feel guilty that their elderly relatives deprive themselves in order to purchase expensive, low-quality and undesired appliances; on the other side, they do not want to offend their benefactors by rejecting presents:

> We don't really talk about money with my granny or uncles and aunts anymore. Not that it is a secret or that we are rich and want to hide it from others, but each one is doing differently and we don't want to bring up what separates us. My granny always asks me if I have enough money. And I say, 'Yes, granny, you don't need to worry.' But then she still goes and brings me 500 crowns so that nobody sees it. She tells me to buy what I need. And it's so hard. I know I will please her when I accept the money, but you know... it's embarrassing to know that she saves so hard for a moment like this...[pause]... And then I go and pay 1500 crowns for my haircut..." (a twenty-seven year old student from Prague whose grandmother lives in a small town in Moravia)

Several middle aged informants disclosed to me that it took them years before they finally intervened and ordered their parents not to buy them any more stuff, or even made them return purchases. In some cases of this sort, seniors were relieved to have to return items, because they realized with regret that they had been tricked or had acted impulsively in making a purchase. Purchase returns are by and large carried out with the assistance of the offspring (which can, only half-facetiously, be interpreted as an inverted form of intergenerational solidarity, helping disoriented seniors adapt to aggressive market practices).

Seniors themselves are generally not knowledgeable about their consumers' rights and are also not as assertive in expressing their dissatisfaction. Age difference in voicing or not voicing consumer complaints suggests that this tendency might also be explained in relation to the senior generation's early life experience under state socialism. According to Kolarska and Aldrich (in Gurdon *et al.* 1999), in their extended application of Hirschman's exit-loyalty-voice theory, people under state socialist regimes have tended to react, for the most part, passively – that is with "silence" – to the abuse that they suffered at the hands of authorities and retailers alike. Whether out of fear or resignation, people tended to articulate complaints within the safe confines of home and not in public. This attitude of passive acceptance at being a victim, and of writing off mistreatment on the part of manufacturers and retailers as simply "bad luck," or "the way it is" began to disappear soon after the demise of the centrally-dictated economy (Gurdon *et al.* 1999). However, while younger cohorts might feel confident in expressing their dissatisfaction with mistreatment or shoddy products, the active expression of such complaints is still difficult for most seniors. Similarly, just as seniors tend to avoid complaining, they also sometimes seek to avoid domestic arguments about wasteful shopping by storing or hiding the expensive appliances in a garage or at the bottom of a dresser (where are already stored yet to be presented dowry gifts for grandchildren yet to be married).

In making sense of the intergenerational tensions that the study of sales tours reveals (and the still preliminary, though suggestive evidence of changing family relations generally), Hochschild's concept of an "economy of gratitude" involving "misgiving" and "misreceipt" of gifts is especially useful (2003). She understands "gift" in the broader sense of any given object or action that extends regular expectations (of a donor and a benefactor) as regards social exchange. In her words, a gift is something "extra", even though in double-earner families it might include something as trivial as washing a dog or performing other domestic chores. Drawing on Hochschild's analysis of the difficulties faced by husbands and wives in negotiating a balance between traditional gender roles and the new pressures brought about by women's participation in the labor market and the disparity in how men and women interpret their separate contributions to the household, it can be argued that the transformation of the socialist economy has led to the principal axis of tension lying across generational rather than gender lines.

Hochschild argues that the misunderstandings that cause difficulties in marriages in the U.S. are the product less of individual traits than of more profound social forces, i.e., the mounting gender gap in expectations about division of labor at home, career sacrifices, and the like. Men in a modern capitalist society only unwillingly surrender their power and prestige to market-achieving women and often interpret the compromises they make to the household economy as a "gift" to their wives, so that when – from their perspective – that "gift" remains unappreciated, resentment and misunderstandings ensue. In an analogous fashion, one can see in the often tense relations between generations in the Czech Republic a similar 'gratitude clash' resulting from each side trying to "help out" family members across the generational divide but failing to understand what help is most appropriate or desired by family members whose actions are based on motivations and cultural assumptions that the other side increasingly is unable to understand.

Sales Tours as a New Lifestyle

In order to fully explain the phenomenon and longevity of sales tours in the Czech Republic, it is critical to realize that, as sales tours have evolved, they have helped seniors fill in the gap that was created as a result of their disconnected contacts with children and grandchildren and their feeling of marginalization in the majority society. In this context, sales tours are opportunities for seniors, often widows or widowers, to renegotiate their identity and group.

As disclosed to me during scattered conversations on the bus, many elderly neighbors and acquaintances set out on tours jointly, notifying each other about upcoming events, registering together, debating about the quality and desirability of products, and most recently also providing each other with tips on how to resist salesmen's attempts to force unwanted purchases on them. All of these activities contribute to creating new informal support groups, and sometimes, even *friendships*. It should be noted that while this late modern, mostly urban, trend of supplementing or compensating family with a network of friends has been observed among young Czechs (Tomášek 2006, 2008, Možný 2008), a proper study of friendships among seniors has been missing[19]. Observations from my fieldwork seem to suggest that a similar trend of substituting family with friends and acquaintances is taking place among seniors. It needs to be emphasized though that, when directly asked about their openness to meeting people, seniors usually seemed embarrassed to admit their attraction to new groups. My informants by and large downplayed the quality and intensity of these contacts. As one woman in her early sixties remarked to me, "Oh yes, we've known each other for quite some time. You know, there are always the same people coming to sales tours. But we never really keep any contacts with one another outside of our trips." While I do not have sufficient evidence to offer a definitive explanation for this (rather common) type of response, I would argue that guilt over reorienting their affection from family kin, dictated by old habits of family-centered assistance, might be one reason why seniors downplay the importance of these connections.

Another obvious sense one acquires on a sales tour is that the rhetorical style of product demonstrations and the interactions accompanying them resembles the atmosphere of a social club. Thus, while doing their best to convince the audience of the merits of Teflon pans or super-efficient induction hotplates, salesmen also offered recipes that promote healthier nutrition and economical meal preparation. Seniors are likewise encouraged to share their own examples of culinary magic. When cleaning products are featured on the program, the salesmen quiz the audience on how to get rid of certain kinds of stains, and arguments break out in the room over

the best techniques, along with discussions on how to enhance sleep or treat a particular illness or pain. These salesmen-led discussions are a true pell-mell, ranging from 'granny's old-fashioned' cures to learning about the virtues of new technologies, and remind one of the inventive multifunctionality of objects under socialism. (To my amazement, I learnt that lanolin, originally designed to soften cloth, can also rejuvenate an aging leather coat; what is more, it can also alleviate psoriasis and varicose veins!)

According to my informants, sales tours, over their fifteen year history, have gradually turned from straightforward trade ventures between friendly salesmen and unsophisticated senior customers into intensive efforts by overbearing marketers to convince ever more cautious and cash-strapped customers to buy goods that they neither need nor desire. At the same time, seniors have not been without leverage in these transactions, and both the marketers and their potential customers mobilize a set of strategies that keeps sales tours sufficiently lucrative for the companies sponsoring them. The unwritten law of both retailers and seniors is to keep balance between commerce and entertainment. Originally this equation was easily achievable. Seniors, hungry for Western durable goods of superior quality, were shopping in droves, regardless of steep prices. In exchange, they enjoyed luxurious bus drives, free lunches, and - as my informants nostalgically recalled - the attention of smiling, caring vendors.

As their home supply of goods expanded, and facing disapproval from their families, along with shrinking savings, seniors gradually abandoned extravagant expenditures. Still, drawn especially by the travel, cultural programs, and the desire for social contact that was offered, seniors have not refrained from registering to attend free sales tours, even when they had no intention to make any purchases. On their end, when profits began to decline, retailers stiffened their marketing strategies. Interactions between retailers and seniors became a contest chase to outsmart the other side. Seniors are aware of the fact that in order to keep sales tours alive, they cannot always be saying "no", at least not straightforwardly and *en masse*, and somebody from the crowd has to purchase the products. Hence, they have creatively developed a variety of "maybe" and "maybe later" responses to the salesmen's strong-arm tactics in order to prolong retailers' hope for future profit:

> We already have six of these blankets. They are extraordinary, we know. And we are thinking about getting a pair for our daughter and her family. But you know, they have their own taste… Why don't you give me your "internet mail," and they will get in touch directly with you. But we will tell them that the blankets are superb… (A retired couple in their late sixties)

While many excuses were carefully prepared at home, last minute alibis are sometimes plotted jointly with friends in restrooms during coffee breaks. This 'customer solidarity' is, however, extended only to the close circle of "friends". Realizing that sustaining sales tours is conditioned by effectuated sales, participants oftentimes encourage newcomers or undecided acquaintances on trips (including me), to buy appliances with the hope that the retailers' continuing profits will lead to their offering future trips. And thus, what might be called viral marketing, i.e. informal 'chitchat' about popular products, is skewed by self-interest in making sure that sales tours continue. While the immediate objective is inverted, the logic of this behavior is similar to consumer practices under state socialism, for while the socialist reality of deficiencies required competition among customers (not retailers) and the winner (of a commodity) had to outsmart other customers to win the prize, sales tours in this declining

capitalist niche feed competition between customers. In this case, however, the object is not to win the coveted object, but to convince other customers into buying goods one is not interested in so as to mollify the salesmen and perpetuate the event.

Despite increased sophistication in marketing, seniors often resist the entreaties of sales personnel to purchase big-ticket items. As a consequence, salesmen, who are salaried on a commission basis, often become distressed and aggressive towards the participating seniors (and often towards each other as well). In 'uncooperative' groups, seniors are occasionally locked in the presentation hall, and demonstrations are extended for long durations, even 7-8 hours in a row, with minimal breaks and lunch being postponed until late afternoon. When seniors protest these conditions, salespeople sometimes threaten to make the "excursionists" travel home in a taxi (an extravagant service that most seniors have never used in their lives), or they will refuse to allow seniors to get into the bus for the return trip home until a designated number of customers have bought a particular appliance. “There are always more than two salesmen and they watch us so that we don’t fall asleep. They act like ‘slave bosses’ (*raubíři*), but how can you not sleep if you've heard the same rubbish so many times?”, an eighty-three-year-old widow commented with laughter. “They also shut us up when we comment that the price is not as competitive as they claim. And they can be pretty rude," complained another. At the end of an unsuccessful sales session, I have seen seniors humiliated by being forced to wait outside in the rain in a long line to receive their promised gifts, all the time being subjected to taunts from the sales staff that they are abusing the good will and hospitality of the company by coming only to pick up their free gifts. “You guys here in Prague are pretty dirty, I must say”, commented one salesman when no one in the group was willing to buy a CZK 30,000 vacuum cleaner. “I hope that at least this washing powder improves your cleanliness,” he added sarcastically. Nearby, seniors pretended to miss the comment and hastily packed their gifts into their bags.

It is remarkable that despite this discomfort and humiliation many seniors are still willing to put up with such behavior. The reason, it seems, is that maltreatment is calculated as a 'necessary price' for having the opportunity to enjoy an active social life. Besides this pragmatism, the legacy of uncivil shopping experiences under socialism makes the entire venue feel less outrageous to seniors who well remember, and perhaps have been conditioned by, the constant humiliations that were an inevitable part of the process of acquiring goods (Kornai 1980, Merkel 1998). Waiting in long lines, sometimes over night, and bribing shop assistants, who - in compliance with socialist practice mentality - were usually brusque, if not rude, in their dealings with customers were everyday realities. Today’s seniors are still accustomed to the rule that they have to suffer before they acquire goods or - even more so - obtain a free gift. As a result, there is almost an expectation that, in order to buy high-tech desirable goods, they will have to endure such behavior. They are not happy with this state of affairs and resent the rudeness they are subjected to, but as under state socialism, they sleep it off and sign up for the next trip as soon as the opportunity is available (the same way they sleep off the criticisms of relatives who are not tolerant towards their willingness to go along with the rudeness of sales personnel).

Conclusion

Towards the end of my research, a leaflet inviting me to attend a *předváděčka* arrived in my mailbox. It promised that every participant would receive a two-pound loaf of ham and a five-pound box of washing powder, but at the end of the event, which I attended, we received only a

plastic tube of spam with an expiration date passed. Somebody at the back of the bus, which was half-empty, was loudly contemplating whether he should feed his dog from his tube of indistinguishable “stuff". A promised excursion to a garden show had left us viewing a lot of half-wilted flowers, and throughout the day, we had been forced to endure a barrage of insults from the sales tour personnel who were short-tempered from their lack of success selling to the seniors. From my seat on the bus, the moment seemed to symbolize the end of *an era*, a transitory period during which one generation of seniors was arduously searching to redefine their position in society and family as well as what the meaning of life for them might be in these new and unfamiliar social conditions. The 'dying interest' that one finds in sales tours is thus both a literal and figurative phenomenon: the seniors who spent their formative years and - in the case of the older seniors - the majority of their productive lives under socialism are not only exhausting their savings and hopes for being appreciated for their contributions to the family; they are also aging and becoming increasingly immobile. Each year more and more of them pass away, and with them go the habits developed under the communist regime.

This article has attempted to provide a snapshot of one aspect of the lives of this generation of seniors, 'victims of their times' who came of age during and after the calamitous events of the Second World War, spent most of their productive years under communism, and then were forced to adapt to the last two frenzied decades of postsocialist transformation. While most view the collapse of socialism as an unalloyed good, many seniors experienced the end of socialism as a time of tremendous insecurity during which they lost their financial stability and social status, as well as their plans for their retirement years. Instead of retiring to spend more time helping their families, they often saw their offspring depart on the high-speed train of moneymaking and conspicuous consumption. When their efforts to play by old roles failed, seniors tried to help in a different way that conformed with the new ethos of postsocialist consumption; however, this too failed to close the gaps in their families, as the gifts they purchase for family members were lukewarmly received - in Hochschild's terms "misreceived" - by the distracted younger generation who were preoccupied with their careers and disdainful of the out-of-fashion consumer choices of their elders. In the atmosphere of ever more diverging values and tastes between generations, "gift misgiving" symbolizes a deep transformation that is taking place in the Czech family. Realizing their diminishing importance to their kin group, seniors have been forced to adapt and have done so in their own way, discovering new identities, new groups with which to associate, new activities to give their lives meaning and enjoyment, and - several times a month - a degree of social agency. As has been shown throughout this article, seniors, in the end, are more than the 'victims of the times' in which they have lived. Those times have made them resilient and creative in turning small opportunities to their advantage. In the case of sales tours, which were invented to exploit their marginal savings, seniors have often, artfully managed to convert the 'non-market' cultural capital attained under socialism to their advantage. In this respect, getting a 'free ride' on a corporate bus might represent their ultimate achievement.

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Notes

I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of my grandmother Marie Řezníčková who made me aware of the intriguing and, for people my age, almost hidden world of sales trips and who promised to take me on one. She helped tremendously by reporting on her ventures and with collecting materials for my further analysis. Unfortunately, we did not make the trip that we planned to take together.

[1] I use the idiom 'sales tour' to translate the popular term "*předváděčka*" (sg.) – or "*předváděčky*" (pl.) - which is a shortened form of "*předváděcí akce*", i.e. "demonstration events". The English phrase, 'sales tour,' is thus slightly inaccurate. However, the travel component will be critical for the current analysis, and therefore I decided to employ this more loaded term.

[2] I have used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of my informants.

[3] In an attempt to compensate for the lack of data on seniors' participation on sales tours, I requested students in various university courses I have taught in the Czech Republic (totaling around sixty people) to investigate the topic among their grandparents. Roughly two-thirds of these students' grandparents had participated at least once in a product demonstration or sales tour. About a fifth of them confessed to regular participation. While conducting an informal survey among university students might suggest a class bias, interviews undertaken in the course of my fieldwork suggested that předváděčky attract seniors across a wide socioeconomic and cultural/educational spectrum. My elderly informants ranged from former diplomats to non-skilled workers, and it might be the case (though I was unable to verify it) that their different economic standing was reflected in the quantity of purchases made by different individuals. This apparently uniform engagement of Czech seniors in sales tours might be explained by the fact that the Czechoslovak population displayed the highest degree of socioeconomic homogeneity in the socialist bloc (Kerbo 2003).

[4] The condemnatory opinion of sales tours among younger cohorts is informed by multiple alerts from media, consumer organizations, and public inspectors who report on the maltreatment of seniors by sales tour organizers (Czech Trade Inspection www.coi.cz, Association for Consumer Protection http://www.spotrebitele.info).

[5] Seniors under socialism enjoyed more stable, if not superior, socioeconomic position as compared with their current situation of economic decline. Age seniority, along with party loyalty, used to be an important indicator determining job advancement, and corresponding salary and pensions were on a relative par with regular salaries (Večerník 1994). As rightly pointed out in a slightly different context, this socioeconomic degradation associated with weakened power and status in the broader family does not affect those seniors who successfully claimed assets through re-privatization (Thelen 2003).

[6] For example: zpovednice.cz (transl. confession), orbion.cz, christnet.cz. larry.cz.

[7] Given how frequently I heard different sales personnel refer to their children's asthma, I am led to conclude either that this illness is an occupational hazard encountered by family members of direct marketers or, more likely, that the "asthmatic child" sales trick was a staple of sales personnel training programs.

[8] For example, Merkel (1998), Berdahl (1999), Rausing (2002), or Ghodsee (2007). On survey evidence about how significant the information on product's country-of-origin is to customers in the Czech Republic, see Klenosky *et al*. (1996).

[9] A common strategy used to be and still is for this generation to scrimp on routine purchases (a practice neatly depicted in a mock documentary film *Czech Dream* by Vít Klusák and Filip Romunda (2004)), and to save meticulously in order to later buy durables of significant (for them) monetary and social value.

[10] In the context of post-socialist Russia, Shevchenko argues that, "strategies of acquiring and manipulating objects express more than acts of economic optimization or the articulation of class differences." In particular, the durable goods (refrigerators, television sets, etc.) in people's homes became associated with the particular eras in which they were purchased and consequently allowed consumers "to inscribe their past and present into a coherent narrative and thus create a meaningful story of their lives" (Shevchenko 2002: 158-159). The author further argues against the tendency to draw a direct line between consumption and investment spending. In the reality of Soviet, and even more so, the Russian economy of the 1990s, where inflation has so often devalued personal savings, buying a refrigerator or TV set can be interpreted as a preemptive measure for securing one's savings. Such an analogy would not carry over to the Czech context, however, which has not been burdened by heavy inflation and where a broader swath of the population has been able to participate in the new consumer economy (ibid).

[11] This is not to discount the existence of monetary exchange for goods and services in the second (underground) economy. However, it should be emphasized here that the importance of the second economy varied significantly among different socialist countries (Sampson 1986).

[12] Bren (2002) provides an insightful account of how the post-1968 Czechoslovak communist regime endorsed the escape to *chatas* as a means of pacifying social discontent by encouraging people to enjoy "the quiet [read apolitical] life" in the country, while also satisfying their material desires in the form of allowing the acquisition of private property, albeit in rural areas.

[13] In a country of 15 million inhabitants (roughly 70 percentage of whom lived in urban areas), there were reportedly 77,500 *chata's* and *chalupa's* (Williams and Baláž 2000).

[14] While the weekend houses across the communist block have been extensively documented as sites providing plots of land used for subsistence or source of status (see, for example, Lovell 2003, Zavisca 2003, or Caldwell 2010 for the context of Russian "*datchas*"), literature on the functions and meaning of c*hata's* and *chalupa's* in Czechoslovakia supports their most crucial function as a site of recreation (Williams & Baláž 2000).

[15] ROH stands for Revolutionary Union Movement, and was the central union controlled by the state and Communist Party.

[16] Marek Piwowski's *Rejs* (1970), a Polish film, represents an outstanding absurdist/satirical comedy that focuses on this activity. In the Czechoslovak cinema, an illustration of the phenomenon of socialist collective travels, even though not up to the standard of Piworski's wit and absurdity, is Bořivoj Zeman's *Anděl na horách* (1955).

[17] In her ethnography of a rural community in Hungary during late socialism, Lampland even documents the absence of the category of leisure time and "absolute commitment to 'possessing activity'" among the retired population (i.e., an all-consuming and constructive use of one's labor), the lack of which was perceived as "a loss of social maturity or adulthood" (1995:318).

[18] This *family nuclearization* as a result of "cultural preference [to] westernize and, at least for some, [declining] economic pressure" has also been observed in other postsocialist countries (Ahmed and Emigh in Smith and Stenning 2006:199).

[19] Jessica Robbins pays some attention to friendships among elderly in the post-socialist world and has noticed shifts in social ties among older people in Poland (Robbins forthcoming). Her observations were made in the context of elderly associated with a long-term rehabilitation center and, what she terms, "a university of the third age."