



Account of Residence in Czech Republic

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1. Introduction

I was assigned to work for KYB Manufacturing Czech s.r.o (hereinafter "KMCZ") as an expatriate for five years between April 2016 and April 2021. Before the assignment, I had been involved in the shock absorber (SA)-related quality support operation in Japan for overseas sites and in charge of ASEAN projects even while I had been preparing for the assignment. Actually, I had never been to KMCZ before. Although I had to begin my work for KMCZ rather suddenly with no specific information available, home is where you make it. I eventually developed personally thanks to a variety of experiences over those five years.

Looking back, I will outline my life there. You know many predecessors who had been sent to the Czech Republic have already talked about tourist attractions and local cuisine, but there are still many other interesting places and stories. I hope you enjoy reading my essay.

2. Information about Czech Republic

Before 1993, the Czech Republic used to be part of Czechoslovakia along with its current neighbor Slovakia. I remember in my childhood the Czech ambassador stepping onto the Sumo wrestling ring on the last day of each tournament (Senshuraku) and read out loud "hyo-sho-jo, anta-wa-erai !" in Japanese (meaning "congratulations, you are the winner") while handing a huge Bohemian glass cup to the champion. Bohemian glass is still one of the famous specialty products of the Czech Republic. Featuring high transparency and hardness, Bohemian glass used to be used for the stained glass in churches and is popularly used in a wide range of applications including flower vases and drinking glasses.

The Czech Republic is a landlocked country bordered by Germany to the west, Poland to the north, Austria to the south, and Slovakia to the southeast. Located in the center of Europe, the country is at a latitude roughly equivalent to Hokkaido. It is very cold in winter. In middle February, the temperature is below -10°C for several consecutive days. When I was in the Czech Republic, I always stayed indoors on weekends during the winter season, except going out for shopping, to spend comfortable hours in warm rooms where the temperature was

controlled by a central heating system. On the contrary, the summer is comfortable with low humidity. You can spend the season without using air conditioners just by keeping the windows open.

The summer in the Czech Republic is the best season to drink beer. In front of restaurants on the street you can see tables, chairs and parasols where people can enjoy talking with their family and friends with a glass of beer in one hand. Speaking of beer, the Czech Republic is number one in the world in per capita beer consumption. Of course, the small country cannot be top in total beer consumption, but scores far ahead of others in per capita consumption. When I walked by a restaurant or bar in the early morning, I sometimes happened to see a beer tank truck parked alongside the building supplying more and more beer to the restaurant or bar. That made me understand how much beer customers drank in the restaurant last night. I recognized anew that Czechs really loved beer every time I saw such a scene.

The word Czech may also remind you of some famous traditional towns including several World Heritage sites. Not only in Prague, but also near Pardubice where I lived, there are many famous tourist sites such as Kutna Hora. The town used to prosper with silver mines and is still dotted with gorgeous traditional buildings.

Among them, the Church of St. Barbara and the Cathedral of Our Lady at Sedlec are particularly well-known. The Church of St. Barbara has Gothic architecture from the 13th to 15th centuries with various statues and paintings decorated inside the church. The historical building has three roofs at the center, around which there are several pointed columns.

The Cathedral of Our Lady at Sedlec is internally decorated using the bones of about 10,000 people. When you step into the cathedral, it is cool even during summer and may feel a little dusty. On the front of the gate there is an emblem. Inside the cathedral you can see a chandelier and several decorations on the wall. All of them are made of bones! You may be astonished by this way of using human bones, something that never happens in Japan.

Pardubice, where the KMCZ plant is located, is in East Bohemia and 100 km east of Prague. A famous event in this city is Velká pardubická, which is a cross-country

horserace or steeplechase held in October every year. Many tourists from everywhere in Europe visit the city to enjoy the race with a glass of wine in hand.

During my expat assignment in the Czech Republic, I lived in the center of Pardubice. I often ate at the plaza where the city hall was located or visited old castles nearby. The city hall was in a traditional building that had been renovated. The building exterior was decorated and lit up at night during seasonal events, which is popular among the citizens.

In addition, the Czech Republic has many other various tourist spots. Most Japanese tourists typically enter the Czech Republic from Prague and then travel to Austria via Český Krumlov.



Photo 1 Pardubice City Hall

3. KMCZ

KMCZ in 2016 finished with a plant expansion to the west (more than doubling from 15 thousand m² to 35 thousand m²) since 2015 and introduced additional assembly lines. The plant had started to increase production since FY2015. With an economic boom in the Czech Republic from around that time, the country enjoyed an increase in capital investment and private consumption year by year. As the jobless rate decreased and wages increased every year, some of the employees retired from KMCZ and tried to work at another workplace on slightly more favorable terms. One of my missions during the assignment was to find substitutes for those who retired.

KMCZ introduced another manual production line for assembling single-cylinder gas SAs and standard SAs in August 2016. As the third line, an ST welding and assembly line was introduced to steadily improve the production plan in December 2017. The plant shipped 3.70 million pcs/year in 2014 before the plant expansion increased the level to 5.70 million pcs/year in 2018. Thereafter, production has increased year by year, although shipments dropped in 2019 and 2020 partly because of the effect of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Currently, on the west side of the KMCZ plant is a loading dock to receive and ship finished products including tubes. Nearby is a storage space for finished products. To the southwest are tube/rod machining lines and part warehouses. The expanded area was mainly used as a finished product yard and a preliminary machining space. To the east of the plant are an internal valve assembly line, a standard SA assembly line, and a strut SA assembly line. The production system is designed to transfer finished products to the finished product yard to the west.

KMCZ has about 700 employees. They work in three shifts for assembly lines and in four shifts for preliminary machining lines. We set up the Open House in summer and held a Christmas party in winter to allow employees to enjoy themselves with smiling faces, while they worked with their serious faces in daily production.



Photo 2 KMCZ Open House

4. Entertainment

Czech people really like to do outdoor activities. On weekends they often go hiking in the mountains, cycling, or inline skating with their family. When I was there, we also played golf on weekends. On golf courses, we often found that the husband of a typical Czech family was playing golf and his wife and children were walking their dogs following the husband. I was moved by the fact that Czechs really loved to be in nature with their family.

Sport is also a Czech favorite. The popularity of tennis may be well known to Japanese. In particular, in women's tennis, several Czech players are ranked high in the world. Many readers may have heard the names Barbora Krejčíková and Karolína Plíšková. News of their performance was reported by Czech television almost every day. It reminds me that a Czech woman won the gold medal in both skiing and snowboarding in the winter Olympics, which was quite before though. The prominence of Czech women in the world of sport is remarkable.



Photo 3 Kunětická golf course

5. Ice Hockey

Ice hockey is very popular among Czechs with multiple active professional leagues. In Pardubice, where there is a professional hockey team, the arena is packed for every game with fans in the team's uniform and they roar on the team regardless of whether it is winning or losing. It was easy to figure out when a hockey game was held just by hearing the chanting on the street. I went to the arena to watch hockey games several times. In these games I saw players battling with each other for the puck or charging into each other. They had a fight once in a while. Unfortunately, I could never clearly see the scoring moment when I was watching a hockey game. Instead, I enjoyed the scoring scene by noting it with the scoring lamp and beep sound as an instant fan.

Hockey is a national sport for Czechs. They play hockey on a skate rink from childhood. Even during summer, they enjoy playing ground hockey using a stick similar to that used for ice hockey. In the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics, the semifinal game was the Czech Republic against Russia. Although the Czech Republic finally lost, Czech staff members in KMCZ were always checking what was going on in the game via the Internet or the like to share information with each other, putting work to one side.

If you tell a Czech person that you are from Japan, you may be asked "Which part of Japan?". Since the Czech national hockey team won the gold medal in the Nagano 1998 Winter Olympics, the word 'Japan' reminds them of Nagano. In spite of being a hockey superpower, the Czech team had only ever won the silver medal, and it had been beaten by Russia many times. In Nagano in 1998, the Czechs were especially happy when the national team won the gold medal by beating Russia in the final. This big event for Czechs did happen at Nagano in Japan. If you talk about the Nagano Olympics, you can get friendly with Czechs very quickly.



Photo 4 A game of ice hockey

6. Czech Food

I am often asked "What is typical Czech food?" One of the popular lunchtime dishes in KMCZ was Schnitzel, thin slices of chicken or pork that are fried. It tastes similar to cutlets in Japan. Japanese expatriates often asked the kitchen to dress Schnitzel with pork cutlet sauce and enjoyed eating it with rice. Neighboring countries including Austria and Germany also have the same dish. Schnitzel is typically served along with potato in these countries.

A kind of beef stew originating in Hungary called Goulash is another typical lunch dish. When you are in a restaurant anywhere in the Czech Republic, you can always find Goulash on the menu. This national food is a little bit salty compared to beef stew in Japan and is often served with steamed bread. I privately recommend Goulash soup in a bowl made of bread.

The next cuisine I want to introduce is Beef Steak Tartare; I do not know if you like it though. Japanese, including me, tend to have difficulty ordering this food at a restaurant because they cannot pronounce it correctly. Steak Tartare is like beef yukhoe seasoned with spices and garlic. You can put grated garlic on a piece of well-baked bread and then add an appropriate portion of Tartare on the bread before eating. Czechs, whether they are men or women, cram it into their mouths without caring about the smell of garlic. I do not know how your stomach will be next day if you eat Tartare too much.

Typical drinks in the Czech Republic include Kofola, a kind of carbonated drink. As the name implies, this is a Czech version of cola. It is said that Kofola originated during the time of Czechoslovakia when people mimicked cola. This slightly carbonated drink smells a little bit like lemon. I thought at first that it was just cola with lemon that had gone flat, but I gradually became used to the taste. It is definitely a national drink along with beer.



Photo 5 Steak Tartare

7. Czech Names

I had an opportunity to learn the typical surnames of Czechs. I want to introduce some of them as their surnames and Japanese counterparts have several things in common. Some Czech surnames are named after the natural world, such as Kopecky meaning "hill" or "mountain" and Novotony meaning "new". I thought these might be similar to the popular Japanese surnames Yamamoto (literally meaning "foot of the mountain") and Arai (literally meaning "new well"), respectively. The order of names is also common between Czechs and Japanese: the surname comes first and is followed by the "first name". This was a story I felt connected me with Czechs.

I almost forgot to say, but Czech surnames for men end a little bit differently from those for women. Most surnames for men end with "ky" or "y" while those for women end with "a". Kopecky, as mentioned above, will be Kopecka for women, and Novotony will be Novotona for women. Many surnames for women add "ova" to the surnames for men.

I found in KMCZ that a popular name for men was Jan. In Czech, "ja" is pronounced "ya". Many famous heroes are called Jan, and this should be popular among today's people too. However, its nickname is a little bit strange. Jan is nicknamed Honza, which is quite different from the original name. I did not get it at all in the early days of my stay in the Czech Republic. I remember I sometimes looked around me trying to find what people were called as I did not understand what the nickname meant. In addition, Anna, Anicka, Eva, and Evicka were also typical nicknames. I wondered why they were called by a nickname that was longer than the original name.

Another interesting story about names is that people celebrate their name day on the date corresponding to their own given name on the calendar. So, Czechs have two birthdays in one year. At first, I did not understand why they would celebrate their birthday again as they had celebrated it the previous month.

8. COVID-19 Pandemic in Europe

COVID-19 first spread as an epidemic in Italy and Spain a couple of months before the news of Japan's first infection cases on the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship were reported. Czechs seemed to look upon it as "That's not my business" in the beginning. However, as Czechs who had come home back from the designated countries were infected with the disease, the Czech Republic started to close its borders with neighboring countries and to suspend air services in March 2020. Various COVID-19 control measures including an entry ban for foreigners were taken to combat the virus in European countries.

KMCZ also took COVID-19 control measures for its employees. For example, those who had traveled to Italy or Croatia during their children's school winter holidays were recommended to voluntarily isolate. In order to cope with the problem of shortages of masks and disinfectants, the company placed orders for these goods early. It also changed the scheduled period of business trips of employees and meant those who had been sent to a foreign country had to come home before the suspension of international air services.

The situation rapidly deteriorated thereafter and was followed by a lockdown. Some customers planned plant shutdowns, and KMNA suspended production in April 2020. During the lockdown, all shops except food markets, gas stations and drug stores were closed. With no restaurants open, I had difficulty in getting food as I lived alone. Other control measures included a night curfew from 9 o'clock at night to 6 o'clock the next morning. The lighting in shops on the streets was turned off and nobody was walking on the street. Even the downtown area was quiet.

After that, the restrictions were relaxed in phases as the number of newly infected patients had changed. A cycle of lifting the ban and the spread of infection was repeated over and over again. During this period, the entry of foreigner tourists was prohibited, greatly impacting the tourism and food service industries.

I had the opportunity to visit Prague on business during the period of relaxed restrictions. The city, which had usually been crowded with tourists, was quiet and nobody was on the famous Charles Bridge (Karlův most) or on the road on the other side of the river. It felt strange the way the city was different from usual, but the scenery was still beautiful.

KMCZ also had a difficult time and struggled to secure the personnel necessary for production during the pandemic because of the increased number of newly infected patients. Some employees were infected and some others were identified as persons who had close contact with patients and were asked not to report to work. COVID-19 may still be advancing or retreating. I hope the pandemic will be over soon.



Photo 6 Prague, photographed from Letná Parks

9. In Closing

I returned to Japan after finishing with my five-year term of residence in the Czech Republic. Now I can see what difficulties my colleagues may have had during their expat assignments in foreign countries.

During my assignment in the Czech Republic, I learned a lot about corporate management as I served as site manager and was involved in management that I had never experienced in Japan. The experience of living in another culture also gave me a good opportunity to change my way of looking at things that I had never previously doubted. Particularly as I experienced living in two countries (before living in the Czech Republic, as I had been assigned to the U.S.A.), I can now compare the people, culture and economy of those countries with those of Japan, which helps me think I am a better person. I really appreciate being given such opportunities.

I would like my colleagues, if they have an opportunity to work overseas, to absorb another culture while they live in the country in addition to their daily work in Japan.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who supported me when I lived overseas. I am committed to continuously doing my best for the development of KMCZ.

Author



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Joined the company in 1992.
General Manager of Quality Management Dept., Quality Div.
Took present post after working in SA Quality Assurance Dept., expatriate in the U.S., Product Planning Dept., and expatriate in the Czech Republic.