

## NIGHTMARE IN PRAGUE



It was 14<sup>th</sup> September 1993 when I landed at Prague Airport for my business trip to Paper Mills in Czech Republic. Completing the Immigration and Customs formalities I emerged with my baggage trolley at the Arrival Hall to be greeted by our local agent Mahender Singh, a Czech Citizen of Indian origin. The airport arrival hall was old and undeveloped reminding of the communist era it passed through.

After exchanging customary greetings, we stood in front of a local car hiring booth waiting for our turn to lease a car for the 4-day trip. Two elderly ladies arrived and stood beside Mr. Singh, ostensibly to seek direction on a map which they spread before us. The ladies spoke in a language which neither of us understood. While my attention was glued on the Car booth, for a moment I took off my eyes to look at the ladies. After few seconds when I turned my eyes towards my trolley, my briefcase which contained my Passport, travellers Cheques, air tickets, cash, suitcase keys and documents, was missing from the trolley rack. I was shell-shocked and pleaded with Mr Singh to chase the ladies, but they had disappeared by that time. I soon realised that the ladies used the Map as a ploy to distract our attention!

Undoubtedly, I was in deep shock, started feeling giddiness and had almost collapsed on the floor. I soon realised that I was a pauper now and bereft of any document in an alien land. I was so perplexed that I was not able to think as what I should do now.

Mr Singh too, was at a loss for words and feeling helpless and guilty. Seeing my predicament an elderly Indian looking gentleman approached us and enquired if he can be of any help. After listening to my plight, he revealed that he had a similar experience when he came to drop his daughter for her flight. He said he was lucky to recover the bag that was snatched from him after they chased the snatchers. He advised me to contact the police booth located in the Terminal, to register my complaint. He, at the same time, also informed me that nothing though will happen as the police is very corrupt. Police FIR was a prerequisite to get a fresh Passport issued from our Embassy. He also assured me that once he reaches his office, he will request the Indian Embassy to send some help. When I requested him to introduce himself, he revealed that he is Mr. Qureshi, Ambassador of Pakistan. Even though I was not in the mental state to talk to him at that time, yet I thanked him profusely for giving me much needed assurances to face the situation. I was amazed that being Pakistani he helped me despite I am being an Indian.

Slowly I regained my senses. Mr. Singh, being around 60 years old, was perhaps too slow to react to the incident and seem to be more perplexed than me despite being there for over two decades. I did realize then that our company had erred in choosing him as our Agent, but it was not the time to ponder on that issue. I soon decided to take command of the situation, as if after a Divine call, and also being a CEO of my company, I was ordained to do so.

We went to the Police officer the booth. He was very unresponsive and indifferent to us. After some persuasion, he enquired about the cash that I lost He then advised us to go to the City Police station to register a FIR as it could not be registered at the airport. When Mr. Singh requested him for a Police vehicle to take us to the City Police station, he was bit annoyed but reluctantly told us that he will inform the City Police station to arrange a transport for us which eventually arrived after a long wait of an hour.

At the City Police Station, which was a shabby unkempt place with hardly few benches to sit on, we were informed that since they did not know English to type on the FIR they need to call another person from his home to register our complaint. We had no choice but to wait for over an hour and a half before the person arrived. He took over an hour to type out our FIR on his rickety typewriter. Once we got the copy in our hand, we rushed back to the airport to collect my suitcase. We took the Metro. I did not take a Taxi as I wanted to save the 50 dollars that I had with me for any exigency.

The biggest dilemma after collecting my luggage at the airport was where I should put up? I had my hotel booking but I could not venture there as I had now no money to pay. With much reluctance and sensing my situation, Mr Singh offered to take me to his residence. Reaching his residence, a hefty Czech lady answered the doorbell. Observing her gesture and unwelcoming mannerism, I felt small and embarrassed in life for the first time as being Chief Marketing Executive of a MNC I always stayed in 5-star hotels on all business trips. I was introduced to the lady as Mrs Singh. Her unwelcoming gesture became clear to me as why Mr. Singh was so hesitant to bring me home. I soon realized that I was not a welcome guest. I could see her angry frowning eyes aimed at her husband for bringing me in. I swallowed all these insults blaming my fate and decided to stay till I had options. Mrs Singh did not for a day come to check if I was comfortable and well placed in her house. She did not even serve coffee/tea or even any dinner for any of those days of my stay. I could see Mr. Singh visibly embarrassed for his wife's behaviour and conduct towards me but perhaps he too was helpless.

Another realization I had in this post-Communist era country was how they treated their guests, wanted or unwanted. Perhaps that may be the way these people behave the way they behave? I, however,

felt lucky and relieved to get a shelter to stay and sleep and the only thing going on in my mind was how could I get made a fresh Passport from Indian Embassy and arrange money so that I do not abort my trip.

In the evening I was feeling hungry after day's ordeal & sensed that my host did not show any inclination to serve any dinner, I decided to go out with Mr. Singh to have our dinner in a small, cheap restaurant nearby. I also thought if need be, I will borrow some money from him till I arrange. During our dinner he disclosed that his wife leaves early morning for job and returns in the evening therefore we will have to make our own breakfast. Knowing the situation, I bought some eggs, bread, a milk pack and a small packet of butter for my breakfast. I could now visualise that though they lived together but they are on their own. Indirectly he sent a message to me to look after myself.

It was obvious despite being tired I was not getting sleep that night, so I decided to redraw my tour schedule. Next day being a Sunday I called our Delhi office receptionist's residence from a telephone booth... I dictated the points which I wanted and advised her to make my call as brief as possible and save my every penny on the expensive International call.

In the morning when I woke up, the lady of the house had already left for her job despite being a Sunday. I still wonder if it was a job call or to avoid us, she left home on some errand. We made our tea and breakfast from the stock of milk, bread & eggs that I bought the previous day. I must admit that Mr. Singh was very embarrassed and apologetic all along for his wife's indifferent behaviour towards me. Otherwise he was extremely helpful all the time except on the cash side. Soon I could understand that he was fully dependent on his dominating wife's earnings. Perhaps all Czechs may not be like her, but I was unlucky to have had such a bad experience.

After finishing my breakfast, I called my office one more time to inform and appraise

my MD about developments at my end and gave my contact number for call back from Marketing Team. Advised them to contact Bank to get my Traveler's Cheques cancelled and to issue fresh TCs which I should collect from the Prague office of the Bank. Lufthansa Airlines too was asked to issue a duplicate Air Ticket through their local office. Requested my office to arrange cash from our parent UK company to be delivered locally through their Bank.

The day passed with great difficulty which seemed to be too long. My agent in the meanwhile tried to persuade me to abort the trip once I get my passport. I however, did not disclose my desire and plans for continuation of the trip.

Next morning, I got up and as usual prepared my breakfast and moved straight to the American Express Bank to collect the new TCs. Bank staff was nice and helpful that on production of my FIR and copy of the lost Passport gave me TCs of equivalent amount. They also confirmed having received the advice from our UK office for the cash delivery of \$1000 which can only be given after I had my new Passport in hand. I, therefore, rushed to the Indian Embassy. The staff there seemed to be aware of my case as the Pakistan Ambassador had already apprised them about me. I must mention here that Indian Embassy, though courteous, was not extremely helpful. I was asked to pay \$350/- cash only in order to get my duplicate passport. After much haggling and intervention of the Ambassador the Embassy agreed to accept TCs against cash. The Embassy advised to get my stay endorsed on the new Passport from immigration office. With the new Passport in hand we rushed to the Immigration Office. There was a long queue and needed prior appointment, but I peeped into the immigration Boss's Office. The Lady boss immediately called me in and was very courteous. She knew English well and heard me patiently. Unlike some bureaucrats, she immediately endorsed my passport giving me a visa for 15 days. For

the first time, I felt all Czechs were not rude and unresponsive. I just cannot express my inner relief of that moment as I was now a legal entrant in that country and could cash my TC's. I again rushed back to the American Express Bank to collect my \$1000/- cash

Once the cash was in my hand, I suddenly felt myself on cloud nine and started working with more energy. Now I decided that I will not abort the trip which I was debating in my mind. I possessed now sufficient cash to resume my business trip and pay back the cash I borrowed from my agent Mr Singh.

It was lunch time now and we went to a decent restaurant, had famous Czech Pilsener Beer and lunch, reviewed my schedule. I had planned to visit Hungary, France, Germany and UK after my Czech tour and I needed to get the Visas for these countries reissued on my new Passport in next 2-3 days which thankfully was accomplished by various efforts and running around. Duplicate air tickets were also collected in between.

My Clients also agreed to compensate my lost days by agreeing to meet me on weekend.

Though I was not very satisfied with my local agent for his laziness, yet I felt that he was especially useful as an interpreter and for guiding my visits. After finishing my day's schedule, we decided to have drink and dinner before calling it a day. Observing Mr. Singh's home environment we always used to have our dinner outside. In any case, now I was comfortable monetarily also. As usual after dinner I bought sufficient stuff again for breakfast items viz: eggs, milk, butter, bread etc. Needless to mention that I also had to clean all my cups, pans etc. before we left for our work. Imagine my predicament that despite my original booking being in 5-star hotel, I had to go through all this.



Next morning, we decided to leave home early, skipping our breakfast, to visit a client located at a distance. In between we found time for some sightseeing, a rarity in a business trip. Despite it being my second visit, I had never had the time to go around this beautiful historical city with great monuments. What a luck despite going through this ordeal. Next day too we started early to wind up our business trip with a visit to a client.

After having my dinner outside. I decided to now Check-in a hotel and move out from my agent's residence. I, therefore, went to drop him and pick-up my luggage. But reaching his residence he vehemently insisted to stay the last night there itself. He wanted to chat on drink that night. I ultimately agreed though reluctantly. While having few drinks I requested Mr. Singh that I wish to meet his wife to say thanks and Good-Bye since she leaves home early morning. She at last met me and surprisingly talked very pleasantly, perhaps feeling relaxed for my impending departure from their home next day. After a little chat before saying Good Night I gave her USD 300/- (a good money in Czech in 1993) which she hesitantly but happily accepted. I convinced her that in any case I would have spent more if I had stayed in hotel. I suddenly noticed an air of change in her behaviour. Even my agent felt nice for my gesture though he never expected it. That night we had a relaxed drink together. Surprisingly, the lady came and served us some munching snacks for the drinks, which never happened in my stay with them.

**Next morning was the climax.** I got ready and went to the kitchen to prepare my breakfast as usual, but I was told breakfast is already laid on the table. I was pleasantly surprised to see the well laid breakfast in style. The Lady had laid it for us before leaving for work. I suddenly realized again the value of money and how it works.

After breakfast, we reached the airport for my next visit of Budapest, Hungary. At the airport, I was feeling a great relief and satisfaction for accomplishing all my jobs and visiting my clients despite such an

ordeal. I like to very humbly mention that my Czech agent hugged me very lovingly apologizing for his wife's behaviour. He confessed that he never expected that I would at all be able to complete all jobs and even visit all clients. But his last and frank confession surprised me. He told me that my paying \$300/- (a big money in Czech those days) to his wife was a very good action by me. It had enhanced his respect in the eyes of his wife, he said. I felt pity and realised how much this poor fellow is depended on his wife.

**During my flight to Budapest, I thought that unless I was bestowed with some DIVINE BLESSING, I could have never braved the ordeal that came my way. My faith and belief in GOD further reinforced after this traumatic experience.**



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Note - (I have written this article with the objective to alert those persons who travel frequently so that they do not go through the ordeal I went through)

