

Secretary Gale submitted this article to Nebraska newspapers for their consideration.

Celebrating 20 years of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe

By John Gale

Years ago, I worked for U.S. Sen. Roman Hruska of Nebraska as one of his legislative assistants. Since Sen. Hruska was of proud Czech descent, he was expected to be a strong voice for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia, then under the tight grip of the Soviet Union following World War II.

Dating back to 1959, Congress authorized the president to issue a proclamation designating the third week of July as "Captive Nations Week." Sen. Hruska would annually join with the president and deliver heartfelt remarks about the military and political domination of those countries by the Soviet Union.

The point of the proclamation was to "manifest to such peoples" the historic fact that "the people of the United States" shared with them their aspirations for the recovery of their freedom and independence. In the 1960s and 1970s, such a goal seemed distant and remote in the midst of the Cold War. However, things dramatically changed in the late 1980s.

I was reminded of the drama of those changing times recently when I received an invitation to attend a roundtable featuring the consul generals of Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary and Poland at the University of Chicago. The roundtable commemorated 20 years of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe.

Twenty years ago, during the so-called Autumn of Nations, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania all experienced popular uprisings that heralded the end of the Cold War. On Nov. 9, 1989, an East German Politburo official announced that the border with West Germany had been opened "with immediate effect." The resulting celebration and tearing down of the Berlin Wall stands as one of the single most recognizable moments of political transformation in the 20th century.

The freeing of some 200 million people from captivity under the Soviet Union was a moment for free men and women everywhere to celebrate. Europe was energized to move swiftly toward deep ties within the framework of the European Union, radiating immense political, military, economic and international clout.

The world has benefited greatly from the freeing of the captive nations in Europe. All of these countries continue to grow and develop as democracies. World trade, economic growth, NATO missions and the global voice of a free Europe all contribute to world peace, stability and prosperity.

Worldwide, there are now 119 out of 195 nations that are considered to have democratic governments. The addition of the 18 countries from Central and Eastern Europe was a significant step forward for democracy in the world.

The late Sen. Hruska would be proud of the ultimate success of the goal of "Captive Nations Week" and the freeing of those nations. Those of Czech nationality still honor his leadership in the U.S. Senate as the voice of Czechs in the United States, a voice he raised frequently

on behalf of those captive nations to ensure that they were not forgotten. Nov. 9, 1989, will be a date in history for all of us to celebrate.

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