

Panelák Stories

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In the formerly socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the building technique [of mass housing] is taken as the most prominent aspect, and the term “concrete slab” is applied to the whole building—panel’niy dom (panel house—Russian), panelák (panel building—Czech), wielka płyta (big slab—Polish), or Platte (slab—German) are the respective terms used by both scholars and the general public.

—Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing*

One of the most important and best examples of the transformational connotations of everyday landscape are the most typical socialist form of mass housing—blocks of flats or paneláks. Today they remain home to a mix of social classes, with the middle class prevailing . . . The attitude of panelák inhabitants to their buildings vary; some “people get used to living in paneláks” . . . Although blocks of flats apartments were considered highly desirable during the communist era, since 1989 a combination of decreasing population, renovation of older buildings, and construction of modern standard alternative housing has led to high vacancies rates, especially in East Germany, or concentration of low income minorities, like Vietnamese in East Berlin or Gipsies [sic] in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary.

—Mariusz Czepczynsk, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities: Representation of Powers and Needs*

AFTER BEDTIME

It was past our bedtime. Robin and I lay very quietly in our beds for about five minutes. Our beds stood six feet apart in a room with a desk, a square wardrobe, and a couple of cabinets, also square with very sharp edges. Despite the sparse furnishings, it was hard to move around, not because the cubes of functional furniture trendy in the 1950s were huge but because the room was really tiny. It was a perfect size for us.

After about four-and-a-half minutes we could not wait any longer.

“Are you sleeping?”

“No.”

“Are you?”

“No.”

“What shall we play?”

“How about the bee and the beekeeper?”

“No, let’s play the wounded soldier.”

“Let’s look out the window to see who’s awake.”

“Ok.”

A large window was conveniently situated right above our heads. We both knelt on our beds and looked out. From our window we could see a row of panelák buildings, four-story cubes identical to ours, where some of our friends lived. We knew that many more blocky structures stretched into the distance, some perfect cubes, some low rectangles, such as our school, and even several high-risers, ten-stories high. These were a pretty blue, and I preferred them to our dirty white cubes, but the kids who lived there were our enemies. We watched the empty playground, a square of poured concrete now glistening in the rain, and we saw small circles of light dancing on the asphalt. I ran my finger across a special groove etched in the windowsill whose purpose my parents couldn’t figure out, but Robin and I knew precisely what it was for. A marble fit exactly into the groove, and sometimes we would send a marble back and forth to each other. Tonight—as every night—we wanted to play longer, so we abandoned the idea of rolling a marble. It made a pretty, hard sound that always attracted one of our parents who’d come to our room and say “Stop that racket!” or “Go to sleep!”

Our parents had a similar reaction to our game of the bee and beekeeper and also to the game of the wounded soldier. While these games were a lot of fun, they required a fair amount of action: transporting the perfectly limp body of the soldier from one bed to the next, pouring water all over the soldier’s face because he or she was wounded and unable to drink properly, or the flying and jumping of the body of the giant bee as it got really angry at the beekeeper who had probed the hive (a person covered by a blanket) with a stick. It was hard to perform these actions, which were necessary for each game, noiselessly. No matter how hard we tried to soften the buzz of the angry bee or stifle the moans of the soldier, a cascade of sounds would inevitably pour forth, gaining in volume.

I am not sure why my parents were bothered so much; they were watching TV in the living room/bedroom that was separated from our room by a paper-thin wall. I suppose the stomping, yelping, knocking, laughing, and very loud whispering must

have been even louder, even more engaging or annoying, than the dramatic TV show called *The Woman Behind the Counter* that they watched. The show, while set in an entirely working-class, peace-loving society and admired by the teacher at school, felt a little too gray and serious to me when I saw half an episode once on a Friday night. The main character cried a lot, but I did not understand why. Nobody died, so why was there a close-up of a giant tear? My parents were not helpful. They said things like, “Why is this half-witted cashier woman so evil and pretentious? In real life the actress is a spy; she has reported her colleagues and they lost their jobs.”

To me she seemed ugly and like a bad actress. She could not even cry properly, had too many unlikely romances, and talked a lot for a cashier woman. In real life, cashier women would just glare at you.

Sometimes my brother and I would see a shadowy silhouette of a head with giant curls, a wooden spoon in the air, and an arched back through the milk-colored pane in the door to our room. Usually it made us laugh but not too loud because we knew that after this initial warning from our mom—we *were* supposed to see her figure and understand—a much larger shape would appear in the doorway, the door would open, and a blinding light would suddenly illuminate our undercover activities.

The games were obscure to our parents, apparently, because they always had the same question: “What is going on?” Obviously, no one answered. Then our father would quickly perform the punishment, which consisted of one for me and five for my brother. The numbers represented slaps on our bottoms with his heavy hand, but it really never hurt too much. We put our faces into the pillows while he proceeded to deliver the punishment, but not to muffle our cries—we were both laughing. Naturally we did not want to spoil it for our father.

For a while, we quietly watched the cube of a panelák that faced our window. It was as if we were looking in the mirror, imagining another brother and sister watching our panelák regularly, after bedtime, just like we watched theirs. The Sleepers’ window was dark, the Three Kids’ window illuminated three head shapes on a fancy sofa, the TV Addicts’ window gave a sickly bluish stream of light, the dark window was dark, the shiny window reflected a street lamp, everything as usual. We were beginning to get tired of inventing new names for something that always stayed the same. If only the dark window had a bit of light sometimes, but no. Disappointed, we turned away from the view.

“What now?”

“Who’s waking us up tomorrow, do you know?”

“I think it’s Dad.”

“Good.”

“Why good? He’s always so harsh and loud. I wish it was Mom!”

This was true. When our mother woke us, which was almost every day, she would gently open the door and we would hear quiet music from the kitchen interrupted by the monotonous sound of a human voice reading the monotonous news: “*Comrade Gustáv Husák, President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, was awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union today, on 9 January 1983. The collective farmers of the village Blížkovice assured the delegation of our leading politicians that they would fulfill or go over the five-year-plan quota despite the severe frosts that unexpectedly started last week. Young pioneers welcomed the Prime Minister comrade Lubomír Štrougal at the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in the town of Prachatice in Bohemia.*” Blissfully, we pulled our blankets tightly around us and continued to dream.

But when our father’s night shift came up every couple of weeks, he would wake us upon returning home from work in the morning. He would burst into our room, turn the light on, and yell at the top of his lungs: “It’s morning! Get up!” It did not help to cover our heads with blankets. He jumped to the window and opened the curtains with an impossibly sharp, screechy noise, always yanking off a few of the pins that were attached to metal loops hanging on the curtain rod. If we were still covered by the time he was done putting the pins back on the loops, he pulled the blankets from our warm, cozy bodies and carried them with him into the kitchen. This was really the last straw, and we hated our father fervently.

“So, it’s Dad.”

Robin started whispering loudly and I became totally engrossed in his ingenious plan. We worked for most of the night. Each of us emptied our drawers full of perfectly ironed handkerchiefs, unfolded them, and tied them together to make a handkerchief rope. Once the rope was long enough, we tied each end to our ankles, lay down, and stretched the rope across the room. It went from the bottom of Robin’s bed to the bottom of mine. Anyone who stormed into our room would surely stumble over our rope.

In the morning, the light went on with a blinding, painful immediacy. The curtains were torn open; a few metal pins fell on the floor, one gently hitting my exposed leg. I remembered! With a start, I sat up and tried to determine what had just happened.

My dad had already gone to the kitchen to make us an unappealing breakfast of a spongy piece of bread and a cold lump of butter smashed in the middle. I looked on the floor, trying to piece together what had happened a couple minutes ago. Did my father stumble? Did I hear him curse? Laugh? Nothing. I did not hear anything. The ingenious rope was lying limply on the floor, no longer taut. My brother was still sleeping, completely covered with blankets and pillows, with only his ankle exposed, the handkerchief rope still dangling from it.

In my confusion and loneliness, something struck me as odd. My father did not yell “Good morning” or “Get up.” In fact, all was silent before the curtains opened. So very silent. I listened for a little while, untying a handkerchief from my sore ankle. Later, even if I tried to fold them back into the drawer, my mom would iron them again.

“Dad? Is it time to get up?”

My father started whistling one of his favorite songs in the kitchen.

“No, sweetie. You can rest for a few more minutes. I am making an extra special butter bread for you.”

I could hear that the oven was on. Today the butter was going to be melted on a superbly crunchy piece of bread. I jumped out of bed, trailing the handkerchief rope behind me before it fell off my foot like an autumn leaf from a tree.