

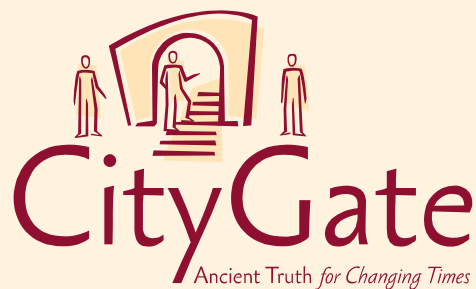
Bureaucracy

How to live with the system....
and sometimes beat it.

A CityGate Field Study

Written by

Marsh Moyle



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This is the first edition of this paper. We would like to thank all who shared their experiences and helped us with their insight. We would appreciate all your comments and critique. They might help us to fill the gaps we left out, and correct our unintended mistakes.

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Bureaucracy

By Marsh Moyle - CityGate

"How to live with the system - and sometimes beat it!"

In the beginning was the bureaucrat, or was it the queue? I, at least, was in a queue. The bureaucrat was a long way off, a sort of second stage in the journey, a milestone but not the end. This was a long, hot, sticky queue. A snake winding its way through dark corridors, memorizing the labels on doors, redesigning floor tiles, looking over the shoulder in front to the newspaper or novel or magazine, shuffling silently forward, waiting for the door to open and bite its head off. Each bite raised the pulse and the lump in the throat. We fidgeted with all our documents, checking an imaginary list, wondering what we had forgotten.

Power dripped from his puffy white face. A paper thin smile revealed nicotine teeth. He had polished that leather chair for twenty years. He knew, and we did not, the vast meaning of these documents. He threw a cursory glance at us, a sort of summing up. We were categorized and labeled in a second, a vast reservoir of intimidation coming to his aid. His mind did not even engage. It was a motor well used to running in neutral. But it had power: a wrong move, a false word or a misplaced pause would drive us from the room in search of further documentation or stamp. History was on his side.

Beside him a young recruit slouched over a broken coffee cup, an overfilled ashtray threatened a pile of precious unprocessed documents. The inevitable rubber stamps, one for the date, one for his name, one for the name of the department and many that no one would ever read cluttered the table. He was new, enveloped in a slow initiation ritual which would stamp out all vestiges of reason for ever, learning the vast meaning and deep secrets of the documents. Learning how to lose a paper or find one mysteriously or miraculously, depending on the need of the moment. Learning how to delay or hasten, discern friend from foe. Learning the skill of discernment that could help him advance to a new seat before this one had even developed a shine. Learning who to obey and when and how and how urgently. The room was bright; on the wall were a hundred little flags pinned carefully and in meticulous order to the wall. Each one spelled the name of an ice hockey club. No doubt someone had heard that he liked these and now everyone brought him one as a gesture of friendliness and appreciation. He had not been to a match in years, but it amused him to watch them faun.

Smoke curled up over his lip as he perused the papers. He crossed a line here and filled a gap there. No gram of guilt could make him hurry. No passion could move him. The shadow of a thunder cloud crossed his face as he looked up. Come back next week, he said, and we will review your case. We walked out into the rain. It was cold and it was damp.

In the army under the old communist regime soldiers were taught "Too much initiative is worse than the class enemy" (The class enemy being the worse thing in the world!). It should not therefore take us by surprise that there is a certain inertia in the system.

Survival in central and eastern Europe demands that one learns how to cope with bureaucracy. A basic understanding of the purpose and reasons for bureaucrats will help in this. The basic issues are trust and control. It is sad but true that men left to their own devices are not likely to think of what is best for their fellow men unless there is something to be made out of it for themselves. This is no less true of the bureaucrat. It does not cross his mind that your taxes are paying his wages.

It is ironic that where there is much trust there is little need for bureaucracy, while where there is no trust, even a mountain of bureaucracy cannot stop evil but merely channels it in other directions. It could be argued that the purpose of the bureaucrat is to measure and tax the evil rather than to hinder it.

It would be wrong to think that all that paperwork accomplishes nothing. A cynic might want to make the case that it keeps people employed and a lot of potentially creative (and possibly dangerous) people off the streets.

Trust is the central problem. Excessive bureaucracy is the attempt by the authorities to cut off any escape from tax and control -- but it is not cost effective. The potential tax avoider, standing in the queue, today for this permission, tomorrow for that, is not making any money to tax. He is losing his entrepreneurial desires as he stands in the queue thinking. He is thinking about how he can do his business without this queue. And so the excess drives him outside the law. First let him make his money -- then tax him.

It is an axiom of the Western board room that the customer is always right. The bitter taste of competition has taught this. But the bitter taste of competition rarely sours the mouth of the bureaucrat, and it is not at all clear who is the customer.

There is a basic assumption in central Europe, stemming perhaps from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and refined to an art form by the communists (because it is as prevalent in Austria as it is in Slovakia, Hungary or Poland), that men must be controlled. Not because they are bad or good, but because they are there. The purpose of man is to be measured and categorized. Perhaps this stems from a Roman Catholic view of man, or the more modern approach of salvation by numbers.

It is unthinkable, in Central Europe, that a man could make a free decision, for example, about the position of his toilet or the length of his telephone cable. We live in an age of experts, and we know that even experts have different opinions. Democracy appears to have been re-defined as the regular choice, by the ignorant or lazy, of experts to make rules for their safety and well being. So we can be sure that they will make as many rules as are needed to earn their wages, as they are men of good report and true to their cause. At least we can be sure that they do not intend to be out of work.

One key to survival is to recognize that there are two realities. There is **the reality of what is** and **the reality of what is written**. A man might own a house in street A, but for tax purposes live in a house in street B. The critical factor is to know when the two realities have to match. It might be that every decade there is a census. At that moment the man must make sure that the realities are aligned - that his documents show he is living in the correct place. No one expects the realities to coincide all the time. (This is a problem for people who come from countries where right and wrong are more clearly defined.)

It does not matter, for example, that you forget your wife's mother's maiden name when you are filling out the form and decided to put in something more poetic. It does matter that you be consistent from that moment on. If the good lady should ever grace your door for a visit she need never know that there is a file with a false name on it in a vault somewhere in the depths of the town hall. Note: If you forget your wife's name consistency will not help you.

There are two types of governmental power, the political and the bureaucratic. In theory the bureaucrats implement the ideas of the politicians. The politician is elected to change and correct; he knows how things should be. The bureaucrat knows how things are. He is

interested in stability. He is the accountant not the entrepreneur. Like all accountants he appropriates power by his mastery of detail: he will out quote you each time. Soon he looks at himself as the master of the house. Knowledge is indeed power.

A brief glance at the architecture of the bureaucratic establishment reveals the value placed on human life. The small, low window forces the humiliated supplicant to bend down to speak. In the ill-equipped waiting room (often the corridor) hapless people shift from foot to foot in an endless stream, swapping stories of small victories, eyeing each other with fear lest a queue jumper or other manipulator of people should do some great injustice.

The living permit, the working permit, the import permit, the export permit, the building permit, the destroying permit, the business permit, the transport permit. All forms of life are legislated, regulated, registered and manipulated. If it can be named measured or labeled it can be taxed or registered.

A late 20th-century fixation is salvation by statistical knowledge. For some reason that is seen as superior and more authoritative than common sense and human relationship.

The following are some ideas which might help you as you wade through the jungle of bureaucracy:

- Put yourself at the mercy of the official. Central European bureaucrats do not like to be commanded to do something. They get too much of that from the boss, and you, whoever you are, are certainly not the boss. But they do like to feel important, and nothing makes them feel so important as being asked advice. Ask meekly, "This is my problem, what would you do to get around it?" It often works, especially if the official is on his own and does not have a migraine. Appeal to his common sense and let him know that you respect his opinion. Sincerity definitely adds value here.
- Never be impatient. This is a sign of immaturity and rebellion. This does not mean that you have to be meek, but it does mean that you have to pay the price.
- Remember, getting through the bureaucratic jungle is a relationship thing. Central Europe runs on connections and relationships. It does not really matter what the rules are, because falling back on your "rights" does not help you. The bureaucrat will not get fired. There are a million laws to protect him (bureaucrats draft most of them) and each one has chosen his profession for its stability. You will very possibly get a blood pressure problem before he gets fired. The way to a bureaucrat's heart is through his pocket or his friend.
- They are not responsible for the bureaucratic jungle. Permission must be granted before changes can be made. The Austro-Hungarian Empire has gone, so there is little chance of finding someone who can give permission to make changes, and therefore change is unlikely to occur. It has been said that Austria has the bureaucracy to run the empire but without the empire. Ivo Andric said it well in his Bridge over the Drina: "The first year they came and measured everything, we did not understand it: but the second year they came and taxed it."
- Initiative is discouraged and risk-taking is a crime. The golden rule of bureaucracy is that each bureaucrat covers his own backside by making sure that his papers and boxes are filled, regardless of the fact that they have no meaning or that no one will ever look at 95% of his work.

- One thing a bureaucrat never does is lose a piece of paper. But he may mislay it if he wants to annoy you. The bureaucrat has many ways to crush you; it is never worth a fight.

What follows are some ideas gleaned from the queue. The author accepts no responsibility if you should attempt to use them:

- **-Closed-** does not always mean closed, and **-Open-** does not always mean open. You may find that the one office you need to go, for that one important piece of paper, is not open except on Mondays and Wednesdays from 7:00 until 10:30. It is now 11:00 Wednesday. Don't despair: all may not be lost! Simply follow a few rules and you may yet get your piece of paper before the long queue starts on Monday morning...
- Be persistent.
- The person in front of you is a human being, so is the person behind you- but you might be tempted to forget that.
- Never let the bureaucrat lose face.
- The bureaucrat is always right.
- Be ready to be surprised.
- Be willing to accept defeat.
- Try to fit into the bureaucrat's categories as much as possible.
- If the bureaucrat is a woman take flowers.
- You get further with the bureaucrat by knowing his girlfriend than his boss.
- If you don't speak the language, always take a translator.
- If you want to get something done outside of office hours, don't speak the language, take flowers, and use humor. Also throw yourself at the mercy of the person guarding the door.
- The amount of flexibility a bureaucrat has is directly proportional to the number of stars on his shoulder.
- The amount of flexibility a bureaucrat has is directly proportional to the size of the bottle in your bag.
- If you want to get something done outside the normal listed hours, go early in the morning before they have gotten into their day, and be foreign.
- Most bureaucrats do not do as much as they think they do when they are not serving you.
- Never, never go just before closing time (up to two hours) to get something important done or initiate something important.
- Always initiate something important early in the day, so that you have time get something else done and not feel you have wasted your day when things go wrong.
- Always keep the phone numbers that get you past the switchboard.
- Always keep any information about the names of important people in the organization.
- Call before you go, to know what paperwork you need. Anticipate what anxiety they are trying to meet and bring other information. Ask other people who have gone through the procedure. Make a list; get all the papers together; then and only then go. Expect to go more than once.
- Do not worry about being true, but always be consistent.
- Always take more papers than you need. Keep plenty of photocopies and pay extra to have them notarized. This is the "critical mass" theory of bureaucratic paperwork: Things only get done when you have reached a critical mass.
- Never be angry. It rarely works. The bureaucrat has all the power and the last word.
- But do be very angry if the bureaucrat is very junior and is not being correct with you, especially if you know his boss well.
- All bureaucrats are reasonable with someone.

- Find the name of the director, go to the head of the queue, speak a foreign language, and act as if you have an appointment with him. When you get to see him, immediately ask for his advice. If you can get a photo of yourself with the President or some renowned person, take it with you and show it around. Act important but not aristocratic.
- Reward him after he has done you a favor. All your national friends will know what to give him. Ask them. This is not a bribe but a reward for helping you. It is only a bribe when you ask someone to do something that is illegal. This is not advised.
- Look at things from his side. You have to meet one of him, but he has to meet hundreds of you.

The door opens silently. We are drawn in. A casual shake of heads and hands, a smile and the passing of papers. A question is asked. How could one? Should one? What do you think? Do you see any way to? Is there another way? What would you recommend? A tightly drawn circle of communication slowly nears its end, a well-worn ritual for the initiated, a castle of despair for those who are not. Would it be possible, if one were to? And what would one do if one could? Someone hears the ticking clock. Hands shake and laughter in the corridor betrays a small conquest. The system has been reined in, at least for today. A triumph of reason celebrated over coffee and cognac.