

Sparling, Don

Kačer, Tomáš (editor); Kamenická, Renata (editor)

**Outside in : a personal history of the Brno Department of English narrated by Don Sparling**

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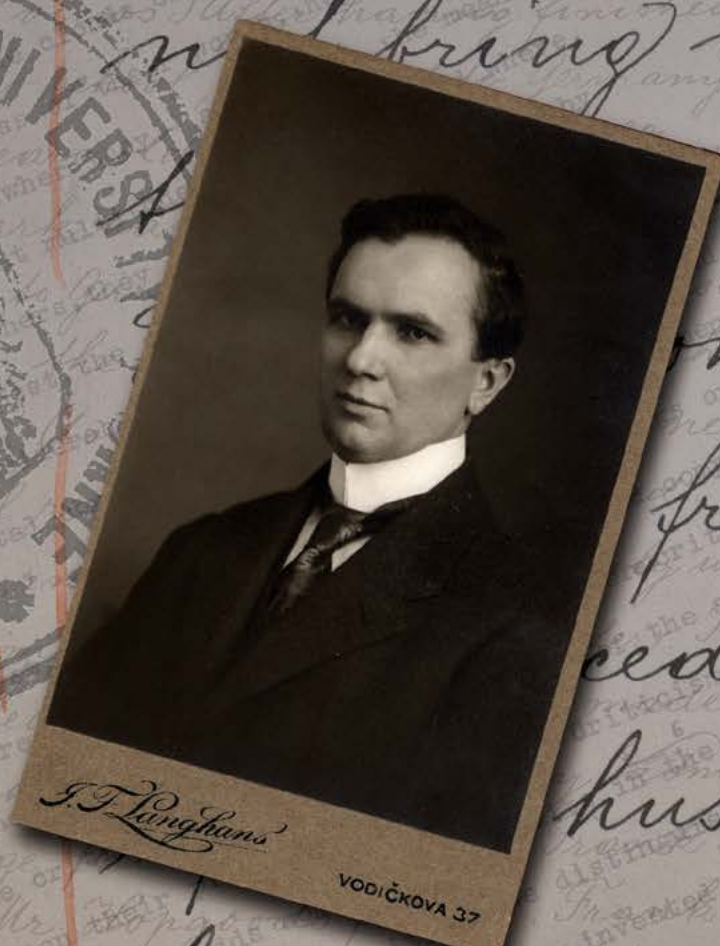
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# Outside In

A Personal History of the Brno Department of English

Narrated by Don Sparling

Tomáš Kačer and Renata Kamenická (eds.)

**MASARYK UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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ARTS**

This book is being published as part of the celebrations to mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of teaching in the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University.

Cover illustration: A portrait photo of František Chudoba against a background of his students' work and the Anglický seminář stamp.

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# Editors' introduction

This book has been prepared in conjunction with an important anniversary in the history of our department. It was just over one hundred years ago, in 1921, that the first teaching began in the Brno English Department, and we are proud to carry on this tradition. This book is also coming out at a time when the department is experiencing a very difficult period, perhaps one of the most difficult ever from a certain point of view. For over a year it was impossible to meet students in person, with as many as three semesters affected by restrictive measures called for by the world-wide epidemic of the killer virus COVID-19. For many a month, life at the department stopped.

At times which are as difficult as the years 2020 and 2021 have turned out to be, each institution may want to look back at its fundamental values and history to regain the strength to carry on. Remembering the history of the department with its highs and lows, twists of history foreseen and unforeseen, preventable and unpredictable, is a good starting point for a realization that whatever the circumstances, the department has always been at the forefront of producing excellence in research, providing the best available education to its marvellous students and, most of all, providing a sense of community for its students, teachers, and administrative staff.

We are currently the Department of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, but this is only the most recent in a series of names since it began as the Anglický seminář a century ago. For that reason, throughout the following text we usually refer to the department as the English Department, or simply “the department”. We are aware that this is very reductive (there are several passages in the book dedicated to all sorts of areas outside the narrow frame of what “English” is) as well as restrictive (there is, after all, a sister English Department at the Faculty of Education, but this book only focuses on the one at the Faculty of Arts). However, it is not the aim of this book to be a fully objective and all-encompassing history of English studies at the university level in Brno.

The book is highly subjective. It suffers from all the deficiencies one can imagine when it comes to a personal account of historical events. They are certainly seen from the single vantage point of the person telling the story, inevitably shaping it the way that they see it, and skipping elements that they were not involved in. On the other hand, the personality of the teller of the historical narrative becomes the guarantor of the authenticity of the historical events and contexts described, making them facts of oral history, an account of which may assume the form of a history book such as this one.

We, as editors, have been lucky to have found a person that meets all the requirements for a reputable vessel for the department's institutional memory: no one else than Don Sparling. Don was one of the most prominent figures in the department from his arrival in the late 1970s till his departure in 2000. Having come to Brno as an outsider to the department's traditions and a relative newcomer to Czech culture as such, he was able to embrace both, assume them critically as his own, and become a crucial influence on them. We believe that there is no one else around today who is able to provide such a complex narrative of the department's history as Don.

One day back in 2019, one of us, Tomáš Kačer, was casually talking to Don about his ideas and plans. The vision of completing Professor Josef Hladký's self-imposed mission to put together a history of the department came up. Don said that he had already started visiting the Masaryk



University archives, interviewing graduates and former teachers, recording their memories, and jotting down notes about the department's history. One day he would write it all up, said Don. Tomáš, having known Don for over fifteen years and being aware of the broad scope of activities he was involved in, which left him with little time to sit down and write a book (or, more precisely, to write *this* book), was sceptical: "Why don't we get together a couple of times and record everything that you've found out, remembered, and learnt from others? I can then turn it into a book." This was the initial impulse for an oral history of the department, and the result is now in your hands – or on your screens.

As every Anglicist knows, each writing project needs a method: otherwise, the result is madness (unless there is madness in the method, as every Anglicist also knows). The progress of this project was the following. First, the history was divided into four periods. The first two periods are (1) the interwar years and (2) 1945 to Don's arrival in the department in 1977. They differ from what came later because in retelling the history, Don had to rely entirely on archival materials and what he learned from other people's accounts. The next period (3), from Don's arrival to 1989, is told from Don's point of view, based on his personal memories and available materials. The last period (4), November 1989–2000, characterizes the decade of complete social change after the fall of Communism and coincides with Don's role as head of the English Department. It consists almost completely of personal reminiscences and considerations.

When the project began, Don met with Tomáš Kačer and Renata Kamenická, who joined the team as the second editor of the work-in-progress, to identify the crucial events and personalities of each of the historical periods. The three of them agreed on a scenario of what had to be mentioned and what could be left out from Don's narrative. Then a series of talks with Don were recorded, with Tomáš and Renata occasionally asking questions. These recordings were transcribed by a student at the department, Barbora Stenglová. Tomáš then read the transcript, cutting it, condensing it, and rearranging it. After this initial editorial step, Renata finished the draft with editorial fine-tuning. Both editors identified various shortcomings in the final text, and discussed these with Don. Based on their input, Don gave the twice edited text a final shape, so that it would keep its lively nature as a narrated, spoken document, but at the same time offer a solid, quick-paced reading experience for the reader.

As such, the book reflects what Don considers crucial for an understanding of the department's history, as well as what he personally finds interesting and amusing. The topics include individual personalities and their relationships, students and their activities, and the life of the department as a community. Also, teaching itself and the continuous reform of studies resonate throughout the book. As you will see, there is only a little space devoted to research. Don felt he was not the right person to summarize and evaluate his colleagues' research. Thus the book does not serve as an overview of the academic achievements of the department's teachers and graduates. Those interested in the academic output of the department may be referred to a series of lectures in the current Master's programme, *English Studies in the Czech Environment*, offered in the fall semesters and providing an overview of works by the most prominent Czech personalities in English Studies, many of them from the English Department in Brno, such as Professor František Chudoba and Professor Jan Firbas.

The book ends in 2000 for two reasons. First, this is the year that Don left the department, so any further narrative would necessarily have to be someone else's. We believe that one day another book will pick up where this one stops. Second, we feel that in many ways the post-2000 developments are in fact the department's present. As such, it is impossible to detach oneself from the current events taking place at the department. It would be difficult to achieve any kind of distance.

## A request to share your memories

The department has played a huge part in the lives of each of us who studied and/or worked here (we, the editors, fit into both of these categories). We believe that is a part of your lives, too, no matter whether you are a graduate, a former employee, a colleague, a current student, or a teacher, simply consider yourself a friend of the department as a whole, or are associated with it in some other way. No matter how you may be connected to the department's history, we would like to ask you to share your memories with us. We will be collecting materials relating to all aspects of the department's history. You may share your *index*, photos, or documents of any kind that you think have a historical value. We will digitize them and give them back to you. The digital copies will be placed in the Masaryk University archives.

We are especially keen on hearing your stories. We will be delighted if you are willing to share your memories of the time you spent at the department. We may agree on a list of topics you want to talk about and sit down with you and make a recording. These recordings will be between 45 and 90 minutes. These will then be stored in the university's audio archive, where they will be available in the future to anyone who might be interested in hearing memories about the department.

If you wish to share your past at the department with us, please send us an e-mail at [english@phil.muni.cz](mailto:english@phil.muni.cz).

We are looking forward very much to hearing from you.

And now, without further ado, we would like to wish you a pleasant experience reading about the history of the English Department in Brno, as narrated by Don Sparling.

*Tomáš Kačer and Renata Kamenická, eds.*



# Acknowledgments

The editors of this book would like to thank the following individuals.

This book would not have been possible without the help offered by all the former students, teachers, and friends of the department who selflessly remembered various details about their time at the department, shared their memories, and offered their archival materials. The editors would like to thank the current and recent leadership of the department for their support of the project, including Jana Chamonikolasová, Tomáš Pospíšil, Jeff Vanderziel, Jiří Rambousek, and Ota Kříž. The help from the department assistant, Tomáš Hanzálek, was also crucial. A number of former teachers helped us with preparations, among others Iva Gilbertová and Eva Golková, whose photo archives have proved crucial. Our work on the manuscript would have been much harder without Barbora Stenglová, who transcribed most recording sessions. We would like to thank the leadership of the Faculty of Arts for recognizing the potential of the project and their willingness to include it in the faculty's prestigious "MUNI Arts 100" edition and support it financially. We also appreciate your patience. We wish to thank everyone at MUNI Press for their help.

Grateful thanks also go to our family and friends who understood that a passionate project like a book about the department can fit into the holiday and leisure time schedule, and that it is a natural presence on the beaches of Croatia (Tomáš) and between satsangs in a retreat centre in the Vysočina (Renata). We would never have met our deadlines without your tolerance.

Last but not least, we are grateful to Don Sparling for saying "yes" to all our crazy ideas and then carrying out the work. For the most part, after all, it's his book and we are grateful we could be a part of the exciting process of its creation.

\* \* \*

As the narrator of this book, I can only say "Hear, hear!" to all that Tomáš and Renata have written, and add that without their "crazy ideas" and dedicated work as editors, the history of the English Department would still in all likelihood be little more than a chimera. My deepest thanks to them both. And I would also like to express heartfelt thanks to all those teachers, students and administrative staff who, over the four decades since I came to Masaryk (aka Jan Evangelista Purkyně) University, have helped make my time here so enjoyable and so productive and so satisfying. Please accept this book as a small form of gratitude for all that you have given me over the years.

"Sir Gawain" IX.

Legouis, 68.

"Sir Gawain" introd. IX.

ibid, X.

"Sir Gawain" X.

Legouis, 68.

him with the offer of her love. But Gawain resisted temptation without the discourtesy of a direct refusal. At each visit she kissed him three times, and he rendered the kisses faithfully to her lord. On the third day he accepted from the lady a girdle of green silk which had such virtue that none could be wounded, who wore it. Gawain promised to conceal it from her lord.

In the morning he rode to Green Chapel. There came the Great Knight with an axe even bigger than before. He made three feints without any success, but, at the third time, he wounded Gawain's neck slightly. The Great Knight proves to be his horse

# From foundation to closure: 1920–1939

A couple of years ago, in 2019, I set myself the goal of writing about the history of the English Department, and decided that one of my first steps would have to be to go to the Masaryk University archives on Žerotínovo náměstí and undertake some research. In the past, I'd picked up bits and pieces of information about the very beginnings of the department, but I had no idea how reliable they were. Pavel Drábek, for instance, once claimed that the Brno English Department as a Department of English standing on its own feet was the first in the country, older than the English Department in Prague. Later I was to learn that it's very difficult to say how old the department is, because the way universities operated back then meant there was no formal founding of departments as such, and so there's no document stating that on such and such a day the English Department was established.

When I turned to the people at the Masaryk University archives and asked how we might identify when the English Department was born, they said that probably the best way was to date it from the appointment of the first professor. And that was 9 August 1920, when František Chudoba was appointed professor by a decree of the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk.

One of Chudoba's first tasks would have been to set about creating what were called the department's *stanovy* – regulations guiding its operation. I thought to myself, well, maybe their approval was really the official beginning. But Jiří Pulec, the former Masaryk University Chief Archivist and the most knowledgeable person in the university about higher education practices back then, said no – these *stanovy* weren't that important. They couldn't be created unless there was already a professor who in effect embodied a department. So he confirmed that the only precise date we can use as the foundation of the English Department – or rather the *Anglický seminář*, as it was called back then – was indeed the day Chudoba was appointed professor.

## František Chudoba, the *Anglický seminář* and King's College London

When I began my research, František Chudoba was little more than a name for me. Or to be more precise an image. When I first came to teach in the department in 1977 there was a whole series of portrait photographs of the Great Men of Czech English Studies hanging on the walls of Professor Firbas's office. And one of them was pointed out to me as being Professor Chudoba, the founder of the department and a literary scholar. But when I set out to do the research in the Masaryk University archives, I discovered, much to my surprise and delight – and gradual dismay – that the Chudoba files – or *fonds*, in library jargon – are one of the largest there. Masses and masses of stuff, thousands of documents dealing with Chudoba.

So, who was Chudoba? A very interesting guy. He was born in 1878 in a small town near Vyškov into a family of millers. This gave them a somewhat higher social standing in the community. Later, his father gave up being an active miller and became an agent buying grains for other



The founder of the English Department, František Chudoba. An official portrait from the 1930s.

© AMU, sbírka C I fotografie, inv. č. 187

larger mills. Chudoba was a very bright youngster. He went to the grammar school in Přerov, where he got excellent marks, and would seem to have been on an upward professional track. But his dream in life was to become a painter. Unfortunately, his very practical father said: “No way.” His plan was to send his son to university. And presumably, as he would be paying for whatever Chudoba did after leaving school, Chudoba was stymied. But he was stubborn. Chudoba’s father wanted him to become a lawyer, an option Chudoba adamantly refused, saying that this simply didn’t suit his temperament. So after long arguments and discussions they came to a compromise: Chudoba would study to be a doctor. He duly enrolled in medical studies at Charles University in Prague. Unfortunately, this backfired drastically because in their first semester students

spent hours and hours hunched over microscopes and a lot of their time in very cold rooms dissecting bodies. Chudoba became very ill, with some sort of chill so bad that he had to interrupt his studies. For the rest of his life he had health problems – internal organs, his spine – as a result of this unfortunate first semester.

Chudoba managed to convince his father that medicine was impossible for him and so he switched over to studying German and Czech. No English Department existed at the time: English was a sideline of Professor Václav Emanuel Mourek, whose main field was German. So Chudoba graduated in German and Czech. How he learned English so well is a bit of a mystery. Apparently he was enthusiastic about attending English lectures offered by Josef Václav Sládek, but it's questionable whether they actually helped him much in mastering the language. Evidence of this can be found in the archives, where there are some interesting drafts of letters that he wrote before graduation. He'd spent some time in Germany and had made friends there. He corresponded with them in English, and what's unexpected – at least to me – is that at that stage, his English wasn't very good. For instance, in the drafts he'd often cross out his first version and replace it with a new version – but it was still fairly rudimentary (“The last three months I ~~were~~ exercised me in English and therefore I write you in this language.”). But he must have had tremendous discipline and willpower, because if you look at his later stuff in the 1920s and 1930s, where there are also first drafts, and where no native speaker could have corrected them, it's written in very good English. We of course don't know what his pronunciation was like. But it seems that that whole generation of Anglicists, and later generations as well, had a distinct accent when they spoke the language. This is completely understandable, given that they grew up before the age of radio and talking films, and had few opportunities to travel to Britain or meet native English speakers. There's no reason to believe that Chudoba was an exception.

Chudoba finished his studies in 1905 with a doctorate in the fields of Czech and German. His dissertation dealt with the Unity of Brethren bishop Jan Blahoslav. In the succeeding years, he earned his living as a secondary-school teacher in various places, Brno included. At the same time, he began focusing on the English-speaking world and its literature, and published articles in various periodicals. These included reviews of new publications in both Britain and the United States and many articles dealing mostly with nineteenth-century English authors – the Pre-Raphaelites, Browning, Ruskin, Carlyle, Meredith. But what caught his attention in particular was the English Romantics. While the image of English Romanticism at the time in the Czech lands, and to a certain extent in the whole Central European milieu, was shaped by the dominant figure of Byron – who was basically a late classical writer – Chudoba became interested in other authors – Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats – who he considered the real representatives of Romanticism in English literature. In 1912 he became a docent – his *habilitační spis* was a book on William Wordsworth he'd published the previous year. It was a kind of bombshell here and elsewhere, a revelation that English Romanticism was about something very different from what people had thought it was. The work caught the eye of F. X. Šalda, and led to what was to be a lifetime friendship between the two. Later, Chudoba was to continue his love affair with English Romanticism here at Masaryk University – the presence of the Romantic writers in the English Department was very strong during the twenty years he was head between the wars. His hand-written lectures in the archives bear testimony to this. And his successor, Karel Štěpaník, continued this line of research with work focused on Keats and Hazlitt.

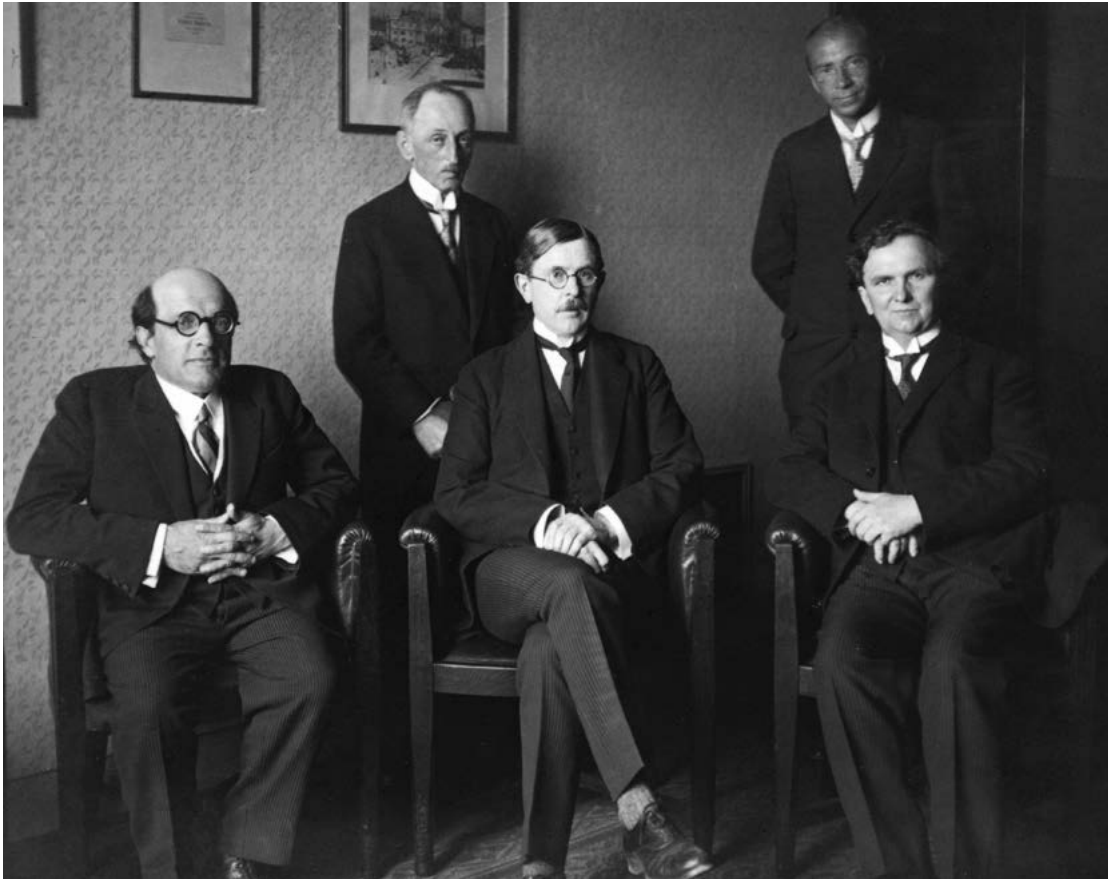
Chudoba's other great love was Shakespeare. His *magnum opus* in this field was the monumental two-volume *Kniha o Shakespearovi*. The first volume appeared in 1941, the year he died, and the second volume two years later. And it was truly monumental – the two volumes together add up to 1669 pages! Rather oddly, it was through Shakespeare, or rather the very large collection of books on Shakespeare in the English Department library, that I first came into real contact with Chudoba. When I joined the department in 1977, I soon discovered that we had a very



curious departmental library. The number of books was amazing, and the quality surprising, but it was only semi-functional. The books were scattered about on shelves in all the teachers' rooms as well as in cupboards in the corridor. To find a book you first had to go to the card catalogue – and know more or less what you were looking for – and find out from the card where the book was shelved. And for this they had a very strange system. The books had *signatory* – call numbers – that had originally been assigned to them based on the room and bookcase and specific shelf where they'd originally been placed when they were catalogued. But of course the books had been moved many times over the years, and this was also recorded. So you first had to see what the card catalogue said, and then you had to consult another card or a sheet of paper to see where the book was currently located. On top of that, all literature – poetry, novels, drama – was shelved by the birth year of the author. (They claimed this was the way they did it in Britain, but like many strange claims about Britain and the British, this was a myth.) But the library was run by *pomvědi*, student assistants, and it seemed that if they didn't happen to know an author's birthdate when a book was being returned, and they were rushed, they'd go like "Hmm – Dickens must have been born around ... maybe 1810?" and stick it back on a shelf in an approximate fashion. At times it was impossible to find books, though you knew they were there somewhere because you'd run across them at some point earlier. It was total chaos, a total mess – utterly maddening. One of the most user-unfriendly libraries I ever experienced, second only to the Bodleian in Oxford.

After a year or so I started to find this so frustrating that I decided I had to do something. So I created a whole new system of call numbers. Not for the linguistics books, though. I said to Josef Hladký, "I don't know anything about linguistics so I haven't got a clue about how to categorize linguistics books – can you look after those?" and he did. But I was responsible for all the other books in the library. Somewhere around 20,000 volumes. I literally took down each book, erased or crossed out the old call number and put in a new one. (I should add that several students volunteered to help me in this – they too were very irritated by the system.) And in the course of what seemed like an endless task I kept coming across books about Shakespeare. At first I thought this was natural, Shakespeare being the literary giant he is. But the numbers kept mounting, and in the end I was totally stunned by how many there were. I mentioned this to Jan Firbas, and he was the one who informed me that Shakespeare was Chudoba's passion, that he'd been regarded as Czechoslovakia's leading Shakespearean scholar in the interwar period. What was amazing was not only the number of books, but the wide range of topics. In fact, I had to invent a whole set of sub-categories for them. One book that caught my fancy was on Shakespeare's boy actors. It was written by a Canadian who later became one of our most famous authors – Robertson Davies. It was basically the first scholarly work on the boy actors in Elizabethan theatre. And it's a relatively rare book. It came out in, I think, September of 1939 – at any rate, just as World War II was starting. Immediately they introduced paper rationing – it was a strategic resource – and many books that'd already been printed were recalled and pulped. So not many copies of that first edition have survived. And here was one of them in our library. It was also interesting to see how many books there were on the "Was Shakespeare Shakespeare?" topic. This was very big in the 1920s and 1930s and it's big again now. You know, it's like mythology – it's eternal, it's circular, it never grows old.

But to get back to Chudoba's early years at the English Department, as I said he was appointed professor in 1920 – in fact one of the first at the Faculty of Arts, which only began to operate that year, the same as the Faculty of Science. (The Faculties of Law and Medicine had started immediately in 1919, the same year Masaryk University itself was founded.) This makes him one of the Founding Fathers of the Faculty – there were of course no Founding Mothers. His task was straightforward – to set up the department physically and prepare it for the first students the following year. But almost simultaneously with being named professor here in Brno – only



R. W. Seton-Watson in Brno.

From left: Jaroslav Kallab (Rector, Masaryk University), Julius Glücklich, R. W. Seton-Watson (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London), Jan Bečka (Rector, Veterinary University), František Chudoba (Dean of the Faculty of Arts), 1928.

© AMU, fond B 95 František Chudoba

three months later, in fact, in November 1920 – the Ministry of Education appointed Chudoba as Czech lecturer at King’s College, the University of London. His job there mirrored his job in Brno – to establish Czech studies. The School of Slavonic and East European Studies had been set up during the war, with Masaryk himself giving the inaugural lecture in 1915. But it really only got going after the war. The Czechoslovak government was very keen to spread the word about all things Czechoslovak – or “Czecho-Slovak” as they tended to put it then – so they decided to fund a Czech lectureship. And Chudoba was chosen for the position, because he’d studied Czech and written a great deal on Czech literary topics – and more generally, on Czech culture – but he’d also made a name for himself in the field of English studies. He must have been adventurous – he set off for London in December 1920 without even receiving final confirmation of what his pay would be. So he arrived there in London and started what was the first Czech programme at any British university. A second Founding Father role.

For two years he led this double life. There in London he busied himself with setting up Czech studies and preparing lectures for students as well as public lectures. Three inaugural lectures came in February and March 1921, and they were big events. We have the flyer announcing them – they were chaired by the British Minister of Education, the Czechoslovak Ambassador in London, and the Principal of King’s College. (Rather strangely, the Czechoslovak Ambassador, Vojtěch Mastný, is listed as Adelbert Mastný!) Chudoba also travelled a great deal around

England, giving lectures on Czech history and literature and Czech culture generally. And of course he was also using his time in England to buy books for the library of the new English Department here in Brno. Then he'd come back here and do everything that had to be done to get the department up and running, and at the same time buy books and other materials to send over to London for Czech studies.

So Chudoba had his hands full setting up the department. There's still some evidence of what this entailed. Among the things we still have dating from those days is the registry book for our library. It's a massive volume, beginning with the first books Chudoba bought, all entered in elegant handwriting. Another thing I discovered while rooting through the cupboards in the corridor of the old Building B, where we used to be when I started re-cataloguing the library's books, is the *Věcný inventář* of the department – the inventory list in which everything bought for the department was recorded. It's a beautiful object, with lovely mottled covers, and it offers a fascinating insight into just what “setting up the department” meant. From letters in the archives it's clear that professors were responsible for their own turf, for purchasing things to create their own little fiefs, and it's all there in the inventory book. Desks, shelves, curtains, lamps, stoves, coal scuttles, coat racks, a portrait of President Masaryk, spittoons (3 of them!), blotters, inkwells, rags for cleaning pens. And in each case, the cost (the rags cost 10 hellers). It's a very amusing document, a fascinating glimpse into how the “c. k.” world was still alive and kicking. Item number 1 in the inventory records the one single object on which the life of all institutions in this part of the world depends: *razítko anglického semináře*.

## Samuel Kostomlatský and English-language teaching

Chudoba's commuting back and forth between Brno and London went on for two years, till the fall of 1922, when his time in London came to an end and he held his first lectures in Brno. But teaching in the department had actually begun a year earlier, in the fall of 1921. This was thanks to a practical English teacher by the name of Samuel Kostomlatský. As yet there weren't any students wanting to focus on English as such, but he offered courses in English open to all students at the university, and others open only to students at the Faculty of Arts. Kostomlatský came to English teaching in a roundabout way. His father was a Protestant minister here in Brno, and Kostomlatský decided he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. Most of the Czech Protestants in this country back then were Calvinists, so Scotland, where the national church is Presbyterian, was a kind of magnet for many of them. Shortly before the First World War Kostomlatský set off to study theology there. When the war broke out, he remained in the country and even at one point served in the British Army. He was in the UK for more than four years, and by the time he came back to Czechoslovakia after the war ended, he no longer wanted to be a minister. Chudoba was looking for someone to teach practical English, and Kostomlatský was like a gift from heaven – someone with extensive practical knowledge of the language as well as lived experience of the realities of British life. So he was hired. He was associated with the department for more than thirty years, but also taught at the technical university and various language schools in the city. In fact, he was so active that it's been said that virtually everyone who learned or studied English in Brno between 1920 and 1960 had him as a teacher at some point. An exaggeration, perhaps, but not overly so. Antonín Přidal studied English and Spanish at the faculty in the 1950s, and enjoyed his teaching so much that after Kostomlatský was kicked out by the Communists in 1956, he took private lessons from him. In one of his books Přidal devotes a whole chapter to his reminiscences of Kostomlatský. He speaks of how different he was from other teachers, and how much his students liked him: “*Byl mile zvláštní a jeho dobrácké způsoby jsme milovali.*” But for Přidal Kostomlatský was more

than a teacher of English. He was someone he had a deep respect for, someone who was also a teacher of life.

I mentioned earlier how the books in the department library I was re-cataloguing were my first “contact” with Chudoba. In Kostomlatský’s case, this contact was real, physical. Some time after I joined the department in 1977 I met him at an event we were celebrating, and then a couple of times later. I was charmed. He was this tiny, fragile old man; behind his glasses, his eyes sparkled with interest and curiosity. His English was careful, old-fashioned, slightly accented. In conversation you immediately sensed his modesty and sensitivity – later I learned that he’d written poems and speculative essays and several novels, composed songs, and took brilliant photos, particularly of the woods in the Chřiby Hills, which he loved. He was deeply unworldly, something reflected in the title of a translation he made of *David Copperfield*. Who else but Kostomlatský would choose to publish this world-famous novel under the title *Život s dobrým koncem?* When he died in 1984 at the age of 89, the department lost its last living link with its origins more than sixty years earlier.

## Chudoba as academic and populariser

Chudoba was very active in the life of the faculty. The system back then was that Deans were appointed on the basis of seniority – that is, when they’d been named professors. So each professor knew in advance when he was going to be Dean. But he only held the position for one year, and then the next professor in line took over. It was more an honorary, symbolic job, not like today when the Dean has to be a major administrator, think about sources of funding, and so on. Chudoba’s turn came in the 1927/1928 academic year – he was the Faculty’s eighth Dean. He definitely belonged to its more conservative wing. There’s some evidence that he was a quintessential Brno/Moravian patriot – he certainly distrusted Prague. It’s hard to say what his reasons were, but for example he was a very strong defender of the idea that the Czech spoken in Moravia was correct Czech as opposed to the lousy Czech they spoke in Prague. There are some very amusing letters where he points out to Prague colleagues just why their Czech was absolutely unacceptable. He kept up his interest in Czech and Czech literature for his whole life, writing articles and reviews for Czech publications and contributing articles on the Czech literary scene to the *Slavonic and East European Review* in London. He wasn’t a fan of the Prague School of Linguistics either – and again, it’s hard to know exactly why. For example, when Roman Jakobson applied here to be named a docent – to go through the habilitation process – Chudoba did everything possible to block him. For some reason he had an intense dislike of René Wellek. My feeling is that Chudoba regarded the people involved with the Prague School as radicals who didn’t respect the rules of “proper” Czech. His idea of Czech was very traditional, concerned with maintaining and defending established standards, as opposed to the approach of the Prague School, which was to examine the actual living language – to put it in a simplified way. Also, many members of the Prague School were foreigners – even Wellek, though Czech, had been born and brought up in Vienna. And for Chudoba, who was a strong Czech patriot, it was somehow unacceptable that so many “outsiders” were making pronouncements about Czech, how it functioned or should function, and so on.

But he wasn’t opposed to the Prague School as such. There’s an interesting story that shows this. Chudoba regularly taught courses on the English language and historical development. But he must have been aware that this wasn’t enough, that linguistics had moved on. Towards the end of the 1930s he asked some Prague School people what young linguist they would suggest who might come and teach linguistics in Brno. And Josef Vachek was recommended. So Chudoba entered into negotiations to bring Vachek to Brno, but these came to an end when the univer-

sities were closed down in 1939. Vachek says in his memoir that he himself was surprised, because Chudoba had this reputation of being a hard-line, anti-Prague School conservative. And it's true that he was conservative. He was also combative, and got involved in many battles with colleagues in the faculty academic board about whether this person or that person should be awarded something or not and often found himself defending some fairly conservative positions against professors who belonged to the progressive "camp".

Chudoba appears to have been more active than many other professors in *osvěta* – what we'd now call outreach to the general public or, in very up-to-date lingo, the "fourth role of the university". In general this was common among professors at Masaryk University in the First Republic. People had been fighting for almost 40 years to establish a second Czech university, and Masaryk University was very much perceived as a Moravian achievement. So there was a feeling among many professors that they should devote themselves – depending on the particular department, of course – to Moravian things: history, art history, geology and so on. Another notion was that they should be in touch with the general public – in other words, should offer public lectures, write articles for newspapers and magazines, and so on. Chudoba certainly shared this view. When he was in England, he was extremely active, travelling around the country during the year and a half that he was there giving public lectures about Czech literature, art and culture. And he did the same thing here, in all kinds of dinky little towns. This was a university professor going to give a lecture in Bystrčice pod Hostýnem, for example, and other similar-sized places – lots of them. He was also very active in the Anglo-American Club here in Brno. These clubs existed all over the country during the First Republic. They allowed people to meet once a week, to play social games in English, to listen to a talk in English, to practise their English by speaking with one another. The Brno club invited guests as far as this was possible, had its own lending library, organized English classes. This was part of a wider phenomenon – here in Brno there was the Alliance française, the Circolo Dante Alighieri, a Russian club, and the Anglo-American Club. They shared a clubroom in the Slavia Hotel, each using it one evening in the week. The Anglo-American Club was very active, and at one period it became the coordinating centre for all the twenty or so Anglo-American clubs in Czechoslovakia. Apparently they were always very pleased when Chudoba came and gave them a talk.

He was also a "public intellectual", a very frequent contributor to newspapers, magazines, journals of all kinds. He wrote about English literature and culture, about American topics, about Czech literature and the Czech language, about translations. He had strong views on many subjects and was a natural polemicist, ready to launch strongly worded attacks on things he didn't like and ready to defend his position. This often led to extended debates in newspapers and journals. One subject he often returned to was the need to expand English at grammar schools. Back then, the teaching of English was almost exclusively restricted to *obchodní akademie*. Chudoba felt this was wrong – that it failed to recognize that English was becoming increasingly important internationally in all fields, not just in business. This was reflected in the way he followed the development of American literature and regularly ordered the latest fiction and other works for the department library. But there was also another aspect to this. He perceived English from what we'd now call an ideological point of view. He shared this view with Otakar Vočadlo, who followed him as a Czech lecturer in London, later went on to found English studies at Comenius University and ended up at Charles University in Prague. They both regarded the study of English as vital to combat the German influence in the country. But Chudoba wasn't as radical as Vočadlo, who at one point apparently made a proposal to abolish the teaching of German in Czechoslovak schools – this a time when there was a 30 per cent German-speaking minority in the country!

Some things Chudoba published were more literary. Several short translations of English poetry appeared in *Lidové noviny*, for example. And he was particularly good at feuille-

tons. There's a wonderful feuilleton by him in which he criticizes the way the city of Brno was caring for its public greenery and contrasts this with the majesty of a splendid plane tree at the corner of Veverří and Pekárenská streets. This was in 1930 – more than seventy years before the tree in question was declared a *památný strom*.

Chudoba's role as a populariser also included radio broadcasts, something that would have been unusual at the time. Among Chudoba's papers in the MU archives there's a hand-written text on the "Was Shakespeare Shakespeare?" theme that he must have prepared originally for some public talk – perhaps for the Anglo-American Club. However, he also cannibalized it at a later date. Bits are crossed out in red ink, and "radio – 13 minutes" and a date have been added on the first page. I asked the late Tomáš Sedláček, a long-time employee of Czech Radio here in Brno, if he could explain this. He traced this down in the archives and discovered that the shortened talk had been broadcast on a Sunday evening as part of what was then the most prestigious weekly Czech Radio cultural programme. Chudoba would have been heard right across the whole country.

I suppose Chudoba would have seen this as part of his mission. A truly cultured person, he believed in the power of literature and he loved writing and he corresponded with all sorts of writers and artists. Of course the problem with all personal archives is that they very seldom have the letters the individuals in question wrote – most of the letters are ones they received. But some very interesting letters Chudoba wrote have been preserved in the MU archives. In some cases they're drafts with corrections, in others fair copies. These are all letters he considered important – he wanted to be sure that he'd always know exactly what he'd written. And he did that particularly if there was a difficult situation, when he wanted to be covered.

Chudoba was a prickly character. It seems he held the reputation at the faculty of being someone that could be offended easily. Going through his papers in the archives, I came to the conclusion that he simply refused to put up with any kind of nonsense from anybody. He wasn't aggressive, just very clear and outspoken. There are several letters that he wrote to English colleagues at London University for which we have the draft copies. In them, he explains that he feels that they aren't dealing straightforwardly with him, aren't being responsible. These were when they weren't answering his letters, for example, when they lost manuscripts and so on. These letters are very polite, but also very specific, very clear, very direct. Chudoba was a boy from the country who'd made it to the top of the greasy pole with little help – he wasn't going to be treated like he wasn't their equal and he was quite ready to call a spade a spade. I think this is more what his "prickliness" was about than that personally he was easily offended or anything. He just believed things should function and work properly, and if they didn't, this should be brought to the attention of whoever was responsible.

By the way, one of his letters indicates that his office was in Building A, on the north side, facing into the courtyard. I tried to find out if there's any old plan that would help me pin it down exactly, but I failed. It would be nice to know the actual room he had his office in, because we have a photo of it showing his desk, portraits of American and British writers adorning the walls, a magnificent tiled stove complete with coal scuttle and all sorts of other bits and pieces.

Chudoba was definitely a workaholic. He used to leave home for the faculty every weekday at 9 am, come home for lunch – the family lived on Veverří, just above Konečného náměstí – go for a short walk after lunch and end up at the faculty, and finally return home sometime after 8 pm. He also went in to the faculty on weekends – on Saturdays and on Sunday afternoons. He'd often bring his younger son, Zdeněk, with him, and stick him in a corner to read a book. In a memoir of his family the younger son wrote he says it didn't seem strange to him – his father was there working and he sat there reading, each doing his own thing. A lovely picture – quite another world from the one we know today. In one of his letters Chudoba writes about Building C, which was built to house the Rectorate of the new university. He talks about how wonderful it is to



František Chudoba's office in the 1930s.

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follow its construction, of how it's night-time and he's looking out of the window of his office and sees this white building rising up in the darkness ... Imagine – he goes completely Romantic over Building C! But for him it was more than just a building – it represented the new university and all its promise, the whole confident, optimistic march forward of Czech society post-1918. And Chudoba was certainly a deep Czech patriot.

Being a workaholic who was involved in many projects, Chudoba seems to have had little time or space for friendships. He had a few colleagues at the Faculty of Arts who were long-time friends. Sundays he often visited the Classics professor František Novotný. Sometimes on Thursday he met with Arne Novák. (I have no idea why these specific days, but that's what his son says.) Rather surprisingly, his closest friendship was with F. X. Šalda. In fact, Chudoba was Šalda's only long-time friend. Šalda himself was a similar kind of loner, and these two somehow hit it off, and stuck together until Šalda's death. Šalda had been very impressed by Chudoba's discovery of the English Romantics and by his whole emotional approach and commitment to literature, and Chudoba admired Šalda immensely. They corresponded regularly, and a selection of their letters was published after the war as *Listy o poesii a kritice: vzájemné dopisy F.X. Šaldy a F. Chudoby*.

Finally, I shouldn't forget one central aspect of Chudoba's life and temperament – his love of the visual. He'd been dead serious when as a schoolboy he said he wanted to be a painter. As late as the summer of 1903, when he was well into his university studies, he went on a course held by the painter Alois Kalvoda in the village of Radějov, just south of Strážnice; a charming period photo still survives. And his family still have some of his paintings. They're fairly accomplished landscapes in a late Impressionist style. Apparently his professional career left him no time for painting. But the world of art remained very important for him. Among the first acquisitions of

the English Department were about a dozen graphic portraits of British and American writers. These were in fact donated by Chudoba – he obviously felt it was important for the students to be exposed to high quality art to inspire them. When he was in England in 1920–1922, he often gave talks on contemporary Czech art and artists. His whole life he continued to collect works of art – mostly prints, but a few paintings as well. His correspondence includes many letters to artists that document in part the works he collected. And his letters to family and friends are full of very visually evocative descriptions of places he visited – forests, parks, and so on. His deeply Romantic spirit clearly chimed with the world of nature.

## The students

There were probably very few students, but it's impossible to know just how many. It's impossible because people didn't register in any kind of degree programme back then. It was quite simple: if you passed your *maturita* at a grammar school, you could automatically attend any university you wanted. (This was on the basis of a law dating back to 1851!) You could sign up for whatever subjects you wanted, though there was a minimum number of hours per semester, and students had to pay for the number of hours they were taught. There must have been restrictions for fields like medicine, but this didn't apply to the Faculty of Arts. Once at the university, you could attend whatever lectures and classes you wanted. To complete a subject – English or German or History or whatever – there'd be some required number of courses in that subject you had to take. You were then given a document called an *absolutorium* confirming that you'd completed your studies – that is, that you'd met the requirements for that subject. For some that was it – they left the university and began their working lives. Only if they planned to teach did they need to take a state exam. We do have a list of students between the mid-thirties and 1950 whose *absolutorium* was in English; only nineteen of them pre-date the beginning of the war. But there aren't any records of this final exam, which seems a bit bizarre. However, even a list showing who'd taken the state exam at Masaryk University wouldn't be definitive. That's because you didn't necessarily have to take it at the university where you'd studied. You could finish in Prague if you wanted, or in Bratislava. So records are very patchy.

We do know if someone did a doctorate. This was rare. There were only two or three of them at the department in the interwar period. The first one was on Whitman. This is interesting for a couple of reasons. The first is that it reminds us that the departmental library has a fabulous collection of American literature based on what Chudoba purchased back in the 1920s and 1930s. A collection of twenty volumes of Washington Irving's work. Twelve volumes of Ralph Waldo Emerson's journals, six of his letters. Dozens of works by Mark Twain. A 37-volume set of Henry James's writings. And hundreds of titles by other American authors. Portraits of Emerson and Whitman hung on the department walls. Chudoba regularly reviewed books on American literature. Yet at the time American literature still wasn't taken very seriously as an academic subject. In the fall of 1947 F. O. Matthiessen, the man who created the concept of the American Renaissance, came to Czechoslovakia and taught a semester in Prague. He was completely astounded by how few American books they had in the Prague English Department library. Granted, some books may have disappeared during the Second World War, but why American books in particular? It makes more sense that they probably weren't so interested in American literature in Prague, were more into British literature. The second reason why I find the Whitman doctorate interesting is that the list of lectures published at the beginning of every semester shows that Chudoba never lectured on American literature. But though Chudoba was conservative, when it came to literature he was very open. Despite not teaching American literature at all, he supervised that doctorate on Whitman. This would make him the precursor of a strong tradition



in the department – if a student comes to you and says she or he wants to write on something or somebody, you say “Fine. Go for it!”

So we don’t know exactly how many students there were. Limited numbers, definitely – the English Department was one of the smallest at the faculty. What were they taught? Kostomlatský had practical English courses with them. Native speakers – more about them later – also taught practical English courses as well as ones on British life and institutions. Chudoba had lectures and seminars. The lectures were devoted to the history of English literature and the historical development of English. Here, it seems students listened and took notes. They were more active in seminars, where they worked with literary texts, including ones in Old and Middle English. Several of Chudoba’s lectures are in the archives. They’re in Czech. Quite a few examples of written work produced by some of the students have also survived, both *domáci práce* as well as work handed in for the *absolutorium* and even the state exam. All of this work is in English. I found this surprising. Until very, very recently both Olomouc and Prague insisted on Czech being the language students wrote their final work in. In our department, it seems, right from the very beginning the practice was the opposite – students had to write in English. To me this is amazing, and deeply satisfying.

I wish we could know more about who the students were. In general, students then didn’t tend to be very well off – many had to earn money in some way. Students from poor families could have their fees waived or partly waived, and there were also a few of what we now call NGOs that helped support them. Most students whose names appear somewhere in connection with the English Department were Czech. A few names appear to be German, some could be Jewish. Often students took courses in a number of disciplines, but only did their *absolutorium* or state exam in one or two of them, which adds another complication to the “who studied English?” question. Going through the names I had at my disposal, I discovered to my surprise that I’d actually known one of the pre-1939 graduates, Jan Nejezchleb. He was a friend of my wife’s, since they both taught at the State Language School, and he was actually a colleague of mine, too, when I taught there in 1969/1970 after coming to Czechoslovakia. Other names emerged from anonymity thanks to Google. Juliana Obrdlíková, for example, was an important figure in the history of sociology at Masaryk University. There were also some “ordinary” people who for some reason have an on-line presence, and two or three “probables”. And I realized that when I was in Prague in the 1970s I’d actually got to know one of the department’s pre-war students quite well. This was Vladimír Vařecha. The war cut short his studies here in Brno. He managed to escape to the UK and fought with the RAF. After returning in 1945 he finished his studies at Charles University and became a well-known translator and teacher of translation. We met, of all places, at the Slovácký krůžek in Prague, where I admired his posh British English and his superb singing and violin skills (he was from Uherské Hradiště, which explains it). But most students remain anonymous. Who, for instance, was the intriguingly named Tuisko Keller? What happened to Julie Kubíčková-Spiessová, the author of the thesis on Whitman? A whole team would be needed to uncover the stories of those early graduates.

## Lecturers from England

Chudoba had a strong belief that his department would be incomplete without a native speaker. And because of the contacts he made when he was in England, he had channels for getting in touch with very promising young people he might be able to lure to Brno. The most important contact in this respect was Sir William Craigie, a Scot who was the editor of the magisterial *Oxford English Dictionary*. Through him in particular Chudoba was able to bring a phenomenal succession of British lecturers to Brno in the interwar period. I don’t know if they were phe-

nomenal as teachers at the department. Some of them undoubtedly were, but the selection was phenomenal in the sense that later they all became leading figures in the worlds of linguistics and English-language teaching.

However, things didn't begin so happily. When Chudoba started looking around for an English lecturer at the very beginning, in 1922, he found a man called Laurence Hyde. He was a British guy interested in Czech culture – if I remember correctly, he was enrolled at Charles University at the time. Chudoba arranged for him to join the English Department as an assistant teacher and to carry on his studies of Czech at the faculty. But this didn't work out. Before long Hyde started complaining that he had too much work and demanded a higher stipend. Chudoba hadn't the slightest patience with his complaints, and in a very polite letter he told him he was fired. (Hyde later translated Čapek's *Krakatit*, which turned out to be a total disaster. Even Čapek, whose English wasn't particularly good, was horrified when he saw how mangled the translation was.) After dismissing Hyde, Chudoba set about finding a replacement. A curious thing here is that although Chudoba was a great lover of England, of English literature and the English language, he had a very low opinion of the English themselves. In a number of letters to friends he expressed his feelings towards them – that they were irresponsible, rather feckless and untrustworthy, that they promised things that they didn't follow through with. In this light it's not so surprising that in one letter that he wrote to a friend about his search for a replacement for Hyde, he says “*Potřebujeme zde anglického lektora – mladého Skota s universitním vzděláním, filologa, třebas jen v anglickém smyslu. Nepíši Angličana, protože Skotové jsou zpravidla lepší pracovníci a lidé svědomitější. Ale znáte-li Angličana podobných vlastností, spokojíme se též Angličanem.*”

His search was successful – though he had to resign himself to an Englishman. Hyde was followed by Simeon Potter, who though young – only twenty-five – already had a lot of experience under his belt (including active service in the First World War) and was hyperactive. He jumped immediately into activities at the Anglo-American Club in Brno, and was soon its President. Later, he became the key figure in putting together the annual publication dealing with the activities of all the Anglo-American clubs throughout Czechoslovakia. His record as an author of textbooks of English was extraordinary. First there was a series of textbooks for the country's secondary schools – his co-author in these was the young Prague Anglicist Bohumil Trnka. Then came *Everyday English for Foreign Students*. This was based at least partly on his experience with his students in the Brno English Department. It's an odd book, in that it uses a rather eccentric system for indicating pronunciation, one invented by none other than – Sir William Craigie! Quite exceptional was *Rozhlasový kurs angličtiny pro začátečníky*. Potter wrote this to be used by people following a course he created and delivered live on Czechoslovak Radio in 1927. These were certainly the first “wireless lectures” – this was his phrase – in the country in which English was taught. Quite likely they were the first such course here for any language. Amidst all this activity he also managed to do a PhD at Charles University. In 1931 Potter left Brno for Southampton, where he began what turned out to be a very distinguished academic career in the fields of linguistics and language as such. He was also keen on popularizing scholarly knowledge. His name became widely known thanks to several publications directed at the general reader, in particular *Our Language* and *Modern Linguistics*.

Potter was followed by Stuart Mann, who it seems wasn't overly active in Brno or Czechoslovakia during his time here. But he was very active elsewhere. Every summer he used to disappear south. Apparently people didn't know very much about what he actually did when he disappeared south, but it turned out that his first love was Albanian. He'd first come to Albania in 1929 to learn Albanian and immerse himself in Albanian culture. He made a living there by teaching in a private boys' school in Tirana. Many years later he wrote a charming short account of his memories of Albania back then. From it you can tell he was clearly fond of the country, but at the same time he makes it sound a bit like a Ruritanian operetta – amusing and implausibly

bizarre. But his grammar of Albanian is still the standard book used by English-speaking students learning the language – almost ninety years after its first publication!

One thing Mann definitely did do when he was here in Brno was to get to know some of the local Roma. Through a Roma student in the department, he visited a group of Moravian Gypsies living in a camp somewhere on the edge of the city. He befriended them, and when he felt he knew their language well enough he wrote to the British and Foreign Bible Society in London. This organization was founded in the 19th century with the specific aim of translating the Bible into languages where a translation was still lacking. In this way, it could help spread God's word to all the peoples of the earth. Mann offered to translate the Book of Acts into what he called "Moravian Romany". His offer was quickly accepted – every new language meant more potential souls saved. Apparently when the book appeared in 1936, he was sent copies by the Society along with a letter asking if he mightn't be interested in becoming a missionary to the Roma, since he was the only one who could communicate with them! The bitter irony of all this, though, is that less than a decade later virtually all the speakers of "Moravian Romany" had vanished in the Holocaust.

Like Simeon Potter, Stuart Mann also published many books. One's called *Anglamer: A Simple Method for Learning to Speak English*. This sounds promising, but Anglamer turns out to be a weird new system he invented that he claimed made mistakes in pronunciation impossible. It employs a phonetic script with 37 letters, distinguished by various diacritical marks (including the Czech *háček*), and a system of punctuation marks and spaces to indicate rising tones, falling tones, a higher pitch and so on. I shudder to think that he probably tried the thing out on his Brno students! Mann eventually ended up in London at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies – the same place where Chudoba had launched Czech studies more than a quarter of a century earlier. He taught Albanian and Czech there. But as a linguist he was interested in a much broader area – the Indo-European languages as a whole. It's claimed that he was able to understand – or at least read – every one of them. Whether or not that's true I guess can't be proved. But the twenty boxes of Mann's papers in the SSEES archives contain documents that are stated to be in the following languages: "Albanian & Armenian & Basque & Breton & Czech & Dutch & English & Etruscan & French & Georgian & German & Greek & Hittite & Italian & Kalmyk & Lettish & Lithuanian & Persian & Portuguese & Romanian & Romany & Russian & Serbo-Croat & Slovak & Umbrian & Welsh". Impressive! He must have been one of those archetypal English academics devoted to rooting around in arcane and remote corners of knowledge. These materials must have been behind his life's work, *An Indo-European Comparative Dictionary*, published in 1987.

The last lecturer brought to Brno by Chudoba was W. Stannard Allen. He came in 1937, at very short notice at the beginning of the summer semester. Apparently the wheels of the bureaucracy had turned very slowly. Chudoba had told Allen his two sons would meet him at the train station. To help with identification, Allen sent him some small snapshots he'd hastily taken of himself that he thought would give them some idea of his general appearance. He added that he'd "doubtless look unmistakably English on Brno station", look younger than his age (he was then 24) and be carrying part of his luggage in a rucksack. Allen's time with the department was relatively brief. The next year came Munich, and in March 1939 the occupation of the country. But that summer Allen was still planning to return for the 1939/1940 academic year. As late as August 1939 he was writing to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts – in very impressive Czech – explaining that the German Embassy in London had told him it was out of the question he'd be able to enter the Protectorate without showing proof that he indeed had a contract with Masaryk University. So he asked if a copy of the contract could be sent to him in Vienna, where he was travelling to, and where he'd be able to get an entry permit for the Protectorate "from the Gestapo". It's all so weirdly neutral and innocent.

Allen too wrote textbooks of English. The best known are *Living English Structure* and *Living English Speech*. *Living English Structure* is probably the most successful textbook in the history of English teaching. It was first published in 1947, and almost seventy-five years later it's still in print. We were using it in the department in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was invaluable, especially since contact with the English-speaking world and English speakers was so limited. Allen's books were among the first to use ordinary English speech as the basis for teaching grammar and other patterns. It's one of my fantasies to imagine that he began trying out this approach when he was in Brno. In fact he returned to Czechoslovakia after the war, and was a lecturer at Charles University, so perhaps it was Prague students who were his guinea pigs. In 1993, when Josef Hladký was Dean at the Faculty of Arts, he proposed awarding Allen the faculty's Silver Medal. This was approved, but then the question was how to get it to him. By chance I was going to England at the time and I took it with me. I visited him at his home in Guildford, south of London, and presented him with the medal and accompanying diploma. We sat and chatted for an hour or two. He told a lot of good stories, in particular about Stuart Mann, who he knew very well. But if I'd been as curious about the history of the department back then as I am now, I'd certainly have pumped him for much more information.

2. on the differences between

sound development.

The tests based on prehistoric differences between Scandinavian and West Teutonic are in Sir

Gawain only two: !!!

bigged, pp. from biggen, ob. = to settle, found in the verse 20 and

biges, 3<sup>rd</sup> person sing. from bygge, ob. = to build in the verse 9. The

O.W. Scandinavian form was byggja, O. Swed. byggia = to inhabit, dwell in, build, Dan. bygge

gg is here a criterion of the Scandinavian origin as the West

Wall 91.

under, circum

# Interlude: the War and its aftermath

In November 1939 the Germans didn't actually close the university down legally – they suspended its activities for three years. A skeleton administrative staff remained, and the professors were sent on “temporary holiday” and provided with some kind of payment – this was Chudoba's case. By this time he wasn't at all well. For the past fifteen years or so he'd spent part of each summer in some spa in Bohemia – Poděbrady was a favourite – or in Slovakia. And like many people he was psychologically and emotionally broken by Munich and then the occupation. So he spent most of his time then just working on his book on Shakespeare. He died early in 1941. The first volume of his *Kniha o Shakespearovi* appeared that year. His older son, Bohdan, finished editing and saw through the press the second volume, which was published two years later. He was also responsible for the publication in 1945 of the collection of letters exchanged between his father and F. X. Šalda that I mentioned earlier.

Bohdan Chudoba was a historian, very right-wing, very Catholic. This wasn't a good combination after 1945. Even before 1948, the *vědecká rada* was dominated by Communists and their sympathisers, and though apparently his habilitation work was very accomplished, it was simply unacceptable ideologically. So the habilitation process was suspended – a huge *cause célèbre* in the little world of the university. After 1948 he emigrated, and of course there were severe repercussions for the family here – his mother and his brother Zdeněk and family. The flat was confiscated, Zdeněk was held in detention for some time, they couldn't get jobs and so on. Bohdan was the kind of golden boy in the family – extremely bright, praised by Šalda and everybody's favourite – and then he leaves and his family's left here to pick up the pieces. Unfortunately not an uncommon Czech story. When I spoke with old Mrs. Chudoba – Zdeněk's widow – about this period, there was definitely a bit of tension in the air and much was left unsaid.

## Chudoba's effects

But long before 1948, Chudoba's books had disappeared. When the university was closed down, Chudoba apparently took masses of books from the department home to use in connection with the book on Shakespeare he was writing. And he also had a huge personal library. After his death his sons returned most of the books that belonged to the department. At least that's my conclusion, judging by the relatively few books listed in the departmental library catalogue that are missing. But Chudoba's personal library was divided up among relatives, and the rest sold to the university library (now the Moravská zemská knihovna). But other things somehow made their way back to the department. Among them were some of those graphic portraits of authors that had been Chudoba's personal possessions. I found them when I was rooting round the cupboards in the department where scholarly journals were stored, along with others that belonged to the department. In fact, not knowing at the time what they were, I once took the portrait of Kipling, and used it in a Gypsywood production. How dumb I was!

The poem 'Merlin and The Gleam' (apparently) was written when the "Idylls of the King" were already.

In spirit this poem is very different from his other Arthurian poems.

It is full of symbolism. Merlin, the sorcerer, signifies the spirit of poetry.

The young mariner—the poet—that watches the "gleam of wonder" to follow "The Gleam" — the poetical imagination, the pure ideals.

Tennyson gives in this poem a sort of a philosophy.

After he had learned the secret of the great master he followed The Gleam for his whole life.

In Tennyson's youth The Gleam, "moving through the valleys and mountains and shone on the faces.

Some people — the critics

# Post-war and post-coup: 1945–1977

The period to be covered now probably seems puzzling. But it's not arbitrary – 1945 marks the reopening of the university, and 1977 my arrival in the English Department. Unfortunately for this period of just over thirty years there's no central documentary source of information like the Chudoba fonds in the university archives that I could draw on. And of course I have no first-hand experience for talking about the department in this period, which isn't the case later on. Which means that it's in fact the most difficult period for me to deal with. I've done half a dozen interviews with people who studied in the department after the war and in the early fifties, and that gives me some sense of what it was like then. My wife, Zdena Sparlingová, started studying there in 1961 and she spoke a bit about the period of the thaw, but she had a rather ambivalent attitude to the department and didn't take much part in its life, so she wasn't able to recollect much that was of interest. In fact she was actually almost kicked out by Jan Firbas, because she disliked and was very inept at *fonetický přepis*, something Firbas was very strict about. And I've talked informally, but not systematically, to other people who studied at the department at some point in this period. So what follows comes mostly from what I've gleaned from various books and articles, and what was told to me by department members and former students over the years.

## Re-opening after the war

Renewing the department after the war wasn't easy. The first challenge was physical. The faculty buildings had been taken over by some branch of the German-run bureaucracy. They made all sorts of alterations and left the buildings in a terrible state. And most of the books had been stashed away in a storeroom. Students were commandeered to help haul the books back and set up the offices and classrooms. And also to help with actual repairs. Jaroslav Peprník once told me a story from when he started studying in October 1945. The first thing that happened to him was that Jan Firbas – who was then a student, but a few years older, which meant he'd done his first semester beginning in June – handed him a trowel and said “We have to fix that wall over there.” This was somewhere in Building A. I wish I had a photo of Firbas and Peprník fixing that wall!

The second challenge was professional and had to do with the continuity of the department. It had suffered badly because of the war. First the university was closed down, and then in 1941 Chudoba died. When the department was re-established in 1945, Chudoba's prize student, Karel Štěpaník, was taken in to cover the literature courses. Samuel Kostomlatský was again on hand for practical English classes. He was helped by a couple of external teachers, Dr. Milada Borůvková – a former student of the department who'd gone on to do a doctorate on the development of feminism in England – and W. P. Jowett, head of the Brno branch of the British Council. But there was no one qualified to head the department, so it was folded administratively into the German Department under its head, Antonín Beer, as a “temporary measure”. (No one realized it at the time, but this was a sign of things to come.) Someone was also needed to introduce the up-and-coming discipline of linguistics. Both problems were solved at one go when Josef Vachek was brought in from Prague with the promise that in short order he'd become a docent and then





Samuel Kostomlatský, the Faculty's original English lecturer.  
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a professor. He speaks a bit about this move to Brno in his *Vzpomínky českého anglisty*. For many reasons it wasn't something he was very keen on. He was active in Prague academic circles and the Prague Linguistic Circle and had already been offered a path to become a docent at what was to become the VŠE. So a bright future lay ahead of him there. What was more, he'd have to commute between Brno and Prague because of other commitments in the capital. But after a long discussion, the Czech linguist Bohumil Havránek, a mentor of his and at the time Dean of the Faculty of Arts in Brno, "disarmed" him by proclaiming that he mustn't decide on the basis of what he found to his personal liking, but on the basis of where he was needed. It says a lot about Vachek's character, and perhaps about the times, that this clinched it, and he agreed to go to Brno. But under the condition that he'd only remain there till someone else was found.

Vachek remained in Brno till 1962, and left then only as the result of Communist plans to remove him. Once in Brno, he was captured almost immediately by the warm reception he received, the enthusiasm of the students, and the inclusive atmosphere at the faculty. There was little stratification in the teaching staff. In his memoir he speaks about the spirit amongst the faculty teachers: “*Byla to skutečná univerzitní demokracie v nejpřínějším smyslu toho slova, jaká tehdy byla sotva jinde možná; rozhodně nikoli v Praze.*” When he got an extremely attractive offer to return to Prague less than a year later – an immediate professorship followed by a six-month research stay in Britain – he turned it down. He says this was because it was becoming clearer and clearer to him that his *poslání* – his calling, his mission – was in Brno and in building up the department here. And this was despite roadblocks along the way. In particular, there was a long delay before he was actually named professor. This finally came in the fall of 1947. Four or five more months, and Vachek might have remained an associate or even just an assistant professor for many more years. However, even after he was no longer head of the department he remained the dominant figure, partly because of his scholarly excellence, partly because of the quality of his lectures, partly by sheer force of character.

It was during Vachek’s period in Brno that most of the teachers I later came to know entered the department. I’ll talk in more detail about them later, but here I think it’s useful to list them, just to give some idea of how the department grew in those first roughly twenty years after the war. As I said, Karel Štěpáník joined the department immediately in 1945, and Samuel Kostomlatský returned. Jessie Kocmanová came later that year, fresh from Scotland. At first she taught English language courses and classes on British and American history and society, and after she got her doctorate three years later she started teaching British and American literature. During the war Jan Firbas had learned English at the Institute of Modern Languages in Brno and had also passed the examination to qualify as a school teacher. He started studying in the first semester that was opened, in July – it was for older students who’d been held back by the war – and graduated after only two years of intensive study in 1947. (The normal degree course back then was four years.) He was immediately accepted in the department as an assistant and soon became Vachek’s right-hand man. In 1950 they were joined by Lidmila Pantůčková, who was a literary scholar. Jaroslav Ondráček graduated in 1953 and Aleš Tichý in 1955. Both of them taught practical language courses in the department, but as teachers employed by the university’s Department of Languages. They only became members of the department later, in 1962 – Ondráček as a linguist and Tichý as a literary person who also specialized in translation. That same year Eva Golková also joined the department. These were the people who built up the department in the course of the first couple of decades after the war, and most of them continued to shape it for the following couple of decades as well.

## Post-1948

In 1950 Vachek was succeeded as head of department by Karel Štěpáník – someone much his junior. But following the Communist coup in February 1948 the whole university was turned topsy-turvy – the old rules no longer applied. Even the institutional framework for the academics’ work was continually in a state of flux. Before long the word “Masaryk” stopped being used as part of the university’s name: people began referring to it simply as “Brno University”, and this was even used on official headed notepaper. But legally it was still Masaryk University, and throughout the fifties there was talk of changing it. This became serious towards the end of the decade, and one name that came up was that of the first Communist President. The idea of teaching at Gottwald University was so appalling that a frantic effort was made to find an acceptable name. And so in 1960 the name was officially changed to Jan Evangelista Purkyně University. It was a close shave.

During this period, the faculty went through great uncertainty and an endless series of transformations. After February the departments were renamed for a short time as “scholarly fields”. These weren’t very effective, and at one point there was even a proposal to close down the study of English and the Romance languages in Brno completely. The argument was that they were also taught at the new university in Olomouc – it was close, and this would help its development. That plan was dropped, and before long there was another reorganization. For a while the English and German Departments were linked up, then the Romance languages and English, followed by a Department of Western European Philology and Phonetics. After a few years came another wave of reform. This left behind it a Department of Romance Studies and Phonetics and a Department of English and German Studies, headed by Štěpaník. Four years later, in 1962, the latter split, and the Department of English and American Studies came into existence.

Despite the organizational chaos of these years, the department prospered. Though Vachek was no longer in the leading position officially, he remained the *de facto* leader, setting the standards and making proposals for new activities. One was to found the Brno branch of the Kruh moderních filologů (Czech Modern Language Association). This brought together academics from the fields of English, German and Romance language studies, and helped strengthen bonds of collegiality at the faculty – bonds that according to Vachek were strengthened even more after they adjourned to the nearby Akademická kavárna following lectures. Another important initiative was to launch a new scholarly journal. *Brno Studies in English* appeared for the first time in 1959 – the first scholarly journal at the faculty devoted to one particular language and cultural field. Over the years it became the model for other departments wanting to launch their own specialized journals. At the beginning it was only published every two years. In the mid-1990s it became an annual. And of course now it comes out twice a year and it’s in the SCOPUS database and has a well-deserved international reputation. A real academic success story.

## Josef Vachek

As I’ve already said, Vachek left in 1962. The circumstances that led to this give an interesting insight into what it was like at the faculty at the time. He and Jan Firbas were deeply believing Christians, Vachek a Catholic and Firbas a Protestant. Neither tried to hide their faith. When Vachek was teaching at the faculty, he’d often pop in to the little chapel that used to be on Grohova street for a quick prayer on his way to class. And Firbas was quite active within the structures of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren. Curiously enough, though there was comment and strong criticism of them in the 1950s, nothing happened to them – they continued as teachers. But in 1960 this changed. For some reason there was a new wave of tightening up. (Something similar happened in the late 1980s.) The people running the country realized that change was in the air and their reaction was to try to block it, or at least to dampen it down as much as possible. So the teachers at the faculty had to undergo a “religious test”. There were three questions: 1. Are you a believer? 2. If not, since when? 3. What religious prejudices do the members of your family suffer from? Only six teachers at the faculty declared they were practising Christians; Vachek and Firbas were among them. After long discussions, the Brno City Communist Party decided that both Vachek and Firbas were what might now be called “deplorables”. In January 1962, a Party representative presented himself at a special meeting of the department and announced that Firbas would have to leave the faculty in 1963 and Vachek in 1964. However, as Firbas told the story, Vachek scored a moral victory. He’d learned what was in store for them and spoke to various people, and so was able to inform the meeting and the Party functionary that he too had something to say – that Havránek, by now head of the Institute of the Czech Language of the Academy of Sciences in Prague and a Communist with unassailable credentials, had offered

him a position there, and he'd accepted the offer. And to add just a little sting, he went on to say that he considered this a more distinguished position than the one he was to be kicked out from here. The authorities were so gobsmacked that that was the end of the affair, and the attempt to get rid of Firbas fizzled out. Vachek himself left for Prague that year but continued to teach externally for the department for another three or four years.

My own experience with Vachek, of course, came later, after I joined the department. He was still alive then, and he often came to Brno for various reasons – to give lectures, sit on committees and so on. He had a Czech accent when he spoke English, but as I've said, that was typical of his generation. In one of the oral interviews I carried out with former students, Ota Kříž, who had Samuel Kostomlatský as a teacher in the 1950s, said that the students loved him as a teacher but they used to smile sometimes at his pronunciation of some English words. I was a bit surprised, though, that Vachek's written English had mistakes in it – something I came across when editing material for *Brno Studies in English*. I think now I'd realize that this was quite normal. But back then, Vachek had been described to me as the great guru of English linguistics in Czechoslovakia, so I expected perfection.

Vachek was renowned for his precision and reliability and for being extremely organized. I witnessed this myself. Whenever *Brno Studies in English* sent out a call for papers, his article would arrive two or three months before the deadline. From my experience that's something unheard of these days, but it was unheard of in those days as well. Or the lectures of his that I attended at various intervals: they were models of clarity and accessibility, something confirmed by the English Department graduates I interviewed. His self-discipline was legendary. One of my favourite stories about him was said to have taken place just after the war, when he was first in Brno. He lived in some part of Brno fairly distant from the centre. At that time there were all sorts of problems with the supply of electricity, which of course affected public transportation – there were blackouts, and sometimes the trams weren't working or weren't running on time. And apparently because Vachek wanted to take into account all eventualities, he'd always leave home early enough so that if the trams weren't running, he could walk to the faculty and get there in time for his lecture. Despite this precaution, though, one day he arrived five minutes late. And he started the lecture by apologizing politely for not getting there on time, explaining why, and then saying "I'll make up for this by lecturing three extra minutes today, and two extra minutes next week."

There were still no entrance exams for the university in the postwar years, and students didn't register in any particular subject. Also, there was huge interest in the English-speaking world after the war, and large numbers of the students wanted to take English courses. Apparently each year in the first lecture of the semester Vachek would start off with an overcrowded lecture hall. He'd begin by speaking in English – "Hello, welcome to this class on ... This is what we'll be doing this semester: ..." And at the end of the lecture he'd say that probably some of them who were present hadn't been able to follow him very well, but this is what it was going to be like for the whole semester, so if that was the case they might perhaps consider making some decisions. I suppose many were totally baffled and had to get friends to translate. But his approach was effective. A lot of students never came back. The other thing that he did on his first lecture was to lock the door of the room where he was lecturing right on the dot and inform the students that he expected students to arrive on time. The rumour goes that he never had to lock the door more than once or twice. Even if he left the door unlocked, people wouldn't dare to enter.

Despite being so demanding, Vachek attracted large numbers of students, I suppose because they realized he was the real thing. If they survived Vachek's first lecture, many of them would end up doing English and focusing on linguistics. But as the prewar system was still in place in the early years after the war, any student at the faculty could attend any lecture he or she found interesting.

And Vachek's lectures were certainly that. They attracted many students who were majoring in other fields. I remember that once, for instance, Professor Antonín Bartoněk told me he'd attended Vachek's lectures even though he was doing Classical philology. That's how he learned about modern linguistics, and this was his *devíza*, his unique ability, for the rest of his career. Thanks to Vachek he had a methodology to explore Classical texts and in particular analyze the many ancient Greek dialects. And he ended up as one of Europe's half dozen top Ancient Greek philologists.

Vachek's students had an immense respect for him. This was something I could still sense when I came to the department many years later. When I was re-cataloguing the library, I discovered a very large collection of books on linguistics stuffed away in a couple of cupboards in Jan Firbas's office. I asked him what they were. And he said "Ah – those are books that Professor Vachek left here for us when he went back to Prague." – "So he gave them to the department? Why aren't they catalogued and on the shelves?" – "Well," said Firbas, "I know he said we could make use of them, but I thought to myself that you never know whether Vachek might need some of them again sometime. So just leave them here." A couple of hundred linguistics books just sitting in the cupboard, almost 20 years after Vachek had left. And the only person who knew they were there was Firbas, who was keeping them there "just in case". That was a very revealing moment, and I realized how revered Vachek was in the English Department. And just how present among us he still was.

## Karel Štěpaník

For me, Karel Štěpaník remains a bit of a mystery, hard to grasp. He's mentioned at different times in Chudoba's papers in the archives and it's clear Chudoba had a high opinion of his work and thought he had great potential. He certainly did all that he could to help him and promote his career. The documents relating to his state exam to qualify as a teacher are there in the Chudoba fonds. If nothing else they reveal how much a person had to do back then to become a teacher, and how very much more Štěpaník did. But he himself seems to have left behind virtually no documents. So there's nothing there for me to go through and form a picture of him, and I never met him personally – he died in 1970. But even when I've asked people what he was like as a teacher, I've never seemed to get much information. Almost everyone commented on his lectures – that he read them out in a monotonous voice. That they were long and filled with details. The word "boring" came up more than once. However, Ota Kříž agreed with the monotonous delivery but disagreed with the "boring". For him, Štěpaník "definitely" wasn't boring – you got a decent picture of the author or period he was dealing with. He also talked about how friendly and informal he was, holding seminars in his office, sitting at his desk and smoking as he read out the lecture. Sometimes the female students there were knitting during the lecture, and they'd drop their needles – and this didn't bother him! Definitely not your ordinary Czech professor.

It couldn't have been easy for Štěpaník. When he joined the department in 1945 he was forty-three – pretty late to start an academic career. Vachek was six years younger than him, but already a star, clearly in a different class as a scholar. And it couldn't have been any easier for Štěpaník once he became head of department. One of his tasks would've been to defend Vachek against the many attacks on him – personal attacks based on his values and beliefs, and professional attacks based on Vachek's stubborn promotion of the Prague School, which was considered "unscientific" and "bourgeois" by Marxist critics, in particular František Trávníček, who was then the Rector. Yet more than once in his memoir Vachek praises Štěpaník for being helpful and "loyal" to him in all his difficulties. Evidently Štěpaník worked in the interests of the department and its members as a whole, and he was certainly successful as head. He presided over

a great deal of change and many innovations during his time as head, and managed to steer the department safely through some very choppy waters indeed. His twenty years as department head is still the record.

## The 1960s and 1970s

In 1965, Josef Hladký finally joined the department. I say “finally”, because Vachek and the other teachers in the department had recognized his talents as a student, and strongly supported him when he applied for an assistantship after he finished his studies in 1956. However, Hladký’s very unsatisfactory *kádrový profil* doomed him – political considerations of course outweighed academic promise, and his application was turned down. He spent the next nine years interpreting, translating, acting as a patent researcher at První brněnská strojírna, teaching English at the Technical University. Time would show how important it was to have him in the department. He was part workhorse, part cheerleader. He had superb organizational skills and was a hard worker, very inventive in finding solutions to the crises that kept cropping up on a regular basis. His ever-present humour and stubborn optimism carried the department through many difficult patches. And he was very good at dealing with the opaque power structures at the faculty. In fact, for the next quarter of century he was the *éminence grise* of the department, and the other teachers knew that he was the one to turn to when problems arose.

And given the period we’re talking about, there were always problems. The first major test for the department, I suppose, came in 1968 and its aftermath. In the wake of the invasion in 1968 came “normalization”. The big question must have been what would happen at the department. Štěpaník, Kocmanová, Pantůčková, Tichý and Golková were Party members. Firbas, Ondráček and Hladký weren’t. Neither group was safe. Those in the first group probably were in a worse position, since the Party was making a thorough revision of its membership, dealing with them in various ways. But the non-Party members were also vulnerable simply by being non-Party members. In the end, rather miraculously, they were all able to soldier on as before, teaching and doing research. The Party members were now non-Party members – the exception being Štěpaník, who died in 1970 – and remained in place. None of the non-Party members had to leave. This really was a miracle. During the Communist years English Departments by definition were suspect, and after 1968 doubly so. At both Olomouc and Prague distinguished members of their English Departments were kicked out of the university. And in Prague the English Department was merged with the more “reliable” German Department. It’s hard to know exactly why the Brno English Department emerged from the *čistky* relatively unscathed. When I asked people who’d been there at the time how they explained this, I received various answers. Most frequent was that the MU Faculty of Arts as a whole hadn’t been as radically engaged and divided in 1968 as other universities and faculties, and so there were fewer personal scores to settle. And also that the leadership of the faculty at the time had done as much as possible to mitigate the impact. Which reminds me a bit of what Vachek said about the sense of solidarity at the faculty in his days.

It was good that the department emerged from all this with its continuity more or less intact. On the other hand, however, it definitely wasn’t good that it was so weak politically – that is, that it didn’t have a single Communist among its members. And this unfortunate *kádrový profil* was to dog the department for the next twenty years.

Jan Firbas took over as head in 1970 – but only as acting head. He was never named official head. This went on for more than three years. It became quite clear to him that with “normalization” in full swing, he was never going to be named official head. So he resigned. This began a strange period in the 1970s and 1980s when we floated in and out of having a head of depart-



Eva Golková (on the left) and Jaroslava Pačesová at the *Fakultáda*, 1964.

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ment. Firbas was replaced by Hladký – but like Firbas, as a non-Party person it was unthinkable that he could be named an official head. He lasted in this position from 1973 to 1980. At that point he was replaced by Aleš Svoboda. Young (only 39), a recent docent, and a Party member, he was an ideal choice from the point of view of the faculty leadership (all, of course, Communists). However, only four years later he left to teach in Ostrava. Back to square one. There was a brief interregnum, during which Hladký was once more “visible”. And then came a completely unexpected decision. The new head of the department would be Zdeněk Masařík, the head of the German Department.

We soon learned the background to this. Because of our *kádrový profil*, the Party had decided to merge us with the German Department. Surprisingly, Masařík had refused. His said we were one of the founding departments at the Faculty of Arts, with a long history, and this was important. Yes, we were going through a bad stage, but this was no reason to abolish us. There was no way he would accept the English Department being merged with the German Department, but he would agree to become the external head of the English Department. This way the English Department would stay as a separate, independent unit. It was interesting that Masařík said no. Perhaps the reasons he gave were genuine. Or perhaps he had unhappy memories of the German Department being merged with the English Department under Štěpaník in the 1950s. In any case, for now I’ll just say that he was a very good head of department. And that this turned out to be just another variation in the continually shifting, non-stable situation of the English Department in the Communist years. Things were always changing. Do we exist, or don’t we exist? Are the teachers politically OK now, or not politically OK now? Who’s the head of department, who’s in fact really running it? Will we have students, won’t we have students (more of this later)? And so on and so on.

## New ventures in the 1960s

All over Czechoslovakia things began to change in the 1960s with the thaw. Here in the English Department, three activities were launched that decade that had an immense influence for the next quarter of a century, and in the case of one of them, that continues down to the present. These were intensive English courses at Cikháj (from 1963), the emergence of the Gypsywood Players (1965), and the student exchange with Leeds University (post-1968). To my mind, all three played central roles in shaping the identity of the department.

### Intensive English courses at Cikháj

In 1963 the department decided that it’d be a good idea to give first-year students a course in practical English – a kind of leg-up at the beginning of their studies. The idea was for some of the department teachers to go out with them to Cikháj, this small village in the Vysočina where the university had a recreation centre. It wasn’t called a recreation centre of course, because that sounded frivolous and a university had no business having a recreation centre. Its official name was something else, like a teaching or learning centre. There the students would have a short, six-day intensive language course.

The first course was in December that year and was compulsory. Over the years all sorts of variations were introduced – courses for higher years, courses where enrolment was voluntary, courses with translation elements or focusing on grammar or whatever. Forty-six courses were held over the next thirty years or so. In all likelihood, every student in the department went on at least one course, and many on several. In time it became clear that in addition to their academic





English Department teachers and students at one of the first intensive language courses in Cikháj, 1965.

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worth, the courses had many side benefits. One of them was to bring the students themselves closer together. Another was to reduce the gap between teachers and students. And the students' sense of identification with the department as such was certainly strengthened by their time at Cikháj.

Early on the custom was established of inviting a professor from some other university to give a lecture to the students on the course. Over the years, virtually every distinguished university teacher of English in the country showed up at some point in Cikháj and gave a lecture. And there were also teachers from universities elsewhere in Europe and even the United States. We really had a whole cross-section of speakers, since the custom was to alternate a linguist with a literary person. One of them, Ian Milner, a New Zealander who taught literature at the English Department of Charles University, commented at the end of his stay in Cikháj on the "genuine friendliness and natural ease of relationship between colleagues [i.e. teachers] and students," which he said impressed and pleased him. This only confirmed something we all felt.

## The Gypsywood Players

Jessie Kocmanová didn't teach at the first courses held in Cikháj. But when she did go for the sixth course, in December 1965, she felt she'd be bored. Luckily, she happened to be reading a book of one-act plays, and that gave her the idea that the students could put one of them on. So the Gypsywood Players were born in this completely serendipitous way.

Almost immediately the theatre production became a separate activity – some of the students would be in Cikháj to attend the language course, and the others would be there to rehearse a play. These courses usually ran from Monday to Saturday, but the actors would arrive at Cikháj on the Friday beforehand and begin rehearsing. Then on Monday the students would appear. The two activities ran in parallel, and the first night of the play would be on Friday. Saturday morning was back to Brno. With this attraction on Friday, we developed the practice of inviting visiting speakers to give their lectures on Thursday evening, and then stay on to attend the performance on Friday. And if possible, we tried to agree on a topic that'd have some connection – no matter how remote – with the play we were putting on. Many were very clever at finding some topic to fit this polite suggestion.

The opening night of the play was one of the highlights of the year in the English Department, for both students and teachers. The students on the course and their teachers formed the main audience. But most of the other department teachers – those who weren't teaching at Cikháj – usually showed up for the occasion as well. And also many students who weren't on the intensive course, even including graduates. Very often for a year or two after they graduated they'd come to Cikháj because they still had friends there. It was a kind of institution, this Cikháj “gathering of the clans”. As was the legendary “backstage party” that followed the first night performance. All this did a great deal to nourish the spirit of the department.

But I'll be talking at length about the Gypsywood Players later, so I'll leave it at that for now.

## The Leeds exchange

Back in the mid-sixties Jessie Kocmanová happened to meet a professor from the University of Leeds. This led to a couple of years of writing back and forth and negotiations at the departmental and university levels. Eventually a formal agreement was signed between MU – or Jan Evangelista Purkyně University, as it was then – and Leeds. It provided for a student exchange between the English Department here and the Russian and Slavonic Studies Department over there.

In the spring of 1968 a teacher from Leeds came here to meet with members of the department. This was Gordon Humphries, whose fields were Russian and Czech. The details of the agreement were worked out, and the exchange was able to begin. The timing was very fortunate. This was a little window when all sorts of things were possible – a year or two later, when “normalization” set in, I don't think the exchange would have got off the ground. The principle was simple. Each year a certain number of students in Leeds chose Czech as their second Slavic language, after Russian. They'd come here in the spring for ten weeks, and the same number of our fourth-year students would go to Leeds for ten weeks. At each end, the students would leave behind enough money to cover the cost of accommodation and meals for the incoming students. It was an asymmetrical agreement, in that the British students were given Czech lessons here by our English Department teachers, but at the other end our students were only allowed to sit in on lectures in the Leeds English Department. But being in England for ten-weeks was one long lesson in itself.

For most of the 1970s and 1980s the Leeds exchange was the only student exchange in the whole of Czechoslovakia, or at least the only one that survived. There'd been others that had started in the period of the thaw, but then students would stay abroad and that would be the end of it. We were very explicit when preparing the students for the exchange – stressing that if anyone didn't come back, the whole exchange would come to an end, and that they should think of future students in the department. (And that if they really wanted to defect, then in some subsequent year they could go on holiday to Yugoslavia ...). I think the highest number of students we sent in one year was nine, the lowest (at the beginning) four. But at least in some

years, this represented a not insignificant proportion of the eligible student body. And even the students who didn't get to go to England had the chance to meet and spend time with the British students who were here. This way they could experience the West at least at second hand and absorb real English with people their own age who shared many of the same interests. So the exchange brought amazing benefits and genuine outcomes (including several marriages). And one final major plus was that the authorities insisted that the students had to be accompanied by a teacher. This, in the seventies and eighties, was like winning the lottery. In the course of the exchange I think every teacher in the department was in Britain at least once, either for ten weeks or for a shorter period (sometimes teachers shared the ten weeks). This was something teachers at other English Departments could only look on in envy.

## The student world

Following the Communist takeover in 1948, the whole university system was overhauled. Entrance exams were introduced to ensure that only some people – the right people – got in. Along with them came quotas – only certain numbers of students could study certain subjects, and then only in certain combinations. Attendance at all classes was compulsory. And so on and so on. From that point on the system for studying became very rigid – there was none of that floating around and doing what you were interested in. This was essentially the system that remained in place till the end of the Communist era, though of course there was both loosening and tightening up at various points along the way. And aspects lingered on even after.

In practice things were more flexible, though this depended entirely on what university you were studying at, what faculty you were enrolled in, what department(s) you had classes in, what teacher(s) you had. So it's impossible to make firm generalizations. From what I experienced after I came here, I'd say that the English Department was among the most open and flexible at the faculty. Certainly our students – who were always studying a second subject in a different department, and so in a position to make comparisons – often said this to me. And many former Faculty of Arts students over the years have told me that they envied their friends doing English. Perhaps this atmosphere in the department was the plus side of our bad *kádrový profil* – and not unlinked to it.

Though regulations were rigid, there were ways of getting round them at least partially, and where we in the department could do something, we did. An important item in the application process was the letter the individual got from their secondary school. Depending on its wording, an applicant could sink or swim. There was nothing we could do about this, but we knew from experience that former students of the department who were teachers were very skilled in knowing what to put in and what to leave out when writing these letters. One particularly delicate area was that of religion. There were in fact two kinds of degree programmes. The first was intended to produce future teachers. The second was aimed at producing future translators. From the point of view of being admitted, one absolutely crucial factor was whether there was any hint of religious belief in the applicant's background. If so, studying to be a teacher was out of the question. Here we could on some occasions do something, like quietly recommending an applicant for admission in the non-teaching programme. But there was little room for manoeuvring.

Strangely enough, the simplest regulation to get round was that of class origin. When I came here in 1977, the system had already been in place for some years. The regulations then called for 60 per cent of the students to be from a working-class background. This certainly sounds ferocious, but the reality was that any number of unexpected people could claim to come from a working-class background. This is because only one of your parents had to come from a work-



Eva Golková teaching a class in the faculty courtyard, 1965.

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ing-class background for you to qualify, and working-class background was defined by the job that the person in question was doing at the time, or the very first job they did. And of course that expanded the possibilities immensely. There were university professors whose first job had been working in a factory right after the war, so suddenly this made their children working-class kids.

The most absurd example of how the regulations could be overcome or manipulated was a case that involved some daughters of a local Protestant minister. Did they have a working-class background? Of course. Their mother had a university degree, but as the wife of a Protestant minister she wasn't allowed to work in her field, so she was employed as a worker in, I think, Zetor. Abracadabra – an impeccable working-class background!

In practice, very few working-class kids were students, at least in our department in the 1970s and 1980s. One year we took in about a dozen students doing German and English. Out of curiosity, I looked into their papers and came to the conclusion that there was only one kid with a genuine working-class background – both his parents worked on a cooperative farm in the Vysočina. But the others – most were not even mixed. They'd grown up as ordinary middle-class kids with educated parents. The discrimination that was actually alive and well was the exact opposite of the official discrimination. The kids really discriminated against were working-class kids – it was much harder for them to climb the rungs to the grammar schools. The rules and the law were one thing, but the reality was different. What's saddest is that this is still the situation today, or perhaps even worse.

## ***Pomvědi* and other students**

*Pomvědi* – *pomocné vědecké síly*, or student assistants – go back to the beginning of the department. One of their main tasks was always to run the department library, for example. But they were also expected to help individual teachers in various ways, and from what I gather, this “special relationship” to the professors meant that their position in the past was more prestigious than it later became. It was hard to become a *pomvěd*. When I interviewed Jaroslav Peprník on his time at the department just after World War II, he remarked rather impishly that one of his greatest achievements as a student was “to break the Protestant mafia”. He was the first Catholic among the “*pomvěds*”, all the rest of whom were – I assume by chance – Protestants.

There was another kind of student that used to be a sort of *pomvěd*. Students finishing their studies in the past didn’t get a title – no initials to put after your name. But very bright students might then write something – often an extension of the final-year dissertation – and then get the title PhDr. I remember when I joined the department in 1977 that Eva Chalupová – a former Gypsywooder and later a teacher in the language school – stayed on for an additional year to do her PhDr, and was also responsible for odd jobs round the department. Much earlier, the PhDr was more like a real doctorate, but by the 1980s it had degenerated to the point that you didn’t even have to write anything to get the title. There were only oral exams in some literary or linguistic stuff and in Marxism and Scientific Atheism. That’s my PhDr. It was a farce.

The way the PhDr changed its nature reflected the way the Communists restructured higher education in the 1950s. The whole system underwent radical change. The Soviet system was introduced, with its DrSc and CSc. In practice the vast majority of people who were admitted for the CSc were either Communist Party members or candidates for membership in the Party, and they were also regarded as future members of departments. This whole phenomenon of incestuous departments for generation after generation is a Central European thing generally, but it was very much strengthened during the Communist era. This meant that those enrolled in a programme to be granted a CSc were few and far between – perhaps one or two students every four or five years. And the practice lingered on after 1989. I remember that after they introduced a genuine doctoral programme here in the English Department in the late 1990s, very few students were admitted. I asked Hladký once why there were so few. And his answer was that the department wouldn’t need more than them. In other words, these were the people who would most likely be moving into positions in our department and, probably, the English Department at the Faculty of Education. Things have of course changed greatly since then.

# Surviving normalization: 1977 through the 1980s

I came to Czechoslovakia in 1969 and started teaching here at the Jazyková škola v Brně – which was in fact the only language school in the city at the time. The agreement was that I'd teach from the time I came in March till the end of the next school year in June 1970. In the meantime, the language school in Prague – I use the definite article, because it too was the only such institution in the city – found out I was here and they asked me if I'd like to come and teach for them. So I thought “Why not? I'd like to spend another year in Europe, so I could experience Prague and then return to Canada.” I went off to Prague at the end of the school year in June 1970.

I remained in Prague for seven years – an amazing seven years! I had an interesting job with the language school. It was one of two positions in Prague for foreign teachers that were funded by the Prague City Council. Twelve periods a week were with grammar schools and the other seven periods a week with the language school. The grammar schools were the most interesting. I got to know a lot of kids and learned about what they were up to and interested in. I went to my first *maturitní ples*. A real eye-opener – the live music, the formal dance at the beginning, whole families there, former students. Something totally different from the typical North American prom. The first year I was there, there were two such positions in Prague – which included a flat as well, so I was quite independent. At the end of that first year the city cancelled the other position. So I was the only one, and they moved me to different grammar schools. It seems some of the headmasters weren't very pleased with me because of my style of teaching and my relationship to the kids – taking them out to a nearby park for a conversation class, inviting them to my flat. I guess they suspected I wanted to indoctrinate them.

After that second year, they cancelled my position completely – that was the end of native English speakers at Prague schools. So I looked around, and began working for what we'd call a Commie-front organization, the International Union of Students, where I did translations. Most were for magazines on higher education and theatre and film, others were more political (though mostly in line with my generally left-of-centre views). Outside my job, I was totally absorbed in what for me was still a very new and very different and very exciting culture. What I was doing, the people I was meeting – one evening at the Slovácký krůžek, the next evening a pub crawl with artists from the Křižovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtípu or members of the Plastic People band ... There was something new every day. I made many friends I still have up till today.

## Joining the English Department

In the meantime, in 1973, I got married. There I was in Prague, and my wife Zdena and our first kid, and then the second kid, were in Brno. I was commuting back and forth and got tired of that after a while. Gradually I got tired of Prague too – for various reasons, the charm had worn off. And in any case Zdena certainly didn't want to move to Prague. So I decided to come back to Brno.

We started asking round about jobs here. It occurred to us that there might be something at the university. Zdena got in touch with Aleš Svoboda, a friend of hers from university days (they were in the same year). In fact Aleš already knew me since we were both teaching at the language school when I was there in 1969 and 1970. By now he was a member of the English Department, but he reported back that there wouldn't be a place available there till somebody retired, and that was a long way off. So I was resigned to going back to the language school. Why not? I'd enjoyed the teaching there, and many of the teachers were fascinating individuals.

And then, quite unexpectedly, Aleš phoned Zdena and told her that everything had changed. One of the members of the department's health had gotten much worse – she'd been ill for some time – and she had to retire. This was Beryl Trejtnarová, an Englishwoman who'd married a Czech airman and come back with him to Czechoslovakia after the war. With her gone, the position meant for a native speaker to teach practical English was now vacant. Aleš said I should get in touch with someone called Josef Hladký, the acting head of department. I rang up Hladký from Prague, and somehow got through to him. I say "somehow", because in those days phone calls between cities weren't easy, especially if you didn't have a phone in your flat, and getting through to someone inside an institution even harder. I told him I was planning to be in Brno the following weekend and asked him if we could meet. I suggested I'd come in to the department. Aleš has spoken to Hladký about me, so he was prepared for my call. His answer was strange. "Perhaps we could meet somewhere else. How about Saturday at 10 o'clock in Red Army Square? I'll be sitting on the last bench, I'll be wearing a beret and I'll be reading the *Morning Star*." I was taken aback, and thought to myself: "Am I getting myself into a spy novel?" Zdena didn't know Hladký then and she said "Well, you'll just have to go there and see what it's all about."

When I showed up as agreed on Saturday at 10 o'clock, sure enough, there was a guy sitting there on the last bench, there was the beret, there was the *Morning Star*. (For those who don't know, this was the daily of the Communist Party of Great Britain back then, and the only English-language newspaper you could get here in those days.) So I came up and introduced myself. Very soon I realized that this whole web of conspiratorial precautions was more like a happening, the product of Hladký's imagination and sense of humour, his ironic way of treating Communism generally. It turned out that he didn't want me to come and meet him at the faculty, because the Dean at the time was a very strange man. As I was to learn later, he was totally paranoid about the West, and could be dangerous. What Hladký had been afraid of was that I'd come to the faculty on Saturday, the *vrátný* would see me, and on Monday morning – or even earlier – the Dean would learn about it and do everything possible to stop me from joining the department.

So Hladký and I started talking there on Red Army Square – nowadays in its fifth iteration as Moravské náměstí – and we clicked. But how to get me in? Eventually, they went round the Dean and spoke to one of the Vice-Rectors, a man called František Hejl, who'd studied English and History just after the war. He was of course a Communist, but he was an open type of person, and at least in my experience later, not dogmatic. Whenever there were May Day commemoration events and such, he'd talk very interestingly and not in the black-and-white way that was the norm back then. So it was Hejl as a member of the English mafia who parachuted me in from above. It's also quite possible that my father-in-law, who was a docent at the Faculty of Education, put in a word for me somewhere with someone, but I've never been able to confirm this – he died shortly after I moved back to Brno. However it happened, I was now somehow in.

## The teachers

I think the best way to convey a sense of what it was like in the department in the late seventies and eighties is to talk a bit about the teachers first. They set the tone, and though very different in many ways, they shared an absolute loyalty to each other and to the department. This was extremely important, given the department's precarious situation from the political point of view. Any kind of infighting would have done perhaps irreparable damage. As I got to know them very well personally, I'll try and speak about them as individuals, rather than focus on their academic achievements – this kind of information is widely available in many sources. Also, this focus is partly to counter an odd thing I've discovered over the years, and that's the way university teachers here tend to be subsumed into the achievements of their professional careers and lose their personal identity. This can be seen at almost any funeral of a Czech academic, and the speeches that are made there. I almost always feel that they're about to bury a title or a bibliography, not an actual person.

I'll begin with Josef Hladký. Joe – from here on I'll mostly be referring to people in the way that I was accustomed to – was the person that ensured the continuity of the department during the 1970s and 1980s. Even when Aleš Svododa was the official head, or Zdeněk Masařík the external head – more of these later – he was the one they turned to for advice. In effect he ran the department – it was “Joe's baby”. And he had the full trust of the teachers. We knew that his main concern was for the department to survive, and he'd do his utmost to ensure this. He was a very hard-working shadow head of department, always looking out for our interests. In the mid-eighties we had very small numbers of students, and he was the one that came up with this idea that we could teach *světový jazyk* at other faculties. In the Classics Department they had even fewer students, but they did things differently there. They got involved in research and translation projects, such as that great series of Classical literature in Czech. So they were able to get through that period doing more academic stuff. Could we have invented some academic project too? I don't know. English was a special case, because English was still regarded with suspicion – more of that later. But of course, teaching *světový jazyk* took away from people's careers. They spent time preparing all sorts of material for classes – Joe himself taught at the Law Faculty, and produced a reader and a set of exercises relating to legal terms for the students there. But these kinds of things weren't of any use professionally when they got back to teaching what they should have been teaching and what they wanted to teach.

It was Joe who really held the department together and kept it going in those years. He was the bedrock as an organizer and as a person. He cultivated good relations with the leadership of the faculty, steadily and pragmatically. He took every precaution to prevent anyone becoming a student in the department thanks to *protekcce*. And when on a few occasions he was unsuccessful, he trusted us as teachers to treat them fairly, exactly like the other students – though he expected that meant they wouldn't last long in the department. (In the two cases I was familiar with, he was right. The students in question disappeared after the first semester.) He lightened things up with his wonderful sense of humour – he knew how this could break down barriers and create occasions that became memorable shared experiences.

This was behind the show he created when the department got its first computer back in the late 1980s. Rather surprisingly, Hladký had a knack for technical things. When the Gypswood Players were frustrated by the lack of a functioning door for their productions, it was Joe who designed one as though he was a trained draughtsman, bought the materials, and oversaw its construction. He loved machines – he was an avid competitor in car orienteering competitions – and new technology. When computers were coming in, he was absolutely fascinated. Our computer was one of the very first at the faculty – I think the first at the departmental level. So Joe decided to organize an elaborate christening ceremony – a computer launch. The phonetics lab was





English Department group photo, 1981.

Front row: Iva Gardavská, Don Sparling, Naďa Kudrnáčová.

Centre row: Desanka Sopusuchová (Department Secretary), Jessie Kocmanová, Lidmila Pantůčková, Eva Golková.

Back row: Aleš Tichý, Aleš Svoboda, Jan Firbas, Josef Hladký, Jaroslav Ondráček.

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tidied up and decorated, students were invited to come. One of the students opened a bottle of champagne, Joe reminded people that it was our first computer, poured the champagne over the (protected) computer, and declared that he was naming it after the Teacher of Nations – Amos I.

Keeping the department running involved many things. In 1968 he started co-editing the departmental journal, *Brno Studies in English*, along with Jan Firbas. Eventually he became its editor-in-chief, and shaped its policy for many years. He was very keen on keeping records of what the department did – for example, it's thanks to him that we have a very detailed chronicle of the more than thirty years of intensive courses at Cikháj. And then there was the immense work he put into the organization of the first Brno Conference of English and American Studies in 1986. (Nowadays “Canadian” is also part of the title.) This was a memorable event. It was the first time Anglicists from the whole of Czechoslovakia came together. Teachers were there from all five universities that taught English at the time – us, Charles, Palacký, Comenius and Pavel Jozef Šafárik in Prešov – as well as individuals from the Academy of Sciences, several publishing houses, the media, and freelance translators. For many of them it was the first time they had a chance to meet Anglicists they'd only heard of or who they admired at a distance. Many of the papers that were presented broke taboos – about American or British authors whose books were forbidden in the country at the time, or even linguistic issues that were problematic for political reasons. Most talked about was a paper by one of the editors from a leading publishing house in Prague, who explained in detail how the process of censorship worked when it came to “undesirable” authors, and how it was possible to get round it. Many of the friendships made at the

conference led to future cooperation of various kinds, some of them still ongoing. In fact like the conference itself. It's now held at five-year intervals, and the most recent – the eleventh – took place here in Brno in February 2020.

On top of all his work for the department, Joe continued with his academic pursuits. He was a linguist, but in the broader sense a philologist. Perhaps his main interests were lexicology and the history of the English language. Samuel Johnson once referred to a lexicographer as a “humble drudge”, and certainly Joe must have put in hundreds of hours in his lexicographic work. I remember helping him a bit with his dictionary of false friends in English and Czech. We met in his office over several Saturdays in the dead of winter. Back then they used to turn down the heating at the faculty over the weekend to the absolute minimum. So there we sat – in our winter coats, with our gloves on and an electric heater to provide at least some warmth – and discussed false friends. Joe's other major dictionary was his famous *The Czech and the English Names of Mushrooms*. He spent many years on this, since it turned out to be an unexpectedly complex topic. But for him this was also a labour of love – he was an avid mushroomer.

Jan Firbas – Jenda – was God. Though he would have blanched at the metaphor. He was the academic backbone of the department in terms of his reputation, the quality of his writings and so on, but also its moral backbone. He was deeply grounded in his faith. He never talked about his religion, never tried to impose it on anyone, but everybody knew that his beliefs were at the core of his whole sense of being. This was something he shared with Vachek. The two of them together kind of set the ethical standard for the department in the post-war years – it was almost as though Vachek had handed on this role to him when he left.

He was a very quiet but strong presence at the department. His English was impeccable. Impeccable in the sense that it was the precise English that an Englishman of his generation and social standing would have. I have no idea how he managed this – the year he spent in England in 1948/49 wouldn't have been enough. From time to time he'd come up with these slightly old-fashioned idioms, which sounded just right when he spoke them. After I started helping with language editing for *Brno Studies in English*, he'd ask me if I'd have a look at his contributions. I gave up after the second or third article. There was no point! It just wasn't worth changing the odd comma here and there. And in fact, a couple of times I made a suggestion for a correction that he questioned, and I realized he was right – that he'd employed a slightly more precise usage than even I was used to. Jenda was also completely consistent in what was apparently a standard Czech practice in earlier years, and that was to translate Czech proper nouns into the foreign language you were speaking. So he'd mention that one of our students had come from the grammar school in “Kingfield”. Or that he was an acquaintance of an old woman who lived in the same building as us in “Blackfields”. I think the best was once when he spoke about one of his sons being a doctor “at the hospital on Baker Street”. I was tempted to ask him if his son had ever caught sight of Sherlock Holmes.

Jenda hadn't started off to be an English teacher. He enrolled in medical studies at the university in the fall of 1939 – he planned to follow in his father's footsteps. When the universities were closed down by the Nazis in November he didn't know what to do. But one day he happened to meet a friend of his who was on his way to enrol in English classes at the Institute of Modern Languages on náměstí Svobody. Firbas joined him and enrolled there too. This was basically a way of keeping yourself from being sent off somewhere to do forced labour. Very soon he discovered he enjoyed the English courses and had a real talent for the language. Immediately after the end of the war he was admitted to the reopened English Department. He was part of the first batch, who began their studies in July 1945 – a crash first term that lasted three months.

It was Vachek who shaped his professional career by introducing him to the Prague School. Firbas went on to develop some of its ideas in a very innovative way. He created the term “func-



Jan Firbas in his forties.

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tional sentence perspective” and laid down its key concepts. His influence was, literally, worldwide. I remember a Chinese (or Japanese?) academic coming all the way to Brno to discuss the complexity of FSP in his native tongue. *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* was published in 1992 by Cambridge University Press – it’s a kind of summation of his ideas. His three honorary doctorates – from the University of Leeds, the Catholic University of Leuven, and the University of Turku – reflected the influence of his work. And this was also evident in the stream of leading foreign scholars who visited and gave lectures in Brno, especially from the 1980s on.

Often in conversation Jenda would speak about the importance of the department as a community. His commitment to this ideal was often shown more formally as well. We used to meet quite often to celebrate important birthdays, various accomplishments of members of the department and so on. Almost always he was the one who made a speech in the name of the department. And he was an outstanding speaker. He wasn’t charismatic, but he spoke very eloquently. I don’t know how much time he put into preparing those speeches, but he’d clearly put a lot of thought into them. I think he had the main points he wanted to make jotted down on a piece

of paper, but otherwise he spoke without notes, let alone any kind of text. What he said was always fascinating, and his rhetorical style was very effective – quiet, sincere, carefully chosen language. What he said always struck us as being genuinely felt.

Jessie Kocmanová was the opposite of Jenda – flamboyant, extrovert, a Communist. But the two got along famously. Over the years she changed a lot. Her family background was interesting. Her father was an illegitimate child, born to a working-class single mother. He'd risen, mostly through self-education, to take an active part in public life. Jessie was bright enough to win a scholarship to the best private girls' school in Edinburgh – a milieu where she had virtually nothing in common with most of her classmates. And then she met up with all these intellectuals at university. This was the 1930s, which meant that most of them were lefties or Communists. Among the Communists was Hugh MacDiarmid, one of Scotland's greatest 20th century poets, who remained a lifelong friend.

During the war she met her future husband, Vincenc. He was a Czech who'd first fought in the Civil War in Spain with one of the Communist international brigades, and later in England with the RAF. Everyone who knew him said he was very charismatic – attractive, sociable, outgoing. Both Jessie and her husband were bohemians, but there was a big difference in that he definitely wasn't an intellectual – in fact he had very little education. It was a strange marriage in many ways. They came back to Czechoslovakia in 1945 as Communists set to “build socialism”. She joined the department and was making her way up as a Party member. But after 1948 things changed. He'd served in Spain – this was now bad, as these Communists with that experience under their belt weren't ready to passively toe the Party line – and then he'd served in the RAF. That was even worse (though, ironically, he'd received the Order of the White Lion for his achievements as an airman from Gottwald!). He started having troubles at work, had to change jobs and so on. At the same time Jessie was building her career as an up-and-coming Communist at the university. Apparently she was super-orthodox back then, though I suspect it was partly to protect her husband. Vachek mentions that at the time he was sometimes the target of political criticism on her part, but that after bitter personal experiences she became a “*lidsky velice přijatelná kolegyně*”. What a wonderful, though slightly ambiguous, phrase!

Vincenc died in 1968. I suppose Jessie's last illusions about Communism also vanished that year, and she continued to change. From what I've learned from former students, back in the late forties and fifties Jessie's courses on British and American life and institutions tended to be pretty loaded politically, but her literature courses were a breath of fresh air. Almost schizophrenic, though understandable given the era. Her political views seemed to put off some students, but I suspect that changed over time – I know from my own experience after 1977 that she was one of their favourite teachers. By this point she was teaching only literature – British literature as well as Commonwealth literature, where she was a pioneer in this country. This suited her to a T. She had an immense knowledge of literature – British, American, Commonwealth, European, world literature. And she knew how to convey her love of it to students. Her approach was to read through as many books about a particular author, or from a particular period, as she could, and then talk to the students about what she thought good, what worked for her, why an author was worth reading, how one author differed from another, and so on. And she asked them about their views. The students loved it. I suppose she gradually became the teacher that she should have been all along.

She was a wonderful person to be with. Funny, super bright, with a phenomenal memory and a very quick mind. I remember a student from JAMU came to me once. He was putting together a production on the theme of the “tramp”, and was looking for tips on English-language books – American, British – he might use. After half an hour I managed to dredge up three or four possibilities. Then Jessie occurred to me. Within thirty minutes she came up with maybe twenty names and titles. And she even whipped up an outline for the student's production.

After Jessie died, I had the melancholy task of sorting out what she left behind. She and Vincenc had four kids. Two of them ended up in the West – the UK and Belgium – in the late sixties and early seventies. The other two younger siblings remained here. They were both very working-class Czechs – I think the daughter was some kind of cook, and the son was a tram driver who was really nice – a *tramp* who used to go off hiking in the woods with young kids and sing *trampské písničky*. But neither of them had any English, so they asked me to go through all of her belongings because they didn't know what was worth keeping and what not. It was strange being there – going through her library of maybe 5,000 volumes and deciding what the department might purchase, all the time brushing away the hair of her collie dog – it covered most of the furniture in the house. I found the draft of a novel she'd written and copies of the CVs she'd prepared over the years for the Party and the university. I read through letters she'd been sent by friends in Scotland, Hugh MacDairmid included. I came across a diary she'd kept sporadically. I felt a bit like a Peeping Tom – but the experience brought me a whole new understanding of Jessie and her very complicated life.

Jessie and Lidmila Pantůčková shared an office. And they shared other things as well. Both were literary scholars. Jessie's focus was nineteenth-century British novelists and poets, in particular William Morris, as well as Scottish literature in general. She was a very proud Scot, and vigorously promoted the recognition of "Lallans" – the version of English spoken in southern Scotland – as a full, separate language. Lidka produced much on William Makepeace Thackeray. It's typical of the times, and the position of English studies back then, that in both cases their major scholarly contributions couldn't be published as books, but saw the light of day in *Brno Studies in English*. Both Lidka and Jessie were very close to the students – many of them turned to the two of them for advice, even on personal matters, when they were in difficult situations. And both of them were heavy smokers – very heavy smokers. At times entering their office was like heading into a proverbial London fog, and the curtains in the room were stained more or less permanently yellow from the nicotine they'd absorbed over the years.

Lidka's scholarly field was British literature, but because ours was a small department she ended up teaching American literature for most of her career. Behind the facade of a respected literary scholar there were surprises. When I learned that she was from Kyjov, I reacted very enthusiastically, saying I knew the town well from going there for *hody*, how much I enjoyed it there and how much I was into Slovácko and its folklore. She was completely puzzled. "I certainly wasn't singing folk songs when I was young – I was playing jazz." It turned out that during the war she was a member of a jazz combo in Kyjov that disguised itself by giving the songs they played funny German titles so the group wouldn't be banned. In her time, you either did folklore or you did something modern and progressive. These were two worlds. It certainly wouldn't have occurred to me that this motherly-looking scholar had such an adventurous past. Later I learned that her husband, Tom Pantůček, was a writer and humourist. He'd been with the *Satirické divadlo* in Brno in the 60s, and was a frequent contributor to Brno radio. He used to join the informal gatherings that took place in the department, and regaled everyone present with his sharp wit. After 1968, of course, like so many others, he and his work were banned. And Lidka had to wait almost twenty years for the title of *docentka* that she so richly deserved.

Aleš Tichý was another of our literary scholars. One of his concerns was the 18th century, in particular the work of Henry Fielding. From the point of theory he was interested in narratology. His other major concern was translation – in fact he can be considered the founder of translation studies at the department. His interests definitely lay more in teaching than in research. And his students appreciated and benefited from this – they felt they were learning to understand literature, not just accumulate facts. He had a peculiar requirement when it came to the scheduling of his classes. Once he mentioned to me in passing that he always arranged it so that he didn't have to teach in the morning. This intrigued me, so I asked him why – what did he do in the mornings,

that he needed them free? “I read,” he said. “You read?” – “Yes.” – “What?” – “Oh, science, history, ideas, that kind of thing.” In fact he read everything and anything – his students referred to him with affection as a walking encyclopedia. You could talk to him about the fields I just mentioned, about philosophy, politics, technology – even about refrigerators (my case, when our refrigerator broke down once, and he explained to me in great detail the different kinds of cooling systems in refrigerators and what was probably wrong with ours). He had this huge, broad perspective. Where knowledge was concerned, he was a kind of Renaissance man. For the practical purposes of his job, of course, this was irrelevant. But it made him a really interesting person. He lived just around the corner from us up in Černá Pole. Very often we’d walk home together in the evening, talking about whatever came to mind. And then at the corner of Durdákova and Helfertova – I lived about 100 meters to the left, his flat was 100 metres straight ahead – we’d stand on the corner discussing things for another half hour or so. These were some of the most stimulating intellectual discussions I had with members of the department. The whole thing was like something out of a 19th-century novel.

In some respects Aleš himself was a figure from the past. He did Fielding and published some very good stuff on him, but his real interests lay elsewhere. He was essentially interested in teaching and in learning as much as he could about the world. He didn’t have a CSc, and it looked as though he never would. But when Zdeněk Masařík became head of the department one of his goals was for us to upgrade ourselves academically. He put a lot of pressure on Aleš to do his CSc, and finally Aleš did write it. Then, irony of ironies, less than a year later he died. That year he was the department teacher who went with the students to Leeds. He began to feel a bit sluggish and went to see a doctor there. And he learned that he had cancer of the liver. He returned home immediately and two weeks later he was dead.

Aleš was known for his precise English, a bit neutral though very sensitive to slight nuances of meaning, and with very few if any colloquialisms. And for his love of Czech, which marked his translations. There’s an odd story that certainly relates to all this. Aleš grew up in the Sudetenland, and then Munich came and the family moved to Brno. He was only seven at the time, and he had real problems communicating with Brno kids because he spoke some kind of Silesian dialect. Apparently he very quickly opted for *spisovná čeština* as the best way to go. His daughter Debora, who was a student of ours and later taught in the department, told me that this remained with him ever after – the only Czech he spoke, even to her and her sister, was *spisovná čeština*. His experience as a boy must have been at the root of how he treated English, and his facility as a translator.

Jaroslav Ondráček was from Nové Město na Moravě and remained there his whole life, commuting daily to Brno to teach. He began with practical English, and later moved on to grammar and some linguistics. The students quite liked him because he was very approachable. But it wasn’t easy for him – as he grew older, he developed a kind of agoraphobia. Eva Golková and I shared an office with him. He’d travel to Brno on a very early bus from Nové Město, come into the office – and then just sit there. He was working up the will to force himself to go out the door and teach. And he did, every day. But always after this intense mental struggle. I think only Eva and I knew about it. For everybody else he was an excellent, natural teacher, but behind the scenes we witnessed this terrible anxiety. I could only admire the way he overcame it, day by day.

Jarek had a phenomenal ear. He’d learned English on his own, mainly by listening to the BBC’s English by Radio programme. And his English pronunciation was flawless. In fact he’d acquired it, once he he’d got a basic grasp of the language, by imitating one specific BBC broadcaster whose Received Pronunciation he found most appealing. His keen ear perhaps also explained his musical ability. On occasion – in language classes, at Cikháj – he’d bring out his guitar and sing English songs. And songs in English – his own translations of songs by Voskovec and Werich and by Suchý and Šlitr. This was always a hit. He also had a natural talent for languages. He’d

studied Italian along with English, and at the faculty he taught both languages. He also published a number of contrastive studies based on these languages and Czech. His Italian came in handy during the Zlatá lyže international cross-country skiing competitions in Nové Město – from time to time he interpreted for Italian competitors. Once he was asked if he could help with a Finnish skier. He was quite willing, but he found he had to communicate with the guy in rather primitive English. This bothered him, so he decided to teach himself Finnish just so he could talk to Finns, who were regular competitors. Later he added Finnish to the courses he taught at the faculty – an elective course offered within the Department of Contrastive Linguistics. A remarkable man.

I mentioned that Jarek and I and Eva Golková shared an office. Like Jarek, Eva taught grammar. A couple of times she asked me about something in the textbook she was using. I was surprised and asked her to let me have a look at it. It turned out to be the standard grammar for universities, written by Karel Hais. And it was filled with an inordinate amount of old-fashioned stuff, some of which I don't think had ever been normal in English. So Eva and I went through the whole book and discussed corrections. From then on, she ended every class with "For next week prepare page X to page Y, with the following corrections ...", which she'd then dictate to the students. Weird, but as was so often the case in the Communist years, there wasn't really any other option. In addition to her teaching and research, most of which appeared in *Brno Studies in English*, Eva was also a great fan of the Gypsywood Players. She was a regular attendee at every production, especially in *Cikháj*, where she also played a key role in organizing the backstage party that followed the premiere of each year's play and was the climax of the week there. At the 50th anniversary reunion of Gypsywood we presented her with a diploma naming her an Honoured Gypsywood Jubilee Spectator.

A major boost – academically and politically and in terms of the non-academic side of the department – came in 1970, when Aleš Svoboda became a member. He was a linguist, and turned out to be the one who picked up and developed the functional sentence perspective tradition from Jenda, just as Jenda had picked up and developed the Prague School tradition from Vachek. (By the way, rather curiously, like Jenda he too had started off on an entirely different track. After grammar school he'd attended the Conservatory here in Brno for four years, where he was preparing for a professional career as a clarinetist. While still at the Conservatory he began studying German and English at the university – he later added Czech – and English seduced him away from his first love.) Over the years he produced a formidable amount of original research – it very quickly gained him international recognition. As a Party member, he also boosted our political profile and later became our on-again off-again head. He and Joe worked closely together, both when Joe was acting head as well as when Aleš was official head – the two together made a very effective team. They did much to smooth troubled waters in the late seventies and early eighties. And Aleš made a major contribution to the Gypsywood tradition when he founded and led the Gypsywood Madrigalists. But I'll speak more about this when I talk about the history of the department's theatre group. It was a pity we lost him to Ostrava in 1984, and a second time – after his brief return to Brno in 1989/1990 – to Ostrava and then Opava and even Prešov.

To round out this period, let me just mention Vidoslava Černá. Vida became a member of the department in 1980 after reorganization at the Faculty of Education put an end to the English degree programme there. She was another linguist brought in to join what was by now a distinctive Brno linguistics tradition. Unfortunately she was only with us briefly – two years later she died very unexpectedly in her mid-thirties. Perhaps my most vivid memory linked to her comes from an evening the department spent at her home – I think for her birthday. She came from a well-situated Brno family that collected art, and her home was like a private art gallery. Contemporary art by Brno painters, and also some paintings by some of the best-known Brno artists from between the wars. It was a fascinating glimpse into the hidden riches of Brno's cultural tradition.

## Students and studies

When I joined the department, people were using whatever textbooks were available – which in Communist Czechoslovakia meant a very limited selection indeed. Most of them were odd. They were out of date and full of bizarre mistakes. I've already spoken about the grammar textbook in use at the time, and how Eva Golková and I produced a “cleaned up” version for the students. Even less satisfactory was a textbook called *A Handbook of English Conversation*. It was written by a woman called Till Gottheinerová, along with Sergej Tryml – if I remember correctly, they both taught at VŠE in Prague. This was a book specifically written for universities, treating a different subject in each chapter, starting with a vocabulary list and then grammar and then conversations. A standard textbook. But the vocabulary lists were far from standard. I'd first learned of the book very early on after I came to Czechoslovakia. My future wife and I went to the Vysočina, where her family had a cottage, and we were walking through the woods. At one point she looked up at a tree and said to me “Oh, that looks like a drey.” – “A what?” – “A drey.” Silence on my part. “Isn't that the right word for a squirrel's nest? That's what we learned in our practical English course.” – “God knows!” Back home, I looked the word up in my very bulky *Oxford Universal Dictionary* (2,515 pages), and sure enough, there it was – the word for a squirrel's nest is indeed “drey”. And I, at the age of 27, and with a degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Toronto, had never once come across it, while the poor innocent students in Brno were being fed it as essential knowledge.

One other thing our students faced right in the first year of studies was the requirement to choose a novel and read one hundred pages of it each semester. They had to know it perfectly – the point was to learn vocabulary. The exam was straightforward. The teacher would open the novel at random, point at something, and ask the student what it meant. So to be fully prepared, you had to learn every word and expression that appeared in the hundred pages of the novel in question. No matter if it was something utterly archaic, something very rare or something totally useless. And it was explained to me that it could only be a British novel because they didn't want the students to be infected by American English. I said to Aleš Tichý, who was in charge of the exam, “Then I guess with my English I must be infecting them. But really – there's no such thing as pure British or pure American English anymore.” After a long discussion, I notched up my first victory in the department – they allowed the students to read both British and American novels.

When I came here, the department was admitting about twenty-five to thirty students a year for full-time day studies. (There were also “Friday studies” for those who were university graduates and wanted to extend their qualifications and for individuals – usually older – who'd never had a chance to study at all.) And as always in those days it was in a combination of English with another language. There'd been a plan around 1968 to reform the whole secondary school system. And because as part of it they wanted to establish bilingual grammar schools they started opening combinations with other subjects – English–History, English–Sociology, and so on. But by the time I came, the only combinations we had that weren't language combinations were English–Mathematics and English–Geography. Students were admitted then on the basis of *směrná čísla*. These were quotas decided upon by the Ministry of Education for every department, every combination, every course of studies. In November every year a dreaded letter would arrive from the Ministry informing you of how many students you could admit the following year, and in what combinations.

When the *směrná čísla* came through from Prague in 1980 we were shocked – there were no numbers for English. Or more precisely, the number was 0. Working through various informal channels we learned from the Ministry that they thought the demand for graduates in English could be taken care of by Charles University and Palacký University. And that as this meant



there'd be no need for English studies in Brno, they were planning to close us down. Working again behind the scenes, we managed to get the decision reversed – reversed in the sense that they'd continue to allow us to exist and admit students. As I recall, this was mainly thanks to Jaroslava Pačesová, an influential Party member and teacher at the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, who also taught phonetics to our students (her degree was in Italian, English and phonetics). However, there was a catch – we'd only be able to admit students for *odborné studium*. *Učitelské studium* was where, in theory, people were trained to become teachers, and *odborné studium* was where they were trained, in theory, to become translators. But of course the numbers were all on the side of the teachers – the projected need for translators was very low. So we had these queer three years in a row where we could only admit very limited numbers of students. The first batch, in 1981, amounted to five students for French-English and five for German-English – and almost half of them dropped out in the course of their studies. The next year there were seven students – all doing Portuguese! And the third year nine or ten doing Italian. Given that at any time we had five years' worth of students in the department, the overall number of students shrank dramatically. At one point we only had around seventy students – and there were nine of us teachers. As I mentioned earlier, this led to several teachers having to teach practical English at other faculties in order to fill their teaching loads.

Teachers were given a lot of leeway in the way they ran their classes, so students were exposed to a wide variety of teaching styles. Some were still using traditional approaches, in which learning was more or less a one-way street. And of course this was basically OK with large groups, for instance for lectures. But in general the situation in the department favoured seminar-type classes. There were seldom more than fifteen students in a class. Very often – particularly after the drop in student numbers in the eighties – I'd have only about five or six students in my seminars for the upper years. The relatively small numbers of students also meant that you had them more than once – sometimes many times – in the course of their studies, and could really get to know them. From the students' point of view, of course, this meant that they didn't feel like ciphers in an anonymous mass.

So there were many pluses for both students and teachers in those days. But I think there was perhaps one tricky aspect of the kind of situation we had in the department back then. If you teach students in many courses, and often meet them in informal settings as well, there's always the danger of getting too close to them, and not being objective when it comes to things like exams and recommendations. This was something I was certainly aware of, particularly because through the Gypsywood Players I was probably closer to students than any other teacher at the department. So I tended to be doubly on my guard against favouritism. At one point I had our very best Gypsywood actor – the very best actor we ever had – in my American literature course. He was also remarkable in that he was also the most naturally gifted student I ever had at picking up languages – he just listened and absorbed. But – he also never read anything. When the American lit exam came, he couldn't answer a single question at the *řádný termín*, so I had to kick him out. Then the *první opravný termín*, and the *druhý opravný termín* ... I think it was the *děkan-ský termín* when he finally passed. Hopefully this settled any doubts students may have had as to whether Gypsywooders had any extra benefits when exam time came (I had heard rumours to this effect at second hand). Just as a final aside, the student had the same problem in the German Department, and Masařík – who was known as a merciless teacher and examiner – came to me at one point asking what to do with the student. Because he was the department's best speaker of German, too, and Masařík just didn't want to lose him!



Students resuscitating a dummy at a paramilitary training course (*branný kurz*), 1982.

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## Teaching

I was hired as a native speaker to teach practical English classes, and at first I did only this. But then at the end of August in 1982, out of the blue, Hladký phoned to inform me that Lidka had been diagnosed with cancer and that I'd have to teach her American literature course. This was two or three weeks before the fall semester was about to start. Because the hope was that the treatment she'd be undergoing would be successful, and she'd be returning to the department, there seemed no point in creating a new course. And in fact it would have been impossible to create a new course at such short notice, so I took over the course she'd taught. I taught it for two years and those were the most intense years of teaching I've ever had.

The American literature course began in the spring semester of third year and continued through two more semesters till the end of the fourth year. So that meant that in the fall semester of my first year teaching the course I was teaching the middle period of American literature to fourth-year students. This ran roughly from the Civil War up to the First World War – Realism, Modernism, Stephen Crane, Henry James and all that. Each week I had to give a full lecture on a prose author and his works. And each week I also had a seminar where we discussed the work of two or three poets. So every week I had to familiarize myself with one novelist or short story writer and two or three poets, select several poems for discussion, give a lecture, teach a seminar – and then start reading again for the next week. It was crazy. And the spring semester was even crazier, because I had third-year students starting with early American literature and the fourth-year students heading into the final period from the 1920s to the present. So I had two lectures a week on major authors and two poetry seminars a week. I don't think I've ever read more literature more intensively than in those two years.

But the craziest thing came at the end of it all, when I had to examine the students. I followed the pattern typical of examinations in those days, not only in our department, but everywhere. The teacher would prepare a set of twenty questions or so covering the whole course to be examined, type them out on slips of paper, and put them into a basket or a box. Students would come in and pick out two pieces of paper and then have 15 minutes to prepare the answers and then come and speak about them. I found it a perverse system, because the logic of it is to find out what students don't know rather to find out what they do know, what interests them. But the most absurd thing was that I told the students "You know, I really want to hear you say something about the poems or the novels or the short stories. How they work, what they say to you, the language. Literature isn't just facts." I tried to get this into their heads, but of course they'd been so deeply brainwashed by the standard system here that very few of them really got this. When examination time came, they'd do what they'd been trained to do: "Henry James was born in... grew up in... He wrote the following novels, blah blah blah." And I kept trying to break in and get them to say something. "Have you read Henry James, even a short story by Henry James?" And the most absurd part of it was that I didn't have a clue if what they were saying was true or not. They'd say "Howells wrote the following novels ..." and I'd go "Hmm, good ..." But they could have said anything, and I wouldn't have been able to challenge them!

Sometimes they went way off track. There was one woman who kept mixing up authors in the 18th century and the 19th century. I realized she had no sense of context, no concept of the course of American history. She knew there'd been a revolution sometime and that there'd been a Civil War sometime. But which one came before the other wasn't quite clear to her. It was incredible. I think the problem – and this was a general problem – was a combination of two things. First, a lack of information about the historical and cultural development of the United States. And second, this horrible positivistic idea that there's a fixed *penzum znalostí* that you have to pour into students' brains and that they're expected to regurgitate. Too often it leaves them with facts floating in a void. It was very frustrating. Somehow the thing itself – literature – got lost in there somewhere. This experience, more than anything else, made me determined that if I ever had a chance to change things, I would try.

But I loved teaching literature, and working with the students, especially in the seminars, was great. I did that for almost two years and then Lidka came back after she recovered from the cancer. I went back to teaching practical English and, for a couple of sessions a week, academic writing – how to write an essay, the basic stuff they should keep in mind. One thing I kept having to point out to them was that well over two thousand years ago a man called Aristotle wrote a very interesting treatise called *Poetics*, and in it he made the fascinating observation that a literary text – in his case a drama – has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The reason I had to keep repeating this is that the Czech style in writing, as you probably know, is to have this loooooong beginning, then the slow development of some theme, then you turn the last page – and there's no ending. It's like falling off a cliff. And you don't know if the writer just decided that they'd written enough words or what. Perhaps 80 per cent of the essays written by students lacked any kind of ending, and I tried my damndest to convince them that in English, at least, this simply wouldn't do. I wonder if it's much different now?

Though students were unaware of it, teachers were given a lot of freedom in putting together their courses. This may sound strange – people have a lot of misconceptions about the Communist years – but nobody ever asked what I was teaching in my courses. In theory, there was a list at the Ministry of what the courses were like and what we were supposed to do. Somebody at the Ministry had the job of making sure that everything was centralized. Once a year, a small group made up of people from the English Departments in Prague, Olomouc and Brno would meet and go through this list that claimed to be a list of what we were doing, what authors and texts we were teaching and so on. After tinkering with it a bit, they'd send it back to the Ministry. And that

was that till the next year, when they'd go through the same empty ritual again. So what teachers were teaching was their choice, and I think all of them shaped their courses to include not only what they liked and were interested in, but also what they thought would appeal to the students.

It was also possible to create electives, though with a small teaching staff they were limited. It's still surprising to me how casual it all was. That's how Canadian Studies got started at the department. One day in 1985 I just went to Joe and said that maybe the following semester I'd like to teach an elective course on Canadian literature. "Sure. Just give me a description and I'll add it to the list of lectures and seminars for next semester." It was very free and easy.

I don't want you to get the impression that everything was ideal back then. There were of course a lot of problems, especially when it came to the department's position in the faculty. But it's also true that more than once, when I was back in Canada in the 1980s, I'd meet friends there and talk about my experiences here. Many of them were also university teachers. I'd describe the situation at the department, the conditions under which I taught – and they'd be jealous. First, they couldn't believe how privileged I was to be able to teach such small groups of students – they were wrestling with "seminars" of thirty students or more. And if they wanted to start a new course it'd have to be discussed with their head of department and agreed to, and then probably approved officially by some committee higher up as well. Quite ironically, they were envious of the academic freedom I had – in normalized Communist Czechoslovakia!

## Extras

There are three kind of loose ends I'd like to tie up here. They all have to do with things that happened at that time, and two of them continued to have repercussions much later.

### English or Czenglish?

In 1978 I started to cooperate with Jaroslav Peprník, who taught at Palacký University, on a textbook project he'd started. This was *Angličtina pro jazykové školy*, which ran to four volumes and introduced to the world the wonderful Prokop family. After these were finished, I continued working with him on the two volumes of *Angličtina pro filology*. These were books our students would be using – the idea was that they'd replace the notorious Gottheinerová–Tryml textbook.

By this time it was 1985, and I suppose I'd caught the textbook bug. I spoke to the editor we'd been working with at the *Státní pedagogické nakladatelství*, Zora Líznerová, about a project of my own that I'd been thinking about for some time. After I'd started teaching at the department, I soon got fed up with encountering the same mistakes over and over. I began making lists and copying down examples of bad usage in Czechs' English. And so I asked her whether they'd be interested in publishing the book I had in mind. And she said "Yes, please."

The deadline for handing in the manuscript was 30 June 1987. But I'm not very good with deadlines. I either just make it under the wire, or I'm late. Early in 1987 I became worried. That year we were planning to go to Canada in the summer to visit my family, and I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to finish it on time. When I told Líznerová this, her response was simple. "Well, if you don't, the man at the Ministry of Education who's going to approve the textbook won't be able to approve it, since he's going to retire this summer. And God knows if we'll ever find anybody else." She went on to explain that many people at the Ministry were highly dubious that the book would ever sell, and it hadn't been easy to find someone who thought otherwise. So for the next four months or so I worked like a devil. I finished the manuscript at two in the morning the day we were leaving for Canada and popped it into an envelope. Then at nine o'clock we took

a tram to the main train station. I nipped over to the post office next door and mailed the package off to Prague. Then we got on the train to Budapest, where we'd be taking off for Canada. Mission accomplished!

As you probably know, *English or Czenglish? Jak se vyhnout čechismům v angličtině* became a runaway best-seller. And eventually a kind of cult handbook. It clearly met a need – language schools and secondary schools began using it in their teaching, and in a later age simply posting it on their websites. “Czenglish” itself quickly became the *terminus technicus* for a kind of English heard only too often in this country. And towards the end of the 1990s the book began to be used in the department's first-year practical English courses. In a sense it'd come home – the vast majority of the material used to create the book had in fact been gathered from our students, bless their little Czenglish hearts.

And the book continues to be used here. Over the years it was worked on continually – updated, added to, corrected and digitalized by teachers and students in the department. And even translated into English. It was this version that two of our teachers, Simona Kalová and Chris Rance, used to create a two-semester course on Czenglish back in 2015. And for the past few months the two of them and I have worked on a thoroughly revised version of the English text. This will be published in the fall – 32 years after it first appeared. So in a sense *English or Czenglish?* is a kind of ongoing project of the English Department. And this new version of the book is also the most recent in a long line of textbooks that have been produced by teachers in the department that stretches back almost one hundred years.

## The Neumark family

I've already spoken about the many months I spent re-cataloguing the books in the department's library, and the surprising discoveries I made. Perhaps most surprising was a collection of about 150 books in English on the First World War. I had no idea why they were there, so of course I turned to the institutional memory of the department at the time, Jenda Firbas, and asked him about it. His answer was immediate: “Oh, those were given to us by Walter Neumark's widow” – as if it was common knowledge who Walter Neumark was. Perhaps to his generation. To cut a long story short, the Neumarks were one of the leading textile families in Brno back at the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Paul Neumark was originally German, but moved to England at some point in the 1860s and became involved in the textile industry there. Then he moved to Brno in the 1880s and founded a very big factory here. It was just opposite Vaňkovka – the Vlněna factory that was demolished just recently. He had two sons, George and Walter, and they inherited the business. Interestingly enough, they'd remained British subjects. George became the Honorary British Consul here in Brno, and after his death his younger brother Walter took over the position. And then in 1939, on March 15, the day the Nazis occupied the country, he committed suicide. His wife was I think Austrian. (Oddly enough, they were married twice, first in a Catholic ceremony in St. James's Church, and three days later in the Red Church – the Neumarks were Protestants, though I think originally Jewish.) She stayed here during the Second World War, and left with most of the rest of the German-speaking population after it ended. But before she left she donated her late husband's collection of books to the library.

Apparently Walter Neumark was fascinated by World War I, and his hobby was collecting books in English about it. It was an amazing collection – memoirs by participants, biographies of generals and politicians, straightforward histories – the lot. But the thing that was unique, and I bet there's only one copy in the whole of the Czech Republic, was a whole series of volumes – around twenty – called *The Times History of the War*. After it was all over, *The Times* published this memorial set with all of the main articles that had appeared in the newspaper during the war. In

volumes the size of the originals, beautifully bound. We didn't know what to do with the collection of books, because it was so specialized. We asked people at the University Library – now the Moravská zemská knihovna – whether they were interested. We were willing to give it to them, just to keep the books in Brno. But they said it was too specialized even for them. So in the end we sold the whole collection to the library of the Military History Institute in Prague for what was a rather large sum of money at the time. I was sad to see it go, but glad that it had found a home where somebody might at least dip into it at some point.

An addition to Walter Neumark's books there was something completely different in the cupboard – a scrapbook. This turned out to be the Neumark family scrapbook. It was full of newspaper cuttings about the Neumarks and there was a whole lot of stuff about Paul Neumark – obituaries, descriptions of his funeral – and about other members of the family. And here comes the lovely bit. Some years later Jenda Firbas somehow met up with George Neumark's son Peter Neumark. Peter was a very distinguished university professor in England – his field was translation theory. Peter and Jenda hit it off, and when Peter came here for the first time in 1987, we presented him with his family scrapbook. It was a big emotional moment for him: "I grew up with this as a kid!" He said that he hadn't seen it for fifty years or so.

Peter became a frequent visitor to the department in the nineties and the beginning of the new millennium. He gave lectures in the department, and put us in touch with other people in the field. He was fascinating to talk to – a visitor from a Brno that had vanished. He was born in Brno in 1916 and had been christened in the Red Church. His parents divorced when he and his brother were kids, and he was then mostly with his mother. But he and his brother, being proper little Englishmen – as I said, the family didn't take out Austrian or Czechoslovak citizenship, though they were at the heart of Brno's commercial life – were sent to a boarding school in England from the age of seven or eight. They were only here in summers. We were talking about his family once, and Peter apologized for not knowing Czech. "I'm sorry I don't speak Czech, but you know, the only person in our family who spoke Czech was my mother. And that was because she had to speak to the servants." As I said, a visitor from a Brno that had vanished. Towards the end of his life we initiated the process for the university to award him an honorary doctorate. It was approved, and he received it in 2007 on his ninety-first birthday. As a fan of Peter's and fan of Brno, I was very proud that the department had played such a key role in closing the circle.

## Christmas stories

Just a few words about a tradition in the department back in the eighties. We used to have these Christmas parties, which were held in the phonetics lab. Officially it was part of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. But since our students studied phonetics there, and it was by far the largest room on the floor where our department was, we used it for all sorts of occasions – birthday celebrations, special events like the christening of Amos I, and so on.

Each Christmas party was different, but beginning in the mid-eighties I came up with the idea of writing a ghost story. There was nothing original in this. I was inspired by Robertson Davies – the Canadian writer I mentioned earlier whose book on Shakespeare's boy actors we had in the departmental library. When they founded a new graduate college in Toronto in the mid-1960s, he was its first Master. He felt that as a young college, it needed traditions. So he introduced all sorts of customs, and one of them was ghost stories, which he delivered at the annual Christmas Gaudy. The neat thing was that all the ghosts appeared at the college because he invented some link with it that drew them there.

I decided we had to have ghosts visiting the Faculty of Arts, too. So each Christmas for several years beginning towards the end of the eighties I told a ghost story at the Christmas party.

And because I love history, they were always ghosts that had some connection with the history of the university or the faculty. The trick with ghosts is that you've got to have a reason why they appear – because it's a particular occasion, or a particular place, or whatever. The first year it was the ghost of Valentine von Falkensteiner. He was a Brno philanthropist whose foundation mostly paid for Building A – it was originally the city orphanage. Jan Masaryk showed up one year – he'd been given an honorary doctorate by the university back in 1948, only a month before the Communist coup in February. I got in touch then with Jiří Pulec, the head of the MU archives, and discovered that Masaryk's visit to Brno to receive the doctorate is massively documented. You could reconstruct it minute by minute. Another year was TGM. I found a record, one of those small 45 RPMs – I wonder how many people still remember them? – with a speech that Masaryk made to the Czechoslovak Parliament in 1928 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the country's independence. I claimed that I'd taped his ghost when he appeared and spoke to me, and played a bit of the speech to them where he talks about what democracy means. And everybody was totally stunned because nobody had ever heard Masaryk speak, never heard his voice – this was in the depths of normalization. Chudoba of course also visited his old department. And the Spectre of Communism. Altogether there were seven ghost stories. People were amused, and I think they learned a bit. You know, you can take the teacher out of the classroom, but you can't take the classroom out of the teacher.

## The end of the eighties

Things began loosening up in the eighties, especially as the decade wore on. Right at the beginning of the decade we'd taken in two new young members, Naďa Kudrnáčová and Iva Gardavská (soon to be Gilbertová) – a balanced pair, as Naďa was a linguist and Iva a literary person. But then we'd run into a wall. Though we needed more new members, our position in the faculty made this very difficult. One of Zdeněk Masařík's main tasks when he took over as external head was to raise our *kádrový profil*. After searching around, we suggested Věra Pálenská, another literary person and someone who specialized in a field that was unique in Czechoslovakia, Caribbean literature. After a year or so, Zdeněk asked us who else we could find. We told him there was no one left in Brno who was both a Party member and had good academic credentials – our department simply didn't produce many Party members. To our great surprise, Zdeněk said “Well, if that's the situation – who do you want?” And we said “Mirek Pospíšil”. Mirek was teaching at the language school then, and was notorious for having probably the worst *kádrový profil* of any English teacher in Brno. And we explained this to Masařík, and why we wanted him. It turned out that Masařík's deepest loyalty was to academic excellence, not the Party. Using his many contacts he managed to get Mirek into the department. And in short order Mirek was followed by Jana Chamonikolasová and Tomáš Pospíšil. Mirek taught language classes and took over responsibility for the translation classes after Aleš Tichý's death, Jana followed in the path of functional sentence perspective, and Tom beefed up the literary section (he later became responsible for American literature). So internally the department was in much better shape than it had been only a few years earlier.

In the course of the decade we also began getting the first foreign lecturers. There'd been a brief window in the early eighties when an American academic, Richard Sage, had somehow come through officially approved channels at the highest level to teach in the department. This was despite the objections of the Dean – the same Dean who was here when I came – and he said nix to anyone following the next year. And that was the end of any American presence – not only with us, but anywhere in the country's universities – for the next few years. The first Fulbright Professor we got, Alan Flint, came in 1986/87, shortly after Czechoslovakia and the US signed



Iva Gardavská (Gilbertová), on the left, and Naďa Holíková (Kudrnáčová) visiting Stratford-upon-Avon during their study trip to Leeds, 1979.

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an agreement to reopen cultural exchanges – they’d been frozen following the invasion in 1968. Like most of the Fulbrighters who came to the department over the next decade or so, he was a literary scholar. But so far as I can remember, he was the only one we roped into a Gypsywood production – there’s a photo of him at Cikháj down on his hands and knees giving a helping hand with the scenery for *Plunder*.

In the spring of 1987, Brno was the beneficiary of the first major public initiative following the cultural agreement between the two governments – a kind of flagship event on the Americans’ part heralding renewed cultural relations. They brought over the Actors’ Theater of Louisville, Kentucky, a repertory company that performed a selection of contemporary American one-act plays. They put them on in the Dům umění – this was then the home of the Divadlo na Provázku – where there was also an exhibition on contemporary American theatre. This was a sensation. Our students were fascinated, and went to see the plays, many of them more than once. People travelled from Prague to Brno to see the plays – the first American cultural presence in the country for almost twenty years. There was simultaneous interpreting, and the interpreters also came from Prague – much to the disgust of local Brno interpreters, who would have done the job just as well. I said the event was a sensation, but in fact most people found out about it by word of mouth – it wasn’t publicized much in the media. And I suspect Brno was chosen as the venue precisely because it wasn’t Prague. Better to have it in “the countryside” – the good old “*Praha a venkov*” mentality. Which, I might add in passing, was what made Brno such a rich cultural scene in the seventies and eighties – it was under the radar of the authorities in Prague. In a peculiar way, in the days of normalization Brno was lucky and even privileged in this respect. And the university benefitted too. At least from my experience, I saw that we could do things



here that weren't possible in Prague, and not even in Olomouc, where the presence of a huge Soviet military garrison meant it too was a "closely watched city".

The British Council was also stepping up its activities at the time, and had already installed the first British lecturers at universities in this country (but not yet in Brno). Both they and the Americans were also very active in what's called cultural diplomacy – using cultural figures to promote your country in a "soft" way. In the latter half of the eighties we were almost inundated with writers – novelists, poets, dramatists, the lot. In Brno, they often gave a public talk at the faculty, and in other cases at the English Club. This was something three of us had set up in 1986 – me along with Petr Antonín and Mirek Pospíšil, who were both teachers at the language school at the time. The original idea was to organize a meeting once a month for a small group of people who'd be given the rare opportunity to have a lively discussion with an invited native speaker of English. What we hadn't anticipated was that instead of a small group, each meeting attracted eighty, ninety, a hundred or more people. So the format was changed to a semi-formal talk of some kind, with questions afterwards. At first we met once a month, later usually twice a month. The speakers were from the UK, Canada and the States and came from a huge range of professions and interests. Looking over a list of the speakers recently – both the speakers at the English Club and those who came to the faculty – I could hardly believe how many of them were leading figures in their fields and often internationally famous. People like William Golding and John Updike, for example. I mention all this since this created absolutely unrivalled opportunities for our students to be exposed to exciting and even important figures in the culture and society of the English-speaking countries. And they took advantage of it. I doubt there was anything like it anywhere else in Czechoslovakia at the time – another proof of just how exceptional Brno was back then.

Against this background, the fall semester in 1989 began with the 2nd Brno Conference of English and American Studies, and this was even more exciting than the first one three years earlier. I remember in particular Josef Jařab, from Palacký University. He'd just come back from an extended stay in the States, and at times while I was listening to him talk I wondered whether he thought he was still there. And I also wondered where he might be three months down the road – in prison, perhaps? In the end, three months down the road he was the newly elected Rector of Palacký University! The conference was a good start-off for the academic year, and it was also good to have two new foreigners in the department. Steve Hardy had already spent two years at the English Department in Olomouc, and now the British Council sent him to us. And we also had a new Fulbright Professor, a young guy called Douglas Dix. The year ahead looked promising.

# Into a new world: November 1989 and the 1990s

In November 1989 we travelled to the university's recreation centre in the Vysočina as usual to prepare our Gypsywood production. It was very ambitious – a musical version of *Animal Farm*. I won't go into the details of this here – that'll come in the section on the Gypsywood Players. We were there just after the Berlin Wall came down. With us were four students from the University of Rostock in what was then East Germany – we'd started an exchange with their English Department a couple of years earlier. So there they were, four students from Rostock, sitting in front of the television in Cikháj, seeing the Berlin Wall come down. They couldn't believe their eyes, and of course because they had no Czech they kept frantically asking what was going on. When we assured them that it was the end of the wall – we were pretty goggle-eyed too – they were frantic to leave. To return to Berlin, to try and cross over into Austria – whatever. They were totally freaked out.

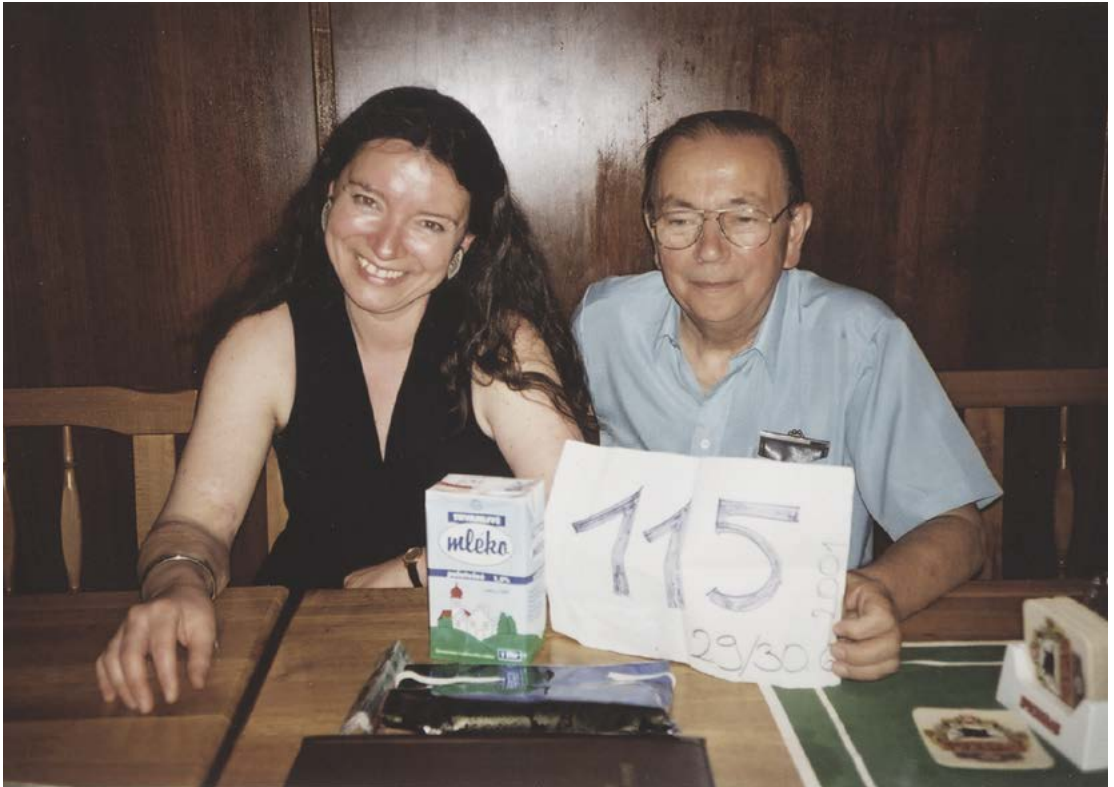
*Animal Farm* premiered in Cikháj on 18 November; the next day we returned to Brno. We were hardly back before the student strike began on Monday 20 November. Two things should be said here. One is that whenever you read about the events in November and the student strike, you tend to get the impression that the students were massively engaged. But the truth is that only a small proportion of students actually took part in the strike. The vast majority of the Brno-based students stayed home, and I suspect the same was true of out-of-towners, most of whom went back to their home towns. There were lots of students from Brno who we didn't see for two weeks. So a core group of students at the faculty ran the strike, and quite a lot of them were from the English Department. I think all the students in the *Animal Farm* production took part in the strike, at least all of them who were from Brno. Mirek Pospíšil was a member of the *stávkový výbor*. As far as I know, our faculty was the only place where both teachers and students were members of the *stávkový výbor*. Dušan Šlosar and Eva Rusínová from the Czech Language Department were also part of it, and of course students – they made up the majority. Again, I think this says a great deal about the atmosphere at the Faculty of Arts back then. By and large, students and teachers trusted each other.

The second thing that should be said concerns teachers. You saw very, very few teachers at the faculty during those two weeks when the strike was going on. They just – vanished. Only a very small group of teachers actually came into their offices, or encouraged us. The most active teacher – not including those in the *stávkový výbor* – was Ivo Možný. He was the one who initiated the creation of the Občanské fórum at the faculty, and for me this was a huge political lesson. Možný came up with this idea of starting the Občanské fórum at the faculty fairly early on – I think it was the first one at the university, in fact – and put together a list of demands. The Rector and Vice-Rectors must resign – the university Rectorate was in the entrance building to the faculty back then – the same for our Dean and Vice-Deans, new elections, no more place for the Communist Party, and so on. There were perhaps a dozen of us at that point. And I suggested that we should circulate the demands to the teachers and get them to sign on so we could show



Iva Gilbertová and Josef Hladký celebrating their birthdays together, 20 years apart, 1981...

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... and 2001.

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we had their support. But Možný said “There’s no need for that. It’s irrelevant.” Only in the course of the next few days did I realize what he knew and I didn’t. That when there’s a breakdown in a society, in public order – and this is what happened in November 1989 – then the people who *claim* to have power *have* power. We said we represented the teachers at the Faculty of Arts. And *de facto* we did, because there wasn’t anybody around any more to say “No, you don’t, we’re the ones in charge.” Not long after that, the other faculties did the same sort of thing. And soon there was the election of a new Dean, and a new Rector, and so on. This was a really important political lesson for me. It’s something that’s enabled me to understand much better a lot of things that have happened round the world since then.

These events launched a period of about six months to a year when there were in effect no rules. You could ignore rules, you could make your own rules and do things the way you wanted to. In December 1989, departments just said “We’re going to elect new heads.” Joe Hladký would have been everybody’s first choice for head of our department. But he’d been elected Dean, so he was out. Probably the second choice would have been Mirek Pospíšil, but Hladký had made him a Vice-Dean. So he was out too. With Joe and Mirek out of the running, the department teachers elected me as head. It was kind of funny, because it was only about a year and a half earlier that the Party finally decided – apparently after much debate – that I could be allowed to apply to begin working towards a CSc. And now, suddenly, there I was, head of the English Department! I had a PhD., that’s true, but I’ve already described how I got it, and that in reality it had no academic value. So my highest “real” degree is my BA Honours from the University of Toronto. Pretty minimal, but it was enough in the end.

# First term as head of department

## New teachers

One of the first things I was faced with when I became head was the need to find new teachers. It was clear that there was going to be a huge increase of interest in English, so we brought over some people from the language school. Milada Franková was the first person I approached. Milada was amazing. All these years that she was teaching at the language school she used to come in to the department to borrow books. She'd ask about the most recent books we'd received, especially novels, and then go off with whatever struck her fancy. It was remarkable how she'd kept up her interest in literature all during those difficult years – a couple of decades by my calculation. We brought in two other teachers from the language school that same year, Věra Vémolová and Katka Tomková. In addition to being a language teacher, Věra was also an expert when it came to testing – she was one of the key people in the language school team that prepared state exams each year for all the language schools in the country. Her knowledgeable ability in this area was to prove invaluable for us. Katka has a very keen ear for the nuances of English pronunciation – this has been of enormous help to our students, especially when they start studies with us, and it's also why she's very much at home in the world of English-language dialects. Another new teacher in the fall was Jitka Vlčková, who'd been an external teacher for the department. She'd been hired to teach a group of students from the Antonín Zápotocký Military Academy who were training with us to be translators – every Friday they'd show up at the faculty in their uniforms. (As a Westerner I was forbidden to teach them – we just nodded and greeted each other in passing.) She joined us as an internal member teaching English, but her interest in Australia later led her to introduce courses that expanded our students' opportunities to familiarize themselves with the English-speaking world. And the last recruit that academic year was Debora Zemenová, again a language teacher, but soon to shift a lot of her time to teacher training.

Over the years we continued to drain the language school. In 1991 we took in Lidia Kyzlinková along with Zdena Sparlingová, my wife. I didn't even tell her that there was going to be a *výběrové řízení* – not that I didn't think she'd make a great teacher, but because I hate the idea of *protekce*. She was the one that came up to me and said “I hear you're going to take a language teacher into the department.” – “I didn't tell you and that was deliberate. Now I can honestly say I didn't encourage you, right?” She applied, and was accepted (I'd also told the selection committee to make their choices based on merit alone). Later years saw other teachers joining us from the language school. Jarmila Fictumová was to play a major part in our translation programme and Simona Kalová was one of the two teachers who were later to introduce the very popular course on *English or Czeenglish?* in 2015.

## New degree programme

But to return to the early nineties. In addition to finding teachers, there was another and deeper concern. Suddenly you're head of department and, well – what do you do? It was clear that we were going to be taking in huge numbers of students. This would mean changes in the way we were teaching, in who was going to teach what, in what methodology should be used and all the rest of it. But I also felt that there should be other, deeper changes. Gradually, in the spring of 1990 and through the summer, I began to realize that we'd have to radically rethink what we were doing. In the end, I came to the conclusion that three things in particular would be crucial.

First, there was the examination system. Up till then, almost all exams were oral exams, which I personally think are very bad when there are large numbers of students. They work



Jan Firbas giving a thank-you speech at the departmental dinner celebrating his 70th birthday.  
From left: Jana Chamonikolasová, Josef Hladký, Helena Firbasová, Jan Firbas, Lidmila Pantůčková, 1991.

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well with a very small number of people. In the English-speaking world we have them almost exclusively at the doctoral level, where you've got a couple of hours to go into depth and have a real discussion. Whereas here, not only in our department, but in the country in general, they'd largely degenerated into quick fact-finding missions. If you look at it logically, what teachers were basically trying to do in these oral exams was discover what students didn't know. And if they found somewhere where the students fell short, they could then kick them out and tell them to come back for a *první opravný termín*, a *druhý opravný termín* ... An exam like this isn't designed to test what you're interested in, what excited you, what you went and read more about. It's designed to find gaps in your knowledge. And in my eyes there was also a second problem with these exams. The way they were done – one professor sitting with one student, no record of what the student said – they gave ridiculous power to the examiner, to the professor. It was totally up to this individual to decide whether or not to let you pass, whether the percentage of knowledge of the required bundle you displayed was satisfactory or not. So one of the main things I was hoping to introduce was a movement towards more written work, essays, more assessment during the semester – a variety of ways rather than what I felt was an outmoded and unfair system of testing.

The second area where I felt something had to be done related to the fact that because of being largely cut off so long from what was happening in the academic world “outside”, there wasn't any awareness of how critical thought had developed over the years, especially in the previous couple of decades. This wasn't such a problem in the area of linguistics, because Jenda Firbas had continued to be in touch with many of the leading figures in that discipline, and several had actually been in Brno and given lectures. But we were sadly lacking in orientation in the

area of the study of literature and culture. I was acutely aware of this, because it was my own case as well.

Finally, the third thing I thought was very important was to change the actual structure of our degree programme – to expand the areas of study, to create new courses, to offer more electives. This would allow students to focus more on areas they were more interested in. Up till then, all our graduates had more or less taken the same courses during their studies. Of course there were some elective courses (though very few). So some mild specialization was possible. If you were interested in linguistics, for instance, you could take one or two extra courses in linguistics, and do your final-year dissertation on a linguistics topic. But by and large the vast majority of courses you'd taken in your five years of study were the same as those that students more interested in literature or translation had taken. I definitely hoped this could be changed, and the sharp increase in the number of teachers made it practically possible.

Canadians tend to make decisions based on long discussions aimed at achieving some kind of messy compromise. And in retrospect, what I remember most from my first year and a half as head is precisely that – an endless series of meetings and discussions where we slowly worked our way towards some agreement that would enable us to restructure the degree programme and introduce the changes that would inevitably follow. Sometimes we met as a department, sometimes the linguistics people met separately, sometimes the literature people met separately, sometimes the cultural studies people met separately. And these meetings weren't taking place in a vacuum. Various other major things were happening or taking place in the world out there at the same time that had an effect on the discussions I just mentioned.

The first was the re-emergence of the British Council in the country, early on in 1990. The British Council hadn't been present in the country officially since it was banned after the Communist coup in 1948. The arrangement in the Communist years was that the cultural attaché at the British Embassy in Prague was in fact an employee of the British Council, here as it were “in-cognito” (though of course the Communist authorities were quite well aware of this). But now the British Council was legally established here, and with a new head. This was Bill Jefferson, who had a reputation for being dynamic and getting things done. And for some reason – or perhaps quite naturally? – he fell in love with Brno and our English Department. He thought that we could serve as a kind of focal point for activities he was promoting that were intended to move things forward in this country. One indication of this was his choice of Brno as the venue for the phenomenal 1st Brno English Teacher Education Conference in 1991. This was a marathon, four-day event – 200 Czech and Slovak participants, 20 British presenters who were the *crème de la crème* of the teacher-training and applied linguistics professions, 20 in-country British lecturers. And Prince Charles – Vice-Patron of the Council – present to speak at the opening. Joe Hladký's organizational skills were tested to the limit, but the event was a smashing success. It was also a great publicity coup for the faculty and the English Department. And Bill continued to support the department by beefing up the British Council's presence here. Steve Hardy was joined by Beth Edgington, a specialist in cultural studies. I'll talk a bit about her in a moment. And for a year Lin Dawson was also a member of the department at the Council's expense. She was a teacher trainer, fully up to date on the latest trends in this very important field. I think we were the only English Department in the country to have three British Council lecturers at the same time. And all played important roles in three key areas – literature, cultural studies and teacher training.

A second set of opportunities was linked with Doug Dix as Fulbright visiting professor. When we were discussing reforming the curriculum one of the things we decided would be needed was a full two-semester American history and culture introductory course for our first-year students. The problem was what to use to teach it. We settled on a two-volume textbook. Doug then went to the American Embassy and explained how ambitious and innovatory this new course would be – and that our students would need to use this book. Remember – by

that time we were taking in around 200 students each year. And the Americans came through with, I think, 100 copies of the set. That represented a big bundle of cash. Of course the question then arose as to who would teach the course, and the name of Jeffrey Vanderziel came up. Jeff was an American who'd come to Brno in 1989 on a scholarship as a doctoral student of anthropology. He spent his time here on an archeological dig in southern Moravia. Doug and I had met him when he gave a fascinating talk in the English Club in the fall of 1989. His scholarship was for the academic year, and then he returned to the States. But we'd been very impressed by him, and thought it would be worth trying to lure him back to take charge of this new American Studies venture. For whatever reason, this was an offer Jeff found he couldn't refuse. He soon settled in, and became a permanent fixture in the department, teaching many courses on American society, in particular various minorities – Blacks, Native Americans, gays. He's of course still here, thirty years later. And for more than fifteen years of that time he put his administrative and organizational skills to good use as head of department. It was his effectiveness and popularity as a teacher that led him to his current position as Director of the Pedagogical Competence Development Centre – a pioneering, university-wide unit aimed at improving the teaching skills of our teachers here at MU.

Another area where Doug was important had to do with critical theory. As I mentioned earlier, I felt we teachers were very behind in this area, with virtually no knowledge of contemporary currents and trends. So I asked Doug if he could give a one-semester series of weekly seminars about what was going on in the world of critical theory for our literature teachers. I must admit this was largely met with scepticism and even signs of rebellion, but in the end I think it was worth it. At the very beginning I told the teachers participating in the seminar “Look, you don't have to start teaching in this way, but you've got to know what's happening. Because you won't be able to talk to your colleagues in other countries without at least knowing what for example deconstruction is.” So they sat through the sessions and a bit of the theory wore off on them. Some more than others, but I don't think the effort was wasted. I doubt any of the teachers were transformed by what they learned, but several picked up something, and were able to deal with the key concepts. They never went on to write things that were fully in these various critical modes, but they used the concepts and ideas in creative ways. Which is what I'd hoped. And to be frank, what I think is much better than just swallowing critical theories whole. Theory is a good servant, but a very bad master.

And finally, back to the British Council. At headquarters in London they came up with this idea that for this whole bloc here – the former Communist countries – and some other kind of more “peripheral” countries, they should create an initiative to promote the wide range of developments in British critical theory over the previous decade or so. So they held three conferences at two-year intervals in the early 1990s. The first was in Salamanca in Spain, the second at Varenna in Italy, and the third in Solothurn in Switzerland. These were week-long conferences and they brought in a whole slew of leading British critical thinkers, trailblazers in many areas – gender studies, queer theory, cultural materialism, post-colonial theory and so on. Terry Eagleton was there, Jonathan Dollimore, Bill Ashcroft, Gillian Beer and many, many more of that calibre. The British Council invited me to attend all three conferences – they said they felt this would provide continuity. (I didn't argue.) These conferences were fantastic. I tried to absorb as much as possible – I felt I was there in order to pick up as much information as I could on what was happening in the world of theory so I could bring it back to Brno. I remember at the very first one, in Salamanca, I asked Bill Ashcroft if he could give me a list of books we might use in a post-colonial course we were thinking of creating in the department, and he said “Well, I think there are really only three on the market at the moment.” It was that early on in postcolonial studies – at the time most of the stuff that'd been written on the subject was in the form of articles in academic journals. These conferences turned out to have real value in helping us to move the department into new areas and create new courses.



The degree programme that emerged after our many months of discussion was very ambitious. Its main features were as follows. The first-year students had three core introductory courses – to literary studies, to American Studies and to British Studies. These were compulsory, along with practical English courses. The second year had foundation courses in linguistics and the historical development of English – these weren't new courses, but traditional courses adapted and updated in various ways. Right from second year on, students took a mixture of compulsory courses and electives. American and British literature, for example, were now taught in eight separate courses, of which students had to take a minimum of three, one of which had to be either American or British literature. But they could of course take more if they were interested particularly in literature. There was a similar arrangement for linguistics. A lot of new cultural studies courses were offered. The stress was put on written evaluation of the courses – this didn't apply to practical language courses, of course, though there too written tests were also used. Oral exams weren't banned outright – this was left up to the individual teachers, but most opted wholly or at least partially for a written format. What was very innovative was a comprehensive exam at the end of the third year. This was in fact composed of four exams – literature, linguistics, cultural studies and practical English. The idea was that this marked the end of the students' first stage of studies, when they'd been given a basic grounding in these four key pillars of study at the department.

In the second stage of their studies – their fourth and fifth years – they could then focus on a particular “track”. In addition to literature, linguistics and cultural studies there was also translation. Of course they could choose electives in any track, but a certain minimum had to be in the track they were specializing in. And as a rule, their final-year dissertation would be in this track as well. The new state exam we introduced was radical. We felt that they'd already been examined on the basic areas of study at their comprehensive exam, so there was no point in repeating this again two years later. And since then they'd all taken very individual paths, according to their interests, so it was literally impossible to find some common ground on which they could all be tested. Instead, we prepared a list of very demanding theoretical books in their field of choice, and they chose from them which ones to be examined on – again, these were usually in the track they'd followed. I used the word “radical” to describe this exam, because that's the way it was generally viewed by the Czech community of Anglicists. I remember describing it to a leading Czech Anglicist at some point in the nineties, and he was appalled – how could we claim we were producing qualified graduates if we didn't make them jump through the traditional hoops that'd been there since time immemorial? (“Jump through the hoops” is my metaphor, not his.)

What no one knew at the time, of course, was that we had anticipated the Bologna Process. This only began in 1999, but its key component was the transformation of Europe's higher education systems through the introduction of a three-cycle structure made up of Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral studies. Our new degree programme was in fact two degree programmes in waiting – a Bachelor's degree ending with the Comprehensive Exam at the end of the third year, and a Master's degree with the new-style state exam at the end of the fifth year. When the Bologna Process was actually introduced in the Czech Republic about a decade later, the transition in our department went virtually unnoticed.

## Single English

Besides the new degree programme, the other major innovation at the department at this time was the introduction of “single English” – that is, a degree programme in which students didn't have to take a second major. At the time this was utterly, completely new – there was nothing like it anywhere in the country. It began rather haphazardly, by letting some students who started studying in the fall of 1990 take more optional courses, and in the general “lawlessness” at the



From left: Steve Hardy, Jana Chamonikolasová, and Don Sparling at the departmental dinner celebrating Jan Firas's 70th birthday, 1991.

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very beginning of the nineties the fact that they dropped their second subject wasn't regarded as important. There was nothing like an accreditation commission back then. But we soon changed it into an official, fully-structured programme with new courses created specially for the single-English students. These were demanding things like specific foundation courses for cultural studies, critical theory, postcolonial theory and so on. And they had to take more courses in areas like linguistics and literature than the other students, who were doing a double major.

There was a lot of opposition to single English. One of the commonest arguments was that to be properly educated you need a double subject degree. My usual response to this was a bit aggressive: "Do you think I'm uneducated? Because at the University of Toronto I did an English-only degree." In fact single-subject degrees are the norm in English-speaking countries, and I was rather keen on this idea of giving students the opportunity to have a similar experience. An important aspect of the single-English programme as it developed was the separate entrance exam we created for it. It was tougher, and it required more thinking and more persuasive skills, I would say. The programme was immensely successful. It was the only one in the whole country, and each year we'd get around 600 applicants – for 25 places! And where they came from was very diverse. Back then, it was still mostly people from Moravia going to MU. Whereas we had lots of kids from Bohemia and from the more distant corners of Moravia. They were also very bright – they wanted to be part of this ambitious programme. And they were very active. They set up a reading club, for example. Or one semester a couple of them offered a weekly get-together where they came up with all sorts of interesting things related to Shakespeare. There was a lot of creativity in the group.

## Student activists

It was a difficult period in some ways, partly because rules were changing and nobody often knew what the rules were. I remember one semester when the students came up with the idea of an evaluation of the teachers. I said OK – in fact, of course, there was no way I could have stopped them. But if I'd thought about it a bit more, I could have handled it better. What they did was to hand out a very primitive questionnaire to the students, ask them fill it in, and then tally everything up. The results were, literally, a list of “the best” and “the worst” teachers. And then they posted it on the department notice board. You can imagine the uproar among the teachers – especially those down at the bottom of the list. This was very unpleasant. I had to put out a lot of fires among the teachers, and I also had to explain to the students what a proper evaluation looked like. I don't think either group was very satisfied with my efforts. I know the students, who were quite radical – or at least the leaders of the initiative – remained sceptical. I think they were convinced I was trying to block progress. Though I'm not sure this was felt by the student body as a whole.

## Doug Dix

After two years as a Fulbright professor, Doug stayed on as an internal teacher in the department. It should be said first off that he was a very divisive figure. First of all, some teachers, perhaps even the majority of teachers, had a very strong dislike for him. There were good reasons and bad reasons for this – his arrogance and disrespect for colleagues on the one hand, and his clear academic ability on the other. Other people were more positive and some of the students were very enthusiastic – they found him inspiring. I felt his seminars for the teachers were important in opening up the world of critical theory, and I personally learned a lot. I think at least some others did as well. And several of the courses he introduced, or where he participated, enriched the curriculum. However, as a person he seemed to be marked by a very unfortunate combination of megalomania and paranoia. He saw himself as a visionary, here to move the whole department forward along lines he would lay down. He also wanted to found a new graduate institute that would somehow become the leading centre in critical thinking in the country. He wasn't particularly interested in hearing reasons why this was in all likelihood impossible from the legal point of view. And so on.

Doug was with us for five years, and eventually he became absolutely fed up. Especially with me. He wrote this amazing letter that he sent to all the teachers in which he said, among other things, that I was the root of all evil in the department. This happened in January of 1994, and he stated in the letter that he wasn't going to speak with me at all for the rest of his time with us, that is until June. And he stuck to his guns – even when I greeted him in the corridor he refused to respond. It was absolutely bizarre. However, on balance, I still think he did more good than bad in the department. Though I rather suspect that if you asked the teachers who were in the department back then, I'd be in the minority.

## Beth Edgington

Like Doug, though to a much lesser degree, Beth Edgington wasn't always easy to work with. She was sent here by the British Council to promote British cultural studies in the department, and she was determined to do this to the utmost possible. So she took a prominent part in the discussions on the new curriculum, and in fact this fitted in with what we were starting to think of – that we

should have compulsory introductory courses on both British and American society. And before I had a chance to think about who might be best for British studies, she informed me that in her opinion it should be Lidia Kyzlinková. And that she'd already spoken to Lidia about it. I was of course taken aback. In fact Lidia was a logical choice, but to speak to her about it before running it past me wasn't in my book kosher. In the end, both Lidia and Milada Franková, who was also involved in teaching British studies, did an MA in British Studies at the University of Warwick thanks to the British Council – another proof of just how much it did for us in the post-1989 era.

Beth was very blunt. She thought that my way of managing the department was too relaxed, that I should be pushing things more forcefully. My style, as I think I've made clear, was to get everyone involved in discussions, and keep them going until some kind of imperfect agreement could be reached. I was amused when, one Christmas, she gave me a book on how to be a better manager. As I said, blunt. And also overflowing with energy. She had this super-organized approach to everything. First draft and second draft before writing essays, for example. Entrance exams based on points in which 50% of the points are for this, 20% for that, 10% for something else, and so on. I think she believed you could always find the true answer to any problem by making it quantitative – what I see in many cases as making it falsely objective. But she did help us tighten up on some things, and she put a huge amount of effort into helping make British Studies a fixed part of the curriculum.

## Ota Kříž as head

I stepped down as head of department in 1994. By that time I'd achieved pretty much what I'd hoped to achieve, and probably as much as was achievable at the time. It'd been a period of rapid, radical change, and that state can only go on for so long before there's a backlash. Also, I was pretty much burnt out. It'd been a very intensive four years or so, and I really felt like I couldn't take it much longer.

Ota Kříž followed me as head. He'd in fact studied in the English Department back in the 1950s along with Joe Hladký and Jarek Ondráček, but then their paths branched. He'd become an English teacher at VUT, where he became well known for his expertise as a translator. That's where I'd first met him, at the end of the seventies, when he ran a whole series of translation workshops over the years – he'd invited me to take part in a couple of them. So when we'd been looking to strengthen our translation courses in the early nineties, I asked him if he'd like to join us.

In some ways he was an “outsider”, and that was probably a good thing. I think he was a good head, and probably the kind of head needed at that point in time. He wasn't set on making changes, and certainly the department needed a rest after the almost “permanent revolution” of the early nineties. And I think as part of this he had more sympathy for the views of the senior members of the department – Jenda Firbas and Joe Hladký – than I'd had. And because of his temperament he wasn't as chummy with students as I was – what perhaps unfortunately they had come to expect. He undoubtedly felt students should be less vocal than they were during my tenure – and in this his view was probably shared by the majority of teachers. But he wasn't in any way closed to them.

It's interesting, for example that the country's flagship queer film festival, Mezipatra, has its roots in the English Department. It's organized by an NGO called STUD. Back in I think 1995 a group of students, almost all from the English Department, approached Ota and said they wanted to hold a meeting to discuss founding a gay students' club, and could they use one of the English Department classrooms for this. He agreed, and that's where STUD began. (They should put up a plaque there!) What's amusing is how its name reflects its origins among students with a knowledge of English. There are three levels at work here. “STUD” of course suggests ‘student’.

But it's also the Czech word for 'shame' – a lovely piece of self-irony, since those students were anything but ashamed of their sexuality. And then there's its third level, the English meaning of 'stud' – a guy who's sexually attractive, "hot". It's a kind of in-joke for English speakers. By an interesting coincidence, at the same time there was a group of about a dozen female students in the department who were into gender issues. They published several issues of a magazine that was funny and also a bit self-ironic – was this in the air in the English Department? – and even set up a lending library of books on gender issues. A good number of them then went on to do further studies here and in England and the United States, and a couple ended up teaching in Brno with the English Department at the Faculty of Education.

## Single English, Act II

Around the middle of the 1990s, the situation at the faculty as a whole began to shift a bit in the conservative direction – towards a kind of "consolidation" after the many changes that came in the beginning of the decade. This was true even within the English Department. For example despite the bad experience with the student evaluation I just spoke about, we'd continued to invite students to department meetings from time to time. The idea was for them to express the students' views on certain issues. I can't remember exactly how it worked, but it was some kind of committee of students from the English Department, with representatives from each year. This began to fade out while I was still head, and then disappeared completely – a kind of parallel to what was happening at the faculty in general. In addition to this general shift, I think it's accurate to say that throughout much of the nineties as a whole the department was viewed a little bit suspiciously by the faculty management – though that may be putting it a bit too strongly. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they were always a bit sceptical about what we were doing. These were things that nobody else did. We were coming up with ideas that were at odds with what had been done since time immemorial. But they didn't interfere or stop us from doing what we wanted to do – with the exception of the decision by the *vědecká rada* that put an end to single English.

Towards the end of my time as head, voices were being raised at the faculty about whether the single-English option should be allowed to continue. These were echoed within the department by some teachers, so some time before I stepped down, I decided to have a formal vote on the issue. And we voted to keep it. However, opposition outside the department continued. I could never figure out why, exactly. Of course the most straightforward reason was the one I'd heard so often in so many situations over the years when I suggested some change: "*Takhle to tady neděláme.*" Or "*Není to naše tradice.*" But I also wondered whether they might have been getting pressure from their students to make changes similar to those we'd made in our department. Many departments were virtually the same as they'd been pre-1989. And certainly on more than one occasion students from other departments told me they wished they had the kind of study options our students did.

Whatever the case, with pressure from the Dean and the acquiescence of some members of our department, the *vědecká rada* made the decision to cancel the single-English programme. What I found disturbing was the way it was done – totally non-transparently. The department was never asked to present its point of view, and in fact we were only informed officially that the programme was cancelled some time after the decision was made. We were told at that point that it was "too late" to question the decision, yet subsequently decisions on other degree programmes were made. For me it was a classic demonstration of how not to run an institution: unless clear rules are in place, and clear records kept of decisions, anything is possible (in the negative sense of the phrase).

As a coda to this business, I should just add that at the present time, something like 80 per cent of the students coming to the Faculty of Arts are admitted on the basis of entrance exams in one subject. So it would seem that the “tradition” that was so firmly defended twenty years earlier wasn’t so strong, or so “naše”, as it had seemed. I’m pleased that what we pioneered has become the norm, but I’m sorry for all the students that weren’t able to benefit from this form of study in the interval. And sorry that we lost something of the geographical diversity in our intake that we’d enjoyed in the “golden years” of single English.

## The Hladký affair

Another example of how rules – and in this case the law – function or don’t function came with what I call “the Hladký affair”. I’d become a member of the faculty Senate with the first elections in 1990, and was a member for most of the decade. So I was there when the whole unhappy business with Joe Hladký came up in 1994. This didn’t affect the department directly, but it was linked to us and did in fact have repercussions for us.

Sometime in 1994 a whispering campaign about Joe began. He was then Dean, and according to the rumours he’d been a secret police agent. From what I know, part of the reason the rumours began was that a few teachers at the faculty were encouraging students to question why he was still Dean – according to the lustration law this shouldn’t have been possible. Whether these teachers’ motives were out of a genuine respect for the law, or an animus towards Joe, I don’t know. Though if it was the former, then there would’ve been no reason to stay quiet in the background.

Whatever the genesis of the rumours was, the faculty Senate asked Joe to come and make a statement. He was straightforward. Yes, he did have a file that listed him as an agent. He then went on to explain that what happened was that at one point in the eighties he was supposed to go with our students on the Leeds exchange as their *dozor*. About a week before their departure, he was called in by the secret police and told they wanted him to write a report on the visit after he got back. And that if he didn’t do it, the exchange with Leeds would be cancelled. Joe said that he didn’t want to endanger the exchange and so had agreed, that he went with the students to England, came back and wrote a report saying the usual blah, blah, blah. They called him in several more times. Then at one of the meetings he said to them “Look, it must be clear to you that I’m not saying anything of interest to you. Can’t we just drop all this?” And that was the end of it.

Joe left the room, and a very interesting discussion followed. I spoke up in his favour, saying something like “Look, I’ve known Joe for years, and I trust him implicitly. And I’ve had my own experience with the secret police, and know how they operate, and I would have made exactly the same decision as he did.” I think I also said that I expected most decent people would do as Joe had done. Some other people spoke, but nobody wanted to say very much. Finally, the Senate passed a resolution, which I also voted for, saying that the Dean had our confidence. And we hoped that this rather evasive response would put an end to things.

But the students continued talking and even writing about the affair, and came back at the next meeting of the Senate. I must admit that what they said forced me to rethink my position. Their point was that we were supposed to be building a new society based on the rule of law. The law says that if you’re listed as having been a secret police agent you can’t be a Dean. By the way, it’s very interesting – or rather peculiar – how the *lustrační zákon* worked. If your position was covered by the law, your employer had to send your name to the Ministry of the Interior. At the Ministry they checked things out and sent you – not your employer – the answer as to whether you were positively or negatively lustrated. And you were supposed to go to your employer and tell them. In Hladký’s case, I assume he must have got a letter saying he was positively lustrated.

What happened then no one knows. Either he went to the Rector, in which case the Rector must have said something like “Let’s just forget about this.” (I know this happened at other universities.) Or the Rector, or the Rectorate bureaucracy, never bothered to follow up on their request. Hladký never mentioned how it was that he continued in his position, which I think was quite ethical of him. In all probability he could have spread the blame, but decided to remain silent.

So the Senate held a third meeting, which Hladký attended. His message was brief. “I became Dean because I thought I could do something positive here at the faculty. It’s clear that in the present situation I’m harming the faculty. So I’ve decided to resign.” I thought this was very elegant, and very much Joe, as I knew him. It must have been a difficult decision. But I had to admit that the students were right. We, the Senate, could have taken a stand on principle – we support Hladký, despite the law – and been prepared to take the legal consequences. But you can’t just say you don’t like a law and so won’t obey it, which is what we were saying, and expect that this is enough, that life will go merrily along. I came to the conclusion that – for whatever reasons – the students had made a fundamental point, while we, the teachers, had acted like Švejks.

I think the experience marked Joe for the rest of his life. He felt it was unjust. And I would agree. He was a lifelong anti-communist – something I witnessed on more than one occasion – never a supporter of the system. And he did so much for the department over all those years, in such difficult circumstances. (Interestingly, Josef Vachek wrote him a very understanding, even comforting letter after all this.) And his description of his dealings with the secret police parallels that of many, many others. But Joe was left over-sensitive and bitter. Our relationship changed – perhaps he associated me too closely with the Senate. We never talked very much after that, even though we’d been very close and had shared a lot of things over the years. And it wasn’t just me. Certainly he continued doing many things in or linked to the department – serving as head of the doctoral committee, organizing several more conferences of English, American and Canadian Studies, writing books in honour of Firbas and Vachek and editing unpublished material by the great Czech linguist Vilém Mathesius. But he was definitely more remote than in earlier years – the spark just wasn’t there. And though Joe wasn’t a particular fan of the single-English degree, I think if he’d remained Dean it wouldn’t have been cancelled, if only because he’d respect what the department as a whole was in favour of.

## Department head redux

In 1998 the Dean at the faculty was Jana Nechutová. As part of her programme of raising the academic profile of the faculty and lowering the average age of the academic staff, she decided that Ota should step down and leave the department. I learned about this when she called me into her office and said that she wanted me to take over again as head. It’s true Ota was over the normal retirement age, though that wouldn’t have mattered so much if he’d had some kind of higher degree. (Ironically, in reality I was in the same position as him. My Honours BA from the University of Toronto had been “nostrified” as the equivalent of the standard Czech university degree, so in this we were “equal”. But as I mentioned before, I also had that PhD. from the 1980s, which on paper made me “more qualified”.) I wasn’t keen on becoming head again – my feeling was “been there, done that” – and I told her so. But she put a bit of pressure on me, so I agreed – on the condition that I’d only do it for one year and only if I could find someone who’d promise to follow after me. Eventually I persuaded Jiří Rambousek to take over after me. In fact in the end I served as head for a year and a half, finishing at the end of 1999.

We’d made a lot of changes when I was head at the beginning of the nineties, but this time round there were no big decisions to make. These came only a couple of months after I stepped down, when the university moved to a new economic model. Basic rates of pay were set for all

positions – *odborný asistent, docent, professor* and so on. Anything more than that had to come from funding obtained by the department or individual teachers. This was a daunting challenge, especially at the Faculty of Arts, and resulted in fundamental changes that are still with us – the art of applying for grants became an essential survival skill for university teachers. But by this point I was no longer in the department.

In 1998 and 1999 I'd become involved in a couple of projects to introduce English-language courses for foreign students coming to Masaryk University on exchanges – we were entering the age of Socrates, Erasmus and the many other programmes that keep students circulating round the world these days (at least in “normal”, non-Covid times). And then in 2000 I was asked by the Rector, Jiří Zlatuška, to become Director of the new university-wide Office for International Studies, which would be implementing these programmes. This was a tough decision – after twenty-three years with the English Department, it was my home. But I'd put a lot of work into the English-language programmes for foreigners, and wanted them to succeed. And I also realized that, given my age, this would probably be the last chance I'd have to make a big change in my life – something almost as big as coming to Czechoslovakia in the first place. So I agreed to leave behind my position in the English Department and go over to “the dark side” as a university bureaucrat. I must admit I was naive at the beginning. I thought that I'd still be able to teach a couple of courses externally in the department each semester. That lasted for one semester. Then I thought I could teach at least one course externally per semester – that lasted for another semester. Finally I realized that being Director of the OIS was a 150% job. After that, I basically didn't do any teaching in the department, and I've only returned to doing so from time to time since my retirement from the OIS, and the university, in 2009.

## Canadian Studies

Canadian Studies could be fitted in almost anywhere in this narrative – as I mentioned earlier, I started the first course on Canada back in 1985, and I've continued being involved in Canadian Studies down to the present. As it's an ongoing story, here I'll just sketch a brief note on its place in the history of the department.

After my first Canada-related course in 1985, I continued creating new Canadian Studies courses in the second half of the eighties. I was so keen to spread the word about my “home and native land” that I taught most of the courses only once – I wanted the students to discover as much as possible about the country. Virtually all the teaching materials came from my personal library. After 1989 things suddenly changed. The Canadian government began throwing money around like crazy – 10,000 (Canadian) dollars to launch Canadian Studies in Prague, another 10,000 to launch Canadian Studies at Comenius, and eventually another 10,000 for us here. In our case, the money was to buy books, the idea being to create a library collection that would meet wider regional needs. Which it did and still does. Currently it has around 6,000 volumes, and serves as a research library not only for our students, but for members of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies. This was established in 2003 and has its Secretariat – where else? – in the English Department. So Canadian Studies not only here but in the Central European region as a whole owe a great debt to us.

It's I think instructive to explain one of the key reasons for the emergence and growth of Canadian Studies. Back in the 1980s the Canadian government developed a brilliant initiative to foster the growth of the discipline. This was the creation of two programmes that gave academics a decent chunk of money to go to Canada for a month. One programme enabled them to do research, the other to collect material for a course they'd then introduce at their home university. Over the next decade or so, about a dozen academics from MU received these grants, and came





Two ex-Acting Heads of the English Department sharing a moment, 1998.

From left: Milan Růžička, Jeff Vanderziel, Bill Ross (British Council lecturer), Josef Hladký, Jan Fírbas.

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back to teach about Canada in their departments. They came from four faculties – Arts, Education, Science and Social Studies – so a wide spectrum of fields was being covered. But the focus of Canadian Studies has always been at the Faculty of Arts. In our department, Tom Pospíšil, Jeff Vanderziel, Klára Kolinská and Katka Prajznerová all received these grants. Petr Kyloušek and Petr Vurm from the Department of Romance Languages also benefited from them. Over the years the Canadianists in the two departments cooperated on things like publications and international conferences. In 2010 it was the Canadianists in both departments that came up with the idea of applying for a massive EU-financed grant in the area of North American Studies. This was the basis for the later creation of today's MA degree programme in North American Cultural Studies. Our research indicated that it'd be unique, since most North American Studies degree programmes are in fact American Studies degree programmes in disguise – the vast majority of the courses deal with the US and only a few deal with one or more of its North American neighbours. In our degree programme, there's substantial representation from Mexico and Canada – and in the case of Canada, both its Francophone and Anglophone elements. What's more, the students have to have English and either French or Spanish to enrol. Again, something unique, its roots going back to the English Department almost forty years ago.

## Final considerations

Now, nearing the end of this narration, I'd just like to speak briefly about a couple of things, one specific and one general.

First, the specific point. Many people may have wished to hear more about the department in the 1990s – who joined the department, the foreign lecturers and professors who were there, the teaching, courses we offered, other activities the department got involved in and so on. And I fully understand this – when we originally agreed to use this oral approach to tell the department's history, I thought I'd be covering much more ground. But when I got to the 1990s, I soon realized this wouldn't be possible. There was simply too much to deal with. Talking about the sheer number of teachers that came to the department – internally, part-time, as Fulbright professors or those from abroad who were here for short periods of time – this alone would have taken up dozens of pages. The teaching we did for extramural students – many of them Russian teachers requalifying as English teachers – is something else that would've deserved extensive treatment. The summer school on American Studies we ran with the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and the development of our ties with that institution, are a fascinating story in themselves. And so on and so on. However, my decision not to cover as much as I'd originally intended was also caused by another factor. Discretion. After thinking for a long time, I realized that some things I'd planned to talk about should remain unspoken, or at least unpublished. These related to various situations I had to deal with – situations that were important in the life of the department – that involved meeting with individuals in private. I'd only be able to give my point of view, and this wouldn't be fair to them, even less fair in that some have since died and so would be totally unable to respond. So some of the history of the English Department has to remain off record. Unless of course at some later date I decide to write things down, with the injunction that the document should be sealed and only opened let's say twenty years after all those involved have died!

And now a few words about a general dilemma that the department faced when I was head – a dilemma that's had repercussions down to the present. It has to do with the basic “philosophy” of the department. To simplify it greatly, in those early years – say 1990 to 1996 or so – there were two basic ideas of what we should be doing. One was that we should be boosting our academic standing. People should focus on getting higher degrees – a CSc, or later a PhD – write articles and publish, set their sights on becoming docents, and so on. The other was that the priority should be creating a new, interesting and challenging degree programme. By and large, I threw my weight in favour of this latter option. I felt that a window had opened up that was unique, that we could create a new programme unlike any other programme in the country, one that students would find very attractive.

This view wasn't shared by everyone. For example more than once in discussions with Jenda Firbas he'd suggest that teachers were spending so much time going to meetings about creating a new programme and developing new courses that they had no time for academic pursuits. That they should be writing articles, publishing, working to get their higher degrees. We had some long discussions on this topic, but neither convinced the other. As they say, we agreed to differ.

I've thought about this dilemma off and on over the years, and I still feel that what I was pushing was the right thing at that time. And I'd probably do the same thing again. I could probably have stressed more the need for academic advancement, but I don't really know if this was possible, given how busy people were doing these other things linked to changing the whole degree programme. But I can also see in retrospect, looking at other departments and with a greater awareness of the degree to which formal aspects are important in the Czech higher education system, that at least a bit more emphasis should perhaps have been placed on people getting degrees. I know that some other departments were ruthless in this respect. Later, for example,

when the ECTS system came in, they created degree programmes designed specifically around the minimum number of contact hours with students so they could concentrate on writing their articles and getting their degrees. And now they're overflowing with people with all the proper degrees and titles.

We aren't. And that's a problem. Certainly the time spent in the early nineties transforming the department meant that many people's careers got off to a slow start or only advanced to a certain point. But there are also other explanations – a “departmental culture” that predates 1989 when it comes to not prioritizing academic publications, and another part of the departmental culture that's always put a high value on students and their interests. Certainly for a department of our size we should have two or three literary professors, two or three linguistics professors, professors in a couple of other fields, several docents, and so on. But when I look at the younger teaching staff, most of who studied in the new programmes we created post-1989, and our graduate students, I think that in the long term the decision was right. It all comes back to the students. I remember when Pavel Drábek went off to do his doctorate in Prague in the late 1990s. I met him a couple of months later and asked about his studies. He said they were a breeze. During the whole first year of the PhD programme they were going through theoretical and critical texts that he'd already read – they were required reading at the state exam for the students in the Brno English Department! So I think we really did create something that challenged and stimulated our students and sent them out into the world with enlarged horizons. That to me is the point of what a university is about.

# Coda

There were so many people and things and events I wasn't able to deal with in the section on the 1990s, and this would be even more true of the period since then. Of course I was no longer a member of the English Department, and for a while even stopped teaching there externally. But I followed what was happening, and after stepping down as head of the Office for International Studies in 2009 I drifted back to doing things at the department from time to time. Some years I offered courses on Canada. I had a small part in the project that led ultimately to the creation of the MA degree in North American Cultural Studies. I delivered papers at successive conferences on English, American and Canadian Studies, and roped Canadianists from many countries into attending. I was also part of the team that organized the hugely successful ESSE conference in Brno in 2018. But I wasn't anchored in the department – these were all peripheral activities. And because I was out of the academic rat race I of course had the luxury of being able to pick and choose what I did. So for the past couple of decades I've been associated with the department, but not “in” it. The story of the English Department from 2000 on will be somebody else's to tell.

If I did decide to write about our department now, though, I'd probably start in the same way I started a few years ago when I first had the idea of writing a history of the department. I'd interview graduates. And I think what would interest me in particular now would be the ripple effect – what our graduates do, how they've spread out into all sorts of different areas of activities over the past decades, how they've contributed to the society. I do know the stories of a few of them, and they're fascinating. Most of us are aware to at least a certain extent of former students who've gone on to be university teachers. They're found everywhere – in our department and the English Department at the Faculty of Education, in English Departments elsewhere in the Czech Republic, in English Departments in the UK, the United States and other countries. And of course in departments in other disciplines – again, at MU, other Czech universities and abroad. Then there are the countless graduates who've become teachers, and several who've started up their own language schools. But I suspect that most of our graduates end up beyond the educational sphere. Just to list a few areas I'm personally aware of – business, real estate, law, the IT sector, politics (local so far, but who knows?), diplomacy, journalism, other media, the visual arts, music, publishing, translating. And these are just off the top of my head.

To my mind, teaching – at least in the humanities – isn't so much about passing on knowledge as about fostering a curiosity about knowledge, a realization of the importance of knowledge, and an awareness that this can only be satisfied in an open, questioning, tolerant society. And one of the mysteries of teaching is that you never really know what your students have picked up from you, how much you've influenced them in their careers or their lives. So the question I'd be asking if I was to write about our department now would be: “What are our graduates doing now?” And how much of what they're doing now stems, at least in part, from what they absorbed during their time as our students. You may say this is just a personal interest, but I think it's more – reaching out to them like this might promote self-reflection and raise important questions about what the department is doing, and in the long run could perhaps lead to new forms of cooperation with our alumnae and alumni. But that sounds like a whole new story ...

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# The Gypsywood Players

The Gypsywood theatre group has been an inseparable part of the department's history and identity for over fifty years now. In many ways, it's virtually impossible to think about the department and its students without looking back at the history of Gypsywood. This was particularly true in the Communist era, when we weren't allowed to take in many students – in the early eighties we were even forced to reduce entrance numbers to less than ten a year. This meant that in some years a good proportion of the English Department student body was involved with Gypsywood. Being part of the Gypsywood Players brought them a sense that it was possible to do things you wanted to do as well as a sense of freedom, both of which were rare commodities in those days. It also gave them a chance to get to know teachers better – particularly Jessie Kocmanová and me, because we were the directors, but many others as well. And this teacher-student link was strengthened by the many Gypsywooders who later went on to become teachers at the English Department – by my count, more than a dozen. And that doesn't include people who ended up as teachers at other departments at the Faculty of Arts, at the Faculty of Education, and even at other universities.

It all goes back to a practice that dates from 1963, when a group of teachers and students from the English Department travelled to Cikháj, this small village in the Vysočina, where the university had a recreation centre. The purpose was to run an intensive English course for a week. The recreation centre itself was rather curious. Cikháj is a village of some 150 inhabitants. And in the 1950s, when the country was “building Socialism”, the people in the village got this great idea that they'd build a cultural centre there. So up went the walls, on went the roof – and then the village ran out of money. They didn't know what to do with this empty shell. Masaryk University stepped in and bought the building and turned it into its recreation centre. So it certainly wasn't purpose-built for anything that it was subsequently used as. It was pretty basic. All of the accommodation – aside from four rooms for teachers – was in rooms with bunk beds. You had six to eight students crammed into these quite small rooms. It also had very primitive hygienic facilities. This meant that if there were a lot of people there for a week or more – and whenever the English Department was there it was packed – the drains plugged up. On more than one occasion I had to actually grope around in the waste pipes to get the system flowing again. Think of the scene in Fellini's *Amarcord* where Carlini tries to retrieve the countess's diamond ring from a cesspit. Cikháj was always a great place for adventures.

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As I said, the language courses started in 1963. And when it came time for a course for more advanced students in **December 1965**, Jessie decided she was bored with teaching practical English. She liked literature, theatre, and all sorts of other things. So she came up with this idea that some of the students would put on a one-act play. It all began very haphazardly, but soon the production of a play became a separate activity. By the time I arrived on the scene in 1977, the usual practice was for the theatre group to go to Cikháj on a Friday, while the students on the intensive course would arrive the following Monday. The Gypsywooders had exactly a week to



The cast of the first Gypsywood production, *Dear Departed*, at Cikháj, 1965.

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rehearse their play – the opening night was on the following Friday. Some years, if we had a very ambitious project, we went a little bit earlier. Or we went twice, with a week in between. All the theatre activities took place in the dining room, which meant that you had to clear everything away after breakfast to rehearse, and then put it all back in place for lunch. And then move things again for rehearsals in the afternoon and put them back for dinner in the evening. And then go through the process again for evening rehearsal, and finally put everything back, maybe at two o'clock in the morning – Gypsywooders rehearsed very hard and partied very hard – so that everybody could be there for breakfast at 7:30. All the time there was this pervasive odour of cooked food in the air. So it certainly wasn't a convenient or comfortable place to work in.

You could say that the space had the great advantage that it was totally flexible. That's true. But this brought with it one great disadvantage – you didn't have proper exits or entrances, flies, a backstage, or anything else that's normally found in a theatre and that shapes the production. You had to really adapt your acting and production style to these very, very limited possibilities. It certainly made for a minimalist staging tradition, one where strict realism was out of the question. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

The first play that was put on in Cikháj was a one-acter called ***The Dear Departed***, by Stanley Houghton. Nothing had been prepared beforehand. The group didn't even have a name. They called themselves "The Cikháj Shiverers" and the play was only put on for that one night in Cikháj. But they clearly had fun, as you can see in a hand-written announcement of the play they prepared for the other students: "Special attraction, fresh from terrific worldwide successes, thousands turned away nightly, make sure of your seat, evening dress essential." That set the tone for the next fifty years.

Jessie used to keep notebooks where she wrote down her thoughts as they occurred to her. When she was at Cikháj she often included little sketches of the place and of costumes, the actors and so on. Once years later she recalled that at first she couldn't get used to the name Cikháj. Whenever she wrote it down, it kept sounding to her like *Sieg Heil!* Obviously she felt she had to come up with a new name and by the next year the students were calling themselves the "Gipsywood Community Drama Group". By the fall of 1967 they'd settled on "The Gipsywood Players". This is a fun name, of course, a perfect example of "folk etymology" – 'Cikháj' sounds like a Czech name for a Gypsy grove. In fact the name of the village is originally from German – it's got something to do with a goat, *die Ziege*. And so the group became the Gipsywood Players, and the actors and everyone else involved in the productions were Gipsywooders.

For the next two productions they stuck to one-act plays by authors such as Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Muriel Spark. Sometimes in the early years they'd also have a spring production, though I don't know if they were at Cikháj to rehearse these productions. The whole thing caught on very quickly. It was very ... how to put it? A student type humour pervaded it, certainly, especially in the early years. And from time to time you'll find bits and pieces of paper in the Gipsywood Chronicle showing how things were done. One year they had a real working programme laid out, which I think is astounding – they had their days broken down into a detailed series of activities. There was something they called "a word and action rehearsal", which I don't think I've ever come across anywhere else – perhaps a sign they were truly amateurs. They were working the whole day. One of the notes says "An approximate end of performance at 22:30. At 22:31, a complete collapse of cast."

This "complete collapse of cast" is quite possible. Certainly when I became involved in the seventies and eighties, we'd rehearse till ten in the evening, sometimes even longer. And when we finished everyone would indeed be exhausted, and collapse. But it usually didn't last very long. After a brief break, everybody sort of came alive. And especially in the early years, in the late seventies, when the Gipsywood Madrigalists were there with us – we'll get to them in a moment – there was a lot of singing and people playing various instruments. Guitar playing and singing continued right to the end of the eighties. But there was also more and more taped music, which could be heard in the students' rooms much of the time and late into the night in the dining room. Basically I had a crash course in contemporary pop music in the seventies and eighties, because the students were really up on what was happening in the world of music. And in fact I learned, to my surprise, that they were very much aware of the cutting edge of pop music. One year when I went to Canada in the summer, some of them asked me if I'd pick up some records by these artists they really enjoyed. They gave me a list of what they were interested in, and in Canada I discovered that nobody in the usual record stores had heard of these groups, let alone have their records in stock. Not even in Sam the Record Man in Toronto, one of the largest record shops in the whole of North America! The students' awareness of what was going on there "outside" was one of the paradoxes of Czechoslovakia in those years. And I think it was partly – or largely? – due to Jiří Černý, who used to travel round the country and put on programmes in all kinds of places where he'd bring out amazing records and tapes from the two suitcases he lugged around and play them for his audience. In Brno his "venue" was the Vysokošolský klub on Gorkého – once the students dragged me there for an evening's education in the latest music. And Černý really did have the latest, not only from the States, Canada and Western Europe, but from countries in the Communist bloc, Russia and elsewhere.

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In **fall 1967** the Gipsywooders put on their first three-act play, Muriel Spark's *Doctors of Philosophy*. This was only their fourth production – they'd made a huge advance in only two years. At



this point Jessie decided that perhaps she should get some legal permission to do these plays. So she wrote to Spark's agent, and got the following reply: "... we are glad to give you permission to do a performance of DOCTORS OF PHILOSOPHY on December 8, provided the conditions outlined in your letter of 2 November are met." Presumably Jessie had explained the performance wouldn't be public, only for students on the intensive course. However, requests for permission to put on plays were usually turned down, so in the end we simply stopped asking – basically all of our productions were illegal. A Gypsywood tradition. Sometimes when we did ask for permission, we were told either we couldn't do it at all, or that the rights weren't available for amateur groups in Czechoslovakia. So what we used to do was to pretend that we were performing for a closed, defined group of people, and claim we weren't selling tickets, just asking for voluntary contributions. Back then in the Communist years, nobody really gave a damn.

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In **spring 1968**, they did **Billy Liar**, by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall. And there're still a lot of people around here in Brno who were in it, people who we know, like Petr Antonín and Lidia Štědroňová (now Kyzlinková). Again Jessie asked for legal permission to put the play on. This time we know exactly how she must have phrased her request, as the author's agency wrote that they had no objection to the two performances she envisaged at the University Study Centre. "As the performances are private and educational, no charge will be made in this instance." This "private and educational" was obviously a good line to use.

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And then there was a break, for obvious reasons – it took a long time for the university to emerge from the chaos following the invasion in 1968. So the next play came in the **spring of 1971**. This was **Heartbreak House**, by Bernard Shaw. I must admit that when I first read through the Gypsywood Chronicle and saw they'd put on *Heartbreak House*, I was amazed – it was incredibly ambitious to tackle this particular play. But then Jessie never lacked ambition. The chronicle includes these funny diagrams she drew, which were her effort to work out the stage movement. They look like something by Jackson Pollock. She must have given up this practice at some point. After I appeared on the scene, and we were rehearsing, she'd say "Well, move a bit over there. Let's see what that looks like." In fact so far as I know, Jessie'd never had any actual experience at any point of being directed by or working with a theatre professional. She simply operated by instinct.

Jessie's programme notes were often very illuminating. She wrote about *Heartbreak House* "This play should perhaps have been a novel. As a drama, it's turned inside out. As it's written, it has no scenic division, nothing much seems to happen." These are really shrewd comments on the play, and they give some sense of how she discussed literature with her students. And she goes on, "Nevertheless, it is played as a new production in England this year and if we include the Gypsywood production, this makes two European premieres in the 64th year after its creation." I love the way she casually includes the Gypsywood Players alongside a London production! She also says that as Bernard Shaw was no longer available for consultation with the Gypsywood producers, they "took the liberty of dividing the play into five acts, but it is capable of so being divided, and may tend to prove that it is a drama after all." It's certainly a very strange play. I personally think it's a magnificent play, but it's very strange, and must have been daunting to produce.

The *Heartbreak House* programme marks the first appearance of the Gypsywood Madrigalists, or at least their first avatar – they're listed as "The Gypsywood Madrigal and Shanty Consort". The "shanty" bit seems to have been a one-off, suited for this particular play. For the next production six months later the programme claims that "Scenery, Lighting and Incidental Music" were



*Heartbreak House*, 1971.

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the work of the “Gypsywood Galliard Group”. “Incidental Music” in the May 1972 production was by “Gypsywood Madrigal and Folk Song Enterprises”, that fall there were the “Madrigalists of Gypsywood”, and finally in 1974 we have the “Gypsywood Madrigalists”. It was a long birth.

The Gypsywood Madrigalists were created by Aleš Svoboda. Aleš had trained at the Brno Conservatory – he originally planned to become a professional clarinetist. The madrigalists themselves weren’t all from the English Department, but I think they were all from the Faculty of Arts. Some of them were studying in the Music Department or studying something else. They were all very, very good singers. At least two of them went on to professional careers as singers – Ladá Richter, who also ended up at one point as head of the Music Education Department at the Faculty of Education, and Jiří Klecker, who became a soloist with the Brno Opera. The group existed for many years. There was a regular turnover – every year some people would join, and others would graduate. In the years when the Madrigalists were around, there was a phenomenal amount of singing, both in Gypsywood productions and of course in the evenings at Cikháj – everything from Renaissance stuff down to contemporary popular songs, and of course a lot of Moravian and Bohemian folk songs.

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In the **spring of 1972** there was ***School Play***, a one-act comedy by Donald Howarth. It was performed on the occasion of a visit to Brno in May by Maria Schubiger, a distinguished Swiss linguist and friend of Jenda Firbas. And for the second play that year, in **fall 1972**, Jessie went for Shakespeare, with ***A Midsummer Night’s Dream***. Interestingly, it was the second time Jessie had directed it – the first time was a quarter of a century earlier. After the Second World War the

British Council had a branch here in Brno down in Pisárky. It had a beautiful garden, and she directed a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that took place there. Something like the kind of thing you get at Oxford and Cambridge colleges. It was probably her very first directing attempt.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream's* got a very large cast – twenty characters, in this production, though one of the women played three minor roles. Still, quite a crowd to deal with. Plus six Madrigalists. We're still at a stage where virtually none of the actors were around as students when I joined the department – though over the years I got to know many of them. Brno's indeed a village, and the Gypsywooders form a tightly-knit community within the village.

This was the year that Jessie came up with this inspired idea of giving titles to Gypsywood actors. At least I assume it was Jessie – it's the kind of thing her very creative and playful mind was always coming up with. The rule was you had to have been involved in three productions. And then you were named an Honoured Gypsywood Player – HGP in short. It was meant as an ironic comment on titles like *zasloužilý umělec* and *národní umělec* and that kind of thing. The ceremony where the titles were awarded took place during the backstage party that followed the opening night of the play on Friday evening. This meant that the students' names with their titles after them didn't appear in a programme until the following year – assuming, of course, that they'd gone on to act in a production for a fourth time. But this means it's quite likely we don't have a definitive list of all the HGPs, which is a pity – at least for me as someone who likes historical accuracy. Later we began to invent all sorts of variations on the basic title to honour individuals involved in other activities connected with the play – HGCM (Honoured Gypsywood Costume Mistress), HGSM (Honoured Gypsywood Stage Manager), HGDr (Honoured Gypsywood Driver). This last one was awarded to Joe Hladký, who often used to chauffeur us round town in his car when we were rounding up props and materials for the costumes and scenery.

The students really look forward to being awarded their title. I remember one year I forgot two people, and it was so embarrassing! They'd been there rehearsing in Cikháj for the whole week. We always announced the new Honoured Gypsywood Players at the backstage party following the opening night. So I read out the list, and presented the new HGPs with their pin-on "medals" and announced "Well, that's it for this year." And as I looked round the room I saw these two students – a guy and a woman – and I could see she was kind of starting to break down. I was like "Oh my God!" It's a fascinating phenomenon. I don't know whether there's an amateur group anywhere else that does something like what we do with these titles. But they're something that's very important for the students, something that binds them to the whole group and to the whole history of the group.

The Gypsywood Chronicle jumps here to 1974 – there's no play for 1973. When we had the big 50th anniversary Gypsywood reunion back in 2015, some of the Gypsywooders were looking through the chronicle at one point, and one of them said "Where's *Lady Windermere's Fan*?" And a couple of others chimed in, asking why it was missing. I was stunned. I'd never heard of it being performed. I hadn't prepared the chronicle, so I couldn't explain why it was missing. I did know, though, that there was no record of *Lady Windermere's Fan* anywhere – no programme, no photos, nothing. So I assumed it must probably have been put on in 1973, the missing year. A week or so after the reunion I sent out an e-mail to all the Gypsywooders who'd been in the plays put on in the few years before and after 1973, and I asked for help with this. I even included a list of the characters in the play, to help jog their memories. Very strangely, no one – not a single person – seemed to remember what role they'd played in the play, or whether they'd appeared in it at all. This baffled me. Then just recently I was looking through another chronicle – the chronicle of the intensive courses at Cikháj. And to my surprise, I found there was no entry for 1973. So it looks as though for some unknown reason nothing happened that year – no intensive course, no play. But that doesn't explain why the students at the reunion were asking about *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Unless they were confusing it with *The Importance of Being Earnest* – though that seems unlikely,



Jessie Kocmanová deep into *Twelfth Night*, 1974.

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seeing that it wasn't just one person who claimed it had been produced. Mass false memory? Who knows? There's a mystery here that's waiting to be cleared up.

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**1974** is more Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*. Now the Gypsywood titles get put in the programme for the first time, after the actors' names. And this was also the year they came up with the first additional title – HGFP (Honoured Gypsywood Former Player). This was awarded to Mirek Pospíšil, who had graduated, but was staying on at the department as an assistant. He's listed in the *Twelfth Night* programme as “voice production assistant”. The photos from *Twelfth Night* give you a good idea of the random, use-whatever-you-can-get way costumes were put together back then. The atmosphere they evoke is sort-of-kind-of-maybe-Renaissanceish. But were they really into bell-bottom trousers back then?

Josef Vachek came to Cikháj that year to give the annual lecture. In a letter to Jessie he wrote: “My sincere thanks for the program, the performance of *Twelfth Night*, the dress rehearsal which I had the privilege of watching. I am still under a heavy impression of all I have seen in Cikháj. The indefatigable work of the staff and the unfeigned working enthusiasm ...” “The unfeigned working enthusiasm” – what a strange phrase! Though I suppose in the Communist years there was a lot of feigned enthusiasm.

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J.M. Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* came next, in **1975**. The crowd has now become a mob – twenty-five roles, played by twenty-three Gypsywooders, one of them being Jessie herself.

Gypsywood was always inclusive. Sometime in October we'd pin up an announcement informing students what play we'd be putting on that year and that anyone who was interested should show up at a meeting that'd be taking place at a certain time and place. And that was it. The basic principle was that we'd take everybody who showed up. It wasn't always easy finding something for them all to do, but of course support people – stage hands, costume mistresses, prompters and so on – could absorb limitless numbers of people. But sometimes, as in the case of *The Admirable Crichton*, there were enough, or almost enough, roles to satisfy all the students who wanted to act. Which wasn't the aim with everyone. I think the common aim they all shared was simply to be part, somehow, of the Gypsywood Players company.

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From the look of the photos, 1976 must have been fun. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of my very, very most favourite plays, and it's also one of the most perfectly written plays in the history of drama. Nothing out of place – not a line, not a word. So I wish I'd joined the department a year earlier, and been part of it – though the problem with plays you really love is that no production ever lives up fully to your mental version of them. Jessie played Lady Bracknell – one of the half dozen greatest comic roles in English drama. It would've been a "hoot" – one of her favourite words – to see Jessie in the role. But I've always wondered whether she was able to suppress her Scottish accent when playing it – a Scottish Lady Bracknell would've been a double hoot.

As a prologue to the play, Jessie wrote this short skit called "Interview in Elysium". In it, someone interviews "the shade of Oscar Wilde" in a TV studio in the Elysian Fields. The point of it is that Wilde congratulates the Gypsywood Players for putting on the play, as this will help to make him known in Czechoslovakia as more than the author of "The Happy Prince" – what he calls a "wretched, trivial fairy tale". This is obviously Jessie speaking, but in other places it could almost be Wilde – "Surely you are aware that in these degenerate times, the amateur is the only purely dedicated professional?" It's a clever piece, and the kind of thing Jessie loved to whip up. For years she used to write Valentine's Day poems to accompany the little gifts the female members of the department gave to us men every year.

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1977 – the year when I start to appear. I arrived in the department in November, and two or three weeks later I was dragged off to Cikháj to take part in *As You Like It*. It was a nightmare. I mean, the whole experience was incredible, obviously. But it was also a nightmare in the sense there was a big cast, no one was really able to speak the language of Shakespeare, and Jessie seemed to have no system. We just headed off for Cikháj and started rehearsing. I don't know how she assigned roles, whether they'd even had a read-through of the play, or what. It certainly didn't seem like it. It was also nightmarish in that I was playing Touchstone, the clown in the play. Even English-speaking audiences can't understand Shakespearean clowns, with their obscure puns and even more obscure contemporary Elizabethan references. So how was I to play the role so a Czech audience could get at least some minimal sense of what I was saying? It was one of the most depressing things I've ever done on the stage.

But what wasn't depressing was being there – the Gypsywood experience. This was exhilarating. I had a chance to meet and chat with and get to know a whole group of students. Many of them I'd be teaching for the next few years. I got to really know Jessie. We hit it off immediately, and formed the basis for a close friendship that lasted till her death eight years later. (Having said that, I can hardly believe it was only eight years – we experienced so much together that it seems



*My Fair Lady* – “The Rain in Spain Stays Mainly in the Plain”, Iva Gardavská and Don Sparling, 1978.  
 Left: Jiří Kudrnáč. Background: The Gypsywood Madrigalists.

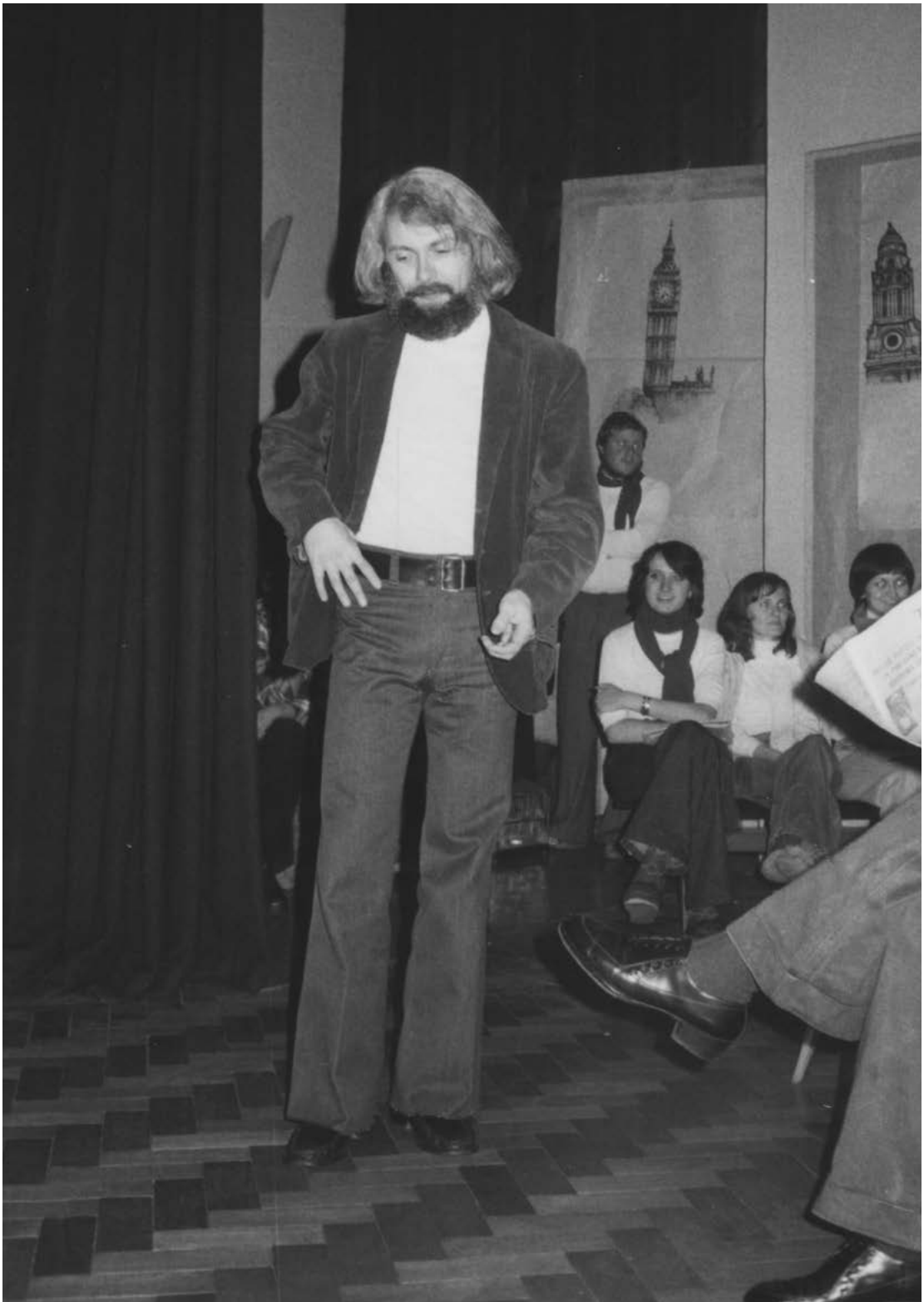
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to me we must have known each other for a much longer time.) And there was the ever-present music and singing. It was like entering a whole new parallel universe.

At some point after we put on *As You Like It* I said to Jessie “You know, the students can’t really handle Shakespeare, and the audience can’t really understand Shakespeare. I think it’s a bit perverse to get them to memorize this kind of English when what they really need is to learn how to speak contemporary English – the rhythms of spoken English, modern words, phrases. I think we should do modern plays, twentieth century plays, contemporary plays.” Jessie agreed, so this was the point when Gypsywood moved away from older drama.

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**1978** saw *My Fair Lady* by Bernard Shaw – one of the two or three most ambitious things we ever did. Apparently the idea of putting on Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s musical had already been in the air for some time, but the question was how to do the music. Aleš Svoboda came up with the idea that it could be sung by the Madrigalists. In other words, the music could be transposed to suit nine voices. In addition, there was completely minimal orchestral accompaniment – a double-bass, a clarinet and some percussion. Aleš was musical director. Michael Beckerman did most of the musical arrangement and he also played in the show. Mike was an American who was here that year with his wife, Karen, on an IREX scholarship. He came to do research on Janáček, so he wasn’t linked to us – he was connected with the Music Department. But he found out about us, and the production, and asked if he could take part. Mike’s a supremely social animal. He’s got absolutely endless energy and creativity, a quintessential New York



*My Fair Lady* – Don Sparling. Background: typical early Gypsywood makeshift scenery and Gypsywood Madrigalists, 1978.  
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Jew. In addition to the musical arrangement, he played the eccentric Hungarian Professor Zoltán Karpathy – wildly over the top, with an absolutely outrageous accent. And in his “spare time” he composed a couple of funny songs based on things he saw or that happened at Cikháj.

*My Fair Lady* was an extraordinary production – I would say unique, because of the music. But not as many people saw it as we’d hoped. Some performances that were scheduled to be put on in January at the space we usually used in Brno – the Vysokoškolský klub on Gorkého – had to be cancelled because of “coal holidays”. These happened back then every so often – for some reason there was a shortage of coal, and all the schools in the country were closed down for a couple of weeks or so. And then the student who played Eliza, Eva Gardavská (Gilbertová), was chosen to go to Leeds that spring, so we couldn’t take it on tour to places we would’ve like to. It’s a pity we could only perform it a few times, because it was a very great achievement. And this was confirmed by a couple of reviews that appeared in *Brněnský večerník*.

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In 1979, we did *The Beggar’s Opera*, by John Gay. It followed after *My Fair Lady*, but we couldn’t do anything quite as grandiose that year. The Madrigalists had dissolved – most of them had graduated. But we still wanted to do a musical. And so, despite our previous decision not to go back in time before roughly Bernard Shaw, we finally agreed on *The Beggar’s Opera*. It’s an amusing thing. It satirizes sentimentality and attacks corruption in a way that still bites – it’s not surprising that Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill recycled it as *The Threepenny Opera* – and the songs are very simple, since the tunes are taken from popular songs of the day and folk songs. Most are sung by one actor/actress, and there are a few duets, so nothing complicated. We were able to put together a small musical combo consisting of a guitar and a double-bass. And Aleš Svoboda was again musical director.

In a sense, it was easy to do. The costumes were basic 18th-century clothes – no problem. But we needed new people, since we’d lost not only the Madrigalists but a lot of the old guard of actors, who’d also graduated. Jessie posted an announcement: “New talent is necessary and welcome. Urgently needed: talented artists to help with scenic and poster work, singers and instrumentalists, hefty chaps to shift scenery under unusual circumstances, and lasses handy with their needle making costumes.” She also wrote: “Previous experience with acting is welcome, but not essential.” This could perhaps serve as the motto of Gypsywood.

One thing that wasn’t so easy was revising the text of the play to make it comprehensible and current. First there was the 18th-century English, and then the references to the politics of the period. Some of the language changes were simply mechanical – for example, changing “hath” to “has” – but others had to do with archaic terms and complex syntax. We could have done it in the original, of course, but we wanted to stick to our new policy of not making students learn English that wasn’t current any longer.

In retrospect, I think it was one of the most enjoyable productions to put on. Nothing was very complicated, and there was so much music. The songs were very catchy, so a lot of the Gypsywooders picked them up, and we’d sing them in the evenings when we sat around after the end of the rehearsals. There was a custom that went back several years of learning one or more “Cikháj songs” each year. The previous year there’d been one of Mike’s songs about some re-used rubber tires adorning the entrance to the recreation centre. This year we had “*Do lesička na čekanou*” – but in Latin! “*In silvam venatom venit junventus venator ...*” I don’t know who translated it or where we found it, but everyone was singing “*Do lesička*” in Latin. We also had a song in Romani – or perhaps what purported to be Romani. And a well-known folk song from Slovácko – “*Vyletěl fták*” – in Esperanto: “*Bird’ ekflugis super la nubaron / Ege belan havis ĝi plumaron / super ĉia kreaĵar.*” To quote Joe from *Great Expectations* – “What larks!”

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From 1980, we had a new group of actors. There was a clear break from the core of actors we'd had when I came in 1977. Only a couple had acted in Gypsywood before. Alan Ayckbourn's **Absurd Person Singular** was a contemporary play, but rather tricky for us to stage. In one scene, we had to have a kitchen stove so one of the actresses could stick her head in it when she tried to commit suicide. In another scene, she tried to hang herself – and none of the places where we performed had a handy place to tie the rope to! There were three different households, which we had to indicate somehow. We simply put up a sign in the background with the names of the appropriate couple for each scene. Doors were important – people were constantly coming in and going out. So we constructed a flimsy, indeed primitive, structure that'd allow us to open and close a door. But every time we opened it, we wondered whether we'd be able to close it again. So – basic amateur stage design. It required a lot of imagination on the part of the audience.

Officially, the Gypsywood players were a *zájmová divadelní skupina* that operated under the aegis of the faculty branch of the Socialistický svaz mládeže – our plays appeared every year in a report they published on their activities. That's how we could perform officially as a group, travel to put on plays elsewhere, and so on. On paper, of course, we were going to Cikháj for a five-day intensive course in English, working on our language skills. Everybody understood that this was simply a cover, and we were left alone to do whatever we wanted. This was typical of what went on during the Communist years.

The play was hugely successful – really the first time we'd hit our audience with something completely contemporary. There was a lot of black humour, but it's not a black play. Complex, though, and the students had a great time with it. It brought together the next generation of Gypsywood players. There was also an interesting long-term knock-on effect. Later, as part of his final-year dissertation, Tom Pospíšil translated the play into Czech. This was then used by the Divadlo bratří Mrštíků – it's now the Městské divadlo Brno – when they put it on in 1991. And subsequently the play was staged in Tom's translation by theatres in Prague (twice, by two different theatres), Liberec and Jihlava. Never say that Gypsywood doesn't have a country-wide influence!

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1981. Jessie and I searched around and came up with **The Season at Sarsaparilla**, by Patrick White, the Australian novelist and Nobel Prize winner. We both liked the play, but were hesitant. It's a serious play and Gypsywood hadn't done a really serious play before, with the exception of *Heartbreak House* many years earlier. And the staging would be a bit of a problem. Once again the play took place in three different households. But unlike Ayckbourn's play, which presented them in three successive scenes, this time they all had to be on the stage for the whole play. Our solution was to literally divide the stage into three thirds, with curtains separating them from one another that ran from upstage towards downstage. So 1981 was the year when we bought masses of curtains – more than thirty metres of material! They were dark blue and unfortunately slightly shiny – we learned that this created problems with the lighting – but they were very light, which mattered the most. We had to string up cords and use clothespins to attach the curtains to them. Again, primitive, but they served their purpose. And the curtains continued to be used in various inventive ways for the next decade. They turned out to be a good investment.

As I said, we were hesitant at first because the play was serious. But in the end it was well received, I think because on the whole the actors had become fairly good. We have a photo of the audience at Cikháj watching the play, and they look completely caught up in it. The caption for the photo reads "Not a play to take lightly." It was good that we could also put it on in Brno at the Vysokoškolský klub, where we could use the stage more creatively. It was bigger, and had a wide forestage in front of the three households, so the actors could move about freely and even sit on the edge of the forestage facing the audience. This was always something we faced when



*Absurd Person Singular* – Jessie Kocmanová wondering how to improve the Hopcrofts' kitchen, 1980.

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we travelled – how to adapt the show to the local conditions. That year, for example, we were in Olomouc. The stage there in the Divadlo hudby was very small, and things were so crowded that we had to make extensive changes – no garden with flowers, for example, and a scene where one of the characters was carried in on a stretcher had to kind of worm its way across the stage. From that time on we always thought a bit about the stage in Olomouc when we started planning our productions. There was one real problem there, though – a very large Baroque statue that dominated downstage left. We simply decided to pretend that it didn't exist.

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**1982** was *Habeas Corpus*, by Alan Bennett. Another completely contemporary play. The text of the play included the lyrics for several songs, but not the melodies. But we wanted to get back to music – we'd been without it for three years at that point. So I turned to my mother-in-law, Zdena Kurfürstová, who was a phenomenal pianist with an amazing ability to harmonize, transpose to different keys and so on. She had a whole repertoire of popular songs from the 1930s. I asked one of our students, Jana Nezmeškalová, who was also a great pianist, to come to our flat. My mother-in-law played through her repertoire of songs for us, and Jana and I worked out which lyrics would fit best with which melodies. For the production, Jana turned to a friend who was also studying at the faculty (though not in our department), Ivan Doležálek. The two supplied the music, on piano, guitar and a few other instruments. Ivan has since become a well-known musician, playing with many bands (some his own) and a composer in many genres.

Like *First Person Singular*, this was a black comedy with very serious undertones. It was full of over-the-top situations. The theme of artificial breasts, for example, kept cropping up in the play – Katka Kučerová (Tomková) appeared with a ridiculous bosom that stuck out about thirty centimetres in front of her. At one point in the play I was dancing a tango clenching a rose in my mouth and the script called for my trousers to fall down. This is one of the classic clichés of English farce. But how to make it happen? In the end we worked out a system with rubber bands – at one point in the middle of the frenzied dance I released the bands and the trousers shot down. Laughter and applause! Thinking about it now, I wonder if the play is staged much these days. Of course it's in fact a strong criticism of the obsession with sex in contemporary society and of sexism in general. But given the current hyper-correctness in Western society ...

The audience responded to it all brilliantly – there was a lot of visual humour, a lot of (necessary) exaggeration and overacting, and the songs were remarkable. Unlike in many other plays where the music merely adds to the mood, here the songs were integral to the action. The individuals' characters were reflected in the lyrics of the songs: "I'm not too old at fifty-three / A worn defeated fool like me / The tickling lust, it still devours / My waking hours." – "Twas on the A-43 that I met him / We just had a day by the sea / Now he's gone and he's left me expecting / Will somebody please marry me?" The play was full of all these sexually frustrated people, who represented three generations of English society, all of them treated with unsettling irony and at the same time a kind of indirect sympathy. Tying the whole play together was the cleaning lady Mrs. Swab, who would periodically comment on the other characters and deflate their obsessions. Like a chorus from a Greek tragedy, but a one-woman chorus.

I'd say this was one of the most complex plays we put on. And in terms of overall quality, one of our best productions. I'd rank it among our top three or four. Later, when Tom Pospíšil was in Leeds, he learned they were doing *Habeas Corpus* in Norwich. So he went there, saw it, and this is what he wrote to us: "There were no songs. The texts were said without music, like poems. There was not so much fun. The audience were laughing at different places. There was perfect timing, but no enthusiasm." If Tom was correct, the professional production in Norwich was a sorry second-best to our Gypsywood effort. No surprise!



*The Matchmaker* – band members Dáša Valešová, Jana Nezmeškalová and Lada Vystrčil, 1983.

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By the way, we ran into a problem that year. The head of the German Department, Zdeněk Masařík, complained to the Dean that several of the Gypsywooders whose second subject was in his department had missed a week of classes by being in Cikhaj. We then received an official letter from the Dean saying “Dear Comrade Svoboda, the *děkanské kolegium* has decided that in future the English Department intensive week shall be held at a time when no lectures are taking place.” In other words, the whole way we prepared our plays would go down the drain. But Aleš Svoboda as head of our department wrote back and made the case for us, and the crisis soon blew over. The irony is that only three years later, after Masařík became our external head, he was the one sending us to Cikháj.

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This was followed the next year, **1983**, by Thornton Wilder’s *The Matchmaker*. The play has an interesting DNA. Its first avatar was as an English one-act farce back in the 1830s. Then it was adapted as a full-length play by the Austrian dramatist Johann Nestroy. In the twentieth century this in turn was adapted by Wilder and then later rewritten as *The Matchmaker*, and this was subsequently turned into a musical, *Hello, Dolly!* Film versions of both the play and the musical also appeared. And its most recent incarnation is *On the Razzle*, a version adapted from Nestroy’s play by Tom Stoppard. All of this as proof of just how strong the basic story line is.

The play was difficult to costume because we wanted to get a quasi-authentic 1900 look, but in the end I think it looked reasonably believable. It benefited from very experienced actors – almost everybody performed well and was very convincing. Pavel Krutil was with us for the first time, teamed with Radek Klepáč as two clerks in a store somewhere in the countryside who run

away to New York. Katka Kučerová (Tomková) had the main role – she was the matchmaker, but was also looking for a husband herself. This year again we wanted to have music and again my mother-in-law helped us with it. We'd found a set of LPs released by the American government celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. One of them included popular songs from Broadway productions at the turn of the twentieth century. We chose ones we could fit in with the play. My mother-in-law transcribed them and then we tinkered with the lyrics. For a second time we had Jana Nezmeškalová and Ivan Doležálek with us for the music, joined this time by Laďa Vystrčil and Dáša Valešová. All the songs were done as entre-acts – five of them. They were all fun to sing and even more fun to listen to. A couple were popular sentimental songs, there was a rollicking, boozy *odrhovačka*, one song just raised the energy between acts, and Katka had a snappy song about hunting for a husband. She rehearsed it down to the last detail, and performed it brilliantly. She was one of our best actresses, and once had an interesting thing to say about this. Apparently before she started in with Gypsywood, she'd been afraid to speak in public. And it was memorizing lines so she could speak fluently before an audience that helped her to break that barrier. Basically this changed her life. She's the best advertisement that I can think of for the role of student drama in language teaching.

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**1984** brought *Kidnapped at Christmas*, by Willis Hall. I call it our miracle play. By mid-October, Jessie and I were completely at our wits' end. We had no idea what to put on that year. We were desperate. And then, about a week before we were supposed to meet everybody for the first time that year and announce what we'd be doing, a play appeared mysteriously in the post. Jessie hadn't ordered it, I hadn't ordered it. But when we looked at it we saw it was a wonderful play. There was only one *háček* – it was a play for kids, and not only that, a pantomime. The Christmas pantomime is an exclusively British phenomenon – it's only put on there. It opens before Christmas and runs till the end of January or even longer if it's successful. For many small companies in the provinces it's the piece that keeps them financially afloat – night after night after night they have parents bringing their children to the theatre to see the show. Pantomimes are usually based on a traditional story like *Cinderella*, which is then parodied – for instance, the ugly sisters are always played by men in drag. They're full of buffoonery and slapstick and stock characters, and they have their own conventions. The villain is always trying to sneak up on the hero or heroine, who are unaware of this, and the kids get excited and shout out and warn them – “Watch out! Behind you, he's behind you!” At first the actors don't react, which gets the kids even more excited. So it's 100 percent participatory theatre, and we had no way of knowing if this could be carried off with our audiences here, even though in this case it was a modern pantomime about two escaped convicts. In the end we decided to risk it.

It turned out to be a real romp. The actors had never seen anything like this, so it was a challenge. We had no idea if it would work or not till the opening night. But Jessie indicated in the programme that audience participation was part of the pantomime tradition, and we also spread the word to friends who'd come to the performance. I even have a vague memory that we told them explicitly that they should take the lead. Whatever the case, it worked – the audience acted like five-year-olds. They picked it up very quickly in Gíkháj and in the theatres later. It was immensely successful.

We took a shortened version of it, which was partly in English and partly in Czech, to Akademické Brno. This was both a festival and a competition for students involved in *ZUČ – zájmové umělecké činnosti*. It met with the same reception there. In one of the newspapers a reviewer described it as “welcome refreshment”. Jessie and I got a prize for our “long-term dramaturgy”, which was a laugh, since our choice of play every year was based largely on what we could

get our hands on, and that year had been dangerously chancy. Radek Klepáč and Pavel Krutil – the two escaped prisoners – were declared the best actors of the festival in the amateur section (there was another section for students at drama schools). Since Akademické Brno was a national event, in effect this meant they were the best student actors in the country! I might just add that, as was often the custom, I played a role in the play that year, and was with them when we performed at the festival. I had to learn a few bits in Czech – and I was hopeless! This experience doubled my respect for our actors and what they were able to accomplish.

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In 1985 we did something very different – ***The Late Christopher Bean***. This was by Sidney Howard, a guy who was a very successful American playwright in the interwar period but is largely forgotten today. Despite the erratic way plays were selected for Gypsywood, over the years we managed to put on virtually every genre of play in the English-speaking theatre world. (Maybe the Akademické Brno jury was onto something when it gave us that award.) And with *The Late Christopher Bean* we added a new one – what’s called the “well-made play”. This kind of play has a very clear, logical structure – the plot and all the little sub-plots fit together very neatly, and there’s often a surprising twist to the plot at some point. It tends to be a realistic play with credible character development. In a sense, it was different from many of the plays we put on because most of them had a very strong comic element. This one had comic moments, but essentially it was a serious play.

The play’s about a dead artist whose work is being rediscovered. A dealer learns that the owner of a large number of his paintings isn’t aware of their worth, and sets out to acquire them dirt cheap. It was interesting for us – for Jessie and me – because we had to work more with the actors in terms of getting them to create characters. They had to get inside their characters and they had to interact with other actors in ways that made their actions believable. Because the play is about this stash of paintings, we had to have a whole lot of them. And because we hadn’t thought about this in advance when we were still here in Brno, we decided in Cikháj that the only solution to our problem would be to go from door to door in the village and ask people if up there in the loft they didn’t happen to have a picture frame or even a painting they could spare. And it worked! We actually managed to get seven or eight paintings. One was a decent portrait. Another was something really charming. It was roughly 25 by 30 centimetres, with a lovely gilded ornamental frame. It was a religious painting – a 3D pre-Kolář Kolář collage. At the back there was an image of the Madonna and Child that you could see when you looked at it head on – something normal. But there was also a whole series of vertical strips of glass inside the frame on which they’d pasted strips of two other images of the Virgin and Child. When you looked at these strips from the left, these lined up to form a second complete image, and when you looked at them from the right, you saw a third image. Amazing! I’d never seen anything like it. We nicknamed it *The Virgin(s) of Cikháj*. And I must admit, it’s the only time I’ve ever stolen university property, or rather would-be university property. It’s now in our cottage. But that’s only about 20 kilometres from where it was originally, so I figure it feels at home there.

When we went through the village looking for paintings and frames and stopped at one of the cottages, an old woman greeted us with “Oh, you’re back again!” Because the year before, when we did *Kidnapped for Christmas*, we needed the sound of barking for when dogs were chasing the escaped prisoners. So we’d wandered around Cikháj to find some dogs that we could get to bark for us, and tape them. And this was the old lady whose dogs we’d taped. Back then we’d wanted to see if we’d got the sounds of barking right, so we played them back. She’d been astonished. “Oh, that’s amazing! How did you get the dogs in there?” Our contacts with the locals were minimal, but memorable.

This was Jessie's last production. Before we went to Cikháj I'd suggested to her that maybe she mightn't want to go there, because she was so obviously ill. But she refused. She always slept in a room on the first floor. But in 1985, she couldn't get up the stairs at one go. She'd have to go up a few steps and then sit down and have a rest. And then a second stage and sometimes even a third stage, before she made it up to her room. She was obviously in very bad shape. But Jessie being Jessie, she simply ignored it. I remember one time she said she had to go up to her room and take her pills. I offered to bring them down, but she said "Oh no, there're too many. You won't know which ones to bring down." So we made this laborious journey up to her room. Sure enough, there was a box with about a dozen different pills. She picked out the ones she had to take, and then announced, "My doctor told me I should drink them down with tea or water." So she poured out some tea and drank them down. And then reached behind the window curtain and brought out a bottle of red wine – her favourite – poured glasses for the two of us, and said "Cheers!" I was aghast. "Jessie, you're not supposed to take your pills with alcohol!" Her response was pure Jessie: "But you saw me taking them with tea!"

And then it was time to leave Cikháj. We usually hired a bus and came back Saturday morning. When we got to Brno that year we ordered a taxi for Jessie because she was in no shape to get home otherwise. That was the last time I saw her. She died maybe two weeks later. And I think she knew she was dying. In fact, I'm convinced she knew it. But she just wasn't going to miss her last Cikháj. She used to do these little sketches when she was at Cikháj. After her death we found a sketch she'd made from the window in the room that she'd always stayed in for those twenty or so years. It's in the chronicle. To say that Gypsywood was an important part of Jessie's life would be an understatement. It was part of her self-redemption. Jessie had gone through a lot personally, and the ideals that she'd brought with her when she came to Czechoslovakia in 1945 had slowly withered. With the death of her husband in 1968, and the death of whatever ideals she had about Communism, her links to the department, and to its students, grew stronger. And the Gypsywooders held a special place in this, since the theatre was a passion for her. She was so creatively bohemian! I think the energy and the work that she put into Gypsywood was probably more important to her than her teaching, because it brought her closest to the students in a way that she found wholly satisfying. The Gypsywooders were like a second family to her.

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**1986, *Plunder*.** This again was a new genre for us. It's a farce by a guy called Ben Travers who had this whole series of wildly successful farces on the English stage in the 1920s and 1930s. With the war, this kind of play went out of fashion and Travers more or less disappeared. And then he returned big time in 1975, at the age of 89! *Plunder* is witty and silly and was an absolute joy for everyone – director, actors and audiences. We even managed to rope in our Fulbright Scholar, Alan Flynt. Alan had come here with his wife and kids in the fall of 1986, and we dragged them all off to Cikháj for the week and put him to work on the scenery.

Farces usually require a lot of everything – costumes, props, stage furniture, whatever. *Plunder* was no exception, and so a big challenge. We needed to come up with costumes in the style of the 1920s – checked sweaters, pumps, slinky dresses, ropes of pearls. One scene set round a table required half a dozen chairs and a floor lamp and something that could pass for a sideboard. And the props were staggering – dozens and dozens of them. Some had to function, like a siphon bottle that sprayed out soda for drinks. At one point there had to be a roulette wheel, a champagne bottle, four wine glasses, four whiskey glasses, a tablecloth, and a lot of other things on the table. It was very demanding for the props people, because if they didn't put every single one of those things in exactly the right spot, the scene would fall apart. If someone reached into a drawer for

a key and the key wasn't there – the play would grind to a halt. So at every performance the props people and the stage hands had to be on high alert from start to finish.

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Joseph Kesselring's ***Arsenic and Old Lace*** is one of the classics of the American stage. For this 1987 production we had a very strong cast – almost all the actors had been in one or more previous production, and a good portion could boast Gypsywood titles. The staging didn't involve any unusual demands, so we could concentrate on the acting, in particular things like nuances in speaking dialogue, and the tricks of comic timing. I guess the most challenging things were how to make one of the actors look like Teddy Roosevelt – his character actually believes he is Teddy Roosevelt – and how to make another look like the popular image of Frankenstein. By this time, we were getting noticed fairly regularly by newspapers such as *Rudé právo* and *Brněnský večerník*, and were written up in the university magazine *Universitas*. Favourably, of course.

*Postscript.* A quarter of a century later the play was put on by Městské divadlo Brno. Several of the Gypsywooders who were in our production went to see it. Apparently it was great fun – but not as much fun as the 1987 production (at least for them).

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*Arsenic and Old Lace* was followed that same academic year, in the **spring of 1988**, by a musical – ***Oh! What a Lovely War***, by Joan Littlewood. I'd actually seen it in England in 1964 – not in Stratford East, where it was put on originally, but in the West End. I was totally bowled over by it. It's a devastating critique of the debacle of World War I – the incompetence of the generals, the ignorance of the public “back home”, and the appalling life of the ordinary soldiers – all done in a kind of distancing upbeat music-hall style that only underlines the horror. For a long time I'd wanted to do it with Gypsywood. But it's complicated to stage because it requires period images in the background – battle scenes, period publications – a whole set of Pierrot costumes as well as lots of military clothing and props. Don't forget this was the Communist years. How could we put all this together?

Then once in 1987 I was talking about the Gypsywood theatre with Jim Potts, who was the British Council man in Czechoslovakia at the time. He was a very dynamic guy, and brought a lot of academics and writers – particularly poets (he was a poet himself) – to the country. When he learned about Gypsywood, he asked whether we might like a British director to come sometime and direct a production for us. My answer was “Wow, yes.” And Jim found this remarkable woman by the name of Marguerite Jennings, who was Director of the Bradford Youth Players. Marguerite wrote that she wouldn't be able to direct a play she hadn't done before just for us – she simply didn't have the time – but we should have a look at a list she enclosed of plays she'd recently done with the youth theatre, and see if there might be something we'd be interested in putting on here in Brno. And there on the list was *Oh! What a Lovely War*. I couldn't believe my eyes.

We communicated back and forth by snail mail – the only way at the time. Among her questions was “What about the costumes and properties?” And I said “Oh, we'll take care of those at this end, and we can find some musicians.” I had no idea at the time where and how. “But we'll need background images, and something to help with the music.” So she brought some taped music for the different scenes, and slides with the background images. She showed up just before Easter. It wasn't possible to go out to Cikháj for a week, so all the rehearsing took place here in Brno over the Easter holidays and during the following week. Our rehearsal space was in the Dům pionýrů a mládeže – now the Centrum volného času – down in Lužánky.



We had a cast of twenty, ten men and ten women. We told them the rehearsals would be intensive, and they should count on being there every day, especially over the Easter holidays. How naive! People “discovered” they had other obligations – not only over the holidays, but throughout the remaining days of rehearsals. They came and went at odd times – something impossible at Cikháj. On top of this, casting was complicated, since the musical’s composed of many scenes, some with all twenty actors, some with only a couple. Marguerite did entrust specific roles to individuals where needed, but generally the actors were playing “representative” figures rather than individualized characters. Which also didn’t help discipline. So the rehearsals were very shambolic.

One of the actors was Jiří Rambousek, and he was employed at the time at the Dům pionýrů. We thought this would be great, since he could arrange for anything we needed, and be on hand for rehearsals. Somehow we forgot being employed there meant he had other priorities than Gypsywood. Marguerite would say “Okay, now we’re going to do act two, scene three.” And I’d say “Well, Mr Rambousek can’t come at the moment ...” So we’d rehearse without him. And later “Uh, his boss needs Mr Rambousek at the moment ...” It went on like this for two or three days. Then one time when I began my unfortunately-Mr-Rambousek-isn’t-here speech, she interrupted me: “Oh, the invisible man. Okay.” From then on, Jirka was The Invisible Man. Eventually he did show up a few times.

Finally, we had the dress rehearsal on stage at the Vysokoškolský klub – in the afternoon of the day the play would be having its opening night. The dress rehearsal was in fact the first time that all the actors were present together. Then about 15 minutes into the dress rehearsal, the manager of the club came quietly up to me and whispered “You’ve got to come with me to my office. We have to talk about something.” I said “Sorry, I have to be here – I have to translate for this woman.” But he was insistent. “No, no, you really have to come with me. Some policemen want to speak to you.” So I slipped away to his office and sure enough, there were two policemen. It turned out they wanted to speak with one of the actresses. I said “I’m sorry, but we’re in the middle of the dress rehearsal.” They weren’t impressed. “No, this is a serious thing. And it can’t wait.” I gave in. “OK. Who do you want?” – “Athena Alchazidu.” As they were taking her away, I asked when she’d be back. “When we’re finished questioning her.”

I went back to Marguerite and began very hesitantly “You won’t believe this, but ...” I explained the whole situation to her and she just sort of looked at me, paused for a moment, and then nodded. Not a word. By this time, I guess she’d become so accustomed to things that she wouldn’t have believed possible before coming here that nothing fazed her. As far as I could make out, she was very much shaped by an approach that’s common in much British theatre, and that’s a tendency towards realism. Costumes should look like their historical models, props should be real props – in this case real military helmets, real guns. Right at the beginning she gave me this whole list of things to get, and I looked at it and thought “Oh, oh. This isn’t going to be easy.” I didn’t say “no” to her, but instead “Well, I’ll see what I can find.” We did manage to get various things from the faculty’s *kryt civilní obrany*, which was in the basement of Building C. They had lots of perfect stuff like little metal boxes with red crosses on them and medicine inside. And they had miles and miles of bandages. These we could use for those weird puttees that soldiers wore in World War I. And they had helmets of course. They weren’t exactly English World War I helmets, let alone German helmets, but they’d do. And we had a phenomenal Costume Mistress, Lenka Čecháčková, HGCM, who coordinated the team sewing the twenty Pierrot costumes.

But of course there were things we couldn’t get for them, like rifles. So we had to explain to Marguerite that we were going to have symbolic rifles. “What do you mean by that?” she asked. I said they would have dowel rods, which they could sling over their shoulders, use for shooting and so on. Not a problem, I said, this is theatre! She looked at me sceptically, but eventual-

ly agreed to this. And we had to sew a lot of things too. The Pierrot costumes mainly, but also, for example, flags. Where could you buy a Union Jack in Czechoslovakia in 1988? And where in Czechoslovakia back in 1988 would you find out what the Imperial Russian flag looked like? We had to do all this research and talk to professors about it. And when it came to the music, we even had to find out what the Imperial Russian anthem had been.

So we gradually managed to put it together, whittling down Marguerite's requests day by day. There was a lot of singing in it, of course, because it's a musical. And most of the songs are popular musical-hall songs of the day, plus religious hymns in one of the scenes. The students loved it all – you're dressing up, you've got these wonderful songs that you're singing, and you're sending out a very strong anti-war message, and a message about the idiocy of generals and politicians. Messages like these had strong reverberations in Communist Czechoslovakia.

We had Zimour for the music. They weren't students, but a local Brno band. Their leader was a guy called Milan Potůček, who's still an important figure on the Czech music scene. They were amazing. We just gave them tapes with the music and they rehearsed everything on their own. Then we met with them once or twice before the dress rehearsal, and that was it. Hard to believe – they were an established group, they had their schedule of performances, but they found time just for these crazy students because they thought it would be fun. It may sound strange, but during the Communist years I had similar experiences more than once. If you were doing something different, especially something that might not be officially approved, there were many people who were extremely willing to cooperate and help out. I guess it was their form of pushing back against the system.

The opening night was a smashing success, and so were a few further performances. When Marguerite came round from the audience to appear on the stage for the curtain calls, she whispered to me "Until this moment I really didn't believe we'd pull it off!" She'd been a wonderful director – able to adjust quickly and with good humour to a completely new environment and all the unexpected complications that kept popping up day after day. Very English. Unflappable.

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The **fall of 1988** saw our regular annual production, and for the first time in twenty-one years we went for one-acters – two of them. The first was *The Alligator Man*, by Jack A. Kaplan. It touches on a lot of things – racial tension in America, environmentalism, sexism, the longing for escape and adventure – and treats them in a light, frothy way, just enough to offset the more troubling background. The second play was *Trevor*, by the English playwright John Bowen. This was something very different. It concerns two women who share a flat. Each has invented a boyfriend so that her mother will stop asking her when she's going to have one. And then one set of parents announces they're going to visit and want to meet the boyfriend. The women panic, and one of them asks an out-of-work actor friend if he'll play the non-existent boyfriend, Trevor. He agrees, and the parents arrive. But quite unexpectedly the second pair of parents also turn up. So the friend has to run back and forth between two rooms, pretending to each set of parents that he's their daughter's boyfriend. This is all very funny, almost slapstick, until there's a slip-up, and eventually the women have to confess to their parents that neither has a boyfriend, that they're lesbian lovers.

When I first read the play, I was fascinated by it – not only the theme, but the way for most of the play what you have is a kind of farce, and then it suddenly slews into realism and a deeply serious mode. But I didn't know if I'd have willing actresses. This was 1988 in Communist Czechoslovakia – the topic was taboo. So I spoke to the two students I felt would be best in the women's roles. I explained what the play was about, that if they agreed to play the roles they'd have to make the characters believable, embrace, kiss a bit, and so on. And right away they said yes, no problem, they wanted to do it. Which, I must admit, surprised me.

What was interesting was the audience reaction. From what I've been able to find out, it was probably the first play put on publicly in Czechoslovakia with a lesbian or gay theme. After the performance ended, three women who'd been in the audience came up to me and they were very angry. One of them was a medical doctor, and she said "I don't think that's the sort of thing you should be putting on. This isn't acceptable." She didn't say we were promoting filthy, perverted sex – but that was clearly the subtext of what she was saying. And a man who spoke to me insisted that "this" wasn't something students should be involved with. Other people who would normally congratulate us after a performance sort of quietly disappeared after the play was over. Virtually all the teachers in the department saw it at Cikháj and the adjective I heard several times was "interesting". Without going into any specifics about whether they liked it or disliked it. No one came up to me and said that it was daring, great, a breakthrough or whatever, let alone express congratulations. Just "interesting". I don't want to give the impression that everyone was put off by the production. By no means. Certainly many middle-aged and older spectators were. But not the younger members of the audiences, not – so far as I could judge – our English Department students. They seemed to have no problem. Perhaps they were surprised, but they clearly liked it.

Again, we put a shortened version of *Alligator Man* on for Akademické Brno. We were the only English-language student theatre around, so it was always amusing taking part in these competitions – the other plays were always in Czech. This time we had short little interventions in Czech, explaining what the scene was about – we wanted the audience and the jury to get the gist of the action. Before getting to Akademické Brno, we'd had to go through a *fakultní kolo*, a *celoškolské kolo* and a *krajské kolo*. At the *národní kolo* we won two awards. What was amusing was the reasons they gave for awarding the prizes. *Čestné uznání za 3. místo za kultivovanou interpretaci a inscenaci Alligator Man* and *Čestné uznání za dlouholeté a cílevědomé vedení souboru*. These are lovely, soothing phrases.

Mirek Pospíšil happened to know John Bowen, so he wrote him a letter informing him we'd put on the play and ignored copyright. Bowen wrote a long letter back, among other things saying "I don't mind your department breached copyright of *Trevor*. I'm delighted that they had fun with it and managed to bring it off. It's not an easy play because the timing is difficult. Ping-pong between the rooms of the set, always likely to go wrong ... And then there's the blackness at the end which doesn't work unless one has believed in the reality of the feeling between the two girls." And indeed – Pavel Krutil had ping-ponged brilliantly as Trevor, and Karla Tenková and Simona Šulcová were utterly convincing as the lovers.

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Now for *Animal Farm* in 1989. I'd somehow, two or three years earlier, come across a copy of a musical version of George Orwell's classic novella that the National Theatre had put on in London in 1984. And I'd thought to myself "Gypsywood's got to do this ... sometime." Which wasn't then. I didn't want to be kicked out of the country, and I didn't want the department to be blown out of the water. But by the summer of 1989, I felt we could risk it. By that time (partially) free elections had been held in Poland, and Hungary was dismantling its barbed wire border with Austria. Demonstrations of all kinds were breaking out. And I thought, well, things are moving in such a way that even though there'll probably be a *průser*, I don't think it'll be fatal. So at the first Gypsywood meeting early in October I told the students we'd be doing *Animal Farm* that year. Sensation!

A key thing was the music. The text I had contained only words and notes for the songs. But there were no arrangements, and we had no musicians. Luckily, though, we had Petr Brabec, who was one of the most accomplished students we ever had, extremely bright and a great musician.



*Animal Farm*, 1989.

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What he did was use his synthesizer to compose the music for the show. Each song had its own arrangement, reflecting the character and the mood of the song – each one was as it were individually crafted. They did a great deal to create the atmosphere of the play.

It was yet another very complicated show to prepare. Costumes were a headache – how do you dress people to give some suggestion of the animals they are? And the masks were a super headache – more like a migraine. What we did was to buy the kind of masks kids might wear to a party and then use *papier-mâché* – strips of newspaper that we'd glue to the masks – to build them up in the shape of the animal head in question. And then they had to be painted. But we discovered you couldn't hear the actors properly, so we had to cut away the bottoms of the masks so they covered just the eyes and cheeks. All this took endless hours of picky, boring work. We also had to produce banners with political slogans, and those were great fun. We patterned them on the banners you saw everywhere in those days, with their absurd Communist slogans. The same type face, the same colours, yellowy gold against red – in fact the colours of the Soviet flag. We tried to push it as much as we could, as much as we dared.

We were at Cikháj from from 10 November. The dress rehearsal was on the evening of Friday the 17th. And during a break Mirek Pospíšil came up to us and said “Something big's been happening in Prague.” We finished the thing and tried to find out what was going on “out there”. Saturday brought the final rehearsals - difficult, when we were all desperate for news about how things were developing. Then the opening night on Saturday evening, and Sunday morning we came back to Brno. There was a student at the faculty when we arrived there, and he told us the students would be going on strike on Monday.

Immediately on Monday morning, the strike was launched. Late that afternoon we all marched down to náměstí Svobody. Nobody knew what was waiting for us there. Brno wasn't like Prague, where demonstrations had been going on for more than a year. So we had no idea how many people would respond to the call to meet in the square. It was totally packed, and I guess everyone had the same feeling as I did – maybe it's finally happening.

Earlier that day the students had come to me and said that they wanted to perform *Animal Farm* for the striking students. "That's a great idea, but the problem is that it's in English." And they said "That doesn't matter – we'll put it on in Czech." I was puzzled. "What do you mean?" – "Well, we know our lines, so we'll just speak them in Czech." I was dumfounded – did they really mean this seriously? We agreed we'd meet for 15 or 20 minutes after the demonstration back at the faculty. The main thing was to agree on names in Czech – what will the name be for "Animal Farm", what will the different characters be called? They'd of course sing the songs in English.

They performed the play the next day, Tuesday. The Aula was packed. The atmosphere was extraordinary. I'm quite certain I'll never again experience such a perfect conjunction of art and life. I remember there was one line in the play that went something like "You pigs have gone too far this time!" The whole place exploded in laughter and cheers! I'm still in awe of their feat of translating the lines into Czech as they went. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my twenty plus years with Gypsywood. Some teachers were also present, including a couple of members of the Communist Party. One of them came up and remarked that the play had been "interesting". That word again!

Everybody outside Czechoslovakia was fascinated by what was happening here. Tom Pospíšil had gone down to Vienna to scrounge printing materials for the striking students, and met up with some students from Vienna University. They helped him with assistance, and later arranged for him and a delegation of students from Masaryk University – still then Jan Evangelista Purkyně University – to be officially received by the Austrian Vice-Chancellor Josef Riegler. Here in Brno, Tom also met up with another Austrian, and through him we were invited to perform in a little village just across the border, Langau. So a couple of weeks before Christmas Gypsywood made a little excursion to Austria. For the majority of students this was the first time they'd ever been in "the West". Crossing to the other side of the (ex-)Iron Curtain! It was totally mind-blowing for them. And even for me, since crossing the border in and out of Czechoslovakia always held the potential for some kind of hitch, something not quite in order with my visa or whatever. Now the border had ceased to exist – there was no need for passports, even ID cards. Absolute freedom to come and go.

In Langau, we only did a few scenes from *Animal Farm*, along with several songs, of course. And there were explanations in German of what we were doing. We rounded off the "tour" with a visit to the Christmas market in Vienna. Tom Pospíšil and I and a few students took up an invitation from the Vienna students, who were members of one of those traditional German student fraternities, to visit their clubroom – by coincidence, the fraternity was holding its annual Christmas gathering that day. It was a fascinating glimpse into a whole different world, with fraternity members of all generations there, wearing their funny peaked caps and other paraphernalia of the fraternity traditions. What was fascinating was talking to three older guys who'd been students at the German University in Prague. They'd been expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1945 along with three million or so of their fellow "Germans". Forty-five years later, they still spoke quite passable Czech. Four months later, *Animal Farm* once more took us abroad, to an English-language theatre festival in Warsaw, where we put on the full play. From the audience's reaction, I'd say that, for whatever reasons, Orwell and *Animal Farm* didn't have quite the same resonance for Poles as they did for Czechs.

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“Freunde aus dem Osten”: Tom Pospíšil as the “Studentenführer” of a delegation of Masaryk University students meeting with Austrian Vice-Chancellor Josef Riegler and Günther Wiesinger, head of one of the student fraternities at the University of Vienna, 6 December 1989.

© T. Pospíšil

The next year, **1990**, we did a reprise of *Oh! What a Lovely War*. We hadn't been able to put on many performances when we did it the first time in 1988, and we had a cupboard full of costumes and props from the show. Most of the students who'd been in the original production two years earlier were still around. These were all good reasons for reviving it. And there were personal reasons as well. We were well into the period of transition that came with the collapse of the system in 1989. By now I was head of the English Department and up to my ears in work – the task of finding new teachers, long discussions entailing radical changes in our degree programme and methods of teaching, and so on. I was also in the faculty Senate, where a group of us were revising all the faculty regulations. So I just didn't have time to put together a new play. What we did was kind of “upgrade” it a bit. For example we cut out silhouettes for the rifles, sewed more flags – they made a great contrast with the white Pierrot costumes – made a better job of distinguishing the various allied armies, and so on.

This production also took us abroad – to Erlangen in Bavaria and to Salzburg, both at the invitation of the local English Departments. And for a grand finale in May 1991, we put *Oh! What a Lovely War* on for the 200 participants of the 1st Brno English Teacher Education Conference. The group of actors in this production had been together for many years, and everyone really bonded. And we still meet, every year just before Christmas, to chat and laugh and catch up on each other's lives. I think something like this is unique, certainly in the English Department and perhaps *vůbec*.



*Oh! What a Lovely War*, 1990.

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It occurs to me that I haven't said much yet about our audiences, and where we performed, over the years. I've already spoken about Cikháj and the way the opening nights there were kind of "internal" events within the English Department – the audiences were made up exclusively of students on the intensive course, other current students plus ex-Gypsywooders, teachers from the department, and guests of the department like the teachers who gave the Thursday evening talk. Back in Brno – and I'm talking here about my time, from the late seventies to the early nineties – we attracted a lot of our students who hadn't been at Cikháj, plus students at the language school and students from various grammar schools. But there was also the general English-speaking public, which covered a huge range of people and all ages. I think the oldest spectator I encountered was almost 90 – Jaroslav Čiřař, who'd had a fascinating career that included being secretary to TGM just after World War I. Look him up in the online encyclopedia of Brno's history.

Outside Brno, both Olomouc and Bratislava were on our regular circuit – as a rule we'd perform there every year, our visits being organized by the local English Departments. Prague was usually a problem – it seemed hard to arrange for organizational support at that end. But we did go there in spring 1991 with *Oh! What a Lovely War*, and then in 1992 with the *15-Minute Hamlet* and *God*. As far as I recall we organized our 1992 appearance ourselves. We thought it appropriate that on that second occasion we performed in the Divadlo Jary Cimrmana in Žiřkov – both plays were rather Cimrmanish. Performances in other cities usually depended on cast members who could arrange things in their home towns. I remember Ostrava, Zlın and Kroměřıř. I think that's all.

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Back to the Gypsywood productions. In **1991**, we again returned to the format of two one-act plays. By this time the Vysokoškolský klub no longer existed, so we had to find another venue. The best option was Leitnerka. But it wasn't easy to act there – they don't have a stage, it's really just a space.

The opening one-acter was Tom Stoppard's **15-Minute Hamlet**. It's ideal for Czech audiences, because even if they can't understand the English, they more or less know what's going on, because everybody knows *Hamlet*. And as an encore, we added a **15-Second Hamlet** someone had found.

The second play – Woody Allen's **God** – was longer. It was a joy – a very funny text, and plenty of opportunities for over-the-top acting. But there were two headaches. One had to do with the costumes. The play is set in Ancient Greece, so we had to sew a load of those bloody Greek chitons. You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to sew a Greek chiton that actually looks like a Greek chiton and not like a heap of rags. And you wouldn't believe how much material you need for them. It's incredible – yards and yards and yards. The second headache was a very tricky scene where God appears above the stage and descends below. Yes, the Classical *Deus ex machina*. We ended up creating a weird vehicle from the body of an old baby carriage that was launched on a kind of ramp. It was a nightmare to get it to work smoothly – in the first few attempts when it made the transition from ramp to stage the angle was too sharp, or the speed too great, and it kind of reared up and toppled over. Eventually we managed to get it right. Which relieved me, since I was playing God. A very easy role, since when the *machina* eventually stops, it's revealed that God is dead. But every time I went down that ramp, I wondered if this might not end up being literally true.

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**Sweetie Pie** followed in **1992** – a play that's a little bit different. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, in terms of genre virtually every play we put on can be regarded as something a little bit different. But this was different in that it was a collective creation, the work of the Theatre-in-Education Company in Bolton, England. It was created specifically to be used by and in schools, and for school kids – I assume secondary school kids – as actors. It's about Sweetie Pie, a woman who's just out of school, and is kind of marginal in society. But in the course of the play she finds herself. The whole production was different from what came before for a number of reasons. For one thing, we'd reached a point where putting together a cast wasn't easy. In the early nineties, the whole world was suddenly opening up to the students. They could do all kinds of things that were impossible before, and so they weren't as interested in Gypsywood as they'd been before 1989. So it was good that the play had a fairly small cast. And we still had a lot of "leftovers", people who'd been in productions at the end of the eighties. But there were several "newbies" as well, and they ended up being in only one production. The play worked in the end, though we didn't travel very much with it. And we performed it in a more modest setting than we'd been used to in the past – the Operní studio of JAMU's Faculty of Music in Královo Pole. It was a kind of slow winding down of Gypsywood.

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Then came the **fall of 1993** and at the end of September I did what I did every year – I announced that those who were interested in being in the Gypsywood play should meet on such a such a day at such and such a time in such and such a classroom. Only a handful showed up, maybe seven or eight people. We talked for a while and we all agreed that it simply didn't make any sense to go ahead with Gypsywood. I myself was under increasing pressure from other activities I was



doing. A few of the students – they'd been in *Sweetie Pie* – also admitted that even they had shown up more out of a sense of duty. Nobody was very keen on continuing, and we all had good, objective reasons for our decision. And so in 1993 there was no play whatsoever. The continuity of Gypsywood was suddenly interrupted.

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In **1994** there was a very odd production. It's sort of like the uncle in the family you don't talk about very much. This was **Prime**. It was from a book with short little skits, a whole series of them. It was directed by Derek DeWitt. He showed up in the department one day and said he'd heard about Gypsywood, and we hadn't done anything the previous year – maybe he could help revive it? I agreed. If he could find the students, and was prepared to put in the time, then why not?

Derek was an American, one of the many foreigners that were floating around Brno in the beginning of the nineties, probably teaching English somewhere. And so he went ahead. It was an unhappy production. Virtually none of the students had done any acting at all. It also included some people who were from outside the department – some native speakers of English, some foreigners who were in Brno. So it was a mixed collection of individuals who I guess by the nature of things couldn't really form a company where people could learn from one another. It was also unhappy from another point of view. The department couldn't give them any money. And we didn't have a theatre we could make available. So they had to decide where they would put it on. They ended up renting the Divadlo Bolka Polívky on Jakubské náměstí, which seats around 200. They had two performances, with probably not more than 30 or 40 people at each. So the poor actors faced a huge more or less empty auditorium. Thinking about it now, I can't remember ever talking to any of our students who were in the production and asking how they felt. But it must have been a very strange and maybe even disturbing experience.

\* \* \*

Two years passed, and then in **1996** there was another attempt to revive Gypsywood. A group of students prevailed on Glenn Timmermans, a British Council lecturer in the department at the time, to direct them in a play. He chose Brian Friel's ***The Freedom of the City***. This is a powerful and angry play, set in Northern Ireland and written in the aftermath of the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in 1972. Gypsywood had never done anything like this before, so it was a bold choice. And it was made even bolder by the fact that, again, the students had never acted before – at least in the context of Gypsywood. But the actors dealt with both these limiting factors with great energy, and the play ran for three successful performances in the cellar stage at the Divadlo Husa na provázku.

\* \* \*

Now we jump another two years, to **1998**. Ted Johns, the author and director of the play we put on, is one of my very oldest friends in Canada. We started off university together in September 1961 – we were roommates in the residence in our first year. Ted eventually ended up becoming an actor and a playwright. He's written all sorts of plays, some of them one-man shows that he performed, others plays for full casts. This was one of them, ***The Death of The Donnelly's***. It's about a feud that took place in the nineteenth century in southern Ontario between the Donnelly family and the community. It's part of Canadian folklore, a Canadian myth. Songs have been written about the Donnellys as well as books and several other plays and even a rock opera.

At some point in the eighties or nineties, when I was in Canada and Ted and I were sitting together in the evening, talking and drinking, I said “Why don’t you come over and direct one of your plays sometime for Gypsywood?” So in 1998 he got some kind of grant from the Canada Council for him and his stepson, Chris Royal, to come over to the Czech Republic and put on the play with us. Ted directed and Chris, who was a trained actor, was the assistant director. Chris was also in charge of the music, because there were folk songs in it, and the dancing – typical North American square dancing – and the fights. The music was mostly guitar music, but we also had a violin. And again, we put together an ad hoc cast, though several of the people had been in *The Freedom of The City* a year and a half earlier. The cast worked well together. What probably helped was that many of them knew each other well, as they were studying together in the same year. They gave the impression of being a “company”.

At first sight, *The Death of The Donnellys* may seem like a rough and ready play. In fact it’s quite sophisticated. But there’s lots of action, physical fights, angry encounters, rough language, all of which might give an erroneous impression and creates special demands on the actors. It was an energetic and rollicking production. The singing was good, the dances were good, the fights were good. Even the chickens were good. The plot requires a couple of them to be on stage. Our stage manager found them somewhere in Brno, and they performed well, but she had no place to keep them overnight. So we housed them in our garden shed. I think three nights in all. Ted was very pleased with the production. I’d been talking to him for nearly twenty years about Gypsywood, but he had no idea what to expect, or at any rate wasn’t getting his hopes up. But both he and Chris returned to Canada ready to spread the good news about the group.

\* \* \*

A year later, in the **spring of 1999**, we had a kind of fringe Gypsywood production, ***The Parrot***. This musical creation was based on an essay by Edgar Allan Poe called “The Philosophy of Composition”, where he explains how he created “The Raven”, as well as the poem itself. The essay presents the poem as the product of a coldly rational series of speculative questions and logical conclusions. I don’t think anybody really believes a word of it, but it’s a good read. The text of “The Philosophy of Composition” was abridged and shortened by Pavel Drábek, who was a student in our department at the time – he’s now a full professor at the University of Hull in the UK – and the music was created by Ondřej Kyas, a long-time buddy of Pavel’s and a brilliant composer of serious music. (As well as, currently, a member of the Brno alternative group Květy.) They’d already collaborated on various short sung pieces that they called mini-operas. At that point, these were still basically things they created for friends, so with this they were venturing out into the world a bit. *The Parrot* has three singers. It was sung by Pavel and another English Department student, Lukáš Morávek, and me. The piece has two parts. It begins with my part, which is made up of excerpts from “The Philosophy of Composition”. And the second part is “The Raven” – this was sung by Pavel and Lukáš. Except that in this version the figure of the Raven is replaced by a Parrot. The whole thing was a wonderful parody and full of comic moments. We all had a ball putting it on. We in fact performed it twice, in the cellar at Skleněná louka and then in the cellar stage of the Divadlo Husa na provázku. This latter performance was recorded (a bit fuzzily) – you can watch it online in a series of three YouTube videos.

And in **1999** we did something else new – **we recorded the best songs** from our previous shows over the previous twenty years. We’d had this in mind for some time, but never got round to it. But that year we thought why not? – let’s give it a try. Our idea was that we’d get together and rehearse a bit and then record the songs and that would be it. Little did we know! We made a selection of the songs from the plays that we put on with music, which were mostly back there in the eighties – things like *Animal Farm*, *Oh! What a Lovely War*, *The Matchmaker*, *Habeas Corpus*.



Pavel Drábek and Don Sparling trying their best in a recording studio, 1999.

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But also stuff from the late seventies – *My Fair Lady* and *The Beggar's Opera*. We contacted the people who'd been in those plays and then we all went off to Cikháj, just like in the past. Though this time only for a weekend. We decided which songs we'd record, and practised them a bit just to start getting our voices back in shape. Some people were there with their partners, and a couple of little kids were running around. It was a very special Gypsywood event.

Back in Brno, we'd arranged to record the songs with a professional sound engineer high up in some studio in the Janáček Theatre. It must have been torture for him, dealing with total amateurs. And we had to do it at night. Many, many, many evenings after the theatre closed at 11 pm we trooped into the dark building and made our way up to this remote recording studio, and remained there till two in the morning, determined to do our best. And if you listen to the recording now, you'll see that our best was precisely what's captured in the title of the CD – *The (We Did Our) Best of Gypsywood*.

The singing is far from perfect, but I think it does give at least some feel of the atmosphere that was created by and around the songs originally. I personally found it a bit frustrating. When I came to Brno in 1977 I was fresh from seven years attending the Slovácký krúžek in Prague. I was very active in the group – seven or eight times a month there'd be some activity with singing, either on its own or when dancing. So back then I had a reasonable voice. In 1999 I was faced with the fact that I really didn't have the voice I'd once had. But I was comforted by the realization that nobody else had the voice they'd once had either. The way I put it is that the recording is "very authentic".

The third Gypsywood event in **1999** was the staging of *Murder in the Cathedral*. This, to my mind, was the most exceptional accomplishment in the history of Gypsywood. And this too came from the fertile mind of Pavel Drábek, who came up with the idea of creating a musical version

of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Pavel adapted the text and was the director, and again Ondřej Kyas composed the music. But this time it was in effect a full-length opera. It had a very large cast. There were nineteen women in the chorus – the “Women of Canterbury”. This was perfect for our English Department. Almost inevitably, given the makeup of the student body, many more women than men show an interest in taking part in Gypsywood productions. But for historical reasons, male roles outnumber female roles in most plays. Which leaves only three solutions. You can re-direct the “surplus” women to things like costumes, props, prompting and the like. Or you can rewrite the play a bit, changing male characters to female characters where this is possible. Or you can paint moustaches on the women and assign them male roles. (I don't think I was ever forced to choose that third option.)

In addition to the Women of Canterbury, there were eight individual roles, all for men – Thomas Becket, four Tempters and three Priests. They both sang and spoke their lines. And nine musicians. The show was put on in the *Dům volného času* in Lužánky, and lasted something over two hours. And you know, I was utterly absorbed in it throughout. They were of course working from a very strong text. But Pavel, crazy Pavel – I use crazy in a very positive sense, as you know – had this brilliant idea of framing T. S. Eliot's play with medieval St. George plays. I've seen this play three other times, including once at Stratford-upon-Avon in England, and it was always a failure. The play's a strange goulash – Classical Greek chorus, high rhetoric and realistic dialogue, that jocular Brechtian ending, when the four Knights, who've just murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket, come forward and speak directly to the audience, justifying their action. For me it never came together, it never really worked. What totally stunned me in this production was that by adding these goofy, entertaining St. George plays at the beginning and end, everything clicked. Somehow the St. George plays tied everything together in an archetypal whole, one where high ritual and the carnivalesque coincided. It was “artificial” in the sense opera is “artificial” – highly stylized but charged with a kind of elemental energy. Even the greatest actors in the English-speaking world couldn't give it life – and here in Brno it sang (literally). It was powerful and moving and I was emotionally exhausted at the end. On so many levels, and in so many ways, it was a brilliant success.

They put it on three times in Brno, and had one performance in Bratislava the next spring. But it was very difficult bringing the whole cast and the musicians together, especially since most of the musicians were already into their professional careers, with engagements elsewhere. Two members of the cast were Americans, here as exchange students. Ben Williams is now a theatre professional in the United States, teaching theatre at NYU and part of The Elevator Repair Service, one of the most progressive experimental theatre groups in the States. In a book he published a few years back he said that all he's ever learned about theatre, he learned with this crazy company called the Gypsywood Players, an amateur English-language student theatre group. Joshua Mensch now lives in Prague and he's a poet – recently he published *Because*, a novel in verse. I think it's a huge shame that *Murder* isn't revived by some professional or semi-professional group. It's extremely effective and works at all levels – the original text, the added dimension with those St. George plays, the music. It was a bold experiment, and I'm still convinced its time will come.

There's a curious footnote to all this, simply as another example of how Gypsywood is connected with so much that isn't Gypsywood. In 2000 I became head of Masaryk University's international office. MU's a member of the Utrecht Network, along with 25 other universities. In 2003 they held their annual meeting in Brno and we wanted to do something special for the final evening. I happened to mention this to Pavel, and he said “What if we create a mini-opera for them?” And so the two of us put together a libretto with a plot that brought in all the different member universities of the Network. Ondřej composed the music, of course. And the singers were staff from our international office, including me and five other people, Lukáš Morávek

among them (he'd played the role of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*). So on the final day of the Utrecht Network meeting we took all the participants down to a wine cellar in Hustopeče for the evening. And then after ample food and drink, I announced there would be some entertainment. And people were astounded – it's not every day you become part of an opera! Each year the host for the AGM tries to come up with something special for the final evening, but *Phil and Sophy*, the mini-opera we created specially for the Utrecht Network, set a new benchmark.

And here comes the point. For this mini-opera, Pavel and Ondřej had put together a small orchestra of five musicians. And these were the musicians that became the core of Opera Diversa – that was their premiere as a group. So – *The Parrot*, the same duo creating *Murder in the Cathedral*, some of the musicians and a lead singer in that production being in *Phil and Sophy*, and then the creation of Opera Diversa, with Pavel as its first Artistic Director and Ondra its in-house composer. Opera Diversa's made a reputation as one of the most interesting new contemporary music groups in Brno – and it has this little drop of Gypsywood in its DNA, like Neanderthals in humans. I find this fascinating, because it's like teaching as a profession. You never know whether what you're teaching students will have some completely unanticipated effect somewhere down the line ten or twenty years later. And it's exactly the same with Gypsywood. You can't know what the implications of Gypsywood will be.

\* \* \*

I mentioned a moment ago that in 2000 I became head of the MU international office, the Office for International Studies. This meant me leaving the English Department, and my contact with it became sporadic. Which means that my links with Gypsywood, which itself had been sporadic in the nineties, became even weaker. So what I'll talk about from here on will be pretty much at second hand, just to put things on record.

As sometimes happens with demanding and successful projects, *Murder in the Cathedral* took its toll. It probably drained a lot of energy from the main protagonists, especially Pavel, and it was the last Gypsywood production for the next five years. But the spirit of Gypsywood was always there. Students would prepare little sketches for the department's Creativity Nights and teachers like Katka Tomková who were ex-Gypsywooders would try to inspire students to do something. But the company needed someone to organize it all.

It was only in **2004** that one of our native speakers, Matthew Nicholls, who taught practical English and academic writing and who's himself a writer, decided to write a play and put it on. He came up with this funny story based on Czech fairy-tales and the British-Czech cultural clash called ***A Bohavian Fairy Tale***. The production followed in the Gypsywood tradition in the sense that it had lots of musical numbers with singing and dancing, and it brought a lot of people together. Linda Kyzlinková (Nepivodová) and Filip Krajník were in the cast, among others. The group didn't go to Cikháj, though. Perhaps that's why this turned out to be a one-time-only thing. Still, it was very popular and successful – they put it on several times at the Barka theatre in Královo Pole. Unfortunately, for various good reasons Matthew wasn't the one to take up the challenge and run the company in the following years either. So there was another long gap – this time for a full seven years. Gypsywood was on life support.

\* \* \*

In **2012**, one of our Master's students, Michal Mikeš, became interested in the company and he began talking to everyone about it. He came to me and spoke about it, too, but I was too busy with other projects at the time. He talked to Pavel Drábek, who'd led the *Murder in the Cathedral* production well over a decade before, but Pavel too was busy as the head of the Theatre Studies

Department and Associate Professor at the English Department, so he couldn't commit himself either. But both Pavel and I recommended Tomáš Kačer, who'd acted in *Murder in the Cathedral* and had just finished his doctorate. Which meant he had – theoretically at least – oodles of free time. Tomáš had no association with the department back then aside from being a graduate, but he agreed to run the project.

Tomáš decided to do ***The Real Inspector Hound***, an early play by Tom Stoppard that – by sheer coincidence – he'd been doing his research on for many years. Michal Mikeš was officially the director of the show but it was a truly collaborative effort where everybody chipped in whatever – limited – experience with theatre they had. Suddenly there was the germ of a new company, with actors, musicians and lots of stage hands. The spirit of the old Gypsywood somehow came back. The group went to Cikháj together – it was almost like a pilgrimage – and then performed the play at the Barka theatre several times in December. It was a great success. And it was especially satisfying for old Gypsywooders, who were heartened to see the group alive and kicking again.

More importantly, though, this turned out to be the first year of the revived Gypsywood as we know it today. In 2013, Tomáš joined the department as faculty member at the same time as Jeff Smith, who had experience with theatre from his earlier years in the US. The two of them have been running the company since then – Jeff as the Artistic Director and Tomáš as the Director of Everything Else (aka *Capo di tutti capi*). In a way these two are doing what Jessie and I were doing – sharing responsibilities, inspiring one another, helping each other out. And having a ball in the process.

At least two generations of students – and counting – have participated in Gypsywood productions in the company's latest reincarnation since 2012. The company continues to provide the department with a strong sense of identity and entertainment. A lot has changed over the fifty-plus years since the beginning of Gypsywood. One of the greatest changes is that the university recreation centre in Cikháj has been closed down so the intensive rehearsals now take place in Telč, where the university has its splendidly refurbished University Centre. Productions there are open for preview as public rehearsals, but it's no longer the custom for department members and students to go and see the current play there. The opening night takes place in Brno. In some ways, the name of the company reflects this change. These days most people really need to dig into the background to understand where this slightly bizarre name comes from, since no one has experienced and very few have even heard of Cikháj.

\* \* \*

However, in **September 2015** we made an attempt to remedy this. That year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first Gypsywood performance, an anniversary we felt should be celebrated. So we announced there'd be a Gypsywood family reunion, and went all out to contact as many former Gypsywooders as possible. The response exceeded our expectations – in the end almost 150 current and former Gypsywooders were present. The event began with a special performance by the current Gypsywood company of their latest production, ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, at the BuranTeatr just round the corner on Kounicová, and continued in the faculty's new Building B. This was beautifully symbolic, since it's on the same site where the English Department was located for so many years before moving to its current location on Gorkého. In fact the new building had just been opened, and our event “launched” it as a public space. Another Gypsywood first! We spoke a bit about the history of the group, declared Eva Golková an Honoured Gypsywood Jubilee Spectator, and then spent the next few hours consuming large quantities of food and drink and renewing old friendships. It was an amazing occasion – people converged on Brno from all over the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and a few even from abroad. Even more amazing,

we had participants from every Gypsywood production over the previous half century, including two from the very first production, *The Dear Departed*, back in 1965 – Lída Molerová (Kolářová) and Ivo Semerád. It would be an interesting exercise to figure out how many “generations” of Gypswooders were present.

And the Gypsywood generations continue. The company is still a place for students to come together, work on a shared project, make new friendships and engage with amateur theatre. And once again the Gypsywood Players is an integral part of the spirit of the department. To use a very old-fashioned phrase, I’m tickled pink the tradition lives on. Performances now take place typically in Brno in mid-December, and they offer an opportunity for a lot of ex-Gypswooders to meet and catch up with the latest events at the department. And as a rule the productions themselves continue another tradition – they’re a lot of fun!

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# Outside In

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