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Suzanne Nash

The UNESCO Chair of Museology and World Heritage

Mrs. Suzanne Nash's memories of the origins of the UNESCO Chair of Museology and World Heritage and of the first UNESCO Chair holder

Vinoš Sofka.

The full title of the UNESCO Chair at Masaryk University in Brno shows how its founders considered museology: adding the words "world heritage" gives museology a very broad scope of action, far beyond the museum institution itself.

Initially Jan Jelínek, the renowned anthropologist who also founded the department of museology at the Moravian Museum in Brno, brought the concept of the museum object to a theoretical level, that of the Document, a witness of a place and time important to us.

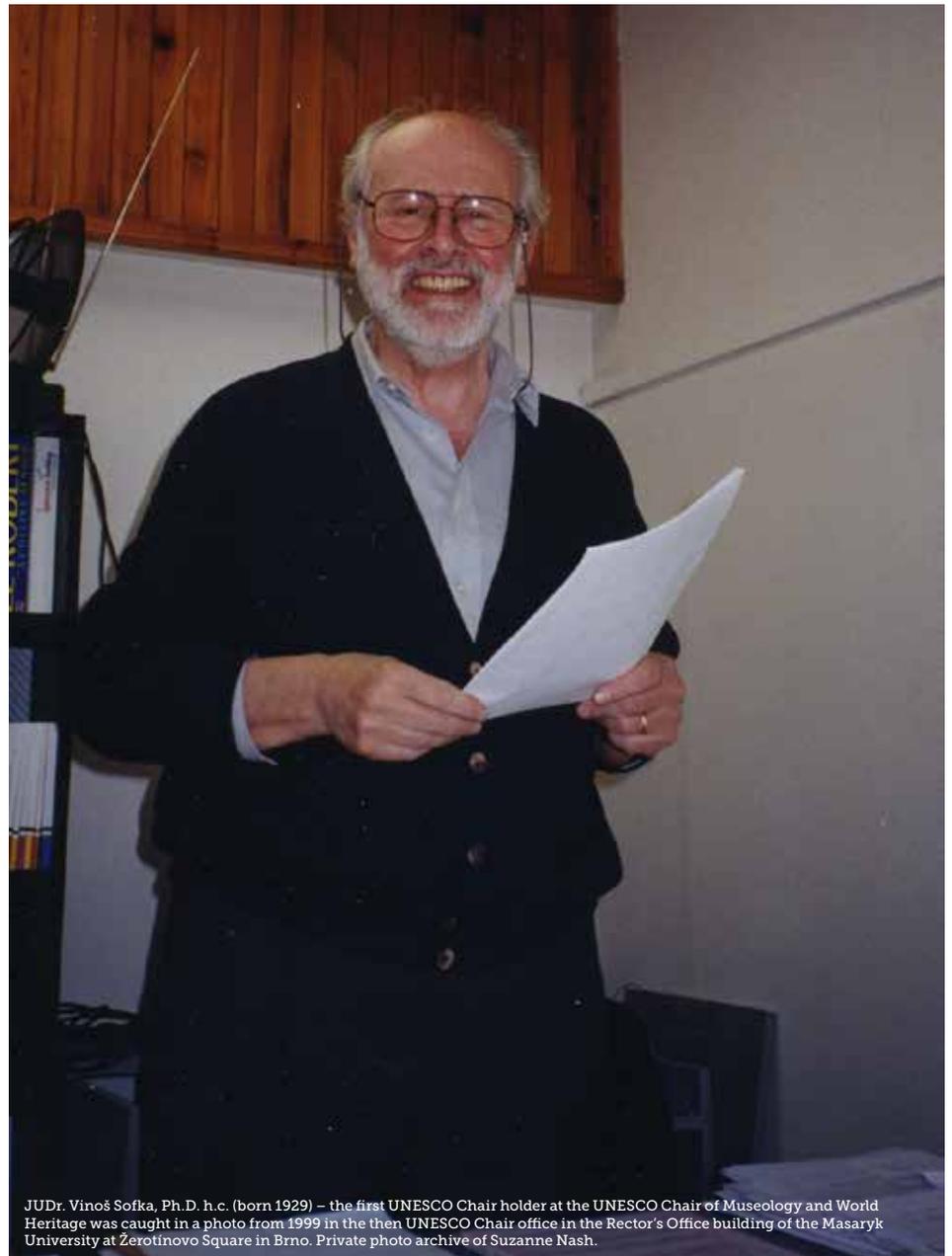
The first responsible of the museology department, Z. Z. Stránský, and the museologist Anna Gregorová, took museology outside the walls of the museum to create theoretical concepts of musealisation, fitting this action into a "relation of man to reality".

The purpose then of the Chair of Museology was to promote research on the ways this broad scope of museology could be seen. This is a vast programme for what was a Chair with only two people: a Chair holder and an assistant. Clearly serious choices had to be made: one was to take over leadership of the International Summer School of Museology (ISSOM), run by Dr. Stránský from 1987 to 1997, and to further Dr. Vinoš Sofka's project on societal transition. The transition studied was specifically the transition from a Communist system to a Democratic one – a change that had traumatized countries in the former Soviet Bloc starting in 1989, continuing during the 1990s – and into the new century too.

The making of something entirely new is often the work of one person and depends on that person's personality. The UNESCO

Chair is no exception. Vinoš Sofka seized upon the opportunity offered by the UNESCO Department of Education to create university chairs in innovative fields in those universities who saw the need to further develop their disciplines.

Vinoš Sofka had just the right background and personality to see a UNESCO Chair happen. First of all, his biggest asset was the ability to create a broad network, to charm new friends and to cultivate intellectual exchanges with brilliant people.



JUDr. Vitoš Sofka, Ph.D. h.c. (born 1929) – the first UNESCO Chair holder at the UNESCO Chair of Museology and World Heritage was caught in a photo from 1999 in the then UNESCO Chair office in the Rector's Office building of the Masaryk University at Žerotínovo Square in Brno. Private photo archive of Suzanne Nash.

His path in life went through many phases. Born in Brno in 1929, he attended schools in Brno and studied law at the University – but all was upset by the Communist takeover in 1948. Not only was the faculty of law closed in Brno, but he was also put into prison for no apparent reason at the age of 20 – although studying law, attending church, and making jokes about Stalin were already serious offences. The prison experience marked him for the rest of his life. He was released after a few months for lack of proof of being an “agent of the CIA”, and continued to study law at Charles University in Prague, avoiding authorities as much as possible.

However, when finally receiving his Dr. degree and applying for a job, he was told he was “ideologically impure” and there would be no state job for him. He could not afford to be without work (he was the eldest of four boys, whose father had died when Vиноš was 15) and became a construction worker. From there he studied to be a mason (a job he enjoyed), then he became a manager for worker relations when the magnificent Fair Grounds in Brno were rebuilt in the 1950’s. From there he was appointed manager at the institute of archaeology to work on construction needs of the digs at the site of the Great Moravian Empire near the Slovakian border.

Luck struck when UNESCO initiated a project for an exhibition in 1963 on the Great Moravian Empire to celebrate the 1100th anniversary of the arrival in 863 of the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius and the creation of writing in Slavonic lands. Vиноš was part of the team to mount the exhibition that included events and research publications, when the Commissioner of the exhibition suddenly died and Vиноš was appointed to replace him, at the young age of 30.

From there the museum career was on its way. He took the exhibition abroad to many places, another breakthrough for an exhibition mounted in Communist Czechoslovakia, first showing in Germany and then in Austria, Greece and Sweden.

When on August 21 1968 Soviet-led forces invaded Czechoslovakia and put an end to the “Prague Spring”, Vиноš and his family were in Greece. They decided that return-

ing under a Communist regime would be impossible with his dissident background, and through friends they eventually landed in Sweden. In 1969 he got a job in Stockholm at the State Historical Museum as manager of exhibitions, and became a member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). He joined ICOM’s International Committee for Museology the same year it was founded by Dr. Jelinek in 1977. He became President of the museology committee between 1983–1989, organizing annual international symposia and publications. He was Vice-President of ICOM for the following three years.

His network now covered all outstanding museologists of the time, as well as many persons in the Department of Education at UNESCO. The groundwork was laid to create a UNESCO Chair at the University in his hometown when he retired in 1994. Since 1989 Vиноš had been giving courses at the international summer school of museology in Brno, and working from this base Masaryk University applied for the Chair, which was approved at the UNESCO General Assembly in 1994.

The work of the Chair during Vиноš’s years between 1996 and 2002 was the summer school until the last one in 1999, and the establishment of the Transition Project in museums in the former Soviet Bloc, most importantly in Russia, and particularly in Siberia: Barnaul, Krasnoyarsk, Kemerovo, Novokuznetsk, and Perm.

One cannot do everything, and the active creative role did not leave time or energy to write as much as we would have liked. The successes in the museology of social awareness and trauma were not sufficiently recorded at the Chair. By now Vиноš was approaching the age of 80, his health was beginning to fail, and his knowledge of six languages (his own, Russian, German, Swedish, English and French) left him feeling uncomfortable for writing in any of them.

It is nevertheless a great satisfaction to see that those endeavors he worked so much to create, the International Committee of ICOM for Museology and the UNESCO Chair of Museology, still continue today, always renewed and always looking toward the future. ■