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SOME IMPRESSIONS CONCERNING VINOŠ SOFKA  
(1929–2016): LAWYER, BRICKLAYER, ADMINISTRATOR,  
AND MUSEOLOGIST

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In retrospective the period 1975–1990 may be considered as the heyday of the international museology discourse. Three of the personalities that played a key role were rooted in Brno and of the same generation. This museological “Triumvirat” consisted of Jan Jelínek (1926–2004), Zbyněk Stránský (1926–2016), and VINOŠ Sofka (1929–2016). Jelínek being the initiator, Stránský was one of the key theoreticians, while Sofka was the decisive organiser. All three personalities had a connection through the Moravian Museum, but the main vehicle of their contribution to the international museology discourse was the ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM).

VINOŠ Sofka will probably be remembered by an international audience mostly as successful president of ICOFOM (1982–1989). Out of appreciation for what he has meant for ICOFOM and the museology discourse at large, the committee elected him as honorary member in 2007. Till his health prevented him to continue, Sofka remained an active member.

In his obituary, François Mairesse, ICOFOM’s current president, recalled that for many members of the committee Sofka was “a museological father or grandfather figure,” adding “He was one of those people who, on the one hand, one is proud to have known and who, on the other hand, one sincerely admires for his humane qualities.”<sup>1</sup> These “hu-

1 MAIRESSE, François. Two ICOFOM Giants. In *ICOFOM International Committee for Museology*

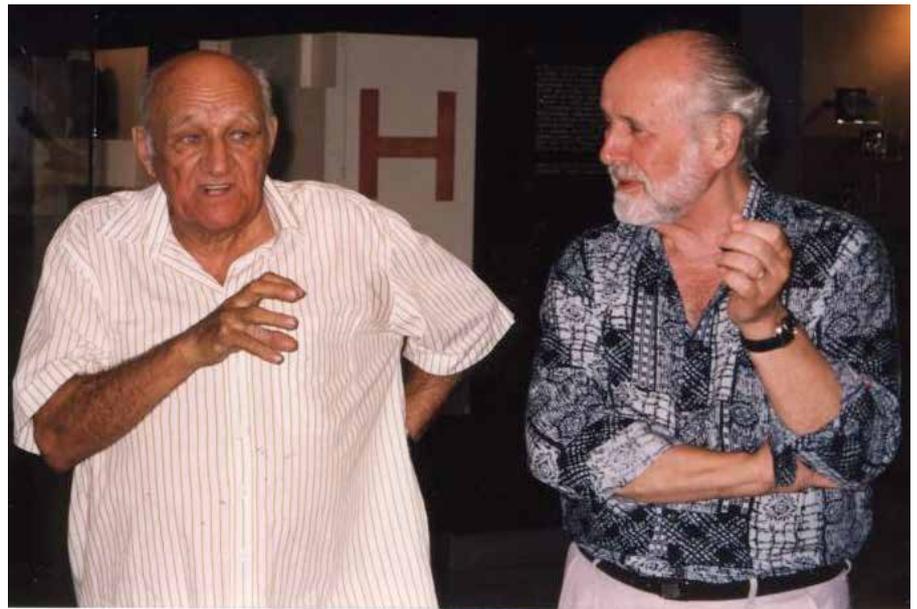


Figure 1: Jan Jelínek and VINOŠ Sofka. Photo: Peter van Mensch, July 1991.

mane qualities” were important, but his crucial contribution to the international museology discourse lies somewhere else. As Mairesse pointed out: “Man of consensus, he developed a methodology that aimed to reconcile the different ways of thinking about world museums and museology. This involved understanding, discussing and working towards synthesis.” This in particular refers to the role of ICOFOM as meeting place of museologists from the socialist countries of Central and East Europe and those of other parts of the world before the political changes of 1989, but also to his attempts to keep the supporters of the “muséologie nouvelle” aboard after the creation of the International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM) in 1985. Sofka himself

[online]. [cit. 2016-05-19]. Available from [www: <http://network.icom.museum/icofom>](http://network.icom.museum/icofom).

described ICOFOM as “an oasis in the confrontational world, where [...] people from East and West met, as if this outer world of suspicion, mistrust and disbelief did not exist, and in an atmosphere of understanding, tolerance and friendship around their common concern, exchanged ideas and worked together towards their common goal.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1995, Sofka published a detailed account of his life. He wrote at length about his experiences in former socialist Czechoslova-

2 SOFKA, VINOŠ. *My adventurous life with ICOFOM, museology, museologists and anti-museologists, giving special reference to ICOFOM Study Series: A Very Personal View of a Very Small Piece of the Contemporary History of Museology, a Study Which Became, Due to the Unpredictable Events of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century, a Very Personal Concern that Evolved into a Pursuit in the Heart and Mind* [online]. April 1995 [cit. 2016-05-19]. Available from [www: <http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/minisites/icofom/pdf/ISS\\_HISTORY\\_1995\\_V\\_SOJKA.pdf>](http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/icofom/pdf/ISS_HISTORY_1995_V_SOJKA.pdf).



Figure 2: Vinoš Sofka and Peter van Mensch, together with the participants of the 1990 ICOM annual conference, hosted by President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia.

kia, his escape from the regime, and new life as Swedish citizen.<sup>3</sup> Trained as lawyer, he was forbidden to work as such and took up the profession as bricklayer. Soon he became administrator of the Czech Academy of Sciences. In 1962 he became responsible for organising a huge project on the historical Great Moravian Empire, including the organisation of a large exhibition which eventually travelled to Greece, Austria, Germany, Poland, Sweden, and in 1968 to both Berlins. This was his first exposure to the world of museums and museology, and to the international networks. In his own words: *“Completed with a lawyer’s sense for a systematic and interdisciplinary approach, an administrator’s managerial methods, and a bricklayer’s experience of craftsmanship and ordinary peoples’ wisdom, it became my*

*point of departure for museological thinking.”*<sup>4</sup>

Sofka became employee of the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm. In his work the need for theory in the museum’s practical work became more and more apparent, and he started to promote museology in the museum and elsewhere. From 1978 onwards ICOFOM became the focus of his international activities. In his 1995 text Sofka has described in detail how he discussed his membership with Jan Jelínek, the founder-president of the committee, and how he developed ideas about the role of the committee during its 1978 meeting in Poland. Sofka’s paper, “Research in and on the Museum”<sup>5</sup> can be considered as *“springboard for the com-*

*ing activities of the Committee, and even personally for me in my very practical and broad museum work in Sweden, and in ICOFOM, especially as its Chairman since 1982.”*<sup>6</sup>

In his 1978 paper Sofka made a distinction between collection-based (subject-oriented) research and museological research, the latter being research on the museum as such. His conclusion was: *“Only the research in the museum that tackles both these tasks [...] can make it possible for the museum to fulfil its role in the society of today.”*<sup>7</sup> Sofka’s characterisation of the specificity of both types of research was still rather superficial, especially in view of what had already been discussed in, for example, the Soviet Union, the German Democratic

<sup>3</sup> See note 2.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

<sup>5</sup> SOFKA, Vinoš. Research in and on the museum. In JELÍNEK, Jan and VĚRA SLANÁ (eds.). *Possibilities and limits in scientific research typical for the museums*. Brno: International Committee for Museology, 1978, pp. 58–68.

<sup>6</sup> See note 2.

<sup>7</sup> SOFKA, Vinoš. Research in and on the museum. In JELÍNEK, Jan and VĚRA SLANÁ (eds.). *Possibilities and limits in scientific research typical for the museums*. Brno: International Committee for Museology, 1978, pp. 68.

Republic and Czechoslovakia, but it mapped out the themes that would dominate ICOFOM's discussions for many years to come.

After 1989 Sofka was eager to contribute to the (re)development of museology in his city of birth. At Masaryk University, where the International Summer School of Museology was already established in 1987 he was appointed Chairperson of the School's Scientific and Pedagogical Council (1990). In 1994, the Director General of UNESCO and the Rector of Masaryk University decided to establish the UNESCO Chair of Museology and the World Heritage in Brno, Czech Republic, as the first UNESCO Chair with this specific orientation in the world. Sofka became chair holder (till 2002).

As chair holder, Sofka was very much interested in the transition issues following the fall of the Soviet Union and the fall of the other regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> In the project his personal early experiences with totalitarian regimes served as driving force. Museum, he wrote, were misused by the regimes. Museums should not only liberate themselves from this, but play an active role in processing the past by reflecting on their own histories. Sofka continued to promote the Transition Project in Russia (the Gulag Museum in Perm, for example, contacts in Barnaul, Kemerovo and Moscow) until 2009, but the climate under Putin was not favourable to finding fault with Stalinism.

In December 2011, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch and I visited Vnoš Sofka and Suzanne Nash in their house at Täby (Sweden). We had lengthy talks about Vnoš' life, his involvement in ICOFOM and ICOM,

and his experiences with the International School of Museology and the Chair of Museology and the World Heritage. One of the anecdotes appears to me of major significance. Suzanne told of an experience which had a deep impact on Vnoš during the German occupation (1938–1945). Walking with his father on Czeska, the main pedestrian shopping street in Brno, sometime in 1939–1940, they stumbled upon an aggressive marching group of German Czechs who were Nazi-sympathisers singing Werhrmacht songs. Vnoš' father purposely went with him to the middle of the street to march against them, and refused to make way.

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<sup>8</sup> SOFKA, Vnoš. Changes in the world and European upheavals: heritage, museums, the museum profession and museology. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 2004, vol. 33, pp. 94–101.