

SUMMARY

Exile and Identity. The Post-Prague Spring Exile in Austria and Switzerland

Can your “national identity” be lost when you live abroad for half a century? This question was at the core of my interest in the Czech exile. This monograph deals with the Czech refugees in Austria and Switzerland who fled their motherland after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. It is based on various archival materials and recorded semi-structured interviews with narrators who had witnessed the Soviet invasion and became a part of the following exodus. All sources were gathered during field research which was being carried out among the Czech communities in Austria and Switzerland from 2011 to 2015. The analysis focused on two main issues which were integral parts of the Czech exile in the second half of the 20th century: 1) the process of integration of newcomers in the host countries and 2) a change of their national identity.

Austria and Switzerland were the first Western states which opened their borders for the Czechoslovak refugees after the Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968. Each of the state granted asylum to nearly 12 000 refugees within 2 years. The comparable numbers of accepted Czechs and Slovaks as well as the similar benevolent approach of both governments to the refugees were the reasons behind my decision to compare the Czech exile in these host countries. I was interested whether the Czechs were well-integrated into the majority and whether there were any differences between the Czech communities in Austria and Switzerland. Moreover, I was concerned to find out how influenced the integration process their representation of national identity in the interviews. What did it mean to them: “to be Czechs”? The integration and the Czech identity

as *a category of practise* had become the key issues of the book which was structured accordingly.

Chapter 2) deals with methodology and Chapter 3) with theoretical questions. I employed comparative method to analyse archival sources obtained in various archives (such as the Austrian State Archive, the Czech National Archives, or the Swiss Federal Archives) as well as a method of oral history to deal with the questions of national identity of Czechs living in exile. Chapter 4) is focused on a description of the Prague Spring, which was suppressed by the Soviet invasion, and the following exodus of Czechoslovak citizens to Austria and Switzerland. Chapter 5) is dedicated to the comparison of the integration process of newcomers. I applied a theory of professor Heckmann who divided the process of integration into 4 different categories – structural, cultural, social and identificational. Chapters 6 & 7) are focused on the recorded interviews and the analysis of the changes in a representation of the Czech national identity of the former refugees in the interviews. The last chapter of the monograph deals with the Czech identity as *a category of practise*.

Popularity of the reform movement called the Prague Spring in the West as well as a shock out of the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia, literally, opened the door for thousands of Czechs and Slovaks fleeing the country. The Austrian authorities registered 162 000 refugees within the first 2 weeks after the invasion. The key role in opening of borders for the Czechoslovak citizens played the Austrian Embassy in Prague led by the ambassador Rudolf Kirchschläger. Moreover, the Soviet troops followed Brezhnev's orders to let people go because: *"Only the contra-revolutionaries would flee."* The borders remained open until October 9, 1969. Until then the stream of refugees had continued. People had been leaving the country mainly out of fear of uncertain future which was personified by the Soviet tanks in the streets of their cities and towns. Many people, especially the ones who had been persecuted in the past, took a risk, and left the country to build up a professional career in the free world. Altogether there were approximately 70 000 people who fled and stayed abroad at that time.

The Western societies and governments, especially the Swiss and Austrian one, manifested solidarity with oppressed nations and set liberal requirements for the Czechoslovak asylum seekers. As soon as they were given asylum, they were provided by accommodation and got access to the labour market. The biggest problem in the first phase of the integration process was the lack of language proficiency of the newcomers. Only 2.5% of them could speak fluently German (or French in case of the Francophone cantons of Switzerland). The refugees who were described by a Canadian observer as *"young, well-educated and skilled – precisely the type of immigrants Canada wanted"*, were highly motivated too. Despite the lack of necessary language skills most of them found a job within a month. It was due to the continuing economic boom in the West in the late 60s. All the factors

(the skilled, educated, and motivated refugees as well as the benevolent migrant policy and enough workplaces) launched the successful integration process of the Czech refugees. Gradually – as the sociological surveys say – they got better education, appropriate jobs, and new friends too. The research conducted in early 90s among the Czech communities in Austria and Switzerland showed that most of the former Czechoslovak refugees had reached the socioeconomic status of the Austrian and Swiss majority. For instance, their children, the second generation of the refugees in Vienna, scored even higher in ranking of accomplishing the tertiary education (10.7 %) than the German-speaking majority (7.7 %). All the data gathered during the field research confirmed that Czechs were successfully integrated in both host countries. Moreover, integration was fulfilled in all 4 dimensions presented in Heckmann’s theory, including social identification. It meant the former refugees perceived the host countries as their new home and were proud of the citizenship they had acquired in the integration process. It happened 4 years after their arrival in the case of Austria and 12 years after their arrival in the case of Switzerland. The same findings suggested the interviews with narrators which were recorded in Austria and Switzerland in 2013 and 2014.

The last two chapters of the book deal with the Czech identity of the former refugees. I decided to apply concepts presented in the well-known article of Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper: *Beyond Identity*. I did not intent to analyse national identity as a self-evident term but in Brubaker’s words as the “*category of practise*”. I was interested in ways the Czech national identity was represented in interviews by narrators who were participants of the immigration wave in 1968. How did the former refugees understand a term: “*Czech identity*”, and what narrations did they use to describe it? These were the fundamental questions. To make the findings more evident I substituted the concept of identity with terms of *identification* and *self-understanding*. These two concepts were used as the *categories of analysis*.

The analysis focused on two equally important issues in the interviews: 1) Identification of the former refugees with the Czechoslovakia, later the Czech Republic and 2) Identification of the former refugees with the Czech nation, especially with other members of the Czech diaspora. Even though there were 41 participants in the project, all the interviews consisted of narrations which had the same pattern thus allowing me to generalize the findings. The identification of refugees with Czechoslovakia, which was founded as the “national state” of Czechs and Slovaks, has considerably changed during their lifespan.

The narrators who were born between 1940 and 1950 always recollected Czechoslovakia with linkage to the Communist totalitarian regime which had ruled the country since 1948. Narratives describing their childhood in 50s were full of unspoken fear in families and recalled memories of various injustices they had witnessed. It changed when narrators were recalling their life in 60s. The time

was depicted as the “golden age” of narrators’ lives which was nonetheless brutally interrupted by the Soviet invasion. The subsequent stories vividly described experiences with the Soviet troops in the cities of Czechoslovakia which eventually led the narrators to leave the country. At the beginning of their exile there were feelings of loss of the homeland which soon turned to anger due to the political situation in the country where all reforms of the Prague Spring were halted, and Alexander Dubcek had to step down in April 1969.

As the integration process was successfully taking place, Czechoslovakia was becoming more and more a foreign state for the former refugees. However, it changed once again after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 when Czechoslovakia became a democratic state. The borders opened and all narrators could return to restore ties to family members and friends who had stayed in the country. Despite the critical view of many narrators on the political situation, *identification* with their former motherland became stronger. It strengthened even more after the Czech Republic had joined the European Union. Nowadays many of the former refugees have dual citizenship and *identify with* the country of their origin.

The analysis of the interviews showed the same progress regarding *identification* with the Czech nation. At the beginning of the integration many refugees did not want to actively participate in the Czech national clubs or associations, which existed in Austria and Switzerland, partly due to fear of the Czechoslovak Secret Service agents who were known for infiltrating them, partly due to reluctance to any collective activity (which the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia had been enforcing). Instead, as they asserted in the interviews, they fully focused on establishing their new existence in the host countries. The already-existing Czech diaspora in Austria regarded this approach of the Czech newcomers as a “betrayal of the national cause” and refused further cooperation. This led the participants of the 1968 immigration wave to found their own associations. Eventually, it created a huge gap between the two generations of Czechs in Austria. Only after the fall of the Iron Curtain, when the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia collapsed, the gap slowly started to fade away.

The situation was different for Czechs who put down roots in Switzerland because the Czech community over there was very small (less than 200 active members) due to the strict immigration policy of the Swiss state before 1956. The arrival of 11 973 Czech asylum seekers meant “new blood” for the ageing local Czech community. Many new clubs and associations were established. One of the main ones was the Czech Sokol organisation which had the largest membership. However, many refugees favoured the integration into the Swiss majority to participation in the Czech clubs as was the case of the immigrants in Austria. It is estimated that only some 10% of them took an active part in the local Czech community. The rest focused on learning German or French language and getting appropriate jobs or education. In both countries the *identification* of the former

refugees with the Czech community and the Czech nation became stronger only after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Nowadays, as they claimed in the interviews, they feel to be a part of the Czech nation abroad. What did it really mean to be “a part of the Czech nation” though?

The last chapter of the book dealt with the *Czech self-understanding*. The collected data showed that the self-understanding of people living abroad is strongly connected to the Czech language and culture. The narrators represented the Czech identity in the interviews through the perfect knowledge of the Czech language. The reason was that many people ceased to use the Czech language in the integration process and replaced it with German or French. After 50 years they forgot to speak Czech. These people were considered by other members of the Czech community as the ones who lost their “Czechness” and, that is interesting, they did not regard themselves as Czechs either. The *Czech self-understanding* of being a part of the nation was strongly intertwined with the Czech language and the Czech high culture such as literature, film and drama which contained the Czech language. To put it simply: to keep the Czech identity abroad means to keep speaking Czech abroad as well.