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Surviving normalization : 1977 through the 1980s

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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 vtipu 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 *protekce*. 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.