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Into a new world : November 1989 and the 1990s

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Into a new world:

November 1989 and the 1990s

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

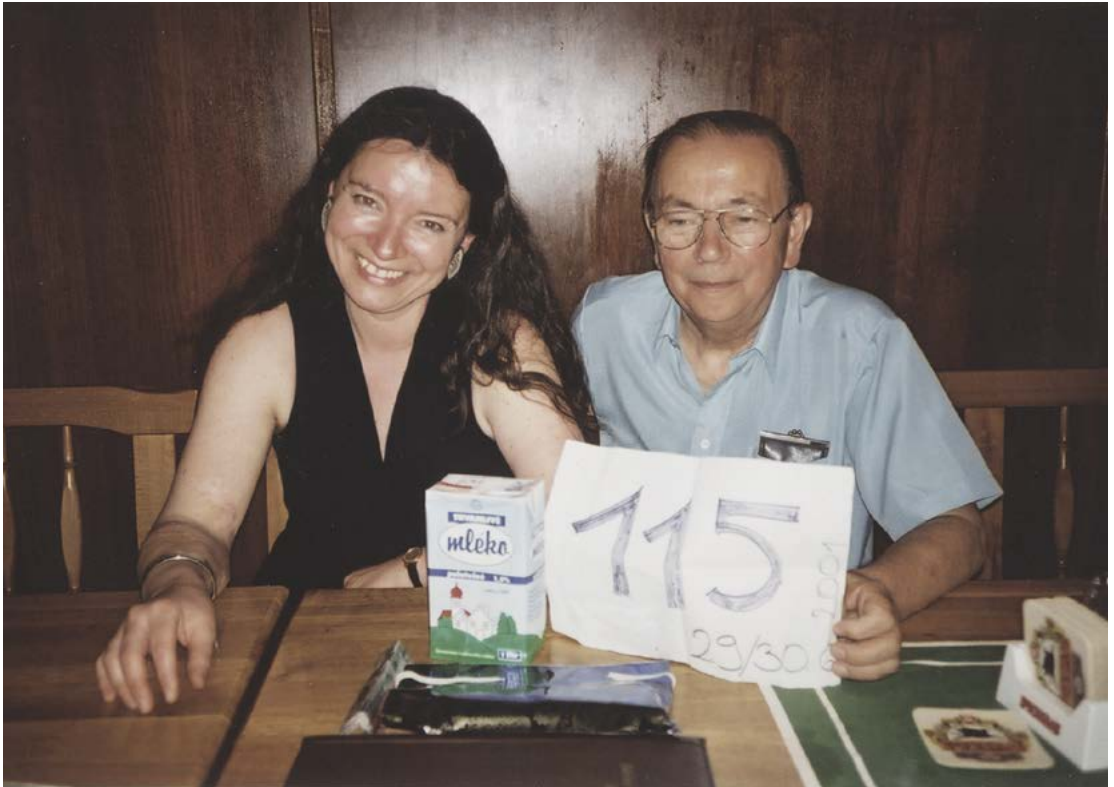
Animal Farm premiered in Cikháj on 18 November; the next day we returned to Brno. We were hardly back before the student strike began on Monday 20 November. Two things should be said here. One is that whenever you read about the events in November and the student strike, you tend to get the impression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

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



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

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... and 2001.

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

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

First term as head of department

New teachers

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

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

New degree programme

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Single English

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



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

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

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

Student activists

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

Doug Dix

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

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

Beth Edgington

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

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

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

Ota Kříž as head

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

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

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

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

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

Single English, Act II

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

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

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

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

The Hladký affair

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Department head redux

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

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

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

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

Canadian Studies

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

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

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



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

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

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

Final considerations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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