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Samuel Kostomlatský

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SAMUEL KOSTOMLATSKÝ



Samuel Kostomlatský, the last surviving member of the founding generation of the Faculty of Arts of Brno University, former head of the English Section of the Institute of Modern Languages and former teacher at the English Institute, died on 9 October, 1984, at the age of 89.

He was born in Bystré near Nové Město nad Metují in northeastern Bohe-

mia, on 5 January, 1895. His father was a technician employed by a railway company, but after surviving a near-fatal bout of pneumonia brought on after he had broken through the ice during skating, he decided to devote his life to spreading the word of God. After attending an Evangelical school in Germany he founded a reformed Evangelical church in Prague, and later moved to Brno. Samuel Kostomlatský thus attended primary school in Prague and gymnasium in Brno. He showed great literary talent while still a child, and at the age of thirteen he was already helping his father to edit a church magazine called *Betanie* and starting to write poetry himself, at first under the pseudonym of Pravdomil Kralický (the first name means "truth-lover" while the second is taken from the village of Kralice in western Moravia, where the classic Czech Protestant translation of the Bible was made and printed by the Czech Brethren from 1579 to 1594). He also learned English, in addition to the Latin, Greek and German taught at the gymnasium, and after finishing the gymnasium in 1913 he was sent to a Protestant college in Glasgow to study theology, the idea being that he would take over from his father when he had graduated. When World War I broke out a year later, he was interned for a short time as a citizen of an enemy country. We was soon released and was able to continue with his studies. Besides his theological studies, he devoted much time

and attention to the English language and English literature, even reading Dostoyevsky in an English translation. Towards the end of the war he got involved in the work of the new Czechoslovak organizations in Britain and for a short time served in the British army.

After returning home in 1919, he was offered a position in the diplomatic services of the new Czechoslovak Republic, but this he turned down. He also decided not to follow in the footsteps of his father, who had died in the meantime, and he actually stopped being a member of any church, having formed instead a theistic philosophy of his own, which incorporated elements of Indian philosophy. Using his knowledge of the English language and of English literature, he started teaching English.

The University of Brno was founded in 1919 and the English Department of the Faculty of Arts started regular classes in the year 1922–23. There were three teachers, Professor František Chudoba, Samuel Kostomlatský and Laurence Hyde, a British lecturer. Kostomlatský also taught at the English Institute and for a short time at the Technical University of Brno. After World War II he was head of the English section of the Institute of Modern Languages, later on renamed The School of Languages. When the university re-opened in 1945, he continued his classes in the English Department as an external teacher and remained there till 1956. It has been said that virtually everyone who learned or studied English in Brno between 1920 and 1960 was a pupil of Samuel Kostomlatský's: altogether, they must have numbered in the thousands.

His experience in teaching led him to write a few but useful and highly perceptive publications. Drawing on his long experience as a teacher, he published an 87-page book on *English idioms and their function in speech* (Brno, 1971) and a paper called *Idiom as instrument of personal approach* (*Sborník prací filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity* E 10.33–4, Brno, 1965). His deep understanding of literature can be seen in his analysis of the rhythmic effects in Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Crossing the Bar', published in

Brno studies in English 14.133–7 (Brno, 1981). He also wrote an interesting textbook of English, *Don't stand on ceremony*, a straightforward story about young people and their elders. The lessons in the book are actually episodes in an unfolding narrative. Kostomlatský chose to use a method found in modern radio and television courses.

The teaching of English, however, was not S. K.'s only sphere of interest. The literary talent he showed in his youth continued to develop. He wrote a number of poems and in 1937 published a novel, *Plameny mezi buky* (Flames Among the Beeches). A number of his poems were published in magazines, while many of them remained in manuscript form, mainly those devoted to his friends, as did another novel, a satire. He was a member of Moravské kolo spisovatelů (The Moravian Circle of Writers). He was also active in another field of literature, that of translation. He published a translation of *David Copperfield* in 1932 under the title *Život s dobrým koncem* (A Life with a Good End) and produced innumerable translations into English of papers, studies and even books, in all spheres of the humanities.

But Samuel Kostomlatský's creative talents were not merely literary. He was also a musician and composer and wrote a number of songs, either to his own words or to the words of Jarmila Urbánková.

Nor should his activities as a photographer be forgotten, especially his superb photos from the Chrby Hills, a region in eastern Moravia to which he felt strong ties.

Samuel Kostomlatský had a profound knowledge of the English language, English literature and English history. He was an inspiring teacher, a person with wide cultural interests and a courageous and kind man with a balanced philosophy of life. No one who met him could fail to be charmed by his enthusiasm or attracted by his integrity. His death not only marks a severing of the last links with the beginnings of the Department of English in Brno, well over sixty years ago, but brings a deep sense of personal loss to all those who knew him.

Josef Hladký