

Kačer, Tomáš; Kamenická, Renata

Editors' introduction

In: Sparling, Don. *Outside in : a personal history of the Brno Department of English narrated by Don Sparling*. Kačer, Tomáš (editor); Kamenická, Renata (editor). First published Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2022, pp. 7-9

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Jávor, Anna; Ježek, Miroslav

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Editors' introduction

This book has been prepared in conjunction with an important anniversary in the history of our department. It was just over one hundred years ago, in 1921, that the first teaching began in the Brno English Department, and we are proud to carry on this tradition. This book is also coming out at a time when the department is experiencing a very difficult period, perhaps one of the most difficult ever from a certain point of view. For over a year it was impossible to meet students in person, with as many as three semesters affected by restrictive measures called for by the world-wide epidemic of the killer virus COVID-19. For many a month, life at the department stopped.

At times which are as difficult as the years 2020 and 2021 have turned out to be, each institution may want to look back at its fundamental values and history to regain the strength to carry on. Remembering the history of the department with its highs and lows, twists of history foreseen and unforeseen, preventable and unpredictable, is a good starting point for a realization that whatever the circumstances, the department has always been at the forefront of producing excellence in research, providing the best available education to its marvellous students and, most of all, providing a sense of community for its students, teachers, and administrative staff.

We are currently the Department of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, but this is only the most recent in a series of names since it began as the Anglický seminář a century ago. For that reason, throughout the following text we usually refer to the department as the English Department, or simply “the department”. We are aware that this is very reductive (there are several passages in the book dedicated to all sorts of areas outside the narrow frame of what “English” is) as well as restrictive (there is, after all, a sister English Department at the Faculty of Education, but this book only focuses on the one at the Faculty of Arts). However, it is not the aim of this book to be a fully objective and all-encompassing history of English studies at the university level in Brno.

The book is highly subjective. It suffers from all the deficiencies one can imagine when it comes to a personal account of historical events. They are certainly seen from the single vantage point of the person telling the story, inevitably shaping it the way that they see it, and skipping elements that they were not involved in. On the other hand, the personality of the teller of the historical narrative becomes the guarantor of the authenticity of the historical events and contexts described, making them facts of oral history, an account of which may assume the form of a history book such as this one.

We, as editors, have been lucky to have found a person that meets all the requirements for a reputable vessel for the department's institutional memory: no one else than Don Sparling. Don was one of the most prominent figures in the department from his arrival in the late 1970s till his departure in 2000. Having come to Brno as an outsider to the department's traditions and a relative newcomer to Czech culture as such, he was able to embrace both, assume them critically as his own, and become a crucial influence on them. We believe that there is no one else around today who is able to provide such a complex narrative of the department's history as Don.

One day back in 2019, one of us, Tomáš Kačer, was casually talking to Don about his ideas and plans. The vision of completing Professor Josef Hladký's self-imposed mission to put together a history of the department came up. Don said that he had already started visiting the Masaryk

University archives, interviewing graduates and former teachers, recording their memories, and jotting down notes about the department's history. One day he would write it all up, said Don. Tomáš, having known Don for over fifteen years and being aware of the broad scope of activities he was involved in, which left him with little time to sit down and write a book (or, more precisely, to write *this* book), was sceptical: "Why don't we get together a couple of times and record everything that you've found out, remembered, and learnt from others? I can then turn it into a book." This was the initial impulse for an oral history of the department, and the result is now in your hands – or on your screens.

As every Anglicist knows, each writing project needs a method: otherwise, the result is madness (unless there is madness in the method, as every Anglicist also knows). The progress of this project was the following. First, the history was divided into four periods. The first two periods are (1) the interwar years and (2) 1945 to Don's arrival in the department in 1977. They differ from what came later because in retelling the history, Don had to rely entirely on archival materials and what he learned from other people's accounts. The next period (3), from Don's arrival to 1989, is told from Don's point of view, based on his personal memories and available materials. The last period (4), November 1989–2000, characterizes the decade of complete social change after the fall of Communism and coincides with Don's role as head of the English Department. It consists almost completely of personal reminiscences and considerations.

When the project began, Don met with Tomáš Kačer and Renata Kamenická, who joined the team as the second editor of the work-in-progress, to identify the crucial events and personalities of each of the historical periods. The three of them agreed on a scenario of what had to be mentioned and what could be left out from Don's narrative. Then a series of talks with Don were recorded, with Tomáš and Renata occasionally asking questions. These recordings were transcribed by a student at the department, Barbora Stenglová. Tomáš then read the transcript, cutting it, condensing it, and rearranging it. After this initial editorial step, Renata finished the draft with editorial fine-tuning. Both editors identified various shortcomings in the final text, and discussed these with Don. Based on their input, Don gave the twice edited text a final shape, so that it would keep its lively nature as a narrated, spoken document, but at the same time offer a solid, quick-paced reading experience for the reader.

As such, the book reflects what Don considers crucial for an understanding of the department's history, as well as what he personally finds interesting and amusing. The topics include individual personalities and their relationships, students and their activities, and the life of the department as a community. Also, teaching itself and the continuous reform of studies resonate throughout the book. As you will see, there is only a little space devoted to research. Don felt he was not the right person to summarize and evaluate his colleagues' research. Thus the book does not serve as an overview of the academic achievements of the department's teachers and graduates. Those interested in the academic output of the department may be referred to a series of lectures in the current Master's programme, *English Studies in the Czech Environment*, offered in the fall semesters and providing an overview of works by the most prominent Czech personalities in English Studies, many of them from the English Department in Brno, such as Professor František Chudoba and Professor Jan Firbas.

The book ends in 2000 for two reasons. First, this is the year that Don left the department, so any further narrative would necessarily have to be someone else's. We believe that one day another book will pick up where this one stops. Second, we feel that in many ways the post-2000 developments are in fact the department's present. As such, it is impossible to detach oneself from the current events taking place at the department. It would be difficult to achieve any kind of distance.

A request to share your memories

The department has played a huge part in the lives of each of us who studied and/or worked here (we, the editors, fit into both of these categories). We believe that is a part of your lives, too, no matter whether you are a graduate, a former employee, a colleague, a current student, or a teacher, simply consider yourself a friend of the department as a whole, or are associated with it in some other way. No matter how you may be connected to the department's history, we would like to ask you to share your memories with us. We will be collecting materials relating to all aspects of the department's history. You may share your *index*, photos, or documents of any kind that you think have a historical value. We will digitize them and give them back to you. The digital copies will be placed in the Masaryk University archives.

We are especially keen on hearing your stories. We will be delighted if you are willing to share your memories of the time you spent at the department. We may agree on a list of topics you want to talk about and sit down with you and make a recording. These recordings will be between 45 and 90 minutes. These will then be stored in the university's audio archive, where they will be available in the future to anyone who might be interested in hearing memories about the department.

If you wish to share your past at the department with us, please send us an e-mail at english@phil.muni.cz.

We are looking forward very much to hearing from you.

And now, without further ado, we would like to wish you a pleasant experience reading about the history of the English Department in Brno, as narrated by Don Sparling.

Tomáš Kačer and Renata Kamenická, eds.

