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Post-war and post-coup : 1945–1977

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Post-war and post-coup: 1945–1977

The period to be covered now probably seems puzzling. But it's not arbitrary – 1945 marks the reopening of the university, and 1977 my arrival in the English Department. Unfortunately for this period of just over thirty years there's no central documentary source of information like the Chudoba fonds in the university archives that I could draw on. And of course I have no first-hand experience for talking about the department in this period, which isn't the case later on. Which means that it's in fact the most difficult period for me to deal with. I've done half a dozen interviews with people who studied in the department after the war and in the early fifties, and that gives me some sense of what it was like then. My wife, Zdena Sparlingová, started studying there in 1961 and she spoke a bit about the period of the thaw, but she had a rather ambivalent attitude to the department and didn't take much part in its life, so she wasn't able to recollect much that was of interest. In fact she was actually almost kicked out by Jan Firbas, because she disliked and was very inept at *fonetický přepis*, something Firbas was very strict about. And I've talked informally, but not systematically, to other people who studied at the department at some point in this period. So what follows comes mostly from what I've gleaned from various books and articles, and what was told to me by department members and former students over the years.

Re-opening after the war

Renewing the department after the war wasn't easy. The first challenge was physical. The faculty buildings had been taken over by some branch of the German-run bureaucracy. They made all sorts of alterations and left the buildings in a terrible state. And most of the books had been stashed away in a storeroom. Students were commandeered to help haul the books back and set up the offices and classrooms. And also to help with actual repairs. Jaroslav Peprník once told me a story from when he started studying in October 1945. The first thing that happened to him was that Jan Firbas – who was then a student, but a few years older, which meant he'd done his first semester beginning in June – handed him a trowel and said “We have to fix that wall over there.” This was somewhere in Building A. I wish I had a photo of Firbas and Peprník fixing that wall!

The second challenge was professional and had to do with the continuity of the department. It had suffered badly because of the war. First the university was closed down, and then in 1941 Chudoba died. When the department was re-established in 1945, Chudoba's prize student, Karel Štěpaník, was taken in to cover the literature courses. Samuel Kostomlatský was again on hand for practical English classes. He was helped by a couple of external teachers, Dr. Milada Borůvková – a former student of the department who'd gone on to do a doctorate on the development of feminism in England – and W. P. Jowett, head of the Brno branch of the British Council. But there was no one qualified to head the department, so it was folded administratively into the German Department under its head, Antonín Beer, as a “temporary measure”. (No one realized it at the time, but this was a sign of things to come.) Someone was also needed to introduce the up-and-coming discipline of linguistics. Both problems were solved at one go when Josef Vachek was brought in from Prague with the promise that in short order he'd become a docent and then



Samuel Kostomlatský, the Faculty's original English lecturer.
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a professor. He speaks a bit about this move to Brno in his *Vzpomínky českého anglisty*. For many reasons it wasn't something he was very keen on. He was active in Prague academic circles and the Prague Linguistic Circle and had already been offered a path to become a docent at what was to become the VŠE. So a bright future lay ahead of him there. What was more, he'd have to commute between Brno and Prague because of other commitments in the capital. But after a long discussion, the Czech linguist Bohumil Havránek, a mentor of his and at the time Dean of the Faculty of Arts in Brno, "disarmed" him by proclaiming that he mustn't decide on the basis of what he found to his personal liking, but on the basis of where he was needed. It says a lot about Vachek's character, and perhaps about the times, that this clinched it, and he agreed to go to Brno. But under the condition that he'd only remain there till someone else was found.

Vachek remained in Brno till 1962, and left then only as the result of Communist plans to remove him. Once in Brno, he was captured almost immediately by the warm reception he received, the enthusiasm of the students, and the inclusive atmosphere at the faculty. There was little stratification in the teaching staff. In his memoir he speaks about the spirit amongst the faculty teachers: “*Byla to skutečná univerzitní demokracie v nejpřínějším smyslu toho slova, jaká tehdy byla sotva jinde možná; rozhodně nikoli v Praze.*” When he got an extremely attractive offer to return to Prague less than a year later – an immediate professorship followed by a six-month research stay in Britain – he turned it down. He says this was because it was becoming clearer and clearer to him that his *poslání* – his calling, his mission – was in Brno and in building up the department here. And this was despite roadblocks along the way. In particular, there was a long delay before he was actually named professor. This finally came in the fall of 1947. Four or five more months, and Vachek might have remained an associate or even just an assistant professor for many more years. However, even after he was no longer head of the department he remained the dominant figure, partly because of his scholarly excellence, partly because of the quality of his lectures, partly by sheer force of character.

It was during Vachek’s period in Brno that most of the teachers I later came to know entered the department. I’ll talk in more detail about them later, but here I think it’s useful to list them, just to give some idea of how the department grew in those first roughly twenty years after the war. As I said, Karel Štěpaník joined the department immediately in 1945, and Samuel Kostomlatský returned. Jessie Kocmanová came later that year, fresh from Scotland. At first she taught English language courses and classes on British and American history and society, and after she got her doctorate three years later she started teaching British and American literature. During the war Jan Firbas had learned English at the Institute of Modern Languages in Brno and had also passed the examination to qualify as a school teacher. He started studying in the first semester that was opened, in July – it was for older students who’d been held back by the war – and graduated after only two years of intensive study in 1947. (The normal degree course back then was four years.) He was immediately accepted in the department as an assistant and soon became Vachek’s right-hand man. In 1950 they were joined by Lidmila Pantůčková, who was a literary scholar. Jaroslav Ondráček graduated in 1953 and Aleš Tichý in 1955. Both of them taught practical language courses in the department, but as teachers employed by the university’s Department of Languages. They only became members of the department later, in 1962 – Ondráček as a linguist and Tichý as a literary person who also specialized in translation. That same year Eva Golková also joined the department. These were the people who built up the department in the course of the first couple of decades after the war, and most of them continued to shape it for the following couple of decades as well.

Post-1948

In 1950 Vachek was succeeded as head of department by Karel Štěpaník – someone much his junior. But following the Communist coup in February 1948 the whole university was turned topsy-turvy – the old rules no longer applied. Even the institutional framework for the academics’ work was continually in a state of flux. Before long the word “Masaryk” stopped being used as part of the university’s name: people began referring to it simply as “Brno University”, and this was even used on official headed notepaper. But legally it was still Masaryk University, and throughout the fifties there was talk of changing it. This became serious towards the end of the decade, and one name that came up was that of the first Communist President. The idea of teaching at Gottwald University was so appalling that a frantic effort was made to find an acceptable name. And so in 1960 the name was officially changed to Jan Evangelista Purkyně University. It was a close shave.

During this period, the faculty went through great uncertainty and an endless series of transformations. After February the departments were renamed for a short time as “scholarly fields”. These weren’t very effective, and at one point there was even a proposal to close down the study of English and the Romance languages in Brno completely. The argument was that they were also taught at the new university in Olomouc – it was close, and this would help its development. That plan was dropped, and before long there was another reorganization. For a while the English and German Departments were linked up, then the Romance languages and English, followed by a Department of Western European Philology and Phonetics. After a few years came another wave of reform. This left behind it a Department of Romance Studies and Phonetics and a Department of English and German Studies, headed by Štěpaník. Four years later, in 1962, the latter split, and the Department of English and American Studies came into existence.

Despite the organizational chaos of these years, the department prospered. Though Vachek was no longer in the leading position officially, he remained the *de facto* leader, setting the standards and making proposals for new activities. One was to found the Brno branch of the *Kruh moderních filologů* (Czech Modern Language Association). This brought together academics from the fields of English, German and Romance language studies, and helped strengthen bonds of collegiality at the faculty – bonds that according to Vachek were strengthened even more after they adjourned to the nearby *Akademická kavárna* following lectures. Another important initiative was to launch a new scholarly journal. *Brno Studies in English* appeared for the first time in 1959 – the first scholarly journal at the faculty devoted to one particular language and cultural field. Over the years it became the model for other departments wanting to launch their own specialized journals. At the beginning it was only published every two years. In the mid-1990s it became an annual. And of course now it comes out twice a year and it’s in the SCOPUS database and has a well-deserved international reputation. A real academic success story.

Josef Vachek

As I’ve already said, Vachek left in 1962. The circumstances that led to this give an interesting insight into what it was like at the faculty at the time. He and Jan Firbas were deeply believing Christians, Vachek a Catholic and Firbas a Protestant. Neither tried to hide their faith. When Vachek was teaching at the faculty, he’d often pop in to the little chapel that used to be on Grohova street for a quick prayer on his way to class. And Firbas was quite active within the structures of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren. Curiously enough, though there was comment and strong criticism of them in the 1950s, nothing happened to them – they continued as teachers. But in 1960 this changed. For some reason there was a new wave of tightening up. (Something similar happened in the late 1980s.) The people running the country realized that change was in the air and their reaction was to try to block it, or at least to dampen it down as much as possible. So the teachers at the faculty had to undergo a “religious test”. There were three questions: 1. Are you a believer? 2. If not, since when? 3. What religious prejudices do the members of your family suffer from? Only six teachers at the faculty declared they were practising Christians; Vachek and Firbas were among them. After long discussions, the Brno City Communist Party decided that both Vachek and Firbas were what might now be called “deplorables”. In January 1962, a Party representative presented himself at a special meeting of the department and announced that Firbas would have to leave the faculty in 1963 and Vachek in 1964. However, as Firbas told the story, Vachek scored a moral victory. He’d learned what was in store for them and spoke to various people, and so was able to inform the meeting and the Party functionary that he too had something to say – that Havránek, by now head of the Institute of the Czech Language of the Academy of Sciences in Prague and a Communist with unassailable credentials, had offered

him a position there, and he'd accepted the offer. And to add just a little sting, he went on to say that he considered this a more distinguished position than the one he was to be kicked out from here. The authorities were so gobsmacked that that was the end of the affair, and the attempt to get rid of Firbas fizzled out. Vachek himself left for Prague that year but continued to teach externally for the department for another three or four years.

My own experience with Vachek, of course, came later, after I joined the department. He was still alive then, and he often came to Brno for various reasons – to give lectures, sit on committees and so on. He had a Czech accent when he spoke English, but as I've said, that was typical of his generation. In one of the oral interviews I carried out with former students, Ota Kříž, who had Samuel Kostomlatský as a teacher in the 1950s, said that the students loved him as a teacher but they used to smile sometimes at his pronunciation of some English words. I was a bit surprised, though, that Vachek's written English had mistakes in it – something I came across when editing material for *Brno Studies in English*. I think now I'd realize that this was quite normal. But back then, Vachek had been described to me as the great guru of English linguistics in Czechoslovakia, so I expected perfection.

Vachek was renowned for his precision and reliability and for being extremely organized. I witnessed this myself. Whenever *Brno Studies in English* sent out a call for papers, his article would arrive two or three months before the deadline. From my experience that's something unheard of these days, but it was unheard of in those days as well. Or the lectures of his that I attended at various intervals: they were models of clarity and accessibility, something confirmed by the English Department graduates I interviewed. His self-discipline was legendary. One of my favourite stories about him was said to have taken place just after the war, when he was first in Brno. He lived in some part of Brno fairly distant from the centre. At that time there were all sorts of problems with the supply of electricity, which of course affected public transportation – there were blackouts, and sometimes the trams weren't working or weren't running on time. And apparently because Vachek wanted to take into account all eventualities, he'd always leave home early enough so that if the trams weren't running, he could walk to the faculty and get there in time for his lecture. Despite this precaution, though, one day he arrived five minutes late. And he started the lecture by apologizing politely for not getting there on time, explaining why, and then saying "I'll make up for this by lecturing three extra minutes today, and two extra minutes next week."

There were still no entrance exams for the university in the postwar years, and students didn't register in any particular subject. Also, there was huge interest in the English-speaking world after the war, and large numbers of the students wanted to take English courses. Apparently each year in the first lecture of the semester Vachek would start off with an overcrowded lecture hall. He'd begin by speaking in English – "Hello, welcome to this class on ... This is what we'll be doing this semester: ..." And at the end of the lecture he'd say that probably some of them who were present hadn't been able to follow him very well, but this is what it was going to be like for the whole semester, so if that was the case they might perhaps consider making some decisions. I suppose many were totally baffled and had to get friends to translate. But his approach was effective. A lot of students never came back. The other thing that he did on his first lecture was to lock the door of the room where he was lecturing right on the dot and inform the students that he expected students to arrive on time. The rumour goes that he never had to lock the door more than once or twice. Even if he left the door unlocked, people wouldn't dare to enter.

Despite being so demanding, Vachek attracted large numbers of students, I suppose because they realized he was the real thing. If they survived Vachek's first lecture, many of them would end up doing English and focusing on linguistics. But as the prewar system was still in place in the early years after the war, any student at the faculty could attend any lecture he or she found interesting.

And Vachek's lectures were certainly that. They attracted many students who were majoring in other fields. I remember that once, for instance, Professor Antonín Bartoněk told me he'd attended Vachek's lectures even though he was doing Classical philology. That's how he learned about modern linguistics, and this was his *devíza*, his unique ability, for the rest of his career. Thanks to Vachek he had a methodology to explore Classical texts and in particular analyze the many ancient Greek dialects. And he ended up as one of Europe's half dozen top Ancient Greek philologists.

Vachek's students had an immense respect for him. This was something I could still sense when I came to the department many years later. When I was re-cataloguing the library, I discovered a very large collection of books on linguistics stuffed away in a couple of cupboards in Jan Firbas's office. I asked him what they were. And he said "Ah – those are books that Professor Vachek left here for us when he went back to Prague." – "So he gave them to the department? Why aren't they catalogued and on the shelves?" – "Well," said Firbas, "I know he said we could make use of them, but I thought to myself that you never know whether Vachek might need some of them again sometime. So just leave them here." A couple of hundred linguistics books just sitting in the cupboard, almost 20 years after Vachek had left. And the only person who knew they were there was Firbas, who was keeping them there "just in case". That was a very revealing moment, and I realized how revered Vachek was in the English Department. And just how present among us he still was.

Karel Štěpaník

For me, Karel Štěpaník remains a bit of a mystery, hard to grasp. He's mentioned at different times in Chudoba's papers in the archives and it's clear Chudoba had a high opinion of his work and thought he had great potential. He certainly did all that he could to help him and promote his career. The documents relating to his state exam to qualify as a teacher are there in the Chudoba fonds. If nothing else they reveal how much a person had to do back then to become a teacher, and how very much more Štěpaník did. But he himself seems to have left behind virtually no documents. So there's nothing there for me to go through and form a picture of him, and I never met him personally – he died in 1970. But even when I've asked people what he was like as a teacher, I've never seemed to get much information. Almost everyone commented on his lectures – that he read them out in a monotonous voice. That they were long and filled with details. The word "boring" came up more than once. However, Ota Kříž agreed with the monotonous delivery but disagreed with the "boring". For him, Štěpaník "definitely" wasn't boring – you got a decent picture of the author or period he was dealing with. He also talked about how friendly and informal he was, holding seminars in his office, sitting at his desk and smoking as he read out the lecture. Sometimes the female students there were knitting during the lecture, and they'd drop their needles – and this didn't bother him! Definitely not your ordinary Czech professor.

It couldn't have been easy for Štěpaník. When he joined the department in 1945 he was forty-three – pretty late to start an academic career. Vachek was six years younger than him, but already a star, clearly in a different class as a scholar. And it couldn't have been any easier for Štěpaník once he became head of department. One of his tasks would've been to defend Vachek against the many attacks on him – personal attacks based on his values and beliefs, and professional attacks based on Vachek's stubborn promotion of the Prague School, which was considered "unscientific" and "bourgeois" by Marxist critics, in particular František Trávníček, who was then the Rector. Yet more than once in his memoir Vachek praises Štěpaník for being helpful and "loyal" to him in all his difficulties. Evidently Štěpaník worked in the interests of the department and its members as a whole, and he was certainly successful as head. He presided over

a great deal of change and many innovations during his time as head, and managed to steer the department safely through some very choppy waters indeed. His twenty years as department head is still the record.

The 1960s and 1970s

In 1965, Josef Hladký finally joined the department. I say “finally”, because Vachek and the other teachers in the department had recognized his talents as a student, and strongly supported him when he applied for an assistantship after he finished his studies in 1956. However, Hladký’s very unsatisfactory *kádrový profil* doomed him – political considerations of course outweighed academic promise, and his application was turned down. He spent the next nine years interpreting, translating, acting as a patent researcher at První brněnská strojírna, teaching English at the Technical University. Time would show how important it was to have him in the department. He was part workhorse, part cheerleader. He had superb organizational skills and was a hard worker, very inventive in finding solutions to the crises that kept cropping up on a regular basis. His ever-present humour and stubborn optimism carried the department through many difficult patches. And he was very good at dealing with the opaque power structures at the faculty. In fact, for the next quarter of century he was the *éminence grise* of the department, and the other teachers knew that he was the one to turn to when problems arose.

And given the period we’re talking about, there were always problems. The first major test for the department, I suppose, came in 1968 and its aftermath. In the wake of the invasion in 1968 came “normalization”. The big question must have been what would happen at the department. Štěpaník, Kocmanová, Pantůčková, Tichý and Golková were Party members. Firbas, Ondráček and Hladký weren’t. Neither group was safe. Those in the first group probably were in a worse position, since the Party was making a thorough revision of its membership, dealing with them in various ways. But the non-Party members were also vulnerable simply by being non-Party members. In the end, rather miraculously, they were all able to soldier on as before, teaching and doing research. The Party members were now non-Party members – the exception being Štěpaník, who died in 1970 – and remained in place. None of the non-Party members had to leave. This really was a miracle. During the Communist years English Departments by definition were suspect, and after 1968 doubly so. At both Olomouc and Prague distinguished members of their English Departments were kicked out of the university. And in Prague the English Department was merged with the more “reliable” German Department. It’s hard to know exactly why the Brno English Department emerged from the *čistky* relatively unscathed. When I asked people who’d been there at the time how they explained this, I received various answers. Most frequent was that the MU Faculty of Arts as a whole hadn’t been as radically engaged and divided in 1968 as other universities and faculties, and so there were fewer personal scores to settle. And also that the leadership of the faculty at the time had done as much as possible to mitigate the impact. Which reminds me a bit of what Vachek said about the sense of solidarity at the faculty in his days.

It was good that the department emerged from all this with its continuity more or less intact. On the other hand, however, it definitely wasn’t good that it was so weak politically – that is, that it didn’t have a single Communist among its members. And this unfortunate *kádrový profil* was to dog the department for the next twenty years.

Jan Firbas took over as head in 1970 – but only as acting head. He was never named official head. This went on for more than three years. It became quite clear to him that with “normalization” in full swing, he was never going to be named official head. So he resigned. This began a strange period in the 1970s and 1980s when we floated in and out of having a head of depart-



Eva Golková (on the left) and Jaroslava Pačesová at the *Fakultáda*, 1964.

© E. Golková

ment. Firbas was replaced by Hladký – but like Firbas, as a non-Party person it was unthinkable that he could be named an official head. He lasted in this position from 1973 to 1980. At that point he was replaced by Aleš Svoboda. Young (only 39), a recent docent, and a Party member, he was an ideal choice from the point of view of the faculty leadership (all, of course, Communists). However, only four years later he left to teach in Ostrava. Back to square one. There was a brief interregnum, during which Hladký was once more “visible”. And then came a completely unexpected decision. The new head of the department would be Zdeněk Masařík, the head of the German Department.

We soon learned the background to this. Because of our *kádrový profil*, the Party had decided to merge us with the German Department. Surprisingly, Masařík had refused. He said we were one of the founding departments at the Faculty of Arts, with a long history, and this was important. Yes, we were going through a bad stage, but this was no reason to abolish us. There was no way he would accept the English Department being merged with the German Department, but he would agree to become the external head of the English Department. This way the English Department would stay as a separate, independent unit. It was interesting that Masařík said no. Perhaps the reasons he gave were genuine. Or perhaps he had unhappy memories of the German Department being merged with the English Department under Štěpaník in the 1950s. In any case, for now I’ll just say that he was a very good head of department. And that this turned out to be just another variation in the continually shifting, non-stable situation of the English Department in the Communist years. Things were always changing. Do we exist, or don’t we exist? Are the teachers politically OK now, or not politically OK now? Who’s the head of department, who’s in fact really running it? Will we have students, won’t we have students (more of this later)? And so on and so on.

New ventures in the 1960s

All over Czechoslovakia things began to change in the 1960s with the thaw. Here in the English Department, three activities were launched that decade that had an immense influence for the next quarter of a century, and in the case of one of them, that continues down to the present. These were intensive English courses at Cikháj (from 1963), the emergence of the Gypsywood Players (1965), and the student exchange with Leeds University (post-1968). To my mind, all three played central roles in shaping the identity of the department.

Intensive English courses at Cikháj

In 1963 the department decided that it’d be a good idea to give first-year students a course in practical English – a kind of leg-up at the beginning of their studies. The idea was for some of the department teachers to go out with them to Cikháj, this small village in the Vysočina where the university had a recreation centre. It wasn’t called a recreation centre of course, because that sounded frivolous and a university had no business having a recreation centre. Its official name was something else, like a teaching or learning centre. There the students would have a short, six-day intensive language course.

The first course was in December that year and was compulsory. Over the years all sorts of variations were introduced – courses for higher years, courses where enrolment was voluntary, courses with translation elements or focusing on grammar or whatever. Forty-six courses were held over the next thirty years or so. In all likelihood, every student in the department went on at least one course, and many on several. In time it became clear that in addition to their academic



English Department teachers and students at one of the first intensive language courses in Cikháj, 1965.

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worth, the courses had many side benefits. One of them was to bring the students themselves closer together. Another was to reduce the gap between teachers and students. And the students' sense of identification with the department as such was certainly strengthened by their time at Cikháj.

Early on the custom was established of inviting a professor from some other university to give a lecture to the students on the course. Over the years, virtually every distinguished university teacher of English in the country showed up at some point in Cikháj and gave a lecture. And there were also teachers from universities elsewhere in Europe and even the United States. We really had a whole cross-section of speakers, since the custom was to alternate a linguist with a literary person. One of them, Ian Milner, a New Zealander who taught literature at the English Department of Charles University, commented at the end of his stay in Cikháj on the "genuine friendliness and natural ease of relationship between colleagues [i.e. teachers] and students," which he said impressed and pleased him. This only confirmed something we all felt.

The Gypsywood Players

Jessie Kocmanová didn't teach at the first courses held in Cikháj. But when she did go for the sixth course, in December 1965, she felt she'd be bored. Luckily, she happened to be reading a book of one-act plays, and that gave her the idea that the students could put one of them on. So the Gypsywood Players were born in this completely serendipitous way.

Almost immediately the theatre production became a separate activity – some of the students would be in Cikháj to attend the language course, and the others would be there to rehearse a play. These courses usually ran from Monday to Saturday, but the actors would arrive at Cikháj on the Friday beforehand and begin rehearsing. Then on Monday the students would appear. The two activities ran in parallel, and the first night of the play would be on Friday. Saturday morning was back to Brno. With this attraction on Friday, we developed the practice of inviting visiting speakers to give their lectures on Thursday evening, and then stay on to attend the performance on Friday. And if possible, we tried to agree on a topic that'd have some connection – no matter how remote – with the play we were putting on. Many were very clever at finding some topic to fit this polite suggestion.

The opening night of the play was one of the highlights of the year in the English Department, for both students and teachers. The students on the course and their teachers formed the main audience. But most of the other department teachers – those who weren't teaching at Cikháj – usually showed up for the occasion as well. And also many students who weren't on the intensive course, even including graduates. Very often for a year or two after they graduated they'd come to Cikháj because they still had friends there. It was a kind of institution, this Cikháj “gathering of the clans”. As was the legendary “backstage party” that followed the first night performance. All this did a great deal to nourish the spirit of the department.

But I'll be talking at length about the Gypsywood Players later, so I'll leave it at that for now.

The Leeds exchange

Back in the mid-sixties Jessie Kocmanová happened to meet a professor from the University of Leeds. This led to a couple of years of writing back and forth and negotiations at the departmental and university levels. Eventually a formal agreement was signed between MU – or Jan Evange-lista Purkyně University, as it was then – and Leeds. It provided for a student exchange between the English Department here and the Russian and Slavonic Studies Department over there.

In the spring of 1968 a teacher from Leeds came here to meet with members of the department. This was Gordon Humphries, whose fields were Russian and Czech. The details of the agreement were worked out, and the exchange was able to begin. The timing was very fortunate. This was a little window when all sorts of things were possible – a year or two later, when “normalization” set in, I don't think the exchange would have got off the ground. The principle was simple. Each year a certain number of students in Leeds chose Czech as their second Slavic language, after Russian. They'd come here in the spring for ten weeks, and the same number of our fourth-year students would go to Leeds for ten weeks. At each end, the students would leave behind enough money to cover the cost of accommodation and meals for the incoming students. It was an asymmetrical agreement, in that the British students were given Czech lessons here by our English Department teachers, but at the other end our students were only allowed to sit in on lectures in the Leeds English Department. But being in England for ten-weeks was one long lesson in itself.

For most of the 1970s and 1980s the Leeds exchange was the only student exchange in the whole of Czechoslovakia, or at least the only one that survived. There'd been others that had started in the period of the thaw, but then students would stay abroad and that would be the end of it. We were very explicit when preparing the students for the exchange – stressing that if anyone didn't come back, the whole exchange would come to an end, and that they should think of future students in the department. (And that if they really wanted to defect, then in some subsequent year they could go on holiday to Yugoslavia ...). I think the highest number of students we sent in one year was nine, the lowest (at the beginning) four. But at least in some

years, this represented a not insignificant proportion of the eligible student body. And even the students who didn't get to go to England had the chance to meet and spend time with the British students who were here. This way they could experience the West at least at second hand and absorb real English with people their own age who shared many of the same interests. So the exchange brought amazing benefits and genuine outcomes (including several marriages). And one final major plus was that the authorities insisted that the students had to be accompanied by a teacher. This, in the seventies and eighties, was like winning the lottery. In the course of the exchange I think every teacher in the department was in Britain at least once, either for ten weeks or for a shorter period (sometimes teachers shared the ten weeks). This was something teachers at other English Departments could only look on in envy.

The student world

Following the Communist takeover in 1948, the whole university system was overhauled. Entrance exams were introduced to ensure that only some people – the right people – got in. Along with them came quotas – only certain numbers of students could study certain subjects, and then only in certain combinations. Attendance at all classes was compulsory. And so on and so on. From that point on the system for studying became very rigid – there was none of that floating around and doing what you were interested in. This was essentially the system that remained in place till the end of the Communist era, though of course there was both loosening and tightening up at various points along the way. And aspects lingered on even after.

In practice things were more flexible, though this depended entirely on what university you were studying at, what faculty you were enrolled in, what department(s) you had classes in, what teacher(s) you had. So it's impossible to make firm generalizations. From what I experienced after I came here, I'd say that the English Department was among the most open and flexible at the faculty. Certainly our students – who were always studying a second subject in a different department, and so in a position to make comparisons – often said this to me. And many former Faculty of Arts students over the years have told me that they envied their friends doing English. Perhaps this atmosphere in the department was the plus side of our bad *kádrový profil* – and not unlinked to it.

Though regulations were rigid, there were ways of getting round them at least partially, and where we in the department could do something, we did. An important item in the application process was the letter the individual got from their secondary school. Depending on its wording, an applicant could sink or swim. There was nothing we could do about this, but we knew from experience that former students of the department who were teachers were very skilled in knowing what to put in and what to leave out when writing these letters. One particularly delicate area was that of religion. There were in fact two kinds of degree programmes. The first was intended to produce future teachers. The second was aimed at producing future translators. From the point of view of being admitted, one absolutely crucial factor was whether there was any hint of religious belief in the applicant's background. If so, studying to be a teacher was out of the question. Here we could on some occasions do something, like quietly recommending an applicant for admission in the non-teaching programme. But there was little room for manoeuvring.

Strangely enough, the simplest regulation to get round was that of class origin. When I came here in 1977, the system had already been in place for some years. The regulations then called for 60 per cent of the students to be from a working-class background. This certainly sounds ferocious, but the reality was that any number of unexpected people could claim to come from a working-class background. This is because only one of your parents had to come from a work-



Eva Golková teaching a class in the faculty courtyard, 1965.

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ing-class background for you to qualify, and working-class background was defined by the job that the person in question was doing at the time, or the very first job they did. And of course that expanded the possibilities immensely. There were university professors whose first job had been working in a factory right after the war, so suddenly this made their children working-class kids.

The most absurd example of how the regulations could be overcome or manipulated was a case that involved some daughters of a local Protestant minister. Did they have a working-class background? Of course. Their mother had a university degree, but as the wife of a Protestant minister she wasn't allowed to work in her field, so she was employed as a worker in, I think, Zetor. Abracadabra – an impeccable working-class background!

In practice, very few working-class kids were students, at least in our department in the 1970s and 1980s. One year we took in about a dozen students doing German and English. Out of curiosity, I looked into their papers and came to the conclusion that there was only one kid with a genuine working-class background – both his parents worked on a cooperative farm in the Vysočina. But the others – most were not even mixed. They'd grown up as ordinary middle-class kids with educated parents. The discrimination that was actually alive and well was the exact opposite of the official discrimination. The kids really discriminated against were working-class kids – it was much harder for them to climb the rungs to the grammar schools. The rules and the law were one thing, but the reality was different. What's saddest is that this is still the situation today, or perhaps even worse.

***Pomvědi* and other students**

Pomvědi – *pomocné vědecké síly*, or student assistants – go back to the beginning of the department. One of their main tasks was always to run the department library, for example. But they were also expected to help individual teachers in various ways, and from what I gather, this “special relationship” to the professors meant that their position in the past was more prestigious than it later became. It was hard to become a *pomvěd*. When I interviewed Jaroslav Peprník on his time at the department just after World War II, he remarked rather impishly that one of his greatest achievements as a student was “to break the Protestant mafia”. He was the first Catholic among the “*pomvěds*”, all the rest of whom were – I assume by chance – Protestants.

There was another kind of student that used to be a sort of *pomvěd*. Students finishing their studies in the past didn’t get a title – no initials to put after your name. But very bright students might then write something – often an extension of the final-year dissertation – and then get the title PhDr. I remember when I joined the department in 1977 that Eva Chalupová – a former Gypsywooder and later a teacher in the language school – stayed on for an additional year to do her PhDr, and was also responsible for odd jobs round the department. Much earlier, the PhDr was more like a real doctorate, but by the 1980s it had degenerated to the point that you didn’t even have to write anything to get the title. There were only oral exams in some literary or linguistic stuff and in Marxism and Scientific Atheism. That’s my PhDr. It was a farce.

The way the PhDr changed its nature reflected the way the Communists restructured higher education in the 1950s. The whole system underwent radical change. The Soviet system was introduced, with its DrSc and CSc. In practice the vast majority of people who were admitted for the CSc were either Communist Party members or candidates for membership in the Party, and they were also regarded as future members of departments. This whole phenomenon of incestuous departments for generation after generation is a Central European thing generally, but it was very much strengthened during the Communist era. This meant that those enrolled in a programme to be granted a CSc were few and far between – perhaps one or two students every four or five years. And the practice lingered on after 1989. I remember that after they introduced a genuine doctoral programme here in the English Department in the late 1990s, very few students were admitted. I asked Hladký once why there were so few. And his answer was that the department wouldn’t need more than them. In other words, these were the people who would most likely be moving into positions in our department and, probably, the English Department at the Faculty of Education. Things have of course changed greatly since then.