

“My Life Was Determined by History”:

An Interview with Jaroslav Pánek*

Stanley B. Winters

Professor Emeritus
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Zdenka Winters

Associate Director (ret.), Sprague Library
Montclair State University

November 2002
Working Paper 02-1

© 2002 by the Center for Austrian Studies. Permission to reproduce must generally be obtained from the Center for Austrian Studies. Copying is permitted in accordance with the fair use guidelines of the US Copyright Act of 1976. The Center for Austrian Studies permits the following additional educational uses without permission or payment of fees: academic libraries may place copies of the Center’s Working Papers on reserve (in multiple photocopied or electronically retrievable form) for students enrolled in specific courses: teachers may reproduce or have reproduced multiple copies (in photocopied or electronic form) for students in their courses. Those wishing to reproduce Center for Austrian Studies Working Papers for any other purpose (general distribution, advertising or promotion, creating new collective works, resale, etc.) must obtain permission from the Center.

**This interview originally appeared in an abridged form in the Austrian Studies Newsletter in the winter and spring issues, 2002. It was conducted in Czech by Stanley B. Winters, Professor Emeritus of History, New Jersey Institute of Technology, and translated by Winters and his wife, Zdenka Winters, Associate Director (Ret.), Sprague Library, Montclair State University, New Jersey. Both the ASN and the Working Papers versions were edited by Daniel Pinkerton. The former was copyedited by Kenneth Marks, and the latter was copyedited by Nicole Phelps. Thanks to Gary B. Cohen for additional assistance with Czech language questions.*

Jaroslav Pánek is a professor of Czech and Slovak history at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University and director of the Historical Institute (HÚ, Historický ústav) of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. He is coeditor of Český časopis historický (Czech Journal of History) and chairman of the Association of Historians of the Czech Republic. He served as vice rector for foreign relations at Charles University and is a member of the Collegium Carolinum, the Czechoslovak History Conference, and other international scholarly institutions and organizations.

Prof. Pánek's specialty is the early modern history of Central and Eastern Europe from 1500 to 1800, including the Habsburg monarchy and the Kingdom of Bohemia. He has written over two dozen books and monographs in that field and dozens of essays in collaborative works on criminality and the criminal justice system from 1500 to 1800, on the history of the South Slavs and Czech-South Slav relations, and on Czech historians and historiography. He has also written for newspapers, magazines, film, radio, and television.

Pánek grew up in the 1950s and attended Charles University just before, during, and after the Prague Spring. His interview provides a fascinating glimpse into Czech education and academic life during a period that spans from Soviet domination to post-1989 freedom.

SZW: *When and how did you become interested in history?*

JP: With the passage of time, I increasingly realize that my personal life was determined by history, and that in the process of, first, a spontaneous and, later, a conscious perception of history, my grandfather was the strongest influence. He was an exemplary self-made man, a son in the large family of an innkeeper and small businessman. He was born in the central Bohemian village of Odolena Voda in 1884. At the end of the 19th century, he came completely penniless to Prague and apprenticed as a butcher and sausage maker only because one of the masters in the butcher's guild accepted him as an apprentice without charging a fee. Bit by bit he built a rather large and prosperous food enterprise. He bought a house at the edge of Hradčany (not far from the Prague Castle), where our family still lives.

I spent my childhood with my grandfather. From this revered old man, retired and once again without property, I heard a narrative about Prague and the Bohemian countryside in the era of the struggle of the Czechs toward an independent state; about the suffering of the Czech soldiers on the Austro-Russian front in Galicia; about the Nazi terror in the Second World War

(some of our relatives lived in Lidice); about building the family business and its complete destruction and the loss of all hope after the communist takeover in 1948. With him, I relived the ordinary events and personal stories of the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. I began to perceive the course of history as something dramatic, often mysterious, and yet still comprehensible. Later, I had many other influences, especially literary, but my grandfather's narrative was my basic and strongest inspiration.

SZW: *Which foreign languages did you learn as a youth, and which ones at university?*

JP: Language education when I was young was very poor because of the political isolation of Czechoslovakia at the time. We all had to learn Russian from the fourth grade of primary school until the university. Those who were motivated could achieve a relatively good level with it. As for schooling in other languages (English and Latin), I encountered them only in 1962 at age 15 at the three-year gymnasium. Because I was interested in languages, I taught myself. Besides the mediocre half-private language school, I benefited from my grandfather. With his help, from childhood I learned German conversation. His parents had sent him on a one-year exchange to a German family, and a German child from north Bohemia came to learn Czech with them.

Fate brought me close to a significant Slavist and translator, the Slovene Oto Berkopec, who settled at the end of the 1920s in Prague. From him I learned Slovene and Serbo-Croatian. This opened a gate to the Balkan cultural community. Otherwise, in youth, I devoted time to a number of European languages, especially the Slavic and Romance ones. I did this by self-instruction from books and sometimes by listening to foreign radio stations. However, because of my lack of contact with the live languages, my skill remained limited and passive. I use only some of them actively. Even now, I am sorry that I, along with an entire generation, did not have the chance to perfect them at universities abroad and by traveling.

SZW: *Did you serve in the Czech Army?*

JP: I did not; I was excused for reasons of health. In 1948, when there was a great poliomyelitis epidemic, I contracted polio and was very sick from it. Contrary to many of my contemporaries, I survived and escaped with relatively few consequences. Still, the military doctors decided that I should gain life experience somewhere else than in the field of war.

SZW: *When you entered Charles University in 1965, you chose historical, archival, and Slavic studies as your concentrations.*

JP: This was a serious problem from early youth because in resolving it I unintentionally quarreled with my parents. My father and mother grew up in rather rich and enterprising families.

They belonged, as it was then said in Czechoslovakia, to “the upper ten thousand.” The events that followed February 1948 destroyed their political standing, their finances, and, finally, their health. My father had to work in a mine and foundry. He contracted silicosis and after a lengthy illness died prematurely. My mother, too, was allowed to work only in menial jobs and was never fully reconciled to that personal humiliation. As a result, when asked by the Czech reference work *Kdo je Kdo* (Who’s Who), I could honestly say that my father was a worker and my mother was a worker. This was true, of course, only after the wave of “proletarianization” swept over them.

Both of my parents, through no fault of their own, were socially shipwrecked people. They hoped their two sons would find employment that would enable them to survive in bad times. My older brother had extraordinary technical talent. There were no doubts about his future. However, I was drawn to totally impractical interests. Because I was a good student, my parents wanted me to become a doctor or lawyer. I had no aversion to these professions; in fact, I was drawn to psychology and the law. Later I came through the law to legal history, but by adolescence I saw my future only in history or philology.

My parents thought my inclinations were the foolishness of an adolescent boy and were unhappy with me. They asked Berkopec, who lived in a nationalized house that we formerly owned, to speak with me and lead me to reasonableness. But after a lengthy discussion between the old gentleman and this naive beginning gymnasium student, everything came out differently. Dr. Berkopec told my parents he could not help; and since he and his wife had no children, he began to devote himself to me as if I were his own son. He opened a window on the outside world—especially Yugoslavia—for me. To us in the closed Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavs seemed to enjoy an ideal of the type of freedom that could only be achieved through state socialism. I am grateful to that kind scholar, but today I realize that I tormented my parents enormously by my obstinacy.

SZW: *What professors influenced you in your undergraduate years?*

JP: First of all, the road to Charles University was not smooth. I was a child with a “bad origin” because I came from a “capitalist” family. Moreover, at that time my older cousin was caught at the border while trying to escape to the West. This was a scandal for the Prague newspapers, and in 1962, before I was accepted into secondary school, I had to appear before a “street committee” of staunch communist citizens. Its chairman told me that socialist society did not allow children with origins such as mine to study in secondary or higher schools. I knew from my grandfather and my parents what the regime had done to them, so at that moment I felt that my world had collapsed. Yet matters did not end there. Right after this, an older man, a deputy director of the primary school whose last grade I had attended, rose to defend my right

to further education. He used the socialist argument, of course, that it was in the interest of the working class for the younger generation to be educated. The street committee allowed me to study. It was one of the most important moments in my life. I realized that even in this miserable regime one could still pursue one's goals, and that there were people, often formal members of the ruling class, who were willing to do something for others and broaden the space for a freer life.

I entered Charles University in 1965 without any problems. The political easing before the Prague Spring was already visible. I passed admission examinations in language and history, after which I became a university student. The five years 1965-70 were relatively favorable. Party pressures were loosened and instruction was unusually liberal. The university was weak in Slavic studies, but history had outstanding people who inspired me. In the second half of the 1960s, a group of relatively young docents rose to the top, publishing their initial great works.

Zdeněk Fiala was noted for his skill at synthesis, Ivan Hlaváček for his unyielding attempt to educate all his students as future historians, Josef Petráň for amazing psychologically profound narrative, and Robert Kvaček with his large-scale synthesis of the political history of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Also, one should not omit older historians such as František Kutnar, who personified the continuity with the old tradition of the Goll School,¹ and František Kavka, who did not hide the need to reevaluate the shallow Marxist phraseology of the 1950s. To study history at the university in Prague at that time was a joy, although before the ending of our studies we were precipitously torn from our naive dreams and thrown into the cold reality of “normalized” socialism.

SZW: *While working for your first doctorate (the Ph.Dr.), you lived through the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968. How did you and your fellow students react to it?*

JP: The fate of my family and the experiences of early youth evoked in me an inner distrust of the government and, similarly, of the regime. I never shared the inner dilemma of people who believed that communism was the most just form of organizing society and then after August 1968 lost their illusions about the Soviet system. My parents were closest to the Czech National Socialist Party.² They were not politically engaged, but at home they maintained somewhat idealized images of T. G. Masaryk, “the president liberator,” and Edvard Beneš, “the builder,” as the embodiments of the best possible social order. Father even preserved their portraits and

1. Jaroslav Goll (1846-1929), was professor of history at the Czech University in Prague and is generally regarded by Czechs as the father of the scientific study of history. (SW)

2. The Czech National Socialist Party was not connected to and did not share any tenets of the Nazi Party, and antedated the founding of the Nazi Party by 23 years. (SW/Ed.)

books. We used to say it was a disaster that General Patton did not reach Prague in May 1945, because if he had, we might not have known the communist regime. Yet we appreciated individual communists who behaved decently—the man who defended my right to attend college, or a former employee of my grandfather's who allowed him to live at my father's house after he had been banished from Prague.

In this light, the Prague Spring appeared to be not the fall of communism but a time when life in Czechoslovakia would become more tolerable. Scholars were happy that they could travel behind the Iron Curtain, that it was possible to write more openly in the newspapers and periodicals (it was a time of my initial public articles), and that there was a more liberal climate in the university. The Warsaw Pact invasion was a crushing blow for us all. This was evident in the student strikes, when we stayed for whole days and nights at the faculty, and then in January 1969 at the funeral of the previously unostentatious fellow history student Jan Palach, who immolated himself. Incidentally, when the radio reported this on January 16, 1969, they referred to the deceased only by the initials J. P., and my mother sank into despair, fearing it was me. She was mistaken. I was never that courageous. We stood as an honor guard at Palach's coffin and openly accompanied him on his final journey through Prague. But we did not do more. These spontaneous displays brought no policy changes. They were only expressions of shock, of the state of mind of young people who had lost the prospect of a normal development. I considered the possibility of emigration, but unlike many of my fellow students I finally decided to stay. I shared the opinion that we were the ones at home, not the occupation forces, that we had only one motherland, and that somebody had to stay.

SZW: *How did you begin your career in the archives?*

JP: During my studies I applied for a stipend from the Central Bohemian district office of the National Committee. They were seeking an archivist for the worst district archives anywhere—so bad that no university graduate wanted to work there. I did not wish to be a financial burden on my parents, so I asked for the stipend. I had to promise I would stay on the job at least five years. So in July 1970 I began at the district archive in Benešov, where no expert had worked in a long time. I supervised two workers who maintained the registers of the local offices and collections of the historic towns and villages in a region of about 100,000 inhabitants. I rose to the position of vedoucí (head) and later ředitel (director). They were splendid examples of *Titel ohne Mittel*. I was under the district office and was the lowest paid employee. Today the same archive has many specialized workers in a beautiful modern building, the result of the growth of Czech archives in the 1990s. Back in the 1970s my position was unbelievably poor. Despite that, I never regretted those five years in Benešov. I learned to work with archival sources, I met many wonderful people, and I learned to understand the country way of life. For a born

Prager, that was important. In Benešov, I concentrated, among other tasks, on editorial work for the journal *Středočeský sborník historický* (Central Bohemian Historical Journal) and tried to direct the scholarly work of the region's historians. They honored me in 1995 with election as chairman of the editorial board of this publication.

SZW: *In 1975-1976 you worked as an administrative assistant at the Státní oblastní archiv in Prague. Was this a step up?*

JP: It was not, but it was an opportunity to work in Prague, where I had continued to live during my five years at Benešov. And perhaps more importantly, it was a chance to learn archival work and organization of the historical aspects of a larger region, Central Bohemia, the area surrounding Prague, that had close to 1,000,000 inhabitants. During the years 1970-76, I completed my dissertation on medieval history and published a number of studies based on unpublished sources dealing with the social pathology, criminality, and repressions of the 16th through 18th centuries. Dr. Josef Janáček, an expert on early modern Czech history, reviewed it favorably, noting its regional insights.

SW: *You left archival work in 1976 to become an odborný pracovník (research associate) at the Ústav československých a světových dějin (ÚČSSD) (Institute of Czechoslovak and World History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences).*

JP: Dr. Janáček suggested that I seek a job in the ÚČSSD, where he headed its Department of Early Modern History (from the early Middle Ages to 1848). Before then, the institute had gone through vast personnel changes. Well-known dissident historians were thrown out in the great waves of 1970-1974. They included Jaroslav Mezník and reform communists such as Karel Bartošek, Karel Kaplan, Josef Macek, Pavel Oliva, Vilém Prečan, and František Šmahel. A group of fresh graduates of historical studies at the university was taken into the institute. Some of them emerged as prestigious specialists in the 1970s and 1980s; others became political propagandists for the regime. When I was released from Benešov, the open positions for prospective research associates were already filled. But Dr. Janáček had an open secretarial position for which he was able to hold a competitive search. There were many applicants. Although I was not a member of the party, the search committee selected me—perhaps because it was not an academic or scientific competition in which all my other contemporaries were entered.

Some of my very first duties at the institute included editorial work on the first two volumes of *Přehled dějin Československa. Do roku 1526-1848* (Historical Survey of Czechoslovakia, 1526-1848). I had to translate the Slovak chapters into Czech and arrange the bibliographical portions of this wide-ranging book into two volumes that were published in 1980-82. In the

meantime, I was informally preparing a systematic scholarly work on the history of Czech estate society in the 16th and early 17th centuries. The main advantages of my switch from an archive to a scholarly institute were the possibilities of exploring broader questions and access to a rich institutional library.

Dr. Janáček was among those respected experts who were deemed politically unsuitable. He was a member of the KSČ (Czechoslovak Communist Party) from 1945 to 1946 but left it after his teacher Otakar Odložilík tried hard to secure him an extended study leave in the United States. At the beginning of “normalization,” Dr. Janáček was tolerated by the hard-line communist leadership; he even became chief of his department, but he had no significant influence in the institute’s administration. Janáček was a very productive scholar. He was envied by inept colleagues, who persecuted him in various ways. He suffered in not being allowed to teach at the university. Therefore he used the institute as a means of educating aspiring scholars. Many high profile historians of today’s middle generation were schooled by him—Petr Čornej, Jiří Pešek, Miloslav Polívka, and Josef Žemlička among others. I was fortunate that Dr. Janáček informally included me among his students. Under his authoritative guidance I gained valuable experience for my future research on early modern history.

SZW: *Would you say then that Dr. Janáček most influenced your decision to specialize in early modern Czech and Central European history?*

JP: He was not my only mentor in that regard. At Charles University, my study of medieval history began under the tutorship of Prof. Fiala. In an effort to combine history with Slavistics, I researched the concept of Czech history and the Czech-Polish relationship in the medieval Polish chronicles and annals. Later, as an archivist, I had access above all to modern sources, and I was also occupied with regional historical problems of the first half of the 20th century. But I never went beyond 1948. The possibility of scholarly research for me ended there. Therefore I concentrated on the early modern period, and I came to the ÚČSSD already with that specialization. After several months, its leadership said I should transfer to the department of the history of socialism and deal with themes with better prospects. I thanked them for the offer, but told them that I was interested only in the early modern period and would rather return to the archives. To my surprise, the pressure eased, and Dr. Janacek was able to retain me in his department.

SZW: *In Kdo je Kdo (Who’s Who) you are listed as “bezpartijní” (without party). Under normalization was this a handicap?*

JP: Neither in the past nor in the present have I identified with any political party. But for several years I was a member of the KSČ. In the 1990s the question of past party membership was

often used in political struggles in the Czech Republic; many people liked to maintain that they had to join the party under irresistible pressure. I do not agree. Anyone could refuse an offer of membership, though with the risk he or she would suffer unpleasantness and in extreme cases lose a preferred job. However, in the 1970s and 1980s one definitely was not threatened with prison or losing one's life for refusing party membership. Joining the party was a question of calculation and a matter of free choice within a concrete societal framework where the basic political freedoms were violated.

At the outset of the 1960s I was a child from a "bourgeois" family, but this was of no more interest after the Soviet invasion and occupation of the country. When the party campaigned to get new members, I received several offers while in Benešov. I refused them. I was not exposed to any specific reprisals. Similarly, one could probably have survived in an academic institute, and that would have brought several advantages, one being a savings in time. This was because the main duty of party members was to attend meetings several times a month. With their boring purposelessness they reminded one of the theater of the absurd; however, active members were rewarded with higher salaries and a feeling of power.

In the late 1970s the party passed some measures dampening research on earlier periods of history. Their aim was the progressive liquidation of research on the older history and concentration of "research" on modern history, above all the development of the workers' movement and the KSČ. The intention was to transform historiography in the ČSAV (Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) into a perfect prostitute for the regime, obliterating scholarly research and repeating the babble of servile political phraseology. The manner by which this perverse image was to be shaped in the ÚČSSD was to a certain degree to be decided by the party organization and its cells, small groups of KSČ members in the individual departments of the institute. But the department of early modern history was in an extremely unfavorable situation, for it had few party members. Only two scholars who joined the ÚČSSD in the 1970s, medievalist Josef Žemlička and Hussite specialist Miloslav Polívka, were KSČ members; therefore, immediate party supervision of the department rested in a *kádrové oddělení* (cadre section) that was entrusted with control of the Institute's employees. In order to moderate or halt the pressure to liquidate medieval and early modern history, we had to establish a party group in the department with a minimum of three members. After consulting with Dr. Polívka, Dr. Žemlička, and Dr. Janáček, I decided to enter the KSČ at the end of the 1970s. Obviously this strategy was only a partial measure, but together with other circumstances and an overall relaxation of the situation in 1980, it may have helped. After the establishment of this party group, the autonomy of our department increased, and it was able to publish its research program on the history of feudalism. In 1979 we founded a *sborník* (anthology), *Folia Historica Bohemica*, and organized conferences, after which the idea of the quick liquidation of our department began to

fade. In the second half of the 1980s, the danger was averted. Although my membership in the KSČ brought unpleasantness and deprived me of free time, I do not regret my step. Were such a critical situation to occur again, I probably would do the same thing.

SZW: *After the Prague Spring, despite the new, more oppressive regime, you managed to pursue your CSc. degree. What difficulties did you encounter?*

JP: Even during Husák's "normalization," it was possible for a scholar of the early modern era to obtain a CSc. (candidatus scientiarum) degree, which at the time corresponded to the Ph.D. With help from my unofficial mentor Dr. Janáček, I prepared a monograph on the struggles of the estates opposition against the Habsburgs in the previously neglected period between the first crisis of the Habsburg monarchy and the *Česká konfese* (Confessio Bohemica), from 1547 to 1577. I defended this work in 1980 in a normal examination for a "candidate" dissertation. I also had to pass, as other historians did, examinations in languages (the obligatory Russian and the elective German), history, and philosophy. Both of the last two subjects were specifically characterized by demands of the time because, besides the usual historical materials, one had to master Marxist phraseology and the one-sided idealized history of communism. Otherwise, the required examinations were quite rigorous. At that time, the CSc. degree could be granted by the universities and by the ČSAV. Mine was conferred by the academy, and the degree was signed by the ingloriously renowned communist propagandist/historian Václav Král, with whom fortunately I had no other contact.

SZW: *Did you have an opportunity at any time in the 1970s to study abroad to research your dissertation?*

JP: Study abroad in the 1970s was absolutely unthinkable. That privilege was reserved only for the most reliable members of the KSČ. As an employee in the institute, I was allowed for the first time to spend a few days in Italy in 1983. Dr. Josef Janáček, my department head, recommended to Fernand Braudel and Alberto Tenenti that I read a paper at the conference organized by the Istituto internazionale di storia economica in Prato. It was an adventure of a certain kind because I had only the round-trip ticket by rail. For the portion of the trip through Austria, I could not get any foreign money. The scrutiny at the Czech border was so strict that the Czechoslovak customs officers looked thoroughly through every single paper I carried with me. To be able to manage at all, I took with me a German book about the Thirty Years' War, which I sold at a Linz antiquarian bookstore for a few shillings. This enabled me to reach Prato. Luckily, at the conference I met a Yugoslav historian who understood life under socialism. He offered me a small loan, which I was able to repay. Although I yearned to travel, I confess that many times I felt humiliation at the poor conditions under which a Czech historian traveled.

It was only in the second half of the 1980s that it became possible from time to time not only to go to a conference but also to study at foreign archives and libraries. That was the period of the clear disintegration of communist rule. In the Academy, a spontaneous liberalization was taking place. The leadership's control over one's foreign connections weakened considerably.

SZW: *How did you finance and conduct your research? Was there a common procedure for aspiring historians at the ÚČSSD?*

JP: The mode of financing scholarly work in those years is not only barely comprehensible to foreign scholars but also completely misunderstood by present-day younger scholars in the Czech Republic. There were no grants; there was no possibility of non-state support. All finances were in the hands of the state. It allotted funds to the institutes. There, the directors or their deputies divided it up. Ordinary staff members got a salary sufficient to survive; sometimes they received small honoraria for published articles and books. The meager funding brought home the reality that in “the state of workers and peasants,” the “working intelligentsia” was merely a tolerated element.

SZW: *You began to publish on a variety of subjects in the 1980s. Did this distract you from early modern history?*

JP: Until the end of the 1980s, I tried to keep my concentration primarily on the subjects of the 16th and early 17th centuries. According to Dr. Janáček's plan, I was to write as soon as possible a continuation of his book *České dějiny*, in which he mastered the short period of 1526-47. I soon discovered that the latter half of the 16th century was barely studied and that it was necessary to conduct extensive archival research. Up to 1989, I covered sources in a majority of Czech and Moravian archives and prepared the materials for several monographs. Many of them have not yet been written up. This concentration was possible because it was not possible for me to participate in university teaching or the organizing of scholarly work. In the ČSAV, that was reserved for a handful of “the chosen.” In the last years before the fall of communism, it finally became possible for me to educate postgraduate students, whom I could orient to the issues in early modern history. My best students then were Václav Bůžek, today a professor at the Jihočeská univerzita in České Budějovice, and Jiří Mikulec, head of the Department of Early Modern History in the Institute of History of the Academy. When I wished to communicate some of my knowledge to a broader public, I tried to write in an understandable style. I was able to present my main theme, the history of the early modern nobility, in lectures at the Prague City Library. Later, to my great joy, I met a number of university students who had attended these lectures when they were gymnasium students. The lectures had aroused their interest in 16th- and 17th-century Czech history.

SZW: *In the months of November-December 1989 and January-February 1990, what role did you play when academia was in upheaval?*

JP: During 1989 it was obvious even in the ÚČSSD that change was brewing. The question was whether it would be changed in a liberalizing sense or, on the contrary, that the regime would be tightened in a repressive “Chinese” way. Diverse opinions flourished within the institute. The opposition had not yet crystallized, and nobody exhibited undue political courage, including me. A strike committee was formed only in the first few days after November 17, 1989—as in other institutions—because of the violent incidents in Národní třída.³ The committee’s aim was to remove the existing institute leadership and unite with the “academic” historians in the stream of political events. Characteristically, no one from the older generation joined the strike committee out of fear of reprisals by the existing communist regime. I remained on it as the sole member of the middle generation along with several younger historians. The situation was so fragile and uncertain that none dared join the strike committee from among those who later—when the outcome was irrevocably decided—became very tough advocates of unyielding anticommunism.

The strike committee succeeded in opening up stormy discussions that began to clear the musty atmosphere and to formulate new historiographical perspectives. In the name of the Institute, I participated with others shortly after the revolution at the memorable meeting in Prague’s “Delta” hall. There, for the first time, historians from the official institutions, from the dissidents, and from the shelved “sixty-eighters” (formerly reform communists) met in heated discussions and exchanges of opinions about the state of Czech historiography. These discussions opened the road to a new arrangement of our field; fortunately, it did not lead to political purges but to factual evaluations of scholarly work. In deciding this, the older generation enjoyed the highest authority, no matter the wing to which they belonged. Among them in particular were Jan Křen, Josef Macek, Jaroslav Mezník, Josef Petráň, František Šmahel, and Josef Válka. It was to their credit that scholarly criteria prevailed over utilitarian political considerations in setting the future tone and direction of our profession.

SZW: *The Institute of History (HÚ) was reorganized at that point. Were you involved? What were your duties and authority after the reorganization?*

JP: Early in 1990 unforeseen possibilities for teaching and for organizing research arose. My

3. Národní třída or National Street is a major artery that links the Vltava River with Wenceslaus Square in the heart of Prague. On November 17, 1989, the official student holiday, it was the site of a confrontation between riot police and students. (SW)

colleagues elected me as a department head and gave me an opportunity to create an independent department of early modern history. This was confirmed by Dr. František Šmahel, an outstanding medievalist, who returned after a fifteen-year absence to the renewed HÚ as its first post-1989 director. To my small joy, he asked that I become his deputy (in addition to my duties in the Department of Early Modern History), which soon involved supervising the greater portion of administrative duties connected with the Institute's management.

At the beginning of 1990, Prof. Josef Petráň invited me to teach as an adjunct at the Philosophical Faculty in Prague, and he urged me to transfer from the academy to the university, where new instructors were needed. In the spring of 1993 I accepted this invitation in part because I was not very successful in building the early modern history department at HÚ. I did succeed in attracting some excellent specialists from other institutions, but, ironically, that was the germ of the instability of the new department. The shocks of overhauling the academy and a continuing threat of dissolution led the majority of scholars in the early modern period to enter universities. At the time they seemed to offer a better future. When the outstanding church historian Noemi Rejchrtová told me that she was returning to the Protestant Theological Faculty at Charles University, I decided to accept the invitation to join the Philosophical Faculty in Prague. There, for the first time in my life, I was able to teach university level history and Slavistics. My position as assistant director of the faculty's department of Czech history was—in contrast to the heavy administrative burden at the HÚ of the Academy—only a formality and rather insignificant. I even began to commute to Brno, where without remuneration I taught early modern history and the history of Slovenia at the Philosophical Faculty of the Masaryk University. This rewarded me with a new experience, but it became difficult to concentrate on synthetic research. My biggest regret is that it became impossible for me to finish my work on the history of the Habsburg monarchy, to which I had given so much time while at the Academy.

Somehow along the way, I earned the degree of Doctor of Science (DrSc., doctor scientiarum). It was considered a confirmation of the highest qualification in the field of history, and it was bestowed by the scholarly boards at the ČSAV or the universities, which are duly accredited. It required a candidate's successful defense of a synthetic monograph that is recognized by three examiners as a distinguished contribution to the field. In 1991, at the suggestion of Dr. Josef Macek, my book, *Poslední Rožmberkové. Velmoži české renesance* (The Last Rozmberks. Magnates of the Czech Renaissance), passed through adversarial proceedings. After that, the ČSAV gave me this degree. In the 1990s, the degree gained great prestige, but it also had its opponents. These won a majority in the Czech legislature; therefore, according to the new laws on higher education, the DrSc. degree was not awarded after 2002.

SZW: *In 1990 you were named externí učitel at the Philosophical Faculty, then externí docent, docent, and finally, professor. How did these positions differ from each other?*

JP: As an external instructor (before habilitation) and an external docent (after ordinary habilitation), I taught without pay, and I selected quite freely, according to my scholarly interests, the classes I would offer. As a docent, a regularly employed member of the faculty, I taught in addition so-called *kurzovní přednášky*, lectures that systematically covered the major questions of the early modern period. Sometimes I gave the students exercises, and eventually I taught proseminar subjects such as Introduction to the Study of History. It is the same now that I am a professor, only that I have less obligatory duty with a minimum of six hours of teaching weekly. Assistants follow my lectures with exercises, using discussions to review the material for the student's further referral. In reality, of course, the teaching takes much more time, with a diploma seminar, consultations with doctoral candidates, and examinations.

In Czech universities, help from secretaries and assistants is not given directly to docents or professors, but to the whole faculty, institute, or department. As a docent and now as a professor, I can have help from a secretary in administrative matters.

SZW: *In 1998 you succeeded Prof. Šmahel as Director of the Institute of History. How was this appointment decided? Were your colleagues involved? Was there a competition for the position?*

JP: The nomination process for directors of institutes at the AVČR is strictly formalized in the bylaws of the academy. Directors are chosen for four year terms and may have one more term of four years thereafter. The Academic Board of the Academy selects a committee together with the Scholarly Council of the Institute from distinguished representatives in the field. In the case of the Institute of History, this means not just historians but also sociologists, ethnographers, and other specialists from the academy and the universities in Prague, Brno, and other cities. The committee usually has about ten members. On it also sit some members of the Scholarly Council of the Institute of History, who are elected by all its scholars. The democratic principle is thus assured in two ways, but always indirectly: first, through the elected Scholarly Council of the Institute and second through the Academic Council, in which the Institute may be represented on the basis of the successful candidacy of some of its deputies in the Academic Assembly. For example, in the period 2001-2005 the Institute of History is represented in the Academic Assembly by two elected members and in the person of its director; in the Academic Council by one member (Docent Radomír Vlček), who succeeded with his candidacy at the election of new leadership of the Academy in March 2001.

When I applied, there were two other candidates, Josef Žemlička, a leading Czech medieval-

ist, and Dr. Jan Gebhart, an expert on the Second World War. Both are employed in the Institute; Dr. Žemlička as chief of the department of the Middle Ages, and Dr. Gebhart as chairman of the Scholarly Council of the Institute.

SZW: *Your career took off like a rocket in the 1990s with many administrative duties, memberships in national and international scholarly bodies, and editorial responsibilities. Yet you continue to publish scholarly articles and steer great research projects. How do you manage these multiple roles?*

JP: Some of my colleagues think I love offices and gather them as did the medieval pluralists, the clerics who filled the offices of priests, canons, and other profitable sinecures although they were unqualified for their tasks. I can only say that I do not have and never had any inner need for a multitude of functions. There were many that were offered that I refused and others that after some time I voluntarily surrendered. Nor do I strive for personal publicity. I prefer much more to sit in peace in an archive or my home office because research and creating historical narratives are my greatest pleasures. Among the paradoxes of my life is that I am pulled into organizational and editorial duties, leaving much less time for systematic scholarly work than I would wish.

It may be unbelievable to some that I “fell” into most of my official duties without any effort on my part. Before I became deputy director of the HÚ, I tried to convince Prof. Šmahel that I had no clerical skills and would much prefer to do research, but eventually I gave in to his wishes. In 1996, the central organization of Czech historians, the “Historický klub,” entered a deep crisis. Nobody wanted to become the president, an ungrateful task—that is, to rescue the organization before it decayed. A small group undertook changing its form into the “Association of Historians of the Czech Republic.” They did not hold strong institutional positions and were ridiculed for their hopeless clubmanship. I could not turn down the appeal of these honest and determined people, so I accepted the chairmanship and together we committed several years of our lives to the effort to improve communication within the community of Czech historians.

It never occurred to me that I would become a vice rector of Charles University. I had been active in the Prague Philosophical Faculty for only a few semesters and had held no positions of leadership in the school. Again, more or less by chance, I found myself in a crisis situation which had arisen without my involvement. The University Rector, Professor Malý, a prominent historian of law, had some time earlier been one of my teachers. Later I collaborated with him in preparing a conference about the history of early modern times. He had refused to endorse a faculty approved candidate for a vice rectorship and wished to find a candidate of his own to

submit to the University Senate. Shortly before the Senate was to vote, Malý asked whether I would be willing to accept the functions of vice rector for foreign relations. At the time I had so little interest in the structure of the university's leadership that I did not even know how many vice rectors there were and how they divided their departments. Moreover, at the time I had very tense relations with the then leadership of the Philosophical Faculty. They had not agreed to begin proceedings to consider my professorship in 1995 on the grounds that I had not been at the Philosophical Faculty long enough. Professors Jaroslav Mezník and Josef Válka at the Masaryk University in Brno began their own proceedings for my promotion through their institution. The dean of the Prague Philosophical Faculty, Docent František Vrhel, changed his mind and said he would begin the proceedings immediately if I canceled those in Brno. Obviously I could not agree, whereupon in my own faculty I became *persona non grata*.

In that rather tense atmosphere, I received the invitation to become one of the two prorectors who would represent the faculties of humanistic and social sciences on the university level. After brief reflection, I accepted the offer because it was an interesting and once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. For the first time I had a chance to travel almost over the whole world, a dream from my childhood on. It was not tourism, but the coordination of relations with universities on five continents. Our basic goal was to rebuild the multifaceted but somewhat fragmented relations of our university as a rounded global network of collaborations by Charles University in partnership with other great world universities. This required opening dealings with colleagues in the United States, China, and other countries. I devoted three years of my life to this task with some success. The present network of contacts by our university is territorially and thematically more balanced than before. It provides our scientists, teachers, and scholars with many more exchange opportunities and it better supports Czech (Bohemistic) studies abroad.

From the beginning of my function as prorector, I insisted that I intended to fulfill it only for one elected term of three years. I was convinced that an extended stay in this demanding administrative office would tear me completely from my scholarly field. In 1998, František Šmahel was nearing the end of his second and final term as Director of the Institute of History. I decided to enter the competition to succeed him. My conception was that the Institute should end the atomized pattern of employment among individual scholars and undertake large-scale projects hitherto unrepresented (a new Encyclopedia of Czech History, intensive work on a National Biographical Lexikon, etc.). In this case my action would be not the result of chance, but a purposeful effort undertaken because of a freely chosen responsibility.

Although the burden arising from some functions is time consuming, I cannot stop my research and writing for publication. Were I to halt that activity, I would appear to my colleagues as an untrustworthy director and to my students as an uninteresting and perhaps even ludicrous figure. That would be a sad end to a historian as a "servant of scholarship." On the

other hand, the intensity of my research is not what it would have been without my organizational duties. Today, however, I have students who are independent scholars to whom I can hand over topics for research that originally I might have liked to pursue. Indeed, the span of my lifetime is shortening, but I feel great satisfaction and joy that my former doctoral candidates have developed “my” themes from bygone days better than I could have done.

As for managing a busy life, two great shocks from childhood were decisive for me: polio and the social liquidation of my family. Both led me to hang on and endure and acquire an active relationship toward life. Thank goodness I survived my illness and then other serious threats; for instance, in youth I was not far from death due to an accident on an Alpine glacier in Slovenia and again after a fall into stormy seas in the Adriatic. I became determined to leave at least a small footprint behind me. When in youth I read the wonderful essays of the great Czech philologist Vilém Mathesius, I adopted his idea of cultural activism and especially the “command of creative humility,” which “requires only that we recognize that it is our task, a task that in a given situation we can do better than others, or ultimately the task that only we can carry out. It is our duty to seize such a task with all our strength and self-sacrifice.” (Vilém Matheius, *Možnosti, které čekají. Epištoly o tvořivém životě*. Praha, 1945, pp. 35, 37.) In that spirit I understood my part in the organizing of Czech scholarship. Even if sometimes one feels tired, one must continue to work according to one’s strength, aware of one’s imperfections, anchored in one’s family and fellow men, and conscious that we are not here alone and only for ourselves.

SZW: *Can you comment on the advances in Czech historical scholarship in the past decade?*

JP: There have been multiple changes in Czech historical research since 1989, not always unequivocally positive. It was relatively simple to provide the workplaces in the scientific institutes and higher schools with computers. This technological leap was very quickly mastered by the young and middle generations of historians. A larger problem is thematic and methodological innovations in Czech historiography. They depend to a significant extent on the modernization of the scholarly infrastructure, especially of specialized libraries, and the possibilities of study abroad. Opportunities are already open to the present youngest generation. I am convinced that beneficial results will soon appear. Among my doctoral students, there are already several who know Western languages well, have mastered relevant methods, have international contacts, and successfully present their work at international conferences. The future of Czech historical research lies in this type of scholar.

The traditional Bohemocentrism, the concentration on domestic problems, has been a hallmark of much of Czech historiography since the 19th century. It limits the thematic range of the field, but it is not necessarily a sign of backwardness if research is supported by knowledge

of foreign historiography and its methodology. Within the field of Czech history, it is possible to investigate all the basic problems of political and economic history, material and spiritual culture, historical anthropology, and even modern microhistory. A substantial number of Czech historians suffer from an inclination toward simplistic neopositivistic description. This avoids more complicated questions and broader international comparisons. Nevertheless, the best young scholars will be able to overcome this longtime deficiency.

At the same time, one should bear in mind that our scholars do not focus exclusively on Czech themes. We are developing new research on West European and American history to complement traditional strengths in Russian and Balkan history. Czech Ibero-Americanists have achieved noteworthy results, and two historians (Svatava Raková and Lenka Rovná) are focusing on the history of the United States and Canada. In their case, one should remember that it is important not just to focus on the contents of North American history, but also to transfer the new questions and methods to the Czech Republic, so that others can apply them to Czech research on Central European problems.

Today's Czech historical research lacks sufficient strength to create great—original and conceptually rounded—syntheses of the history of mankind with the success of historians of the 1930s under Josef Šusta's leadership. It tries, however, to map world history through surveys of individual states and regions. Czech scholars have produced original historical narratives of Bulgaria, the lands of the former Yugoslavia, Portugal, Russia, Greece, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Canada, Mexico, Uruguay, and South Africa. These works, if not in all cases on a world-class level, certainly broaden the horizons of Czech historians as well as lay readers. The close attention to our own problems is breaking down, and step by step the attempt to bring Czech history into connection with West European and world history is gaining strength.

SZW: *Are American researchers in Czech history adequately prepared for work in Czech libraries and archives? Are the archives able to meet their needs?*

JP: The activity of the Czechoslovak History Conference indicates that even the history of such a small territory as the Czech Republic has attracted many American scholars. Their work, similar to that of British and French historians, is immensely important to us for several reasons. American historiography has developed continuously over a long time span and directly creates, or receives, the methodology of world historiography, which is then reflected in research on Czech history. Further, American scholars perceive Czech and Central European history from a distance. This sometimes may lead to a misunderstanding of details but obviously allows for a strong comparative evaluation of Czech development. Finally, American historiography, thanks to its enormous human potential, has unique prerequisites for coordinating international research.

For example, the publication of the worldwide yearbook, *Scholars of Early Modern Studies*, had great significance. As its national editor for the Czech Republic, I prepared its bio-bibliographical foundation. The yearbook was published by Truman State University. It enabled scholars to learn about the results of Czech historical research on the 16th to 18th centuries, while Czech historians of that period had a survey of worldwide scholarship. Unfortunately, publication of the yearbook ended in 2000. The *Czech and Slovak History Newsletter* has an even greater importance for bringing Czech historiography into an American and global context. We are preparing a Bibliographical Lexicon of Scholars of Bohemian, Czech, and Czechoslovak History Studies with the same goal in mind. As of this writing [*January 2002—ed.*], we have assembled data from about 300 historians the world over. American experts on Czech history will occupy a leading place in this publication.

Accessibility to the sources of Czech history is still unsatisfactory, not only for American and other foreign historians but also for Czechs. The condition of the libraries in which periodicals and serials are stored is catastrophic. On the other hand, the situation in the archives is much better. In the 1990s most of them were improved with new buildings and, particularly in regional archives, modern equipment. I hope that a similar improvement takes place in the central archives. Although there were some positive changes, I am aware that for American scholars, research in our libraries is stressful. I am sorry, and at this moment ask only that they not be discouraged by these annoyances.⁴

SZW: *Whole new topics and areas of Czech history have opened up in the past decade. Do lower and higher school textbooks need revisions to take new interpretations and findings into account?*

JP: School history today is completely different from that of twelve years ago. It offers alternative views of our country's history, and for receptive students, rich material for reflection. Yet problems persist. As for textbooks, enormous changes occurred in explanations of the Czech past in the 1990s, and this reality was reflected in them. Until 1989 the primary and middle schools used only centrally approved textbooks. These texts conformed to the obligatory Marxist-Leninist conception of history. In 1990 dozens of textbooks were independently published offering differing interpretations. Their diversity and absolute freedom of interpretation were typical of today's postmodernist perspective. However, sometimes this freedom also allowed for confusion, unsound scholarship, and altogether poor quality. Textbook publishing became a very lucrative business in which pedagogical quality was sacrificed for immediate gain.

4. Because of unprecedentedly high flood waters in mid-August 2002, some archives in Prague and other cities along the Vltava River lost valuable holdings of historical records and artifacts. (SW)

Politics indeed played a role. The occasionally declared “neutrality of opinion” is difficult to practice where modern history is discussed; it is not easy to obtain balanced evaluations. The situation is especially complicated in the rapidly changing postcommunist countries. Clearly, a great influence on the interpretation of identical problems depends on the author’s standpoint, whether Left or extreme Right, democratic or monarchist, religious or atheist. No one textbook could satisfy all the political, religious, and ethnic demands of the inhabitants of the state in which it would be used. But we must attempt to meet the needs of a pluralistic society. In the Czech environment, this means respect for the entire community that has lived, and now lives, in this locality (including Jews, Roma, Germans, Poles, and a growing number of Vietnamese). Religious groups demand greater respect for diversity without having textbooks express a preference for some historical concept (above all, Catholic, Protestant, or atheist).

All this notwithstanding, the greatest defect in secondary school history education lies not in textbooks but in teaching. The responsible central agency, the Ministry of Schools, shows little concern for its quality, and the time allotted to teaching history is meager. As chairman of the Sdružení historiků ČR (Association of Historians of the Czech Republic), along with representatives of the Asociace učitelů dějepisu (History Teachers Association), I often dealt with high government officials and members of parliament. They verbally conceded the need for reform but did little to improve conditions. We must find the political will. Historians and teachers must persist in the struggle to cure these ailments.

SZW: *To conclude, how does the present generation of student historians differ from earlier ones?*

JP: When I began university teaching in 1990, my colleagues and I believed that freedom of instruction automatically aroused deep interest and corresponding diligence in almost all students. But as the euphoria of freedom ebbed, the quality of applicants for programs in history generally declined. Some teachers sounded an alarm and decried a calamitous decline of the national culture. But this phenomenon is not peculiar to Czechs. It is due to poor reading habits, the visual depiction of culture, superficial thinking, and a plethora of haphazardly structured information. History is not an exclusive subject that is supposed to reveal universal truths, but a challenge to those who wish to experience the adventure of knowledge. We do have students who care deeply about their field and believe it self-evident that what the past generations lacked constitutes a good education today: a quality education at home, learning at least two Western languages, a short stay at a Western university, research in foreign archives, and reasonably speedy publication of their findings. These young people express their critical abilities not only in lectures and seminars but also in reviews and articles. A sizable number are women, who show they are not merely equal partners of men but also capable scholars with

specific opinions about concepts of the history of culture, of everyday life, and of ideas and mentalities.

Some representatives of the young generation emerged at the close of the 1990s with indiscriminate critiques of everything “old.” This tendency proved unproductive. Today, there are exciting ongoing discussions among historians. The present middle generation almost always avoids controversy over the meaning of Czech history, but the young generation speaks out more emphatically. The future of Czech historical research in the twenty-first century rests with these young scholars.