A Dictionary of Czech Culture*

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The selections here come from a larger dictionary of Czech culture. The aim of the dictionary is not to provide a comprehensive account of Czech history and culture, but rather to introduce the reader to some concepts – people, places, songs, slogans – known to all Czechs. These concepts generally do not appear in dictionaries, textbooks, or histories, or at least not in the form they do here. Yet all of them are well known to Czechs living in the latter half of the twentieth century. They are the furniture of his or her mental universe. Just about every Czech alludes to them when talking to friends, situates new phenomena in relation to them, and assumes them to be a natural part of the world. I thus try to explain not just their literal meaning, but also the set of associations that has grown around them.

(The arrows → refer to other entries in the dictionary.)

Armádní umělecký soubor (Army Chorus): The largest and most famous of the many choruses that sang so-called *masové písně* (mass songs) praising the communist regime. Associated with the Stalinist fifties, the repertoire of these groups included titles like *Sláva tankům* (Hurrah to the Tanks), *Za Gottwalda vpřed* (Forward with → Gottwald) or *Píseň o Fučíkovi* (A Song about → Fučík) and featured inane lyrics about the beauties of socialism and the men who built and defended it. Musically they resembled nothing if not American musicals from the era of *Oklahoma* and *South Pacific*. Performances by these choruses were a necessary component of any state holiday and the songs were a part of all school curricula. The best-known composer in the genre was Radim Drejsl whose most famous composition, *Rozkvetlý svět* (World in Blossom), features the lines "It's enough just to look around to see how much beauty surrounds us/Smoke from the factories and children in the sandbox." Upon his return from his first trip to the Soviet Union in 1953, Drejsl was so disillusioned by what he saw there that he took his own life.

Bican, Pepi (1913–2001): The greatest Czech soccer player of all-time and one of the greatest goal scorers the world has ever known. Born to a Czech family in

* The entries presented here have been contributed by the author as a sample of the 400+ entries gathered so far for the manuscript of the dictionary, which currently stands at 65 000 words and also includes an additional set of appendices with lists of the most popular books, foods, movies, etc. For more information, see the Editorial in this issue.

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Austria, he first gained fame as a striker with a nose for the net playing for the Vienna club Rapid. In the thirties, he transferred to Prague's Slavia, though he did not get his citizenship papers in time for the 1938 World Cup, when with the goalie František Plánička he might have delivered the title to the Czechs. His goal scoring, however, continued unabated even through the war years. He finished his career with an incredible five thousand goals (643 in league play), a total that became the title of his best-selling autobiography. The communists, however, banished him from his beloved Slavia to the backwater of Hradec Králové and after his career had ended put him to work as an ordinary laborer on the Holešovice docks. As if these humiliations weren't enough, the bureaucrats in charge of world football records voted not to make him the top goal scorer of all time (they argued that his goals under the Protectorate (→ *Protektorát*) should not count) and Czech sports fans did not choose him as the greatest player of all-time (likely because he was not sufficiently Czech for their tastes).

Bobřík (Little Beaver): *Bobříks* are tests of ability and strength for young boys and girls. They were set down in Jaroslav → Foglar's *Rychlé šípy* (Fast Arrows) books, and their name is derived from the Beaver River near which the book's young heroes had their adventures. Among the best known of the 13 *bobříks* are silence (not saying a word for 24 hours), bravery (staying alone all night in the woods), and nobility (no lying or cursing). The remaining *bobříks* are nimbleness (various running and jumping tests), precision (stone throwing), rescue, swimming, good deeds (100 must be performed), flowers (50 species of plant must be identified), loneliness (10 hours without being seen or heard), handiness (manufacturing a useful object), strength (5 pull-ups), and hunger (a day-long fast). To this day kids perform *bobříks* and sew a patch on their sleeve whenever they 'hunt' one down. *Bobříks* have even penetrated the adult world: when a politician lets slip something better left unsaid, he is said not to have held to the *bobřík* of silence.

Bony: Coupons introduced in 1957 that allowed citizens to buy imported goods – like Levis jeans, Swiss chocolate or Adidas sneakers – at special → Tuzex shops. *Bony* were obtained from the state in exchange from foreign currency which citizens were required by law to turn in to the government who needed it to cover its perpetual shortages of foreign exchange. By the eighties, black-market sellers of *bony* (→ *veksláci*) had become a common sight on street corners, whispering to passersby: "Need some *bony*" or "Wanna buy *bony*." A popular eighties film called "*Bony a Klid*" (Bony and Peace) provides a surprisingly honest look at the world of bony trading. As the politician Karel Künhl notes, prices quoted in bony were probably the only accurate prices in the country under communism.

Burian, Vlasta (1891–1962): Known to Czechs as the king of comics, Burian was the most popular star of Czech film and theater in the thirties and forties. A scrawny, mustachioed figure, Burian began as a comic actor in a theater which he owned and whose plays he wrote. As the writer Josef Škvorecký describes him, "He was

something of a Czech Groucho Marx. He had the same mercurial energy, was capable of similar verbal floods, and stupefied the audience with wise-cracks, explosive gags, aggressive conquests of women, and fantastic mimicry." With the coming of sound films, he became the country's most marketable star. Many of his films were adapted from his own plays and most involved mistaken identities. Thus in *Přednosta stanice* (The Station Master) he plays a ticketless train passenger who is taken for the stationmaster. The same kind of mix-up inspired *U pokladny stál* (where hospital staff believe he is a VIP) and *C. a k. polní maršálek* (where he is mistaken for an Austrian field marshal). Burian had the misfortune of being at the top of his career when the Nazis invaded. Though his collaboration with the invaders was of a lesser degree than many future communists – he once made fun of Czech politicians and Jews on a radio broadcast – he was hauled before a tribunal after the war. He was banned from performing and most of his great fortune was confiscated (his luxurious lifestyle was probably the real reason for his punishment). Though he eventually returned to the stage and film, he never recaptured his prior zaniness. His association with the bourgeois First Republic (→ *První republika*) also meant that his films were shown only intermittently under communism. Since the revolution, Burian's work has been enjoying a revival. Hardly a week goes by without a film of his appearing on television and his remains were recently reburied in the national cemetery → *Slavín*.

Hašler, Karel (1879–1941): The author of patriotic and popular melodies beloved to this day. Like George M. Cohan, his closest American counterpart, Hašler began as an actor and vaudevillian, but later turned to writing popular songs. The best known is his sentimental ode to Czechness, "*Ta naše písnička česká*" (Our Czech Song), whose text tells us that when our Czech music dies then we will no longer live. His compositions became folk hymns on his many journeys across the country and were published in volumes entitled "Old Prague Songs." His popularity was so great between the wars that a manufacturer of menthol candies called them "*Hašlerky*" and used the slogan "Hašler coughs, no matter/Hašlerky will cure him." The lozenges can still be found on supermarket shelves today. Hašler himself died in a Nazi concentration camp after being arrested for ignoring warnings not to perform patriotic and anti-Nazi songs. Instead of being celebrated after the war, however, the communists made him and his music into persona non grata because of his many songs hailing → Masaryk and the legionnaires (→ *legionáři*) and making fun of the inter-war communists.

Mariáš: Popular Czech card game. In just about every Czech pub you can find a table of old men playing the card game *mariáš*. The rules are somewhat similar to bridge, with players winning points by collecting tricks. Usually played by three players, the game uses a German set of 32 cards: ace, king, overknave (*svršek*), underknave (*spodek*), and ten through seven in the four suits of acorns, hearts, leaves and bells. One player makes a bid to win a given number of tricks and the other two players try to prevent him. The name comes from the French for mar-

riage, a marriage between the king and the overknave, which is worth extra points. More complex than the game itself are the betting permutations, though the stakes are usually measured in *haléři* or the Czech version of pennies. A variation of *mariáš* called *ütli* is the most popular card game in Hungary.

Maturita: School-leaving exam for students in college prep and specialized high schools (→ *gymnázium*). The main event in the process is the oral exams that take place at the end of the senior year (known as *oktáva*), when teachers hand out a set of approximately 50 questions. Students have a week – the so-called "*svatý týden*" (holy week) – in which to prepare answers, with the entire class of thirty usually pooling their knowledge. On the day of the exam, dressed in their Sunday best, students enter the room individually and pick a question out of a hat. They are then grilled orally on this question by a committee composed of their homeroom teacher, a specialist on the subject in question, and a school inspector. Failure means that the student has to go to summer school and then retake the exam or else repeat the entire year. Passing marks are often obtained through bribes or → *protekce*. During holy week, students about to sit the exam dress up in costumes and go out begging for donations to their graduation party. The party is an all-night drinking bout for students and teachers alike. The tradition of *maturita* has given Czech students a common experience for almost a century and is the subject of numerous films and novels.

MDŽ (*Mezinárodní den žen*/International Women's Day): A holiday honoring women celebrated yearly under communism on March 8. Though acknowledged by the United Nations, International Women's Day was celebrated mainly in communist countries where it was supposed to replace Mother's Day. It originated, however, in the United States in 1909 and was first organized by the Socialist Party of America. In the communist celebration of MDŽ, women were traditionally given flowers and their contributions to the building of socialism honored in schools, factories and offices. In reality, the holiday became just another excuse for Czech men to go out drinking. Today, it has disappeared completely and is gradually being replaced by Mother's Day. Another international holiday, MDD (*Mezinárodní den dětí*/International Children's Day), celebrated on June 1, has survived the revolution and continues to be marked by fun and games for the country's youngsters.

Olympic: Popular rock group. Founded in 1963 as one of the country's first rock-'n'roll bands, Olympic was initially home to a changing cast of many of the country's best rockers. Playing foreign songs, and then as a backup band in the theater → *Semafor*, Olympic became an artistic force under the leadership of vocalist and guitarist Petr Janda in the late sixties. The group's bread and butter was early Beatles-style love songs and middle-of-the-road classic rock. Their signature tune is *Dej mi víc své lásky* (Give Me More of Your Love), with the catchy refrain "My dear, give me more; my dear, give me more; my dear, give me more of

your love; there's almost nothing I want; there's almost nothing I want; I only want to caress your hair." Their list of popular singles, all of which are campfire favorites, includes *Želva* (Turtle), *Jasná zpráva* (Clear News). *Osmý den* (Eighth Day), and *Okno mé lásky* (Window of My Love). Like aging rock pioneers in the West, Olympic continues to play forty years after its founding, with the balding Janda still attracting new admirers. Its fans now range from preteens to the middle-aged and include the majority of the population. A new musical in Prague traces the group's history.

Pravopis (Grammar, literally "Correct Writing"): For a nation which professes to have a complex language, Czechs are extraordinarily sensitive about grammar. Bad spelling is frequently taken to be a sign of low intelligence. The special bane of Czech writers are → *vyjmenovaná slova* (exception words) and foreign words. The sensitivity to grammar may have to do with the fact that Czech intellectuals only began using the language in the mid-nineteenth century and made it their main instrument for awakening national feeling. Worries about *pravopis* today focus on the deleterious effects of text messaging. Some believe that because text messages and emails are written without diacritics, people will forget how to use them. As evidence of Czechs' interest in grammar, the Czech Language Institute at the Academy of Sciences runs a telephone advice line that receives upwards of ten thousand calls a year.

Protekce: A hard to translate word that includes such practices as favoritism, nepotism, string pulling, and even what we would now call networking. Though endemic under communism, its roots are much older. A classic film of the thirties stars Vlasta → Burian as a hospital patient who is mistakenly identified as a VIP and treated accordingly. After the communist coup, however, chronic shortages in everything made *protekce* a fact of daily life. It was most widespread in education, where getting into college required an inside connection who had to be paid off, but it was almost as common in healthcare, housing, and at the butcher's. Even today the tradition continues. As one car mechanic put it, "*Protekce* ended, but old buddies remained." Children of influential parents, a common phenomenon in show business among other professions, are known as *protekční děti* (protected children).

První republika (First Republic): In the eyes of most citizens the First Republic, lasting from independence day October 28, 1918 (→ *28. říjen*) to the Munich capitulation in 1938 (→ *Mnichov*), stands for hard-work, prosperity, and freedom. The communists, however, did all they could to besmirch the period as a time of poverty and exploitation in economics and oligarchical rule by a handful of powerful politicians (the → *Pětka* – the leaders of the five major parties) and large firms (especially the → *Živnostenská banka*). The truth lies closer to the former version as the First Republic was one of the world's major industrial powers and was the only country in Central and Eastern Europe to remain a democracy be-

tween the wars. Symbols of the First Republic include President → Masaryk, the writer → Čapek, and the shoemaker → Baťa. Present-day democrats and capitalists of all political stripes turn to the First Republic for inspiration and symbolic capital. Besides the First Republic, the only other numerical designation in widespread use is the Second Republic which lasted for only a few months between Munich and the Nazi occupation. Today Czechs live in either the Fourth, Eighth or even First Republic, depending on your numbering scheme.

Pyšná princezna (The Proud Princess): Most watched Czech film of all time. *The Proud Princess* is based on a fairytale by Božena → Němcová and tells the story of the headstrong princess Krasomila, who refuses all suitors until King Miroslav, disguised as a humble gardener, tames her spirit and wins her heart. In its filmed version from 1952, the story takes on communist elements, with a good empire triumphing over an evil one and manual labor the sign of the new aristocracy. The film inaugurated a Czech tradition of filmed fairytales (→ *pohádka*) with live actors. These films are produced almost annually and include such classics as *There Once Was a King*, *The Awfully Sad Princess*, and *Three Nuts for Cinderella*. They are shown in marathon sessions during the Christmas holidays.

Rádio Yerevan: The communist-era station broadcasting from the capital of the Soviet Republic of Armenia. It was referred to most frequently in a series of jokes popular throughout Eastern Europe. These jokes took the form of a question addressed to *Rádio Yerevan*, followed by the station's humorous answer. Their American equivalent would be knock-knock jokes. Here are a couple of examples. "Q: Is it true the poet Mayakovsky committed suicide? A: Yes, we even recorded his last words: Don't shoot, comrades." "Q: Can we introduce communism into Switzerland? A: Yes, but it would be a shame." Folklorists say that the jokes refer to Yerevan because of a long Eastern European tradition of Armenian jokes (often told in fake Armenian accents). The butt of most Czech jokes, however, are neither Armenians nor even Poles, but stupid policemen (→ VB). Humor of course flourished under communism because of the lack of other outlets for dissatisfaction and the general misery of life. Jokes have noticeably deteriorated since the revolution.

Rifle: A synonym for jeans throughout Eastern Europe. In the 1950s, the Italian Fratini brothers, Giulio and Fiorenzi, decided to challenge the American monopoly on the manufacture of blue jeans and start a factory to make their own under the label Rifle. They had their greatest success exporting the jeans to Eastern Europe. By 1986 they had sold 3 million pairs in Russia and had conquered the Czech market to such an extent that Czechs began to use the word *rifle* (pronounced ree-fleh) in place of *džíny* (jeans). Though more stylish and prized than Rifle, Levis were available only in → *Tuzex* shops and commanded top dollar on the black market. Besides being the uniform of the young, jeans are associated with the dissident movement and figures such as Václav Havel.

S tebou mě baví svět (With You the World Is Wonderful): Voted by Czechs their favorite film of all time. Its main characters are three married men preparing to take their annual men-only ski vacation. Instead, however, their wives scheme to force them to take along their children. The film's folksy humor lies in the ingenious ways the husbands find to take care of and entertain their charges without a maternal presence. Its closest Western parallel might be *Three Men and a Baby*. The film is typical both of the innocuous comedy preferred by the communist regime and of Czech tastes in popular entertainment which tend towards the sentimental and unsophisticated.

Tramping: If you ever take a Saturday morning train in the Czech Republic, you are likely to find yourself surrounded by scruffy-looking people of all ages wearing green camouflage uniforms, carrying large backpacks and lugging along guitars. They are not army reservists but "tramps". The word was borrowed from the Jack London memoir "The Road," but in the Czech lexicon it refers not to bums but to ordinary students or working people who spend every free weekend sleeping under the stars (*pod širákem* – under the wideness, in Czech). Tramps are not just individual nature-lovers, but highly organized groups with their own leader (known as a sheriff) and name (usually something in English, like Dakota, Red River, or Yukon). Each group has its own set of rules – there are attendance requirements and everyone is assigned a nickname – and usually claims a special place in the woods known as a *trampská osada* (tramp settlement). The tradition began as a fad in the twenties as an escape from urban life, but was sustained and acquired new meaning as a form of protest during the war and under communism. The tramping movement has spawned its own musical genre with songs like *Bedna od whiskey* (A Crate of Whiskey), *Rosa na koleji* (Dew on the Rails), the tramp anthem *Vlajka* (Flag), and even the Czech translation of John Denver's *Country Roads*, all of which celebrate life on the open road, exotic lands, unspoiled wilderness, friendship, and love. While most young people grow out of their tramping phase, there is a hardcore who remain tramps until they die.

Vepřo-knedlo-zelo (Pork-Dumplings-Sauerkraut): The most traditional Czech meal. It consists of a couple of slices of pork chops, four bread dumplings, and a dollop of sauerkraut. It is guaranteed to leave your tastebuds unstimulated, sit like a rock in your stomach, and clog up your arteries. For Czechs, however, it is the ultimate comfort food. It is available at every pub and restaurant and forms a staple of Sunday afternoon dinners. Czechs even refer to it in the shortened form listed here, instead of saying its full name, "*Vepřové maso s knedlíky a zelím.*"

Věstonická Venuše (Věstonice Venus): The name given to a small clay figure of a woman found during an excavation in the village of Dolní Věstonice. It has achieved notoriety both because of its age – over 25,000 years old – and its exaggerated breasts and behind. The figure appears at the beginning of all Czech history textbooks and has been giggled over by generations of students.

Vítaní občánků (Welcoming the Little Citizens): A ceremony introduced in the fifties to replace traditional christenings. Like everything else it was imported from the Soviet Union, where it was known as an October christening. During the ceremony young couples gather with their newborns at the local town hall where the babies' names are written into the town register. The mayor then presents them with gifts, for example, a book for recording milestones in the baby's life, and makes a short speech welcoming them to the community. Though christenings have become common again (they never completely disappeared under communism), *vítaní občánků* maintains its place alongside them to this day, though without the communist baggage.