

From a High School Teacher to the President of IOHA:

A Short Biographical Sketch of Miroslav Vaňek

It is always tricky to write a profile especially when the person is still alive. To describe the complexity of a man's destiny in its completeness is a hardly attainable ideal to which all the biographers try to get near as near as possible. There is no doubt that biography is one of the most difficult historiographic genres. Besides, the understanding of some things in a person's life is more difficult when the pilgrimage through their life is still an open chapter of his life (we hope that in Miroslav's case it will be open as long as possible). Despite this cautiousness we attempt to make a small biographical sketch.¹¹⁷ We hope we will be able to describe the most distinctive features (mostly professional) of the life of a historian, a pedagogue, an academic and a "functionary" whose life story could be, with a little exaggeration, considered an example of the "Czech dream" made a reality. A path from behind of a teacher's desk to the presidency of IOHA...

Whether we like it or not, the family and our birth place influence us for the rest of our lives. Miroslav Vaňek was born on 11th March 1961 in Teplice, North Bohemia, former Czechoslovakia. Teplice is a well-known spa city, where throughout the ages famous personalities such as Russian tsars Peter I and Alexander I, the Austrian emperor Franz I, Frederick William III the king of Prussia or other renowned people like Giacomo Casanova, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Ludwig van Beethoven, Frederick Chopin, Ferenc Liszt or Richard Wagner stayed. Miroslav Vaňek inherited from his parents an easy-going character and positive relation to people, great communication skills, and also he was predestinate to become a teacher. Northern Bohemia, a dynamic region which has undergone many changes during the 20th century, has given to Miroslav an inclination for urban life style, a passion for rock music¹¹⁸ and for sports as well as some health

¹¹⁷ This article was born as a part of and in the framework of the Project *Česká společnost v období tzv. normalizace a transformace: životopisná vyprávění*. (*The Czech Society in the Years of the So-called Normalization [after 1968] and Transformation [after 1989]*). Project number P410/11/1352 financed by Czech Science Foundation GA ČR 2011–2015.

¹¹⁸ According to Miroslav's personal testimony, in the years 1982 -1984 he was organizing public (but informal) events where rock music was played..

problems. He also gained there a desire for learning new things, looking for new information and meeting new people and new places.

The geographical extent of Miroslav's life is really remarkable. In Klatovy (Czech Republic) he graduated from high school and met his future wife Ivana (teacher and primary school headmaster); in Pilsen (Czech Republic) he obtained his University degrees in various fields of study (Primary School Pedagogy, Pedagogy and Psychology, Czech Language and History). In Prague he got his first job as a primary school and later as a high school teacher – initiated his work in an academic institution and achieved his habilitation qualification in Politology. His son Ondřej was born there. Earlier in Olomouc Miroslav had gotten his Ph.D degree in Czech and Czechoslovakian History. In Chapel Hill (North Carolina, USA) he was employed by the local University. The Silesian city of Opava was the witness of Miroslav becoming a Professor in the history field focused on Czech and Czechoslovakia history.¹¹⁹ The list of the places above suggests that Miroslav Vaněk does not really belong to that kind of people who spend all their lives on one place. The remarkable adaptability and also the persistency to assert himself in new places or situations belong to Miroslav's qualities which are a part of his life.

Apart from having witnessed moments and events which documented their era Miroslav Vaněk started his career of a historian at the Faculty of Education in Pilsen. There he successfully presented his M. A. diploma work focused on circumstances of the fall of communism in Pilsen in 1989. Due to his interest in history of the Velvet revolution (and specifically in the notes and reports produced by the President's Office, then Václav Havel's) Miroslav – still a Prague high school teacher - got in touch with historians from the Institute of Contemporary History (later AV ČR – Czech Academy of Sciences), some of them founders of this institution. There was Milan Otáhal and Vilém Prečan, then the Head of the Institute, both members of the Czechoslovak dissident movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In 1992 Miroslav accepted the offer to work as a researcher in the Institute of Contemporary History and he has been working there ever since. His first works referred to the Velvet Revolution of 1989, one of them analyzing the results of public opinion polls carried out before November 1989.¹²⁰ Although he was primarily expected to investigate the economic and social history before the 1989 change in Czechoslovakia (mainly because the political history had already been investigated on by other researchers), Miroslav found his own field of his interest and he was able to

¹¹⁹ Structured professional curriculum vitae of Miroslav Vaňek can be found on the web pages on his own home work place, Ústavu pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR v.v.i. See <http://www.usd.cas.cz/cs/pracovnici/miroslav-vanek> (quoted 16. 1. 2011).

¹²⁰ See VANĚK, Miroslav, *Veřejné mínění o socialismu před 17. listopadem 1989: Analýza výsledků výzkumu veřejného mínění prováděných ÚVVM od roku 1972 do roku 1989 (Public Opinion about Socialism Before November 17, 1989: Analysis of the Results of the Polls Carried Out by the Institute for Analysis of the Public Opinion from 1972 to 1989)*. Praha: Maxdorf, 1994, 59 p..

convince his superiors about its meaningfulness. : Environmental issues and the ecology movement in Czechoslovakia.¹²¹

Another favorite topic of Miroslav's has been the young generation (mostly university students) of the 1980s and 1990s, which he started to research on together with his colleague Otáhal. The project "Students in the Era of the Fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia – biographical interviews (1996–1998)", supported by the Czech Academy of Sciences Foundation (GA AV ČR) became a turning point in Miroslav's career and a breakthrough for Czech oral history. This was the first time when the oral history methodology was used in historical research, with consistency and according to the professional standards common in Anglo-Saxon countries, Germany or Austria. Later on and in consequence of the project's success, a team of oral history researchers from the Institute and elsewhere was formed. Luckily, the team was able to avoid problems typical of many Czech research teams of that time – methodology inaccuracies, unfamiliarity with international trends and also a limited Prague-centric" perspective. Even though the team members were still learning about the method and its proper use and were only gaining their first experiences in the field a "how to work" model was born. Further developed in the following years, the model is still being used by Czech oral history researchers (at least those who work at the Institute of Contemporary History) (these days. Most importantly, the results of the "student" project attracted the attention not only of numerous specialists from the Czech Republic and abroad but also of many "non-professionals" and general public.¹²²

Thanks to the success of this project, other projects with the name of Miroslav Vaněk as lead-researcher came to existence.¹²³ His ability to lead a research team and to make new people join in the research activities (including PhD and Master students of both sexes), thus creating a colorful intergenerational and interdisciplinary team with a professional and yet human attitude) represented an

¹²¹ See VANĚK, Miroslav, *Nedalo se tady dýchat: Ekologie v českých zemích v letech 1968 až 1989*. (Trouble Breathing. Environmental Issues in Czechoslovakia in the Years 1968–1989) Praha: Maxdorf, 1996. 170 p.

¹²² Especially in OTÁHAL Milan – VANĚK Miroslav, *Sto studentských revolucí: Studenti v období pádu komunismu životopisná vyprávění*. (A Hundred Student Revolutions: Students in the Era of the Fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia: biographical narratives) Praha, 1999.

¹²³ Among the most important ones, let us mention *Kulturní a společenské aktivity mladé generace a cesta k občanské společnosti* (Cultural and Social Activities of the Young Generation. A Path towards Civil Society) funded by Czech Academy of Sciences Foundation 1999–2001; *Politické elity a disident v období tzv. normalizace. Životopisná interview*. (Political Elites and Dissident Movement in the so-called Normalization Years. Biographical Interviews) Czech Academy of Sciences Foundation 2002–2004 *Průzkum české společnosti v období tzv. normalizace. Biografická vyprávění příslušníků dělnických profesí a inteligence* (An Insight into the Czech Society in the Era of the so-called Normalization [1969–1989]. Biographical Narratives of the Members of the Working Class and the Intelligentsia) funded by Czech Academy of Sciences Foundation 2006–2008. The most recent project *Česká společnost v období tzv. normalizace a transformace: životopisná vyprávění* (Czech Society in the Era of the so-called Normalization [1969–1989] and Transformation [after 1989]: Biographical Narratives) is still in progress and is financed by the Czech Academy of Sciences Foundation (2011–2015).

important “key to success” and stood at the birth of a long-term research project focused on the era of the so called «normalization» (after 1968) and the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. It is probably useless to say that not all of the projects were based on interviews analysis and interpretation but the focus of interest of that mentioned above shifted to this field more and more frequently.¹²⁴ The oral history itself, as well as its terminological and methodological aspects which soon started to be discussed, became closely connected to Miroslav’s name and even more so after Miroslav had published several fundamental oral history studies, handbooks, textbooks and manuals.¹²⁵

From a general historiography point of view, it was also thanks to Miroslav Vanek’s efforts that a new historiography movement mapping the events of the so called “small history” (study of less visible population groups and processes which up till then had mostly been omitted or even completely ignored by historians) was formed in the Czech Republic. . Although that fact was not initially clear, it represented an essential contribution to and an important shift of focus for the Czech and Czechoslovak contemporary history research (political, social and cultural history). The fact that the interviews collections have been archived and remain available for the future generations is an important heritage of all the oral history projects that were carried out.¹²⁶ The results of the oral history work, both Miroslav’s own and the ones carried out by his team, were accepted with different reactions by both the professional and general public, may they have been enthusiastic, positively tuned, dispassionate and constructively critical, negative, or even negativistic. Could those viewpoints be objective or not, the truth is that the reactions were never indifferent and only time will help us to evaluate them “unemotionally.“ The institutionalization of the oral history method along with the creation of the Oral History Center as one of the Departments of the Institute of Contemporary History

¹²⁴ See for example VANĚK, Miroslav et al : *Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu* (Islands of Freedom. Cultural and Civil Activities of the Youth in Czechoslovakia of the 1980s). Praha, 2002 (editor and co-author); VANĚK, Miroslav – URBÁŠEK, Pavel, *Vítězové? Poražení? Politické elity a disent v období tzv. normalizace. Životopisná interview* (Winners? Losers? Political Elites and Dissent During the So-called Normalization. Biographic Interviews. 2 volumes). Praha, 2005. (editor and co-author). VANĚK, Miroslav (ed.): *Mocní? A bezmocní? Politické elity a disent v období tzv. normalizace. Interpretační studie životopisných interview*. (Helplessness of the Powerful and Power of the Helpless: Political Elites and Dissent During the Period of the So-Called Normalization – Interpretation Essays of Biographic Interviews.) Praha, 2007 .VANĚK Miroslav (ed.), *Obyčejní lidé...?! Pohled do života tzv. mlčící většiny. Životopisná vyprávění příslušníků dělnických profesí a inteligence*. (Ordinary People...?! An Insight into the Life of the «Silent Majority». Biographic Narratives of Members of the Working Class and the Intelligentsia) 3 volumes. Praha 2009. VANĚK Miroslav, *Byl to jenom rock’n’roll? Hudební alternativa v komunistickém Československu 1956–1989 (Was it Just Rock’n’Roll? The «Other» Music in the Communist Czechoslovakia.1956–1989)* Praha, 2010.

¹²⁵ VANĚK, Miroslav et al . *Orální historie. Metodické a „technické“ postupy*. (Oral History. Methodological and «Technical» Procedures). Olomouc, 2003 VANĚK, Miroslav, *Orální historie ve výzkumu soudobých dějin* (Oral History in Contemporary History Research). Praha, 2004,. VANĚK, Miroslav – MÜCKE, Pavel – PELIKÁNOVÁ, Hana, *Naslouchat hlasům paměti: teoretické a praktické aspekty orální historie* (Listening to the Voices of Memory: Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Oral History). Praha, 2007.

¹²⁶ The collections are listed and can be found at http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz/pages_cz/sbirky.htm.

in 2000 (with Miroslav Vaněk appointed as its Head) represented an important success and marked another turning point for oral history in the Czech Republic. Thank to the friendly attitude of the management (namely Oldřich Tůma, the Institute's President) that is how the first oral history home in the Czech Republic was created and developed similar to those abroad (above all in the Western Europe). And again thanks to Miroslav's lively attitude, the Center began to promote a wide range of research-related activities: teaching, , popularization, archiving).

One of these activities was pedagogical work at universities. At the turn of the millennium this definitely was not a commonplace among the "gownsmen" of the Academy of Sciences, as at that time there was a relatively large gap even in mutual contacts, not mentioning the interest in tuition itself, between the "exploratory" Academy and the "educational" universities. Loyal to his family tradition, to the ethos of a pedagogue and also because of his affection for handing over the knowledge and experience to the younger ones, Miroslav became a pioneer at his workplace. But his course was somewhat paradoxically inverse compared to the usual way of many of his colleagues – he first set out to teach abroad (2000, 2004 - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA), later he was teaching foreign students arriving at our country (since 2001 – Collegium Hieronymii Pragensis, Prague) and only after that he started to teach at the Czech and Moravian Universities (2002-2003 – the Department of History, College of Philosophy, University of Palacký, Olomouc; 2002-2003 – the Institute of Czech History, College of Philosophy, Charles University, Prague; 2003-2008 - the Institute of Political Sciences, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of Charles University, Prague). Since 2005 he has been giving lectures at the Faculty of Humanities (Charles University in Prague), a place where he most visibly "dropped the anchor". Because of his lectures and courses being very well received (plus his organization and diplomatic skills) and thanks to the long-lasting support of the Faculty Headquarters, a Master Program in Oral History – Contemporary History was accredited by the Czech Ministry of Education in 2008.¹²⁷ Miroslav as a historian and expert is nowadays very hard to imagine without his second job of a university pedagogue. According to the progress during last few years it is possible to say that he literally enjoys his 'double role' of a "mediator" between the world of science and the world of education and he is also very successful in this sphere.

Miroslav Vaněk has become involved in many other professional activities connected with his profession, in which he excelled as a skilful negotiator and an 'academical diplomat' with a huge scale of contacts from many various fields of study, regions and other domains of human activities. Not counting his function in Institute of Contemporary History (Scientific and Institutional Council)

¹²⁷ For more information about the Faculty visit : <http://www.fhs.cuni.cz/ohsd/>

Miroslav excelled as a long-time member of the Czech Science Foundation committee, in which he has been at the head of the field committee for Social sciences since 2007.

His great negotiating abilities and also the abilities for making compromises started asserting themselves proportionally to gradual ascent of grants which were intended for the funding of the basic researches. It was mainly thanks to his initiative that the Czech Oral History Association (COHA) was established in 2007¹²⁸ It is hard to imagine the work of the Association without Miroslav's visions and contacts. During the four years of its existence approximately 30 institutional members and nearly 70 individual members have joined the Association.. Later, at the end of 2008, Miroslav was also elected leader of the newly established National Committee of Oral History (affiliated to the Czech Academy of Sciences).¹²⁹ In the summer of 2009, moment at which the Czech Academy of Sciences was in real existential danger (due to financial restrictions caused by the financial crisis), Miroslav was nominated a member of the Council for Cooperation with Universities and Preparation of Future Academic Researchers., .¹³⁰

Apart from these activities Miroslav has been persistently dedicating his time to popularization of scientific and pedagogical work in the mass media of all kind.¹³¹ Above all we have to underline his cooperation with public media specifically the Czech Television where he regularly appears as a guest or assists with creation of some popular TV programs (*Historie.CS, Retro* etc.,). During 2010 Miroslav was active as a TV moderator in *Rendez-vous* a Czech TV program where he mostly moderated discussions with social scientists and historians and other experts in humanities. Despite a difficult broadcasting time which could influence the ratings, it was one of the few cases when a historian was able to create his own TV program in the live broadcast.¹³² Another part of Miroslav's efforts to popularize history are his public lectures on diverse history topics given to general public (from school children to the oldest people interested in history) at schools, archives, museums and other culture institutions in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. It is necessary to point out that he paid attention to all these presentations and following discussions with the same verve and concentration as to his own university courses or presentations at prestige conferences. In short, none

¹²⁸ For more information about COHA see <http://www.oralhistory.cz/>.

¹²⁹ For more information about the National Committee of Oral History see http://int.avcr.cz/cs_narodni_komitety/.

¹³⁰ See

http://www.avcr.cz/o_avcr/struktura/poradni_organy/Rada_pro_spolupraci_s_vysokymi_skolami_a_pripravu_vedeckych_pracovniku_AV_CR.html .

¹³¹ In the years 2007 -2010 Miroslav Vaňek has made 72 appearances in the media as expert in oral history and contemporary history. .

¹³² Altogether he moderated eleven shows. During the 16th IOHA Congress in Prague the leading oral historians Donald A. Ritchie, David K. Dunaway and Janis Wilton appeared as guests in the *Rendez-vous* studio.

of his lectures is too “small” for him to give it less attention. Another of Miroslav’s characteristics rather unusual among historians who often try to keep distance from current events in the society , (thus hoping to maintain an objective perspective) is that Miroslav has always been ready to get involved in questions connected with his professional activities as a – in Raymond Aron’s terms – “committed observer”. It is necessary to mention, however, that he has not always been successful. In any case he has always done so without political ambitions with good will and openness to a constructive dialogue with the opponent.

One of the last remarks should be dedicated to the international dimension and feedback of Miroslav’s work as they make him so much different from his peers not only in his homeland but also abroad. Since the very beginning of his scientific career there has been a very beneficial tendency (a feature not very typical of the Czech environment) to exhibit and promote the results of his work and to maintain contacts with experts from abroad, at the same time becoming part of the international oral history network. From the very first modest steps at international conferences, we were witnessing a continual forming of a historiographer distinguished and respected within international scientific spheres – in the Central-European environment at first, then in the Euro-American and finally in the global context.

Even though he has never been through any special linguistic training, Miroslav managed to master foreign languages (namely English) to an extent exceeding a great number of his more trained colleagues. It may have been endorsed by his friendly, communicative and easy-going character and also by the favorable conditions offered to a researcher from Eastern Europe. Whatever the reason, Miroslav’s ability to respond to the demand induced by foreign experts and academic communities (i.e. students and other academic officials in the first place) must not be attenuated. The reports, lectures and courses on chosen topics related to contemporary Czechoslovakian history were based on Miroslav’s own research and he managed to present them in a very attractive manner, too. In this respect, his long-term lecture stays (they were by no means primarily research travels) in the US appear to be crucial. He was figuratively “thrown” into the whirl of life abroad and he managed to work on himself to an incredible extent and to gain confidence and motivation necessary for further doings. Last but not least, he succeeded in “infecting” his environment with his enthusiasm for international cooperation (he also has merit in regular international attendances of his colleagues) which was an essential step to his not becoming a “lonely wolf” or “a big fish” in the small pond of purely Czech (and Central European) science. Therefore his own outcomes and the ones of the teams he had lead became not only competitive (both in quantity and quality) but also ground-breaking (e.g. as far as the extent of projects or the field of organization and work-productivity are concerned) in comparison to foreign countries. It was not by accident that at the international oral history congress in

Guadalajara (Mexico) in 2008, Mirek was offered a membership in the Executive Committee of the International Oral History Association (IOHA) at the position of a regional representative for Europe, in which he eventually officiated between 2008 and 2010. Later, holding the next 16th annual IOHA congress in Prague in July 2010 presented a symbolic reward for Miroslav and his associates. Despite some organization difficulties (caused namely by the financial crisis and reluctance of some of the Czech political representatives to financially support this significant event), they succeeded in organizing the congress. During the congress, Miroslav was elected “first among equals”, i.e. the IOHA President¹³³ for the years 2010–2012. The passage from a small town to the imaginary academic paramount seems to have come to an end.¹³⁴ Paraphrasing Sir Winston Churchill, we cannot but wish warmly for this not to be the end, not even the beginning of the end but perhaps the end of the beginning” of Miroslav’s career.

One might question the story above for being too simple and sketchy or as though it was cut out of a simple-minded soap opera. In my opinion, the truth is quite the opposite and only the man discussed himself knows how many smaller or bigger failures, setbacks and difficulties he must have been through. There was a habilitation application given in three times, several unsuccessful project applications (including three international E. U. ones submitted in collaboration with Polish, Hungarian, Slovak, Croatian and Slovenian colleagues), disappointment of the unsuccessful scientific work competitions, an exhausting series of media appearances during more or less important jubilees, repetitive criticism on the work results (both team and individual), which was patiently yet energetically rebutted etc. This is only the tip of the problem iceberg brought on by the life of an academician. Apart from a stable family background, Miroslav triumphed over all this due to his positive attitude to life (and an active way of living it as well), a combination of research, pedagogical and communication talent. Little by little, he also discovered and developed (partially unwillingly) the

¹³³ For reports on the congress see for example FREUND, Alexander: *Conference Report: 16th International Oral History Conference*. In: *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 30 (2010), available at http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz/download/A.Freund-IOHA_2010_review.pdf, or McDOUGHALL, Alison: *16th International Oral History Conference. Between Past and Future: Oral History, Memory and Meaning*. In: *Word of Mouth*, Spring 2010, pages 14–15, 22–23, available at <http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz/download/A.McDoughall-16thIOHA.pdf> or MORÁVKOVÁ, Naděžda: *XVI. mezinárodní konference orální historie : Mezi minulostí a budoucností, Praha 2010 / XVIth International Oral History Conference: Between Past and Future, Prague 2010*. In: *Memo 2011*, n. 1, page 111.

¹³⁴ The ascent and the results of oral history in the Czech Republic, personified in the work of Miroslav Vaněk were appreciated by the Czech Academy of Sciences Vicepresident Jaroslav Pánek in his summary paper, see PÁNEK, Jaroslav: *Non multa, sed multum. Humanitní a společenské vědy v České republice 1990–2010 (Humanities and Social Sciences in the Czech Republic in the Years 1990–2010)*. 2nd part. In: *Akademický bulletin (Academic Bulletin)* n. 10, 2010, p. 8–11 (available at <http://abicko.avcr.cz/cs/2010/10/05/index.html>). Another evidence of Vaněk’s acknowledgement in the community of international experts is his contribution to a prestigious collection of essays on oral history. See VANĚK, Miroslav: *Those Who Prevailed And Those Were Replaced: Interviewing on Both Sides of a Conflict*. In: Donald A. RITCHIE (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Oxford University Press 2011, pages 37–50.

abilities of a “science manager”. Above all, the crucial part of his success consists in honest and tireless everyday work (sometimes on the verge of workaholism) accompanied by the principle of friendliness attitude towards both his colleagues and the broad public in effort to satisfy all at the most reasonable extent. Finally, Miroslav’s humility and modesty need to be mentioned as neither of these two qualities of his have suffered a change since the days of my own student years. Such (un)“common” stories are still needed not only in the Czech scientific environment...

Translated by Hana Bortlová and Kateřina Sýkorová