

Rustic Baroque

a novel by Jiří Hájíček

Winner of the Magnesia Litera prize for literature



Also in this volume,
selected stories from
The Wooden Knife

RUSTIC BAROQUE

a novel by Jiří Hájíček

with additional stories from
The Wooden Knife

Translated from the Czech by
Gale A. Kirking



A Real World Press book

Copyright © 2005 Jiří Hájíček
English translation copyright © by Gale A. Kirking

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the express, prior permission in writing from the publisher, nor may it be otherwise circulated in any form, physical or electronic, other than that in which it is published and without the aforementioned condition being imposed upon any subsequent purchaser.

Published by Real World Press, the publishing division of English Editorial Services, s.r.o., Černopolní 57, 61300 Brno, Czech Republic

Book design by English Editorial Services, s.r.o.
First printing in the Czech Republic, November, 2012

This book was originally published in Czech by Host - nakladatelství s. r. o. with the title *Selský baroko*. The additional stories are from the book *Dřevěný nůž*.

ISBN 978-80-905357-1-8

orig.: ISBN 80-7294-164-X and ISBN 80-7294-111-9

To my father, who is 70 years old this year
and who from the beginning of the 1950s was not permitted even to learn a trade
because he was the son of a kulak,
who left his small South Bohemian village at 15 to work in black Ostrava,
who returned in good health and instead of working with horses, as had his
farming forefathers, horse-traded in motorcycles and secondhand cars,
who had a Jawa 125 “pérák” motorcycle and then a Čezeta “kejvačka” scooter¹
and after that a Jawa 350 two-cylinder that he traded for his first car, a wartime
DKW left behind by the Germans,
who during the “building of socialism” period and the Second Five-Year Plan
owned an unbelievable car, a Citroën 11 produced in 1934 and that had been
owned by Prince Paar of Bechyne,
who took the wheel and over 40 years ruined his back in driving tractors without
springs, trucks, buses and similar old junk,
who drove without an accident through the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s,
who after the Velvet Revolution saw half of Europe as a bus driver,
and who to this day remembers as if it were yesterday every square foot of that
59-acre farmstead that already long ago ceased to exist...

¹ “Pérák“ and “Kejvačka“ are affectionate, colloquial nicknames for these old-time, Czech-made Jawa and Čezeta motorcycles.

Contents

Translator's Introduction	v
Note on Czech Pronunciation	ix
<i>Rustic Baroque</i>	1
Major Characters in <i>Rustic Baroque</i>	147
Stories from <i>The Wooden Knife</i>	149
Memories of a Village Dance in 1986	149
The Wooden Knife	163
Horses are Supposed to be Buried	170
Melancholy Leaves from Democracy's Autumn Trees	187
About the Author	201
About the Translator	201

Translator's Introduction

One Saturday a few years ago, I sat down with the weekend magazine that comes with the Friday edition of *Hospodářské noviny*, the leading financial newspaper here in the Czech Republic. There was an interview there with a “newish” Czech author who had just been awarded a literary prize for his new novel set in rural villages of South Bohemia.

I immediately felt a sort of connection to this Jiří Hájíček. He was descended from a long line of farmers, like me. We each had grown up in a small, rural community (he in South Bohemia and I on a Wisconsin family farm). We had both graduated from agricultural universities and were working in the banking sector. Both were deeply interested in history, and both were writers (he an author of fiction, and I a former journalist and writer of nonfiction).

Later, as I read his novel, *Selský baroko*, as it pulled me into the South Bohemian setting and into a historical space extending back to and beyond the early years after the Velvet Revolution, through the forced collectivization of this country's private farms in the 1950s, and occasionally touching even upon the times of the former Austro–Hungarian Empire, and as I was caught up in the drama and mystery of the story, I realized that I was reading a special book, a book that should be shared with readers beyond the Czech Republic.

It has been an honor and a pleasure for me to translate Jiří Hájíček's book and to make it accessible to the English-language reading public.

For me personally, there is something special about publishing *Rustic Baroque* in English during 2012, because this year marks the 20th anniversary since I first moved to the country then still known as Czechoslovakia. It was a country in flux at that time, still less than 3 years after the Velvet Revolution. The country and people were struggling with their past, their day-to-day lives and their futures – all at the same time.

December 31 of that same year would mark the so-called “velvet divorce” as the Czech and Slovak parts of the country would go their separate ways. That 1992 agreement to split Czechoslovakia was signed between the then-political leaders of the Czech and Slovak lands in the now-famous Villa Tugendhat, which, coincidentally, is just six doors down the street in Brno from where my wife and I now live and where this book was translated.

Villa Tugendhat (a UNESCO World Heritage site renowned as an example of Functionalist architecture and fictitiously immortalized in Simon Mawer's *The Glass Room*) is itself symbolic of the transformation this country has seen: it was many years in decline, through the Nazi occupation, through four decades of Communism, and through the first two decades of this new era. Closed for

renovation the past two years, after much controversy and several scandals in relationship to its restoration and ownership, the Villa reopened to the public just this spring. Like the Czech Republic as a country, that house is old but renewed. And if the walls could speak of what they had seen in their time, oh, the stories they could tell.

Rustic Baroque is a novel which borrows its name from another architectural style. This style (also recognized with its own UNESCO monument) originated in the 19th century. It is characteristic of rural South Bohemia, on the other side of the Czech Republic from where I live. This is home to Jiří Hájíček. For me, personally, it seems not so much that this author weaves tales for us of South Bohemia, but, rather, I perceive that South Bohemia divulges its stories to us through Jiří Hájíček's capable hands.

This book's story takes place about a decade after the Velvet Revolution. Through the novel, Hájíček's South Bohemia recollects the tumult in the countryside during the 1950s collectivization of agriculture, sheds light upon the torn social fabric in the decades to follow, and characterizes how Czech people of all generations struggle to come to grips with the unresolved remnants of their past in the years since totalitarian communists were driven from power in 1989. The characters toil to resolve their disparate feelings of guilt, thirst for revenge and desire to forgive.

South Bohemia and Jiří Hájíček have many more stories to tell. I was delighted, therefore, when the author agreed to include into this volume four short stories from his 2004 collection published under the title *The Wooden Knife* (*Dřevěný nůž*). Like *Rustic Baroque*, these stories are set in the same South Bohemian countryside – but each in a slightly different time. The selected stories bridge the period from the last years before the Velvet Revolution (“Memories of a Village Dance” is from 1986) to the early years after communism's fall (“Melancholic Leaves from the Autumn Trees of Democracy” is set in 1996). They deal with memorable episodes of everyday life made more poignant by the backdrop of a changing social landscape.

While all the stories included in this volume are readily accessible to any reader, as a translator, I wanted to offer a little something extra so that the reader would not only enjoy a wonderful story but also enhance his or her understanding of the Czech Republic that Jiří Hájíček and I share with 10 million other Czechs and I suppose quite a few tens of thousands of foreigners. Many of those expatriates and the millions of tourists who visit this country from abroad each year experience little more than Prague and a few tourist sites. There is so much more to the Czech Republic, its culture, its society and its natural and historical heritage.

Therefore, you will find that I have added a number of annotations to help the reader understand certain subtleties that might otherwise be missed by a non-Czech reader. I made a conscious effort to be conservative about this, however, so as not to interrupt the flow of the reading. Moreover, I have added a brief pronunciation guide to help with the few Czech words (such as names) that

unavoidably must remain even in an English translation, as well as a list of the novel's main characters.

While I have resisted the temptation to write an extensive historical essay to present broad context for the reader, perhaps it is worthwhile here to summarize just a few points from this country's history that are particularly relevant to the stories presented here.

Most readers will surely know that Czechoslovakia was one of many countries carved out of the former European empires at the end of World War I. Today's Czech Republic had been part of the Austrian portion and today's Slovakia part of the Hungarian portion of Austria–Hungary. With a large German population in the Czech lands and many Hungarians still living in Slovakia, there had existed considerable ethnic strains in the young interwar democracy. These tensions, of course, contributed to the country's occupation in World War II and to the expulsion of many Germans at the end of that terrible conflict.

After World War II, the German occupiers were, of course, shortly replaced by communists – both of the locally grown variety and those imported from the Soviet Union. Following a communist coup d'état in 1948 and effective victory by 1951–1952 of that wing of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia favoring the Soviet Union's model of communism, the collectivization of agriculture and nationalization of essentially all business activities and enterprises in the country began rolling like a steamroller across the society. Many farmers, tradesmen, shopkeepers and industrialists resisted, but collectivization and nationalization were unstoppable.

Largely from land, livestock and other property expropriated from the rural communities' most successful farming families, the collective farms were created in the 1950s. The story told in *Rustic Baroque* reaches back to this period and to the stories of a few who resisted – and to those of some who did not.

Now, jump ahead three to four decades. In 1989, the country's communists were driven from power in a peaceful revolution. Who would rule now, and who would take control over the assets of the country? This was being decided in a somewhat disorderly – and for some often disappointing and disillusioning – manner during the 1990s.

The restitution, reprivatization and redistribution of the nationalized and collectivized assets essentially turned into a sort of free-for-all in which millions of Czech citizens received little or nothing while a relative few more ruthless and perhaps smarter individuals became wealthy and obtained control over much of the nation's property. While some regained assets in restitution worth millions that had been taken from their families by the communists, others had their restitution claims denied or struggled, perhaps in vain, to get their family property back. It is in this time that *Rustic Baroque* is set.

Probably no translator is able to complete a work of this magnitude without assistance, and that is certainly very true in my case. I would like to thank my colleague at English Editorial Services, Ing. Lucie Šnytová, for her excellent

assistance in preparing the first draft of *Rustic Baroque* and my colleague Jan Fiala who had a similar role in preparing the stories from *The Wooden Knife*. I also thank my brother Duane, who read the manuscript of *Rustic Baroque* and offered many useful comments and corrections. My most sincere appreciation goes out to Jiří Hájíček and his wife Nicole Matéffy for their support and encouragement throughout this project, and especially for their friendship. This translation never would have been completed (not by me anyway) without the enduring and unconditional love and support of my dear wife Regina, as well as her patient guidance in many, many of the finer points of understanding Czech language and culture. Last but by no means least, I thank my wife's family, whose members have made me feel at home in my adopted second country and help me every day to appreciate it more.

Gale A. Kirking
Brno, October 2012

Note on Czech pronunciation

Every letter in the Czech alphabet has only one sound and is pronounced essentially the same at all times. The accent (emphasis) in Czech words is always on the first syllable. The diacritical marks ˇ and ° appearing on vowels affect the length of the vowels sound but not their color. Thus, an “a”, “e”, “i”, “o”, “u” or “y” with such a mark is pronounced roughly twice as long as is a vowel not bearing such a mark. For example “a” is pronounced “ah” but á is pronounced “aahh”. Shown below are those letters from the Czech alphabet having sounds different from those in the English alphabet.

a	Always pronounced “ah” as in <u>al</u> ma <u>ma</u> ter
c	“ts” as in boot <u>s</u>
č	“ch” as in <u>ch</u> ase
e	Always pronounced “eh” as in “bed”
ch	Always pronounced like a hard, guttural “h” (as in German “ach!” or the composer’s name “Bach”).
i	Always pronounced like “ee” as in “sheep”
j	Always pronounced like an English y as in “ <u>y</u> es”
r	Lightly rolled, as in Spanish or Russian
ř	The most difficult sound in Czech, it might loosely be described as a hybrid of “r” and the “zh” sound in “ <u>pleas</u> ure”. In English, it is most commonly seen in the name of the Czech composer Dvořák.
š	Pronounced “sh” as in “ <u>sh</u> eeper”
u	Always pronounced “oo” as in “fool”
y	Always pronounced like “ee” as in “sheep”
ž	Pronounced “zh” as in in “ <u>pleas</u> ure”
ˇ or ˇ on or after d, l, m, n or t	These diacritics essentially insert a short “y” sound after the consonant. Thus, for example, t is pronounced as in “ <u>not</u> <u>y</u> et.” The name of the main character of this novel, Straňanský, is pronounced “STRAH- <u>ny</u> ahn-skee.”

Rustic Baroque

a novel by Jiří Hájíček

The Dog's Kitchen

Oh, for God's sake, not this miserable place again, I just thought to myself and sighed. The sun was searing through the thin green leaves, and the crown of the linden tree above us hummed with summer. Tourists exhausted by the scorching heat were plodding along the footpaths in the park, heading to the castle gate.

Mr. Šrámek sat beside me on the bench and just kept talking. I was looking forward to being within the coolness of those stone walls nearby, in the weirdly pallid light of the research room, the muffled rustling of archival documents, the musty odor exuded by old books.

"A man has to pull every word out of you," he said.

"You shouldn't have come here again," I answered.

"But you know these villages, these people. For you it's just a matter of a few days. You said so yourself. So why don't you want to do it all of a sudden? I don't get it..."

I was flipping through the files he had given me only in order to put this torrid and unpleasant interlude behind me. A few newspaper clippings, sheets torn from some yellowed brochure, copied pages of official documents. I repeated to myself the name of the village and then the three family names one after another: Jircha, Kubach, Mařánek... Yes, of course, Mařánek.

"It's house number 11. Two-gabled farmstead on the square, well kept up. And across the way, there's that ruin that used to be a farmhouse with the vaulted gate, and it has a two-storied granary. A part of it's been knocked down, and the cooperative farm stores some machinery there. The barn's about to fall in, too. They call it the Jircha place. And the Kubach farm? I don't remember exactly just now."

"I can see that you have it all in here," Šrámek said, tapping his head, his plump face brightening.

"Mainly in here," I replied, lightly rapping with the knuckle of my index finger on the laptop computer in its black case.

"Mr. Straňanský, it's certainly somewhere at those farmsteads. We don't know where, but you'll find it. Someone may have it in some old shed around there, maybe in Černá Hůrka, I don't know... People used to keep such things. The old folks still come and sit about on the village squares there..."

"Tomašice, Černá Hůrka, Smrčí," I was pronouncing the names of the villages out loud. It's like a swirl in a kettle, those farmhouses, surnames, godparents, christenings...

"I had a few jobs from over that way some time ago. I think I even wrote about those farmhouses. But that was many years ago! These villages are dying out, Mr. Šrámek."

He bent his shaven pink face toward me. He was around 50, his hair already turning gray, wide suspenders on his light summer shirt with short sleeves, chubby arms.

"I tell you, it's a letter. It's there somewhere, that much we know. Maybe there's even more documents. At the village hall? At the rectory? I don't know, you're the expert. You may find there's a whole pile of papers. In some cupboard or in an attic."

He lowered his voice a bit more.

"And then it would be a straightforward swap, Mr. Straňanský, just as I told you. Papers to me, money to you."

The sun was right above the Třeboň castle, I was kicking at the bench with my heel and my thirst was pleading for me to get out of there. It was difficult to swallow. I was thinking about the open spaces above and beyond the fields back home, about water and shade. But now I was in this pressure cooker. Šrámek was prodding me to decide, to agree, and his hot, unpleasant shadow was pushing me into a place where I did not at all want to go.

"You know what? You should find somebody else."

"Mr. Straňanský! These things happened years ago. Who knows for how long that woman is already dead. There's no danger for you."

I got up and stretched my back. He stood up, too, sweat on his forehead, wet spots on his shirt. I handed him the things.

"Keep it, Mr. Straňanský. I'm going back again through Jindřichův Hradec on Friday. I'll come by."

And he immediately carried on, as if I had said nothing at all: "Here at one o'clock?"

I was looking at the half-dry grass.

"It's a deal," he said after a while – in fact speaking just to himself. "If you're not here, I'll come by and ring for you at the archive."

* * *

I weaved my way through the castle courtyard that was filled with sightseers and the searing August sun, then climbed up the few stairs to the portal entrance of the regional archive. I locked the file from Mr. Šrámek in a locker downstairs, and on my way to the research room I was thinking of Daniela again.

She was still sitting there, in that rustling silence: blond hair and tanned face, freckles on her nose. She filled the stark room with her very presence. She greeted me with a glance, then smiled. When I had seen her in the archive for the first time, she had been almost hidden behind a stack of civil records books. She had asked for as many as three thick volumes at once. She had gotten hung up already at the first lines of the first record... but her hair! And the way she spoke, how she wrinkled her nose in concentration as she read.

I settled down at the table to the work I had started earlier, an open register of births from 1856 to 1870. I marked the page, then closed the old book for a while.

I was going through the database of names in my laptop. Ah yes, I had last seen it three years ago. Some family tree had taken me there, some ascending lateral branch. Kubach... I pushed the book aside and drew the laptop closer. I continued searching the computer's memory – yes, I had done some Janatas over there, too – it was opening out a family tree. Graphics showing six generation levels dropped down on the screen, a pyramid of names and relationships. It grazed a bit the village of Smrčí, sometime around 1805... Family Sládek, house number 5. Photographs of the farmhouse: I clicked the file with the JPG extension. And yet another name: Mařánek, house number 11. All the data was stored on the hard drive. But what was most important was not in the computer. I stared at the vaulted ceiling. That's right, I had once worked out the history of several farmsteads and a local church. I had still been pecking it all out on a typewriter back then.

I went back to my work, but my concentration was shattered. Pushing aside the births register again, I continued through the records. The laptop was shining pale light into my face, my finger tips were racing around the keyboard, I was stroking the letters, filling the screen with names and surnames. Dozens, hundreds of names were saved in that little sweetheart that I turned off at the end of every day, closed and slid into its leather case. It was everything to me.

"You look sort of troubled," Daniela said softly. She had almost startled me with her face bending down to me, her hair practically radiant in the deep duskiness of the research room.

"I don't want to disturb you too much anymore," she apologized.

"It's ok," I said quickly.

Yesterday she had not yet known anything. Neither that the workers in the archive will bring her anything she might think of – registers of births and deaths, registers of weddings, land registers, letters of consignment, old tax registers, registers of felonies committed, lists of souls, parish chronicles, census questionnaires – nor that it is not their job to help her to read the archival documents. She had asked me about almost everything.

"Wait until you work your way through to the old handwritten script they call *Kurrent*," I smiled, and her green eyes were so close, "it will be when you flip through the civil records to the middle of the 19th century. The correct name for it is German neogothic script."

"This here is plenty enough for me, I won't be able to make it out in any case."

"This is a normal script. It's called humanistic handwriting. But I know this book and this parish priest quite well. Well, he did scribble a bit. A backward slant and ligatures, you know. He was fond of using abbreviations."

She did not now seem so optimistic as she had in the morning.

"I thought it would go a lot faster for me," she said, disappointedly returning to her desk.

The whole afternoon was just dragging by, the sun was reveling beyond the windows and the heat was relentless. I closed the register earlier than usual. I could not stand it there any longer.

"Will you be here tomorrow?" Daniela asked.

I was standing over her with the heavy book that I was about to return.

"I'll be doing fieldwork. I have some photographing to do."

"But the dinner still stands?"

I was already out the door of the research room. I had to smile a little, she was looking at me, her hair falling into the open register, reading glasses on her nose. Her look was a bit desperate.

"Yes, it does. I am looking forward..."

"But wait!" She looked around at the other two people in the room, hunched over their reading, and lowered her voice again, "Where do we meet?"

"That's right," the door almost closing behind me, "so, six o'clock at the Dog's Kitchen?"

"Where?"

"At the Dog's Kitchen."²

"Where is it? You hear me, where is this place???" I could hear her muted voice behind me.

* * *

Tomašice, Smrčí. The rich villagers Jakub Jircha and František Kubach Sr. stand accused of disparaging the people's democratic regime. They are opposed to the collective farm established in the village. They have secretly collaborated to incite others against the representatives of the Municipal People's Committee and against the collectivization in agriculture.

In my car, I was reading on the steering wheel a photocopy of the judgment of the people's court from 1953. Kubach finally got off with just a suspended sentence, as did the former owner of the sawmill, Šilhavý. Everything was pushed onto Jircha at that time.

I tossed the papers from Šrámek onto the seat beside me and drove on to the village. I left the car at the tavern. An old memory filed away long ago crossed my mind: they make a good soup there, thick and spicy... It had perhaps been in winter then. Now the sun was beating down, beginning of August. I left the shade of that ramshackle building, crossed the road, and headed toward the little church that was almost hidden in the crowns of the linden trees. The small gate was half open, rather twisted out of shape and would not shut properly. I looked

² Dog's Kitchen is the local name for a part of the castle in Třeboň where the hunting dogs of the nobleman who formerly owned the castle would have been kept.

up to the tower. The bells are back! Saint Wenceslas and the Virgin Mary!!! Ah yes, I remembered after all.

Grass between the curb sections, yellow and dry. Cast-iron crosses baking hot from the sun, some of them leaning a bit. A few graves overgrown with weeds. Here and there, a small flame glowing in a grave lamp, tombstones, the soft murmur of the Vltava River from down below the church. Behind the wall, a small cart for dried out wreaths and evergreen branches and withered flowers. I found the grave quickly. It seemed to be maintained, although not very meticulously. It was not overrun with weeds, as were some of the other graves nearby. Only parched grass at the front half covered the engraved plate on the cross. A burnt-out candle, its wick baked onto the bottom of its small, round, brownish-red container. The Zandl Family, it said on the plate. Antonín, died 1949; Anežka, date of death 1970. I pulled a notebook from my shirt pocket and flipped to notes I had made from the births register before leaving. Names, dates – everything was correct. I turned a page. There was the name that Šrámek had dictated to me. Rozálie Zandlová,³ born 14 April 1921.

She was not inscribed together with her parents on the cross. I walked through the tiny cemetery up to the old morgue in the corner where the dead bodies formerly were kept until burial, then walked back. I did not find her name.

“Hello, can I help you with that watering can?” I approached a stooped and haggard old woman. She flashed me a sharp look from under her headscarf as she was dragging a full watering can to a grave thickly covered with velvet pansies. I stood for a while on the footpath in front of the well. She walked back past me and started to pump water.

“The Zandls don’t have another grave here, do they?”

She straightened up a bit, looked toward me and then kept on pumping. She left the filled watering can under the pump, dried her hand in her dark blue, ornamented apron.

“It’s a bit neglected, the vase has fallen over,” I began again, this time a little more loudly. I stood about 10 steps distant from her, and I did not know whether or not she could hear me well.

“The sexton says that grave’s not for sale,” she finally retorted.

“I’m not interested to buy it.”

“So what do you want?” she asked in a raspy voice.

“They had a daughter,” I said and paused for a bit. “Rozálie Zandlová...”

She jerked her head sharply, as if alarmed by my uttering that name. The sun was roasting the battered wall of the church, its tall windows dark as a river’s

surface, colors showing faintly only through the stained-glass at the top. I looked up at the rusty rain gutters, moss-grown roof tiles and small spire. That is where the death bell had tolled... She walked with firm, short steps along the footpath, and I stepped a bit to the side. She passed me, then turned back. I caught a look at the wrinkled and tanned face beneath the headscarf. And of the dark eyes deep-set beneath the creases of her forehead. She must have been well past 80.

“Her grave is somewhere else,” she said tersely and kept walking.

“Who looks after that grave, then? Do you know?”

I waited for a moment to see if she would stop. Then I strode quickly from the cemetery gate to the road without even looking back, only feeling some weight at my back from which I wanted quickly to escape. The full blast of the afternoon sun beat down upon me, the asphalt blazed beneath the soles of my shoes, and the smell of tar was in the air. I saw the old woman’s slight, hunched figure heading toward the village. I started walking slowly in the same direction and then got in the car, into the stifling swelter of baking metal and plastic. I drove up the narrow road to a small hill and pulled off onto a field road. Leaving the door open, I ran up the slope that afforded a view of the countryside. There was a long dairy barn just beyond the village, not kept up, the nettles reaching almost to the windows. I sat down on the meadow and stretched myself onto the spiky grass. Short, bristling blades, like a hedgehog’s quills or my son Hynek’s crew cut hair. I smiled at the thought of him, staring into the sky as small clouds slowly moved along. The shimmering air was drawing out the scents of grasses and flowers, strewing them all about. Only then did I feel light again, and the shivers left my spine. Delight poured into me, and when I half-closed my eyes and relaxed a giddiness took me into its arms and carried me away. Open countryside. I smiled contentedly at the sky. What I had expected based upon my memories of the village had proven true. The notes about the Tomašice bells will certainly be at my brother’s place in Hvozď, somewhere in that room where I had formerly lived as a bachelor.

* * *

Daniela was standing beneath a mighty chestnut tree. I could see her already as I came past the aviary, with its parrots, pheasants and peacocks. Dressed in red pedal pushers and a white T-shirt, she was looking at the ground, perhaps at the straps of her sandals. Her loose hair tumbled in a flaxen stream down past her shoulders. I slowed my pace, and the current of tourists flowed around me. It was just past six in the evening.

“Are you looking for chestnuts? It’s too soon...” I said as I came up to her, instead of greeting her.

“You came, at last! I was almost worried that I was waiting at the wrong place.”

“So you found it?”

³ Czech feminine family names usually end in the suffix “-ová”. Thus, the masculine family name in this case is “Zandl” and the feminine version of the same name is “Zandlová.”

She just smiled. We were facing one another, and I looked toward the restaurants. All of them were bustling with people.

“Where are we going? The Fish Scale? Or the Little Fish Scale, as it were?⁴ Or someplace else?”

We took seats on the terrace in front of one of the restaurants and ordered dinner. A bottle of cool mineral water and another of wine were already on the table.

The air was motionless. The roofs of the brewery and a brick chimney with a spark arrester created a background behind Daniela. The menu was full of the local fish specialties. Children were running about below the terrace and between the tables. There was a group of students with their heavy backpacks stacked in the corner, Germans, Dutch, Brits, Russians.

“There was a guy looking for you in the archive today,” she said when she looked up from the open menu. I continued to examine the side dishes – American fries, rice, potato croquettes...

“Was his name Šrámek?” I asked disinterestedly. My heart started thumping a bit, and an unpleasant feeling came to my stomach.

“No, someone called Eliáš. I was just having coffee with the archivist lady in the office when he came.”

I was a bit relieved, like when that old lady at the cemetery in Tomašice had disappeared among the houses.

“Yes, he’s a former client.”

“So, maybe a new job for you then?” She looked at me inquiringly over the top of the menu. There was a little light of interest in her eyes. I looked into them for a moment, then back to the menu.

“Doubt it. As far as I know, Mr. Eliáš is now browsing every possible archive in the republic, trying to find his name in the civil records and land registers. All for nothing, of course.”

“Why?”

“Because he doesn’t believe what I tell him. He thinks that he can do it better himself. He assumes that everything will be just as he expects it to be.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” said Daniela, rubbing her freckled little nose with her fingers.

“Remind me in the research room next time, I’d rather show it to you directly in the books.” I had to laugh, and I closed the leather-covered menu.

“What are you laughing at?” she asked, also smiling. Her dark sunglasses were perched in her hair above her suntanned forehead. She was squinting against

the setting sun. It seemed as if I knew that wrinkle of concentration above the eyebrows from somewhere.

“You know, not everyone is quite what he thinks he is.”

“Well, I will surely remind you of that in the research room,” she said after thinking for a moment. “I am really interested to know more about it.”

Full goblets of white wine were standing before us. She was the first to take hers in hand.

“So,” she asked, “what shall we drink to?”

“To your genealogical research, of course,” I said.

“And to your work, may it be successful. By the way, please call me...”

“...Yes, to success,” I repeated quickly, interrupting the suggestion about to cross her lips that we agree to use the familiar form of “you” with one another. I brushed it off, and the moment passed. We drank, and the Veltliner wine was refreshing.

“So, you don’t think I’ll make it by next Friday?”

“I don’t want to be a spoilsport, but there are people who have been coming here for years. It takes patience to collect a genealogical record.”

“I think it’s mainly about finding a system, as in any other work. I’m good at that sort of thing.” She crossed her legs and took a sip of wine. There was no doubt in her voice.

“I’ve never met anyone doing this as a regular job,” she continued after a while, reconnecting the thread of our conversation.

“It’s an unregulated trade under the Trades Licensing Act. I like it that way.”

“And what is actually the official name for this occupation?”

“The name is a bit misleading,” I said, and could not help but to smile, “it’s ‘providing services of a personal nature.’”

“And what education do you need to do that?”

“I went to library school,” I said, “and then I did additional studies in archiving and in history.”

We commenced eating. I was not really very hungry, having been battered all day by the blasting heat. My camera and laptop in its case were hanging over the back of the chair beside me. Daniela’s softly exhilarating presence, the chirping of tourists, cars and muted music from the speakers. A sultry summer evening was settling upon the city of Třeboň.

“You’re like so many people from here,” she started after a while, a bit cautiously, “sort of aloof, reserved...”

I shrugged my shoulders sheepishly.

“When I was coming from Prague, past Budějovice,⁵ I picked up a hitchhiker.

⁴ The name of the restaurant would probably be “Šupina,” meaning the scale of a fish, but Czechs often refer to things using diminutives (in this case, “Šupinka,” or “little fish scale”). Extremely frequent use of diminutives might be associated with the talk of villagers, as opposed to that of city dwellers.

⁵ The South Bohemian city of České Budějovice is sometimes referred to simply as Budějovice.

A guy maybe 40 or so. Tight-lipped, too, just like you. He sat looking out the window at the countryside. During the whole 10 miles he said only three simple sentences.”

I poured more wine from the bottle into her glass, into both glasses.

“How do you like the guest house?” I asked.

“Thanks, it’s really nice. I’m worried that the two weeks will pass too quickly.”

“Quite a lot of people spend their holidays in the archives looking for their ancestors. It’s quite in fashion just now.”

She gave me a bit of an offended look. Or maybe it was just my imagination. Her voice continued to resound cheerily. It was pleasant, as if it was coming from some place I knew.

“I haven’t actually been inside the castle yet.”

“Oh, yes, the Rosenberg suites... I can tell you about that right here at the table. I used to be a tour guide when I was younger, during holidays and at Christmas.”

“I’d also like to take some trips.”

“You have a plan?”

“Not really, but I definitely want to go to Holašovice to see the rustic baroque of South Bohemia. It’s listed by UNESCO and... why are you laughing?”

“Sorry. It just struck me as funny that I’m at work here and you’re actually a tourist. A tourist who wants to see castles and chateaux, and that rustic baroque of South Bohemia...”

“Do you have something against Holašovice?”

“No, I don’t, absolutely not. Only that ‘rustic baroque’ always amuses me. In fact, Holašovice used to be a German village. Hollschowitz in German. Absolutely full of Germans. Before the war, maybe three Czech families lived there altogether. And it’s a bit far from here, on the other side of Budějovice.”

“That doesn’t matter, I have a good car,” she said, a bit offended.

“I believe you.”

We were enjoying the local specialty, splendidly garnished.

“So you think,” she said, clearing her throat after a bit, “that I shouldn’t go to Holašovice?”

“No, no, absolutely not. I only wanted to say that I go around to many villages to take pictures for clients, and there are quite a lot of nice villages. Without buses filled with Japanese tourists.”

She insisted on paying for dinner. There was no talking her out of it. For my help in the archive, she said. The waiter bowed and thanked us for the tip. I accompanied her to the front of the guest house. It was already dark.

“I wonder what might an apartment look like that belongs to a history expert like you,” she said at the entrance.

“What would you think?”

“Maybe in some building from the 17th century, with alcoves, wrought iron door handles, arches...”

“My living situation is a long story. I have a rented apartment in a *panelák* apartment house⁶ here in Třeboň. Cheap, from a friend. One room plus a kitchen on the edge of town...”

“I thought you were from Třeboň.”

“Not at all. I stay here overnight only a few days in the week because of work. Otherwise, I live in a small village. Its name is Touchov...”

⁶ *Paneláks, or “panel houses,” are apartment buildings made from prefabricated concrete panels. They can range from 4–5 stories to high-rises of more than 20 stories. Constructed in groups, they may house fewer than 100 families at one location or many hundreds of families. They are generally associated with communism and some may regard living in a panelák as a sign of low status. Many panelák buildings in the Czech Republic are fundamentally well engineered, however, and they have been handsomely renovated in recent years.*