

Roaming on the Wheel

Historical review

There is road winding uphill from Davle, lying on the banks of the Vltava, to the settlement Sloup, situated above the river valley. The road was built in 1912, at the time when cars were rare and it was horse or cow pulled vehicles that “dashed” along the roads. My grandfather was one of the first who went by car in that area; his “cart without horses” reached maximum speed of 40km per hour. In about 1960 the dusty road was covered with asphalt and it was widened in bends due to busses. Nowadays the road is used by cars, truck, vans and busses that rush there one behind another. When passing each other, the large vehicles must slow down or even reverse. Occasionally some car drives in the ditch, mainly in winter...

My parents had several pre-war bicycles in the barn of our small farm at Sloup. They were especially useful during the war, when petrol was not available. It was only allotted for special occasions. Such a case occurred when I was born in April 1945 – my father was allowed to transport me and mother in his car from Prague to Sloup¹. I liked my mother’s bicycle STYRIA which reached every hill. In my school days we used to go for short cycling trips with mother and sisters in the neighborhood of our house. The roads were quite safe that time – cars were rare and went slowly. Sometimes we used to meet a horse-and-cart.



Davle in thirties; the iron bridge “played” in the film “The Bridge of Remagen” by Milos Forman²

When the bicycle was invented, cycling became a sport and entertainment of the rich. Gradually bicycles penetrated among ordinary people, mainly on the village. They rode on

¹ When my parents were leaving the maternity clinic, there was just air-raid warning and my parents ran to the shelter. The nurse shouted on my mother: “Madam, you have left your boy here!” (according to my mother’s narration). Our family lived at Sloup during the war.

² The film was shot during the Prague Spring and the presence of historical tanks was utilized by Soviet propaganda for justification of the invasion in Czechoslovakia in August 1968

them to work, to the field, for shopping, for the train. In the sixties however, the car boom started and cycling became risky and annoying, especially in the neighborhood of Prague, where bicycles almost disappeared. The authorities didn't regard cycling as a perspective way of transport that time. It was only in eighties that cycling was rehabilitated and first cycling paths appeared in Prague. Since then, cycling has become quite a popular relaxing sport. That has possibly happen owing to mountain bikes which are not bound to reinforced pathways.

You won't steal

During my studies at university I got the FAVORIT, a modern racing bicycle of that time. The only problem was that its frame was rather small for me; custom-made frames were only made for top competitors that time. When I worked in Roznov³, I went on bicycle everywhere, even for short trips. But it was especially in Piestany, where I "emigrated" in 1978. It is an extensive spa town situated on a plain and people there went cycling whole the year, both young and old. Not only went cycling – the bicycles were also often stolen. To prevent that, a special "bicycle-identity" card was introduced there. The drivers went carefully and there were little crashes with cyclists.

I worked in a one-storey house with a garden. It was a detached workplace of the Slovak Academy of Science. Once I left my bicycle in the object overnight. When I came to work in the morning, there was a colleague who used to come to work as the first. He invited me saying:

"Honza, is that your bicycle?"

"Yes, it is".

"I have had nearly stolen it".

"???"

"You left it on the gateway and anybody could climb here over the fence. It's better when I steal it than anybody else".

He was a portly man about forty, father of two children.

Some of my colleagues even carried their children to nursery school on the bicycle – one child sat on the frame, the other in the back. However there was nothing like cycling trips organized those times.

Gardening was quite popular in Piestany and I also had a small garden at a village 3km away from the town. We used to meet there with my colleagues and chat over a glass of beer. As I went there on bicycle, I used to pass by a gypsy dwelling and a dog always ran after me from there. As there was quite a high traffic, I was afraid of losing equilibrium and falling under a wheel. I contacted the police, but they chuckled out: they said that it wasn't their business – they had allegedly to solve robberies and murders only. When I rode to my garden shortly later, there was a fatty spot on the road.

Return

In 1984 I left Piestany and I was enrolled at the Application Division of the Institute of Physics in Prague⁴. I stayed at my parents' but I didn't feel comfortable at my old home; I became a "countryman" in the meantime and I spoke some Moravian dialect. When I visited one institute they made fun of me saying that I am a Slovak who tries to speak Czech. I

³ Rožnov pod Radhoštěm, north Moravia

⁴ Realizační středisko Fyzikálního ústavu ČSAV

worked in the institute for two years and finally I was kicked after a conflict situation⁵. I found an asylum at Tesla ELSTROJ, which was a branch factory of Tesla ROZNOV⁶ seated in Prague, but my pay was shabby. In summer 1988 I returned back to Moravia – I became a member of the famous Cooperative Farm Slusovice to work there as an expert for semiconductor technology.

In this period (1984-88) I kept my flat in Piestany and I regularly went there. In Prague, on the other hand, I renewed my activities in the Academic Hiking Club and got new friends. One of them was Mirek⁷, a propagator of cycling. In summer 1986 he invited me for a weekend cycling trip. We started at Andel⁸ and rode along the clearway for Karlovy Vary. There were about 15 of us. We stayed overnight in a restaurant, sleeping in bags on the floor. On Sunday we turned back to Prague through the valley of Kacak⁹ and along the Berounka. It was hit with me – I felt excellent among these people. I was waiting for another undertaking like this, but with no effect

It was only after the Revolution, when I worked as a foreign guide, that I was able to save some money and had a new, sufficiently big frame made for my bicycle. On this renewed bike I undertook a solo trip across Holland and Germany¹⁰. I started in Amsterdam and went along the coast to The Hague and then I turned in the inland and continued along the Rhine, Main and the *Donaukanal*¹¹. I had three chamber-music “play-ins”¹² during that trip. My bicycle however broke down on the way and I had prematurely to turn back home by train.

The trip was a great experience for me and I met many interesting people on the way. Paradoxically, I felt much safer abroad than at home; when I stopped to repair my bicycle there were always people around who offered me help¹³. In one Dutch camp I met an old couple who permanently stayed in the camp, because they had to sell their house. The gentleman played a game with an iron ball and his wife cooked in the tent and watched TV. Dutch people do maximally utilize the area of their land; as I rode across one town, the path led close beside the channel (*gracht*); once an object flew from a near house just before me and I almost fell into the water. The people were fighting at home; they apologized to me. I met there also women on the bicycle with babies in a basket fastened to handlebars. The paths were so narrow that sometimes it was difficult to make way one another.

As I continued to the south into Germany, the people seemed to me more reserved; they were obviously also richer. Once a camper stopped next to my tent in the trailer camp and stretched out its hydraulic legs. My tent looked like a dwarf beside the camper. A man came out coughing; I was shivering from cold every night and remained healthy.

It was sometimes difficult to find a campsite. Once I camped on the bank of the *Donaukanal* and people from neighboring town were walking their dogs around me till night. Another time

⁵ See Handful of Reminiscences at www.technologie-kvalita.cz/honza

⁶ My former employer

⁷ Mirek Prokeš; after 1989 Mirek became an activist of Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and member of the regional parliament in Prague.

⁸ Anděl, a busy crossing at district Smíchov

⁹ Kačák, a brook, tributary of the Berounka river

¹⁰ See my Handful of Reminiscences

¹¹ A channel connecting the Main and Danube

¹² I was member of ACMP, the association of chamber music players

¹³ In contrast, shortly before the trip I fell over on a busy road in Prague and was knocked insensible; as I was coming to myself, I lay on the road and the cars were rushing around.

I rode all the day; the sun was setting and the camp was still far away. I waved on a passing car and asked about the way. After a while the car came back and the driver invited me in his home. It was a small one-storey house in a garden. I had dinner with him and his friend and he borrowed me an eiderdown. I slept in my tent in the garden, being warm again after a long time.

There was an extremely long city on the way with an extremely long name – Mönchengladbach. I had my last “play-in” at a druggist there. As I rode along the cycling path, another cyclist was passing me. I spoke to him and he answered mixing Russian words in German, so we switched to Russian. He came from Soviet Union with two his sons and they got housing and a support for prequalification here, as their forefathers were German. My host was single, he had a well-furnished flat. We played in the evening together with two ladies – teachers of music – and I stayed overnight. He gave me some money for the road so that I wouldn’t “live like a dog”.

There were spacious cycling paths along the Main and groups of cyclists were riding there, including priests and nuns. At one village I could see with my own eyes a “run for health”: in the evening many people ran out in the street at once for jogging together. I had only seen that in a film before.

In September 1992 I joined the Apprentice Training Centre in Prague-Vysocany¹⁴ as a teacher. I stayed with my parents in a small room which was originally allocated for a servant; I lost my flat at Piestany when Czechoslovakia fell into two parts and it was impossible to rent a flat of my own. I tried to go to work on bicycle and I took a runabout across a park and along the river. I took me two hours daily (not much more than by public transport) and it much improved my health.

En Route to Vienna

In June 1995 I accidentally met Mirek and he informed me about an undertaking he was organizing – a cycling trip to Vienna for a meeting of young *Friends of Nature* from all European countries¹⁵. The host and sponsor of the meeting was the Austrian Social Democratic Party; they used this opportunity for propagation of their program, mainly the critics of Czech and Slovak nuclear power plants (Temelín, Dukovany). Czech, Polish and German delegations came to the meeting on bicycles.

The Czech delegation, which started in Prague, included 11 Czechs ranging from 13 to 50 years of age and 6 young Russians from Moscow. The youngest – a Czech-American, rather unrestrained girl had a tumble at the beginning, and somebody had to ride beside her as a guard on all the way. I and Mirek were just 50.

I rode as light as possible; I got a tube-shaped light tent, which however was of no use – one couldn’t move in it and it didn’t even protect in the rain. Fortunately, there was no need of a tent – we partly stayed overnight in school buildings and it was warm and didn’t rain; in the camp in Vienna I could hide under the dining tent. I took my guitar and we took turns at carrying it; the last cyclist was carrying a flag.

¹⁴ Vysočany, 9th district of Prague

¹⁵ It was organized on the occasion of the celebration of 50th anniversary of establishment of the “Naturfreunde” organization.



En rout to Vienna, 1995

Nowadays, there is an international cycling path Prague-Vienna; that time we went across the highlands of Vysocina¹⁶ along local roads and we were often losing the way. Once we rode twice around the same circle and when we finally approached the goal, it was quite dark. Only one in the group had a light; he went in the front and the others had to follow a faint light before them. As we used to start rather late, at about 10am, we mostly rode at the maximum heat. Still I stood that quite well.

The Russians – 2 boys and 4 girls – were nice and the girls played guitar excellently. We could “brush up” our old knowledge of Russian. Some of them rode on mountain bikes that they had bought in Prague; however one girl went on the heavy UKRAJINA bicycle without the transmission and she had to push the bicycle at every hill. We visited several sights on the way – e.g. the Jewish cemetery at Trebic¹⁷, or the castle Lipnice. At Pribyslav¹⁸ I visited the memorial of Jan Zizka; my companions had no interest to look at it.

¹⁶ Českomoravská vysočina

¹⁷ Třebíč

¹⁸ Přebyslav – the Hussite commander *Jan Žižka z Trocnova* died there in 1424.



Jewish cemetery at Trebic

We crossed the border at Znojmo and made for the Danube. We stayed overnight at a boathouse belonging to *Naturfreunde*. We were treated to various kinds of baked good from the local bakery. In the morning we went along the *Danube Cycling Path* and we finished our trip at the *Emperor's Court*. However we still had to ride to our camp at *Campingplatz Süd* which took about 2 hours.



On the Austrian side

The international meeting lasted one week and several activities were organized: a tour of a historical mine and a reconstructed gothic castle. We also sailed on the *Neusiedler See* and were informed about the nature conservation area around the lake. There was also enough

time for individual activities in the camp. I spent a lot of time bathing at the Donauinsel in the clean and cold Danube water. Other Czech participants were seeking nudist beaches. Our top undertaking was however the protest action against the French nuclear experiment that occurred that time. We lay on overheated pavement in front of *Stefandom* in regular figures and were shot by TV. There were also discussions taking place in the camp; I had an opportunity to speak with a member of Austrian parliament.

Vienna has an extensive network of cycling paths and they are widely utilized. We were given free tickets for public transport and I had never used it; I rode on the bicycle everywhere. The stay was almost free for us – participants from the “poor countries”. All expenses were refunded. However once I had the idea to taste the famous Viennese delicatessen – *Wiener Kafee mit Apfelstrudel* – and it cost almost all my money.

When the meeting was over I rode along the Danube Cycling Path to Bratislava and I stayed overnight with my friend. Then I set off along the former fiercely-guarded border along the Morava¹⁹. It looked like a bird paradise there, I didn't meet anybody. Finally I came to the end of the road, there was forest around. I don't remember how I got to the bridge over the Morava, which connects Czech Republic with Slovakia. After crossing it, I continued to Breclav and took a train to Prague.

Timeslipping

In spring 1995 I was teaching English at the Czech University of Agriculture in Prague. Although the working conditions were objectively better than those at the Apprentice Training Centre at Vysocany, I didn't feel well there; the atmosphere at university was rather cold and impersonal. I endured one semester there only and turned back to Vysocany. At the same time the situation in our family became (paradoxically) complicated due to the restitution of possessions to my father. I had to leave my father's flat in Prague and I lived in stop-gap conditions. I fall ill and after a partial recovery I still suffered from a chronic fatigue. In winter the teaching was limited due to shortage of coal, which helped me. Once I fell asleep during last lesson on Friday when writing in the class register, and the students fled home. My superior, Mr.K. noticed that and I got a warning²⁰. I left the Centre at the end of the school-year and tried to support myself by translating. I was however not able to sit for long hours at the computer. The translations had to be ready soon (e.g. during the night) in an adequate quality. Finally I took the opportunity to teach German (and later on also physics) at a school for medical nurses. In spite of health problems I undertook several cycling trips during that period.

In October 1995 I took part in the “*Cycling Track*” led by Mirek²¹. We started in Prague and rode along the Elbe to the white-horse breeding station at Kladruby. This lap was 111km long and we reached the farm at night. Next day we rode to *Kuks* – a castle decorated with famous sculptures representing human traits. It was the goal of the “*Stezka*” – the meeting of all its participants²² enriched with various competitions.

Every year in July I used to attend the *Summer School of Early Music* at Valtice, south Moravia. I usually took my bicycle with me. The school lasted for about a week and the

¹⁹ The Morava is a river in Moravia, a tributary of Danube. Its final stretch is the border between Austria and Slovakia.

²⁰ Later on, when I was teaching at the training centre at Záběhllice, I got known that Mr.K. was kicked from there for stealing money from pockets of pupils in the changing room.

²¹ Mirek Prokeš, see above

²² Refer to “Handful of Reminiscences”

intensive work in the classes filled me up with new energy. Once I decided to set off for a trip after the final concert. I rode to *Hodonín* and stayed there overnight with my friends. Next day I continued to my former home at Piestany. I made for *Skalica* and climbed to the ridge of the *Bile Karpaty*. The road was so steep that I was nearly falling on my back. There was a narrow road along the ridge and I rode there quite alone – it was like in heaven. As I was approaching Brezova²³, I met a student coming from that village, who turned back home. We rode uphill together, but he left me on the top: he let downhill without braking as if he were gliding. I rode behind him carefully until I came to familiar places – to Vrbové and to Piestany.

I finished my teacher's career in June 2004 and I was enrolled by National Theatre as a gate-keeper. I could stay with my parents in Prague again. My mother died in October 2004 in the age of 90 and I stayed alone with my father. I only could leave him if somebody stood in for me. The only trip that I undertook that time was that to *Lilienfeld* (Austria), for the Summer Academy of Music. I got some lessons on singing and I attended some performances and parties. Nevertheless, I also took my bicycle with me and rode a part the way along the cycling path to *Mariazell*. I spoke to one pilgrim there who blamed the Jews of all the evil in the world. I left Lilienfeld after 3 days and rode to Danube and continued along the river to Tulln, where I took a train for Prague. On the way I stayed overnight at a pension and I met there a group of Slovak workers who were building a bio-gas station. The Austrians care of their environment much more than Czech people.

When my father died in July 2008²⁴, I moved to our forestry house at Sloup. During a year I got a mountain bike and started to ride again. But my knee betrayed me – it began to hurt and swell. So I bought Nordic-walking sticks in addition.

Sloup, September 16, 2010

²³ Brezová pod Bradlom, the birthplace of Milan Rastislav Štefánik, an astronomer and one of the founders of Czechoslovakia

²⁴ At the age of 96