

My Father's Memoirs (I)

A few Notes

My father, Dr. Vladimír Matys (26.4.1912 – 20.6.2008), was born in Prague. He was a lawyer and worked at the Ministry of Finances for whole his post-war career (1945 – 1972). A great deal of his life is however related to hunting and forests. In contrast to my mother, he wrote rarely – I never got a letter from him. It has been the situation in the forests around Sloup (near Davle) in sixties that made him write. He was deeply moved by the careless mechanized exploitation of the forests in which he knew every stone and where he spent a great deal of his life. This “liquidation” of forests became however quite normal today. The forests (about 250 hectares) were in possession of our family from about 1916 until the nationalization in 1950.¹

My father's “Memoirs of Davle, Sloup and the Surroundings” are mainly dedicated to history of the forests, the fauna and the local people from the end of 19th Century. He describes the ways of planting the trees, occurrence of wild and bird species, natural catastrophes, the way of life in the country, and the situation during 2nd World War and the arrival of Soviet Army. The text is closely related to the local conditions and obtains many details which would be difficult to translate. For this reason I limited the English version to the memories that father dictated to my sister Ludmila during the last years of his life.



Father at Sloup, about 1960

First World War and the Post-War Period

My grandfather's family lived at Valentýnská Street, in the Old Town of Prague. They also possessed a piece of land at Bubeneč, which lay outside the borders of town. It was very helpful during the war – they grew some food there which would be smuggled into the town. At the beginning of the war the family stayed at Jevany at a farm. Grandpa was not called

¹ in the restitution after 1990 a part of the forests was turned back to my father.

into the army; he was in charge of coal supply for Prague. At Jevany they followed the war events at the beginning of the war. My father first saw a car there.

Those times grandpa² purchased lands at Sloup together with his brother Václav, who was a farmer³. Sloup belonged to Davle, a village situated on the Vltava 25km south of Prague. Father describes their first voyage to Sloup on a steamboat, which was the main transport means of that time.

Whole our family (except father), including our servant and a pram, came to the landing place. We got on the steamboat and took seats in the restaurant on the lower deck. They served me tripe soup. Sailing upstream took about 4 hours. There was no dam at Vrané at those times; there was a strong rapid instead. We landed at Davle about noon and we got off together with other passengers. We slowly climbed uphill to Sloup⁴. I stopped at a low wall and I shouted to the people around me: *"Proletarians of all countries become allied and establish a Soviet republic!"* They worried about that and granny forbade me to speak that way....

They stayed at Sloup Farm and took part in harvest. There were Serbian prisoners of war staying there. However after some conflict between both brothers, grandpa decided to rebuild the forestry house as a "Villa" for his family and they moved there. The Villa was a project by architect Koula, who supervised the construction and relaxed by catching butterflies. My father followed him in that activity.



The Villa at Sloup (rebuilt forestry-house), about 1930

² My grandfather, Dr. Jan Matys (1875-1931) was a pupil and follower of T.G. Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak president. He took part in the First Resistance and worked in the state administration of Czechoslovakia

³ These lands originally belonged to the demesne of Slapy. Václav Matys ran the Sloup farm until its nationalization in 1950

⁴ The slope there is called "Kopanská"

Father recalls the declaration of Czechoslovakia on October 28th 1918, when all people in Prague went out in the streets. Soon after the war, an epidemic of Spanish Flue broke out and many people at Sloup were dying. My father was also laid down with the flue; he was the only of the family. Grandpa became the director of Prague Steel Company and he would travel by car Mercedes-Benz, 20HP, which reached the maximum speed of 40 km/hour. He had a chauffeur. The drivers were not very respectful those times; if two cars going in the same direction met on the road they tried to overtake one another, the loser found himself in a cloud of dust.

The Forests

A great deal of my father's memories is related to forests.

When my father prematurely died in 1931, I had to overtake the responsibility of the forest economy.



Father with his rifle, Sloup, about 1930

The invasion of pests

The underbrush was mostly young, with pines and firs prevailing. In 1924 an invasion of nuns (pests) occurred. They attacked fir trees. The fight against them using primitive means was futile, it looked like a catastrophe. However, finally the excessive pests crawled on the top of the trees forming big pears and then fell down and died. There hasn't been any occurrence of that pest since then.

Birds

In twenties there was *wood grouse* that regularly appeared in the forests. However, in 1927 they nested in the forest belonging to Václav and there was a young man who shot all of them. The *small grouse* appeared only once in winter.

We used to hunt woodcocks, which were very difficult to observe, as they flew low over the land.

Planting trees

In contrast to the protagonist of the novel "*The man who planted trees*" by Giono I was rather unsuccessful. When we passed over the forests, there were almost exclusively pines and firs, which was obviously incorrect. Grandpa tried to plant deciduous trees. We collected seeds of oaks, beeches, maples and other trees, but all the efforts were futile. The seeds were taken away by birds and if any trees appeared, they were liquidated by cows and goats that roamed in the forests. Grandpa tried to limit the grazing in the forests by a fence, which was criticized by the villagers. Fortunately, in 30ties there were new working opportunities at building of the dam and other constructions and the "invasion" of cows in the forests lessened.

Burning the Stake

There was a man at Hvozdnice⁵ who converted the people of this village to Protestantism. On July 6th they regularly burned the stake in memory of Jan Hus⁶. Our family once attended the ceremony and forester Benda was the preacher. There were many people at the stake, but Benda also had some opponents. During his speech one lady interrupted him saying that he speaks of love and he steals. The senior of the church had to stop her.

Benda was an educated man; he read a number of books on philosophy and I liked to listen to his views. On the other hand however he was a poacher.

A hanged man

I liked to hunt together with Benda. Once we were waiting for hares in silence and suddenly I heard a strange cough. We went in that direction, it was getting dark. The coughing ceased. We already wanted to turn back, when I got a stroke on my head. I looked up and saw a hanged man. I tried to climb up and cut the rope, but finally the tree bowed and we both fell down. We recognized the young man, he was from Sloup. There were just people coming from the train and we asked them for help. Finally we succeeded to rescue him.

From 1927 till Nazi Occupation

In the years 1927-28 we lost our two good helpers, foresters Camsky⁷ and Benda. It was difficult to find a fill-in for them. An experienced forester from the Schwarzenberg demesne recommended a young candidate to us – Josef Dráb and taught him in all the secrets of *forestry*. At the same time my father got seriously ill. After his death in 1931 it was me and my mother, who were beset by the worries related with the forest economy⁸. Fortunately the situation was calm at those years. The climatic catastrophes came later on.

⁵ A village near Sloup

⁶ Master Jan Hus was burnt on the stake at Constance on July 6, 1415

⁷ Čámský

⁸ Father studied Law at Charles University that time

They were a catastrophic draught in 1937 and extreme frosts in the years 1939 – 1941. It was the time of Nazi occupation and the forest economy was taken over by the Protectorate authorities. They specified the limits for individual sorts of lumber and imposed delivery of pulpwood on us. A great deal of the fir underbrush fell down under the weight of snow that time. The wood was exploited by a single firm. They transported the logs to the river, bent them into rafts and floated to Germany.

The extreme weather also influenced the game populations. Rabbits disappeared as they couldn't reach their holes. On the other hand, foxes were overpopulated; we shot 15 foxes every year. They came across the frozen Vltava.

Cottages

As wartime was approaching, many people became interested to get a piece of land in the Valley of Bojov⁹. I visited Mr. Barton z Dobenina together with the head forester at Klínek and we agreed not to let invasion of country cottages into Bojov Valley. Only the forests owned by peasants changed into weekend settlements.

One cottage only was built on our side of the brook; it belonged to Jaroslav Simsa, a nature conservationist and founder of the Scout Movement. It is now owned by John¹⁰ family.

Starting on Work in 1937

Father describes the situation at the tax office, where he started to work as a tax official. The chief of the office had extensive competence; for example, he could transfer the employees to other places, even on the opposite end of the republic. People told stories about his weirdness. He didn't tolerate any intimacies among his subordinates.

Canoeing

Father started to do canoeing in 1939 and he got acquainted with mother¹¹ at the boathouse. They both took part in a trip on the Vltava that year starting at Zivohost¹². The trip was rather dramatic – there was a flood wave approaching to their camp and they had to set off before it came. The canoe of my mother and her friend Mária turned over in rapids and father had to run along the shore to rescue both the girls and their canoe from the current. Water temperature was 7 degrees and they were chilled through. Fortunately, there were people on the shore who helped, and finally they succeeded to finish the trip. Father and mother bought a canoe and started to do canoeing.

The Year 1945

One could feel at every step that Front was approaching. There were partisans appearing in the forests around and German deserters fleeing westwards. It was surprising that the food

⁹ Bojovské údolí; the brook there was the border of the estates of our family and those of the nobleman Bartoň z Dobenína, seated at Zbraslav Castle

¹⁰ Jaroslav Šimsa. Josef John used to be a deputy minister in the Communist government, later on he signed CHARTA 77 and was kicked. The cottage was destroyed by the flood in 1964 and was renewed.

¹¹ Dr. Ludmila Matysová – Učňová (26.4.1914 – 23.10.2004), born at Prostějov

¹² Živohošť near Slapy. Most of the village was later flooded over by Slapská přehrada (Slapy Dam).

supply went regularly – we got milk, flour, edible fat etc¹³. We were deciding whether to stay in Prague or move to Sloup. Finally, when Jan was born¹⁴, the whole of my family took a taxi to Sloup. We rode there under permanent threat of air raids. I shot a roebuck which grazed next to our garden to improve our nutrition.

Once I went to Mechenice¹⁵ to buy bricks and I met a Soviet soldier riding the bicycle. I asked him where was he from and he said “*I am Siberian*”. It was a great surprise. Soon later a group of cavalymen appeared at our Villa. They entered the garden, opened the front door and a horse's head appeared inside. A cavalryman shouted “*Captain will stay here*”.¹⁶ At the driveway to Villa there was a patrol. Once I turned back home and they stopped me; it took me a long time to persuade them that I lived there. Russians slaughtered cows at Sloup Farm, but they only consumed meat. The entrails were thrown out on the manure and villagers were coming there for tripe. Soldiers had lice and both my daughters and grannies got lice too.

There were many thieves among the soldiers and they stole poultry, bicycles etc. There was an officer responsible for liquidation of damages staying at Villa; he received complaints from people who came here. My brother Ivan¹⁷ worked there as an interpreter. One part of our barn served as a prison. They kept thieves there and also the soldiers of Vlasov army who were executed.



Uncle Ivan and aunt Edith, Sloup, about 1940

During the last period of war trains were not running; some tunnels were used by the Nazi for war production. Father went to Prague by the first train that was dispatched from Mechenice; he traveled on the roof. He visited his former workplace, but there was nothing to do. A group of Germans was cleaning the house. German snipers were still on towers of

¹³ Obviously in Prague, where father worked

¹⁴ That's me – on April 11, 1945

¹⁵ Měchenice, a village near Davle

¹⁶ The soldiers belonged to the army of marshal Malinovsky

¹⁷ My uncle Ivan had an extraordinary linguistic talent; he mastered almost all European languages

churches; father saw a Soviet soldier capture a sniper. However father contacted some friends of his and in July he began to work at the Ministry of finances.

There was a lot of work at the ministry and there were no “working hours”. Father took part in preparations of the first state budget and cooperation with other state institutions. He worked at the Ministry until his retirement in 1972.



Our family (without father): Lída, mother, Olga, Jan; Sloup about 1960

Father worked under five ministers. His career was mostly marked by minister Julius Duriš¹⁸, “whose reign of terror lasted for 10 years”. In 1967 he was removed from his office and replaced by minister Sucharda, who was a very respectable man.

It was a period of a struggle between the progressive and the conservative wings within the Communist Party:

I recall a large meeting I attended. It should originally been devoted to school reform but in fact it was about economy. Among a number of politicians and economists who took part in the discussion it was especially economist Ota Šik¹⁹ who put forward many stimulating suggestions concerning the economical reform...

I went home with deputy minister Machacka. He told me about a meeting at the Central Comity he lately attended. It followed from the dealings there, not the educational system only, but the state itself was to be reformed. This information raised a hope for a better future in me.

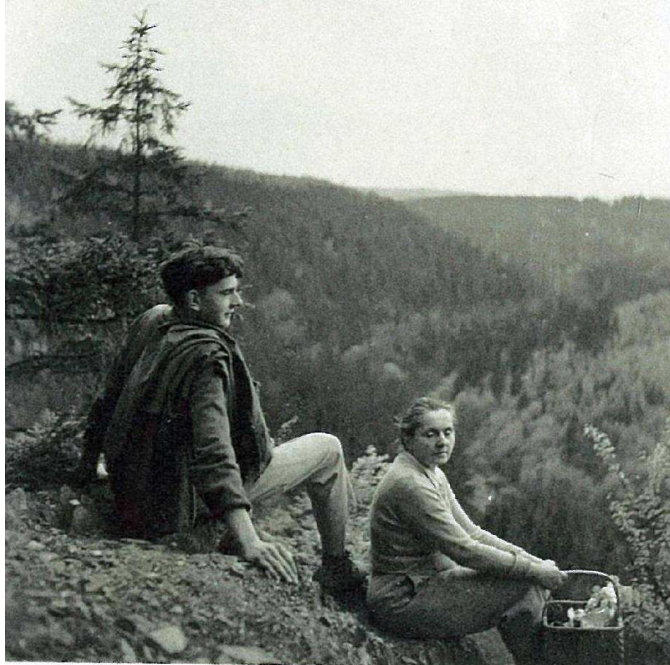
The new Party Secretary, Alexander Dubcek²⁰, came with the slogan of “socialism with a human face”, which met with a good international response. The response of Soviet leadership was immediate – a field exercise of Warsaw Pact armies was announced. Yugoslavian president Tito visited Czechoslovakia and tried to warn Dubcek.

¹⁸ Július Ďuriš

¹⁹ Ota Šik was one of the most distinguished personalities of Prague Spring. His conception of “socialist market economy” couldn't be realized because of Soviet intervention. He defected in Switzerland.

²⁰ Dubček

On August 21st my wife came from her morning shopping and she said that there were tanks going along the street; she couldn't say whose tanks they were. Later on we were informed about the intervention, both the official and unofficial way. For several days after the telephone was dead and there was no public transport. We had no contact with our daughter Ludmila living at Písek²¹.



Jan with mum, at the viewpoint above Bojov Valley; about 1960

²¹ A historical town in south Bohemia