

Water Sport

Baptized in river

My parents got acquainted on the river, or more precisely at the boathouse¹. My mother had a friend Edith who went canoeing with her brother. When her brother emigrated to England my father was chosen as her new bowman. Edith was Jewish and my uncle married her at the beginning of the *Protektorat* with the words "No general will order me who I am to marry". That apparently was the bravest deed in his life. My parents got also married at that time – this way both my father and uncle avoided the compulsory work in the German Reich. My sister Ludmila was born in September 1941, Olga in November 1943, and I was born in April 1945, before the end of the war.

Edith was a lawyer and she was able to fix it so that her name in the register was erased. She hid in our country seat, in a forestry house at Davle, 20 km south of Prague. However a blackmailer appeared who asked my uncle for money under the threat that he would tell the Gestapo. My father succeeded in taking care of him with the help of his schoolmate who served as a gendarme; his deed must be highly appreciated.

Soon my father became the skipper and my parents went on canoeing even at the beginning of the war. They mostly shot the rapids on the Vltava that have irretrievably disappeared under the surface of the lakes of the later-built dams. After the war the upper reach of the Vltava was open for canoeing again. After the forcible transfer of Germans, the "gold-diggers" were plundering there and the land evoked the Wild West. In contrast, in the traditional Czech inland the villagers were on friendly terms with water sportsmen and often there was long-standing friendship among them. The sportsmen could sleep on the hay on rainy days, they could drink fresh milk etc. This "agro-tourism" was finished by the *collectivization of agriculture*. Nowadays agro-tourism is developing again, especially abroad.

As we were growing up, our parents took us to the boathouse at Bráník². We used to paddle upstream to a cove and camp there. Sometimes father towed the canoe to the mouth of the Berounka tributary. Once we were caught by a thunderstorm and we waited it out in a small military tent. For water sportsmen the boathouse was their second home. Besides excursions on the river or training for competitions, the boats were mended on special stands; the old canoes, which were covered with canvas and sealed with cement, were very touchy. A river trip has a special charm – one appears in a quite different environment, isolated from the noise and rush of ordinary life. It's a very good form of relaxation after work. My parents went canoeing weekly until the age of 70 – while they could carry the boat.

¹ I learnt that from my father's memoirs which he dictated to my sister Ludmila before his death (my father died in June 2008 in the age of 96)

² A district at the periphery of Prague, upstream



Fig.1. My mother, at the boathouse, spring 1975

Every summer our whole family went for a fortnight's expedition. We mostly ran the Lužnice³ and the upper reach of the Vltava and we usually ran the whole trip up to Prague through the new-built dams. Sometimes we made a stopover at Davle, deposited the canoes with our friends, and went bathing and camping to the St. Killian Island during the holiday. On this island, which is situated near the mouth of the Sázava, many people used to camp on summer holiday and people were ferried here and there. Nowadays the island is deserted and wild; there are hardly any boats ever seen on the river. Once a year, in June, people come here to celebrate holy mass in the ruins of monastery.

Water expeditions

I first set off for a family expedition when I was 11. We floated the boats under the railway bridge at Cervena⁴. Father waded into a soldier who wanted to rout us out saying that there is a military zone and "*regulation is regulation*". Father replied that "*one must sometimes die in conformity with regulations*". We floated through a deep valley that is flooded now. Both the castles Zvíkov at the confluence with the Otava and Orlick towered up high over the river. Nowadays, after the dam is filled, both the castles are just above the surface and they look like water fortresses. We met a raft and floated a stretch, loaded on the logs. It brought us to the swelling of the Slapy Dam. In those times the shores of the dam were muddy and there were stumps after forest exploitation there and the water was green with algae. Except for this, nature was untouched; there were a lot of blueberries growing in the forest. Nowadays the shores are surrounded with weekend houses. The same situation we found on the lakes at Orlick and at Lipno⁵; which we ran over in the following years; they weren't still fully filled that time.

Nevertheless, it was the Lužnice below Suchdol that used to be the most grateful river stretch for beginners. The river meanders there through the floodplain forest. Both the skipper and the bowman could check their skill and cooperation here. The skipper steered the boat and the bowman had to obey him. The voyage was livened up by fallen trunks that might be either

³ Lužnice, a tributary river of the Vltava

⁴ The bridge at Červená used to be the highest one in middle Europe. It is supported by stone columns that must have been surrounded with concrete before the dam at Orlick was filled.

⁵ Both these lakes (or dams) have kept a record: the Orlick Dam is 70m high and uses 4 Kaplan-type turbines which unique for this height; the lake at Lipno has the largest area in Czech Republic

passed under or pulled over. Clouds of mosquitoes were the other things livening up of the voyage. The third member of the crew, who didn't paddle, had to keep mosquitoes away from the bowman; the skipper had to help himself.

The first campsite was situated at the *Majdalena Dam*. This is the point where the New River is separated; it deflects the excess water to the Nežarka⁶. The remaining stream – the Old River feeds the Pond Rozmberk⁷. Sailing onto our greatest pond was marvelous – one can allegedly see the globe curvature on its surface. The middle part of the Lužnice is relatively calm. There are rapids below Tábor only; the water used to be rather polluted there. If one didn't like paddling along the lakes of the dams, one might finish the expedition at Tyn or at Bechyne⁸.

On the upper reach of the Vltava the water is clear and very cold; the temperature below 8 degrees would be indicated by painful ankles. The water there was even drinkable; before 1914 the water in the Vltava was drinkable even in Prague! ... Bellow the Lipno Dam, there is a 10km steep stretch full of large boulders, the *Devil's torrents*. Normally this stretch is dry, and water is led in tubing to the turbines situated at Vyšší Brod⁹. This stretch is only flooded when water-slalom competitions are taking place. We had to find some transport means there. Bellow Vyšší Brod, there was another peculiarity – the paper mill at Vetrní¹⁰. The water bellow the mill was full of tufts; it was allegedly polluted with substances containing phenol. A healthy river has a considerable self-cleaning capacity; however this pollution allegedly floated through Elbe down to Germany and the phenols were extracted from the river there...

Our greatest family expedition was the passage of the *Hron* (Slovakia) in 1961. We started at Podbrezová and ran the Hron downstream until its flow into Danube at Sturovo¹¹. We ran on two canoes. Father and sister Olga went on the wooden "ribbed" canoe; I navigated a new canoe of glass laminate with mother and sister Lída rotating at the bow. The glass-laminate canoes of the first series had the classical shape with keel and they were difficult to navigate. I had thus a more difficult job than my father, but I mastered it quite well in my 16 years. Water was low and in the bends the main stream went down under the willows lining the shore. It was necessary to navigate the ship precisely so that it neither was dragged under the trees nor stranded on the shoal.

The most significant object on our trip was St. Benedict Monastery¹². Further on below the monastery there were Hungarian villages and the people there had locust trees in their gardens instead of fruit trees. The monks obviously educated the villagers in the neighborhood and preserved the Slovak language. We met a group of Gypsy children playing on the shore and father got acquainted with one Gypsy boy – they were in correspondence for some time. Finally we came to the river mouth and camped at a campsite. From there one could see the spires of Ostrihom Cathedral¹³ and the railway bridge over the Danube. Ostrihom used to be the seat of the Archbishop, who administered a part of Hungary including the Slovak dioceses. We loaded the boats on the train at the nearby station and we went home next day¹⁴.

⁶ Nežárka, the tributary of the Lužnice

⁷ Rožmberský rybník

⁸ Tyn nad Vltavou, Bechyň – historical towns at the confluence of the Lužnice and Vltava

⁹ Vyšší Brod, a town and monastery; it is the point where the Vltava turns to the north

¹⁰ Papírna ve Větrní

¹¹ Štúrovo, a town on Danube, southern Slovakia, where Hungarian language prevails

¹² Kláštor Svätý Beňadík

¹³ In Hungarian: *Östergom*

¹⁴ I repeated the passage of Hron 20 years later with my Slovak colleagues.

During my studies at the Technical College (1959 – 1963) we organized together with my colleagues three expeditions on the Lužnice¹⁵. In two of them we ran all the reach up to Prague; once we finished our trip at Tyn¹⁶. After 1st year of our university studies, we organized a water expedition as well; later on we preferred international working camps, which offered us wider horizons...

Speed Canoeing and Kayaking

I also got in contact with the speed (racing) canoeing; for that matter we had our boats deposited in the *Sparta Praha* boathouse, where a racing team trained. In 1959 I took part (together with my sister Olga) in a training camp at Slapy. Among the managers there were famous sportsmen – the world champions *Kudrna and Karlík*. We trained paddling in the kneeling position on the seven-canoe and the correct style of paddling on the kayak. However I couldn't continue to train during the school year due to the violin.

About that time I made myself a glass-laminate kayak with the help of other family members. The boat was relatively fast and it had a high bow. It permitted me to shoot rapids and overcome lapping on lakes easily, as the bow lifted me over the waves. Nevertheless, it had one drawback – I couldn't take a rest on the river; if I stopped paddling, the boat automatically turned by 180°.

I regularly trained on this boat and I took part in two official undertakings. One of them was the *Fitness Water Trip* on the Sázava in 1966. We ran it on high water and numerous water clubs were taking part there. The second was the competition of tourist ships *Cernosice – Praha*¹⁷. In this competition I came as 2nd of about 50 boats; the result was influenced by the boat shape. After the race I still had energy enough to sit on the bicycle and ride towards Benesov, where our student pacifist organization¹⁸ backed an orphans' home.

An Environmental Review

In the years 1956 – 1964 I regularly took part on water expeditions. During this period the main Czech rivers had substantially changed. Originally one might camp almost anywhere; the river was surrounded with forests or mowed meadows, sometimes with heaps of hay. One could find drinking water almost everywhere – any water bubbling out of earth was drinkable. The water in the river was mostly suitable for swimming and hygienic purposes, washing up or cooking potatoes. The ground wasn't yet covered with chips of glass and trash and one could walk barefoot everywhere.

The new farming methods and the public welfare had bad consequences. In the 2nd half of sixties one could only camp at reserved campsites and long stretches of the Vltava and the Lužnice were surrounded with weekend-houses. As a result of using chemicals in farming, nitrates penetrated into underground water and many species of insects, including butterflies disappeared¹⁹. After introducing detergents in the automatic washing machines the rivers became full of foam that didn't disintegrate. The water closets were another calamity for water purity. Traditionally human excrements were composted and turned back to soil; nowadays they pollute water or are costly liquidated in sewage plants. People consume

¹⁵ Lužnice, the tributary of the Vltava

¹⁶ Tyn nad Vltavou

¹⁷ Závod turistických lidí Černošce-Praha

¹⁸ In 1968 we established a Czechoslovak subsidiary of SCI – Service Civil International

¹⁹ As a consequence, also some birds, e.g. partridges

various medicaments including hormonal pills, whose residues often terminate in river. They may e.g. change the gender of fish or influence the fertility of men.

It appears as if nature were defending itself from human interventions²⁰: One of its arms are the wood ticks infected with lyme disease or encephalitis. The globalization causes introduction of new exotic species that replace the original flora and fauna. They are mostly harmful for human interests and some of them are even poisonous.

Nowadays villagers don't breed cows, sheep or goats, so the meadows are not browsed which reduces the biodiversity. In seventies forests were seriously damaged by sulphurous emissions from coal power plants that were generously built in those times. Nowadays, after their desulphurization, forests gradually regenerate.

There are changes appearing even in the human organism itself due to civilization influences – stress, air and water pollution, sedentary way of life. Treatment with antibiotics has weakened our immunity. Contemporary medicine enables survival and reproduction of individuals who would have died in natural conditions. This acts against natural selection and in the long term it worsen the quality of population, which is more and more dependent on medicines. These factors may also contribute to obesity, which becomes an epidemic in rich industrial countries.

All the above factors cause alienation of man from nature, whose part we originally were. Until recently man could stay in the forest and live off its fruits. Nowadays, one must be properly dressed before going there. We shall soon have to live in an artificial environment. But it may also have other consequences – we shall be walked over by poor nations in the same manner as the barbarians conquered Rome.

The Slovak Anabasis

After graduating at university I had to pass one-year military service. Then I spent another year at a study stage at the Laboratory of Electron Microscopy of the Institute of Macromolecular Science²¹ in Prague. In August 1970 I joined TESLA Electronics Works at Rožnov pod Radhoštěm²². The hills around Rožnov lured us to go on a hikes from spring till fall and cross-country skiing in winter. We also made excursions to the nearby Slovak mountains.

I only turned back to water sport 8 years later, after moving to Piestany²³ in Slovakia. This town is situated on the Váh which flows through the thermal resort and flows into Slnava Lake under the semi-roofed Bellus²⁴ Bridge. The water of the lake is led through a channel to the power plant at Madunice.. There was a modern boathouse at a cove of the lake. The water sports practiced there included canoeing, windsurfing and yachting. The water there however wasn't pure enough for swimming. In some places of the lake there was so much seaweed that somebody had allegedly become entangled in it and drowned. The dam was built as a dyke²⁵; when we carried boats over the dam during expeditions, we had to wade through windblown deposits of plastic bottles.

²⁰Cf. „Gaia counters the bow” a book published recently

²¹ Ústav makromolekulární chemie ČSAV

²² Rožnov pod Radhoštěm, northern Moravia

²³ Piešťany, town with a thermal resort in West Slovakia

²⁴ Slnava; Emil Belluš, a prominent Slovak architect

²⁵ Dam made of stone and earth (sypaná hráz)

I worked at the *Department of physical electronics*²⁶ of the Slovak Academy of Science in Piestany. There were about 20 mostly young scientists at the department. I found that the Academy had sent a few canoes with paddles to Piestany, but nobody knew where they were. I gathered several colleagues interested in canoeing and finally we found two of the canoes and started to sail on the lake. Gradually we started to organize water expeditions together with workers of the *TESLA Piestany* factory²⁷. We regularly took part on “*Voyage of Friendship*” which was an officially organized undertaking; it took place every year on 9th of May. There was some political setting – it was reminder of the end of WWII. However, we organized our expedition quite independently. We used to run the Váh from Piestany to Komárno, a town at its flow into Danube; the trip was about 100km and we had to pass it during 2 days.

I took part on 4 of these expeditions and each one was quite different. In the first expedition, we had to overcome a strong headwind; in the second, the sun burnt and we had to keep in the shade along the banks. In the third one it was raining all the way and it was only plum brandy that improved our temper. For the 4th time it was rather cold and I had a young inexperienced bowman. During one landing he unexpectedly jumped on the shore and turned the boat over. I had nothing dry to put on and I trembled with the coldness. Fortunately a kind soul appeared²⁸ and lent me knitted pants, which rescued me. Since then I have always taken knitted pants on any (not only water) expedition.

The Váh flows relatively slowly below Slnava and there was only one hurdle on the way to Komárno – the unfinished dam at Kralova²⁹. We had to sit in the boat paddling for 12 hours a day. My back hurt... I imagined at those moments what a favor are the dams on Czech rivers – the carrying of the boat exercises all one’s muscles.

I also had an opportunity to run a small stretch of the Danube bellow Bratislava. Navigation on the Danube is quite specific. The river flows very fast and one must pay attention to buoys. Meeting with a buoy had cost the lives of even experienced sportsmen... On the banks of Danube, there are some Hungarian fishermen’s restaurants (*Halásczarda*) which offer goulash of fish (*haláslé*).

Nevertheless, the most interesting undertaking of ours was the expedition on the Hron in 1981. It was just 20 years after I ran it with my parents. In the meantime the monastery St. Benedict was renamed (by communists) *Benedict on the Hron*³⁰. Otherwise little had changed. There were gypsy children playing on the shore the same way as before. As some of my colleagues spoke Hungarian, we could go for a chat in the Hungarian villages.

We were successfully using my 20 year old guidebook; however when we landed at the mouth at Štúrovo, we were a little astonished. The railway station didn’t exist any more and the bus didn’t come there due to a subway. We had to board again and paddle against the stream.

²⁶ Oddelenie fyzikálnej elektroniky (OFE) SAV v Piešťanoch; the Academy itself seated in Bratislava

²⁷ I joined TESLA Piešťany Works in 1980

²⁸ It was a lady from another club; she had reserve clothing sealed in plastic foils

²⁹ The dam at Kráľová is now finished; there is a large lake at that place

³⁰ Hronský Beňadík



Obr.2. Shooting the rapids on the Hron, 1985

The last expedition that I took part on in Slovakia was that to Danube branches. They should have been soon flooded by the dam at Gabčíkovo³¹. It was a kind of leave-taking with that natural resort. We had a chat with the folks of the village Bodfky that was going to be



Obr.3. Danube branches, 1987

soon cut off from its neighborhood.

³¹ Gabčíkovo Dam was realized in 90ties; the Hungarian part of the project has not been realized due to political changes after 1990

When I worked at the Slušovice Cooperative Farm³² (1988 – 89), I took part on an water trip on the Otava³³. We went by cars and were shooting some interesting stretches. It was no extraordinary experience – it couldn't be compared to a real water expedition, during which one lives in an intimate contact with nature for some period of time and *one must rely on one's powers!* In such a situation, one reveals some abilities that one hadn't the faintest idea of. The thermoregulation, for example: after some time of adaptation one doesn't mind neither hot nor cold temperatures.
That was my last water trip.

³² Cf. My Reminiscence of Slušovice, www.technologie-kvalita.cz/honza

³³ Otava is a tributary of the Vltava, southern Bohemia