

Humphreys College

NEWSLETTER SUPPLEMENT

SUMMER QUARTER

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MEET YOUR TEACHER

FORTY YEARS IN EDUCATION

PART I: COMING OF AGE IN COLD-WAR EUROPE

This year coincides with three anniversaries: forty years of his teaching - the first half in former Czechoslovakia, the second half in the United States, and the last decade at Humphreys College. Those 40/20/10 anniversaries inspired the following Q & A exchange between Dean Jess Bonds and Humphreys' Librarian Stanislav Perkner.

Q: In retrospect, what had motivated you, four decades ago, to become a university educator?

A: Before I became an Assistant Professor of the Department of Radio Broadcasting at Charles University in Prague, in the early 1970s, I was nurturing two dreams: music and writing. My parents were blue-collar railroad workers in a small town in Central Bohemia, nearby Prague. They wished that their only son would find an "office job" – "not to be exposed to the elements," as my mom would put it.

Q: What happened to your music plans?

A: Up until my high-school years, I was a promising violin and French horn student. At the age of fifteen, I even won an annual competition for young players conducted by the International Radio and TV Organization. For the first time, I saw my name in the media. My parents were excited. It was clear I would pursue my post-secondary edu-



Sixty years ago: Kindergarten 1951 - the top row, the first on the right with a fresh haircut.



Fifty years ago: Sixth grade - the top row, 3rd from the right.

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cation at the prestigious Prague Conservatory of Music. With my award, I'd be admitted automatically at the age of eighteen.

Q: However, you abandoned this opportunity. Why?

A: My parents were very disappointed. As a high-school teenager, I was easily distracted by soccer and ice-hockey, and by voracious reading. They lost their control and could not force me to practice music anymore. I realized that I would have to practice several hours a day. Also, as I was exposed to the world of my ambitious artistic competitors, I realized that some of them were better. I was not willing "to play the second fiddle."

Q: Instead, you decided to study social sciences and journalism at Charles University in Prague, former Czechoslovakia.

A: My passion for reading triggered serious writing aspirations. In high school, I managed to launch a monthly student magazine. It was exciting to see my name in print. Some of my book reviews found their way to the national newspapers. Most of my contributions, however, were never published; those that made it were heavily edited. For about two years, I had a chance to run a weekly news roundup for the local cable radio station – an equivalent of American public access channel. Obviously, every show was pre-recorded and subjected to censorship. It was good preparation for my future career in the field of radio studies. An absolute failure were my attempts to write poetry and pop-song lyrics. In short, I was a better reader than writer. Another reason to study social sciences and journalism was the fact that those programs were math free. I avoided math at all costs.

Q: When did you start to study English?

A: In Czechoslovak high schools, every freshman chose one of the Western languages—English, French or German—and studied it for four years – up to the cumulative "maturity exam." I have been always interested in languages, both my native Czech and, since the high-school years, English. Once, as an elementary-school child, I asked my mom why the name of the country we spell *Kanada* appears on the cover of a travel book as "Canada." Was it an error? She explained to me that some foreign languages might be confusing by spelling words one way and pronouncing them in another. It prompted my later interest in linguistics. Because former Czechoslovakia was a Soviet-bloc country, all of us born after WWII had to study Russian – from fourth grade through college. When I applied for admission into the university in 1964, my alternative choice was the Oriental Languages Program of Charles University.

Q: I assume it was another math-free zone...

A: No math, no physics, no chemistry! I'd prefer to study Japanese and Chinese rather than algebra and trigonometry. In high school, I chose an elective Latin over Descriptive Geometry. By a sheer miracle, I somehow passed the compulsory math part during the exit exam to complete my high-school education. Otherwise, this interview would never take place: a high-school failure in math could not admit me to any Czechoslovak university. At the very beginning of my part-time cooperation with Humphreys College, somebody unexpectedly cancelled his contract and I was offered to teach Elementary Algebra. It was both flattering and embarrassing. I wished I could master both math and social sciences as my friends Rowena Walker, Leslie Walton or Richard Hunt, but there was no way!

Q: Let's return to the mid-1960s in Prague and your first university experiences.

A: My first attempt to be admitted to the Social Sciences and Journalism Programs was very disappointing: Out of several hundred applicants, only twenty could be accepted. In Czechoslovakia, as a socialist country, education was free-of-charge; therefore, the government reserved the right to be selective. Moreover, my chosen program grew attractive due to the beginning of an ideological thaw of the 1960s. Many started to believe, mistakenly as it turned out, that the censor-

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ship era imposed by the Soviet Union-controlled government was heading to its end. Luckily, after appealing the negative decision of the entrance-exam committee, I was accepted to the five-year course of study. My first semester at Charles University started in fall 1964. Unlike my parents, I believed that I was born on the lucky star.

Q: Why would your parents oppose your choice? Here you were, admitted to the most prestigious university in Czechoslovakia, established in the 1300s, winning admission to the attractive program of your own choice...



The original seal of Charles University

A: Today I understand their quiet skepticism. They were born in 1915 and 1920, at the beginning of the independent Czechoslovak Republic. Before that, for more than 300 years, both Czechs and Slovaks were subjected to the oppressive Habsburg (Austrian) Empire. After WWI, the empire collapsed. With Woodrow Wilson's support, Czechs and Slovaks established their first independent republic. They elected Thomas G. Masaryk, a Charles University Philosophy Professor as its first president. Incidentally, he was married to an American, Charlotte Garrigue of New Jersey. Sadly, after two decades, this independent democracy in the heart of Europe collapsed. The 1938 Munich International Conference decided that parts of the young democratic country would be given to Adolf Hitler to appease him. Within months, Czechoslovakia was occupied by the German Army. Among the first Nazi victims were journalists, writers, and other intellectuals. The end of WWI, in

1945, triggered another wave of ideologically motivated purges. The victorious allies represented by Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph V. Stalin had carved up central Europe and Czechoslovakia found itself under Soviet influence. Naturally, all hopes of a free press disappeared. Another dramatic political upheaval in 1948 was the beginning of the Soviet dominance of Czechoslovakia that lasted four decades.

Q: In other words, your parents saw the journalistic profession in 20th-century Czechoslovakia as a risky business.

A: They never expressed it that way. However, the ideologically motivated professional purges were too frequent: 1918, 1939, 1945, 1948..., When my wise grandfather, a small farmer and WWI veteran, heard about my journalistic plans, he gave me some advice: "In this country, you should first learn some good trade – how to cut hair, repair roofs, cook food, mend shoes or television sets. Then, you could do whatever you wish. Even in prison, they always need a barber or a cook! Those guys always survive!" I was seventeen and took it as a good joke.

Q: Despite the fact that journalism and education have much in common, they are two different professions.

A: My ultimate decision to abandon the journalistic dream was related to the deep political crisis in 1968 Czechoslovakia. It was the year of the so-called Prague Spring. The economic problems stemming from the systematic destruction of private ownership after 1948 triggered a reform movement led by progressive economists and journalists. Not only the general public, but even many political and state leaders realized that the prosperity levels of pre-war Czechoslovakia could not be achieved without privatization of small businesses and liberation of the political system. The reform movement met with general enthusiasm. The new Communist Party leader, Alexander Dubček, declared that his goal was "to build an advanced socialist society on sound economic foundations – in other words, socialism that corresponds to the historical democratic traditions of Czechoslovakia." In April 1968, Dubček launched a popular political program of "socialism with a human face." At the same time, along with many other government reforms, media censorship was abandoned overnight – for the first time after twenty years. It made a great impression upon anybody with creative ambitions.

Q: It sounds like Gorbachev's reforms of the 1980s that led to the dismissal of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

A: The Prague Spring of 1968 introduced similar transforming ideas as—two decades later—Gorbachev's "perestroika"

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and “glasnost.” At the end of the 1960s, unfortunately for Czechs and Slovaks, the Soviet Union was governed by Leonid Brezhnev. He was the head of both the Communist Party and the rigid state apparatus, including the military, governing the country from 1964 until his death in 1982. Those neo-Stalinists were not impressed by the Czechoslovak effort to humanize the state-driven economic and political system. In the middle of the night, on Wednesday, August 21, 1968, several armies of the Warsaw Pact, led by Soviet generals, crossed the borders between Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary to occupy Czechoslovakia for the following two decades.

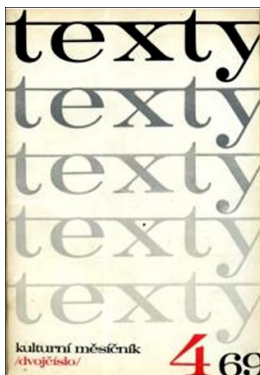
Q: How do you remember the August 1968 occupation?

A: By that time, I was married to my university classmate; our first child, Eva, was 15 months old. For my generation, the occupation was a major shock and a life-changing event. Some of my friends and professors left the country. Most of them settled in neighboring West Germany and Austria. Some headed to Britain, Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, the U.S., South Africa, and even Australia. For us as a young family, in the middle of my university course of study, with the baby, such a decision was unbearable. Additionally, we knew that the entire families of “illegal defectors” were exposed to governmental harassment. Even defectors’ personal property was confiscated as a result of kangaroo trials which took place in their absence. To leave the socialist country without permission was considered a crime. This rule still generally applies to Cubans, North Koreans, and most Chinese.



The New York Times informed on the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

Q: How did you feel about your choice of academic program—social sciences and journalism—under the new political regime?



The literary review “Texty,” a late bloom of the 1968 liberated press conditions in Czechoslovakia; its publication was banned in 1971.

A: My illusions were in shambles. At first, the grasp of the new, neo-Stalinist government was not strong. Brezhnev realized that to use military power against a small country calling for reasonable reforms was unpopular. As we know today, it was the first geopolitical error that led to the ultimate collapse of the entire Soviet system twenty years later. In 1968, it was too late for me to change my academic program. Moreover, in 1969, I was offered the job of my dreams—to become a co-editor of a new literary review, a late bloom of the 1968 liberated press conditions. At the same time, my wife managed to move from her initial newspaper reporting job to the field of sociological research. Unfortunately, my journal ceased to exist after two years of existence because it published politically incorrect materials. One of them was a memoir written by Josef Škvorecký, a Czech author who settled after August 1968 in Toronto, Canada. Overnight, my revue lost its registration with the Ministry of Culture. That was it! Characteristically, the title of the revue was *Texty* (Texts); it was the editorial board’s hopeful, but naïve, statement of a non-ideological editorial policy. The new regime could not be fooled.

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Q: As I understand it, after the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia, you decided to complete your academic program but stayed away from political journalism.

A: It was the plan, though it turned to be unsustainable. Literary magazines and similar non-ideological periodicals gradually disappeared. Some of them moved to the West—to Paris, Rome or Munich, along with their editors who decided to leave the country. A few of those periodicals, under new editors, reemerged as pro-regime broadsheets. For a year or so, I turned to radio drama reviewing in the daily press, but even that grew increasingly difficult as the overall programming became ideologically manipulated in a dogmatic direction.

Q: When did you graduate from Charles University?

A: In June 1970, I received my master's degree in social sciences; my minor was radio journalism. It took me longer than expected. While my wife completed her academic program, I was babysitting little Eva; then it was my turn. At the end of my final exams, I received an unexpected—and liberating—job proposal. Professor Vladimír Kovářik, Chair of the Radio Department at Charles University, my alma mater, offered me an assistant position. As a matter of fact, his picture is hanging in my Humphreys office as we speak.

Q: Why would you call the offer “liberating”?

A: As a student, I worked for the same professor as his part-time assistant. He had become my informal mentor. A specialist in Greek and Roman history, an author, and a renowned radio and television broadcaster, Kovářik became my role model. He himself escaped the broadcasting jungle and decided to spend the last decades of his professional life in academia. During one of our chitchats in one of our favorite Prague wineries, he listened to my existential worries and advised me to follow his path: “There is always a way to reach a solace. As Cicero would say, ‘When the gates of Rome remain locked and the seaport of Brindisi is too far to be reached, turn to an internal exile.’”

Q: In other words, your mentor advised you to pursue an academic career.

A: Professor Kovářik was even more specific. He recommended I think about two possible directions of the internal exile. First, the history of radio broadcasting. Second, broadcasting systems abroad. “I see that you are seriously interested in the mass media. Why not take advantage of it? If nothing else, you can offer your students some good examples from the past and from abroad.”

Q: So, the deal was done. Nothing but a bright future awaited you at the ancient university.

A: I wish it were that easy! The starting salary of an assistant professor was shockingly low. The university was located in Prague, known for its permanent accommodation crisis. After graduation, I was obliged to serve 12 months of compulsory military service. Would this job wait for me? Ultimately, due to the lining up of stars and family sacrifices, I was able to enter the halls of the ancient university as its employee. The Bohemian part of my academic career could start.



Charles University, Prague, was established in the 1300s by Charles IV, King of Bohemia.

Will be continued in the Fall 2012: Part II

In April, the Humphreys College Academic Council co-sponsored two sessions with Richard Berengarten, English writer and Professor of Oxford University. Both presentations were a part of National Poetry Month activities, organized by the Heritage Writers Community of Stockton. At the end of his Stockton visit, the author gave an interview to Robert Reinarts, a Stockton-based writer. The following are excerpts from their dialogue as it was broadcast on the Public Access Channel.

Richard Berengarten:

MY POETIC IDENTITY... My poetic identity is my human identity. I think of all identities as being overlapping. First of all, I'm a human being; that's the overriding category within the order of nature. Below that, I'm a poet. And below that, I'm a poet writing in the English language. And below that, I am a male; I think even if I had been born female, I would still have been a poet. That's the way I configure my pack of identities. And then, below all of that, come all sorts of other elements: I was born in England, so I'm English, I'm British, I'm Jewish, I'm white, I'm European. I went to a certain kind of school. Those are the dominating sets of identities that trickle down a whole mass of other, smaller, identities: I love rugby football. I used to collect stamps when I was a kid. All of those sets of identities interlock in my literary work.



BEING A BRITISH AND EUROPEAN—AND JEWISH—WRITER... In 1999, I published a book called *Against Perfection*. There'd been a lapse in my publishing in the 1990s. I was writing a lot, but I hadn't published anything. On the back cover of that book I confessed that I would prefer to consider myself a European poet who writes in English, rather than an English poet, for several reasons. One is that I don't like nationalism. In particular, I don't like the breed of English poets who think of themselves as English, and not Scots or English, and who are terribly proud of that. That strikes me as a sort of insularity. Secondly, I am Jewish; it somehow didn't seem quite right to call myself merely an English poet. If you're a Jew, you have many other dimensions. Thirdly, I lived in Europe—in Italy, Greece, and former Yugoslavia. I'm a bit of a linguist, so I'd call myself a European poet, even though the term European sounds exclusive. I would like to suggest that I am a universalist poet.

MY MENTOR WAS OCTAVIO PAZ... The great Mexican poet Octavio Paz became my mentor. I was very lucky to know him when he spent a year in Cambridge as the Simón Bolívar Professor. Paz influenced me enormously. In the collection of essays *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), he said that we are contemporaries of all humanity. Paz was writing out of the Mexican experience, but out of the Mexican experience, he was universalizing. He was creating a sort of model for modern or postmodern man evolving from the pre-Spanish invasion culture. In his view, we are contemporaries of all mankind.

A SCHOOL OF HUMANITY... After the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the Second World War, which engulfed everybody, we had the Declaration of Human Rights from the United Nations. To me, it's an incredibly important document. We as poets don't need to fuss about whether we are belonging to this school or that school. We are writing for all humanity.

THE MULTI-CULTURAL WORLD... I'm a multi-culturalist. If you look at the streets of any American city, and it's increasingly true of any British city, you will hear a myriad of languages. Outside my window in Cambridge, I can hear Polish, I can hear Cypriot Greek, I can hear Bulgarian. As I walk up and down the streets, I can hear Mandarin Chinese

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and Cantonese, all sorts of different languages. That is a part of my heritage. Every language is international. George Steiner taught me at Cambridge that we are all extra-territorial. At the opposite, you'll find Albanian, Syrian or Columbian Spanish in New York. We are all in it together. I think poetic forms travel and poetry travels in the same way as biological species, in the same way as the potato or a grain of rice.

TO SEE THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND... We base our poems firstly on the holistic notion that underlies all science and all religions: the principle of love. As I'm talking, I'm thinking very much of *tai* energy and my *tai chi* teacher. We marry that sense of the universal with the particular. William Blake, another of my great masters, wrote about the minute particulars that are irradiated within the universe. In poetry, you have the minute particular irradiated with the universal and the universal somehow equally illuminated by the particular. For example, Christopher Marlow wrote about the infinite riches in a little room. You've got the tiny detail and you've got the sense of infinity. William Blake in his well-known poem *Auguries of Innocence* writes, If you see the world in a grain of sand or heaven in a wild flower, you hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour. As I see it, those are the conduits of poetry.

THE RING OF ASTONISHMENT... I love to work with children. In a primary school workshop, a 9-year-old boy stood up and read the poem he had been making. Suddenly, he stopped. A hush swept through the eighty or so children of his age sitting on the wooden floor of the assembly hall. We were held in an almost palpable ring of astonishment and awe made by his words rippling on and through air into our ears until one child put hands together and started clapping and everyone joined in. It's not great art, it's not Shakespeare; it's just a 9-year-old kid with his schoolmates. I call those moments the common miracle. They constitute poetry.

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