

Humphreys College

NEWSLETTER SUPPLEMENT

SUMMER QUARTER

SEPTEMBER 2013

MEET YOUR TEACHER

FORTY YEARS IN EDUCATION

PART V: MOVING WEST

This academic year coincides with three anniversaries: forty years of 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.

The previous parts of the interview are available in the following issues of the Humphreys College Newsletter Supplements:

Part I, *Coming of Age in Cold-War Europe*, Summer 2012:

http://www.humphreys.edu/pdf/newsletter/newsletter_2012_summer_supplement.pdf

Part II, *At Charles University in Prague (1972-1990)*, Fall 2012:

http://www.humphreys.edu/pdf/newsletter/newsletter_2012_fall_supplement.pdf

Part III, *My Indiana Summer (1986)*, Winter 2013:

http://www.humphreys.edu/pdf/newsletter/newsletter_2013_winter_supplement.pdf

Part IV, *The Lull Before the Storm (1986-1989)*, Spring 2013:

http://www.humphreys.edu/pdf/newsletter/newsletter_2013_spring_supplement.pdf

Q: Last time, your story ended with the dramatic events of the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution of 1989. In its aftermath, you lost the deanship. Charles University decided to close the School of Journalism in 1990. After less than two years with the Prague-based International Institute for the Training of Journalists, you decided try your luck in California.

A: Originally, I came to Stockton for an extended vacation accompanied with some light lecturing in local schools and churches. A week after my arrival, I addressed a Sunday congregation of Stockton's Unitarians. Soon, the invitations came from the Rotary and Lions Clubs, University of the Pacific, San Joaquin Delta College, World Affairs Council, and



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San Francisco's studios of PBS, to name just a few venues interested in an insider's view of the Soviet empire collapse. Ultimately, with the substantial help from the PF Consultancy International, I spent five weeks on the road. My coast-to-coast lecture tour led me through 25 states and the District of Columbia.



Q: Who were your listeners?

A: Most invitations came from universities. At the beginning of the 1990s, many of them still maintained their Russian and East European programs. Frequently, they would arrange not only my classroom presentations but also evening discussions for the general public and interviews for the local media.

Q: Finally, you could identify with the characters of your favorite book – Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.

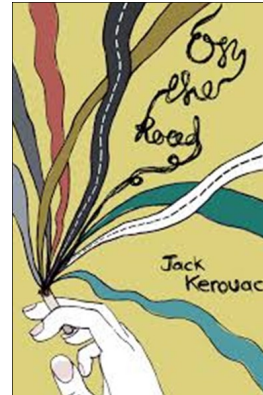
A: Definitely. I made sure my lecture tour included Los Angeles, Tucson, New Orleans, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, and Reno. Otherwise, any similarities with Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, Rollo Greb, and other disheveled beatniks ended here. For my public appearances I wore a gray or brown suit, off-white shirt, and a tie – my typical Prague attire. It took several years before I adjusted to a more relaxed California style.

Q: What led to your ultimate decision to settle in the United States?

A: Several weeks after my 1992 lecture tour, I returned to Europe to enjoy—finally!—unrestricted travel between the East and West. In Switzerland, I received a notice from Washington, D.C, that the State Department granted me a permanent-residency status. With the green card, I could return to the United States and establish myself professionally.

Q: What were your long-term plans?

A: The timing could not be better. My long-term plans included my Czech family. First of all, I wished to invite my teenage sons, Stanislav and Radim, and immerse them in American daily life, especially in the language. Ultimately, both of them spent their year in American schools, though neither of them decided to stay permanently. I felt a bit disappointed; however, I soon realized that their generation might see the United States differently. Since 1990, they lived in a liberal democracy, ready to pursue their Czech dream. Unlike my baby-boom generation, they were allowed to see the world. In their eyes, America lost its “promised land” appeal that used to be so powerful for the youth reduced to live in the Soviet bloc.



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Q: Obviously your decision to settle in California could not be easy. After all, you left behind your family and professional past.

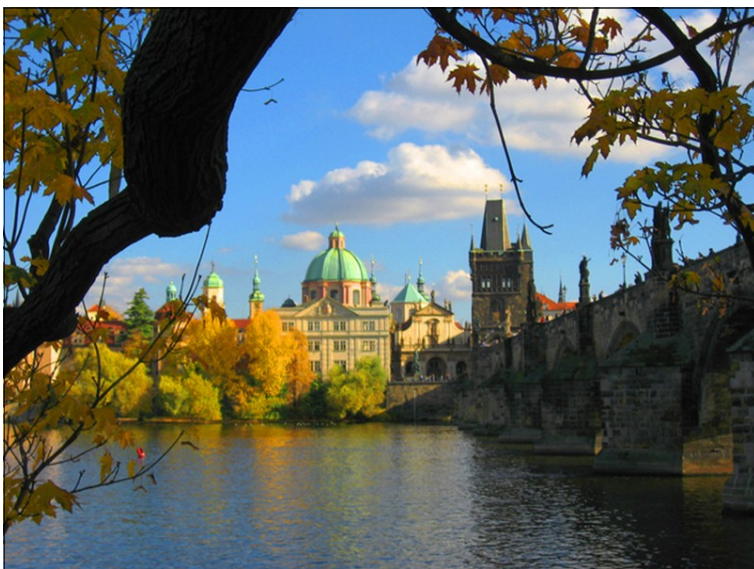
A: As I said in the previous interview, at first I was not sure whether to spend “the second half of my life” overseas. In my late forties, I was still willing to give it a try though I kept paying my Czech social security and healthcare premiums. I was determined to find an adequate job in academia; otherwise—most likely—I would return to Prague. This interview would never have materialized.

Q: Yet, you decided to stay and became a Californian. When did you reach the point of no return?

A: First of all, I considered myself lucky. The federal government offered me a life-changing choice; the green card entitled me to find a permanent job and ultimately become a citizen. I was fortunate that I found an opportunity at San Joaquin Delta College. Luckily, my Ph.D. in General History, earned in former Czechoslovakia, qualified me for it. When signing my first American teaching contract, I recalled an ancient adage, attributed to Seneca: “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” The years of studying English, without any real chance to use it in Soviet-dominated Czechoslovakia, ultimately came to fruition at the Personnel Department of Delta College.

Q: How did you handle your first semester-long teaching assignments?

A: I started in summer 1993 with a United States History course, known to generations of students as 17A: from the beginnings to the Civil War. As a new instructor, I did not dare to request a textbook of my own choice. I ended up with the 959-page tome written by the Pulitzer Prize winner Irwin Unger. Again, I was lucky: my first course subject matter required to cover “just” the first 400 pages. Unger is an outstanding writer. His vocabulary is extremely rich and imaginative. I had to consult my English-Czech dictionary frequently. My initial lectures were based on detailed notes extracted not only from Unger’s textbook; I wished to discuss “the clashing views,” which required additional readings. In short, my first years at Delta College turned out to be a great learning experience.



Q: Obviously, after teaching in Prague for almost two decades you had to notice some differences in the academic process.

A: Traditionally, Czechoslovak universities require a much higher volume of student readings, especially in social sciences and humanities. The main *lectures* are linked to *seminars* focused on student presentations, practical applications, and in-depth discussions. Since the medieval era, the basic form of university assessment remains the oral examination; sometimes, it requires previous written reports and objective testing. Each graduate-level program includes a research-based diploma paper—thesis. Its defense is based on two written reviews: one from the student’s adviser, another from the opponent. After the defense, the

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student takes a set of comprehensive “governmental exams” before a committee of examiners. Summer internships are generally required. Additionally, about two percent of graduates pursue post-graduate—doctoral—studies; this post-graduate process is close to the American model as it was adopted from German research universities in the course of the 19th century.

Q: How did you cope with the ethnic diversity of your California students?

A: Prior to my arrival in the United States, I had never met anybody from Mexico or the Philippines. Czechoslovak schools hosted some students from the Soviet-friendly countries, for example, China, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, Egypt or Syria; however, most students were Czech and Slovak native-born speakers. Delta College appeared to me as a linguistic Babylon. Soon, I realized that my lectures must be crystal clear. I started to pay more attention to the logical structure of each session and the entire course. In Prague, I could count on students’ knowledge of basic historical, social, and geographical facts. All graduates of Czechoslovak high schools had to pass nationally-mandated and standardized exams. Each applicant for the university admission had to pass comprehensive entrance exams. Because all education was tuition free, the national government exposed the applicants to the selection process. At Delta College, I soon came upon students who were unable to identify differences between John Adams and John Quincy Adams, Theodore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan or find Rome and Athens on the map. On the other hand, I struggled with my first classroom roll calls. All of those Hispanic and Asian names! I never stopped apologizing for my faulty pronunciation. I had to admit that I had never before heard about Tagalog and Ilocano or about the Hmong people.

Q: In a way, you became a student yourself.

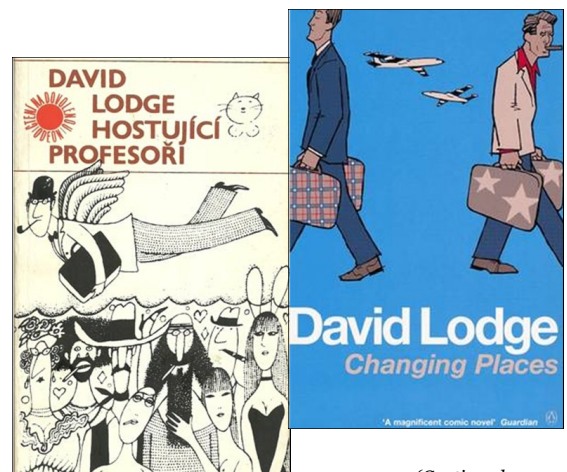
A: In the course of my first semesters at Delta College, I had to adjust my teaching strategy. First, I started to generate comprehensive lists of terms and names extracted from textbooks and supplementary resources. In the lectures, I used them as dots to be connected. Secondly, I would encourage my students to read primary sources. Too many attempted to write about the origins of the Constitution without reading the document itself.

Q: What was the most challenging part of your Delta College experience?

A: Despite the fact that I had been always an enthusiastic foreign languages learner, I had to extend my English vocabulary and conversational skills pretty fast. Summer courses at Delta College were very intense: I would meet my students four times a week! As a visual-type learner, I produced hundreds of lecture notes pages. Up until now, I am sometimes haunted by a nightmare that I am not ready for an all-important foreign-language presentation.

Q: When did you start feeling linguistically comfortable?

A: In my case, it took almost exactly seven years. I will never forget that summer 2000 World History lecture when I experienced that liberating feeling: I dared to put aside my handwritten notes and still deliver a solid presentation. It did not mean that I threw my papers away; I still always carry my notes to classroom – just in case.... Interestingly, after those seven years of the total language immersion, I started to read English-written *fiction* regularly. Prior to that, I had to consult dictionaries often. My first was David Lodge’s bestselling novel *Changing Places*. I knew the story from the Czech translation. Reading it in its original form was delightful.



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Q: After two decades of living in America, do you consider yourself bilingual?

A: I wish to become bilingual. For years, I have maintained “scrapbooks.” Every time, I see some interesting English word or phrase, I write it down.

Q: For example?

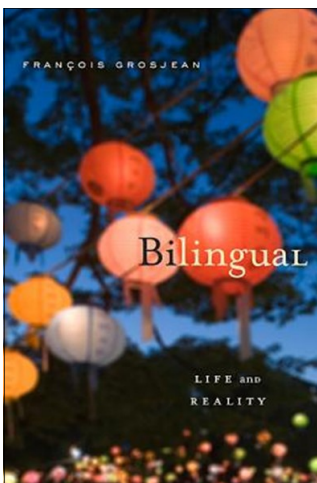
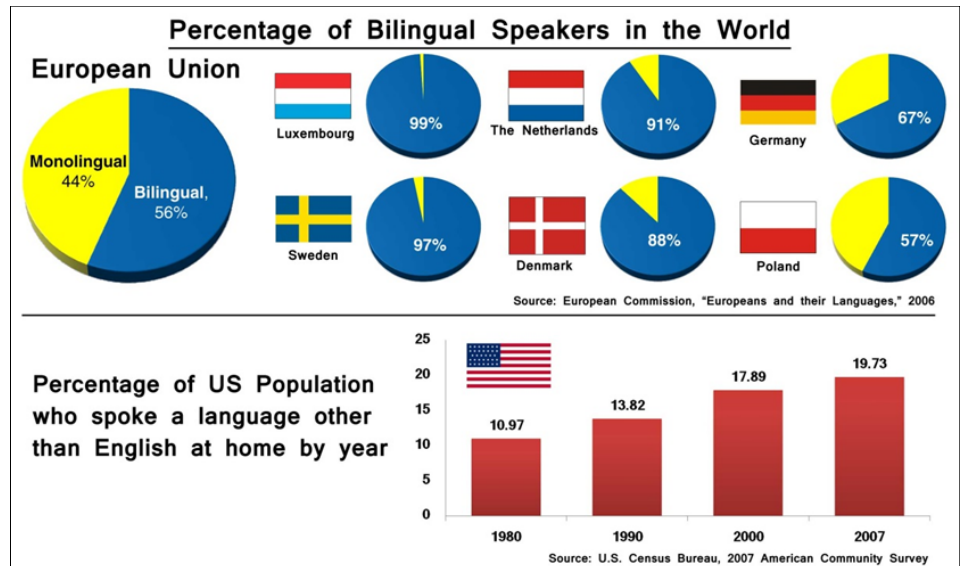
A: I’ll give you a few examples of interesting English usage. In March, I recorded a trio of interesting words: *alliterate*, *illiterate*, and *literate*. I was not sure about the meaning of the first of them: alliterate is “a person who is able to read but disinclined to do so.” In one of the latest issues of *The New Yorker*, I found this quote: “The greatest statement of equality is in the Declaration of Independence, written by a slaveholder” (Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Jeffrey Toobin). A *New York Times* reviewer wrote about the *Sex and the City* main character: “A hardly working New York writer...” While reading the classic Ignazio Silone’s novel *Bread and Wine*, I found the true origin of Václav Havel’s programmatic statement: “Truth and brotherhood will reign among men instead of lies and hate.” Those were the words written by Luigi Murica, a young anti-Fascist tortured to death by Mussolini’s militias. Last week, I recorded a statement made by my library colleague Richard Hunt in a conversation with Professor Cynthia Becerra: “He lives in a math jail”; it perfectly describes my own life-long struggle with mathematics.

Q: Do you think in English or Czech?

A: More and more often, I think in English. The other day I drove and thought about a birthday letter to my 33-year-old son in Prague. To my surprise, I was “composing” it in English. Last month, I spent three weeks with my older son and his family, visiting us in Tracy. I had to keep reminding myself that I ought to speak Czech, especially with my little granddaughters, ages 3 and 7. The second-grader Nela even noticed my “strange accent.”

Q: Do you have any advice for the English learners among your students?

A: First of all, millions of people worldwide are bilingual and multilingual; it applies to about fifty percent of all Africans and millions of Latin Americans and Asians. It is estimated that Stocktonians speak about fifty different languages at home. About one-third of today’s continental Europeans can communicate in English. Sometimes, second-language acquisition would serve as a sheer means of survival: in Hitler’s concentration camps, all orders were given in German... What was Greek and Latin for the ancients, it is English for today’s world. My bilingual students have a unique advantage to be immersed in the English-speaking environment and use it for both personal and professional advancement. The human brain’s linguistic wiring is amazing. I recommend to learn more about it read the lively and entertaining book *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (2012), written by François Grosjean, Professor of Psycholinguistics at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland.



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Q: I assume that in Soviet-dominated Czechoslovakia, your access to English conversation was limited.

A: In general, the foreign-language literacy of the Czechs and Slovak has been high; it has been determined by the country's location in the heart of Europe: Germany on the West, Russia on the East. I recall that both of my grandfathers were Czech-German bilingual because they grew up in the Hapsburg monarchy. However, up until my arrival in California, some twenty years ago, my English was bookish rather than conversational. My Czech teachers—God bless their heart—drilled me mercilessly in English grammar rather than in pronunciation. Not one of them was a native English speaker. One of my main teaching subjects at Charles University was International Broadcasting. To prepare my lectures required intensive reading. Should I make my reading notes in English? Czech was easier.... All of that changed upon my arrival in Delta College. My note preparation had to be done exclusively in English.



Q: How would you characterize the development of your English writing skills?

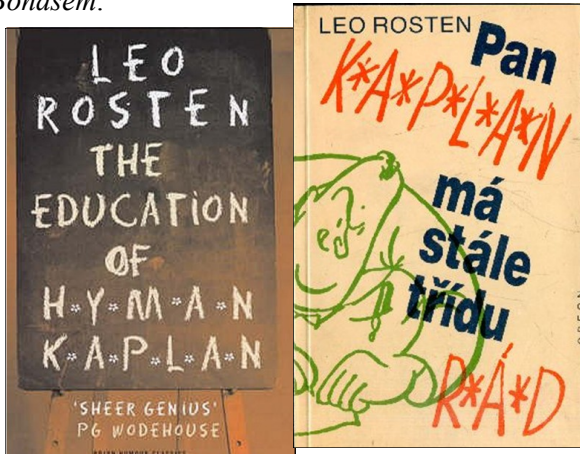
A: I feel relatively comfortable in the field of English grammar. It is very helpful when I edit and grade student assignments. However, I feel less secure as a writer. The Czech language differs from English in many ways – from the basic word order to the rules of pronunciation.



Czech is a “synthetic” language. Unlike in “analytical” English, various grammatical elements can be expressed in one word by prefixes and suffixes. I had to learn that in English the actual word needs not be changed; the same grammatical effect could be reached by using separate auxiliary verbs, pronouns or adjectives. For example, for saying “It is raining,” I need just one Czech verb: “Prší.”

Q: What is the most difficult aspect of English for the native Czech speaker?

A: Unlike many other languages, English is challenging for its pronunciation rules. Its phonology is especially hard for very young learners. On the other hand, many Czech learners complain about the seven cases for each Czech word, with various options for singular and plural. For example, your last name would appear in the following versions: You are *Bonds*; without *Bondse*; towards *Bondsovi*; I see *Bondse*; I am calling you: *Bonds!*; talking about *Bondsovi*; talk with *Bondsem*.



Q: Well, Bonds away! You know – Bombs Away! Oh, well. Sorry to interrupt. Please, continue.

A: Another hurdle is the necessity to memorize the gender of nouns – similarly as in the other Slavic languages, and also in German or French. Many of these inter-lingual differences are charmingly depicted in the classic 1930s novels written by Leo Rosten—born into a Yiddish-speaking family in what is now Poland—under the titles *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* and *The Return of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N*. Their main character is a highly assertive language school

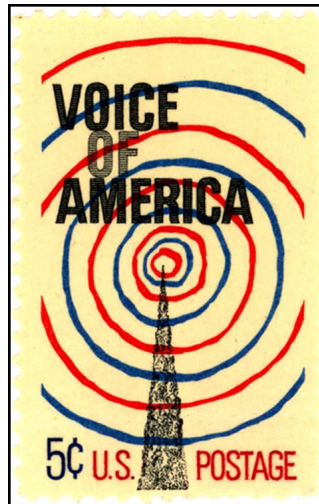
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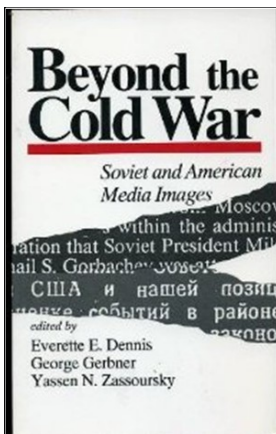
student, born in Ukraine, who still struggles with English—after 15 years in America. He drives his endlessly kind American teacher Mr. Parkhill nuts by his malapropisms: According to Mr. Kaplan, the opposite of height is *lowth*, the plural of sandwich is *delicatessen*, and, as Mr. Kaplan stubbornly insists, the plural of host is *hostess*, the plural of ghost is *ghostess*.... I have always been fond of bilingual writers, for example, Polish-born Joseph Conrad, Russian-born Vladimir Nabokov and Gary Shteyngart or Czech-born Milan Kundera writing in French. Another example can be taken from current journalism: Greek-born Arianna Huffington.

Q: Would you count American mass media among your English-language influences?

A: Back in the Soviet-era Czechoslovakia, the only authentic English could be heard from the basic-English news broadcast by the BBC World Service. Another source, though limited, was pop music broadcast via Voice of America or Radio Luxembourg; the latter served the United States military personnel stationed in Western Europe. Except for the brief period of the 1968 Prague Spring, Czechs and Slovaks had extremely limited access to the English-language press. Paradoxically, some American and English books could be purchased in the Soviet-operated bookstore chain that served English language students. Most of them were abridged editions of Anglo-American classics full of Russian grammar notes.



Q: I assume that it was not easy for you as a Prague-based international media specialist to find study resources?



A: For years, I was painfully aware of this handicap. Most of my resources about British and American media were outdated and incomplete. In the early 1970s, I privately complained about it to Yassen N. Zassoursky, Dean of the Moscow School of Journalism. He advised me that the Lomonosov University Library archived numerous Ph.D. dissertations written by Soviet researchers who gained access to the radio and television archives in London, Washington, D.C., Munich, Paris, etc. It was happening on the basis of various academic exchange programs of the Cold War era. Most of those papers were never published; they were considered politically sensitive. Dean Zassoursky, a leading Soviet Americanist, the author of *The American Literature of the 20th Century*, and the godfather of critical journalism in his country, granted me access to those resources whenever I arrived in Moscow. In the course of the two decades, it was the main goal of my almost regular trips to the former Soviet Union.

Q: In other words, in order to learn about the West, you had to travel to the East...

A: It was just another example of our life in Absurdistan of the former Soviet bloc. All of those restrictions were lifted almost overnight after the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the end of the Cold War in 1991, marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

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Q: Then, a few years later, you settled in Stockton, switched from Czech and Russian into English, and spent eight years as a History instructor at Delta College. How did you find Humphreys College?

A: Let's say that Humphreys College found me. One day, in the mid-1990s, I received a message from Gaither Loewenstein, then the Dean of Instruction. He was searching for a new adjunct instructor to teach Mass Media and Society. I was recommended by Jerry Briscoe, UOP's Social Science Professor. After an interview with Loewenstein and Professor Rowena Walker, I started to teach classes in the Stockton, Modesto, and Sacramento campuses. Soon, I also cooperated with the Humphreys College Library. After several years, in July 2001, I was hired as a full-time librarian and social sciences professor.

Q: As I recall, your initial task was to establish the first Learning Center at Humphreys College.

A: It started with a more systematic student tutoring. Soon, I was ready to launch a regular series of small group workshops known under the name How to Succeed in College.

Q: How did you feel in a much smaller college – after eight years at Delta?

A: I gladly embraced smaller classes, though it took me a while to adjust to the quarter system. At Humphreys, I had to make my history lectures much more concise. Generally, I have seen many similarities in the student demographics. From the very beginning, I was a member of the Academic Council of Humphreys College. Ultimately, I served as its chair for several years. Academic management matters have always interested me – from almost the two decades at Charles University through the vice presidency of Delta's Academic Senate to Humphreys' advisory committees.

Q: How would you summarize your Humphreys' teaching experiences?

A: At Delta College, I was permitted to teach only history courses; I could not even step into a political science class as a substitute. Humphreys' teaching assignment policy is more liberal. Besides teaching various history courses, I have been encouraged to try some humanities, including my favorite Introduction to Philosophy. Several years ago, I entered a brand new field: online instruction. Originally, I was skeptical. Gradually, I am exploring new dimensions of its enormous learning potential. When almost all my Czech and Slovak friends and former colleagues are retired, I am trying something new!

Q: Along with the late Rowena Walker, you have gained a reputation for developing new upper-division courses.

A: Similarly as Rowena came with World Geography and the Great Personalities in Humanities and Social Sciences, along with many paralegal courses, I succeeded with three new subjects: American Immigrant Experience, The Supreme Court in American Life: Landmark Cases, and The American Presidency. So far, so good – all of them became a part of the curriculum. In conclusion, I feel lucky that Humphreys College found me and that I found Humphreys College.



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Q: I think it's only fitting to ask about your future plans at Humphreys College or elsewhere. Are you working on other projects? How long do you plan to teach?

A: Too many open-ended questions.... Too many books to read, too many courses to teach, too many countries to visit.... For several years, I have been recording my life stories for a Czech-language book edition. I feel blessed to see it all: the childhood in the Cold War Bohemia town, the turbulent 1960s with its Prague Spring, twenty years in the Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution, and—finally—a few very productive decades in California.

Note: This concludes the five-part series.

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