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Several Comments Regarding an Unfairly Overlooked
Book or Contemplation of the Significance of Cultural
Heritage in Post-modern Czech Society
(Instead of a Standard Review)

*Kilka uwag o niesłusznie przeoczonej książce, czyli rozważania
o znaczeniu dziedzictwa kulturowego w ponowoczesnym
społeczeństwie Czech (zamiast standardowej recenzji)*

Summary: The text presents a book that collects the views of nine experts on the historical center of Prague. At the same time, it analyses their attitudes in the context of the contemporary relations within Czech society.

Key words: cultural heritage, post-modern Czech society, Prague

Streszczenie: Tekst stanowi prezentację książki, w której zgromadzono opinie dziewięciu ekspertów na temat historycznego centrum Pragi. Przedstawia również analizę ich poglądów w kontekście współczesnych relacji wewnątrz czeskiego społeczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo kulturowe, ponowoczesne społeczeństwo Czech, Praga

Tłumaczenie: Klaudyna Michałowicz

Introduction

When a book, in whose title the myth of a world-class Prague appeared (*Praha světová 2017 aneb devět rozhovorů o historickém centru hlavního města / World-class Prague 2017 or Nine Interviews on the Topic of the Historic Centre of the Capital City*), was published in 2017, this publication failed to attract the attention it deserved (Kučera 2017). This publication was not “just” nine interviews on the topic of the historic centre of Prague¹, whose historic core was declared a national heritage reservation in November 1971

¹ This concerns four or five districts, which were merged into the Royal City in 1784 (Ledvinka 2017: 15).

(Soukupová 2007: 28) and registered as a prestigious UNESCO world heritage site² in 1992 (Patočka, Heřmanová 2008: 129–130), but chiefly a testimony of how renowned contemporary experts (historian and archivist Václav Ledvinka, art historian Jiří T. Kotlík, archaeologist and preservationist Jaroslav Podliska, preservationist Pavel Jerie, diplomat Milan Beneš, architect and town planner Jan Sedlák, historian and pedagogue František Kadlec, art and architecture historian Martina F. Koukalová, biologist J. Sádlo) establish the importance of cultural heritage for post-modern Czech society on the example of Prague.

Prague as cultural heritage

The addressed experts agreed that Prague is an important historic European metropolis, constantly growing and preserved in its entirety and very similar to Krakow according to V. Ledvinka. The preservation of the Czech metropolis was usually linked to its provincial standing before 1918 (Prague did not have the energy or funds for any rebuilding), and also the absence of any ambition towards being world-class in modern times. Several experts also reminded that the city suffered only minor damage during both world wars. They also agreed that historic Prague originated chiefly during the reign of Charles IV. (1346–1378), and also Rudolf II. (1583–1611) when it was the intellectual centre of Central Europe and was capable of absorbing all major artistic impulses. Some of the addressed experts also emphasised the city-forming importance of the period under the reign of the Přemyslid family (10th–13th century) and the uniqueness of the Prague Baroque style (from 1600). Other experts mentioned the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) as another fruitful period for Prague. The period of the Hussite Movement, a Czech medieval reformation movement, was conversely commemorated by a single Prague monument (the Bethlehem Chapel, where Master Jan Hus preached in 1402), however with the understanding that this is a monument rebuilt by the communist regime (the exact copy of the original building was raised in 1950–1952 (Poche 1985: 177)). The addressed experts considered the Prague panorama and the organic interconnection of various architectural-artistic styles, as well as the ideal location of the metropolis in the middle of the country, to be especially valuable. Some of the addressed experts also pointed out the justification of the dual rating of some buildings (particularly the Art Nouveau Obecní dům on náměstí Republiky (1905–1911)), whose architects however, in their opinion, did respect the area surrounding the building, on the contrary to contemporary architects. Preservationist Jerie rated the previous regime's relationship to monuments ambivalently; on one hand he reminded us of the elaborate system of monument

² The book originated on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of this registration (Šlajchrt 2017: 171).

preservation in theory (the first monument preservation act was adopted in 1958) and the lack of funds for implementation of this system on the other hand. The renovations of Prague Castle, the National Theatre (1868–1881) and some churches were considered exemplary. On the contrary experts considered the North-South Highway, leading through the centre of the city and requiring demolition of neo-Renaissance Prague-Těšnov station, the former Federal Assembly building (1966–1973), the Transgas building (1972–1978), the Palace of Culture (1981) on Pankrác, the site of party assemblies, the television tower at Žižkov (from the end of the nineteen eighties) and partial blanket demolition of Žižkov, a substantial violation of city planning; development of the Myslbek gap site on Na příkopě Street and restoration of the district of Karlín, which was partially destroyed by floods (2002), was considered a substantial violation after 1989.

The opinions of experts in contemporary discourse

Let us now set the opinions of these experts into the context of the time. The Velvet Revolution (November 1989) resulted in a new relationship to cultural heritage, in spite of the fact that it announced a return to the traditions of the First Czechoslovak Republic (Hroch 2004: 15), which was considered the culmination of Czechoslovak democracy. Whereas cultural heritage fulfilled a primarily political role in the First Czechoslovak Republic (with its help society was supposed to identify with the newly established national state) and also an integration role (into a society of diversified opinions), cultural heritage continues to retain a positive value after 1989, but is valued mainly for its memorial and artistic value (Soukupová 2019), which should be a tourist magnet. Is this perception of cultural heritage part of the so-called loss of memory, which some scientists warn of (Hroch 2004: 3)? Is the diminishment of Czech society's interest in the Hussite movement (1419–1437), a Czech medieval reformation movement, which became the pillar of the "memory" of the First Republic (Soukupová 2013: 22–26), and the converse highly positive perception of the period under the reign of Charles IV. truly linked, as Miroslav Hroch (the most frequently quoted Czech historian abroad at the time) stated fifteen years ago, to the diminished interest in the successful Czech National Movement during the 19th century (Hroch 2004: 16, 18)? And finally, did the fact that popular Charles IV. made Prague the capital city of the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, which an element of German historiography still considers a German national state (Hroch 2004: 16) play a role? Or, as I believe, is the popularity of Charles IV. related rather to his political-constructive enthusiasm, with which he also impressed his seal on Prague and defined its boundaries for the next 500 years? And finally: to what degree is the commemoration of the figure of Charles IV. recollection of the worldwide fame of the Czech

lands (Prague was the centre of the greatest European Empire under his reign (Poche 1985: 12))? And finally: can the loss of interest in the Hussite Movement be explained chiefly by refusal of the former regime's manipulation of history, whereas it promoted the Hussite Movement as being a social and national (within the meaning of anti-German) (Soukupová 2019, in the press) movement for forty years after the February Putsch (1948)? Or is our national existence perceived as so matter of course that we no longer require any battle traditions (this would also comply with the fact that not one of the addressed experts mentioned monuments in relation to the Czech Resistance)?

The perspective of maintaining a cultural heritage

Most of the interviewed experts viewed the future of the city as quite ambiguous and unoptimistic. The experts expressed their concerns that the mass tourism, which is already destroying the authentic historic ambiance of Prague, will transform Prague into a tourist attraction or open-air museum in the future.³ The centre of the city is increasingly depopulated and the remaining inhabitants are becoming foreigners in their own city according to Kotalík (Kotalík 2017: 32). This threat is being increased by the interests of developers, the lack of humility by architects and their sense of proportion, and the failure to respect the authority of preservationists in public discourse, the cult of private ownership, or the alleged Czech disrespect of authorities. According to the experts, the second major intervention in the character of the historic city began after 1989 (following redevelopment at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries). It is also important that, in the publication, Prague was considered neglected before 1989, but was also considered a truly historic city in spite of its shabbiness and ever-present scaffolding. A sort of nostalgia for the preserved city without its destroyed historic interiors seems to appear. According to some experts authenticity can now only be found in the former Prague suburbs (Žižkov, Holešovice). Some of the experts also consider displays of vandalism (graffiti on historic buildings), which not even Prague has been spared, to be a threat to historic authenticity.

Prague inhabitants as guardians of the city's memory?

Contemplation of the inhabitants of the Capital City of the Czech Republic also appeared in some interviews, although this frequently ranged within a stereotypical framework (arrogant Praguers). However, V. Ledvinka's reflection about the direct link between the relationship with the city and the age of its inhabitants (patriotism is a virtue of the older generation) can be considered functional. It may even be possible to use this standpoint

³ So-called drunk tourism and the related prostitution is considered especially pernicious (Šlajchrt 2017: 170).

to draw hope that the historic centre of Prague, whose condition is currently criticised by the UNESCO organisation, will remain a world heritage monument in oncoming years. And some experts have also been heard to say it may be possible to negotiate with some developers or to “refine” tourists and the selection for them. From the botanical viewpoint Prague is also considered to have potential in regard to its diverse natural heritage.

The issues that some of the addressed experts discussed naturally do not apply to just the Czech Republic (Pešková 1997: 32–33). However, in relation to cultural and natural heritage the responsible officials should chiefly keep in mind that monuments are the visualisation of the past (Pešková 1997: 34) and are something that people need in order to understand themselves in the present. Czech society’s relationship to its national traditions is less intensive compared to Poland (Hroch 2004: 20) and any nurturing of a positive cultural heritage could lead to mobilisation of Praguers to work for “their” city and to identify with it.

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