

## **The Soul of the Highlands**

As a little boy I really liked wandering through the vast forests in the surrounding areas of the village of Javořice (837 m above sea level), the highest peak of the Czech- Moravian Highlands. These woods are filled with granite boulders, rocks, and peat bogs. In fact, they are so deep that in the 17th and 18th centuries, persecuted Protestants used to secretly meet there. From about the 13th century onwards, these forests were colonized from both the Czech and Moravian sides of the border by people who were given tax breaks from the authorities for clearing the woods and starting to cultivate the land there. Mrákotín, which is located not far from the magical town of Telč, is one of the oldest settlements in this area: written records mention it for the first time in 1195. It is also one of the few places in Horácko (Highlands) where priest František Sušil collected folk songs in the first half of the 19th century.<sup>1)</sup>

*Under the green alder tree near Mrákotín,  
A youth bought a horse for two groschen.  
Run, oh run, my raven-black horse,  
Run until you reach my darling Anička.*

It was only later that I learned that people used to sing in households and communities there. By that time, I had already been introduced to the rich and lively world of urban songs in Brno. In the land of my ancestors, I did not personally learn anything else beyond the quiet and bashful church singing which survived only thanks to the efforts of the teacher from the music school and the self-sacrificing organ player. During the biggest annual folk festival in the area, the village fair in Studená, merry-go-rounds would be whirling in the air, children would be buying candies, but nobody would be singing or playing music, neither in the village square, nor anywhere else in the community. Perhaps by evening,

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1) František Sušil. *Moravské národní písně*. Praha: Vyšehrad, 4<sup>th</sup> imprint 1951 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1860).

the atmosphere would become more animated with the sound of dance hall rock music for the young people, but by that time I would already be asleep, or enjoying the story-telling of the elderly people at family gatherings. They would reminisce about how they used to go to the fields every day, and how "grandma" used to prepare quick and simple meals, rarely with meat, because there was neither time nor money for such pampering.

Quite often there were potato pancakes baked without oil directly on the red-hot burner plate of a small stove and then spread with plum butter. With their sour-sweet flavour, I would go back to the olden days, just as during the summer holidays when I would take out manure in a wheelbarrow from our stable, scatter some clean golden straw in its place, and help my grandma by carrying huge baskets of freshly chopped straw to feed the ten cows in our cowshed. They, however, no longer belonged to us as they had in the past; they belonged to the state farm, but my grandma had to look after them in order to get some pay and then to be able to live to see her late retirement.

In the end, my grandma, who had been as sound as a bell, did enjoy several peaceful years before she followed her husband to the grave at the ripe old age of ninety. From her youth, she had known nothing but work: at 16, she left her birthplace in Sedlejev near Telč to work as a servant on the farm of some relatives in Praskolesy near Mrákotín. In Praskolesy in the centre of the village you can find an ancient old hollow linden tree with a built-in belfry where the inner-space of the tree can conceal a whole primary school class including the teacher. Praskolesy is also the place where they keep an ancient illustrated Melantrich Bible in the house opposite the linden tree, a reminder of the days when many Highlanders had books at home to read especially during the long winter nights.

From there the maiden went to Prague as a servant, as many others from that region did, then returned home to marry a nice older man from Studená, a farmer and carpenter, with whom she had five children and a full life: mostly of work and more work. Her life was interwoven with regular attendance of Sunday mass; nevertheless, my granny did not lack humour or an objective view of the world. She resembled that ancient linden tree, which is lovingly capable of holding within it all her children, and looking down upon the workings of the world with such

wisdom that cannot be gained in any other way than through the living of a long and difficult but full life.

She knew many proverbs and sayings. When I was a boy I would love to listen to her when she reminisced about her youth, or when she gave me advice about how to cope with various difficulties. An example was some advice about dealing with warts: she said to make as many knots on a rope as the number of warts, to bury the rope under an eaves trough, and when it decomposed, the warts would vanish. How far back into the past can we see such folk magic? Forty years later, I found this "recipe" quoted almost word for word in a late 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from the region of Nové Město (the northern border of the Czech- Moravian Highlands).<sup>2)</sup>

What really is the core of the inhabitants of the Highlands (Horácko) - these Highlanders and their neighbouring Sub-Highlanders (Podhoráci)? On the occasion of the 1938 Highland Exhibition, one expert commented thus: "To enter the soul of the land, and to understand a Highland man is not easy. There are no outer effects there, as is the case in the regions of Haná, Slovácko, or Chodsko in Bohemia. Here the landscape seems to vanish into fog and skies, and is carried away with the high sky somewhere out of this world, beyond tracks and roads, as if there were no towns there. Here the folk are poor but hardworking and patient; they neither moan, nor complain. The Highland men rarely dance, and when they do go to dances or similar forms of entertainment, they do not dress up in grand style. They are all made up of dry sinewy muscle. This is from their hard work, which is not easy or rewarding in these windswept fields and gradient heights. Instead, Highland men are somehow more real, although often ironic and mocking."<sup>3)</sup>

There are no highlands like highlands, no mountains like mountains, or human tribe like human tribe. The only things which definitely unite the inhabitants of all highland and mountain areas are poverty and hard work; these do not bring satisfaction from their abundant and diverse harvests, but simply a foundation for the continuation of mere survival. Life penetrates down to the care of principles. These Highland men from

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2) *Selský archiv*, books IX and X. Velké Meziříčí. 1914-1916, p. 54.

3) Fr. V. Mokřý in his chapter "Art in the Highlands", in the catalogue *Výstava Horácka*. Velké Meziříčí, 1938, pages not listed.

Horácko are different from the inhabitants of the Carpathian areas, from Moravian Highlanders, from the poor mountain cottagers of Kopanice, or from Valachians and their Slovakian neighbours, who would sing, dance and play out both their troubles and their passions. They would let off steam in fights at Saturday night dances: their hot blood would boil, but cool down just as quickly. They are like bulls. These Highland men are also show-offs, but in their own specific ways, more like rams, without grand gestures. You would not say that my uncle, at first sight a mild, short and heavy-set fellow, could heave his 130-kg friend by the belt with his teeth. He bet this in a pub and won. He also bet that he could do a hand-stand on the chimney of a two-storey house. He won this bet too.

In spite of the fact that you rarely encounter a live song coming from the lips of untrained singers in the Highlands and Sub-Highlands, as compared to the southeast of Moravia, or that it is almost impossible to come across an original folk song there, it was not so in the past. There was plenty of it there, but it lived a private, secret life in the past two centuries. It is thanks to the persistent efforts of pioneering collectors in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like priest František Sušil that thousands of records were discovered (though many of them are still concealed in archives), and some of them have been made available in songbooks.<sup>4)</sup> In the past few decades, even the folkloristic life, that is the deliberately cultivated "second life" of the highland folk song has been more humble and less assertive in comparison with the eastern parts of Moravia. Apart from urban ensembles such as Vysočan from Jihlava and Třebičan [from the town of Třebíč], there are only a few examples in the area of the Highlands and Sub-Highlands; their fragile existence has been rekindled over and over again by the spirit of enthusiasts, be it in the North of the Highlands in Žďár nad Sázavou and Nové Město na Moravě, or in the Sub-Highlands of Telč and Velká Bíteš.

Where have all the original folk musicians and bands gone, those who surely must have played in the Highlands in the past? The

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4) These song collections are available now: Marta Toncrová: *Lidové písně z moravského Horácka*. Brno: EÚ AV ČR, 1999; Josef Hora. *Písničky a popěvky ze severu Horácka*. Brno: self-published, 2003; Míla Brtník. *Zpěvník horáckých písní po lidech sesbíraných*. Jihlava: Horácké folklorní sdružení, 2004. Zdena Jelínková discussed folk dances from various regions of the Moravian Highlands in several books.



"squeaking quartet", or a string quartet that was given this name because of the home-made musical instruments it employed, used to be a speciality of the Jihlava region and one of the most remarkable examples of Czech village instrumental music at that time.<sup>5)</sup> In other places, the fiddle would be accompanied by a clarinet, double-bass or bagpipes. What other reason would there be for people from the southern edge of the Sub-Highlands to sing the following words at Christmas time:<sup>6)</sup>

*Fiddle, fiddle, fiddle, fee,  
The fiddler is playing the fiddle,  
The Christ-child is smiling from a donkey's stable,  
The piper is playing clarinet,  
The merry village youth is crying out in joy,  
The piper is taking in a breath to blow,  
The goat-kid is shrieking to the dance.*

When and why did the old-time dances disappear? Half-way between Praskolesy, where my grandmother served as a maiden, and the little town of Studená, where she got married, there is a community of Sumrakov hidden in the hills. It was there that headmaster Josef Smetana<sup>7)</sup> recorded 17 old folk dances around the beginning of the 20th century. This may have been right around the time when my granny (born 1904) was working in the neighbouring village. Unfortunately, nothing like that remained in her memory, or she never told me about it; nevertheless, her memory was excellent. As she seemed to be all too familiar with work and not entertainment, she maybe had no natural inclination to music. In 1952 ethnographer Bohuslav Pernica tried to prove the existence of the old-time dances in the region of Sumrakov and elsewhere in the region of Telč, and wrote: "nobody knew them there and nobody knew anything about them."<sup>8)</sup>

What an abrupt end to an old tradition! The most likely reasons were the two world wars; after them, it was difficult for life in the villages to

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5) See the CD *Proměny v čase*, Gnosis Brno, 2001.

6) Bohuslav Pernica. *Rok na moravském Horácku*. Brno, 1938, p. 95.

7) Gazette *Od Horácka k Podyjí*, 1924 - 5, p. 67. .

8) Bohuslav Pernica. *Říkadla, škádlivky, lidové hry a písně. Moravské Horácko a Podhorácko I*. Havlíčkův Brod: Krajské nakladatelství, 1952, p. 27.

resume its old routine. Another unquestionably fundamental change arose with the change of property conditions after 1948; this completely uprooted the existing village order with its thousand-year-old continuity.

The character of Moravian Highlanders and its non-eruptive emotional charge could not definitively be expressed in music and song predominantly; thus, this music and songs have not survived the adverse historical periods to a significant degree, unlike that of the Slovak and east Moravian regions, where they did survive. The soul of the Highland man has been built up in more layers of cultural expression: a certain natural meditateness and spirituality must not be omitted. This is reflected in a predisposition to simple philosophizing flavoured with subtle humour; then there is the religious contemplation; and finally an original poetic vision of the world. All these tendencies can already be traced back to the lyrics of folk songs, which, although they are musically more related to the songs of Bohemia, are more inclined towards a certain melancholic lyricism.

As to the contemporary production of singer-songwriters, which I can see as a creative continuation of the former [traditional] folk song, there are no expressively defined performers in the area of the Czech-Moravian Highlands either; the creators of the region tend more to lyric poetry and meditation. For me this can be symbolized in singer-songwriter Žofie Kabelková (born 1983) from Jihlava, and especially in her song "Prosím tě" (Will you, please):<sup>9)</sup>

*Will you, please  
Tell my plane trees  
That I will not get up from bed tomorrow  
Open wide the windows  
So I can fly free as a cormorant*

*Will you, please  
Also tell the ravens  
To toll the knell to me  
From the heights of our little church  
They say that the tone of the bells is beautifully pleasing*

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9) CD Žofie Kabelková: *Žiju*, Indies Records, 2003.

*Will you, please  
Tell the ancient roots  
That I will remember them even there  
People long for ages  
For close encounters*

I asked Žofie how it was possible to write such a text at the age of 18. She replied that it was at a hard time, when her grandmother was dying, when Žofie was emotionally very close to her grandma and internally somehow connected with her at that moment.

I believe that an evident cultural uniqueness of this area (within the context of the Czech lands) can be seen when I remind you of just some of the outstanding poets and men of letters who come from the Czech or Moravian side of the Highlands, many of them who created artistically in a continuous union with this area. At first glance there does not appear to be any distinctive rebel or founding statesman coming from Horácko, figures like Masaryk or Palacký. Nevertheless, looking back into the distant past, we come across the excellent thinker and preacher Tomáš Štítný. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century in his yeoman stronghold, he wrote what would historically be the first religious pamphlets in the Czech language, and he made the first translations from Latin to Czech of religious materials, initially to educate his family and neighbours, and then for the general public in Prague.

At the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was another stronghold, this one in Kralice nad Oslavou, which concealed a secret printing press of the Czech Brethren. It was there that the famous Kralice Bible was printed, the one that helped establish the modern Czech language. In connection to this, it is interesting to mention the idiosyncratic translator and publisher Josef Florian from Stará Říše. Through his religious and cultural radicalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he created a state within a state, a bastion of Catholic orthodoxy right in his own home - in some ways also a 'stronghold'. He refused to send his numerous descendants to school, but instead taught them himself according to his beliefs; he considered his Good Work edition a true Christian mission in a pagan world. Vincenc Furch (1817 - 1864), a native of Krasnice near Telč, a Czech National Revival poet and a playwright of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, introduced through his creativity a space which was soon occupied by

other great poets of Czech poetry: Otakar Březina (1868 - 1929), Jakub Deml (1878 - 1961), and Bohuslav Reynek (1882 - 1971). They all come from different parts of the Czech-Moravian Highlands and remained firmly rooted in this context. They were followed by the generation of Jan Zahradníček (1905 - 1960), Klement Bochořák (1910 - 1981), and Josef Suchý (1923 - 2003), who became somewhat distant from their native environment in favour of the urban environment, but nevertheless remained internally connected with it. What is it that even through time and space they all have in common? They share meditateness, spirituality (though not in a visionary and spiritualistic way, but rather a down-to-earth and melancholic way), and an innermost approach to their native land, whose images, depicted in poems or on the canvasses of painters, have been metaphors of emotional and spiritual certainty for their creators.

Please note that this is an official abridged version of the Czech lecture authorized by the author.

*The content of this text and my attitude to the Highlands have been influenced mostly by my grandmother Růžena Vinklerová, nee Lojdová (1904 - 1994); her son - my uncle and godfather - Jaroslav Vinkler (1933); and my parents, Alena and Karel Plocek.*





*The old linden three in Praskolesy*



*Countryside near Javořice*



*A window in the wall in Praskolesy*





*A barn in Světlá*



*The wall of a barn in Světlá*