Tramp Song: Czech, or World Music?

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There are various definitions of world music. It can either be perceived as a set of all modern adaptations of originally traditional local music styles, or perhaps of their combinations and fusions. Or – in a broader sense – traditional styles can be added to the definition separately. Then the definition will include all kinds of traditional folk and ethnic music, from the pipe music of Domažlice, Balkan brass band music and Tuva guttural singing to the Sahara blues. World music includes ancient as well as relatively new genres. Indeed, the Moravian cimbalom music has barely a hundred-year history (that is, the pedal operated cimbalom), and the Jamaican reggae developed into its today form from ska and rocksteady only after WWII. So why could world music not include also such a typically Czech genre as the tramp song?

I do not intend to explore the music qualities or authenticity of tramp song in this paper. More than for its musical qualities, the tramp song is interesting as a sociological phenomenon. And although even today we do not have to search for tramps, who boast with foxtails on their caps, in ghettos and open-air museums, the golden age of tramping finished, in my opinion, a few years after the fall of the communist regime. The borders have opened for everybody, so today the tramps can go to Texas, to the lands under the Southern Cross, or to Japan instead of the formerly popular Sázava river valley. They can stay at home and visit music festivals, such as the Folk Holiday in Náměšť nad Oslavou. They will encountrer exoticism of the highest quality even there.

In our globalized time it is easy to be interested in world music. The internet allows us to find recordings from the most remote parts of the earth within seconds; YouTube provides the videos of performers who the Czech generation of the early 1990s knew only from the articles of Petr Dorůžka in *Rock & Pop*. I have to admit that I often skipped them, because there was no way how to listen to the music described.

But let us go even more decades back to the 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, a common Czech man interested in exotic countries did not usually have enough money and time to travel to Argentina by ship. Nobody dared to think of going to the Sahara for music, and as for Siberia, people travelled there for a different reason than to study throat singing; above all, they went there less willingly. Those few lucky Czechs who did visit some faraway countries, returned mostly with written and photographic materials. Czech lovers of adventure ended

up reading travel books by Albert Vojtěch Frič, novels by Karl May or at best by Jules Verne. In the 1920s and 1930s, our fellow countrymen had a chance to watch Western movies, first silent, then with sound. In the 1940s, Czech travellers and adventurers Hanzelka and Zikmund started to reveal the secrets of exotic places to their countrymen. Concerning music – and I am a bit ahead here – American folk songs were brought to our country after WWII by Jan Werich, who wrote Czech lyrics to some of them with his colleague Jiří Voskovec. Until 1946, another intensive contact of Czechs with a certain type of world music had been via a music group of Václav Kučera, called originally Philipines Hawaiians; the roots of the band were in the tramp movement as well.

In the Czech lands, a unique tramp movement emerged in the period before and after WWI. In his foreword to a considerably representative songbook *All Tramps' Muse* (Všech vandráků múza), a singer songwriter Tony Linhart says: "[It was] romanticism, the rapture over the unknown, the charm of the campfire, the silent forest and deep valleys with wild rivers. The invisible curtain, behind which all this is hidden, was in the Czech lands first slightly opened by Boy Scouts, still deeply in the period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Then WWI stepped in, with war deserters hiding in the woods. Later, after the war, short stories by Jack London appeared, as well as first silent cowboy films from America. On the Vltava path in the St. John Rapids, the first wild Scout appeared too: the forefather of the tramp, later both praised and cursed." [1] Music historian Josef Kotek in his *The History of the Czech Popular Music and Song* (Dějiny české populární hudby a zpěvu) places the origin of the Czech tramp song to the period after WWI. According to Kotek, this [social] subculture emerged with the "urban youth (frequently from lower social classes) which compensated their disappointment at the war and the after-war unrest by an idealized return to nature and romantic rambling." [2]

Since its emergence, the tramp movement looked for inspiration in faraway places, especially on the North American continent. This can be seen not only in the English term tramp with a varying Czech pronunciation, but also in the names of the early tramp settlements. They were called not only Lost Hope or Valley of Horror but also Utah, Yukon, Eldorado, and Louisiana.[3] The founders of the tramp song genre, such as a cook apprentice Jarka Mottl, Vladimír 'Eddy' Fořt,

1) *Všech vandráků múza. Velký trampský zpěvník.* [All Tramps' Muse: A Great Tramp Songbook]. Praha 1996, p. 4.
2) Josef Kotek. *Dějiny české populární hudby a zpěvu (1918–68).* [The History of the Czech Popular Music and Song]. Praha 1998, p. 106.
3) For the early history of the Czech tramp settlements see details in Bob Hurikán. *Dějiny trampingu* [The History of Tramping]. Praha 1990 (2nd ed.).

Roman 'Sally' Prkno, and the Korda brothers, formally drew inspiration from popular music, and in the lyrics they used English or American sounding personal names, such as Bessie. In these songs, they glorified brave sailors or at least men in such an exotic vessel like a canoe. Nevertheless, hardly any of the prominent authors visited the described countries themselves. The only honourable exception was Eduard Ingriš, unfortunately almost a forgotten Czech globetrotter, the author of "Niagara" [4] that has become the tramp song evergreen.

Primarily American themes were favoured by the authors of tramp songs after WWII (among others, these songs were inspired by the heroic deeds of American soldiers and marines, such as "Guadalcanal"). With the onset of the Communist dictatorship, the imagined America and everything related to it gained new connotations and an increasing flavour of freedom. No wonder that besides the early tramp songs, which were inspired by swing and popular music, a new trend came at the end of the 1960s. It is related very much to the new born Czech country music, a Cenral European imitation of the North American white people's folk music.

But rather than in the music development, we will be interested in the content, in the lyrics of the tramp song. Even though there are many Czech tramp bands with new songs today, we will focus on the evergreens of tramp music. For this paper I have analyzed forty five tramp songs that originated between the 1920s and the 1950s and have been performed ever since. They are available in the first two volumes of the songbook I have mentioned above, *All Tramps' Muse*.[5]

Before we will comment on the analysis, let us mention two interesting and authentic analyses by other authors. Already in 1932 a satirical group called Teachers of Kocourkov (Kocourkovští učitelé) named the main themes of tramp songs in their "Recipe for a tramp song" (Recept na trampskou píseň): "Take the passion for ruby lips/combine it with sweet Margaret/then add a small canoe/sweet Hawaii and so on/many friends/who like each other/put that in a little cabin on the banks of a lake/wrap it all in an evening dusk/light camp fires/and you have got a song for tramps.[6]

In an equally charming way, with intrinsic irony, Cpt. Kid (a nick-name of Jaroslav Velínský, b. 1932, a Czech writer, tramp, banjo player, swing music guitar player, singer-songwriter, and one of the founders of the Porta Music

4) The lifestory of Eduard Ingriš is covered in Miroslav Náplava. *Plavby sebevrahů* [The Suiciders' Voyages]. Brno 2004.
5) Všech vandráků múza. Velký trampský zpěvník. [All Tramps' Muse: A Great Tramp Songbook]. Praha 1996; *Všech vandráků múza II. Velký trampský zpěvník.* [All Tramps' Muse II: A Great Tramp Songbook]. Praha 1998.
6) See Kotek, p. 116.

Festival) stated 14 basic tramp song themes in his lecture in 1996. Besides agitprops, heroic songs, and social songs, we should be primarily interested in his geographical songs, Northern songs, Red Indian songs, and exotic songs. According to Cpt. Kid, the geographical songs "deal with cities and countries, population density, area, natural conditions, raw materials, constitution, etc. They inform us that it is three hundred miles to Fort Adamson, that God and cowboy rule in Cherokee, that the Yellow River flows in Shanghai, that in Mexico everybody has his own cow (...) and that there are geishas in the Yokohama harbour." Northern songs are, according to Cpt. Kid, "works in which the severe spirit of the Arctic blows. Their authors invented a strange Czech word *polar*, and animated the plains with the reindeer, elk, salmon, and even the penguin, even though it only lives in Antarctica. Song topics deal with the dramas that took place in the icy wasteland: here a man is so touched by the departure of his fellows that he drops everything to the snow, there a man keeps going away to the north for no clear reason, while another one never leaves his little cabin in the snow plain." Considering the Red Indian songs, Cpt. Kid says that they are, "except of the popular "Ho Ho Watanay", more or less recognizable forgeries (...) and it is better not to think about them." And finally, the exotic songs "flourish with cacti, bamboos, skull hunters, black musicians kidnapped from their homes, sakuras, black-eyed Malaysian women, saxophones, gramophones, paper lanterns, and geishas. Everything is exotic here: there are ruby lips and pale cheeks, a hero can be killed with a spear, drowned in a lagoon, or sold to an Arab in Smyrna."[7]

Now we can approach our analysis. In almost a half of the tramp songs, we find words like distance, faraway [lands], or a long way. A journey or other paths and routes are mentioned in one quarter of the songs, and the world is mentioned in nearly every fourth song. These characteristic features may indicate a prototype of 'world' music. Exoticism is evoked by expressions like a river, mountain, and sea especially. Sailors are mentioned in 13 percent of songs, as well as whisky, an exotic drink; a captain and a harbour are present in every tenth tramp song.

The most frequently mentioned geographical terms are not the Czech Sázava and Okoř, but Oklahoma. Yokohama and Montana can also be frequently found in tramps songs, so there is obviously an interest in both the western and eastern hemispheres. European holiday resorts are not mentioned; they are probably considered too ordinary. So instead the Dolomites and Paris, the tramps used to sing about Colorado, Arizona, and Guadalcanal in the Pacific Ocean. Sweet girls

7) Cpt. Kid. "Stručný úvod do teorie trampské písně" [A Brief Introduction to the Theory of the Tramp Song], *Folk & Country* 7-8, 1996, pp. 34–35.

of Japan, Malaysia and Mexico appear in the songs too. A geography expert would turn his attention to the fact that the southern hemisphere is neglected and that crossing the equator must have been a taboo for the tramps. However, reading the song lyrics carefully, we find out that the Southern Cross appears in the songs as frequently as the terrestrial record holder Oklahoma.

Please note that tramp song authors also use appellatives that evoke exotic countries. Besides the drinks of whisky and brandy, the authors repeatedly mention the Japanese cherry tree, savannah, and even more frequently, prairie in their texts. Only once I have noticed the words geisha, hacienda, or jackal, but even those I would mark as typical for tramp song lyrics.

Of course we cannot talk ourselves into believing that tramps songs primarily deal with travelling, faraway lands or imagined exotic countries. The most frequently mentioned substantive is a song or a little song; this suggests that the main focus of tramp songs is the song itself; so it is all some kind of tramp song 'art for art's sake'. The second place is taken by the nouns girl or maiden and their diminutives, which means that love is another key theme, either in its romantic platonic form, or in a crudely natural, erotic form. Considering song lyrics about girlfriends and babes or even about geishas, the feminine area obviously wins among the song lyricists. The already mentioned faraway places and other travel themes hold the next place.

However, it is obvious that the tramps were already attracted by the far-off lands at the birth of the tramp song. As we have seen, neither the authors nor performers had many chances to get to know some real exotic music at that time. And so they created it in their own way. In their songs, they played the game of cowboys and sailors; they glorified the Japanese cherry tree blossom, the mighty reindeer caribou, or the Indian in a canoe, honestly believing that something noble of these representatives of flora, fauna, and indigenous people will stick to them. They built totems without competing with the later works of Claude Lévi-Strauss concerning the analyses of tribal life. They let the ukulele moan in the darkness without having a chance to hear some real Hawaiian bands. In their songs, they sang about an arrow flying across the savannah without having an idea what music could accompany an arrow flying across a real savannah.

In all these attempts, the tramp song was naive, but let us say it was naive in a likable way. Already in the 1920s and 1930s, tramp songs reflected the landlubbers' hunger for the sea, the Central Europeans' hunger for faraway countries, for the steppes of North America, for the islands of Japan, the Far North, and the Pacific Ocean. Even today, tramping has not disappeared. Tramp song bands keep singing about girls and women. Song continues to be the key word. There have not been less roads today, rather more railroads. Tramps no

longer ride horses in songs; they rather drive a car and truck, or perhaps they chant odes to the bicycle. I have heard tramp songs about computers and SMS messages: why not to believe them? After all, these are the themes that interest the remaining tramp community today. On the other hand, if a contemporary tramp composed a song about a geisha in Yokohama or cowboys in Oklahoma, I would not believe him. What was the corner-stone of the genre seventy years ago, and what today can be perceived as a reflection of the bygone society with travel restrictions, I now cannot call anything but a stale cliché.

So do tramp songs belong to world music? No, not from the musical point of view. No analysis of the song lyrics will help us place the tramp song to world music, because for world music song lyrics are usually of marginal interest. However, I am sure that for several decades the tramp song has functioned in the Czech lands as a substitute for something which at that time was not called world music yet, and which was unavailable to our fellow countrymen. Perhaps it was so because of the lack of technology or the impossibility of travelling abroad for economic and political reasons. Evidently, the tramp song cannot be called the root of the Czech world music. But we can definitely consider it the root of the Czech interest in world music.

(For the list of analyzed songs, see the Czech part of the book.)