

# T for Texas, T for Thelma, and T for *Tillandsia usneoides*

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## When We Left Prague

Even in the US, the Lone Star State is an icon of the romanticised frontier. In the Czech Republic, we have learned of its charms from such everlasting smash hits as “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” “Rusty, Dusty, Arizona, Texas,” and “T for Texas,” songs that are as widely known as the most popular Czech folk songs (like “*Žádněj neví, co jsou Domažlice*” or “*Běží liška k Táboru*”). Maps of Texas share some names with top ten Czech country music songs, including Abilene, El Paso, Houston, and other Western names like Laredo, Texarkana or Colorado. No wonder that jeans used to be called ‘Texas trousers’ in the former Czechoslovakia.

Near the former Soviet Air-Force Army base in *Hradčany* near Mimoň, there is a Lone Star State Bar; near the town of Třeboň there is a place called Texas; in the Czech and Moravian Highlands there is a Texas Rangers tramping group; and in the village of Horní Kalná, Krkonoše Highlands there is a New Texas Bar. There, a note informs visitors: “10% off on drinks for all cowboys: those wearing cowboy outfits (at least jeans, a cowboy shirt, and a Stetson hat) while drinking. We reserve the right to judge whether outfits meet the requirements (just any hat or T-shirt instead won't do).<sup>1)</sup> The music played here is certainly Texan.”

Just as Czechs and Moravians keep Texan ways alive, Czech traditions are kept alive in Texas. For example, in Horní Kalná a local Czech tradition of witch burning (in spring) done in Texan style, and at La Grange, Texas, an open air stage built in a rural Baroque style, high above the Colorado river, hosts a Czech traditional festival celebrating St. Nicholas. Thus Czech living traditions as well the forgotten ones are kept alive in Texas. In La Grange's “*Muziky, Muziky*” festival, the performers and audience wear Czech and Moravian folk costumes of all sorts, including traditional hand-made Moravian embroideries as well as new costumes meeting Texas cheerleaders fashions, decorated with Lone Star symbols. The sound system is run by an Indian woman, and the programme is produced by a lady who spent her life on the Pacific Ocean; she is fond of esoteric science, playing the ukulele, and yodeling. Apparently, she has no Czech ancestry.

<sup>1)</sup> Western-country areál Nový Texas”. Downloaded June 5,2008. <<http://www.western-country.cz/novytexas.htm>>.

In the nearby village of Nechanice, Texas, there is a real cowboy in a real ranch throwing his lasso. Down the road in Dubina, the church path leads over a wooden bridge made in the times of Judge Bean; from Hostýn Church Hill, Texas, there is a view of rather flat countryside, much flatter than Hills of Hostýn, Moravia; and Texans in Prague, Texas, certainly cannot complain about hordes of tourists as do their Czech counterparts (their problem, instead, is depopulation). The remains of Czech-Texan villages consist of well-kept churches and cemeteries, unlike their un-kept counterparts in ghost towns in the Czech Sudetenland. In Texas, local roads meet at an old dancing hall, to remind one of past times of musical fame and grandeur.

(The original English version)

*When we came to good ole Shiner, the sun was shining bright  
There's plenty beer to drink and plenty food to eat  
When we came to good ole Shiner, the sun was shining bright*

*When we came to good ole Texas, the sun was shining bright  
There's plenty beer to drink and plenty food to eat  
When we came to good ole Texas, the sun was shining bright*

(The original Czech version)

*Když jsme opustili Prahu, slunce svítilo.  
A my jsme popíjeli a dobře jsme se měli,  
když jsme opustili Prahu, slunce svítilo.*

*Když jsme opustili pivovar, sklenka byla prázdná.  
A jídla bylo dosti a piva do sytosti,  
když jsme opustili pivovar, sklenka byla prázdná.  
Když jsem opustili Shiner, bečka byla prázdná.  
A my jsme popíjeli, a dobře jsme se měli,  
když jsem opustili Shiner, bečka byla prázdná.*

[Translated as: When we left Prague, the sun was shining bright/ *We were happily drinking, having a good time/* When we left Prague, the sun was shining bright. When we left the brewery, the glass was empty/ *There was plenty to eat, and plenty of beer/* When we left the brewery, the glass was empty. When we left Shiner, the keg was empty/ *We were happily drinking, having a good time/* When we left Shiner, the keg was empty.]

On weekends, some Czechs-turn-Texans meet near Prague to sing of the Colorado River, while Czech-Texans sing above the Colorado River<sup>2)</sup>. Even though their songs differ, both groups share a love of music. Czech-Texans sing Czech and Moravian folk songs, and at the weekend Czech-Americans prefer American country music. This is shown by the above lyrics: in Prague sung in Czech, and in Shiner, Texas, in English. Certainly there are many interesting connections; though in only one place can “*Letěla husička*” and “*Waltz across Texas with You*” be heard at the same time. Nevertheless, both songs reveal nineteenth-century Czech diction accompanied by rather modern, honky-tonk sounds of a bass guitar. These two worlds meet and miss again: while in Texas the folks enjoy primarily Czech and Moravian folk songs, on the other side of the world the Czech folks enjoy more their western swing or “Czech Country and Western” (known as tramping songs/campers' songs in Czech). Peculiarly, an American lecturer in Czech from Austin, Texas, recalling his student years at Prague confesses how much he enjoyed listening to the Czech Country and Western band called the Greenhorns.

Let us compare two Novaks, the Czech and the American one, whose fates might be shining living examples of Czech and American slogans. While the Czech slogan claims 'who runs away first, comes first' [*kdo uteče, vyhraje*], the Texan one claims '*I wasn't born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could!*' On Friday night in Texas, Joe Novak would wear his Moravian costume to Friday's festival *Praska Pout*, while looking forward to the *kolaches* and singing “*Když jsme opustili Prahu*”; on the other side of the world, his Czech counterpart Josef Novák, knick-named Houston among the tramps, set off for his weekend camp and, while walking down to the Smíchov Railway Station in Prague, mumbled a popular Czech song “*Všichni už jsou v Mexiku*” [Everybody's gone to Mexico]. The sweet, isolated absurdities of these intercultural exchanges occasionally get disturbed, such as when an immigrant's descendants visit their old country. Likewise, some Czech tramps and hikers enjoy diaspora tourism and fly to hike in Texas. The question is, won't some of them end up like the Czech man named Čeloud, a maker of nativity scenes in Třebíč, Moravia, who once in his life made a journey to Bethlehem, there displayed his nativity scene, but returned home to keep making his nativity scenes in the same Moravian-Austrian way?<sup>3)</sup>

2) Please note that the Czechs place the river of their lyrics to a different location.

3) Melníková Papoušková, Naděžda. *Putování za lidovým uměním*. [A Journey for Folk Art]. Praha, 1941, p. 194.

## Leaving and Coming Back

While the activities of some Texan Czechs have irrefutable origins (proved by original antiques like an old wooden cabinet or a musical instrument brought from the old country), the Czech Texans in the Czech Republic cannot share such a distinctive analogy. Let us compare “*Texas*” by the *Patrola Band*, and the waltz “*Chaloupky pod horami*” [Log Cabins under the Mountains] by Dalecký:

I remember Texas  
How I lived there alone  
In a valley below Snow Mountain  
Where I used to sit by a river.

[The original Czech version: Vzpomínám na Texas, jak jsem tam žil sám, v údolí pod Sněžnou horou u řeky sedával.]

This is the waltz by Dalecký:

The sun was nicely warm in the mountains  
And my log cabin was as made in dreams  
There I spent my childhood, my whole life  
There I as a boy sang “Where Is My Home”.<sup>4)</sup>

[The original Czech version: Hrálo slunce, hrálo krásně, hrálo na horách/ a v tom čase chaloupka má stála jako v snách/ tam jsem prožil svoje mládí, celý život svůj/ tam jsem jako chlapec zpíval “Kde domov můj”.]

Both songs are nostalgic; while the first one opts for an imagery world openly, the waltz pretends to refer to a real setting; it is questionable whether its author really spent his youth sitting on a doorstep of a log cabin feeling warm in the sun, singing the Czech national anthem. In theory this scenario may be quite possible, but perhaps in practice two notoriously known notions were amalgamated: the archetype of log cabin in the Czech mountains and national folk songs.<sup>5)</sup>

Although perceived as contradictory terms, is there really a difference between the acts of escaping and returning? In fact, how does a Prague impersonator of the legendary Strakonice Bagpiper differ from a Czech Celt celebrating Beltine in a South Bohemian castle, or a dreaded Rasta Man with

4) “Kde domov můj” is the title of the Czech national anthem.

5) Woitsch, Jiří. “Ta naše chaloupka česká. Proměny mýtu lidové architektury.” [The Little Czech Cottage. Transformations of the Myth of Folk Architecture]. In *Dějiny a současnost* 6/2008.

a round face of Good Soldier Švejk, or a re-enactor in Napoleonic uniform headed every first week of December to the famous battle site in Slavkov [Austerlitz], Moravia? We may try to discover numerous other analogies, but how do these images differ from a Romani youth dressed in the latest hip-hop fashion, or a wealthy New Russian lady dressed in the latest world fashion, when they both just demonstrate that they are 'in' as stubbornly as Old Timers who would cling to and openly extol their cottages (in the same way as re-enactors of the Napoleonic cult, and Czech tramps to their weekend "Home Valley" songs and style of life)?

Regarding the range of genres, reflecting on the roots or distancing from them, is always a conscious choice. That is even more true when regarding music. Even the village musicians, deeply rooted in traditions, play folk songs, brass band music, or cross-genre dancing music despite the fact that they themselves listen to various genres. Were roots given to us? Or is it more of an experience of authenticity, of something we have lived through? Perhaps that was answered by Keith Richards who met Mick Jagger through their love for recordings of American bluesmen.<sup>6)</sup> Out of these and similar encounters jazzmen, rockers, folk singers, bluesmen, heavy metal followers, rappers or folk ensemble singers are born.

Not many of us would keep their grandmothers' songbooks, and if we do, they are buried deep somewhere. Yet everyone keeps a popular album that has been played over a thousand times. The biological taxonomy recognizes a main root, and side or lateral roots, as well as accessory roots, and there are even rootless plants. Perhaps today we should be compared to *Tillandsia usneoides*, a plant known as Spanish moss. This plant is able to vegetate even on telegraph wires. After all this plant is used to fill upholstered chairs; perhaps there is no better analogy for these musicians of our age.

### **Faster than Ferrari**

And how deep should these roots go? Do Celtic origins determine our identity more than our more recent and real Austrian-Hungarian histories? Besides time difference, there is the geographic dispersion and variance: go back a few generations and the Czech Republic Road Atlas works no longer. Above all, the very fact that we can make these choices is telling. Perhaps we possess exaggerated illusions: the renowned folk singer Marie Procházková (1886-1986) of Strážnice described everything she acquired from her parents as ancient, including the broadside ballads.<sup>7)</sup> Such roots are sufficiently concrete, but perhaps precariously

6) Richards, Keith. *In his Own Words*. London, 1994, p. 11.

7) Pajer, Jiří. *Marie Procházková (1886-1986). zpěvačka ze Strážnice*. [Marie Procházková (1886-1986), the Singer from Strážnice]. Hodonín, 1986, p. 48.

shallow. In other words, the roots are not less shallow than those of our children when they listen to their parents' old LPs. After all, isn't the family outing or the rock'n'roll tradition just as deeply rooted as Procházková's ancient songs?

The real traditional music roots (like the great grandfather's violin or great grandmother's songs) are to be built on, and those are scarcely as common as a vintage car. At least all the Czech families hold on to books written by Erben or Němcová, illustrated by Aleš or Kašpar, or somehow artfully touched up by Rais, Holeček, Baar, or Klostermann or even those re-edited and re-painted by Josef Lada. (Even I used to hang onto a Marešová illustration from an Old Czech Calendar.)<sup>8)</sup>

(The new mock version of a Czech nursery rhyme)

I've got horses, jet-black horses, they belong to me  
When I feed them cucumbers, they outrun motorcycles  
When I feed them cereals, they outrun Formula One cars  
When I feed them potatoes, they outrun Ferraris.

[The original Czech version: Já mám koně, vraný koně, to jsou koně můj, když já jim dám okurku, předhoněj i motorku, když já jim dám bobule, předhoněj i formule, když já jim dám brambory, předhoněj i Ferrari].

It is surprising that children themselves manage to rediscover texts and arts retrieving the past. This happens spontaneously and ranges from hockey players' cards to comments on louse appearance. But at the same time, there is no talk of nursery rhymes, of 'jet-black horses,' not to mention family singing. Yet the viability of these roots persists, and the songs, nursery rhymes and national revival pictures are passed on in families and at schools, which ensures continuity and survival and helps to defend the cultural heritage from aggressive attacks of modern times.<sup>9)</sup> And, if it is worth attacking, then it must be meaningful. Moreover, we can say that the direction of these attacks is the recommended direction.

One may be urged to come up with more insightful results. One might search folk song collections from the Horácko or Kladensko regions since our roots might be located in there. This might not be in vain since one may come across something a bit unfamiliar, like folk Christmas puppet dramas that were staged in a nearby street a hundred years ago; or, we might rediscover memories of the

8) Plicka, Karel, and František Wolf. *Starý český kalendář* [An Old Czech Almanac]. Praha: SNDK, 1959.

9) Stopnický, Matěj. "České národní omalovánky". [The Czech National Colouring Book]. In *Literární noviny* 2008/6, p. 13; Bělohradský, Václav. "Knihy dovedou otřást světem". [Books Can Shake the World]. An interview by Dora Kaprálová. *MF Dnes*, August 11, 2007, section D, pp. 5-6.

singer-songwriter Hais, who used to live just over the river. Or we might get close to the roots through our weekend cottages, where we would discover folk songs of the region that are very familiar but perhaps sound a bit archaic: we have to translate them from German, the language our grandparents used when things were they did not want to be understood by youngsters.<sup>10)</sup>

### No Wish to Go Back

The overall picture is not self-contained at all, and in such cases one must go back to many possible places: an idyllic village setting as pictured by Mikoláš Aleš, an *Imagined Village* by Georgina Boyes,<sup>11)</sup> the *Virtual Countryside: the Last Place of an Idyllic Life* (as *Dějiny a současnost* magazine put the theme it their June issue),<sup>12)</sup> into a log cabin below the mountains, back to the Czech Strakonice of the legendary Švanda the Bagpiper, to the village of Hrusice of painter Lada, among modern folksingers who speak neither southern nor western dialect but something more regional and proletarian,<sup>13)</sup> down from Chicago to the sweet sunny South, into Ethiopia of the Rastafarians, into the Africa of Afro-Americans, or into the Highlands of Robert Burns. More or less, into "culture nearing the 'folk society', self-sufficient, non-industrial, geographically isolated group of friends and relatives, in cooperation producing only what is consumed, and consuming only what is produced, communicating only orally/aurally."<sup>14)</sup>

The recruiters of the Prague's Texas Rangers Corral state this: "Cut yourselves off from civilization, and leave the technologies within the city limits, and move to the 19th century; move into a century when mail was delivered by Pony Express, a century of oil lamps when the centre of social activities was a saloon. Believe me: you will not wish to go back."<sup>15)</sup> A description of Smithville, a village made of recordings from Smith anthology, written by Greil Marcus, is much more spectacular, and it uses a retrospective utopia created by songs, even though it is a bit overstated. It is "on one hand a real exile, and on the other hand an imaginary return home".<sup>16)</sup>

10) Spurný, Tomáš. *Sammlung von Adolf König: Notenaufzeichnungen und Dokumente eines Reichenberger Volksliedsammlers aus den Jahren 1904-1934*. Passau, 2000.

11) Boyes, Georgina. *Imagined Village. Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*. Manchester, 1994.

12) The theme: *Virtual Countryside: the Last Place of an Idyllic Life?* *Dějiny a současnost* 6/2008, pp. 28-43.

13) Cantwell, Robert. *When We Were Young. The Folk revival*. Cambridge-London, 1996, p. 329.

14) Minton, John. "Houston Creoles and Zydeco. The emergency of an African American Urban Popular Style". In Evans, David (ed.). *Ramblin' on my Mind*. Champaign, 2008, p. 375.

15) "Texas Rangers Corral WI." Downloaded on Jun 5, 2008. <<http://www.texasrangers.cz>

16) Marcus, Greil. *Invisible Republic*. New York, 1997, pp. 125-126.

An image of a root being as firm, and strongly anchored safe in deep waters, out of which an age-old tree trunk grows, having spreading branches full of fruits, does not correspond to modern times. Today, when thinking of an analogy to the contemporary musical presence, in creep images of the bark beetle consuming the trees, or mould, or natural seeded wood. And that is why the roots are needed—any roots! If searching for roots ceases in the past, it is only certain—where else those would be? It is up to each and everyone to decide how far to go to meet the past in order to gain the most exact picture. There are appreciable reserves. For example, one of the most noteworthy and remarkable instrumentalists performing at the *Folk Holiday Festival* tried to persuade me a while ago that in his native village and region, folk songs simply did not exist, unaware that there, earlier on in 1893–1907, Karel Kořízek and Božena Čapková, the mother of the famous Čapek brothers, collected a large songbook.<sup>17)</sup> One needs only to go back to the preindustrial times, or more concretely, back to pre-record player and pre-radio days. Examining a Zdenka Braunerová art studio in Roztoky, or an immense discography of Bob Dylan, or Texavia, a racy Houston band of the accordion player Mark Halata, we may see that such a picture of the past shall be more reliable than imaginary contemporary times presented to us in order to be trusted.

Certainly, it is an inexcusable mistake that is it easier to obtain Texas jail recordings than to get to hear recordings of Southern Bohemia marshlands, but after all, if we listen to the tunes and melodies of Catalonia, old Vienna or Texas, the location is not as important; what matters is the time period. For example we may listen to Lilly and Thelma Knox<sup>18)</sup> in one of the dumpy corners of the South, of Murrells Inlet in South Caroline. Anyway, one may notice their songs orally/aurally resemble our great-aunts' traditions. What truly matters is to continue where the tradition ended.

17) Čapková, Božena, and Karel Kořízek. *Lidové písně z Úpicka*. [Folk Songs from the Úpicko Region]. Ed. by V. Thořová. Praha, 2002.

18) Lilly and Thelma Knox. "Daniel in the Lion's Den". CD *South Carolina-Got the Keys to the Kingdom (Deep River of Song)*. Rounder Records, 2002.



