Life is Laughter through Tears

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Important events of human life, mainly crucial ones, get a much deeper meaning when connected with a particular person. Within the studies of folk culture in the beginnings of folklore as a scholarly subject this meaning was often neglected. Attention was mainly paid to aspects which today demonstrate the old times, the way of living in a particular period, evidence of skill, imagination and aesthetic sense. They could be analyzed in different contexts, their development and period influences can be revealed, comparative aspects can be applied. However, it is only in connection with a particular bearer, performer or creator that a special level appears which makes the surviving aspect alive and extends its dimension, whether material or spiritual. Nowadays, the humanities have been fully aware of the importance of the interpretation of the materials collected, and the 'living past' has been in various ways a natural part of many disciplines (such as experimental archaeology, open-air museums, and music and dance reconstructions).

Still, the question remains how much information about a particular person can be found in the past in order to complement an image of the past by an individual life story and a philosophical outline of the sense of human existence in connection with all cultural aspects of a particular period. Men of letters and scholars were not always interested in people of humble origin.

Efforts to address the above-mentioned issues can be traced across all humanities. In historical science, fragments from the past have been often used to reconstruct the image of human life in a particular period. A representative of important Czech writings is *Legenda o Ostojovi* (The Legend of Ostoy) (2004) by the archaeologist Zdeněk Smetánka, who depicted the life of man in the early Middle Ages. Social history can be interpreted from examples of historically proved life stories of specific

people from different social levels. This approach can be seen in examples of the volumes of *Člověk na Moravě 19. století* (2004) (The 19th Century Man in Moravia), *Člověk na Moravě v první polovině 20. století* (2006) (The First Half of the 20th Century Man in Moravia), and *Člověk na Moravě ve druhé polovině 18. století* (2008) (The Second Half of the 18th Century Man in Moravia), a book series edited by Brno historians Lukáš Fasora, Jiří Hanuš, Jiří Malíř, and Libor Vykoupil.

History as a science has been dealing with the history of everyday life only for some decades, when scholars started to focus, apart from the upper class, also on lower social classes, and when a separate branch of historical anthropology arose from social history. Ethnology, however, has been working with human everyday life since its beginning, within the limits of science given by the period and place. As to the heritage of traditional culture, it is music and songs with which we emotionally resonate most, but of course, they have to be extended by their content and sophisticated formal aspects. The age of romanticism defined the perception and presentation of folk culture as an aesthetic symbol of emerging national cultures; aspects of this approach have survived until today. Popular songs, broadsheet ballads and later evergreens which were a natural part of folk repertoire were examined by researchers; however, amateurs did not search for the importance of meaning or form within these genres. Anyway, exploring the context of the origin and the interpretation of these songs, we will get the same laughter and tears as from the outstanding repertoires of traditional rural areas. Take for instance the memories of František Hais, a Prague songster and a procession chanter, who captured originally and in a very catching way the life of the Prague´s underprivileged inhabitants of the 19th century.

The relatively extensive folk collections which developed in accordance with an interest in folk culture in Europe and also in the Czech lands from the early 19th century do not contain, with some exceptions, personal notes about performers or creators. Bearing this in mind, we value very much the life testimonies which were preserved, such as the narration of the singer Eva Studeničová (born 1851) from the

Slovak Svätý Ján. It was recorded by Karel Plicka in the 1920s and published in the collection *Eva Studeničová spieva* (Eva Studeničová Sings) (Plicka, 1928, 3-5) in 1928. The life story of a country woman, whose three children died and who as a widow had to fight with all the difficulties of the world, provides another view on her song repertoire.

Chronicle entries and personal records by Bible readers are no less strong: they reflect the personal happiness, sadness and desires of their authors. They let us look into a human soul as far as many centuries back from now. As for the Bible readers and their notes, the literary historian Bedřich Slavík says that the Bible "used to be a refuge and an authority both for prudent readers and poetry and memories writers both among Catholics and Evangelicals..." (Slavík, 1940, 17). The authors, who were more or less educated, and quite often only self-educated, left us their work both in verse and prose (including dramatic pieces of so-called peasant theatre). We can include those who wrote for a certain requirement of a public presentation, often within noble social ideas, as well as those who just recorded family and ancestry histories (Slavík, 1940, 22). This explains why such old records usually inform us about the development of real life and its fight for survival. War catastrophes, natural disasters and poor crops are sometimes referred to more often than personal sorrows. The Bartošek Chronicle, recorded perhaps by three authors in Uherský Brod in the second half of the 16th century, brings personal news only in short announcements about births or deaths in the family. However, even a record without any other comment can reveal a lot about the writer´s inner life. One of the possible authors of the records, Jiří Bartoška (cca 1530 – cca 1584/5), a native of Uherský Brod, faced a family tragedy in 1572. Within a one month period from September to October 1572 his three sisters, one brother, some of their children and servants died during a plague epidemic. Record commentaries follow each other briefly one by one:

"On Friday before the day of St. Havel, Dorota, the youngest daughter of Václav Bartoš died at 3 p.m., she was buried the next day in the church."

"On Monday before the day of St Havel, Kristýna, a granddaughter of Václav Bartoš, a child of his late daughter Johanka, died at 11 a.m.."

"On Thursday the next night, on the day of St. Havel, Jan, a grandson of Václav Bartoš, a child of his daughter Eliška, died at 10 p.m.." Five more similar records follow. (Zemek, 2004, 86–87).

Petr Zemek, who made the records accessible in 2004, points out that the author does not express any personal emotions and does not remind us of any family relation to the tragedy. However, an analysis by a graphologist, arranged for by the editor, proved strong emotions: neat handwriting written under strong pressure; such a feeling, when a man is even not able to cry. (Zemek, 2004, 87). Almost three hundred years after, a similarly expressed anguish of mind can be found in the records by Věnceslav Metelka (1807–1867), musician and Bible reader from the region of Podkrkonoší, whose personality was examined by an outstanding Czech folklorist Jaromír Jech. Jech published Metelka's biography and records (see Jech 1982, 1983). In 1862, remembering his son's funeral six years ago, Metelka recollects: "I didn't cry. The stream of my tears dried up..." (Jech 1982, 96).

However, the presence of death was quite intense during the last centuries. Wars, high infant mortality rates, incurable diseases, and also public executions contributed to this. Since the mid-14th century, there were especially large plague epidemics, which hit Europe in numerous waves and were a real disaster. German historian Norbert Ohler says that it was the plague epidemics which started the medieval popular motif of 'the dance of the Death', which was frequent in fine art, drama and literature: "It enabled one to capture the fear of the death by image and words, and to control it" (Ohler, 2001, 324–325). Death was portrayed as a dancer, the dying itself then as a dance of death. Dancing was always considered as something undue and sinful by the Church, and interdicts against dancers influenced learning about the dance culture of different periods a lot. (Stavělová, 2008, 82). In the Czech lands the most complete survey was done and published by culture historian Čeněk Zíbrt in his work *Jak se kdy v Čechách tancovalo* (1895) (How they used

to Dance in the Czech Lands). A migrating motive of a warning to dancers, who danced when they were not allowed to (such as at Christmas or other Church holidays) appeared in European culture since the Middle Ages in various written and fine sources (Katona, 1900, 385–390). God's punishments, which were sent to godless dancers, appear for instance in the medieval *exempla* (a girl was taken away by the devil, a lightning lit the church with dancers, and so on. Gurevič, 1996, 415). They can also be traced in earlier, orally transmitted legends (Katona, 1900, 388). The Dance of the Death was then an extreme form and also the way of the church to express the fear of death, despite the fact that the topic of "the world to come", and stories about it included also motives and images from Eastern cultures and the Ancient times. The stories were read, written down, transmitted orally, and gained regional specifications. The Dance of Death also expressed the idea that everybody is equal when facing death, and that there is only one way to look upon it: the aspect of transiency (Huizinga, 1999, 238–239).

Medieval culture especially introduced the image of contrasts: heaven and earth, the spiritual and the physical, the tragic and the comic, life and death. It was also the studies of the Middle Ages that brought to the research a double dimension of culture: one of them can be perceived as official, the other one as a folk one. Medieval folk culture is often described as a culture of laughter, or a culture of carnival. Theoretical discussions about borders, overlapping or integrity of medieval culture and its streams have been described by the works of many medievalists, who, based on various period sources, esp. Latin Church documents, tried to exemplify the basis of older levels of folk culture, their systems and individual categories. One of the most discussed is the category of laughter mentioned before. Russian scholar Aron Gurevič says: "Laughter seems to be an expression of personal psychical mechanism, which was the only way to face death and its bearers, devil powers, representatives of the hell. Laughter didn't destroy fear, it didn't overcome it or didn't break free from it, but it freed the unbearable tension caused by an awareness of death and a post mortal revenge,

which was supposed to come after death inevitably." (Gurevič, 1996, 368).

Many researchers consider death and an awareness of death the main generator of culture. German religionist and archaeologist Jan Assmann (2003) claims: "An important part of our activity, and especially its culturally relevant part, comes from the desire for immortality, the desire to cross the border of the self and the time given to our life". A similar idea is expressed by the authors of a Polish study *Smierc jako organizator kultury*, (Death as an Organizer of Culture) which deals with rituals in folk tradition and which separates a dichotomy of the life of the living and the dead (Tokarska, Wasilewski & Zmyslowska, 1982). Besides that, however, some experts also present their ideas about a negative "antinomy of death": the impossibility to imagine "the end of life" (Macho, 2003, 87). Philosopher Jan Sokol sees in human cultures a larger burden of death in the sense that a man gets more individual, more self-oriented, and less family and community oriented. (Sokol, 2004, 172). However, different scholars agree that the journey of a dead body is important in various cultures, and that it represents a transitional period. Its principles in human life within the context of rituals were introduced in ethnology by a French researcher Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in his work *The Rites of Passage.*

Although the analysis of cultures is mainly a discussion over different theoretical patterns, which can be more or less generalized, there remains under the surface not only a particular culture with its rituals and habits, but also the lives of its members. Within the use of interpretative anthropology resources, which search for the meanings of examined facts, a new methodological space was opened for ethnology to learn and to deal with this personal information.

A language connotation 'laughter through tears' was used by an important Dutch historian and anthropologist Johan Huizinga in his work *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919). Within its borders, he aimed it mainly at the topic of love poetry (Huizinga, 1999, 520–521). In the figurative sense we can apply it to the life of a man in general. There

are, of course, also extreme situations in human life when a natural polarity of laughter and tears does not work. Here we can name the topic of the holocaust. In the Czech lands there is the work of historian Ctibor Nečas and ethnologist Dušan Holý *The Suing Song* (Žalující píseň) (1993). It is an accusation of human degradation in the period of Nazism not only because of historical facts about concentration camps and the genocide of the Romani; first of all it captures suffering and pain, which was literally sung out by those who survived. Such a dimension of human existence stands aside all comparisons, learning it should remain an ultimate memento. Even besides this dark side of history there are still many difficulties of life and we have to go on. Let's return once again to the Bible reader Věnceslav Metelka, who in his notes keeps mentioning his two dead children at the end of his days. Unwittingly he expressed an everlasting polarity of the human existence: "I gave them a handful of soil – who will give it to me? What a strange world! They cried there next to the grave, but as soon as they turned, there was smile on their faces" (Jech, 1983, 86).

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