The Meeting of Sadness and Joy in the Early 19th Century Folklore Records by Jan Jeník from Bratřice

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Jan Jeník, the knight of Bratřice (1756 – 1845), was a war veteran, enlightener of the time of Joseph II, and a Czech patriot. He was a humorist by nature. As he always brought entertainment to society, he became a favoured daily guest in prominent Prague families: He was always sober, chivalrous, witty, but also shocking with his varied songs and tales; he became a famous entertainer. Jeník's collection *The Short Songs* (Jeník, 1810, and particularly Jeník, 1832) is in fact a written record of a great scenario comprising the content of his many live performances recorded subsequently. It is a parade of various oral genres and songs, a mixture of moods and interpretive approaches. Working out the programme blocks, he makes alternatively use of poetic numbers and black humour, kindness and sarcasm, tenderness and abusiveness, and frolicsome humorous stories with a surprisingly tragic ending. Considering this diversity, we have to approach Jeník's work in a complex way; we should not just pick bawdy songs, for which he was most famous.

To understand Jeník's work fully, we have to focus on humour in all aspects. His fresh humour is a common feature of his stories and various stories from life. With his sense for feasible jokes, hidden comicality and entertaining exaggeration, Jeník was able to chose typical examples from an extensive repertoire of his age, as well as to present a humorous event with great success. He was a master of humorous miniatures extending the best of the tradition of humorous tales and sermons: the tragicomic circumstances of building up a students' legion, the story about a hoaxer Father Giggler, the report of a madam Flekl's café-house

and a students' rebellion against her girls, and so on. Absolutely unique is his depiction of carnival entertainment with respect to its extent and interpretation. Jeník's commentaries on various documents are also funny; mostly they are included intentionally for their grotesqueness. There is, for example, a request of a student to the rector of the university to release him from the college prison (he minted forged coins and wanted to pay his beer with them), or the minutes of interrogation of a student who together with his friends in a taproom slapped the landlady while the other spanked her with a sword.

Jeník used a wide range of laugh-making devices, from gentle impishness, through mockery, to black humour. He was able to amusingly describe how a seminar student shivered with the fear of bogeys, another time he 'regretted' that due to lack of space he could not recount the examination of a raped girl who was asked very funny questions by the auditor. His reference on a ricochet shot ending up deep in the bum of a regiment drummer has a hint of blasphemy. Josef Polišenský (1947, 13 – 14) compared Jeník's creativity and ardour to the one of a Czech writer Jan Neruda. It is possible to continue with this comparison even more: Jeník's natural way of writing, his almost journalistic style, his admiration of progress, permeating enlightenment and ubiquitous humour also remind us naturally of the father of Czech columnists.

Jeník designates his detached humour and bright use of wit, irony and sarcasm even for serious information, for depicting key moments in history, deeds and nature of popular historical figures. Jeník's story about his own case concerning the contest of a soldier's pay and subsequent audience with the Joseph II is told so suggestively that, as Jeník himself indicates in his diary, he had to recount it very often in society (Polišenský, 1947, 42 – 43). He was able to find inspiration for a winsome humorous story even by an event much more ordinary than the audience with the emperor. We can compare his talent to the 20th century Czech actors and entertainers such as Miroslav Horníček, Jiří Sovák and Vladimír Menšík, who were able to build up their amusing stories around any little everyday event.

Also in one of his last letters to Tomáš Akvin Burián (Professor of the Czech language in Vienna, Jeník's ward, son of Lukáš Burián who was Jeník's valet), Jeník starts with an anecdote from his life (Čenský, 1875, 244 – 245). For him, an anecdote was any story, not only a short account of humorous and interested incident. Jeník's work includes a great amount of tiny compositions very close to the current conception of an anecdote: witty sayings, riddles, crude and naive verses (which he recorded intentionally for their intentional wit, or on the contrary, for their non-intended comicality), wall inscriptions of the same quality, and most of all the words of 'short songs': traditional song lyrics. The present paper purposely avoids this field: the author has devoted enough publicity to it, and he has been working on its critical edition (so far I, Traxler, 1999).

After recollecting and writing down about two hundred short dance songs in each of his collections, Jeník turned his attention to other genres: "In the wintertime, when evenings are long, girls used to meet in a house with friends and neighbours, and while spinning, they also sang. It is my intention to record some of the longer songs, so you are acquainted with local customs and with cheerful spirit of the people" (Jeník, 1832, 55). There follow various historical songs from different periods of Czech history, which Jeník used to call a "satirical singing of our ancestors"; such as "About the Great Divine Retribution..." from the early days of re-Catholicism, or "Bless You, Uncle! What's New..." from the period after the Seven Years' War.

Another song, most likely a broad-side ballad, is supplemented with this story: One of the daughters of Lord Berka of Dubé and Lípa 'decided' to enter a convent, where a monk fell in love with her and she become pregnant. A similar misdemeanour should have been followed by capital punishment, however, the maiden came from a wealthy family, thus the execution of the punishment was left in the hands of the family. One day before she was walled up, she allegedly established a foundation appointed to feed the poor in front of the church every anniversary of her execution. She composed a song in memory of herself, which should be

sung before the meal. Jeník introduced the song and then he did not forget to lighten the whole situation: many years after that event, during a reconstruction of the Rychmburk castle, the bones of Miss Berka were found and two shinbones have been ever since showed to visitors (Jeník, 1832, 71 – 74). To this he added his enlightened progressive contemplations and views on the theme of punishment of fallen maidens and single mothers. After he strictly denounced these practices, he recollected a typical Sunday and holidays custom, when such single mothers had to stand in front of the church door with a black candle and say or sing to every passer-by:

Welcome here, to the mass,
I fell down, that I confess!
(Jeník, 1832, 74 – 76).

Next, Jeník recorded folk songs and broad-side ballads connected to the theme (Jeník, 1832, 91 – 92). Then he recalled a collection of the oldest Czech social songs in rococo style (Jeník, 1832, 92 – 702 and elsewhere). He recorded these songs in an early stage of popularizing, and evidently knew nothing about their authors. Further he presented a music-hall song, directed against feminine fashion crazes and generally against all females. He created his own title "In the Streets Frippery – In the Chest Shittery", then he added a masculine version (Jeník, 1832, 103 – 108) and he described the circumstances related to the performance of these songs (Jeník, 1838, 75 – 83).

Jeník returned to the issue of single mothers to tell a story which supposedly happened several years ago at the Karlštejn castle. A schoolmaster's son fell in love with a housemaid from the deanery and she conceived, but his father was radically against their marriage. The girl had an idea that they could scare the devout and spook-fearing schoolmaster at night. She put on a bed sheet, posed as a purgatory soul and managed to force him to agree with the marriage. But the whole conspiracy came out and the schoolmaster informed the dean and asked him to question his housemaid and punish her. When she was taken to the supreme authority at the castle, she managed to get rid of the guards,

jumped to the near-by well and drowned. The humorous story ends up tragically, but it would not be Jeník if he did not turn off and reverse the tragic ending to have a comical point:

> Those who have been to the Karlštejn castle certainly know the deepest well in the kingdom, which is located there. It has got a big wheel above and a well-built man has to circle inside it for one eighth of an hour to get the bucket with water up. Therefore it is evident how many days and nights were necessary to deprive the well of the very last drop of water – because nobody ever wanted to drink it any longer! (Jeník, 1832, 187 – 197).

The subjects of Jeník's tales are various, and these ones especially are peculiar events and motives: a students' revenge on a religious hypocrite, a quarrel of two shepherds over a priest's wording during the liturgy, a well-functioning love triangle of a schoolmaster, a schoolmistress and a pastor, a charming murderer of her old husband, who avoids execution thanks to a strip show in the courtroom, and many others. However, Jeník's main interest is in wise and unwise fools (Frynta, 1973), life clowns, and peculiar people (Heveroch, 1901), typical characters (Cibula, 1985), extroverts and jokers (Bor, 1993; Suchý, 2008) of all kinds, known and unknown, famous and forgotten. In his work, Jeník pays extensive attention to their tricks, affairs and life stories.

Medical doctor Sager from Brno cured the queen Maria Theresa of chickenpox, for which he obtained a huge reward and a lifelong rent. After his mother's death the emperor Joseph II abolished such pensions as not deserved. This exasperated doctor Sager to such a degree that he went to Vienna and he questioned the verdict in front of Joseph, suggesting that it would not be valid for someone who saved the queen's life. Joseph replied that doctor received very good payment for his cure and had enjoyed his rent for years. Sager asked shortly: "So, I shall receive my pension no more?" Joseph said "No". Sager turned around and while leaving he whispered to himself: "Kiss my ass then!" Let's see how Jeník describes what followed:

Joseph heard it and ordered doctor Sager to say aloud what he

whispered so impudently, otherwise he would be jailed. The doctor replied that he was quiet, less the pain of his heart might utter something. But he himself did not understand why Joseph wanted to make so unhappy a person who prolonged the life of his mother, the queen. He, the doctor, would be forced to beg in his old age or to take his own life. Joseph shook his head hearing such a speech, but then he declared that he would not back out of his regulation, but would continue to pay the doctor's pension by himself.

Around 1800 Sager moved to Prague. Local scamps made fun of his bizarre clothing: summer or winter he wore a large shaggy hat, wide coat with short coattails and a long red jerkin. He did not run his private practice in Prague, so he did not compete with local physicians and he spent the rest of his life in peace until he died at the age of eighty (Jeník, 1832, 197 – 206).

An outstanding Czech physician Václav Jáchym Vrabec also inspired one of Jeník's favourite studies of strange people. Vrabec was a monk for several decades and later he became a prior of a monastery and hospital in Prague, where he helped those, who were gravely ill. He had the privilege to accomplish a detailed autopsy of the dead. Soon he became a respected surgeon in the Czech lands (he performed the first caesarean section there) and abroad as well. While healing the breast of a daughter of a wealthy Prague merchant he asked his patient to marry him. He arranged his dispensation with the help of the emperor and the pope and married Alžběta Fidlerová. He bought a house in Spálená Street, a carriage and horses. He started up his own private practice. He had quirky egalitarian manners and outraged upper classes against him and gained the reputation of an impertinent person. But when someone from the notables had serious health problems they always called for Vrabec and he did not hesitate to ask for a considerable payment for his work. Later he became a regional physician and veterinary surgeon of a Kouřim district at that time. He loved his work to such a degree that he travelled through the region at his own expense, with his horses, curing both people and animals and spreading public education: he wrote rhymed

instructions for curing the beef cattle. He intended to publish these songs and offer them to set to music, because he wanted the housemaids and housewives to sing them and learn from them while milking. His plans were disrupted by his sudden death (Jeník, 1832, 206 – 237).

The Free Lord Zsekelly was a commander and treasurer of castle guard at the imperial court in Vienna. Because he was not acquainted in mathematics he had to rely on his accountant. But after the accountant's death it turned out that there was a great debt. Zsekelly, though in fact innocent, got a severe long-standing sentence (the emperor sent him to some kind of galley slavery). Joseph II abolished the penalty only after outraged public criticism that he read in printed pamphlets (Jeník, 1832, 237 – 243). Since then on every occasion defamatory articles or pasquinades were spread about the emperor. When an inscription celebrating Joseph II was inscribed and decorated with gold at the frontage of the new asylum in Vienna, the very next day someone climbed up and pasted a piece of paper over the inscription, which said: "Joseph always the Second, but here – among the lunatics – the First." The emperor laughed at this. But one insolent pasquinade made him really angry and he shouted angrily that he would give two hundred ducats to any person who would reveal the person who dared to do such a thing. The reaction was immediate; the very next day a pamphlet went around designated to the emperor:

Not care two hoots 'bout your dough,
There's none to betray me and show,
There were four culprits then:
Me, ink, paper, and pen!
(Jeník, 1832, 243 – 249).

Jeník went on with his display of various remarkable characters. Next he focused on the street conjurers and comedians. The tales about those are called: "Cheery heart of our forefathers, who above all other loved music, singing and dancing and who were highly pleased when all these took place in the streets... At all times we may find a weird man who entertained people in the street".

Around 1765 an Italian settled in Prague and he was "a merry fool and clown of the town of Prague". From spring to autumn he performed his dances: every week he travelled one of the four Prague boroughs and their various main streets (and he was soberly and very well honoured). Every morning without any trace of weariness he danced to a guitar accompaniment and sang over and over: „Charapaniara, paniara, charapaniara!"

Another quirky character was Johnny Rejoice alias Whoofer, a young man with a cheerful face and a prankish look. Every day he rambled in the streets, pubs and taprooms, "he did his tricks everywhere and he was really good at it". He initiated laughter, he was always surrounded by crowds and they teased him, but he always resisted. Rich people endowed with a sense of humour or malty bunch let him make costly costumes and he walked in the streets dressed as a soldier or a noble man with a plentifully powdered wig on his head, or dressed as a rag picker in a coat made of various coloured patches. The number of spectators grew and their enthusiasm was even encouraged by Johnny's language (a similar children's diction has survived till today).

Jeník devoted most of his attention to a soldier initially of the same rank as Jeník himself: captain Count of Harrach, a commander of prince Kinský's regiment. The deeds of this man attracted Jeník's attention. Because of his humorous nature, Jeník devoted a major part of his records to the description of the Count's tricks: "The Count left nobody alone and had not missed any chance to do something malicious to someone. His ideas were so clever that he almost always avoided punishment." For example he saw a coach driver fast asleep and immediately searched for human excrement in the centre of Prague to make a moustache under the driver's nose of it. As he did not find what he wanted he got another idea. He stole a wig maker's dummy with a wig, placed it into the carriage and shouted Go. "The coach driver woke up and saw the lord in a wig sitting in the carriage, so he drove him away." Count Harrach watched this from a distance amusedly. On another occasion, he gathered 35 bagpipers on the occasion of his superior's

wife's name day; he paid them well and quartered them in an inn. He let every one of them put a lantern with a candle on their head and led them in a procession to the Old Town Square in Prague in front of the prince's palace. "Each bagpiper was ordered to play a different song. The sound was so piercing that all the people woke up even in the most remote streets and after a while the whole square was full of listeners and spectators." Although the Count said that he wanted to make a spectacular performance out of love to the princess and that it took a lot of work and money to get so many virtuosos to Prague, he ended up in prison for fourteen days.

Jeník then depicts the Count's most daring action, when he managed to get the whole municipal government of the town of Velvary drunk. Then he promised everybody beautiful new wigs and for that he shaved their heads. After that he sent them all home to their wives. It was a scandal and Harrach was in danger of being degraded. "Anyway," says Jeník, "if all the stories about Count Harrach were written down, a huge pile of paper would be used up." In his almost forty years of service captain Harrach was never promoted considering all his misdemeanours. On his retirement, he was finally promoted to the rank of major. When his friends congratulated him on this, the Count told him: "Behave so well as I did and you will be major too!" (Jeník, 1832, 258-186/2). Here it is impossible not to see the similarity to major Terazky from Miloslav Švandrlík's 20th century humoristic novel *Black Barons*.

Jeník's interest in weird people and tricksters might be explained by the fact that he – though maybe unintentionally – included himself among such people. In his military diary he wrote that once he was sleeping in a house of some baron and baron's dogs ate his harness conserved by fat. He forced the baron to remedy the situation by the night, but he still came late to his regiment. "I told there," writes Jeník, "my unique dog story to some officers. Instead of pitying me, they laughed at me and made jokes of my incident and I felt very sorry because of it" (Čenský, 1875, 241). It is obvious that the officers did not laugh at him because of their malevolency, but that his funny

interpretation of the story made them laugh.

In a non-dated letter to Tomáš Burián from the 1830s, Jeník angrily complains that some mockers called him 'The Last Hussite' based on an indecent joke (Polišenský – Illingová, 273). Evidently, the moodiness of his old age could contribute to Jeník's anger, but the point of this joke, the fact that it was mentioned several times, and the striking similarity to the old 'dog story" suggest that here we meet another of his masterfully built stories; its second strong point is in seeming irritation of the affected person (Traxler, 2005, 121).

Jeník's aversion and impossibility to adapting to new thoughts and ideas made him a peculiar, even ridiculous person in his old age. He was an anachronistic but still a respectable figure of Prague society, one of those he so keenly wrote about. In his report about jokes on Jeník's account, Josef Bojislav Pichl characterises the relationship of the young national awakeners generation towards Jeník's enlightened patriotism: "That old Czech fool is said to have above his bed a big portrait of Hussite leader Žižka with a mace and halberd. Every evening he kneels in front of it and worships it and asks Žižka to rise again and cast all the Germans away from the Czech lands!" (Polišenský – Illingová,1989, 107).

"There are no remedies against the years, and the same it is with me," said the ageing Jeník without a trace of resignation. In spite of his 82 years of age, he began to work on a new series of his handwritten *Bohemica*. In its heading he sparkles with wit: "Collected by Jan Jeník, the knight of Bratřice, who wrote this without glasses and whose head is not yet grey." After a proverb, he quoted a song; as a real folklorist: "No tooth but one is in his mouth, it's loose and soon it will be out".

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