

## With Dr Vanda Jiřiková on Ethnography and Makeshift Settlements

The interview was conducted by Martin Dolejský and David Platil

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PhDr. Vanda Langrová, later married Tůmová, and then Jiřiková, is a prominent Czech ethnographer. She was born in 1933 and worked at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences from 1962 to 1972. She focused on research into workers' housing and lifestyle, and in the 1960s, she made a significant contribution to discussions on the possibilities of ethnographic research into contemporary workers in Czechia (Tůmová 1964). One of her important topics was the makeshift workers' housing, where she combined historical perspectives with a mapping of the current situation. During her research, she conducted numerous interviews with residents of makeshift housing estates that still existed at the time. Her work also included questionnaire surveys, drawing up building layouts, and taking photographs. The result was, among other texts (namely Tůmová and Štěpánek 1965), the publication of the book *Pražské nouzové kolonie* (Prague Makeshift Housing Settlements) in 1971 (Tůmová 1971). During the period of so-called normalisation that followed the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in 1968, she was forced to abandon her academic career. After leaving the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, she worked in various museums, devoting herself partly to folk architecture and folk customs (Jiřiková 2012). The interview focused on her research on Prague's makeshift settlements.

### **How did you get into ethnography?**

I always tell everyone that it was completely by chance. Because at the high school in Mělník,<sup>1</sup> where I graduated, I tried my hand at drawing. And I was very good in our class. So, I thought I'd try for the School of Applied Arts. But there it became pretty clear to me then that I was not so great at it. There were a lot of us, of course, so I did not pass the entrance exams. However, the committee that evaluated us discussed the results with everyone. And because I showed them drawings from the folklore festival in Strážnice,<sup>2</sup> where I tried to capture the dancers, costumes, and so on, they said: "Well, why don't you try ethnography?" I had never heard the word ethnography before; I had no idea what it was. So, I tried it, and they accepted me (at the Department of Ethnography and Folklore, Faculty of Arts, Charles University – note of editors), which is how I started studying this field.

### **What was the field actually like at the time when you entered college? Who taught you? What was the composition of the student body, and what was the focus of the teaching?**

There were only a handful of us. There were always four or five people in each cohort, so it was quite pleasant, and we always got along well. At that time, the department was headed by Professor Pertold (Otakar – note of editors), a wonderful person whom I greatly admired. He lectured on exotic ethnography. I was more interested in Czech ethnography because, like many ethnographers, I was a member of a folk ensemble in Mělník during my youth. I imagined that ethnography would be about songs, costumes, and folk art, but there was no mention of that at the beginning, so I was terribly disappointed. However, Pertold lectured so interestingly that I became fascinated by his topics. It was great. He was a pleasant person, inviting us to his home and making us very strong black tea.

Then there was an important figure, Nahodil (Otakar – note of editors), but you have surely heard a lot about him. We quite liked him because he was a good speaker and young, but his lectures always revolved around one thing: the various Siberian peoples, their family relationships, and their complexities. I must admit, I did not find it very interesting. Associate Professor Stránská (Drahomíra – note of editors) is truly a historical figure, one of the classics of ethnography. Her lectures were comprehensive and interesting, but impossible to remember. It was particularly tedious for our male colleagues when she lectured on head coverings, and many of them failed their exams as a result. Associated Professor Pražák

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<sup>1</sup> A district town approximately 40 kilometers north of Prague (note of editors).

<sup>2</sup> The Folk Music and Dance Festival in Strážnice was founded in 1946 and has gradually become the largest and most famous festival in the Czech Republic (note of editors).

(Vilém – note of editors), I loved him very much. He lectured on architecture, and those were perhaps the best lectures I can remember. Chotek (Karel – note of editors) was also a unique personality. At that time, he began to think that ethnographers should focus not only on villages but also on towns and their surrounding areas. However, it remained just a plan. He chose the village of Nebušice,<sup>3</sup> so the students went there. Unfortunately, I wasn't with them because I got married early on and had a small child at the time, so I couldn't go. However, from what I have heard from my friends, it was not particularly beneficial. They did not learn much. For the time being, it was just an idea in his head about how it could be, and nothing came of it. Then, once, we were in the Ostrava region with Robek (Antonín – note of editors), but nobody was particularly interested in it either.

### **What did you focus on in your thesis?**

I wrote my thesis on living in a cooperative village. We were simply guided towards the present. And everyone usually chose a topic that was a few steps away from home, because we did not have any money and no one gave us any. I lived in Mělník with my mother, so I chose the village of Kly,<sup>4</sup> a pleasant village, and titled my thesis *Housing in the Cooperative Village of Kly near Mělník*. But the fact is that the cooperative aspect actually had a simple meaning. People no longer needed farm buildings if they worked in a cooperative, so they were often converted into dwellings or repurposed for other uses. But I admit that even at that time then, I was more interested in traditional architecture: gates or houses with preserved black kitchens, all of which I found incredibly interesting. And besides, Kly is such a beautiful area on the banks of the Labe River, so I enjoyed the fieldwork there.

### **What did you do after college? And how did you end up at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore?**

After graduating, I started working at a museum in Zábřeh na Moravě, and then a year later, I moved to Šumperk,<sup>5</sup> as the districts were being merged. It was a really interesting place to work. I did what museum curators do when they arrive at a museum and are unsure of where to start. I could do whatever came to

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<sup>3</sup> A village near Prague that became part of Prague in 1968 (note of editors).

<sup>4</sup> A village with a population of approximately 1,700, located 26 kilometres north of Prague and 7 kilometres from the district town of Mělník (note of editors).

<sup>5</sup> Zábřeh na Moravě and Šumperk are Moravian towns (approximately 13,000 and 25,000 inhabitants) in the Olomouc Region (note of editors).

mind. It was great. The town of Šumperk is interesting. A group of people my age who worked in the cultural centre, the library, and the theatre got together there. So, I really enjoyed being there. But after three years, Dr Skalníková (Olga – note of editors) appeared, who headed the so-called Department of Contemporary Studies at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. She was well-versed in the world and, together with Dr Fojtík (Karel – note of editors) and Dr Syrovátka (Oldřich – note of editors), they became interested in studying the urban environment. And somehow, she had the opportunity to accept a post-graduate position in her department. Some friends recommended me to her, so she came to see me in Šumperk. I admit that I didn't really want to leave, as I was interested in what I was doing there. However, I eventually made up my mind and joined the Institute. I think it was in the fall of 1962.

I joined Dr Skalníková, and those makeshift housing settlements were not my choice; I was simply assigned to them. This was because Dr Vařeka (Josef – note of editors), who specialised in folk architecture, knew that it was also necessary to focus on the city and the workers. So, he began documenting the buildings of workers and the city. And Ladislav Štěpánek worked for him. Štěpánek was not an employee of the Institute. He was an older gentleman, but an excellent documentarian, so he gathered a lot of material. Well, Skalníková thought that this could be followed up on. And that's how it happened.

### **Did you build on any previous research in the case of makeshift housing settlements?**

I was definitely following in Štěpánek's footsteps, using the materials he had left behind. He even personally introduced me to it, taking me with him—I do not remember which settlement it was—and showing me what it was like there. You asked why I chose Slatiny and Krejčárek. I admit that chance played a role here again, because my husband and I lived with my grandmother in Bohdalec for a short time, which is not far from Slatiny. And we took the children to kindergarten in Slatiny.<sup>6</sup> So, I knew the area a little, and it caught my attention. And Krejčárek, I do not really know. I recently visited there, and I was aware of it; I had read about it, which piqued my interest. Because the environment was extremely interesting, on that steep slope, those rows of houses. So, both were coincidences. I visited some other settlements just out of curiosity, but I only focused more deeply on these two. It wasn't about getting an overview of the makeshift housing settlements in Prague. It was more about everyday life. At that time, ethnographers frequently used the term “way of living.” In other words, we

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<sup>6</sup> Slatiny, Krejčárek, Bohdalec are names of Prague settlements (note of editors).

were not studying buildings, but primarily ways of living. So that was actually the core of my interest.

I even lived at Krejčířek for about four months, which was great. It was due to my family situation, a bad situation, where I had nowhere to live. And so, I stayed in a room with an interesting lady, Mrs. Žižková from Žižkov. I believe I submitted some material to the Institute regarding that. Her husband, Mr. Žižka from Žižkov, was a peculiar character. He predicted the future. He had devised special graphs, which he used to determine when people's curves were in the rosy stage of success and, conversely, when they were in decline. So that lady gave it to me. I think I passed it on to the Institute. So that was an interesting episode. She told me all sorts of things. I admit that I probably didn't make full use of many of those stories and memories, which is a shame. And it's the same in other fields, which makes me unhappy now, because as I have moved from one workplace to another, I have brought a box of records from each. Often completely unwritten and sometimes even difficult to read. And now I am trying to transcribe what I can on the computer, and I am unsure to whom I'll pass it on; probably the Institute.

#### **What was the research method?**

This question makes me smile. There was no team. I went there completely on my own. No one else deals with it. Štěpánek had already lost interest in it at that point. So, I went there alone. With great trepidation, I must admit. At first, I didn't know what to do. But to answer your question: it was really just that I met someone, I saw a lady by the fence, and I stopped. I asked her how long she had lived there. If she had been there a long time, that was great. I started asking about others. And everything else unfolded from there. Everyone knows that when you talk to someone about a place, they will recommend a neighbour or an older person, or someone who has lived there the longest and can tell you the most. So that's how it continued.

#### **Can we pause to consider the practical aspects of recording statements in the field and their subsequent processing and storage? Who determined the structure of the questions or thematic areas?**

I wrote it down. Whatever I managed to do, I then rewrote on cards. Let me tell you something about that. This is not slander, but there really was no well-thought-out archiving system at the Institute. We basically didn't have to hand anything in at all, and many employees didn't submit anything until their work was completed. They simply collected information in drawers and then wrote something from it. My colleague Dr Šťastná (Jarmila – note of editors), with whom

we often collaborated, and I were fortunate to be sent to Poland for a student stay at the “*Obóz Etnograficzny*” (Ethnographic Field Camp – note of editors). The Poles had a perfectly developed method. They had prepared questionnaires, “*kwestionariusze*”, and I copied them all by hand. The students received a questionnaire for each topic they were to work on. At the end of the camp, which usually lasted 14 days or 3 weeks, I don’t remember – in a selected location, they had to submit the material, transcribed in a similar manner. They even had to write a summary report about what they had learned. We were excited about it, so we decided, without anyone telling us to, that we would start doing the same thing at the Institute. So, we began transcribing and storing the material as much as possible.

**Did you encounter any mistrust from the locals, or how did they perceive you in the field?**

I must say that I was fortunate. Most of them were pretty happy to talk to me. When you start by asking about their memories of the early days, people really like that, because the past was not dangerous, and they can confide in you about it. It was worse when you asked about their current relationships; they did not say as much then. You also must take some things with a grain of salt. It is not entirely reliable, but people quite like reminiscing about the early days (how they built it, how they sourced materials, what it looked like). They often even say more than you ask them.

I had more personal problems. I admit that I experienced what the Germans wrote about in their study *Angst des Feldes*, fear of the field. I was happy to read their German reflections, because I had experienced it and sometimes felt that one should not interfere in people’s private lives. It happened to me that I ran away early and only returned the next day after calming down. I was not one of those researchers who could walk anywhere and ask anything without any problems or stress.

**Can we return to Ladislav Štěpánek? He accomplished a great deal of commendable work in the field of settlement research.**

He did everything possible that was assigned to him. This was probably assigned to him by Dr Vařeka as part of his studies in construction. Štěpánek also enjoyed writing and wrote extensively, publishing numerous articles that covered not only the urban settlements but also folk architecture in Central Bohemia and beyond. He had a vast knowledge. But it is true that sometimes, when he ventured into certain issues, such as social ones, he did embellish things a little. I experienced this later, after I left the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore,

when he wrote about the situation in the Slaný area.<sup>7</sup> At that time, he embellished things a little, or when he wrote about this open-air museum in Třebíz,<sup>8</sup> he wrote that it was the only open-air museum that showed social relations, which is nonsense. So, he was quite unreliable in such minor details, but otherwise an interesting personality.

**What was your work assignment?**

I had to write my thesis. That was the basic task. I was supervised by Dr Fojtík and Dr Skalníková. Fojtík even took me to Brno once to see what the makeshift housing settlements there looked like. Furthermore, he showed me how to take photographs, because he was an enthusiastic photographer. I wasn't very good at it.

**How many years have you been working on the topic of makeshift housing settlements?**

Four years. Or five. Well, something like that. So about five years. Well, it is not much.

I mentioned Dr Šťastná. We also travelled to the Ostrava region with Dr Skalníková. And there, in the Ostrava region, it was supposed to be a monograph that never came out. And we liked to go out into the field together the most. That was a different kind of work. Because one of us talked and the other observed and took pictures. So, when there are more people, it is a different kind of work.

**What was the atmosphere like at the Institute? Did you encounter any ideological pressure that would influence your work?**

I am not aware of any pressure until 1968. At that time, a peculiar management style prevailed. The director was Dr Jech (Jaromír – note of editors), but then the leading persons of the Institute came forward to suggest that he would not be the sole director, but rather a member of a triumvirate. The management consisted of Jech, Skalníková, and Scheufler (Vladimír – note of editors), which I think was a pretty good solution. And they really did not have any ideological pressures. They chose the topics, so the fact that they focused on the study of the city and the workers was, in a way, designed to suit the regime, which it did. And, there was no need to get too involved in political issues. In connection with the makeshift housing settlements, I had to read all kinds of newspapers,

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<sup>7</sup> Slaný is a town in Central Bohemia, about 17,000 inhabitants, approximately 40 kilometres north-west from Prague.

<sup>8</sup> Třebíz is a village in Central Bohemia, with about 200 inhabitants, approximately 45 kilometres north-west of Prague (note of editors).

old communist leaflets and so on, but that was not the essence of the matter, and no one forced us to do it. It was only when Robek arrived that things changed significantly after 1968.

**Can you describe how this affected you specifically?**

Yes, it affected me. I admit that I belonged to a very naive generation. Being part of the folklore ensemble had a big influence on people. So, I naively believed in the ideology of the time. We danced in the ensemble and wore blue shirts. If you have seen the film *Žert* (The Joke),<sup>9</sup> it was similar, with the girl standing there singing. So, I experienced that kind of silly enthusiasm. When you saw through it, it made it worse. For those who had been clear about it from the beginning, it wasn't so difficult. For us, it was a terrible blow when the crimes, trials, and things like that began to be revealed. Before 1968, I was the chairwoman of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement organisation at the Institute. And I experienced some quite interesting moments, because the trade union organisation at the Academy was extremely active in 1968.<sup>10</sup> I remember the whole-academy assemblies, where very harsh criticism of the current situation was voiced. These were experiences that cannot really be conveyed. I did what many others did, which was to throw away my party membership card.<sup>11</sup> That was a serious offense, so I was expelled. Expelled party members had to leave their jobs. So, I had to quit completely.

I haven't mentioned one employee. Dr Mišurec (Zdeněk – note of editors) was the head of the documentation department. He was a wonderful person and understood the situation perfectly. He saved me, because I was alone with two children. He knew that leaving immediately would mean financial hardship for me. So, he took me into his department. So, I worked for him at the Institute for the last two years or so. I wrote cards about literature and similar things. But it was a good situation, so I was able to stay there longer. So, I experienced the beginning of Robek's rule.

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<sup>9</sup> Vanda Jiřikovská refers to a film shot in 1968 by Jaromil Jireš and released in 1969, based on a novel written by the well-known Czech-French writer Milan Kundera (1929–2023). The novel was first published in Czech in 1967 and in English in 1969. Its fully authorised English version dates back to 1982. The novel is about young people in communist Czechoslovakia in the 1950s who believed in the communist regime and whose naivety backfired on them and ruined their lives for many years (note of editors).

<sup>10</sup> In protests after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops (note of editors).

<sup>11</sup> The narrator is referring to the Communist Party (note of editors).

### **How has the atmosphere at work changed?**

A lot has changed, and I admit that I felt it was a terrible insult to the profession, and I was ashamed of what Robek wrote in *Český lid* (Czech People).<sup>12</sup> Those editorials, political and ideological, were quite awful. Well, during the purges that followed after 1968, many people sensibly kept their mouths shut and spoke cautiously, but I could not be cautious, so I said what I thought straight out. And it turned out as it did. Robek apparently had a guilty conscience towards me.

So, when I finished at the Institute, and the opportunity arose to join the museum in Slaný, he even drove there and told the local Communist Party group that, although I was ideologically misguided, I was employable. And so, they accepted me.

### **Let us return to the urban settlements and your book *Pražské nouzové kolonie* (Prague Makeshift Settlements). How was the book received, and what do you think of it in hindsight?**

I had to look it up again. When I read it now, and if I were to criticise it from the outside, it seems like the work of a beginner. And it's far from systematic work. A lot of things are random. I realised that an ethnographic study of the makeshift settlements would be ideal if it could build on something you had done. A historical overview with lots of facts. And only then go to people and ask them about their everyday lives. What I did could be described as the history of everyday life, as it is now known.

### **You later turned your attention to other topics, but have you ever felt the desire to return to the subject of workers' settlements?**

I didn't return to it, nor did I want to. But I was curious to see what was happening. So, when Dr Viktorínová organised the exhibition Poor Prague, I was thrilled. I went on an excursion with her when she was showing people around Slatiny,<sup>13</sup> so I sometimes added my own personal memories to the story. I was very interested in the exhibition, which I think was last year, in Vršovice<sup>14</sup> at the *Vzlet* Gallery (Take off Gallery – note of editors). It is a tiny little gallery. So, I went to see it, and it was great. There were lots of photographs on loan from people, which I was seeing for the first time. And I went to see the monument

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<sup>12</sup> The journal that was published by the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore Studies and now by its successor, the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences (note of editors).

<sup>13</sup> Prague former makeshift settlement (note of editors).

<sup>14</sup> Prague quarter (note of editors).

commemorating Slatina gardens at Vršovice station. So, it's not that I wasn't interested, but I never returned to it professionally.

### **What did you study then?**

I simply had to do other things. I worked here in Třebíz for a long time, which is an open-air museum. So, I had to learn a great deal about folk architecture. I worked with conservationists, with Dr Bureš (Pavel – note of editors), and I conducted a comprehensive documentation of village settlements for him, which I found really interesting. In a small museum with only one ethnographer, you have to do everything. I also devoted a lot of time to customs, and I tried to organise many exhibitions on this topic. And when I finished in Třebíz, I was contacted by the Central Bohemian Museum in Roztoky,<sup>15</sup> where they were looking for someone part-time, so I started working there. Dr Procházka (Lubomír – note of editors) also started there, having left the Institute. He focused on folk architecture, and we agreed that I would work on customs. And since then, that's what I've been doing most. Then I left Roztoky and a friend, Dr Hobl (Dalibor – ed.) from the Kolín Museum,<sup>16</sup> who worked intensively at the Kouřim<sup>17</sup> open-air museum, contacted me again. He was also looking for someone there because they were establishing a workplace for folk culture, which was in every region. So, from 2005 to 2010, I worked in Kouřim. I had a free hand there, so I again devoted myself mainly to customs. And I have a lot of material on this topic. To this day, I still collaborate with the Ethnographic Society's commission for folk customs and attend seminars. Most recently, I was in Uherské Hradiště<sup>18</sup> this year.

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<sup>15</sup> Roztoky is a little town, approximately 9,000 inhabitants, about 10 kilometres north to Prague (note of editors).

<sup>16</sup> Kolín is a district town with a population of approximately 33,000, located about 65 kilometres east of Prague (note of editors).

<sup>17</sup> Kouřim is a little town in Central Bohemia, with about 2,000 inhabitants, not far from Kolín, and about 60 kilometres east of Prague (note of editors).

<sup>18</sup> Uherské Hradiště a district capital in Central Moravia, approximately 25,000 inhabitants (note of editors).

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