MY CULTURE, MY HOUSE

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This article is based on a paper I presented on the floor of the Festival and Congress Centre of the city of Varna – and this location seemed to be a perfect match with the topic of the article. The following lines will deal with questions of (so called) cultural houses in the region of contemporary Czech Republic. This topic is maybe not a regular and recurrent headline of historical research but it is definitely not any marginal topic because cultural houses represent one the major elements of the structure (or even infrastructure) of cultural life of all the region of the Central (and also Eastern) Europe. Cultural houses still remain emblematic buildings and spaces open to cultural activities of all kinds.

TALKING ABOUT THE PAST

It is more than important to talk and discuss (about) the past. However, it could be sometimes difficult to find a pertinent way how to deal with our own history. And if we want to deal with heritage of the communist period of (our) history, we have to face multiple dangers.

It would be never enough to repeat that it is necessary to point out that contemporary history is a dangerous field – many of us remember the previous period however everyone has got their own point of view and their own memories. It is well known that a human memory is the less reliable source of information we have – and it is the most attractive one at the same time! However, contemporary research in the field of contemporary history and art and culture cannot get by personal testimonies.

Today, when more than three decades have passed from the 1989 and its Velvet revolution – as we, Czechs, still love to call this historical milestone —, a new generation has grown and started its careers: generation with no personal experience with communist society.

And it is not by chance that a new generation of researchers aims more and more often its attention to the questions of recent history, mainly to the second half of the 20th century.

However, should we say that this generation is already freed from the communist past? The answer is definitely not so easy. There is always (any) past, there has been always something before. Both, in our lives and in the life of the society.

And that's why, right now, we have to ask more than ever – how was our life before and how is now. Has it changed or not? How? And what has remained?

A SHORT DIGRESSION TO BEGIN: TRACES OF THE PAST

In the first months of 2023, there were many occasions to see how topics from the Czech (and maybe Czechoslovak) communist past are strong, important and influential even in contemporary Czech society, more than '30 years after'…

For example, during Czech presidential elections in February 2023, the communist history of both final candidates – Petr Pavel (elected president) and Andrej Babiš (ex-prime minister and defeated presidential candidate) – became crucial for their campaigns and 'propaganda'.

The question was easy: does it mean that if one was once a communist, one stayed – for ever – dishonest, contaminated and untrustworthy? And how to differentiate where 'having intercourse' with totalitarian regime is still acceptable and where it starts to be inadmissible and unacceptable?

On the other hand – every single period of history leaves a path in both life of all the society and personal life of every single person. The second half of the 20th century is not any exception, as we can see – for example – when we take a look at the structure of theatre venues in the Czechoslovakia or/and Czech Republic (not excluding Slovakia as well). The approach of the communist regime to the cultural life was ambiguous and put down many questions to contemporary – let's say – post-communist society.

The paths of history – and it is no important if it was a 'good' or 'bad' history – are still here and we have to honestly admit that we cannot get rid of this heritage easily. And maybe it is not necessary.

WHERE CAN I FIND THEATRE IN THIS CITY?

Central Europe – i.e. area including Czech and Slovak Republic/s – is one of the regions with the biggest density of theatre buildings (and maybe theatre companies as well). Shortly speaking, theatre can be found almost everywhere. And for the purposes of this article – the notion 'theatre' doesn't mean only 'theatre buildings' but also 'theatre activities', i.e. performing theatre in general.

To be more precise – recent research in the history of Czech professional and non-professional theatre proved that there were moments in the history when theatre was played in almost every single Czech village. Since the end of the 18th and beginning the 19th century many communities even built their own permanent theatre buildings or adapted halls of local public houses and inns for theatre activities.

Such 'architectural' effort went hand in hand with both popular activities of travelling theatre companies (domestic and foreign as well) and with strong tradition of local amateur theatre companies as well.

We can find many representative theatre buildings even in 'small' cities all around the Czechia – majority of them built at the end of the 19th century or during the first half of the 20th century. However, this period covers two completely different political and historical eras: Czech lands in the frame of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (until the end of the Great War) and (since October 1918) an independent Czechoslovak state.

If we analyse the situation and structure of 'Czech' cultural life in the last one and half century we can positively confirm that theatres (in the sense of theatre buildings) are convenient not just for theatre activities. It is absolutely impossible to leave aside a huge number of other local 'cultural spaces' where theatre and other cultural events (like concerts, dance evenings or balls) were – and often still are – organized and hold.

If we come back to the 19th century, another 'regional speciality' would become evident: many of these cultural spots – really essential and indispensable for a local social life – were founded thanks to effort of popular Czech sport and cultural societies and associations - like Sokol or Orel.

Activities of all these associations have to be seen in the context of an effort supporting national – or maybe even nationalistic – attitudes of the Czechs

at the end of the 19th century, of one nation living inside a multi-national Austro-Hungarian Empire.

HOUSES OF FALCONS AND HOUSES OF PEOPLE

And it is exactly there, in the second half of the 19th century, where we should look for the origins of cultural houses in the region of the Central Europe. The Sokolovny – i.e. the Houses of Sokol [Falcon] – as we call these buildings till today – could represent (in fact) the first generation of 'cultural houses'.

The Sokolovny gathered almost all cultural, sport and social activities of that time. Theatre has been meeting there with music, concerts, dance balls and exhibitions and with important civic activities as well – not excluding elections, discussions or political meetings.

Beside these spaces we can add also other types of these 'cultural' or 'multi-purpose' buildings: like 'popular houses' or 'workers' houses' founded mainly by various political, civic or social associations.

And all these buildings, founded far before the Communist Party has been even founded, will be used and re-used for the cultural and propagandist purposes of the communist regime in the periods to come.

To summarize: these buildings and spaces have played very important role in development of Czech society and helped a lot in reinforcement of Czech 'national awareness' and contributed strongly to the foundation of independent Czechoslovakia in October 1918. However, while the situation – and the role of these buildings – has strictly changed after the WWII and mainly after the communist coup d'état in February 1948, the venues have remained, cultural, social and political events persisted however the dramaturgy of the programmes changed oppositely.

ALL THE CULTURES IN ONE HOUSE

The range of social, political and cultural changes in the Czech society after 1948 was significant and deep reaching but the communist regime knew well how important is the role of 'culture' for the life of the society. It is indeed obvious that reasons for supporting 'cultural venues' were – from the communist point of view – totally different than it was before. A 'new progressive'

culture should serve political intentions and objectives and should help the Communist Party to seize control over every part of the life of the society.

And that's the point in the history where the idea of genuine cultural houses was born. The cultural houses quickly emerged as a central point of life of the local communities. Culture should come as close as possible to the people in order to audience didn't have to go far to get its piece of culture.

Nevertheless, the idea of cultural houses is not any Czech speciality. We can find brilliant examples of this 'cultural-political issue' in other countries all around Europe as well.

Czechoslovak cultural houses were founded according to the Soviet model but it is definitely necessary to mention – at least shortly and briefly – also another possible approach which could be represented by famous French project of *maisons de la culture* created by André Malraux in the post-war years and promoted later on by Jacques Lang and other French politicians – mostly from the left-wing (i.e. socialist) parties and governments.

Both, Western and Eastern ideas of cultural houses have one thing in common – they consider art and culture as an important part of life of the society. As if right to culture should be seen as a necessity for every single person – or maybe better: for every single member of the society.

However, it is very important to point out one important difference: to be a socialist (or left-winged) in the Western society (as André Malraux or Jacques Lang in France) means something completely different than to be a communist (or socialist) in the Eastern part of the world before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

On top of that, another essential difference has to be mentioned: Malraux's French project of *maisons de la culture* was led by idea of decentralising – the aim of the project was to push cultural life from the centre (i.e. Paris) to the regions, firstly (in the 1940s-1950s) to the Parisian periphery, secondly (during the 1960s-1970s) to the regions all around France.

Czech situation was completely different. The structure of cultural spots in the region of the Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia was – as we have already mentioned above – decentralised since a long time ago. Cultural activities even in small regional cities were rich and created a natural part of life of local communities.

This situation definitely helped a lot of new socialist/communist governments in the Czechoslovakia after 1948 and easily became a natural part of

the cultural politics. However, despite the fact that the communist regime intended to use a dense net of regional cultural houses mainly to promote its own ideology, elaborated structure of cultural spaces did not disappear even after the revolution of 1989.

On the contrary: the net of local cultural houses – in addition to the local-regional-municipal theatres and other cultural spaces as Sokolovny or workers' houses – constitute the basis of actual structure of cultural spots and centres in the Czech Republic.

SEDIMENTATION OF CULTURES

Speaking about these processes, we could maybe talk about – some kind of – process of sedimentation, the layers of history being sedimented, one after another, for a long time.

Thanks to this continuous and 'never-ending' process we have a unique opportunity to live in the world where pieces of history are still a living part of our present. And we have to deal even with 'bad' periods of our histories.

If we take as an example the situation of cultural spots in the region of the Central Europe we can easily see and follow how every new regime used what was available for its purposes:

Czech nationalists during the 19th century (in the frame of Austro-Hungarian Empire) used for their cultural and national activities not only (their own) newly founded buildings but also cultural spots founded by German speaking inhabitants of the region – as municipal theatres or 'houses of people'.

The first Czechoslovak republic in the period between the world wars decided not only to build a brand new – often unique and modernist – buildings to promote cultural and social life of a new-born Czechoslovak nation, but it always took advantage of older cultural centres from the 'pre-Czechoslovak era' as for example (above mentioned) Sokolovny. And these buildings represented, in fact, the major force boosting cultural life in the countryside and in many small cities all around the Czechoslovakia.

Another layer was added even by the Nazis during the WWII.

However, major contributions to the structure of Czech (or Czechoslovak) cultural map are due to the 40 years of the Communist regime. But – once

again, not even the Communist regime did destroy former layers from the past – on the contrary, the totalitarian regime used existing structures to its own purposes, as we have already mentioned above.

Similar to other communist countries, Czechoslovak communist regime needed 'modern' cultural houses on its own – so new cultural houses were supposed to be a multi-purpose and multi-cultural buildings in order to serve all 'socialist' needs of 'the people'.

If we ask about the results of these development activities we have to admit that we can find a huge net of local cultural houses all around the country with – even today – rich 'cultural' programmes. These buildings usually work as *stagioni* – hosting mostly private touring theatre companies (almost only with funny boulevard comedies) or musical events of any kind.

However, in contemporary life of cultural houses there are many troubles to overcome. First of all, they are the technical issues. The major problem of Czech 'cultural houses' is their technical conditions. On top of that, they were originally conceived as multicultural venues for all kinds of art which could seem to be a brilliant and modern idea. The problem is that artistic life is more and more diversified and contemporary need of 'universal' spaces is completely different than the need of periods of the 1960s-1980s.

Layout plan of interior and technical insufficiency of certain cultural houses represent important reasons why e.g. theatre dramaturgy of these cultural houses is mainly based on easy-going comedies without complicated stage design.

And – last but not least – there is a question of purely economical issues: continuous running of these cultural houses is often very expensive and as they are mainly in the hands of the municipalities, they became excessive burden for municipal, i.e. public, budgets.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES AND ANOMALIES IN CZECH THEATRE WORLD AFTER 1989

From the Communist revolution of 1948 to the Velvet revolution of 1989, almost all official theatre activities in the country were centralised, including creation and administration of theatre buildings and cultural houses. On the other hand, the state-regulated economy offered possibilities to project and realise buildings which are generally expensive to build and run.

And while fundamental structure of contemporary net of theatre venues in the Czech Republic (and in Slovakia as well) is based on 'communist' foundations, almost no one build new theatres in free market. Very low number of new theatres have been built after 1989 and not so many new cultural houses have been established in the last three decades. We have to admit that – if we put aside some new independent and alternative theatre spaces – Czech audience goes and sits at the same auditoriums as 40 or 50 years ago.

To conclude, let's take a closer look at one example of a typical Czech paradox. One of the last 'cultural venues' newly built in the Czech Republic was the amazing brutalist and/or new-functionalist building of contemporary Prague Congress Centre, opened in 1981 as the (Prague) Palace of Culture.

In the last 40 years, this venue followed an impressive trajectory: the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and later the NATO members and EU statesmen met here. Mikhail Gorbachev, Barack Obama or Elton John and Bob Dylan – all appeared here.

Generations of teens learned to waltz and polka in the local hall and danced in large crowds during the legendary Rockfest events. An audience of more than one million applauded one of the first Czech musical show after 1989 – Count Dracula.

And it was also here that astronomers excluded Pluto from the planets of the solar system, while tens of thousands of people from all over the world come here for international congresses.

By focusing on the biggest of Czech cultural houses we should come back to all the little ones which create a unique and pretty paradoxical eco-system of the Czech cultural world.

One thing is clear – contemporary world of theatre in the Czech Republic is completely different than it was before. Since 1989, there are not only public theatres but – once again – the private theatres as well.

But both private and public companies can always meet on one and same stage – in the house of culture of this or that city all around the country. Or maybe on the stage of an old Sokolovna from the end of the 19th century…

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